

Important Tasks of Evangelization Today

Introduction

The theme of today has been given as *The Christian Gospel and Asian Religions and Cultures Today. Tasks of Evangelization — Challenge and Response!*

I have taken the liberty to reformulate it in a different way. *Important Tasks of Evangelization Today — Challenge and Response.* It will be easier to handle and to follow.

The main tasks, or problems of Evangelization, specially in Asia today can be formulated as follows:

1. What is Evangelization in the context of Asia today?
2. Evangelization and humanization (or Development; or Liberation).
3. Evangelization and other Living Religions.
4. Problems of Baptism.

I. What is Evangelization

We can begin with the questions which the 1976 Synod on Evangelization and Pope Paul VI put to themselves: In our day, what has happened to that hidden energy of the Good News, which is able to have a powerful effect on man's conscience? To what extent and in what way is the evangelical force capable of really transforming the people of this century? What methods should be followed in order that the power of the Gospel may have its effect?

The answer can be found only when we understand correctly what evangelization is. "Any partial and fragmentary definition which attempts to render the reality of evangelization in all its richness, complexity and dynamism does so only at the risk of impoverishing it and even of distorting it. It is impossible to grasp the concept of evangelization unless one tries to keep in view all its essential elements."

The Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, has placed the mission of the Church into perspectives which are appropriate to our times and regions. It recognizes 'evangelization' as understood in terms of 'proclaiming Christ to those who do not know Him, of preaching, of catechesis, of conferring baptism and the other sacraments' (EN 17). But it does not regard these activities which are part of the universal sacramentality of the church, as the only legitimate 'mission work'. It defines what it means by evangelization: "For the Church, evangelizing means bringing the good news into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence, transforming humanity from within and making it new". This statement immensely widens the very concept of evangelization, and yet in no way waters it down. On the contrary, it brings it out more forcefully by continuing: "But there is no new humanity, if there are not first of all new persons renewed by baptism and by lives lived according to the Gospel. The purpose of evangelization is therefore precisely this interior change and if it had to be expressed in one sentence, the best way of stating it would be to say that the church evangelizes when she seeks to convert, solely through the divine power of the message she proclaims both the personal and collective consciousness of people, the activities in which they are engaged and the lives and concrete milieu which are theirs" (N 18)

The next paragraph, No. 19 of *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, contains one of the weightiest statements concerning our whole mission in Asia. "For the Church, it is a question not only of preaching the Gospel in ever wider geographic areas or to ever greater numbers of people, but also of affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, mankind's criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation."

All this could be expressed in the following words: "What matters is to evangelize man's culture and cultures (taking account of their immense pluriformity in the Third World) in the wide and rich sense which these terms have in *Gaudium et Spes*, always taking the person as one's starting point and always coming back to the relationships of people among themselves and with God... The split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our times. Therefore, every effort must be made to ensure a full evangelization of culture, or more correctly, of cultures. They have to be regenerated by an encounter with the Gospel. But this encounter will not take place, if the Gospel is not proclaimed". (EN 20)

II. *Evangelization and Development*

The question of Evangelization and humanization should not detain us long. Humanization (or Development or Liberation) is an element of Evangelization. "Between evangelization and human advancement — development and liberation — there are in fact profound links. These include links of an anthropological order, because the man who is to be evangelized is not an abstract being but is subject to social and economic questions. They also include links in the theological order, since one cannot dissociate the plan of creation from the plan of Redemption. The latter plan touches the very concrete situations of injustice to be combatted and of justice to be restored. They include links of the eminently evangelical order, which is that of charity: how in fact can one proclaim the new commandment without promoting in justice and in peace the true authentic advancement of man? We ourselves have taken care to point this out by recalling that it is impossible to accept "that in evangelization one could or should ignore the importance of the problems so much discussed today, concerning justice, liberation, development and peace in the world. This would be to forget the lesson which comes to us from the Gospel concerning love of our neighbor who is suffering and in need."

