

The Gospel to the World

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You will probably excuse me if I present you a paper pronouncedly life-and-context-related. Jesus looked at the fields, the flowers, the dust of the earth, and the distant skies; he looked at the sick, the toiling masses, the hungry, and the disoriented crowds. That was the starting point for his reflections, and for his sermons. I would invite the evangelizers, especially in this context the among the lay people of Asia, to look at the realities of this continent: painful, even alarming with violence and corruption, etc... and the same time encouraging, re-assuring, and hope-filled with many positive movements.

Many of the saints we admire lived in troubled times, but they knew how to look at the brighter side of things and build on limited possibilities even in extremely bad situations. Some had to face opposition that came up from enemies of the Church or totalitarian governments. They were harassed even put to death. However, many of them knew how to befriend opponents and elicit help from them. Not rarely, they were creative and drew strength from the very difficulties they confronted. For them, problems were possibilities, and crises were God-given opportunities; trying to go even beyond possibilities was sheer ecstasy. May be we can attempt something similar.

If we wait passively for better times, better facilities, better equipment, better personnel, better atmosphere to take up our work seriously, we would merely be deceiving ourselves. All we can do is to begin from just where we are, use the means we have, be happy with our present co-workers, and take the work at least one step forward. But in doing so, we may need to innovate, think afresh, look at things from a new angle, break new ground, win new collaborators, build up resources, adopt new directions and lead things to a new level of existence.

SECULARISATION VS. FUNDAMENTALISM

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There are many things that cause us worry in our times. In the field of Christian faith, we can see the great Sahara of the secularized world expanding in every direction. It may be less in Asia than other places, but even here intellectuals are seriously affected. God and the values of his Kingdom are ignored or marginalized in the media, politics, economy, entertainment, university, development works, and human promotion. The people whom we serve are continuously exposed to perspectives that ignore the transcendent. Our public debates, studies in natural and human sciences, programmes for the development of the human person at various levels, research objectives, intellectual efforts, goals that social movements set before themselves... everything evades the question whether there is anything beyond the visible and the tangible.

Coming closer home, in many of our own Catholic institutions, hospitals, schools, universities, training centres it is possible that a faith-vision is becoming blurred and faith formation is growing weak. Shall I make bold to say that our seminaries and houses of formation are under heavy pressure to look at things merely from a secular point of view...guided solely by highly secularized social and psychological theories?

There is the other trend too of growing Fundamentalism in Asia in reaction to secularization. In sharp response to the powerful secularization trend in the West and its impact on the rest of the world, there is a strong reassertion of indigenous religious traditions. And this tendency at times develops extreme forms, emphasizing unfortunately only certain external aspects of religion: superficial details, empty traditions, lifeless laws, fanatical self-expressions, and even militancy. Would I be wrong to say certain Catholic charismatic groups manifest a streak of this trend when they condemn other religions and take aggressive postures?

Such a trend is often linked with local politics and exaggerated forms of re-assertion of cultural and ethnic groups even going to the point of violence. Myths and legends are interpreted as history. Prejudices are strengthened. It expresses itself in closing the doors to missionaries, or restricting their area of activities (blasphemy laws like in Pakistan, "Freedom of religion" bill like in India), organizing mob resistance to evangelical activities, culminating in the burning of Churches, humiliation and even elimination of Church personnel.

People are pulled in the direction of secularization on the one hand, especially our young people studying in universities or employed by big companies, and Pentecostal sects on the other. My question is, is there a moderate option, a middle position in between: just being earnest and sincere believers? Can we be carriers of the message of that “middle path” avoiding fanaticisms? Can we be real evangelizers?

GLOBALIZATION VS. ASSERTION OF LOCAL, REGIONAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITIES

The Globalization of economy is a topic so widely discussed, I need not spend much time on it. We are fully aware of the impact that the prevalent global system has on the media, worldviews, outlooks, cultures, and attitudes. To the extent that the globalization may bring into existence an intelligible and practical system that can make international collaboration easier, it can be helpful:

- I. to the extent it offers job opportunities to people in the Third World;
- II. to the extent it encourages work culture and guarantees adequate remuneration;
- III. to the extent it stimulates economy;
- IV. to the extent that universal norms for ensuring transparency, accountability, mutual responsibility, fairness to the weak and protection of environment may be developed... to that extent globalization seems to be a welcome development.

