The Second Century is Closer than You Think (Part 2 of 2)

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(2 of 2)

This morning, we were discussing some general points of commonality and difference between the condition of the world, of society and of religion in the second century, and comparing them with our own situation. I ended with a suggestion that there are parallelisms between the pre-Christian society of the second century and the post- Christian society that is rapidly becoming our own context. Another, more common way to put it is in terms of the pre-Constantinian and the post-Constantinian periods.

What I meant by this is that, just as the early church had to find ways to witness to the faith, and to nourish it in believers, with no aid from the society around it, so do we now find it necessary to learn how to be the church at a time when many of the props that society and culture used to give us are rapidly eroding.

Those props began developing at the time of Constantine, and the church was able to take them for granted until a relatively recent time. The first of these props to go was the official support of the State. This began disappearing with the American and French revolutions and is now almost totally a thing of the past, so that even in those countries where Christianity is the official religion of the state this has little practical significance.

Then other props have also begun to erode. Education, once a monopoly in the hands of churches, has become ever more secular. Mass communication, catering to an ever more

diverse population, seldom presents religion as a significant dimension of human life. The old social mores supporting the church have begun to disappear. When I first arrived at Atlanta in 1969, it was still considered unseemly to treat Sunday morning as just one more day of fun and leisure. Today, as I go to church, I pass neighbors mowing their lawns, loading their cars to go on picnics, and jogging along the sidewalks. It is now I, and not they, who am the odd man out.

Many Christians are trying to respond to this by clinging as much as they can to the old social order. If the mass media will not deal with religion, we will do so with our own radio stations and television channels. If people will not come to our revivals as they used to, we will bring the revival to their living rooms. If the old social niceties regarding Sunday are passing, we will at least make sure that alcohol is not sold on the Lord's Day.

Some of these responses may be good, and some not so good. That is debatable, and I have no wish to debate it. But what should be clear is that these are all rear-guard actions, actions parallel to those of an army in retreat, trying to delay the advance of the enemy. As such, they may succeed for a while. But they do not suffice.

If the Lord has placed us in this globalized, syncretistic twenty-first century, our primary task should be to find ways to be the church today, in this context, rather than to find ways to preserve the context of an earlier age.

And for this, I submit to you, there are a number of things we can learn from the pre-Constantinian church.

First of all, we need to redefine and refocus our understanding of evangelism. I grew up thinking that evangelism was mostly the task of evangelistic preachers who came to our church and held an evangelistic campaign, or even of more famous preachers who came to our town and gathered a multitude in a stadium. This seemed to make sense, for most of the sermons in the book of Acts —sermons by Peter, Stephen, and Paul— were addressed to people outside the church, and the result was phenomenal —to the point that thousands were converted. Likewise, John Wesley, Dwight Moody, Billy Graham, and many others provided a wonderful ministry through this sort of evangelism, preaching to the unchurched masses, bringing them to Christ.

But as a historian I note that, oddly enough, after the book of Acts we hear of very few such evangelistic sermons. Indeed, it would appear that evangelistic preaching disappeared with that first generation of believers. Why did this happen? Even more surprising is that the church continued growing. How did the church manage to grow, without evangelistic preaching?

When one stops to think about it, the answers to these questions are obvious. The witness of the early church was mostly to Jews —first to Jews in Palestine, and then to Jews in the Diaspora. When Peter spoke at Pentecost, and when he spoke before the Sanhedrin, those hearing him were Jews. When Paul spoke in such places as Antioch of Pisidia, he was in a synagogue, and he addressed his audience as “my brothers, you descendants of Abraham’s family, and others who fear God” (Acts 13.26). As we know, these “God-fearers” were people who had come to believe in the God of Israel, in the scripture of Israel, and in the moral laws of Israel, but had not taken the decisive steps of becoming proselytes and thus becoming Jews. They attended the synagogue regularly and were quite familiar with the Scriptures and the God of Israel but were not Jews, for they had not gone through the baptism of proselytes, and did

not follow all the dietary and ceremonial laws of Israel.

The reasons for their not becoming Jews varied. In Acts 10, we have the story of one of these God-fearers who was also a Roman centurion. Quite possibly he did not become a Jew because this would put an end to his military career. Earlier, in Acts 8, we have the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, a man so attached to the faith of Israel that he had traveled all the way from Ethiopia in order to worship at the Temple. Yet he could not become a Jew, and must forever remain a God-fearer, because the law of Israel forbad a eunuch from being added to the people of God.

