



A succinct way to put the mission of the Legionaries of Christ is this: to send out to the world priests who can both evangelize culture and form others to do the same.

But what does evangelization of culture mean?

St. John Paul II defined culture as a shared way of life of a given community (See R. J. Staudt, "Culture in the Magisterium of John Paul II", *Claritas* 3.1 (March 2014), 52-65). Straightforwardly, then, evangelization of culture means evangelizing the shared way of life of a given community. Now, a "way of life" is a very practical thing. Perhaps the Pontiff, being a philosopher himself, had in mind the (then)recent work by Pierre Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995) in which Hadot argued that ancient philosophy was never just a set of doctrines or answers to theoretical questions; it was always a way of living out a human life together with others: from Pythagoras in his school to Socrates in the *agora* to Aristotle in the Lyceum. Nor could a search for wisdom really be anything else: even contemporary usage does not deploy the term "wisdom" only or primarily for abstract theoretical knowledge or answers to non-practical questions.

Wisdom is a matter of a whole life, then as now. If culture is the shared way of life of a given community, one can see that wisdom for a given person in that community is what enables him or her *truly* to live out that life in the best way possible. Indeed, the practices of a culture are defined by those actions that are the best; so, in so far as a culture aims at what is truly good, it is wisdom that, in the practical as *prudential* and in the theoretical as *sapientia*, defines the various aspects of that way of life itself and wisdom also that leads us to criticize the ways that culture is not aimed at the good. A shared way of life, then, in so far as it is good, is derived from wisdom.

How can we describe the practical life of the person who lives wisely?

One thing is clear in general: the person who lives the common life of his people in the best way lives a life that is beautiful in all aspects. For many plain people living ordinary lives, this means living in simple and beautiful ways: such people are and have good friends, they dress well, live in as beautiful homes as are fitting (and possible) for them, they care for their possessions, they clean and keep clean, they beautify their surroundings, they may contribute to the arts in their time and place, they foster parish life, care for the poor, visit the sick and aged, they develop their own talents and help others realize their potential too, and they try as much as is right for them to influence the political life of their community for the best.

## II

But this picture has only to be drawn for us to see at once the problem of our own day: wisdom and beauty are both very hard to find.

And this seems to be precisely what the evangelization of culture is meant to address. In a way, every religious order in the Church has evangelization of some aspect of our shared way of life as part of its specific task. But many of the more active orders focus on clear problems like education, poverty, care for the elderly, nursing, etc. And, in a largely Christian world, these are some of the most important social problems facing the Church. We are not, however, any longer living in a Christian world. Pope John Paul perceived this, and his response was to call for the evangelization of culture. Since he meant culture as a shared way of life, and since he knew well the missions of most religious orders, we can see that he meant specifically that what needs to be evangelized now in special way are those aspects of our shared way of life that have been turned away from (or never pointed toward) the truth of the Christian faith and the beauty of the Christian life; this is because every account of the good life implies a sociology. Such evangelizing includes everything from art to clothing, from holiday celebrations to social life, from public spaces to architecture of churches, shops, homes, and businesses; of particular importance here are those aspects of our culture that are more shared than others, e.g. families, friendships, organizations, public spaces, work, and celebrations. This kind of change of culture requires not just religious orders and dioceses that can host their own events or build their own institutions, but it also entails that there be a concerted effort to form leaders who can effect change in their own lives and in the lives of their communities. For a reform of our shared way of life, we need *leaders who are apostles of the ordinary*. This is the mission of the Legionaries of Christ, an urgent mission for a darkening time.

### III

And this mission may be the most difficult mission of all: culture cannot simply be reformed through policy changes and initiatives; the people whose culture it is must *want* to reform it. And the only way they can want to reform their culture is if they perceive clearly that their way of life is in need of reform and that the reforms proposed are actually good. If people do not think their way of life needs change, or if they do not think the changes proposed are good, they will not want to change and will not be able to see why they should change.

This in itself should cause us concern. Can we actually change minds on the most fundamental questions of how we should live together? That is a hard question to face. But let's assume that we can do so, somehow, through the work of the Spirit---all things are possible with God.

