

Encountering the Self

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Undoubtedly, the Twelve Apostles headed out in proclaiming the Gospel to the whole world, as the Lord Jesus asked them to do. The countries of the Roman Empire were their main proclamation arenas. Christianity became widespread, took root and was established in those countries where the Greek and Roman civilizations crossed paths.

Why did the early apostles focus their evangelism on countries within the borders of this empire? There is no doubt that this article does not have enough room to contain a detailed answer, although the short answer notes practical reasons such as the ease and security of movement within the lands of the empire. Also, scholars of the development of philosophy and religions unanimously agree that religious ideation yearned for a savior, such as Christ, and considered it an urgent need. Perhaps this is what the Apostle Paul meant when he said, “When the fullness of time has come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman” (Galatians 4:4).

The Greek and Roman civilizations played an important role in accepting the new religion. They contributed to carving and formulating articulations and laws of faith, and they prepared the clothing of Christianity’s expressive, architectural, educational and artistic garments.

Throughout its history, over the course of twenty centuries, the Church has worked to spread spiritual and material light, wherever it is found and existed. The leaven of the gospel fermented the dough of the world, wherever the gospel was spread and was accepted by the people. The prevailing ideas and values changed, and they were replaced by the values of the Bible based on love, mercy, and equal filiation to God. In its endeavor to transform the world into an image of the Kingdom of Heaven, the Church played a major role in changing the intellectual and moral structures of the world, which at that time were based on the glorification of power. Thus, in Christ, love was considered the strongest expression of power.

These lines raise many questions for us. What is the nature of the relationship between Christianity and civilization? What is the concept of civilization in this context? What are the elements of Christian civilization, so to speak? How does the church serve the world in this field? Does the church follow the civilization that was built and started by man only, or does it ascend man to the civilization of God? And if it does ascend, how does it manage to reflect the spirit of the gospel on the world

in which it resides, feed it with the breath of Christ, to lead it to the pastures of salvation? Which of the world's tools does the church use for the service of the world, and truly for its salvation?

Likewise, do we need civilized tools to convey and evangelize the Gospel, or is its truth sufficient for us to profess it openly? But how do we present it to others, including both believers and non-believers? There are many more similar questions.

There is no doubt that the answers do not come easily, and they always require the believers to consult each other, and ask for the revelation of the Holy Spirit to enlighten them with the expedient answers.

I will briefly concentrate on behaviors. Why does the Church not sufficiently succeed in leading believers to practices that, in the concept of this era, are signs of civilized advancement, while these same behaviors are purely rooted in the gospel and reflective of the fruits of the Holy Spirit? Why do we repeatedly come across a higher level of moral behavior outside the ecclesiastical milieu compared to that inside?

A person or an organization is described as "civilized" if they manifest refined characteristics such as kindness, amiability, sociability, simplicity, and beauty based on proper understanding of human beings, their challenges and needs. Organizations are also "civilized" if they allow the cultivating and nourishment of the talents of individuals. Contemporary business management science highlights the importance of the partnership between employers and employees to reach the highest success rates and enhanced productivity.

Dialogue has become a caliber to assess societies' progress or regress. In our contemporary world, listening to the other is no less morally important than speaking to them because finding solutions requires mutual research. Moreover, attempting to understand others as they present themselves rather than as we would prejudge them based on their own background has become an issue at the core of successful human relations in today's world.

If we approach these concepts from a Christian perspective, we will find out that most of them are of biblical origin, motivated by sincere love and humility. The Gospel tells us to offer these virtues but leaves it up to the Church to teach us how to practically implement them in our daily lives. Isn't there an abyss between believing in principles and virtues, and their practical application? It is not enough to embrace a principle unless we truly live by it.

Education, especially Christian education, is not found on teaching principles only, but rather on training the believers on how to live them and translate them into the course of daily life.

Do we conclude that there is a crisis of pedagogy inside our church? From my standpoint, I cannot but deduce that what we witness within the church, regarding disheartening issues in our milieu, stems from a pedagogical crisis.

In our upbringing, we focused more on manifestation of piety than on the importance of the source of piety. Many focused on the vertical dimension of the Christian life at the expense of the horizontal dimension, forgetting that the cross of Jesus, which leads to resurrection, consists of two sticks: the horizontal and the vertical. Can believers' relationships with God be proper if they transgress their brethren? Didn't our parents, and our Bible before them, teach us that those who love God while loathing their brothers are liars? How can we explain claiming faith and love along with the absence of refinement? Or claiming to defend the faith and the Church by considering others as enemies? Does the presence of the Holy Spirit align with the growth of inferiority complexes, which perceive those who are different as opponents, preventing us from meeting face to face? How can those who are away from the Church be convinced of its beauty when they occasionally witness vulgar behavior? How do we preach love without malice while observers do not see love's embodiment in our midst?

The Church does not lack zealous, committed, and intelligent sons and daughters, but rather humble and prudent ones who know how to critique in a constructive way, rather than to criticize. There are many who criticize and judge, positively or negatively. Although this might indicate care and attention, it often seems to require evaluation to turn it into constructive criticism. Our reality resembles a group of young boys playing in a dirt lot. One of them falls into a muddy patch while they are running around. His companions rush, each in turn, to clean up their friend by scooping up muddy water with their hands, thinking that they are doing a good deed, while in fact they are adding dirt to his dirt.

In fact, we need a civilized attitude and genuine humility in dealing with one another. This will yield to less talking and more listening, less opining and more understanding, less contempt and more respect. The Orthodox Church, not necessarily the Orthodox people, is the Church of Truth. The Orthodox people should be nothing but disciples on the path. The closer they get to God, the more contagiously they illuminate.

When we understand that we are seekers of the truth, not distributors of it, we begin to truly live the Gospel, and in the Gospel.

Originally published April 20, 2015.