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## "New Evangelization in the American Context: Some Observations and An Approach"

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Fr. Donald S. Nesti, CSSp, a native of Pennsylvania, was ordained to the priesthood in 1963. He earned a licentiate and a doctorate in theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. Fr. Nesti's teaching assignments include Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA; the Pontifical College Josephinum, Columbus, OH; and currently the University of St. Thomas Graduate School of Theology, Houston, TX. In the administrative field he served as Director of the Immaculate Heart Seminary, Bethel Park, PA; Director of Planning, Research and Renewal, Congregation of the Holy Spirit USA, Eastern Province; President, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA; and Provincial Superior, Congregation of the Holy Spirit USA, Western Province. Currently, he serves as the Director of the Center for Faith and Culture, University of St. Thomas, Houston, TX, a Center he founded in 1994 in response to Pope John Paul II's 1983 creation of the Pontifical Council for Culture. In addition, Fr. Nesti has lectured extensively, authored books, published articles, conducted workshops and served as retreat master for clergy, laity and religious groups.

## NEW EVANGELIZATION IN THE AMERICAN CONTEXT: SOME OBSERVATIONS AND AN APPROACH

From the time of creation and culminating in the Incarnation of the eternal Word, God still loves the world and seeks to involve all in the relationships of his love life. The principal word in this statement is “relationships,” for that is what love is all about. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* put it succinctly when it says (CCC, 53):

The divine plan of Revelation is realized simultaneously “by deeds and words which are intrinsically bound up with each other” and shed light on each another. It involves a specific divine pedagogy: God communicates himself to man gradually. He prepares him to welcome by stages the supernatural Revelation that is to culminate in the person and mission of the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ.

St. Irenaeus of Lyons repeatedly speaks of this divine pedagogy using the image of God and man becoming accustomed to one another: the Word of God dwelt in man and became the Son of man in order to accustom man to perceive God and to accustom God to dwell in man, according to the Father's pleasure.

*Evangelization* is the name that we give to the process of inviting people into this school of the divine pedagogy of divine love. It is a process in which we seek to relate lovingly to life as it is experienced by people in their cultural contexts, in the circumstances in which they find themselves, so that God can meet them where they are. It is a relational *process* which seeks to touch how they live in society, but first and foremost to respond to the perennial questions of meaning which arise in their hearts. Who is God? Or is there a God? What is the human person and who am I? What is the world? How do the three relate to one another? These, we might call the permanent questions that coincide with humanity's search for other permanent things – the One, the Good, the Beautiful and the True revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Today we speak about the *New Evangelization*, i.e., how to relate the message of Gospel Love to a world that changes so quickly that we do not even seem to have time to reflect on how to address the questions or love people through the process of

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clarifying them and seeking answers. Attempts of the Church to respond to major cultural shifts have ranged from defensiveness and rejection of the cultural changes to conciliatory openness to the new, while not giving in on the unchangeable truth of the Incarnation and its implications for humanity.

The defensive reactionary approach can be seen in the pontificate of Pius IX and in the deliberations and actions of the First Vatican Council. Subsequent to that Council, Leo XIII sought to counter Bismarck's *Kulturkampf*, or battle for civilization, with an intelligent and pliable defense of Christianity which did not cede on what Catholics hold as essential. Leo sought not to exacerbate the contrast and conflict with modernity by a reactionary intransigence immobilized in a cultural traditionalism fossilized in models grown old and past their time. He sought harmony and friendship between the Church and modern civilization as is witnessed best in his encyclical, *Rerum novarum*. During the pontificate of Pius X, a new approach to cultural change was adopted, namely, the development of a Catholic *Kulturkampf* to "Restore all things in Christ." Pius became the "town crier" in the battle against modern civilization. He perceived Christianity as conquering the cultural trends and bringing to perfection the ideal of Christian civilization. Evangelization and civilization became one and the same. The Reign of God was also of this world, a universal Christian civilization.

