

EVANGELIZING PRESENCE

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Last year, when I was in Washington, D.C., I met a young French Jesuit Scholastic studying labor relations. We had an interesting conversation about the priest-worker movement in France, where priests actually live as laborers, working in factories and mines. This is an effort of the Church to enliven the faith of one of the secularized and de-Christianized sectors of a society that had once been deeply Catholic. He narrated an experience he had while living and working among factory workers as a Jesuit Novice. One day, a worker mentioned to him that he was building a model of a church out of match sticks and asked for advice on where to place the different parts of the church, such as the altar, the confessional, the bell tower. The young Jesuit Novice was happy to help him in this. Some days afterward, the worker called him and said, "I want to give this model of the Church to you." The young novice was overwhelmed, saying, "You have worked so hard on it, why don't you keep it. There is no need to give it to me." The worker responded, "Please accept it. It means a lot for me to give it to you." The worker had discovered that this young man who had been working with him was a religious preparing for the priesthood. The young Jesuit Novice's presence in the midst of the laborers had touched him personally. He remembered the faith of his youth, the faith he had not practiced for so many years. There was awakened a yearning to return to the Church, a yearning for God. The young novice noticed a certain sadness about the laborer as he talked about the Church, almost a desire to be welcomed back into the Church. In some wonderful and mysterious way, the process of evangelization was taking place.

Here in the Philippines, the Church is alive and vibrant; the symbols of the faith are strong. Yet, there is the realization that many of the faithful are not effectively reached by the Church, and there is an increasing secularization taking place, especially among the Westernized elite. What has taken place in many European countries formerly deeply Catholic but now secularized and de-Christianized could take place here in the Philippines. The old faith that is merely cultural, traditional, and pietistic is in danger of being swept away by the winds of social change and of becoming irrelevant to the real issues of life.

The Catholic Church is aware of this danger and is intensifying its efforts at promoting evangelization. However, its understanding of evangelization is key for the life and mission of the Church. One of the great papal documents in the modern Church is Pope Paul VI's Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Evangelization in the Modern World, issued on December 8, 1975.¹

There the late Holy Father says that it is not enough to define evangelization in terms of proclaiming Christ to those who do not know him or of preaching, and conferring Baptism and other sacraments. (17)² This is only part of the reality. Evangelization is in fact the totality of the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. (14) For the Church, evangelizing means bringing the Good News to all the strata of humanity and, through its influence, transforming humanity from within and making it new. (18) It is a complex process made up of varied elements which are complementary and mutually enriching. These elements include the renewal of humanity, the evangelization of culture, the primary importance of witness of life, the need of explicit proclamation of the Gospel, a vital and community acceptance, and apostolic initiative. (24) This evangelization must proclaim a transcendent and eschatological salvation in Jesus Christ, beginning in this life but fulfilled only in eternity. (27) This evangelization would not be complete if it did not take account of the unceasing interplay of the Gospel and man's concrete life, both personal and social. (29) Between evangelization and human advancement including development and liberation - there are in fact profound links. (31) The message of salvation in Jesus Christ should be proclaimed without reduction or ambiguity. (32) It must envisage the whole man, in all his aspects, right up to and including his openness to the absolute, even the divine Absolute. (33) The Church is certainly not willing to restrict her mission only to the religious field and to dissociate herself from man's temporal problems. (34) Evangelization will never be possible without the action of the Holy Spirit. (75) Through the Holy Spirit, the Gospel penetrates to the heart of the world, for it is he who causes people to discern the signs of the times - signs willed by God - which evangelization reveals and puts to use in history. (75)

That is the heart of the teaching of *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, regarding the nature of authentic evangelization, a teaching that has been clearly continued by Pope John Paul II, and beautifully expressed in the

¹Pope Paul VI *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation On Evangelization in the Modern World, (Pasay City: St. Paul Publications, 1976).

²These numbers refer to sections of *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

in the Puebla Conference, the meeting of the Latin American bishops in 1979, which spoke of "liberating evangelization." So, we ask, if this is so clearly the teaching of the Church, why is it not such a dynamic and living reality in the life of the Church? My analysis is that people simply do not understand what integral evangelization is. For many, they do not have an integral faith life. There is a dichotomy between their faith life and their human life. They have compartmentalized their religion. Of course, all this is a matter of degree, but that is my point: there is a need for the Church to promote a more integral and holistic faith response in the lives of all its people allowing the Gospel to permeate every area of life.

