

Congress EEC

The Person and the Challenges
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Conversion. Theme of the Congress

“There were things that were changing inside me, but it took me three years to formalize my path. When you start to discover faith, you do not know whether it is really faith” (Florence).

“Alexander, then, what are you going to do? I am here, inside you, why are you afraid? I am here, here for you! We were always together, all these years! I listened to you, and you have heard me; I have searched for you and you have searched for me!” (Alexander).

“I have been for a long time in a cocoon where it was dark, I experienced a transformation, I have been reborn freer and truer, I want to live and I am not afraid to use the wings that the Lord has given me” (Monia).

“As for me, I do not know what way to go from now on. I am discovering this step by step, trying to do what is good, somewhat like the words of St Augustine: ‘Love and do whatever you want’” (Octavia).

1. The theme: A reflection in the line of previous EEC Congresses

I wanted to begin my speech with four short quotations that we will find in our stories. In extreme synthesis, they state the meaning of our work. The EEC has decided to reflect on a fascinating and contemporary subject: that of conversion.

Even in secularized Europe, in fact, we are witnessing an event that neither psychology nor sociology, nor the other human sciences can justify with a full explanation, an event that has something that defies analysis: the coming or the return to the faith of the unbaptized or those who have long broken all relations with the ecclesial community. We are giving the name of “conversion” to this initial access or this unexpected return to the faith. From the beginning we realize that the term is not easily demarcated, but we will be helped progressively to specify its boundaries. The choice of the theme was made at the conclusion of our last Congress in Malta in 2012. It immediately seemed like a consequential choice, consistent with the stages of reflection carried out in previous conferences.

In the Congress in Lisbon (2008) the EEC had addressed the issue of the first proclamation.¹ The reflection was focused on the proposal of the Gospel in a culture in which the faith is no longer by itself, no longer acquired by inheritance. That is how we have reflected on the need to give a kerygmatic connotation to catechesis, to make it missionary, a return to the very essence of the faith, making the gift of the Gospel accessible in a European cultural context which is largely secularized.

The Congress in Krakow (2010) has explored the theme of narrative catechesis.² The choice was consistent. The proposal of the faith in a kerygmatic

¹ The proceedings of Lisbon Congress (2008) on “The missionary conversion of catechesis” were published in French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and English:

– E. Biemmi, A. Fossion (edd.), *La conversion missionnaire de la catéchèse. Proposition de la foi et première annonce. Actes du congrès de l'Équipe Européenne de Catéchèse. Lisbonne, du 28 mai au 2 juin 2008*, Bruxelles, Lumen Vitae 2009.

– *Catechesi missionaria*, « Catechesi » 78 (2008–2009) 3, p. 1–80; p. 4, 2–42- Equipo Europeo De Catequesis, *La conversión misionera de la catequesis. Relación entre fe y primer anuncio*, Madrid, PPC 2009.

– *A conversão missionária da Catequese. Debates e práticas sobre a relação entre a fé e o primeiro anúncio na Europa; The conversion dimension of catequesis. Debates and practices about the relation between faith and the first announcement in Europe*, «Pastoral Catequética » 5 (2009) 13, p. 7–151 (Portuguese text) e p. 155–291 (English text).

² The proceedings of Krakow Congress (2008) on “The narrative dimension of catechesis” were published in French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese:

– E. Biemmi, A. Fossion (edd.), *La catéchèse narrative. Actes du congrès de l'Équipe Européenne de Catéchèse. Cracovie, du 26 au 31 mai 2011*, Bruxelles, Lumen Vitae 2011.

– Équipe Europea di Catechesi, *La catechesi narrativa. Atti del Congresso dell'Équipe Europea di Catechesi. Cracovia, 26–31 maggio 2010*, a cura di E. Biemmi e G. Biancardi, Torino-Leumann, Elledici 2012.

– Equipo Europeo de Catequesis, *La dimensión narrativa de la catequesis*, Madrid, PPC 2011.

way, in fact, requested a return to the founding event, the Passover of the Lord, from which the Christian community was born and is continually re-born. This event must be narrated before being explained. The historical and relational nature of the faith calls for a language which is based on witness as the first story of any testimony, as we find at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke (1, 1–4) and in the first verses of the First Letter of John (Jn 1, 1–4).

We thus understand that narration is not one of the many languages of access to the Christian faith, but it is the original one, the wellspring, the language and structure that intersects and structures all the others.

