

Matthew 28:16-20 - hermeneutical key to the Gospel of Matthew

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ABSTRACT. This study analyses Matthew 28:16-20 as the hermeneutical key to the Gospel of Matthew. The text contains a narrative part about the eleven disciples meeting the risen Jesus in Galilee (vv. 16-17) and Jesus' final words commissioning them to evangelize all nations (vv. 18-20). The location of Galilee symbolizes openness to the Gentiles, fulfilling Old Testament prophecy. The mountain setting represents an encounter with God, as in other key moments of Jesus' ministry. The disciples' worship yet doubt (v. 17) shows imperfect faith, inviting readers to mature belief. Jesus claims absolute, cosmic authority from God (v. 18) as the basis for commissioning the disciples to "make disciples of all nations" through baptism and teaching (vv. 19-20). This universal mission corrects earlier limitations only to Israel. Teaching them to obey Christ's commands grounds the mission in Jesus' ethical demands. His perpetual presence (v. 20) assures guidance despite uncertainty. Thus, the text presents a mission paradigm for readers: Christ – centred proclamation for God's kingdom, not power; fidelity to Jesus' original disciples; invitation to internalize divine daughterhood; and responsibility to embody values commanded by Jesus. This call for active discipleship awaiting the Parousia proposes to resolve doubt into faith.

Keywords: hermeneutical key, Galilee, mission, disciples, nations, baptism, teaching, presence, discipleship

The text of Matthew 28:16-20 is considered by many exegetes to be a "key pericope" that helps us to understand the entire Matthean work, both through the theological reasons it contains and through the position it occupies

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at the end of the first canonical Gospel. This text is not only the end of this work, its last verses, but also the last words of the Saviour Christ, or the “testament of the Risen One” entrusted to the eleven to be handed down from generation to generation until the end of time (Mt 28:20)¹. This pericope contains a theophany or Christophany: on the morning of the Resurrection the angel told the disciples that their Lord had risen “as he said” (Mt 28:6) and that “he is going before you to Galilee” where they will see him (Mt 28:7); therefore, “he eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain² to which Jesus had directed them. where Jesus had commanded them. And when they saw him they worshipped him” (Mt 28:16-17 – ESV). The Matthean text represents a retrospective view of the entire work that the evangelist offers to his recipients and readers; a synthesis that combines the themes found in the pages of the first Gospel, especially the Christological and ecclesiological themes³.

Pericope shape

Formally, the text of Matthew 28:16-20 contains a narrative part with the “eleven disciples” as protagonists (vv. 16-17) and a speech or short discourse by Jesus (vv. 18-20). The pericope is thus made up of two scenes, with an unexpected change of subject, literary genre and style. The second scene, in which the Saviour Christ is the protagonist, is liturgical in character and very solemn.

Throughout the first scene, the eleven disciples are presented to us in narrative form through actions and attitudes and with the help of verbs in the aorist tense: “they went into Galilee” is the first action of the disciples, which corresponds to the command Jesus Himself gave to the miraculous women on the morning of the Resurrection: “Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee” (Mt 28:10), a command expressed earlier in v. 7, through the angel’s voice: „Behold, he is going before you to Galilee”. The other two verbs are *προσεκύνησαν* (“they worshipped him”) and *ἐδίστασαν* (“they who [earlier] had doubted”), a binomial familiar to readers of St Matthew’s Gospel and elsewhere⁴.

Not a single word is spoken in the first scene, and the reader of the pericope is left with the impression of a simple style, typical of St Matthew,

¹ Massimo Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles* (Bologna: Centro Editoriale Dehoniano, 2016), 179.

² The mountain is an important symbolic element in the first Gospel. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus reveals himself and his teaching on “a high mountain” (Mt 5:1; Mt 17:1). See details in Alexandru Moldovan, *Propedeutică la Sfintele Evanghelii* (Alba Iulia: Reîntregirea, 2022), 165-7.

³ Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Matthew, The Gospel of the Church* (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 1998), 774.

⁴ See Mt 14:31-33, a text in which unbelief and doubt are followed by an admission of authority and deity of the Saviour: “Truly you are the Son of Gog”.

which demands attention to the essential. Nothing is left to chance or to details that might distract the reader. The verb *καὶ ἰδόντες αὐτὸν* (“and seeing Him” or “as soon as they saw Him”) in v. 17a is the connecting element.

