

**Text of André Fossion on the theme “Catechesis and catechists for the new evangelization” during a meeting at the Vatican on September 16, 17 and 18, 2021, to those responsible for catechesis of the 33 European episcopal conferences, organized by the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization. The text can be shared and broadcast without restriction.**

## **Contemporary catechesis at the service of the Churches of Europe**

### *Grace in the heart*

To begin this talk on "contemporary catechesis in the service of the Churches of Europe", permit me to quote Saint Paul VI from his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. This phrase is paradoxical in an assembly like ours dedicated to the proclamation of the Gospel. Paul VI writes: “It would be useful if every Christian and every evangelizer were to pray about the following thought: men can gain salvation<sup>1</sup> also in other ways, by God's mercy, even though we do not preach the Gospel to them<sup>2</sup>”. This affirmation which underlines the generosity of the grace of God resounds in our ears like authentic good news: good news for every person, good news for the Church and for every Christian. My remarks will endeavor not to deviate from this good news, without, however, watering down the difficulties and demands of evangelization today.

Given the time restriction, I will not dwell on a long analysis of either the situation of the Churches or that of catechesis in Europe. Rather, I would like to focus on tracing a pathway for the participation of catechesis in the mission of evangelization and service of the Churches in Europe, the land of mission and also of harvest.

### **Catechesis in Europe in a context of secularization and pluralization of religious propositions**

All the Churches of Europe are currently being exposed to a context of secularization and pluralization of religious propositions. In this context, we have moved from a Christianity of convention to a Christianity of conviction.

European catechesis itself has changed considerably. Forced by circumstances, catechesis has become missionary. Its task is to awaken faith and to accompany the path of “becoming a Christian” in a context where faith is not taken for granted. Inspired by the adult catechumenate which is essentially missionary, European catechesis has become more and more of an initiatory type. It offers a step-by-step. It relies on journey personal and community relationships. It aims to draw people into communion with the person of Jesus Christ and to integrate them into the community of Christians. Without losing the concern for systematic teaching, contemporary catechesis emphasizes the kerygma; a kerygma that it explores in concentric circles, in a narrative language, based on an assiduous and participatory reading of the Scriptures. And the main agent of catechesis has become the Christian community itself

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<sup>1</sup> « To be saved » according to the latin text

<sup>2</sup> « Haud inutile erit, si singuli fideles singulique evangelizatores orando hanc perscrutantur sententiam: homines, etiamsi eos non evangelizaverimus, salvi esse poterunt etiam per alias vias, propter Dei misericordiam ». *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 80.

which believes, lives and celebrates. This is like an open book that can be read and shows what the Christian faith and life consist of. In fact, there no catechesis worthy of the name, which is not articulated to a living community and to witnesses who can offer a catechising bath of ecclesial life.

### **A widespread and persistent crisis of desirability in Christianity**

Nothing is simple, however, because contemporary catechesis, despite its dynamism, struggles; it suffers and voices out its suffering. It fails to straighten or curb the trend of those who distance themselves from the Catholic Church. It appears that the erosion of Christianity in Europe, in the case in its Catholic version, continues inexorably. There is even a speculation of collapse<sup>3</sup>. Certain rural or urban regions are today a veritable catechetical desert. The question arises: what is to be done to do, when there is nothing left, when there is no longer any ecclesial environment which can welcome and support catechetical action, which can offer a catechising "ecclesial bath"? We must remember here Friedrich Nietzsche's prophecy about our time: "From now on, he writes, it is no longer our arguments, it is our taste that decides against Christianity". This challenge is very strong. The question concerning Christianity today's is no longer posed only in terms of credibility but also in terms of desirability. Many of our contemporaries, however, in their search for truth, goodness and beauty, do not have any appetite for Christianity as it is proposed to them or as it is experienced. Christianity today in the public arena in Europe struggles to make itself heard and to present itself socially and culturally, credible and desirable. Also, the challenge that we need to face collectively in the Church, it is fundamentally a problem of desirability: desirability of listening to the Christian message and also desirability of the proclamation because it is not sure whether Christians themselves are willing to share the gospel or equipped to do the same.

How can the ecclesial body as it is today, with its strengths and weaknesses, become more evangelizing? How to respond to the wish of the Directory by applying it to the specific situation in Europe: "To deepen the role of catechesis in the dynamics of evangelization<sup>4</sup>"? What posture of communication should we adopt today to increase the desirability of the Gospel proclamation as well as the desirability of hearing it? There is no miraculous solution. Nevertheless, I would like to propose here a fundamental path to take: it is by enabling a flow of a theology of grace through the veins of the ecclesial body that catechesis can best contribute to making Christianity desirable and can participate in the mission of evangelization and of service in the Churches in Europe.