"We must not ignore the fact that many, even generous Christians who are sensitive to the dramatic questions involved in the problem of liberation, in their wish to commit the Church to the liberation effort are frequently tempted to reduce her mission

to the dimensions of a simply temporal project. They would reduce her aims to a man-centered goal: the salvation of which she is the messenger would be reduced to material well-being. Her activity, forgetful of all spiritual and religious pre-occupation, would become initiatives of the political or social order. But if this were so, the Church would lose her fundamental meaning. Her message of liberation would no longer have any originality and would easily be open to monopolization and manipulation by ideological systems and political parties."

"With regard to the liberation which evangelization proclaims and strives to put into practice one should rather say this:

— it cannot be contained in the simple and restricted dimension of economics, politics, social or cultural life; it must envisage the whole man, in all his aspects, right up to and including his openness to the absolute, even the divine Absolute;

— it is therefore attached to a view of man which it can never sacrifice to the needs of any strategy, practice or short-term efficiency.

Hence, when preaching liberation and associating herself with those who are working and suffering for it, the Church is certainly not willing to restrict her mission only to the religious field and dissociate herself from man's temporal problems. Nevertheless, she reaffirms the primacy of her spiritual vocation and refuses to replace the proclamation of forms of human liberation; she even states that her contribution to liberation is incomplete if she neglects to proclaim Jesus Christ."

The Church links human liberation and salvation in Jesus Christ, but she never identifies them, because she knows through revelation, historical experience and the reflection of faith that not every notion of liberation is necessarily consistent and compatible with an evangelical vision of man, of things and of events; she knows too that in order that God's Kingdom should come it is not enough to establish liberation and to create well-being and development.

And what is more, the Church has the firm conviction that all temporal liberation, all political liberation — even if it endeavours to find its justification in such or such a page of the Old or New Testament, even if it claims for its ideological postu-

lates and its norms of action theological data and conclusions, even if it pretends to be today's theology — carries within itself the germ of its own negation and fails to reach the ideal that it proposes for itself whenever its profound motives are not those of justice in charity, whenever its zeal lacks a truly spiritual dimension and whenever its final goal is not salvation and happiness in God.

III. *Evangelization and Other Living Religions*

We are now approaching the most acute problem of the mission in Asia, namely, the new relationship of our Christian message with the existing living faiths of the Third World. We are at the same time approaching one of the most difficult questions of present day theology, made all the more difficult since the problems concerned cannot be adequately solved except by those personally acquainted from inside with these religions. So the answers cannot but be long in coming.

A. *Discovering the Kingdom*

What is required today is nothing more and nothing less than a new theological understanding of the role that 'non-Christian religions' or better still 'the living faiths of mankind' today play in the work of salvation. They and we must understand the saving activity of God in them. The deep and radical questions, that are to be investigated, and lived, solved in this context, constitute a long-term programme for mission work in the Third World. Research and experimentation must go hand in hand with a deeply prayerful and contemplative 'living in' with these religions, before we can come to any definite pronouncement on this matter, which will be vital for the entire future of 'mission work', of evangelization. Above all, the 'non-Christian religions' will stand up as formidable challenges to any missionary who dares to proclaim 'the infinite riches of Christ' to people, who may be much more deeply steeped in the experience of God. All our Christian communities in the Third World will have to face the same challenge if they evangelize, and still more if they do not evangelize!

The Church has rediscovered the deep conviction, (in fact she had never lost it, though some of her theologians, perhaps

many of them, did) that 'the light that was shining into the world' illumines every man, every human being in the Third World, with its divine splendour. Today with an openness of mind we can see the tremendous treasures God created in the countries of the Third World, the living religions which reflect this divine light, and are an everlasting glory to its Creator.

