

# A Church in Dialogue

The Art and Science  
of Church Communication



25 years at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross  
Gema Bellido (ed)



# A CHURCH IN DIALOGUE: THE ART AND SCIENCE OF CHURCH COMMUNICATION

*25 years at the School of Church Communications  
Pontifical University of the Holy Cross*

Edited by  
GEMA BELLIDO

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Via Sabotino 2/A – 00195 Roma  
Tel. (39) 06 45493637  
info@edusc.it  
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## Chapter 5

# CATHOLICISM AT THE TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM: LEGACY AND HORIZONS (1996-2021)

*Carlo Pioppi*

### 1. THE STATISTICAL DATA

The Catholic world, like all human realities, has experienced such important transformations in the last twenty-five years that we can certainly speak of this period as a time of transition.

If we consider the global statistical data of the Catholic Church between December 1996 and December 2019,<sup>1</sup> the first impression is that of a certain stability, without significant growth. The number of faithful increased from 995,128,000 to 1,344,402,000, but the percentage of Catholics in relation to the overall population remained more or less the same: in fact, it increased by a few tenths of a percent, from 17.3% to 17.7%. Ecclesiastical circumscriptions increased significantly (from 2,776 to 3,026: an increase of 9%) and the same can be said of the number of bishops (from 4,375 to 5,364: +23%); the growth in the number of priests was much smaller in percentage terms (from 404,336 to 414,336: +2.5%), and there are

<sup>1</sup> The following data are taken from: Secretaria Status (Rationatium Generale Ecclesiae), *Annuario statisticum Ecclesiae 1996* (Città del Vaticano: L.E.V., 1998); Secretaria Status (Rationatium Generale Ecclesiae), *Annuario statisticum Ecclesiae 2019* (Città del Vaticano: L.E.V., 2021).

some rather worrisome figures such as the decrease in the number of women religious (from 828,660 to 630,099: -24%) and in the number of marriages celebrated (from 3,283,212 to 2,225,494: -38%, a decrease made more important by the increase in the number of faithful of around 350 million).

An examination of the global data sheds light on the regional changes in Catholicism during the period considered here. The increase in the number of faithful in absolute terms occurred everywhere: in North America<sup>2</sup> (from 213 to 276 million), in South America (from 278 to 371 million), in Europe (from 283 to 285 million), in Africa (from 109 to 251 million), in Asia (from 103 to 149 million) and in Oceania (from 8 to 11 million). If, however, we consider the percentage of Catholics in relation to the total population, growth has been conspicuous only in Africa (from 14.7% to 19.5%), and with a slight increase in Asia (from 3% to 3.3%) and in North America (from 46% to 47.1%); on the other hand, the percentage has decreased slightly in South America (from 87.3% to 86.5%), in Europe (from 41.4% to 39.6%) and in Oceania (from 27.9% to 26.3%). The limited growth in North America is caused by the percentage increase in the Canada-USA area (from 23.9% to 24.8%) and in the Antilles (from 64.3% to 67.7%), while in the Mexico and Central America area there has been a decrease (from 91.5% to 88.5%).

The distribution of Catholics by continent varied as follows during the period considered here: in 1996, 21.5% lived in North America, 28% in South America, 28.5% in Europe, 11% in Africa, 10% in Asia and 1% in Oceania. In 2019, on the other hand, the distribution was as follows: North America 20.5%, South America 27.5%, Europe 21%, Africa 19%, Asia 11%, Oceania 1%; therefore, the distribution by continent remained similar, except for two changes: a relative decrease in Europeans (-7.5%) and an increase in Africans (+8%).

As far as the number of priests<sup>3</sup> is concerned, it can be seen that their number has grown in Africa (from 24,649 to 49,461), Asia (from 39,404 to 70,254) and, to a lesser extent, in South America (from 39,685 to 50,984), while it has decreased in North America (from 80,397 to 70,709), Europe (from 215,062 to 168,328) and Oceania (from 5,109 to 4,600). The percentage decrease of presbyters in North America

<sup>2</sup> From Canada to Panama, and including the Antilles.

<sup>3</sup> The numbers offered are those of priests present in a territory, not those incardinated.