This tension between approaches to evangelization and culture continued through the pontificates of Benedict XV, Pius XI, and Pius XII. With the arrival of John XXIII and Paul VI a new understanding of evangelization emerges from their understanding of the Church and its salvific loving role in the world. Beginning with John's ground-breaking encyclical, *Pacem in terris* and then Paul VI's *Ecclesiam suam*, to evangelize means to be in dialogue with the world in which not only sin but grace is already at work. This is the message of the Second Vatican Council and subsequent synodal statements such as *Justice in the World* (1971) and *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1974).

Papal teaching subsequent to the Second Vatican Council presents variations on Council teaching as is seen in the voluminous encyclicals of John Paul II and in the syntheses and style of the powerfully insightful three encyclicals of Benedict XVI that bring Catholic teaching full circle with St. John's proclamation, *Deus caritas est*, God is Love. In his social encyclical *Caritas in veritate* (Love in Truth), Benedict XVI challenges the world with the social and economic implications of divine agape.

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The Church's longing to relate gospel love to the hearts of all people and their cultures was evident in the recent Synod of Bishops which sought to address the need for a *New Evangelization*. What was evident in the synod discussions was that rather than seeking new tactics or methodologies, what the synod called for most was *renewed dispositions of heart of the evangelizers themselves*. It is in the habits of the heart of the evangelizers that one will see the embodiment of the contrast and relationship between gospel and cultural values. The Synod Bishops repeatedly emphasized that the newness of the evangelization depends on the renewed, loving hearts of the evangelizers. A Canadian layman, Sebastian Gomes, was present at the synod as a journalist for the Canadian TV channel, "Salt and Light." When speaking about what he heard in the synod he said that what most impressed him was the call for humility on the part of the Church. Humility is the recognition of the poverty and weakness of Jesus' disciples in relation to the credibility of the mission. Humility presumes conversion in the Church that is the result of the action of the Holy Spirit. This is the primary disposition of heart needed for evangelizing.<sup>1</sup> It is interesting that Pope Francis chose Mr. Gomes to do one of the readings at the Mass celebrated by the pope for his installation. Pope Francis, himself, was a participant in that Synod. Given his words and actions since becoming the Bishop of Rome, we already see signs of the spirit and gestures that must pervade the New Evangelization, our new way of relating to the *arche agape*,<sup>2</sup> the original love of God for the world.

To celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council on October 11, 1963, Pope Benedict proclaimed 2012-2013 to be a Year of Faith. This year also marks the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Celebrating a year of faith could be likened to a time for the faithful to wash their window on the world – their worldview. Just as ordinary windows gather dust and dirt and need washing, so too does the window through which we view our 1) relationship with God, 2) who we are and how we relate to one another in community and 3) the world in which we live. Such a window washing in love can clarify for us the loving response we are called to make to God and to those who most need our love. In changed and changing circumstances in which the human life-meaning-questions remain ongoing, we are responsible for refreshing our faith response to God's self-communication to us, God who is love. Loving response to love will pervade all our relationships - personal, societal, systemic and institutional.

It is helpful to recall what Paul VI said about the essence of evangelization when he wrote *Evangelization of the Peoples* (henceforth *EN*). What Paul VI said is worth quoting in its entirety:

*...evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new...*

*...affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, mankind's criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life...*

*EN, 18.* For the Church, evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new.... The purpose of evangelization is therefore precisely this *interior change*, and if it had to be expressed in one sentence the best way of stating it would be to say that the Church evangelizes when she seeks *to convert, solely through the divine power of [Agape] the message she proclaims, both the personal and collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete milieu which are theirs.*

*EN, 19.* *Strata of humanity* which are transformed: for the Church it is a question not only of preaching the Gospel in ever wider geographic areas or to ever greater numbers of people, but also of affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, mankind's *criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life*, which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation.

*EN, 20.* All this could be expressed in the following words: what matters is to evangelize man's culture and cultures (not in a purely decorative way, as it were, by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to their very roots), in the wide and rich sense which these terms have in *Gaudium et Spes*, always *taking the person as one's starting-point* and always coming back to the relationships of people among themselves and with God.

