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Koinonia

Reading: Ac 2:41-47 - The church in Jerusalem and Jn17:21-23

Dear brothers and sisters,

Twenty-one years on from the AFI gathering at São Paulo in 2002, it is with joy and deep gratitude that I welcome you to the inauguration, here in Vitoria (Brazil), of our 23rd Consultation. I am still grateful to the Lord for inspiring the late pastor Pierre Truschel to organize that Conference in Grenoble (it was in 1999), at which those of us who at Positano in 2000 were part of the initial nucleus of this “koinonia”, first met one another. And yes, I say “koinonia” because this was the initial inspiration, this is the heart of the relationships we wanted to live out and experience in this “Fellowship”. We had a vision and devised a project of *apostolic koinonia* which would give greater breadth to our understanding of the role and responsibility of the united apostolic ministry and which would fertilize the life and future of the church. With a sense of gratitude I think I can say today that in these twenty-plus years we have actually experienced, to a greater or lesser extent, but *in a real* even if *partial way* – and it has been beautiful – “something” of what the Lord had made us dream of. So there is hope, I believe! And we need to move forward!

The mystery of God and the church

There have been many themes and topics which we have reflected on and explored over the years. But the one reflected in our Mission Statement certainly remains fundamental, arising as it does from the revelation of our God and of the church “created” by God (in his own image) as a mystery of love and supernatural relationships.

Fragmentation

Today, faced with a growing, increasingly extreme individualism and the apparently unstoppable process of fragmentation of the church, we intend to reflect on the theme of the “Church as Community”, having chosen the combination “*Church-Community*” (“Church *hyphen* Community”), signifying the intimate connection, the quality of the relationships postulated for Christians and for churches in the Word of God, “*the Father from whom every family takes its name [identity]*”¹, for his entire “spiritual family”. On other occasions over the years, although from different perspectives, we have discussed this subject. At this time, and in view of the radicalization of “polarizations”, which in turn derives from that fragmentation, we felt it was necessary to try to go to the heart of this trend which is truly pathological; as Pastor Mraida (“*Individualism and Community*”) and Pastor Paulo Borges jr (“*From Me to Us*”) have done so excellently.

A neglected aspect

In this introduction of mine, I thought I would try to touch on an aspect that is “rarely dealt with”, but which increasingly seems to me to be at the heart and origin of these difficulties of ours.

¹ Eph 3:14

“Happy is he who can know the causes of things,” as someone has said. And someone else: “The end depends on the origin”. This aspect has to do, in my opinion, with the revelation (followed by the understanding) of the nature and fundamental identity of God; of life and the relational dynamics that animate the depths of the Triune God who revealed Jesus Christ to us! Hence also comes the understanding of the nature and identity of the church.

A God of Relationships

Now, as I read the Scriptures, the conviction has matured in me more and more that at the heart of the nature and identity of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – lie “relationships”. That is, that our God is a God of relationships. We could say *a God-Community* [Koinonia]. He himself is Relationship! In my opinion, this is what the apostle John means when, in 1Jn 4:8, he writes “God is love”. In short, a God of communion. In His deepest identity and existence, love. That is to say, a God who, even before loving, is in himself (I/You/He) love. Because in Him, being (“*I am who I am*”) precedes doing. He *is*, before *doing*. He is love first *in himself*, in the movement and dynamics of love that are active in him. Then, coming out of himself, he loves... he clearly shows the desire to love and to be loved.

The fellowship in Jerusalem

The fellowship in Jerusalem, the church of the apostles, was a small insignificant group facing the giants of its time (tradition, culture, religion, political power, etc.) without complexes, entrusting itself to the strength and joy of the Gospel. “*It was not mass success – as Cardinal Martini wrote – that characterized the first Christians, but an incisive penetration of the mass*”. However, this community is a reflection and symbol of the Trinity that lives in it. For at Pentecost it is the Trinity itself, through the Holy Spirit, which is poured into their hearts – Rom 5:5. Now they are *immersed* in God (baptism) and *inhabited* by God (Pentecost). And it is the *God-Fellowship* which, *from within, enables* them to express grace, mutual love, fellowship.² That is, on the foundation of the Trinity (“*Do you not recognize that Jesus Christ is in you?*” – 2Cor13:5) and with the thrust and the driving force of the Trinity within, they find themselves *communities of love and koinonia*, learning to welcome one another and relate as brothers and sisters.

The church before the church

As someone has said, *the Trinity is the church before the church*, which is thus “conceived” and already present at the heart of the Trinity, and “poured into” and “generated in” the heart of man, to inhabit and “animate” it with the same “circular movement of love” which binds *together* the three persons of the Trinity. This was my experience on the day of my conversion. Together with the Lord, this “community” entered my heart! And I immediately experienced a supernatural, unexpected and surprising love for my brothers. A confirmation of the new life. In fact, it is written: “*We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers*” – 1Jn 3:14.

Pentecost

On the same wavelength, but several years later, came the effect of “my Pentecost”. A new overflowing experience of God’s love. A sudden, astonishing repetition, with an experience of

² “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”
2Cor 13:13

supernatural enlargement and extension of his love within me; of my love as a consequence, this time for the whole body of Christ, for all the brethren (Eph 3:14-21).³ Therefore, from the “wounded” heart of God to the “pierced” heart of man – Acts 2:37. From my heart (as a Christian), now inhabited by God, to my brother’s heart. To ignite, activate and nourish in my inner man the same dynamic of love that moves the inner life of God. And here my vocabulary becomes inadequate. For *Him, the Lord*, to activate – how can we define them? - “covenant relationships”? In any case, “*love relationships*” of the same nature and quality as those by which they are generated and nourished. The relationships of love and covenant that bind the Trinity together. Their strength and resilience is intimately connected to the “mystery of unity” which eternally holds God together (“One”) and is called to undergird and keep together Christians, Christian marriages and the unity of the church. “*This mystery is great. I say this of Christ and of the church*” – Eph 5:32. It is this “fellowship” that is the foundation of our fellowship with the Lord and with our brothers and sisters, preceding and nourishing it.