### **Enabling the flow of a theology of grace through the veins of the ecclesial body**

What we need first of all in today's Church in secularized Europe is a theology of the grace, a theology of the generosity and the universality of God's salvation. Christianity is a mystery of given, received, shared grace. Evangelization reveals this grace. The *Directory for Catechesis* says it with force and accuracy "The recognition of the primacy of grace is fundamental in evangelization, from the first moment<sup>5</sup>". This message of grace is intended for the Church

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<sup>3</sup> Guillaume Cuchet, *Comment notre monde a cessé d'être chrétien. Anatomie d'un effondrement*, Seuil, Paris, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> *Directory*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Directory*, 33a.

herself. "The church has a constant need of being evangelized, if she wishes to retain freshness, vigor and strength in order to proclaim the Gospel<sup>6</sup>", writes saint Paul VI. The evangelisation, in fact, begins with the evangelization of the Church herself. It would be an illusion to believe that we no longer have to be evangelized. The Gospel account also testifies to the deafness, misunderstanding and strong resistance of the disciples with regard to the teaching and attitudes of Jesus. So it is, there is no doubt that the Church today also is in need of being continuously evangelized. We always have to put ourselves in the school of the unprecedented word of the Gospel.



The Pope came to greet the hundred participants in the meeting

The word grace is, anthropologically and theologically, a very rich term. It belongs to the vocabulary of communication, of a specific type of communication. Grace is that which is received from another for free. Grace is a way of relating to others in which gifts are exchanged and transmitted gracefully, without counting. Grace designates this relationship of gratuity itself. We know how important it is for every human being to have in his life at least one person from whom he has the assurance that he will always be welcomed, loved, unconditionally, without having to pay. The unprecedented word of the gospel - often hidden, buried or ignored - is to say precisely that any human being, whatever he is, good or bad, can find this place of unconditional welcome in the mysterious power of the one in whom we hold life and whom we call God: Father, Son and Spirit. "From his fullness we have received grace after grace<sup>7</sup>". There is the grace of creation. There is, in addition, the grace of salvation, the grace of life in abundance, according to a promise included in the creation, itself more original than original sin. In addition, there is the grace of knowing and living it now: the grace of faith. The Christian message is fundamentally this message of grace. Any Christian celebration, it must be said, begins with preparing oneself to receive the grace of God. "The grace of Jesus Christ our Lord, the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you always."<sup>8</sup>

The theology of grace outlined here in its foundations is a discourse. It delivers words to express and celebrate faith. Besides that, it also induces and inspires a way of being, a gracious lifestyle which combines all the aspects of grace that the lexical field of the word "grace" lists: gratuity ("gratis"), gratitude ("gratitude"), forgiveness ("gracious"), pleasure ("pleasant", "pleasure"), freedom ("gracious"), beauty ("gracious"), gentleness, non-violence ("gracile"). In this resides the taste, the flavor, the salt or the desirability of the Gospel, which inevitably arouses the desire to bear witness to it and to share it.

What consequences, what deployments can the primacy of grace inspire in the catechetical field? Recognize the multiple pathways to salvation, according to the words of Saint Paul VI cited at the beginning of this interview, by virtue of the generosity of God's salvation, there is

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<sup>6</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 15

<sup>7</sup> John 1,16

<sup>8</sup> 2Co 13,13

no need for the proclamation of the Gospel in order to benefit from salvation. In the same paragraph, Paul VI elaborates his point by distinguishing several ways to salvation: the extraordinary ways of salvation and the ordinary ways. The ordinary ways are those which pass through the sacramental order and through membership of the Church. The extraordinary ways, in reality the most common as the most frequented, are those which pass through the royal route, common to all, of the beatitudes, works of mercy and righteousness<sup>9</sup>. Certainly the Church, the body of Christ, is the universal sacrament of salvation: no salvation without the Church. But, thank God, there is salvation outside the Church<sup>10</sup>. It is capital today in secularized Europe, where Christians have the feeling of becoming a minority, to emphasize the generosity and universality of salvation and to confer in their eyes an authentic theological and spiritual consistency to the way to salvation which does not pass through the sacramental order. If there are several ways to salvation, in the end it is the same salvation. It is a liberation for Christians to recognize and speak out about the plurality of means to salvation. Catechesis can help Christians recognize, thanks be to God, this plurality and to rejoice in the action of the Spirit in the hearts of human beings.