We may discover to our astonishment that Christ was (and still is) present in an eminent way in the Third World much before any Christian messenger reached there. What is more: Christ may have revealed himself in new dimensions, which may not be contained in this particular way, as we have understood Him up to now in our so called Christian 'theology', which is always a fragmentary representation of the infinite riches of Christ and of his kingdom. It is one of the most thrilling thoughts that the mission of the Church in Asia tomorrow will be, not only to bring Christ and his Church to this immense continent, the cradle of mankind's history, but also to discover with astonishment and amazement and immense joy, the presence of this hidden Christ in his own home continent. We will realise that these Living Faiths are not so much fortresses to be conquered, and perhaps razed to the ground, but rather tabernacles to be lovingly opened with the love of the Lord, to be beautified and perfected by His saving presence. We will also realise that for all men, and for all religions, Jesus is the Liberator from all that enslaved them. 'The words of Christ are at once words of judgment and grace, of life and death, for it is only through putting to death that which is old, that we can come to the newness of life' (AG 8).

If this should be true, it will have some far-reaching consequences for all our mission work. We will have to go about with much less self-assurance, and will have to listen much more to the promptings of the Spirit, which may show us wonders we have been overlooking up to now. It is in this case very probable that the missions will have to pass through a *kenosis* similar to the one which was manifested in the baptism of the Lord, when the Redeemer of the world, ready to dispense his immense riches of truth and love, went to his precursor, John the Baptist, to empty himself completely, in order to be filled with the plenitude of the Spirit. It is almost impossible to imagine what richness may be awaiting a new type of Christianity that is no longer

European and western, but genuinely Asian, once this process is initiated and finally brought to completion.

B. *The Necessary Kenosis*

(i) *The Unique Mediator*

This will be a *kenosis*, a *metanoia* for both the Church, that it may become the Kingdom, and for other Living Faiths that they may be perfected and beautified into the New Jerusalem. For other religions, the first, and the essential change will be the acceptance of Christ. 'In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days He has spoken to us by a Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things' (Heb. 1,1-2). This will be the *kenosis* asked of all Living religions so that they may be offered to the Father, that they keep themselves open and allow themselves to be inspired by the message of Jesus; he belongs not only to Christians but to all men. His total dependence on God; his absolute trust in him; his unconditional commitment to the struggle of the people; his faith in human dignity, in equality, brotherhood; his conviction that God will prevail over all powers of evil; that love is stronger than hatred, are inspirations to all.

(ii) *Personal Redeemer*

Another element will be the acceptance of a personal saviour. This implies a concept of personal sin. No one can become of the Kingdom unless he 'loses his life'. Christ the Redeemer came to give his life as a ransom for many. It is from our sinfulness that He freed us. It is this liberation from all what is worldly, this conversion from selfish values to the beatitudes, which Christ the Liberator of sinful man offers to the Third World, which has yearned for the 'real', for the Nirvana, a freedom from sin, not only social, but first of all from personal sin. So *metanoia* which is the beginning of the Kingdom, is not, first of all, a new outlook, like Gandhian Philosophy or Marxist brotherhood. It is a liberation from sin. Without this liberation, the Kingdom will be closed. So the mission of the Church is to give this awareness of our littleness, our wickedness before God, and the assurance

that Jesus through his sacrifice sanctified for ever all his elect, individually and in his Church.

(iii) *Lord of History*

A third element in the *metanoia* of Living Faiths — we saw above how much they will contribute to the richness of the Kingdom — is the acceptance of worldly realities of time, of matter. There is a tendency among many of them to forget the meaning of history, of the values of temporal realities.

The African peoples know only two dimensions of time: a long past and a dynamic present. The future as such, had no value in their thought. For them, history did not move towards a point in the future but strove to re-establish the origins, to adapt the present to the past. Asiatic religions remain trapped in the cycle of birth and rebirth. The neighbours of the people of Israel, the Babylonians and Canaanites believed in gods that had fixed the world at the beginning for all time. They had no new horizon towards which a people could journey. In contrast to all these, the God of Israel was a God of nomads who must ever continue their journey. Christ has once for all broken the barrier of death (Rom. 6, 9) and through the breach has opened up for us an everlasting future.

Hence as a part of their *kenosis*, in their becoming the Kingdom, Living Faiths must accept Christ the Liberator as the Lord of History, as the Liberator of entire man, of society. Religions must, through this *metanoia*, provide both an intense union with God and the renewal of unjust human structures. Hence God experience in Jesus will have social implications. The Kingdom established by the preaching of the Word will have both the vertical dimension of sacramentality and the horizontal one of liberation theology. The new Jerusalem, will include a new social order grounded in-a-God-experience in Jesus.

