

# Light Shining in the Darkness: The Prologue of John and the Realm of Mission Activity

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The Prologue of Saint John, of the Fourth Gospel, is the fundamental text for our Congregation, the missionary inspiration of our founder, and the source of the perpetual renewal of our charism. As far as I am able, I would like to try to describe the Prologue, even define it, in a sentence. But I was invited to speak a little more at length, and so I want to take you on a journey, a mission-ecclesial-pastoral journey based on that text, one which was so dear to our founder, Arnold Janssen. In John 1:1-18, we read:

<sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word: the Word was with God and the Word was God.

<sup>2</sup> He was with God in the beginning.

<sup>3</sup> Through him all things came into being, not one thing came into being except through him.

<sup>4</sup> What has come into being in him was life, life that was the light of men;

<sup>5</sup> and light shines in darkness, and darkness could not overpower it.

<sup>6</sup> A man came, sent by God. His name was John.

<sup>7</sup> He came as a witness, to bear witness to the light, so that everyone might believe through him.

<sup>8</sup> He was not the light, he was to bear witness to the light.

<sup>9</sup> The Word was the real light that gives light to everyone; he was coming into the world.

<sup>10</sup> He was in the world that had come into being through him, and the world did not recognize him.

<sup>11</sup> He came to his own and his own people did not accept him.

<sup>12</sup> But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to those who believed in his name

<sup>13</sup> who were born not from human stock or human desire or human will but from God himself.

<sup>14</sup> The Word became flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that he has from the Father as only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.

<sup>15</sup> John witnesses to him. He proclaims: 'This is the one of whom I said: He who comes after me has passed ahead of me because he existed before me.'

<sup>16</sup> Indeed, from his fullness we have, all of us, received -- one gift replacing another,

<sup>17</sup> for the Law was given through Moses, grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ.

<sup>18</sup> No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

## 1. The Concept of the Word

The concept of the "word", or "logos" was well known in the ancient world when the fourth Gospel was being written. The philosophical use of that term goes back perhaps to Heraclitus (535–475 BCE), but it was also used by Plato, Aristotle, the sophists, the stoics, and finally, by Alexandrian Judaism, in the works of Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE – ca. 45 CE). He was the user best known to us today. Philo took up the "Logos" from the stoic tradition and incorporated it into his theology, connecting it to the biblical topic of the "Word of God", and with late Old Testament Wisdom.<sup>1</sup> John (whom we take to be the author of our text) may be using this concept in a totally new manner: not in its speculative and philosophical sense as in the ancient world, but filling this idea with new content. John takes "Logos" in senses intended for Christians, or any who are looking for faith and for eternal life. It is, in fact, to be understood, developed and felt according to his Gospel. More precisely, it is to be understood according to the chapters immediately following this Prologue.

What are the most important theological ideas in this fragment of John's? Here I will make use of part of a Vatican document where it has a "reading" and an explanation of the concept of Logos. I have not used those parts dealing with the task of ecumenism, and the salvific value of the people of other religions, which some have criticised rather strongly.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Logos>; For this theme see, T. Haintaler, *Griechische Denkelemente im frühen Christentum - "Hellenisierung" des Christentums?* in: <http://www.sankt-georgen.de/leseraum/hainthaler5.pdf>

The Congregation for Doctrine and the Faith, in its Declaration “Dominus Iesus”, which is about the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church, uses the word Logos 6 times, always to emphasise the following.

a) The divinity of Christ – pre-existence

b) The humanity of Jesus, the Word was made flesh, a concrete human being in a concrete stretch of history, a person is very important, because Gnosticism and various heresies were already present in the primitive church, denying the humanity of Jesus, and speaking only of his “divinity” or his divine origin (emanation). This was the origin of “the logic of incarnation” which is the fundamental basis of any pastoral-missiological articulation of our faith. (*Evangelii Gaudium* [EG] 117, 262.) Pope Francis takes up this principle of our faith from St. John-Paul II. In that pope’s letter *Novo millennio Ineunte* there is a mention of the principle. (52) John-Paul II used the concept “logic of the Incarnation” in the field of spirituality. He wrote “there is a need to resist the temptation of a spirituality which is intimate and individualistic, which would be hard to reconcile with the requirements of charity (not to mention the logic of the Incarnation), and ultimately, with the eschatological tension of Christianity”. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, in the first instance, he uses the term in another way, one to which we will return (117). In its second instance, the John-Paul text cited above is cited, with this addition: ... There is always the risk that some moments of prayer can become an excuse for not offering one’s life in mission; a privatized lifestyle can lead Christians to take refuge in some false forms of spirituality. (262)