In the second scene the reader's attention is directed to Jesus: v.18a “nd Jesus came and said to them” has the role of an introduction with a very solemn unfolding (participle + infinitive verb + participle)⁵. In this way, the reader's attention is directed to the words that follow. We have the conjunction: “therefore” (*οὖν*) and “and behold” (*καὶ ἰδοὺ*). A solemn declaration of authority: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me”, is followed by a precise command to the Lord's disciples: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Mt 28:19-20 – ESV)

Unlike the first scene, in which not a single word is spoken, in the second scene, the words of the Saviour are the central element, and the reader's attention is focused on them, and rightly considers them decisive words because they are spoken at a solemn moment and the end of the Gospel.

“The eleven disciples went to Galilee” (v. 16a)

As can be seen, the scenario of the pericope is provided by Galilee, the region or place where the Saviour Christ began His preaching activity: “When he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee” (Mt 4:12 – ESV). In this region the Saviour Christ preached the coming of the kingdom of heaven and performed miracles; it was also here that the Saviour experienced acceptance and rejection (or rejection) from the Jews⁶. However, the theological significance of this place is indicated by the expression “Galilee of the Gentiles” (*Γαλιλαία τῶν ἐθνῶν*) in Mt 4:15, mentioned at the end of St. Matthew's Gospel, makes precise reference to a prophecy in Is 8:23-9:1. The land of Israel, which was the geographical and historical setting in which the Messiah carried out His public activity, is presented by the words of the prophet Isaiah, and then confirmed at the beginning of the Lord's activity, as the land of openness to the Gentiles: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.” (Is 9:1; Mt 4:16 – ESV). We have, then, a prophecy which finds a new fulfilment now, on the last page of the Gospel, the place from which the disciples are sent by the Lord “to all nations”.

⁵ Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 180.

⁶ See Mt 11:20-24; 13:53-58, the latter of which seems to have a parallel text to the episode presented by St. Luke in chapter 4:16-30.

The topographical detail is already a message in itself, “Galilee of the Gentiles” (*Γαλιλαία τῶν ἐθνῶν*) is not only the land inhabited by a cosmopolitan population, but it is the place where the Saviour began His preaching, the place where His hearers heard Him speak with authority and great power (Mt 7:29)⁷. The Saviour Christ returns to the place where He began His preaching work to “validate” this work and His entire mission but also to entrust the “field” in which He worked to other workers, His disciples. Therefore, they too will begin their missionary work from where He began.

Beyond the space in which the action takes place, the evangelist Matthew offers his reader another interesting detail, a theological motif that is dear to him: that of the mountain. The mountain is the place where Jesus teaches the crowds (Mt 5:1), it is the place visible to all (Mt 5:14), the mountain is the place of temptation (Mt 4:8), but above all, it is the place where man meets God⁸, the place closest to heaven. This aspect of topographical detail, which can be found in all cultural and religious areas, was also brought out as clearly as possible in the pages of the Old Testament, in the story of the great Moses who, on the mountain, received the call to the mission (Ex 3:1 ff.) and the Law of God (Ex 19-20)⁹.

In the text of Matthew 28:16, the mountain in Galilee refers to the “high mountain” on which Jesus changed His face (Mt 17:1), the place where the Lord revealed His profound identity as the Son of God. The Saviour's change of face is linked to the event of His Resurrection, because that episode is a foretaste of the revelation of his glory, the Lord revealing his identity in advance, which, however, must remain hidden “until the Son of Man is raised from the dead” (Mt 17:9). On the last page of the Gospel, in its very last lines, the revelation of Jesus' identity becomes evident, as does the role of his disciples, just as clearly and obviously.

The mountain, like the region indicated – Galilee – is a precise choice of St. Matthew. The “high mountain” on which the tempter takes Jesus during the temptation (Mt 4:8) to offer Him absolute “dominion” over the world is climbed again, but by a different path (or by a different path): it is not a gift easily obtained, but is the “fruit” of the Passion and death on the Cross¹⁰, because “Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory” (Lk 24:26 – ESV)¹¹.

⁷ Da Spinetoli, *Matthew, The Gospel of the Church*, 774.

