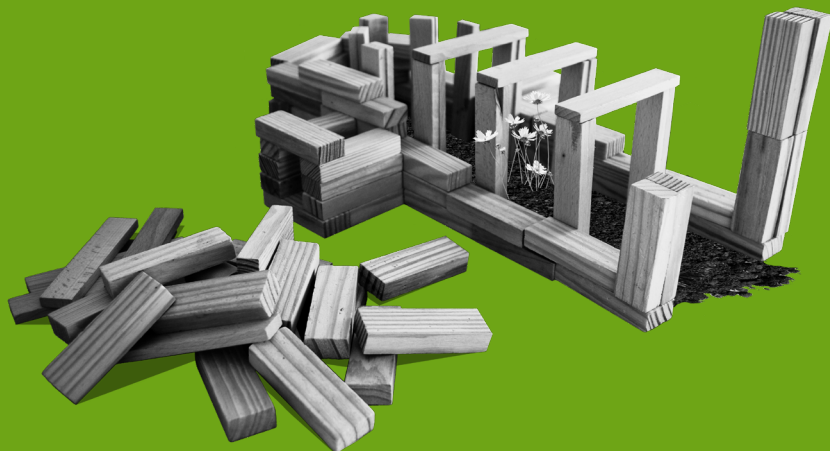




Being Christian in Europe?

Víctor Codina



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INTRODUCTION

In 1985, when I was living in Oruro, Bolivia, I published booklet called *Ser cristiano en América Latina [Being Christian in Latin America]*, which was widely distributed in that continent. After briefly explaining that being Christian consists not simply in believing in God or doing good but in following Jesus, I examined three catechisms that reflected different ways of being Christian. The first was the traditional *Catechism of Pius X*, which saw the Church within a context of Christendom and proposed questions and answers that were to be memorized. The second was the *Dutch Catechism*, which was open to dialogue with the modern world, in the spirit of Vatican II. And the third was Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga's *Catechism for Base Communities*, which was inspired by the liberation theology of Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979); it posed questions in order to stimulate dialogue in community.

In 2018, after working for 36 years in Bolivia, I returned to Barcelona, where I found myself in a panorama very different from the one in Bolivia and Latin America. The differences are not only social, political, and cultural, but also ecclesial and religious. In the midst of a secularized world with great religious pluralism, we are witnessing a profound crisis that is ecclesial, religious, and Christian.

Concretely, in the forty years since *Cristianisme i Justícia* began in 1981, the situation of the Church and society has change radically in Spain. Let us look at some of the data just for this country:

- The percentage of persons not belonging to any religious denomination rose from 8.5% in 1980 to 27% in 2018.

- According to some researchers (Pew Research Center in the U.S.), Spain is the European country with the third highest defection from Christianity; it ranks sixteenth among the world's least religious countries (Win/Gallup International).
- Since 2006 the number of practicing Catholics has dropped 27%.
- In 2000 some 75% of weddings were celebrated using the Catholic rite, but by 2018 only 22% were.
- Religion is identified with the right or even the extreme right, as a forced imposition.
- The younger generations are less and less religious. According to the Basque sociologist Javier Elzo, the percentage of Catholics will continue to fall, so that religion will cease to be a sociological reality and become simply a matter of personal conviction.

Of course, this situation is not exclusive to Spain; it affects the whole of Western Europe, though there are differences among regions.¹

The Spanish situation is peculiar, however. The parts of Europe that have been secularized longer are more respectful of the Catholic Church than are many Spanish sectors, which display what journalist Pilar Rahola calls a “subtle Christianophobia” regarding the Church and anything Christian. There is also a kind of subtle political persecution against whatever is Christian: many mass media use the Church's sins as an argument against Christianity; they report only what is negative in the Church, never what is positive.

The reaction of the extreme right in the Church to the present situation

is very dangerous. They would like to return to the 1950s, the years of Spanish Christendom before Vatican II, as if they were the proprietors of a deformed Christianity that has little to do with what is truly Christian. All this does is reinforce the Christianophobia.

Therefore, what is said here about the situation in Europe should be adjusted according to the socio-religious context of each country. Rather than make a socio-religious study of the European situation, our aim is simply to offer a theological and pastoral reflection on the tendencies that are emerging in Europe.

Given these limitations, we are not asking how we can be Christian in Western Europe today. Our question is more radical: we are asking whether it is possible and whether it makes any sense to be Christian in present-day Europe, especially as a woman. The problem is not only pastoral and ecclesial (“another Church is possible”). It goes much deeper: it is a problem of belief in God and of faith in Jesus.

What seems clear is that one cannot be a Christian today in Europe just by relying only on tradition and culture; being Christian requires free choice and personal conviction. It is not enough to be baptized as a child; it is necessary to pass from a Christianity of quantity to a Christianity of quality.

To make a personal option for faith, a new type of Christian initiation may be helpful. For some people, especially the young, the initiation may be their very first, and so totally new. For others, the majority, it will really be a re-initiation in a personal and historical context that is different from their first initiation. In both cases it is best to speak of “re-initiation” since it will

be very different from the traditional Christian initiation, both in content and in orientation.

It is no longer possible to begin with theoretical or dogmatic discussions about the Church and Christianity. We have to start by announcing the Gospel message (the *kerygma*, in classical terms). We cannot begin with talk of laws and morality; we must speak rather of spirituality, conscience, and discernment. We can no longer make preserving the Church the aim of our pastoral ministry; we must open people up to the evangelizing mission.

The famous question that Abbé H. Godin posed 75 years ago, whether France was already a mission country, can now be extended to all Western Europe.² Paul VI tried to respond to this new situation by stressing the need for evangelization in today's world (*Evangelii nuntiandi*), and Francis

has tried to do the same in his pastoral exhortation on the joy of the Gospel (*Evangelii gaudium*), which serves as a roadmap for his pontificate.

In this booklet, after giving a short exposition on the crisis of European Christianity, a topic already extensively studied, I will make a modest attempt to open up paths toward a new Christian initiation.

I am aware that making a socio-religious diagnosis is easier than doing pastoral and spiritual therapy. This booklet certainly will not have the same reception and diffusion as the one I wrote in Bolivia in 1983; it will be more polemical.

In any case, my long stays in poor countries of the South may help us to view re-initiation as a process that will take place from below, from the poor, from the passion of the people, from the great masses of humankind.

1. THE CRISIS OF EUROPEAN CHRISTIANITY

In Europe we are witnessing a genuine collapse of the Christian faith. In relatively few decades, a European society with deep Christian cultural roots has become a society in which Christianity is culturally irrelevant. It is a European ecclesial winter.

1.1. Ecclesial winter

In European countries with a Catholic tradition, ecclesial practice has diminished drastically. There are fewer Catholic baptisms, marriages, or funerals. Fewer people are attending Sunday Mass, and fewer children are being taught the faith. The sacramental celebration of penance or reconciliation is passing through a crisis.

In many places the Sunday Eucharist is attended almost only by the elderly. It is not an exaggeration to say that older people are the main ones preserving the faith, while their children, though baptized and catechized, are slowly taking leave of the official Church, and their grandchildren have often not even been baptized and hardly know the meaning of Christianity. The transmission of the Christian faith

has been interrupted. The traditional Christian concepts have been emptied of meaning; they say nothing to the new generations.

Many European youth live their lives apart from any institution, especially the Church. The Church has been reduced to a strange sect.

