



Some Reflections as We Walk Toward the 4th Centennial of the Congregation of the Mission

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Abstract:

In anticipation of the 400th anniversary of the Congregation of the Mission's foundation, the author invites us to reflect on the possibility of a modern Pentecost to renew Vincentian spirituality and evangelization. He examines whether the profound experience of the original Pentecost, which revitalized the early disciples amidst crisis, can be replicated today. The author proposes that a new Pentecost requires understanding and addressing the complex, secular, and pluralistic realities of contemporary society. This reflection highlights the necessity of a genuine conversion and a return to the core Christian values, emphasizing love and openness over rigid doctrines. The author calls for the Church to engage dynamically with today's globalized and technologically advanced world, urging a shift from hierarchical structures to a more inclusive and networked approach. This transformation aims to reconnect the Church with younger generations, fostering faith through lived experiences and personal witness, and ultimately, proposing a hopeful, vibrant Christian message in the modern era.

Anticipándose al 400 aniversario de la fundación de la Congregación de la Misión, el autor nos invita a reflexionar sobre la posibilidad de un Pentecostés moderno que renueve la espiritualidad y la evangelización vicencianas. Examina si la profunda experiencia del Pentecostés original, que revitalizó a los primeros discípulos en medio de la crisis, puede repetirse hoy. El autor propone que un nuevo Pentecostés requiere comprender y abordar las realidades complejas, seculares y pluralistas de la sociedad contemporánea. Esta reflexión pone de relieve la necesidad de una auténtica conversión y de un retorno a los valores cristianos fundamentales, haciendo hincapié en el amor y la apertura por encima de las doctrinas rígidas. El autor insta a la Iglesia a comprometerse dinámicamente con el mundo globalizado y tecnológicamente avanzado de hoy, instando a un cambio de las estructuras jerárquicas a un enfoque más inclusivo y en red. Esta transformación pretende reconectar a la Iglesia con las generaciones más jóvenes, fomentando la fe a través de experiencias vividas y testimonios personales y, en última instancia, proponiendo un mensaje cristiano esperanzador y vibrante en la era moderna.

En prévision du 400^e anniversaire de la fondation de la Congrégation de la Mission, l'auteur nous invite à réfléchir à la possibilité d'une Pentecôte moderne pour renouveler la spiritualité et l'évangélisation vincentiennes. Il examine si l'expérience profonde de la Pentecôte originelle, qui a revitalisé les premiers disciples en pleine crise, peut être reproduite aujourd'hui. L'auteur propose qu'une nouvelle Pentecôte exige de comprendre et d'aborder les réalités complexes, séculières et pluralistes de la société contemporaine. Cette réflexion souligne la nécessité d'une conversion authentique et d'un retour aux valeurs chrétiennes fondamentales, en mettant l'accent sur l'amour et l'ouverture plutôt que sur des doctrines rigides. L'auteur appelle l'Église à s'engager de manière dynamique dans le monde globalisé et technologiquement avancé d'aujourd'hui, en préconisant le passage de structures hiérarchiques à une approche plus inclusive et en réseau. Cette transformation vise à reconnecter l'Église avec les jeunes générations, en encourageant la



foi par le biais d'expériences vécues et de témoignages personnels et, en fin de compte, en proposant un message chrétien vibrant et plein d'espoir à l'ère moderne.

Keywords: Spirituality, Evangelization, Pentecost, New World, New Catholicism

I have heard many times our Superior General, Father Tomaž Mavrič, praying that the 400th anniversary of the foundation of our Congregation might be an occasion for a new Pentecost, in order to revitalize our spirituality and, I imagine, our evangelizing action in today's world.

I have wondered whether it is realistic to think, and thus pray, that such a unique and founding event of the Church itself, of which we Vincentians also are a part, be "repeated." This article that I am about to write aims to propose some reflections so that Father Tomaž's desire (and thus prayer) can somehow be translated into concrete reality in the world in which we live: a world in some ways very different from the Palestinian world in the 50 days after Christ's resurrection, in other ways perhaps with some things in common.

Let us immediately clear the field of some possible ambiguities. No one, I think, imagines that on the day of Pentecost over the heads of the apostles, gathered in the cenacle with Mary, flames came down, a strong wind came in through the windows or something like that. Then what could have happened? I imagine that this group of the Lord's first disciples (and this is the aspect in common, in my opinion, with the situation of much of the Church today) was greatly in crisis: the hopes placed in Jesus of Nazareth had gone up in smoke, with no longer a prospect for the future, a great disappointment invaded the spirits of each and every one.

At this point, there were two paths: either they resigned themselves to the new situation, convincing themselves that there could be nothing more they could do to re-propose the gospel of a man who died on the cross, or they could become aware that that gospel was now in their hands, delivered to them by the Master himself, who asked them to live and interpret it in light of the new situation. That scanty group of disciples chose this second path. It was Pentecost!