Thus, when in the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia, Paul addresses his audience as “my brothers, you descendants of Abraham’s family, and others who fear God.” He is speaking to people who are well acquainted with the faith and the scriptures of Israel and who therefore have a fairly clear notion of what he is saying to them. He is not telling them to embrace a new God, nor even a new religion. He is rather telling them that the promises of the God they have known for a long time have now been fulfilled in the person of Jesus the Christ, Jesus the Messiah.

The same is true of most public speeches of Paul in Acts. The main exceptions are when he spoke to Roman officials —and we have no news of anyone being converted as a result of these sermons— and when he spoke at the Areopagus in Athens —and here he did have results, although somewhat meager.

But as Christianity crossed the border between Jew and Gentile and began bringing into its ranks Gentiles who before their conversion had not even been God-fearers, matters were quite different. Just as when Paul spoke in Athens some among his listeners thought that Jesus and Resurrection were two

new gods he was proposing, so could many other Gentiles quite easily misunderstand the proclamation of the gospel. To evangelize them, it was not enough to preach a sermon and make a call to accept Jesus as the Messiah and be baptized.

Once the synagogue was no longer available to them, Christians did not have public fora in which they could preach and thus evangelize their hearers. If there had been soap boxes in the second century, and some Christian preacher had dared stand up on one and preach at a street corner, passers-by would have no idea what he was talking about. This became evident quite early. There is a passage from the Roman writer Suetonius, probably written in the first half of the second century, in which he says that in the middle of the first century, around the year 52, emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome because they were "making disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus." We know of that decree by Claudius from other sources, including Acts 18, where we're told that "Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome," and that this was the reason why Priscilla and Aquila were in Corinth. Scholars are generally agreed that the "Chrestus" of whom Suetonius speaks is none other than Christ, and that what happened in Rome was similar to the many other events that we find in Acts, where the preaching of the gospel by Paul and his companions repeatedly results in violent disagreements among the Jews who hear them. If that is the case, it is significant to note that, not only at the time of Claudius, but almost a hundred years later, in the time of Suetonius, Gentiles had no idea what was meant by calling Jesus "the Christ" or "the Messiah."

Even had they known what was meant by calling Jesus the Christ or the Messiah to evangelize them, it was not enough to preach a sermon and make a call to accept Jesus as the Messiah and be baptized. There were many other things that had to be let go, as well as many other things to take in. One had to

abandon the gods of one´s people, the gods of one´s guild, and the gods of one's family. And this in turn would most likely mean being disenfranchised as a member of one´s people, of one´s guild, and even of one´s family. One had to learn that abandoning children to be picked up by strangers or to be killed by animals was against the will of God, and that so were adultery and homicide. One had to learn that, no matter how powerful the Emperor may be, God is above the Emperor, that one´s final commitment must be to God, and that if there is a conflict between these two, one may well face martyrdom.

This could not be done by means of a sermon from a soap box, not even by means of a sermon on the Areopagus. This required forms of evangelism very different from Paul's sermons in the synagogues.

Thus the "evangelistic" preaching that we find in Acts came to an end. Evangelism now took place, not speaking to a wide audience and inviting people to immediate conversion, but rather through faithful witness, long conversations, and cogent arguments. Some of this took place at a sophisticated intellectual level. Early in the second century, this was in the case of Justin Martyr, who had long sought after the truth and eventually became convinced that Christianity was the "true philosophy."

Justin tells us of his long intellectual pilgrimage in the first two chapters of his *Dialogue with Trypho*. Then, in the third chapter, he tells of meeting "a certain old man" with whom he began a long philosophical conversation, with the result that in the eighth chapter Justin says:

> . . . straightaway a flame was kindled in my soul, and a love of the prophets and of those who are friends of Christ, possessed me; and whilst revolving his words in my mind, I found this philosophy alone to be safe and profitable.

Later in the same century, an Athenian now known as Clement of Alexandria also traveled in search of the truth,until an old Alexandrian by the name of Pantenus showed him the "true philosophy" of

Christianity, much as Justin´s unnamed “old man” had done for him.

