

Jesus' Evangelization

In order to help us understand our mission of evangelizing the poor, I wish to reflect with all of you about the kind of evangelization that Jesus did. I thought of calling this talk: "Jesus' Evangelization of the Poor," since, in His heart, the poor were the prime target of His Good News. But the thought occurred to me that Jesus' evangelization was not limited to the poor. Rather, His bias for the poor, His evangelization of the poor, His identification with the poor was itself His message of evangelization to the rich as well, showing them in a most graphic way the path of their salvation.

"How happy are the poor in spirit: theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew: 5, 3). "The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for He has annointed me. He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor" (Luke: 4, 18). It is not accidental that in the gospel accounts of Matthew and Luke, the very first words Jesus speaks in His public life are to and about the poor. For if Love is the essence of His message and of His being, poverty is its cornerstone and foundation.

One of the basic themes repeated in the Old Testament is that God takes His stand with the poor. He explicitly states His predilection for the poor when He explains (in Deuteronomy: 7, 7) His reason for selecting the Israelites as His Chosen People: "If Yahweh set his heart on you and chose you, it was not because you were the greatest and mightiest of peoples, but rather because you were the weakest and smallest of all peoples". Again and again, Yahweh reveals Himself as a God of the poor.

It is only natural, then that Jesus, as the Word of the Father, embody this basic theme of the Old Testament not only in His words and actions, but in His being and in the way He lives. Jesus lived among the poor. He shared the conditions of the poor. He was poor. He was born poor; lived poor; died poor. And in so doing, He brought the Old Testament revelation, that God is a God of the poor, to a new and startling fulfilment. For Jesus, as the concrete expression of God the Father, reveals to us not just a God of the poor, but He reveals to us a God who is poor, a poor God. For the poverty of Jesus is not the poverty of this world, the poverty which degrades and dehumanizes, the poverty which is the result of our collective sins against Nature, ourselves, and each other. The poverty of Jesus is the poverty of God.

I think it is essential to be clear about the fact that God himself is poor. He is Who He is, but He *has* nothing. He does not have, nor does He need or desire any possessions. If God were not poor, then how could Jesus have been poor, since His task as the Word is precisely to show us what kind of God we have for our Father.

But rather than get too abstractly involved with the poverty of God, let us look at the poverty of Jesus. For it is His poverty in the concrete which shows us in the flesh the inexpressible poverty of God.

The poverty of Jesus was not just, or even mainly, *economic* poverty, even though that is an important factor. That He did not have a home of His own — or, as He puts it: "The Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" — is not just a pious thought to be edified by and then passed over and forgotten.

It is one of the few biographical data about Jesus in the Gospels which can open the door for us to see how He really lived. He did not have a home, an office, or sprawling headquarters. Which means he was often at the mercy of friends and sometimes at the mercy of the elements. But it means much more than this. It means He always had to meet people either in neutral territory (roads, markets, fields, mountains, boats, the temple) or else on their turf — that is: in *their* homes or *their* offices. Possession of home brings not only a kind of social stability to the family, but it also carries with it a very subtle power. For a

man's home is truly his kingdom; it is the place where he is master. To be without a home is to be in a position where one is never master; in other words, to be in a position of weakness. To be poor is not such a simple thing as having empty pockets and no money in the bank. It also includes all the things that result from not having money or possessions. Jesus, because He was poor, did not share the rank and position of the wealthy; He did not share the sense of power which men of money and politics enjoy. He did not have any official degrees or titles of the educationally or socially advantaged. In a word, in terms of the system of values of *this* world, He was powerless. Powerless like all of the poor before and after Him. And so He shared the lot of the poor: to be overlooked, to be set aside, to be forgotten; to be looked down on, rejected, ridiculed and despised. He shared their loneliness and isolation, their vulnerability and insecurity.

But all of this is only half of Jesus' poverty. We mentioned above many of the conditions of the 'haves' that He did not share. By far the much more important thing is that He did not in the slightest aspire to these things; He had no desire for them at all. It is this fact that clearly shows us the freedom of the poverty of God; not to need what is not really necessary, not to desire what is not needed. We will never be poor with the poverty of God, nor will we ever be free with the freedom of God as long as we feel we need what is not really necessary and as long as we desire what is not really needed.

