

Reading the Sign of Times: Catholic Women and the Call to the New Evangelization.

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The sign of the times in the Church

The Council Fathers' in *Gaudium et Spes* urged the faithful to be aware of the sign of the times. "The church carries the responsibility of reading the sign of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel...in a language intelligible to every generation...it should be able to answer the ever recurring questions which people ask about the meaning of this present life and of the life to come..."¹ As a Church we celebrate fifty years since our Council Fathers' forged a new path for the *Church in the Modern World* during the Second Vatican Council.

Along with the Holy Father we recognize all the fruits the Council has borne for us throughout this past half century, but we must also consider the hard work that lies ahead in continuing to reach out to the *modern world*. Moreover, perhaps it is timely and important for us to reflect upon the words of The Servant of God, Pope Paul VI, during his homily at the end of the last Council session:

*"...it is necessary to remember the time in which it [the Council] was realized...it took place at a time which everyone admits is oriented toward the conquest of the kingdom of earth rather than that of heaven; a time in which forgetfulness of God has become habitual, and seems, quite wrongly, to be prompted by the progress of science; a time in which the fundamental act of the human person, more conscious now of himself and of his freedom, tends to pronounce in favor of his own absolute autonomy, in emancipation from every transcendent law..."*²

The words of Pope Paul VI were also the words that Pope Benedict echoed during his Audience on October 10th, the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council and the beginning of the Year of Faith (*Annus Fidei*). We read the signs of these times and realize that this invitation to the Year of Faith is an invitation to grow in our love for the Lord and His Bride, the Church. The Pope calls all

¹ Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, Northport 1996, 4.

² Benedict XVI, General Audience, October 10, 2012.

faithful, from every corner of the earth, to reflect on faith; a faith that “grows when it is lived as an experience of love received and when it is communicated as an experience of grace and joy.”³

We also must not overlook the fact that the Holy Father concurrently invites us to receive a renewed impetus for the new evangelization. We cannot deny that the Synod of Bishops held this past October to reflect on the *New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith* is also a call for us, the faithful, to reexamine our lives and our efforts to evangelize those we are in contact with every day. For at the heart of the call to the new evangelization is the sharing of this *experience of love received*, the love of a person--Jesus Christ--our faith.

The sign of the times in our world

As we learn to interpret the milestones we live within our Church and in our lives of faith, we must also interpret the contemporaneous signs we witness in the world around us. The words of Pope Paul VI are timeless in that they should remind us that our witness of faith is more urgent than ever. In a world that grows increasingly hostile to faith, we have a responsibility to be the light that brings hope to every facet of society.

We live in a world where even those countries that were once rooted in Christian values have now *forgotten God* for the most part. Spurred on by the *progress of science* and technology, countless western cultures in particular, dismiss the idea that God created man and instead imply that man has created God for sentimental reasons alone. There is an ever increasing indifference and relativism among the youth. It has become progressively difficult to find an *intelligible language* with which to communicate with the younger generations. We must also mention the fact that questions that once seemed fundamental as to the purpose of life are no longer relevant to many. Words once imbedded in Christian meaning such as freedom, truth, life and happiness are now words that are relative and mutable according to context and convenience.

We are also witnessing a more aggressive push to banish faith from the public square. In countries such as the United States, where the Constitution itself speaks of the “trust in God” and “Creator”, we find a disturbing trend to eliminate the very foundation and beliefs with which the country was founded upon. It is a movement that is rapidly and incessantly plaguing the minds of younger generations, whom

³ Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter, “Motu Proprio data”, *Porta Fidei* for the Indication of the Year of Faith, 2012, 7.

having had little to no exposure to a Christian based culture, are finding these campaigns to eliminate God from the public forum not only acceptable but necessary.

