
KINGDOM OF GOD, CHURCH AND SOCIETY

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PREMISE: THE CONTINUITY AND RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE THEME OF **FULLNESS** AND THE THEME OF THE **KINGDOM**

First of all I would like to acknowledge here our debt to the insights – authentic revelations – of the apostolic team who founded the “Christian Fellowships” in Argentina, for their historic contribution to the Church on the subjects of the Lordship of Christ and the Kingdom of God. I would refer you to the foundational and preparatory works by Jorge Himitian¹ and Orville Swindoll² written in preparation for this consultation and to provide a basis on which to develop our thinking.

I would also like to suggest that, in my understanding, there is a link and a continuity between the subject (which we considered in previous years) on “*The Progress of the Church towards its Fullness*” and the present reflections on “*Kingdom of God, Church and Society*”, since the theme of the Kingdom is basic to the Church and intersects its path *towards its fulness*; because the path towards fulness coincides with the *process* of growth and the increase of the Kingdom; and because *the fulness* is in fact the fulness of the life of the Kingdom, the Kingdom of God fully realised. This is true at the personal level (*the person* being the habitation of God by the Spirit), at the interpersonal level (*the community* as the habitation of God by the Spirit), and at the ecological and universal level (*the earth* and *the universe* full of His glory!). By then God will have healed, inhabited and filled with Himself all relationships and the whole creation! A new creature! A new community! A new creation!

INTRODUCTION

I would like to introduce this talk on “Kingdom of God, Church and Society” with two images taken from the Old Testament: 1. The vision in Daniel of the **rock cut out, but not by human hands**, which smashes all the kingdoms it meets along its path, becoming **“a huge mountain filling the whole earth”**³; 2. The image of **Mount Zion** in Isaiah⁴ which, rearing up above all other mountains, **becomes the universal centre of attention for all peoples**. And then two images from the last book of the New Testament: 1. The vision which shows us **the Lamb on Mount Zion**;⁵ and 2. The vision of **“a new heaven and a new earth”** which also shows us the **new Jerusalem**.⁶ The rock, Christ; the mountain of the Kingdom; the new

¹ Jorge Himitian, *The Gospel of the Kingdom of God*.

² Orville Swindoll, *The Kingdom of God and the Spiritual World*.

³ “You looked, O king, and there before you stood a large statue – an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were broken to pieces at the same time and became like chaff from a threshing-floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth... In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure for ever. This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands – a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces. The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true and the interpretation is trustworthy” **Dan 2:31-45**

⁴ “In the last days **the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come** and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.’ The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war any more. Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord” **Is 2:2-5**

⁵ “**Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion**” **Rev 14:1**

⁶ “**Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’ He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’”** **Rev 21:1-5**

Jerusalem, which is the bride of Christ, the Church (*"the tabernacle of God with men"*); the ultimate renewal of all things (*"I am making everything new!"*).

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS THE GREAT THEME OF THE BIBLE

The word "kingdom" means "authority and sovereignty exercised by a king". The expression "Kingdom of God" (or "Kingdom of Heaven") signifies the authority and government exercised by God; we could say, "the rule of God"! In the second place, the "Kingdom of God" is the sphere over/in which God reigns, where His orders are obeyed, where His will is implemented or carried out. The authority and the government of God (Jesus the Lord!) are received with joy, accepted obediently and manifested through our personal lives and relationships on earth as in heaven. We could express it as *"the sphere where God rules"*.

In the Old Testament

The Old Testament reveals to us God as Creator, Ruler and Judge over the universe, the earth and history. His Kingdom is an eternal government and dominion:

"Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations"(Ps 145:13)

"The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all" (Ps 103:19)

"His kingdom is an eternal kingdom; his dominion endures from generation to generation" (Dan 4:3)

"Your God reigns!" (Is 52:7)

In the New Testament

- John the Baptist prepares the way for the coming king: *"Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near"* (Mt 3:1-2). For Jesus, *"the time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"* (Mk 1:14-15). This is why he sends out the Twelve – *"he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God"* (Lk 9:1-2) – and the seventy, to say to the people: *"The kingdom of God is near to you"* (Lk 10:9).

The message of the Kingdom is Jesus' central message in the Gospels

- *"The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached"* (Lk 16:16). The whole of the Sermon on the Mount. (Mt 5-7). The great prayer: *"Our Father... Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven"* (Mt 6:9-13), and the great exhortation: *"Seek first his kingdom... and all these things will be given to you as well..."* (Mt 6:33).

The kerygma of the Gospels: *"The kingdom of God is here, is at hand, is among us, has come!"*

The apostolic kerygma: *"Jesus Christ is Lord!"*

In the Acts and Epistles, for reasons depending on culture, theology and historical context, we **witness a transition in the language**. The Messiah and King becomes Christ and Lord, *Kyrios!*

I would add moreover that the statement with which Luke begins his Book of Acts underlines in indisputable terms not only the centrality and vastness, but also the richness and depth of the theme of the kingdom. So we read that Jesus *"until the day he was taken up to heaven...showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. **He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God"*** (Acts 1:2-3).

