**Missionary preaching and the first announcement**

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**INTRODUCTION**

I am happy and honored to be the guest speaker at the international meeting of the Congregation of Mission and to address this assembly. The Claretian order to which I belong was formed some 200 years after the founding of your order. However, the two founders, St. Vincent de Paul and St. Anthony Mary Claret, have in common a great discovery of the thirst for the Word in the people of God, and a great need, that is, desire to preach. Both gathered around them priests, from which two orders of preachers and missionaries were born: Vincentians and Carettians; and in ambi cases also women's congregations and lay associations. The difference between the two charismatic personalities lies in the fact that the French St. Vincent also greatly developed the charitable direction of evangelization; while the Catalan St. Anthony Mary Claret devoted himself mainly to evangelization: preaching, spreading good books, training priests ... although, of course, charity did not forget it either.

The title of the talk requested by me sounds, Missionary Preaching and the First Announcement. The title immediately suggested a certain problem to me. Of course there is missionary preaching that is not first announcement. This kind of preaching is present in both missions ad gentes and popular missions, parish preaching and catechesis. It is the missionary's efforts to consolidate and deepen the Word. The effort then is missionary, but the moment itself is not the first proclamation.

So where "physically" is the first proclamation happening today? Is this not primarily in Asia, where there are ancient and great religions that do not know Christ? So should my lecture be mainly about Asia and similar places? No. In Europe itself there are more and more situations of the first proclamation: either through the route of migration, or through the route of internal secularization. With a difference: in front of migrants from another religion we speak for the first time about Christ; in front of secularized Europeans we speak as if for the first time.

Let us stay with the "physicality." The situation of the first proclamation takes place in the same parish courtyards and secular European churches. Church structures are still in contact with the world, both with people who "do not know" Christ and with people whom Christ "no longer knows." Since this is the case, I too, a European country priest and an itinerant missionary, am questioned and allowed to speak about it today.

We started with the Vincentians and Claretians, to the core we will go with the Dominicans. My theme will be developed in three parts, according to the three words of the Dominican motto: *contemplata aliis tradere*. With *contemplata* we will talk about the preacher facing the first announcement, with *aliis* about the recipients, with *tradere* about the sermon.

**CONTEMPLATED**

The motto of the last general chapter of the Claretian Missionaries (Rome, 2021) reads: rooted in Christ and bold in mission. This motto hides a spiritual development, if not a spiritual drama, that our Order has experienced since the Second Vatican Council. In the first two decades after the Council, our Order launched into renewal and focused on missionary action. There was an incredible expansion of the Order in Asia and partly in Eastern Europe. Under the influence of liberation theology, work with the poor was strongly emphasized. In the 1990s the danger of activism was felt, at the same time many Claretian martyrs of the Spanish Civil War were beatified, which directs us to the (mystical) theme of martyrdom and the veneration of martyrs. In the new millennium there were chapters that emphasized our relationship with the Word, including our need to discover the worship of God. In my opinion, this also happened because there were more and more members from Asia in the Order.

If I put it this way: the Claretians still want to be bold in mission, even in a social sense, but only if we are firmly rooted in Christ.

In short, rooted in Christ, believing in Christ, contemplating Christ, worshiping, praying: this is the primary foundation of a good preacher of the first and second proclamation. *Contemplated* in a preacher must be true and abundant. What is the first proclamation? For two centuries it has been the same: proclaiming Christ incarnate, immolated and risen and helping people to meet him. But if you don't know him and worship him, how will you show him to others? We are not too sure that all missionaries have a strong faith. J. B. Metz said that the crisis of God, which we experience, is ecclesially codified.

It was once said, that a missionary preacher stands on two feet: prayer and study. But this is where we seem to be losing ground.

The prayer of the modern priest and missionary is weak, too often secondary, because primary remains the community action or imperative (being with the people). For even when a bishop or provincial comes for pastoral visitation, he will be very happy if "your works are great": good numbers of people, many groups, many events, good health of facilities, beautiful church ... St. John of Avila, Doctor of the Church, taught, that already a simple presbyter must possess "the virtues of the monk and the zeal of the apostles." This is all the more true for the missionary preacher.

At this point I remind you that it was not for nothing that Father Claret was endowed with a special mystical gift, namely, that the Holy Host in his body did not decay all the time between communions. He was a tabernacle. Why? Because God wanted to show that a man of great words and great works, a true working machine, can and should also be a man of constant prayer.

