



# *Apostles for Today*

*Reflection and Prayer - March 2013*

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## **THE TRANSFORMING EFFECT OF THE CENACLE EXPERIENCE AND THE NEW EVANGELIZATION**

### **1. Inspiration for the Cenacle Experience**

The inspiration for the cenacle experience is drawn from St. Vincent Pallotti, who had a filial and tender devotion to Mary as Queen of the Cenacle. The Cenacle icon of Mary Queen of Apostles was drawn under his direction and it depicts the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Our Lady and the apostles. Mary overlooked the failure of the apostles during the passion, crucifixion and death of Jesus and gathered them in prayer in the cenacle for the gift of the Holy Spirit. As a result the missionary Church is born from the maternal care of Mary.

The life of St. Vincent Pallotti was moulded by this icon of the Cenacle. He writes in his spiritual diary: “Wherever I shall be, I intend to imagine myself to be together with all creatures in the Cenacle in Jerusalem where the apostles received the Holy Spirit. I shall remind myself to renew this desire often. As the apostles were there with Mary, so will I be in spirit with my most beloved mother Mary and Jesus. As they are special intercessors, I am confident that they will help me and all other creatures to receive the abundance of the Holy Spirit.” (cf. OCCC X 86)

### **2. Gospel Foundation for the Cenacle Experience**

The large upper room which Jesus told Peter and John to prepare for the Passover meal is referred to as the cenacle (Lk 22:12). It is here in the cenacle that Jesus expressed his earnest desire to eat the Passover with his disciples, capturing the warmth of relationship between him and his disciples in love and friendship (Lk 22:15). During the Passover meal, which was his last supper with his disciples, he instituted the Eucharist establishing the new covenant of love. The context of the feast of the Unleavened Bread when the Passover lamb is sacrificed heightens the nuance of Jesus’ own death on the cross for the salvation of humanity (Lk 22:7). The self-gift of Jesus on the cross is emphasized in the Gospel according to Luke with the words: “This is my body which is given for you,” and “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” (Lk 22:19-20). The cenacle is, therefore, the place of love, intimacy and self-gift in the Eucharist.

According to Acts 1:13, the disciples continued to stay in the cenacle in Jerusalem in obedience to the command of Jesus not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for the promise of the Father, which is the gift of the Holy Spirit (Lk 24:49; Acts

1:4-5). On the one hand, they were continually in the temple praising God (Lk 24:53), and on the other, they gathered in the cenacle together with Mary the mother of Jesus and devoted themselves to prayer with one accord. Therefore, it is logical to conclude that Pentecost took place here in the cenacle, although Acts 2:1 does not explicitly refer to it but only says “they were all together in one place.”

### **3. Characteristics of the Cenacle Experience**

Acts 1:13 in its context gives us the following characteristics of the cenacle experience – being gathered by Mary, being Spirit-filled and Spirit-led, devotion to prayer and living in Fellowship.

#### **3.1 Being Gathered by Mary**

The apostles are gathered, sustained and united in prayer by Mary who is at the centre of the cenacle. From the cross Jesus had entrusted John to Mary with the words, “Woman, behold your son” and John was told “Behold your mother” (Jn 19:26-27). From that moment on, Mary became the mother and queen of the apostles and of the Church. Therefore, the cenacle experience is essentially characterized by a filial devotion to Mary who as the Spouse of the Holy Spirit became the mother of Jesus, accompanied Jesus all through his life and gathered the disciples to receive the gift of the Spirit at the beginning of the Church. To stand at the foot of the cross with Mary and meditate on the passion of Christ is thus central to the cenacle experience.

#### **3.2 Being Spirit-filled and Spirit-led**

The apostles are gathered with Mary in the cenacle to be clothed with power from on High. The “power of the Most High” that overshadowed Mary at the annunciation and which descended on Jesus in the form of a dove at his baptism, is the same Holy Spirit who will rest on the disciples as tongues of fire. The effect of the Spirit on Mary was that she conceived and brought forth Jesus into the world. Jesus was equipped with the Spirit and carried out his ministry. This same Spirit is now given to the disciples through the cenacle experience that they might give birth to Jesus in the world like Mary, and that they might be equipped with the Spirit in their ministry like Jesus.

#### **3.3 Devotion to Prayer**

Another characteristic of the Cenacle Experience is continuous prayer. After the ascension of the Lord, the disciples are continuously in the temple blessing God and the temple is a house of prayer. Acts 1:13 says that they devoted themselves to prayer in the cenacle. Describing the first Christian community Acts 2:42 says that “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” It was in the cenacle that Jesus instituted the Eucharist and the cenacle experience is fundamentally an experience of Eucharistic communion and adoration. A meaningful celebration of the Eucharist

and adequate time spent in Eucharistic adoration are integral to the cenacle experience.

