



Vigil of Pentecost with the Ecclesial Movements  
18 May 2013

*The third question:* “Holy Father, I would like to ask you how I, how we can live as a poor Church and for the poor. How does a suffering person pose a question for our faith? What practical, effective contribution can all of us, as members of lay movements and associations, make to the Church and to society in order to address this grave crisis that is affecting public ethics” — this is important! — “the model of development, politics, that is to say, a new way of being men and women?”

I shall return to the idea of “witness”. First of all living out the Gospel is the main contribution we can make. The Church is neither a political movement nor a well-organized structure. That is not what she is. We are not an NGO, and when the Church becomes an NGO she loses her salt, she has no savour, she is only an empty organization.

We need cunning here, because the devil deceives us and we risk falling into the trap of hyper-efficiency. Preaching Jesus is one thing; attaining goals, being efficient is another. No, efficiency is a different value. Basically the value of the Church is living by the Gospel and witnessing to our faith. The Church is the salt of the earth, she is the light of the world. She is called to make present in society the leaven of the Kingdom of God and she does this primarily with her witness, the witness of brotherly love, of solidarity and of sharing with others. When you hear people saying that solidarity is not a value but a “primary attitude” to be got rid of... this will not do! They are thinking of an efficiency that is purely worldly.

Times of crisis, like the one we are living through — you said earlier that “we live in a world of lies” — this time of crisis, beware, is not merely an economic crisis. It is not a crisis of culture. It is a human crisis: it is the human person that is in crisis! Man himself is in danger of being destroyed! But man is the image of God! This is why it is a profound crisis!

At this time of crisis we cannot be concerned solely with ourselves, withdrawing into loneliness, discouragement and a sense of powerlessness in the face of problems. Please do not withdraw into yourselves! This is a danger: we shut ourselves up in the parish, with our friends, within the movement, with the like-minded... but do you know what happens? When the Church becomes closed, she becomes an ailing Church, she falls ill! That is a danger. Nevertheless we lock ourselves up in our parish, among our friends, in our movement, with people who think as we do... but do you know what happens? When the Church is closed, she falls sick, she falls sick. Think of a room that has been closed for a year. When you go into it there is a smell of damp, many things are wrong with it. A Church closed in on herself is the same, a sick Church.

The Church must step outside herself. To go where? To the outskirts of existence, whatever they may be, but she must step out. Jesus tells us: “Go into all the world! Go! Preach! Bear witness to the Gospel!” (cf. Mk 16:15). But what happens if we step outside ourselves? The same as can happen to anyone who comes out of the house and onto the street: an accident. But I tell you, I far prefer a Church that has had a few accidents to a Church that has fallen sick from being closed.

Go out, go out! Think of what the Book of Revelation says as well. It says something beautiful: that Jesus stands at the door and knocks, knocks to be let into our heart (cf. Rev 3:20). This is the meaning of the Book of Revelation. But ask yourselves this question: how often is Jesus inside and knocking at the door to be let out, to come out? And we do not let him out because of our own need for security, because so often we are locked into ephemeral structures that serve solely to make us slaves and not free children of God.

In this “stepping out” it is important to be ready for encounter. For me this word is very important. Encounter with others. Why? Because faith is an encounter with Jesus, and we must do what Jesus does: encounter others. We live in a culture of conflict, a culture of fragmentation, a culture in which I throw away what is of no use to me, a culture of waste.

Yet on this point, I ask you to think — and it is part of the crisis — of the elderly, who are the wisdom of a people, think of the children... the culture of waste! However, we must go out to meet them, and with our faith we must create a “culture of encounter”, a culture of friendship, a culture in which we find brothers and sisters, in which we can also speak with those who think differently, as well as those who hold other beliefs, who do not have the same faith.

They all have something in common with us: they are images of God, they are children of God. Going out to meet everyone, without losing sight of our own position. There is another important point: encountering the poor. If we step outside ourselves we find poverty. Today — it sickens the heart to say so — the discovery of a tramp who has died of the cold is not news. Today what counts as news is, maybe, a scandal. A scandal: ah, that is news! Today, the thought that a great many children do not have food to eat is not news. This is serious, this is serious! We cannot put up with this! Yet that is how things are. We cannot become starched Christians, those over-educated Christians who speak of theological matters as they calmly sip their tea. No! We must become courageous Christians and go in search of the people who are the very flesh of Christ, those who are the flesh of Christ!

When I go to hear confessions — I still can't, because to go out to hear confessions... from here it's impossible to go out, but that's another problem — when I used to go to hear confessions in my previous diocese, people would come to me and I would always ask them: “Do you give alms?” — “Yes, Father!” “Very good.” And I would ask them two further questions: “Tell me, when you give alms, do you look the person in the eye?” “Oh I don't know, I haven't really thought about it”. The second question: “And when you give alms, do you touch the hand of the person you are giving them to or do you toss the coin at him or her?” This is the problem: the flesh of Christ, touching the flesh of Christ, taking upon ourselves this suffering for the poor. Poverty for us Christians is not a sociological, philosophical or cultural category, no. It is theological. I might say this is the first category, because our God, the Son of God, abased himself, he made himself poor to walk along the road with us.

This is our poverty: the poverty of the flesh of Christ, the poverty that brought the Son of God to us through his Incarnation. A poor Church for the poor begins by reaching out to the flesh of Christ. If we reach out to the flesh of Christ, we begin to understand something, to understand what this poverty, the Lord's poverty, actually is; and this is far from easy.

However there is one problem that can afflict Christians: the spirit of the world, the worldly spirit, spiritual worldliness. This leads to self-sufficiency, to living by the spirit of the world rather than by the spirit of Jesus. You asked the question: how should we live in order to address this crisis that affects public ethics, the model of development and politics? Since this is a crisis of man, a crisis that destroys man, it is a crisis that strips man of ethics. In public life, in politics, if there is no ethics, an ethics of reference, everything is possible and everything can be done. We see, moreover, whenever we read the newspapers, that the lack of ethics in public life does great harm to the whole of humanity.

I would like to tell you a story. I have already told it twice this week, but I will tell it a third time to you. It is taken from a biblical *midrash* by a 12th-century rabbi. He tells the tale of the building of the Tower of Babel and he says that, in order to build the Tower of Babel, bricks had to be made. What does this mean? Going out and mixing the mud, fetching straw, doing everything... then the kiln. And when the brick was made it had to be hoisted, for the construction of the Tower of Babel. Every brick was a treasure because of all the work required to make it. Whenever a brick fell, it was a national tragedy and the guilty workman was punished; a brick was so precious that if it fell there was a great drama. Yet if a workman fell, nothing happened, that was something else. This happens today: if the investments in the banks fall slightly... a tragedy... what can be done? But if people die of hunger, if they have nothing to eat, if they have poor health, it does not matter! This is our crisis today! And the witness of a poor Church for the poor goes against this mentality.