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M.M.

Introduction

I would like to first thank all of you for your warm welcome here in Amsterdam. In particular, I want to thank Fr Jeroen de Wit who has taken care of the practical part of my coming today.

The general topic of my reflection today will be the New Evangelization in the context of the parish. I think that's a concern we all share in Europe: the life of our parishes is fading and the pastoral methods we have been trying over the past decades are not fully satisfactory. We do see many good initiatives in leading parishes. We do see a lot of people with the firm desire to transform their parishes into missionary parishes. But despite all of this, we feel that something is missing in many Catholic parishes. We experience the need to move from a pastoral strategy of maintenance and supervision to one of evangelization. Of course, celebrating the liturgy in a worthy manner is a good thing but it is not enough. Of course, restructuration can be a good thing but if it's only a form of managing decline, it surely isn't enough. Some of our priests, deacons and dedicated people have been thinking that it was sufficient to celebrate the liturgy in a proper way to bring people back to Mass. This is correct in a sense: a beautiful liturgy, with proper sacredness, is truly attractive. But it is only part of the solution. One cannot just say: let's set up a beautiful liturgy and everything will be fine. Unfortunately, this is not how it works! As attractive as the Liturgy is, we cannot use it to shirk our responsibility in the New Evangelization. The idea of restructuration is also an important task for us but again, the entire solution doesn't rest on it. We might plan a nice "mega-parish". For all that, in itself, this plan will not meet the challenge of the New Evangelization. Actually, I think that in today's world the problem is deeper. In today's world, one cannot settle for simple changes of method. What we need first is a deep conversion both as individuals and as communities. Indeed, the conversion of the world starts with our own conversion. In the words of *Evangelii nuntiandi*, "the Church is an evangelizer, but she begins by being evangelized herself." (n° 15)

Therefore, in our trying to understand the New Evangelization in the context of the parish, we need to see how to convert our communities and ourselves. We want to see that going from maintenance to mission in our parishes entails a great deal of conversion. In this first talk, I want to emphasize the conversion of parishes as a whole. In the second talk, we will address the conversion of the ordained ministers.

The conversion of the parish as a whole

The Holy Spirit always gives life. And so, the Church is always going to be sprouting new life: you cannot keep it down. I think in the last fifty years, we have seen a lot of that renewal and new life through communities and movements. I personally come from one of these movements: the Emmanuel Community. And I am sure that the Holy Spirit has been using these communities to bring his new life to the Church and to the world. These communities were charismatic and/or traditional, because there has also been a traditional renewal, present in the Church at that time.

This of course is a good thing but I think that it is also the symptom of something going wrong in the Church. In fact, these communities are also an attempt to overcome the mediocrity of certain parishes. Sometimes, parishes have become places of minimalism. And so when parishioners came alive in their faith when they had an encounter with Jesus, when they became zealous and enthusiastic and wanted to have authentic community, they would go to these movements and eventually leave their parishes.

In fact, many people have found in the communities what they couldn't get in their parishes. Therefore, we should be thankful to God for these communities because they give us a good example of what a true catholic parish looks like. It is now time for us to adapt the experiences of the renewal to our parishes. Of course we cannot apply everything. Of course we have to be cautious about certain excesses of these communities. Nevertheless, I am sure we have something to get from their example.

The reason why I am telling you all of that is simple: as we speak about the role of lay people in renovating parishes, the model of these communities shows us that lay people have taken their vocation in hand. Indeed, following the call of Vatican II, the Christian faithful has played a very important role in the renewal of the past 50 years. I am convinced that in the process of renewing parishes, dedicated people have the same role that they had in these community. Let us then understand what this role was in the communities of the renewal, and how we can bring the essential elements of this role into parishes.

- **Seeking holiness: concerns all of us.**

The first and most important thing people have been looking for during the renewal was holiness. All of these movements created after the Council have been a magnificent search for holiness. We might think about methods. We might think about methods to change our parishes. But if all of that is not grounded in holiness, our work will be fruitless and even counter-productive. Holiness should be our primary concern for us and for all of our parish. Indeed growing in sanctity is not only the task of the priest : it is up to all of us to become saints. And this of course is not a choice but a necessity. Thus, if we want to evangelize in our parish, we first

need to aim at holiness, which is union with God: “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain” says psalm 127 (NRSVCE).

Even if we work out our pastoral in terms of organization, process or governance, we should always recall that methodological reflections and consideration on pastoral activity are secondary with respect to the “pedagogy of holiness” Pope Saint John Paul the Second earnestly called for. The Word of God, a regular sacramental life and self-denial, feeds the density of our pastoral life.