(-12%), becomes much greater if one considers only the Canada-U-SA cultural area (from 61,221 to 44,778: -27%), where the fall is greater even than that of Europe (-22%). Still regarding priests, it should be considered that the total increase of about 10,000 corresponds to a growth in diocesan presbyters of about 20,000 and a decrease in religious of about 10,000. The latter, then, have diminished everywhere except in Africa (where they have gone from 10,555 to 15,016) and in Asia, where they have almost doubled (from 16,329 to 30,577). In 2019 there were 132,200 regular priests (32% of presbyters).

The overall number of faithful per priest increased from 2,461 to 3,245, with these differences by continent: North America from 2,651 to 3,903; South America from 7,005 to 7,282; Europe from 1,318 to 1,697; Africa from 4,428 to 5,086; Asia from 2,620 to 2,123; Oceania from 1,575 to 2,378; thus, the ratio of faithful to priests improved only in Asia.

Seminarians<sup>4</sup> increased from 105,870 to 114,058; there was a conspicuous growth in Asia (from 25,169 to 33,821) and Africa (from 18,156 to 32,721), some increase in Oceania (from 861 to 964), substantial stability in North America (from 15,002 to 14,076), a slight decrease in South America (from 18,041 to 16,588), and a collapse in Europe (from 28,641 to 15,888).

The overall number of lay religious (i.e., not priests) diminished from 58,967 to 50,295, with significant decreases in North America, Europe and Oceania (aggregating the data for these three zones, the fall was from 38,733 to 22,957), a very slight decrease in South America (from 6,093 to 5,996), a substantial growth in Africa (from 6,986 to 9,085) and Asia (from 7,155 to 12,257).

The sharp decrease in the number of women religious indicated above (-24%) was similar to the previous figures: there was a decrease everywhere except in Asia (+38%: from 126,305 to 174,764) and Africa (+58%: from 48,693 to 77,054). In fact, their number fell by 42% in North America (from 154,565 to 89,668; the percentage rises to 55.5% if only the Canada-USA area is considered), 28% in South America (from 90,357 to 65,049), 45% in Europe (from 396,868 to 216,846) and 43% in Oceania (from 11,872 to 6,718).

<sup>4</sup> Not counting those at minor seminaries.

To complete the picture of those in holy orders and consecrated life, we can point out the growth in permanent deacons from 23,452 to 48,238: they remain a phenomenon typical of rich countries (of the 48,238 in 2019, 34,693 are in Canada, the United States and Europe). Finally, members of male secular institutes decreased (worldwide) from 683 to 582; for female ones, the number of women diminished from 29,978 to 20,913.

Statistics regarding sacramental practice give us an idea, albeit imprecise, of the vitality of Catholic communities: baptisms of adults (i.e., after the age of seven) have diminished in Europe (from 92,146 in 1996 to 77,206 in 2019), remained stable in Asia (from 391,144 to 389,482) and increased in the rest of the continents: North America (from 257,920 to 313,828), South America (from 423,537 to 511,041), Africa (from 1,058,082 to 1,574,388), and Oceania (from 13,429 to 17,087). Adult baptisms show us the evangelizing power of communities.

The following are the statistics for baptisms of children up to seven years of age: North America, from 4,081,377 to 2,666,936 (-35%); South America, from 4,698,783 to 2,761,679 (-41%); Europe, from 2,601,586 to 1,695,512 (-35%); Africa, from 2,095,449 to 2,874,221 (+37%); Asia, from 2,272,927 to 2,270,081 (stable); Oceania, from 117,435 to 97,956 (-16.5%).

Total baptisms (adults and children) decreased from 18,103,815 to 15,249,417 (-16%); the only continent that saw a growth was Africa, from 3,153,531 to 4,448,609 (+41%).

First Communion went up in Africa (from 1,491,824 to 2,127,297), Asia (from 1,520,955 to 1,656,967) and Oceania (from 86,958 to 88,134); while they went down on the other continents: North America (from 2,757,287 to 2,266,919), South America (from 3,091,116 to 2,041,769) and Europe (from 2,570,680 to 1,652,501).

With regards to confirmations, which offer us an index (albeit relative) of the perseverance of young people in their religious practice, the situation is as follows: they have increased in Africa (from 1,318,210 to 1,712,415), Asia (from 1,240,529 to 1,330,774) and have remained stable in North America (from 1,981,604 to 2,001,602); instead they have fallen in South America (from 2,047,529 to 1,704,698), Europe (from 2,170,465 to 1,484,714), and Oceania (from 82,557 to 80,808).