This situation is reflected also in the notable drop in vocations to the ordained ministry and the consecrated life, so that we are left with an inverted demographic pyramid: a large number of older priests and religious and a very small base of young ones. The infirmaries and the rest homes for retired clergy are filled with the elderly, while many seminaries and novitiates are almost empty. This decrease in vocations to the ministry and the religious life is one more symptom of the religious crisis of Western Europe.

Today we find new relevance in the question of J.M.R. Tillard: “Are we the last Christians?”

1.2. Seeking explanations

This situation has been aggravated by the negative impact of the present institutional Church. The First Vatican Council stated that the Church was a great sign of credibility because of its holiness and its universality, but today the Church is a major obstacle for faith:

- Besides the recent scandals related to Vatican finances and clerical pederasty, the problems include the non-evangelical nature of church governance (authoritarianism, abuse of power, centralism, distance from humble folk, etc.); the patriarchal hierarchy formed exclusively of celibate males; the disenfranchisement of the laity, especially women; and clericalism, which is a type of leprosy in the Church (Francis) and a perverse structure (C. Schickendantz).
- There is a theological and cultural disconnect: doctrines and dogmas are formulated in ways that correspond more to Hellenic mentalities rather than to Semitic ones. In any case, they are far removed from a modern or post-modern mentality.
- The morality taught is legalistic and casuistic; it is top-down, pre-modern, and not very personalist. It is based on a dualistic anthropology, is excessively focused on sexuality, and uses guilt and fear of punishment to keep people bound to the Church.

- For the great majority of the faithful, the liturgy is unintelligible, even after the change from Latin to the vernacular. It is clergy-centered and encourages little participation of the community. It is excessively rational, it lacks a festive character, and it is very distant from the people.
- The baptism of children continues to be the ordinary form of Christian initiation established by canon law and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, even though European society is no longer sociologically Christian and baptism has little meaning for many people.

For many people, Christianity and the Church are a type of *déjà vu*, something familiar but obsolete, a worn-out object retrieved from trunk of old throwaways. For some people it is the embodiment of all that is bad in our culture: repression, lust for power, inquisition, censure, control, male chauvinism, moralism, hatred of life, and feelings of guilt about sin. Whatever is wrong in our culture is attributed to Christianity (G. Amengual).

Moreover, as J.B. Metz points out, the lives of many European Christians hardly differ in practice from those of non-Christians. European Christianity is often bourgeois; faith is an external varnish that does not transform people’s real lives. Should we therefore be surprised that young people feel especially alienated from the Church?

And if it is difficult for a man to be Christian in Europe, how much more difficult it must be for a woman—in an extremely male-dominated Church that marginalizes women!

1.3. God in exile

What most concerns us here, though, is not this crisis of the European churches but the crisis of the image of God inherited from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Indeed, the ecclesial crisis is nothing more than the logical consequence of this crisis of God's image. God has become a stranger in our house; an alien, distant God; a God in exile (Lluís Duch).³ Modernity and post-modernity have undermined all the certainties that were previously taken for granted.

Human beings cannot exist outside a culture, and people in Europe are feeling today that they have been invaded by a secular, pluralist culture whose religious and social paradigms are unstable.

The number of atheists has increased, and many individuals are now quite impervious to God (Charles Taylor). The process of secularization has produced a thick concrete barrier that needs to be perforated in order to sustain a philosophical or spiritual debate (Marie Balmory).

It seems that Karl Rahner's assertion that every human being is a possible "hearer of the Word" is now superseded. Modern-day secularization is not simply the withdrawal of the Church as a power in society, nor does it mean only the elimination of references to God or Christianity in civil society; rather, it is the disappearance of God from the realm of social images. Secularization involves an anti-religious or a-religious worship of immanence, a humanism closed off to any type of transcendence.

The result is a disconnected, omnipotent, totally free ego that accepts

no mediation, heteronomy, or dependence; its autonomy is total; it is impervious to God.⁴

The number of agnostic or religiously indifferent persons has especially increased in

Western Europe. We no longer see so much the rigorous atheism that was common in the 19th and 20th centuries; we no longer hear that "God is dead." What prevails now is disinterest in transcendence; no one is interested in what lies beyond everyday reality, the world of work, money, food, health, consumption, sex, well-being, and security in old age.

What prevails instead in many parts of Europe is a crass form of materialism. People live in a bubble of indifference and globalization where the economy, the mass media, the politics, and the citizenry all reflect a bourgeois spirit.

One need only visit the center of important European cities like Paris, Barcelona, Milan, or Berlin to have evidence of the ostentatious luxury and wealth on its avenues (great hotels and restaurants, banks, swanky retailers, jewelry and perfume shops, theaters and cinemas, fancy gyms, etc.). These stand in stark contrast to the marginal neighborhoods where the poor and working-class people live. They barely survive on wages that never cover their basic expenses; they pay steep rents and are quickly evicted. It is the world of unemployed youth, undocumented immigrants, and homeless people with no one to help them.

The dominant culture promotes the myth of eternal youth, of power and wealth, of unending progress. It exalts technology, economic wizardry, and the technocratic paradigm. It worships

neoliberal capitalism, the body, sex, pleasure, the self, and the most extravagant individualism. All this comes at the cost of destroying nature; pillaging the earth, our common home; and consigning the mass of humanity to poverty and obscurity.

Europe has moved from having Christian roots to being anti-Christian in practice. In other words, it has become a post-Christian, pagan society in many places, decadent in many aspects, and far removed from the ideals of the Christian leaders who forged the European Union. To see a symptom of the dominant mentality, we need only consider the closure of European ports to African migrants.

1.4. The desire for something more

Some authors believe that secularization, laicization, and the desacralization and disenchantment of the world no longer have the same force they had years ago. They say that, to the contrary, in many places there is a certain desire for spirituality, though often it is of an ambiguous or exotic nature.

Some people pursue a form of gnosis that seeks interior enlightenment and salvation. Rejecting the traditional image of God and embracing nebulous New Age concepts, they experience a type of self-wrought salvation. Their anthropology allows no transcendence, their faith is locked in subjectivity, their doctrine is without mystery, and their spirituality is disincarnate (cf. *Gaudete et exsultate* 36-46).

This liquid society has lost all sense of salvation and eschatology; it gener-

ates no commitment to work for a better world and no ethics to fight against injustice. It has passed from psychology to sociology, from the mythical figure of Prometheus, who steals fire from the sun to promote human progress, to the figure of Narcissus, who falls in love with his own image reflected in the water.

In the midst of this religious pluralism, some people are increasingly attracted to Eastern spiritualities (Buddhism, Hinduism, the *advaita Vedanta*, etc.) and to silence and contemplation; they practice yoga, Zen, mindfulness, and self-help. Other people are strongly influenced by ecology and adopt the religion of Gaia, the sacred earth.⁵ An increasing number of persons defend belief in “not belonging” (Grace Davis); they practice a spirituality without religion (Laila de Ahumada), a spirituality without gods or beliefs (Marià Corbi), or a spirituality without God (Comte-Spomville, F. Mayorga).⁶ Also engaged in this intense search for spirituality are restless souls who are disappointed with the institutional religious paraphernalia of the Church of Christendom and so become obsessed with mysticism; they read and study the mystics, whether Christian (John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, Hildegard of Bingen, etc.), Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi, or Native American.

To understand these options, we should recognize that spirituality which is what can give life to religious institutions, has been asphyxiated by dogmas, rituals, and laws. It also must be admitted that some of these more spiritual options have suffered from a certain elitism that looks down on the religiosity of the people.