As faithful Catholics, we must cultivate a renewed sense of urgency. We must take up arms, so to speak, and fight this ever increasing hostility towards God and the Church. We must once again acknowledge the Council Fathers' words and take responsibility to read the sign of the times and recall that "it is the duty of all lay people to cooperate in spreading and building up the kingdom of Christ."⁴ Furthermore, we as laity must "band together to remedy those secular institutions and conditions which are an inducement to sin..."⁵

A revitalized effort for the *new evangelization*

It is clear that all these signs, both within the Church and in the world, point to a revitalized effort for the new evangelization. Let us examine some of the comments of the Bishops in the *Lineamenta* for the Synod on the New Evangelization, a document written in preparation for the Synod:

*"Presently, in reviewing the dynamics of the "new evangelization", the expression can now be applied to the Church's renewed efforts to meet the challenges which today's society and cultures, in view of the significant changes taking place, are posing to the Christian faith, its proclamation and its witness. In facing these challenges, the Church does not give up or retreat into herself; instead, she undertakes a project to revitalize herself."*⁶

The new evangelization is indeed a *renewed effort to meet the challenges of today's society and culture*. The aforementioned changes and obstacles we are facing in so many previously Christian cultures, are *the significant changes* that should imbue us with courage to speak out and proclaim the Gospel in every realm of our lives. Notwithstanding, it is certain that we must not give into the temptation to retreat into our faith communities where we feel welcomed and understood. Once we have recognized the sign of the times the only natural and legitimate next step is to interpret them as a collective cry that rings out from every part of society. A cry of

⁴ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, Northport 1996, 35.

⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, *op. cit.*, 36.

⁶ *Lineamenta*, Synod of Bishops, XIII General Ordinary Assembly, The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith, 2012, Ch. I, 5.

a people that yearn to be infused with the Gospel truths, the truth that is Christ himself.

Women speak for themselves

As we take the time this year to reflect on our faith and find a renewed sense of evangelization, we must still go a step further and ask: How does this all apply to us as women? How are we as women to play a vital role in the new evangelization today? Perhaps one of the first things to examine before answering these or any other questions is to ask exactly what fundamental values are being compromised? Essentially, what *intelligible language* are we obliged to learn and speak in order that we may answer this collective cry and teach our culture and it's people to ask the right questions that will lead them to Christ?

Perhaps here we can pause for a moment and take a look at a recently published book entitled: *Breaking Through: Catholic Women Speak for Themselves*, edited by Helen M. Alvaré. Dr. Alvaré is a law professor at George Mason University (Virginia, U.S.A.) as well as a Consultant to the Pontifical Council for the Laity. This book takes a look at ten American Catholic women and ten pertinent issues they confront with the light of their faith. Dr. Alvaré writes: "These are women who are honestly trying to grapple with how their faith might inform their thinking and their acting." The essays are short testimonies of how these American Catholic women deal with the issues of: children and family, marriage and dating, single parenting, contraception, beauty and materialism, homosexuality and more. These are issues that stem from the values that are being contorted and ripped from their Christian roots. These are the issues that are at stake. Many of these issues are what the secularized masses wittingly use to back up the myth that "religion is out of step with 'freedom.' Especially women's." ⁷

Hence, this book is as timely as ever. Dr. Alvaré reads the sign of the times and launches this compilation of essays where believing Catholic women are able to find a public platform in which readers are able to discover "who believing Catholic women are, and what we think about being Catholic and female today..." ⁸ It enables Catholic women to *speak for themselves* instead of allowing the relentless drone of the media and even politicians to speak for them. Dr. Alvaré exposes the reality that not all women are inclined to settle for the status quo; that ordinary,

⁷ Breaking Through. Catholic Women Speak for Themselves. Helen Alvaré ed., Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., Huntington 2012, p. 12

⁸ Breaking Through. *op. cit.*, p. 12

intelligent, prosperous women are willing to base their lives upon the very Christian values secularized society deems insignificant and out of date.

