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THE MISSION OF THE NEOCATECHUMENAL WAY IN TIMES OF COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

The Catechism of the Catholic Church proclaimed that “by its very nature infant Baptism requires a post-baptismal catechumenate. There is a need not only for instruction after baptism, but also for the necessary flowering of baptismal grace in personal growth” (no.1231).

In secularized society like ours, where religious indifference is spreading and many live as though God did not exist, there are multitudes who need to rediscover the sacraments of Christian initiation, especially Baptism. In today’s deeply secularized world, *the new evangelization* represents a fundamental challenge. The ecclesial new realities which are marked precisely by their missionary zeal, are called to a special commitment in a spirit of communion and cooperation.

According to John Paul II Holy Spirit, through the Second Vatican Council, has raised up valid instruments with which to respond to the questions of contemporary person, and among these is the Neocatechumenal Way.

1. NATURE OF THE NEOCATECHUMENAL WAY

The nature of the Neocatechumenal Way was defined by His Holiness John Paul II when he wrote:

I recognize the Neocatechumenal Way as an itinerary of Catholic formation valid for our society and for our times.¹

The Neocatechumenal Way is at the service of the Bishops as a form of diocesan implementation of Christian initiation and of ongoing education in faith, in accordance with the indications of the Second Vatican Council² and the Magisterium of the Church.³ As a result, the Magisterium has repeated several times the necessity and urgency of the “post-baptismal catechumenate”. Pope Paul VI suggested in Ap. Ex. *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 44: “By now it is clear that contemporary conditions make it ever more urgent that catechetical instruction is given in the form of a catechumenate.” Pope John Paul VI recognized in Ap. Ex. *Catechesi tradendae*, 44: “Our pastoral and missionary concern... is for those who, even if born in a Christian country, even in a sociologically Christian context, have never been educated in their faith and, as adults, are true catechumens.” And John Paul II added in Ap. Ex. *Christifideles laici*, 61: “A help [in the formation of Christians] may be given... through a post-baptismal Catechesis of a catechumenal kind, by means of re-proposing some elements of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, aimed at leading

¹ Jan Paweł II, Epist. *Ogniquialvolta*, 30th August 1990, AAS 82 (1990) 1515.

² „The catechumenate for adults, comprising several distinct steps, is to be restored.” (*Vatican II, Sacrosanctum concilium*, 64); Cf. also, *Ad Gentes*, 13-14.

³ Following the Conciliar Decrees, the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship published the *Ordo Initiationis Christianae Adultorum (RCIA)*. Chapter IV of the *RCIA* suggests the adapter use of catechesis and of some rites belonging to the catechumenate for the conversion and maturation in the faith also baptized adults.

to the acceptance and living of the immense and extraordinary riches and responsibilities of one's Baptism."

In 1993 John Paul II noticed that the Neocatechumenal Way, in which the itinerants and the missionary families mature, is able to respond to the challenge of secularism, the diffusion of sects and the lack of vocations. The reflection upon the word of God and the participation in the Eucharist make a gradual initiation into the sacred mysteries possible, form living cells of the Church and renew the vitality of the parish by means of mature Christians capable of bearing witness to the truth through a radically lived faith.

This Way appears particularly qualified to contribute in dechristianized areas to the necessary *reimplantatio ecclesiae*, leading man in his moral behavior towards obedience to revealed truth and even reconstructing the very fabric of society, which has been destroyed by a lack of knowledge of God and His love. Already, in some regions, nuclei of missionary families, which can be the light of Christ and an example of life, are being formed.

In many speeches or acts of his pontificate one finds an echo of the historical memory of that *realized apocalypse*, experienced in his very person, which was the tragedy of the Second World War, the camps, the gulags, the millions of deaths, the terrible injustices.

The Church and Christians are called to respond to the danger of the new challenges, which are far more dangerous than the former one. For Wojtyła, to re-evangelize means to drive away the spectre of a new apocalypse that risks destroying man and society. At the heart of the pontificate of Saint John Paul II lies the vision of a Church which, leaving behind all triumphalism, animates a drive for evangelization, the *new evangelization*, in order to re-evangelize traditionally Christian nations which are plummeting into paganism.