But most conversions probably took place through encounters and conversations of a much less sophisticated nature. Roughly at the same time as Clement was rejoicing in having met Pantenus, a pagan by the name of Celsus wrote a searing treatise against Christianity. There he renders unwitting testimony of the work of these unlettered and unknown evangelists:

> We see, indeed, in private houses workers in wool and leather, and fullers, and persons of the most uninstructed and rustic character, not venturing to utter a word in the presence of their elders and wiser masters; but when they get hold of the children privately, and certain women as ignorant as themselves, they pour forth wonderful statements.

These were the main evangelistic methods available to Christians in the second century. And they used them so well that soon Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire and well beyond its borders.

Thus, while “evangelistic sermons” worked in a first-century setting, when most of the audience were Jews, by the second century, when it was mostly a matter of bringing the gospel to Gentiles, it had to be supplanted by new methods and new approaches. As I look at the history of evangelistic preaching as I knew it and came to value it, I note a similar process. John Wesley, first in Bristol and then throughout England, was preaching to people who knew the basic tenets of Christianity and the fundamental principles of its way of life. They were, as we correctly call them, “unchurched” people. They were not people who had never had any contact with the church. They were not people who had never heard the Good News of the gospel. They were people who had heard the Good News and who generally believed it, and Wesley’s work consisted in reviving and refocusing their faith, in providing them with a deeper insight into the Christian life and calling them to follow it. The same was true of Dwight Moody as he preached on both sides of the Atlantic, and of Billy Graham as he preached throughout the world: the majority of their audiences, and most of those whom they brought to Christ, were people who, even

before they came to listen to them, had a fairly clear idea what it was that they were talking about. In my own native Latin America, as I was growing up, we constantly preached “evangelistic sermons” with great success. There, too, those who listened to us were not complete strangers to the Christian faith. They were mostly Roman Catholics —either nominal or real— who knew the basics of Christian doctrine and of the message of salvation, and simply needed to hear it in a different, more compelling and more authentic way.

But today things have begun to change. The salesclerk in the jewelry store of whom I spoke this morning, the one who did not even have the remotest idea of who it was who hanged on the cross, will probably never listen to our evangelistic sermons on radio and television, and even less will she come into a church to hear an evangelistic sermon. If we rely only on evangelistic preaching, be it over the airwaves in church, we are effectively writing her off as a child of God.

This means that we have to refocus and redefine the evangelistic task. If I today knock on a door and invite someone to come to a particular service at which a famous evangelist will tell them about Jesus Christ, I am implying that I myself know very little of Jesus, and that therefore I leave the task of evangelization to the experts. What we need to do is find ways to equip that woman who went into the jewelry store so that, when the clerk asked her whether she wanted a cross with or without the “little man,” she would be able to tell her about Jesus and the significance of the cross. What we need today is a sort of evangelization that does not depend on professionals and specialists but is the task of every believer. As in the second century, we need people who can interpret the Christian faith in such a way that intellectual seekers can recognize it as the “true philosophy,” and we also need thousands upon thousands of workers of wool and leather, carpenters, lawyers, plumbers, homemakers, doctors, who

know how to give an account of their faith.

In short, the example of the second century should lead us to redefine, refocus, and retool our evangelistic work.

But, while it is true that we hear very little of evangelistic preaching in the second century, it is also true that we hear much of preaching. The difference is that this preaching was not addressed primarily to those outside the church, like Peter's sermons at Pentecost and to the Sanhedrin, or Paul's sermon in Antioch of Pisidia, but rather to those inside the church. This was not a new creation of the second century. On the contrary, as far as we know from a very early date when the church gathered for worship —which centered on communion— the blessing and breaking of the bread was preceded by extensive readings from Scripture and careful explanation of the passages read. At a time long before the printing press, when very few could have copies of Scripture, and many could not even read, preaching within the context of worship was addressed to believers —some of them church members and others not yet baptized— who needed to learn more about the Christian faith, and who also needed encouragement and guidance to live by it.

We have an instance of all of this in Acts 20, when Paul is in Troas preparing to leave for Miletus. The disciples were gathered "on the first day of the week, when we meet to break bread." This was what we today would call Saturday night, for the new day began at dusk of the previous one. We are told that Paul was speaking until midnight. (And —perhaps as a word of warning and encouragement to us preachers who tend to be long-winded and to lose the attention of our audience, we are also told that young Eutychus went to sleep and fell from a window.) He was speaking for a long time in preparation for the

breaking of the bread. In other words, they were doing what we know was the general practice in the second century: the service of the table was preceded by the service of the word.