After which the Book of Acts describes how Peter first made the linguistic transition referred to above: *"Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, **both Lord and Christ**"!!!* (Acts 2:36). Subsequently Paul, who even more explicitly reveals the parallel, or rather the identification, between the Kingdom and the Lordship of Christ: *"...he explained and declared (to the Jews) the **kingdom of God** and tried to convince*

them about Jesus... he **preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ**" (Acts 28:23,31).

Thus "about the kingdom of God" has become "about the Lord Jesus Christ"!

In the Book of Revelation: the Kingdom has come, is definitively established in its fulness!

"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (Rev 11:15)

"We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty... because... you have begun to reign" (Rev 11:17)

"Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: 'Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ'" (Rev 12:10)

"Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: 'Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns'" (Rev 19:6)

So we understand that the Kingdom of God is concerned with

"...the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure... which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ ." (Eph 1:9-10)

WHERE IS THE KINGDOM OF GOD?

I read a story about an old rabbi who once asked his friends: "Can you tell me where God is? Or rather, Where does God come in?". They answered: "But God is everywhere. He is omnipresent!" But he continued to insist, "No!" In the end they asked him wearily, "Well then, where do you say God is? Where does God come in?" And he answered: "Of course God is present in creation and everywhere in the universe. But, as far as people and the world are concerned, *God comes in wherever someone makes room for him!* God wants to come in wherever someone is ready to receive ("to all those who received him...", Jn 1:12) or to take in God."

And this is true! From the beginning of time God has wanted to come into the world, which is His. In the end, and in exemplary fashion, He did so in Christ's body through Mary's consent. He has continued since then to do so, and still does today wherever there are men, communities or "spaces" ready to receive Him; in every relationship, activity or situation in which there is the will to receive Him.

A. THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS IN CHRIST

It is Jesus who inaugurates the Kingdom: "*The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it*" (Lk 16:16). The *physical place* of God's entry, of the Kingdom of God into the world, of the kingdom of heaven on earth; the strategic and decisive *point of contact* between man and God is Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary.

Some time ago I was helped to fix this in my mind by the image of an hourglass. The upper part is God, the Kingdom of Heaven; the lower part is man, the kingdoms of the world. Jesus' prayer – "*Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*" (Mt 6:10) – interprets God's supreme desire and plan for the relationship between heaven and earth, the heart of God and the heart of man! He wants to transfer heaven to earth, to come and dwell *on earth* in every man's heart and relationships. As it is written: "*A body you prepared for me... to do your will, O God*" (Heb 10:5,7). Jesus, in his incarnate body, has become the channel, the point of contact, the passage leading from heaven to earth. In him, in his body, heaven (the "kingdom of heaven") has touched earth once and for all, permanently and

eternally. He has brought heaven to earth and has joined, for all eternity, heaven and earth.

In Christ, Daniel's *rock*, "the kingdom of God is near you" (Lk 10:9). It is *already* available to us... In him, in his life (his character), in his words (the Gospel of the kingdom, the *kerygma* and *didache*) and in his works (the power to work miracles, the exorcisms), the kingdom and salvation are *already* available as a gift for the poor in spirit, the pure in heart, the hungry and the afflicted – for all those who are ready to receive him as Lord. In him the Kingdom has arrived, in him we have contemplated the glory of God.⁷

God's government and authority are in Christ. God's will is expressed and manifested in Christ. Therefore the Kingdom, the fulness of God's government, comes to us with Christ and "in Christ". Receiving the kingdom is identified with receiving Christ: "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven" (Mt 10:32-33). Man's final destiny is decided on the basis of his position regarding Christ.

Therefore, the kingdom of God not only comes with him, but it is *inseparable from his person*. As someone has said, the novelty of Jesus' message about the kingdom of God "is He himself, simply his person" (Schniewind).⁸ God himself, God's kingdom is "in Christ". "**For in Christ all the fulness of the Deity lives in bodily form**"(Col 2:9). Which is why the Bible states: "**He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross**" (Col 1:13-20).

Therefore "in Christ" the kingdom has come near and is available to us. The Kingdom is "in him", with him, for him. As the lovely old prayer of the Latin liturgy says, "In Christ, with Christ and through Christ, to you, God the Father Omnipotent, all honour and glory." "So that in everything he might have the supremacy" (Col 1:18).

Christ is the beginning (the head/the start) and the end (the finisher) of the Kingdom.

