

The New Communities and the ‘New Evangelization’

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In 1541 a young man left the port of Lisbon to serve the Gospel in Asia. He never saw his family, his closest friends or Europe again. He died 11 years later on an island off the coast of China. It took two years for his brothers in Rome to learn the news. Today we remember him as the cofounder of the Society of Jesus and the greatest missionary since St. Paul.

In just a few days, on Dec. 3, we celebrate his feast day. And while so many years and so many miles separate us from the work of St. Francis Xavier, he’s the perfect patron for our time together today. Obviously the Sodalitium and the Jesuits are very different communities. The Sodalitium has its own unique genius and purpose. God will use the gift of your lives to achieve things that no other community can.

But the saints belong to all of us -- and in many ways, every Sodalit has made the same choice Francis did, leaving behind his old life and following Jesus Christ. Every Sodalit has paid a cost for his choice. And each of you personally has proven your love of God and your ability to serve, just as Francis did, or you wouldn’t be here today as leaders.

Very few Americans understand the kind of courage it took for Alexi and Mario Salazar to leave everything they had in Peru, move to the United States, begin the Christian Life Movement, and become part of my people’s life as a Church and a nation.

Very few Americans know the endurance it took for Rossana Goni and her sisters to found the Marian Community in Denver, or Jose Ambrozic and his brothers to begin the Sodalitium, or Alejandro Bermudez to start the Catholic News Agency.

Very few Americans know the patience and humility that all of these apostolic efforts demanded. But I think I do -- because I saw them bear fruit.

God has worked something extraordinary through the passion and genius of Luis Fernando [Figari] – and also through the zeal of every member of the Sodalitium. As a bishop, I’ve seen the results. So before I do anything else, I need to say: *Thank you for your service to Jesus Christ and his Church.*

I want to do three simple things today: *first*, I’ll share some observations on the general state of the Church; *second*, I’ll talk about the role of new communities and charisms like the Sodalitium in the new evangelization; and *third*, I’ll offer some thoughts to this group as a brother in consecrated life, based on my own experience as a Capuchin and a bishop. I have a fourth point to mention as well; but it’s really more of a story. I’ll come back to it at the end of my remarks. Let’s turn first to *the state of the Church*. Some years before he was elected Pope, Joseph Ratzinger was asked what he thought about the health of the Church. He answered that she was doing very well; she was just a lot smaller than most people thought. He was exactly right. We need to think of the Church in our age as a seed of life embedded in layers of dead tissue and

challenge. We also need to distinguish the Church in the emerging world from the Church in the developed nations.

In the emerging world, the Church has few material resources. She rarely has adequate money for education, development or ministry. She faces well-financed and aggressive Islamic growth, and cults and competing religious groups of every sort. And she suffers various forms of state harassment and persecution in China, North Korea, Vietnam, across the Islamic world and even in India.

The situation in developed nations is more ambiguous. In some places the Church has ample resources. She supports a wide variety of important educational institutions and service ministries. She often has an effective public voice.

But Catholic and other Christian influence on the course of daily life in the developed world is rapidly diminishing. Catholic worship statistics in Western Europe are very low. The number of persons who self-identify as Catholic is declining. And while American religious belief and practice remain high by European standards, these facts are changing. Roughly 75 million Americans claim to be Catholic, but less than a quarter of them attend Mass on most Sundays. Some 69 percent of American Catholic adults say they would *not* encourage someone to become a priest or religious sister. The implications of that one piece of data for the sacramental and apostolic life of the Church in the United States are enormous.ⁱ

How did this happen? I can only speak for my own country. The American Founders were far friendlier to religious faith than their French revolutionary counterparts. And well into the 1940s, American government and religious bodies often worked in a mutually supportive way – and very effectively -- to serve the common good.

But there's a flaw in the American gene code. The Jesuit scholar, John Courtney Murray, named it more than 70 years ago. Murray once said that America is simultaneously a land “of immense material comfort” and “immense suffering of a peculiarly soul-destroying kind” – a nation driven by the anxiety for money and the fear of life without it.ⁱⁱ

From its founding, America has always been a paradox: a country of fierce individualism and hunger for material success, tempered by widespread Christian faith and community. If the Churches decline, the selfishness and greed rise. And this is exactly what's happened in the United States since the end of the Second World War.

Father Murray, writing in the mid-20th century, hoped that Catholics would provide a Christian soul to American life in a way that Protestants no longer could. We know how that turned out. Notre Dame social researcher Christian Smith and his colleagues have tracked in great detail the spiritual lives of today's young adults and teen-agers.ⁱⁱⁱ The results are sobering. So are the implications for Catholic life in the decades ahead.