Our ability comes from God⁴

So then, the matrix, foundation and driving force (initiative) of this dynamic of love is the love of God itself! That Love lived in the Trinity, expressed and revealed in the life of Christ, poured out and made active in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. It is the source from which to draw, which makes us capable of loving God, loving our neighbor, loving our brothers and sisters. In short, it is the love of God that enables us to love God, to love our neighbor, to love our brothers and sisters.

In substance, it is a matter of rediscovering the truth of the very Presence of God the Trinity in our hearts. Or rather, better, in our bodies! To become more and more aware of the reality of this mystery. To learn how to activate and cultivate this relationship in an intimate and profound way. To allow the “Communion of God” to inhabit our relationships. This spirituality will be able to save us. This spirituality will save us! We need revelation. Let’s pray. We need the Revelation of the communion that is God, and to experience God. This spirituality will be able to save us if we welcome it as fundamental for and in our lives. If it becomes for us a daily and precious experience of love.

I conclude with a poem that has left a deep impression on my heart: The author, Chiara Lubich, founder of the Focolare Movement, was deeply fascinated by the mystery of the Trinity and considered its revelation and experience as crucial for unity and love among Christians.

The Trinity within me
 The Trinity within me!
 The abyss within me!
 The immensity within me!
 The abyss of love within me!
 The Father that Jesus announced to us
 within me!
 The Word!
 The Holy Spirit, which I want always

³ ...that you, being rooted and established in love, **18** may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, **19** and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” Eph 3:14-21

⁴ 2Cor 3:3-5

to possess to serve the Work, within me!
I ask for nothing better.
I want to live in this abyss,
lose myself in this sun,
live with Eternal Life.
So? To prune the outward life
and live in that within.
To the degree that I cut off communications
with the outside,
to that degree I speak with the Trinity
that is within me.⁵

Giovanni Traettino

⁵ 1Diario del 22.5.1972, cit. in «Gen's», 29 (1999), 1, p.

Carlos Mraida

Individualism and community

For this reason, I kneel before the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God

(Ephesians 3:14-19).

My approach to the topic I have been asked to address is theological. I am not a professional theologian, but rather a pastor. I have received theological training, for which I am grateful, but my pastoral work has allowed me to see in the life of the church and in the lives of individuals some deficiencies in our theological statements and therefore in our practices. So, I approach the topic not with the technical rigor that a theologian would, but from a pastoral concern. Because I believe that the problem of individualism, which threatens the communal life of the church, is not only in the world, but also in the church, based on what we believe and teach.

In 2008, in my presentation at AFI, I quoted several authors who defined the culture of that time. Luc Ferry classified it as the era of "ultra-individualism." Pascal Bruckner baptized it as "super-individualism," and American sociologists like Lash called it "narcissistic." Lipovetsky had nicknamed it the "second individualist revolution" to describe the transition from limited individualism that inaugurated the 18th century to total individualism. "According to Touraine, it is not a matter of seeking the meaning of the world, but the meaning of 'my' life. The system has imposed the model of personalization of articles (customized) to increase the impression of 'being someone,' to make us believe how much we are worth. The brand is not imposed but cooperates in making the 'self'; companies do not pressure us to spend for their benefit, but to invest, above all, in ourselves. In politics, it is no longer a matter of waving a specific and strong ideology, but of accommodating the voter's request. In the new highly pragmatic psychotherapy, one gives up prescribing a change in the client's behavior if such correction bothers them; it is better to resort to drugs. It costs firms four or five times more to attract a new customer than to retain the one they have, so above all, it is about not scaring them away... There is no longer talk of social classes, but only of lifestyles. The class struggle has been replaced by the struggle to be oneself, and the struggle for revolution has continued with the desire to be oneself."⁶

As we can all see, in these 15 years, the acceleration of the advance of individualism in our global culture has been brutal. The current world mutilates the person in their openness to others, thus causing a growing dissolution of social bonds. "It is common to retreat into a fictitious world of

⁶ Carlos Mraida, "Iglesia, Reino y Sociedad", AFI, 2008.

desire and dissatisfaction that distances people from a fruitful path of encounter with the other, with reality, with life. There is a deep desire for connection, but at the same time a tremendous fear of commitment, involvement, being limited, or harmed by the other⁷. Individualism centered the human being in a narcissistic way, preventing them from the possibility of loving and having a transcendent relationship with Love."

Parallel to this, the individual lives in fear of disappearing in the "collective" and desperate for the lack of community. They are anxious to avoid being homogeneous, while at the same time suffering from the loneliness and weight of the cult of the self.

But what is coming is an even greater growth of this savage individualism, impossible to measure. I will call it Individualism 3.0, because with Internet 3.0 and virtual reality, the individualistic exacerbation will take unimaginable forms. Through virtual reality, the system will try to make the individual believe that they do not need anyone else. They will be able to have more satisfying sexual sensory experiences than those they can have with another person because they can be programmed according to the consumer's preferences. They will also be able to have customized "spiritual" sensations. Each person will be able to create their own cult according to their individual desires. Not only can we already choose to worship with the music we like, listen to our favorite preacher, and give online with a cellphone, but we will also be able to add the sensation of experiencing angelic manifestations. In this way, no established church cult can compete at a sensory level with what each individual can program.

Obviously, this way of life goes against the essence of the church, which is essentially a community of faith.

The difficulty of the challenge

The great challenge of individualism as a society and as a church is that it is so deeply rooted and naturalized in our cognitive architecture that we are not even aware of its dangers. It is so deeply embedded in the fabric of our Western consciousness that it is part of our way of thinking and therefore it is difficult for us to critically visualize it. One of the apostolic tasks of our time is to unmask this reality that opposes the essence of the Gospel. We need to teach the pastors of our nations to discern the manifestations and expressions of individualism in preaching, teaching, and ecclesial practices. In this way, we can proclaim a countercultural gospel and develop a rich and growing community life that can be a vehicle for the transformation of our society. Otherwise, we will fall into cultural captivity.