This means that, as we seek to learn from the second century, we need to refocus and reshape not only our evangelization, but also our preaching. As the twenty-first century advances, we will find ourselves preaching less and less to people who have a general idea of what Christianity is all about, and more and more to Christians eager to learn how to live out their faith in today's world, and how to give witness in that world. If it is true that increasingly our audience will be the body of believers, rather than a group of unbelievers or even of unchurched people, we have to learn how to employ that preaching as a means to help the congregation grow both in its understanding of the Christian faith and in its to that faith. When we gather for worship, we must no longer think that our audience is composed of unbelievers who need to be evangelized. Rather, it is composed of present and potential evangelists whom we must equip for their task —equip them both emotionally and intellectually.

In other words, our audience today is less and less like Paul´s in Antioch of Pisidia, and more and more like his audience in Troas. And therefore, our preaching, which used to be patterned after Paul's speeches in Antioch of Pisidia and in other similar places, will have to be patterned after Paul´s speech in Troas —except that, hopefully, we will not preach our audiences to sleep!

What I grew up calling evangelistic preaching went out into the world in order to find people to bring into the church. This other form of preaching —a form in which I am suggesting we must now focus on the congregation and its equipping— will take place within the church, with the church as its audience, but with the purpose of sending the church out into the world.

Thus, while in my youth I was taught a centripetal view of preaching, we must now begin to focus on a centrifugal view of preaching.

But this preaching must not be merely centrifugal. If we are truly to equip the congregation for ministry and witness in the world, our preaching must bring the world before the congregation. Church members who merely hear again and again about the meaning of the cross will be only partially prepared to witness to the salesclerk in the jewelry store. They must also understand the world in which that sales clerk lives. Church members who are to witness to people who suffer from the loneliness of individuals in today's global environment must know of that loneliness and that global environment.

So, the second century has much to teach us, first, on evangelism; and, secondly, on preaching.

But the second century also has much to teach us about Christian education. Here again, things have changed in recent times. And they have changed in ways that bring us back to the time before Constantine. After Constantine, the church came to rely on the general ethos of society for much of its Christian education. Practically everybody —with the main exception of Jews— was a Christian, formed in a society in which most others were Christians, and in which the church was the main instrument of education and formation. The great medieval cathedrals were not only the books of the unlearned; they were also the most interesting things and one of the most alluring venues in town. The church did not have to worry about teaching the story of Christmas, or of the cross, or of Pentecost, or of the martyrs, because all this was constantly repeated in a thousand conversations, and it was depicted in stone and in glass in cathedrals and other churches. It was part of the common story of the people. When stone and

glass did not suffice, the central narrative of the faith was depicted in dramatic plays in which the entire town was involved. In most cases society looked up to monasteries for guidance in life. And the hours of monastic prayer also became the hours by which the secular day was measured.

I grew up at a time when much of this had changed, but its remnants were still there. Schools were no longer under the tutelage of the church, but much of what they taught coincided with the teachings of Christianity and reinforced them. Anybody living in that society would know much about the Christian faith —even those who had never darkened the threshold of a church or attended Christian worship of any kind.

In those circumstances, many came to think of the church's educational program mostly in terms of Sunday School, consisting of some forty minutes of lessons for children and youth, while the adults —those few who felt that Sunday School was important— discussed an interesting book or topic of their choice. We thought we could afford to do that for two reasons, both fallacious. First, we thought that since we lived in a Christian society, we could trust that society at large to teach Christian values —and sometimes even doctrine. And second, we thought that if we were adults there was little more we needed to learn about the Christian faith.

But today things have changed drastically. Today, a store clerk right in the middle of the Bible belt may well have no idea of the story of the cross. Today, we are becoming increasingly aware of the incompatibility of some of the values of our society with Christian values and principles. We know that we live in a society that values self-centered competition, fame, money, power, and what we are told is personal success. And we also know that much of this, rather than an aid, is an obstacle on the way of

our Christian obedience and on the way of our Christian witness.

All of this is of one piece with what I have said before: As Christians and as a church we are living in circumstances that are quite similar to those of the second century. At least, they resemble the fourth century more than the thirteenth, or the sixteenth, or even the nineteenth.

