
Giovanni Traettino**The challenges facing the church in Europe today**

First of all, I would like to thank Pastor Jorge Himitian for suggesting that, in the context of our discussions on “the future of AFI”, we should hold a “consultation” on the challenges facing the church in the world today. “Thinking together” continues to be one of the most stimulating and fruitful experiences of our journey together. And we need to ask ourselves questions about the future role of our “shared calling” in the context of the challenges facing the church in the world we find ourselves in. Furthermore, I believe it is useful to approach the question from a perspective that is closer to the various geographical and cultural contexts in which we find ourselves working. There are differences and peculiarities characterising and differentiating our various societies. At the conclusion of this process, we should have a clearer understanding.

In the last two AFI meetings, I have already suggested some thoughts about Europe and the future of AFI. This time I shall add some further considerations, in the hope that they may help us to concentrate our attention increasingly on what, in the final analysis, I believe is most important for our future progress.

Come, Holy Spirit!

On the subject of Europe, last year I made the striking discovery of what seems to me a most interesting “discussion workshop”, which has been set up at the Theological Faculty of the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. The course is entitled “Re-imagining the Church of the 21st Century”. Taking as its starting point the invocation of the Holy Spirit (“Come, Holy Spirit!”), serious attention is paid to the “new things” that have burst upon the scene of church life during the last century, significantly altering its appearance, giving rise to new hope in many believers, encouraging expectations of renewal and making it possible to imagine a new future for the church. The context of these deliberations – spiritual and highly qualified – is fundamentally that of the historic churches – Catholic, Anglican, Reformed, Orthodox – with a contribution from major representatives of spiritual movements closer to the evangelical, ecumenical and charismatic streams. We have taken note of the involvement of men and movements such as Holy Trinity Brompton and the Alpha Course, Taizé, Enzo Bianchi and Bose, the Archbishop of Westminster, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Father Raniero Cantalamessa and the Focolarini. The participants also include, as welcome guests and interlocutors, Pentecostal pastors. This is a pioneering experiment, in a fruitful and creative climate, which is truly on the frontier. Together with Pastor Ernest Bretscher we

were able to take part in last year's session, and have been invited to make a contribution to this year's too.

Signs of something new

You are all aware by now of the other "novelty", which has accompanied us for three years now. As a consequence of the relationships formed between Pastors Himitian, Mraida and Saracco and Cardinal Bergoglio at Buenos Aires, on 28 July 2014, after the latter was elected Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis came to visit our fellowship, to ask forgiveness for the part played by Catholics in the persecution of Italian Pentecostals and to start a new chapter in the climate of relationships between the Church of Rome and the Pentecostal world. How often has my mind gone back with gratitude to the prophetic friendship last century between David Du Plessis and Pope John!

In a few days we shall witness another "novelty". Together with numerous other evangelical and Pentecostal pastors from various parts of the world, we shall commemorate the first, historic Pentecost vigil with Pope Francis, to celebrate our shared origins, our DNA, our shared "Pentecostal" heritage, at the Circus Maximus.

We shall also remember our common roots in the blood of the martyrs, both those of ancient times and those whose lives are taken day by day in various parts of the world, just because they are Christians.

I would also like to recall – to remain within my own limited experience – the meeting that took place at Athens in June 2015 with Archbishop Ieronymos II, the head of the Greek Orthodox Church in Greece, and some of his assistants. We were invited to meet him in his office in Athens – the first time in history that a head of the Orthodox Church of Greece had welcomed an evangelical pastor. We prayed together and our meeting was much blessed. We have kept in touch in order to allow the Lord to make our relationship fruitful. Their meeting (between Francis and Jeronimos) at Lesbos was to some degree helped by this contact.

