S

IGNS OF THE TIMES

“The signs of the times belong to the pedagogy of revelation. They can be identified with the seeds of life sown in the world and in the heart of each person, so that one may more easily grasp the action of the Holy Spirit who continually raises up new forces for the full accomplishment of creation. The signs of the times can be discerned in all the aspirations and events of humanity, which determine human progress and direct us toward more human forms of life. Christ and the Church remain the permanent signs of God’s presence”[[1]](#footnote-1).

“The Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions that humankind asks about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other”, as stated by the II Vatican Council[[2]](#footnote-2). The Marist Constitutions indicate that Father Champagnat sought the will of God in the signs of the times[[3]](#footnote-3), that fidelity to our mission demands continuous attention to them[[4]](#footnote-4), and that discernment in the Spirit requires their proper interpretation[[5]](#footnote-5).

Constant attention to history and to its relationship with the Gospel brings about a theological awareness of the signs of the times. These are “phenomena that, given their significance and frequency, characterize an era and express the needs and aspirations of humanity in a given period” (Marie-Dominique Chenu).



In biblical terms, the “signs of the times” are “signs of the Kingdom of God”[[6]](#footnote-6), which means that for us not all phenomena characterizing a historical period are signs of the times, but only those that actualize the Kingdom of God.

Jesus of Nazareth is the “primordial sign of the times”, and the Church, sacrament of Christ, is the quintessential sign of the times today.

Recovering the value and meaning of this category for the life of the Church and for theological reflection was possible thanks to the prophetic work of John XXIII. This Pope repeatedly emphasized the original meaning of Matthew’s verse with the intention of challenging Christians to perceive the changes in the contemporary world and proclaim the Gospel using an understandable language.

Attention to the signs of the times is an essential task for the Church and a responsibility for each of us. It brings about a clearer discovery of all that is beautiful, good and true in our history and in the world to which we belong. For us believers, these signs have further significance: they indicate the permanent presence of God who, after the event of the Incarnation, lives in our midst and alongside us.

They invite us to be insightful, that is, to look at the deepest and innermost levels of reality, in order to become aware of what is essential.

The attention to the signs of the times – which includes identification, understanding and interpretation – does not exempt believers from the task of constantly creating new signs that can give visibility to revelation taking place today. A theology of the signs of the times that only pays attention to their understanding and interpretation without committing to generate new signs would lack an essential element. The above-mentioned criteria also imply that believers are always ready to identify new signs of the times, because they are permanently attentive to the situations of life.

1. *Formation Guide Glossary*, 2006, p. 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. GS 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. C 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. C 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. C 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cf. Mt 16:1-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)