This is seen most clearly in an institution that was central to the life of the church in the second century but that today has been so reduced that only a vestige of it remains: the catechumenate, or preparation of people to receive baptism and join the church. It may surprise us to learn that, in contrast to the book of Acts, where people were converted and immediately baptized, converts in the second century often had to go through a process of preparation —normally for at least two years— before they were baptized. Here again we see the changes made necessary as the church crossed the border between Jews and Gentiles. Jews could be baptized as soon as they recognized Jesus as the Messiah promised to Israel. Gentiles needed to learn of the God of Israel and of the Church; they needed to reject gods they had served for generations; they had to change behaviors that were perfectly acceptable to society at large; they had to count the cost of confessing Christ —costs in financial terms as well as in terms of family and societal relationships. This they could not be expected to do on the spur of a moment, because they had heard a particularly moving sermon.

So, the church developed the catechumenate. A person became a catechumen when he or she, having learned of Christ through the witness of believers and probably having attended the service of the Word for some time, requested to receive baptism and join the church. At that point they were enrolled on the list of catechumens, and their official catechumenate began. They were assigned sponsors who would

accompany them on their pilgrimage as they prepared to receive baptism. Usually, a small group of catechumens would gather regularly with a teacher in order to study Scripture and to discuss and mutually support one another as they grew in faith and understanding. But the sponsor would also monitor the person's development in the practice of Christian living. Had he really abandoned the god of his guild, even though this would cause him severe economic loss? How was she handling the inevitable conflicts with her non-believing husband?

After a period that often lasted some two years, the bishop or pastor would take direct charge of the final instruction of the catechumens in the last few weeks before they would be baptized. Such baptisms took place preferably on Easter and were accompanied by a series of rites. I shall come back to those rites shortly. But first, a personal story that illustrates why I say that the second century is closer than we think.

About ten years ago, I had the opportunity to preach at my home church in Cuba. After my sermon, the pastor made an altar call, and a number of people responded. But I noticed that as each individual came forward, another one of the same gender and approximately the same age would also stand up and come to stand by that person. Later, I asked the pastor about this, and his answer was, "For some forty years, these people have had little occasion to hear anything about the gospel or the Bible. Until recently, even Christmas celebrations were banned. They have sincerely accepted Christ as their Savior. But most of them have little idea what this really means. They will have to change many of the ways in which they grew up. In many cases, their jobs will be threatened. They need to learn more of Christian doctrine. But most especially, they need to understand the nature and the cost of discipleship. They need to navigate through pressures and temptations that now they cannot even imagine. It would not be

fair to them, nor to the church, to simply baptize them as if they fully knew what they were doing. So, I have trained a number of church members to serve as sponsors to new converts. They are men and women, young and old, but I have spent quite a bit of time training and supervising them. Now, when people ask to join the church, they must begin by joining a group under the leadership of one of these sponsors. When the group gathers, the sponsor teaches them the Bible and discusses the various dimensions of Christian living. But the sponsor also visits them at home and, if possible, at work, in order both to support and to monitor their preparation for the final commitment of baptism. Then, after a year or so in such groups, I bring all the candidates together and personally lead their last few weeks of study before their baptism."

Now, this man, an excellent pastor, had received only marginal theological education. I am quite certain that he had never heard of the catechetical practices of the church in the second century. And yet, he reinvented them! Why? Because he found himself living in conditions very similar to those in the second century.

This is very different from the pattern in which I grew up. In my church, adults who asked to join the church were enrolled in a series of four to six classes of which one or two were devoted to the particular doctrinal emphases of the Methodist tradition, and the rest had to do with church polity and government, supporting the church, and so on. After that, if they had not been baptized earlier, they were baptized, and became members of the church. As to younger people, when I asked to become a member of the church, the youth advisor sat with a group of us for about three hours, explained a bit about what our responsibilities would be, and next Sunday we were officially received as members of the church.

Today things have begun to change. Even in the Bible Belt, where I live, increasing numbers of those asking to join the church are people with little or no previous church connection. In that sense, we are returning to conditions similar to those of the second century. And, if trends in the next two or three decades continue as in the last decades, by the time many of you who are now entering seminary come to the end of your career, you will have to have devised systems and procedures similar to what this pastor in Cuba has devised. Furthermore, some denominations are beginning to take this into account and to develop programs such as the Roman Catholic Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults (commonly known as the RCIA), which reinstates the "order of catechumens" and provides for their preparation for baptism and for their baptism itself.

Thus, summarizing, the fact that we're moving into a period similar to the second century means, first, that we must redefine and refocus our evangelism; second, that we must redefine and refocus our preaching; and, third, that we must redefine and refocus our Christian education, particularly in that which relates to the preparation for baptism and membership, but also in that which relates to continued growth in the Christian life.

