

# Evangelization in the new Areopagus (Acts 17:16-34)

## 1. Objectives

- To positively highlight the creativity of the first Christians to take advantage of all circumstances and spaces in the proclamation of the Risen Christ.
- Insist on the importance of faith formation as a means that opens dialogues and makes it possible to argue with other ways of seeing and believing in God.
- Encourage us to be creative in sharing the convictions we confess as members of the Church in the present day of our lives.
- Re-evaluate the different means we have today to announce the Gospel and ask ourselves if they respond to the new Areopagus to which the Good News must reach.

## 2. Prayer

Lord Jesus, today as in your times we are faced with multiple scenarios where your project of life is not yet accepted. We recognize that this heterogeneous and changing reality, whether from a socio-cultural or religious point of view, asks to be understood in the light of your love and mercy that you always lived and preached. You call us to proclaim the Gospel to those who do not know it, and to support your children in the knowledge of their own faith. We know, Lord, that the value that today's culture gives to freedom with regard to one's own faith can be understood as a great opportunity for adherence to the Lord to be a deeply personal, free, mature and conscious decision. May evangelizing action instill in us believers a clear and sure identity, serenely capable, in dialogue with the world, of giving a reason for Christian hope with docility, respect and an upright conscience.

Assist us with your Holy Spirit, so that living in this society of "information" that saturates us indiscriminately with data, all on the same level, and ends up leading us to a tremendous superficiality when it comes to the essence of your message; we, guided by your Spirit, can educate in the truth accompanying processes of maturing in values.

Lord Jesus, following the example of Paul and the early Christians, we long to enter into those centers of existence, anthropological spheres and modern areopagi, where cultural trends begin and new mentalities take shape: schools, scientific research, work environments; the area of social media and communication; the sphere of commitment to peace, development, the protection of creation, the defense of the rights of the weakest; the world of leisure, tourism, welfare; the space of literature, music and different artistic expressions.

## 3. Text: Acts 17:16-34

<sup>16</sup>While Paul waited for them in Athens, he became more and more indignant at seeing a city so steeped in idolatry. <sup>17</sup>He conversed with the Jews and proselytes in the synagogue; and he did the same every day in the marketplace with those he met. <sup>18</sup>Even some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers entered into dialogue with him. Some said: What does this charlatan want to say? And others: He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities. For he proclaimed Jesus and the resurrection. <sup>19</sup>So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, "What new



**Working document, meeting no. 16 April 2024**

**Missionary formation around the book "Acts of the Apostles".**



doctrine is this that you teach? <sup>20</sup>You speak to us of strange things, and we want to know what it is <sup>21</sup>(It is that all the Athenians and foreigners who lived there had no other pastime than to chat about the latest news).

<sup>22</sup>Paul, standing in the middle of the Areopagus, said: “Athenians, I have observed that you are extremely religious. <sup>23</sup>Indeed, in going through your city and contemplating your sacred monuments, I have found an altar on which is written: “To the unknown god”. Well, that which you venerate without knowing it is what I am announcing to you. <sup>24</sup>The God who made the world and all that is in it, and who is the Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples built by man’s hand; <sup>25</sup>neither does he need men to serve him, for he gives to all life, breath and all things. <sup>26</sup>He created from one man the whole human race to dwell in all the earth, fixing for each people the times and boundaries of their territory, <sup>27</sup>in order that they might seek God, in case, groping about, they might find him. In reality, he is not far from each one of us, <sup>28</sup>since we live, move and exist in him. Thus have some of your poets said: “We are of his lineage”. <sup>29</sup>Therefore, if we are of God’s lineage, we must not think of divinity as resembling gold, silver, stone, or sculpture made by human art and genius. <sup>30</sup>Now, however, overlooking the times of ignorance, God makes known to men that all everywhere are to be converted, <sup>31</sup>for he has appointed a day, when he will judge the universe in righteousness by a man appointed by him, whom he has accredited to all by raising him from the dead. <sup>32</sup>When they heard this “resurrection from the dead,” some laughed; others said, “We will hear you again about this. <sup>33</sup>Then Paul left the meeting. <sup>34</sup>Some, however, joined him and believed; among them were Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and some others.

