

## **I The time of the witnesses**

**José María Rodríguez Olaizola**

### **Introduction: There are no strategies**

Go out into the world and spread the Gospel! The cry continues to ring out. The call is clear. The Gospel is the same, and we still believe it's good news. The disciples do their best. But the world, as usual, as is so often the case, has changed.

And a new wine must be poured into new wineskins. That's why the evangelists are often thrown by society in which they don't feel particularly comfortable and where people would seem to have become indifferent to the subject of God and its potential implications in everyday life.

However, driven by the awareness of a mission and the desire to share the best thing they have, the disciples who now want to be teachers continue to ask themselves: Do some ways work better than others? Are there possible strategies? Where can I find a master's degree in evangelisation? Do we have teachers who not only help us to discover the Gospel, but who also teach us to understand the world, to see if both elements can fit in with one another today?

Isn't this an approach which prompts a certain amount of frustration? Certainly not because of apathy. The desire to continue spreading the good news remains alive and kicking. There is ambition. There is passion. There is courage. And there are a lot of people with good intentions. But do we really have to keep looking for a formula of contemporary evangelisation? Doesn't it sound a bit like the dream harboured by medieval alchemists of finding the philosopher's stone, or like the legend of Arthur and the sword in the stone, which simply sits there waiting for someone to take it out so that we can finally enjoy a Camelot of wine and roses.

Of course, the answer has to be no. I don't believe that the response to contemporary evangelisation lies in a recipe. I don't even know if such a

*José María Rodríguez Olaizola*

recipe exists. I don't have it anyway. A recipe of what to do, how to succeed, what methods to use in order to combine the Gospel and life? It's too ambitious. It's as though we were to try and give one of those speeches pronounced by successful entrepreneurs, doctors who prescribe personal, job-related or vocational self-help methods, who immediately set about trying to convince you that if you do what they say your unstoppable march towards success will be a breeze. If that truly were the goal, it would be enough simply to find the contexts or experiences that function today in the clergy, to try and draw generalisations and to learn from them. But I fear we would soon discover that what works in

*The Gospel prompts us to deal with the basic questions of existence: God, love, suffering, death, time, or the meaning of life.*

one place and time will not necessarily do so in another, since the combination of contexts, people and circumstances means that things will always be different. With this introduction one could be forgiven for believing that this article is drawing to an end. Neither methods nor strategies exist. Full stop. The end, right? Well no, not yet.

What I'm going to try to do in these pages is offer a reflection I share with others. A reflection on the present day, and on life, and on how this may (or not) become a contemporary way to transmit the Gospel.

### **If it's good news, why isn't it accepted?**

Let's start with a fact. The Gospel can be good news. It is. Today too. For people of all conditions. Because in a world of ubiquitous loneliness, it speaks about coming together. In a context where egoism has led to the isolation of individuals and peoples, the invitation to generous, decentralised love offers a much broader road towards hope. In a society shaped around surfaces, facades and the dizzying heights of change, the Gospel talks about depth, about life's back rooms, and about permanence, and in doing so offers a much more solid basis for dealing with life. In a media-driven, virtual world where empty, short-lived discourses with no history multiply, the Gospel speaks with words that refuse to change with the passing of time. In a sphere of demanding relationships, where the fear of not being liked or of rejection hound many people, the compassion of a God who welcomes weakness becomes more than necessary. In a space such as that of the contemporary world, where

## *The Moment of the Witnesses*

inequality has become a reason for exclusion, and the poor have no place in the global equation – some voices refer to surplus lives – the Gospel is a cry for justice and liberation of the most fragile. On a stage like ours, where the *post-truth* provides an excellent definition of how stories are constructed on the fringes of reality, the Gospel endeavours to look at the deepest reality of the human being. And, amid entire generations who are forgetting to ask themselves questions, the Gospel prompts us to deal with the basic questions of existence: God, love, suffering, death, time, and the meaning of life.