Cultural captivity

⁷ Vicente Manuel Fernández, Pablo de Tarso, de la adhesión personal a Cristo al compromiso comunitario y social.

The church lives in a permanent tension between being in the world and being of the world. This is the cultural tension. Unfortunately, throughout the centuries, the people of God have fallen into the cultural captivity of the church. This is when the culture of our time, with its values and beliefs, penetrates the church and the church becomes captive to that culture. This is what I believe is happening mostly with the church today. We see a church captive to individualism, through an intimate, privatized, and individualistic gospel. Captive to narcissistic self-absorption through a gospel of self-help.

The cultural captivity that the church is a victim of has made the Bible lose its centrality. The gospel will only be counter-cultural with transforming power if the Word has the status of truth. Otherwise, not only does the church lose its liberating power, but it ends up captive to a culture where nothing is an absolute truth, but truth is individually defined. Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ

(Col 2:8, NKJV)

Individualism as an autoimmune disease in the church.

The immune system, created to defend the body against external attacks, makes a mistake and attacks the body's tissues or organs. The body attacking its own body. Unfortunately, in differentiating ourselves and defending ourselves from the Catholic Church, we have weakened our theology and message with seeds of individualism that are now harming the Church itself.

That is why we find it so difficult to confront the fierce individualism of our time and generate a community spirit. We try to denounce it as something external to the Church, but it is the church itself that, with its theology and practice, like a Trojan horse, introduces this "unclean spirit" into the body itself.

And by believing that it is an external, worldly evil, we make the same mistake as the Pharisee in the temple. "I thank you, Lord, that I am not like..." This prayer immediately isolates us from our reality and excuses ourselves, making it impossible for us to see the beam of individualism in our own eye. If individualism is the way people think and relate, then we must understand that we Christians, and especially church leaders, are deeply implicated. Indeed, our attitude should not be that of the Pharisee, but that of the disciples when Jesus told them that one of them would betray him: "Is it I, Lord?" This approach will give us more opportunities to critically analyze not only the culture in which we live but also our way of nurturing this evil within the church and toward society. "Knowing how the world encourages us to think and live will equip us to resist it."⁸

Some Examples

In the 17th century, the church activated its immune system through a lively movement that sought to revitalize personal faith and internalize evangelical piety in response to the dryness of

⁸ Carl Trueman, "El individualismo expresivo", <https://es.9marks.org/articulo/el-individualismo-expresivo-y-la-iglesia/>.

German Lutheran academia. Many wonderful fruits were produced, but like any reactive movement, one aspect was overemphasized at the expense of other biblical elements, and in the following generations, its own contribution became distorted. Personal faith ended up becoming an individualistic experience. The modern Protestant missionary movement exported this individualistic theology of pietism to the world and associated it with capitalist culture. This resulted in the exportation of an individualistic conception of life, faith, economics, and politics. They attacked the ideal of a social order under the control of the church, but along with that, they developed an autoimmune approach within the people of God that makes it very difficult for us to build community.

In the last decades of the last century, the influence of psychology penetrated the church, providing very good assistance in caring for people, but which fed a gospel of self-help. And spiritual disciplines such as inner healing and deliverance were infected with individualism, canceling out the most fruitful therapeutic factor, which is community life.

More recently, and especially since the pandemic, the church has massively entered the virtual world, exacerbating the loss of community, the significant reduction of gathering, and individual religious consumerism.

The individualistic spirit that arises from the rejection of God as Father and figure of authority has brought about the discrediting of everything institutional in society. Without an Absolute that institutes, every institution loses its relevance. The church has suffered this very strongly. Despite the growing interest in spirituality, however, it does not necessarily translate into conventional Christianity, but traditional Christian communities are in decline. People are not aligning with established denominations. They are not looking to a tradition to follow, or an organization to join. Instead, they are looking for something that will help them in their individualistic spiritual quest. The function of spirituality is "to help me feel better."

The biblical emphasis on gathering to experience communion and the life of "one another" has become blurred to simply attending a liturgical event. Our worship services not only express but also promote individualistic attitudes. Dozens, hundreds, thousands of people share an auditorium, in which each one develops an individualistic worship, "me and God," in many cases narcissistic, and without regard for the other.

Therefore, those within the church who react to cultural captivity but do so by promoting anti-institutional tendencies that endorse the exodus from congregational life and feed the number of non-congregants who are leaving, saying that it is a healthy advancement and a sign of a new and revolutionary expression of Christianity, are deeply mistaken, and are being used by the system of this world. Because such tendencies are the result of a logic of consumerism that turns individualistic choice into the central and only sovereign factor. This idea that has now been established, that each one is assembling the spiritual elements they need and find valuable, thus constituting millions of "personalized churches" experiences, actually belongs to the consumerist worldview of the worldly and demonic system, driven by the therapeutic demands of the individual. More than an expression of revolutionary Christianity, it is an expression of affirmation

of the status quo of individualism and consumerism. And its autoimmune effect undermines the structures of the church, the only reality capable of constructively resisting the worst of current culture, which is its egoism.

This has also led to a weakness in biblical foundations among believers and syncretism. It's a buffet-style Christianity, where each person serves themselves according to their own preferences⁹. The combination of religious diversity and extreme individualism means that "each individual is ultimately the arbiter of their own personal fulfillment and what is individually significant."

The lack of commitment to social transformation is very evident in the contemporary church. The challenge is not the pursuit of transforming the reality of others, but rather the pursuit of "feeling good about myself."