## 4. Development of the topic

### a. Structure of Acts 12, 1-7

- a. Introduction: 17:16-21.
- b. Paul’s speech: 17:22-31.
- c. Impact of the speech: 17:32-34

### b. The text

Athens was considered a center of intellectual formation. On arriving in Athens, Paul first addressed the Jews in the synagogue (17:17), but he also discussed with the people in the square. Thus he came into contact with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, the most popular schools at that time. Paul is invited to present his teaching in the Areopagus, a square to the west of the acropolis, or before the Areopagus, which would be the council of the Areopagites, the aristocratic court of justice that sat in the square (17:19,22-31).

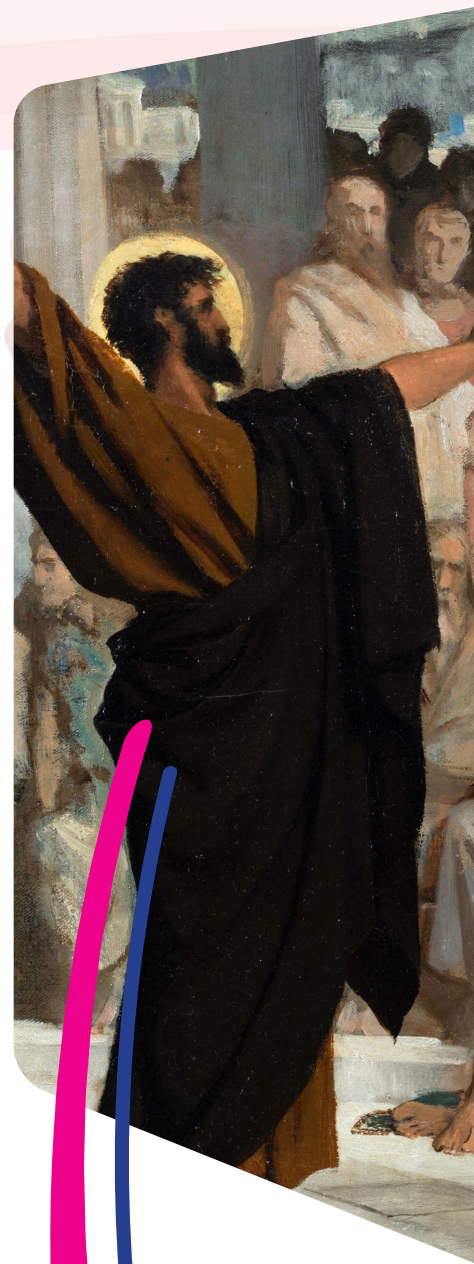
Luke writes an exemplary discourse before the Gentiles to win them to the faith. Equating faith with philosophical formation, he emphasizes that faith is not purely religious sentimentality, but that it answers questions about being, about its cause, its objective and its meaning, about truth and understanding. Paul continues the philosophical part of his discourse with the Christian creed: the salvific plan of God, the invitation to repentance and salvation by the judge.

Paul’s preaching is relatively successful, for some believe, among them the Areopagite Dionysius and a woman named Damaris. The readers can deduce that in the houses of Dionysius and Damaris the domestic churches will meet.



**Working document, meeting no. 16 April 2024**

**Missionary formation around the book “Acts of the Apostles”.**



Irenaeus chooses three moments that are considered representative of the whole career of the apostle to the nations: first, Paul's ministry in Damascus, immediately after his conversion (Acts 9); then the speech before the Areopagus (Acts 17); finally, the words pronounced in Lystra, while the local population wanted to grant divine honors to Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14).

### c. In Perspective of the evangelization we are called to carry out:

This speech is a true master class in the evangelization of culture, and anyone engaged in this task today should read it carefully. The great Catholic historian Christopher Dawson says, the passage of an itinerant Jewish preacher from one side of the Aegean to the other would not arouse the interest of any conventional historian of the time, but the fact is that it constituted one of the most decisive events in history, for it marks the introduction of Christianity into Europe and, through Europe, to the whole world.

