

The Church in a Time of Epochal Change

Creative, Meaningful Communities as Leaven

Manuel María Bru Alonso

What is asked of Christian communities today? How should we face ever growing secularization? The author is the episcopal delegate for catechesis in the Archdiocese of Madrid (Spain). His thesis: There is a need for open communities, even small, welcoming spaces of accompaniment, listening, and prayer that transmit peace and the joyful celebration of the faith. (Reprinted from the Spanish issue of Ekklesia.)

‘We are not living an era of change but a change of era’, Pope Francis repeatedly emphasized. Although this well-known statement has become somewhat of a cliché and being understood as simplistic, the challenges for the global Church's mission today are undoubtedly increasing¹.

Cardinal José Cobo, Archbishop of Madrid, spoke of finding ourselves in this change of era as signifying that, on the one hand, “we shall need to change our language and adapt pastoral approaches to the moment. The customary ways no longer work. The change of era demands this step, so that we may proclaim the fascination of the Gospel to a city and to peoples who are thirsting for it”. On the other, it means facing “the challenge of stimulating communities, parishes, and ecclesial realities of every kind in missionary fields: open communities, family-like communities, and above all communities which are oriented towards God. Communities that proclaim through deeds, words and celebrations, the compelling power of the Gospel”.²

A New Face Arising from the Ashes

Does this hark back to the 'creative communities' spoken of by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger half a century ago? He coined this expression to describe the future Church, made of minorities and constituted by basic Christian communities which would be alive in parishes, in charismatic groups, in various institutions, in ecclesial Movements, and so on. For many this was scandalous. Some even interpreted it as a deeply pessimistic alarm in the face of advancing secularization, whereas he saw it as a providential opportunity for the Church to rise from the ashes of the profound crisis in traditional Western culture and

modernity with a new face and a new missionary impulse. “[U]sually”, said Pope Benedict, “it is creative minorities who determine the future, and in this regard the Catholic Church must understand that she is a creative minority who has a heritage of values that are not things of the past, but are a very lively and relevant reality.”³

Another great theologian of the Vatican II era also laid the foundations for reflection on 'creative communities.' French Dominican Yves Congar, in his work *Power and Poverty in the Church*, proposed a Church seeking to serve rather than to dominate, one speaking words of welcome rather than condemnation. He saw a Church that opens its doors not only to believers but to all of humanity, for this is the nature of the Church from its very beginning. We can think of when Jesus preached apostolic poverty and experienced the 'failure' of his missionary action, since many, like the rich young man (cf. Mt 19:16–30), turned their backs on him. In fact, some asked: "This way of speaking is hard, who can listen to it?", and "many of his disciples withdrew and did not go with him anymore". But the few who followed him, like Peter, understood that "you alone have the words of eternal life" (Jn 6:60-68), and showed great apostolic poverty as a human collective.⁴

Far from the End of a Journey

Thus, we should not be frightened if, in this moment, we are living a time characterized by "internal and external secularization" (St. Paul VI), "silent apostasy" (St. John Paul II), an "eclipse of God" and "religious indifference" (Benedict XVI), and of an "absence of faith" (Francis). This is a seeming "failure" in our mission as understood according to worldly categories. But it is inherent in the DNA of the evangelizing adventure.

And it is difficult for us to think — as Pablo D'Ors says — that Christianity is being born, and that 'the past is never reason to oppose the present and future of our faith.' Finding ourselves at the bottom of the arc of postmodernity in terms of secularization ought to seem to us anything but the end of the journey. Might not all of this instead constitute a new beginning, after an evangelization phase lasting a mere two thousand years, in which we passed through the trial of a passing Christendom that has nothing to do with an incarnate, world-rooted Christianity? Did not St. John Paul II mean something similar when he explained to us that "an overall view of the human race shows that this mission is still only beginning and that we must commit ourselves wholeheartedly to its service?"⁷

What *kind* of Community?

In speaking about "creative communities" it is good to say something about the two words composing it. What kind of community are we talking about and what does this "creativity" consist of?

These are small communities in social contexts of non-belief or other beliefs, where a Christian presence is decidedly in the minority, even if the post-secularist society does not

necessarily have to be a society without religion. But it is also a question of *creative communities*, capable of initiating unprecedented processes of evangelization and being significant in their own socio-cultural context because of their witness. They are spaces of authentic communion, because they cultivate the spirituality of communion proposed by St. John Paul II⁸. This makes them capable of evangelizing by their mere presence: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (*Jn* 13:35). Moreover, as the Portuguese theologian José Cardoso states: "the less evident the life of communion, the less we evangelize. But conversely, the greater the witness to communion (*koinonía*), the more the fruits of the new evangelization are verified, beginning with joy, hope, zeal, missionary zeal, and strength in adversity"⁹.

But it is also a question of communities putting this spirituality into practice, as a true synodal experience. Pope Francis did not invent the adjective "synodal". Rather, he recalled the fact that it is not an adjective but a noun. The Church is nothing more than this: from the Council of Jerusalem in apostolic times to the present day, she has seen herself mirrored in the Acts of the Apostles which describe the Church as this "group of believers" who "were of one heart and soul" (*Acts* 4:32)¹⁰.