In 1952 Wojtyła, a young priest, wrote an article which is extraordinary for its relevance today:

Catechumenate of the twentieth century.⁴ Reflecting on the Paschal Vigil, he examines the signs which express the resurrection of Christ: the light that shines from the resurrection and allows contemplation of the new life and the water, the passage of the Red Sea, symbol of the passage from death to life. This is why at the center of the night there is baptism, which is the offer of a change of nature prepared by the catechumenate: Tonight the catechumens must be born again... can one who is already alive be born again perhaps? Maybe a life can exist which one has not lived up to now? ...Because to believe in the God whom Christ announces as his Father... is not only to believe, but to be reborn again... we know that... we do not only belong to a confession, a religion, but that we receive a new life...⁵

One of the Council Fathers who contributed most to the rediscovery of Christian initiation and hence of the catechumenate was a young Polish bishop, then auxiliary of Kraków, Karol Wojtyła. In his intervention in the conciliar hall in 1962, during the discussion on the text of the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* on the liturgy, Wojtyła supported theses which at that time were revolutionary about the rediscovery of the catechumenate.

In his address to the Holy Father John Paul II in 2002 Kiko Argüello said: We are glad to be able to thank you personally for the approval of the Statutes by the Pontifical Council for the Laity, above all because in them we are recognized for what we are: an itinerary of Catholic formation, a post-baptismal catechumenate which, lived in small communities, helps to rediscover and to live the immense riches of the baptism received. Some canonists in different commentaries have shown how this approval is of great importance for all

⁴ K. Wojtyła, *Katechumenat XX wieku*, Znak 34 (1952), p. 287-296; *The Catechumenate of the Twentieth Century*, Personalism 3 (2003), p. 59-68.

⁵ Ibid.

the Church, since it is the first time that a post-baptismal catechumenate is being recognized and approved.

How much consolation your word has always given us! Already in 1952 you underlined the necessity to reintroduce the Catechumenate. During the Council you contributed in a fundamental way to the re-discovery and the restoration of Christian initiation and of the Catechumenate. In this very place, Castel Gandolfo, when you received us for the first time twenty-three years ago, you expressed to us your conviction that, in the face of modern atheism, the baptized needed a catechumenate that could reinforce their faith.

For many people the neocatechumenal experience has been a journey of conversion and of maturing in the faith through the rediscovery of Baptism as a true source of life, and of the Eucharist as the culminating moment in Christian life; through the rediscovery of the word of God which, shared in fraternal communion becomes a light and guide for life, through the rediscovery of the Church as an authentic missionary community.

The Neocatechumenate, being an itinerary of Christian initiation, is implemented in the parish, “the usual place in which one is born and grows in the faith”,⁶ the privileged location in which the Church, mother and teacher, brings to birth in the baptismal font the children of God and “gestates” them to the new life.⁷

⁶ Congregation For The Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, 91; see also, 64 „Initiatory catechesis is thus the necessary link between missionary activity, which calls to faith, and pastoral activity, which continually nourishes the Christian community. This is not, therefore, an optional activity, but basic and fundamental for building up the personality of the individual disciple, as it is for the whole Christian community. Without it, missionary activity lacks continuity and is sterile, while pastoral activity lacks roots and becomes superficial and confused: any misfortune could cause the collapse of the entire building.”

⁷ Congregation For Divine Worship, *Ordo Initiationis Christianae Adultorum*, Introduction, n. 45; Congregation For The Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, 225.

Within the parish, the Neocatechumenate is lived in small communities – called “neocatechumenal communities” – since the complete or common form for the Christian initiation of adults is communitarian.⁸

The model of the neocatechumenal community is the *Holy Family of Nazareth*, the historical place where the Word of God, became Man.⁹

2. MISSION IN TIMES OF COVID-19

On March 27, 2020 Pope Francis presided over an extraordinary moment of prayer in the time of the pandemic, in the empty square of St. Peter’s Basilica¹⁰. After the proclamation of the Gospel on the “Calming of the Storm” (Mk 4: 35-41), he pronounced these words:

“*When evening had come* (Mk 4:35). For weeks now it has been evening. Thick darkness has gathered over our squares, our streets and our cities; it has taken over our lives, filling everything with a deafening silence and a distressing void, that stops everything as it passes by; we feel it in the air, we notice in people’s gestures, their glances give them away. We find ourselves afraid and lost. Like

