

Getting Involved

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V^o Encuentro – Grapevine TX

September 21, 2018

Introduction

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“Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. The Lord gets involved and he involves his own, as he kneels to wash their feet. He tells his disciples: ‘You will be blessed if you do this’ (Jn 13:17). An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelizers thus take on the ‘smell of the sheep’ and the sheep are willing to hear their voice.”¹

During our gathering this morning, we will think about “getting involved”. Of course, this seems like preaching to the choir. You are involved – Up to your eyebrows! You have dedicated a great deal of time over the last years to the preparation of the V Encuentro. The Lord only knows how many other responsibilities you already carry in your parishes, dioceses, schools and universities and beyond. With the many commitments you carry, I’ll bet that you often feel like a juggler, who struggles to keep six or seven oranges in the air and must deal with someone who is asking her for a match!

Speaking with you, I don’t think the question is whether or not to be committed to the mission of Jesus in His Church. The question is not “whether”

¹ Pope Francis, apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, no 24.

but “where”? There are so many needs, so many wounds, so many voices calling out, or already silenced by resignation, even despair. And, I am going to tell you a little secret about bishops and priests. You can often tell the preacher’s sins by what he preaches about. I have spent a little over a year and a half as the archbishop of a local Church that counts around 1.5 million Catholics, living in only four counties. Each Sunday we celebrate the Eucharist in more than twenty languages. Our worshippers include some of the richest – and the poorest people in this country.

After visiting the 27 deaneries that make up the Archdiocese of Newark and listening to hundreds, perhaps thousands of people, the question remains, “where do we start?” This is not a question any of us can answer on our own. But, you know that already.

In the passage from the Gospel of Luke that tells us of the two disciples on their way home to a little village called Emmaus, Jesus shows us the importance of asking questions as an essential step in the evangelizing process. The methodology of this V Encuentro calls to meet others and listen to them first, particularly persons who are going through very difficult moments. The encounter must be initiated by asking them about their lives, their concerns, their hopes, their ideas, their needs, their dreams. It means listening deeply and creating a space of trust and safety. Then, what?

The Acts of the Apostles, the inspired book that introduces us to the history of the early Church, could well be called “Gospel of the Holy Spirit” – such is the role of the Spirit in all apostolic missions developed by those apostles, deacons and faithful of the first days of Christianity.

The double miracle of Pentecost

The birth of the Church as told in *Acts* teaches us an important lesson about our mission in the United States today. We are called to continue the double miracle of Pentecost.

The first miracle can't be missed: the spectacular sight of thousands of people with hard to pronounce names, all hearing the Good News in their own language. Scripture tells us that those people were "astounded and amazed." (2: 7).

The second miracle is more subtle and could be overlooked. These groups do not become porridge, that is, the people with the hard to pronounce names are not required to sacrifice their language, customs, music, culture – all that makes them them – in order to follow Jesus. These people remained Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of..." They find a source of unity that goes beyond culture. They experience the Holy Spirit.

Earlier this year, Pope Francis described the experience of unity in diversity. Speaking to diocesan priests and lay leaders of the Diocese of Rome, he urged them to seek "harmony" in parish activities and groups. "Not order – order is static – but harmony, which is a gift of the Spirit".²

As we continue to read the Acts of the Apostles, we are charmed by the evident harmony that is created by the Holy Spirit. Already in the second chapter,

² *Meeting with the Diocese of Rome*, 14 May 2018

the Word of God presents the first of three summary passages (along with Acts 4:32–37; 5:12–16) that outline, somewhat idyllically, the chief characteristics of the Jerusalem community:

"They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." (Acts 2: 42–47)

Once we get past the blissful descriptions, we can see the tensions brought about by the second miracle of Pentecost. Interestingly, the harmony is broken by a problem we all know very well. The first real dispute in the early community is over language and its implications (Acts 6, 1-6). Remember how the sixth chapter of Acts begins?

"At that time, the number of disciples continued to grow the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

So the 12 called together the community of the disciples and said, it is not right for us to neglect the Word of God to serve a table.

Brothers select from among you, seven reputable men filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom whom we shall appoint to the task, whereas we shall devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word.

The proposal was acceptable to the whole community, so they chose Stephen, a man filled with faith and the Holy Spirit. Also Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas of Antioch, a

convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid hands on them.”

