

Crisis and opportunity in communities

New wine in new wineskins

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Starting from the Gospel image of the new wine that needs new wineskins, the author reflects here on the reality that every community, with the passage of time, needs to renew itself and discover new potential in the inspiration from which it was born, and new forms by which to live concretely. Only in this way does a charism, and the community from which it was born, remain alive. This article is part of the upcoming work entitled: The Serpent and the Ark. On the destiny of communities, Città Nuova, Rome, 2026.

The Bible is many things; it is also an ethical and spiritual map for navigating nocturnal crossings of turbulent rivers and a guide for arriving alive at the end of exoduses and returns from exiles, and so that a 'faithful remnant' may return. Biblical Wisdom is a rarely used essential resource, because in religious communities the Bible is there at home for prayer, meditation, liturgy, and for retreats. But it is much less frequently seen as a steady, collective spiritual guide, when other resources have been exhausted.

If we look closely, for example, at a well-known passage from Luke's Gospel: "He also told them a parable: 'No one tears a piece from a new cloak to patch an old one. Otherwise, he will tear the new and the piece from it will not match the old cloak. Likewise, no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins, be spilled, and the skins will be ruined. Rather, new wine must be poured into fresh wineskins.'" (Lk 5:36-38).

The Generation after the Founder

Communities live by a spirit – the wine – that generated them. We call this the 'charism,' but they also live by structures, practices, organizations, norms, rules, written and oral traditions, statutes and constitutions born to preserve, maintain, and care for the charism itself. *These are the wineskins.* In Luke's Gospel, the wineskins were the Law and the Mosaic institutions, while the wine was the Spirit, the advent of the Kingdom of Heaven. The wineskins had fulfilled an essential and good function, without which the first wine – the covenant, the Law, the promise, the prophets – would not have been preserved. But, in a time (*kairos*) that had suddenly become new, those good wineskins of yesterday became

unsuitable. So, if those containers had not been changed, their contents would have been lost, too.

The new wine metaphor can suggest many things to communities, especially to the second generation that is still close to the generation of the founder. They have good reasons to think that the wineskins of yesterday are suitable, because the 'new' wine itself is that of yesterday, not of today. And it is precisely here that the decisive challenges are found.

When a charism arrives on earth...

When a charism arrives on earth it is a very new wine, fruit of an unprecedented vintage. The charism is the fruit of grafts from vines within the same great vineyard of the Bible, the Gospels, the Church and human history. Perhaps on earth, there is no novelty more absolute than charisms. Everyone understands that new wine needs new wineskins at the beginning. Who, for example, would have thought of forcing the Franciscans to live in Benedictine abbeys?!

But after a beginning where the Gospel and this (new) life were sufficient, the community creates new structures over time. Thus, statutes and norms, together with prayers, liturgies, praxis, and traditions are created. The richer charisms also generate a spirituality, with new words and languages capable of serving and preserving that initial newness. But 'newness' cannot be expressed, understood or told with yesterday's words and tools, not even those offered by Scripture or – for Christians – the great tradition of the Church.

To express a true novelty in *substance*, a *new form* is also needed. For example, when Mother Teresa heard a second calling and founded the Missionaries of Charity, she did not think for a moment that she could live her new life calling while remaining within her previous community. If she had absurdly done so (as sisters and authorities will certainly have advised her), nothing truly new would have been born.

Continual renewal

Everything becomes much more difficult when we are dealing with a community that *was itself born yesterday from a new wine*. These charismatic communities born just yesterday from a new wine find it harder to recognize the moment in which they must once again change the wineskins, because that new wine of yesterday is today undergoing a 'new' change. If it is left inside the same initial wineskins it begins to dissipate. It is very hard to understand this because by now the very new vintage has existed for some time and given birth to much life and successes. Nearly everyone believes the wineskins built by the founder will last forever. They believe that the new wine has already arrived and in that charismatic community nothing else new can arrive in the future. Thus, the same wine will continue to be drunk, because there is no better one either on earth or in heaven. And if someone is unhappy with yesterday's wine, they have simply become part of the wrong community.

But there is a decisive moment — almost always more than one over the course of time — when that wine which was new at the moment of its earthly arrival undergoes a change that makes it into something different: *A new novelty within the first novelty is created*. Generally, the death of the founder is one such moment in which the wine changes substantially. The wine changes because the charism is alive and therefore evolving, and wineskins that were fine yesterday, now age very quickly. Likewise, the community generated by the charism is also evolving.

If one grows attached, however, to the splendid wineskins of yesterday, communities age together with their casks and remain trapped in forms of the past. These forms are loved too much to thank them, bid them farewell, and finally abandon them.

A Greater Promise

To conclude, let's return to the Bible and its wonderful theology of the 'remnant', as proclaimed by Isaiah and the prophets. Not all the people reach the Promised Land nor return from exile: only a remnant. From the first to subsequent generations, only a remnant is saved, but it is truly saved. But this remnant is sufficient for salvation history to continue. Abraham set out for the Promised Land and died as a stranger, possessing only land for burying Sarah. Moses did not enter the Promised Land; his children did. But they arrived in a complicated land, different from the one imagined. The promise of the land is not the land achieved. That actual land was small, fragile, steep, and without milk and honey. For this reason, they had not recognized it.

Today, in order to begin believing again in a hope that is not in vain, *the promise of an end that is greater than the beginning* is needed: "Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat; The calf and the lion and the yearling together, with a little child to guide them. The cow and the bear shall graze, together their young shall lie down; the lion shall eat hay like the ox. The baby shall play by the viper's den, and the child lay his hand on the adder's lair. They shall not harm or destroy on all my holy mountain." (*Is. 11:6-9*).