Christ is the life, the seed of the Kingdom

Christ is the root and foundation of the Kingdom

Christ is the boundary of the Kingdom

Christ is the character, quality and nature of the Kingdom

Christ is the model of the Kingdom

⁷ "The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God is – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth... John gave this testimony: 'I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptise with water told me, "The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptise with the Holy Spirit"' **Jn 1:9-16, 32-33.**

⁸ B. Klapper, s.v. "Regno", in *Dizionario dei concetti del Nuovo Testamento*, Dehoniana, Bologna, p.1535

Christ is the fulness of the Kingdom
Christ is the length, the breadth, the depth and the height of the Kingdom.

***So to receive Christ means receiving the King of the Kingdom
To receive him as Lord means submitting to his rule, making room for the Kingdom.***

B. THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE CHURCH

The kingdom of God is in Christ and Christ is the root and foundation of the church. The church (Heb. *qaal*, Gk. *ekklesia*) is "***the definitive convocation***" of the people of God, profoundly and irrevocably joined to Christ for eternity. No correct understanding of the church can leave out or be separated from Christ. The head and the body, the bride and the bridegroom go together. Christology and ecclesiology go together; ecclesiology has its root in Christology. On this subject, the apostle Paul says: "***This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church***" (Eph 5:32); "***The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ***" (Gk. *houtōs ho Christos*) (1Cor 12:12).

So therefore the Kingdom of God, *in the measure in which* through Christ it enters people's lives, is present and "in some way" continues (it is a dynamic reality, *a becoming*), though limited and partial ("in part"), but increasing, in the community of the redeemed, the Body of Christ, the church. Thus Scripture declares, "***He has... brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves***" (Col 1:13); "***You purchased men... and have made them to be a kingdom... to serve our God***" (Rev 5:9-10); "***He has made us to be a kingdom***" (Rev 1:6) and: "***I, John... your companion in the suffering and kingdom... that are ours in Jesus...***" (Rev 1:9)⁹.

Nevertheless it is important to see that, while Christ is totally identified with and coincides with the Kingdom, so that he who receives Christ receives the Kingdom (the King and the rule of God), it is not the same with the church. While in Christ the fulness of the Kingdom *already* exists, the church which (in the *time of faith*) has the fulness of Christ (*the mystery of Christ in us; "in him you have everything in full"*, Col 2:10), is nevertheless *progressing towards the fulness* (unity, quality and quantity) which is in Christ. The church, to say it with Cullmann, finds itself "between what is already and what is not yet", "between the here and now and the there and then". It is in a *process*. The *Christ event* (His person and work) has set in motion what may be called "*the Christ process*", while we wait for His return! In fact "*when Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory*" (Col 3:4).

God's intention is to *fill* everything with the impression of his being¹⁰: a *dynamic process* of invasion, conquest and "filling" which, begun by Christ, grows in us (in the individual), in the church, in the world, in view of the *pleroma* which is Christ¹¹. Because at the end of this process "*God will be all in all*" (1Cor 15:28).

⁹ Also worth exploring, in the episode of Peter's confession, is the relationship which Jesus establishes between his person, the church and the kingdom.

¹⁰ "*In these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word*" **Heb 1:1-3**

¹¹ "*He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross*" **Col 1:13-20**

"To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen"! (Eph 3:21)

From this perspective the Church, as the Body of Christ, is "the Kingdom community". Although not to be identified with the Kingdom, it is "the agency of the Kingdom", the witness of the Kingdom, the guardian of the Kingdom, the historic¹² and divine instrument of this strategy. With the presence and the help of the Holy Spirit, the Church carries on her mission of proclaiming, testifying and demonstrating the Kingdom in order to bring to society and the world "*the aroma of Christ*", the *influence* of the Kingdom. "There is between the church and the Kingdom an inseparable relationship, but not ... identity" (George Eldon Ladd). *On this point* one can agree with the opinion expressed in a document,¹³ in other respects highly controversial, of the Catholic Church:

"The church is the primary entry point into the new order of the Kingdom in present history. It is salt and light, a city set on a hill. **It is not the Kingdom and at times may betray the Kingdom, nevertheless it is in a fundamental way ... the sign of the Kingdom in the present world ...** Herein lies the church's high calling and at the same time her perennial challenge and opportunity. Yet how often believers misunderstand or "under-experience" the church as the community of the Kingdom ... **The church is called to be present together** redemptively in the world, **yet unconditioned by bondage to the world's values**".

C. THE KINGDOM OF GOD BEYOND THE CHURCH

The mystery of God, hidden from all ages, has to do with *Christ* ("Christ in us") – *The Body of Christ* (Christ among us)! The Kingdom of God reaches us in Christ and finds – one might say – its expression in the Church. Now, the Church lives in a *world governed by other influences*. In order to influence it, it is called to preach "the Gospel of the Kingdom" and to live out the life of the Kingdom, teaching individuals and communities to live and think in conformity with the Kingdom. It should attract the world to the Kingdom of God by exercising, or trying to exercise, a good *influence* over it, acting like yeast in the dough. "The Kingdom of God depends on the church." (PN).

