

## The Formation of a New Christendom: a Discursive Political Project of the Neocatechumenal Way

## La Formación de una nueva cristandad: proyecto discursivo del Camino Neocatecumenal

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Recibido/Aceptado: 19-02-2021/25-05-2021

Cómo citar: Batista Córdoba, Reinaldo y Brayner, Cristian. 2021. "The Formation of a New Christendom: a Discursive Political Project of the Neocatechumenal Way", *Journal of the Sociology and Theory of Religion*, 12. Extra-1: 117-129.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/jstr.Extra-1.2021.117-129>

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**Resumen:** La investigación presentada examina el fenómeno representado por el Camino Neocatecumenal, autoidentificado como un movimiento cristiano surgido de la escena eclesial durante la década de 1960, el cual de acuerdo con uno de sus iniciadores, el artista, Francisco Gomes-Argüello, está presente en más de una centena de países. El escopo del análisis ha sido limitado por el proyecto de restaurar el cristianismo primitivo, conforme expuesta por el grupo, bien como un intento de formar una nueva cristiandad, según identificada por los movimientos discursivos- situación que termina por generar una realidad paradójica.

**Palabras clave:** Camino Neocatecumenal, Cristiandad, Catolicismo, Discurso, Religión

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**Abstract:** The research that is presented examines the political phenomenon represented by the Neocatechumenal Way, a self-entitled movement of a Christian initiative that emerged onto the ecclesiastical scene during the 1960s and which, according to one of its founders, the artist Francisco Gomes-Argüello, is currently present in more than a hundred countries. The scope of the analysis was limited to the project of rescuing primitive Christianity, as presented by the

group, and to the intent of forming a new Christendom as identified by the movement's discourse - a situation that ends up generating a paradoxical reality.

**Keywords:** Neocatechumenal Way, Christendom, Catholicism, Discourses, religion

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

When we look at the discursive production of the Church, as well as the sub-groups that it is composed of, we are faced with objectives of a religious nature, as well as political objectives. It would be naive to consider that both the ecclesiastical institution and its quite varied groups and realities exclusively possess statements and programs related to the sacred. Numerous positions and statements of representatives of the Church are configured in the political dimension, as explained by Mainwaring (1989) and Amaral (2010).

By politics, the meaning adopted here refers to a broad aspect that goes beyond the partisan sphere or the powers of the state. It is a polysemantic concept that is valid, but refers to phenomena that are within the bounds of civilizational norms and conventions, including the nature of government or state administration (Bobbio, 2009), but also include the conduct of social life (Amaral, 2010). Related to politics is power; that is, politics and power are interrelated and interdependent. The political person is interchangeable with the human person; it is unfeasible to try to separate these two aspects of the same being; people act politically while simultaneously acting within religious, family or school spheres.

According to Bobbio (2009) power may be "a relation between two subjects, of whom one imposes on the other to his own advantage and determines, independently, the behavior" (2009). This situation is perceptible in concrete facts and actions, such as the formulation of discourses, the intention of which is to convince and dominate others through persuasion, (Charaudeau, 2011).

To say that a religious institution has a political character is not to depreciate it, but to realize that people and communities are more complex than hasty observations might reveal. The reflection upon acts, intentional or not, of religious groups, demonstrate contests of power. For example, when the Neocatechumenal Way is positioned and institutionalized, it acts as a religious and political institution, without prejudice to one or the other, but they are perspectives of the same phenomenon.

The formulation of the Statute of the Neocatechumenal Way, as well as numerous catecheses, interviews and classes of and by its leaders

demonstrate this relationship. Although they are non-state documents, they intend to legitimize their intentions and actions to their peers and to ecclesiastical society in a more global context; in the specific case of the Statute the intent is to legalize Neocatechumenal practices in other areas and before ecclesiastical entities, through a legal document.

When a group, or a path of faith, such as the Neocatechumenate manifests itself through an official document, it clearly intends to create a bureaucracy, as a necessary means for improving its diffusion throughout Christian catholic arenas. At the same time, when an eminently legal text is produced, it acts politically, in consideration of the fact that it intends to convince the reader or the intended audience of the authority of a given speaker or author, (Charaudeau, 2011).

The Statute arises from the encouragement by John Paul II to the founders, after thirty years of de facto existence; to formalize The Way before the Church. From then on, the process of formulating the Statutes, which was temporarily approved in 2002, began. The Pontiff said that this was a "...very important step, which opens The Way to its formal legal recognition by the Church, giving you a further guarantee of the authenticity of your charisma "(John Paul II, 1997), thus establishing the Statute in the category of a legal document, with a political character.

