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PASTORAL LETTER FOR ADVENT 2012

ENTRUSTING YOU TO GOD AND HIS WORD

One of the beautiful qualities which the human person is endowed with is the capacity to listen. Many are those who yearn for some meaningful words which may be relied upon. At the same time, today, the human person is tempted to turn a deaf ear since he is weary of hearing words which sound sweet but are hollow. Words have lost their worth, so much so that it has become easy to twist them around. In a certain sense, today the human person is opting to be deaf!

The mission of the Church

Within the historical framework shines forth the mission which the Church has, that is, to announce Jesus Christ – “That is a word that you can rely on and nobody should doubt it” (1 Tim 4:9). In other words, we can see that there is an urgent need for a new evangelization.

The narrative of the deaf and dumb man who was brought before Jesus springs to mind. Jesus lifted his eyes towards the heavens and mouthed a “word”; the deaf man’s ears were opened and “he began to speak clearly” (Mark 7: 31-37). The Church is duty bound – and should - offer the same service to our society which has rendered itself deaf and as a consequence, is finding it difficult to “speak clearly” on important topics such as God, human life, the family, the work place, economics and science. We need to attain the skill of communicating with one another in order to become truly one family, harbouring a genuine concern for the common good. We need to find those words which, because they are poignant, serve to shape the person. We need words which do away with any form of hypocrisy in order that we may form relationships which are sincere and just. We need words that heal. It would indeed be a boon to use words which are courteous! Above all, today the human person needs words which encourage him to break the silence and speak out - both in the village square and on the church parvis – in order to stir the stagnant waters, not only in secular society but also in the religious sphere!

The Word that saves

Before pronouncing the word by which the man's ears were opened, enabling him to speak clearly, Jesus "turned his eyes towards the heavens" to show us that the Word which brings hearing to the deaf and sight to the blind comes from heaven. This "Word" is Jesus himself: "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1: 14). This is what the Gospel is all about: it is not a book which contains beautiful stories of the past; rather it is one of the ways in which the Resurrected Christ renders himself present in our contemporary history! The Gospel is an affirmation that God is not silent and indifferent in the face of history, but he spoke to mankind by sending us his Son. His is a Word that saves.¹

At the opening of the recent Synod of Bishops, Pope Benedict XVI insisted that the scope of this evangelization is "to help people encounter the Lord who alone fills our existence with deep meaning and peace, and to favour the rediscovery of the faith, that source of grace which brings joy and hope to personal, family and social life."² In the final Message of the Synod, we read that "The work of the new evangelization consists in presenting once more the beauty and perennial newness of the encounter with Christ to the often distracted and confused heart and mind of the men and women of our time, above all to ourselves. We invite you all to contemplate the face of the Lord Jesus Christ..."³ In this appeal lies the core of the pastoral work of the Church! Woe betide us if we do not announce Christ!⁴

The most important task

In comparison with this mission of evangelization, every other mission of the Church has little or no meaning. The Word of God must penetrate the heart of the human person as soon as possible and for this reason, we appeal to individuals as well as to ecclesial communities to discern whether the above-mentioned task of evangelization is being given priority in our ministry; in analyzing the nature of our pastoral work, we need to find the courage to give priority to that which should come first.

This "Word" may be read in the Bible and we, as your Bishops, recognize that the more time passes, more and more groups are focusing upon this Word. But the Church also believes that even in the world around us, there is the "seed of the Word", that is, there are signs of the presence of Christ. For this reason, if we wish to announce the Good News, we cannot but be alert to what the world is

¹ See Acts 4:12

² *Homily during Holy Mass at the Opening of the 13th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, Vatican, 7th October 2012.

³ *Message to the People of God at the Conclusion of the 13th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, Vatican, 26th October 2012, par. 3.

⁴ See 1 Cor 9:16

saying. Dialogue with society is profitable and not a deficit because through dialogue, we are also able to discern God's hand in our life narrative! An important aspect in this exercise is the dialogue between faith and culture. The Synod states that: "the new evangelization needs a renewed alliance between faith and reason. We are convinced that faith has the capacity to welcome every product of a sound mind open to transcendence."⁵ Jesus healed the deaf and dumb man within the pagan confines known as the Decapolis⁶ where there existed a combination of cultures, religions and philosophies. But he did not avoid this reality; rather he took the opportunity to establish dialogue in such a situation!

The Church responds to the human cry

The Church stands convinced that she must open up her ears to the cry of the human person who is burdened with the cross. Just as Christ standing before the deaf man protested against the Evil which displayed its power in the infirm condition of man, the Church "sighs deeply" (Mark 7:34) upon seeing the wounded person, be the wound physical, moral or spiritual. This yearning gives testimony to the fact that the Church is prepared to pour oil upon the wounds of those who are suffering, particularly through the dissemination of the Gospel which is "able to heal every human weakness".⁷ The Church cannot enclose itself within the comfortable and secure confines of its sacristies, however it must emulate the Good Samaritan who traverses every path, even those which are dangerous and on the wayside; it is there that one meets Christ who is present in the wounded and abandoned. This new evangelization also demands that the Church not only wipes away human tears, but it must also do its utmost to prevent those same tears from being shed. This reminds us of the appeal made by the Synod which states that: "we need to discover opportunities to encounter Jesus, truly evangelical approaches rooted in the fundamental dimensions of human life: the family, work, friendship, various forms of poverty and the trials of life, etc."⁸

A desire for conversion

In order to evangelize effectively, the Church must first sit at our Lord's feet and pay attention to his Word. If Christians, particularly those at the forefront, do not heed his Word, how can they pass it on? A Church which is spiritually weary cannot expect to be a spiritual catalyst for society! New evangelization is possible if its members and its structures become internally renewed. This renewal is possible if we open up our ears to the Word which has the power to

⁵ *Message to the People of God at the Conclusion of the 13th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, par. 10.

⁶ See Mark 7:31

⁷ *Message to the People of God at the Conclusion of the 13th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, par. 6.

⁸ *Ibid*, par. 4.

recreate us. Therefore “ we firmly believe that we must convert ourselves above all to the power of Christ who alone can make all things new... We know that we must humbly recognize our vulnerability to the wounds of history and we do not hesitate to recognize our personal sins.”⁹ The more we come to resemble Christ through this process, the more our words will be credible.

Welcoming the coming Christ

Advent is a time of preparation so that at Christmas, we may celebrate the mystery of the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us¹⁰, to the extent that we could reach out and touch it with our human hands¹¹. At this particular moment, we urge the local Church to welcome Christ with a renewed enthusiasm; through the intercession of Mary, Mother of the Word, we pray to the Holy Spirit to sustain us that we may not be afraid to embrace the challenge of the new evangelization, which has the power of restoring sound to the deaf and speech to the dumb.

We commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified!¹².

We impart upon you our Apostolic Blessing.

✘ **PAUL CREMONA O.P.**
Archbishop of Malta

✘ **MARIO GRECH**
Bishop of Gozo

⁹ Ibid, par. 5.

¹⁰ See John 1:14

¹¹ See 1 John 1:1

¹² See Acts, 20:32