For our purposes in seeking to evangelize anew, the words and phrases in these passages that most stand out are: *all the strata, transforming humanity from within, solely through the divine power of the message, personal and collective consciences*, in relation to the interior change both of human hearts and societal habits of the heart. The strata that he refers to are: *criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life*. Everything depends on *taking the person as one's starting-point*. To have a love which is so intentional that it can pervade all of these strata is the ministry of evangelizing cultures anew. It is in light of this history of the Church's desire and mandate to evangelize that the Center for Faith and Culture,

University of St. Thomas, Houston, Texas has for the past twenty years sought to relate to all sectors of the dominant American culture in building on the strengths of the culture while offering the expanded vision of human life contained in the *arche agape* of the Gospel.

### **The Center's mission states:**

The Center for Faith and Culture seeks to understand and affect the relationship between the Gospel and the American way of life in relation to God's ongoing encounter with humanity in the light of faith. Through dialogue it assists participants to live as faith-full citizens of our democratic republic. It brings the Catholic voice to the ongoing conversation about the meaning of life, and the liberty and pursuit of happiness we hold in common as Americans. In its activities it also seeks to relate the Gospel to various American subcultures, e.g., Hispanics/Latinos, African-American, and Asian.

In its programmatic offerings the Center incorporates both theory and practice, giving special emphasis to the formation of community leadership that will be capable of integrating faith and culture through ongoing reflection and action. Since we believe that holistic spiritual development is at the very core of all cultural development, this too, constitutes an essential dimension of the Center's work.

Two major undertakings offered by the Center have developed as a result of this mission as it relates to the New Evangelization, one academic and the other pastoral. The academic Master of Arts in Faith and Culture is a thirty-six credit M.A. which also offers a Certificate for students who complete the eighteen credit core courses but do not wish to complete the M. A. itself. The "New Evangelization and Pastoral Formation of Faithful Citizens" is the pastoral one that the rest of this article will describe as the Center's response to the call of the Church for a fresh approach to evangelization. The pastoral program is an outgrowth of the Center's twenty-year experience in seeking to live its mission. It presumes that the program will evangelize the evangelizer, that it will be transformative of the life of the one who desires to share the transforming power of Gospel Agape with others.

*...God Still So Loves the  
World...*

### **Adult Faith Formation in the New Evangelization<sup>3</sup>**

The title of this pastoral process is "*God Still So Loves the World: The Ongoing Dialogue with the World of Faithful Citizens.*" It is offered as a curriculum resource tool or study guide for

engaging Catholic faithful in dialogue with our American way of life. It flows from the missionary character of our faith and requires a recommitment to the social dimensions of followers of Christ as faith-full citizens. It evokes the responsibility of faithful citizens to being the life-giving message of the Gospel to the world. It is structured in such a way as to assist groups to deepen their faith commitment through reflection, dialogue and the acquisition of skills and can be adapted to youth groups, study groups, catechists, adult learners, and any faith study groups. The goal is to gather the Catholic faithful to contemplate and live their identity and lives as worship (Romans 12:1-2) as “full, conscious, active participants” in the contemporary world.

The process has been tested with two pilot groups. One was composed of students and professors from the M. A. in Faith and Culture program. The other was made up of diocesan and parish ministers and other experts who serve in the areas of adult education, family and youth ministries, retreat centers as well as representatives of religious communities. Most recently the process has been offered to a group of permanent deacons and their wives. These pilots have been of immense help in honing, reshaping and modifying the approach that we have taken. We are now at a point of sifting the materials used for the process and readying them for print.

The process consists of four stages under the general heading of: *God Still So Loves the World*. Each stage, in turn, has four sub-sections. Each stage seeks to incorporate art, literature, poetry, visuals, etc., which incorporate a holistic experience to what is proclaimed. Each section of each stage lasts approximately two hours.