I believe that Pentecost can indeed be repeated today, if we are able to re-enact the profound experience of those who, starting from a new and unexpected (crisis-provoking) situation, were able to find the right way to become the Lord's witnesses in the world and thus evangelize it. On closer inspection, they used a method well known to us, which we are used to denote by the triad, see-judge-act.

For that reason, I will try to look at some of the deep dynamics of today's reality (as complex and diverse as it is, if we consider it on a global level) to see it as it is, and then discern some possible proposals for intervention (thus judging such avenues viable), so that they may guide concrete action toward a desirable new Pentecost in function of our evangelization in the contemporary way.

I must make an obvious premise. It is not feasible to encapsulate in one article the reading of the dynamics and the proposal of the respective perspectives at the level of the entire Congregation, given its presence on the five continents, which are characterized by social, cultural, and ecclesial problems that are enormously different from one another. As much as I will try to propose reflections that fit everyone, the conditioning due to the European context in which I move and which I know best will be evident: a context moreover that is also difficult to define unambiguously: post-

modern, secularized, post-secularized or even post-Christian? However, we have to keep in mind that the globalization of the world tends to drag with it also the processes of secularization that, although typical of the Western world, easily affect the so-called emerging countries and even the so-called Third-World countries (concepts now outdated in the de facto globalized world).

In any case, in Europe at least, the Church is facing an unprecedented generational junction: in the population who are under 30, those who do not attend Church or who feel completely indifferent to the “God question” are in a clear majority. When my generation (60-70 years old) passes on, the European Church, already thinned out, will find itself with an even smaller number of faithful.

There is both an organizational problem and a language problem. As for the structure of the Church (bureaucratized and hierarchical), it appears increasingly unable to keep up with a world that has become fast-paced and pluralistic. As for the language problem, liturgies appear verbose and tired, the words spoken are too often distant and impervious to life. It is never more important than at this time to focus on the underlying question: is there still room for the Christian “good news” in today’s world?

In the past, the alliance between Christianity and modernity for several centuries was always strong, although there have been continuous skirmishes. In fact, as conditions developed for the uprooting of modern forms of life from their religious foundations, modernity (the state and the market) resorted to religious cultures to assert and strengthen itself. The very churches lent themselves to the game, profiting from it.

But since the 1960s, there has been a break in the moral consensus that had accompanied the long phase of “secularized Christianity.” At the origin of this change are two dynamics. First, the spread of subjectivistic culture among all social classes, which, since the advent of the consumer society and youth movements of the late 1960s, has become prevalent in all Western countries. The second phenomenon concerns the increasingly pronounced focus on the theme of desire, objectified in the myriad of material goods that our society is able to produce and distribute.

In the following years (between 1989 and 2008), modernity reached such a level of maturity that it thought it could do without Christianity and become a global project capable of involving all of humanity as such, regardless of its cultural, ethical, and religious content.

Now, this highly accelerated process, which is at the origin of the enormous development achieved in the past two centuries, is in danger of spiraling out of control. Thus, at the beginning of the 21st century, European culture is faced with two major issues.

The first has to do with the phenomenon of the “globalization of modernity”: today the modern demon, freed from Western and, therefore, Christian history, now roams the world, interacting with cultures other than our own. Indeed, even with its “neutrality,” science was born in the bed of a West imbued with humanistic and Christian values, which placed man at the center. But there is no guarantee with respect to the future as other cultural universes appropriate the scientific-technical method to manipulate reality. For example, the path China seems to have taken suggests a path of modernization that thinks about the individual-society nexus and immanence-transcendence very differently from the Western tradition.

The second issue of utmost importance that challenges European culture is the

transhumanist hypothesis, which aims to reprogram man, deemed manifestly imperfect. By asserting the total coincidence between the limitless development of technology and the maximization of individual freedom, transhumanism mocks any anthropology that does not coincide with techno-scientific anthropology. The implicit assumption is that human beings are to be “augmented” continually, reducing their difference from the machine bit by bit. I think it is easy to see at this point what is at stake, which exposes us to risks that are difficult to predict and calculate.

In this sociological context, what role can Christianity play today and in the near future? It is clear that the role played by Christianity in recent centuries (that of being the cultural complement to the processes of modernity) has weakened greatly. Contemporary modernity is increasingly attracted to the possibility of complete autonomy from its Christian premises. This is not to say that the role of Christianity and its resilience should be considered at the end of the line. Certainly, Christianity still has the resources to play an important role in the history of modernity; provided, however, that there is a profound conversion, a return to the spirit of its origins in the light of new questions. This is not a matter of recovering the role it had in the past, but rather of imagining the new role it can play in the future.