Thus this book helps us to understand and confirm that the many Christian values that are subjected to the plague of secularization are intricately interconnected to the issues that we as women deal with in such intimate ways. Women are at the heart of these issues! As mothers, daughters, wives, educators, health-care providers and workers we deal with these concerns on a daily basis. Furthermore, we see a prevailing movement of western women ascending to numerous positions of influence, wealth and public office. These are indeed signs for us as women! This is proof and at the same time a calling for women to step up and become a vital part of the renewed call to evangelize. As Dr. Alvaré, together with the various authors of *Breaking Through* put forth so eloquently, we as Catholic women must *speak for ourselves*.

The role of women in the *new evangelization*

So how are we to play a vital role in the new evangelization? The Holy Father gave us words of inspiration at the very beginning of his Pontificate when he reminded us to shed “ever clearer light on the joy and renewed enthusiasm of the encounter with Christ...to set out to lead people out of the desert, towards the place of life, towards friendship with the Son of God, towards the One who gives us life, and life in abundance”⁹ We, as believing Catholic women are privileged in that we share an innate gift for reaching out to the many who find themselves navigating through these deserts of life.

Chiara Amirante, founder of the New Horizon’s Catholic community, a community that puts particular emphasis on the new evangelization was one of seventeen female auditors present at the Synod on the New Evangelization. In a recent interview with Zenit she highlights the many gifts that women can contribute to the new evangelization at large. She states:

*“[the Synod] stressed many times the importance of woman and her specific charism in the New Evangelization. I’m convinced that women precisely because of her particular capacity of receptivity, of attention to those who suffer, of listening, because of her sensibility and maternity, her peculiar capacity to love, will be able to make a real, fundamental contribution.”*¹⁰

⁹ Benedict XVI, Homily for the beginning of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome, April 24, 2005.

Through our capacity to love, to heal, to educate and listen we find ripe opportunities to shed light on the joy of encountering Christ. These are opportunities that offer us the chance to give witness to the faith and truth that enlightens every aspect of our lives. It is in the day-to-day encounters with others that we are called to give a real witness to the joy and freedom of our faith. Again, we must eradicate the myth that our faith is but a sentimental reference point that robs us of our innate freedom. We as women are particularly vulnerable and essentially the main subjects of this myth precisely because so many of the issues society grapples with touch upon the sanctity of life and sexuality, particularly women's sexuality.

One prime example of this distorted view of women's freedom can be found in the current crusade of the so called "war on women" in the United States. Although mostly politically charged, this term is being used to demean women who stand for the sanctity of life, the true meaning of marriage between a man and a woman as well as the belief that the use of contraception is not only a grave health-risk to women but that it goes against the dignity of a woman's body as well as the dignity of the sexual union. The fact that women would *allow* themselves to be informed by their conscience and their Christian beliefs is, to much of the culture, an outright forfeit of freedom. The media in particular peddles this secularized view and inculcates young minds with the idea that true freedom lies in "liberating ourselves" from antiquated Christian values.

Yet, because our lives as women form a part of the apex of these very values, we already possess the *intelligible language* our culture so desperately needs to hear. This *intelligible language* that is required in order to speak to the culture of today is the very language women speak. Furthermore, in many respects, the one's we need to address (evangelize) are women themselves. Increasingly, we see that the predominant voice behind the many falsehoods being disseminated, particularly the ones denigrating women of faith, are women themselves; sometimes even so called Catholic women.

As "the Church exists to evangelize"¹¹ so do we as women exist to evangelize. We need to become an integral part of this renewed call to evangelization because as women we can be strong witnesses to the pressing issues of our time. We can be witnesses and at the same time teachers of the faith because we deal with these issues in our day-to-day lives. We have not only dealt with these concerns but many

10 Zenit interview with Chiara Amirante, The Role of Women in the New Evangelization, October 26, 2012. <http://www.zenit.org/article-35821?!=english>

11 Benedict XVI, Homily for the Opening of the 13th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization, October 7, 2012.