Stage One: *A New Evangelization: Because God Still So Loves the World*. The aim of this stage is to rekindle in the participants a sense of the enchantment of the universe throughout which the recreating Divine Spirit of God is present and active. It seeks to allow the participants to enter into the “dearest freshness” that Gerard Manley Hopkins speaks about in *God’s Grandeur*. This approach is also based on the work of philosopher, Charles Taylor,<sup>4</sup> whose concern is to confront the challenges presented by the process of “disenchantment” that has taken place in the modern world. He says that we need to seek a kind of “re-enchantment.” To be enchanted is to be open to reality beyond what we see, to the presence of the divine, to mystery. Being enchanted means that belief is not just another option, but an everyday reality. It is the way to be enchanted by something outside the self. We might translate this into the need to give a rebirth to the sense of the

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Mystery of the Divine Being present throughout the universe even in its downtrodden state (Ephesians 1:3-14). It is a world downtrodden but nonetheless groaning for fulfillment while the Spirit works in the present bringing forth first fruits (Romans 8:23) through a new birth from above (John 3:3). *The process of this stage encourages the participant to develop a receptive habit of heart to the beauty of transformative love that God seeks to give all. It involves the experience of the universe itself as sacramental. What follows from this is an understanding of the Eucharist, itself, the "Mystery of Faith," as the Sacrament of cosmic unity and the recapitulation (Colossians 1:19) of all in the Spirit, through Christ in adoration of the Father.* It is the sense of the Eucharist in the Orthodox Tradition of the Mystic Supper, the Supper of the Lamb sacrificed and risen. The experience is captured in Teilhard de Chardin's *Hymn of the Universe* in which he uses the Roman Catholic Mass as a metaphor for his understanding of humanity in relation to the universe and the unity of all creation, emphasizing the simplicity, coherence and harmony of everything through the universal presence of the Word. It leads to a sense of the ongoing "Dance" (*perichoresis*) with the Trinity for Love of the world. The *communio* of Eucharistic love is experienced as the only force that can bring individual beings to their perfect completion by uniting them one with the other.

Stage Two: ***Cultivating Our Culture – Bringing Love to Our Way of Life.*** This stage flows from the teaching of St. Irenaeus on the unity of God and the unity of salvation history. He is the Church Father most quoted by the Second Vatican Council (14 times) after St. Augustine. He insists that God began the world and has been overseeing it ever since with his creative act. Everything is a part of this plan whose high point is the advent of Jesus. He opposed anything which held that creation was bad and insisted that God is always at work even in fallen creation. John Paul II in speaking of Irenaeus said that we cannot forget the world in which we live, its legitimate demands and the currents of thought abroad in it which often bear truths that must be recognized (Address, no. 4 on his trip to France). We have to recognize that which draws together, the authentic institutions to be favored and the need to correct.<sup>5</sup> While there are defects and errors in this world, the Church refuses to be hypnotized by them. We must always consider what the Fathers have called the *semina Verbi* (seeds of the Word), the *praeparatio evangelica* (preparation for the gospel), the traces of the grace which is active in every person and hence in every culture (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22). *The working of grace can be seen in everything human that unifies the person and unifies the community.* Unity in love is the will of God.

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It is in this light that Stage Two approaches the historic founding of the United States as a democratic republic. The goal is not to *Instaurare omnia in Christo* (Pius X's motto in its Tridentine translation of the Vulgate), but to *Recapitulare omnia in Christo* (sum up all things in Christ, as the Neo-Vulgate says). Christ is the Head of all people, the universe and of Christians in particular. He is the Head who guides and directs, who causes humanity to live and develop. The image is a restorative one, concerned more with the idea of gathering, of joining together, of enrichment in universal fraternity. The Word enlightens every person. This presumes that God's creating Spirit is already at work in humanly constructed ways of life (cultures) and that these ways of life already have within them the seeds of the Eternal Word made flesh. Therefore the Council promoted culture as man's search for human value and says, "In this way, the human spirit grows increasingly free of its bondage to creatures and can be more easily drawn to the worship and contemplation of the Creator."<sup>6</sup> That is why Irenaeus could say that "the glory of God is man fully alive" provided that he remains in contact with his Creator. The full text of St. Irenaeus is: "the glory of God is man fully alive, and the life of man is the vision of God. If the revelation of God through creation already brings life to all living beings on the earth, how much more will the manifestation of the Father by the Word bring life to those who see God" (*Adversus Haereses* (Against Heresies) IV, 20, 7). The full text brings perfect balance to the approach that Christians should take to understanding the relationship between faith and culture. The seeds of God's unifying love are already at work in human efforts to unify people; the Gospel can build on these cultural unifying desires and actions with the greater vision of Gospel *agape*.

