

The Parish in Contemporary Culture Rev Rene' Camilleri

It is not easy to speak of the parish in contemporary culture given that the two realities separately are already quite complex in themselves. There is no one type or model of parish, just as it is difficult to imagine one homogeneous culture that can be identified universally as the contemporary culture. The model of parish normally depends on one's ecclesiology, and we all know that there are different ecclesiologies, different mentalities and visions of the church. Just as there are different ways of seeing our priesthood or of appreciating lay participation or even the role of ministries in the life of the parish. Ecclesiology has always evolved according to changes of different epochs and there have been different models of the church in time. There was a time when the church was seen as **Societas Perfecta** or **Mater et Magistra** and then in the Council as **Sacramentum Mundi** or **Sacrament of Salvation**. Today Pope Francis is proposing the model of the church as field hospital. There is a meaning in this, linking more intimately the mission of the church and the more immediate needs of contemporary humanity.

It is always necessary to discern the type of parish that the demands of today's emerging culture call for. Long ago **Yves Congar** insisted that ecclesiology needs to be defined starting not from the standpoint of the institution but from that of God's people. Because if we are servants of the people of God, then the people are our 'masters'¹. The christian community is today more than ever inserted in the processes of change which impact strongly on the lives of people. Besides, the christian community does not necessarily coincide with the parish community given that for many the once territorial parish simply does not exist. Belonging nowadays is very fluid. The question is how can we respond today to the demands of a culture that is so fluid, in progress, heterogeneous and multicultural? The philosopher **John Caputo** speaks of two types of church or parish : one which is highly organised, beaucocratic, efficient, well addressed in high technology, and another where people are coming day and night knocking at the parish door to ask for help to pay the electricity bill, or to ask for a meal, or to ask help with a son or daughter having problems with drugs².

John Caputo is the expert on the philosopher of Deconstruction, Jacques Derrida. I am not going to enter into the philosophy of Derrida here. I mention him just because since the advent of secularization it was commonplace for us to think that

¹ Yves Congar, Power and Poverty in the Church. The Renewal and Understanding of Service, Paulist Press, New York 1964 (2016).

² John Caputo, What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church, Grand Rapid, Michigan 2007.

it was contemporary culture that left such an impact on the life of the church that today we are where we are. Always culture was blamed. But what really deconstructs our ecclesiastical constructions is not culture but the Spirit himself. Danger has always been seen as coming from outside. Little do we acknowledge that much before the postmodernists, it was the biblical prophets who deconstructed the institutions of religion and Jesus in this was perfectly in the prophetic line of thought.

It is not only culture that provokes us for change. It is the Spirit who blew over the Council and who still blows today through the signs of the times that demand of us to re-invent the parish. I remember 30 years ago the book by an Italian priest, **Antonio Fallico**³ where he speaks of diagnosis and therapy of the parish, of priorities in our pastoral action, and of radical choices that needed to be made. We have gone through unending diagnosis on our part. One though needs to see whether we have the courage to apply the needed therapy. Coming back to ecclesiology, it is opportune to revisit what *Lumen Gentium* exactly means when it puts the church in the category of 'sign' and 'instrument' of God's love for humanity. The church is not the destination. And hence we need to ask: what church do people need today? How can our parishes offer the space where the encounter with God can happen in a culture which many define as just Godless? Culture can declare on its part that 'God is dead', but it is not culture which verifies whether God exists or not, or how to discern God's presence in the world. We all live in a disenchanted world, where the 'charged' signs that once marked the Christian culture are lacking. Yet our time can still be a *kairos*, a moment of grace, the time of God. It stands with us to have the power to discern God's footprints in today's world and in what manner he continues to manifest his merciful gaze. It is in the here and now of this culture that the church more than ever is called to be a sign of this presence of God and of his love for entire humanity.

