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A Church with an Amazonian face

Message for Lent 2018

During Lent we hear the call of St. John the Baptist: “Repent, and believe in the good news” (Mk. 1:15). The Greek word that is translated with repent is ‘metanoia.’¹ The meaning of this word is: change of mind. Metanoia is a change from within usually because we receive new information (think for example about the conversion of Paul on his way to Damascus). A change in our thinking has to be accompanied by a change in our behaviour and in our attitude. Metanoia is not a switch that we can turn on or off. It is a slow and radical process that transforms our culture to correspond ever more to the ideals of mercy and justice, which are characteristic of the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ. In this regard, Pope John Paul II referred to present day culture as a ‘culture of death,’² while Pope Francis characterized the same culture as a ‘throwaway culture.’³ Both terms of the Popes describe essentially the kind of culture we are living in. When we come to the realization of the destructive web in which we are caught, it can lead to

¹ The biblical concept of ‘metanoia’ refers to an inner turnaround: it means both ‘turning away from’ [evil] as well as ‘turning towards’ [Yahwe, the Lord]. In the preaching of the prophets of Israel it has both a religious as well as a moral significance. The religious significance of ‘metanoia’ points to the turning away from the gods of the surrounding nations to trusting in and worshipping Yahwe alone, with whom Israel made a covenant through Moses. The moral significance of ‘metanoia’ points to the call to Israel to turn away from injustice and the neglect or violation of the values and norms that are upheld in the commandments of the covenant. This same twofold significance of the term ‘metanoia’ is also found in the New Testament, but then especially focused on God’s Kingdom, the reign of God’s love and values. The Kingdom of God which is proclaimed and embodied by Christ, the Kingdom which He brings to realization through the Paschal mystery of his suffering, death and resurrection.

² This term was introduced by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical ‘Evangelium Vitae’ of 1995, as a description of “the emergence of a culture which denies solidarity,” which “is actively fostered by powerful cultural, economic and political currents which encourage an idea of society excessively concerned with efficiency.” In a certain sense, “it is possible to speak of a war of the powerful against the weak: a life which would require greater acceptance, love and care is considered useless, or held to be an intolerable burden, and is therefore rejected in one way or another. A person who, because of illness, handicap or, more simply, just by existing, compromises the well-being or life-style of those who are more favoured, tends to be looked upon as an enemy to be resisted or eliminated. In this way a kind of “conspiracy against life” is unleashed.”

³ In many instances, Pope Francis has warned against what he calls an increasingly expanding ‘culture of waste,’ which is promoted by the intrinsic dictatorship of a mere economic logic, whereby everything (including the human person) that is no longer considered economically viable or forms a hindrance to efficiency, is sacrificed. In his Wednesday audience of June 5, 2013, Pope Francis says that “we are losing our attitude of wonder, of contemplation, of listening to creation and thus we no longer manage to interpret in it the rhythm of the love-story between God and man.” This “culture of waste” tends to become a common mentality that infects everyone. Human life, the person, are no longer seen as a primary value to be respected and safeguarded, especially if they are poor or disabled, if they are not yet useful — like the unborn child — or are no longer of any use — like the elderly person. This culture of waste has also made us insensitive to wasting and throwing out excess foodstuffs. Consumerism has induced us to be accustomed to excess and to the daily waste of food, whose value, which goes far beyond mere financial parameters, we are no longer able to judge correctly.

an overwhelming feeling of powerlessness. The suffering, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus provide us nonetheless with the evidence that the powers of death do not have the final say.

By increasingly dedicating ourselves during Lent to fasting, prayer and care for the poor, we create in ourselves the capacity for this metanoia to occur. It is a total reversal from a culture of death to a culture of life, and from a throwaway culture to a culture of mercy.

Surprisingly, in our days the awareness has surfaced that humanity needs to be merciful towards the whole of creation. This awareness is still very fragile in comparison with the power of the rich, who continue to promote a culture of death with their hunger for ever more material wealth and welfare. Some think that nature is something lifeless that can be manipulated at will. But the plants and the animals, water and air, are not lifeless things but unique creations of God which have an intrinsic worth. The Spirit of God is present in all that lives, grows and breathes. Man is only a steward, the caretaker of God's creation and not its omniscient ruler. Pope Francis laments the fact that every animal species that becomes extinct, is one less species on earth to praise the Lord! He calls for an ecological conversion. A conversion that leads to the awareness that we are responsible for the integrity of creation.

Pope Francis has given the bishops of the Amazon rainforest the task to transform the church to a church with "the face and the spirit of the Amazon." Those who can help us achieve this are the indigenous peoples. After all, they have been living for thousands of years in harmony with the forest without leaving behind a destructive footprint. In an authentic meeting with them we can learn how to respect all creatures and not extract from the earth more than we really need. We can once again discover the joy of simplicity and find fulfilment in the little we possess. We can learn from that, that *being* is more important than *having*.

A church with an Amazonian face is also a church that steps into the breach for the defense of poor, marginalized farmers and people living in traditional tribal settings. Such a church will oppose legislation that poses a threat to the rights of these people. Such a church adopts a critical attitude towards mega-infrastructure projects and economic exploitation, such as projects generating hydro-electricity, use of waterways, gas, oil and lumber exploitation, and deforestation on behalf of industries in agrarian mono-culture and cattle breeding. A church with an Amazonian face will fight against the societal consequences of illegal activities such as human trafficking and drugs trade, and also oppose legislation, programs and activities for wildlife protection that in no way take into account the rights and traditions of indigenous peoples.

The world needs to rid itself of the view that considers the Amazon as an inexhaustible source of raw and auxiliary materials for other countries, without any regard for its inhabitants. What is needed is "a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking,

policies, an educational programme, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm” (Laudato si, 111).

Recognition of indigenous peoples – their rights, lifestyles, traditions, language and culture – and authentic dialogue with them is the best way to work at our metanoia. This requires of us a radical detachment from the prevailing culture where we consider ourselves superior to them and view their culture as inferior and undeveloped.

The conversion to a church with an Amazonian face should make us aware of the immense complexity of the Amazon rainforest, the biodiversity of flora and fauna. The inhabitants, who are part of the rainforest through a healthy symbiotic relationship, and as such maintain the very delicate balance of life, can be considered as a tangible symbol of the balance of all life on earth.

This balance is now under great threat from human activity. This activity emanates from a culture of death and a throwaway culture. We are, however, optimistic that the early countercurrent against this reprehensible way of thinking will gradually increase in strength. Ultimately, this will result in a total conversion of the human heart.

I would like to invite you during this season of Lent, to attune your fasting, prayer and care for the poor to the call of Pope Francis, to transform the church to a church with the face of the Amazon.

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