Spiritual streams

I would add that during the last century, alongside episodes such as those just cited, what can only be called "streams of life and spirituality" have watered the soil of Europe and refreshed the church – the church without any adjective, the "great" church. I am thinking of the biblical and evangelical movement, with its recovery of the primacy and centrality of the Word of God, the rediscovery of the power and simplicity of the Gospel; that of the initial proclamation (the kerygma) and the apostolic teaching (the didachè). I think of the fellowship movements (koinonia) inspired by the prayer of John 17 ("That they may all be one"). I think of all those who, in their desire to go back to the spirit and the freshness of the early church, have rediscovered the first chapters of Acts, the church of Jerusalem. Today I meet so many believers who have been made fruitful by these spiritual movements, who pray and work for friendly encounters, for brotherly dialogue and for unity among Christians. I think of the serving movements (diakonia) that, inspired by the spirit of Christ, have

dedicated their lives to the weakest and the outcasts. And I think of the great and variegated Pentecostal and charismatic movement that has brought Christ to millions of people throughout the world and revived and renewed the lives of millions of nominal Christians. Here is a range of movements and spiritual streams that are increasingly tending to converge, to influence one another and to intertwine. They are giving rise to a rich spiritual chemistry which, once launched, cannot fail to bear fruit in the new season that is beginning, cannot fail to make both the church and the future fruitful.

The virtue of hope

So something is going on! There is new hope! There are clear signs of openness and new developments for the future of the church, in Europe too. Underground, like subterranean rivers, there are pressures for renewal, reformation and unity which must surely bear fruit in due season. God's preferred style is hiddenness, like the seed that falls into the ground or the leaven, the salt... The processes, even in our own difficult country of Italy, are under way. In the last century the preparation of the ground and the sowing of the seed began... As we have already seen, various spiritual movements, often across church boundaries, have emerged unexpectedly, have been raised up. The old paradigms are being challenged! I am still thinking of the hopes raised by the birth of the ecumenical movement, the surprise of Vatican II, the powerful waves caused by the birth and tumultuous development of the Pentecostal movement. And again, of the appearance on the world scene of outstanding men and women: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John XXIII, Paul VI, Chiara Lubich, Basilea Schlink, Roger Schultz, Martin Luther King, Teresa of Calcutta, Carlo Maria Martini.

Is this to be a new era?

We must however observe that, alongside the positive signs, there are others that are questionable or undeniably negative. But then, has not the course of history always been like that? Undoubtedly, the challenges facing Christians here in Europe today are far from negligible. They are the same ones facing every European citizen.

They include the political and economic spheres, bureaucracy and the administration of justice, in a regrettable context of creeping corruption which is eroding the moral fabric of society, particularly in some of the countries of Southern Europe. The price paid is enormous, and falls especially on the weaker sections of society. Poverty, even here in Europe, is increasing at a rate we thought belonged in the past. And beside these problems, which are essentially "material", we have to remember – as someone has observed – the numerous powerful altars erected by modernity. And yet – hoping as it were against hope – I somehow believe that what has taken place in the last century is preparing a 'new era', a *kairòs* (a particular time) of new acceleration in the process of people returning to God, of rapprochement between Christians and of a new openness, a new ability to listen to the

world, including Europe, in view of the realisation of that ‘fulness’ which is God’s dream from all eternity.

I personally believe that political commitment and action are important. Somebody has called this the highest form of charity. And I think that every Christian and every Christian fellowship should take to heart “the common good”, the wellbeing of the “city”. But I am still more deeply convinced that, in order to change our cities, the most important and strategic level lies in the dimension that comes before politics, in both the “pre-political” and the “personal” spheres. I mean the building up of individuals and of communities. These are the “containers” that take priority in God’s eyes, they are God’s gifts to mankind. These are the “agencies” in which right from the start He chose to invest, and through which He still wants to manifest himself for the healing of the land and the redemption of mankind.