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It is from this vantage point that Stage Two looks for Gospel seeds in the American way of life as articulated in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. *This Stage also leads the participants to an understanding of what "culture" is and how it is promoted by the Second Vatican Council, not only in *Gaudium et Spes* but also in other documents which develop major theological and ecclesiological themes of *Gaudium et Spes* and *Lumen Gentium*. The Stage then undertakes the work of identifying areas of relationship and contrast between the dominant American cultural worldview and the worldview of the Gospel. In doing so it seeks ways to shed light on how the Gospel responds most fully to the American inalienable rights of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."* The aim is to name both the beauty and the tensions inherent in seeking to live the dual citizenship of American Catholics whose ultimate citizenship is in heaven. The challenge is how faith-full citizens are to live this dual citizenship

with loving realism. How, according to the Gospel mandate, to “go and teach all nations,” can members of Christ’s body who seek a “more perfect union” keep engaged fully, consciously and actively in the life of the civic community to make the *semina Christi* (seeds of Christ) within the dominant American way of life spring forth and bear fruit that will last? This is what is implied in being “faithful citizens” which far exceeds the limited interpretation of the phrase as is sometimes given it in reading the USCCB (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops) letter on the subject during the period just prior to presidential elections. Faith-full Catholic dual citizens are required to critique the way of life they share with fellow Americans. They are charged to critique in love and be neither bashers nor “love it and leave it” people.

To love is to relate! To love is to communicate! To love is to live the asceticism of dialogue.

Stage Three: *Inside Voices for the Outside World – A Spirituality of Dialogue*. What then is the way to a “more perfect union” of people living in a world enchanted by God’s Spirit? *The only way that respects human beings as essentially social, relational, as wired for community and communion - dialogue. To love is to relate! To love is to communicate! To love is to live the asceticism of dialogue.* Stage Three, therefore, intends to lead participants into the beauty, the hard knocks and rough edges involved in seeking to bridge the gap between culture and faith. It presumes the relational spirituality of the Beatitudes; the habits of the heart of the Sermon on the Mount; the putting on the mind of Christ whose life was the life of the Word in dialogue with the world. It is in the context of trying to live and dialogue with a “company of strangers”<sup>37</sup> that we encounter the greatest challenge to live the love which fulfills the law. We must be realists and recognize that our first temptation is to flee the tension that arises, to shut down, to force our point, to divide and conquer and fail to embrace the patience, perseverance and the slow tempo of transformational dialogue. We have to learn how dialogue is at the heart of how people bond in community. In dialogue we also appreciate that good borders are essential for good relationships and at the same time how to cross frontiers. We have to get beyond the noisy gongs and the clanging symbols and polarization. This involves learning the art and the asceticism of dialogue. It is an art which requires immense self-discipline. Pope Francis has made it clear in his allocutions that a culture of dialogue, listening and mutual respect is at the heart of the Church’s desire to evangelize anew.

Stage Four: *Called and Sent to Love the World*. We must realize that we are not alone in this Christian vocation to love the world. The dialogue that we enter into finds a foundation in all who share one baptism in Christ and all who worship the One

