

EVANGELIZATION:

THE OLD AND THE NEW

By: Joe Tremblay

Do We Live in a Post-Christian World?

Official preacher of the Pontifical Household, Fr. Cantalamessa, in an email correspondence with the Catholic News Agency a few years ago, made reference to the growing concern that we live in a post-Christian world. He said that if the New Evangelization is to have the same success as the Original Evangelization of the Apostles and Church Fathers, we have to consider their "methods and means" which brought about a Christian civilization. "Such means," he said, "were fundamentally the announcement 'in Spirit and power' of the Paschal mystery of Christ dead and risen, united to the testimony of life."



In the ancient world the early Christians knew what they were being saved from. Pagan immorality was constantly on display in the Roman Empire. Slavery was a well-established institution; human sacrifices had been a ritual in every continent; not just abortion, but infanticide was a socially accepted practice; blood sports- that is, gladiator games -required human fatalities in order for the masses to be entertained; women were second class citizens, having no rights over their fathers or husbands; and the birthrate dropped precipitously because children were seen as a liability rather than a blessing. And if that weren't enough, the third century was beset with political turmoil. There were 31 Roman Emperors during that same century with only 6 having died a natural death. This was fallen humanity before the Gospel took root.

Returning to Founding Principles and Practices:

With that said, the New Evangelization, if it is to rise to the challenge of the New Paganism and bear similar fruits of the Apostles and Church Fathers (the "Old" Evangelization), it would do well, as Fr. Cantalamessa indicated, to use their "methods and means." But such "means and methods" cannot be reduced to preaching and teaching only. The early Christians had different pastoral practices and disciplines; certain attitudes towards their own Faith and other religions that were markedly different from our own.

Just as the Old Paganism differs from the New Paganism; so too the New Evangelization, as it exists today, reveals certain differences from the Original Evangelization of the Apostles and early Christians.

Below are the pastoral practices of the early Church that are markedly different from our own. The gap that exists between the Original Evangelization of early Christianity and the New Evangelization in modern times needs to be closed before a post-Christian world can become Christian once again. Pope Leo XIII said, "When a society is perishing, the wholesome advice to give to those who would restore it is to have them return to the principles from which society sprang...Hence, to fall away from its primal constitution implies disease; to go back to it, recovery." However, in order for society to follow this course, Catholics- both clergy and laity -must do it first; which is to say that the Church must return to those principles which brought about the rapid growth of early Christianity. Then, and only then, instead of showing decline as she has in recent decades, will she generate growth not unlike those of her spiritual ancestors.

Seven Dissimilarities Between the Old and the New:

And now for those characteristics which distinguish the Original (or the Old) from the New Evangelization:

1. *Consciousness of Eternity.* Eternity was daily impressed upon the consciousness of the early Christians. Their preaching, teaching, worship, social discourse, good works and meditations were ordained principally towards that end. Among Catholics today, eternity is rarely a theme for sermons, teachings, books or otherwise. This is primarily due to death as being a taboo topic of discussion.
2. *Necessity of Repentance.* For the early Christians, repentance was an absolute condition upon which people entered into communion or remained in communion with the Mystical Body of Christ. Up until the 1960's, a candidate wanting to join the Church had to believe all of Christ's teachings and had to be willing to live the life of Christ. Among Catholics today, however, repentance is rarely insisted upon for the mistaken notion that a more lenient pastoral approach attracts more souls to the Church or that such insistence would scare prospective converts away from Church.
3. *Value of Suffering.* When there is an aversion to suffering as something useless or when the Wisdom of the Cross is undervalued, then unconventional, creative and heroic ways to advance God's cause is sparing. The preaching of the Gospel in ancient times was a

Revolution of the Cross. It gave new meaning to suffering, poverty and infirmity. It went further by proclaiming that such misfortunes could be used as instruments of grace and redemption. The saying among early Christians was, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." This understanding also allowed for great achievements. But among today's Catholics, suffering as a condition of following Christ or as a means of reparation is not widely understood as being essential.

4. *Evangelization and Charity.* The early Christians recognized that evangelization and charity belonged together. Bearing witness to Christ's love was not simply a matter of relieving "spiritual poverty," as it is today among orthodox Catholics, but rather by appealing to the totality of man- body and soul. The same spiritual giants that were responsible for preaching memorable sermons and writing seminal books for the ages- such as St. Augustine and St. Basil –also founded hospices and orphanages for the needy. Currently, we have those who work for the Church by evangelizing and teaching; their main concern is the salvation of the soul. On the other hand, we have another group of people who, working for the same Church, serve the poor and disabled with hardly a thought given to their spiritual needs. The former is more important than the latter, to be sure. But in the past the latter served as a powerful instrument of evangelization; one which attracted souls to Christ. In any case, it is a problem that in today's Catholic Church one group of people administers to the soul and an entirely different group administers to the body; the former being religious, the latter being secular.

Again, evangelization and charity belong together. Our Lord juxtaposed the care for the soul and the body when "he summoned the Twelve and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick."

5. *Taking it to the streets.* The early Christians did not expect the unbeliever or the sinner to come to them. Instead, they went out to the public forum to meet sinners. Today we expect them to come to us; to our bible studies, prayer groups and conferences; most of which are on church property. I believe we cannot just limit the communication of the Gospel to religious venues anymore. We have to be more willing to go on "their turf," the turf of the sub-religious and the unbeliever. Upon arrival, we would do well to speak their language. The Gospel message, as Vatican II taught, should answer "their" questions and address "their" concerns; not just ours. After joining their conversation, we can then introduce them to a conversation with Christ.