⁸ Cf. *can. 519 C.I.C.*: „The Parish Priest is the proper shepherd of the parish entrusted to him, exercising pastoral care in the community entrusted to him under the authority of the diocesan Bishop in whose ministry of Christ he has been called to share: in accord with the norm of law he carries out for his community the duties of teaching, sanctifying and governing, with the cooperation of other presbyters or deacons and the assistance of lay members of the Christian faithful.” Cf. *can. 281 C.C.E.O.*

⁹ Cf. *RCIA, 3*; Congregation For The Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis, 258, note 25*: „It is important to see that Pope John Paul II in *Christifideles laici*, 61 establishes the usefulness of small ecclesial groups within the parishes, and not as a parallel movement which absorbs the best members of the parish: ‘Within the parishes...small ecclesial communities, where present, can be a notable help in the formation of Christians by providing a more extensive and incisive consciousness and experience of ecclesial communion and mission’.”

¹⁰ Cf. <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/events/event.dir.html/content/vaticanevents/it/2020/3/27/uniti-in-preghiera.html>

the disciples in the Gospel we were caught off guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm.

In this world, that You love more than we do, we have gone ahead at breakneck speed, feeling powerful and able to do anything. Greedy for profit, we let ourselves get caught up in things, and lured away by haste. We did not stop at Your reproach to us, we were not shaken awake by wars or injustice across the world, nor did we listen to the cry of the poor or of our ailing planet. We carried on regardless, thinking we would stay healthy in a world that was sick. Now that we are in a stormy sea, we implore you: *Wake up, Lord! Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?* Lord, you are calling to us, calling us to faith. Which is not so much believing that you exist, but coming to you and trusting in you.”

It is interesting to hear the experiences of the brothers and sisters of the families in mission and of the *missio ad gentes* in the World as a Memorial of their spontaneous reactions in the light of faith at the onset of the epidemic and then during the months of lockdown imposed in many countries of the five continents as a health measure. This measure forced the families to live closed in their homes together with their children and old people, while the number of victims increased at a frightening rate, many of them forced to die without the comfort of their faith and their family.

These families from Europe found themselves in an unusual situation compared with the communities in general. They were in Wuhan, China, in Chile (South America), Japan (Asia), Congo (Africa) and Italy and Germany (Europe) as families in mission at the outbreak of the coronavirus and it astonished us how, deeply immersed in a situation of fear and terror, and of forced seclusion, they reacted to the pandemic in the light of faith, a fruit of many years in the Neocatechumenal Way, and of the particular grace that accompanies the families, the presbyters, the itinerants and the sisters in mission all over the world.

We want to discern what the Lord is saying to the neocatechumenal communities, to today’s Church and to today’s society. We shall do this without presuming to give complete and definitive answers,

but certain that in this “providential” time, the Lord has shown us the foundations on which to go on with the Church and the Neocatechumenal Way in the future that God will give us and that he alone knows.

During Easter time the letters from the missions carried concret news. They have been very impressed, and grateful to God for the help, by how the Chinese brothers and sisters were taking care of (and were concerned for) the mission families: they brought them fruit when it couldn’t be found, they provided masks for the children because these absolutely were not to be found, they send them money to do the shopping and they always asked how they were. The families have also heard from old friends and acquaintances in Wuhan, all very surprised and happy to know that they are still here with them.

On Saturday nights, as it was told by the European catechists, they celebrated everything in the mission families: they read the readings and the children did the echoes of the Word of God. It was very beautiful and helped them. On Wednesdays they provided a scrutatio of the Word. The mission families decided to scrutinize the reading from Luke 21:23-26: “But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! For there will be great distress in the land and wrath upon this people. And they will fall by the edge of the sword and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled on by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men’s hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth.”

Everyone rediscovered the importance of the celebration of the Word, which has been enlightening them day after day and the gift of the Eucharist every Saturday evening, celebrated in the community or in the family, depending on the possibilities.