In the Congress in Malta we have completed this issue by investigating not only the question of the plurality of the languages of faith, allowing the entire person to enter into all the dimensions of Christian faith, but the one which is most radical – “language” as a “symbolic universe”, as a place for our progressive becoming human and for the possibility in this human journey to become believers.³

Why, then, the issue of conversion? The coming or the return to the faith of adults becomes the concrete place in which to exercise and verify the extent of the missionary dimension of our proclamation, but with a clear reversal of perspective on which to return: conversions are asking us to look at things not only from the point of view of the ecclesial community and of its proposal, but from the real experiences of those who come to faith. So we want to put ourselves in a position to listen to the Word as it unfolds in a journey in the heart of the people, of how the Gospel is still “becoming flesh and getting constantly better” (EG 126) in human history.

2. The method: the reality is greater than the idea

This Congress therefore marks a substantial change of method from the previous ones. The logic in our catechetical reflection so far had to start from

– *Congresso da Equipa Europeia de Catequese. Cracóvia, Maio de 2010. A problemática da dimensão narrativa da catequese*, in «Pastoral Catéquetica» 7 (2011) 20, p. 43–151.

³ The proceedings of Congress of Malta (2012) have been published in Italian and in French: E. Biemmi, G. Biancardi (a cura di), *Linguaggio e linguaggi in catechesi*, Atti del Congresso dell'Equipe Europea di Catechesi, Malta, 30 maggio – 4 giugno 2012, LDC, 2013; E. Biemmi, A. Fossion (edd.), *Le langage et les langages en catéchèse*, Editions Lumen Vitae, Bruxelles Namur 2015.

a systematic reflection on the themes chosen (first proclamation, narrative, language) and then together seek the catechetical implications and repercussions on evangelization and catechesis. It was a somewhat deductive method: from reflection to practice. So, for example, the contribution of the biblical scholar, the philosopher, the systematic theologian and the catechist constituted the framework in previous congresses, while the study and discussions in the assembly allowed us to discuss the catechetical implications respecting the different countries represented. With some courage now we will try to do the opposite, or rather to take a path that goes from practice to practice, seeing our practice and questioning it with all the depth of our reflective capacity. The goal is to practice reflectively, or to continue practicing while reflecting. Our Congress will therefore be an exercise in practical theology, with the aim of producing a whole catechetical theology.

Pope Francis in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* provokes us in his own way to go in this direction, in view of a missionary Church: “There also exists a constant tension between ideas and realities. Realities simply are, whereas ideas are worked out. There has to be continuous dialogue between the two, lest ideas become detached from realities...Realities are greater than ideas. This principle has to do with the incarnation of the word and its being put into practice: “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is from God” (1 Jn 4, 2). The principle of reality, of a word already made flesh and constantly striving to take flesh anew, is essential to evangelization. It helps us to see that the Church’s history is a history of salvation, to be mindful of those saints who inculturated the Gospel in the life of our peoples and to reap the fruits of the Church’s rich bimillennial tradition, without pretending to come up with a system of thought detached from this treasury, as if we wanted to reinvent the Gospel. At the same time, this principle impels us to put the word into practice, to perform works of justice and charity which make that word fruitful. Not to put the word into practice, not to make it reality, is to build on sand, to remain in the realm of pure ideas and to end up in a lifeless and unfruitful self-centeredness and Gnosticism.” (EG 231–233).

This text, which reveals in a rather obvious way a particularly familiar approach which is sensitive to the Latin American theology, is full of provocation for us. The statement that “the reality is superior to the idea” challenges us. It tells us that the action of God precedes us in history and at the same time for this action of God to become history it needs the Word, our believing word, our ecclesial witness.

3. The aim: listening to a revelation which is in progress

We are here at the core of the problem of our congress: restoring the Christian life to the corresponding dignity which it deserves. Christophe Theobald told us clearly: “*Faith therefore has a story*, I hope this is understood!”⁴ He reminds us that there is a revelation which definitely took place in the story of Jesus of Nazareth, and in the stories of his meetings with different people, but God continues to construct history with the human being. We note that after the great canonical history of salvation narrated in the Old and the New Testament, stories of conversion and faith have multiplied until today. As recalled by the Pope in the text quoted above, we are called to promote the history of the Church and of each of its members as the history of salvation, a salvation in progress. We are called to value these stories as *testaments*, to consider them in some way a post-canonical testament, written with the ink of the Spirit in the lives of people. Is it too bold to say that after the Old and the New Testament there is a “third testament” which is still in the writing phase and that we are called to accept? Of course we should not be so naive because we know that this “third testament” is governed by the first two and that there is a difference between stories of Christological faith and apocryphal narratives.⁵ The Church has many times acknowledged the work of the Spirit in the lives of the saints and at the same time has so often disavowed experiences and practices which are far away from the Gospel. It is up to us to continue this work of discernment. This exercise can restore energy to pastoral and catechetical work and give it a missionary dimension in practice and not only in its intentions.