c) The unicity of the person of Jesus Christ: the pre-existing Logos is Jesus the son of Mary – one and the same person. There are no other saviours, though this does not throw into doubt the possibility of salvation for those who have not been given the possibility of knowing Jesus Christ.

d) The one saviour of all. As everything was made or created through the Logos, everyone is predisposed to salvation. This is the meaning of the words “He was in the world, and the world was made through him.”

Many of our confreres have been writing on this topic, on the incarnation of the Logos or Word, and impressive ideas can be found in their work. One confrere writes thus: “The incarnation teaches us to lay more value on the smell of a sheep (an allusion here to a book on an episcopal service, written by Bergolio and with the title, “The Scent of the Pastor”) than on the aroma of incense or the odour of the library.”<sup>2</sup> A truly “revolutionary” idea [note the inverted commas] for someone aware that what the Magi brought to Baby Jesus was precisely incense (Mt 2:11), and who also knew of the love that our holy Founder had for the natural sciences and for academic studies in general.

Another confrere has recently written: “The essence of our congregational charism emanates from the very mystery of the *Incarnation of the Word of God* (Jn 1:14). The Word of God became **Humanity**; it burst into our history to show us the way to be fully human (EG 264)...Our model of mission is not that of **christianization**, but **incarnation**. It aims to promote the integral dimension of human life (EN 31). All with whom we relate should find in their own traditions and cultures how to comprehend and live this sole objective of humanization.”<sup>3</sup>

The logic of the Incarnation lies much deeper: God unites Himself with our history, not only He has created us, but He became one of us, so as to be able to save, through our nature, human life itself. The aim of the Incarnation is to make us sons of God, and to bring about a deeper friendship between God and what he has created, a friendship which has a body and a name: Jesus. The incarnation of the Logos is the most historical and tangible moment of our universal history. It is not an incarnation outside of time and space, as one idea of humanity might suggest. On this point, we must admit that our confrere’s citation from *Evangelii Gaudium* does not exactly correspond with the idea which Pope Francis expressed. (264) And there is nothing new in this: Vatican Council II had said, in its Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, “In reality it is only in the mystery of the incarnate Word that the mystery of mankind finds illumination.” (22)

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<sup>2</sup> Carlos del Valle, Sommer 2016/Nr.: 217, Beinanderbleiben Nachrichten aus der Mitteleuropäischen Provinz SVD, Sankt Gabriel, in: <http://www.panamzone.net/net/es/nuestra-espiritualidad/75-espiritualidad-y-carisma-del-verbo-divino.html>

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Light Shining in Darkness: PANAM Pathways of Mission*, in: In Word and Deed, No. 4 - September 2016, SVD Publications, Generalate – Rome, <http://www.svdcuria.org/members/svdocs/annual/wd/wd04en.pdf>

It is no wonder, therefore, that all the truths revealed in Him would thus find their source and reach their summit. He is “the image of the invisible God” (Col 15:29) and the perfect man who has restored to the sons of Adam the similitude of God, left deformed right at the start because of sin. This is because human nature has been taken up in him, without thereby being annihilated (Col 15:30), by that very fact this nature has also been elevated in us into a sublime dignity. With the Incarnation, the Son of God has, in a way, been united with every human person.” (GS)

The historical incarnation of Jesus is also an event of communication: the Word was made flesh so as to make us know the Father, and also the Holy Spirit. The incarnate Word is the revelation *par excellence*. It is a moral obligation, and for us who are of the Divine Word, also a fundamental ontological obligation, to announce the Word as a means of communicating our faith, and also as being the pre-existing Logos, the incarnate Son of the Father. The Letter to the Romans tells us “faith comes from what is preached, and what is preached comes from the word of Christ.” (10:17)