Greek-speakers and Hebrew-speakers quarrelling – in that unharmonious situation it isn't hard to see the challenges of our multi-cultural communities. But the Source of real harmony will not permit the discord to destroy the community, and raises up servants, “full of faith and the Holy Spirit.”

In the middle of the Book of Acts, the real crisis arrives and threatens the very life of the community. What do we do with the converts from paganism, the Gentiles? Must they accept all the customs of Judaism, including the Law of Moses and circumcision? Chapter 15 narrates how the community met the crisis head-on but it is clear that the leaders were not the authors of the solution. In communicating their decisions to the communities, the apostles dare to write:

"So we are sending Judas and Silas who will also convey this same message by word of mouth: 'It is the decision of **the holy Spirit and of us** not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities.'" (Acts 15: 27-28)

The truth is that the Pentecost experience turned the apostles and other disciples into new creatures. We can say that the Church was fully born from this, the third glorious mystery. The spectacular growth of the new People of God cannot be attributed to either the shrewdness or the eloquence of the first preachers, but to the action of the Holy Spirit.

Now, twenty centuries later, we ask: how is it that so many Jews and gentiles became Christians when there were no printing press, radio, TV, internet or as many communication resources as we have today? Because they were docile to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. People did not act simply based on human criteria. To stress the leadership of the Holy Spirit, the author of the Acts of the Apostles dramatizes the story by making the Holy Spirit speak. **“While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’”** (13:2).

In order that we missionary disciples fulfill the apostolic mission that has been entrusted to us, we need the action of the Holy Spirit. We need to remain open to its inspirations and responsive to its charisms.

How do we do that? By asking the right questions.

Where is God opening a door?

The activity of the Holy Spirit in the early Church teaches us to ask a crucial question: where is God opening a door? Let me illustrate what I mean by citing a passage from the 16th chapter of *Acts*:

"They traveled through Phrygian and Galician territory because they'd been prevented by the Holy Spirit from preaching the message in the province of Asia.

When they came to Mysia, they tried to go on to Bithynia but the spirit of Jesus blocked them, so they crossed through Mysia and came to Troas.

During the night Paul had a vision, a Macedonian stood before him and implored him with these words, 'come over to Macedonia and help us.'

When he had seen the vision, we sought passage to Macedonia at once concluding that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

We sailed from Troas making a straight run for Samothrace and on the next day to Neapolis and from there to Philippi, a leading city in that district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We spent some time in that city." (Acts 16: 6-11).

What a fabulous lesson! Twice the Holy Spirit prevents Paul and his companions from pursuing their own plan. For us too, not every defeat is a disaster. Our failure might simply be the work of the Holy Spirit, teaching us that we must go in a different direction. When Paul had the vision of the Macedonian, he knew where he should go. He discovered where God was opening a door.

[What keeps us from going through it? The need for Pastoral conversion](#)

However difficult the circumstances, the Church cannot shy from its mission, since it exists to proclaim the Gospel to every creature and bring to all people that light of Christ which shines out visibly from the Church.

When Jesus commissioned his disciples, he might appear to have counseled against stewardship and development, when He taught, "**Do not take gold or silver or copper for your belts; no sack for the journey, or a second tunic, or sandals, or walking stick. The laborer deserves his keep.**" (Matthew 10: 9-10).

The words of Jesus clearly imply that initiative comes first and resources come later. Anybody involved in planning mission activity has a real challenge in these words. Put a slightly different way, we have to be very careful not to close doors by the way we plan: that is, we need to be led by the sense of where God is actively opening doors and put the initiative and energy there in the trust that

somehow that action will generate the resources we need – “For the laborers deserve their keep.”

I believe that as we progress in identifying the mission of the Catholic community in this country today, we will be successful in assembling the resources necessary to sustain that mission. This Encuentro is a graced moment where we can invoke the Holy Spirit and ask: where is God opening a door for the Church today? If the Holy Spirit helps us discover the door, we can count on what we need to enter.

We will have to review all our structures and strategies, asking if they are what the mission requires now, however effective they may have been in the past. We will have to make sure that we do not just think and speak about the Church in some introverted way, but have an eye to the mission and what it requires of us now in this particular Church, which is part of a universal Church.

[The Question posed by Vatican II and Francis](#)

The Second Vatican Council and Pope Francis help us look for the door.