The greatest evangelizers were saints. And if the laity doesn’t ensure its spiritual root, it become only humanitarian and philanthropic. It becomes a certain kind of voluntarism, technical and militant. Then, the Holy Spirit is no longer the main agent and the soul of the apostolate. Facing new forms of spirituality and wisdom, our faith reminds us that there are no methods or procedures to get closer to God, apart from the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, union with God is the only way to see things as God sees them. Christians understand that they cannot be satisfied with what the world tells about itself, with what observation and analysis allow to understand about our society. In the words of Pope Francis in his encyclical *Lumen Fidei* “faith does not merely gaze at Jesus, but sees things as Jesus himself sees them, with his own eyes: it is a participation in his way of seeing” (n°18).

This might not seem to be relevant for our topic. I think quite the contrary. If we really want to give our parish a new impulse, we all need to be holy as God is Holy. We simply cannot cut corners on that. And the reason why I am talking about holiness in this first part, is that there is a special holiness for lay people. Given the challenge that they face. Given the life they have to lead, lay people are called to a certain kind of union with God.

It first starts with interiority. Interiority is not only a part of human life where God dwells at certain privileged times. It allows us to keep this state of mind in the middle of our noisy and frail societies. We need an inner free space, some room in our hearts, freed from anything that can hinder our relationship with the Lord. This inner space is aimed at “feeling and tasting things interiorly” in order to “let God be God in [us]”, according to the words of Meister Eckhart. The necessity of this inner space demands a tenacious and ongoing resistance to what causes dispersion and “entertainment” as would say Blaise Pascal. Without this “interior life” vigorous and demanding, without this new look given by our interior eyes, we simply cannot recognize how God is working unceasingly and silently in us and in the world.

Technological sophistication, mixed with consumerism makes the modern man a hostage to the diktat of instantness and immediacy, with compulsive manners: everything at once, in one click. It is a great curb in our trying to concentrate and to pray. Therefore, we are in need of interiority to preserve our thinking too. Thinking requires at once silence, time, attentiveness, openness to emotion, a good lifestyle and affective security. Psychologists have observed that instable thinking is related to affective instability, to digital invasion and in a broad way, to the crisis of interiority. Now Christian interiority has two dimensions: it is

both the place of self-identification, and the space for prayer, adoration and divine grace. Since the “digital empire” pushes around the whole human interiority, it threatens both of these dimensions.

The first task of lay people then is to preserve interiority, to make it their first aim, especially in parish activity. This ground is fundamental and absolutely necessary. One cannot overemphasize it.

The second task of lay people in the Church and in the World is the fact they are a model. Being an example is in itself a great testimony, whatever the ways it is received. Exemplariness requires of the lay people a great deal of self-denial and sacrifice. But it is also the only way to be honest with God and connected to our neighbor. Fundamental to our point is the frequent reception of the Sacraments. One of the most beautiful input of the renewal (both charismatic and traditional) is the recommendation to use the sacrament of confession repeatedly. Charismatic activity is not primarily about singing in tongues and healing the bodies. It is first and foremost our availability to the reception of the Holy Spirit. And where do we get this personal disposition? During confession. The remission of sins that we receive in this Sacrament is the Holy Spirit Himself. And it is not my telling this. The opening prayer of the 7th week of Easter tells us: “the Spirit himself is the remission of all sins”. Therefore, one of the best ways to receive the Holy Spirit is sacramental confession. Unfortunately though, people have had a tendency to neglect this sacrament. According to a poll of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, only sixteen percent of American Catholics go to confession at least once a year. I do not have the figures for Europe but I assume it is about the same. This tells us a lot about what do in the parish if we want to evangelize. Why don't we start with this? Reopening our confessionals? Preaching about the necessity of confession? I think it is a very important task for all of us to witness our love for this sacrament in the parish. This is very practical, very easy in a sense... and this is certainly where God is awaiting us.

Another experience many people have had with the charismatic renewal is Eucharistic adoration. This might be more of a French charismatic thing. But I do think it is also a very good thing in the parish, that all people, priests and lay faithful, can do. It reminds me of the powerful moment many of us shared during the World Youth Days in Madrid, back in 2011, when pope Benedict celebrated a benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. This benediction happened after a great rainstorm but people movingly decided to kneel anyway, in the mud and in silence before the Lord. I think this is quite a great example of dedication to the Blessed Sacrament. And to all of you who feel you cannot do anything about your parish, let the Lord Himself transform your parish through repeated times of adoration. Many parishes have started continuous adoration (at least for certain portions of the week): this is one of the greatest messages of hope one can bring in the parish today.