⁸ The great Moses once heard the Lord's call, “Come up to me in the mountain and be there” (Ex 24:12). The mountain is the place of the theophany or revelation of the Lord. And the prophet Elijah, walking “forty days and forty nights”, came to the foot of this mountain (3 Kg 19:8) and it was there that the Lord appeared to him. Raniero Cantalamessa, *Urcuşul pe Muntele Sinai* (Alba Iulia: Reîntregirea, 2022), 13-7.

⁹ Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 182.

¹⁰ The Apostle Paul, in his Epistle to the Philippians, writes: “For this reason God has raised him up” (Phil 2:9).

¹¹ Da Spinetoli, *Matthew, The Gospel of the Church*, 775.

Matthew's portrayal of Jesus' disciples is important because they disappeared from the scene of the Gospel story at the time of Jesus' arrest: "Then all the disciples left him and fled" (Mt 26:56b). Their presence now on the mountain in Galilee plays an important role: readers of the Gospel will always have recourse to the disciples of the Lord – who were his direct witnesses – when they question the soundness of the teaching they have received.

**"And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted"
(v. 17)**

The verbs used by St. Matthew in his account in v. 17 are typical of the evangelist's description of the Lord's disciples elsewhere in his work: *προσεκύνησαν* ("they worshipped him") is one of the favourite terms of the first Gospel, and in combination with *διστάζω* („to doubt") appears only in the text of Mt 14:31-33, a text in which the reproach for "little faith" is addressed only to Peter, although the other disciples are not excluded, a fact confirmed by the statement in Mt 28:17 "they worshiped him, but some doubted". Therefore, the meaning of the word *διστάζω* ("to doubt") in both Mt 14:31 and Mt 28:17 is clarified by its close relationship to the term *ὀλιγόπιστος* ("little believer"). Using this word, St Matthew characterizes the disciples of the Lord on several occasions¹², the *ὀλιγόπιστια* of the disciples indicating the faith that is lagging, the immature faith, the incomplete faith, the faith that, at the moment of trial, does not know, or is unable, to recognize the Lord¹³. So, it is not "unbelief", indicated in Mt 17:20 by the word *ἀπιστίαν*, but incomplete faith.

It is very difficult to say whether the phrase *οἱ δὲ ἐδίστασαν* refers to the whole group of disciples or only to some of them¹⁴. The grammatical wording in the original Greek text gives room for both interpretations. However, the substance of the discourse is not affected.

Doubt is a natural and usual thing in the case of the Resurrected Jesus' revelations, and the evangelist Matthew wants to draw an ideal framework for his community, but historically his community is still showing its limits: it is on its knees before Christ, but with its perplexity and contradictions, with amazement mixed with perplexity, but this will in no way hinder its future mission¹⁵. However, the future mission of the disciples will not depend solely and exclusively on them, but on the presence of the risen Christ.

¹² See Mt 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20.

¹³ Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 184.

¹⁴ The bilingual edition of the New Testament from the Vatoped Monastery on Mount Athos has the version "And when they saw Him, they worshipped Him, but some doubted" (p. 86).

¹⁵ Da Spinetoli, *Matthew, The Gospel of the Church*, 775.

The reader of the Gospel is called on the one hand, to discover in the “eleven” (the first group of disciples), the foundation of his Christian existence, and on the other hand, is called to overcome their doubt, fear, wavering faith and to reach the mature faith required by the Lord¹⁶.

“And Jesus came and said to them: All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (v. 18)

In contrast to the previous scene described in verses 16 and 17, the Savior's last words (recounted in vv. 18-20) are contained in a solemn literary scheme. Jesus enters the scene, speaking to them and saying the words, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me”, that is, supreme authority¹⁷. His entrance on the scene is as solemn as can be, and the reader of the Gospel is left with the expectation of important statements. Nevertheless, the Saviour is referred to in both v. 16 and v. 17 simply as *ὁ Ἰησοῦς*. One would expect a more imposing Christological title, such as *Χριστός* or *Κύριος*, titles which are frequently used throughout the first Gospel. It seems a minor detail, but it is not at all so. The reader of the Gospel is invited to see in the risen Christ, who was given “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Mt 28:18b), the historical Jesus, who experienced the Cross and the Passion and who was accompanied by the same disciples, whose faith had wavered for a time, and who now stand before him¹⁸.

