

Proclaiming the Gospel in the 21st Century

Archbishop Sotirios of Canada

(Presentation at the Meeting of Hierarchs
of the Ecumenical Patriarchate - September 2021)

What is the Gospel?

Before we start discussing how we should go about proclaiming the Gospel in the 21st century, we first need to remind ourselves what the Gospel really is. The Greek word *euangélion* speaks for itself. The Gospel is the Good News. It conveys the message of the salvation of humankind through Jesus Christ. The Gospel proclaims humanity's return to the paradise which was lost. The Gospel enables nothing less than the deification of man. Those who hear the Gospel and apply it in their lives enjoy a secure path of return to the Kingdom of God. They will be deified. The Gospel is the true word and promise of the God-Man Christ. The Gospel embodies "words of eternal life."

Who is Christ?

Christ is the Only Begotten Son of God. Light of Light. True God. He is the only true God. He was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man. He was crucified. He died on the cross. He descended triumphantly into hell. He was resurrected. He ascended to heaven. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. His Kingdom will have no end.

Importance of Proclaiming the Gospel

From what we have already briefly outlined, it is easy to understand the importance of proclaiming the Gospel. Christ Himself commanded His disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you." We can definitely postulate that the salvation of humanity depends on the proclamation of the Gospel, that is, on learning about the Gospel and putting what we learn into practice in a full and unimpeded manner.

Contemporary Contempt for the Gospel

There is great contempt for the Gospel today. In the past for example, Bibles were readily available in all hotels. They are no longer available. More than that, the Bible is considered by many to be an intolerant text. Opponents of the Gospel rely on science, technology and theories of human rights in an effort to discredit the Gospel. They forget however that both science and technology come from God. They also forget that the first to unequivocally promote equal human rights was Christ through the Apostle Paul who said, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is

neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Many people, especially those with political authority, exhibit a profound distrust towards the clergy. Most of the time, the clergy is treated courteously, but only in order to win over votes from supporters.

There is an absolute need in the 21st century for the Gospel to be proclaimed in such a way that these developments are impeded as much as possible and for the Gospel to once again take its rightful place in society. Perhaps it will not be possible at this time for the Gospel to regain its previous prominence in hotels and other public places. But it must at least benefit from a privileged place in the libraries and bookstores of all our communities (churches), and in the offices and homes of all Christians. Together with the text of the Divine Liturgy, a copy of the Holy Scriptures can be placed in the pews of our churches. It is necessary for all our communities, for all the churches, to organize libraries with a capacity to lend out books, but also to operate small bookstores. Christians should be able to readily purchase copies of the Gospel, and they should also be able to easily borrow edifying books.

To achieve this will require a lot of effort from hierarchs, priests, community councils, chapters of the Ladies Philoptochos, catechists, youth departments and all devout Christians.

On the Sermon

In light of the above, it is easy to understand that the sermon serves a pivotal and vital function in proclaiming the Gospel. Preaching must be Christocentric. Our message must ultimately always relate to Christ Himself. Christ is the only Saviour, the only true God.

We must strive to highlight our faith in God, the value of human rights, the love we need to show to our neighbor as well as to our enemy, and the Church's teachings on righteous judgment and eternal life.

Many contend that sermons must be inspired or informed by the teachings of the Holy Fathers or the patristic tradition. This assertion requires some clarification. If it is understood that the texts of the Fathers should be used in order to help and guide us in the interpretation of the Gospel, then this does not pose a problem. But in cases where there is a glaring divergence, and the words of the Fathers are being used to eclipse or to disguise the words of Christ, then this can become highly problematic. Even worse, when reference is made to the sayings of 'elders' which are incompatible with the Gospel but are intended only for purposes of self-praise and self-promotion, then this becomes quite sinful, to say the least.

We all know that priests and even hierarchs do not all have the necessary aptitude and talent for quality Christocentric preaching. We all know the level of theological education of our priests is not always what it should be. For this reason, I think it is necessary for the Church to provide support and annually appoint some capable preachers to prepare a book of sermons for the whole year. In this way, a different set of sermons will be available for every year. Of course, this is not an easy task. But I think it is necessary in order to effectively proclaim the Gospel. However,

this would not displace the work of preparing and preaching original sermons. The published set of sermons will simply serve as a general guide, to remind priests that their preaching must be centered on Christ.