The logic of our Christian faith is for us not to set christianisation in opposition to incarnation. It is true that an integral development of every human person is part of Christianity, but for this to be successful we need the Revelation. As Pope Francis says: “God’s word teaches that our brothers and sisters are the prolongation of the incarnation for each of us: ‘As you did it to one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it to me’ (Mt 25:40).” (EG 179)

## 2. The Situation Today in the Wider World

The following have been the prevalent understanding of the people. 40 years ago it was *Jesus, yes – Church, no*. 20 years ago it was *God, yes – Jesus, no*. 10 years ago it became *God, no – religion, yes*, and today it has become *religion, no – spirituality, yes*.

What does *Evangelii Gaudium* have to say on the modern world? Here I would like to return to the text, to numbers 14 and 15 which are based on the labours of the Synod and on previous documents of the magisterium. Pope Francis writes, “It was recalled there (the XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops) that the new evangelisation is a call to all, and fundamentally comes about in three areas. In the first we put the space of the ordinary pastor’s activity, ‘animated by the fire of the Spirit, so as to inflame the hearts of the faithful who regularly take part in community worship and gather on the Lord’s day to be nourished by his word and by the bread of eternal life’.” (EG 15) This pastoral effort is aimed at the growth of believers so that they may always better respond to the love of God, with all of their life.

The Pope goes then goes on to say that, in the second place there “is that of ‘the baptized whose lives do not reflect the demands of Baptism’, who lack a meaningful relationship to the Church and no longer experience the consolation born of faith...Many of them are quietly seeking God, led by a yearning to see his face, even in countries of ancient Christian tradition. All of them have a right to receive the Gospel. Christians have the duty to proclaim the Gospel without excluding anyone. Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, they should appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet. It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but ‘by attraction’.”(EG 15)

It is then interesting to note how Francis places mission *ad gentes* (or as some describe it today: *inter gentes*) in third place. I quote: “John Paul II asked us to recognize that ‘there must be no lessening of the impetus to preach the Gospel’ to those who are far from Christ, ‘because this is the first task of the Church’. Indeed, ‘today missionary activity still represents the greatest challenge for the Church’ and ‘the missionary task must remain foremost’. What would happen if we were to take these words seriously? We would realize that missionary outreach is paradigmatic for all the Church’s activity. Along these lines the Latin American bishops stated that we ‘cannot passively and calmly wait in our church buildings’; we need to move ‘from a pastoral ministry of mere conservation to a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry’.” (EG 15)

So, where is it that we are positioned as SVD? Here I will go to Saint Paul. In his first letter to the Corinthians he writes: “Has Christ been parcelled out? Was it Paul that was crucified for you? Were you baptised in the name of Paul? I am thankful that I never baptised any of you after Crispus and Gaius, so none of you can say he was baptised in my name. Then there was the family of Stephanas, of course, that I baptised too, but no one else as far as I can remember. For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the Good News, and not to preach that in the terms of philosophy in which the crucifixion of Christ cannot be expressed” (I Cor 1:13–17).

To baptise is the fruit of the work of the missionary life, but for baptisms there is also the requirement of preparing the ground. In my opinion it was for this reason that Saint Arnold founded us. We should work where baptism is not an act which is widely esteemed or valued, but where it is to be promoted also among people who have no interest in our religion.

There is something else too which must be understood. An integral definition of the mission of the Church will make no division between dialogue, socio-cultural development, and the proclamation of the Good News.<sup>4</sup> Many authors are of the opinion that Pope Francis has succeeded in overcoming the division between dialogue, development and geography, and the announcing of the Good News by placing all under a single aspect. That is to announce the Word, which is the incarnate Logos, to arrive at an integral development of every person, of society itself, and of the entire world.

In this sense there is always a need to set out from the current reality: "Realities are greater than ideas. This principle has to do with 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." (EG 233)

### 3. Universality and Particularity: Interculturality and Inculturation<sup>5</sup>

Fr. Antonio Pernia says: "I believe we can speak of interculturality as a heritage which we have inherited from our Founder. It is rooted in the intention of the Founder, so it is now justly enshrined in our Constitutions.