Jesus' last words in St Matthew's Gospel can be divided into three statements:

First, we have a solemn declaration of authority (18b): Jesus presents Himself as “Pantocrator”, called by God to participate fully – and as true Man – in His divine and universal omnipotence (the use of the passive diathesis in this text should be emphasized); He did not take His power alone, but “it was given to Him”. The use of the term *ἐξουσία* in Mt 28:18 has been linked by exegetes and commentators to the text in Daniel 7:13-14. There are obvious literary coincidences between the two texts that cannot be denied or ignored, but the theological orientation of the two texts is different. In the Book of Daniel *ἐξουσία* (“absolute authority, dominion or power”) does not lie at the origin of a missionary mandate, and “the Gentiles” are not summoned to be evangelized.

¹⁶ Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 184.

¹⁷ During His public activity, the Saviour Christ made a statement like the one He is making now: in Mt 11:27, Jesus expresses Himself thus: *Πάντα μοι παρεδόθη ὑπὸ τοῦ πατρὸς μου*.

¹⁸ Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 185.

Ἐξουσία (“authority or power”) has always accompanied Jesus throughout His public activity¹⁹, but the combination of the three elements in our text, “all power in heaven and on earth”, is a unique phrase. A similar, but less solemn formulation is found in Matthew 11:27: “All things have been handed over to me by my Father”. In both Mt 28:18b and Mt 11:27a, the initial statement about the authority Jesus received from his Father and as a true Man is laid as the foundation for the statements that follow. If in Mt 11:27 the declaration of authority is a basis for the Son's power to reveal the Father to the world, in Mt 28:18b the same declaration of authority becomes a basis or foundation for the missionary mandate Jesus gives to his disciples. However, the historical Jesus now presents Himself as Lord and absolute Master of history, Who – through His resurrection from the dead – was called to participate also as true Man in the divine kingship; He is the Son of God to whom is due worship, honour and praise.

Such a view of the risen and glorified Lord might seem very different from the aloof and sober style in which His public activity had been presented up to that point, but the reader of the Gospel will not be surprised, for he knows that Jesus' *ἔξουσία*²⁰ refers not simply to His power, but to His power to save the world to which He was sent²¹.

The fact that the Son of God has attained – through the Passion and Resurrection – absolute sovereign power is not at all sensational. On the contrary, it seems superfluous information, but the fact that he reached such a status and as a true Man (i.e., with the human nature he assumed through the Incarnation) is a much more important proclamation to be made to people. “All things have been handed over to me by my Father” (Mt 11:27) now returns, in different words, to the end of his earthly mission (Mt 28:18b)²².

Then follows the missionary mandate given to the eleven (vv. 19-20). From the absolute authority of the Risen One flows the missionary mandate that the Lord gives to his disciples²³. We have the conjunction *οὖν* (“therefore” or “therefore”), which is articulated by a main phrase in the imperative: “Going, teach all nations” and by two others in the participle: “baptizing them” and “teaching them” (vv. 19b and 20a), obviously connected to the main phrase. Surprisingly, instead of the classic verb *κηρύσσω* (which translates as “to announce”, “to proclaim”, “to preach”), we have the verb *μαθητεύω*²⁴ (which translates as “to make disciples”).

¹⁹ See Mt 7:29; 9:6.8; 10:1; 21:23-24.27.

²⁰ See details in Werner Foerster, “*ἔξουσία*,” in *Grande Lessico del Nuovo Testamento*, vol. 3, coll. 630-665. Richard Karpinski, *Exousia at the basis of Jesus' teaching and apostolic mission according to St Matthew* (Rome, 1968).

²¹ Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 186.

²² Da Spinetoli, *Matthew, The Gospel of the Church*, 776-7.

²³ Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 186.

²⁴ A word that appears four times in the New Testament, including three times in Matthew (Mt 13:52; 27:57; 28:19) and Acts 14:21.

The phrase “all the Gentiles” (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη) raises the question of the relationship between Israel and the Gentiles²⁵. The juxtaposition of this statement, which supports the universalism of salvation, with other (equally important) texts that consider the priority of Israel before the Lord in the same Gospel, has caused serious difficulties not only on the question of the mission of the Saviour and His Church but also on the general plan of the Gospel. In texts such as Mt 10:5b-6 and Mt 15:24, Jesus states that his mission is “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”; so must be that of his disciples: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”. This problem becomes even more acute in more radical texts, such as the text in Mt 21:43 in which Jesus expresses himself so radically: “Therefore I say to you that the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to the generation that bears its fruit”²⁶.