Where should sermons be delivered? Everywhere. In churches. In reception halls. On the radio. On the television. On all forms of social media.

Sermons must be delivered at baptisms, at weddings and at funerals. At baptisms, the priest must explain to the parents and the sponsors the most basic duties of ensuring a Christocentric education and upbringing of the newly illumined.

In the sacrament of marriage, the priest must clarify to the newlyweds, and more generally to all those present, that the family is the core of society and that it must be nurtured according to Christ and always strive for salvation.

The service of the funeral provides a great opportunity for the preacher to speak directly to the soul about Christ as the true God and Saviour of the world, but also to enlighten those present on the Church's approach to the afterlife. A good priest never misses this opportunity to plant a seed on what it means to live in Christ, on what our faith teaches about the resurrection and the afterlife.

The proclamation of the Gospel must be carried out through more traditional catechisms as well. Catechism is relevant for persons of all ages, from infants all the way to the elderly. I would say that catechisms along with the study of the Holy Scriptures and the sermon are the basic ways of proclaiming the Gospel.

Catechism sessions must offer real instruction about our faith. Recreation can be useful, but the main goal is to help people discover and integrate what it means to live according to Christ. There are two main challenges in doing this. The first relates to the catechists and their character, that is whether or not they themselves live according to Christ as well as their level of theological education. The second concerns the availability of suitable catechetical teaching aids and resources. There is no doubt that finding and training catechists is one of the most difficult tasks. Every community must expend every effort for this purpose.

Dechristianization of Christianity

In proclaiming the Gospel, great importance must be given to the fact that recently, perhaps without even realizing it, Christianity itself is being de-Christianized. Instead of portraying Christ, emphasis is often placed on the saints, the hierarchs, the priests, the abbots, the monks, the nuns, the elders. We do not mean that the relevant honour should not be given to the saints and the icons, but the decision of the Synod for the restoration of icons must be strictly applied: **“Thus we declare, Thus we assert, Thus we proclaim Christ our true God and honour His saints, in words, in writings, in thoughts, in sacrifices, in churches, in holy icons. On the one hand,**

worshipping and reverencing Christ as God and Lord. And on the other hand, honouring and venerating His Saints as true servants of the same Lord.”

When this synodal decision is not observed, bit by bit, Christianity is gradually de-Christianized. When the worship of Christ is considered to be equivalent to the image of the saints, the chestnut of St. Paisios, or the slipper of St. John the Russian or St. Dionysius, then it should be quite apparent that Christianity is indeed being de-Christianized.

“Having been concealed in divine darkness, Moses, slow of tongue, declared the Law that God had written.” Moses was covered with divine darkness and was given to narrate the divine law, that is, the ten commandments. When the honour of the saints is greater than the honour of Christ, when we come to worship the chestnut and the slipper, we are no longer within the realm of the divine darkness which enlightened Moses, but a dark gloom has taken hold which generates tremendous confusion and misunderstanding. As a result, the believer is prevented from clearly understanding that only Christ is the Saviour. The preacher must be very careful here. We honour the saints, the icons, the holy and sacred relics but we do not worship them, we do not equate them to Christ.

Teaching about Miracles

This is another issue that the preacher must be mindful of: the question of the attribution of miracles. The source of miracles is always Christ. The faith of the people, including the faith of the saints, serves an auxiliary function. Saints alone do not perform miracles. Christ performs miracles. Consider the following analogy. There is a faucet in every house. When the faucet is opened, water comes out. Water comes out, because somewhere upstream from the faucet there is a water cistern. If there was no cistern, no water would come out of the tap. The same goes for miracles. The reservoir of miracles is Christ. The saint represents the conduit through which the miracle is performed. Let us not confuse things. Should we also talk about fake miracles? Better not. Unfortunately, many continue to present themselves as saintly for financial advantage.

Language of Proclaiming the Gospel

For the effective proclamation of the Gospel, together with everything else, the evangelist-preacher, the catechist and those who are otherwise engaged in proclaiming the Gospel need to know how to communicate well in the language of their audience. Without a coherent command of the language, there can be no success. I not only mean the use of the Greek language, but also the languages that are spoken in the countries where we are called to preach the Gospel.