As well as the Holy Spirit who, in His liberty ("*The wind blows wherever it pleases*", Jn 3:8) and sovereignty, acts how and where he likes, there are two basic instruments that the Lord has chosen to bring the Kingdom into the world: the believer and the church!

It is illuminating what the Count of Montalambert writes in his *The Monks of the West*, on the *influence* exercised by Benedict of Norcia on 6th-century society:

"Historians have competed with one another in praising Benedict's genius and intelligence; they have imagined he intended to regenerate Europe, halt the disintegration of society, re-establish education and protect literature and the arts ... I am firmly convinced that he was never concerned to regenerate anything except his own soul and that of his fellow monks."¹⁴

Benedict's fundamental, strategic contribution (which is also the fundamental contribution of Christianity!) was to give value to "*the person*" and "*the community*"! And alongside the *contemplative life*, the *active life* ("Ora et labora")! The contemplative life, as in the relationship between the sap and the plant, nourishes and is expressed in the active life. The new creature grows through a relationship with the Lord and

¹² "...**through the church**, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known..." **Eph 3:10**

¹³ *Dominus Jesus*

¹⁴ Quoted. in Alister McGrath, *Roots that Refresh. A Celebration of Reformation Spirituality*, Hodder & Stoughton, London-Sydney-Auckland, 1991, 1995.

expresses itself in an active process of personal **and** social *transformation*. The person **and** the community, through their life and actions, *transform* the face of man and the earth (agriculture, crafts, industry, medicine...) *ferment* and *influence* the world (literature, arts, politics, governance...).

These two choices in particular, *community* and *work* (both physical and intellectual), will be decisive for the future of Christianity and the world!

Therefore **the person** and **the community; prayer** and **work!**

Please allow me now a short digression.

As heirs of the Reformation we certainly have in our spiritual DNA an awareness of the value of the person and the "need" – as McGrath¹⁵ observes – "to internalise our understanding of the Christian life":

"This need still exists. There is still a danger of Christianity being understood as something external and formal, a series of religious practices... The rise of existentialism reminds us urgently of the abiding need to establish a relationship between the Gospel, on the one hand, and on the other, subjective awareness and the world of experience in which individuals live. *There is a constant need for what Kierkegaard called 'a process of appropriation of the most passionate inwardness'* (in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* of 1846). *Those who are unable to root the Gospel in the world of common experience are putting at risk the entire future of Christianity"*

And we, as heirs of Revival and the Pentecostal/charismatic branch of Christianity, emphasise even more the importance of a *personal experience* of God in conversion, in the baptism in the Holy Spirit, in the exercise of spiritual gifts, in worship.

However, it needs to be added that:

"*The Reformation never accepted a radical Christian individualism*¹⁶. Its insistence on the need to make Christian faith significant and relevant to the individual was accompanied by an insistence on the *need to live the Christian life in the context of a church fellowship. The community of faith is not a chance appendage to faith...* Many modern Protestant books, such as for example *Life Together* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, have reaffirmed **the importance of community for the deepening of faith and of personal and collective commitment...**"¹⁷

It is therefore important for us too to complement the "*appropriation of the most passionate inwardness*" by emphasising, both for the individual and for society, community life. Moreover, alongside such an important component, and one so heavily emphasised in our circles, as the *contemplative life*, we must also emphasise the *active life*. In both areas Benedictine spirituality sets a good example of a classical ideal of evangelical and Reformation spirituality.

And this is also useful for *the transformation of society*. It is interesting to consider that for both Benedict and Luther, relationship with God (the *contemplative life*) immediately produces a commitment (*active life*) towards society and in taking responsibility for transforming the world. One only needs to recall the Protestant concept of *work as vocation!* So *conversion* yes, but also *transformation!* Of oneself, society and the world!

It is tragic to think of countries which today have millions of evangelicals, but are not experiencing any significant transformation! Millions of "new creatures" who are not bringing in significant elements of "new creation". Perhaps there is insufficient

¹⁵ *Op. cit.* p. 215. Emphasis mine. [N.B. The quotations from this work have been retranslated from the Italian edition due to unavailability of the original text.]

¹⁶ The risk run by Pentecostals! [Author's note]

¹⁷ *Op. cit.* p. 217. Emphasis mine.

awareness of the need to get rid of "escape theologies" and develop a theology and a spirituality of "responsibility" ("I care"), commitment and redemption, for the *common good* and in view of a *new creation*.

Taking a critical look at ourselves, we must agree that
"the evangelical movement has made room for 'inadequate and unauthentic forms of spirituality' that are totally incapable of responding to the needs of modern society. A sectarian attitude, dominated by the urge to withdraw from the world, has assumed a dominant position in movement which was originally engaged in the *conversion* and *transformation* of the world"¹⁸

The message that comes down to us clearly from Benedict and the best of our historical Christian heritage, and from Luther and the Reformation (not forgetting the implications of Calvin's theology in terms of the spirituality of *asceticism in the world* and the ethic of responsibility, and Weber's interpretation of the origins of capitalism), but also from some revival and church renewal movements (think of Wesley and the Methodist movement), is that of an "inner" commitment for the transformation of the individual (conversion and sanctification) and of the church, but also a "horizontal" commitment to the *common good*, for the transformation of society and the world.