Canonical marriages show the trend, already noted in these statistics, of an increase in Asia (from 530,470 to 535,092: +0.9%) and Africa (from 282,073 to 398,781: +41%), and a decrease in the rest of the world: North America (from 867,238 to 409,471: -53%), South America (from 823,026 to 378,321: -54%), Europe (from 1,053,602 to 488,353: -54%), Oceania (from 26,803 to 15,476: -42%).

These statistics show an important and progressive disaffection towards the practice of the sacraments, as well as poor compliance with Catholic sexual morals (a clear fall in religious marriages): if the decrease in Europe is undoubtedly also influenced by demographic aging, the same is not true in other geographical areas, especially in Latin America, an area with a predominantly Catholic population, which is registering a rather large decrease.

To conclude this numerical presentation, it should also be pointed out that there has been a general increase in the educational activities of the Catholic Church: considering the data at a global aggregate level, kindergartens have gone up from 57,268 to 72,667 (and children in them from 5.2 to 7.5 million); elementary schools from 84,027 to 98,925 (students from 25 to 35 million), middle schools (lower and upper) from 34,277 to 49,552 (students from 13.6 to 19.4 million). The number of students enrolled in Catholic institutions of higher education and universities went up from 3.5 to 6.7 million. To a lesser extent, assistance and charitable institutions increased, from 105,612 to 112,053, but this figure (partial compared to the immense charitable work of Catholics) shows how the Catholic Church continues to carry out impressive social work on behalf of the needy.

## 2. THE CHURCH IN DIFFERENT GEOPOLITICAL AND CULTURAL AREAS

The Church's relations with the societies and cultures present in the world over the last 25 years can be presented in nine geopolitical areas: Anglo-Saxon North America, Latin America, Western Europe, Russia and ex-communist European countries, the Islamic world, sub-Saharan Africa, India and West Indochina, Asian communist countries and the Pacific area.

In the first area, largely made up of the United States and Canada, we have witnessed the definitive collapse of the Catholic social milieu of Quebec, the erosion of which had already begun after the Second Va-

tican Council; in English-speaking Canada and the United States, the Church, in spite of the child abuse scandals that have seriously wounded it, and in spite of advancing secularization, has nevertheless been able to maintain a certain vitality. In this it has been helped in part by the fact that in these areas Catholics are, and have always been, an undoubtedly non-privileged minority, which has given them an *esprit de corps* and belonging that to some extent has been preserved. The statistics, as we have seen, indicate, however, a conspicuous decrease in the number of clergy (-27%) and religious women (-55.5%).

In Latin America, the Church has remained strong, but has found itself caught between different problems: the lack of a significant middle class; the presence of widespread poverty and narrow privileged classes; the inability of the ruling elites – including the Catholic ones – to pilot a redistribution of wealth and culture that would favor the stabilization of democratic systems; the development of political systems based on a populism of different stripes, but generally lacking a wise and far-sighted development strategy; and the spread of a secularized mentality, which finds support from long-standing anticlerical power groups. In addition, the rather serious problems of security make the action of the Church difficult in not a few places. The vitality experienced in the last seven decades by Latin American Catholic communities seems to have reached an inflection point, at least if one looks at the statistical data: counting South America alone, two important signs are the 28% decrease in the number of nuns and the 54% decrease in the number of marriages (the latter percentage is the same as in Europe, but it should be considered that here it is caused in part by demographic aging, while South America is a continent with a significant population of young people).

Western Europe appears to be the area where the Church finds itself in the greatest difficulty: areas that were once traditionally – and by an overwhelming majority – Catholic, now no longer appear to be so: Ireland, Portugal, Spain, France, Belgium, Rhineland, Bavaria, Catholic cantons of Switzerland, Austria, Italy, Malta. In these countries, Catholicism, until a few decades ago, was a constitutive element of culture and society: now, because of increasingly strong secularization and migratory movements (which have brought a large number of members of other religions to live in these areas), they too find themselves in a situation of strong pluralism and not infrequently of hostility or resent-

