

Jorge Himitian

Congregation or community?

INTRODUCTION

Today we conclude the activities of the International Apostolic Communion. This apostolic community was founded 23 years ago in Italy. The name of this movement in English is Apostolic Fellowship International (AFI). Each year we choose a country to carry out two activities: an Apostolic Consultation and a Pastors' Conference.

On Wednesday and Thursday, we held our Apostolic Consultation in a hotel in Vitoria, thanks to the organization of our beloved Vince, a member of the AFI Executive Committee.

The AFI is chaired by our beloved Giovanni Traettino, who is with us this morning.

The theme of the Consultation, established in advance, was: CHURCH-COMMUNITY.

This Consultation, attended by apostles and pastors from five continents, was highly impactful. One of the main preachers was our dear brother Carlos Mraida, with whom I have had a deep friendship for over 30 years. We both live in Buenos Aires.

The words he shared were of a high theological, biblical, and, at the same time, prophetic nature.

This morning, I would like to refer to what Carlos shared and highlight some truths that have had a profound impact on me. I am certain that those words mark our destiny, what we must achieve here on earth so that this world may believe that Jesus is the Son of God.

I don't claim to be original in this message, but rather to highlight some of the things Mraida preached and to suggest, based on his message, some lines of pastoral action.

INDIVIDUALISM

We live in a society whose main characteristic is *individualism*. In the last two decades, we have moved towards *hyper-individualism*. And we are rapidly moving towards *wild individualism*, in the words of our brother Carlos.

The selfishness of the human heart makes social coexistence very difficult. Governments and nations cannot find the way, the solution. The center of everyone's life is their own self. Money, pleasure, home, car, business, every activity and effort has a center: the self.

The world's population is growing, and the world's major cities are the places where populations are concentrated. Millions of people live in the same city. However, individuals are increasingly isolated from one another. The loneliness that millions of people suffer is very sad, even though they live together in a city with millions of inhabitants.

There is exacerbated materialism in society. As the Bible says, the root of all evil is the love of money. Greed and unrestrained sex are solely focused on personal satisfaction, ignoring others. Quarrels, violence, and corruption abound. Governments are unable to find a way to appease the masses. The gap between rich and poor is ever widening. The rich are ever richer, and the poor are ever poorer.

This is not the society God dreamed of. The plan God had proposed for humanity since before the creation of the world is diametrically opposed to what we witness in our society today. The plan born in God's heart was for human society to be a true family. That we would love one another, that there would be unity among men, healthy and fraternal relationships. What God had planned was for us all to be his children and that, with God as our Father, we would live as brothers.

But unfortunately, sin entered, and with sin, death. Death means separation. Man was separated from God and separated from his neighbor. And so were born hatred, crimes, wars, theft, greed, adultery, divorce; all different expressions of the selfishness of the fallen human heart.

God loved this world in darkness, this world in sin. And he loved it so much that he sent his Son to change our destiny, to change our hearts, to remove sin from us and eradicate the selfishness rooted in the human heart.

JESUS' CALL TO A RADICAL CONVERSION

Jesus' call to all is: *"Follow me."*

Matthew 16:24:

"Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'"

This call from Jesus to deny ourselves implies the end of selfishness. Taking up the cross and following Jesus means becoming like him, that is, being willing to die for others.

When they asked Jesus what the greatest commandment was, Jesus replied, *"You shall love the Lord with all your heart."* They didn't ask what the second commandment was, but Jesus immediately added, "And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:34-40).

This call from Jesus to a radical conversion aims to remove selfishness from the human heart and transform us, through the power of the Spirit, into men and women like Jesus.

Our Father's eternal purpose is to have a family of many children like Jesus. He wants us to be a family, not simply perfected individuals. Being a family is the consequence of being like Jesus. To the extent that we resemble Jesus, we become a true family, we become a church-community.

What is the church? We have learned, over the years, that the church is not the building where we gather; the church is us. And what are we? We are a family; the family of God; children of God; children of the same Father; therefore, we are brothers. This is our eternal identity:

children of God and brothers to one another.

The apostle Paul gives a very precise description when he speaks in the first person plural in Romans 14:7-8:

"For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself.

*If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Whether we live or whether we die, we are the **Lord's**."*

This is the description of a true Christian. None of us lives for ourselves.