And if all of this is the case, why is it so poorly appreciated? Why do so many people live with their backs to or show direct hostility towards the Gospel? Even those who claim to be believers prefer a wider, less specific faith, more ethereal, reduced to “there must be something”. What makes it so difficult to evangelise? It’s not as if we are in a virgin land where the word of the Gospel has never been heard. We’re not in the time of the great discoveries, when people who had never heard of Jesus Christ would come across missionaries who would give them the good news for the first time. Our society, secular in its definition and options, and at times secularist in its militancy, is Christian in its culture and tradition. The contents of our holy history, the biblical icons, the evangelical parables, impregnate our collective memory. Religious monuments fill our streets and museums. The great names in the history of these twenty centuries are men and women of faith who, thanks to that faith, brought about progress in science, knowledge or humanism... It’s also true that dark areas and errors exist, and that, together with resounding successes, there are mistakes for which the Church has been forced to beg forgiveness. The reality is complex, full of intermediate shades and nuances. But many people are not attracted by the Gospel. They don’t trust in it, or appreciate it, or look for it. And the Church is, well, better at arm’s length, thank you very much.

But the problem is not only that the Gospel is missing from the lives of the non-believers – or from the lives of those who don’t define themselves as Christians. Isn’t there a Gospel dormant inside all Christians? A domesticated Gospel turned into inertia, which no longer moves or provokes us, or which forces us out into the elements. A Gospel wasted on set phrases, on institutions that do nothing but repeat the same old words, playing out roles that slip, like any another piece, into the big machinery of this society of contrasts and trenches. A Gospel buried beneath tons of books, traditions, spiritualities, classes and courses. A Gospel that sees

*José María Rodríguez Olaizola*

itself as, and wants to succeed in, moving part of the structure of our parishes, dioceses, congregations, schema, schools, universities and journals, a Gospel that fails to pierce our homilies or our social media... Sometimes due to shortcomings and at others to excess, because by fiddling, quoting and distorting it we have become immune to its real meaning.

### **Announce or live the Gospel?**

There is a necessary, although perhaps insufficient requirement when addressing evangelisation today. Sellers of hot air are no use. It's true that the teachers who announce something and then proceed to do exactly the opposite is nothing new. Even Jesus said to his disciples, when talking to the teachers of the law, the bit about "Do what they say, not what they do". While the criteria of coherence and authenticity have probably always been necessary, today the first evangelisation must perhaps have its effect on the lives of those who preach. The Gospel has the ability to change lives, to turn hearts of stone into hearts of flesh and to change the focus of points of view and goals so that we will seek, in our days, a project which is the Kingdom of God. But making false claims, beating about the bush, trotting out the facts people know or vaguely recall, and repeating clichés are worthless endeavours. Today a bearer of the Gospel must be someone truly convinced of its importance, someone who deeply understands its logic. This doesn't mean perfect, heroic, unique and peerless individuals. What it does mean is persons whose lives mirror the Gospel, every day, from their own strengths and weaknesses. Thus, the first search, the first question, the first step, must be to ask ourselves, truly, what kind of Gospel we are living. And we must keep our eyes peeled for, at least, three enemies of the Gospel.

#### ***a) The Gospel without love is not the Gospel***

The Gospel teaches us a way of relating to one another. It teaches us how to look at one another, to care for one another, to respect one another. It proposes a look at creation and, within that, especially, at humanity. My neighbour is my brother. Love, in the style of God, is the best guide of relationships. Obviously, this doesn't mean a world of ideal people who all get along famously well because they're all bosom pals. Similarities and distances exist, as do friends and enemies, people you agree with and others you don't. This is all human and normal. The true challenge lies in

## *The Moment of the Witnesses*

expressing real love (much more than a feeling, a disposition towards respect, recognition, and the good of others) in all relationships.

Often, in the public sphere, on social media and in the press and TV, we see people supposedly talking from the Gospel who express themselves in a way that truly turns your stomach. Insults, controversies, humiliations, generalisations, aggressiveness and arrogance, attitudes that only serve to multiply the lack of communication and violence. Will anyone ever believe someone who's talking about Jesus Christ in such a fashion?