Exactly how we can do it, though, is an equally hard question. If we can change culture and change minds on such important questions, the only possible way is through evangelizers who, in addition to a knowledge of the faith and fervor to change the world, have a thorough knowledge of contemporary life and of the values that contemporary life encodes and which underlie that life. One cannot adequately evangelize people whose views and the way of life derived from those views one does not understand. But, even more than this, the reason that evangelizers must understand the views and life of contemporary culture is chiefly that *those evangelizers are themselves participants in contemporary culture* and with it they themselves share at least some of those ways of life that need to be evangelized.

So, apostles must first understand and evangelize what is a key part of *themselves* at every age, Christ calls us to conversion, a continual conversion, a conversion of belief, habits, manner of life, political institutions, of everything. If evangelizers do not seek such an understanding of themselves and conversion for themselves and their own way of life, they are simply blind guides leading the blind.

But what is entailed in coming to understand a person's views and his or her way of life, even if that person is oneself? What, in fact, is understanding in such a case? Understanding here is a knowledge of the causes of those views and the causes of the life related to and derived from those views, as well as a knowledge

of the truth of the various matters. One needs a knowledge, then, of where those views and this life came from. Such knowledge of the causes of views and ways of life is not primarily a matter of knowledge only within the contemporary academic discipline of philosophy or theology; it is a knowledge of how the human past and present have been shaped by the pursuit of goodness and truth in every aspect of human life and how those pursuits manifest in one's own life and the shared way of life of one's community; hence, the necessity of a study of man informed by the right account of human nature and its place.

Men and women live out their lives seeking good things, but ordinary people generally do not realize that these practical goods and their way of life are both derived from implied accounts of goodness and truth. Philosophy and theology as pursuit of good and the highest end of human beings are not abstract disciplines, but are found at the heart of every decision a person makes and at the heart of every human institution, indeed, of everything that can be called human at all. It is this pursuit of truth and goodness innate in human beings that unifies all aspects of human life. But most people do not recognize this. Because of that, apostles need to pay particular attention to how accounts of goodness and truth underlie all aspects of human life (cf. St. Paul in *Acts* 17 at the Areopagus in Athens). Thus they need a knowledge of human culture and its history, human goods and how the pursuit of those goods has influenced human life.

But this knowledge is not of the same kind as knowledge that a secular educated person would have of the same subjects. First, it is built upon the Catholic understanding of man and nature and is thus an understanding that integrates the best accounts of the various subjects into the Catholic framework. (It also helps us to refine that very understanding; there are still questions that need better answers, still problems that need to be solved.) Second, such an education is equally both a matter of specific content and a matter of inculcating a real love of learning and a knowledge of how to learn. Third, every aspect of such an education focuses both on the relevant subject matter and on how that subject matter is connected in a real way to the larger world; this is the genuine knowledge of causes. On this point, students must take the active role because only by understanding for themselves the various causes will they come to a true understanding that will remain with them and to a real love of learning that will sustain them.

This is the best kind of integral formation of the intellect.

## IV

But, of course, this education into human culture is only what enables one to engage a human being where he or she is. A true apostle is not solely concerned with narrowly intellectual problems. He or she is primarily a friend to those he or she seeks to evangelize, and this is a friendship that must be based on truth. One crucial thing that friends do for each other is help one another realize their respective potentials for excellence. So, too must the evangelizer. And now we can see the full weight of what evangelization of culture means: not just knowing philosophy and theology, not just knowing culture, not even just knowing culture in the right way, but chiefly *evangelizing culture means transform in the shared way of life of one's community friendships based on and leading toward truth and goodness because those friendships foster human excellence of all kinds.*

And that reveals the true *place* of beauty in evangelization. The first beauty is the beauty of a wise and loving human life. Beauty in the material or social aspects of human culture is and must be built upon truth revealed and lived out in the wise life oriented toward God. It is those living the life of wisdom who will help others and themselves to realize their potential for excellence, their potential to recognize beautiful things, to make beautiful things, to do beautiful things, to live together in beautiful ways. This is how we walk the way of beauty, the *via pulchritudinis*, in bringing the world back to God (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 167).