A true personal conversion to Christ cannot but lead to individual and social transformation, a change in the social and political climate of the city and the nation, blessing and a real – even though partial – transformation of the world. The societies and civilisations "influenced" by Christianity show the signs of this. Some of the most significant movements of spiritual and moral reform in the history of Christianity have had a profound impact on the civil and political life of society and the world. As well as those already mentioned, one can think of William Wilberforce and the movement for the abolition of slavery, Martin Luther King and the struggle against racism, or Mother Teresa of Calcutta with her commitment and service to outcasts.

In my opinion it is necessary to keep in creative tension the *detachment* of the *in but not of* (our necessary detachment from the world – "in the world but not of the world") and the "*as if not*"¹⁹, with *the commitment* to seeking the *common good*, loving one's neighbour. We need to maintain a very clear distinction between the "yeast" and the "dough", "influence" and "control", "service" and "power", "last things" and "penultimate things", what is good – even though partially and provisionally – (sometimes "the good is the enemy of the best") and what comes down to us from the "future" of the coming kingdom, the new humanity, the new society, the new creation!

TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF WORK

On this subject it seems to me that the theological position which, whether or not we are aware of it, we have on the *value and meaning of work* is particularly important. One of the basic areas of God's mandate to man at creation was undoubtedly work. *Work as a basic means of cooperating with God* for the preservation, management and transformation of creation, in view of the new creation! The Bible says:

*"When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, no shrub of the field had yet appeared on the earth and **no plant of the field had yet sprung up; the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no man to work the ground**" Gen 2:4-5*

Here seems to be suggested " a partnership between the creating God and working human beings"²⁰.

¹⁸ *Op. cit.* p.220

¹⁹ "What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs is to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away" **1Cor 7:29-31**

²⁰ Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, "Toward a Theology of Work", Oxford University Press, New York, 1991, p. 98

Whence ***the great importance and dignity of work.***

Having said which, *the crisis of work*, after the fall, is down to *personal causes* (attitudes and actions, lack of personal honesty or integrity), *structural causes* (policies of the system, organised crime, business decisions), and also – in the modern world – to *technological causes* (industrial reorganisation, obsolescence of machinery).

And the question arises: what dignity or significance is left in work?

Traditional theology, taking as its starting point for the Christian the influence of his new life in Christ and the doctrine of sanctification, concluded that **a.** work has value and importance as a means of *providing for one's own needs*, but also to *help the poor and needy*; **b.** work helps to *subdue the "flesh" and train Christian character*. All very true!

But in this perspective – so the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf²¹ argues – the concept of work (the *active life*) becomes instrumental and subordinate to the *contemplative life*. This leads to a real risk of harming and largely diminishing the status and dignity of the *active life*.

And this is especially true in the light of an eschatological understanding which, rather than envisaging the transformation of the world (*Transformatio mundi*) is thinking of its destruction (*Annihilatio Mundi*). The first of these viewpoints implies – even if it is through a dramatic crisis of transformation and purification – *the continuation* (as it were by a resurrection!) of this world; while the second envisages the total destruction and *discontinuity* between the present and the future order. Both positions have firm supporters among theologians.

"Two radically different theologies of work follow from these two basic eschatological models ... *If the world will be annihilated and a new one created ex nihilo then mundane work has only earthly significance* for the well-being of the worker, the worker's community, and posterity... the results of the cumulative work of humankind throughout history will become nought in the final apocalyptic catastrophe, human work is devoid of direct ultimate significance... one devalues human work and Christian cultural involvement I use the word in the broad sense of social and ecological involvement)..."²²

"Belief in the eschatological annihilation and responsible social involvement are logically compatible. But they are *theologically inconsistent*."²³

"*The picture changes radically with the assumption that the world will end in apocalyptic destruction but in eschatological transformation. Then the results of the cumulative work of human beings have intrinsic value and gain ultimate significance, for they are related to the eschatological new creation...*"²⁴

Clearly, this second position can only be consistently sustained on the basis of the attribution of an intrinsic value and goodness to creation. This option gives a foundation and dignity to the work of preservation and transformation of the world, in the expectation that this earth together with the entire "*creation... will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God*" (Rm 8:21). In fact, as has been observed, "The liberation of creation... cannot occur through its destruction but only through its transformation"²⁵

And F.F. Bruce adds:

²¹ Miroslav Volf, *Op. Cit.*, p 73.