### **Sharing the gospel not for the world to be saved, but because it is saved**

But then, if there is salvation apart from faith in Christ, without belonging to the Church, why is it still necessary to proclaim the Gospel? It is in answer to this question that Christians can be clearly told. If we share the gospel, it is not for the world to be saved, but because it is saved. It changes everything; it changes the spirit, tone and role of the gospel proclamation. If salvation in Jesus Christ has already been given, then the gospel proclamation takes place in a space of gratuity, without imposition or obligation of result. The gospel proclamation is not necessary for salvation. "Who am I to stop God from doing anything?"<sup>11</sup> This non-necessity of the gospel proclamation, paradoxically, makes it easier and more desirable. Because, if the announcement is not necessary for salvation, it nevertheless appears radically salutary for those who listen to it and infinitely precious for what it allows to recognize, live and celebrate. Not necessary for salvation, salutary, precious: this is how we can qualify the gospel proclamation and the Christian faith itself. This is the fine pearl, the treasure hidden in a field, of which the gospel speaks, to which one steadfastly clings as soon as one has found it.

It is therefore to honor the right of others to hear them and out of charity that the gospel is proclaimed. It is charity, in fact, that urges us to evangelize, for the joy and for the new communion that faith in the Good News opens between us, with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ. "What we have seen and heard we proclaim now to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; for our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus-Christ. We are writing this so that our joy may be complete" (1John1.3-4).

### **Honor and articulate the kerygma of Jesus and the kerygma concerning Jesus**

To honor this diversity of pathways to salvation, catechesis should teach catechists to distinguish and closely articulate the kerygma of Jesus and the kerygma of the Apostles about

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Memento of the deceased of the third Eucharistic prayer

<sup>10</sup> All salvation, ontologically, passes through the Church, the body of Christ, the universal sacrament of salvation. This ontological plane is distinct from the phenomenological plane where the acknowledgement or not of salvation in Christ is manifested by the subjects, over the course of history.

<sup>11</sup> Acts 11,17

Jesus<sup>12</sup>. To evangelize is to take up and combine these two kerygmas. The kerygma of Jesus is his preaching centered on the beatitudes<sup>13</sup>, on the charitable works he associated with the approaching Kingdom of God and the revelation of a Father, God. The kerygma about Jesus is of a different order. It is the postpaschal kerygma of Christians which invites us to recognize Christ the Savior, the Son of God resurrected by the power of the Father, opening to all humanity an unbelievable hope. This paschal kerygma invites us to come together, to receive baptism, to celebrate the salvation offered in the Church and to bear witness to it to the ends of the world. Christian preaching honors these two kerygmas - of Jesus and about Jesus - by associating them closely. The kerygma of Jesus does not constitute the church; it opens the common way of access to the Kingdom of God through the practice of the beatitudes and through works of mercy, even when the name of Jesus is not recognized and confessed explicitly. Happy are all of you, of all nations, cultures, religions who are meek and humble in heart, merciful and peacemakers, the Kingdom of Heaven is yours. The kerygma on Jesus, on the other hand, opens access to the additional grace of recognizing salvation in Jesus Christ and of celebrating it in the Church. This Jesus who spent his life doing good, proclaiming the beatitudes of the Kingdom, you crucified him, but God, his Father, rendered him justice and witness by resuscitating him<sup>14</sup>. This paschal kerygma call for the confession of his name, as Savior and Son of God. The kerygma of Jesus makes it possible to discern the Kingdom of God present in the today profane and secularized world of as soon as one a person cares for the other. It allows us to recognize the ordinary holiness of each other in daily life and to let ourselves be taught by it. We learn the gospel of the beatitudes by watching people live. Thus, the kerygma of Jesus invites us to acknowledge and harvest the fruits of the Kingdom, even to its tender shoots, present in the heart of the world. The gospel of the beatitudes educates our gaze and shows the abundance of the harvest. In the process, the paschal kerygma offers in addition, to whoever wants to hear it, the free and precious pathway to adhesion to Christ, risen and savior, without this adhesion to Christ presenting itself as the obligatory means to salvation.