The theologian J. B. Metz sums up neatly what has been happening recently in many Christian sectors of European society. People at first were affirming, “Jesus, yes! Church, no!” They then went on to proclaim, “God, yes! Christ, no!” Then it was “Religion, yes! God, no!” And finally they ended up with “Religion no, but spirituality, yes!” But what kind of spirituality do they mean?

At the same time, many young people and adults, whatever their spiritual or religious convictions (post-Christian, agnostic, indifferent, atheist, ...), are working to help others: the poor, the evicted, the homeless, migrants, unemployed youth, street people, the elderly, and the discarded. They volunteer in solidarity organizations; they are dedicated to defending women; they fight against femicide and human trafficking; they take stands against torture, global warming, and contamination of the planet; they work in health and education or in organizations that promote human rights, peace, justice, etc. Indeed, many young people state that they do not need God or religion or Christian faith to be honest, committed, and just or to defend the environment.

Even though they may not express it or even realize it, this great mass of seekers is moving in the direction of the Kingdom that Jesus preached, and they are moving more firmly in that direction, perhaps, than many of those who are “lifelong Christians.”

1.5. Going to the roots

In trying to explain this complex situation, we have to explore a multiplicity

of causes. First, we are living in a profound change of epoch. It is a new “axial age” (Karl Jaspers) which is breaking with the traditions of the past three millennia.

We are dealing with a new paradigm, one that has brought countless scientific, technological, informational, social, economic, cultural, linguistic, sexual, and political changes. The religious and spiritual dimensions of society are naturally also affected by the prevailing secularization, religious pluralism, confusion, chaos, and disorder.

Clearly the old Church of Christendom—that of Constantine, the crusades, pontifical theocracy, the inquisition, proselytism, and cooperation with colonial powers—has exploded and is in intense agony, though it is a slow, drawn-out agony. The present situation is the consequence of a long process that began with the Enlightenment and modernity, a process that the institutional Church ignored or opposed (Pius IX) until Vatican II (1962-65) and the papacies of John XXIII and Paul VI.

All these changes have affected what some call the “social brain,” that is, the convictions we share that are more the fruit of our social environment than of our personal reasoning (R. M. Nogués). As a result, traditional Christians are disturbed and feel guilty, as if they were to be blame for the failure of faith in their families. What is actually happening is that the younger generations experience a different culture: they prefer massive rock concerts to liturgical celebrations. Many of them live in another galaxy, having little knowledge of God, Christ, or the Church.

We should add here that this ecclesial and religious crisis in Western Europe does not necessarily represent the sentiment and thought of all peoples and cultures. But the danger exists that Europe will be considered the model and reference point for the future of all humankind, and that it will be established as such.

Unlike Europe, the countries of the global South—Asia, Africa, and Latin America—are profoundly religious. Those continents are the home of the great ancestral religions that remain alive in the midst of great changes.

We must also remember that, in the midst of this religious chaos in Europe, expressions of what is called “popular religiosity” remain strong. They make manifest the faith of the poor and simple folk who express, even with possible ambiguities and syncretism, their profound trust in God and their love for the crucified Lord. They honor Mary and the saints, they go on pilgrimage to sanctuaries, they organize processions during Holy Week, they light candles to their favorite saints, and they trust that God will never abandon them. This religion of the people is an example of God’s predilection for the ordinary folk, the ones to whom the mysteries of the Kingdom have been revealed (Luke 10,21-22; Matt 11,25-27). Despite the ambiguities, the faith of the poor makes manifest the Christian people’s spirit of faith.⁷ A new breath of air is coming from the South, thanks to Pope Francis, and filling the lungs of the Church.

As we will point out later, Europe’s wealth and abundance is not unrelated to Europe’s colonization of Asia, Africa, and the Americas. We can there-

fore ask ourselves whether the agnosticism and religious indifference in Europe are not closely connected with structural sin, with the colonialism imposed by the great European powers past and present, and with the continuing exploitation of other continents by European multinationals.

1.6. A hopeful perspective

Even so, the present process of ecclesial and religious demythologizing, which extends throughout Western Europe, should not be seen as something negative. It can be interpreted as a sign of the times, a call to conversion, and a liberation from a purely traditional, unthinking type of Christianity. It can free people from conventional forms of superficial, external religiosity that can be easily utilized and manipulated for other ends. What is happening in Europe may even be a moment of grace, a *kairos*, that will help to reform many of the religious convictions and institutions of the past.

In the Acts of the Apostles there is a rather strange narrative, but it is actually very significant for our own times. The Holy Spirit had prevented Paul from preaching the Word to the Jews of Asia and Bithynia, but one night he had a dream vision in which a Macedonian asked him to come and save his people. Paul interpreted the dream with his companions, and they decided to travel to Macedonia, convinced that God was calling them there (Acts 19,6-10). From Macedonia Paul went on to Philippi, then to Athens, and finally to Rome.

The Spirit stopped Paul from preaching to the Jewish world and

called him to evangelize the pagan, gentile world. In this way, the Gospel reached far beyond Judaism, eventually encompassing the whole world.

The Spirit closes doors and opens them. The Spirit closes doors to the past and opens doors to the future. The Spirit is always disruptive and surprising.

How can we understand the European reality so as to open it up to a hopeful future? How can we transform it truly into a time of grace, conversion, and new birth?

Arturo Sosa, the present superior general of the Society of Jesus, made the following suggestion:

Our aim is to collaborate with the Church in experiencing secular society as a sign of the times that offers us

the opportunity for a renewed presence in the heart of human society. ... Today's mature secular society offers conditions that foster the rise of more personal religious processes that are independent of social or ethnic pressure. People can explore different avenues in depth, and they can choose freely to follow Jesus, belong to a church community, and adopt a Christian lifestyle.⁸

If in the past European Christianity had a very evangelical character (Francis, Ignatius, Teresa of Avila, Vincent de Paul, Therese de Lisieux, Charles de Foucauld, Edith Stein...), can it not be that way again today in a very different context?

The question is, then, is it possible to be Christian in Europe today?

2. MYSTAGOGY: AN INITIATION IN FAITH

Before directly answering the question about the possibility of being Christian in Europe today, we would like to propose, as an aid for interpretation, the concept of *mystagogy*; it is a term that comes from the study of the history of religions but is unknown to many people today.

2.1. What is mystagogy?

According to Mircea Eliade, an expert on the topic, mystagogy is a pedagogical category; it is something that teaches us about a new and unknown world, whether it be cultural, social, or religious.

Religious mystagogy, which is our present interest, involves initiation into the Mystery by means of myths, rites, and oral teachings, all of which are aimed at transforming the religious and existential status of the persons being initiated. At the end of the process the initiates enjoy a status totally different from the one they had at the beginning: they have been transformed.⁹ In the history of religions there are different types of mystagogy:

- collective mystagogies (e.g., the obligatory rites of puberty for all the boys of a tribe);
- initiations into certain groups (mystery religions, sects, certain religious groups);
- initiations for certain religious vocations (e.g., religious and social leaders).

However, in all types of initiation there exist certain constants:

- *Separation*: Every initiation involves physical separation of the neophytes from their ordinary ambience; the neophytes are taken to an unfamiliar place. The change of place symbolizes the newness of life that is about to begin, for every

initiation entails a conversion, a new birth, a rupture with the earlier life.