The real religion of vast numbers of American young people is a kind of fuzzy moral niceness, with an easy, undemanding God on duty to make people feel happy whenever they need him. It's what Smith calls “moralistic therapeutic deism.” To put it in the words of a young woman from Maryland, “[Faith is] just whatever makes you feel good about you.”^{iv}

This is the legacy that my generation has left to the Church in the United States. For all practical purposes, American Catholics are no different from everybody else in their views, their appetites and their behaviors. This isn't what the Second Vatican Council had in mind when it began its work 50 years ago. It's not what Vatican II meant by reform. And left to itself, the life of the Church in my country is not going to get better. It's going to get worse.

Unfortunately, what happens in my country impacts everyone else. The developed nations lead not just through the "hard power" of military, economic and political strength. They also lead through the "soft power" of their mass media; media that tell us what to desire; whom to believe; what qualifies as news; and when to laugh. The developed world creates the appetites, aspirations and dreams of the planet. And those dreams – even today – bear the stamp of "Made in America."

This brings me to my second purpose: *the role of new communities and charisms like the Sodalitium in the new evangelization*. From the outside, the Church in my country often looks strong. We have buildings and ministries and programs – but these are misleading. Catholic life is weakening from the inside. The pace of that weakening increases as young people detach from Catholic culture. My own city of Philadelphia is a prime example of how this is already happening.

It doesn't need to be this way. Tens of thousands of young Catholic men and women *do* take their faith seriously. They *do* try to live it vigorously. More than 17 million American Catholics worship at Sunday Mass every week. Double that number attend Mass at least once a month. Millions support the Church financially. And many are active in their parishes and in other ministries outside Sunday worship. These are good facts to build on. In the United States, the faith is not just a memory. It's still alive. But there's no way we can go back to the "glory days" of the past as a model for the future.

Catholic life needs to be reignited. American culture is a new kind of mission territory. It's a cocoon of marketing, entertainment and manufactured appetites; a narcotic of distraction, noise and relentless propaganda for self-absorption and confused sexuality. Being in the United States in the weeks before Christmas is an education in what the culture really worships. It worships *commerce*.

Real Christian discipleship *rejects and resists* the kind of radical personal license and acquisitiveness that animates a consumerist society. So when the Catholic Church teaches about the dignity of the unborn child, the purpose of human sexuality, economic and immigration justice, the rights of religious communities and believers, and the nature of marriage and the family – she's not just "unpopular." She's *hated* as the enemy of individual privacy and personal freedom. And that theme shapes the way the Church is treated in the mass media.

For Catholics in my country to recover their vocation as a Church, they need to be awakened; they need a reason to be zealous again about their faith. They need to hear the witness of people like yourselves who live the Catholic faith with confidence and joy. They need to see their Church growing and fruitful, *and young again*, instead of constantly retreating and in decline.

This is the value of the new ecclesial communities and movements. They're alive in Jesus Christ, and their new life and energy spill out into the whole Church. What the Sodalitium brings to the Church is a clear and honest view of our pastoral realities – including the failures and flaws of the Church herself; a view tempered by love, ruled by fidelity, but unencumbered by legacy, habits of the past or an investment in keeping things the way they are.

The essence of the new communities is a new spirit of Christian equality rooted in the mandate of baptism, honoring each vocation in the Church for its unique task and importance, but recognizing that the call to holiness is universal, and that the mission to “make disciples of all nations” belongs to *all of us in equal measure* – ordained, consecrated and lay.

A holy impatience; the passion of youth; a sober understanding of the culture that shapes us; a zeal for Jesus Christ guided by deep intellectual formation, and a demand for *excellence in all things* for the sake of God's glory – these are all marks of the Sodalitium. And they're the tools God uses throughout history to make all things new. The fruitfulness of the Sodalitium and its sister communities and movements comes from *living* the new evangelization without compromise and at personal cost, instead of planning for it and talking about it, but never actually *doing* it.

Nothing is more powerful than the witness of Christian men and women loving God and serving God's people; working together; and sharing lives of courage, joy and friendship. In an age of aggressive individualism and the isolation it breeds, the new ecclesial movements offer two absolutely priceless gifts: *community and purpose*.

Let's turn finally to my third goal: *to offer you just a few brief thoughts as a brother in the consecrated life who also serves as a bishop*. My own religious family is the Capuchins. The Capuchins began as a reform movement within the Franciscans. They wanted to get back to a pure observance of the life that Francis intended for his order, living the Gospel *sine glossa*, without gloss – in other words, without the kind of “commentary” that interprets the demands of the Gospel away.

The irony, of course, is that the Franciscans themselves began as a reform impulse within the larger Church. But within a few decades, Franciscans began softening and accommodating their life to the patterns of their time. For many of the friars, the passion of the founder weakened into a memory, and then an ideal, and then a good intention.

Your founder is still with you. That's a great blessing, and you're still a young community. But it's human nature to compromise; to make excuses; to get lazy; to wander away from the original mission. Consecrated life is a balancing act between rigor and necessary adaptation.