4. Our Exercise: listening to stories

We found four stories of “conversion.” It was not easy to meet people and ask them to narrate how they came or returned to the faith. It was a longer and more complex procedure than writing a lecture. The stories are about 4 different cases: Florence is a young woman who comes to baptism when she is 29 years old; Alexander is a university professor who returns to the faith after a long journey

⁴ *La fede ha una storia. La struttura narrativa della trasmissione e la sua regolazione ecclesiale*, in: *La catechesi narrativa*, oc, p. 47.

⁵ *La fede ha una storia. La struttura narrativa della trasmissione e la sua regolazione ecclesiale*, in: *La catechesi narrativa*, p. 31.

of intellectual search; for Monia the birth of her first child brings about a strong experience of God's presence; Octavia, who comes from the Orthodox Church, emigrating to another country meets a Catholic parish and rediscovers her faith. We will analyse the paths of these four stories which are emblematic of many others.⁶ We will do this in two complementary perspectives.

The first, as the subtitle of our Congress indicates, will be to be attentive to the three components of a conversion: the act, the process and accompaniment. The act of conversion indicates the occurrence of access to the faith: how is it that a person converts and what does conversion look like? The process refers to the steps that have helped, hindered, or slowed the person. The accompaniment finally regards the attention that the witness and the ecclesial community enact to encourage the process of conversion.

The second perspective comes from the *General Directory for Catechesis*. Paragraphs 53–57 are fully dedicated to conversion, which is described in its two indistinguishable stages: initial conversion “by the Holy Spirit and the proclamation of the kerygma ... but brings with it adherence to Christ and the will to walk in his footsteps” (n. 57) and permanent conversion, for “membership in Jesus Christ – the text says – starts a process that lasts a lifetime. Who comes to the faith is like a new-born baby, who little by little, will grow and change into an adult, moving towards the “perfect man”, the maturity of the fullness of Christ” (n. 56).

To apply these two perspectives we have divided the stories into two parts (initial conversion – permanent conversion) and we have provided two great moments for working groups: the first to operate a discernment on the stories, and the second to develop points of reference that help the Christian community to accompany the processes of ongoing conversion.

5. The program: a path at service of the method and the objectives

The program that we have prepared is consistent with the aim and the method of our meeting.

⁶ The analysis of narratives from the lives of people has for a long time been done in Theology and in pastoral ministry, even though at times in a fragmented way. Cfr. G. Adler (sous la direction), *Récits de vie et pédagogie de groupe en formation pastorale*, L'Harmattan, Paris 1994.

It includes the following stages:

1. The comprehension of the problem stage which occupies this morning. After my speech there will be a debate to confirm, deepen, and broaden the issue of conversion. We wish to enter into our reflection by asking the right questions.

2. A personal reading of the four stories of conversion followed by the contribution of two mentors of our work. Giuseppe Laiti will offer a contribution on conversions to Christianity in the first centuries of the Church; Roland Lacroix on how conversions to the faith take place today. As you can see, the two expert mentors will give us the keys to interpret the stories of conversion correctly.

3. An analysis phase of the stories in language groups. At the end of this work we will give to the two mentors the synthesis of the group work.

4. An immersion in the historical and ecclesial reality of our host country, Slovenia. On Saturday, we will spend a day in Ljubljana. It will be devoted to listening to three witnesses in the morning and we will have a reflection at the Faculty of Theology of Ljubljana in the afternoon on the subject of conversion. As a result, the visit to Ljubljana is not so much a break in our work, but rather a time of listening and to get to know the Slovenian Church from the perspective of our reflection.

5. Finally the preparation of a number of points of reference to accompany the processes of initial and ongoing conversion in catechesis. As I said at the beginning, starting from practice and returning to practice. The final dialogue with the two mentors will help us to make a synthesis of our work.