²² Miroslav Volf, *Op. Cit.*, pp 89 – 90

²³ Miroslav Volf, *Op. Cit.*, p 89

²⁴ Miroslav Volf, *op. cit.*, p 91

²⁵ Miroslav Volf, *Op. cit.*, p 95

“Se if words mean anything, these words of Paul denote not the annihilation of the present material universe on the day of revelation, to be replaced by a universe completely new, but the transformation of the present universe so that it will fulfill the purpose for which God created it.”²⁶

And the argument would seem to be implicitly reinforced by Paul himself through the parallel which he establishes with “*our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies*” (Rm 8:23). Our belief in the resurrection of the body would itself seem to postulate this development. As we wait Moreover creation itself “*has been groaning in the pains of childbirth*” (Rm8:22) as she “*waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed*” (Rm8:19), .. the new creation.

Now, it is the Spirit who introduces the Christian into the experience of the new creation through his breaking in and his indwelling. “Christian faith is eschatological. Christian life is life in the Spirit of the new ceation or it is not Christian life at all. And the Spirit of God should determine the whole lie, spiritual as well secular”²⁷

From this whole argument it follows that: 1. Work has its basis in the creation mandate and possesses an enormous dignity that derives from being God’s fellow workers, by the Spirit, to better preserve, manage and transform this world (as happens in man through sanctification), in anticipation of the new creation. 2. Every Christian is called to discern his gifting and use it to help others, not limiting charisms to those for the church but understanding that they are gifts given to us by God for the world. In this way we establish a foundation for an understanding and practice of *work in the Spirit!*

In this direction one could naturally argue in favour of some kind of commitment in politics and economics, as well as in the sphere of work. This theological approach creates the premises for rethinking our relationship with the world and giving us a new attitude aimed at seeding the earth, “starting from here and now”, with *certain elements* of the Kingdom of God.

A new perspective for our pastoral practice and for a fruitful placing of the disciple and the church in the world!

Translation: Geoffrey and Judith Allen

²⁶ Miroslav Volf, *op. cit.*, p 95

²⁷ Miroslav Volf, *op. cit.*, p 79

PORTRAIT OF AN APOSTLE

Who he is and what he does

Giovanni Traettino

Apostles represent the foundational ministry of the New Testament church. It is no coincidence that the only historical book of the New Testament is entitled "*Acts of the Apostles*." The apostles are basic to the development of the early church: they are the unifying key to the events described, those around whom are generated movement and life, catalysts for all the other ministries.

The Twelve and the others

The "Twelve" occupy a unique position that can never be repeated, as eyewitnesses of the life of Christ, guarantors of faithfulness to his teaching and spokesmen for the message they saw incarnated and lived out by him. The Church in later times had to measure every revelation or teaching against the standard of the message passed on by the Twelve, as – by God's providence – it has been preserved for us in the New Testament.

But after them and alongside them, God gave to the church, after the Ascension, **other** apostles (Ephesians 4:11-15, 1^o Corinthians 12:28), of whom Paul is the first-fruits and the supreme example. Through his ministry and his claim to apostleship, he represents the historical proof and theological confirmation of a continuing apostolic ministry in the church.

Through him the apostolic ministry is confirmed as a necessity that is not only foundational, but also continuing, in order that the life and government of God might find full expression in the church "*until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ*" (Ephesians 4:13).

How did we manage without them?

The answer is that, in fact, they have never been absent from the Church. Every generation of believers has had its apostles. Sometimes they may have been called by other names (bishops, theologians, teachers, missionaries, pastors, reformers, etc.); but they have always been present among God's people to give expression to the will of God in their generation.

However, today there is a growing awareness among Christians of the need to recover, permanently and visibly, the person and role of the apostle. It is easier to build a house properly when the various craftsmen and their skills are clearly identified. We can build better if we do it according to God's pattern, or in other words, using the methods and instruments revealed in the Word of God.

Who chooses apostles?

The continuation of an authentic apostolic ministry in the church can be neither biblically established nor practically guaranteed by means of a so-called "apostolic succession", as the Roman Catholic tradition would have it. Rather it **is Christ Himself, risen and ascended to the right hand of the Father**, who in each generation raises up His ministers in the church. It is He who appoints them, through his choosing and calling into ministry. They are gifts that **He** continues to give to men (Ephesians 4:8).

Apostolic ministry, then, has its origin in God's free and sovereign choice (2° Corinthians 1:1). It is He, and no one else, who decides to call them to carry out this work. There are no schools of apostleship!

Their character will be deeply marked by the **calling** they have received from their Lord. This calling is accompanied by a deep experience of God's **grace** and mercy: not merely the grace of salvation, but grace for ministry.

And it is in the crucible of his intimate **encounter** with the risen Jesus that the apostle receives the **revelation**, or revelations, which from then on will become an inseparable part of his personality. Grace, the need for inward brokenness, the father heart of God, the nature of sonship and submission, the nature and mission of the church, zeal for the restoration of His house... such revelations become the burden burning in the apostle's life and the substance of his **commission**.