We are still in the Paschal season and one of the iconic texts these days undoubtedly is the narrative of the Emmaus disciples. This text can be a metaphor or the backdrop for what we have to say today on the parish and contemporary culture. It is a narrative where Jesus in person walks along with the two disciples and enters with them into a long conversation without imposing himself, without interrupting their journey, but who patiently empathises with their sentiments of fear, anxiety, and lack of hope. Walking along with them, he knew how to enlighten them, responding to their anxieties with the Word, until he makes them come to the vital discovery.

We have analyzed and over-analyzed contemporary culture and we continue to repeat what at times sound as clichés. Without any doubt analysis is important. The reading of the signs of the times is needed. But after this reading, we need a serious discernment that brings us to establish priorities. **Pope Francis** in his *Evangelii Gaudium* says that we cannot continue to do things as we have always done them. After the Council we went through a certain restructuring. But many a

³ Antonio Fallico, *Le cinque piaghe della parrocchia italiana. Tra diagnosi e terapia*, Edizioni Chiesa-Mondo, Catania 1995.

time it ended up being just cosmetic. The Council asked for a change of direction and a change of mentality. A change in the way we see our priesthood, our ministries, a change in the way we serve our people to build up the **ecclesia** as community of faith.

In *Evangelii Gaudium* the Pope writes: “The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community.....We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to the people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented”⁴.

Much has been said and written on our approach to culture. This approach cannot be confrontational, as unfortunately many a time it has been. This reminds me of the narrative in the **Book of Numbers** when Moses and the Israelites were approaching Canaan and Moses sent explorers there to report back on the land and on the peoples who inhabited it. These explorers came back and reported everything to the community. They showed the fruit of the country and said that it truly flows with milk and honey. But they also warned: “We can’t attack those people; the land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them” (Numbers 13,25-33).

They spread fear in the people. Many a time this same fear transpires in our approach to contemporary culture, almost forgetting completely how faith in God empowers us. Sometimes we ourselves are tempted to judge as irrelevant or even not efficacious at all our ministry. But our force is not in the way we confront culture. It is not even through argumentation that we can win over the dominant culture, as often we’ve sought to do on ethical issues. As Pope Francis says, the Gospel comes before ethics. If we judge contemporary culture on the basis of the major ethical issues, our conclusion makes us look a complete failure. But I repeat, the Gospel first. It is the inner power of the Gospel that we need to explore in order to respond, not through philosophical theories or argumentation, but with the same Gospel. **Pope Paul VI** in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*⁵ had already emphasized this speaking about the fidelity both to a message whose servants we are and to the people to whom we must transmit it living and intact. “This message poses three burning questions:

1. In our day what has happened to that hidden energy of the Good News, which is able to have a powerful effect on man’s conscience?
2. To what extent and in what way is that evangelical force capable of really transforming the people of this century?

⁴ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 28

⁵ Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, n. 4.

3. What methods should be followed in order that the power of the Gospel may have its effect?

In our approach to contemporary culture we need a new pedagogy of the faith. Perhaps we need to revisit the ***De catechizandis rudibus*** of St Augustine. Because the transmission of the faith is lacking when it is not autobiographical. That which, again, says Paul VI, that we need more witnesses than teachers. In his ***Confessions*** Augustine speaks of transformative experiences. If the parish does not embark on a new pedagogy of the faith, on what truly transmits the faith, it remains simply a structure, an institution, a service station surely not enabling persons to meet God. It continues to make Christians, but not disciples. Just like many of our seminaries today that continue to produce functionaries but not evangelisers. Our contemporary culture needs disciples, no more baptised and sacramentalised Christians who are not evangelised. In his *The Cost of Discipleship*, **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** has written that : “Christ not only makes people good; he makes them strong too”. Perhaps we need to go back to an older vision of the Christian life when what was central were not the commandments but the virtues. Because virtues at the end of the day form persons to be strong for the journey. We have entire generations who have gone through religion classes in our schools, and for years have attended our catechism classes in our parishes. Many remain nominal Christians while others have simply left. Contemporary culture needs people who not only know doctrine, but who are strong in character, who have truly experienced in their life what encountering God really means and felt the energy that faith transmits.