Congregational tourism is another characteristic. It causes believers to constantly change churches based on the show or service they offer, thus avoiding being disciplined, integrated, and shaped by the community. The correlation of the auditorium church where thousands are spectators and a few are the show's protagonists has fed infantile, egocentric fantasies in pastoral leadership, turning the church into the church of Pastor So-and-So. And not only does it damage local community spirit, but it also prevents the unity of the church in the city, as each pastor assumes the individualistic delusion of being "the" man of God for the city, ignoring their fellow servants.

But in my opinion, the strongest element in this self-immune activation is the strongly individualistic bias of a distorted kerygma and evangelical theology. As someone said, the seed of the gospel was born in Palestine, then taken to northern Europe, from there to the United States, and from the North Atlantic world, the seed was transplanted along with the strongly individualistic cultural pot. Therefore, I believe we need a theological revision first and then a review of the life and mission of the church.

Towards a Trinitarian Theological Revision

I believe we need to strengthen our Trinitarian theology and its implications. From here, I will derive the other statements to be reviewed. When it comes to God or the Trinity in our churches, very little is said about what the AFI Consultation in 2012 called "A God of Relationships." Relationships are not just a functional aspect of God; they constitute His ontological essence. God does not have relationships; God is relationships. That's why the apostle John defines Him by saying, "God is love." The confession that God is One and Three speaks precisely to this. Three

⁹ The Los Angeles Times illustrates these changes with an article titled "Spiritual Blend Appeals to People of Many Faiths." The article features a woman who describes herself as "a good Jew, Southern Baptist, and young Buddhist" who takes delight in this "custom-made spiritual arrangement." "It works for me," she says. "I literally feel like I'm at a free buffet, serving myself." The article continues to describe the typical scenario with expressions like "religion, do-it-yourself," "spirituality, mix and match," and "cut and paste." (KANG, K. C., Los Angeles Times, December 27, 2003).

persons who are One. And this, more than a speculative mystery, conveys to us diversity in perfect unity through that relational essence.

There is another aspect that I want to emphasize once again within our conception, formulation, and above all, experience of the Trinity. We suffer from a noticeable weakening of the person of God the Father. Evangelicals have rightly emphasized the person of Jesus Christ, our Lord. And Pentecostals and Charismatics have wonderfully emphasized the person of the Holy Spirit. But God the Father is the "Lost Person" in our collective experience. He is affirmed in doctrine, but only in terms of certain aspects such as being the Creator. However, this has little impact on the practical and everyday life of God's people. And this significantly affects the identity of the church because it is from the Father that every family in heaven and on earth takes its name (identity). From a relational Father, a relational church, family, and community emerge. But from an absent father, a people made up of individuals seeking to fill their void of fatherhood, consumed by consumerism, narcissism, and self-centeredness, arise. Therefore, we must develop a Trinitarian theology that restores the fatherhood of God. God the Father does not have a significant impact on the lives of individuals and the community. However, God reveals Himself in the Bible as the Father, Jesus is the way to the Father, and the Holy Spirit cries out, "Abba, Father." In other words, the fatherhood of God is central to the Gospel. That's why the devil presents himself as an alternative father, the father of lies. Because it is my conviction that ultimately, all human problems stem from some form of paternal lack, and all problems are resolved in a father-child relationship with God. That is why Jesus came into the world, for that purpose.

Anthropology

The human being created in the image and likeness of God, a God of relationships, leads us to an anthropology that reflects the image of God. A development of the Imago Dei in a Trinitarian, relational, and communal perspective. Moving from the theological emphasis of the Trinity in its substantial aspect (hypostasis) to the centrality of the relational. Ultimately, the Imago Dei is revealed in the relationality of those who are a community: the church. And from the image and likeness of the one who said, "Let us make man," that is the first-person plural, of the three Persons of the Trinity, human beings, male and female, as a person and not just an individual. When the human being is turned into an individual separated from their community, they are depersonalized because they were created by God to be in a relationship: "it is not good for man to be alone." The focus on individualism leads to the abandonment of the human being's condition as a person (image and likeness of God) to become simply an individual, separated from their Father and their purpose.

The church can find in the extreme individualism of our time a paradoxical opportunity if it manages to recognize that its faithful are "persons" and not just impersonal attendees of meetings and events. If it does so, it will be an alternative community for those who suffer from the B side of individualism, which is the loss of identity absorbed in the collective of the consumerist system. Western culture owes the concept of the person to Christianity. By virtue of their spiritual birth in

Christ and their Trinitarian creation, a subject is a "person" who is structured "from others" and "for others." It requires first inwardly and then outwardly a discipleship that leads to a healthy understanding of the biblical self, that is, the ecclesial self or the self in communion. But if within the church, it is not possible to visualize that ecclesial or koinonic self, the church will not be able to show an alternative to the reigning individualism that produces in people the double tension of living on the one hand in a hyper-individualistic reality and at the same time and paradoxically, suffering a painful loss of identity.

Christology-Soteriology

The apostolic task entrusted by Paul to his representative Timothy was to correct deficiencies. And I believe that this is a commissioned task for apostolic ministries today. The most important doctrine in its application and the least taught and developed is probably the doctrine of the incarnation. A docetic Christianity that fails to fully embody the complete gospel in its mission and therefore fails to be a response to the needs of nations, especially those who suffer the most.

We must move towards a communal soteriology. Following Jorge Himitian, we must reinforce that God's eternal project is the formation of a family of sons and daughters similar to the Son¹⁰. A gospel that demands personal responses but not individualistic ones. We have preached a private, intimate, individualistic salvation. But we have preached a privatized, individualistic gospel. And the problem with this is what Paul warns the Colossians about when he tells them *to walk in the way they have received the gospel*. People receive an individualistic *kerygma* distorted by individualism, and then they continue to live in that way. Like a Trojan horse, we have introduced from the beginning a message in which an unconscious Gnostic Christology is preached: to follow the Head who is Christ, without His body, the church. As a result of this, before the pandemic, more than 50% of those who say they are evangelical in Latin America had no affiliation or did not attend any church.