Exegetes and biblical commentators have sought solutions and explanations for these seemingly antithetical texts, and these have resulted in three answers: first, both the command to the disciples to “make disciples among the Gentiles” and the command to do the same, but only within the borders of Israel, come from Jesus Himself and reflect two stages of His activity. There were two different periods in the evolution of the Gospel proclamation process.

Secondly, Jesus' command preserved in Mt 10:5b-6 comes from Jesus and refers strictly to sending on a “trial mission”; in Mt 28:19, on the other hand, we have the intention of the Matthean community, an intention based on Jesus' intention or simply due to the extension of the missionary area. Finally, both commandments represent the creation of the early Christian community and reflect two phases of the Church's preaching²⁷.

The Gospel of Matthew contains both perspectives in its pages, and the text of Mt 28:19a seems to express, perhaps, the decisive point of view.

To solve this problem, the reader of the Gospel has at his disposal a central element of St. Matthew's theology: Jesus is the “fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets”; he is the “ultimate and definitive fulfilment” of God's plan to save the world. St Matthew saw in Jesus the eternal Covenant of God with his people, a Covenant to which “all nations” were called to adhere. Unlike St. Luke, Matthew's writing betrays a much more intense emotional involvement or participation and a more vivid concern for Israel's destiny (much closer to St. Paul's concern

²⁵ Alexandru Moldovan, “Israel and the Gentiles in the Vision of the Biblical Prophets,” *Studia Theologica* 1-2 (2002): 265-84.

²⁶ The Judeo-Christian community of St. Matthew is open to the Gentiles, for they have received Messiah (Mt 2:1-12), and the Jewish political and religious authorities rejected him. Da Spinetoli, *Matteo, Il Vangelo della Chiesa*, 778.

²⁷ Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 187.

in the Epistle to the Romans, even if the nuances are slightly different), but the overall vision leaves no room for ambiguity: on the one hand, St. Matthew shares, along with the whole Old Testament tradition, the idea that God's plan is for the "setting in place of the kingdom of Israel" (Acts 1:6), an idea that emerges from the texts of Mt 10:5b-6; 15:24 and 19:28. On the other hand, the same vision is outdated and inappropriate to the eschatological time (which has already begun with the death and resurrection of Christ). There was, therefore, a limited vision that excluded the Gentiles from God's original plan, a vision that has in the meantime been overcome, and this "overcoming" is clearly expressed by the reference of the eleven to "all the Gentiles"²⁸.

But this new perspective does not appear in the Gospel story at random, as a *deus ex machina*, but it existed in God's eternal plan: already in chapter 1 of his Gospel, St. Matthew presents us with the universalistic character of the salvation brought by Christ to the world by presenting his genealogy (Mt 1:1-17).

Saint Matthew did not hesitate to extol in his work the special faith of those of other nations: the faith of the centurion (Mt 8:10), and of the Canaanite woman (Mt 15:28). At the foot of the cross, he presented the faith of the centurion and of those who, together with him, guarded Jesus: "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Mt 27:54). The pagans confess Him as the Son of God, while "His own" curse Him. The sending now to the Gentiles only confirms a tradition or something that happened during the Messiah's activity in the world.

It was hard for the Jews to give up, or rather, to see themselves stripped of the privileges of divine calling and to see the Gentiles on the same level with them in God's plan: "These last [Gentiles] worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat" (Mt 20:12 – ESV) or, an even harder word, after the healing of the servant of the centurion: "I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Mt 8:11-12 – ESV) or Jesus' word in Mt 21:43: "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits". However, for St. Matthew, this does not mean an arbitrary choice of the community he represents, or the opinion of some apostle of the Lord (for example, St. Paul), but represents the firm and unequivocal will of Christ²⁹.

²⁸ Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 188.

²⁹ Da Spinetoli, *Matthew, The Gospel of the Church*, 778-9.

There are two connotations of “fulfilment”: baptism and the fulfilment of the commandments. Readers of the Gospel will recognize in the Mystery of Holy Baptism “the new sign of the Covenant” and in participation in the life of the Holy Trinity one of the most important theological aspects of the entire New Testament³⁰. In contrast to St. Luke and St. Paul, the former of whom emphasizes baptism “in the name of Jesus” (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5) and the latter of whom emphasizes participation – through Baptism – in the death and resurrection of Christ, St. Matthew is concerned with “grafting” and the full engagement of the baptized in the Trinitarian dynamism of the divine life.

