

The New Evangelization, the Priest and the Challenge of Secular Morality

Text of the message sent by His Eminence Cardinal Sarah to a conference for priests held in Thornycroft Hall (Manchester, UK) in March 2013. The Cardinal had been due to deliver this lecture but was unable to attend because of the Conclave.

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Since last October 11th, we have been celebrating *The Year of the Faith*. This is a great gift for the entire Church and an opportunity — guided by the Holy Spirit — to reflect upon our faith and to proclaim it in a society that seems to be moving away from God. Let us take a look at the current social situation, and consider the priest's challenging role nowadays.

The new evangelization of countries and environments which are in great measure secularized, means that it is among many of the baptized where a new catechesis in the Faith and moral principles is required, sometimes implying new pastoral and apostolic initiatives.

Secularism seeks to exclude the role of religion in public life and, as a consequence, to set up a culture without God. It seems to affirm man's autonomy and power but, paradoxically, in the end it can obscure even the most fundamental truths about human dignity and related natural institutions, such as marriage and family. In this context, the New Evangelization implies an appeal to each person and the whole of society to rediscover the purifying role of faith towards man's reason and its elevating effect on it.

The Church's mission of announcing the Gospel to the world involves clergy and laity alike. In fact, the laity are called to act within the temporal order to build a society imbued with Gospel values, shaping society in a Christian way (cf, Vatican Council II, Decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 13). As Saint Josemaría Escrivá – one of the forerunners of

this conciliar teaching – said, “The layman’s specific role in the mission of the Church is precisely that of sanctifying secular reality, the temporal order, the world, *ab intra*, in an immediate and direct way” (Conversations, n. 9). This requires, in the words of Cardinal Newman, “a laity, not arrogant, not rash in speech, not disputatious, but men who know their religion, who enter into it, who know just where they stand, who know what they hold, and what they do not, who know their creed so well, that they can give an account of it, who know so much of history that they can defend it, I want an intelligent, well-instructed laity... You ought to be able to bring out what you feel and what you mean, as well as to feel and mean it” (*The Present Position of Catholics in England*, 390-1).

But, for this role, they require a deep and solid spiritual life and a

thorough grounding in the faith. New Evangelization, therefore, implies that the clergy help them to know their Christian doctrine better, and promote the awareness of what the universal call to holiness means for them. On one occasion, during the Council, Archbishop Marty, later Cardinal of Paris, in conversation with the then Mgr Escrivá, said that the task of the laity was to make the temporal order Christian, and the Opus Del founder answered: “Yes, as long as they have a contemplative soul, otherwise they will Christianize nothing and worse still they themselves will be transformed and instead of making the world Christian, they will let themselves become worldly” (Card. Julian Herranz, *En las afueras de Jericó*, Rialp 2005).

As the priestly ministry does not exist for its own sake, but for the formation of the Christian

community, we – shepherds of God’s flock – celebrate the Sacraments so that the faithful may receive the force that will enable them to transform the world. Nonetheless, we must dedicate ourselves to the preaching of the Gospel, and to catechetical activities, in such a way that the Christian message is presented in all its dimensions. In this task of announcing the truths of God and humanity, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is an important instrument to explain to the faithful the power and beauty of a faith that changes their lives. It makes the pastoral work easier: attractive homilies, deeper courses of catechesis and theological training for adults, good preparation of catechists, etc.

It seems to me that an area of particular interest for this new effort of evangelization is marriage and family. The traditional truths of

marriage, procreation, gender and parenting belong not only to Revelation, but also to natural law, and hence are known to human reason and so apply to everyone. In putting them over, therefore, the Church is not imposing anything on anybody, but rather remembering the anthropological truth which is in the interests of their happiness and wellbeing, and that of others and society as a whole, Pope Benedict XVI has reflected specially on this on his message for the World Day of Peace (January 1st 2013).

Obstacles in the mission of re-evangelizing peoples and cultures should not make us lose courage. History teaches us that the Church, following its divine Master, and by the grace of the Holy Spirit, rises again many times. Our Lord asks our collaboration, in a special way, owing to our priestly vocation. In this sense, Saint Paul advises us: “Show yourself

a model for believers, by word, conduct, charity, faith, purity... Commit yourself to reading, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the spiritual gift that is within you, which has been conferred upon you by a prophetic intervention accompanied by the imposition of the hands of the college of priests" (1 Tim 4, 12-14).

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I am happy to send this message to the priests who will meet in Thornycroft Hall (Manchester). I feel sorrow at not being able to travel to share my priestly experiences with you, my dear brothers in the priesthood. As you know, I have to participate in the Conclave which has to elect the successor of dear Pope Benedict XVI. I pray to the Holy Spirit to help me and all the cardinals to be good instruments in the hands of God. May the Holy Spirit inspire us!

May the Holy Spirit give joy and fortitude in the faith for the new successor of Saint Peter, which Saint Catherine of Siena called, with words that saint Josemaría used to repeat, “*il dolce Cristo in terra*”,

May Mary, daughter of God the Father, Mother of God the Son, spouse of God the Holy Spirit, help you and me to be good priests, holy priests, joyful priests.

Rome, March 1st 2013

Robert Card. Sarah

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