There are also those who see in this phase of Christianity’s history a propitious time for a revival, even considering it a phase of maturation of Christianity itself, provided that we do not try to return nostalgically to a time before the crisis or to solve this crisis rashly, with a mere outward reform of ecclesiastical institutions, without making deeper changes at the theological and spiritual level (cf., T. Halik, *Afternoon of Christianity. The Courage to Change*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 2024).

We live in a new world ...

“*This time is not only a time of change, but a change of epoch*” (Pope Francis). The forms of religion and their role in various cultures and societies also change with it. Secularization has not caused the end of religion, but its change.

The starting point of any analysis of the future of the Church and its activities (evangelization, missions, etc.) is inevitably the obvious realization of a way that has changed. This is not an event that happened, but a long process that has matured over the centuries.

Gone is that world that originated in the 4th century, corresponding to the political choices of Emperor Constantine (and later Theodosius) and the great dogmatic councils, from Nicaea (325) to Constantinople (381). At least there is no longer that compact microcosm capable of imposing itself over a vast territory and repelling every possible attack on it (atheism, secularism, modernism, etc.).

The idea of order and balance that Christianity had inherited from Greek culture at a certain point in history no longer held: something jammed, or rather, it was no longer able to contain the growth of that human subjectivity that Christianity itself carried and nurtured.

An important moment in this process was the crisis of the religious order produced between the 14th and 16th centuries, during which the sovereign took the place of God and the state that of the Church. From then on, political discourse began to compete with religious discourse.

Now, however, we are at an even further stage, in which politics has been

supplanted in turn by technology: the utopia of a perfect society now translates into the pursuit of individual enjoyment; ideology becomes technology and the sovereignty of the state gives way to the sovereignty of the self.

In the new reality, Christian transmission from parents to children is no longer something obvious that can be taken for granted. Things that were once obvious, such as attendance at places of worship, civic life punctuated by the religious calendar, dogmatic observance of Sundays (not to mention the moral norms proposed by the Church's magisterium), now encounter a "transmission failure," to use an effective image proposed a quarter century ago by the then Bishop of Clermont, France.

Faith once was transmitted from one generation to the next as a set of teachings shared by the social community as a whole and to a good extent consistent, even without making it explicit, with the social institutions themselves. Then came '68 with its contestation to the principle of authority, the radical transformation of the media, and desire capitalism with its emphasis on individual choice.

The fact remains that the traditional approach of faith "by adherence" has become increasingly anachronistic over the centuries. That is, we are at the end of a world in which faith followed the logic of adherence to a *body* of doctrine and shared practices. Advanced modernity has challenged this pattern from at least two perspectives. On the subjective level, the idea of conforming to an external pattern becomes impossible the moment support and pressure to conform in one's surroundings are lost. On the side of institutions, then, distrust of any ethical reference pushes toward proceduralism and ritual forms that are increasingly emptied of meaning.

But we know it well: crises can either lead to disarray or to profound renewal; much depends on the evolution of our consciousness. Europeans today are discovering themselves as Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox, Muslims, Jews: hence the possible maturation of a new sensibility, based on a broad cultural and religious pluralism; without forgetting that pluralism is not simply the sum of many individual options, but the result of a complex and articulated social and institutional architecture.

We must be very careful not to give into the temptation to take shortcuts or to believe that the solution lies in building alliances with political groups that promise to "defend Christian values" (in exchange, of course, for electoral support and social legitimacy). The model based on the exchange of power between politics and religion is very dangerous for both (as history has demonstrated abundantly), but especially for the Church, which would then find its hands tied, effectively blackmailed by political power.

Much also depends on the communities of faith: even if some of them are strongly under the spell of fundamentalism and nationalism or, at any rate, of radical thrusts that are hardly compatible with the principles of secularism and pluralism. Will we, as Christians, be able to grow in this new sensibility, to open ourselves to a common hope and mutual trust? Put another way, under what conditions will the Christian faith still be able to play a significant role in the new situation?

It is clear that to master the technocratic monopolization that threatens to dehumanize man today, reason is not enough. Reason is useful and necessary to set limits, to say "no," but it is unable to say "yes"; that is, to give impetus to that dynamism that is at the origin of faith.

Faith can play a dual role today: on the one hand, it is called to unmask the

illusory promises of technical society; on the other hand, it is about rediscovering the true Christian identity, before and beyond reason. Love, which is the core of Christianity, does not conflict with reason: it enlarges it.