From the program we can easily deduce that the method is really that of practical theology. The function of the two experts is to accompany us in this common task. It is for this reason that we have gladly defined them as “mentors”.

6. At stake is serving the Spirit

Having understood the theme, the object of our work (stories), the method chosen and how this was changed into a working program, we are now able to grasp more deeply what is at stake and the challenges of this congress.

Recognizing and serving the Spirit: it is with this in mind that we can summarize what is at stake in our Congress. The stories of conversion are what will surprise us. They confront us with two conclusions: the Holy Spirit continues to work in history; secularized, post-modern and globalized Europe is not

closed to the grace of the Gospel. The miracle of men and women who accept the Gospel in their lives and are deeply transformed by it continues to take place in Europe. This realization leads us also to reflect on the consideration of Géraldine Mossière, who states: “Contemporary conversions call into question the paradigm of secularization of some modern societies”.⁷ We can at least think of a secularized culture that is not in itself alien or hostile to the Gospel but to the sociological form which it has taken in a Christian society.

A conversion always retains a dimension of mystery because of the intersection of the Spirit and of human freedom, and it must be considered and studied in this way. To those who questioned Edith Stein about the “why” of her conversion she would say: “This is my secret.” As noted by Catherine Chalier, Edith was discrete as suggested by John of the Cross. “When it comes to conversion, no human curiosity can quench the greatness of such a question, even though asked through a great benevolence”.⁸ Juan Carlos Carvajal Blanco writes this: “The origin of faith is always in secret. It does not only remain in the privacy of the heart of those who convert, but even for the person involved, the motion towards God remains a mystery”.⁹ The experience of conversion manifests itself as something more in a person’s life, a surplus that exceeds the knowledge of the protagonist. “This is the secret. Therefore, if many converts remain discreet about it, it is not to protect some unspeakable secret, but rather to let them breathe and grow in the splendor of a truth which they perceive with gratitude and awe, and that guides their lives but evades all forms of appropriation”.¹⁰ So this will be the attitude of our work: we are not analysts who dissect people and the values they live but believers who study the paths of grace in the human heart.

The ultimate goal of our work is to serve the Holy Spirit who always precedes us. The aim is to make our contribution to render catechesis and every other pastoral ministry of the Christian community a diakonia of the Holy Spirit. In fact, we can do nothing if the Holy Spirit does not precede us. This will

⁷ G. Mossiere, *La conversion religieuse: approches épistémologiques et polysémie d’un concept*, Groupe de recherche Diversité urbaine, Université de Montréal: https://depot.erudit.org/bitstream/004010dd/1/WP_mossiere1_GRDU.pdf (8.06.2016).

⁸ C. Chalier, *Le désir de conversion*, Editions du Seuil, p. 19. All the first chapter of this book, which bears the title ‘Le secret’, helps us to reach out with respect to the stories which we shall discuss.

⁹ J. C. Carvajal Blanco, *El precatemenado, al servicio de la conversión inicial*, in *La conversión en el proceso de la Iniciación Cristiana*, “Teología y Catequesis” 127 (2013), p. 99.

¹⁰ C. Chalier, *Le désir de conversion*, p. 29.

progressively render the activity of the Church more missionary, an “outgoing” Church¹¹. The choice of the subject and method of our congress is a form of training to look at reality not from the center but from the periphery, from the life of the human being who, to cite a nice expression of the Italian bishops, is “the alphabet of God”. It is also a training to avoid thinking about catechesis as a commitment to “frame” the lives of people in our pastoral programs, but to reprogramming our catechetical and pastoral ministry at the service of God’s actions and designs instead.

It is in this way that we can make room for the stories of conversion and basically restore the full dignity of theological, catechetical and pastoral spirituality which are no longer seen as separate disciplines, but understood as the soul of every reflection and ecclesial practice.

7. The challenges for catechetical reflection and for catechetical practice

Let me finish by highlighting some questions that are provoked when listening to stories of conversion that end up in catechesis. These questions are challenges at the same time.

