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MISSIONARY CHALLENGES IN INDIA

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Foreword

This paper was prepared by Archbishop Marcello Zago in his capacity of Secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. He was to deliver it at the National Symposium on Mission to be held in Shillong India in July 2001. The preparation of the text was apparently finished in June 2000 that is about eight months prior to his death. An entry in his diary for June 25 2000 notes that he had made a mistake in the year. He was away on a working-vacation at the seaside as was his custom when a telephone call from his personal secretary reminded him that the symposium was not in July of the current year but the following year 2001.

Archbishop Zago died on March 12 2001. The paper was presented posthumously at the symposium in Shillong by Fr. Fernando Galbiati P.I.M.E. President of the Pontifical Missionary Union who represented the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples at that meeting.

A fine summary of the missiological thinking of a man who dedicated his life to the mission of the Church OMI *Documentation* by the presentation of this paper on the occasion of the second anniversary of his death wishes to mark with gratitude Marcello Zago's contribution to the missionary life of the Oblate Congregation and of the Church.

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The missionary challenges that one faces in India have particularly demanding aspects. India is a real mosaic of cultures some of which are highly developed and at the same time it has enjoyed a certain unity for the last thousand years. In its own context compared to other countries and to human history it has produced an unprecedented number of philosopher-theologians and "schools". It is the cradle of autochthonous religions and the receptacle of religions from other parts. It is open towards the various spiritual paths but in its history has known a succession of predominant religions: the traditional religions were supplanted by Hinduism and Hinduism by Buddhism only to return once more to Hinduism. These changes did not always come about in peaceful ways but conversions are an incontestable fact even if they took place in a particular cultural context.

Christianity has roots going back nearly two thousand years but it still remains a minority and is generally considered a foreign religion. Alongside the earlier Christians of Kerala the modern missions have given birth to a few other Christian groupings and in more recent times the conversions among the tribal

peoples have given rise to some vibrant churches in the north of the country. But the country and its culture as a whole have not been touched by this Christian presence. Foreign missionaries remain mostly as an historical memory. The active missionaries working in the various parts of the country are of Indian origin mostly from Kerala and they experience problems of adaptation that are not always easily resolved. The diversity of rites stirs up tensions and competition and the real focus is not always Jesus Christ.

In this complex and rich context what is the mission of the church? Is it something that the Church finds and defines according to circumstances or is it something given to it by the Founder and flowing from its very nature?

Missiona task entrusted

The Church does not give itself its own mission but rather receives it. In the New Testament Christ gives a precise mandate to the Church. According to the Synoptics the community of disciples is invited by Christ to "baptize" and "teach" (Mt 28:19-20) to "preach the Gospel and baptize" (Mk 16:15-16) to [preach] "repentance for the forgiveness of sins" and "to be his witnesses" (Lk 24:47; Acts 18).

Certainly each evangelist underlines one or other aspect of the mandate (cf. RM 23). While the Synoptics insist on proclamation (Mark) on community building (Matthew) or on witness (Luke) John who is the only one to speak explicitly of "mandate" underlines the Trinity as the source and aim of mission (cf. Jn 17:3; 20:21).

Christ entrusted other tasks to his community of disciples: they should be *salt* (cf. Mt 5:13) *light* (cf. Mt 5:14) *leaven* (cf. Lk 13:20-21) in the society to which they are sent or where they find themselves. These images express an active role of the Church in the world that is carried out through life and not only through works. And then there is the new commandment this commandment which is concrete love and is given priority not only towards the brothers (cf. Jn 13:14) but towards all (cf. Mt 5:44) on the model of the Father (cf. Mt 5:43-48) and of Christ himself (cf. Jn 15:12).

One could say that Christ has left two great commandments: to love and to proclaim the Gospel. These are not opposed to one another but are complementary; both lead to the experiential knowledge of God that can be shared by all of humanity.

The mission of the Church in relation to the world is first of all received from Christ. The Church is called to carry it out to incarnate it. The forms of mission however have to be sought; the "how" must be always invented according to the situations and possibilities. But the task of loving and giving witness are permanent. If one of these two commandments is denied in principle or in fact the Church is not only unfaithful but it destroys itself.

