2. Rebuilding the Lord's house

A Church without contrapositions

In the first Advent meditation, we turned our gaze to the Parousia of the Lord at the end of time, contemplating the image of a God who announced and promised his glorious return. Given this hope, we felt called to be vigilant, lest we lose the ability to recognize God's grace working silently in history. It is precisely this grace that continues to give life to the world and to offer the Church ever new opportunities for conversion. It teaches us to live, as in the days of Noah, under a patient sky, never tired of renewing trust in us, despite our weaknesses and contradictions.

In this second meditation, we will focus on the delicate responsibility of welcoming this grace not only as individuals, but also as a community of believers. Baptism has made us "God's co-workers" in constructing, throughout time and history, his "building" (1 Corinthians 3:9), which is the Church: a "sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race", according to the courageous and prophetic definition given by the Second Vatican Council (*Lumen Gentium*, 1).

But to what unity should we bear witness? And how can we offer the world a communion that is not reduced to a generic appeal to brotherhood, but becomes a stable and credible point of reference capable of regenerating trust?

1. The illusion of uniformity

To answer these questions, we must return precisely to where the first Advent meditation left us: in the aftermath of the flood. After the great cataclysm, Scripture opens up a surprising scenario: God blesses Noah and his sons, entrusting the earth to them once again. Human violence did not have the last word, and history resumes with a new rhythm. Genesis devotes an entire chapter to a long list of peoples, languages, territories, and genealogies: a varied mosaic that seems to say that when life is reborn, it does not produce identical copies but differences. It is in the multiplication of forms, faces, and cultures that God's blessing bears fruit.

However, this movement of distribution and differentiation exposes humanity to a risk that it immediately perceives as threatening: dispersion. Having experienced the fragility of existence, nascent humanity fears fragmentation, fearing that it will no longer be able to remain united as one people. It is in this atmosphere that the story of the Tower of Babel arises, immediately following the list of peoples (*Genesis* 10). The episode begins with an apparently reassuring note: "The whole earth had one language and few words" (*Genesis* 11:1). A condition that might seem ideal for peace and cooperation. But what follows soon reveals a certain ambiguity:

> Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth (*Genesis* 11:4).

The intention is clear: to create a single point of convergence – a fortified city and a very high tower – to guarantee the unity of the human family and thus to exorcize the fear of dispersion. The plan, seemingly commendable, conceals a deadly logic: unity is sought not through the composition of differences, but through uniformity. Everyone speaks the same language, repeats the same words, pursues the same goal. It is the dream of a world where no one is different, where no one takes risks, where everything is predictable.

Even the choice of materials reflects this mentality. The narrator notes that the builders use bricks instead of stones and bitumen instead of mortar. Stones retain their irregularity; they can be worked and joined without their shape being lost. Bricks, on the other hand, are identical, standardized, perfectly stackable: a symbol of a society that fears the effort of freedom and prefers the security of similarity. The result is apparent unanimity: everyone is aligned, everyone agrees, there is no dissonance. But it is only a facade of cohesion, achieved at the cost of eliminating individual voices.

Recent history is familiar with this tendency: the twentieth century saw totalitarian regimes capable of imposing a single way of thinking, silencing dissent and persecuting those who dared to think differently. Whenever unity is built by suppressing differences, the result is not communion, but death. Today, in the age of social media and artificial intelligence, the risk of standardization takes on new and more subtle forms: algorithms that select what we see, creating information bubbles in which everyone encounters only those who think like them; artificial intelligence that standardizes language and thought, reducing human complexity to predictable patterns; platforms that reward quick consensus and penalize thoughtful dissent.

This temptation does not even spare the Church. How many times in history have we confused unity of faith with uniformity of expression, sensibility and practice? How many times have we desired immediate consensus, unable to accept the slower pace of true communion, which does not fear confrontation and does not erase nuances?

2. Confusion as therapy

Faced with the plan of the Tower of Babel, God chooses to intervene in a surprising way, far from violent punishment or indifference. The biblical text notes with subtle irony that "the Lord came down to see the city and the tower" (*Genesis* 11:5): the construction that men imagined capable of touching the sky turns out to be so tiny that God has to stoop down to observe it. But the real focus of the story lies in the words that follow.

> The Lord said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech" (*Genesis* 11:6-7).

At first sight, these words might seem like the reaction of a jealous God who fears human competition. But a careful reading – and the memory of the flood just narrated – suggest another interpretation: God does not want to punish, but rather to prevent a deadly drift, a process of "de-creation" that is once again threatening life.

