

Instruction "The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church", of the Congregation for the Clergy, 20.07.2020

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Introduction

1. The ecclesiological reflection of the Second Vatican Council, together with the considerable social and cultural changes of recent decades, has resulted in various Particular Churches having to reorganise the manner in which the pastoral care of Parish communities are assigned. This has made it possible to initiate new experiences, enhancing the dimension of communion and implementing, under the guidance of pastors, a harmonious synthesis of charisms and vocations at the service of the proclamation of the Gospel, which better corresponds to the demands of evangelisation today.

Pope Francis, at the beginning of his Petrine ministry, recalled the importance of "creativity", meaning thereby "seeking new ways", that is "seeking how best to proclaim the Gospel"; in respect of this, the Holy Father concluded by saying, "the Church, and also the Code of Canon Law, gives us innumerable possibilities, much freedom to seek these things"^[1].

2. The situations outlined in the following Instruction, represent a valuable opportunity for pastoral conversion that is essentially missionary. Parish communities will find herein a call to go out of themselves, offering instruments for reform, even structural, in a spirit of communion and collaboration, of encounter and closeness, of mercy and solicitude for the proclamation of the Gospel.

I. Pastoral Conversion

3. Pastoral conversion is one of the central themes in the "new phase of evangelisation"^[2] that the Church is called to foster today, whereby Christian communities be ever more centres conducive to an encounter with Christ.

The Holy Father, in this regard, recommends that: "If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges,

within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: "Give them something to eat" (Mk 6:37)^[3].

4. Urged on by this concern, the Church "faithful to her own tradition and at the same time conscious of her universal mission, she can enter into communion with the various civilizations, to their enrichment and the enrichment of the Church herself"^[4]. The fruitful and creative encounter between the Gospel and the culture leads to true progress: on the one hand, the Word of God is incarnate in the history of men, thus renews it; on the other hand, "the Church [...] can and ought to be enriched by the development of human social life"^[5], enhancing thereby, in our present age, the mission entrusted to her by Christ.

5. The Church proclaims that the Word, "became flesh and lived among us" (Jn 1:14). This Word of God, who loves to dwell in our midst, in his inexhaustible richness^[6], was received the world over by diverse peoples, inspiring in them the most noble of aspirations, such as the desire for God, the dignity of every human life, equality among men and respect for difference within the single human family, dialogue as a means to participation, a longing for peace, welcome as an expression of fraternity and solidarity, together with a responsible care for creation^[7].

It is unthinkable, therefore, that such newness, whose propagation to the ends of the earth remains incomplete, abates or, worse still, disappears^[8]. In order for the journey of the Word to continue, the Christian community must make a determined missionary decision "capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelisation of today's world rather than for her self-preservation"^[9].

II. The Parish in a contemporary context

6. The aforesaid missionary conversion, which naturally leads to a reform of structures, concerns the Parish in particular, namely that community gathered around the Table of the Word and the Eucharist.

The Parish has a long history and from the outset, it has played a fundamental role in the life of Christians and in the development and pastoral work of the Church. We can see this in the writings of Saint Paul. Several of the Pauline texts show us the formation of small communities as domestic churches, which the Apostle simply calls a "house" (cf., for example, Rm 16:3-5; 1 Co 16:19-20; Phil 4:22). With these "houses", we get a foretaste of the birth of the first "Parishes".

7. Since its inception, the Parish is envisioned as a response to a precise pastoral need, namely that of bringing the Gospel to the People through the proclamation of the faith and the celebration of the Sacraments. The etymology of the word makes clear the meaning of the institution: the Parish is a house among houses^[10] and is a response to the logic of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, alive and active among the community. It is visibly characterised then, as a place of worship, a sign of the permanent presence of the Risen Lord in the midst of his People.

8. The territorial configuration of the Parish, however, must confront a peculiar characteristic of our contemporary world, whereby increased mobility and the digital culture have expanded the confines of existence. On the one hand, people are less associated today with a definite and immutable geographical context, living instead in "a global and pluralist

village"; on the other hand, the digital culture has inevitably altered the concept of space, together with people's language and behaviour, especially in younger generations.