### **Join the modern Areopagus, risk hospitality and harvest**

A catechesis which thus insists on the primacy of grace and the universality of salvation invites us to take risks along the paths of the world to meet the other and to walk together. There is here a notorious reversal of perspective compared to the usual discourse which invites Christians to be welcoming; here, it is a matter of taking risks with regard to the reception in the other's place. We could invoke here the example of Jesus himself who had no place to lay his head; he was therefore constantly dependent on the welcome accorded to him along the way by others<sup>15</sup>. Jesus also sent his disciples on missions to towns and villages, committing them, in the same way, to the hospitality of others. It is on towards same path of encounter that the new Directory invites when it encourages the ecclesial community to enter "into the junctures of existence, anthropological domains and modern areopagus where cultural trends are created and new mentalities are shaped"<sup>16</sup>. The challenge here is to involve Christian communities in generating new cultural trends. Given the socio-political tensions of the current world, the health crises, the ecological crisis, the climate challenge, etc., one can expect a forthcoming

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<sup>12</sup> John-Paul II, *Redemptor hominis*, 16,1990

<sup>13</sup> The beatitudes manifest themselves as a fulfillment of the law. Cf. Mat 5,17.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Acts* 2,29-36 ; 3,13-26 ; 10,37-43.

<sup>15</sup> Christoph Theobald, theologian, speaks of "the holiness of hospitality of Jesus ». Cf. *L'Europe, terre de mission*, Cerf, Paris, 2019, p.81.

<sup>16</sup> *Directory*, 324.

exuberance of spirits. Will Christians remain out of the game, outside this birth of a new world? Pope Francis, on the contrary, strongly encourages them to ally and collaborate with all researchers of humanity: "I also advise that you have, in a special way, the capacity to dialogue and encounter. Dialogue (...) is seeking the common good for all<sup>17</sup>". And the Pope adds: "Remember moreover that the best way to dialogue is not that of speaking and debating but that of doing something together, of making plans: not alone, among Catholics, but together with all those who are of good will<sup>18</sup>". Thus, it is to the practice of dialogue and collaboration on the paths of life that the Pope and, with him, the Directory invite. This sending of the Church to the crossroads of existence does not stem from a spirit of reconquest, nor from loud proselytism, nor from identity communitarianism. Rather, it is a matter of bearing witness to the gospel in an authentic dialogue, in search of and at the service of humanity.

*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you. ... But do this with gentleness and respect,*

An authentic dialogue supposes that the interlocutors present speak to each other like a friend speaks to a friend<sup>19</sup>, accepting within their meeting an empty space which dislodges them from the center and leaves room for the unknown, for the "unknown God", as Paul would say, or in other words, to the mystery of existence that we can never enclose in our words and our representations. In this dialogue, the Christian can offer hope to his interlocutor, as the apostle Peter asks: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect<sup>20</sup>". The interlocutor will freely draw whatever benefit he likes, possibly the desire to approach the way of the gospel. In return, Christians will be able to learn from the interview with their interlocutor life lessons, anthropological, ethical or cultural perspectives that can enrich their faith, force them to question themselves and open up horizons that have hitherto been unnoticed. In this case, it is the world that gives strength and relevance to the gospel in a way that may surprise us. Also, evangelization at the crossroads of existence mentioned here is a two-way path. We are always evangelized by those we evangelize. The mission, from this point of view, does not separate itself from the harvest: to labour in mission is always to harvest, it is always to discover a harvest already there. "He goes before you into Galilee, there you will see him.<sup>21</sup>" "We believe in the Gospel, writes Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*, which says that "The kingdom is here, it returns, it struggles to flourish anew. Christ's resurrection everywhere calls forth seeds of that new world; even if they are cut back, they grow again, for the resurrection is already secretly woven into the fabric of this history, for Jesus did not rise in vain<sup>22</sup>". Mission lands like Europe also turn out to be harvest lands, lands where the fruits of the Kingdom can be reaped bountifully.

### **Urge the Church to undertake bold reforms.**

Catechesis among the People of God can make its contribution to evangelization. But catechesis cannot do everything. It is dependent, positively or negatively, on the more or less humanizing and desirable image that the Church offers of herself in the eyes of the world. Also,

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<sup>17</sup> Meeting with the participants in the fifth convention of the Italian Church, Florence, 10 november 2015.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>19</sup> According to the divine pedagogy of God himself which speaks to men as friends (*Dei Verbum*, 2)

<sup>20</sup> 1Peter 3,15.

<sup>21</sup> Mat 28,7.