IV. *Sociological Implications of Baptism*

It is important to pay attention to the difference of the meaning of Baptism in the theological tradition of the Church, and its sociological implications.

There are many in the Asian continent, certainly in India, who know and love Christ, but will not be of the Church. They explicitly exclude Baptism as an unbecoming change of one's society; the Church, as unnecessary in going to Christ whom they venerate. Due to various sociological factors, sometimes Baptism appears to them as a sign, not of a new life, but of a new society with its roots abroad; as a giving up of a society of their birth, as the beginning of an ostracism in their family. One cannot say with certitude exactly how many such persons there are, but they would seem to surpass the pitiful number of Christians. They know and love Christ but they do not wish to be part of the Church. Mahatma Gandhi is a good illustration of this group. While they yearn for the saving activity of God, they are afraid of what is presented as his kingdom.

What is the responsibility of the Church towards the growing number of these people, who are interiorly very much committed to Christ though sacramentally, i.e. by Baptism, they do not desire to be of Christ's Church?

How is the 'kingdom' to be presented to this growing group? Does the kingdom begin with Baptism? With the desire to be of Christ fully? What is the mission of the Church towards this group? To urge them to Baptism? To wait for the growth of their numbers, till perhaps in a generation or two, they understand and desire Baptism, and the fullness of communion in Christ? How far is it advisable to keep silent about the necessity of Baptism?

The problem is not completely new. The working paper of 1974 Synod of Bishops spoke of 'those many who though they have been baptised, do not share the life of the Church', do not live as Christ's. They have the fulness of sacramental commitment but very little, if any at all, of personal commitment. Can we think of another group that has almost the fulness of personal commitment, but no sacramental incorporation because sociological factors hinder them? Is the kingdom i.e., God's saving activity in Baptism, or in a personal commitment? If both cannot be hoped simultaneously, what is the mission of the Church now to those millions of the Third World?

One can discuss the question further. With the old 'mission' concept, the passport for the citizens of God's kingdom was Bap-

tism. Very few of the heroic missionaries and fewer of the theological theoreticians of the past realized that 'Baptism' means something very different in many of the Third World countries, from what it means in Scripture. We must accept that the sacrificial element of the commitment to Christ is an essential dimension of our Faith. This consists in the death to self, a complete conversion to God. But many other implications of Baptism are due to historical accretions. When the Apostles baptized the first Jews, little changed externally. Christ entered fully into their personal lives and created at the same time a new Christian community that adored the Father in spirit and in truth. All the rest remained the same. Even when the first 'pagans' were baptized in the Greek-Roman world, things remained more or less the same. When Roman citizens were baptized, they remained Romans as before. It is not so with the people of the Third World who were baptized. In many of these countries, especially in the Asian continent, Baptism often meant and still means a radical *social* change. In India, for example, the one who is baptized automatically passes over into an entirely new system of law that henceforth governs his marriage, his property rights and his entire social life, and in most cases cuts him off socially from his former background, the very root from which he draws his life.

These vital implications, which an essentially religious act, Baptism, has for the life of baptised Asians, have often been overlooked by theologians, missionaries and Church planners. This question of Baptism in its socio-legal implications for most Asians should be taken up for serious scrutiny by a congress like ours, that wants to convey the good news of Jesus Christ to the Asian people and others of the Third World in similar situations. This vital topic I find missing on the agenda of this congress and I believe we will miss a good deal, if we by-pass this key issue: mission and conversion, Baptism and its social consequences for the people of the Third World, especially the Asian continent. We must see this problem in its particular context, in the context of 'anti-conversion bills', which is very different from the context in which it appears, for instance, in the west.

Certainly, the final goal can be formulated in traditional terms as the incorporation of the peoples of the Third World

into the people of God in Jesus Christ through Baptism, reaching its fullest union in the Eucharist and then spreading out to establish new communities of love centred around the altar and the bishop. Was it a realistic goal or an illusion and a pious wish of some of the best missionaries? Could Baptism be separated from the entire cultural, social and religious life of those who had accepted Christ as their new Lord and Master?