1. The arrival of new converts as witnessed by stories of conversion always poses a problem to the ecclesial community. Every newcomer brings about an unbalance. A conversion upsets the personal life of the convert but also that of all his social relationships. The entry into an ecclesial community is asking the community to let itself be upset, to welcome something new which cannot be anesthetized and placed in the limits of what is already planned, the already known, that which is taken for granted. The conversion of every single person also asks some form of conversion from the receiving community. This is a call to live a paradox: “transmit” the faith of the Church and the different forms it took in history (knowledge, rituals, and lifestyle) and at the same time be led to a new understanding of the Gospel, the same Gospel which takes on new meanings thanks to the people and the cultures that accept it. Basically it is to

¹¹ See the issue dedicated to this theme and which is very rich in the notions presented: *Une Église en sortie?*, Revue internationale de catéchèse et de pastorale «Lumen Vitae», vol LXX (1/2015).

truly implement the process of “*traditio-receptio-redditio*” which is constitutive of the Christian faith and its transmission.

2. The paths of arrival to faith, as we will see, are very personal and diverse. The European context, finally ceasing to be a monoculture, favors different paths and stories. This raises the question of a Christian community that can no longer think of structuring the paths of its members in unique and standardized ways. The model of a “traditional parish”, in which all Christians are naturally found in a context of sociological adherence to the faith, does not hold the current complexity and diversity of paths. This situation, together with the belief that the place of Christian unity is the local Church under the guidance of his bishop, becomes an appeal “to think of a polyphony and play the music score” (Catherine Chalier). The consideration of initial and permanent conversion paths (and therefore also of belonging) as homogenous is now unthinkable. How can we envisage a unity in difference? There may be a stimulus in this regard in the experience of the “emerging church” in the English context. Andy Buckler, presenting this experience from the missionary perspective shows the need for the Christian community to be configured according to the logic of a “mixed economy”, according to which traditional forms of being a church (and among them the form of a traditional parish) can coexist with new forms in a respective complementarity. “The goal of mission – he says – is not only to lead the new members in the existing forms, but also to enable new forms to emerge, which will be “Churches” just as the others,” and all this in order to protect and encourage new ways that God gives to his Church. This mixed economy which protects diversity, is also ecumenical, because the unity of the Churches is found in the Lord’s command to proclaim the Gospel to every creature.¹²

3. The third challenge that emerges from the theme and in the narratives of our congress is on the training to the ministry of accompanying both initial and ongoing conversion processes. Our current catechists have been trained to reach out to those who have already given their support to the faith and have already crossed the threshold of the ecclesial community. Apart from those who accompany catechumens, an experience which is still fragile in most European countries, our catechists usually take on the ministry of a “*cura fidei*” in parishes

¹² The contribution of Andy Buckler (*L’Eglise émergente en contexte anglophone*) was given in a European ecumenical meeting promoted by the Protestant Faculty of Theology of Strasburg on the theme of the new evangelization: J. Cottin, E. Parmentier (sous la direction de), *Evangeliser. Approches oecuméniques et européens*, Lit Verlag, Zürich 2015.

designed or organized to offer religious services. A clear missionary perspective that is at the service of the Spirit, and a church shaped so as to play a polyphonic score calls for the development of ordained and lay ministers suitable to serve a mission and not only to bring order to the internal life of the Church. It is no coincidence that the recent international conference promoted by the ISPC in the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies of Paris focused on the figure of the new catechists.¹³ We are called to profit from this work and promote it in our reflection.

The three issues raised and solicited by narratives of conversion are surely not exhaustive. I hope they will stimulate our discussions in view of further enrichment in the unfolding of the Congress.

8. A final wish

Let me end with a wish. Working on the theme of conversion is not possible without personal involvement. As in ancient philosophy the search for truth demanded a change in the one who was searching (a change referred to by the term conversion), so listening to how the Spirit continues to work in Europe will not achieve its goals without our willingness to change our way of thinking and acting. My wish is that these days of meeting on the theme of conversion will also be a conversion experience. Everyone will personally see to the ‘what’ and the ‘how’. The exercises of reading and reflection on the narratives are in some way real “spiritual exercises”, because they aim at recognizing and accepting the action of the Spirit. Therefore we will evaluate the success of our meeting not only by the quality of our reflection, not only by the friendliness of our relations, but also by the change that occurs in us.

I wish you all a good conversion.

Translated by Carl-Mario Sultana, University of Malta

¹³ *Les catéchètes dans la mission d’Eglise*, VII^e colloque international de l’ISPC en partenariat avec la Faculté de Théologie de l’Université Catholique de Louvain, Paris 17–20 février 2015. The proceedings will be published around September–October 2015.