<sup>22</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*, 278.

the Directory underlines that the missionary impetus requires "a real reform of ecclesial structures and dynamics<sup>23</sup>" with audacity and creativity so that they all become more missionary, more evangelical. Let's identify here at least three areas where the Church can reform and make herself more desirable.

### *The Church in her diakonia,*

Today the Church gives a good evangelical image of herself when she fights for peace, for justice, for the safeguard of the planet. It is likewise when it shows itself committed to young people, the poor, the sick, the dying, the oppressed, the refugees and the neglected of all kinds. Or when she puts herself at the service of personal as well as social healings and reconciliations. But there are also functions of the Church, practices or attitudes which, as Pope Francis has repeatedly pointed out, seriously handicap her testimony. The Church must therefore be careful to maintain and manifest her vocation: to serve humanity in the name of the Gospel. "All the doctrinal richness of the Church aims at only one thing: to serve man<sup>24</sup>", said Saint Paul VI at the end of the Council. In this way, the Church has an urgent duty to constantly reform herself in order to be a body of charity in the flesh of the world; a loving body, an active body and also a speaking body; a body that speaks with charity of the mystery of charity present in the heart of the world. Let us not forget that evangelism begins with the bodies. Charity, in fact, is felt and felt in bodies. Pope Francis speaks of evangelization as a continuous interaction. "Meanwhile, the Gospel tells us constantly to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction<sup>25</sup>". Catechesis calls the Church to intensify this aspect of service to the world, by striving, as the Directory invites her, to practice it in places of suffering, loneliness and poverty<sup>26</sup>.

### *The Church in her liturgy*

The liturgy, a place of celebration for Christians, is also, for the world, an open door to the Church and a possible space for evangelization. Today, however, in Europe, the Sunday liturgy is hardly seen as desirable; it is less frequented and often deserted by the younger generations, even the catechized. Sunday assemblies, in general, are aging, with no prospect of change. We deal with it as if it were inevitable. Yet rituality is very much alive in today's society and young people have a sense of the ritual and celebration. They have the ability to celebrate what makes their life and matters to them. Shouldn't it be necessary, therefore, that episcopal conferences encourage research on human rituality in its various forms, especially today, and open liturgical experiments, with young people by giving them "real latitude" and responsibilities for exploring new sacramental and non-sacramental ritual expressions, close to life and circumstances? The period of lockdown due to Covid-19 allowed the Christian people to be inventive in this regard. There are, in fact, many ways to be invented, of celebrating the Gospel, which can provide many paths towards the Eucharistic celebration. It should also be noted that, in many catechetical circles, the desire is expressed to see the Church open up new modes of access and formation to the priesthood. It also calls on the Church to be vigilant in the training of new

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<sup>23</sup> *Directory*, 40.

<sup>24</sup> Paul V, *Concluding exhortation of the council Vatican II*, 7 december 1965.

<sup>25</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*, 88.

<sup>26</sup> *Directory*, 269 to 282, 381 to 391.

priests so that they listen to the world and to the Christian people, without slipping into a sacralizing ritualism.

*The Church in her governance*

In terms of governance, the functioning of the Church is the subject of much questioning among the Christian people and in the society. Clericalism is a real problem that slows down the inclination towards faith and obscures the exceptional potential of the Gospel. At a time when civic ethics lean more and more towards gender parity in the exercise of power, power in the Church remains overwhelmingly in the hands of male clerics. Men and women, however, anthropologically and theologically have the same dignity. A synodal Church can only be inclusive; she can only walk on her own two feet and breathe with both lungs. This requirement will only increase in the future. Therefore, in the current synodal efforts, should not the Church, listening to the Gospel, to the Christian people and to the world, equip herself, with audacity as much as with wisdom, with perspectives allowing the establishment of a gender parity in decision-making that concerns the People of God, at all levels? Would we not then be dealing with a real reform which would make the Church more credible and more desirable, more human and, therefore, more evangelizing?

The image of the Church as a "field hospital" was spread by Pope Francis, thus emphasizing her diaconal mission. I would like to end with a complementary image, festive this time. That of the dance and the merry-go-round. The grace of the Gospel animates the bodies and sets them in motion to move around. We enter into faith as we enter into a dance. It is also necessary that a space opens up to all, good or bad, of all sizes, and that a hand is extended which invites you to follow suit and join in the merry-go-round. Christianity is a hymn of joy. The European anthem is also a hymn of joy. Perhaps it foreshadows some happy encounters to come. May the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, "the one called to our help", lead us there.

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