- What is the characteristic of someone who is not in Jesus? - Who lives for himself.
- What, according to Paul, is the characteristic of someone who is born again, who is in Christ, who has experienced a true conversion, who recognizes Jesus as Kyrios? - Who no longer lives for himself.

Those who are not in Christ say: *"All I have is mine, for me, and for my benefit. My life, my wealth, my time, my abilities—everything is mine, for me, and for my benefit."*

Jesus, on the other hand, says: *"Whoever of you does not renounce all that he possesses cannot be my disciple."* (Luke 14:33)

This complete Gospel transforms us into disciples. What is a disciple?

- A student. The goal of a student is to learn. What should he learn?
- To be like Jesus. A disciple wants to be like his master.

In 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 and 17, Paul explains the same thing in different words.

"For the love of Christ compels us, because we hold this view:

that if one died for all, then all died;

And he died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves,

but for him who died and was raised for them.

...

So if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away; behold, all things have become new.

The love of Christ impels us. What a verb! It is very ancient. What does it mean to impel? It obliges us without forcing us. It is a moral, spiritual obligation.

How many died? Everyone. And he died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. Jesus died so that you might no longer live for yourself.

- We died to five things, and the last is the greatest:
- We died to sin (Romans 6:2).
- We are dead to the old man, or to the flesh (Romans 6:6 and Galatians 5:24).
- We are dead to the law (Galatians 2:19-20).

- We are dead to the world (Galatians 6:14).
- We are dead to ourselves; that we may no longer live for ourselves, but for him who died and was raised for us (2 Corinthians 5:14-15).

In verse 17, Paul says:

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation;

the old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new."

Before my conversion, I was very argumentative. If there was a fight in the street, one of the two was Jorge Himitian. I was very rebellious with my parents, a liar, a blasphemer, a foul-mouthed thief. Christ changed my life. Hallelujah! But the most important change that occurs in a convert is not that they no longer commit adultery, steal, or swear, etc. The most important change is that they no longer live for themselves but for Christ. I know many "converts" or "semi-converts" who have abandoned moral and visible sins, but who continue to be at the center of their lives. Everything they have continues to be theirs. Every effort is for them. But God's word teaches us exactly the opposite: that **"...from him, and through him, and to him are all things"** (Romans 11:36).

If conversion doesn't strike the core, it isn't a complete conversion. The core is my death. It's denying myself, taking up my cross, and following Jesus. **Losing my life to gain it.**

EMBODYING THE WORD

Jesus said to his disciples: "You are the salt of the earth... you are the light of the world." Dear brothers and sisters, we become salt and light only if we put the Sermon on the Mount into practice. This is the fundamental catechism, the teaching of the Kingdom. To the extent that we put into practice what the Sermon on the Mount says, we will become the light of the world. But if the individualism that dominates society persists in the Church, salt has lost its flavor and is no longer good for anything except being despised by men.

Alexia Salvatierra (academic dean of the Latin Center and associate professor of mission and global transformation at Fuller Theological Seminary), in her article "The Complete Gospel and Community Organization," published by the Lausanne Movement, writes: "When my daughter was in high school, she brought home a friend who had grown up in a family with no religious affiliation or formation. The girl said to me, 'I have a certain interest in Jesus, but only if He really makes a difference in the world.' She wanted to know Jesus if that knowledge would have a meaning in making the world a better place."

Many of the nations' young people find themselves at this point. Politicians and government leaders have already exhausted their various theories for changing the world. All those theories have failed. Neither the right nor the left...

Jesus continues to tell us: "You are the light of the world." We have the solution: the Gospel can change the world, but first it must be incarnated in the Church. The Word became flesh. If we have good theories, good concepts of the kingdom, a 100% biblical theology, but all this remains in the air and is only theory, we have no solution to offer the world. We must incarnate the Word.

If the individualism, selfishness, greed, and lust that prevail in the world are perpetuated in the Church, there is no hope for humanity.

THE EXAMPLE OF A CHURCH-COMMUNITY

Let's move on to chapter 2 of Acts. Let's see what effects the incarnate Gospel has on society.

Acts 2:42

"And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers."

I confess that for a long time I interpreted this text as meaning "to continue in the teaching" meant following the sequence of lessons 1, 2, 3, and so on, until they were all completed. It's good that we do so. But, listening to Carlos this week, I realized that "to continue in the teaching" means, rather, putting into practice the teaching imparted. Isn't this what Jesus meant when he said, "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you"? (Matthew 28:20).