Interiority and exemplariness are therefore two great methods we all want to develop in our seeking holiness. The layman in particular, witnesses God through his entire life. Just as Nazareth precedes Jesus' public ministry, our converted lives

(in both a spiritual and a moral way) have to precede and guide any of our pastoral activities. A converted life do converts others. In front of seducing speeches, Christ sends us with the sole richness of what he has worked in us since we've met Him. Our identity of believers needs this consistency between faith and behavior.

So, the conversion of the parish, --its pastoral transformation so to speak, starts with our turning toward holiness, as individuals and as communities at the same time. This in turn can become a "virtuous circle": the more I try to convert myself, the more I evangelize people; and the more I evangelize, the more I convert myself. I pray that all of us can find this momentum, which will lead us to eternal happiness.

Now that we have spoken about holiness, let us address the different approaches and methods one can consider in order to renovate the parish. This can happen in two areas: fraternal communion, and evangelization.

- **Fraternal communion**

Another great thing people couldn't find in their parish was the sense of communion. People just walked away from their parishes because they simply didn't feel at ease. They didn't feel welcome. It is certainly due to our modern individualism. Social fragmentation, the loss of team spirit and the privatization of human life have brought forth self-centered communities, without any openness to God and to others. The breakdown of the social fabric hurts people in their very essence. The invasion of digital technology in our daily lives makes our families broken down and split up. Family members spend their time together, glued to their screen, with no verbal connection. Priests and even bishops during masses with the Pope draw their cell phone from their pockets to take a photograph or even a selfie... This is clearly symptomatic of our society. We want to communicate everything to everyone, we want our privacy to be known; or on the contrary, we want to know about people's privacy...

Now, the task of the New Evangelization is not primarily about communication. It's all about communion. One communicates something but one is in communion with someone. The evangelization requires an interpersonal encounter, something not completely foreseen, something free and profoundly joyful. Facing the crisis of confidence toward great public institutions (including the Church), one can note the strong demands for proximate relationships, the search for friendship and empathy via social media or charities. Even the yellow vests (I know you've had some of them), who were not especially appealing for communion, are indeed experiencing a great sense of fraternity. People on the roundabouts have created deep friendships over the past months. Even couples met on the roadblocks and one of them got married. And if the movement is long-lasting, it is certainly because people have found something greater than what the world can give them. In a recent article, the French journalist Élisabeth Geffroy presented this reality in a beautiful way: "[the Yellow Vests] have tasted

unpurchaseable happiness, the happiness that shows no interest on the department stores in the middle of Christmas season to prefer the solidarity lived on the edge roads, the simple and effective joy of shared meals around a fire, the dedication of the one who holds his post in the cold waiting for the one who will relieve him. If they had not found a truer form of happiness in their struggle, would the Yellow Vests have lasted that long?” In a nutshell, people have tried to find communion because nobody was able to give it to them.

I think as a Church, we all need to consider these demands. Although it might entail for us to go out of our comfort zone, this openness is vital for our communities. If our communities are close-minded, we cannot say they are experiencing real communion. One cannot say: “I am united to Christ in the Eucharist and there’s nothing else I need”. In fact, if we are truly united to Christ through communion, we are also united to those who receive the same Jesus with us during Mass. Every one of us is a partaker of Christ’s body and so becomes a member of this body. Moreover, we want to expand our communion so that all men can become partakers of Christ’s body: this is what fraternal communion is all about.

Getting to know each other in the parish, spending some time to socialize after Holy Mass are very simple ways to start this communion. Of course it is not enough but we should start with these simple things. Our communion also calls for some kind of self-gift, in order to grow together towards the Lord, to give ourselves to Christ by welcoming our brothers and sisters as a gift from God. Christianity participates in the emergence of new lifestyles, grounded on sound anthropology and on the social teaching of the Church.

Our parish renewal should certainly start by applying the principles of anthropology and the social teaching of the Church to the life of the community.

- **The Liturgy: a great tool for the New Evangelization**

The numerous liturgical abuses of the seventies are mostly behind us now, thanks be to God! Over the past years, we have seen in France parishes and communities choosing to emphasize the order and beauty of the Liturgy (both in the Extraordinary form and in the Ordinary form). And I assume the tendency has been the same in at least some parishes here in the Netherlands. All of this is also part of what we call the “renewal”. I am sure the Holy Spirit is at work behind these liturgical movements too. They tell us something about renewing our parish life and the life of the Church. In fact, the Liturgy is a treasury that is not fully exploited. First of all, if we follow the rules that the Church gives us, our Liturgy will be dignified and respectful. The Lord and all of us deserve a decent worship, following the Church’s teachings and the rubrics.

