



Excerpts from a Conference of Bishop Claude Champagne, O.M.I.

The New Evangelization (3)

Last October, Bishop Claude Champagne, O.M.I., the new Bishop of Edmundston, launched our 2008-2009 pastoral year at the Diocesan Centre by helping us deepen our understanding of the new evangelization, and telling us of the presence of the Spirit and the coming of the Kingdom.

Toward a New Reality

These Church conversions began with the first years of evangelization. The Holy Spirit urged Peter to go to meet the centurion Cornelius. In this important encounter, Cornelius receives the Good News, while Peter comes to understand that he is not just a circumcised man, separated from the uncircumcised who are the members of Cornelius' family, but he is first of all a human being like all those who are present. Furthermore, this encounter makes him understand more fully that God does not make a distinction among persons and that he desires the salvation of all. The Jerusalem Church was upset: it had to change from the Jewish perspective to the universal perspective. It was obliged to divest itself of a recently acquired Judeo-Christian identity to open to a new reality. The experience of the missionary Church is somewhat like that of a young couple welcoming their first child: a dimension of life as a couple must die to give way to life with another person. A few centuries later, the Roman Church was obliged to abandon its identity to receive the barbarians. Today, the Church centred on Europe and North America is in the process of dying to this Western reality, to give way to a universal Church in which the continents of the South are increasingly making their presence felt in ecclesial life.

Toward a Post-modern World

Again today, the Holy Spirit urges the Church to go toward this post-modern world that will undoubtedly bring death to a certain way of being Church, to a certain identity. A missionary Church must not nourish nostalgia for the past. Our world, loved by God, has its strengths and weaknesses like the world of bygone days. It faces new challenges: justice and peace, sustainable development and preservation of the environment, the meeting of world religions, questions about the meaning and quality of life. As Pope Benedict XVI invited us in his first encyclical, we must look on this world with love. As a Church, we must die to what is old in us to develop a loving, respectful presence toward those to whom we are sent. In the years since Vatican II, the missionary Church has better understood how it is called to put itself at the service of the Reign of God: by proclaiming the

Good News and forming new Christian communities, but also by spreading the evangelical values that are the expression of the Reign of God. Ultimately, by interceding for the world, the Church is at the service of the Reign of God.

Need for a Look of Love

Making ourselves present, therefore, involves seeking to discover the other, knowing them for what they are, in their culture, their mentality, in their search for a full human life, for the profound meaning of life. We are invited to receive the questions of our contemporaries. Thus, in going toward young people, we approach them with interest in them as individuals, in their lives, their joys and sorrows, their dreams and despair, but also their commitment, loves, friendships, questions and fears. We must therefore recognize those whom we address. Currently, certain groups in our communities feel invisible in the Church: women, ethnic minorities, the poor, homosexuals; they may express resentment toward the Church. They need to be regarded with the love they so fervently desire. At times, this presence will be the only possible means of evangelization. Some of our contemporaries have developed an allergy to all preachers and all forms of preaching. This is the experience of Blessed Charles de Foucauld, followed by the Little Brothers of Jesus and the Little Sisters of Jesus: silent witnesses of divine love. Our world remains sensitive, however, to attention to others and charity toward the poor, children, those who suffer. We are reminded of the impact of Blessed Mother Theresa of Calcutta and of Jean Vanier on our contemporaries.

Entering into Dialogue

Evangelization is now carried out through dialogue. Paul VI wished to make the Church a Church of dialogue with our Christian brothers and sisters, with the members of other religious traditions, and finally with those who claim to be agnostics or atheists. For each one of us, this signifies the end of a monologue in which we were able to have exclusivity of speech. It also assumes that the evangelizer genuinely knows how to listen to the other, not to confront them and convince them rationally of the validity of our viewpoint – we have tried it without success for centuries – but instead in the spirit of being ready to recognize that the other has some truth to share, some goodness to offer – truth and goodness, fruits of the action of the Spirit of the Risen Christ. It is vital to encounter young people with the fundamental values that mark their lives today: the quest for happiness, freedom, authenticity. It is important to accept these values while considering them with a critical eye. This signifies that we are open to learning about the other. It is possible that some of our partners in the dialogue may be more influenced by the action of the Spirit than we ourselves, committed disciples in the footsteps of the Risen Christ. The important thing is that we all seek to draw closer to what God, as we know him, expects of us. Opening ourselves to the truth and beauty of the other can open the heart of the other to recognize the truth and beauty to which we wish to bear witness.

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