What does it mean to build unity through uniformity? It means denying people their uniqueness, sacrificing differences to the common project, abolishing the otherness that makes encounter possible. It is the dangerous utopia of a society made up of identical copies, where no one can surprise or be surprised anymore. As the Holy Father said when addressing communication professionals, this is a world marked by "the confusion of loveless languages that are often ideological or partisan" (Pope Leo, 12 May 2025). But such a world has nothing divine about it: it is the antithesis of creation. God creates by separating, distinguishing, differentiating: light from darkness, water from earth, day from night. Difference is the very grammar of existence. When humanity chooses the path of uniformity, it is reversing the creative impulse, seeking a form of security that coincides with the rejection of freedom.

The confusion of languages is therefore an act of protection, not destruction. God does not divide in order to reign, but differentiates in order to allow life to develop anew. He restores to humanity its most precious gift: the possibility of not all being the same. He prevents a single voice from imposing itself as the absolute criterion, suffocating all otherness. Dispersion thus becomes a cure: it interrupts a project of death, stops the dream of unity obtained at the price of freedom, and restores dignity to singularities. It is a therapy that reopens the space for alliance, because alliance does not exist without distance. There is no communion without difference.

God certainly desires that people be united, but not in just any way. The unity that arises from the elimination of differences is not communion, but fusion: a flattening that reduces humanity to a mass. To better understand the risk of Babel, the New Testament offers us a mirror image: Pentecost. In the Acts of the Apostles, people from different nations – and speaking different languages – understand the apostles each in their own language (*Acts* 2:1-12). This is a decisive detail: linguistic plurality is not abolished, nor does the Holy Spirit impose a single universal language. The apostles speak their own language and the listeners understand their own: diversity remains, but it no longer divides. There is no uniformity, yet there is communion. There is no single voice, yet everyone hears the same good news. Pentecost will be God's

response to the anguish of Babel: not eliminating differences to create unity, but transforming them into the fabric of a broader communion.

3. The temple to be rebuilt

Humanity will take a long time to assimilate the lesson of Babel and understand that the encounter between God and man becomes possible only where the similarities that unite us and the differences that make communion true are preserved together.

Starting from chapter twelve of Genesis, the biblical story – as we know – narrows its focus and concentrates on the story of a people, Israel, called by God to occupy a unique place in the history of salvation through the gift of a covenant. After liberation from slavery in Egypt, the long and arduous journey through the desert and entry into the Promised Land, Israel gradually came to desire a form of organization similar to that of the surrounding nations: a king to lead the people and then a temple in which to preserve the presence of the Lord and his Law.

Both of these choices will bring with them constant ambiguity. The monarchy, because it symbolically represents the temptation to replace the lordship of God, the only true King and Guardian of Israel, with a human sovereign. The temple, because its vocation to be a house of prayer will always be exposed to the risk of corruption in its various forms, reducing the sacred space to an external rituality, separated from life and from the living encounter with the Lord. It is no coincidence that the first project to build a temple, which matured in the heart of King David, met with a timid and almost perplexed response from God. Through the prophet Nathan, the Lord said to him: "Would you build me a house to dwell in? … The Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house" (2 Samuel 7:5, 11). It is as if God were reminding David that the initiative of the covenant always comes from Him and cannot be enclosed in a building constructed by man.

History will show how real this ambivalence is. The temple in Jerusalem will be destroyed several times and, through the powerful voice of the prophets, the people will interpret those moments – together with the exiles that will accompany them – as consequences of their own unfaithfulness to the Law. Yet it is precisely these moments of distance from the land and the temple that will become opportunities for Israel to rediscover, in a deeper way, the gift of the covenant and the sincere desire to return to living according to it.

A particularly significant moment came with the return from Babylonian exile and the arduous task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and the Temple. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah offer a vivid account: "Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned" (*Nehemiah* 2:17). Faced with this bleak scenario, the governor Nehemiah makes an appeal: "Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem". The returnees respond: "Let us rise up and build", and they "strengthened their hands for the good work" (*Nehemiah* 2:18). It is immediately

clear that the reconstruction will be slow and difficult. However, the people are not discouraged: "The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build" (*Nehemiah* 2:20).