The Capacity to Be Leaven

Let's move on to the second question: what does the term "creativity" mean in its connection to communities?

Pope Francis told us that true creativity is born of evangelizing zeal, since "whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today's world."¹¹ But it is always a question of a creativity arising from charity, because "charity cannot be neutral, antiseptic, indifferent, lukewarm or impartial! Charity is infectious, it excites, it risks and it engages! For true charity is always unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous! (cf. 1 Cor 13). Charity is creative in finding the right words to speak to all those considered incurable and hence untouchable."¹²

For Cardinal De Kesel, Archbishop of Brussels¹³, the key lies in the Church's relationship with the world. When Christianity was a cultural religion, the world and the Church coincided. We deluded ourselves that we lived in a Christian world. In a secularized culture, this is no longer the case. The world is infinitely larger than the Church. The Church is not the world, but lives in the world. Mission cannot be confused with the restoration of a homogeneous Christian civilization. The Church is not called to gradually conquer the world. The coincidence between the Church and the world is not a reality that takes place in history but at the end of time. As long as the world lasts, the Church will live in *the diaspora*.

De Kesel recalls a statement of Pope Francis during his apostolic journey to Morocco: "The problem is not when we are few in number, but when we are insignificant, salt that has lost the flavour of the Gospel – this is the problem – or lamps that no longer shed light (cf. Mt

5:13-15). I believe we should worry whenever we Christians are troubled by the thought, we are only significant if we are the flour, if we occupy all the spaces. You know very well that our lives are meant to be “yeast”, wherever and with whomever we find ourselves, even if this appears to bring no tangible or immediate benefits (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 210).¹⁴.

Foretasting new heavens and a new earth

Evangelization’s ultimate (eschatological) goal over centuries lies not only in ensuring as many people as possible accepting Jesus at the end of their lives because they accept the Good News proclaimed, but in the fact that they can come to recognize him implicitly in the witness of Christians, in the Christian community (in creative communities) and come to know a foretaste of the new heavens and new earth.

From a concrete pastoral perspective, the important thing is not the existence of fantastic parishes with ever greater numbers of groups and activities. Rather it is important that there are even small, attractive spaces of welcome, accompaniment, listening, and prayer that transmit peace, and are a festive celebration and initiation into the faith. Similarly, it is not important to have apostolic initiatives involving fully prepared lay people in the highest positions of public life (political, economic, educational and media) and with the most sophisticated means for the mission, but rather movements and ecclesial communities that offer listening, bonds of communion, spaces of mutual love, and evangelizing witness. What matters is to start from these communities, where it is possible to offer what the mystic and servant of God, Chiara Lubich, called *the attraction of modern times*, to become “sharers in God’s plans for humanity, to embroider patterns of light on the crowd, and at the same time to share with our neighbor shame, hunger, troubles, brief joys.”¹⁵

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- 1 The reflection here further expanded by M.M. Bru Alonso in, *¿Ha fracasado la Nueva Evangelización? El desafío misionero de la acogida a cercanos, alejados y lejanos de la fe cristiana*, Editorial San Pablo, Madrid 2024, 688 pp. On this topic: pp. 436-453.
 - 2 Card. J. Cobo, Homily delivered during the celebration marking the beginning of his episcopal ministry as archbishop of Madrid, 8 July 2023.
 - 3 Benedict XVI, Meeting with journalists on the flight to the Czech Republic, 26 September 2009.
 - 4 Cf. Yves M.-J. Congar, *For a Servant and Poor Church*, Ed. Qiqajon, Community of Bose, Magnano 2014.
 - 5 Card. R. Blázquez, *Living the Faith in Today's World*, Address on the occasion of the ceremony in honor of Card. Carlos Osoro, San Dámaso Ecclesiastical University, October 26, 2023.
 - 6 P. D'Ors, *The clouds pass, the sky remains*, in «Vida Nueva» n. 3338 (28.10-3.11.2023) p. 50.
 - 7 Saint John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* (7 December 1990) n. 1.
 - 8 Cf. id., Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (6 January 2001), n. 43.
 - 9 J. Cardoso de Almeida, *Evangelizing Community in the Perspective of St. John Paul II*, in L.M. Figueiredo Rodrigues (ed.), *Proponer la fe en una pluralidad de caminos*, PPC Ed., Madrid 2021, pp. 65-66.
 - 10 Cf. M.M. Bru Alonso, *What is the Synod on Synodality?*, Ciudad Nueva (December 2021) pp. 8-9.
 - 11 Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013) n. 11.

- ¹² Francis, Homily at Holy Mass with the new cardinals and the College of Cardinals, 15 February 2015.
- ¹³ Card. Joseph De Kesel, *The Relationship between Christianity and Secularization in the Postmodern Era*, Conference at the Congress of the European Catechesis Team in Brussels, 2 June 2022.
- ¹⁴ Francis, Address to the Meeting with Priests, Religious, Consecrated Persons and the World Council of Churches, Rabat Cathedral, 31 March 2019.
- ¹⁵ C. Lubich, *Essential Writings*, New City Press, Hyde Park New York (2009), pg. 169.