

The church at the crossroads

A shift in pastoral approaches is needed to keep up with the transitions of modern society. The church at the crossroads.



We are seeing a world in transition and the church in transition with society. There are essential things; there are accidentals.

Spiritual wisdom is knowing what we can change and what we cannot change. Prophetic courage is changing things we can change to make them better. Pastoral humility is accepting the things that we cannot change, to explore new ways and approaches to make the Gospel understandable to our generation.

Pastoral courage is the resoluteness with which the shepherd holds his staff, forges bravely onwards, often into uncharted territory, leading his flock through paths unknown, but always in docility to the prompting of the Spirit "who blows where He wills".

There are rapid changes happening in Philippine society and it is imperative for us churchmen to acknowledge them so that our pastoral praxis can better answer the needs of the Filipino nation. We can be victims of change, but we can be its authors as well as its guardians. Pope Francis is providing us, pastors, with a sterling example of what it is to respond and at the same time to lead, to change boldly, but to hold to what is true faithfully as well.

De-coupling of space and time

Social philosophers speak about the "de-coupling" of space and time. We were formed in seminaries where the daily schedule was considered the will of God and the whole day was composed of regimented ordered activities. There was a time for prayer, for study, for play, for meals, for sleeping and others. There was a fixed place to eat, to pray, to rest and to recreate. The day was for work. The night was for rest. The chapel was for prayer. There was a proper place and time for everything.

This is no longer so. There are no longer fixed spaces and time for different activities. Our youth work at night as call center agents. Night is no longer associated for rest. People no longer go to stores to buy commodities. They can shop online from a computer at home. The home is not just for family life. It is now also for commerce and business. There is online Visita Iglesia (church visit) during Holy Week. Our seminarians belong to the wi-fi generation and chat not in face-to-face encounters but

through the worldwide web. They get in touch without getting touched.

Can we see a church adopting this "de-coupling" of space and time? Our generation of young Catholics seeks Pokemon in our parish churches and accidentally finds God while window shopping! The unconventional Mass schedules at noon or late at night are attracting many young Catholics. Looking beyond our adoracion nocturna maybe we should consider nocturnal ministry for call center agents?

Are we ready to ride on Facebook as our pulpit to proclaim Christ to our young generation? And while many of us members of the clergy shirk away from what we take to be the "commercialization" of the liturgy by celebrating the Eucharist in malls and in other public spaces, in the very least, we should ask ourselves whether or not we should be more accommodating in respect to our concepts of "sacred space."

Rationalization and pluralism

Another sign of being at the crossroads of our time is rationalization with pluralism. Rationalization is a defense mechanism in which controversial behaviors or feelings are justified and explained in a seemingly rational or logical manner. Rationalization avoids the true explanation and makes fallacious explanations attractive.

Pluralism denotes a diversity of views and stands, rather than a single approach or method of interpretation.

Both pluralism and rationalization yield to the deprivileging of privileged philosophical or theological or scientific constructs. We saw that in the [reproductive health] law debate. We experienced that in the pre-election catechesis last year. Two generations ago, the authority of the head of the family or the parish or diocese was never questioned. Today, leaders are asked by what authority do they demand obedience and oblige compliance? It happens in our diocesan chanceries. It happens in the [Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines]. It happens to all who hold authority.

What are we to do in a culture of rationalization and pluralism? A church in dialogue? A church that listens? A humbler church? But the other side of us is anxious that we might be compromising the Gospel and moving with the world rather moving the world with the power of God. There are challenges needing answers.

When pluralism is perceived as a threat, fundamentalism becomes a very attractive proposition — because every fundamentalist looks for immovable anchorage, and in religions, this will take the form of the fundamental text. But fundamentalism is no harmless hermeneutic position, because it is also intolerant.

Precisely because other views, perspectives and postures are considered inimical, it has tolerance for none except a privileged reading, a canonized position, an established posture.

Clearly, fundamentalism is not an option for our church, for if anything at all, the Lord insisted, to the chagrin of the religious guardians of his day, that the Scriptures meant more than the words they had committed to memory and to ritual apparently conveyed.

There has to be openness in the Philippine Church that is confident, at the same time, in its rootedness

to the indefectible Spirit of the Lord.

Turning to experts

The experts are admired and extolled. Expertise is no longer just limited to persons and institutions. We have entered a highly specialized generation in medicine, in commerce, in engineering, in communication technology — there is an expert in everything. But this extolling of experts has also resulted in the lessening of trust in the traditional repositories of confidence unless these institutions captivate the fancy of a society of experts and specialists.

Where is the church an expert of? Jack of all trades and master of none? There are experts in politics and business. There are experts in the arts and culture. There are experts in science and sociology. What is our expertise that would necessitate people to come? Are we perceived and acknowledged experts in God? Can we prove that faith in God is relevant for the unfolding of world history? Our youth say we are experts in God but then "Who cares about God?" It hurts.

Our experiments in the Philippines Church that de-emphasized theological study and academic pursuits have not altogether been fruitful and promising. The people we lead are, in this day and time, more educated, more highly schooled, and will have very little patience for peddlers of superstition, who conceal ignorance behind what they announce to be "mystery."

We must with daring and honesty ask ourselves whether or not our priests and our seminarians, our religious and our lay leaders, give themselves to the serious study of theology that enables them to answer the vexing problems in human hearts, the agnosticism of many of the young, and the indifference of those who think that the days of religion have given way to the age of science.

Shell institutions

Many institutions are symbols of stability and permanence. We teach the stability of marriage. We teach that the church stands on solid rock with Jesus as the cornerstone.

Let us compare the current understanding of the family and the church as institutions of stability and permanence to the conventional understanding 30 years ago. Families and religion have become shell institutions but the inside has radically changed. The relationships have changed; the understood submission to authority has shifted, the presumptions with regard to decision-making have evolved. We still carry the shell but the shell can be deceptive, illusory and fictitious.

We have our liturgical pageantry but are our rituals connected to the hopes and frustrations, the joys and grief of our people? We issue pastoral letters but are we still understood and relevant to the struggles and visions of our people? Can we listen to gutter language without judgment? Are we not becoming shell institutions — lovely to see with nothing inside?

The transitions need our attention. The shifts in paradigms need shifts in our pastoral approaches. A defensive church will not inspire and ignite souls. I have many questions but I lack answers. With you I search for answers and ask the Spirit to inspire and set our hearts afire.

Archbishop Socrates Villegas of Lingayen-Dagupan is president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines. He delivered this message at the start of the 114th plenary

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