We subsequently find a long account of volunteers who, side by side, generously offer their services so that the city walls can be rebuilt. The story is evocative because it says that each person takes responsibility for restoring a section of the walls, right in front of their own house. However, there are enemies who hinder the reconstruction work. The returnees are forced to be very vigilant and to defend themselves.

> Those who carried burdens were laden in such a way that each with one hand laboured on the work and with the other held his weapon. And each of the builders had his sword girded at his side while he built (Nehemiah 4:17-18)

When the new foundations of the temple are finally laid, the scene seems to be filled with enthusiasm. The priests with their trumpets, the Levites with their cymbals, all the people celebrate the Lord by singing: "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel" (*Ezra* 3:11). It is a moment of collective joy, almost an exultation that seems to melt away the weight of years of exile.

But immediately something unexpected happens. While many cheer with cries of joy, others – especially the elders who had seen the first temple – burst into uncontrollable tears. The Scripture observes:

> The people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping (Ezra 3:12-13).

This final scene is extraordinarily powerful. The singing is no longer homogeneous: two voices rise, one of joy and one of sorrow, without immediately harmonizing. This is the real atmosphere in which the reconstruction of the temple of the Lord takes place. When a sacred space is rebuilt, no one starts from scratch: there are wounded memories, nostalgia, inevitable comparisons between what is lost and what is born, between what was and what will be. Reconstruction can never be a linear process: it is made up of enthusiasm and tears, new impulses and deep regrets.

4. The renewal of the Church

The biblical account of the rebuilding of the temple becomes a valuable compendium for understanding the mystery of the Church and her perennial need to renew herself in time and space. Like the walls and the temple of Jerusalem, the Church – both divine and human – is called to allow herself to be continually rebuilt, so that her historical form may be transparent to the

beauty of the Gospel. The saints understood this better than anyone, sensing when the "house of God" showed signs of wear and tear.

Among them, Francis of Assisi occupies a special place. In the silence of his search, he hears the voice that says to him: "Francis, go, repair my house, which, as you see, is in ruins" (Second Life of Thomas of Celano VI, 10 – FF 593). The saint of Assisi began to respond to God's call by restoring stone buildings. He soon realized that the temple to be renovated was the Church herself, wounded by divisions and weighed down by ways of life that no longer revealed the freshness of the Gospel. With the radicalism of his following, Francis restored to the Church the luminous simplicity of evangelical fraternity.

This is not an exception: over the centuries, the Church has always perceived and experienced the need to renew herself in order to remain faithful to herself and, at the same time, to continue to serve the world. The Second Vatican Council recalled that the pilgrim Church is called by Christ to "continuous reform" and that "every renewal of the Church is essentially grounded in an increase of fidelity to her own calling" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 6). Renewal, therefore, is not an extraordinary requirement, but the ordinary attitude of the Church that wants to remain faithful to the Gospel and the apostolic mandate.

The sacred history we have retraced, from Babel to Israel's return from exile, offers us some fundamental criteria for discernment. First of all, ecclesial renewal never coincides with the temptation to make everything uniform. As at Babel, the risk of transforming unity into standardization is always lurking: thinking that communion requires only identity of style, sensibility or expression. A Church that renews herself is not a uniform Church, but a Church capable of welcoming variety, leaving it to the Spirit to order it into a harmony greater than our own measures.

A second element emerges from the scene of the builders of the walls, who work with one hand and wield weapons with the other. Renewal is never a naive or peaceful endeavour: it requires continuous spiritual combat, because baptism enables us not only to build, but also to resist what opposes the Gospel. Those who stop fighting – against pride, laziness, illusions or ideologies – also stop edifying the body of Christ. The Church is renewed to the extent that her members accept to remain in authentic spiritual combat, without taking refuge in the shortcuts of pure conservatism or uncritical innovation.

Finally, the scene of rebuilding, where some rejoice while others burst into uncontrollable tears, gives us a third lesson. Every true renewal involves a willingness to bear the weight of communion. Rebuilding the Church means accepting this intertwining: the coexistence of enthusiasm and nostalgia, of hopes that are born and wounds that still bleed. Communion is never a homogeneous feeling, but the place where different voices learn to remain close without cancelling each other out. It requires knowing how to listen even to what does not coincide with our sensibilities, to accept the pain of others without judging them, to allow ourselves to be touched by their stories. It is in this patient capacity to "suffer" together that the Church truly becomes a home

for all, and that the fragmented song of the people becomes, over time, a greater praise.