In the light of the foregoing, I believe that integral evangelization is the basic vision that should permeate all activities within the Church. I have tried to foster and promote this vision in my own apostolate, especially in teaching and reflecting together with my faculty members in the Theology Department of the Ateneo de Davao University as well as with our graduate students in our Graduate Theology Program. In this issue of *Tambara I*, I want to share with you the fruit of some of these endeavors in the hope that a fuller explicitation and understanding of integral evangelization will lead to a greater actualization of a reality already present in the life of the Church, especially here in the Philippines.

Allow me to begin by defining integral evangelization: the proclaiming of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament bringing about a personal conversion impelling one to a greater involvement in the process of humanization, the process of true human development and liberation. The evangelization process must, therefore, not stop at the point of personal conversion but must lead to active involvement in the life of the Church and in fostering the human. To stop after the experience of personal conversion without active involvement in the efforts of daily life will result in the conversion experience being lost and the person falling back to where he was before. There is too much passivity in the Church, especially among many of the laity. There is a need to promote dynamic active participation in the life and mission of the Church. The evangelized are called to become evangelizers. The evangelizer must proclaim a clear message of salvation in Jesus Christ, a message that must not be divorced from life but must permeate and penetrate concretely all areas of life. Some who have experienced conversion do become active but only in spiritual activities. This is good, but it is not enough. It does not fully manifest the power of the Gospel coming into touch with the realities of people's lives.

Furthermore, integral evangelization would be significantly

actualized by promoting the following: 1) the fostering of an evangelizing presence of the Church in the world; 2) the transformation of the Church into a community of dialogue; and 3) a more effective involvement of the Church in authentic efforts for human development and liberation.

First, there is the need to define, explicitate, foster and actualize an evangelizing presence of the Church in the world. Such a presence would allow the Gospel to permeate and penetrate all areas of human endeavor and renew it from within. Why is it that so many people simply do not seem to care about the Gospel message? Why is it that so many people look upon the Church and faith in Jesus Christ as meaningless? Why are so many caught in a materialistic way of life oblivious to spiritual values? Yet, why at the same time are so many people searching for meaning in life? There is a deep hunger in all men and women for God. Failure to respond to it has resulted in an emptiness and restlessness among them. There is a need for the Church to fill this void with the message of salvation, with the Word of God. What is needed is to explicitate and actualize this presence in symbols that would touch the deepest recesses of the human heart yearning for life, giving witness to that Mysterious Reality, the encounter with Whom will evoke the response of a generous faith. There is a need to spell out the symbolism and signs of this evangelizing presence. Two key areas for this in the life of the Church are the fostering of community and the actualizing of mission.

This leads us to our second point: the Church should become a community of dialogue. We are only too aware that our world is a world of alienation: within ourselves, between ourselves and others, and between ourselves and God. Left to ourselves, there would be no hope of healing. Fortunately, this alienation has been shattered by the coming of Jesus Christ. He enables us to approach the Father. "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." (John 14: 6) In enabling us to fulfill our transcendent drive to union with God, and community, Jesus enables us to become more fully human, to become more fully who we are called to be. Furthermore, he heals our brokenness and forgives our sins, enabling us to grow in wholeness and humanness through his great gift of the sacrament of reconciliation. What a pity it is that this sacrament is in such disuse these days in spite of our continuous need for conversion, for healing, for reconciliation, for forgiveness. There is a need for the Church to make this special gift present in the life of her people, in the life of the world. It is essential for full humanization. It is so necessary for our life together.

The Church should therefore become a sign and instrument of this reconciling power of Jesus, a community of dialogue in which we both challenge and support each other in our efforts at evangelizing presence. There is a basic unity in the Church which must be realized, but we must not expect homogeneity in the Church. There are many different expressions of the faith, many different ecclesiologies, Christologies, ideologies, political orientations. A key problem in the life of the Church today is to actualize unity amidst such diversity. What a shame that such differences do not bring forth the richness of diversity but the scandal of division. Those of one position tend just to speak with those of similar positions. What is worse, there is labelling, accusation, condemnation, and conflict. This is destructive of an evangelizing presence. Instead of these negative tendencies, there should be deepening of our union in the Lord Jesus Christ, and the realization that there are many ways to live this out. Among these, there must be efforts at dialogue, searching for the truth together, challenging each other if we believe there is no evangelizing presence in our respective approaches, and supporting each other if we believe there is. Of course, this is not easy. To do this well, we need facilitating leadership, true authority for service, able to bridge differences and bring people together. Community is always in process of becoming. A true community of dialogue is a true sign of evangelizing presence. Unless the Church is able to actualize this struggle for community within herself, how can she be a credible sign in proclaiming this to the world? Unless the Church actualizes this, she proclaims an empty