- *Initiation into the myths of origin:* The initiates are instructed in the religious history of the community; they are taught by the “elders” about what happened in primeval times. The instruction is done orally, passing from generation to generation the collective memory of what happen *in illo tempore*, “in that former time” of the community’s origins.
- *Initiatory trials and rites:* These constitute the essential core of the initiation. Their purpose is to have the initiates “die” ritually and symbolically to the past; they are taken back to the primeval chaos, to “time zero,” to the tabula rasa, so that they can be reborn to a different world. The rites of collective initiation can be rather dramatic. They may involve having the initiates remove their clothing and be shut up in a strange place with their eyes blindfolded. Or they may involve the initiates’ being circumcised, their being made to pass through difficult terrain, or their being buried in a shroud to symbolize a funeral rite. Such rites can be understood only from the perspective of dying to the earlier world and being born again. Young women are also initiated into the mystery of sexuality and life by the older women of the society.
- *Returning to the world as a new person:* The initiates are interiorly transformed; they are now adults and full members of the community. Biological and gynecological images are used to describe them:

new birth, newborns, seeds, neophytes, infants. After the initiation to puberty, for example, the young people return to their communities with new names and a new language; they are recognized as full members of the community.

2.2. Christian initiation

The early Church, which was born in the pagan Roman Empire, assimilated the elements that were common to all religious initiation, but it transformed them radically in accord with the paschal mystery. The dead and risen Christ is the one who makes us die to the past and generates in us a new life in the Spirit by means of sacramental symbols and rites.¹⁰

The initiation process took on structure in the New Testament, borrowing certain elements from the Old Testament. In the Acts of the Apostles we can discover the principal elements:

- Evangelization, or announcing the Good News (Acts 2,14-36; 8,5-12; 8,28-35)
- Committed faith of the new disciples (Acts 8,12; 16,14; 16,31)
- Baptismal immersion (Acts 8,17; 19,5; 10,48)
- The gift of the Spirit (Acts 2,38; 8,26-40)
- Entrance into the Church (Acts 41-47; 4,32-37)

2.2.1. Catechumenate

Christian initiation became more organized in the second century, and by the third and fourth centuries its struc-

ture was quite uniform throughout the whole Church, despite differing traditions in the churches of Africa, Jerusalem, Constantinople, and Rome. The basic initiation process was called the *catechumenate*, and for those coming from pagan religion, it followed an initial stage called the *candidacy*. The catechumenate lasted three years, during which the catechumens were initiated into the Christian mystery and the life of the Church. During those three years they experienced the essential dimensions of every mystagogy.

2.2.2. Separation

The candidates were separated from the pagan world and initiated into the group of catechumens by making a renunciation of the past and of evil. They had to give up some professions considered incompatible with the Christian faith, such as running houses of prostitution or sculpting statues of pagan gods.

2.2.3. Initiation into the origins of Christian faith

During this stage the catechumens were introduced to the scriptures, they were urged to practice Christian charity (visiting the sick, helping widows and orphans), and they participated in the liturgy of the Word that took place before the Eucharistic celebrations.

During Lent, the catechumens were initiated into the “myths of origin” of the Christian faith by the “elders” (bishops, priests, and deacons). This process involved:

- Biblical lessons oriented toward baptism, and explanation of the

mysteries of the faith summed up in the creed, which the initiates had to memorize and profess.

- An introduction to prayer and spirituality, focusing on an explanation of the Our Father, which they had to learn and recite.

2.2.4. Sacramental rites and tests of initiation

The sacramental liturgy of Christian initiation was preceded a highly symbolic ceremony: the renunciation of evil and profession of the faith.

As the initiates looked toward the west, the place of darkness and the symbol of evil and sin, they renounced Satan, all his pomps, and all his works.

What were the pomps of Satan? They were the spectacles of the pagan circuses, which featured not only horse and chariot races but also idolatrous processions with the images of pagan gods, displays of sexual immorality, gladiator battles, humans fighting with wild beasts, and even the execution of martyrs. The pomp was a concrete structure of sin at the time, and it had to be renounced by the initiates.

The renunciation of evil and sin was followed by the Trinitarian profession of faith in the Father, the Son, and Spirit; the initiates made this profession looking toward the east, the place of light. This liturgy of Christian initiation took place during the Easter vigil, when the whole Church was celebrating the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The celebration had three sacramental moments:

- The initiates’ immersion into the water of the baptismal font symbol-

izes their ritual death by; their coming up out of the water symbolizes being born to a new life. The baptismal ceremony is a sacramental ritual of death and life: dying to sin and receiving the gift of new life that bursts forth from the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is not that water has some magical power to save us; rather, what saves us is faith in the resurrection of the Lord, with whom we are united in baptism (Rom 6,1-11).

- The anointing with chrism, following the baptism, signifies the gift of the Spirit; it confirms and expresses that it is the Spirit of the Lord Jesus who frees us from sin and gives us new life, along with many other gifts and graces.
- Participation in the Eucharist of the “neophytes,” that is, those recently born to the faith, concludes the Christian initiation; the initiates are fully integrated into the ecclesial community, whose center and summit is the Eucharist.

2.2.5. *Mystagogical catechesis*

In many ancient churches the initiation was supplemented with what were called *mystagogical* catechetical lessons during Easter week. These lessons helped the new Christians to un-

derstand better the sacramental mysteries they had already received.

In contrast to the more rationalist, utilitarian mentality of modern times, the first Christian communities were convinced that many dimensions of the Christian faith can be understood only after one has spiritually experienced the Christian mystery through the sacraments.

2.2.6. *Some consequences*

What conclusions can be gathered from our study of mystagogy, both in Christian initiation and in the history of religions?

The first conclusion is that every initiation involves a long process; it is not something immediate or instantaneous; it requires much patience and perseverance. The second conclusion is that this long process is not just rational and doctrinal; it is experiential and practical; it involves dying to the past and opening oneself to new life. The third and final conclusion is that the initiation takes place in community; it is not just as an individual act. The community intervenes through its elders, who represent the community, so that completing the process means insertion into a new community, the Church that welcomes the new Christians.

3. BEING CHRISTIAN IN EUROPE: THE CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY

To respond to the question of being Christian in Europe today, we now propose a mystagogical process of initiation. In order to apply this mystagogical process to the European world, we must recognize that being Christian in Western Europe today involves a long road of Christian initiation or re-initiation. This is true whether one is coming from an abandoned or unrecognized Christian tradition or from a world that is already post-Christian.

In this long process, the starting point cannot be doctrinal, moral, or ritual. It must be experiential, opening oneself up to Transcendence. Concretely, it involves a direct encounter with the person of Jesus of Nazareth as he is presented in the gospels.

A lucid text of Benedict XVI expresses this attitude well: “One does not begin to be Christian through an ethical decision or a great idea, but through encountering an event, a Person, that opens up a new life horizon and bring about a decisive change in orientation.”¹¹

In 1966, after Vatican II, the theologian Karl Rahner had an intuition about a future that had already begun. He described it as follows:

There is need for a mystagogy or initiation into religious experience, which many people believe they cannot find in themselves. ... The spirituality of the future will no longer rely on an evident and unanimous public conviction or on a generalized religious ambience that exists prior to personal experience and decision. The religious education that has been customary until now will

in the future serve only as secondary training for institutionalized religious life. Mystagogy is what will have to provide the true “idea” of God, based on the felt realization that humanity is the abyss, that God is essentially the Incomprehensible, and that God’s incomprehensibility, instead of diminishing, increases as one comes to know more and as God draws close to us in his self-giving love.¹²

Nowadays we do not initiate people to the newness of faith; we do not evangelize a religious community with a Jewish tradition, as the first apostles did. We do not follow in the footsteps of the missionaries—such as Paul in Athens or Xavier in India and Japan—who initiated into the Christian faith members of the great world religions or of pagan religions. Nor do we try to evangelize the native peoples with autochthonous religions, as did the first missionaries in Latin America. The challenge today is to evangelize people who live in regions that have Christian cultural roots but who find themselves immersed in a world that is secularized, post-Christian, religious pluralistic, indifferent, and agnostic. It may be that post-modern atheists lack the vigor of their 19th century counterparts, but they still contaminate all their surroundings.