The apostle is a servant who has received, "*not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father*" (Galatians 1:1) a task to fulfil. This is the content of his preaching and the substance of the responsibility with which he must work. The authority (*exousia*) conferred on him is closely related to the work he must carry out and of which he must give account to God.

This commission is normally limited in time and space. During his life-span, in a certain geographical area and/or with certain people, he must do his part of the work needed to bring about the future of Church.

How can we recognise them?

1. An apostle is **a man who is sure of himself**. He has dealt with the problem of his identity, basically through God's calling, grace and purpose for his life. He is conscious of the responsibility that God has entrusted to him. "*For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline... Join with me in suffering for the Gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus... I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day... Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you – guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.*" "God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace..." (2° Timothy 1:7-9,12,14, Galatians 1:15).
2. His sense of security, however, does not produce in him independence, nor does it make him pushy and aggressive. An apostle is **a man of relationships**. Three years after his experience at Damascus Paul goes to stay with Peter for fifteen days (Galatians 1:18). And after 14 years of intensive ministry, he goes back again to the most notable apostles – James, Cephas and John – to set before them the message of his preaching and receive their confirmation and approval that he was not running his race in vain (Galatians 2:2). This interdependence betrays a certain degree of insecurity, which is vital for the Body of Christ because it allows the wealth and the particular message of one to enrich the life and ministry of another. An apostle has learned to sit at his brothers' feet to receive from their ministry; he also has the humility to receive their correction and reproof when necessary (Galatians 2:11-16, cf. 2° Peter 3:15). So he is capable of living out peer relationships: he is not the sort of man who is limited to "vertical" relationships. Timidity or fear – which produce hostility and isolation – do not condition his friendships or his reactions.
3. Set free from the fear of submission, he **is a man able to express the fatherhood and the heart of God**. He is thus equipped to communicate life, security and a sense of identity not only to individuals (whether ordinary believers or ministers), but to whole churches. The basis on which he interacts with the church is organic, not formal or official. What he **does**, what he builds, depends on who he **is**. So it is essential to avoid the danger of

trying to “act” the apostle. We can only be what we are, what God has called us to be. Neither more nor less. He is also a **catalyst for men**, and especially **ministers**. In Romans 16 there is a list of twenty people who probably found their ministry through their relationship with Paul.

4. An apostle is **a man with an overwhelming desire for unity** – in other words, for right relationships – between believers, but above all between ministers (whose strategic role he has understood) and local churches. He has understood **that the essence of the Church lies in relationships**.
5. He is **a man of revelation**. Paul speaks of “*the mystery... which has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets*” (Ephesians 3:4-5, cf. 1° Corinthians 2:6-10 and Galatians 1:12). And at the heart of his revelation is **the Church**. He has the ability to discern the reality of situations and to unmask what spirits are at work.
6. Together with the revelation of God’s mysteries, an apostle has also received the ability to handle them. He is **a strategist**, able to take detailed decisions in the light of a general strategy and to see problems from the perspective of their possible implications for the whole work of God.
7. He has been captivated by God’s purpose and has a burning desire to carry it out in the time and space that God has assigned to him. This makes him **tenacious and persistent**. One characteristic trait of his personality is that he takes no account of his personal well-being (2° Corinthians 4:8-12, Acts 20:24). On the contrary, he knows he has been called to pay a high price in terms of pain and suffering (2° Corinthians 4:6, 11:16, 12:10; Philippians 3:10, Galatians 6:17; 1° Timothy 3:3) in order to fulfil his calling.
8. He is a man with **a deep awareness of the calling and commissioning of his life**, and aims to:
 - present every man, and thus the whole Body, mature in Christ;
 - give the church stability, expanding it and projecting it beyond its local area;
 - find and train workers to build the church.

As he does these things, he moves with the spiritual authority that derives from the calling and commissioning he has received. His is a spiritual authority, not domination or authoritarianism.

9. He is **a ruler and a builder**.
 - He is able to set and keep to a course, while at the same time remaining flexible.
 - His aim is to make the entire Church function as a body, activating every member’s gifts and keeping healthy the “joints and ligaments”, that is, functioning relationships between them.
 - He has a strategic mentality as a man of vision. He is therefore an initiator and a pioneer.
 - Nevertheless he is not content just to possess a vision, but is aware of the need to plan, build and travel along the “road” he has seen (perhaps one pointed out by a prophet). He marks out its borders, both spiritual and material, turning the plan he has seen in the sphere of the invisible into practical and visible reality. He thus gives form and structure to the Church.
 - He tests and confirms (and sometimes demolishes!) existing realities.
 - He is continually aware of the need to find the right combination of opposite tendencies and keep a balance between the “dynamic tensions” of the Gospel. He thus gives completeness and wholeness to the church.

What does an apostle do?

1. **He works together with other ministers as a team**. He is not a “Lone Ranger” or solo performer. We never see Paul travelling alone: he is always surrounded by other men,

some of them already trained, others undergoing training. At the end of his life, in 2° Timothy 4, he gives news of and makes arrangements for no less than ten close fellow-workers.