ment towards the religion that was once the majority. This situation has become more pronounced in the last five lustrums. Italy and Malta, where the Church still enjoys a relative prestige among the population, perhaps escape this situation, but only in part. In any case, in all the above-mentioned countries, the definitive decline of the social regime of "Christianity," and of the attempts to reintroduce it, can be noted. In the other countries of Western Europe, Catholics, already unimportant for being a minority (and historically not liked), have no importance in the life of the nation. The European Union, born in a Christian environment, even if not confessional (just think of Robert Schumann, Konrad Adenauer and Alcide De Gasperi, and the majority percentage of Catholic inhabitants in the original European Common Market of six countries), is completely losing these roots, in a process that in the last twenty-five years has experienced a profound acceleration. In the area of Western Europe, then, socialist circles have lost their solidarity and social charge, to flatten themselves in liberal positions. Liberal ideology is, in fact, the real winner of the game following the collapse of the Soviet Union. After having absorbed the forces of the left in their camp, the liberal power groups have resumed, starting from the 90's, a very critical and aggressive attitude (of decimononic type) against Christianity and in particular against the Catholic Church. In fact, they have been imposing: an economic neoliberalism that has little by little erased many social conquests of the 50's, 60's and 70's of the last century; a culture inspired by anthropological postulates that are hardly compatible with the Catholic *Weltanschauung*; a communication devoid of historical sense and highly critical of the past, especially the Christian past, with attitudes that are often aprioristic. But the situation of the old continent, more than showing a crisis of Catholicism, highlights the decline of European civilization, which seems to have reached the end of its historical journey.

The situation in the ex-communist countries of Eastern Europe and in Russia is somewhat different. In a good part of this area Catholics are a more or less conspicuous minority among an Orthodox population, and their relations with the majority Churches (which, since the 1990's, have again been linked to the state authorities and have been supported by them) have not always been easy. Other countries, once with a Catholic majority, are very secularized, as is the case in the Czech Re-



public. In still others – in Poland, Slovakia and Croatia, and to a much lesser extent in Hungary – Catholicism, having emerged victorious from the struggle against communism, has reorganized itself in an efficient manner, and in the last five five lustrums has known moments of success and social importance; but the question remains whether anything will change as the younger generations – who did not directly experience the persecution carried out by the communist regimes and the courageous resistance of Christians – will take on important roles in the life of these states.

In the period considered here, the Islamic world has experienced a considerable growth in importance and aggressiveness, both because of the drift of fundamentalist terrorism operating on a global level, and because of the economic importance (such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia) and political importance (Turkey, Iran, Pakistan) to which some Muslim countries have risen. In the twenty-five years studied here, there has also been a strong emigration of Muslims to countries of Christian tradition, especially in Europe. Countries with an Islamic majority have been characterized by an ever decreasing tolerance towards religious minorities (therefore also towards Catholics), who have often been the object of aggression, attacks, and prevarication. Moreover, this weak tolerance never contemplates the possibility of evangelizing Islamic populations, for whom the passage to another religion remains in fact, when not by law, a decision fraught with suffering and danger. Moreover, between 1996 and 2021, the non-denominational regimes in the area (Libya, Egypt, Syria, Iraq) were overthrown or weakened due to the power policies of the Western world, particularly the United States, France and the United Kingdom; Turkey, which since the 1920s had pursued a secularist and pro-Western policy, has radically changed direction, distancing itself from its European and American allies and reaffirming its religious identity. Islam therefore poses two challenges to the Catholic Church: one of coexistence with Muslim minorities, both native and of old and new immigration, in Europe and sub-Saharan Africa; the other of survival, in the Saharan areas, in North Africa, in the Middle East and in Pakistan. In Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine, areas once rich in a thriving and vital Christian minority, there has been a steady departure of Catholic elements to safer regions (Europe, the Americas, Oceania).



In recent years, Sub-Saharan Africa, the area where the Catholic Church has been growing, has gone through a very difficult period: in addition to the traditional Franco-American antagonism over control of the area, there has been a growing and aggressive Chinese intervention. With the exception of South Africa, all countries in the area are characterized by weak economic systems, non-democratic political structures, civil wars and high levels of poverty. In addition, strong Islamic terrorist activity (e.g., in Nigeria and Kenya) has developed in many countries, causing much grief and devastation. In the twenty-five-year period presented here, Africa south of the Sahara appears to be the geographical area where development does not seem to have great prospects in the short term.

In India, too, there has been a change in policy, with the victory of Hindu-inspired political forces, which have embarked on a religious policy of harassment and hostility towards Christianity, sometimes accompanied by unofficial actions of aggression against persons and structures of the Church. In Thailand and Bangladesh, Catholics are a tiny minority of the population; in Myanmar, they have also suffered not insignificant discrimination; in Sri Lanka, the end of the civil war in 2009 led to a slight improvement in the situation in the country, where Catholics represent about 7% of the population.