During Lent and Easter times, they have received many testimonies of how the Lord passed with power in the celebration of the Easter Triduum, even if in the midst of grave difficulties. In the celebration of the Easter Vigil everyone experienced the Presence of the Lord

in a special way and the communion it created among all; many said that it was an historic Easter Vigil (2020 and 2021), which will never be erased from their hearts.

In the various experiences they have seen the importance of personal prayer in a more intimate relationship with the Lord and with the Neocatechumenal community or in the family, especially the Celebration of the Word of God, either via streaming with one's own community, or celebrated in the family, in communion with the community, and the participation in the Eucharist on Saturday evening, with one's community where this was possible, or in the celebration of the *Mass of the Catechumens (of the Word)* of the Sunday liturgy on Saturday evening, presided over by the head of the family. In addition to these two weekly celebrations, many communities have maintained contact by telephone with the brothers and sisters who were most lonely. It was a time of communion that supported the Neocatechumenal communities in the midst of widespread terror of the fear of the coronavirus and of death.

Another element that emerged during this time in Europe was the rediscovery of the "Family as a domestic Church" (CCC no. 1655-1658). The brothers and sisters who were able to celebrate the Easter and Pentecost Vigils remarked on the joyful participation of the children, even those who had left the community. For many, the celebration of Easter in the family with their children reminded them of the Passover of the Jews celebrated in the family, even in the time of the Diaspora: the Celebrations in the Synagogue and the Feasts in the families have kept the Jewish people alive to this day.

This night the mission families have lived the PASSOVER in their houses, protected by the Blood of the Lamb, while outside, dark and silent the angel of death was really passing. They were walking in the night through the desert while listening to the readings, to the Word of the Lord, and they were crossing the Red Sea where the Lord was freeing them from death and filling them with the Spirit of the Risen Lord! All was joy and happiness of real experience of the Passover of our LORD. It is certain! CHRIST IS RISEN!!!

Their experience during this time of Covid-19 has been to realize what an immense grace it is to live in small Christian communities, because although they have not been able to go to church to celebrate the Word and the Eucharist, what they have learned in the Neocatechumenal Way it has made possible to live in a Domestic Church. Even though they couldn't meet as a community they have not lost the communion with the brothers (thanks to the social network, especially via live streaming) and thanks to their catechists, who assist them assiduously, they have received all the help needed in this time of tribulation. Because of the pandemic, this time of lockdown, absurd as it may seem, has been an incredible grace, has been a time of communion in the family, a time to realize what truly matters and that the Lord is all you need to find joy in your everyday life.

Being able to celebrate the Easter Vigil with their communities via internet has been a gift from Heaven: they have tasted the beauty of having a Christian community where they can listen together to the Word and live the faith as a God's people. They have experienced how prophetic Kiko and Carmen have been: Jesus Christ is truly the Kyrios who knocks down all barriers and gives them the gift of loving each other in spite of our sins and the situation of emergency in which they were living.

Their mission families have literally been saved by the domestic celebration of Lauds, Liturgy of the Word, the Domestic Eucharist, which, together with the tripod (the Word of God, the Liturgy, the Community), has regenerated their persons through the Holy Spirit and gradually rebuilt communion among them.

From the letters they have sent, we can deduce the future that awaits the Neocatechumenal Way in the mission of the Church.

“How many questions, inevitably (and foolishly) we ask ourselves in this time of pandemic that affects all our certainties: about what the aftermath will be like, what the consequences on our lives, on the Church, on the Way will be, on how and when future convivences will be, as it will take some time for things to go back to normal. All these questions however lose meaning if we think and believe that it

is the Lord that “marks” history “according to His wisdom and for a holy purpose.” (From the letter of the European team in Uganda).

CONCLUSION

We know that there are many studies, many interpretations of the coronavirus, many scientists and politicians who are studying the coronavirus and its consequences in the aftermath of the pandemic. The Holy See has also set up a task force dedicated to this study: “To embrace hope, to embrace the human family.” On 20th March, 2020, Pope Francis asked the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development (DSSUI) to create a Commission, in collaboration with other Dicasteries of the Roman Curia and other institutions, to express the Church’s concern and love for the entire human family in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially through the analysis and reflection on the socio-economic and cultural challenges of the future and the proposal of guidelines to address them.