The Christian wager is to rediscover the *surplus* of life; that is, its openness to the Other from him/herself, which is at bottom the good news of the gospel, not least because, if man does not believe in God, he believes in idols, as Max Scheler wrote. Reason without faith does not exist—a warning as relevant as ever for a society in which the technical model relativizes everything in order to assert its own as its only legitimacy. Everything must be made matter subordinate to a function: everything (even life itself) must be available, usable, manipulable. So, sooner or later, everything becomes “waste,” us included.

that challenges our faith

We need to rediscover faith as *commitment*—commitment that also arises as a willingness not to be caged by an ego that presumes to be able to dominate the whole world and, in the end, leaves us frustrated and walled inside a dry and unsatisfying self-referentiality. The liberation that the Christian faith can propose to today’s person has to do with that very simple, yet today difficult to decipher, anthropological movement that allows us to go beyond our own existence and thus traverse it fully. The one who lets go of one’s life, who does not hold it back, and does not pretend to control it, finds it: this is pure gospel.

Therefore, Christianity has something important to say to contemporary people, reminding them that the choice of faith is a different and more satisfying way to live “life” to the full. The contribution that Christianity has to offer today’s world is thus to suggest a different way to fulfill the promise that modernity has disregarded.

To become vital, meaningful again, faith in Jesus Christ needs to regenerate itself in light of new questions. The Church then should not rigidly fix doctrinal content, but rather foster the experience of faith. One does not become a Christian because one knows and accepts a doctrine, because one adheres to formulated truths. One becomes a Christian because one learns the elementary but difficult movement of life, which asks one to trust. From this point of view, the younger generation cannot access the faith unless they encounter adults who are capable of first living and then communicating their personal experience of faith.

The gospel is not a model, but an experience, which nevertheless manages to maintain a universal projection. The parables of Jesus and the stories of daily life communicate something all-encompassing. The Church today is called to think of itself as a network, not a hierarchy.

It is surprising to see how little the Church knows how to take advantage of being a planetary network. Yet, for a young person today to see the Church or a congregation as a door that can connect you with the whole world could be a reason to get closer. What can we say, in times when the Erasmus project has proved so positive for universities, about the almost total absence of international experiences in the formation path of young priests and religious. As I write (July 2023) preparations are being made for World Youth Day in Lisbon: it could be an excellent opportunity for a true universal faith experience.

The gospel is a dynamic message, not a static one. Jesus’ central concern was never to gather a group of zealots, but to teach his disciples not to be crushed by error and always to get back up, confident in the mercy of God the Father: to be open to life,

to love, to the surprise of God's grace, despite human limitations. This is all we need to pass on to today's youth so that they will spontaneously open themselves to the beauty of the gospel of Jesus.

Unfortunately, today, especially among young people, the widespread perception of the Church is instead that of a rigid, somewhat closed and procedural, formal organization concerned with preserving itself and protecting orthodoxy instead of becoming a mother who accompanies people's lives with mercy and benevolence; a Church where discourse prevails more than facts, theory more than practice, and where, not infrequently, facts contradict speeches.

Tenderness, gentleness are the conditions for rebirth. Too often in the Church we speak of God only from the perspective of the children, who tend, with impatience, to regard authority as the Law. This is an error in perspective. A good parent desires to see the fullness of life flourish in his or her children, in the necessary and unplanned ways and times, in the unexpected forms it may take: thus, is our Father in heaven!

The message is important, but it must be conveyed in the right language. Take, for example, the proclamation of salvation, which has always been a central message in the preaching of the Church. What discourse on salvation can we offer to contemporary people in the age of technology? Hospitals or clinics themselves have changed in nature in the contemporary world. They arose as places for the care of sick people. Today they are conceived as true health factories. Their goal is not so much to accompany the sick person as to fight disease and ensure physical healing through the most advanced techniques.

The idea of health itself tends to change. Today it no longer refers only to the treatment of diseases, the recovery of damaged functions (*healing*), but extends to include the idea of prevention and especially the building up of vital functions and performance capabilities (*enhancement*). Today, even in the very hospitals run by religious people, the only salvation expected is that of the body, in full confidence in the professional skills of physicians and the latest technology.

The example of the hospital helps to understand the more general problem: about what salvation can we speak to contemporary people today? The question is challenging and calls for a profound rethinking of our message. A discourse on salvation that, while remaining faithful to the gospel, is able to speak to contemporary people must have the courage to convey a more dynamic and open vision of life: not another life that will be experienced in eternity if we have merited it, but a life that we can somehow already savor in the present, beyond all contrasts and failures, when we experience "eternal life" in the various temporal moments of our existence. The Christian lives the newness of life in every moment. Is this not the work of the Spirit who "makes all things new"? Is this not the "new Pentecost" to which we can look forward?

In this perspective, "to die to self" does not mean to sacrifice, but to place one's trust in the life from which we come and to which we are destined to return. This is the message we can bring to the world today: witnessing to the possibility of escaping the fate of death by living in the knowledge that life is superior to death; that salvation is the call that concerns every human being to be part of the great process of life that precedes us and to which we belong. This is a credible proclamation, provided we do not make life coincide with individual existence and learn the lesson left to us by Francis of Assisi, who still fascinates so many young people today.