The second leg on which the preacher stands is study. In our congregation we used to say: six months of mission, six months of study. However, this study did not mean reading newspaper articles and gathering information about this and that, but serious spiritual and theological literature. Today you meet priests who know everything about current events, but have not read and studied the Pope's latest encyclicals; missionary encounters who cannot remember the last time they read a big book; pastoral workers leaning on 20-page handouts and flyers.

We live in a complex world. Changes are rapid and unpredictable. Study and lifelong learning are our weapons so that we do not get lost in this world and so that this world does not marginalize us.

However, from the point of view of the first announcement, it is not enough to read something important about Islam, because we have Muslim migrants, or about nihilism, because Europe is in darkness. As said, it is still necessary to read dogmatics, morals, the classics. I remember a professor at the Gregorian saying, good dogmatics is the basis of good pastoral care. In the age of relativism and complexity, this is even more valid.

Under the *contemplated* chapter we can also talk about the emotional state of the preacher. Speaking in the language of the theological lives, I would say that the preacher also on the psychological profile must be a man of hope. The listener must think seriously about himself, but at the same time feel the magnetism of hope, joy, and divine positivity. Only then is he converted.

Even at this point we need to check our preachers. Preaching with too much resentment, pessimism, fear, is not missionary.

If we talk about missionary preaching and first announcement, we must ask about missionary consciousness. Does today's preacher have a missionary consciousness? Does he have a pastor, an awareness that today even the simple Sunday homily must convey something of the first proclamation? Is he aware that we are facing a task of evangelization, similar in magnitude to the task of the holy brothers Cyril and Methodius - to quote Claretian Cardinal Fernando Sebastián? Regarding the urgency of the new evangelization Cardinal Walter Kasper once said: we argue about what frame to put on our pictures when we have the house on fire.

At the end: sermon preparation. I remember a confrere, pastor and rector of a Marian shrine in the Alpine area of the Celje diocese. He had a reputation as a good preacher. One weekend I lived with him. On Sunday at five o'clock in the morning I heard this priest as he was walking down the hall and talking loudly. I thought he had some guests. But he didn't talk to anyone. He practiced his homily, which he said two hours later; he practiced content emphasis and also rhetoric; he spoke as if he had a church full of people in front of him. This means the preparation.

Preparing your homily well means respecting the One you will speak about and those to whom you will speak.

**ALIIS**

Respect the recipient, then. And so we turn to ALIIS. Who are the listeners of the first announcement?

The Gospel of Christ has gone around the world. Christianity is the first truly global religion, sociologists say. However, two-thirds of humanity have not yet heard of Christ, two-thirds of humanity are waiting for the first announcement. These are mainly members of the major religious systems-Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism-including the Chinese people.

In these areas, the first announcement is related to interreligious dialogue. Our former Father General Josep Abella, now auxiliary bishop of Osaka, Japan, said, We used to recognize a good missionary for his social work, today we recognize him for his capacity for interreligious dialogue.

The question arises: are dialogue and first announcement mutually exclusive? How can a good missionary be one who first and foremost strengthens dialogue with nonbelievers? Can one say, in the climate of dialogue, that there is no savior other than Jesus Christ? The answer is: the nature of dialogue is the search for truth. Dialogue is already an act of truth. Those who do not trust dialogue do not trust Christ and the interlocutor. That is why there is proclamation through dialogue.

Apostle Peter exhorts us to be "always ready to answer anyone who asks you for the reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Pet. 3:15). This "whoever asks you" is our addressee, the unbeliever. In the dialogue, in fact, the moment comes naturally when the unbeliever asks the believer about the core of faith. The first announcement happens not only because the missionary wants it, but also because the unbeliever asks him. If he is interested in Christ and if he is attracted to Christ, it is his humanity that rises to God. The missionary preacher is sometimes only a minor instrument in this event of grace and conversion.

We must not allow ourselves to be confused. The world has put Christian evangelism under suspicion. We are accused of proselytizing. Let us accept the world's criticism and face it, but we must not allow our evangelism to stop under the pressure of the powers of this world. People who for the moment do not believe in Christ and are still waiting for the first proclamation will also be our judges at the end of time.

In lands of ancient Christian tradition, often the first proclamation is really the very first proclamation, especially in contact with migrants or in contact with the almost century-old atheism in some parts of Europe (now third generation of the secularized in the Netherlands, masses of the unbaptized in the east of Germany ...). But there is another situation even more frequent: when the first proclamation is "as if it were the first." This is the situation of the new evangelization, which we encounter in virtually every parish yard in Europe. The recipients of the "as-if-it-was-the-first" proclamation are either the actual ex-Christians or the self- estranged and indifferent Christians.