At the same time that the Statute consolidates the Neocatechumenate as a valid follow-up of Catholicism; it delimits its area of action and its boundaries when describing its institutional functioning. From the indication of its intentions, to its practices, up to it concluding with the process of succession of the founders of the movement: this is the triad that coordinates neocatechumenal projects and actions, in a centralized and hierarchical way.

The discourse produced in the Statute reflects an intention to establish itself as a legitimate institution to propagate Sacred Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church. Reading this fact as an intentional political action, it would be possible to conclude that it is a discourse of power, in which its authors, representing the will of the Responsible Team of The Way, demonstrate the peculiarities of the Neocatechumenate, in order to convince the intended audiences that its Biblical and Magisterial interpretations are correct and are therefore confirmed by the Holy See.

Beyond the pragmatic side of the Statute, there is also promotion and reinforcement of an imagery among the followers of the Neocatechumenal Way, which is described and detailed in the document, in a simple and intelligible way for its members; the speeches make sense to those whom

understand its context, and whom make the appropriate connections, and thus the text acquires meaning (Fairclough, 2008).

## 2. Statute and intertextuality

One of the peculiarities of the Statute (Neocatechumenal Way, 2008), as well as of other Neocatechumenal statements is its intertextuality. In order to guarantee legality and legitimacy, they use documents from the Ecclesiastical Magisterium, where they obtain subsidies to support their ideology and praxis. Quite often, there are quotations of papal statements in the 23 pages of the document. John Paul II, for example, was cited directly or indirectly 21 times, while Paul VI was quoted twice and Leo the Great once. Probably the greatest absence is of John XXIII, the pontiff responsible for convening the Second Vatican Council; who is not mentioned at all.

Thus, we verify the presence of several texts to justify the Neocatechumenal document. The Magisterial statements are used in a lawful way, guaranteeing the full integration of the Neocatechumenate within the Church, among other dimensions, by placing itself under the authority of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, when it states in Article 1: "The Neocatechumenal Way is at the service of the bishops as a modality of diocesan realization of Christian initiation and permanent education of the faith, according to the indications of the Second Vatican Council and the Magisterium of the Church "(Neocatechumenal Way, 2002)

At this point they base their argument on the conciliar indication of the need to restore the adult catechumenate. It is perceived that this is a historical construction of the group's ideology, since in principle there would be no such connection to the conciliar texts, as stated by Francisco (Kiko) Argüello (2007) to radio COPE. In any case, this quotation seeks to establish a relationship of obedience and subservience to the project of "updating" the Church, proposed by John XXIII in convoking the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council.

It is a strategic approach founded by leaders of the movement to gain support for their project, which has encountered opponents in the church, such as those pointed out by Cardinals Raymond Burke and Francis Arinze, surrounding the Sacred Liturgy (La Repubblica, 2012). Discourses are also constructed in symbolic exchanges, which in turn are organized in a relationship of forces (Charaudeau, 2011), for this reason they work to establish that Neocatechumenal ideas and actions are in harmony with the papal and conciliar will, thus undermining the discourse and argument of

opponents, which accuses them of dangerous innovations in the celebration of the Mass, such as the fact of communing, until recently, sitting around a table of the Eucharist and uttering monitions that would rival Sacred Scripture.

The Church, in a general way, has an affection for symbolism, so the resorting to of the Magisterium would confer credibility on what is being done, for the catechumenate would go back to the earliest times of Christianity, while still in the Roman empire, as emphasized in the Statute (Art 1<sup>o</sup>, § 3), as well as to a connection with the Holy Family of Nazareth (Neocatechumenal Way, Art. 7, § 2). Despite the search for a relationship with the origin of the Church, the Neocatechumenal Way is contextualized in the twentieth century, so the statutory document, throughout its entirety, seeks to determine that it is a reality for people of the contemporary age, who do not know the gospel or who have turned their backs on it, (Neocatechumenal Way, Art. 5 § 1).

In this way it is stated that the intended audience of the Neocatechumenal discourse, would be concrete people, with specific characteristics, even included in Magisterial texts, such as the General Catechetical Directory. The delimitation of the recipient is significant because it demonstrates that the Neocatechumenos intend to restore old values, lost in a contemporary society that has been shaken by hedonistic projects.

In short, it can be said that the Neocatechumenate understands its existence as a tool to lead people to the Church, without isolating them from society, which in the understanding of the formulators of the statement, is corrupted by drugs and immorality (Neocatechumenal Way , Notes of Article 13 § 2). Therefore, it is necessary to understand the discourse within this context (Fairclough, 2008), as a viable alternative to save parishes, families and young people from destruction (Schönborn, 2014).