But this is not all. We must also refocus our worship. Historians of theology and of liturgy often use a Latin phrase, *lex orandi est lex credendi*, which in essence means that how and what you worship determines what and how you believe. We preachers may not like it, but the truth is that what people sing and what people pray develops deeper roots in them than anything we might say. This is why so many debates throughout the history of theology have revolved around worship formulas and practices: because such formulas and practices will greatly influence what people believe and how they live. Examples abound. Both Luther and Calvin paid great attention to the hymns that were sung and the

words that were said in worship. What has kept the Church of England together, through all sorts of controversies and changes, is the *Book of Common Prayer.* When my father was sorely distressed, he would repeat the words of his favorite hymn —a hymn he had learned in his youth: "O love that will not let me go, I rest my weary soul in thee."

Unfortunately, we have forgotten the importance of worship in Christian formation. We spend hours preparing a sermon, but we often entrust much of the worship service to worship leaders to whom we provide little or no guidance, and who chose what to sing on the basis of what they or the congregation like. Thus, in a world and a church that suffers from too much individualism, we sing almost exclusively songs in the first person singular. In a word that requires evermore mature Christians, we sing the same thing over and over again, Sunday after Sunday, with little or no sense that our worship is part of the ongoing pilgrimage of Christian growth and sanctification.

Keeping that in mind, allow me to go back to what happened to those catechumens that we left a few minutes ago, while they were preparing for baptism, and to give a brief outline of what happened around and at their baptism. Most of what follows is based on a book called *The Apostolic Tradition*, commonly attributed to Hyppolitus of Rome, and said to have been written in or about the year 215. But Hyppolitus wrote this book in protest against what he considered the dangerous innovations of his contemporaries, and therefore most scholars agree that it reflects the practice that were common in the second half of the second century.

According to that book, three and a half weeks before Easter the pastor or bishop would bring the catechumens before the community of the church, announce that these were the people preparing for

baptism, and ask the congregation if anyone knew of a reason why any of them should not be baptized. If questions were raised about any of them, the pastor would inquire as to the validity of the objections and decide whether the person in question was ready for baptism or not. If not, the person could be asked to continue as a catechumen for another year. Those who were deemed ready would then prepare for their baptism and their admission into the full communion of the church, which would take place on Easter.

When that day arrived —that is, on the night of the Saturday before Easter— while the church gathered for worship, those to be baptized gathered at a different place nearby, next to the baptistry where they were to be baptized. They were then taken to the baptistry in three separate groups: men, women, and children —yes, this text does say that children were baptized, and some of them small enough so that their parents or other adults had to speak in their stead. The reason for separating them into three groups was that baptism was received naked. (And since this is a question I always get at this point, let me hasten to add that the proprieties were observed, either by having women deacons baptize the female candidates, or by having a curtain in the baptistry itself between the bishop and the women to be baptized.) Baptism must be received naked, because it was a new birth to a new life, and one was to enter into this new life as naked as one entered into the old one.

Just before descending into the water, the candidate was invited to renounce Satan, the power of evil, and the temptations of the world. As a sign of this renunciation, the candidate would turn to the west, the realm of darkness, pronounce the required renunciation, and spit. Then, turning and facing the east, the candidate would proclaim his or her acceptance of Jesus Christ, “Sun of justice.”

Having entered the water, the candidate would kneel in it and would be asked three questions, each followed by pouring water over the head. While these questions varied from church to church, they all followed a similar pattern. In Rome, the questions were the essence of what we today call the Apostles' Creed: Do you believe in God the Father almighty? (Yes, I believe.) Do you believe in Jesus Christ, His Son, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, etc.? (Yes, I believe.) Do you believe in the Holy Ghost? (Yes, I believe.)

Upon coming out of the water, the neophyte was dressed in a white robe. This was not a sign of purity, as we might think today, but rather of victory, for that was the symbolism of the color white at the time. The neophyte had now died to the old and was born to a new life of victory over evil, thanks to the victory of the Risen Lord.

Finally, the neophytes were anointed with oil. In ancient Israel, anointing was a sign of priesthood and kingship. The title of "Christ," or "Messiah," meant the Anointed One. Now believers were anointed as Jesus had been anointed. They were now priests and kings, part of the royal priesthood that is the people of God.