God. Our dialogue must first and foremost be ecumenical and interreligious. We are not in this alone. All four constitutions of the Second Vatican Council (*Dei Verbum* on Revelation, *Lumen Gentium* on the Church, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* on the Liturgy, and *Gaudium et Spes* on the Church in the Modern World) point to how the Catholic Church, in which the Church of Christ subsists, is in relationship with all categories of believers and non-believers alike. As we seek “a more perfect union” within our republic, these are fellow citizens with whom we walk the journey to a recapitulation of all things in *arche agape*. It is with them that we must seek the goal of Christ’s ministry, so that the whole world may be one in God who is Love. It is fitting, therefore, that *as we seek to evangelize in a new way and bring the Good News of God’s love for the world to a secularized culture, we do so in dialogue with others who believe in Christ, who believe in the one God, and who even proclaim that God cannot be known or does not exist*. We have to develop a sense of belonging and participating in what Martin Marty and Robert Bellah<sup>8</sup> call the *Public Church*. This final Stage, therefore, seeks to inform the participants on the vision given by Vatican II in all these strata of dialogue and suggest practical ways in which working with other people of faith in the context of civil and associational life we can together seek the common good and move toward the more perfect union that we desire as Americans and as citizens of heaven in God.

### **Impressions of the Process Thus Far**

At the time of this writing we have only a limited formal evaluation of the process based on the experience of the first two pilot groups. On the basis of the responses that we have received, both written and oral, the comments tell us the following. All appreciated the experience that they had over the several weeks of their participation in three-hour sessions. They found the information new and challenging. In some cases they found it to be too much to take in over the short amount of time that they had to absorb it. They found themselves challenged and are aware that something is about to take place in them in a transformative way but are not quite sure what that implies as yet. They are anxious to continue the process and go deeper and see it as contributing to a new sense of freedom and life for themselves and others. They have begun also to catch glimpses of implications that the process has for other areas of Catholic life such as the purpose and the focus of the parish, of a diocese, of Catholic educational institutions as we seek to relate to the major cultural shifts that we are experiencing.

Donald S. Nesti, C.S.Sp.

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It becomes evident, to this writer, that it will take communities of faith who have gathered in prayerful reflection and dialogue on a regular basis to understand that faith is not an ideology and that living together in pluralistic society can only occur when we live a love that goes beyond mere tolerance of diverse opinions. Transformation of culture, its institutions and systems of order is a communitarian undertaking, not individualistic. Gospel Agape and its implications for living life in a more perfect union is not an ideology among others. It is the answer to Pilate's question about truth. It is the intransigent Truth of Love which dies and rises as the source of the perennial newness of the Gospel and Evangelization.

Donald S. Nesti, C.S.Sp.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Gomes, Sebastian, *Address on the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization*, presented at the University of St. Thomas, Houston, TX, January 23, 2-13.

<sup>2</sup>*Arche* (Ἄρχη) is a Greek word with primary senses 'beginning', 'origin' or 'first cause' and 'power', 'sovereignty', 'domination' as extended meanings. This list is extended to 'ultimate underlying substance' and 'ultimate indemonstrable principle'. *Arche* (or *archai*) also designates the source, origin or root of things that exist. If a thing is to be well established or founded, its *arche* or starting point must be secure, and the most secure foundations are those provided by the gods—the indestructible, immutable and eternal ordering of things.

<sup>3</sup>This process has been developed collaboratively by Maureen Bacchi and Donald S. Nesti, C.S.Sp. Ms. Bacchi has been associated with the Center for Faith and Culture since its inception twenty years ago. She has served in various ministerial offices of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, worked with several religious orders of men and women, is a well-known teacher of spiritual direction, serves as teacher and a consultant for the Permanent Diaconate Program for Galveston-Houston and is a highly recognized family and marriage counselor and social worker. Father Nesti is the founding Director of the Center for Faith and Culture at the University of St. Thomas, Houston, TX.

<sup>4</sup>Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*. Harvard University: The Belknap Press, 2007.

<sup>5</sup>Mons. Philippe Delhay, Secretary General of the International Theological Commission, *Pope John Paul on the contemporary Importance of St. Irenaeus*, taken from *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English, 9 February 1987, page 6.

<sup>6</sup>*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 57, 4.

<sup>7</sup>Parker Palmer, *A Company of Strangers*, New York, Crossroads, 2000, pp. 40-46; and *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, San Francisco: Jossey-Boss, 2011.

<sup>8</sup>Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, p. 246.