Although the Catechetical Directory of the Neocatechumenal Way was quoted several times, and its publication was authorized on January 8, 2012, access to this document is restricted, and sold only in Catechumenal Centers, for those elected as catechists. They are composed of catecheses, teachings given by the Responsible Team of the Way and later passed on to the regional teams, which transmit the steps or phases to the community

With no intention of forcing our outcome to say what we want, we can find in the Statutes a legislative and bureaucratic character,, intending to prove and establish for the Roman Curia and other prelates the legality and legitimacy of the Neocatechumenal Way. In this sense, it resorts, according

to a historical tradition, to ecclesiastical documents and to the so-called Magisterium, in order to affirm that Neocatechumenal practices are based on the most sincere dogmatic tradition of the Church, therefore, evident in the ideal of propagating a precise model of Catholic Christianity.

References to pontifical, canonical and catechetical discourses break the boundaries of sacred and evangelical by areas and demonstrate that the supposed innovations introduced by The Way in the liturgical or catechetical spheres are foreseen in texts and legal documents of the Church. The recognition of their practices is a political issue as well, because it seeks to convince sectors of the Church that the project is part of the strategy of converting people to Catholicism.

The founding discourse, which is also present in the Statute, serves simultaneously for the prelates who administer the Church, as well as for the laity and those whom have taken religious vows and are part of the Neocatechumenal communities. Their opinion comes to be shaped by the political discourse articulated originally by the Neocatechumenal summit represented by the International Responsible Team. The projection of the Neocatechumenal ideal would so profoundly transform its members that its social language changes, just as its political-partisan position, socioeconomic ideology, and conception of the role of justice, governmental power, and citizen participation in the State.

This is evidenced when it is stated, as presented in the Statute, that the Neocatechumens will be altruistic and will be attentive to the material, emotional and spiritual needs of their peers.

To degree the Neocatechumens grow in faith, the signs of "koinonia" begin to manifest: non-judgment, non-resistance to evil, forgiveness, and love of the enemy. The "koinonia" also makes it possible to help the needy, to care for the sick, for those who suffer and for the elderly, and to help, as far as possible, those who are on a mission (Neocatechumenal Way, 2008. Art. 16° §1 )

It is evident that belonging to communities will transform the subject, which in turn will promote changes in their society. One of the purposes of the Neocatechumenal Way is to make society take on the semblance of Christ, either by observing the experience of those who leave on a mission, or in the projection of the parish as a model of a perfect body, when it shines "before men as Visible Body of the Risen Jesus Christ" (Neocatechumenal Way, 2008. Art. 16 § 3).

Therefore the projection of Christ's humanity, justice, mercy, and altruism would be on view for ordinary people who live in society but would

not necessarily belong to it. The Neocatechumens assume the role of protagonists in the transformation of the world. Starting from the community, parish or family, they present to these social groups the enlightened path to the realization of a project of teleology and salvation; this is seen as the most appropriate option for concretizing the civilizational archetype designed by its founder, to which even the State submits. This is seen as a strategy of survival and preservation, since social structures would be eroded by hedonistic utilitarianism.

The propagation of this ideal would be due to the replication of the experiences lived within the community, which implies listening to, and learning of catecheses; the basic point of the group's discursive norms. It is catechesis that enables them to live in society as Christians (Neocatechumenal Way, 2008 Art. 17 § 1)

If the Neocatechumens are prepared for the ecclesiastical mission, they are predisposed to evangelize, wherever necessary, so that that they leave their zone of comfort and security to risk depending on others, including financially, as a way to take risks for the Lord. These new evangelizers should be consistent in their lives outside the Church, respecting the ethical precepts outlined by the Neocatechumenal community; introducing, wherever they find themselves, the superior values of a life dedicated to God.

The Neocatechumenal Way is a social institution structured in a very hierarchical way. At the top resides the International Responsible Team formed by two founders of the group: Francisco (Kiko) Argüello and Carmen Hernández, both celibates, and by the priest Mario Pezzi. This lifetime-team is led by Kiko, author of the main catecheses and chants, as well as by the aesthetic reformulation of temples and buildings used by Neocatechumenal communities, which would be a visible form of the new order designed for the Church and for society.

Because they are elderly, and to ensure continuity of the project, the Statute in its Article 35 presents the ordering for the replacement of these members when they die. The substitution of the members of this team will occur in a differentiated way: when one of the founders dies, the other will automatically assume the function and responsibility of the deceased team member; If the priest renounces or dies, the other members of the team will be asked to appoint another priest to the position, whose name must be presented to the Pontifical Council for the Laity, which must confirm the name. It is interesting to note that the possibility of renunciation of founders was not considered in the document.