It is the quality of our life that bears witness to our faith. What speaks of our faith is our own life, not what we think or say about God. When we talk about the way we live, I am not just referring to the moral sphere, our virtues and sins. The way we live (and thus express our faith) also includes our emotional richness, our imagination and creativity, our sensitivity to beauty, our sense of humor, our capacity for empathy, and a whole host of other qualities.

puts the Church institution in crisis

As the world, which might once have been called Christian, changes, the people who adhere to it evidently change as well. The so-called “religious sense” has certainly not disappeared; if anything, it is being transformed and seeking alternative institutional forms of expression. Today more and more religious forms are emerging in which individuals seek and build direct links with the transcendent, preferring horizontal and equal relationships to ecclesiastical and vertical hierarchies. Sociologist Luigi Berzano speaks in this regard of a fourth secularization, in which religion would not be emptied of spiritual experiences, but would be transformed into more personalized forms, independent of dogmatic content and traditional historical religions (see L. Berzano, *The Fourth Secularisation*, Routledge, Abingdon-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, 2019).

Major religious institutions today seem incapable of renewal, so much so that individuals struggle to feel them as their own. Today there are fewer and fewer regular churchgoers; that is, those who go to church “when the bell rings” (according to Gabriel Le Bras’ effective image), to make way for a new figure of the believer, that of the nomad, the pilgrim, the wandering believer, who transcends denominational and territorial affiliations (cf. D. Hervieu-Léger, *Il pellegrino e il convertito* [*The Pilgrim and the Convert*], Il Mulino, Bologna, 2003).

A clear example of this is the growing success of popular mass gatherings, such as the World Youth Days, inaugurated by John Paul II in 1985, or the gradual increase in pilgrimage destinations, to Guadalupe in Mexico, Aparecida in Brazil, Santiago de Compostela, Lourdes, Padua, Assisi, Medjugorje, and, as far as we Vincentians are concerned, to rue du Bac in Paris.

In fact, it is plausible to adopt pilgrimage as one of the icons of today’s moving religious landscape, at least in a twofold sense. On the one hand, it metaphorically refers back to the fluidity and multiplicity of spiritual paths, now predominant in Western culture; on the other, it fully responds to a booming form of religious sociality, which is defined in the name of mobility and temporary membership, often partial and fragmentary.

While the figure of the habitual practitioner was connected necessarily with a fixed ritual practice that was socially perceived as dutiful, regulated by the religious institution, communitarian and territorialized, thus stable, as well as regularly repeated, that of the spirit nomad and pilgrim is characterized by an individual and voluntary practice, autonomous, exceptional, and out of the ordinary (cf. D. Hervieu-Léger, *ibid.*, p. 87).

Rather than a godless and valueless generation, the current one could be described as a generation without reference points and in constant search: a search conducted in very different forms than in the past, with little or no knowledge of doctrine, a precarious practice to say the least, and a certain *ad personam* [to the person] trust in Pope Francis, who inspires sympathy and is considered capable of

conveying the Gospel message.

Franco Garelli, a sociologist at the University of Turin, who has directed a very thorough research on faith in young people, reports that while denial of God and religious indifference are growing significantly among the under-30s, partly due to the spread of a practical atheism among those who maintain a tenuous link with Catholicism, nevertheless, in them the question of meaning remains lively (cf. F. Garelli, *Piccoli atei crescono* [*Little Atheists Grow Up*], Il Mulino, Bologna, 2016). For many of them, religious feeling is expressed in their personal interiority, moving from a vertical dimension (the relationship with transcendence) to a horizontal one (the search for individual harmony).

It is clear that we face a great challenge today. The time has come to move beyond the idea of religion as simply a private phenomenon, which ends up failing to value the contribution that all religions can bring to the public sphere today.

Conversely, religions are also called to courageous change. The Catholic Church itself, instead of imagining an improbable return to the past, if it wants to be faithful to its history and at the same time to the historical moment in which we find ourselves (and to be meaningful for the people of our time), must have the courage to work out an alternative way between the modern model (antagonism between politics and religion) and the contemporary model (reduction of religion to a private phenomenon).

It is in its ability to regenerate its institutional logic that the future of the Church is at stake. Two brief examples: the practice of the sacraments and the role of women. As for the former, the Church seems to have lost the awareness that, in a world that no longer knows “rites of passage,” the sacraments are a potentially extraordinary resource for helping people make a collective journey that restores depth to each person’s experience, that marks existential passages essential for the formation of personal identity and social recognition. But it must have the courage to rethink them because, born in the context of *societas christiana* [Christian society], in today’s secularized society they do not convey the same meaning as they once did.