To unite not oppose

In discerning missionary activity it is necessary to distinguish what is essential and fundamental from the practical means of application. One has to recognize what ought to be done and distinguish it from what is concretely possible.

One must recognize the necessity of witness of proclamation of community formation even if it is not always possible to carry these out in the concrete situation or if they demand special steps and forms. These activities have always been recognized as an integral part of mission. The ways of fulfilling them however have not always been understood and carried out in the same way. This does not mean that the forms are not important; they can upset or destroy the ecclesial activities themselves. For example the lack of inculturation and respect for cultures has in certain cases made the proclamation unintelligible and the resulting communities irrelevant in their context.

The aim of mission is three-fold as recognized by *Redemptoris Missio* (cf. 18-20): it is to announce the Good News so as to allow persons to choose Christ and be converted to Him; it is to help disciples enter the ecclesial community through baptism and Christian initiation (cf. RM 26); it is to promote evangelical values for the growth of the Kingdom which is already present beyond ecclesial confines and stretching towards its eschatological fulfillment (cf. RM 20). "The Kingdom is the concern of everyone: individuals, society and the world. Working for the Kingdom means acknowledging and promoting God's activity which is present in human history and transforming it. Building the Kingdom means working for liberation from evil in all its forms. In a word the Kingdom of God is the manifestation and the realization of God's plan of salvation in all its fullness" (RM 15).

"The Church is effectively and concretely at the service of the Kingdom. This is seen especially in her preaching which is a call to conversion... The Church then serves the Kingdom by establishing communities and founding new particular churches... The Church serves the Kingdom by spreading throughout the world the gospel values which are an expression of the Kingdom and which help people to accept God's plan." (RM 20).

The settings and aims of missionary activity are therefore wide-ranging and allow the Church to live out its mission in some form in every kind of situation. Ideally every local church is called to accept and fulfill all the aims of mission even if it cannot exercise them all in certain situations (cf. RM 57). It is not by free choice that one limits oneself to one or the other but because of external impediments. This can happen also in certain parts of India. While acknowledging certain priorities in a given context a Christian community must integrate the various aims and not arbitrarily choose one to the exclusion of the others.

Principal Activities today

Concretely the various goals are realized through specific activities. In his missionary encyclical John Paul II focused on some goals that "have particular importance in the present situation of the Church and the world" (RM 41). These are witness, initial proclamation, invitation to conversion and baptism, the formation of local churches in which the ecclesial basic communities are a force for evangelization, inculturation, dialogue with the brothers of other religions, the promotion of development through the formation of consciences (cf. RM 42-59).

If one compares these directives of the pontifical Magisterium with the orientations in the documents of FABCone sees that the horizons of the former are much wider and more comprehensive than the latter at least if we stop at the first assembly at Taipei in 1974 as is the tendency. If on the other hand one takes account of the declarations of the various general assemblies that better represent a certain episcopal magisterium then the similarities are much greater.

The Synod of Asia and for Asia expressed authoritatively in the exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* better reflects the missionary doctrine of the Magisterium. It is normal that Asians underline the importance of dialogue and inculturation as these are much more necessary and new in the Asian context. And it is likewise normal that the Roman indications underline proclamation to a greater extent as this is the primary task entrusted by Christ to his Church.

The important thing is to not detach what the Spirit is saying to the Church in today's world and to be attentive to his directives.

To be and not only to do

Mission is not expressed only nor principally in doing. It is first of all the expression of the superabundance of being as in the Trinity (cf. LG 1-5) and as in Christ. "Since the Good News is Christ there is an identity between the message and the messenger between saying doing and being. His power the secret of the effectiveness of his actions lies in his total identification with the message he announces: he proclaims the Good News not just by what he says or does but by what he is" (RM 13).