The team will be fully recomposed when both of the founders die (Neocatechumenal Way, 2008). From then on, a legal succession will be organized, headed by the Electoral College, which will have between 80 and 120 members, and may be changed according to the criteria established by the Pontifical Council for the Laity, which will receive the list of voters. Members of the College, as well as any catechist, may be elected. The person in charge of the Responsible Team will always be a layman; married or celibate.

The approved Statute establishes the obligation of the elected team to submit to the dicastery. "The confirmation of the election of the team will be requested by the person in charge of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, according to the law. In the event of a lack of confirmation, the entire team shall be re-elected." (Neocatechumenal Way, 2008, Art. 35, §2 4°)

This entire process demonstrates a consolidated political structure, with defined and bureaucratized governance. The fact that the International Responsible Team consists of three members, to a certain extent would guarantee democratic decisions. However, in fact, the role of each member is distinct and unequal, so that it is possible to perceive in the existing team an imbalance of powers, since Kiko Argüello receives more coverage in the media and in the dissemination of his speeches than the other members.

In fact, Neocatechumenal communications enhance Kiko Argüello's speeches, simply by noting the various interviews he has given, as well as his catecheses and statements. The speaker's speeches are significant for several reasons: it indicates the direction that the group will follow, for example, in the formulation of new strategies of evangelization, such as Families on Missions, as established in Art 33.

The family theme is an essential aspect for the group, given the catecheses present in the Catechetical Directory of the Neocatechumenate, as well as the multitudinous meetings organized by The Way, which brings together families from several countries, such as those held in Madrid beginning in 2007. The weight and the power of the discourse over families assumes a significant role, which is given exceptional emphasis in the Statute, when the importance of celebrating the Eucharist on Saturdays nights was defined as a way to keep Sunday for family activities and to prevent young people from going to dance-clubs and to guard them against contact with drugs (Neocatechumenal Way, 2002. Art. 13 § 2).

Although the Statute incites the Neocatechumens to become present in society as Christians (Neocatechumenal Way, 2008. Article 17 § 1); It is said that some places are unfit for them, such as nightclubs. Apparently,



according to the prevailing discourse, young people should remain united with their peers and away from places that might lead them to disobey the rules or teachings of the Church. This is defended by catechists, as a repetition of the normative statement of the Institution.

The Neocatechumenal speech intends to transform the personal and social reality, through the fomentation of Christian morality, quoted in the Statute in the footnote of Art 8º, § 3, which reads that "At the center of the whole Neocatechumenal path there is a synthesis of kerigmatic preaching , or a change of moral life "(Neocatechumenal Way, 2008). By morality, in this case, one may understand several categories, but by the tradition so often quoted, it would fall to some extent within sexual morality, since many catechises have this theme as the object of examination.

Obviously there is the desire for a new form of Christianity, where people are clear about their social, political and religious roles. To avoid, for example, dance-clubs is to go against the social order, since youth habitually frequents these places to have fun. To maintain a chaste life before marriage and to constitute a family open to life, which is to say to not avoid pregnancy, are examples of practices that are contrary to behaviors seen as normal in contemporary Western society.

### **3. NEOCATECHUMENAL WAY, POLICY AND SEXUALITY**

The project of the Neocatechumenal Way begins with personal change, so that one could say that the identity of the people would be reformulated. The way they would perceive social phenomena would be seen through the lens of the teachings transmitted by the catechists and formulated by the International Responsible Team.

For the success of this endeavor it is necessary to constitute a new mentality, to be assumed by the young, old, single and married as revealed truth. A new group imagery emerges, which interprets everyday events as religious actions, regardless of whether they are occurring in ecclesiastical, state or civil spheres (Orlandi, 2007). Thus, it would be the intention to constitute a new Christianity, where the most diverse environments are governed by Christian ideals.

For the success of the project it is necessary that its members also assume a new linguistic structure, obtained from the deepening of biblical knowledge, to the point of familiarizing themselves with its word, its language (Orlandi, 2007), as stated in Art 19º, § 1, which deals with the first stage of conversion, which lasts approximately two years. At this stage, not

only will the Biblical language be acquired, but also the group's speech structure, which ensures the recognition of community participants.