In 2020 Anne Case, the Professor of Economics and Publics Affairs at Princeton University, and Angus Deaton, winner of the 2015 Nobel Prize in economics, the Professor of Economics and International Affairs at Princeton University and Presidential Professor of Economics at the University of Southern California, have published their highly important book *Death of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*. Death of despair from suicide, drug overdose, and alcoholism are rising dramatically in the Western European countries and in the United States of America. In 2018, there were 158,000 deaths of despair in the US, the same number as in 2017. Deaths of despair is called by Anne Case and Angus Deaton the despair epidemic. Long before the arrival of COVID-19, the lives of European and Americans had been disintegrating with deaths from suicide, drug overdose and alcoholic liver disease rising year on year. The despair epidemic and the COVID epidemic make a challenge for American and European capitalism. “COVID is a worldwide pandemic, affecting rich and poor countries, while deaths of despair, although not exclusively American, are much more serious in the US than in

other rich countries.”¹¹ Why is capitalism failing so many? What’s the economy got to do with it? Could the reason for this phenomenon be hidden in a fragmented approach to the human person? Could it be that Capitalism does not pay attention to the true reality of the human person, who is at once, in his or her existence a unity of physiological (material), mental, and spiritual reality not fragmented? The human person whom an economy and indeed any business seeks to serve, is not only the exteriority but also the interiority at once. The person remains the subject of both experiences given from interior and from exterior. A concentration on both kinds of experience which in fact constitute the integral experience of the human person is called for. The same discernment is given by economist Anne Case and Nobel Prize winner Angus Deaton in their statement that “capitalism is an immensely powerful force for progress and for good, but it needs to serve people and not have people serve it.”¹² The world is experiencing a catastrophe, thus according to Prof. Case and Prof. Deaton capitalism needs to be better monitored and regulated.

Why is lack of religiosity and the decline in churchgoing a problem? One answer is that, over long enough periods of time, religiosity responds to the social and economic environment. In poor countries around the world, especially in Asia and Africa, almost everyone identifies as very religious, but religiosity is lower in richer industrialized countries, particularly in Western Europe. The argument—the secularization hypothesis—is that as education spreads, as incomes rise, and as the state takes over many functions of the church, people turn away from religion. Put crudely, people need religion more in more hostile environments. This would fit the American states, where those with lower incomes and less supportive state governments have a higher fraction of religious *people*. It would also explain why it is true that, while more religious *people* do better than less religious people on many outcomes—they are happier, less likely to commit crimes, less

¹¹ A. Case, A. Deaton, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*, Princeton 2020, p. 10.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 262.

likely to abuse drugs and alcohol, and less likely to smoke – more religious *places* – including US states – do worse on the same outcomes. Religion helps people do better, and they espouse religion in part *because* their local environment is difficult. When religiosity falls over time, it is the *people* side of this story that applies, and people lose the benefits that religion brings.

The mission families are grateful to Kiko Argüello and Carmen Hernández for the Neocatechumenal Way they have brought, which is an inestimable gift. According to the initiators of the Way true communion goes further than any notion of time, place and danger. The mission families experienced this communion with power during this time of pandemic isolation. The growing apostolic faith is the concrete answer to the problems of our life in this time of Covid-19.

The prophetic words of Pope Paul VI are realized particularly in the mission of the Catholic Church in times of Covid-19 within the Neocatechumenal Way. Saint Paul VI, in the audience to the Neocatechumenal Communities on 8th May, 1974, said: “We greet the group of priests and lay people who represent the movement of the Neocatechumenal Communities – here we see post-conciliar fruits! – gathered in Rome from many dioceses throughout Italy and other countries. [...] How great is the joy, how great is the hope, which you give us with your presence and with your activity! [...] To live and foster this re-awakening is what you call a kind of ‘post baptism’, which can renew in our contemporary Christian communities the effects of maturity and depth which were achieved in the early Church during the period of preparation for Baptism. You do this afterwards. ‘Before’ or ‘after’ is secondary, I would say. The fact is that you aim at the authenticity, fullness, coherence and sincerity of Christian life. And this is a very great merit which, I repeat, consoles us enormously.”¹³

Key words: pandemic, COVID, Church, mission

¹³ Paweł VI, *Notitiae*, n. 95-96, July 1974, p. 230.

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