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# **“Do not be afraid, little flock”: Evangelizing in a Time of Change (I)**

It's time to shift our perspective, moving from nostalgia to boldness, and from a defensive faith to one that confidently offers a vision of the world and of life. This is the 18th installment in the “Combat, closeness, mission” series.

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A group of scouts, hardened by years in the desert, venture into unknown lands. They advance among rolling hills and lush valleys; they find clusters of grapes so large they must be carried by two men, and figs that would put to shame any market in the East (cf. Num 13:17–24). Their hearts swell with enthusiasm, almost to the point of euphoria, at last seeing this long-awaited land: its greenery, its life, its enormous fruits. Hope becomes concrete, tangible. With their own two hands, they touch a world that seems to offer everything they have been waiting for all these years. Yet along with the promise comes anxiety: this land will have to be conquered. And a feeling of hostility lingers in the air.

### **Scouts in a land of giants**

In the distance, they glimpse fortified cities. Closer at hand they discover inhabitants tall as oaks, literal giants!

Some of them forget God's strength and sow the seeds of discouragement. Soon the people begin longing for the manna of the desert... Their enthusiasm vanishes like dew in the morning sun. Tension rises between those who want to give up and return to Egypt and those who still have a sparkle in their eyes and the spirit of conquest: a few dreamers, truth be told. The land is beautiful, yes, but the undertaking seems titanic in every sense. A sense of inadequacy creeps into their minds; the certainties they once relied upon begin to shake (cf. Num 13:27-14:4). Their hearts waver between trust and the temptation to flee, between the desire to enter and the fear of being crushed. The choice is clear: either engage with this new land or remain entrenched in the desert forever.

For decades, the people will remain trapped in this decision. At root, they

are held back by their lack of trust in God. Still ringing in their ears are the scouts' words: "We saw the Nephilim there... we looked like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and so we seemed to them" (Num 13:33). Paralyzed by fear of the new challenge, almost all of them will end their days in the desert. Only a few "dreamers" – Caleb, of the tribe of Judah, and Joshua, of the tribe of Ephraim – will survive the passing of time. They are neither the strongest nor the boldest, but they know that victory does not depend on their strength or the sharpness of their weapons, but on the living God who walks in their midst.

Forty years later, after a long period in which their wavering hope has been purified, the people once again find themselves at the threshold of the promised land. Caleb and Joshua are still there, and Joshua, the man who trusted in God, will lead this

renewed people across the Jordan. They are spurred on by the words the Lord spoke through Moses: “Choose life” (Deut 30:19). “The Lord is telling each one of us that He created us to live, to be happy. And He asks: ‘Are you going to choose me? Are you going to choose Life?’ That is what the ‘little ones’ have discovered and chosen. They know that the infinite desire to live that they carry within comes from and leads to God. And they want nothing else. They understand that triumphing in life, succeeding in life, means letting God's love fill them and then distributing it generously.”<sup>[1]</sup> —

Still, the Israelites gathered around Joshua cannot yet grasp something fundamental. They lack the key to properly interpret their entry into the promised land. Immersed in their own history of exile and liberation, they cannot yet perceive

its deeper meaning. They do not yet see their place within the great story of salvation. For the moment, their outlook is still one of conquest and confrontation: they dream of a crushing victory, the kind that the Book of Joshua sings about. Their mindset is one of combat and triumph, of pitting their strength (though comparatively modest) and their culture (still quite limited) against the nations before them. Their goal is military and cultural conquest, by the weapons at their disposal.