of us have battled with them in our own private and intimate ways, allowing the light of faith to ultimately inform us and lead us to the truth. Would it not be apropos to now recall the beautiful and inspiring words of Pope Paul VI in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses." ¹² This is indeed the role for us as women, to be *witness and teacher!*

The desire for conversion and holiness

Yet, there is one important element upon which we must meditate before we can be *witnesses and teachers* to a culture that is so desperate for the truth that is Christ. The Council Fathers' hastened a *universal call to holiness*, a call deeply affixed to the call of evangelization. The call to holiness which is deeply rooted in a sincere desire for conversion is necessary in order that we may be credible witnesses in a world plagued by doubt and uncertainty. Our Holy Father emphasized the importance of conversion in connection to the new evangelization. "Thus, we cannot speak about the new evangelization without a sincere desire for conversion. The best path to the new evangelization is to let ourselves be reconciled with God and with each other." ¹³

If we are to love as Jesus does than we must first seek to be continually renewed in both heart and mind. Through this clearing out of the obstacles of pride and sin we make room for the graces of the Holy Spirit in order that He may lead us to a deeper understanding of God's truth--Jesus Christ Himself. In this desire for conversion, this humbling of ourselves if you will, we realize that our strength comes solely from God. In turn, we enkindle a constant desire to receive more and more graces through the Sacraments of the Church as well as through a profound dedication to deep personal prayer. Through this desire for conversion and holiness we will soon learn that it is the light of Christ and not our own that will capture hearts. We will learn to say, as Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta said:

*"Stay with me and then I shall begin to shine as You shine,
So to shine as to be a light to others; The light, O Jesus
will be all from You; none of it will be mine; It will be you,
shining on others through me." ¹⁴*

12 Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, 41.

13 Benedict XVI, Homily for the Opening of the Synod, *op. cit.*

14 Mother Teresa of Calcutta prayer.

www.worldprayers.org/archive/prayers/invocations/dear_jesus_help_me_to.html

Moreover, we can rely on the gift of the saints that the Church has granted us. Pope Benedict highlighted this essential call to holiness and stressed the importance of the intercession of the saints . The saints “show the beauty of the Gospel to those who are indifferent or even hostile, and they invite, as it were, tepid believers, to live with the joy of faith, hope and charity, to rediscover the taste for the word of God and for the sacraments, especially for the bread of life, the Eucharist.”¹⁵ Nowhere is the witness of constant conversion and a burning desire for holiness more evident than in the lives of the saints. Together with their intercession and our own desire for holiness we can *show the beauty of the Gospels to those who are indifferent and even hostile.*

Conclusion

The current *sign of the times* is clear. We are to pay heed to these signs and learn to *interpret them in the light of the Gospel.* We as women are fluent in the *intelligible language* necessary for our time and need to be ready and willing to speak this language to those we encounter in every sphere of our daily lives. We have the advantage and privilege of intimately knowing what so many struggle to understand because we too have struggled with these issues of the sanctity and purpose of life, marriage, sexuality, the dignity of our bodies and so much more. We are the heart of these concerns. Because we too have battled with our own doubts and we allowed the light of our faith to inform and lead us to the truth, we are able to be *witnesses and at the same time teachers.* We have learned that true freedom cannot be severed from God and His truth. Consequently, as women, we have a responsibility to answer these *recurring questions which people ask.*

As we embark on this Year of Faith we will find ever impelling reasons and even a sense of urgency to not only grow deeper in our love for the Lord and His Church, but to seek out our own conversion and holiness. In this abandoning of ourselves to God we will become more credible witnesses in a world that has lost sight of the truth found in God alone. Let us, as believing Catholic women, learn to *speak for ourselves* and *breakthrough* contemporary society with the witness of our lives and our faith as we recall the words of Blessed John Paul II as he tirelessly reminded us throughout his pontificate to *be not afraid!*

¹⁵ Benedict XVI, Homily for Opening of Synod, 2012, *op. cit.*