Catechism Aids

Another issue is the availability of catechism aids. A few things need to be done on this subject. Firstly, we need to produce appropriate catechism aids. Secondly, we need to favour effective and brief catechism sessions. Thirdly, we need to create a booklet with a collection of the sayings

of Christ. The strategy is complex and costly. Nevertheless, if we want to effectively proclaim the Gospel, we must see to these things. I remember how, many years ago, His All-Holiness had spoken about the need for better catechism. As far as I know, nothing has really been done about such a critical issue. I look forward to addressing this topic in the discussion that will follow.

Relationship Between Christ and the Evangelist

Evangelists, preachers, catechists must have a close and inseparable relationship with the Saviour Christ. They must absolutely believe that Christ is the only Saviour, the only true God. They must be daily connected with Him through prayer, through actively participating in the sacraments, through carrying out the will of Christ. A lavish lifestyle on the part of the evangelists (hierarchs, priests, catechists, etc.) does not help in effectively proclaiming the Gospel. It scandalizes. Let me quote an English proverb, "On the soft beds of luxury most kingdoms have expired." The scandalization of the faithful is destructive to souls.

The people we are proclaiming the Gospel to, the catechumens, can sense this connection between the evangelist-catechist and the Saviour Christ. They can feel the sincerity of the evangelist-catechist. Hypocrisy and trickery on the part of the evangelist-catechist cannot last for long. The people, the catechumens, will soon abandon him or her. The damage will be incalculable. Souls are being lost.

Today's Reality of Believers-Churchgoers

Statistics show that the number of faithful participating in the services and the sacraments of the Church is decreasing daily. This is a harsh reality. Things are even more difficult now with the coronavirus. The Church must consider what will happen in the period after the coronavirus, if indeed the faithful will return to the Church. Have they perhaps gotten overly accustomed to watching Church services livestreamed in their home, sitting on their couch or lying on their bed? Proclaiming the Gospel must also deal with this issue because participation in the sacraments is at the heart of our faith. The statistics demonstrate, at least for Greece, that more marriages take place each year civilly rather than in Church. This should not only concern us, but the evangelist-preacher should ponder deeply about this and be in total anguish.

Coming to Terms with the Problems

The Church is a family. It has structure. It has a Patriarch. It has a Holy Synod. It has hierarchs. It has priests. It must always act in unison. Everyone must show spiritual obedience. Everyone should behave like "strings on a guitar."

The current phenomenon, where hierarchs, priests, abbots, monks, nuns, 'elders' pronounce a position which is different from that of the Church, is not only worrying, but can also be characterized as schismatic and even heretical. We saw what happened with the protest against the ever-prudent Metropolitan Chrysostom of Patras.

These incidents must not only become relevant topics for the evangelist-preacher, but they must also be considered by the Church more generally, and by the Holy Synod.

Feedback and Accountability

There must be some form of accountability in the proclamation of the Gospel. One must constantly examine the situation to see whether the strategies employed in the proclamation of the Gospel are having the desired effect. We must check to verify if there is progress. This may sound like policing but it is not. The evangelists-preachers must themselves be in a position to assess the effectiveness of their work. As usual, the Bishop watches over everything. In this case, he must continue to do so in a discreet and unobtrusive manner.

Purpose of Proclaiming the Gospel

We have said that the purpose of proclaiming the Gospel is to help the faithful live according to Christ. Along with this, evangelists-preachers must always remember not to take a negative approach with people, but to offer the truth of our faith in a supportive, loving and hopeful manner.

Gifts to the Faithful

Each Community-Church should donate the following catechetical aids to the faithful:

- a) A Bible and the sayings of Christ to newlyweds.
- b) A catechism book to parents and sponsors at each baptism.

Epilogue

The presenter is not infallible. The proposals we have put forward are not carved in stone. They are simply ideas which are placed before everyone for further discussion. We have not endeavoured to lecture, but rather to speak to you as a peer. Everything we have said is being provided for the purpose of dialogue with a view to implementing certain initiatives.