Moreover, it is quite easy to hypothesise about how the continuous development of technology will ultimately change our way of thinking, together with the understanding of self and of social living. The speed of change, successive cultural models, the ease of movement and the speed of communication are transforming the perception of space and time.

9. As a living community of believers, the Parish finds itself in a context whereby the territorial affiliation is increasingly less evident, where places of association are multiplied and where interpersonal relationships risk being dissolved into a virtual world without any commitment or responsibility towards one's neighbour.

10. It is noteworthy how such cultural changes and the evolving territorial ties are fostering within the Church, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, a new discernment around community, "which consists in seeing reality with the eyes of God, with a view to unity and communion"^[11]. The whole People of God must urgently embrace the Holy Spirit's invitation to begin the process of "renewing" the face of the Church.

III. The value of the Parish today

11. In virtue of this discernment, the Parish is called upon to read the signs of the times, while adapting both to the needs of the faithful and to historical changes. A renewed vitality is required that favours the rediscovery of the vocation of the baptised as a disciple of Jesus Christ and a missionary of the Gospel, in light of the Second Vatican Council and subsequent Magisterium.

12. The Council Fathers were prescient in writing: "the care of souls should always be infused with a missionary spirit"^[12]. In continuity with this teaching, Saint John Paul II specified that: "Whilst the Parish is perfected and integrated in a variety of forms, it nevertheless remains an indispensable organism of primary importance in the visible structure of the Church", whereby "evangelisation is the cornerstone of all pastoral action, the demands of which are primary, preeminent and preferential"^[13]. Subsequently, Benedict XVI taught, "the parish is a beacon that radiates the light of the faith and thus responds to the deepest and truest desires of the human heart, giving meaning and hope to the lives of individuals and families"^[14]. Lastly, Pope Francis recalled how "the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelisers"^[15].

13. In order to promote the centrality of the missionary presence of the Christian community in the world^[16], it is important not only to think about a new experience of Parish, but also about the ministry and mission of priests, who, together with the lay faithful, have the task of being "salt and light of the world" (cf. Mt 5:13-14), a "lamp on a lamp-stand" (cf. Mk 4:21), showing forth the face of an evangelising community, capable of an adequate reading of the signs of the times and of giving witness to coherent evangelical living.

14. Beginning with a consideration of the signs of the times, it is necessary, in listening to the Spirit, to produce new signs. With the Parish no longer being the primary gathering and social centre, as in former days, it is thus necessary to find new forms of accompaniment and closeness. A task of this kind ought not to be seen as a burden, but rather as a challenge to be embraced with enthusiasm.

15. Imitating their Master, the Lord's disciples, in the school of Saints and shepherds, learned, not without suffering, how to await the times and ways of God, thus nurturing the certainty that He is present until the end of time, and that the Holy Spirit – the beating heart in the life of the Church– gathers together the children of God dispersed throughout the world. As a result, the Christian community should not be afraid to begin and accompany processes within territories that are host to diverse cultures, in the sure and certain hope that, for the disciples of Christ, "nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts"^[17].

IV. Mission: the guiding principle for renewal

16. Given the above-mentioned changing realities, their generous dedication notwithstanding, the current Parish model no longer adequately corresponds to the many expectations of the faithful, especially when one considers the multiplicity of community types in existence today^[18]. It is true that a characteristic of the Parish is that its rootedness at the centre of where people live from day to day. However, the Parish territory is no longer a geographical space only, but also the context in which people express their lives in terms of relationships, reciprocal service and ancient traditions. It is in this "existential territory" where the challenges facing the Church in the midst of the community are played out. As a result, any pastoral action that is limited to the territory of the Parish is outdated, which is something the parishioners themselves observe when their Parish appears to be more interested in preserving a nostalgia of former times as opposed to looking to the future with courage^[19]. It is worth noting, however, that from a canonical perspective, the territorial principle remains in force, when required by law^[20].

17. Moreover, mere repetitive action that fails to have an impact upon people's concrete lives remains a sterile attempt at survival, which is usually welcomed by general indifference. If the Parish does not exude that spiritual dynamic of evangelisation, it runs the risk of becoming self-referential and fossilised, offering experiences that are devoid of evangelical flavour and missionary drive, of interest only to small groups.

