

Giovanni Traettino

The Kingdom of Heaven on Earth

The church's responsibility for the social transformation of nations
The church's responsibility for the moral transformation of nations

“Our Father in heaven... your kingdom come;
Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”
Matthew 6:9-13

Dear brothers,

It is a great joy to be together again, as guests of the beloved pastor Angel Manuel Hernandez Gutierrez. Our thanks to you and to your precious fellowship that is hosting us, the *Iglesia Misiòn Cristiana Moderna*. It was my personal wish to meet here for this year's consultation, because from the very first meeting with Pastor Angel and his fellowship we felt a great affinity between his spirituality and that which we have cultivated over these years. I am therefore delighted that we can meet together here for this nineteenth meeting of AFI.

Welcome and Introduction

I welcome this opportunity, as the Permanent Coordinator of AFI, to give my warm, brotherly and affectionate welcome to all the sisters and brothers who have set aside these days, in some cases sacrificially, to renew our relationships, deepen our fellowship, and reflect together on an issue that we believe is of strategic importance, certainly for our own way forward, but also and more importantly for the progress of the whole church in the 21st century. After last year's reflections on *“The challenges facing the church in the modern world”*, this year our theme is *“The Kingdom of Heaven on earth”*, with particular attention to the *responsibility* of the church for *moral transformation* and for what I believe is in many ways connected to it, *social transformation*.

The whole area associated with these challenges is of particular concern to apostolic ministries, but also affects those of us who find ourselves in positions of leadership or coordination, who are inspirational or influential in the life of the spiritual family to which we belong. This is not always an easy position; among other reasons, because we may – perhaps unconsciously – be conditioned by psychological influences, states of mind, mentalities and inherited theological and cultural traditions, embraced in a simplistic and uncritical manner, which limit our understanding of God's plan and prevent us from having a clear vision of reality.

It can be crucial for our life and ministry to listen, open our eyes and become aware of this reality, because it may be that our certainties, our paradigms, our understanding and our churches are being challenged and are beginning to show their limitations in confronting the reality of the world around us; a world which is increasingly changeable, characterized more and more by powerful processes of opening up ("globalization"), and at the same time by a parallel defensive withdrawal on the part of many social groups, whether ethnic, cultural, political or spiritual.

I am thinking – on the Christian side – of the "spirit" of denominations built in a strongly defensive and "tribal" fashion, or of the "sovereignism" producing worrying new forms of nationalism. I think of the defeatist and escapist theologies which give birth to terrified, pessimistic narratives leading to negative interpretations of the present and visions of the future without depth or hope. These produce resignation and a rejection of responsibility for the "common good" in the present, and a lack of perspective and vision for the future yet to come of the Kingdom of God in the Church and in history.

In preparing for this meeting, I read the contributions of the other speakers and was edified by the positive perspective of faith accompanying their thinking and encouraged by their shared exercise of the crucial virtue of hope for the purposes of God's plan for history and the church. God reigns! Hallelujah!

The role of the Church as a connector

Now, as someone has observed: *“One of the most difficult issues in the study of the Kingdom of God is its relationship to the church.”*¹ And we are here to consider the **function** of *the church as God's instrument to promote social justice and morality*, its role as a connector and an interface. This immediately raises the question of our understanding of the church (its nature and extent, its substance and historical “visibility”) and of its historically “varying” and “variable” levels of faithfulness to its mission to be the *salt and light* of the world (“the church of the saints” or “a holy whore”?). This is a debate that has continued to fascinate Christians throughout the ages, and it is still crucial in our generation. It is of decisive importance for the “progress towards the fullness” of the future of God's purpose for the world and for the contribution that the church is called to make to the success of this strategy.

Kingdom of God, Church and Society

It will be helpful here, as we begin our deliberations, to recall the contribution of the thoughts developed in the first decade of our journey (2000-2010). For this reason I invite you to read the papers available on our website (www.afint.org) from the Consultations in Chile in 2008, Nigeria in 2009 and Italy in 2010.

In Chile we began to examine the theme of *“Kingdom of God, Church and Society”*, continuing with the same theme over the following two years in Nigeria and Italy. It seemed clear to us, as was highlighted by the main contributions in Santiago, that there is a *connection* and *continuity*, a close and deep-rooted relationship, which from a Christian perspective can and must be established between these three realities: the Kingdom of God, the church and society.