It is thus a verification of the fact that the proposition of Neocatecúmena conversion would change the spiritual perception of Christians, their teleological intentions, as well as their ideals and social and political behavior. Let us look at, for example, families on missions, a situation in which the family nucleus, formed by parents and children, leave their place of residence, schools, friendships and jobs to live in a place where Christianity is weakened, extinct or unknown ( Art. 33°).

This motivation arises from the project of transforming society by what some call the "basic cell of society" (Anderson, 1980; Wojtyła, 1978). In this case, the catechesis considers modern society as being distorted and that there is a movement to destroy the Christian family model. In fact, it is a discourse that unites many people, due to its power; that is to say that this power is conferred on it, because alone it would not possess it (Foucault, 1987). In other words, countless people believe and propagate these ideas, valuing the discourses and legitimizing them.

For Michel Foucault the discourses produced by all societies are controlled, sectioned, and redistributed by procedures that aim to make an alliance by means of a promise of powers and perils (1987). This is what we see in the case of the discourse on families, which materializes in the formulation of a praxis seen by some social and ecclesiastical followings as radical, because they are ultra-montanic readings and irrational and decontextualized obedience to the documents on Responsible Parenthood.

Not coincidentally, the field of politics and sexuality would be, according to Foucault, the two most controlled and obscure aspects of discourse, in general, and probably of society. Although the option of obedience to the Ecclesiastical Magisterium is a point of coherence of the Neocatechumenate, it is seen by opponents of the Neocatechumenate Way as intransigent and ultra-orthodox, which ends up generating exclusions of the group and its members because its discourse would be inadmissible for some social segments, (Foucault, 1987). However, it is a clear strategy of the leaders of the group, who in the Statute put themselves in position of subservience to the Supreme Pontiff, and as previously said, especially to the postulates of Paul VI and John Paul II.

It may be speculated that the field of sexuality and politics are intertwined in the Neocatechumenate. The first meeting of families in Madrid took place in December 2007, when presidential candidate José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero campaigned in the elections scheduled for March 2008.

On that occasion Kiko Argüello admonished the crowd gathered in the Plaza Colon to take a position against divorce, which in that context had a clear message, since the government of the PSOE, led by Zapatero, had approved of the so-called "Express divorce," and of homosexual marriage, in 2005.

According to Kiko in an interview with COPE radio in 2007, marriage is indissoluble, because Christians do not divorce. God would teach us to love the enemy, even if the enemy is the spouse. The contemporary social environment, from his perspective, is sick and is against Christians. So much so, that at present, Catholics are divorcing.

He goes further by saying that Europe is moving towards apostasy, a reason for Christians to live in communion, helping each other, as the first Christian communities did. And he categorically states: "There are no people in The Way who separate, who divorce. The small Christian community saves the family and the family saves the Church "(Argüello, 2007). At this point his speech is blunt in telling people and priests, bishops and cardinals, that through the Neocatechumen families the church will be saved. The political side of the discourse is evident, which demarcates its place from a position of power.

After being asked in an interview with the Spanish newspaper La Razón, how the idea of celebrating the Family Encounter was born on December 30, 2007, Kiko Argüello, said

"It came after having seen how in Italy we had promoted "Family Day," a gathering in favor of the family; against the Italian government's attempt to legalize stable unions and homosexual unions ... then, here in Spain, the "Express " divorce. With 90,000 marriages destroyed, we thought, "Why not do something to support the family." [...] "it was not to oppose someone or to engage in politics, but Christians need support; to see thousands of whole families, happy; to see that families are an immense joy; the paradigm of God's love for humanity ". (Argüello, 2011)

The clear social-political effort of reforming Christendom is evident: saving society from a proclaimed catastrophe, which is due to society's moral deviations, which stifle interpersonal relations and destroy the social contract.

#### **4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The statements of the Neocatechumenate are interpretations of Sacred Scripture and the Magisterium, which fall into the category pointed out by

Foucault, of the relation between discourse and commentary. It is in constant transformation, being that in each period and context it assumes a different meaning. The commentary is understood as the phase differential, the so-called phase shift, represented by what happened between the first and second text. This occurrence allows the creation of new discourses arising from the first (Foucault, 1987)

Nothing is static, not even discourse, and as a consequence, the new is for updating the old, by saying what has already been said, but reinterpreting it, so that it assumes meanings that sometimes are different from the thoughts and desires of the original text or discourse.

Neocatemunal discourses are within this logical framework, since they do not directly have the object of being political, at least, in the partisan sense. However, they take on a political character when they interfere in the civil or legislative order of a given state, as well as when they produce official documents interested in gaining recognition by a greater variety of ecclesiastical strata, as was the case with development and publication of the Statute cited.

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