Also often perceived by the person wishing to announce the Gospel, is a hint of profound mistrust or rejection of the world for which said Gospel wants to be good news. This tends to come with sweeping bitter criticism, generalisation on the decadence of everything, whether talking about young people, music, the economy, politicians, or the part of the Church that they don't like. I don't think you can evangelise the things people detest. Because at that stage you no longer want to bring these people the good news, but rather to win them over.

### ***b) The Gospel without depth is not the Gospel***

Jesus travelled the world learning and teaching people to look into the depths. We mustn't be taken in by the simplicity of the parables, or the familiarity of the elements he uses to construct his discourse: a mustard seed, a sheep or a feast. Because that simplicity conceals true knowledge of the human being, of the Jewish faith and of the social dynamics of his world. A wisdom probably born from curiosity, observation and reflection. To convey good news to a world like ours we must dedicate time, effort and our lives to getting to know that world.

The roads to the depths may be manifold. I would like to talk about at least three of them.

One, the intellectual search. Today we need true Christian intellectuals, thinkers, people who endeavour to obtain knowledge of science, of theology, of culture, of pedagogy, or of any field in which a need is perceived. But said intellectual commitment is demanding, and takes time, solitude and effort (not to mention means).

The second road would be that of a spiritual life; in other words, the cultivation of an inhabited inner being. The spiritual life is not only a question of proceeding with actions, measured in hours and ticked off on a list of tasks carried out. It is the endeavour, the real attempt, to turn the Gospel into your inner music, to have the desire to make the word trigger

*José María Rodríguez Olaizola*

inner mechanisms and flush out blockages. It is the honest and naked question about God. And it is, finally, the willingness to learn how to read the reality around us with interiorised categories of believer.

Lastly, the third road towards depth would be the elements. The elements represent a space in which you are at risk, where you become vulnerable. One profoundly human dynamic is to construct your life around things that make you feel safe. As you age, you start to uphold convictions and dynamics which are more or less familiar to you, you learn how to control things. But venturing out into spaces where you lose that power and that peace of mind unsettles you. For many, the elements represent contact with the hellish aspects of this world, with the most vulnerable, with those who are sick or in pain, with the inexplicable... It's in the storm that we can sometimes find more answers.

*All too often what we see are the veneers of the Gospel. Unfounded opinions. Affirmations without depth. The civil servants of evangelisation.*

But only too often what we see are the veneers of the Gospel. Unfounded opinions. Affirmations without depth. The civil servants of evangelisation, where passion gradually morphs into routine and vocation into work. Too many experts and no storm. All too often no effort is made to learn, to understand, to reason, to interpret, to equip ourselves with tools which will truly help us to understand and to transform this world.

### ***c) The Gospel without commitment is not the Gospel***

The Gospel, when truly lived, envelopes you, ensnares you and engages you. It changes your life, because it fills it with possibilities and urgencies. It connects you to others, from the feeling of community, and from the duty of justice. The Gospel involves you in many of life's dimensions. It urges you to relate with people on the basis of compassion rather than hatred or intransigence. It prompts you to love generously, with no negotiating or possessiveness. It confronts you, time and again, with the need to share (your time, your talents and your belongings) with those who have nothing or who may need you. It influences the way you live, love, celebrate, spend money, consume, the subjects you discuss or embrace.

If your life experiences absolutely no changes on embracing the Gospel, could it be because in fact the Gospel is not actually in your life?

## *The Moment of the Witnesses*

And here we have, yet again, a question we must ask ourselves when wondering whether or not it is possible to evangelise. What specific commitments has the Gospel prompted you to embrace?

This section will serve to highlight a question that I believe is essential. To evangelise, the only road forward is to be the bearer of our beliefs. And while the word can be spread explicitly at times (and it does often require that explicitness), at many others it is transmitted in the way we love (or not), explore (or not) and commit (or not).