So let's look at what happened in that church as a result of having incarnated the Word.

Acts 2:44-47:

"All who believed were together and had all things in common. They sold their possessions and goods and distributed the proceeds to all, as any had need. And continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their meals with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who should be saved."

THIS IS NOT A SIMPLE CONGREGATION, IT IS A TRUE COMMUNITY, A FAMILY. It is the result of preaching a complete Gospel, a radical conversion, and perseverance in doctrine. The love of God occupied the center of their hearts, and this put an end to individualism and transformed these three thousand individuals into a true community.

What a challenge we face! To be Church, to be family. And not simply a congregation.

Many times we are "brothers at Mass, but not at the table." Here they were brothers at Mass and at the table. They visited each other, ate together in their homes. They were a true family. The poor no longer cried. No child went to bed hungry. Those who lived isolated or alone now had a family.

Dear brothers, the Church that lives the kingdom is God's answer to this society sick with individualism.

Our goal is to be like Jesus. But what is Jesus like? He was the only son of God, heir of everything, material and immaterial. Perhaps Jesus said to the Father: "All right, Father, I will die for the sin of the world. They will convert, their sins will be forgiven, but keep in mind that I am the only son; this is non-negotiable. It's fine to save them from hell, welcome them into heaven, but I am and will be your only son and the heir of everything." Was this what Jesus said? On the contrary.

Jesus made us children of the Father, giving us the same status as he had. He made us heirs of God and co-heirs with him of everything. *He made us brothers in the Mass and at the table.* Our goal is to be like him.

OUR IDENTITY

Our identity comes from the Father. Our current identity originates from eternity past. It is what the Father dreamed, desired, and decided within himself since before the creation of the world.

We are not children of God by nature, but creatures of God. We were formed from the dust of the earth. The only Son of God by nature is Jesus. For this reason, He is called the Only Begotten. He has the same nature as God. We, having been taken from the dust of the earth, were chosen by the Father of Jesus before the foundation of the world to be holy and without blemish. In love, He predestined us to be adopted as His children through Jesus Christ.

Our present identity comes from eternity past. We are adoptive children of God. But so that this adoption is not a mere protocol, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, through whom we cry out, "Abba, Father." We can call Him "Father" with the same Spirit as Jesus. We are adopted children, but because His Spirit is in us, we have been made partakers of the divine nature.

Our present identity comes from future eternity. What will we be in eternity? – The family of God; children of God, brothers and sisters to one another. In heaven, we will not be pastors or apostles. The most honorable title we can have is that of being children of God.

What will we be in future eternity? Will anyone there be hungry? Will there be poor people? Will there be sin? Will there be tears? Will there be Pentecostals, Baptists, Assembly of God members, or Community members? No, that is our present identity.

John Wesley once had a dream. He saw a vision of hell and then of heaven. An angel led him to the gates of hell. Seeing Dante's picture of hell, he was horrified and asked:

"Are there Catholics here?" "Yes, many," the angel replied.

"And are there Anglicans?"

"Yes, many," he said.

"And are there Baptists?"

"Yes, many."

Since he was the founder of Methodism, he fearfully asked, "And are there Methodists?"

"Yes, there are Methodists," he replied.

Then the angel led him to the gates of heaven. And he asked,

"Are there Catholics here?"

"No, none."

"And Anglicans?"

"No."

And fearfully he asked, "So they are all Methodists?"

"No, there are no Methodists here."

"And who are these?"

The answer was, "They are those washed by the blood of the Lamb."

I'll tell you another dream. I don't remember if it was John Wesley or someone else from that era who dreamed it. The fact is, the angel also took him to the gates of hell, and there he saw a very long table with millions and millions of people sitting on both sides of it. They were all weak, thin, rickety, emaciated, sad, and hungry. There was plenty of food on the table, every kind of food, but they were starving. "What's happening?" he asked. And the angel said to him, "Look carefully." And he saw that everyone there had stiff elbows and straight arms, unable to bend them. That's why they couldn't put food in their mouths.