The mission of the Church is not only the command to baptize but also the work of preaching. The preaching motive is not new: the verb *διδάσκω* (“to teach”) and the noun *διδάσκαλος* (“teacher”) have in St. Matthew’s work about as many occurrences as in the other two Synoptic Evangelists. The special character of the text of Mt 28:20 is that the work of preaching, the mission of teaching people, is “qualified” by the observance of Christ’s commandments: “Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (20a). St. Matthew emphasises, more than St. Mark, the link between teaching and morality (Mt 5:2; 7:29) and stresses, more than the other New Testament authors, the importance of morality in the Christian life. This is also confirmed by the fact that using the verb *ἐν-τέλλομαι* (“to command/command”), the whole preaching activity of the Saviour Christ is presented in Mt. 28:20a as a “command”. St. Matthew’s formulations refer the reader of his Gospel to a whole range of Old Testament pericopes (especially from the Book of Deuteronomy) that refer to the authoritative will of Yahweh³¹.

Thus, it will not be difficult for the reader of the first Gospel to see that the preaching and work of the Saviour fully interpret and fulfil the will of God³², fulfilling it in the two commandments which sum up all: love of God and love of neighbour, for “On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Mt 22:40 – ESV; Lev 19:18.34). It is clear, then, that the practice or fulfilment of the commandments – which qualify the Church’s missionary activity – is the most appropriate response to God’s will.

³⁰ The Trinitarian formulation in Mt 28:19b is unique in the pages of the New Testament. For St. Matthew, The Holy Trinity is the author of our salvation. Invoking the names of the Persons of the Holy Trinity – the Father, The Son and the Holy Spirit – at a decisive moment in the Gospel story cannot be accidental, because through Baptism the Christian participates concretely in the life of the Holy Trinity. Da Spinetoli, *Matthew, The Gospel of the Church*, 780.

³¹ Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 188-9.

³² It is along the lines of what St. John says repeatedly in his Gospel: “I came down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of the Father who sent me” (Jn 6:38; 4:34; 5:30; 8:28-29).

“And behold, I am with you” (20b)

The assurance of His presence in our midst is the last word of the risen Lord in the first Gospel: *Εγὼ μεθ' ὑμῶν εἶμι* (“I am with you”). This is a *leitmotif* in biblical literature: it is found throughout the pages of the Old Testament, addressed both to individuals and the whole community. These words indicate the presence of the Lord and his protection. In the text of Mt 28:20b it is an active presence, the presence of Christ in history and not just a static presence in a particular place of worship³³.

In the text of 1:23, St. Matthew gives the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 and the prophetic name of the Saviour: *Emmanuel*, which translates as “God is with us”. Except for the text in Mt 27:46, which gives the cry of Jesus on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”, the text in Mt 1:23 is the only one in which the Evangelist Matthew gives us an express translation. The informed reader of the Gospel, but I also believe the ordinary reader, will easily recognise the explicit intention of the hagiographer: the first prophecy in his work (Mt 1:23) corresponds to the last statement (Mt 28:20b)³⁴. The text of Mt 28:20 suggests that not only the Child born at Bethlehem represents the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy (7:14), but also the Lord risen from the dead, the Son of God who holds in his hands the destiny of the history of the world and man; the Risen Christ is the definitive fulfilment of the Scriptures. The One who was dead and is now alive is called “God is with us”; the One who, with His presence, assists the disciples in their mission among the nations³⁵.

Jesus is not a prophet who retires from the scene at the end of His mandate, He is the Son of God who remains eternally bound to His saving work and to all those who – of their own free will – will adhere to His destiny. The Evangelist Matthew does not simply say that Jesus will not abandon his disciples but says that “he will be with them (*μεθ' ὑμῶν*) always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20b). This presence of Christ in our midst, mentioned only by St Matthew (Mt 18:20), refers to the presence of Yahweh during his people, a presence which ensures the success of the missions entrusted to him³⁶. The Saviour Christ will not take the place of his disciples, he will not act in their place, assuming their responsibilities, but he will not delay in supporting them throughout their mission.

³³ Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 189.

³⁴ Da Spinetoli, *Matthew, The Gospel of the Church*, 781.

³⁵ Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 190.

³⁶ William D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew. A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988-1997), 694.