As we have seen already, the great majority of European citizens today live tranquilly in a society that was Christian in its origins but is no longer Christian. It is a lay society that possesses great human and social values but is often opposed to religion.

For many young people, whether they have been initiated into the

Christian faith or not, Christianity and the Church are something strange and unknown. They are relics of the past, fit to be placed in an ancient history museum, like the Greek and Egyptian gods. Young Europeans live in a world that is secular, technological, and scientific; it is a world with a different language and different symbols.

Some Europeans not only reject the Christian faith; they have apostatized, asking to be removed from the Church’s records. The great majority of today’s Europeans were originally Christians, baptized and initiated into the faith, but they later abandoned the Church and perhaps also the Christian faith and any belief in transcendent values. Nevertheless, there is a growing number of people who at one time abandoned the Church and possibly the faith, but who today are seeking something new. They want something that does justice to the positive human and spiritual dimensions that they have experienced in these years, but without necessarily returning the Church of old. It is not a retreat but an advance.

For people who have been living only in a secularized, post-Christian world, such as many of our young people, Christian initiation means being introduced to the Christian faith as something new, something they have never known or experienced. But for those who belonged to an earlier Christian tradition, the task is re-initiation, which does not mean returning to forgotten traditions of the past. Rather, it means discovering something new that gives their lives fresh meaning and value.

Both groups, in any case, have to take some prior steps that are common to every type of mystagogy.

3.1. Separation

The separation that accompanies every initiation should be understood not only in a physical but also in an existential sense. The living encounter with the Jesus of Nazareth of the gospels will be authentic for a European only if it is closely linked to the world of the poor and the victims, to the global South that Europe has exploited and dominated for centuries and continues to dominate today through transnational structures and corporations. The European culture of progress and welfare has colonial roots in the past and neoliberal roots in the present. A post-colonial conversion is necessary.

In other words, this encounter with Jesus of Nazareth entails not only a personal conversion (always necessary) but also a social and structural conversion away from a culture that is colonialist, machista, and neoliberal. It involves divorce from a technocratic paradigm that has excluded persons of other cultures, ethnicities, and sexual orientations and that has destroyed and continues to destroy creation, our common home.

We cannot approach Jesus from the world of Western Europe without hearing the voice of the poor, the martyrs, the innocent, or the victims of the structures of sin, victims whose cries reach to heaven.

As Santiago Agrelo, bishop of Tangiers, has said so well, we cannot be Christian and drape our border walls with razor wire that wounds the flesh of our brothers and sisters who want to migrate to Europe. Nor can we be Christian if we close our doors to refugees who cross the Mediterranean,

fleeing from their countries on fragile, overloaded boats. We must feel some shame and guilt for our indifference and lack of compassion.

We must therefore distrust any initiation to the Christian mystery that is reduced simply to a personal spiritual experience. The famous dictum of Karl Rahner—"The Christians of the 21st century will be mystics, or they won't be Christians"—is positive and valid, but nowadays it is insufficient unless it makes it clear that European Christians of the 21st century must be prophets as well as mystics. They must emphatically denounce all the injustice of the past and the present; they must reject and distance themselves as much as possible from the structures of sin that contaminate our Western reality (our "pimps"). Or to use the formula of J. B. Metz, ours must be an "open-eyed" mysticism; it must call to mind the passion of Jesus and that of the crucified peoples of this world. We cannot be merely spectators of the people's *Leidensgeschichte*, the history of their passion.

The modern world sparkles in its luxurious cities, its technological progress, and its cybernetic prowess, but without some direct experience of the horrors of that same modern world, it is difficult for people to feel indignation at the injustices, compassion for the victims, and determination to transform the world. As long as people live anesthetized, living in a bubble of affluence and indifference, they cannot open themselves to others or to the Other. It is not enough to marvel at the beauty of snow-covered mountains or to feel ecstasy on beholding a beautiful seascape or on hearing a great symphony. It is not enough to seek interior peace

with Eastern concentration techniques like yoga or Zen. If contemplation is the beginning of wisdom, then a certain critical indignation at what is happening in today's world is needed in order to open oneself to the real Mystery.

3.2. Openness to Transcendence and Mystery

Given the present situation, we can take advantage of certain cracks in this reality which will open us to the Mystery. Xavier Morlans enumerates some of the possible openings toward transcendence:¹³ parents' experience of the birth of their first child, appreciation of one's affective dimension instead of just the rational and logical, a more trusting attitude of openness to what lies beyond human limitations, and the ability to escape from individualism and relate to others.

And other openings can be added: besides marveling at the beauty of nature or of art, there is the experience of indignation in the face of evil in the world—not just sickness and old age but injustice, war, environmental destruction, impunity, corruption, the mendacity and selfishness of political leaders, sexual abuse, the hypocrisy of supposedly religious persons. Will there be, then, no justice in the world?

One final, dreaded crack is a bit taboo: death. What will happen to us at the end of life? What is there after death? Does everything end here? Does life have any meaning? Is suicide the only valid option in the face of the world's evil?

Christian initiation is not possible without these and other openings and

questions. In reality, we are not dealing with a problem or an enigma but with a Mystery, *the* Mystery, whatever name we give it: Transcendence, Absolute, All, One, Being, Cause, God.

3.3. A personal encounter with Jesus of Nazareth

If a certain openness to Transcendence makes us question the meaning of our lives, Christian mystagogy happily offers us elements that keep this Transcendence from becoming something vague and blurry; they turn it into a concrete personal encounter that gives new meaning and context to our lives. We begin not simply with religious pluralism or interreligious dialogue (both necessary today) but with the Judeo-Christian tradition.

In this tradition the “elders” perform a very important function: they bear witness to the Christian spiritual practice of the Church, they offer spiritual wisdom, and they initiate persons into the mystery of Jesus. And they do this before there is any reference to ecclesiastical doctrine, morality, or ritual.

In classical terms, the elders offer some preambles to the Christian faith, which concretely means presenting the Gospel in one of the forms it takes. The neophytes are taught the originating myths of the Christian tradition and are introduced to the historical Jesus of Nazareth.

A slow, prayerful, meditative reading of the gospels allows the Spirit to attract the readers toward the ultimate mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, who died and was raised up. The readers are attracted to a spiritual encounter that is

not merely rational but vital, affective, and compassionate; it fills the readers with interior joy and opens them up to a new style of life.

It is helpful to begin with the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and then move on to the gospel of John, whose prologue opens up the mystery of Jesus, his divine sonship, and his taking on flesh in order to bring us his light and his life. Neophytes can then continue with the Acts of the Apostles, which tells the story of how the Church was born by the force of the Spirit.

All this requires a setting of silence and prayer, as one passes from the historical Jesus to the Christ of faith so as to know him more clearly, love him more dearly, and follow him more nearly, day after day.¹⁴

3.4. The death and life of initiation: opening up to faith

There is a before and an after in the encounter with the Lord. It involves passing from a self-oriented, satisfied life to a certain feeling of existential emptiness. One enters a dark opening and becomes aware of oneself as a limited, sinful human being; one experiences the anguish of a new birth and a new life that is offered as grace and as gift.