As for the role of women in the Church, it too needs to be rethought and placed in a new way. It is not just a matter of “equal opportunity”; that is, it is not about numerical equality, but about “reciprocity” between the feminine and the masculine. Reciprocity is a dynamic perspective, as differences fertilize each other and generate the unprecedented. Reciprocity suggests the urgency of changing the world through female contribution, rather than placing more women in the world as it is. Eve is born not so much to “complete” Adam but to stand before him in reciprocity.

From a sociological point of view, the Church as an institution is necessary for the faith to be passed down through the centuries. Somewhat like the body with respect to the spirit, so the institution is necessary to make sure that the proclamation of the gospel can be transmitted between generations. But just as the body becomes a problem for the spirit when it absolutizes its own needs, in the same way the institution must remind itself always that it exists so that faith can be embodied in the dynamics of personal and collective life. Now, the risk of every institution, including the ecclesiastical one, is the heterogenesis of ends: that is, to transform itself from a means and an end, from a support for the transmission of faith to a bureaucratic apparatus that affirms and reproduces itself.

There is an urgent need to move from the Church as institution to the Church

as people. Pope Francis' Latin American sensibility leads him to give a first-rate role to the common people, away from all intellectualism and clericalism. The people are full of the humanity that interests the gospel, made up of wealth and poverty, holiness and sin, momentum and inertia.

But can one still speak of "the people" in Europe or in the West in general? In other words, does that religious sense to which Pope Francis refers by referring to the people still exist in a radically individualized world, in which a populism that instrumentally uses religious symbols to its own ends is infiltrating increasingly?

To recover the sense of the people, the Catholic Church is called to interact with the real-life condition of the people, with their fears and hopes. The people are the set of people in relationship, sharing a place and a history. It is the opposite of the mass, composed of isolated individuals, mutually indifferent or distrustful, with their heads bent over their cell phones.

Through fidelity to life, of Bonhoefferian memory, we can find the lost path again, so as to regenerate ourselves, without trusting too much in the institution and its discourses, but betting on life. The end of ideologies is not only about political doctrines, but also about religious doctrines.

... challenges our method of evangelization

This is the terrain on which the game of the oft-repeated "re-evangelization of Europe" is being played out: no discourse will be sufficient if it is not born from a profound experience and a language that is that of witness; that is, of experience that speaks of concrete life and is capable of inspiring others because it moves within a horizon of meaning.

Contemporary culture struggles between two opposite extremes: that of inhumanity and that of transhumanity. On the one hand, the number of innocent victims of the processes of modernization, side effects and unavoidable costs to the welfare of others, is growing more and more. From this point of view, the term "poverty" is now inadequate to indicate this condition. Perhaps the term "impoverishment" would better express the idea of diminishment and destruction from a process perspective.

At the opposite extreme is the pole of transhumanity. In the transhuman, there is no longer a "world," because everything is manufactured and therefore manipulable, with the risk that we ourselves become a piece of the cog in the manipulating machine.

It is precisely in countering these two drifts that the Catholic Church can play a significant and important role by drawing attention to two consequences of our technological model: that of human waste and mystery.

The first consequence, of which the current Pontiff himself has recalled strongly, is that of the marginality that every advanced society continually reproduces, reinforcing what he himself calls the "culture of waste." Here, on the topic of the poor, we Vincentians could play a more significant role, if through the window of the poor we know how to look critically at the established social and economic order, instead of being content with a pastoral ministry that leaves that order as it is, and if we know how to "apply systemic change as the common method of our evangelical actions" (cf. *Final Document of the 2022 GA*, Point C, Line of Action no. 6).

The second drift of the current technological model has to do with the sense of mystery, questioning, and prayer. We live in a world that is too full, too fast, where every moment is saturated and every place connected, without silence, without emptiness. In this regard, we should have the courage to rediscover the true meaning of prayer, liturgy, ritual, silence. Our prayer needs to recover its ability to relate us to the ultimate horizons of our existence, to bow before the mystery of life. Today's secularized person has a great need and desire for this prayer, not repetitive formulas.

The Catholic Church today is called to build a bridge between the contemporary condition and what it is not yet, in a momentum that only the ability to stand on the two frontiers of waste and mystery can animate. The Catholic Church has a great liturgical tradition, which today is in danger of folding in on itself instead of animating the world. There is a great need to experiment with new ways of praying in the contemporary city. For prayer achieves its purpose when it is concrete; that is, it knows how to speak of life and to life, involving mind, heart, body, without being cold, detached, and verbose.

The issue of "authority" in the Church should also be revisited. The Church urgently needs to rediscover the true meaning of authority, which is not to dominate or control, but to "authorize," thus to make one grow in freedom; not, however, as a paternalistic concession, but in the original sense of "making authors" of one's own destiny, letting go of some of one's dominion and allowing each person to take responsibility for his or her own choices in life; an authority that makes those who are weaker, younger, inexperienced grow, accompanying them to become in turn actors or authors.