### **The implicit announcement**

What is implicit is our life. We transmit our beliefs not only with our words, but also – and perhaps more so – with our gestures, our body, our silences, what others see. We talk with the life we lead. With the way we work, rest, spend money, celebrate, waste time, make the most of it... Perhaps today, in a society like ours, what may represent more of a question mark for many people isn't our proposals, our courses, talks, workshops, invitations to train, social media communications, etc. but rather the way we behave and live.

In this respect, perhaps our greatest challenge now lies in lending visibility to the invisible. Because, due to a combination of modesty, embarrassment or lack of media interest, our society notably tends to obscure the religious dimension in people's lives, which is always reserved to the private sphere. Always? Well not really. Often when a public figure is guilty of inappropriate behaviour, if they have religious beliefs, a large part of the social media and the press soon pick up on the fact: "This is a woman who goes to mass every day", said the media rather sarcastically in the case of Marta Ferrusola after certain steps had been taken to investigate the Pujol family fortune. On the other hand, however, there is rather less enthusiasm when it comes to highlighting the religious conviction of people who show exemplary behaviour.

Here my intention is not to comment on media dynamics or to analyse the different cases, even if they are plentiful. Instead, what I would like to emphasize is how your life can (or not) represent proof of your faith.

There is a road which is simple, but necessary and real: we must lend greater visibility to faith and life. Make it more transparent, more specific. The discussion on the visible signs of faith sometimes comes down to the advisability or not of using religious clothing or habits, in the case of the clergy or the dedicated, or whether or not one should wear visible symbols

*José María Rodríguez Olaizola*

enabling us to know a person's faith. While I don't deny the need for a profound, prejudice-free reflection on these issues, I do believe that the issue of lending visibility to faith goes even deeper and further back. There was probably a time when religion was, in many societies – in Spain it definitely was – oppressive, ubiquitous and imposed. In this respect, the changes introduced from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as from the Second Vatican Council, were hailed as a liberation, both by the believers, who found a new way to express themselves, and by the non-believers, who no longer felt that certain spaces were colonised by religion. Thus, for

*The Gospel is a truth  
that must engage in  
dialogue with the  
knowledge and perceptions  
of men and women of a  
time, with a specific culture  
and its battles.*

decades there was greater awareness as to the necessity and importance of a different kind of visibility, placing much stronger emphasis on proximity and closeness than on the differences of religious people. While I don't deny that this remains valid (given my belief that all distinctions seeking to create distance send the wrong kind of message), today we must somehow recover the spaces, words and places which remain visible for faith. Here the idea

### **The explicit announcement**

is not to colonise, to impose or to stand out. It is simply the fact that we need to remind this world that there are still many people, normal people, for whom faith is part of their everyday lives, of the way they deal with problems, of their points of view when making decisions, etc.

But as well as showing who we are by the way we live and not hiding what we believe in, today it is also essential to be explicit in our announcement. Let's go back to the beginning of our reflection: are there ways, formats and manners which can boost evangelisation today? Undoubtedly there are different scenarios.

I would like to look at three kinds of evangelist. The first is the translator. The second is the Samaritan. The third is the friend. And in all three I will take Ignatius of Loyola as a reference.

#### ***1. Translators***

Translating the Gospel into the categories of every era is essential. At least

## *The Moment of the Witnesses*

if we want a Gospel internalised by people. If we only seek blind and uncritical attachment to a group, then we can do without the translation and, in its place, provide clear-cut advice on rites and guidelines. In this case the person doesn't practice because they understand, but because they have been seduced. However, this is not the best way to help people to grow freely and deeply.

The Gospel is a truth that we believe is valid for all eras. But it is also a truth that must engage in dialogue with the knowledge and perceptions of the men and women of a time, with a specific culture and its battles. When one observes the enormous effort made by Ignatius of Loyola in his book on the Spiritual Exercises to adapt the Gospel to a specific context, it is fascinating to sense, through his words, the society he knows so well: kingdoms, flags, battles, temporary and eternal lords, binaries, the prides and ambitions of his time, futile loves, the sieges of walled cities... It is true that precisely the book of Exercises has many other elements which are more universal in their approach to the human being, and to anthropological elements that remain equally valid today (desire, volition, emotions...).