18. The renewal of evangelisation requires a new approach with diverse pastoral proposals, so that the Word of God and the sacramental life can reach everyone in a way that is coherent with their state in life. Ecclesial membership in our present age is less a question of birthplace, much less where someone grew up, as it is about being part of a community by adoption^[21], where the faithful have a more extensive experience of the Word of God than they do of being a body made up of many members, with everyone working for the common good (1 Co 12:12-27).

19. Over and above places and reasons for membership, the Parish community is the human context wherein the evangelising work of the Church is carried out, where Sacraments are celebrated and where charity is exercised, all with missionary zeal, which, apart from being an intrinsic part of pastoral action, is a litmus test of its authenticity. In this present age, marked at times by marginalisation and solitude, the Parish community is called to be a living sign of the proximity of Christ through fraternal bonds, ever attentive to new forms of poverty.

20. In view of what has been said so far, it is necessary to identify perspectives that allow for the renewal of "traditional" Parish structures in terms of mission. This is the heart of the desired pastoral conversion, which must touch the proclamation of the Word of God, the

sacramental life and the witness of charity, in other words the essential areas in which the Parish grows and conforms to the Mystery in which it believes.

21. Perusing the Acts of the Apostles, one realises the transformative effect of the Word of God, that interior power that brings about the conversion of hearts. The Word is the food that nourishes the Lord's disciples and makes them witnesses to the Gospel in the various circumstances of life. The Scriptures contain a prophetic impetus that makes them into a living force. It is necessary to provide instruction on how to listen and mediate on the Word of God through a variety of different approaches to proclamation^[22], adopting clear and comprehensible means of communication that announce the Lord Jesus according to the ever new witness of the kerygma^[23].

22. The celebration of the Eucharistic mystery is "the source and summit of the whole Christian life"^[24] and accordingly, the essential moment for building up the Parish community. Therein, the Church becomes aware of the meaning of her name (Ecclesia): the coming together of the People of God to praise, implore, intercede and give thanks. In celebrating the Eucharist, the Christian community welcomes the living presence of the Crucified and Risen Lord, receiving the announcement of the entire mystery of salvation.

23. The Church perceives here the need to rediscover Christian initiation, which generates new life, as it is placed within the mystery of God's own life. It is a journey that is ongoing, that transcends celebrations or events, because, in essence, it is defined, not as a duty to fulfil a "rite of passage", but rather as a perpetual sequela Christi. In this context, it would be useful to establish a mystagogical itinerary that genuinely affects existence^[25]. Catechesis needs to be presented as an ongoing proclamation of the Mystery of Christ, the objective of which is to foster in the heart of the baptised that full stature of Christ (cf. Eph 4:13) that is derived from a personal encounter with the Lord of life.

Pope Francis has recalled the need to "mention two false forms of holiness that can lead us astray: gnosticism and pelagianism. They are two heresies from early Christian times, yet they continue to plague us"^[26]. In the case of gnosticism, one is dealing with an abstract faith that is purely intellectual and made up of knowledge that is far from lived reality; meanwhile, pelagianism leads man to depend on his own abilities, thus ignoring the action of the Holy Spirit.

24. In the mysterious interplay between the action of God and that of man, the proclamation of the Gospel comes through men and women who give credibility to what they say through the witness of their lives, together with their interpersonal relationships that inspire trust and hope. In these times, marked as they are by indifferentism, individualism and the exclusion of others, the rediscovery of brotherhood is paramount and integral to evangelisation, which is closely linked to human relationships^[27]. In this way, the Christian community makes Our Lord's words their own, as they spur us to "put out into the deep" (Lk 5:4), trusting in the Master as we pay out the nets in the assurance of hauling a "large catch"^[28].

25. The 'culture of encounter' is conducive to dialogue, solidarity and openness to others, as it is person-centred. Naturally, a Parish must be a place that brings people together and fosters long-term personal relationships, thereby giving people a sense of belonging and being wanted.

26. The Parish community is called truly to master the "art of accompaniment". If deep roots are planted, the Parish will become a place where solitude is overcome, which has affected

so many lives, as well as being "a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey and a centre of constant missionary outreach"^[29].