Basic principles and essentials

So then, there is hope! Years ago, the Cardinal Archbishop of Florence Silvano Piovanelli gave a good answer to someone who asked about his expectations for this millennium. He replied that it will be an epoch in which there will be a return to the basic principles of Christianity. Father Raniero Cantalamessa, too, likes to repeat that God has given evangelicals the gift of going back to basics. “Foundational principles” and “basics”. These are two sorts of values with which we evangelicals should find ourselves very much at home. I believe that they are the ingredients of the “prophecy” entrusted to our “side” to stimulate and bring new life to the historic churches, especially the Church of Rome. We need to go back to first principles and re-emphasise the essentials, even among ourselves, paying particular attention to the individual and the community.

The individual and the community

With regard to the first of these – the individual – we know that, on the positive side, this was and still is the greatest contribution made by the Protestant and Evangelical tradition. Today however we must once again raise the standard of revival with its call to holiness. In the context of various “backslidings”, we need a new stimulus towards holiness. Regarding the second element, community, we need to enrich our “heritage”: in my opinion, within our tradition we still need to think afresh and recover this dimension.

There is an interesting new book by the American Orthodox writer Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, subtitled “A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian World”. It is a stimulus and at the same time a challenge to recover in this world the value of the local church, the experience of community. Christ for the individual, and the Trinity first of all for community. Afterwards come all the fundamental truths. It is all well preserved in the excellent summing-up of the basic Creeds: the Apostolic Creed and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. The indwelt person; the indwelt community. It might seem a small thing, as we face the challenges of a highly complex and enormously expanded world, a globalised civilisation. But I believe these are the instruments – the humble yet fundamental instruments – that,

made alive by Christ. This year marks the 300th anniversary of the beginning of the Revival in Europe (Geneva, 1817). “We find ourselves at Geneva in 1817. The theology students at the Académie, still Calvinist by tradition but not in doctrine, are in a long-standing crisis: their professors’ teaching, resulting from a rationalistic mentality, is out of tune with the feelings of their generation, born out of Romanticism: to be a Christian does not just mean living a virtuous life, but also experiencing spiritual renewal...” - Giorgio Tourn, “1517, 1817, 2017, fra Riforma e Risveglio”, Riforma, March 2017.

“Rod Dreher argues that the way forward is actually the way back – all the way to St. Benedict of Nursia. This sixth-century monk, horrified by the moral chaos following Rome’s fall, retreated to the forest and created a new way of life for Christians. He built on principles of order, hospitality, stability, and prayer. His spiritual centers of hope were strongholds of light throughout the Dark Ages, and saved not just Christianity but Western civilization” – Rod Stiger, *The Benedict Option*, Sentinel, New York, 2017. From the Preface.

And the Trinity, can once more in human history take on and defeat the great challenges which today’s reality is facing us.

The mission of AFI

A final consideration, concerning – in this context – the nature and calling of AFI. AFI is an International Apostolic Fellowship. A fundamental part of its ethos is its relational approach, in the conviction that this is the root nature of God, the DNA of His fellowship. Relationships, relationships, relationships! This is why its ministers, and especially apostolic ministers, are themselves called to be men on the frontier, bridge-builders, ministers of reconciliation. And AFI is called to operate over the moats and in the cracks that have formed primarily – but not exclusively – between the various evangelical and Pentecostal families; and then to take possession of new territory for Christ, continually drawing together and creating relationships, in every sphere, with other ministers who have the same heart and the same passion for unity; first incarnating, and then promoting ever more clearly in people the life and ways of Christ, building and increasing Fellowship.

In this process we need to get free, to the extent that we become aware of them, of all that is left in us of vanity, pride and independence, and to practise and promote everywhere a spirit of listening, service and unity, investing our time and resources first and foremost in relationships with other apostolic ministries. And together with them – men called by God – to influence and orient, by both attraction and imitation, new generations of disciples and new and old fellowships, bringing them into relationships of brotherly love and fruitful mutual acceptance. In the spiritual desert of our time, we must always keep as our first priority the building of safe-haven fellowships and holy people.

“So then, no more boasting about human leaders! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God” 1Cor3:21-23.5

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(trans. Geoffrey Allen)