The intention of the Founder – First of all, interculturality is rooted in the intention of the Founder. Three events can be cited in support of this (Cf. Josef Alt, *Journey of Faith: The Missionary Life of Arnold Janssen*, pp. 916 ff.)."<sup>6</sup>

Let us look at what Pope Francis says in EG 117: "If properly understood, cultural diversity does not threaten the unity of the Church. It is the Holy Spirit, sent by the Father and the Son, which transforms our hearts and makes us able to enter into the perfect communion of the Holy Trinity, where everything finds its unification. It builds the communion and the harmony of the People of God. The same Holy Spirit is the harmony, as if it were the bond of love between the Father and the Son. It is the one which stimulates the rise of a multiple and varied richness of gifts and at the same time builds a unity which is never just a uniformity, but a multiform harmony which attracts. We would not be doing justice to the logic of incarnation if we think in terms of a Christianity which is monocultural and monotone."<sup>7</sup>

### 4. The Parish as Existential Element of Missionary Work

Where the vocations are, it seems that parishes become ever more important. In Europe too the number of parishes is growing; those cared for by the Society.

Ever more confreres are working in parishes. I have taken data on the USS Province for the last Chapter:

In Active Ministry (%)	2000	2005	2012
Parish Ministry	50.8	42.4	73.7
Education	0	0	0
Other Apostolates	15.4	23.7	5.3
SVD Vocation-Formation	0	2.5	0
Administration/Support	12.3	10.2	5.3

<sup>4</sup> Klara Csiszar, Den Missionsbegriff mit dem Lehramt integral (neu) denken, in *Verbum: 2016, Weihnachten.*; Shin, Jeonghun: Kirche als Weltforum. Zum Dialogverständnis in kirchlichen Dokumenten seit dem Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil, Münster 2010, 76.

<sup>5</sup> SVD MISSION 2012: *Sharing Intercultural Life And Mission*, SVD Publications – Generalate, Rome, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Antonio Pernia, SVD, Superior General, Report to the Society, *SVD MISSION 2012* in: <http://www.svdcuria.org/public/histrad/gchapter/rep2gc/rep12en.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Vedi: Vgl. Gmainer-Pranzl, Franz: Die Vielstimmigkeit des Logos – Überlegungen zur eigentümlichen Universalität des Christlichen. In: Ozankom, Claude / Udeani, Chibueze (Hg.): *Theologie im Zeichen der Interkulturalität*, New York 2010, 227-247, hier 246-247.

For me life in a parish means life in a community: “True faith in the incarnate Son of God is inseparable from self-giving, from membership in the community, from service, from reconciliation with others. The Son of God, by becoming flesh, summoned us to the revolution of tenderness.” (EG 88)

During the visit of Papa Francis to Poland a meeting was arranged between the Pope and all the members of the Episcopal Conference of Poland. The encounter took the form of a dialogue behind closed doors with 4 questions and 4 responses, and the text was published in Rome one week after the meeting. S.E. Leszek Lesziewicz (Auxiliary Bishop of Tarnow) had put the following question: “Our pastoral engagement is for the most part based on the traditional model of the parish community, built on the sacramental life. This model continues to bear fruit. However we are noticing that, even with us, the conditions of daily life are rapidly changing and require of the Church a new mode of pastoral activity. Holy Father, you spoke, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, of missionary disciples who carry the Good News with enthusiasm to the world of today. What does that suggest for us? In what way does it encourage us so that we may be able to build the community of the Church in our world in a fruitful and fertile manner, with joy, with missionary dynamism?”

Pope Francis replied: “I would like to emphasise one thing: the parish is ever to be of value! The parish needs to remain: it is a structure that we should not throw out of the window. The parish is indeed the house of the People of God, the one in which that people live. The problem is, how do I set up the parish! There are parishes with secretaries who look like ‘disciples of Satan’, who frighten the people! Parishes with doors closed. But there are also parishes with open doors...”

