

Diocese of Portsmouth

Formation days for the framework volunteers, Basingstoke 4th July 2015
“Personal Encounter with Christ at the Heart of New Evangelisation”

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1. The problem of sense, the meaning of life. The real issue for contemporary people is, as blessed John Henry Newman said, the matter of certainty, the longing for a way out of confusion about ourselves, God and the world, things and people. What is my way? Who am I? And you? What do you have to do with my vocation? How can I make sense of an experience of failure? And another one of success? Is everything not destined to dissolve into nothing? From the film *Blade Runner*: "I've... seen things you people wouldn't believe... Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched c-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like [chokes up] tears in rain. Time to die..."

"All of those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain". Sometimes we have a bad feeling of losing or wasting our time. Not just momentarily but for a whole life. Is not everything that is personal going to dissolve and disappear into an impersonal space that at the very end flows to nothing, like tears in rain?

As Ratzinger said "The deepest poverty is the inability of joy, the tediousness of a life considered absurd and contradictory. This poverty is widespread today, in very different forms in the materially rich as well as the poor countries. The inability of joy (Pope Francis says that the key is the joy, the joy of the gospel) presupposes and produces the inability to love, produces jealousy, avarice -- all defects that devastate the life of individuals and of the world." (Card. Ratzinger, on the New Evangelisation, Rome 2000)

2. What is the antidote to this modern poison of nihilism? For sure it is not organisation, structures, policies, morals or programmes. As John Paul I said: «The real drama of the Church that likes to call itself modern is the attempt to modify the wonder of the event of Christ with rules».

Let me tell you a story that can help you to understand this. "Let us picture the world as an immense plain where numerous groups of human beings, under the direction of engineers and architects, are busy working on disparate projects to build bridges with thousands of arches serving as links between earth and heaven, between the ephemeral place of their existence and the "star" of destiny. With its infinite number of building sites, the plain is a hive of activity. At a certain point a man arrives on the scene, and his gaze embraces the whole frenzied workplace. Suddenly he shouts: "Stop!" Those closest to him cease working, and then gradually the others follow until they are all watching him. And he tells them: "You are great and noble. You are making a sublime effort, but it is an unhappy one because you will never manage to build a road linking your world with the ultimate mystery. Abandon your projects, lay down your tools. Destiny has taken pity on you. Follow me and I will build the bridge, for I am destiny." Now let us try to imagine the reaction of all of those people to such a declaration. First the architects, then the work foremen, then the best of the artisans would find themselves telling their labourers instinctively: "Don't stop working. Keep going. Can't you see this man is crazy?" And they would echo: "Of course, he must be crazy." Resuming their work on their bosses' orders, others might say: "You can see he's crazy." There would be just a few who would not take their eyes off this man, for they have been profoundly moved. They would not obey their bosses as the masses had done, but would approach and follow him. Within this flight of fancy is the story of what happened in history and is still happening now. At this point, we no longer find ourselves confronting a theoretical (philosophical or moral) problem, but an historical one. The first question we must ask is not: "Is what the Christian message says reasonable or

right?" but "Did it happen or not?" or "Did God really intervene in history?" (Luigi Giussani, At the Origin of Christian Claim)

Our bishop is very aware of this: "I am very conscious that no programme is going to save us as such: this is really about a change of mind and heart arising from an encounter with the Person of Jesus Christ." +Philip.

"Without a personal relationship with Christ we can change structures but without fire in them." +Philip

"Research shows that many Catholics do not practice their faith because they find it meaningless. They drift away or they never come to Mass because they do not have a strong personal relationship with God or a strong sense that Christ has called them to be his disciple. Even many practising Catholics do not have a strong sense of God as personal or that Jesus has called them personally to follow Him." +P

"In the new evangelisation (NE), it seems to me we need to give much more attention to helping people to love God, helping people to meet Him, helping people to find Jesus, helping people to sense Christ's personal call to them to be His disciple. Then, with new fire in the belly, people will naturally hunger to know their faith better, to know the Bible and the Catechism, and to receive the sacraments, and to support the Church in her mission." +Philip

I agree pretty much with this diagnosis and also with the prescription. We have issues to understand God, ourselves, others and the world. God comes into the world, and remains in it as a human shape, because He knows that only the personal encounter with Him, only a personal relationship with Him allows us the happiness, the serenity, the positivity to face whatever happens in our life. Let us think of a child enjoying a day in Legoland. He likes it. He is driven mad with joy. But when he gets lost, his laughter turns to tears and his joy to fear. "Where are my parents?" So what really makes

him happy and able to face everything is not Legoland but the presence, the personal relationship of belonging to his parents. As Fr Keith Barltrop said last time, without a new ardour, NE is not going to happen.