By its nature, the Sodalitium is predominantly consecrated laymen. It actively engages the world. The needs of the apostolate will change over time and place to place. But it's vital for the Sodalitium to constantly bring members back to anchor themselves in the original charism of the community, and to struggle against the natural drift toward inertia, habit and a desire for comfort that eventually challenge every consecrated community.

Be demanding on yourselves, and patient with your brothers. That sounds simple, and it is. It's just also very difficult. Be patient with the Church as well. God works in the new communities

and movements in the same way he once did in calling up the great religious orders. The Sodalitium is a new form of service for a new time. But not everyone sees that, and not everyone *wants* to see it. For some Catholics, including some bishops and priests, the new ecclesial movements are strange or threatening or just irrelevant. That will change. The needs of the Church in the developed world will become more painful and more urgent in the coming decades, and the new communities bring life where there is none. But it takes time.

Pray – together and alone. That seems too obvious to mention. But one of the worst temptations in active ministry is substituting our work for a real friendship with Jesus Christ. If we don't spend time with him, we can't love him.

Finally, where evil abounds, virtue abounds more. Likewise where virtue abounds, expect the devil to interfere. Expect trials. Sin and failure are part of consecrated life just as surely as they're part of priestly and lay life. Holiness consists of trying again, and again, and again to live the life of a saint, and helping others to do the same. Have confidence in the holiness of the path your community is on, and know that you have many, *many* brothers and friends like me who pray for you every day.

I've talked mainly about the Church in the developed world today, because that's the Church that I serve and the world I know best. The problems facing the Church are real. They can easily make us forget that God made us for joy not sadness, and happiness not fear. But every once in a while, God reminds us that we know only a little part of his story, and the whole story may be much larger and very different from what we think.

I have an acquaintance, Joe Mahoney, who served as a U.S. Marine infantry captain in Vietnam. He was posted to Dong Ha, very close to the North Vietnamese border. Because of the fighting, it was a dangerous place for anybody, including the locals. While there, he met a young Vietnamese priest, Father Paul Thanh Hoan, who ran a parish and a home for orphans called the White Dove. Using scrap wood and other materials he scrounged from the war effort, Joe helped the priest build bunk beds and two new living structures for the orphans, and eventually a sewer system. Joe and Father Paul became friends. But Joe went back home in October 1968, and like a lot of veterans, he didn't want to think about Vietnam for years.

After the war, Joe assumed that the priest had been killed by the Communists or died in prison. Earlier this spring, 44 years after he left Dong Ha, Joe found Father Paul on the internet. He visited him in Vietnam earlier this month. Father Paul survived the war. He saved his orphans. And he was never sent to the prison camps.

There's more. Father Paul became Bishop Paul, ordinary of the Diocese of Phan Thiet. And Bishop Paul, now retired, founded a community of Christian service whose members teach sewing and pig farming to the local people, and run water purification stations and boarding houses for young women and men. They also operate five medical dispensaries that treat hundreds of people each day and tens of thousands of persons every year. Most importantly: Everything the community does is built around prayer, daily Mass and Eucharistic devotion. On a Sunday during his visit, Joe attended 5 p.m. Mass at All Saints Parish in Saigon. The church holds 500 people. It was full. The courtyard of the church holds 600. It was also full. So Joe stood in the street with another 800 people in an overflow crowd and listened to the

Liturgy on loudspeakers. The average age of the worshipers was in the 20s or 30s. There were no old people. The elderly attend the 5 a.m. Mass to avoid the city traffic.

In a country where people are poor and the Church is under constant pressure from a hostile government, Catholic life is not just surviving. It's *thriving*. Christianity is growing all across the southern hemisphere – in fact, growing more rapidly than any other religion, including Islam. The lesson is this. Lima, Philadelphia and Vietnam are separated not just by geography, but by language, culture and history. But the love of Jesus Christ is the same. The presence of God in the lives of his disciples is the same. And the friendship of people who serve God's son can bridge every barrier of time and distance, *because the mission is always the same*: to bring Jesus Christ to the world, and the world to Jesus Christ.

When Francis Xavier left Lisbon in 1541, the task given to him by Portugal's king was to restore the faith of Portuguese settlers and traders in India. God had other plans. God used him to evangelize Asia. God will use the Sodalitium and other new communities and movements in ways we cannot see, and that will bear fruit long after Luis Fernando and I are gone. But I thank God for the privilege of being present at the beginnings.

ⁱ Catholic statistical data in this talk are drawn from the November 14, 2012, CARA research report to the American bishops

ⁱⁱ John Courtney Murray, S.J., "The Construction of a Christian Culture," 1940, Woodstock Theological Library

ⁱⁱⁱ See Christian Smith and colleagues, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011; and *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2005

^{iv} From the Smith lecture, "On Moralistic Therapeutic Deism as U.S. Teenagers' Actual, Tacit, De Facto Religious Faith," Princeton Theological Seminary, 2005; adapted from his book *Soul Searching*