However, the structure of the team is always open and flexible, in relation to the particular objectives to be reached.

2. **An apostle generally works in close partnership with a prophet.** *"And God in his wisdom said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles'..."* (Luke 11:49). *"... built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets..."* (Ephesians 2:20). The foundation of every church, and of all the other ministries – what gives the building stability and solidity – is a relationship with these two ministries.
3. He carries out his governing function over the other ministries **with a father's or an elder brother's heart.** It is sufficient to read Paul's letters to Timothy to understand what this means.
4. He **builds and coordinates relationships between different ministries**, working for reconciliation and unity among Christian leaders. He has a deep awareness of the need they have for one another.
5. He **identifies, chooses and ordains local church elders and other ministers** (Acts 14:23, 1° Timothy 3:2-13, 5:22, Titus 1:5-9). The system of "democratic election" of ministers by the congregation has no biblical justification (the translation of Acts 14:23 in some Bibles, "having had elders elected", is not based on the Greek text but rather on the translators' ecclesiological prejudices). This system frequently has negative effects on the church: it means that the "sheep" end up by governing and overruling the "shepherds", who dare not take unpopular stands or decisions.
6. He **builds and coordinates relationships between local churches.** The apostles are the "link" that can create unity among the different local churches, without having to resort to the formal or bureaucratic structures typical of "denominations".
7. He **builds the church in practical terms, according to God's plans** (Hebrews 8:5). The prophet **sees** this plan, but it is the apostle who has received wisdom from God **to translate it into practice**, involving all the ministries and the entire church. In this way he builds **a stable and lasting structure**, according to the divine pattern, which includes an order or "hierarchy" of functions (1° Corinthians 12:27-28). The purpose of these however is to reach the objective, not to have or give "status".
8. In his ministry, he **principally manifests one or more of the other major gifts** (prophet, pastor, evangelist, teacher). While the prophet prophesies and the teacher teaches, there is no such verb as "to apostle"! We can see this diversity in the Scriptures: Paul is a teacher-prophet, Peter an evangelist-pastor. But the apostle has received from God a greater anointing which equips him to tackle any kind of work (see 2° Timothy 4:2,5) and to supervise and coordinate the work of the other ministries.
9. Some apostles are mainly **resident**, others **itinerant**. This depends, among other factors, on the different requirements of the times and on differences in calling. For example, in the New Testament we see James permanently resident in Jerusalem, Paul always on the move, and Peter sometimes stationary and at other times travelling (Acts 9:32; Galatians 1:18, 2:9; 1° Corinthians 1:12, 9:5; 1° Peter 5:1). Similarly, in church history we see Calvin resident his whole life at Geneva and Wesley continually moving about. So an apostle may preside over a local church. But not all those who do so are apostles!
10. His desire is to **communicate the "deposit" which he has received from God** to the hearts of the ministers and the believers around him (2° Timothy 1:13-14, 2:2, 3:14).
11. He **rejoices when he is able to communicate and rebuild things formerly not understood** (Ephesians 3:2-7, Colossians 1:25-29).

12. He has the ability to **endure suffering and shame** because of the joy set before him (1° Corinthians 4:9-13, 2° Corinthians 11:23, 12:12, Colossians 1:24, etc.).
13. He is able to **distinguish between the essential and the secondary**, and **to handle the present in the light of the future** that is yet to come; consequently he is oriented more to **goals** than to **activities**.
14. He knows how to **delegate responsibility to others** (Titus 1:5).

How does he work with the prophet?

There are various areas of overlap between apostles and prophets. It becomes still more difficult to distinguish between them when the apostle has a ministry that is mainly prophetic. But the prophet tends to see things in stark contrast; his vision is often clearer and more sharply defined. The prophet is more an **inspirer**, the apostle more a **builder**, taken up with an overall vision of God's plan for the Church. These two ministries are complementary and mutually enriching.

Traps for the apostle to avoid

An apostle must beware of becoming bogged down in administrative and pastoral details, matters that deacons (Acts 6:2-4) and elders should be taking care of. It is true that there may be periods in which he has to give himself to pastoral work: Paul describes himself as a "nurse" (1° Thessalonians 2:7) and Peter as an "elder" (1° Peter 5:1); but only in situations where elders have not yet been appropriately established. Under such circumstances he may have to give the church a "push" until it is possible to ordain elders. After that he will act as a father to the elders, though without renouncing the freedom to minister into the lives of other believers.

He must also avoid the temptation to devote time to people who should rather be left to seek God on their own account, and that of feeling obliged to visit a church or a territory for no better reason than that he has not been there for a long time.

Only in this way will he be free to carry out the work to which God has called him: to be an "expert builder" of the House of God, which is *"built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets... and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord... to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit"* (Ephesians 2:20-22).