I am returning to the Scriptures. Perhaps the two Books that today can mostly be of inspiration for us are the Books of Esdra and Nehemiah. It was a crucial moment in the history of God’s people when entire generations who were born in exile were returning from their exile to Jerusalem. It was a moment of discernment and priorities. When Nehemiah asked for news about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, “They said to me, those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire”. And Nehemiah “ sat down and wept”. But then he took courage to rebuild God’s assembly. Today, when we ourselves feel as if in exile in a culture that seems all the time pushing faith to the margins, like Esdra and Nehemiah our task is to rebuild God’s assembly. But this cannot just be a return to the past. In the religious emptiness that the exile had created in the history of God’s people, an emptiness very similar to ours today, these two prophets knew how to discern what was really needed in that particular moment so that the return of the people from exile could make them rediscover the God of life.

We need to ask whether our parishes are really in a position to respond to the demands of a society that has changed so much. **Andrea Brugnoli**, in a book he published in 2016⁶ has exhaustively delved into this. For quite some time we felt

⁶ Andrea Brugnoli, *Parrocchie da incubo. Manuale per cambiare stile di chiesa*, Fede & Cultura, Verona 2016.

lost in our parishes, struggling to try new things, seeking to create structures, and to invent activities. We have to acknowledge also that in the aftermath of the Council to date we have seen very lively parish communities. But I think that by and large evangelisation has been left on the back burner in our agendas because we were busy doing so many other things and perpetuating so many pastoral activities in the way we've always done them. But meanwhile, people were leaving.

Evangelisation is never indoctrination but it is always an inculturation. It takes us nowhere to continue to wage cultural wars. We need to acknowledge that nowadays we live in a free world, at least here in the West. The failure of the institutions of the church, the empty churches and seminaries, the exodus of so many from the church, can at the end of the day not just be the outcome of the pressure from outside but also the result of a disenchantment within the church itself. It would be wrong on our part to keep always blaming the culture. It would be a false diagnosis that would lead to the false therapies. Secularization needs to be acknowledged as a moment of grace, a *kairos* for today's church.

The pastoral conversion about which Pope Francis speaks in *Evangelii Gaudium* is surely not a cosmetic exercise as unfortunately happened with so many reforms after the Council. A closed institutional system cannot survive in a world in continuous evolution. The Spirit of wisdom and *parrhesia*, which is the new wine, cannot be put in old wineskins, just as the tomb could never contain the body of the crucified Jesus.

One of the major challenges today is how to connect with those, who are many, who no longer come to church but who seek God. The Italian Episcopal Conference back in 2009 published a *Lettera ai cercatori di Dio*. The question that needs to be posed is: how can we help people encounter the God of Jesus Christ? Amongst those who consider themselves believers today, many are not rooted in a tradition inspired by the christian faith. Christendom is past for ever. We need to re-invent ourselves today as priests, as lay persons, as catechists, as parishes, perhaps even as believers. Many children, youths, and adults whom we know are like those born in exile and, at the time of Esdra and Nehemiah, were returning to Jerusalem. But what are we proposing to them? What are today the essentials for rebuilding God's assembly, to create truly christian communities? What are we offering them? As **Paul Lakeland** many years ago has written in an article on the future of the faith⁷ "Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living". The tradition we are committed to pass on to the next generations is a living tradition and we should beware from transforming it into traditionalism.