It is necessary to die to a self-sufficient, earth-bound past and be born to a new and different life. It is necessary to open oneself to Someone, place oneself in his hands, trust in him. All is grace, gift, and interior attraction. Because of a vitalizing experience that goes beyond all moralism and rationalism, we are made to feel like new men and women, overflowing with an inner

joy that fills all existence with light and opens paths to the future.

It is the experience of the blind in the gospel who begin to see, of the sick and the afflicted who are healed, of the sinners who are forgiven, of the dead who are raised up and have a new lease on life. Words fail us when we try to express this experience: joy, delight, hope, consolation, heat and light, interior lightness and agility. It is the experience of Thomas as he touches the wounds of Jesus and exclaims, "My Lord and my God." It is the experience of Augustine, who discovered a beauty ever ancient and ever new. It is the joy of Edith Stein, who spent a whole night reading the life of Theresa of Jesus and then declared, "This is the truth!"

Jesus not only offers us a fully human life with values like justice, solidarity, compassion, forgiveness, and commitment to making the world better, but he also opens to us to a new, transcendent dimension, to the mystery of the Father, Creator of heaven and earth, and to the gift of the Spirit. Not only does he humanize us, but he lets us call God Father (Mother); that is, he makes us participants in the communitarian mystery of God's life; he divinizes us so as to bring our humanity to fulfilment.

The response to this encounter cannot be simply rational; it must be wholehearted. It is not just believing *in* him but *believing him* and opening ourselves to a new reality that transcends us. It means passing from death to life, the new life of the Spirit that impels us to follow Jesus wherever he goes, as did those first disciples in Palestine.

This faith does not cease to be a (Paschal) venture, just as unbelief is. It

does not eliminate doubts, but it does open us to the “marvelous uncertainty of faith” (Marcel Légaut).

3.5. Gradual discovery of the ecclesial dimension of faith

This long process of joyful encounter with Jesus leads us to recognize that it was the Christian community that offered us the memory of Jesus through the gospels. Thanks to the community of Jesus, which is the Church, we have had an encounter with him, an encounter transmitted to us by the ecclesial tradition of the “elders” of Christian initiation, that is, the prophets and saints throughout history.

The following of Jesus is personal but not individualistic; it involves forming part of a community that originated with the people of Israel and the Paschal Mystery of Jesus; it is a community that orients its life around the mystery of Jesus.

The Church, inspired by the Spirit, is the People of God moving in united, synodal fashion toward the Kingdom. We are not alone because we form the People of God, a community that is human and divine, holy and sinful, chaste and impure (as the Church Fathers put it), needing always to have recourse to divine mercy and to begin anew. It is also the Church of Peter, who denied Jesus, and of Paul, who in persecuting Christians persecuted Jesus. But above all it is the Church of the Spirit that carries on the mission of Jesus for the Kingdom and never abandons it.

We need to discover the profound spiritual and mystical dimension of the Church, which is not simply a bureau-

cratic organization and which should not be identified with its hierarchical leaders. The Church is a permanent Pentecost, an image of the Trinitarian community, the People of God, the Body of Jesus in history, the Temple of the Spirit. Therefore, seeking to follow Jesus apart for the Church is an illusion. The following of Jesus begins with the sacramental celebration of baptism, which is entrance into the ecclesial community and immersion in the paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is so not only because a sociological law states that every charism needs a certain institutionalization in order to perdure in time, but also because the Church must be seen in the light of faith, as the real, historical body of Jesus, his image and sacrament, his living presence in history.

3.6. A new life

If the initiates have not been baptized, then they must prepare themselves to receive baptism, be enriched with the gift of the Spirit in confirmation, and participate in the Eucharist. If instead they are “old” Christians returning to the faith and the Church, then they should renew the spirit and the practice of the sacraments of Christian initiation that gave them life and make the Eucharist the center of their ecclesial life.

The Eucharist is not simply an obligation or a social rite; it is the center of Christian life. Without the Eucharist there is no Church, for the heart of the Church is the paschal mystery made present and celebrated in the Eucharist, especially on Sundays. The Eucharist is an anticipation of the banquet of the

Kingdom, and it provides the strength we need to live the faith in everyday life. The first Christians stated that they could not live without the Eucharist, and they were ready to die before renouncing the profound conviction of faith that is the Sunday Eucharist.

A new life is beginning both for those being initiated into the faith for the first time and for those returning to the faith after a time of exile and diaspora. Both groups must take seriously what it means to be Christian in Europe and the West today. They must also, like the early catechumens, renew in faith the baptismal renunciations of sin, evil, and the structures of sin. Today that means renouncing injustice, corruption, machismo, violence, militarism, destruction of nature, lack of solidarity, racism, consumerism, worship of money, and social anesthesia. It also means welcoming migrants and respecting their culture and religiosity.

Believers must be open to the Trinitarian mystery of God, who is the Father, Creator heaven and earth; who is the incarnate Son, Jesus of Nazareth, who went about doing good, was crucified, and rose again; and who is the Holy Spirit, vivifying Lord of life, present in the Church and the world. Faith means working for the Kingdom of God by being committed to making the world more just and to caring for creation.

3.7. A new way of presenting the faith

Today's equivalent of the mystagogical catechesis given to the new Christians in the early Church would be the biblical, theological, moral, liturgi-

cal, pastoral, and spiritual formation the initiates receive in a process of permanent catechumenate for adults. Naturally, it will be done in the light of the theology of Vatican II and the post-Council period, especially the teaching of Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Laudato Si'*, and *Amoris Laetitia*.

The faith needs to be presented in today's modern and post-modern language and culture. Scripture and dogma must be interpreted critically, and a different perspective must be developed for morality, eschatology, and ecclesiology.¹⁵ All of theology, liturgy, morality, and ministry must be renewed, using new categories and paradigms, but this is not just the work of theology professors. It must be done by accompanying the poor and the marginalized and by listening to victims with compassion.

In an effort to synthesize the proposals and make them explicit, we cite some controversial issues that need to be resolved:

- There should be an introduction to both the Old and the New Testaments, but it should not be fundamentalist or literalist. It should take advantage of the advances in critical historical exegesis, the literary genres, the teachings of *Dei Verbum*, and other Church teachings on the Bible. Faith is not opposed to reason; there needs to be a dialogue between faith and modern science.
- Christology should begin from below, by fostering familiarity with Jesus of Nazareth, and from there introduce people to the paschal

mystery of his divinity and the revelation of the Trinity. The incarnation should not be considered simply as a remedy for sin (*O felix culpa!*) but as a central part of the Father's creative project, which seeks to communicate, through Jesus and the Spirit, his life and his love to humanity and the world.

- The death of Jesus on the cross did not happen in order to make satisfaction to the Father for human sin, as if God were demanding infinite reparation through the bloody death of his Son. Rather, Jesus' death was the result of the love and devotion he had for humanity, and of the service he rendered to the Kingdom, the loving project of his Father.
- As Maximus the Confessor stated: when the Father saw Jesus risen from the dead, he could say, "For this I have created the world." The Risen One is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end of creation, the first fruits of a new humanity, of the new heaven and the new earth, of the transfiguration of the cosmos, of the eschatological Kingdom.
- We need to move from the concept of an almighty, omnipotent God to a theology of God who is Father and Mother, loving and merciful, creator of heaven and earth. God wants us to preserve creation and develop it with respect and justice. He has sent his Son in the humility of our flesh and our world in order to share with us his life.
- Overcoming the theological and pastoral silence about the Holy Spirit, we need to propose a theology of the Spirit as Lord and Giver of life. The Spirit gives the Church vi-

talinity and dynamism, but the Spirit is poured over all humankind, not just the Church. The Spirit is present in the religious and cultural traditions of all peoples, transforming the world till it reaches the eschatological fullness of the new heaven and the new earth.