Pneumatology

The filling of the Spirit has been framed in exclusively individual experiences. But the filling is a personal experience that occurs in a communal context: ***"Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 5:18-20)***. The traditional passage on the filling of the Spirit is, first of all, a Trinitarian text that occurs within a framework of experiential or celebratory recognition of God's fatherhood. And it is a communal experience. Pentecost is the birth of the anointed community, not of anointed individuals. It is the opposite of Babel with its linguistic individualization. But the individualistic message of salvation has caused people to continue walking according to that received gospel and to live experiences of the filling of the Spirit in an introspective, private, individualistic way.

Ecclesiology

¹⁰ Jorge Himitian, El proyecto del Eterno, Editorial Logos.

Our ecclesiology is nourished by the previous items, especially our concept of God. Because the Trinity is a model for the church. Gregory of Nyssa, one of the Cappadocian fathers, said that the Trinity is the church before the church and that the church should be a reflection of the Trinity. Because God created the church and everything is created in his image and likeness. From the Person of God the Father, which has been weakened, comes a concept of the church as a family that is also weakened. Because the Father is the one who forms the family. From a gospel with a disembodied salvation, we have made people believe that they can have a good relationship with God without the church. From the lack of teaching on the God of relationships, where personal diversity not only does not divide but also feeds unity, we end up living the sad reality of a divided, atomized church, unable to be an alternative for a world fragmented by individual interests.

From there, we have developed models, practices that have fueled individualism, undermining the spirit of community. We carry out services in which dozens, hundreds, thousands are encouraged to have a "God and me" relationship, where the communal is conspicuous by its absence. And although it is a communal service, each individual can have the same experience in their room almost without any differences. Our buildings are auditoriums, dark places to prioritize the use of screens and lights, but that prevent the registration of the other, further feeding that individualistic liturgy. Meetings where what happens on the platform is important, and therefore where a few are protagonists and the vast majority are spectators, making it impossible for the priesthood of every believer in the framework of the community. Pastoral leadership that, in not a few cases, instead of showing a father figure, reflects a boss who demands obedience from individuals.

The mission of the church must manifest the love of the Father through an alternative community of love. The church does not have a culture different from the world, but it is a different culture. It does not have a social strategy, it is a social strategy. It does not have a social ethics, it is a social ethics. Its lifestyle judges the world and at the same time attracts it. But judgment begins with itself. Because the challenges of the gospel point primarily to the church. The church must be different from the world, true community to be an alternative community. The change in reality is not primarily the result of actions, but of being that manifests itself in transformative actions. The church as an alternative community of love, as a family of the Father, is salt and light in the world. The church as an alternative community, with its lifestyle, announces and not only denounces the problems of the world. What makes the church an alternative community is love. Everything else the world can achieve and express, and in most cases it does it better than the church. What the world cannot give people is the love of God, which restores their dignity as persons, their identity as children of God, their belonging to a family, which individualism and consumerism of the system have stolen from them.

And this must be put into practice in the mission of the church. From an absolutely communal ecclesiology, we must develop counter-cultural, alternative models of mission. Models such as the ministry led by Pastor Abe Huber with missions not of individuals sent in isolation, but of communities that establish themselves in the new field and mission as a community generate a lot of enthusiasm and hope.

In Buenos Aires, we have developed a multigenerational pastoral model, and a family pastoral from cradle to death. Emphasizing small groups, not only as a methodology for numerical growth, but so that the spirit of community, solidarity among the most needy, and commitment are lived with greater radicalism.

We need models to develop virtual world missions that integrate people into communities and do not disintegrate them.

Congregations that reach everyone. That are not expulsive. A community closed in on itself, no matter how warm the relationships are, manifests an individualism prolonged in a human group that protects itself. The networks of individualism are only broken in open communities that launch their members into the world, that generate and encourage missionaries.

In short, the church created in the image of God, as an expression of the being of God. In which its members are finding the perfect image of being a person, that God grants to humans as his creation, in their community life as the body of Christ.

Eschatology

The image of God is ultimately an eschatological concept. It is our divine destiny and, as such, has crucial implications for our understanding of the nature and role of the Church. To reconceptualize the imago-Dei as a social reality and to recover the eschatological hope that, as a corporate reality, we will be made in his image is the eschatological destiny of the new humanity. The character of the triune God is expressed through humans in community. Wherever community arises, humans are drawn out of isolation into bonded relationships. The image of God does not reside in the individual person but in the relationship of persons in community. The relational life of the triune God is represented in the communal communion of the participants of the new humanity.

Conclusion

Individualism is fundamentally a consequence of sin, because at the beginning all things were created for communion. In communion with the Father, the diversity of human beings does not separate but unites in unity. Redemption reverses individualization by restoring communion.

In this context of extreme individualism, the recovery of the central place of the Church as the Father's family is essential. Its condition as a community of the Father's love makes it indispensable in the midst of the hyper-individualist void. Jesus said there were two models: the church as a marketplace, as a reflection of this hyper-individualistic system, or the church as the Father's House. Therefore, I conclude by saying that the DNA of the church, as the Father's House, has to reflect the Father. That is, we have a genetic inheritance. The characteristics of our Father are transmitted by his Holy Spirit to us who are his children to express them to the world. This is what Jesus, our elder brother, did. He said, "***He who has seen me has seen the Father***" (John 14:9). And then the apostle John would say, "***No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known***" (John 1:18).

People, when they see us as a church, have to see our likeness to the Father and have to know some of the characteristics of the Heavenly Father by seeing them manifested by us.

John himself defined God, saying that God is love. What is the nature of the Father's love?

