

THE PASSION OF THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matthew 28:19–20).

At the onset of the new millennium, Pope John Paul II called for “a new evangelization.”¹ It is a *new* evangelization because it makes all things new. This call summons up all the passion we have, a passion to truly touch the passion of our world, much of which has opted for a culture of death.

Is it any wonder that the young people have best understood this call of Pope John Paul? During his lengthy pontificate, Pope John Paul showed a Christlike love of youth, of children, not only because they are the future but because they are little and vulnerable. Our age has become too big for itself and takes itself far too seriously.

Here is the key to open the gate to a new evangelization through Christ’s passion: We must learn to become little and simple; otherwise it is impossible for our passion to be in Jesus Christ and in his passion. We must take literally and realize explicitly and concretely the words of Jesus, “[W]hoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it” (Luke 18:17).

Unless we are truly humble, passion will seem to us to be mere emotion. Unless we practice humility and live in humility, our faith will remain implicit rather than practical and vibrant. Unless we can see with the eyes of a little child, we will be blind.

Passion always wants to express itself, to act itself out, to become explicit. The *kenosis* of Christ resulted in his becoming incarnate. Passion does not hint around at what it wants but seeks to get what it desires, to concretize itself, to have a body, to become flesh. Yet as we will see, in being explicit, passion also requires patience.

The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth

The Catholic church has been a consistent voice insisting upon the truth of the gospel throughout the world in these confused times, particularly defending such issues as human life in all stages of its development. Now more than ever it is important that we not be afraid, that we respond to the grace that would preserve us from a failure of nerve so that the church continues to speak with the courage that Christ has given her and the Holy Spirit sustains in her.

A real persecution of the Catholic church in our times has created a hypersensitive caution over possible litigation and a dread of misrepresentation in the media. But we must not yield to the temptation to only hint at what we mean, in cautious statements made through a shield of spokespersons and screened by a phalanx of lawyers. The voices of the shepherds and surely those of the flock must become ever bolder and more insistent, ever clearer. And our voices must always be loving, so that, no matter how we are accused, we can never be guilty of hate mongering, no more than Christ can be.

We can find inspiration in looking back to the centuries in which Catholics enlisted in Crusades to regain the Holy Land and

its sites from non-Christian conquerors. At the moment it is politically incorrect to suggest that there was Christian self-defense going on in the Crusades, whatever else went on. But in the midst of the various motives attributed to those efforts, stories have emerged of at least two small bands of lowly pilgrims who decided that they must save the Holy Land, the places where Jesus lived and died.

Legend has it that these bands were made up of children as young as six; thus the name "Children's Crusade." Some historians consider it more likely that the pilgrims were poor serfs and servants. In either case, we can say that they were "the little ones" of the world. Perhaps misguided or abused, they went forth in ignorance of what they faced. Many were slaughtered, others taken into slavery.

Was this all meaningless? In today's culture, victims can feel entitled to never forgive. Did these little ones even know they were victims?

My sense is that God may be calling the church in our times to be the new children's crusade. Jesus calls us to turn and become like little children. Is he calling us to be slain, as were these innocents, as were those King Herod killed in his paranoia, as were the fifty million aborted in the United States since 1973, victims of a lifestyle that had no room for them?

Will God call us to give our lives in witness to the passion, death and Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ? It is not clear. God help us if we come to our demise in any way other than as little children. God help us if we die out because we keep our mouths shut or because we abort and contracept our posterity or simply die in our sleep.

Is it fair to suggest that many scandalous events in the church's history have occurred because her members have behaved in every way *but* like little children? The virgins caught

without enough oil and the servants caught unready for the master's return have this in common: they were ill-disposed, caught posturing as something they were not.

No matter what we pretend to be, we are only children! The relief in admitting this is that we can be sure we have a heavenly Father. Though we know deep down that we are "illegitimate"—in the sense that we all are "captive to the law of sin" (Romans 7:23)—we know our loving Father has adopted us, has made us his own.

Be Not Afraid!

We are only little ones, yet so much is expected of us! Actually, no more than of the birds of the air or the flowers of the field.

Love sacrifices as Christ sacrificed. Sometimes death is required, and along the way it can mean sacrificing things such as tax-exempt status so that we can say what we really mean with genuine passion. Often the gospel proclamation involves even persecution, in little ways or greater ones.

Let's not pretend the persecution is not happening, and let's not be surprised that it is happening. Jesus warned his followers that we should expect attack and criticism from unfriendly and even hostile quarters. Jesus' warning should intensify our efforts toward passionate evangelization. To the extent that we experience persecution and sacrifice, we must be doing something right!

We need to remember and be strengthened by the oft-repeated message of Pope John Paul II throughout his long pontificate: "Be not afraid!" This message, which we also hear in Scripture—for example, from the angels announcing the birth of Christ and from Jesus when he appeared to his disciples the evening after he rose from the dead—must be the way in which Christians greet each other.

Our times have witnessed the sweeping growth of evangelical Christian movements throughout the world, often attracting people because the Christ they present is living and passionate. People hunger for passionate and life-changing decision. Strangely, such approaches to Christianity sometimes are at home with promises of comfort and prosperity instead of the cross which is somehow viewed as a thing of the past.