A first lesson for us: an evangelist never rests, for the Lord's mandate is to announce the Good News to the ends of the earth.

After spending some time in the northern part of the territory-Macedonia, Philippi, Thessalonica-Paul returned to Athens. It should be noted that, although his preaching in the north bore some fruit, it also aroused fierce opposition. He was arrested and taken prisoner in Philippi and aggressively pursued in Thessalonica by an angry mob. From the beginning, the preaching of Christianity met with opposition and Christian preachers were put in danger. Those who venture into this field today should not be surprised that the work is hard. But I would like to place special emphasis on the fact that Paul went to Athens, perhaps the greatest cultural center of ancient Rome. It is an established fact that Christians - from Paul to Augustine through Thomas Aquinas, John Henry Newman and John Paul II - made their way to centers of thought, communication and art. If the great mission of Jesus is to be honored, culture must be evangelized.

Arriving in the great city, Paul went directly - as was his custom - to the synagogue, for his Good News was that God, Jesus Christ, had fulfilled the promise he had made to Israel. He knew that the Jews were in a better position to understand what he was talking about.

We find here another crucial lesson for the evangelizers of this time: we must not forget the relationship between Jesus and the Jews. When we speak of Jesus without reference to the Torah, to the temple, to the prophecies, to the covenant, we quickly turn him into a more or less inspiring teacher of imperishable truths. But when we announce him as the climax of Israel's history, we set fire in the hearts of those who hear us.

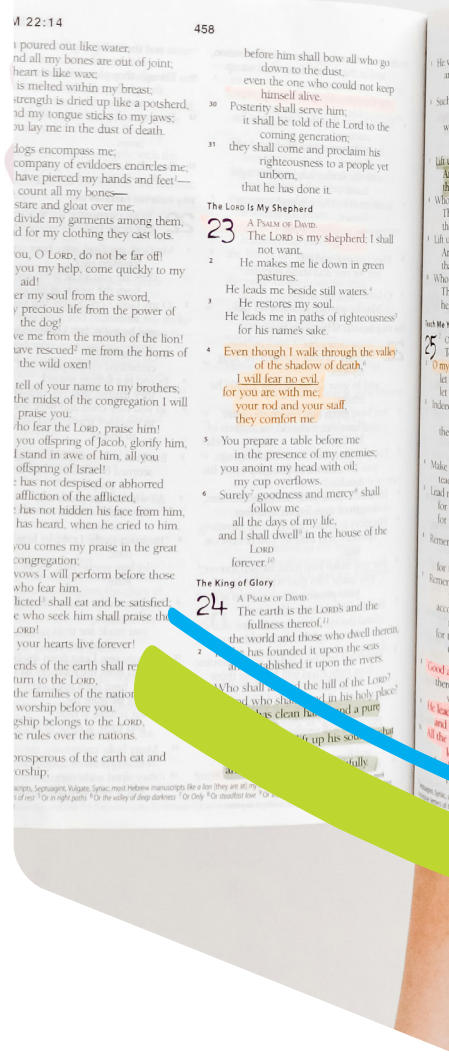
Later we are told that Paul went "to the marketplace and spoke to those who were there". The sons and daughters of Israel were the best disposed to accept Paul's message, but the Gospel was for everyone. Thus, his evangelization was exorbitant, indiscriminate, offered on streets and rooftops, to anyone who would listen. Ours must be like that. And to demonstrate the scope of his preaching, we are told that Paul dialogued with some "Stoics and Epicureans," that is, with the fashionable philosophical voices of the day. The Gospel must be, as Paul himself said, "all things to all people," capable of appealing to the most ordinary people as well as to the most sophisticated.

