

Key foundations for a proclamation of the faith

A kerygmatic Church

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One challenge for today's forms of catecheses, especially in Western Christianity, is that of being satisfied with merely delivering religious "information" without personal experiences or an involvement in the story itself. By looking at the Church's origins, and especially the Acts of the Apostles, we can better grasp those essential elements needed for a life-changing proclamation. The author is professor of ecclesiology at the Theological Faculty of Central Italy (Florence) and teaches at the Sophia University Institute in Loppiano (Italy).

In order to speak of a "kerygmatic Church", we must first focus our attention on that which defines and characterizes the Church *as* Church. To do this, it is essential to study the moment and origin of its birth, in order to trace the essential elements inscribed in its DNA, elements that have remained fixed throughout the course of history.

The question of the Church's origins

If we examine diverse texts, we find varying accounts of the Church's origins. However, the core of Christology is present in all of them: the Incarnation of the Word made flesh, the calling and sending forth of the apostles and disciples, Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom; Mary and John standing at the foot of the cross, blood and water flowing from the wound of the Crucified Jesus, the appearances of the Risen Jesus after the resurrection, and the Holy Spirit's descent at Pentecost.

In one way or another, all the varied textual perspectives are true. Rather than a paradox, this affirms a great truth: The Church constitutes an ongoing phenomenon; one that began and developed throughout the course of history instead of in a single instant.

Fruits of a shared experience

In this light, there is one key episode referred to by most ecclesial scholars. It is found in the second chapter of the *Acts of the Apostles*. There, we find Peter in front of a large assembly, standing and recounting his experience of Christ. What happens in that moment? We read in the text: "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?'" (*Acts 2, 37*). And it concludes: "So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added to their number." (*Acts 2, 41*).

To understand the most authentic meaning of the "kerygmatic Church", it is important to understand what happened in that moment of Peter's preaching, irrespective of the essential

sacramental dimension linked to baptism. An apostle stands up and speaks of his own personal experience of Jesus. Peter is totally involved in this story; he is present in the content of that announcement.

This is a first characteristic of the kerygmatic proclamation: the one who is communicating the faith must share his or her own personal experience of living it. The one who proclaims must be existentially involved in what is announced. It is not a question of reporting events, but rather recounting those facts that one's eyes have seen, one's ears have heard and one's hands have touched (cf. *I Jn* 1, 1-3).

From religious information to “performative” communication

One clear problem in current catechetical formation, especially in Western Christian communities, is that of being satisfied with the simple delivery of religious ‘information’ about someone in a way where personal involvement in the story is lacking. Being a part of what is being recounted is not about presenting a myriad of concepts; instead, it is about sharing *a reality, something that really happened*; something the speaker experienced. In addition, if one starts from abstract discourse, it is easy to slip into a catechetical mode focused almost exclusively on transmission of faith content, as if faith itself can be contained through its mere accumulation. It is as if the Church is considered kerygmatic in nature because information and concepts are communicated. Instead, the Church must be “performative” in its way of communicating, and thus able to generate the same experience in both the listener and the communicator.

Proclamation generates a communion of life

Returning to the episode from the *Acts of the Apostles*, communication of the faith preceded the sacrament of baptism, constitutively forming and marking the beginning of the phenomenon of the Church. This is how it began. Precisely for this reason, proclamation not only refers to the past but it is a dynamic reality that continues to define the Church down through the centuries, day after day.

Through a kind of osmosis, communicating one's own experience gives rise to a deep communion of life between the one who preaches and the one who welcomes the announcement: whoever communicates his or her faith feels a part of what is being proclaimed. It is as if a person gives both themselves and the content at the same time. Thus, in welcoming the proclaimed message, a person welcomes both the witness and the content. If the one who proclaims is in fact a part of what is being proclaimed, then it is equally true that the person receiving this same testimony is existentially involved as well.

Objectivity and subjectivity: Real facts impact one's own destiny

Aside from the relationship between two interlocutors, it is important to briefly look at content when speaking about a kerygmatic Church. It is fundamentally the content, in fact, they can exert an impact on one's own destiny even to the point of giving new meaning to one's very existence. This reality contained in the announcement allows the listener to freely accept or reject what has been received. Acceptance implies an entrusting of one's existence to this new, constitutive relationship.

In communicating the faith, these characteristics also speak *to ideal forms of proclamation*.

Since a preacher reports everything they have heard with their own ears, seen with their own eyes, and touched with their own hands, language use must be *concrete and descriptive*. It would be somewhat belittling to convey tangible experiences through conceptual abstractions.

However, another element to keep in mind is that communication of the faith is not individual in nature but rather it is communitarian and ecclesial. To avoid communicating merely subjective feelings, it is good to remember that preaching the faith is not the narration of an interior experience. Rather it regards facts that occurred, things that were real and concrete. *The objectivity of what is communicated* guarantees the credibility of the experience recounted. The latter provides indisputable truth about what is being proclaimed. No one, in fact, can deny what has happened in his or her own existence.

This close relationship between objectivity and subjectivity also has implications for the *language* used in expressing the experience. There is no room for statements like 'in my opinion' or 'I feel this or that . . .'. A clearly objective narrative is needed, and Church tradition offers the needed language by which to express personal experiences.

Beginning from the gaze upon another

For communicators, a final point to emphasize goes beyond acceptance or rejection by the listener: It is the importance of acknowledging *the positive nature of the other* and casting aside any preconceived judgements. The whole of humankind is ontologically linked to Christ precisely by virtue of his incarnation. The dynamic of "going forth" so frequently mentioned by Pope Francis, is not dependent upon the world's need for the Church. Rather it is the Church that goes forth in search of its Lord present in the world, and what lies *outside* itself.

In communicating one's faith experience (of personal encounter with Christ), a person must gaze upon the interlocutor as Jesus did. The blind, the lepers, and the possessed approached Him during his journey to Jerusalem. In these encounters, Jesus looked at each with a particular gaze, even before miraculously "touching" their wounds. He grasped in them *the fullness to which each was called, the fulfillment of his or her own humanity*. Herein lies the miracle: It is a restoring to the other the possibility for once-lost fulfilment in the present. Through this freely given gift, every void has been filled and humanity reached its fullness.

In order to be itself, the Church must have this same Christological gaze in encountering the 'other' who is often fragile and wounded. In this way, the unique fulfilling path for which each one has been created can emerge, and preaching the faith becomes *personal, authentic, embodied, and fruitful communication*. To be truly kerygmatic, the Church must be able, even when one seems completely disinterested in the things of faith, to awaken in the other the ever-present desire for the true and complete fullness of life.