Now, I can tell that simply following the rubrics is too sketchy of a pastoral method. If we believe that the Liturgy is the main tool to make missionary parishes, we need much more than rubricism. We need to rediscover Christian rituality as a

way for God to unveil his mystery and for us to know and to love Him. I don't want this talk to be a course on Sacred Liturgy of course! I just want to give you some insights on how the Liturgy can bring us and bring people closer to God.

The first thing regarding Liturgy and the New Evangelization is beauty. Beauty is certainly the most missionary part of the Liturgy. Abbot Dom Gérard Calvet, founder of the abbey of *Le Barroux*, once told that there was two doors to enter the Church on Earth. The first door is very small and this is the door of reason. The second door is extremely wide, and this is the door of beauty.

In itself, beauty is attractive and thus missionary. In itself, beauty can bring people back to church. Indeed, beauty tells us something about God; about the one who is Beauty *par excellence*. For that reason, I think we ought not to think about ways to make our celebrations more attractive. Our main point should be to make our celebrations more beautiful. This concerns cleanliness and order for the eyes, music and diction for the ears, and sometimes incense for the smell in order to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (ps. 34: 8). Everything in the Church should convey beauty so that people feel attracted to prayer...

The second thing regarding Liturgy and the New Evangelization is the sense of the sacred. There is a link with beauty but it adds to it the notion of transcendence and verticality. Now there has been a tendency over the past decades to water down this notion on the pretext that one should not make God distant from our concerns. I think that's a false problem because God has made Himself one of us through the Incarnation of His Son in order that we be divinized. The aim of the Incarnation is for us to be elevated to the Life of God. In turn the aim of the Liturgy is to elevate us to the mystery and the Life of God. This includes and presupposes a notion of verticality: we cannot understand the greatness of our call if we do not get that God is infinitely above us (even though at the same time He is one of us). Restoring the Sacred of our Liturgy is therefore a great tool for the evangelization because it explains that we don't celebrate the Liturgy because it is nice. We gather to celebrate the Liturgy because through the Liturgy we encounter God.

On this point, the Master of Ceremonies of the pope, Monsignor Guido Marini recounted a beautiful story in one of his recent addresses. He said it was an old legend from the early ages of Christianity in Russia. Here it is: Prince Vladimir of Kiev was investigating about what could be the true and fitting religion for his people. Therefore, the representatives of the three great religions (Islam, Judaism and the Roman Catholic Church) present to him, by turn, each of their beliefs. Each of them gave beautiful defenses in order to prove that their religion was the best and the most fitting religion. But in the end, none of these beautiful talks seemed completely convincing and the Prince could not really make a choice between the different presentations.

The prince then decided to send envoys to see what the prayer of these different religion looked like. At Constantinople, the emissaries attended a Divine Liturgy in Hagia Sophia, where the full festival ritual of the Byzantine Church was set in motion to impress them. This produced a great impression on them. Here is

what they reported: "we came to the Greeks and were led where they serve their God. We did not know if we were in heaven or on earth. We experienced that God lives there with men."

Now this story, even if not completely historical, tells us a lot about how the Liturgy in both its beauty and sacredness, can change the minds and the hearts. These men had been brought into the world of God. The splendor of his face made present in the celebration of the holy mysteries, had conquered them. The liturgy to which they had participated had been truly missionary since it had made possible the contemplation of the beauty of God. In the Liturgy, there is an interior strength, independent from our will, a power that helped over the ages the spreading of the Gospel. And what was true years ago is still true nowadays: the beauty of God in the Liturgy can bring people to worship God. As Pope Francis writes, "Evangelization with joy becomes beauty in the liturgy, as part of our daily concern to spread goodness. The Church evangelizes and is herself evangelized through the beauty of the liturgy, which is both a celebration of the task of evangelization and the source of her renewed self-giving." (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 24)

- **Conclusion**

In this first talk, I wanted to show the major principles that can revitalize our parishes. Through personal sanctity of life, through fraternal communion and through the Sacred Liturgy, we have the indispensable grounds on which we can build the renewal of our parishes. These elements appear essential to me if we want to build our communities on the rock and not on the sand (Mt. 7: 24, 26). In the second talk, we will address the implementation of these principles.