Actually, the people who enter the promised land with Joshua will only establish themselves among these nations with great difficulty. Even while holding fast to their own roots, they will learn to weave relationships with other peoples. And little by little they will begin to grasp that their role is not to dominate. The Lord will reveal the

key to understand gradually, through the prophets: “I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth” (Is 49:6). They were called to bring light! For that reason, neither numbers, status, or cultural resources mattered. Unknown lands and giant peoples posed no real threat. The light they were to carry was that of the God who had chosen to dwell among them as “Prince of Peace” (Is 9:6). They would enlighten the nations with the peace the world cannot give (cf. Lk 10:5–6; Jn 14:27): “the peace of the risen Christ, a peace that is unarmed and disarming, humble and persevering.”<sup>[2]</sup> —

## **Making contact**

A “modern apostle”<sup>[3]</sup> — may also feel like one of those little scouts in a world of giants; scouts who long to carry the ark of the covenant that will enlighten all nations into the

heart of the world. “Children of the light, brothers and sisters of the light: such we are. Bearers of the only flame that can light up the paths of the earth for souls, of the only brightness which can never be darkened, dimmed or overshadowed.”<sup>[4]</sup> —

Like the people who followed Joshua, we too would like to find the confidence to pass from the desert into a land shared with people very different from ourselves. For that immersion is what allows us to become light for the nations. To do so, however, we must first take the great step that the people in the desert never quite managed: we must choose to make contact. *We*, the chosen people, fully aware of our smallness and insufficiency... and *others*, the real reason God chose us. At times those others seem like giants or very different from ourselves, but in reality they are very much like us.

Some of them do not yet know the living and true God, or they hold a mistaken image of him. And they need us, because, even while living in a rich land, they often endure real hardships.

In any case, “it is not true that everyone today — in general — is closed or indifferent to what our Christian faith teaches about man’s being and destiny. It is not true that men in our time are turned only toward the things of this earth and have forgotten to look up to heaven. There is no lack of narrow ideologies, it is true, or of persons who maintain them. But in our time we find both great desires and base attitudes, heroism and cowardice, zeal and disenchantment: men who dream of a new world, more just and more human, and others who, discouraged perhaps by the failure of their youthful idealism, hide themselves in the selfishness of seeking only their

own security or remaining immersed in their errors.”<sup>[5]</sup>

But how do we go out to meet them? How do we decide not only to make contact, but to remain in ongoing dialogue with so many people we encounter along the path of our lives? In many parts of the world, it is clear that Christians have become a “little flock” (Lk 12:32), much like our first brothers and sisters in the faith. Of course, encouraging news comes to gladden us from time to time: reports of the growing number of adult baptisms in some countries, the increase in priestly vocations on other continents, the sight of so many young people celebrating the Jubilee alongside the Pope... All of this fills us with joy. Yet it does not erase the fact that in some places we continue to be a minority, sometimes silenced by a culture that often fails to understand the Christian faith. Generations change, and passing on

the faith becomes increasingly difficult. We can understand the dismay of many parents who, despite their best efforts, were not able to pass their faith and Christian life on to their children. Perhaps they tried to do it the same way their own parents did, but this time, it didn't work. Something went wrong. There are numerous factors at the root of this phenomenon, among them that the context has changed radically and calls for something different.

Pope Benedict XVI explained that, “whereas in the past it was possible to recognize a unitary cultural matrix, broadly accepted in its appeal to the content of the faith and the values inspired by it, today this no longer seems to be the case in large swathes of society, because of a profound crisis of faith that has affected many people.”<sup>[6]</sup> Years earlier, the venerable Fulton Sheen had said the same thing, with

remarkable clarity, to a stunned audience: “We are at the end of Christendom. Now not Christianity, not the Church. Remember what I am saying. Christendom is economic, political, social life as inspired by Christian principles. That is ending — we’ve seen it die.” Nonetheless, he added, “these are great and wonderful days in which to be alive (...). It is a picture of the Church in the midst of increasing opposition from the world. And, therefore, live your lives in the full consciousness of this hour of testing, and rally close to the heart of Christ.”<sup>[7]</sup>

## **A faith that looks for a thousand ways to proclaim itself**

What now? It is time to change our perspective: to move from nostalgia to boldness, from a defensive faith to a faith that confidently proposes a vision of the world and of life. Faced with this world so full of promise, yet

seemingly dominated by *giants* – whether of technology, finance, culture, or media – we are called to trust in God and to make a choice. We can rest in idealistic nostalgia for the “good old days”: it is so easy to think, now, that everything was simpler back then... But in reality, apart from the fact that it was not always so simple, and certainly not in every part of the world, the nostalgic vision paralyzes the apostle, leaving him watching this *post-Christian* world with apprehension, waiting for it to improve on its own. Trust in God, in contrast, leads us to look forward with youthful wonder at a world that could be better described as *pre-Christian*, because it must rediscover the newness of Christ, as if for the first time.