This should also be true for the Church and for every missionary. Missionary effectiveness is more the consequence of being than of doing (cf. RM 77). Inculturation itself should not be a kind of superficial "make-up" but should be the expression of an experience of a way of being in Christ. Thus the community and the person becomes a sign. The same witness which is the first form of evangelization (cf. RM 42) is not an external or verbal exhibition of oneself but rather the transparent expression of a life in the Spirit. In this way the true missionary is a saint (cf. RM 90): "A missionary is really such only if he commits himself to the way of holiness. [...] The universal call to holiness is closely linked to the universal call to mission. Every member of the faithful is called to holiness and to mission." (RM 90). "Through holiness of life every Christian can become a fruitful part of the Church's mission" (RM 77). "The missionary must be a contemplative in action. He finds his answer to problems in the light of God's word and in personal and community prayer. My contact with representatives of the non-Christian spiritual traditions particularly those of Asia has confirmed me in the view that the future of mission depends to a great extent on contemplation. Unless the missionary is a contemplative he cannot proclaim Christ in a credible way. He is a witness to the experience of God and must be able to say with the apostles: «that which we have looked upon... concerning the word of life... we proclaim also to you» (1 Jn 11-3)" (RM 91).

This dimension of mission while it is true everywhere is particularly important in India where religion is evaluated first of all from the quality of its inner experience and not so much from the effectiveness of its works. The Christian can learn to be challenged by the spiritual experience of the members of other religions but he must also assume the specific way of Christian holiness that is participation in the divine life which finds expression not only in the relationship with God but also with the neighbour. The divine-human charity becomes the atmosphere and the spring of every truly missionary activity which then becomes witness. The missionary encyclical concludes the chapter on the paths of mission with this eulogy on charity: "It is in fact these works of charity that reveal the soul of all missionary activity: *love* which has been and remains *the driving force of mission* and is also «the sole criterion for judging what is to be done or not done changed or not changed. It is the principle which must direct

every action and the end to which all action must be directed. When we act with a view to charity or are inspired by charity nothing is unseemly and everything is good»" (RM 60).

Collaborators and not Owners of the Mission

The mission does not belong to the Church and much less to individual Christians. The mission is God's. The Trinity is its source not in "*specie aeternitatis*" as a remote and initial cause but as a permanent source. The Spirit is the agent of mission (cf. RM ch. III) Christ is its model (cf. RM chs. II and IX) as the texts of the New Testament show. The Holy Spirit directs the mission of the Church as described in the Acts of the Apostles (cf. RM 24); it is he who promotes its inculturation (cf. RM 25) and makes the Church missionary (cf. RM 26-27); he is present and active in all times and places (cf. RM 28) going before and accompanying the activity of the missionaries (cf. RM 29).

The missionary must therefore allow himself be led by the Spirit so as to be transformed and guided by him (cf. RM 87). This demands that the individual missionaries and the community get on the Spirit's "wavelength" so as to discover his presence and be inserted into His saving work in persons and peoples. Missionary activity cannot start from zero but must continue that salvific process that the Spirit carries out in religions and in cultures and not only in individuals. An ecclesial discernment is necessary then knowing that it is the same Spirit that operates in the Church and in the world and who has operated in Christ (cf. RM 29). For this prayer is at the very heart of the mission because the Kingdom of God is a gift that should be asked for as Jesus indicated in his prayer (cf. RM 20).

Between the Spirit and the Word Incarnate there is no dichotomy. To the Spirit is attributed the activity and to Christ the role of exemplar. Christ is the model not only in what he teaches and does but also in what he is (cf. RM 13). The missionary too must live the mission with a coherent unity of life that is lived out in intimate communion with Christ (cf. RM 88). Paul in his Letter to the Philippians (25-8) described Christ's basic attitudes as "a total self-emptying which leads Christ to experience fully the human condition and to accept totally the Father's plan. This is an emptying of self which is permeated by love and expresses love. The mission follows this same path and leads to the foot of the cross" (RM 88).

It is this way of following Christ that gives sense to the persecutions and martyrdom that accompany the history of mission. "The supreme test is the giving of one's life to the point of accepting death in order to bear witness to one's faith in Jesus Christ. Throughout Christian history martyrs that is 'witnesses' have always been numerous and indispensable to the spread of the Gospel. In our own age there are many: bishops, priests, men and women, religious, lay people - often unknown heroes who give their lives to bear witness to the faith. They are *par excellence* the heralds and witnesses of the faith" (RM 45).