By conquering death, the Lord has left the kingdom of death and entered the kingdom of the living forever, and his disciples will be able to call on him for help at any time. The Lord's disciples will not have to deal with a past, closed and long-vanished experience, but with One who is alive forever and ever and who will assist, through the Spirit, the march of His work towards the Eschaton. The link which establishes this living relationship of Christ with His Church, between the pilgrim Church towards the Eschaton and Christ, even if this is not explicitly stated, will be assured by the faith of the disciples. Christ and his Church are united forever, because the liturgical assembly is called in his name with the precise intention of advancing in spiritual understanding and of actualizing, in time, his experience and sacrifice: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26 – ESV). When the Church loses this dimension and orientation, it ceases to be the community of Christ's disciples and becomes an ordinary assembly³⁷.

With this openness to the living and glorified Christ, to whom he was given all power in heaven and on earth, present among His own until the end of time, Saint Matthew ends his Gospel convinced that he has given his community a "point of reference", of cohesion or connection and of perfect security.

The Church is not a human organization – even though it has an administrative apparatus – but a living organism; it is born of a personal and living relationship with Christ and is sustained by an intimate and vital relationship with Him³⁸: "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:4-5 – ESV).

"I" and "you" – or more correctly – "I in you" is the binomial and the reality that gives comfort to the Church in her earthly pilgrimage. The Church is Christ's and will remain so even in His apparent absence from her midst³⁹. It is interesting and suggestive that Saint Matthew, unlike the other two Synoptic Evangelists, says nothing about the episode of the Lord's ascension into heaven, precisely so as not to alienate Jesus from the community of his disciples⁴⁰.

³⁷ Da Spinetoli, *Matthew, The Gospel of the Church*, 781-2.

³⁸ Alberto Mello, *Gospel according to Matthew. Midrashic and narrative commentary* (Magnano: Edizioni Quiaqajon, 1995), 499.

³⁹ Da Spinetoli, *Matthew, The Gospel of the Church*, 782-3.

⁴⁰ Alexander Sand, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1992), 916.

“Until the end of the age” (20c)

This expression refers to the time between the historical Jesus and the Parousia; it is the time of the Church, a time characterized by the sowing and growing of good wheat, but also of tares. The words of the Saviour “I am with you” are, in this case, an invitation to readers of all times to seek and discover the presence of the Lord in their own experience, often contradictory, marked by the mixture of faith and doubt, light and darkness, tribulation (Mt 8:23-27), opposition and persecution (Mt 10:17-23). *Εγὼ μεθ’ ὑμῶν εἰμι*, should not be understood as an expression indicating a specific place, but as a commitment and a promise of the Saviour to his disciples, which responds to the uncertainties, insecurities, doubts of the disciples clearly expressed in Mt 28, 16-17⁴¹.

Finally, in response to the initial doubts of the eleven (Mt 28:17), the Saviour offers them – through St Matthew – the promise of his presence in their midst. Unlike the other evangelists, who are concerned with removing the hesitations of the disciples with new signs and signs (Mk 16:14; Lk 24:41-43; Jn 20:27), the originality of St Matthew consists in showing his readers the full authority of Christ's words (Mt 28:18-20)⁴² and the promise of an active presence amid his disciples, which they will have to discover amid trials and suffering (Mt 8:23-27). For St. Matthew, the word of Christ – and by extension the word of God⁴³ – and not new revelations or new proofs, is enough for the readers of his Gospel to sustain their faith. Sight is not decisive! The Saviour Christ Himself expresses this admirably in the parable of the unmerciful rich man and poor Lazarus: “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead” (Lk 16:31 – ESV).

The message that the first evangelist writes at the end of his work is a call to faith in Jesus Christ, alive and at work – through His word and His mysterious presence – amid the community gathered in His name⁴⁴.

⁴¹ Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 190.

⁴² *New Testament Study. General Introduction. The Gospels according to Matthew and Mark*, ed. Stelian Tofană (Bucharest: Basilica, 2022), 529.

⁴³ Lk 16:29: “They have Moses and the prophets; let them listen to them” is the invitation that the evangelist Luke addresses his Gospel readers.

⁴⁴ Da Spinetoli, *Matthew, The Gospel of the Church*, 783.