The poverty of Jesus is not an accident of history. It is not an advertisement for asceticism. It is not a sentimental adornment of His personality to make Him more mysterious and thereby more attractive. The poverty of Jesus is a view into the essence of God. His poverty was not something tacked on to him; rather, it was an expression of His very being and existence. And here we can catch a glimpse into the tremendous unity we find in the person of Jesus. There was no discrepancy between the words and actions of Jesus, but even more significant: there was no gap between His very being and the expression of that being in and through His words and actions. His poverty is an expression of the way He is, of His life-stance. And therefore, it is a crucial component of His evangelization, of His spreading the Good News. For it is first and foremost the Person of Jesus, not one of His

activities, that *is* evangelization. To put it another way, Jesus *is* the Good News. He *is* the message that He came to bring. He is unique in that His words and actions so perfectly mirror and express His being. The force of His words and actions and of the way he lived springs precisely from this unity. Our ineffectiveness in evangelizing is *not* inadequacy of methodology; it is the discrepancy between our words and actions and our being. For example, on the level of our being, we are not poor with the poverty of God, and so our declarations about solidarity with the poor, while being perfectly phrased, do not ring true. And so they are either fruitless or counterproductive.

I am sorry to have been so abstract and so abstruse up to now, but I think it is necessary, before discussing the evangelization of Jesus and of the Church, to state that it is the very being of Jesus that is the core of His evangelization and, secondly, that in His very existence, He is poor with the poverty of God.

Now let us look more concretely at the way in which Jesus went about evangelizing and then, after that, move on to a few comments about the evangelization which the Church does.

If we look at the flow and process of the life of Jesus, we see that first of all, he began from a position of poverty and weakness, which has been described at length above. We have His miracles, His preaching, and then the effects of these: both for the hearers and for Himself.

The miracles of Jesus were *first of all*, a completely honest and genuine response of love to various immediate, human needs. This was His starting point; this is where He began. When He came upon a blind man, a lame man, a leper, a widow's dead son, He *first of all* responded in love to this human situation.

It was honest and genuine because there were no hooks attached, no selfishness involved. It was a response of love because He did what He could — that is, He put into practice what He was able to do. There was no absolute necessity to cure the leper or the blind man, or console the widow by raising her son back to life. These people could all go on living, somehow, in the state in which Jesus found them. But here they were: a lame man, a blind man, a widow grieving over her son. He *could* cure the lame and the blind man, so He cured them. He *could* raise the

young man back to life, so He did. Before we jump to second, third, and fourth level theological meanings and interpretations, I think it is very important to see the phenomenon as it is: Jesus responding in a very human way to a human need. There is a marvelous simplicity here and a decided lack of game plans, organization charts and other complicated calculations. He meets people *where they are at*; He responds to their immediate needs with genuine love; He enables them to live more humanly.

Although the miracles of Jesus were a genuine and honest response to human needs, they were more than this. For the people were healed not only in a physical way, but simultaneously they were healed spiritually, emotionally, psychologically and existentially. Jesus' action met the immediate need, but went beyond it. While solving the problem that was on the surface, His action also penetrated to a deeper level. And He frequently called attention to this fact by adding some message of conversion or of faith or of hope which raised the whole situation to a new plane: "Go in peace: your sins are forgiven"; "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more"; "Your faith has made you whole." The recipients of His actions of love found themselves pointed in a new direction, living on a totally new level of life.

The important thing to notice here is the unity of Jesus' miracles in themselves and with the words which accompanied them. There were not two actions, one on the physical level, one on the spiritual; or, one directed to the physical level, the other to the spiritual. He did not first cure the physical disease and then pray for spiritual healing. There was one action, which touched the total person. And it was not a question of taking care of the physical need by action and then tacking on a spiritual meaning by the accompanying words. The main point here is that Jesus did not separate the words from the action. The words were an expression of the fullest meaning of the action. And He did not separate the physical from the spiritual. His one action of curing penetrated to all levels of being. To speak more concretely, the one physical action of curing a physical disease was able to touch the depths of a person's *spirit because of the purity and integrity and intensity of the love from which His action sprang.*

And because of this love, Jesus actions were totally for the well-being of the other. His preaching and His miracles were not for His own betterment. They were for the people, totally for the people so that they would be healed and made free. That this is the case is obvious when we look at His life as a whole, as a single process. The pattern of His life led to the Cross. Having lived the way He did, He ended up with no power base at all. He ended up a 'worm and no man.' He ended up with no place to stand — literally and figuratively — for at the end, He was suspended between heaven and earth. He started from a position of weakness; He ended up in a position of even greater weakness.