This leads to our third point, namely, that the Church must become significantly involved in efforts for human development and liberation. The mission of the Church is to foster and proclaim the Kingdom of God, to foster the Kingdom of love, peace, and justice in the midst of a world torn by hatred, violence, and injustice. Jesus Christ initiated this mission in his very Person. This therefore must be the mission of the Church in following her Lord. The Church must be a credible sign in fostering this mission. She cannot simply preach without action; otherwise, she preaches an irrelevant word. She must involve herself in the socio-economic and political realities of her people precisely to safeguard and uphold human dignity. She must accompany her people in their journey, sharing their pain as they struggle with the Cross embedded in their personal and social situations, while manifesting the powerful presence of the Risen Lord, always a hopeful sign. To do this well, the Church must foster all aspects of its social mission: the charitable, developmental, and

liberationist approaches.³

To focus on only one approach would be deficient. No one approach is sufficient in itself. Yet each makes a contribution to the development, liberation, and humanization of God's people. The charitable approach supplements the deficiencies of public services and tries to help the poor and destitute meet their basic needs. The Church has always been strong in this approach by sponsoring schools for the poor, hospitals, orphanages, low-cost housing, and nutrition and feeding programs. However, essential as the charitable approach is, it is not enough because it merely helps those in need to survive; it doesn't make them progress. Thus, there is also the need for the developmental approach which tries to give people skills to help themselves socio-economically. The Church has done this by fostering credit unions and cooperatives, promoting small-scale industries and local handicrafts, and the increase of agricultural production. Yet even these efforts are not enough because development efforts soon encounter the unjust structures in society that favor the powerful and wealthy and oppress the weak and poor. Thus, there is the need for the liberationist approach as well to make the poor aware of their own human dignity as well as the unjust structures. These people's organizations are either community or sectorally based, such as farmers, fishermen, or urban poor groups. The poor themselves are the agents of change. However, all efforts of the Church in the social sphere should and must be guided by Gospel values. Simply to engage in social action, community organizing, or conscientization efforts without being guided by and actualizing Gospel values would not be calling forth the power of the Spirit to help in the effort. What is needed is both competence and evangelizing presence. This is true for every apostolate of the Church, whether it be charitable, developmental, or liberationist.

In fostering evangelizing presence, the Church must be contextualized, fostering the process of inculturation, going to the roots of culture, challenging and revitalizing it with the presence of God's powerful Word. The contexts of the local Churches differ. There is certainly a difference in the contexts of First and Third World Churches. Yet, whatever the context, the basic reality is the same. One reason why many of the local Churches in the Third World experience a more dynamic faith life than their sister Churches in the First World may be that they have been forced to respond to the severe socio-

³Ralph C. Salazar, "Justice, Social Action, and the Church," *NASSA News* 12 (June 1980); 2-6.

economic and political realities which have violated the humanity of their people. That response in faith has brought much vitality to the life of the Church. Perhaps the seeming irrelevance of the Church in the First World is caused by a low level of response to the problems facing her people. This may be so because the degree of material prosperity and economic and political security in the First World seems to call for a less urgent response to the needs of the people. However, the First World Churches must realize that although the problems are different, there are also urgent demands of their people that they must respond to. Notice that I am not saying that the First World Churches are not responding to the needs of their peoples, but that the type, level, and actualization of that response clearly affects the faith life of these Churches. The local Churches of the First World can learn much from the pastoral experiences of their sister Churches in the Third World.

Ultimately, this matter of evangelizing presence leads to the question of the role of the laity in the Church. The tendency in the Catholic Church has been to depend too much on the hierarchy and the religious. This has resulted in the passivity of many of the laity. What is needed is to call them forth to a more responsible and active participation in the life and mission of the Church. Since the laity are characterized by their secular nature, they are in the privileged position of being able to bring the Gospel into every area of life: socio-economic, political, and cultural. They need a spirituality that will sustain them in their professional and familial lives. They need to be given freedom and trust to enable them to do their thing. To allow this to develop harmoniously is another critical area in the life of the Church. Their empowerment is essential for proclaiming the Gospel in every area of human endeavor. This is not to minimize the role of the hierarchy and the religious in the life of the Church. Their role will continue and even grow in the evangelizing efforts of the Church. But there is a need to further empower the laity to be true proclaimers of the Word primarily by the witness of their lives in their everyday activities.

The challenge the Church faces today therefore is the degree of its actualization of integral evangelization. Of course, it is there in the life of the Church, but there is a need to intensify the vitality and dynamism of its presence, allowing the Spirit to move within history with meaningful symbols, awakening within the yearning hearts of men and women an authentic experience of life and fulfillment made possible through Jesus Christ. This is the evangelizing presence that the world needs and has a right to demand from the Church today.