The programme of the pericope

On a programmatic level, the model of mission that the Matthean text proposes stimulates the reader of the Gospel to a challenging confrontation. First, St Matthew tells us that the Church does not refer to herself in her preaching; her only *raison d'être* is the mandate of the Risen One for a service to the Kingdom of Heaven and to the man who is to be part of it. To focus on the internal problems of its administrative (worldly) structure is to disregard the primacy of God and His Kingdom. Let us not forget that even after His resurrection from the dead the Saviour's teaching to the disciples focused on the theme of the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:3), while the Lord's disciples, who still had an unfulfilled faith, were concerned with the establishment of "the kingdom of Israel" (Acts 1:6).

"The first word of the Church – Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger said in a speech on the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, delivered in the Diocese of Caserta – is Christ and not herself; the Church is pure and holy to the extent that her entire attention is directed to Him [...] Indeed, a Church that exists only for herself would prove superfluous.... The crisis of the Church, as reflected in the concept of the people of God, is *the crisis of God Himself*; this crisis is due to the abandonment of or estrangement from Christ. What remains is only a power struggle, and the power struggle is enough in the world, there is no need for it in the Church."⁴⁵

The importance that the text of Mt 28:16-20 gives to the disciples⁴⁶ or "the eleven" reflects St. Matthew's intention to entrust to a historical group of disciples who followed Christ the function of *trait-d'union* and, therefore, the guarantor of the faithful transmission of the Christian message to successive generations. Reading this work, readers have the impression or the feeling that within it we have St Matthew's constant concern to safeguard, at all costs, the sound teaching of the Saviour Christ⁴⁷.

The reasons for this concern could be internal or external. The Jews who received Christian teaching (Judeo-Christians), who are also the first recipients of the Gospel of Matthew, had to confront the Jews who rejected it, and the correct understanding of Jesus' teaching was the "test bed" for their own identity and the correct interpretation of the Torah⁴⁸. Then, within the community of St. Matthew the preaching of the Gospel of Christ could lead to a subjective hermeneutic of the teaching (Mt 7:15). Therefore, safeguarding the sound teaching of Christ was a matter of survival.

⁴⁵ *L'Osservatore Romano* 17-18 (2001): 5-6.

⁴⁶ Gianfranco Ravasi, *The Gospels* (Bologna: Centro editoriale dehoniano, 2016), 187.

⁴⁷ Grilli, *Synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles*, 192.

⁴⁸ See the severe indictment of the spiritual leaders of the Jews, the scribes and Pharisees, by the Saviour Christ in Mt 23.

For Saint Matthew, discipleship is the model and content of evangelization. The eleven, called to continue Christ's work or work in the world, are defined primarily by their status as disciples. At all times, to be a Christian means "to be linked to Jesus Christ", to be in Christ totally and unconditionally: "they left everything and followed him" (Mt 4:20; 8:22), recognizing his presence in the Church and the world.

This bond is the foundation of the Church as the "family of God", which the recipients of Matthew's Gospel feel and know that they make up (Mt 18:17; 23:8). St Matthew best portrayed among the holy evangelists the image of the Church as the family of God: those who hear and do the word of Christ and do the will of the Father in heaven are to Christ "brothers and sisters and mother" (Mt 12:49-50). After the Resurrection, Jesus calls his disciples "my brothers and sisters" (Mt 28:10); equal in dignity (Mt 18:1-14), the Lord's disciples are "sons of the Father in heaven" (Mt 5:45), to whom they all address him as "Father" (Mt 6:9).

Divine sonship has an actual or real connotation in St. Matthew's work, as understood by Clement the Alexandrian, who writes that "Christ shows sons, brothers and heirs [of the Kingdom] to those who do the will of His Father in heaven."

The missionary work of the Church must be understood as "education for the ethics of responsibility", which St Matthew indicates on the last page of his Gospel, in the words: "Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:20a). At the origin of St. Matthew's vision lies a fundamental category within the theology of this evangelist: the sense of a righteousness superior to that of the spiritual leaders of the Jews of Jesus' time: "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:20). There is a "higher righteousness" which essentially consists in a right understanding, a will and a doing that is following God's will. The deep meaning of this righteousness is the unity and harmony between *ὁμολογέω* ("to confess") or *ὁμολογία* ("confession") and *ποιέω* ("to do") or *ποίησις* ("work").

The reference of the disciples to "all nations" corrects the previous reference limited only to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt 10:5-6) and expresses clearly and unequivocally the universal dimension of the Christian mission.

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