The evangelization of Jesus was a process of total giving, of complete emptying of Himself. The results of Jesus' evangelization, for *Jesus*, were — to borrow the words of John the Baptist — not His increase, but His decrease. And His willingness to decrease had its origin in His poverty.

Earlier we said that an important aspect of Jesus' poverty was that He did not even aspire to the things this world judges important. This was the poverty He began with: not wanting what was not necessary. But under the marvelous tutelage of the Father, the man Jesus learned through experience that poverty means even more than that; it means, in its perfection, giving up even what little you have, even to the point where there is nothing more left to give except to give up even what you are. To give up your life and your very being.

Now let us look at the evangelization of the Church. Having looked at the way Jesus went about it, it is fairly clear where the Church's deficiencies are and what she must do to pattern her evangelization after that of Jesus. I would like to list only a few.

The first thing the Church must do is to seek out Jesus and ask for His healing, for the Church's being is fragmented. It is true that the Church can never be, in her very being, the Good News. Jesus, and only Jesus, *is the* Good News. But it is the mission of the Church to reflect this Good News as clearly and accurately as possible. And the essence of this Good News is: giving. The 'official Church' does not reflect this 'total giving,' this continuous 'self-emptying' of Jesus. Rather, very often she

gives the impression of the opposite: of being entrenched, of guarding and protecting what she has. She does not project a consistent and effective impression of giving up her life for the world. The 'this-worldly' elements in the Church fall into the fallacy of almost every large corporation: spending too much energy on keeping the institution alive, or on expanding it. The Church falls into the error of trying to increase herself rather than to increase the flock. Jesus gave Himself as food for the life of the world. Insofar as maintaining or expanding the status quo of the *institution* is her major concern, the Church is reversing the process and feeds upon the flock to increase her own institutional life.

The second thing the Church must do is place herself as clearly and as firmly as possible in the position of Jesus. She must know poverty experientially and existentially. Not by researching poverty, not by studying the poor, not by interviews or statistics, but by being poor.

And how does one become poor? There may be several ways. Simple force of logic or an abstract love of poverty as a virtue might force us to do as Zacheus did: give away half of what we own, or sever (cut off) some of our links with people or centers of power which are counterproductive in terms of real evangelization. But I think the most effective method would be that of Jesus: to open my eyes, really, to the world and the people around me. To open my heart, to open my life and to open my being to what are their most immediate needs and to respond to these needs in the integral way that Jesus did.

And this brings us to the third thing that the Church must do: she must respond to human needs *as Jesus did*: in simplicity, in honesty, and most of all, in love. And here is perhaps, the crucial problem for the Church and the one most easy for us to grasp, even if it is not easy to solve. How many of the activities of the Church are done *out of love*? The Church has not been blind or deaf to peoples' needs. She runs orphanages, old peoples' homes, hospitals and refugee camps. She cares for the poor, the sick and the dying. She has her parishes and schools. But how often does she do these things out of Love? When any activity in any of these areas is a response of love to another human being, there evangelization is taking place. But when any of these

activities are done out of a sense of duty, or of habit, or just in order to be doing something, there will not be enough Evangelization, or there will never be evangelization. It was the love in Christ's heart that gave the unity and effectiveness to all He did. It is only to the extent that the Church recaptures love and makes her life a constant expression of that love that she will be able to approximate, in some degree, the effectiveness, the transparency of Christ. The Church must cease separating the physical or the natural or the human from the spiritual. She — the Church — must cease concentrating first of all and only on the spiritual. This was not the way of her Master. She must begin with a human response to a human need which is informed with the love of the Spirit. She must not think of evangelization as some certain activity that must be done; evangelization must be for her, as it was for Jesus, the expression of her love for men.

If we use the little courage and the little love that we have to respond concretely to the human needs around us, we will be drawn ever more deeply into that emptying process that was the evangelizing of Jesus. This means we give up power, the trappings of prestige, the emptiness of being recognized as important. It means that eventually we give up what we have, we give up ourselves, and finally we give up even what we are. But in this lies the freedom, the liberation and the salvation of the world.

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