I quote:

“The theme of the Kingdom is foundational for the Church and intersects its path towards its fulness; because the path towards

¹ GE Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, The Lutterworth Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 105

fulness coincides with the process of growth and the increase of the Kingdom; and because the fulness is in fact the fulness of the life of the Kingdom, the Kingdom of God fully realized. This is true at the personal level (the person being the habitation of God by the Spirit), at the interpersonal level (the community as the habitation of God by the Spirit), and at the ecological and universal level (the earth and the universe filled with His glory!). By then God will have healed, inhabited and filled with Himself all relationships and the whole creation! A new creature! A new community! A new creation!²

And again:

“In the course of these deliberations... we stumbled across the theme of “*Transformation*”! The subject of *Fullness* and that of the *Kingdom* raise the question, in God's economy, of *Transformation*: transformation of the *individual* Christian and the *Christian community*, and – to the degree that they are transformed, even if partially (though truly!) – that of *society* and of the *land* in which we live.

“All this began from God's insatiable, invincible and irreversible desire, from all time, to live in and possess the heart of man. It is what I like to call – more even than the Gospel of the Kingdom – the *Gospel of Desire*! We must start from the Gospel of Desire in order to understand the *Gospel of the Kingdom*. We must start from the heart of God to understand the heart of the Kingdom. The *Gospel of the Kingdom* is nothing but the *Gospel of the Desire* which God has always had and continues to have, to *enter and possess the heart of man*!

“The *bridge*, the connection between the Gospel of Desire and the Gospel of the Kingdom, is the *Gospel of the Incarnation*!³ God's purpose was to *inhabit* and *experience* man – the new tabernacle (!) –

² Giovanni Traettino, *Kingdom of God, Church and Society*, AFI Santiago, 2008

³ As someone has said: “The Incarnation is the spiritual and theological foundation of commitment in the practical sphere”

from within: a tabernacle no longer made of walls of cloth, wood or stone, but walls of flesh. It was inaugurated by God in Christ (“*Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me*”⁴), and is continued in Christians through the breaking in and indwelling of the Holy Spirit (“*Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you.*”⁵)

“But all this would be incomplete if we did not comprehend that the ultimate purpose of the Gospel of Desire, of the Kingdom and of the Incarnation is *the Gospel of Transformation!* God’s desire has always been the complete recovery of man in order to transform him, *from within*, in his personal life and his relationships, into His own image and likeness!”⁶

The earth and creation

The same plan of redemption and transformation also, naturally, includes the earth and all of creation. So the final outcome of the story will not be – as some believe or appear to believe – *destruction* but, as with the resurrection of Christ, “new heavens and a new earth”: *renewal and transformation!* As it is written: “*Then He who sat upon the throne said, ‘Behold, I make all things new.’*”⁷ And elsewhere: “*creation groans and labors with birth pangs... the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God.*”⁸

The manifestation of God’s children

The manifestation of God’s children! In the “person” of the believer; in the “person” of the church! The Christian inhabited by God and the church inhabited by God are His strategic investment in the future of humanity and of the creation, since in the Christian understanding of history, the “pre-political” dimension of relationship with God and with our brothers precedes and is the foundation of the “political” dimension of the commitment of Christians and the church in society and in the world. The political dimension

⁴ Hebrews 10:5.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 6:19.

⁶ “Welcome” at the AFI Consultation, Lagos 2009

⁷ Revelation 21:5

⁸ Romans 8:23,19

must be rooted and engaged (steeped in, motivated by and practiced in) the workshop of the “pre-political” relationship with God and with others. The transformation of the Christian and the church precedes and is the spiritual foundation of their desirable and possible contribution to the transformation of the *agorà* and of the *polis*; the highly complex and challenging dimension of the city, work, government and the state. To summarize: from the “inner forum” to the “outer” one!

Christian responsibility

From this premise we can understand the need for a renewed awareness of “Christian responsibility” in society and politics: a need founded on the divine logic of the Incarnation as the spiritual and theological foundation of practical commitment. “*I care!*” “Immersion”, so to speak, precedes “fellowship”. The life of God “within” precedes the effectiveness of Christian life “on the outside”. The immersion in Christ of the Christian and the church comes before the effectiveness of the Christian’s relationship to society (the social body) and the state. Commitment in the social and political arena becomes, for the Christian, “*a demanding way of living out the Christian commitment to serving others*”⁹; politics becomes the collective (or social) organization of Christian love (*agape*), a way of extending and giving everyday practicality to the Christian inspiration of love for one’s brothers, for one’s neighbor and for the world; the responsibility to which every Christian is called of seeking the “common good” of the city. As it is written: “*And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace you will have peace.*”¹⁰ And in the Gospels: “*Love your neighbor as yourself!*”

Christ therefore, *the life of Christ* in the Christian, makes *the life of the Christian* possible and effective in the church. Christ, *the life of Christ* in the church, makes *the life of the church* possible and effective in society and in the world. Christ, the *transformation* brought about by Christ in the Christian, makes the *transformation* of relationships in the church possible

⁹ Pope Paul VI

¹⁰ Jeremiah 29:7

and effective. The *transformation* produced by relationships in the church (*and between churches!*) makes the *transforming action* of the church in society and in the world possible and effective.