The reading of contemporary culture that we need today cannot be simply sociological. We need to have the imagination to let the Bible read the times for us. I refer to the ***Letter to the Exiles*** by Jeremiah where the prophet exhorts the people to inhabit the land "where I carried you in exile from Jerusalem to Babylon". "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry

⁷ Paul Lakeland, Does Faith Have a Future?, Cross Currents 49, n. 1 (Spring 1999) 63-71. Here 63.

and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters” (29, 5-6). This is quite in contrast with the feelings that transpire from the Canticle of the Exiled in Psalm 137 when the exiled sat and wept and asked “How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?” In the light of Jeremiah’s letter, we need not be afraid of contemporary culture but rather ask what can we contribute to humanity today. Cardinal **Avery Dulles** once wrote: “Catholicism has an incomparable intellectual, cultural, mystical and spiritual legacy. Why then does it look so stagnant, why is it so lacking in confidence, enthusiasm and purpose? What can we do to mobilize the religious potential in its tradition”⁸.

We cannot remain in permanent conflict mode with contemporary culture. Our task is to enter into conversation just as Jesus has done with the two disciples of Emmaus not so much on an intellectual level but on the level of the sentiments and emotions of people to offer them accompaniment and walk with them. Perhaps it is again opportune to go back to the great Encyclical Letter of 1964 by Pope Paul VI *Ecclesiam Suam*. When the Council was half way through, the Pope speaks of the need for the church to be more aware of who she is, in order to reform itself and be able to enter the dialogue of salvation with the entire humanity.

Today the Lord invites us to acknowledge ourselves as inhabitants of a foreign land as contemporary culture seems to be from our religious standpoint. From the exile Jeremiah speaks words of hope. Culturally speaking, we are in exile but we need the ***parrhesia*** of which St Paul speaks so much in order :

- to know how to educate people to desire a promised land which is the experience of the living God;
- to remain focussed on what is essential, what really is needed to sustain a faith that is strong and which creates authentic witnesses;
- to make the passage from the present impasse we seem to be in towards a prophetic vision of what church today’s world needs.

We should never forget what **Pope Benedict XVI** said that the opposite of faith is not atheism but the feeling that there is nothing new we can discover in our faith. Two authors from Canada, a country surely not with the christian tradition we are used to, in 2017 published a study⁹ where amongst others they claim: Everything has been said from the time of the Enlightenment to the New Atheism about what went wrong with religion. That position has been amply put and accepted by many. Having sent the sacred in exile, now is the time to review what it really means to lose our religion. Without any doubt, **Charles Taylor** was the most important point

⁸ Avery Dulles, *A Church to Believe In: Discipleship and the Dynamics of Freedom*, Crossroad Books, New York 1992, p. 3.

⁹ G. McCann & G. Bechsgaard, *The Sacred in Exile. What it Really Means to Lose our Religion*, Palgrave, Macmillan, 2017, p. 13.

of reference on the question of secularization. He claims that most probably we are the first society in history where a great proportion of the population seeks to live without any reference at all to any concept of the transcendent.

Many a time we think we have the answers to all the questions people pose. But today it is easy to realize that many questions are not even posed. People seem to have different maps from ours. Many have constructed for themselves a world of meanings that have nothing to do with the divine. For others, inhabiting the world can still have meaning without any reference to the transcendent. Perhaps in our communities our main task nowadays is to create the right conditions for believing. In spite of secularity, faith still seems to hold ground on different levels in our society. It suffices to see manifestations of devotions even on the part of those who do not consider themselves believers. But the most delicate task we have is the passage from faith to believing.

By way of conclusion. What signs do people expect today from our side? What is hitting hard today people in their conscience and what characterizes humanity today? Perhaps we do a lot of talking that never touches people. But there are gestures that speak louder than words and are capable of touching people's hearts. If our words are not accompanied by gestures, they remain empty words just like so many other words said. Pope Francis has captured profoundly what contemporary culture is and what humanity mostly thirsts for. He did this in *Fratelli Tutti*. But particularly in the second chapter where he offers a meditation on one of the texts of Luke's Gospel, the parable of the Good Samaritan. The people whom we meet can be atheist or believers, agnostic or lapsed; but what makes us all similar, and so all brothers and sisters, is the fact that we are all wounded. It is for this reason that more than anything else, the church is a field hospital. The church, like Jesus, is sent in the world first to heal people, much before trying to bring them to faith.