

The Encounter at the Heart of Evangelization

Evangelization is always new because it is the encounter of God the creator and saviour in Jesus Christ within the Spirit. Encounter of God with human beings, encounter of individuals with God, who is revealed to them in the Word and in the encounter of sisters and brothers in humanity.

In his Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*,¹ Pope Francis introduces us to a dynamic of encounter that is destined to determine our being as "missionary disciples" and our mission of evangelization to the heart of God's People. This encounter-dynamic movement is shaping the pilgrimage of humanity as well as that of community life. What about the encounter movement? How far does it go? What does it mean in the life of our communities?

What about this Encounter Movement?

The encounter² falls within a double movement of "going out from oneself"—going to the encounter and letting oneself be encountered—with the aim of entering into a relationship. The encounter, in both of its dimensions, gives rise to a longing, an expectation. It contains an unknown and gives rise to an act of faith. It awakens feelings, implies a motivation, starts and requires learning how to meet, to talk, to dialogue, to listen and to discover (EG 141, 142, 279).

Going out to others means taking the initiative, leaving one's world, setting out, approaching others, entering into communication. *To let oneself be encountered* requires letting oneself be approached, opening a door, making room for the others, welcoming, listening and talking to them.

The encounter is revealed as an issue of freedom and growth in which the history of the person and the community is shaped. Viewed as a place of dialogue, brotherhood, support, commitment, communion and unity, the encounter is the challenge of a life turned towards others, transformed in love and giving, of a missionary life filled with joy.

This movement takes us into the heart of God's plan. Before an individual or a people started going towards God, it pleased God to take the first steps, to let himself be known, to enter into dialogue with human beings (Ex 3:4-5, 12; Is 43:1-5) and to share trinitarian love with him. He, who chose us before the founding of the world, is revealed to us through Christ, the Word made flesh, in the Spirit (Eph 1:3-10). From this founding encounter emerges the desire to let oneself be encountered and to go towards God and towards our sisters and brothers.

The encounter is an experience of calling and sending forth (EG 19-20). The Scriptures reveal to us how the encounter of God with Abraham (Gen 12:1-3), Moses (Ex 3:17), Jeremiah (Jer 1:7), the disciples of Jesus (Mt 28:19-20) led them to allow themselves to be encountered, to go out from themselves, to answer the call and take up the assignments entrusted to them. The Church, born for the mission, proclaims the salvation that God has wrought (EG 113) in the world. Its members are called to the same vocation to holiness (LG 11, 32, 40) and missionary disciples through baptism (EG 120) are sent out and must help one another in the mission (LG 32).

This existential experience of the encounter at the heart of the mission attests that *the person is a mission* (EG 273). We exist by and for the encounter, and we cannot uproot this dimension from our being. We are like branded with the mission to go to the encounter, to bring light, to bless, to enliven, to raise up and to free (EG 273).

How Far Does the Encounter Go?

To let oneself be encountered by God is the experience of a lifetime. An experience of the merciful tenderness of the Father (EG 279-280), of going out from ourselves and going forth on a mission. An

¹ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Rome, November 24, 2013.

² The numbers in *Evangelii Gaudium* which speak of encounter: EG 1, 3-5, 7, 8, 13, 19-21, 24, 27, 30, 33, 42, 46, 49, 87, 91, 97, 111, 113, 120, 132, 153, 166-167, 174, 179, 180-181, 264, 272, 288.

experience of the gaze and call of Jesus that challenges our world (Mk 2:13–14; 10:21–24) and fuels our desire to seek him, to love him and proclaim him (EG 178). "With Christ joy is constantly born anew" (EG 1).

Discovering the primacy of the love of God (Is 44:2, 24; 49:1; Jer 1:5) opens to conversion. The resulting inner upheaval compels proclamation of that love which fills us up. It frees us, makes us close to the impoverished and the excluded. It leads us to recognize their dignity beyond appearances, place and culture, and leads us in search of paths of brotherhood and communion. It guides us in the path that Jesus traced out for us: a path that is sometimes uncomfortable. Jesus went towards the marginalized, served them, restored their dignity, and was judged for such action. He challenged authority and acted against customs. He experienced the encounter all the way to the summit of the cross in the total gift to the will of his Father.

What Does This Encounter Movement Mean in the Life of Our Communities?

The encounter creates and builds community. It reveals an experience of human, spiritual, community and apostolic growth. It proves to be a place of conversion in the love of Christ and of sisters and brothers, and it blossoms through learning about our capacities for welcome, listening, sharing and support.

The community lets itself be evangelized so it can evangelize. The members feel that the Lord precedes them in love (Jn 4:10). They recognize their weaknesses, they try not to retreat nor let themselves get mired in mediocrity (EG 121). The Good News received and shared encourages trust in the encounter of others at the heart of daily life.

The missionary disciple is strengthened in this movement of decentering and discernment. The mission is deepened, and the community and apostolic activities are imbued with this purification process. Always on a mission to evangelize, members advance to the crossroads to invite the marginalized and the poor people. They allow their conceptions and approaches to be shifted to risk an *otherness* of the mission in collaboration with the laity, other institutes and other organisations. They take the time to move forward together in God's time and space, and to work for the long term.³

Another challenge is interculturality. The cultural-diversity encounter, recognized as a gift, leads to the building of unity in "multifaceted harmony" (EG 117). Developing within a dynamic of conversion, the intercultural encounter presupposes more than just good will. It requires dialogue, reciprocity, compromise and a clear and shared vision.⁴ It requires the commitment of everyone in overcoming complacency, competition and assimilation to switch to a radical welcome of the different cultures and achieve true mutual relationship. A relationship in which we ensure that the presence, gifts and perspectives of each can influence the identity, ministries and structures of the community.⁵

Conclusion

At the end of this reflection, we may say that the encounter is an essential dimension of evangelization. It implies a relationship between God and the individual, a relationship that transforms and makes one go out from oneself to go towards the other. Letting oneself be encountered and encountering God as well as sisters and brothers is learned along the way. The missionary disciple, strengthened by the Spirit, carries the love of Jesus to others in the humble attitude of one who is willing to learn (EG 128).

In community, evangelization begins by building a living fraternal relationship, called to carry out the institute's mission. Pope Francis exhorts us "*Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the ideal of fraternal love!*" (EG 101) because the community, place of evangelization, is essentially missionary and

³ Anne Fortin. "Pourquoi évangéliser", *Cahiers de spiritualité ignatienne*, "La nouvelle évangélisation. Pour qui? Pour quoi?", No. 139, January–April 2014, p. 72.

⁴ Anthony J. Gittins, "Introduction to the Intercultural Workshop," CRC General Assembly Montreal, June 2014.

⁵ Anthony J. Gittins, "From Invitation to Inclusion to Radical Welcome," *op. cit.*

life-giving. Finally, the shared mission with others as well as the intercultural encounter in international communities bear witness to the evangelizing mission to which we are called today.

Questions:

1. What about our fraternal encounter in community?
2. What about our encounter with the impoverished people and those on the margins of our society?

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