I knew in Buenos Aires a fine university professor, a Jesuit. When he retired he asked his Provincial if he could go as a parish priest in some suburb to have this other experience. He came back to the Faculty once a week – he depended on that community – and one day he said to me: ‘Tell your professor of ecclesiology that two subjects are missing in his thesis.’ Which ones? ‘First, the Holy People of God are essentially tired out. And the second, ‘The Holy People of God ontologically do what seems best to it. And this is to become tired!’...

Some say that the parish is no longer working because this is the hour for movements. This is not true! Movements are of assistance, but movements should not be an alternative to the parish... The parish is not to be touched: it should remain as a base for creativity, a reference point, a mothering place and all these things... Search out, look for, go out, look for the people, put yourself in the difficulties of the people. I’m thinking of my own country: if you don’t go and seek out the people there, if you don’t make an approach to them, they won’t come. This is something for the missionary disciple, the parish going out. Go out so as to look, seek, as God Himself did by inviting his Son to seek us.”<sup>8</sup>

The SVD Profile of our Parishes and Schools becomes a shining light when we are united with Jesus and this union is expressed in our activities. “Faithfulness to Jesus requires a personal commitment to Him and to his project. Here it is valid to distinguish between Jesus and the Church (as institution). To be faithful to the spirit of Jesus can sometimes require that we adopt a critical position regarding certain aspects and pastoral options which do not take into account the demands of the Gospel. Institutional structures and Church programs are means to help us bring to life the saving message of Jesus; they should never be an obstacle to a more dedicated service to the people of God.”<sup>9</sup>

## 5. Missionary Spirituality

For understanding mission spirituality, I want to go again to Pope Francis, “The primary reason for evangelizing is the love of Jesus which we have received, the experience of salvation which urges us to ever greater love of him. What kind of love would not feel the need to speak of the beloved, to point him out, to make him known? If we do not feel an intense desire to share this love, we need to pray insistently that he will once more touch our hearts... What then happens is that ‘we speak of what we have seen and heard’ (1 Jn 1:3). The best incentive for sharing the Gospel comes from contemplating it with love, lingering over its pages and reading it with the heart. If we approach it in this way, its beauty will amaze and constantly excite us. But if this is to come about, we need to recover a

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<sup>8</sup> [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2016/july/documents/papa-francesco\\_20160727\\_polonia-yescovi.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2016/july/documents/papa-francesco_20160727_polonia-yescovi.html)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 53-54.

contemplative spirit which can help us to realize ever anew that we have been entrusted with a treasure which makes us more human and helps us to lead a new life. There is nothing more precious which we can give to others.” (EG 264)

During the Angelus of 14 August, 2016, Pope Francis said: “In the fulfilling of its mission to the world, the Church – that is, all of us as Church – has need of the help of the Holy Spirit for us not to be held back by fear and by calculation; not to get accustomed to walking within secure boundaries. These two attitudes lead the Church towards being a functional Church, one that never takes risks. No, the apostolic courage that the Holy Spirit kindles in us like a fire, helps us to overcome walls and barriers, makes us be creative and spurs us into movement so that we will also travel on paths that are uncomfortable, or not yet explored, offering hope to whoever we run into. More than ever there is a need, today more than ever, for priests, consecrated persons and the lay faithful, their eyes the eyes of an apostle, for them to be affected, and stop by the difficulties of people, by poverty both material and spiritual. This gives to the path of evangelisation and mission the healing rhythms of proximity. It is the fire itself of the Holy Spirit that takes us to becoming the ‘neighbours’ of others: of people who suffer, people in need... What the Church needs is not bureaucrats and diligent functionaries, but passionate missionaries, devoured by an ardour to carry to everybody the consoling word of Jesus and his grace.”<sup>10</sup>

I want to end with the Prologue of John: “the light shines in the darkness”. Never will darkness be able to extinguish the true light. So I wish for you that the true light of the Gospel may shine in our life, to give to the entire world the salvation which brought us the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ.

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<sup>10</sup> [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/angelus/2016/documents/papa-francesco\\_angelus\\_20160814.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/angelus/2016/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20160814.html)