Translating means knowing the language of a medium and launching oneself into that medium to talk in its categories. Today a lot of what we must try to do lies in speaking in the languages of the contemporary world. To give an example: communication technologies (social media, Apps, web pages, digital content) are the tools most used by people in our contexts of evangelisation. We must keep up to date with them. It's not enough simply to publish online. We must publish online and consider whether or not the contents suit the media – whose dynamics we must be familiar with. But, at the other extreme, it is not simply enough to know its dynamics if these are not evangelical. For example, on the Internet, audiences multiply on the basis of stridency, provocation and scandal. But is that the road to follow for an evangelical message? Progress on the Internet is based on being brief. But how can we combine the briefness of digital messages with the necessary extension of the basic contents of faith? Can you evangelise with tweets? I'm sure you probably can, but there must be criteria, strategy and internal coherence in what you publish.

Another good example would be music. Today we need good Christian music. But that takes time, resources and courage. This said, is music for the convinced or for those we want to attract? Is it for the young or the elderly? The Anglo-Saxon protestant world, for example, is decades ahead of us in evangelising with music, thanks to movements such as the

*José María Rodríguez Olaizola*

Australian Hillsong Worship group, who have become a global phenomenon. And meanwhile, we're still here, as ever embroiled in sterile and nostalgic controversies over organs or guitars, more suited to the 80s and truly miles away from those to whom we would like to take the good news.

To translate is to explain. To explain the meaning and values of many practices, rites, gestures and symbols which have been lost in recent decades. And to demonstrate the consequences these have on the specific lives of people. Today people are thirsty for meaning, for rites and belonging. And therein lies an opportunity. But it is also a responsibility, because, making the most of this disposition, we could fall into the trap of promoting the rite without meaning, the image with no relation to real life, devotion without conversion. Our greatest challenge lies in building bridges between practices and the contemporary world and helping people to cross them time and again.

## ***2. Samaritans***

Today we also evangelise by making the blessings come true. By working for our neighbour. By taking a compassionate approach to a broken and wounded world. Trying to heal its wounds, to provide support to the victims and to show a new side of justice. We evangelise by offering fresh water to quench people's thirst. Solidarity is not something that corresponds only to the Church, but it is one of its treasures and one of its best known and necessary aspects. We must increasingly return to the essence and value of what we do.

When Saint Ignatius was training his acolytes, after class he would send them to the hospitals (which in his context meant homes for the dying, gloomy and rather difficult places). They were obliged to combine their studies with reality, their ideas with the battered lives of many of their peers, so that they would learn more than just the theories. The experience of his first acolytes at hospitals in Venice, and their charity work in Rome in the early days of the Company made them far more credible and appreciated than if they had simply written great treaties on reform of the church.

When talking about the Samaritan Church, we don't consider it to be something which only refers to the aspect most closely related to social and economic questions. Although that is certainly a part of it. We are also talking about caring for people in their deepest, most genuine needs.

In many contexts, the work of the Church institutions is either no

*The Moment of the Witnesses*

longer recognised or is difficult to implement. Perhaps we must cast our eyes back and take another look at why we do what we do. And in that *why*, the Samaritan approach may provide a good guideline. Perhaps we should repeatedly ask ourselves, ‘Who benefits from what we do’? Because it may be that some of the difficulties of acceptance from which we suffer lie in the fact that we offer the answers to the wrong questions, a cure for wounds that people don’t have, while filling our notice boards with announcements for activities that nobody asked us for and only a few actually need; we don’t take time to stop and look at the side of the road, to see what wounds, what helplessness, or what concerns are suffered by those we find there.