... urges the search for a new universalism

Until recently, most people in Europe lived within religious groups circumscribed within their social contours, with a marked consciousness of their religious identity and the difference that separated them from individuals belonging to other religious traditions.

Unlike in the past, today a snapshot of various beliefs can only photograph them as a process in constant flux. It is easy to choose to be an atheist or agnostic, to follow religious orthodoxy, or to change confessions, without any problem.

As Cardinal Martini repeated several times in his teaching, "religious pluralism is today a challenge for all the great faiths, especially for those that define themselves as universal and definitive ways of salvation," so much so that "if you do not want to arrive at new clashes, a serious and correct interreligious dialogue will have to be strongly promoted" (cf. C. M. Martini, *Fratelli e sorelle. Ebrei, cristiani, musulmani* [*Brothers and Sisters. Jews, Christians, Muslims*], edited by B. Salvarani, Rizzoli, Milano, 2020, pp. 886-887).

More than theoretical interpretation or comparison among doctrines, what matters today is the honest description of what is happening in this age. P. Jenkins (see his *The Lost History of Christianity*, HarperOne, New York, 2008) sets up an interesting parallel with the reaction in Christianity that produced the anti-Christian persecution of the late 18th century, respectively with the great missionary movement of the 19th century and the revival of great Catholic devotion in the following century. In fact, he writes in his book, *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis*, "It is possible that the present sense of impending doom surrounding

European Christianity will arouse an equally important movement in the near future. Death and resurrection are not only the fundamental doctrine of Christianity: they represent a model of the structure and development of this religion.” In his view, for this to be realized, it would require the Church to become more engaged in frontier issues, presenting a Christian perspective on social and political issues, such as biotechnology and the defense of the concept of humanity in an age when science has the potential to create new kinds of humanity or new semi-human forms (cf. robotic and artificial intelligence sciences in general).

Now, all churches today are called to face the challenge of religious pluralism—a challenge in many ways more fearsome than atheism or religious indifference, because it defies the traditional understanding of Christian identity in its claim to uniqueness and universality. After all, Pope Francis himself misses no opportunity to reiterate that Christian identity cannot be understood through the denial of the other, but only and constantly in relation to the other, grasped in its irreducible diversity. In other words, the future Church will either be ecumenical or it will not. In other words, ecumenism must finally come off the shelves of specialists and enter permanently the agendas of parish councils, ecclesial movements, religious communities, the current *synodal journey*, and what is called *ordinary pastoral care*.

a new form of ecumenism

The ecumenism we need today is not a matter of a theoretical confrontation on different theological positions, but the affirmation of the concrete vocation to peace of different religions, as forcefully recalled by Pope Francis’ encyclical *Fratelli tutti*. In this perspective, the relationship with other religious traditions is set on the basis of *common evidence* that invites religions and churches (and in them religious congregations) to a profound revision of their own identity. In other words, a true revitalization of one’s charism cannot be sought today in a self-referential way (i.e., only looking inward), but in a frank, courageous, and bold confrontation with external realities that can offer resources and energy for such revitalization.

The current crisis is a crossroads at which the possibility of a radical transformation of the Church, or rather of the churches, is given. If these resist the temptation of egocentrism, narcissism, clericalism, provincialism, and self-referentiality, they will be able to contribute to a broad and deep ecumenism, which is the context in which churches can play an important role in the future. It is not just about the simple “unity of Christians”: the renewal of churches will be able to be a decisive step toward that “universal brotherhood,” which is the great theme of Pope Francis’ pontificate.

This requires intellectual honesty to question ourselves, to enter into crisis, to know how to dialogue with everyone with patience, respect, and in a spirit of listening, to learn to know their history and culture, overcoming the fences that separate us from them. This is how we educate ourselves in mutual understanding. It is not enough to say we are tolerant: we need to truly make room for the other, the different, to give them trust and opportunity. This is a mindset that begins with education and that all religions are called to learn today.

The world today appears to be divided into major cultural and religious areas. This is a situation that could evolve according to opposite scenarios. A first scenario is the cultural-religious consolidation of the different areas, which are increasingly at war with each other, where the clash will be played out more and more in the face of economics, politics, demographics, and technology, without excluding, alas, the

possibility of war.

The opposite scenario involves the gradual divestment of religion as an effect of the triumph of modernity. In this scenario, Europe is the continent where secularization began and where it is now at a more advanced stage. The risk involved is that religion also will become secularized.

Are alternative ways possible? For R. Panikkar (cf. his *Christianity: Christophany*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 2016), the hour of Christianity as we have known it is also drawing to a close, The Christian religion is moving toward the age of “Kristiania,” which “interprets the kingdom within us,” accentuating the dimension of interiority. The risk it runs, looking to the future, is that there will be room only for a personal experience of faith, while the institutional dimension is destined to weaken, perhaps to disappear.