In the countries of the Far East, where communist parties continue to be in power, the situation of the Church varies from the most brutal persecution (North Korea), to an iron control with intermittent harassment by the state in China (a situation complicated by the presence of the so-called Patriotic Association), to a sort of supervised freedom (as in the case of Vietnam).

Finally, in the democratic countries of the Pacific area, the situation of the Church differs greatly from country to country. It appears similar to the European situation in Australia and New Zealand. In Japan and Taiwan, Catholics are a small minority of little importance. In South Korea, the Church, which in the second half of the twentieth century experienced an important numerical growth (also due to the many conversions), has continued to be well organized, active, vital and structured, but seems, in the last five lustrums, to have been partially weakened both in terms of external evangelization and internal religious practice. The Philippines remains a bastion of Asian Catholicism and has be-

come in recent decades a country of significant emigration: its many people abroad are spreading the presence of Catholicism throughout the world.

### 3. THREE PONTIFICATES

In the years between 1996 and 2021, three pontiffs found themselves at the helm of the Church. Until 2005, John Paul II, who – in addition to closing the post-conciliar crisis – led the ecclesial structure with tireless activity in the call to the New Evangelization, in an effort to reconquer society, and to conquer new ground. Suffice it to think, as examples, of the 104 pastoral trips outside Italy, 146 in Italy, and the 317 pastoral visits to Roman parishes; of the doubling of diplomatic representatives to the Holy See; of the huge production of documents (including the second Code of Canon Law, and the new Catechism of the Catholic Church); of the numerous beatifications and canonizations; of the World Youth Days; of the intense and fruitful activity of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. This propulsive thrust given to the Church by the Polish Pope had its peak in the great Jubilee of the Year 2000, but in the following years it weakened, also because of the increasingly difficult health conditions of the now elderly pontiff.

For the difficult succession to the gigantic figure of John Paul II, who died in 2005, the conclave chose Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who was one of the few cardinals endowed with the prestige to take on his shoulders such a legacy. He took the name Benedict XVI, and governed the Church until his resignation in 2013. The eight years of his pontificate were characterized by an intellectually elevated magisterium; by dialogue with numerous men and women of culture, by the determination to put an end to the scandals of child abuse; and finally by the courageous decision to resign: a difficult step (the most recent previous case dates back to 1415, with the resignation of Gregory XII), but truly far-sighted for opening a very useful path, if one takes into account the lengthening of average life and therefore the future possibility of having for long periods of time very elderly pontiffs incapable of serious work and decision-making. At the same time, his pontificate was very painful and at times not entirely happy with regard to the pastoral direction of the Church and external communication. Moreover, in contrast to the ideal of “conquest” typical of the years of John Paul II, under the Ger-

man pope there spread through the Catholic world a feeling of being destined to become a small minority.

The College of Cardinals, meeting in conclave after the resignation of Benedict XVI, directed its choice to the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, who took the name of Francis, and who is the pope *feliciter regnans* at the present time. With his pontificate, one has the impression that the Church has definitively abandoned any ideal of nostalgic restoration of some kind of *christianitas*, and is restructuring itself in order to offer an evangelical witness in a pluralistic, liquid society, far from or even hostile to the Christian vision of the world. But this operation does not seem to be carried out with categories of closure, which could lead to the creation of Catholic “ghettos”, but rather with an open and inclusive mentality, which recalls the attitude of the Church towards the barbarians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages; an attitude of welcoming the Germanic, Slavic, Magyar and Scandinavian masses into Christendom, albeit in conditions of imperfect knowledge of doctrine and – consequently – of moral conduct lacking in certain aspects.

The action of the current Pontiff is also characterized by a great consonance with the aspirations of the peoples of developing areas; by an ability to intercept the common feeling of the current culture and mentality of the masses, thus knowing how to focus on moral battles shared by a large part of the world population; by opposition to neo-liberalism, which prevails at an economic and philosophical level. His work has been criticized within the Church by conservative groups, and these criticisms – which have always existed in the history of Catholicism – have become more visible due to the recent development of communication and the ease with which everyone can spread their opinions through the internet, a possibility that did not exist before the computer revolution.