“Who is this that looks forth like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun?” (Song 6:10). In this biblical

passage, Saint Gregory the Great sees the Church as the true dawn of the world, a dawn still on its way until the end of time. The new day is not behind us but before us: “Those of us who in this life follow the truth are like the dawn, for in part we already act according to the light, but in part we still retain shadows (...). The holy Church of the elect will be full day when it no longer has any trace of the shadow of sin.”<sup>[8]</sup> —

This outlook is more than a comforting thought: it fills us with hope and enables us to accept the challenge that Saint John Paul II raised when he started to speak of a “new evangelization;”<sup>[9]</sup> — a renewed apostolic effort that requires ever more initiative and personal creativity. Perhaps it is true that the Church today cannot count on the tailwind of dominant culture or the “spirit of the age,” but she still has a far stronger wind: the Spirit of Truth,

who even in this new era of apostolic mission will teach us and remind us of all things (cf. Jn 14:26), so that we may carry the life-giving freshness of the Gospel everywhere.

Today, in our own flesh – in our fragility, both in numbers and personally, within ourselves – we can once again recognize Saint Paul’s experience: “We hold this treasure in earthen vessels” (2 Cor 4:7). Perhaps now, in this time of testing, God is inviting us to a more missionary, creative, and personal attitude, like the apostles and the first disciples. Perhaps it is time for a faith that does not settle for defending itself, but looks for a thousand new ways to proclaim itself. “Moved by the power of hope, (...) we will find a new joyful perspective to the world, seeing that it has sprung forth beautiful and fair from the hands of God. We will give it back to him with that same beauty.”<sup>[10]</sup> —

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“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it has pleased your Father to give you the kingdom” (Lk 12:32). Jesus comforted the small group of disciples around Him, bewildered and full of doubts as they were, with those words. And He repeats them to us today. When faith is alive, it is contagious, and its vitality makes it enduring. The first Christians had no power, little structures, and no strength in numbers. And yet, one by one, with the fire of Christ burning in their hearts,<sup>[11]</sup> they touched many hearts. Christians today are called once again to live out the parable of Jesus that so fittingly describes the Church of the first generations: the leaven may be little, but it leavens the whole batch (cf. Mt 13:33).

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[1] “Combat, Closeness, Mission (1): Choose Life,” opusdei.org.

[2] First “Urbi et Orbi” blessing of His Holiness Pope Leo XIV, 8-V-2025.

[3] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 335.

[4] St. Josemaría, Letter 6, no. 3.

[5] St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 132. Cf. also F. Ocariz, Pastoral letter, 14-II-2017, no. 1.

[6] Benedict XVI, Apostolic letter *Porta Fidei*, no. 2.

[7] Qtd. in J.P. Shea, *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission*, University of Mary, Bismarck 2020, pg. 6.

[8] St. Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job* 29:2-4 (PL 76, 478-480).

[9] Saint John Paul II first used this expression in a homily in Poland on

9 June 1979, and he took it up again in a more programmatic way in Haiti on 9 March 1983; on that occasion, he spoke of “a new evangelisation. New in its ardour, in its methods, in its expression.” Cf. also *Christifideles Laici* (1988), nos. 34-35; *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) nos. 33-34, *Novo Millennio ineunte* (2001) nos. 40.

<sup>[10]</sup> St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 219.

<sup>[11]</sup> Cf. *The Way*, no. 1.

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