1. The love of the Father is Familial: If God's eternal project is the formation of a great family of sons and daughters who resemble the Son, then the mission is not only to reach individuals but to form a family. If the love of the Father is familial, the DNA of the church is to be a family that overcomes individualism that isolates, impoverishes, and alienates. The culture of the church, as the Father's House, is that of a spiritual family.
2. The love of the Father is Priority: For the Father, people are the most important, and therefore, they should be for us too. The apostle John says, "**We love because he first loved us**" (1 John 4:19). The word "first" indicates not only that God took the initiative to love us, but that it constitutes his priority. And as we receive his genetic inheritance, it should be ours too. It is not activities, events, or programs that come first, but people. The culture of the church, as the Father's House, is that of the priority of people.
3. The love of the Father is Inexhaustible: "**For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor neither life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord**" (Romans 8:38-39). Nothing, absolutely nothing, will separate us from the Father's love. And we have His DNA. Who or what will separate us from loving each other? Personalisms, localism, different personalities, friction that will always exist, different characters, disagreements on certain issues? No. Today, we determine that nothing will separate us from loving one another, because just as the Father loves us and does not allow anything to separate us from His love, we, His children, love one another. And we commit to working for the unity of His one church in every city. We die to ourselves so that we may always prevail as a group. **For the sake of the Lord, we are being killed all the time, we are counted as sheep to be slaughtered. However, in all these things that try to separate us, we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. Therefore, we are certain that nothing will be able to separate us from the love we have for one another.** The culture of the church as the Father's house is a culture of togetherness.
4. The Father's love gives approval: Continuously, God is telling us that we are His beloved children and that He takes delight in us. He constantly communicates to us that we are special, that we are significant, that we are head and not tail, that we are above and not beneath, that we are here to lend and not to borrow, that we are His special treasure, that we are the apple of His eye, the delight of His heart, the object of His unconditional love, the focus of His attention and care, that we are the salt, the light, that we are chosen, that we are kings, that we are holy, that we are blessed. In other words, He is constantly affirming our identity through His approval and appreciation. And He expects the same from us. The language of the church is the appreciation of the other. The language of the pastors should be the estimation of the other as superior to ourselves. Our mouths are a source of sweet water, a source of affirmation for our brothers. The culture of the church as the Father's house is a culture of honor.

5. The Father's love is practical: It is not a theoretical or romantic love. It is an embodied love that responds concretely to needs. Therefore, we who possess the spiritual genes of the Father reflect that same love by serving and helping one another. This is how the early Church experienced it, as portrayed in the book of Acts: "All who believed were together and had everything in common. They sold their property and possessions and shared the proceeds with all, as anyone had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:44-47). The conjunction "and" indicates that each phrase leads to the next consecutively. Therefore, we could read it from the end of verse 47 back to the beginning of verse 42. In other words, the Lord added to the Church daily those who were being saved as a result of the Church having the favor of all the people. This favor was evident because they witnessed the joyful and unified fellowship of the believers, who shared their possessions so that no one was in need. Their faith led them to have everything in common, and there was no individualistic approach to their belongings. All the believers were of one heart and mind. They did not claim their possessions as their own but shared everything they had. The apostles testified to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time, those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales, and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need" (Acts 4:32-35). The transformation of their lives was so profound and radical that it made them truly one in spirit, soul, and material possessions. The unity in the spirit affected their emotional world, as they had one heart and mind, which facilitated their detachment. It also affected their way of thinking and conceiving life. No longer did they think in an individualistic and selfish manner but through the grace of God that was poured out abundantly on them. This led them to be united in material possessions, so that no one was in need anymore. The culture of the church as the Father's house is a culture of embodiment and service.
6. The Father's love is open: ***God wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*** (1 Timothy 2:4). Therefore, we are not a closed community but a missionary one, continually seeking to integrate more people into the family of faith. The culture of the church as the Father's house is the culture that integrates.
7. The Father's love is restorative: It is the love that receives the prodigal son, with his history of sin, with his stench of the pigsty, and kisses, embraces, and celebrates. Precisely because God is Holy, His love is always restorative. Because if there is no restoration of people, there can be no holiness. Restoration and holiness not only do not oppose each other but are two sides of the same coin. Restoration does not lightly justify sin, and holiness does not condemn the sinner but restores him. Certainly, the DNA of the House of the Father is to heal and restore. We are not a legalistic community, but one that lifts up the fallen. Because we experienced firsthand that the Father's love is a love despite. Despite being sinners, the Father ran to seek us, in Christ Jesus. The culture of the church as the House of the Father is the culture of restoration.

As individualism becomes increasingly brutal and Christians are not exempt, we can fall into the temptation of resigned acceptance. How can we escape from what we cannot escape? We reject any idea that hyper-individualistic, narcissistic reality cannot be transformed. That this is the reality to accept and cannot be challenged. No. As Hendrik Berkhof said, with Christ "a new force has entered the stage of salvation history: the church... The very existence of the church, in which Gentiles and Jews... live together in the communion of Christ, is in itself a proclamation, a sign, a demonstration to the powers that their uninterrupted dominion has come to an end."

Our Lord has already stripped the principalities and powers, exhibited them publicly, triumphing over them on the cross. We are not bound to them. Jesus Christ, the Lord broke their sovereignty, and therefore any change is possible. Our task is to remove their invisibility by declaring Christ's victory over them. Our existence as a church, as a family of sons and daughters of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, already demonstrates that the rebellion of the Powers has been overcome! Our task as an alternative community is to live this and proclaim it. It is not just a preventive-defensive attitude, but a matter of identity and purpose that will lead us to a more genuine experience and a more effective mission.

Carlos Mraida

Paulo Junior

He was hungry - the table's pedagogy

To Be Close or To Get Near

"The Kingdom of God has come to you!"

The Kingdom of God isn't just something or somewhere like a geographical place only. The Kingdom of God has a Nature expressed by an Identity, a Culture, a Language, a Code of Values, Principles, and Fundamentals that reveal it. "Without faith, it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He Is and He blesses those who earnestly seek Him" It is not about physical distance, because there would be no virtue in getting near to God – He is omnipresent, everywhere, near to everything and everyone. "A Veil of Fine Linen"

The greatest of all separations wasn't a thick wall, but a veil of fine linen. It wasn't about the distance to get there – it was about the nature to be like.