#### 4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is clear from the picture presented above that in the last twenty-five years numerous and imposing challenges have appeared on the horizon of Catholicism. Secularization has made continuous progress, often in conjunction with the spread of anthropological visions that undermine certain cornerstones of Christian life. The cessation of hostility on the part of regimes of so-called “real socialism” has been replaced by the

growing hostility of various other political and cultural systems: political structures that have strong Islamic, Hindu and secularist connotations at their base, and in East Asia regimes that are heirs and continuers of communism. There have been strong social, economic and anthropological changes caused by the information and communication revolution, on to which have been grafted those economic changes caused by the pandemic of the last two years. There has been a steady decline in vocations to religious life and an insufficient increase in those to the priesthood, and an increasing abandonment of sacramental practice by the faithful. Countries that were once “Catholic” have disappeared due to secularization and migratory movements.

It seems manifest that the changes that began with the French Revolution have reached their final phase: the Church, after an initial moment of bewilderment in the face of the events that originated in 1789, took a very critical stance towards modernity, at first (until the papacy of Pius IX) looking to the past, to the Ancien Régime. During the long pontificate of Pope Mastai-Ferretti (1846-1878), she began to look ahead, preparing more modern instruments and methodologies (especially around the First Vatican Council) that would allow a reconquest of society. This movement accelerated with Leo XIII and Pius X (with his motto “*instaurare omnia in Christo*”); after the crisis of liberalism that followed the First World War, Pius XI launched an attempt to reconquer society (“*pax Christi in regno Christi*”), continued by Pius XII after the upheavals and terrible suffering of the Second World War. When these impulses were exhausted, the Catholic hierarchy, aware of the changes taking place after the last global conflict, wanted to inaugurate a season of dialogue and openness to modernity, with Vatican II. But these openings soon led to the great post-conciliar crisis, which occupied a good part of the pontificate of Paul VI; it was stemmed by John Paul II, who, with the category of the New Evangelization, tried to relaunch the Church in the reconquest of old and new spaces. Having consummated this attempt as well, Catholicism has no choice but to live in a pluralistic, liquid society, devoid of anthropological and cultural foundations of Christian derivation, definitively abandoning the dream of a new *societas christiana*.

In the face of these imposing challenges, the Catholic Church, strengthened by the experience of 2,000 years of life, having passed through many storms of history, has many strengths, structured over the last two

centuries: since the pontificate of Pius IX, and in particular since the First Vatican Council, it has modernized and developed a number of important resources. In the first place, it is much freer from political power than in the times from Constantine to 1870; precisely because of this, it has developed a great unity around its center, the Holy See. This unity has enabled it to successfully resist the various shades of totalitarianisms in the twentieth century.

The Church, then, has become truly universal, on a sociological level and no longer only on a theological one: thanks to the great missionary work of the first and second millennia (intensified since the nineteenth century), and thanks also to the migratory movements of the last seventy-five years, at the present time there are well-structured Catholic communities in almost all the countries of the world; the “extra-European turning point” of Benedict XV (apostolic letter *Maximum illud*, 1919), and the policies of his successors, has meant that the African and Asian continents – which, as seen above, in the statistical presentation, are the most vital for the Catholic religion – now have a well-structured native hierarchy.

Lastly, a great mobilization of the laity (men and women) has gradually been promoted, which has also led to the birth of profound spiritualities of its own and congenial to it, which make it possible to look at the kerygmatic evangelization of the first three centuries as a model.

Therefore, the Church, making good use of these strengths and keeping more in mind the model of evangelization of the first generations of Christians, can give more space and responsibility to lay men and women, and especially women. In this way, many of their energies, trapped for centuries by clericalism (a negative side effect of the beneficial conquests of the Gregorian Reform of the 11th century), will be freed, and it would be necessary to free them definitively. In this way, a vast work of evangelical witness can develop, lived in freedom and in harmony with many other religious and cultural components, far from political exploitation, and introduced into the current systems of communication. In this way the message of Christ will be able to continue, through the responsible and personal action of so many of his followers – ordinary men and women – to shape, in a positive and luminous way, the human activities of the coming decades, starting from people and not from structures.

To this end, the quality of the spiritual and cultural life (in a broad sense) of well-prepared groups of the laity, who can exert a beneficial influence on the entire world population, both Catholic and non-Catholic, seems to be more important than the control of large masses. The problematic data of the statistics and the obstacles posed by political, economic and cultural powers, which were discussed in the first part of this text, will not constitute insurmountable obstacles for nuclei of Catholic faithful who have the evangelizing vigor of the Christians of the first centuries.