In keeping with the old rhetorical device of captatio benevolentiae (gaining the good will of the audience), Paul praises the Athenians for their spiritual sensitivity:



## Working document, meeting no. 16 April 2024

### Missionary formation around the book "Acts of the Apostles".



“I see how religious they are in all things”. There is more here, of course, than mere courtesy, for Paul is appealing to that which the Fathers would later call *logoi spermatikoi* (seeds of the verb): that is, hints, echoes and indications of the Logos that is fully revealed in Christ. “For as I was walking through the city and observing its objects of worship, I came upon an altar with the inscription ‘to the unknown God.’” In a word, he chose to build on religious principles that already existed in the society he was addressing, assimilating into his distinctively Christian allocution what he could of them.

As evangelizers, we move in the culture of this time, so it is necessary to assimilate what is good and avoid what is contrary to the faith. The dichotomy, so often evoked, between being “open” to a culture or being at “war” with it is simplistic and leads us nowhere.

A final lesson according to Mother Teresa’s principle: don’t worry about success, worry about being faithful. Proclaim the Gospel, do not keep track of converts and leave your increase to God.

### Some texts.

Acts 16,13	By the river, where they thought they gathered to pray.
Acts 16,16	In the place where they used to meet for prayer
Acts 16:23,25	In jail
Acts 16,32	At the jailer’s house
Facts 16,40	At Lidia’s house
Facts 17,2.10.17; 18,4.9	In the Jewish synagogue
Facts 17,17	In the public square
Facts 18,7	At Ticio Justo’s house

### 5. Questions for dialogue

- What are my places of evangelization? Where is the Lord asking me to be his witness now?
- What is my attitude towards those I consider contrary to my faith, am I prejudiced? What importance do I give to the word of God? Does it help me to have a universal heart?
- What could we do better for evangelization than what we already have in our community?



## Working document, meeting no. 16 April 2024

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## 6. Assuming commitments in the challenge for the mission

Today we have shared the Lord's call to proclaim him in all the contexts in which we move daily.

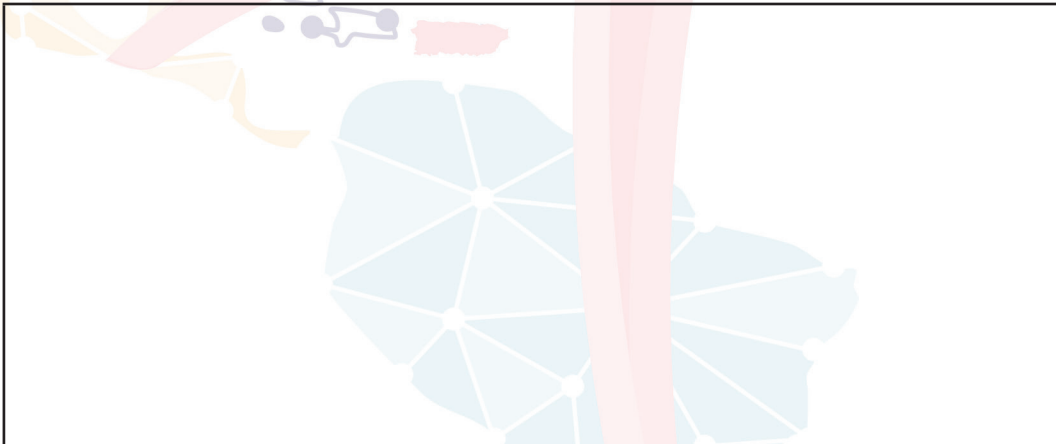
Now let us specify what this word we have reflected on commits me to.

With the light offered by his message, shared meditation and prayer, I place a word or phrase in the following box. In this way I formulate the commitment I want to make.



## 7. Prayer

We place before the Father our lives so that he may bless them and renew us in his Holy Spirit and thus be creative in proclaiming the Gospel. We remain in his loving presence recognizing that he alone is our God and Lord, the one who providentially guides the ship of our history....



## 8. Contemplation

Today we see the world, we listen to the news and it seems that all is lost. It is as if everyone has his own god. From the confidence that springs from contact with the Word of God, we place everything in God's hands and commit ourselves to be docile instruments as St. Paul was.



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