Let’s look at an example. Why do we educate? It depends on the context. In places where education is still not a right guaranteed by states, offering the possibility of learning is, in itself, an enormous help. Teaching people to read, to write, opening the door to the future, is an admirable and basic endeavour. That’s why, in many impoverished places and contexts, educating represents the Samaritan’s work to heal a society.

*Jesus wasn’t a man of the masses (sometimes – occasionally – they followed him, while at others they abandoned him). He was much more of a man for personal encounters.*

But the same cannot be said in other contexts. Let’s look at the case of Spain. Here education is free and universal; it is guaranteed by the state. In fact, it almost seems as though we have become superfluous as educators, and there are full-blown debates as to whether we should even be here or not. The reason for us being here cannot therefore be to guarantee education. That argument doesn’t stand up by itself. So why continue? Perhaps to offer the possibility of an education based on Christian ideology – with everything this entails in the different contexts. To defend the freedom of parents to guarantee that education. Because we believe that, thanks to said ideology, we can provide sensitivity, solidity and an opening towards transcendence for our students. However, simply having written these on sheets of paper as our reasons for being here is not enough.

Today we must ask ourselves if we are or not acting like Samaritans, in

*José María Rodríguez Olaizola*

other words, if we are or not responding to our reasons for being here – which used to lie in the need we felt in people. And if not, we must have the courage to start making drastic decisions. Sometimes I think that part of the difficulty we suffer when it comes to evangelisation lies in the fact that we're trying to re-christen corpses, while life awaits us in other places.

### **3. Friends**

Why are *Youtubers* so successful? Because young people see them as one of their own, as people they know, as friends. At the Madrid book fair one of the longest queues was made up of adolescents – with their parents – desperate for the fleeting opportunity to meet their Internet idols. And they were just as young, almost adolescents themselves. Familiarity, immediacy and proximity become a desperate cry in this era when communication is so paradoxically lacking. Those who enjoy most media success, are those who, while addressing thousands of people, give the impression of talking only to you from the settee they're sitting on in a house which somehow becomes yours too.

Jesus wasn't a man of the masses (sometimes – occasionally – they followed him, while at others they abandoned him). He was much more of a man for personal encounters. The Gospels are full of those moments when a conversation, a shared meal or a kind gesture transforms one or more people. His friends spent years on the road with him. Those who started the Church were a tiny community of men and women, with neither authority nor training, but whose personal encounter had changed them.

Again, Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises are not an experience of the masses. Properly understood, they are an accompanied personal process. The guide is a personal companion, someone who must listen as much as they speak, who must understand the person before them, who must understand the dynamics of the person they are guiding. Like Jesus, as an instructor of the first Jesuit generations, Ignatius was not a legislator who reduced everything to a universal norm. His manner was that of someone who, knowing people, treated each one differently. Hence the heart of a different kind of apostolic relationship: Friendship in the Lord.

And this cannot be understood as a friendship simply based on liking the same things, on fondness and getting along well together. It must be a profound friendship born from interest in the other person, from sharing their life stories and time. Today the biggest effort to evangelise must lie in the personal aspect. It means being prepared to meet. To have

## *The Moment of the Witnesses*

conversations and give explanations. And that takes time. Furthermore, the fact that there are only a few of us means the likelihood of needing time, hence the most likely scenario is that today's evangelisation will be a slow endeavour, involving only a few people. I don't think we're talking about the majority or the masses or about a Christian society; instead, we're talking about a society where believers may well be in the minority, a ferment, a yeast in the dough. But a network woven on the basis of personal relations, of serious involvement and of gestating authentic communities.

### **Conclusion**

There are no strategies, as I said in my introduction. There are no recipes or magic formulas which will work in some places and not in others. There are no guaranteed roads to apostolic success. Of course, there may be sellers of miracles who promise full churches if we do what they say. But the fact of the matter is that what people find most attractive, today, are credible people, credible believers, with all of their fragility, but also with all of their shared passion. Today, more than ever, what may work best is the true dedication of persons. A dedication where we ask ourselves, time and again, what we are doing, why and what for. And putting our heart and soul into the effort.