There is nothing more frustrating than to get near and not be close. There is nothing more disturbing than no distance and no intimacy.

Isaiah 29 – "These people draw near me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."

Matthew 15 – "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules."

Proverbs 6 – "There are six things the Lord hates: the seventh is an abomination to Him: A person who stirs up conflict in the community; those who separate close friends."

Communion: The Ministry of The Holy Spirit

Enlightening the Eyes of Our Hearts

INTENTIONS – PERCEPTIONS – MOTIVATIONS

Fear and bitterness: the task of the devil

✓ He doesn't want to cause us problems or difficulties. He wants to corrupt our nature and compromise the fullness of our calling and purpose as God's family.

✓ His deepest intention is to be "the abomination"

✓ His constant motivation is to break the links of fellowship

✓ His strongest efforts are to put bitterness on the table

REDEMPTION – REVELATION – RECONCILIATION

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to proclaim Good News to the poor. He sent me to heal the brokenhearted:

- ✓ To proclaim freedom to the captives
 - ✓ Recovery of sight for the blind
 - ✓ To set at freedom the oppressed
- To bring the Year of the Lord’s favor”

Luke 2 - “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord.”

Christ is not a Savior trying to be a Lord.

He is the Lord saving, redeeming to reconcile: redeeming – revealing – reconciling. Salvation is the way to enter the place of revelation: the fellowship of the Holy Spirit – it is not just to solve a problem.

TO RECOGNIZE NATURE - IDENTITY - PURPOSE

Beyond the Shape and Movement

Mark 8 – “Jesus asked: Do you see anything? He looked up and said: I see people; they look like trees walking around. Once more Jesus put His hands on the man’s eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.”

Ephesians 1 – “I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know Him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which He has called you, the riches of His glorious inheritance in His holy people, and His incomparably great power for us who believe.”

Materializing the Virtues vs Experiencing the Attributes

The Church is the environment that offers support for the righteous to practice faith, materializing virtues. The Church is not to promote devotional liturgy for the believer to experience power. The Church is to know and fulfill God’s will – not to please us or solve our problems.

John 15 – “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

1 John 3 – “If someone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity, how can the love of God be in that person?”

Love is to give life spontaneously to someone – not to be killed by anyone.

John 10 – “No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.”

Love is to give life spontaneously – not to be taken by force.

The Eternal Purpose of The Table: Sharing to Bless

Instead of Eating to Be Blessed

John 12 – *“The one who looks at me is seeing the one who sent me.”*

John 14 – *“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.”*

2 Corinthians 3 – *“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled faces, contemplate the Lord’s glory, being transformed into His image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”*

The Food of Christ

- We know nothing about
- To fulfill the will of Him who sent Me
- To finish His work

1 Corinthians 11 – *“Your meetings do more harm than good... For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.”*

Mephibosheth : Wounded in the head, crippled in the feet

The Blindness Process

Expectation – Frustration – Blindness

Luke 24 – *“Jesus Himself came up and walked along with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing Him... When He was at the table with them, He took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and began to give it to*

them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized Him, and He disappeared from their sight... Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how they recognized Jesus when He broke the bread."

The Enlightening Process

To Free – To Reveal – To Reconcile

The Table of Christ is for the blessed ones to materialize virtue, assuming the responsibility of sharing the bread. The table of the antichrist is for the greedy to take and eat the desired bread.

The Elements of the Table

Bread – Wine – Olive Oil (Psalm 104 and 128)

Process that transforms us into a visible and living expression of the Father's virtue as the blessed ones:

- Bread: Ground wheat
- Wine: Trodden grapes
- Olive Oil: Crushed olives

No methods or structures to protect and guarantee the right to be fed – the deserved blessing.

Our Father is the Blessor

Joyfully and thankfully moved by His Holy Spirit to be at the table of communion, taking the responsibility of sharing the bread that we hold in our hands.

- The thirst of the water is to flow, not to drink
- The hunger of the bread is to feed, not to eat

Fatherhood is to inspire and direct to the purpose, not to control and protect for the future.

Mephibosheth : Wounded in the head, crippled in the feet.

Paulo Junior

Jorge Himitian

God's vision for the nations – Habakkuk

1. A prophet in difficult times

Habakkuk prophesied to the house of Judah some 600 years B.C. A little before Jeremiah.

It was his lot to prophesy in very difficult times. The last kings of Judah had been very wicked men, with the exception of King Josiah, who did what was right in the sight of God. Josiah's grandfather, Manasseh, and his father, Amon, had done evil before God.

His son Jehoiakim also did evil before God. Most of the population sinned openly, and idolatry was practiced throughout the country.

When the rulers of a nation are unjust and corrupt, they open the nation's spiritual doors to evil principalities and powers, and sin and wickedness increase within the society. The nation is left without protection, without a cultural reference point and without models.

2. The prophet's cry for the moral situation of the nation

*"How long, LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save?
Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?
Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds.
Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails.
The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted." Habakkuk 1.2-4*

3. Our current situation

We have been praying for our nations for years. It is disconcerting to see the advance of evil.

In our Latin American nations, the corruption of the governing rulers is alarming. The United Nations wants to impose the diabolical and foolish gender ideology on all the nations of the world. The gap between the rich and the poor is scandalous and grows wider all the time. Drug trafficking, often in collusion with the governing rulers, is destroying millions of young people in most of the world's nations. Individualism and the love of money continue to be the root of all evil.

Many times, just like the prophet, we say: How long, oh God...? How long will we cry out but you do not listen?

Brothers: The worst thing we can do is to simply resign ourselves to this situation, drop our guard and stop praying, stop believing, stop fighting. The worst thing we can do is lose hope.