Vatican II in its Mission Decree has spoken a language very different from the one used by the previous evangelizers: it had recognized the inner values of non-christian religions, thus giving a new emphasis to the saving activity of God in regions whose living religions exercise great influence.

Conclusion

One thing is certain: only a servant Church will be able to follow in the footsteps of her Servant Messiah. It has to be a radical *kenosis*, evidently a painful one. The great temptation of the Churches in the Third World will be the same as the temptation that accompanied the Lord's mission, namely, not to be a Servant Messiah but to achieve his mission in his own strength and power, the false notions of the Kingdom which the Lord condemned.

A. The Church of the Poor

Another consequence is not less evident: if the Church is ever to fulfill this role of the Servant Messiah, it must be the Church of the Poor. Time and again this topic has come up in big congresses in various parts of the Third World, and yet the situation has not changed substantially even now. The Churches in the Third World continue to give the appearance of association with the higher classes of society, of relying on the power of money and prestige, in spite of all the detachment from earthly things, real and imaginary, which we claim to practise.

An immense new orientation will mark the new course of the Third World missions: the firm commitment to poverty as an essential ingredient for a credible proclamation of the Gospel, receiving everything from the Father.

Though we mention it only now, the first priority in our work of evangelization must be given, from the very first stages of our missionary witness and proclamation, to the presentation of the good news seen as 'total liberation' of the socially and economically oppressed. This is the topmost priority that has to be proclaimed in the Third World under the given circumstances, before time runs out for the missions and other forces take over. China's example, whatever one may say against it, will last as a powerful model for rebuilding the Third World in the same fashion. We should have no illusions: religion will be severely tested in the Third World, and the test will be precisely the social question. No religion, be it Christianity, Islam or Hinduism, that is unable to create a world in which justice dwells, has a chance of seeing much of the third millenium.

B. Ongoing Renewal

Just as the public mission work of the Lord started with a clarion call for conversion, so also the new phase of the world mission starts with a similar call which is expressed repeatedly, for instance, in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 15: "The Church is the people of God immersed in the world and often tempted by idols and therefore always needs to hear the proclamation of the mighty works of God'... in brief, this means that she has a constant need of being evangelized, if she wishes... to proclaim the Gospel. The Second Vatican Council recalled and the 1974 Synod vigorously took up again, this theme of the Church which is evangelized by constant conversion and renewal, in order to evangelize the world with credibility."

Some of the salient features which could act as the criteria of a genuine conversion of the converted ones would be the realization that mission work is the over-flow of the Christ experience, and therefore can never exist without a deep concomitant contemplation and life of prayer. Mission work is not in the first place, as is mistakingly thought by many, a question of finances and personnel, but the over-flow of the Christ experience into others. This presupposes in the missionary a deep, genuine life of prayer.

C. The Church of Hope

The Church in the Third World has to be the Church of hope. In the midst of the complete absurdity that life can produce; the poverty, misery, oppression, injustice that exists in the world, the Christian believes that life has a meaning. He knows that salvation history is realised not only in the mighty works of God for his chosen people and in the recorded actions of Jesus so long ago. To believe in salvation history we have also to involve ourselves in the activity and movement God inspires today.

There is a feeling of worthlessness and hopelessness among many peoples in the Third World. To these people, the Church has to be a sign of hope. We must believe, that beyond all our horizons, God awaits us with the promise of his kingdom. For God is always the God of the Exodus and of the Resurrection; He is always ahead of us on our way, leading us out of captivity, of the unfree conditions we have come to terms with, into the land of freedom.

The Church has to be a sign of this hope to the Third World. The Lord who rose from the dead, lives. He will surely come as Redeemer, as Liberator. "Write these things. They are trustworthy and true". (Rev. 21, 5)

Our attitude should not be one of fear and despair, but of immense expectation. The Lord of history will manifest His mighty deeds in this world of ours.

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