- We need to expose people to the mystery of the Trinitarian Community of love, which communicates itself to the world as the true home and communion table, creating an open family, the source of unity, diversity, and joy.
- The Church was not founded by the historical Jesus as a structured religious institution. Rather, it is the fruit of the paschal mystery and the gift of the Spirit of the Risen One, who transforms the disciples of Jesus, symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel, into missionaries and evangelizers of the whole world, and who helps them develop the structures necessary for communicating the life of Jesus to humankind throughout history.
- We need to move from a clerical, hierarchical Church to a Church that is People of God, made up of all the baptized, walking together toward the Kingdom of God. The Church today needs to be a Church that has its doors open and goes out to meet people. It needs to be a poor Church of the poor, a field hospital, a Samaritan Church, prophetic and paschal, happy and missionary. It evangelizes by the force of the Spirit, with shepherds who smell like their sheep. It is a synodal Church, that is, a Church that engages in dialogue, a Church

where everyone teaches and everyone learns.

- People need to understand that what offends God in our sin is whatever does damage to other persons.
- We need to move away from a conception of original sin as a stain inherited by every newborn child and replace it with a conception of original sin as the sin of the world, a sin that contaminates history and affects us personally and communally. It is from this sin that Jesus liberates us, for he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1,29).
- Baptism should not be conceived as washing away an original stain but as personal insertion into the paschal mystery of Jesus, who takes away the sin of the world and gives us his Spirit, so that by entering into the ecclesial community, we can live a full life and work for the Kingdom of God.
- Although infant baptism makes sense as an expression of the priority of God's grace and the faith of the Church, in today's post-Christian Europe and in the present agony of an established Church, the baptizing of older persons, who have been catechized and who can freely and maturely profess their faith in the Church, should be offered as a possibility and should even be favored.
- The Eucharist should not concentrate only on the aspect of the Lord's presence and the commemoration of his passion; it should also stress the paschal presence of the Risen One and remind people that the central symbol of the Eucharist is the banquet of the Lord, where the breaking of the bread puts us in communion with the Lord and with our neighbors, especially those most in need. The Eucharist is Jesus breaking, giving, and sharing his life with us, and of us breaking, giving, and sharing our life with others.
- The Eucharist also possesses a profound ecological dimension: it is the solid matter of this world being made into the body and blood of the Lord and thus anticipating the banquet of the Kingdom, the communion of the saints, and the transfiguration of the cosmos. To the two invocations of the Spirit over the bread and over the community should be added a third, asking that the Spirit transfigure all of creation in the body of the cosmic Christ.
- The ordained ministries of the Church should not be restricted to celibate men but should be open also to married men, since celibacy and priesthood are separated in the ancient Catholic tradition of the Eastern Churches. Moreover, there are no serious biblical or theological arguments that prohibit women from being ordained, a change that would give the Church a very different face.
- The whole community should be actively involved in the selection and formation of ordained ministers, and the whole community should be consulted above all in the naming of bishops, as traditionally happened in ancient times.
- The episcopacy should not be considered an honor or the goal of an ecclesiastical career. Rather, it should be understood as a pastoral service to the People of God, imi-

tating the poor, humble Lord who washed the feet of his disciples and gave his life for his sheep.

- There is therefore a need to reassess the mission of the bishops, the bishops' conferences, and the synods. Other institutions and figures linked to the past, such as cardinals and nuncios, should also be reconsidered.
- There is also a need to reassess the mission of the Pope as bishop of Rome, the site of the martyrdom of Peter and Paul. As bishop of Rome, the pope presides in charity, but the historical circumstances that have converted the pope into the head of the Vatican State need to be questioned. The papacy and the curia need to be re-organized in forms that are more evangelical and adapted to today's world.
- It is necessary to reassess both contemplative and apostolic religious life as a charism of the Spirit that offers the possibility of a prophetic following of Jesus. The following of Jesus can take the form of service to the marginalized, prophetic confession of the faith, and offering spirituality in a secularized world. To that end, many obsolete structures and traditions need to be revised, and religious must work in close collaboration with the laity. From their small, minority status, they should be ferment rather than cement.
- All of eschatology needs to be rethought; that is, the doctrine about the so-called *last things* (death, judgment, heaven, hell) needs to be deepened in the light of the paschal mystery of the Risen One and our belief in a merciful Father-Mother God whose justice is mercy. With

the last and least as our judges, God is able to pardon us and receive us in the banquet of the Kingdom.

- We must therefore move away from a morality and pastoral ministry that are focused on panic and fear of punishment and seem to concentrate only on sexuality. We must envision a responsible Christian life that is open to the ecclesial, to the poor, and to social and ecological justice. We need a morality that calls us to be continually converted to the Lord and to the values of the Kingdom, such as justice, freedom, equality, and solidarity. We need a morality that takes into account the dignity of the sanctuary of personal conscience and the need for discernment. We need a morality that engages in interdisciplinary dialogue with anthropology and the other sciences.

In this whole process of inculturation and intercultural dialogue, it should be lay men and women, and especially the young, who contribute to this reformulation of Christianity and the Church. It is not a question of breaking with tradition but of being able to experience it today in a renewed, actualized form. The ones who can most help in forging this new way of being Church are the young people who left the Church because they considered it something strange, decadent, and tedious. It is a waste of time and even counterproductive, however, to try to impart Christian formation if people have not passed through the prior process of initiation. Is this not the reason for the limited success of so many formation centers for lay people?

Of course, all the things we have been discussing need to be carried out in communion with companions and with other Christians who have rediscovered the faith, people who are not simply the decadent remnant of a Church in agony. With bases like these, ecumenical and interreligious dialogue makes sense; it allows us to be enriched with all the positive aspects of other spiritual traditions. Especially important is the interreligious dialogue with Islam in Europe.

Our aim should not be proselytism but mutual enrichment through exchange of the gifts the Spirit has poured out on Christians and non-Christians alike, so that all can work together to safeguard the planet Earth and to achieve a more just and peaceful society. None of this is possible, however, without passing first through the process of initiation, through mystagogy.

3.8. The mystagogy of the Spiritual Exercises

Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556) is ordinarily appreciated for his organizational genius and his apostolic leadership. He was a missionary in a society and a Church that were moving out of the Middle Ages and into the modern world. But Ignatius was above all a mystic, a man of God; he was open to the Mystery of the divine Trinitarian majesty; he was in love with Christ, whom he wanted to follow and serve in the Church.

Ignatius himself went through a long process of initiation, a true mystagogy that passed through several stages.¹⁶ After years of a vain, worldly existence in noble courts and knightly adventures,

he experienced a profound rupture with that world. After being wounded in a battle in Pamplona, he returned to his home in Loyola, where he underwent a profound conversion while reading about the lives of Jesus and the saints. Soon after that he set out on a long pilgrimage that took him from Loyola to the monastery of Montserrat, where he confessed and put aside his sword and his fine garments. He then proceeded to Manresa, where he spent many months in prayer and penance, experiencing great temptations, even to suicide, but where he also had great spiritual illuminations that changed him profoundly and oriented his life toward a new missionary and apostolic horizon.

He traveled to Palestine to live where Jesus lived, but when he was unable to remain there, he returned to Europe and began a long course of studies (Barcelona, Alcalá, Salamanca, Paris) so that he would be better prepared to help others. His more personal experience became more communitarian: he recruited companions, his friends in the Lord, with whom he made plans to work in Jerusalem. When they were unable to travel to the Holy Land, they placed themselves in the hands of the pope, who accepted the new group as the Society of Jesus, working to serve the universal Church.