5. Interpreting decline

Sixty years after the Second Vatican Council, we can afford to take a clearer look at what was welcomed, perhaps with some excessive optimism, as a "springtime of the Spirit". As in the case of the early Christians awaiting the return of the Lord, we too are called to reshape our hopes: the prophetic insights of the Council required longer and more complex times, because they were profoundly intertwined with ecclesial maturation and cultural transformations.

If we do not reconcile ourselves with this long gestation period, we risk not understanding the times in which we live: a time in which critical elements and signs of surprising vitality coexist. On the one hand, there is a clear decline in the practices, numbers and historical structures of Christian life; on the other, new ferment of the Spirit is emerging: the centrality of the Word of God is growing, the laity is maturing into a freer and more missionary presence, the synodal journey is establishing itself as a necessary form, Christianity is flourishing in many regions of the world, and a new intelligence of faith is seeking to combine the ancient heritage with a deeper understanding of the human.

Decline and ferment are not mutually exclusive: they are two faces of the same struggle, in which the Spirit purifies itself of what can be abandoned and gives birth to what needs to grow. After all, is this not what Jesus taught us when he described the expansion of the Kingdom of God through the logic of the seed?

> Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit (John 12:24).

Every renewal involves realities that flourish and others that die out. This should not surprise us: it is the Paschal dynamic, in which death and resurrection are inseparable. Of course, it is always difficult for us to accept death and to recognize in moments of decline the trace of a greater hope.

We spontaneously interpret declining numbers as a crisis to be resolved immediately. In fact, the interpretation of this delicate moment in the history of the Church – especially in the West – has become a source of conflict: each side blames the other for the crisis and tries to impose its own idea of the Church. Some interpret the current situation as a consequence of the failure to implement the Council; others, on the contrary, see the Council itself as the cause of a certain impoverishment of the community and of Christian witness. These opposing interpretations, mirror images of each other in their rigidity, risk arming both traditionalism and progressivism, locking the Church into ideological positions that arise not from discernment, but from fear.

Perhaps the truth is simpler and more demanding: in an unprecedented era of change, even the Church struggles to preserve her foundations. Faced with rapid and sometimes indecipherable transformations, the Christian community tends to polarize, oscillating between two opposing temptations: taking refuge in untouchable certainties, or opening up to everything new in order to remain relevant. But both of these reactions expose the Church to a serious risk: transforming a time of decline into a time of decadence, in which not only numbers diminish, but also trust, lucidity and spiritual breadth.

Decline becomes decadence when the Church loses her awareness of her own sacramental nature and perceives herself as a social organization; when faith is reduced to ethics or well-being, liturgy to performance, theology weakens and Christian life drifts into moralism.

In such a complex context, the temptation to simplify is strong: nostalgia for the past or anticipation of an undefined future. Yet decline itself can become a time of grace if faced without fear. It is a time that invites us to abandon the illusion of a Church that is always strong, always socially relevant, always at the centre of attention. It is a time that allows us to rediscover the Church as a work that does not belong to us, that is not guaranteed by human strategies or projects, but that springs forth every time we return to the heart of the Gospel. Accepting decline does not mean giving up. Rather, it means staying away from the conflicts that divide and render dialogue fruitless. It means not seeking immediate or easy solutions, but learning to remain faithful even when the habitual forms weaken. It is an invitation to live with sobriety and trust, without letting ourselves be driven by fear or anxiety about having to save everything.

This is the spirit of the returnees who come back to Jerusalem: they do not rebuild the entire city, but devote themselves to a small section of wall, the piece in front of their house. For us too, renewal comes through humble and concrete gestures. Everyone can offer a fragment of their fidelity, their patience, their charity. No one alone can renew the entire Church. Yet the Church is renewed only through the small portion that each person, day after day, agrees to rebuild.

After all, the Church is not something to be built according to our criteria: it is a gift to be received, cherished and served. Revelation reminds us forcefully: the “new Jerusalem” does not arise from our hands, but descends from heaven, from God, already prepared. It is the highest image of the Church as a reality received, not produced: the home where every tear will be wiped away and every distance bridged. Accepting the Church as a gift – even today, in a time of decline and new beginnings – means living now in the promise that guides us towards that fulfilment in which God will be everything in everyone.

Let us pray

O God, who with living and chosen stones prepare an eternal dwelling place for your glory, continue to pour out upon the Church the grace you have given her, so that the people of believers may always progress in building the heavenly Jerusalem. Through our Lord Jesus Christ.

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