Something similar happens to us. We think we are happy because we have money, a job, family, relationships, position... But the very point of serenity in our life is this sense of belonging to a God who is personal and present. A parishioner of mine who is not baptised has been following a weekly catechism for adults since January this year. After a few months he said: "before starting here Jesus was for me someone from the past having nothing to do with my real life. Now I have the experience that Christ is present and so real that He has to something to do with every aspect of my life".

As Ratzinger said, "this is why we are in need of a NE. If the art of living remains an unknown, nothing else works. But this art is not the object of a science. This art can only be communicated by [one] who has life, he who is the Gospel personified." (Card. Ratzinger, on the New Evangelisation, Rome 2000)

3. There is an additional problem even for those who are true believers. Henry de Lubac, a great theologian of the XX century, called it Dualism, which is about a spiritualist model. I would describe it like this: We are true believers. We have found Jesus. Real. Present. We receive Him in many ways. Life is hard, sin is unavoidable, activities are tiring and relationships are deteriorating. When we are drained because of the heaviness of life, we feel like an uncharged battery. Then we go back to the sources of grace and try to recover and to recharge our spiritual battery. It is a movement that we know well: Charge/spend battery. Something similar to this happens in nature. I think it is an alternate movement, like that of the heart: systolic/diastolic.

I think there is something wrong in such a conception of Christianity. Of course, we do need moments of retreat, prayer, reflection and recovery. But, be careful. It is not to recover from a world that is bad, a world without Christ. It is to recover, refocus, regain the big picture and to rediscover reality in his depth. Time of faith. Faith is the human act of recognition of His working presence. Everything exudes His presence! He is behind every face, every event, every fact, every particle of nature and every success or failure.

It is the lack of awareness of His working presence that throws us into a state of anxious activism. We cannot resist waiting, observing and seeing Him at work. We are impatient – and we want results now. Otherwise we start to do things even if nothing changes. The times of reflection, retirement, prayer and formation are not primarily to plan actions, but to identify the people and the places, the environments and the situations where He is actually making things happen. Do I trust Him? Do I believe that He is leading the history? Or do I think rather that He makes mistakes?

Dear friends, the privileged place of a personal relationship is the direct contact with the person or with the life expressions of a person. In the case of God, His word is twofold. Firstly, He spoke and speaks to us through His creation, through the world, through reality, through life as it is. As the Vatican Council II remarks, the world is not evil. The world is fundamentally good. Of course there is evil, there is perversion of the good. But evil doesn't eliminate good, as Luther thinks. Reality is wounded, but not dead. And even when we face evil, we know that God tolerates evil because we can face it with the confidence that everything works well for those who love the Lord (Rm 8,28).

Secondly, God, seeing our difficulties to face life in a positive way, seeing that we are about to die because of our difficulties in facing our environment... No man is an island. But let me first explain the issue with an example. We are like a plant. We develop our life thanks to a sound interaction with reality. A plant grows thanks to water, soil, light and air. Photosynthesis is made possible through a good interaction with light as somehow the energy from light goes into the plant. But if something does not work well in the mechanism of this interaction, then light, water and soil are not received, or are received incorrectly and the plant starves and then dies. God has realised that since the original sin our way to relate to reality suffers damage. It works, but not always well.

So we enter into the second way of the working of God: he comes to earth personally to repair us, to mend the problem, to foster trust and to help us to face life in a sound way. The problem arises when we think that God comes to give us a recess, a break and that's it. No! He wants us to restart and to face life in a way more in accordance with a sense of positivity, trust and belonging which comes from the personal encounter with Him.