The prophet Habakkuk did not give up. He kept crying out to God. He almost fought with God. Until he received an answer from God.

4. God's first response

"Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwellings not their own." (Habakkuk 1.5-6)

God raised up a pagan nation to punish Judah for her sin.

God's ways are often as strange to us as they were to the prophet.

In geometry the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. But in God, due to human reality, the shortest distance is not always a straight line. To reach the top of the next mountain, one usually has to descend into the deepest valley.

Many times God must take us to the lowest depths and to more intense levels of crisis and suffering in order for us to humble ourselves and turn back to God.

Habakkuk, in light of God's response, was more perplexed than before, but he made...

5. Four wise and fundamental decisions

5.1 The 1st decision: take his place as a watchman

"I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint." (Habakkuk 2.1)

This is determination, persistence and steadfastness. This is not lowering the guard but preparing to fight.

This is what we must do. We are apostles and prophets. We must take our place as watchmen. We are in a higher place. We see into the distance. We must anticipate and notify the people of that which is to come. We must watch in prayer. Be attentive to God. Cry out, fast, intercede until the answer comes. We need to perceive ahead of the others. We need to hear from God. We do not worship an idol that does not hear nor speak. We worship a living God who hears our prayers and answers prayer. We must cry out and “demand” answers from God.

God likes this kind of prayer! And he answers this kind of prayer.

5.2 Habakkuk's 2nd decision: believe the vision

“Then the LORD replied: Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it.

For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay.

See, the enemy is puffed up; his desires are not upright but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness.” (Habakkuk 2.2-4)

A positive vision of the future produces hope and enthusiasm in the one who reads it. It motivates and mobilizes him to action. It drives us to run, it generates passion in the pursuit of that vision. This vision launches us into the mission.

The fulfillment of the vision is guaranteed by God.

“For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false.

Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay.” (Habakkuk 2.3)

Faith is the key to the fulfillment of the vision.

“See, the enemy is puffed up; his desires are not upright— but the righteous person will live by faith.” (Habakkuk 2.4)

This is the grand verse that Paul used to support his thesis on justification by faith, both in Romans and Galatians.

Faith is the response of a humble heart to God's revelation. The opposite is pride. The proud is

guided by his reasoning, and doubts the word of God. The humble receives the word of God with meekness. *He whose soul is not upright is proud, but the just shall live by faith.*

What specifically is the vision that God revealed to Habakkuk?

- in the midst of the unjust accumulation of wealth at a personal, national and international level (Habakkuk 2.6-11);
- in the midst of those who conquer and build cities with blood and iniquity (2.12-13);
- in the midst of an eroticized society in which many get drunk and drug the weakest in order to sexually abuse them (2.15-16);
- in the midst of a materialistic society full of kidnappings, robberies and violence (2.17);
- in the midst of nations given over to idolatry (2.18-19)

God gives the prophet Habakkuk a glorious vision that, like a pearl in the midst of so much garbage, summarizes the vision in a single verse:

“For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.” (Hb 2.14)

I imagine God saying to the prophet: 'Habakkuk, go to the beach, and stand in front of the sea. Take a good look, do you see how these waters cover the sea? In the same way THE EARTH WILL BE FILLED WITH THE KNOWLEDGE OF MY GLORY”.

Habakkuk, write down the vision, record it on tablets, so that the one who reads it and believes it receives such inspiration and impulse that he pursues the fulfillment of the mission in accordance with the vision that I have revealed to them.

Chapter 2 concludes with a tremendous declaration:

“The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.” (Habakkuk 2.20)

As dire as the situation in our nations may be, let us never lose sight of the throne:

God is in his holy temple!

He is sitting on the throne! Jesus

Christ is Lord!

He was exalted

“above all principality and authority, and power and dominion, and above every name that is named,

not only in this age, but also in the one to come...” (Ephesians 1.21). Hallelujah!

Everything is under his control!

In the heavens and on the earth.

In the midst of all the calamities described in the book of Revelation (the seven trumpets, the seven woes, the seven plagues, the action of Satan, the false prophet, the great red dragon), the dominant vision is that there is one sitting on the throne and he reigns.

The great message of the Apocalypse is that the final victory belongs to the Lamb, that the kingdoms of this world will belong to our Lord and to his Christ; and that he will reign forever and ever.

The final vision is that of one church, glorious, multitudinous, triumphant and holy; dressed in fine linen, dazzling white and clean, prepared to receive her Beloved. Hallelujah!

Abraham "grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, fully convinced that what God had promised, He was able also to perform." (Romans 4.20-21).

5.3 Habakkuk's 3rd Decision: Pray for revival

*“A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet. On shigionoth.
LORD, I have heard of your fame;
I stand in awe of your deeds, LORD.
Repeat them in our day,
In our time make them known;
In wrath remember mercy.”* (Habakkuk 3.1-2)

Habakkuk not only believed in God's vision, but also prayed for revival. We must transform the vision into prayer, into intercession.

'Revive your work in our time' is the same as saying revive your work in these difficult times.

But we must pray with faith, believing that we will receive what we are asking for.

Let us cry out to God for a revival in our nations. A new move of the Spirit working miracles and wonders and the conversion of millions in the different continents of the world.

5.4 Habakkuk's 4th decision: Rejoice in god in whatever the circumstance

"...Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us. Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights." (Habakkuk 3.16-19)

Some consider this to be the most perfect praise in all of the Bible.

Brothers, even more difficult days may come, but we need to make the same decision as Habakkuk. Let us say with the prophet: *"With everything I will rejoice in the Lord, and I will rejoice in the God of my salvation."*

The task is not easy. The days to come will not be easy. We need to live in the joy of the Lord every day. We will have better physical and mental health if we live with joy. Our wife needs a joyful husband. Our family too. The church needs a joy-filled pastor. The world needs a church filled with the joy of the Lord. Joy will be a magnet that will attract many to the Lord's church. Amen.

Jorge Himitian

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 Himitian