**V. "A community of communities": A Parish that is inclusive,
evangelising and attentive to the poor**

27. The subject of the missionary and evangelising action of the Church is always the People of God as a whole. The Code of Canon Law emphasises that the Parish is not identified as a building or a series of structures, but rather as a specific community of the faithful, where the Parish Priest is the proper pastor^[30]. Pope Francis recalled that "the parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God's word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration", and affirmed that it is "a community of communities"^[31].

28. The various components that make up the Parish are called to communion and unity. When each part recognises its complementary role in service of the community, on the one hand, we see the fulfilment of the collaborative ministry of the Parish Priest with his Assistant Priests, while on the other hand, we see how the various charisms of deacons, consecrated men and women and the laity, cooperate in building up the singular body of Christ (cf. 1 Co 12:12).

29. The Parish is a community gathered together by the Holy Spirit to announce the Word of God and bring new children of God to birth in the baptismal font. Assembled by the pastor, the Parish celebrates the memorial of the passion, death and resurrection of the Lord, bearing witness to faith in charity, living in a permanent state of mission, whilst ensuring that no one is excluded from the salvific, life-giving message. Pope Francis expressed it thus: "The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community. While certainly not the only institution which evangelises, if the parish proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptability, it continues to be "the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters". This presumes that it really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed group made up of a chosen few. [...] We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented"^[32].

30. The "spiritual and ecclesial style of Shrines" – which are true "missionary outposts" in their own right – is not extraneous to the Parish, characterised as they are by their spirit of welcome, their life of prayer and silence that renews the spirit, the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and their care for the poor. Parish pilgrimages to various Shrines are precious instruments that can serve to strengthen fraternal communion, openness and welcome upon return to the Parish^[33].

31. A Shrine, then, is analogous to a Parish in that it encompasses all the characteristics and services that ought to be found in the parish community, as it represents for the faithful the desired goal of their interior searching and a place where they can encounter the merciful face of Christ in a welcoming Church.

Frequenting Shrines can help the faithful rediscover their being “anointed by the Holy One” (1 Jn 2:20), that is to say their baptismal consecration. At such places, one learns to celebrate with fervour the mysterious presence of God in the midst his people in the liturgy, in the beauty of the evangelising mission of the baptised, and in the call to exercise charity in daily life^[34].

32. A ‘sanctuary’ open to all, the Parish, called to reach out to everyone, without exception, should remember that the poor and excluded must always have a privileged place in the heart of the Church. As Pope Benedict XVI affirmed: “The Gospel is addressed in a special way to the poor”^[35]. In addition, as Pope Francis observed “the new evangelisation is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the centre of the Church’s pilgrim way. We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them”^[36].

33. Oftentimes, the Parish community is the first place of personal human encounter that the poor have with the face of the Church. Priests, deacons and consecrated men and women are among the first to have compassion for the “wounded flesh”^[37] of their brothers and sisters, to visit the sick, to support the unemployed and their families, thereby opening the door to those in need. With their gaze fixed upon them, the Parish community evangelises and is evangelised by the poor, discovering anew the call to preach the Word in all settings^[38], whilst recalling the “supreme law” of charity, by which we shall all be judged^[39].

VI. From the conversion of people to that of structures

34. In the process of renewal and restructuring, the Parish has to avoid the risk of falling into an excessive and bureaucratic organisation of events and an offering of services that do not express the dynamic of evangelisation, but rather the criterion of self-preservation^[40].

Quoting Saint Paul VI, Pope Francis, with his usual parrhesia, stated: “The Church must look with penetrating eyes within herself, ponder the mystery of her own being (...) There are ecclesial structures which can hamper efforts at evangelisation, yet even good structures are only helpful when there is a life constantly driving, sustaining and assessing them. Without new life and an authentic evangelical spirit, without the Church’s “fidelity to her own calling”, any new structure will soon prove ineffective”^[41].

35. The conversion of structures, which the Church must undertake, requires a significant change in mentality and an interior renewal, especially among those entrusted with the responsibility of pastoral leadership. In order to remain faithful to the mandate of Christ, pastors, especially Parish Priests who “are co-workers of the bishop in a very special way”^[42], must resolutely grasp the need for a missionary reform of pastoral action.