Then the angel took him to the gates of heaven. And there he saw again a long table full of delicious food. Everyone seemed healthy, cheerful, as if at a real feast. "Ah, now I understand," thought the man, "these people must not have stiff elbows, that's why they can eat well." But the angel said to him, "No, no, look carefully." Their elbows were stiff, too. So? When they began to eat, he watched with amazement as each one took the food from the table and brought it to the mouth of the brother in front of them. How wonderful! This is the Church. And this is how the Church in the world must be. No more poor people, no more suffering, tears are dried, the sad are consoled. The kingdom of God has come on earth!

The hope of the nations is Christ in us. He in us is the hope of glory. If the individualism and materialism that exist in the world persist in the Church, it is because we are preaching an incomplete conversion and are not persevering in the teaching, in the doctrine of the Lord. Our true challenge is to be a true family, a true community.

CONCLUSION

I will read the last passage, Isaiah 2:2-3.

"In the latter days the mountain of the Lord's house will be established as chief among the mountains, and will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will run to it.

Many peoples will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; he will teach us his ways, and we will walk in his paths.' For out of Zion will go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem."

It's amazing! There is hope for the nations!

I really like the first word that begins this verse: "It will come to pass." This assures us that what the Word says will be fulfilled. Hallelujah!

I ask myself: what is the house of the Lord? - The church.

A church that perseveres in the Lord's teachings will be exalted among the nations. The nations will exhaust all their resources, their theories, their ideologies, their economies, and nothing will work out. Eventually, the nations, tired of their repeated failures, seeing the church as an alternative community, seeing the church as a true family, will come and say: "Come, let us go up to the church, and she will teach us the secret she holds, and we will walk in her ways."

Do you believe it? I believe it too. And if you believe it, you can proclaim with me: It will happen! It will happen! Declare it. Let Satan himself hear it.

CONCLUSION FOR PASTORS

Dear brother pastors, We must chart new lines of pastoral action. What we have done so far is not enough. First of all, we pastors must become a model of what we want to see in our disciples.

Blessed are all those who are faithful in giving their tithes to the Lord. But simply giving tithes is not enough. The tithe is the minimum. We must develop a ministry closer to the grassroots. We must go out and visit our brothers' homes. We must understand their situation in every way. Not only their spiritual situation, but also their family, work, and financial situation. How many children do they have? Is the house very small or very poor? We need to conduct a census of all the families in the congregation. We pastors alone will not be able to do this. We will need deacons, assistants, and servants.

We must have a new vision of our pastoral ministry. Our goal is to become a true family, where there are no needs of any kind.

Our next steps:

- Preach the Gospel of the Kingdom
- Lead those we evangelize toward complete conversion
- Baptism must mean dying and rising again so that we no longer live for ourselves but for the Lord and our brothers.
- We must put the doctrine into practice in the power of the Holy Spirit, otherwise it is impossible.
- "All together and from house to house." Small groups are essential, and through them we can understand each person's situation.
- We must have a complete understanding of the situation of the sheep. Create activities that help us be a family. Develop programs to expand the homes of poor brothers, especially those with many children.

We need a comprehensive plan. We must proceed slowly, but with a long-term plan.

We must develop housing plans for some families. Or for expanding their homes. Not us pastors, but those brothers who have the ability to do so. We must involve brother entrepreneurs, professionals with the ability to start initiatives, plan, and raise funds.

We must promote human development at all levels. Teach skills, teach administration. Help start small businesses. Create a fund for intelligent loans. Offer counseling and training. Otherwise, some brothers and sisters will be condemned to remain forever poor and live on the church's alms. They need help to escape poverty and regain their dignity as human beings. They need to learn a good trade, find a job to support their families with dignity. We must offer counseling and training.

Most people in society don't understand our religious services. Our services are wonderful, but they don't understand them. They don't even understand our sermons. But there is one thing that society understands very well: our good works.

Jesus said: "Let your light shine before men, so that, seeing your good works, they may glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

Then they will come to understand our services and become worshipers. Later, they will understand that Jesus died for our sins. But that's not the entrance door; the entrance door is good works, humanitarian aid, and ensuring that there are no poor among us.

Neighbors, relatives, and those helped by the church will say: these are true Christians. Many think the church is a place where the pastor lives in opulence, demanding tithes and offerings from people, and this scandalizes and offends them. But if the world sees that **the**

church blesses, helps, favors, and gives to people. If people see that the church is not made to receive, but to give, then the world will believe.

Carlos Mraida sounded the trumpet. He spoke a prophetic word. He indicated the direction we must go. And if we can embody this word, there will be hope for the nations.

Jorge Himistian