Etty Hillesum can help us to understand this. Who was Etty Hillesum? She was a Jewish woman from Holland whose letters and diaries, kept between 1941 and 1943, describe her own journey. She died aged 29 in Auschwitz. She was a modern girl, selfish, superficial and who came from a difficult family. Etty met a man when she was 27. Her relationship with him was an occasion to start a process of reflection about her own life. She started to esteem herself and discover other seekers like Rilke, St Augustine and towards the end the Gospels. In those two years Etty became a mature woman, very aware of her own journey and a generous person, always passionate for others. She reflects about human nature at the hand of difficulties and needs, until the point of kneeling down in front of God.

"The eternal covenant is a habit of life in which all that happens is in advance located within the practice of the love of God" (Rowan Williams, on Etty Hillesum, 18 November 2014). So "whatever happens becomes part of that uninterrupted conversation with God" (RW, op cit). "What is distinctive and angular is that she (Etty Hillesum) has elected to be identified, not to identify God simply in her terms, to be a word, a sign. If the religious, as distinct from the simply spiritual, is about responsibility to and for a foreign and transcendent presence, there can be little doubt where to place her." (Ibid.)

4. This is the New Evangelisation (NE). "But Father", some of you could say, "we want a good recipe". Sorry, but the NE sprouts, germinates and stems from a new creation from a renewed person. The method of God from Abraham onwards has never been a recipe but rather a way to be able to choose one to show all how life can be different, how life (exile, slavery, pain, joy, leisure...) can be faced in a more human way. No new way to face life, no new way to evangelise. No joy, no working programme.

When faith and awareness of His presence are in place when we meet someone (because every face tells something about the Mystery) or when we face a problem (because we can always be fearless and curious about how He is going to turn everything into something positive for our growth), then we make the difference.

So we are announcing Him, proposing Him, in the middle of the real stuff of life; at work, in our family and with our friends. Your face reflects, as Moses, is radiant and is a reflection of a presence. You are in the front. You are in the place where people face the real world. A different way to face what people have to face: lack of money, difficulties at work or with family relationships, health issues... This is the NE!

A final observation. Who does the New Evangelisation? Us? The Lord! He makes things happen. Our mission is to collaborate. But we start to make it and after a while, we are like Robin Hood again. We think we are alone doing everything. Why? What does it mean to collaborate? We go along with. Like a boy helping his dad with a small bundle of straw. Where is He at work? What is He doing? Our first task is to identify, capture and recognise where the Lord is at work. Then contribute, come along with, favour, appoint, give space, ask for help and put similar cases together... At the very end accept to embody the life of Christ in your own life.

"The idea that the paradigm religious life is one that 'gives shelter' to a vulnerable divine presence, a narrative that seeks to embody God, to take responsibility for the appearing of God (and of suffering and love), has a particular resonance with Christian and Jewish tradition, and illuminates why a life like Etty Hillesum's is hard to read without that tradition in mind." (RW)

Dear friends, the new method of evangelisation is not a make-up of the ways of communication taking into account the new techniques and the new social media. As Cardinal Ratzinger said, "new evangelisation cannot mean: immediately attracting the large masses that have distanced themselves from the Church by using new and more refined methods. No, this is not what new evangelisation promises" (Card. Ratzinger, on the New Evangelisation, Rome 2000). It is all about understanding that only a life lived by faith, only a life that understands that now belongs to God and so becomes an instrument of the presence of God makes it possible to convey God even where the language about God seems to be abused to the extent that communication of God seems impossible. To conclude with Rowan Williams on Etty Hillesum: "a life given over in this manner makes speech possible at a new level, because it seeks to live from that inner space in which all human seriousness is grounded."

I have prepared some personal reflection questions for you to reflect on during Adoration:

1. The first one refers to the level of nature, creation: where can I recognise the presence of God working in the world?
2. The second one refers to his personal revelation in Christ, redemption: where do I perceive the presence of Christ through His Church (Sacraments, testimony of other's lives...) helping me or others to face life in a confident, curious and positive way?
3. Is my personal relationship with Christ a help to commit as a missionary disciple of Christ? How? Does this personal relationship change my way of doing whatever I have to do in life in order to collaborate with the New Evangelisation?