

THE NEW EVANGELISATION OFFERS A FUTURE FOR THE CHURCH

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The meaning and implication of a ‘new evangelisation’ was the focus of conversation at a recent conference of Marist principals. As a presenter at the gathering, I reflected on the prospects of the Church in future years and sought to engage an ecclesiology that took into account the particular cultural milieu in which we find ourselves and so address what might be ‘new’ in the Church’s response.

It is clear that evangelisation, as the perennial program of Christian faith, confronts a new stage of history replete with possibility even if the challenges are formidable. The specific cultural formation of the West, embracing a matrix of utilitarianism, individualism and fragmentation, and sustained by a climate of secularism, impedes the reception of the Gospel in society and raises the risk of the self-secularisation of the Church. The latter can be seen in the insertion of secular political idiom in contemporary *ad intra* debate, specifically the language of ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’ which continues to frame rival interpretations of the Council.

Hope abounds, however, in the recognition that the present difficulties meeting Christian faith are not, in all reality, the whole. The promise of this moment of history is discovered by engaging with its specific features.

A part of this reality is what the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has described as a ‘new social imaginary’. In a nutshell, the age of authenticity in which we live has created a situation in which each person has his or her own way of realising one’s humanity. It is important to find out and to become all that one can be, to not simply run alongside the events of life but to be truly inside of them, living them from within. Add to this the ‘happy consequence’ of secularisation, the fact that faith will be increasingly a personal and intentional choice rather than a mere cultural inheritance, and we may, as has been suggested, be at the *dawn* of Christianity rather than in the dark night of its obscurity.

Of course, evangelical renewal is not a given. The challenge for evangelisation in this new time will be to provide spaces for the personal appropriation of faith, the inner grasp of one’s own vocation which so often cuts across the prevailing narratives of the crowd (cf. the parable of the Good Samaritan). These itineraries toward God will not be the fruit of technological method or even a matter of appropriate structures, necessary as they are, but will ultimately be inspired and nourished by the witness of a community focused on the mission of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

The sharp divisions of the post-conciliar scene are disquieting in the sense that they communicate little sense of this shared life and lack as well any obvious concentration on the mission for which, in the end, *communio* exists.

Apart from this work of reconciliation and the encouragement of an explicit missionary consciousness, a further opportunity lies in a greater recognition of the significance of charism within our Church and for its faith in the future. Charism is that free and unpredictable gift of the Spirit manifesting the fact that Christian discipleship is possible even in *this* way. As such, loci of charism, including congregational schools and Religious Institutes themselves, make a contribution to a positive imagination of how holiness is exercised. Bearers of charism show forth the accessibility and concrete shape of a life centred in God's gifts; in turn, they invite participants and witnesses to envisage what God is asking to be realised and hence what we might live for.

In the way of the new ecclesial movements that have been ascendant in Europe, communities shaped by a distinct charism have the potential to bring together diverse states of life, the diversity of the People of God, into a corporately shared experience of the Spirit that offers clarity of mission.

To make the point, it could be suggested that it is precisely clarity of mission that many of our parish communities lack, a deficiency not unrelated I think from their lack of *charismatic* consciousness. As parishes remain the primary experience of Church for the vast majority of Australian Catholics, the need for such communities to discern, express and cultivate sensitivity to the Spirit, a Spirit who bestows personal and communal gifts, is ever more important. Without such a living sense of charism, the Church as a whole will continue to appear more a weight to be carried rather than a life to be lived, and parishes will continue to be viewed as a provider of services rather than a community of living faith.

In an age that has seen the demise of a unified Christian majority and shifted the focus to personal responsibility for faith, we need the narratives of holiness that are provided by bearers of charism, whether that be a St Marcellin Champagnat, a St Francis, or a community gathered around a particular expression of Christian discipleship. Such narratives of holiness are essential to the mediation of faith to contemporary culture, to evangelisation, in a time when innumerable and often contradictory stories threaten to obscure or even dismiss outright the one story that Christian faith proclaims and for which the world most deeply thirsts: that of the Crucified and Risen Christ who alone makes all things new (Rev 21:5).