In the book of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius sought to share with others his own mystagogy, that is, his spiritual process and experience, his conversion and initiation into faith. First initiated by his confessors and above all by God himself, Ignatius became a mystagogue, and the Exercises became a mystagogy of initiation into encounter with God and Christian faith.

The book of the *Spiritual Exercises* is not just a text to be read, nor is it a type of doctrinal instruction. Rather, the Exercises described in the book are a spiritual initiation that passes through the diverse stages of mystagogy in the course of four weeks that are spent in silence and prayer.

After the exercitants are physically separated from their usual environment, they are introduced to the Mystery of God the Creator (Principle and Foundation) and are called to conversion of life through the mercy of the Crucified Lord (First Week). During the Second, Third, and Fourth Weeks, the exercitants contemplate the life of the poor and humble Jesus of Nazareth. They pass through his infancy and public life until they reach his passion and resurrection, always asking for greater love and knowledge of Jesus and for the grace to follow him in his project of the Kingdom.

The first critical point in the Exercises is the election, the moment of rebirth, the radical experience of dying to the past and of rising to something new: being totally open and available to God in order to discern and choose what God wants for each of us.

In the classical Exercises the main concern is choosing a state of life, but in our own time the election is about something more radical: it involves moving from obstinate agnosticism or negation of God to experience of the Mystery revealed to us through Jesus of Nazareth.

This election does not depend simply on an ethical decision or logical reasoning. Rather, it is the fruit of a gentle interior attraction—what Ignatius calls “consolation”—which increases one’s faith, love, and hope. The consolation

endows the exercitants with interior joy and delight at finding the horizon and the meaning of life, so that they can love and serve the Lord in all things (the Contemplation to Attain Love).

This Ignatian mystagogy, which is guided by “the one who gives the Exercises,” can today be an excellent path for undergoing re-initiation in the Christian faith and fostering conversion from sin to the Mystery of the merciful God. But the most important goal is the personal encounter with Jesus of Nazareth, who calls us to make an option of faith by following him, guided by the inner attraction of the consoling Spirit.

Such initiation through the Exercises of Ignatius would need to be supplemented by other elements that are not sufficiently present in the Exercises because of the historical circumstances of his time. These other elements would include the cosmic and ecological dimension of creation, conversion to God from both personal and structural sin, complementing the theme of the poverty and humiliation of Jesus with his option for the poor, broadening discernment to include both personal and community discernment, greater stress on the Church of Jesus as the People of God, and greater emphasis on the mystery of the Holy Spirit, about which Ignatius kept silent in the Exercises in order not to be accused of heresy.

With these limitations, but also with these possibilities, the experience of the Exercises, when accompanied by a good guide and adapted to the rhythm and situation of the exercitant, can be a very valuable instrument (thought certainly not the only one) for Christian re-initiation in today’s world.

NARRATIVE CONCLUSION: THE BURNED CHURCH

We still have on our retinas the images of the fierce fire that in April 2019 ripped through Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, the great symbol of Christian art, culture, history, and faith in France and all Europe. The destructive fire touched souls around the world. As Parisians contemplated in horror their cathedral in flames, some wept, some knelt and prayed, and the world's heart went out to them.

It is easy to understand the reasons for the worldwide sympathy and solidarity and for the great interest in rebuilding Notre Dame, but apart from the technical, architectural matters and the criticism being made of wealthy people who donate generously while remaining insensitive to pressing social issues, there are some important questions we need to ask.

The Notre Dame Cathedral symbolizes a type of medieval French society and Church; indeed, it represents a Europe that once had deep Christian roots but no longer has them. Today the situation has changed radically: France is a mission country, and Western Europe is going through a rapid process of secularization, loss of

Christian faith, religious pluralism, indifference, agnosticism, and post-modern atheism. God is in exile.

Rebuilding Notre Dame is not merely an architectonic problem; it forces us to ask ourselves whether we should be satisfied with rebuilding a monument of the Church's medieval past, a symbol of Christendom. Given the present situation, it seems more important for us Christians to ask about the meaning of Christian faith in today's Europe, a continent with tremendous economic wealth but with great social differences; a continent with a colonial past that now closes its doors and its ports to immigrants; a continent that sells arms to warring countries, arms that kill children; a continent re-

sponsible for climate change but reluctant to act firmly to defend the earth.

Rebuilding Notre Dame is justifiable because cultural and religious sentiment needs concrete, visible symbols of transcendence, but we cannot forget that the Church is not built with lifeless stones. The Church is constituted by living stones of Christian communities made up of followers of Jesus of Nazareth, who is the only true temple of God. The new Notre Dame should not end up being just a museum of historical art and culture for tourists from all over the world.

The image of Notre Dame in flames has reminded me of other churches that were burned down in times of persecution or revolution. Concretely, I recalled the reflections of Joan Maragall as he stood in front of the church burned in 1909, during the Tragic Week in Barcelona. Without entering into the causes and the socio-political consequences of the Tragic Week (cf. *El Pregó*, summer supplement, 2009), I would like to present some insights from Maragall's article that seem relevant for the situation today.

After the poet and believer had spent a Sunday morning at a church that had been burned down, he wrote: "I had never heard a Mass like that one. The fractured vault of the church, the peeling walls tarnished with smoke, the destroyed and absent altars—especially that great, black empty space where the major altar had been—the floor invisible beneath the dust of debris, no bench on which to sit, and everyone standing or kneeling before a wooden table with a cross on it, and a torrent of sun entering through a gap in the vault, with a multitude of flies

dancing in the raw light that was illuminating the whole church and made it seem as though we were assisting at Mass in the middle of the street."

For Maragall, that Mass after the anti-clerical violence of the Tragic Week seemed totally new, like one celebrated in a corner of the catacombs by the first Christians. Perhaps the Mass should always be like that: with the doors open to the poor, the oppressed, the desperate, those for whom the Church was founded. It should not be a closed affair, "inwardly enriched and protected by the rich and the powerful who come to sedate their hearts in the peace of the shadows." Fire has purified the Church and restored Christ to his home. Entering into this burned church, one can find Christ, who is truth and life. There is no need to rebuild it, or secure it with iron-clad doors, or ask for the protection of the state.

It is worthwhile reading the whole article of Maragall, which received the backing and approval of Doctor Torras y Bages, bishop of Vic, who had encouraged him not to be silent.

No easy parallel can be drawn between the Notre Dame fire and the burning of the church during the Tragic Week in Barcelona, but Maragall's call not to rebuild the old church still holds true. The destruction should be seen as an opportunity not to restore the Church but to reform it. The Church in Europe must be purified, and it must ask pardon for its sins: crusades, inquisition, colonialism, patriarchy, clericalism, divisions among Christians, sexual abuse, alliance with the rich, etc. It must become the Church of the Gospel, the Church of

Jesus of Nazareth, the Church of the People of God, the community of Vatican II, the Church of Pope Francis: a poor Church serving the poor, a field

hospital, a merciful Church going forth in paschal joy, a Church that cares for the earth and communicates to all the joy of the Gospel.

NOTES

1. The situation is very critical also in Catalonia. Cf. NOGUÉS, Ramon M. (2018). “Quin futur té la religió a casa nostra?”, *El Pregó*, no. 558, pp. 1-9; CODINA I MAS, Pere (2018). “Els nostres fills no segueixen”, *El Pregó*, no. 558, pp. 10-39.
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