One of the most exacting challenges from the Second Vatican Council was its summons to read the “signs of the times.” It was a call to reflect deeply on the events unfolding before our eyes and to respond to them out of mature faith. This was difficult, because many of us were accustomed to react to life rather than interact with it, and few of us possessed what today might be called mature faith. We probably knew the teachings of the church and were well grounded in genuine devotion, but we were passive rather than actively involved in critical thinking about faith

The Second Vatican Council encourages us to “read the signs of times and places” in the light of faith”. The opening lines of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, tells us what many of those “signs” look and sound like:

“The joys and the hopes, the griefs, and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted. These are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties, of the followers of Christ. Indeed nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts for theirs is a community composed of men and women, united in Christ. They are led by the Holy Spirit in their journeying to the kingdom of their Father, and they have welcomed the news of salvation, which is meant for every man, woman, and child. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with humankind and its history by the deepest of bonds.”³

The Pastoral Constitution proceeds to instruct us how to recognize “where” we are called to missionary work:

To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. **We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics.**⁴

³ *Gaudium et Spes*, 1.

⁴ *Ibid.* 4

In the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Francis invites us to carry the mission of Christ in a very challenging “place”. Francis knows the church has deep troubles, but doesn't see the answer as turning inward in self-examination. Cardinal Jaime Ortega, the archbishop emeritus of La Habana, was quoted in a Cuban Catholic magazine shortly after the 2013 conclave, saying that hours before his election, the future pope told his fellow cardinals that the Vatican must turn away from self-absorption and “theological narcissism.” Instead, an embrace of others: the Church must focus its energies on the “peripheries,” which Cardinal Ortega understood to be not only a geographic reference but a reference to those who feel, or have been treated as peripheral—the poor, the damaged, the unbelieving.

The need for the Church to look outward has been a constant theme for Francis. On numerous occasions, he has warned against the Church turning inward. Here's one from a couple of years ago.

The thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds. ... And you have to start from the ground up.⁵

And he warned against losing sense of the priority in sharing the Good News.

One is sick at heart when, in face of a Church, of a humanity with so many wounds, moral wounds, existential wounds, war wounds, which we all feel every day, to see Christians beginning to engage in philosophical, theological and spiritual 'Byzantinisms,' what is useful

⁵ “A Big Heart Open to God,” *America Magazine*, Sept. 19, 2013.

instead is an outgoing spirituality. [...] Today we have no right to Byzantine reflection. We must go out!⁶

Where is the Holy Spirit opening a door for us? The Second Vatican Council tells us to read the signs of times and place. Francis encourages us to look on the existential peripheries of society and Church. We can be sure of it: we will not find our “where” – the place of mission – with the walls and structures of our parish churches, movements and societies.

Conclusion

[Sam in Chicago]

We bishops also must ask ourselves a question. Pope Francis teaches us how. In my mind, there is no doubt that Francis supports the goal of the V Encuentro to contribute to the strengthening of the apostolic activity of the People of God. Several years ago, in an address to the bishops of Italy, the Pope asked that the:

Ecclesial and pastoral sensitivity are also expressed by strengthening the essential role of lay people willing to take on their proper responsibilities. In reality lay people who have an authentic Christian formation do not need a helmsmen bishop, somebody who is always steering the ship or a pilot-monsignor or the input of clergy in order to take on their proper responsibilities at all levels from the political to the social, from the economic to the legislative. They have need, however, of a pastor bishop.⁷

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Address of Pope Francis to the 68th General Assembly of the Italian Episcopal Conference, Rome, 18 May 2015

The Pope is proposing an ecclesial model that envisions a bishop-pastor and a free and responsible laity. Bishops need not try to act like a “pilot” and steer the laity’s choices into the areas he is in charge of. Laity need not demand an endless stream of support and blessings for their apostolic activity nor complain about the hierarchy not underscoring certain hot-button issues on a weekly basis, as unfortunately still happens.

Most of all, bishops should avoid talking to themselves! So should you. Could Pope Francis have been thinking of our days together in Grapevine when he spoke to those Italian bishops

“...for example: a congress or an event is organized that, highlighting the well-known voices, it narcotizes the communities, approving options, opinions and people. Instead of letting ourselves be transported to the horizons where the Holy Spirit asks us to go.”⁸

Of course he wasn’t! May the conversations over the next days help us glimpse where the Holy Spirit is calling the Church in the United States to go ... May we have the courage to ask together, “Where is the Spirit opening a door?” The Holy Spirit will help us answer and enter.

⁸ Ibid.