In missions *ad gentes* the missionary preacher still can count on an authentic desire for God. The question is, can he count on an authentic desire for God even in the secularized cities and villages of our Europe? We believe that God all these European people have not abandoned and that an Augustinian *cor inquietum* remains in all these European people. However, the missionary preacher must be cautious: he must assume that there is a spiritual and moral wound in the people.

We recall the phrase of St. John Paul II. in the exhortation Ecclesia in Europa: "European culture gives the impression of a 'silent apostasy' on the part of satiated man who lives as if God did not exist." The very fact that the Polish pope speaks of "apostasy" gives us a glimpse of a spiritual drama. People who have turned away have turned away from a friend (God, God's representative) and from a community (Church). The way they turned away was "silent." The primary reason was not very "loud," metaphysical, intellectual, protest; rather, they turned away "silently" because they were "satiated" with the goods of this earth.

Missionary preaching must take into account this fragile spiritual state, also characterized by guilt, ignorance, delusion, carefree worldliness. However, it must also take into account a Christian pre-history of these people.

Many times Christ in them has not been cancelled, but rather put in a *stand-by state*. In case of need Christ is placed in an *on* state, turned on. Not in vain did the Polish Pope say, that these European people "live as if God did not exist" - *etsi Deus non daretur*. They are not atheists. For them God ontologically may well exist, however, they want to live life in such a way, that this same God has nothing to do with it. The preacher can address these people with kind words, because after all they are not hostile to God and the Church. Many of them will abandon their *stand-by* condition in old age and illness and become interested in spirituality and the Church.

At the same time, it must be the missionary preacher who is aware that such recipients may also be faced with difficult moral and emotional dilemmas: about family and couple life and also about the culture of death. When you preach to these people, do you know how many women had abortions? Do you know how many men were involved?

My personal dilemma as a preacher is how to talk about abortion. I am not afraid to say that abortion is a sin. I am afraid to say it in such a way as to increase the suffering and despair of some woman who is standing in the church at that moment and looking for a way out of her sad situation.

The other situation of the first announcement, which is "as if it were the first," is a situation of deep wounding: some people have turned away from God and the Church because a priest or a church community has deeply offended him. For example: sexual abuse in the Church. At this point, missionary preaching must also be a form of contrition and repentance. Walter Kasper wrote that the best way to criticize the Church is to do penance for the Church.

In addition, there is a strong ideological anticlericalism in Slovenia, cultivated mainly by leftist, ex-communist political elites who are strong in culture, media and capital. These people are constantly interested in the Church and constantly seeking controversy with bishops and priests. Their atheism is militant and ideological. The Slovenian preacher, who confronts these people, can soon fall into the temptation of conducting missionary preaching in the field of cultural struggle and political connotations. Myself, often involved in polemics with these people, I try to be faithful to a simple rule: on the Twitter polemic, in the homily practically never.

**TRADE**

The act of delivering a message during a sermon requires the listener to be physically present, preferably in the same space as the speaker. Today this physicality is relativized, especially because of the media and the Internet. On the other hand, churches throughout Europe are becoming increasingly empty. Even in grassroots missions we see that preaching is shrinking more and more to those who attend church regularly, and those far away are coming less and less. The question is when will the missionary have the "physical" opportunity to address the people for whom the first announcement is intended?

I think this question is redundant. I think today it is necessary to take every preaching seriously and take it as missionary. The spirit of apostasy hovers over the people and it is everywhere necessary to preach the original message of Christ. Let us remember that we never know exactly who is listening and what exactly is their moral and spiritual state. Perhaps there are among the listeners many more people far from Christ than we imagine.

There are, of course, times when the preacher knows for sure that in front of him stand many unbelieving Christians, half-believers and *stand-by* souls, perhaps even some of the terrible anticlericals. These occasions in our country are the great church ceremonies, especially the Christmas midnight mass; then the great traditions, in our country especially the blessing of Easter foods; special occasions for the first announcement are also events such as weddings and funerals. God is very favorable to people at these times and people are open to hear the Word. Consequently, the preacher must live up to the event; he must prepare well. Above all, he must be careful not to take advantage of these special occasions to rebuke, saying, you have come today, otherwise I don't see you.

But even ordinary sermons should not be underestimated. In spite of the Internet and in spite of declining attendance, the preacher still primarily addresses the people who are physically in front of him and have come to listen to him. We understand this as a potential.