Delays

The gap between our personal and community experience and the moral and social impact of the Gospel of the Kingdom is explained by our slowness in making and continuing to make room for the government of God in our lives and relationships. Walking “in the flesh” is unfortunately more common than walking in the Spirit! Conflict and division often get the better of the search for unity and reconciliation. The secret remains the same: life in Christ: “*I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without me you can do nothing*”¹¹; and Christian unity: “*that they all may be one, as you, Father, are in me, and I in you; that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. And the glory which you gave me I have given them, that they may be one just as we are one: I in them, and you in me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that you have sent me, and have loved them as you have loved me.*”¹²

The instrument of the church

On this basis, starting from a church that remains vigilant in its relationship with the Holy Spirit (*inner life*) and cultivates *from within* the integrity of its testimony (*holy living*), the church will be able to develop more and more credibly and effectively its function as the primary “agency of the Kingdom”, in its relationship to humanity in general and in the varying manifestations of society particular. The “aroma” of the lives of the disciples and the “atmosphere” of fellowship life will become, like the yeast in dough or a seed of wheat that falls into the earth and dies, a powerful factor in making fertile the life of the “city”. As someone has said: “It’s the essential things that make life worth living.” The “evangelistic example” of the church will

¹¹ John 15:5

¹² John 17:21-23

spread its influence principally, as in Jerusalem, by attraction and imitation. It will in fact have acquired an enduring capacity of *koinonia* and *service*, which are the two main rivers of grace which in this season we can – as an outgoing church – pour into society and the world. So, a “church of fellowship” and a “church of service”.

A church of fellowship

A church of fellowship because it witnesses to the authenticity of our being grafted and rooted in the “God of relationships”; a reflection of the transforming power of the “glory”¹³, the “mindset”¹⁴ and the “Spirit of Christ” thanks to the effectiveness of his presence *in us and among us*. A church that manifests the “continuity” of the life of God in our lives and aims to “infect” and involve our neighbors in our life of fellowship...

A church of service

A church of service! Because it is a witness to the possibility of surrendering our pride to God, of a counter-cultural victory over the selfishness and individualism that characterize our age, the two mortal enemies of social life and the promotion of the “common good”. As someone has called it, “*the church of the apron*”, referring to the apron that Jesus used at the Last Supper while washing his disciples’ feet. “We must react against the idea of the church triumphant, acting as God’s viceroy on earth... and strive to follow the example of Jesus, who stated that he had come to serve.”¹⁵ We must resist every temptation to return to a Constantinian church. As Bonhoeffer wrote from a Nazi prison: “The church is only the church when it exists for others... The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary

¹³ “...the glory which you gave me I have given them, that they may be one just as we are one” John 17:22

¹⁴ “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” Philippians 2:5-7 NIV

¹⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Mich. USA, 1989, 1991.

human life, not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell men of every calling what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others.”¹⁶

The specific calling of AFI

In concluding this reflection, I would like to ask myself and you a question: In response to this theme – “Your kingdom come” – what, if any, is the identifying characteristic of apostolic ministry? More particularly, what is the calling and mandate of AFI? of AFI with its awareness of the “Gospel of the Kingdom” in the church and in relation to the church, as a real, albeit partial, expression of the action and life of the Spirit in the church? Especially in terms of fellowship and service? In fellowship among ourselves and in service to the world and the church?

And as a stimulus to reflection, I think of the words of my dear brother Himitian on the occasion of our first meeting in 2000 in Positano:

“We need to create an international place of reflection, for prayer, for revelation, to hear God and listen to one another. We need communication and we need to know what God is doing in different parts of the world, as well as what is he saying. We need to renew our covenant with God. It is a covenant of faithfulness and loyalty to the revelation of the mystery of Christ; a covenant of integrity, of self-denial, of consecration as well as a covenant of love, respect, humility, companionship and friendship between each other.”

Thank you!

¹⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, New York, Macmillan, 1967, p.211