Faced with these facts of persecution there is no need to seek out first of all the methodological errors of the missionary work that might exist and that have to be admitted. What really matters is that these be recognized as an essential dimension of the mission. There is no Christian mission without the cross and self-sacrifice.

Concrete Challenges for the Mission in India

It is rash for a foreigner to try and give directions on missionary activity in a country like India. On the other hand someone who all his life has tried to follow concrete situations first in Asia and then throughout the whole world and reflecting on these in the light of developments in missiology can have something to say that could help in taking up the challenges in a more integrated way. It is in a spirit of humility and of service that I present these indications.

It seems to me that the first challenge for the Church in India concerns its adherence to Christ and to his Gospel that is the holiness of its members the obliging simplicity of its institutions a life that is transparent in prayer in the search for and the experience of God. This is what is expected by the religious culture of the country. It is what brings life to apostolic zeal and creativity. It is the basis of Christian authenticity and identity.

It is necessary therefore to have an integral or comprehensive vision of the mission of the Church even if it is not possible to always and everywhere fulfill all the demands involved. One cannot deny a particular aspect such as proclamation for the reason of not being able to act in a given context. And the missionary theologians have a particular responsibility for pointing out the concrete priorities of missions situating them however in a unified vision. Each dimension calls on the other even if each one has its own form. Dialogue inculturation and human development all carried on by Christians call on and find their full meaning in witness which is proclamation.

While catering for the integrity of the mission the Christian community must be available to carry out all the demands according to possibilities and the apostolic courage and charisms of its members. A particular church (diocese or parish) should try to plan harmonize and carry out all aspects of missionary activity to the extent that the possibilities allow them.

There are situations in which certain activities such as proclamation or dialogue or involvement for justice are impracticable. And yet it is possible to practice mission everywhere in some forms such as through presence or prayer. The Church as community and each individual Christian is always in a state of mission.

Proclamation as the witness of what is lived can often be practiced through informal contact through inter-religious dialogue and through collaboration. If one is authentically Christian then what he/she is living shows through. Proclamation as a proposal with a view to conversion and formation of Christian communities can be a fact in many parts of India particularly among the tribes of the north. And thus being at the heart of the missionary mandate the Church in India has the duty to respond to this opening.

Inter-religious dialogue is the great path of the Church in India to get to know and to become known to collaborate and to have influence both in terms of human progress and in the way of salvation. It is also the way for eliminating prejudices and building positive relationships. Through dialogue the Church becomes present as the companion on the journey and the instrument of salvation. In its various forms ranging from dialogue of life to the sharing of religious experiences from theological reflection to social involvement the Christian community makes its presence felt in the world to which it is sent. This demands a proper initiation and code of conduct just as for other activities.

Inculturation is a challenge that is clearly becoming more and more necessary. It ranges from adaptation of missionaries and Christians when they go to other cultures within the same country to making the local Church a comprehensible and challenging sign of what it is in Christ. It is not merely a ritual adaptation but a deep experience of Christ expressed in the Indian context. The Church in India finds itself in a unique situation from the philosophical point of view. Perhaps no other country can boast of a similar development as that of India. And the fact that such philosophy is rooted in a vision and in religious experience makes the challenge all the more serious and necessary.

Human development and commitment to justice are integral parts of the work of evangelization. They are necessary everywhere. In India and in a globalized world they bring with them particular demands and difficulties. They should question the traditional institutions of the Church such as schools and hospitals to evaluate their commitment and their incisiveness in society. An aspect of particular impact is that of overcoming the castes first of all within the Church and then in society. Respect and acknowledgement of the person is the point of departure and the dynamic heart of a commitment for justice and human development.

In conclusion the spontaneous question arises as to where one should begin and what should be given priority. The missionary encyclical gives a fairly simple answer but one that is difficult to implement. It is charity that helps to discern what should be given priority and for judging what is to be done (RM 60). We are talking about Christian charity which is rooted in God and which is expressed in love for the neighbour.

Besides developing a programme for integral evangelization as mentioned above it is necessary to welcome the charisms that the Holy Spirit inspires and which can give priority to one activity over another. Such charisms must be lived in an atmosphere of communion which respects and encourages the other charisms and other activities allowing for a complementarity that makes the integral nature of the mission effective.

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