Michael White and Tom Corcoran in their pastoralist *best-seller* Rebuilt among others write how they transformed their parish (in the United States) with simple renewal of the Sunday homily. In certain moment they sino realized how the Sunday homily retains its central role even in the times of the new evangelization.

They write thus, "The preaching of God's Word is, along with the sacraments, one of the most important things you can do to make disciples, and it is even more important when you want to attract those who are lost. For lost people and those for whom the path of following Jesus is new, Sunday preaching is the most decisive element of the Sunday experience, since they still do not understand and do not know how to appreciate the Eucharist."

Before giving advice how to preach today White and Corcoran talk about various types of preaching, which hinder evangelism. Briefly: preaching as a Bible circle, as a talk among women faithful to the priest, how to talk to seminarians, how to convince the convinced, complaining clichés, silly humor, comedy, just reading other people's homilies, recycling old sermons, false depth, public confession and boasting ...

For Slovenia, an opinion of mine, there are three ways in which sermons are ill-suited to the needs of the new evangelization: two are content-based, one is liturgical.

First. The sermon is not very biblical. When I returned from Italy to Slovenia, more precisely from Milan, where at that time at the head of diocese was Card. Martini, I noticed that here the Bible is subjected to a sermon, but not the sermon to the Bible. In the foreground was moral teaching, ecclesiastical duties, the sacraments - and the Bible was used as a support for these contents.

Second. Slovenian preachers like to develop a literary genre of lamentation. As secularization advances, the situation seems to worsen. Sermons become bitter, priests pour their pastoral disappointments into them. This is especially true in eastern Slovenia, where priests stay in the same parish for up to 40 or even 50 years. When they were young, their parishes flourished, but now they are disappearing and this causes them pain, pain then enters the preaching.

Third, liturgical. Holy Masses in Slovenia are often full of additional introductions, explanations, announcements. Sometimes it seems as if the priest delivered three sermons during Mass, not one. As they say: when you want to embrace too much, everything gets out of hand.

Concerning the art of oratory, authors White and Corcoran quote St. Augustine, who in turn quotes Cicero, who wrote: "*Docere necessitatis est, delectare suavitatis, flectere victoriae // It is necessary to demonstrate, it is good to delight, it is proper to victory to convince.*" In other words, for good preaching, especially that of the first announcement, we will say, one must: well teach, make joyful and tend to convince.

Teaching. I have experience as a regular Sunday preacher in my parish, as a missionary preacher in other parishes, I preach retreats from time to time, sometimes even spiritual exercises, I am a catechist in the parish and a scout catechist, I also make myself heard on the radio and I write articles and, in recent years, even novels. I have realized that there is a lot of content that people don't know about that can help them accept the Gospel better. There is so much to teach and so much to explore. For example: once I did a scout weekend with spiritual notes with the help of old Slovenian fairy tales, in which I was looking for a gospel message. That is one. Second, with all this we do not emphasize the basic kerygma. The cry: *Christ is risen - hallelujah!* is never consummated. But certainly the mystery of the resurrection can be told in a hundred ways, as I said, even with the help of folk wisdom and fairy tales. Here the leg of the study, which I mentioned in Part I, comes into consideration.

Making joyful. We said: the preacher must be a man of hope. We once asked the great psychologist, priest Anton Trstenjak what is the biggest problem in Slovenian Catholicism. He laconically answered: the long shadow of Jansenism. Jansenistic preaching started from despair towards man. Jansenism did much damage and is one of the godfathers of modern atheism in Europe. Despite the dark times, the virtue of hope teaches us that man is good and that somewhere on the gloomy horizon there is always a wide-open door to light, to a salvation. Hope draws us toward this door. The sermon should evoke positive feelings and a certain quiet joy already in the very act of listening. For example: Herod liked to listen to John the Baptist, even though John rebuked him a lot. But there is more behind it than just the joy of good rhetoric. Why did Herod like to listen to John? Because somewhere in the back he felt that door open to the light. Let this be the law of missionary preaching today!

Convincere. In Italian the word convincere is derived from the word vincere. In Slovenian, on the other hand, convince - *prepričati* is related to the word witness - *priča*. That is, it is necessary to tell something to someone so well and with such sincerity and authority that he also becomes a witness to it, if even personally he has not seen or experienced the thing. For example: we call ourselves the witnesses of Christ's resurrection, if even the real (eyewitnesses) were some women and the apostles, strictly speaking it was only two soldiers at the tomb. And this is the purpose of preaching. So that the hearer may be convinced and become a witness himself!

I thank you for listening to me!