All of this was timed so that the neophytes would march into the presence of the congregation at the darkest hour of the night, which was when the celebration of Easter was to begin —for Christ comes, not when all seems well and bright, but in the darkest hours of human sin and despair.

Now finally the former catechumens were permitted to partake in communion for the first time. But before they did that, they also joined for the first time in what was called "the prayers of the people." As

part of the royal priesthood, they now shared in the priestly task of praying for the entire world —including the Emperor and other authorities who persecuted them.

And, to complete the picture, it is interesting to note that at this their first communion —and only then— the neophytes were given, besides the chalice of wine, another of water, as a sign that they were baptized both within and without, and another of milk and honey, as a sign that they had now crossed the Jordan and entered the Promised Land.

Then, there was a chronological cycle of worship and devotion. At first this had been a weekly cycle, Fridays commemorating the crucifixion of Jesus, and Sundays celebrating his resurrection. But soon, first around Easter, and later also around Christmas and Epiphany, the entire year became a cycle in which one remembered the mighty acts of God in Jesus Christ and in the gift of the Spirit. Thus, all of worship had an educational dimension, helping believers focus on the great saving acts of God.

There is much here that we can learn as we refocus our understanding and our practice of worship. I certainly do not mean that we have to copy all that the church did in those early baptismal services. I am saying that what was done in those services —not only what was said, but also the gestures, what was eaten and drunk, what the neophytes wore, and all the rest, served to show them, and to help them experience, the enormous significance of what was taking place.

Now, back to my friend, the pastor in Cuba. As he told me of his practice of training sponsors, and how people were prepared for baptism, he continued telling me that a few weeks before Easter he brings the candidates for baptism before the congregation, introduces them, and invites the congregation to let him

know if there are any reasons why any of these people should not be baptized. Not surprisingly, he does receive phone calls and other communications to that effect. In that case, he investigates the matter, and may well decide to tell the person to wait another year before joining the church.

And then he told me that he has established the practice of baptizing all candidates on Easter, because he wants them and his congregation to know that baptism is a very serious matter, that it is a matter of dying and rising again, that it is a new birth into a new life, and not just a quaint thing that we do when Grandpa and Grandma are visiting, nor even a mere witness to our conversion. He said, “We no longer live in a world where being a Christian is an easy thing, and we must be clear about it.”

Needless to say, both my wife and I were astounded that this man, without ever having heard of such things, had recreated so many of the ancient practices of baptism. He did so, not because he was informed of how things used to be and wished to restore them out of an antiquarian interest, but because as a pastor he understood the conditions in which his people would be expected to live as Christians, and he was seeking ways in which their practices of worship could prepare them for those conditions.

What we take from all this, and how we adapt it, will take many forms. But no matter what we do, it must help both those receiving baptism, and the congregation witnessing it, to understand and to experience the radical nature of baptism and of new birth in a society such as ours.

Significantly, much of the liturgical renewal of the last few decades has taken into consideration some of the things we have learned from Hyppolitus. Most notably, in churches where there are prescribed

words and rites in connection with baptism, the renunciations —the rejecting evil and accepting and proclaiming a new life— have been restored. This is so, because today more than a few decades ago we are aware of the growing chasm between the mores and values of society and the principles of Christian life and faith.

The second century is not as far away as you think! In our case, a look at that century and its challenges will help us to redefine and to refocus our evangelism, our preaching, our education, and our worship.

But there is one point at which we should take care not to follow the church of the second century. That church did a tremendous job of preparing people to live as Christians in an indifferent and even hostile world. What it did not do —what it could not do, because it had no idea what would happen a hundred years later— was to prepare for the great changes and new dangers that would come when the church became accepted and began receiving the support of the powerful. They did not do it, but we must. We must prepare our people to live as Christians in the present world, with its increasing indifference, but also to live as Christians in the opposite situation. That opposite situation may not be a danger in the North Atlantic, in the centers of the old Christendom that is now passing. But it certainly is an increasing danger in other parts of the world where the church is growing both in size and in influence. In my own Latin America, we have already had an Evangelical dictator. And, sad to say, most of his Evangelical subjects rejoiced in the fact, in spite of the many crimes and atrocities committed under his regime. The dangers of the fourth century still assail us, and —particularly in those places where the church is growing in numbers and in acceptance— we must prepare to face them.

But that is a subject for another lecture on another occasion. Thank you. And may God bless you!