36. Taking into consideration the profound emotional and nostalgic bonds within a Christian community, pastors ought not to forget that the faith of the People of God is interwoven with familial and communal memories. Often, a sacred place can evoke important milestones in the life of past generations, where faces and occasions have influenced personal and familial journeys. In order to avoid trauma and hurt in the process of restructuring a Parish or, at times, diocesan communities, it is imperative that it be carried out with flexibility and gradualism.

In reference to the reform of the Roman Curia, Pope Francis emphasised that gradualism “has to do with the necessary discernment entailed by historical processes, the passage of time and stages of development, assessment, correction, experimentation, and approvals ad experimentum. In these cases, it is not a matter of indecisiveness, but of the flexibility needed to be able to achieve a true reform”^[43]. Accordingly, one should not act “hastily” in an attempt, as it were, to bring about immediate reforms by means of generic criteria that obey a “rational decision” to the detriment of those who actually live within the territory. Every plan must be situated within the lived experience of a community and implanted in it without causing harm, with a necessary phase of prior consultation, and of progressive implementation and verification.

37. Naturally, a renewal of this sort is not the responsibility solely of the Parish Priest, nor should it be imposed from above in such a way as to exclude the People of God. The pastoral conversion of structures implies the understanding that “the faithful Holy People of God are anointed with the grace of the Holy Spirit; therefore when we reflect, think, evaluate, discern, we must be very attentive to this anointing. Whenever as a Church, as pastors, as consecrated persons, we have forgotten this certainty, we have lost our way. Whenever we try to supplant, silence, look down on, ignore or reduce into small elites the People of God in their totality and differences, we construct communities, pastoral plans, theological accentuations, spiritualities, structures without roots, without history, without faces, without memory, without a body, in the end, without lives. To remove ourselves from the life of the People of God hastens us to the desolation and to a perversion of ecclesial nature”^[44].

It does not pertain to the clergy alone, therefore, to carry out the transformation inspired by the Holy Spirit, since this involves the entire People of God^[45]. It is necessary, however, “to consciously and lucidly seek areas of communion and participation so that the anointing of the People of God may find its concrete mediations to express itself”^[46].

38. Consequently, the need to overcome a self-referential conception of the Parish or the “clericalisation of pastoral activity” becomes apparent. When it is acknowledged that the state of the People of God “is that of the dignity and freedom of the children of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells as in His temple”^[47], this inspires practices and models by which all the baptised, by virtue of the gift of the Holy Spirit and their infused charisms, become active participants of evangelisation, in the style and modality of an organic community, together with other Parish communities or at the diocesan level. In effect, the whole community, and not simply the hierarchy, is the responsible agent of mission, since the Church is identified as the entire People of God.

39. Pastors have the task of keeping this dynamic alive, so that the baptised realise that they are protagonists of evangelisation. The presbyterate, whose formation is ongoing^[48], must exercise the art of discernment with prudence, in such a way as to allow the life of the Parish, with its diversity of vocations and ministries, to grow and mature. As a member and servant of the People of God entrusted to his care, the Priest cannot supplant this discernment. The Parish community has the ability to propose forms of ministry, to proclaim the faith and to bear witness to charity.

40. The centrality of the Holy Spirit – a free gift from the Father and the Son to the Church – profoundly enlivens the aspect of generosity, in accord with the teaching of Jesus, who said: “You received without charge, give without charge” (Mk 10:8). The Lord taught his disciples to have a generous spirit of service, to be a reciprocal gift for the other (cf. Jn 13:14-15), and to have a special care for the poor. From this derives the need not to

“commercialise” the sacramental life, and not to give the impression that the celebration of the Sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist, along with other ministerial activities, are subject to tariffs.

The pastor who willingly serves his flock with generosity, must instruct the faithful, however, in such a way that each member of the community feels responsible and directly involved in caring for the needs of the Church in a variety of ways and in a spirit of solidarity, which the Church requires in order to carry out her pastoral service with freedom and efficacy.

41. The mission required of the Parish, as a central driving force of evangelisation, concerns the People of God in its entirety: priests, deacons, consecrated men and women, and the lay faithful, each according to their respective charisms and the responsibility that corresponds to them.