### **3.4 Living in Fellowship**

Prayer leads to fellowship among the members of the cenacle community. Despite the varied backgrounds of the apostles and the varying degrees of their denial of Jesus, they now with one accord devote themselves to prayer. Mary is the reconciling and bonding agent among them who through her maternal care keeps them united in fellowship with a common focus on Jesus. Therefore on the day of Pentecost they are all together in one place (Acts 2:1) to receive the power of the Holy Spirit. The example of service and mutual self-gift that Jesus gave them in the cenacle also binds them together as one family.

## **4. Concrete Expressions of the Cenacle Experience**

Inspired by the spirituality of St. Vincent Pallotti who imagined himself to be always in the cenacle, Fr. Tomy Churathil SAC began to realize that priests and religious can lose their power and effectiveness in their sacred ministry unless they are clothed with power from on high as a result of having gone through a cenacle experience with Mary and the apostles. They will not be able to reawaken the faith of Catholics or enkindle charity if they themselves are not empowered. Involved as they are with various administrative and social responsibilities they can enter into various types of crisis. In fact, Ecclesia in Asia says: "People in Asia need to see the clergy not just as charity workers and institutional administrators but as men whose minds and hearts are set on the deep things of the Spirit" (EA 43). Therefore, reaching out in compassion for the renewal of priests and religious and wanting to take on the role of Mary who kept the apostles in prayer in the cenacle, Fr. Tomy started the cenacle experience retreat for them in 1996. Those who have gone through the cenacle retreat began to experience greater commitment to their vocation and ministry as Spirit-filled leaders in the Church.

Fr. Tomy was also inspired to found the pious association of the Cenacle Sisters of the Sacred Heart (CSSH) together with Sr. Chandrika in September 2002. The charism of the members is to strive towards one's own renewal and to work for the renewal of the people of God, especially the clergy and the religious after the example of Mary, Queen of the Cenacle, who remained in the cenacle and gathered others also in the cenacle building up the community of faith and love to continue the mission of Christ. They become signs of God's love poured out in the cenacle as they live the motto "Burning with love to heal the broken hearted" with the tender loving touch of St. Vincent Pallotti.

## **5. The Transforming Effect of the Cenacle Experience in New Evangelization**

In *Redemptoris Missio* the late Bl. Pope John Paul II invited the entire Church to new evangelization. "The moment has come to commit all of the Church's energies

to a new evangelization and to the mission *ad gentes*. No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples." (RM 3) New evangelization is essentially Christo-centric. The basis of sharing the life of Christ with others is life in Christ. We are called to know Christ and to make Him known. The fundamental activity, therefore, of those called to be missionaries is receptivity to God, of complete docility to the Holy Spirit. "It is not possible," John Paul II states, "to bear witness to Christ without reflecting his image, which is made alive in us by grace and the power of the Spirit" (RM 87). An essential characteristic of this missionary spirituality is intimate communion with Christ. For this every Christian must be renewed in holiness and mission (RM 90). "Missionary activity", declares the pope, "renews the Church, revitalizes faith and Christian identity, and offers fresh enthusiasm and new incentive. Faith is strengthened when it is given to others!" (RM 2).

The pope also explains that in today's world from the viewpoint of evangelization we can distinguish three situations that need to be addressed differently. The first is the situation of the mission *ad gentes* in the proper sense of the term. Bringing the Gospel to peoples, groups and socio-cultural contexts in which Christ and his Gospel are not known (RM 34). Secondly, there are healthy mature Christian communities that are fervent in their faith who need to be cared for pastorally. Thirdly, there is what the pope calls an intermediate situation, where there are entire groups of the baptized who have lost a living sense of the faith, or no longer consider themselves members of the Church. "In this case what is needed is a "new evangelization" or a "re-evangelization." (RM 33) In this third situation people need to be brought into situations of vibrant faith (RM 51). Some need their faith to be renewed and enlivened. Others have had little or no training in the Christian faith and essentially need to be evangelized with the basic Gospel and receive formation in the faith. He believes that this new evangelization is very much tied up with entering "a new missionary age, which will become a radiant day bearing an abundant harvest, if all Christians, and missionaries and young Churches in particular, respond with generosity and holiness to the calls and challenges of our time" (RM 92).

In the above context of new evangelization, the cenacle experience has a very important role to play and has a transforming effect for the Church. The cenacle experience, with its emphasis on being empowered by the Spirit as a result of prayer and contemplation in the company of Mary, the mother of Jesus, is certainly an agent of renewal in the Church and a way of fulfilling in today's world the Church's call to new evangelization.

*Sr. Chandrika cssh, Cenacle Sisters, India.*

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Segretariato Generale, Unione dell'Apostolato Cattolico  
Piazza San Vincenzo Pallotti 204, Roma, Italia [uac@uniopal.org](mailto:uac@uniopal.org)