But we can also ask whether it is possible to imagine a new institutional form capable of holding advanced modernity and Christian faith together in fruitful tension. Indeed, we know well that without the institutional dimension there is no historical existence.

A recently proposed way forward that has been discussed much is quite well known: it is *The Benedict Option* (Sentinel, New York, 2017). The author (Rod Dreher), who describes himself as a “conservative Christian,” argues that the time has come when it is no longer possible to live Christianly in this society. He points to the way of Saint Benedict of Norcia as the solution: to recover the great tradition of the past, so as to detach oneself from the world and history, waiting to be reborn on the ashes of the destruction that the present civilization is bound to produce. This is a path that, while grasping the criticality of the present situation, has the limitation of imagining only a return to the past, rejecting any possibility of maturation of the modern path.

In fact, I believe that in the changed historical conditions, the Christian faith today is called to measure itself with other cultures and religions and question the meaning of the term “universal”; the great issue of “inculturation” of the Gospel message: what does “universal” mean, once it is understood that ethnocentrism leads right to more or less hidden forms of violence?

There is a need to start again by seeking to overcome the rifts inherited from the past, without either stiffening or erasing differences, but by dialoguing and looking for points in common. The Christian world today appears mutilated because of two great schisms that have marked its history: that of the East, which gave birth to the Orthodox Church, and that of the Reformation, which broke unity in the heart of Europe.

To bring a contribution from humanity, the Christian faith must engage in the search for the way of recomposition of the three tiles that make up the message of Jesus of Nazareth. Dialogue among these confessions can be a stimulus and a source of great mutual inspiration to initiate new processes, internally within each and among them. Will this be a new Pentecost?

It is not a matter of imagining an improbable formal recomposition (history cannot be erased), but of carrying on dialogue, overcoming distrusts, growing in mutual recognition, and bringing together an important contribution to an anthropology that promotes the human and defends it from those fearful dehumanizing processes evoked above, in the first part of this reflection.

a new idea of catholicity

It is about rethinking the concept of “catholicity” in this beginning of the 21st century. It is the very etymological meaning of the term that can point the way forward. Being Catholic Christians means accepting that we live in tension: a journey, a road that, as individuals and as a community, we make in our lives and in history.

As the great sociologist Georg Simmel wrote about the fate of human beings, we can only experience life through forms, but no form is capable of containing the whole of life, which is always surplus. From this tension originates the positive dynamism of change, which is the very meaning of life. So it is with the Church and her catholicity.

If the Church of the third millennium wants to be the same as the Church of the second or even worse of the first, it will simply die. Only by being challenged by reality (or, to use a jargon familiar to us, by inculturating itself continuously) will the Church be able to regenerate itself, to be alive and capable of bringing to the world a contribution of humanity, in dialogue with other religions, with politics, with technology, in the conviction that the most beautiful Church is not the one we have lost, but the one yet to come.

To bring a real contribution of humanity to today’s world, the Christian faith is called to focus on the centrality of human life itself and the dignity of the existence of every human being. The “Catholic” outlook on life (all life and all lives) is essential to avoid the most nefarious drifts that lurk in the folds of the technical society, which promises a rosy future for humanity, even if, for the time being, someone has to be sacrificed; a society that insists that there will come a day when everyone will receive the expected benefits—a tale heard many times before by the mouth of modernity, but which has always proved to be ideological and false.

All this requires honesty and courage—above all, the lucid awareness that there are no Christians who are concerned with life (those on the right) and those who are concerned with social justice (those on the left); nor those who protect the embryo (on the right) and those who want to welcome migrants (on the left). There is only one issue that has to do with true “catholicity”: serving the whole man and all men. *“The whole man and all men” is also the criterion for evaluating cultures and religions. Christianity, the religion of the “God who has a human face”, contains this very criterion within itself.* (Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, no. 55).

In modern culture we have come to equate “concrete” with “material, tangible,” contrasting it with “abstract, spiritual.” This is actually a dangerous dualism, because in life (and not only human life) everything is connected, matter is living (and therefore not manipulable at will) and spirit is embodied in it.

Concreteness is the way to inhabit the tension between immanence and transcendence, both constitutive of the human mode of existence. The human being is a “living reality,” neither pure matter nor pure spirit, but is mixed with heaven and earth. Unless it has the courage to overcome this dualism, faith cannot pass the test of this time. The human being is a living concrete, capable of cultivating and cherishing the mutual bond with the world and the mystery that inhabits it.

Here opens the great task to which the Christian faith is called to prove itself. It is an exciting task to which all, but really all and together, each with his or her specific identity, can contribute. If we Vincentians also would be up to the task, this will be the new Pentecost for which we hope.

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