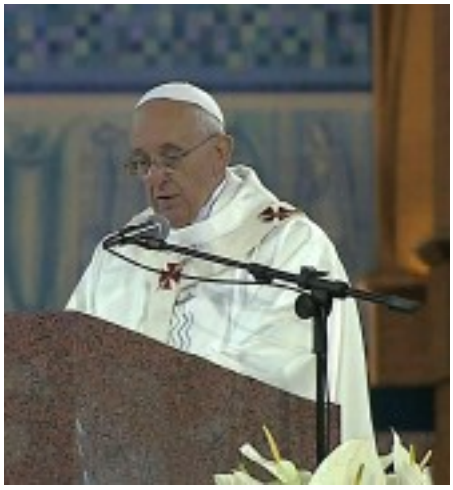


What the Church is called to today
Pope Francis to the bishops at Aparecida July 27, 2013

The icon of Emmaus as a key for interpreting the present and the future Before all else, we must not yield to the fear once expressed by Blessed John Henry Newman: "... the Christian world is gradually becoming barren and effete, as land which has been worked out and is become sand".

We must not yield to disillusionment, discouragement and complaint. We have laboured greatly and, at times, we see what appear to be failures. We feel like those who must tally up a losing season as we consider those who have left us or no longer consider us credible or relevant. Let us read once again, in this light, the story of Emmaus (cf. Lk 24:13-15). The two disciples have left Jerusalem. They are leaving behind the "nakedness" of God. They are scandalized by the failure of the Messiah in whom they had hoped and who now appeared utterly vanquished, humiliated, even after the third day (vv. 17-21). Here we have to face the difficult mystery of those people who leave the Church, who, under the illusion of alternative ideas, now think that the Church – their Jerusalem – can no longer offer them anything meaningful and important. So they set off on the road alone, with their disappointment. Perhaps the Church appeared too weak, perhaps too distant from their needs, perhaps too poor to respond to their concerns, perhaps too cold, perhaps too caught up with itself, perhaps a prisoner of its own rigid formulas, perhaps the world seems to have made the Church a relic of the past, unfit for new questions; perhaps the Church could speak to people in their infancy but not to those come of age. It is a fact that nowadays there are many people like the two disciples of Emmaus; not only those looking for answers in the new religious groups that are sprouting up, but also those who already seem godless, both in theory and in practice.

Faced with this situation, what are we to do?

We need a Church unafraid of going forth into their night. We need a Church capable of meeting them on their way. We need a Church capable of entering into their conversation. We need a Church able to dialogue with those disciples who, having left Jerusalem behind, are wandering aimlessly, alone, with their own disappointment, disillusioned by a Christianity now considered barren, fruitless soil, incapable of generating meaning.

A relentless process of globalization, an often uncontrolled process of urbanization, have promised great things. Many people have been captivated by the potential of globalization, which of course does contain positive elements. But many also completely overlook its darker side: the loss of a sense of life's meaning, personal dissolution, a loss of the experience of belonging to any "nest" whatsoever, subtle but relentless violence, the inner fragmentation and breakup of families, loneliness and abandonment, divisions, and the inability to love, to forgive, to understand, the inner poison which makes life a hell, the need for affection because of feelings of inadequacy and unhappiness, the failed attempt to find an answer in drugs, alcohol, and sex, which only become further prisons.

Many, too, have sought shortcuts, for the standards set by Mother Church seem to be asking too much. Many people think: "the Church's idea of man is too lofty for me, the ideal of life which she proposes is beyond my abilities, the goal she sets is unattainable, beyond my reach. Nonetheless – they continue – I cannot live without having at least something, even a poor imitation, of what is too lofty for me, what I cannot afford. With disappointed hearts, they then go off in search of someone who will lead them even further astray.

The great sense of abandonment and solitude, of not even belonging to oneself, which often results from this situation, is too painful to hide. Some kind of release is necessary. There is always the option of complaining: however did we get to this point? But even complaint acts like a boomerang; it comes back and ends up increasing one's unhappiness. Few people are still capable of hearing the voice of pain; the best we can do is to anaesthetize it.

Today, we need a Church capable of walking at people's side, of doing more than simply listening to them; a Church which accompanies them on their journey; a Church able to make sense of the "night" contained in the flight of so many of our brothers and sisters from Jerusalem; a Church which realizes that the reasons why people leave also contain reasons why they can eventually return. But we need to know how to interpret, with courage, the larger

picture.

I would like all of us to ask ourselves today: are we still a Church capable of warming hearts? A Church capable of leading people back to Jerusalem? Of bringing them home? Jerusalem is where our roots are: Scripture, catechesis, sacraments, community, friendship with the Lord, Mary and the apostles... Are we still able to speak of these roots in a way that will revive a sense of wonder at their beauty?
Many people have left because they were promised something more lofty, more powerful, and faster.

But what is more lofty than the love revealed in Jerusalem? Nothing is more lofty than the abasement of the Cross, since there we truly approach the height of love! Are we still capable of demonstrating this truth to those who think that the apex of life is to be found elsewhere? beauty?

Do we know anything more powerful than the strength hidden within the weakness of love, goodness, truth and people today are attracted by things that are faster and faster: rapid Internet connections, speedy cars and planes, instant relationships. But at the same time we see a desperate need for calmness, I would even say slowness. Is the Church still able to move slowly: to take the time to listen, to have the patience to mend and reassemble? Or is the Church herself caught up in the frantic pursuit of efficiency? Dear brothers, let us recover the calm to be able to walk at the same pace as our pilgrims, keeping alongside them, remaining close to them, enabling them to speak of the disappointments present in their hearts and to let us address them. They want to forget Jerusalem, where they have their sources, but eventually they will experience thirst. We need a Church capable of accompanying them on the road back to Jerusalem! A Church capable of helping them to rediscover the glorious and joyful things that are spoken of Jerusalem, and to understand that she is my Mother, our Mother, and that we are not orphans! We were born in her. Where is our Jerusalem, where were we born? In Baptism, in the first encounter of love, in our calling, in vocation.

We need a Church capable of restoring citizenship to her many children who are journeying, as it were, in an exodus.