The loss of Catholics to such sects, particularly in traditionally Catholic countries, is well documented. Is it the appeal of sacrifice or of prosperity that pulls people to these groups?

Certainly the Catholic church must become an even more radical and powerful witness in a world turned materialistic and secular. We must not become “at home” with the culture, especially to the point of no longer being able to challenge it. Is our faith a cultural adornment like a winter coat that can be put on when the weather calls for it? Or are we willing to live and die for what we profess?

The Holy, the Beautiful and the Sacred

Our times have also witnessed a resurgence of religiosity of another sort, one that is not Christian, often described as “New Age.” The tendency of New Age worship is to engage the deep human mystical need for participation and for an experience of God which contemporary worship often lacks.

There is actually nothing “new” about the New Age movement. Many eventually heretical sects developed within Christianity over the years, most notably the phenomenon of Gnosticism in the earliest centuries of the church. Gnostics believe in God but not in the personal God whom we know as Father. Much of New Age religion is simply Gnosticism revisited, but looking outside Christianity for its passion.

People looking to New Age cults are often looking for the passion that human hearts naturally long to pursue. The past decades have seen devotion suppressed in the church in a way that emphasizes what is beautiful but not what is sacred. Some liturgical reform has progressed in the direction of the mundane. Perhaps more than ever there is a passionate need for deep devotion and the liturgical experience of what is sacred, holy and beautiful. The search for the holy has led many faithful Christians to the Orthodox churches or to celebrations of the Tridentine Mass.

What are people seeking here? Accusations of nostalgia and of obsession with externals apply to some. But one of the seemingly innocuous reasons why Catholics abandon the practice of their faith is the lack of awe and reverence in the celebration of the liturgy. In a world bereft of roots or tradition, in a world of fast food and throwaway clothes, where is the sacred? Sure, McDonald's has fast food, and *USA Today* has fast news, but does the Roman Catholic church need to supply fast Mass? We want to see Jesus!

I really looked up to the priest in my home parish when I was a boy, and I still carry his memorial card in my breviary at the page for the *Magnificat*. Only years later did I realize what was special about him. He did not say Mass or read the Mass; he *prayed* the Mass. At the age of ten, I somehow knew this was different from other Masses I had attended.

Looking back, I think I projected onto this priest in all his ordinariness (he was actually very shy and a bit homely) everything I was looking for in a servant of God. It turns out he was not up to all of my projections. He was a lousy administrator, unable to bring together the people of a newly established parish to build and pay for a new church.

Yet when Father stepped into the pulpit, he preached. Even more importantly, when he ascended the steps to the altar, he

prayed. In his life as well as in his celebration of the Eucharist, there was the sacred and the holy, and in his homeliness there was the beautiful. No one knew until he died, without enough money left to bury him, that he had given all he had to the indigent who came to the door of his rectory, a way of life undoubtedly prompted by his simple prayer.

We are starved for the beautiful, and we crave the sacred and the holy. They can never be domesticated, never kept in a fixed location or controlled. We find them in the Incarnation of the Eternal Word. The sacraments allow us to share concretely and explicitly in them still and to be transformed.

Real Transformation

The intellect is so made as to be able to order our passion, direct it toward God and ultimately shape it in selfless love. Yet what happens when the faith seems reducible to many words with no silence to assimilate them, when liturgical correctness suppresses beauty and living tradition and, worst of all, when scholarly theology and exegesis reduce the Christ of faith to bits of scattered data? Passion dies if it does not protest the dissection that turns faith in the living Lord Jesus into an autopsy of his corpse, washed up along the shores of time. Such an approach to Jesus, in teaching and in worship, gives people stones when they are hungry for the bread of life.

The new evangelization is necessary in these times, since there is a passionate need for the truth to be made explicit—not black and white but *explicit*. The Word became flesh, and the transformation coming through the Word must take flesh in us, must be seen as real.

We are witnessing in the church today—not merely as a human reaction to this need but more importantly through the power of the Holy Spirit—an incredible renewal of devotion to

Christ, often through his passion. Witness the devotion to the Divine Mercy as revealed to Saint Faustina and that to the wounds of Christ through Saint Padre Pio. In earlier centuries the still popular devotions to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and to the stigmata of Saint Francis had this effect of directing human souls to a deeper faith in and love for Christ.

Lay renewal movements and prayer groups often champion eucharistic and Marian spirituality, while clergy and educated Catholics sometimes eye such devotions suspiciously or even arrogantly. Sadly, these are the people who could provide the guidance and leadership these groups need. They could help integrate passion into the fullness of tradition and of liturgical life in a way that intensifies rather than suppresses devotion.

But the source of renewal movements and their naïveté should not surprise us. Again, it is so often through the little ones that the Spirit works, and the simplicity of their faith and devotion is a precious gift to the church, born as it is of passion. There is much more than nostalgia at work. In our times we hear a cry for a deep, explicit and concrete participation in the Word made flesh. ❧