



Apostles for Today

Prayer and Reflection - April 2013

Some reflections on "New Evangelization" from an apostolic viewpoint

At the same time that Vincent Pallotti was writing his works on the ideal of a "Universal, Catholic Apostolate" in the 1840's, hundreds of kilometres north of Rome the Lutheran philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813—1855) in Denmark gathered his own reflections on what it means to be an "apostle" in a short essay entitled "The difference between a genius and an apostle":

"An apostle is not born; an apostle is a man who is called and appointed by God at a specific point in time and sent by him on a mission. An apostle does not develop in such a way that he gradually becomes what he is [according to his own inherent ability]. [...] every human being is essentially equally close to becoming that. [...] By this call to become an apostle he does not become more intelligent, he does not acquire more imagination, greater discernment, etc.—not at all; he remains himself but by the paradoxical fact is sent by God on a specific mission."

People are not only not born apostles, they are not born Christians! At first every human being "is essentially equally close to becoming that" – we are all born equally close to - or maybe more precisely equally far away from - being a Christian!

One does not become a Christian "automatically" in the sense of an unbroken development (but rather, as Kierkegaard says, "through a gradual, evolutionary development"). Becoming a Christian happens at a specific point in time, a turning-point which the Sacred Scriptures call "conversion", a process of re-thinking and changing my life.

A person begins to become a Christian at that specific moment of life when he or she discovers that God himself is calling them to a distinctive, unique way of life that is not "normal" compared to the life of people in our world. From the moment we listen to this call and "follow", when we commit ourselves and our life to God and his Gospel in order to live our daily life with him and through him, we begin the process of conversion, of becoming a Christian.

Vatican II, in a wonderful definition, calls Christian faith a way of life by which we commit our whole self freely to God (cf. DV 5).

We do not become Christians in too easy a way ... simply because our parents have been Christians or because it's "normal" to be Christian. In a strict

sense it is not self-evident or natural to be or to become a Christian! We should not forget this while we talk so much about "New Evangelization" in our Church today!

The Church has no right to expect that there be countries (for example in Europe) where all people automatically or naturally would be Christians, even if that seemed to have been the case for centuries. In Germany for example baptism involved a kind of political correctness... everyone had to be "Christian", you were not asked if you really wanted to "commit your whole self freely to God". Christianity seemed to be just the "normal" way of life ... In 19th century Denmark Kierkegaard complained more than once about the shallowness produced by this "tradition".

The necessity, the adventure, the enterprise and the risk of "Evangelization" begins anew with every newborn child.

Therefore we should stop complaining about all the people and countries which were once "naturally Christian", that people "have lost their traditional faith", that they have "fallen away from Christianity", that we as Church have to "get them back". That would be a twisted understanding of New Evangelisation!

Instead of deceiving ourselves in this way we must be aware that the challenge to "evangelize" is always and will always remain "new" for us. First of all, we as "Christians", we as women and men who are on the way to becoming Christians should care about coming closer to the reality of the world of the Gospel. We first have to evangelize ourselves and our Church.

It is always a new challenge to listen to God's call, to commit ourselves to him ... and to care about "making God's call audible" for the people around us. Our task is to live our lives with the Gospel in a way that is attractive, "magnetic" for others.

This— if we want to follow Pallotti or Kierkegaard — is the only way that people living around us in a "normal", "worldly" way can become "infected" with the idea that God is calling even them to another, different way of life characterised by the fire of infinite love, by justice, compassion and charity.

And if anyone wants to "follow" the call of God and commits him- or herself freely to the vision of a life with God, we should be aware that most people do not normally find such a free decision to be "normal"!

Stimulus for reflection and discussion (I)

- Is my decision to live as a Christian in our world really free and conscious?
- Can I remember any "specific point of time" in my life when I "heard God calling me", when I got an idea of what might be the mission for which I am sent ?

- What circumstances and persons influenced me, impressed me?
- What questions were decisive for me to listen to the Gospel?
- Did my life change in any way through my choice to live my life with God?
- Personally: What does it mean for me to "commit – my whole self – freely – to God"? Every word counts 😊
- How can we intensify our living of the Gospel?

Vincent Pallotti: A daily practical reminder (1848/49)

"There are few who constantly and seriously strive to imitate our Lord Jesus Christ because there are few who think of it; but those who do think of it, in so far as they immerse themselves in this holy thought, aspire likewise, to imitate Him more and more, and from this, love for our Lord Jesus Christ grows in them. As love grows, so trust in the grace necessary to imitate Him grows and with it also, the knowledge of one's unworthiness to receive such grace. In this way one is open to receiving grace ever more abundantly. These are the few who constantly strive to imitate our Lord Jesus Christ".

The "daily practical reminder", which every member of the Union of Catholic Apostolate should carry "to read and think about on every possible occasion" and in this way become one of the "few who constantly strive to imitate Jesus", is taken from St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians:

I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (St. Paul to the Galatians, 2:20)

Text for reflection:

"Lutherans and Catholics together acknowledge the biblical witness on justification and the church as an unmerited gift of grace; they see in this witness a tremendous challenge in our world. God 'desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim 2:4). The message of justification is an expression of God's universal saving will. It promises salvation and the right to life without regard to merit and worthiness. God accepts the sinful creature in pure mercy and thus cancels out the law of works and achievement as the basis for life. God thus opens up a way of life which most profoundly contradicts that which prevails in the world: the life of love. This love arises out of faith and passes on the boundless mercy which it has received. It suffers from the distress and injustice that others experience and meets it with self-sacrifice and renunciation. And it urges the members of the church to promote justice, peace and the integrity of creation together with all people of good will amid the glaring contrast between poor and rich, and in the conflicts between ideologies and interests, races, nations and sexes. Thus the church is both a contradiction

and a challenge in our world as the place where merciful justification is proclaimed, as the locus for community and love, as co-shaper of a more just and humane world".

(Lutheran-Catholic Commission on Unity, sponsored by the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity: Church and Justification. 1994)

Stimulus for reflection and discussion (II)

- What does it mean for me to live my life conformed to Christ?
- Where and when can I experience that Christ is living in me and in my life?
- Where and when do I experience that God "justifies" my life, makes me "just"?
- In what sense does the life of the Gospel "most profoundly contradict that which prevails in the world"? Where do I personally experience this?
- Is such a "contradiction" and challenge more a source of fear or of energy and strength? Where do I find courage to live such a life?
- What do we as Christians "offer" to the people around us? Why is being a Christian really "attractive"?

Prayer (after thoughts of St. Vincent Pallotti)

My God, my mercy,

in every instant you nourish me with your infinite love,

with your compassion and charity, with your justice.

You are destroying all the corruptness of my nature

transforming me into yourself more and more.

You destroy all the carelessness of my thoughts, and make me realise

that my soul is your living image and likeness in this world.

You preserve my hunger and thirst to become similar to you

more and more.

You are transforming and changing my whole life!

You nourish me with your strength

eradicating all my weakness:

You make me strong – living in you!

Therefore I gratefully praise you – and I pray to you:

May the life of my Lord Jesus Christ be my life!

Edward Fröhling SAC, Vallendar, Germany