On the other hand:

- I. to the extent that the global system threatens the people in the developed world with unemployment;
- II. to the extent that it exploits the people in the Third World who are treated as an anonymous mass of “cheap labour”;
- III. to the extent that the anonymity of the of the unregulated global market leaves room for the manipulation of people and diversion of resources into illegitimate hands on a massive scale, throwing out of gear the economy of nations, hurting the weakest groups and interests;
- IV. to the extent it ruins the environment and damages nature;

- V. and finally, to the extent that the system seeks to impose a monolithic culture on the whole of humanity, with the greatest danger to the world's feebler cultures and ethnic groups, it stands in need of serious correction.

There is another side to the picture: resistance to globalization is evident:

- I. those who look at the economic dimension, point out how local industries and indigenous economic skills are dying out;
- II. those whose interest is in the political field mourn the fact that the autonomy of their region or the sovereignty of their nation is being reduced;
- III. those who are proud of their cultural and ethnic identities are inconsolable seeing the daily erosion of their culture and the blurring of their ethnic boundaries to the point of disappearance of identities;
- IV. but others go further. They launch "culture wars" in stiff opposition. The moderates set up groups, launch programmes, and support movements that seek to revive cultural traditions, assert civilizational heritage, affirm ethnic identities, zealously promote dying languages, and politicize religiosity;
- V. there are also fierce clashes between different ethnic and cultural groups, exploitation of minorities and resistance in response, genocide and ethnic cleansing.

Pope Benedict XVI says that religious leaders should play a significant role in creating peace in society, "Peace, so longed for, will only be born from the joint action of the individual, who discovers his true nature in God, and of the leaders of civil and religious societies who—with respect to the dignity and faith of everyone—will be able to recognize and give to religion its noble and authentic role of fulfilling and perfecting the human person".¹

THE BOREDOM OF AFFLUENCE COMBINED WITH UNFAIRNESS TO OTHERS VS. VIOLENT STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE, EQUALITY

¹ BENEDICT XVI, Address to the new ambassadors at the presentation of the letters accrediting them to the Holy See. Clementine Hall, Thursday, 17 December 2009.

Under the present competitive global system, the lucky ones make great fortunes. Those that have had the advantage of belonging to a developed nation, or a leading segment of society; or those who had a good start due to education or for some other reason, move to better positions, as long as they are willing to exert themselves. While upwardly mobile groups are usually highly motivated and are hardworking, those who have already succeeded to make a fortune begin to get tired and bored after a while.

Boredom is often visible among the children and grandchildren of fortune-makers. They gradually grow weary, aimless, directionless, purposeless, and float through life. They begin to squander wealth, seek escape from boredom in a hedonistic lifestyle, take to addictions, drinks, drugs, sex; they find an ultimate solution to their weariness with life in suicide. Affluent nations like Japan and Korea report increasing number of suicides.

An abundance of wealth or even relative equalization of incomes does not necessarily bring into existence a happy society. An accumulation of “things” in one’s hands does not fill one’s heart. It does not make one contented. It is only people who can make people happy.

There are unlucky ones too. People fall behind in the rat-race for success. It may happen through their own fault or others’ fault, or due to unfair structures in society. When inequalities begin to increase and take rigid forms, troubles arise. Right down the centuries, there have been struggles of the less fortunate demanding justice for themselves. They continue to our own days taking different forms:

- I. some justice-fighters are genuine heroes, constantly appealing to the sense of fairness that is planted into human hearts. They seek to be fair to all parties concerned as they struggle for justice. This is the Gandhi-model;
- II. others adopt violent methods and win acceptability for violence by projecting an image of zeal for social equality, fairness, justice. Meanwhile they camouflage their own selfish interests in order to retain the leadership of their community and exploit its members;
- III. others may be merely outsmarting people in similar deprived conditions, who are equally in need of assistance, through their skill for the manipulation of the masses. Thus, even justice-fight itself becomes unjust when the smarter among the poor take advantage of others in similar or worse situations;

IV. the true justice-fighter ensures fairness in all directions: to oneself, one's party or community, to the other party, to all people around. He makes sure not to damage the economy, in which all have a legitimate stake.

Is it possible to be industrious, intelligent and creative in one's work in such way as to be a perfect success on the one hand, and preserve a sense of responsibility for the common good on the other? Can we bring the Gospel into actual situations of affluence (evoking responsibility for others) and into situations of poverty and injustice (inspiring an intelligent, effective and fair manner of claiming justice) ?

4. EXAGGERATIONS OF DIFFERENT KINDS

We have seen above one kind of exaggeration or the other. We see similar continuously in our daily life. Our personal exaggerations invite a personal resistance. Social exaggerations invite social resistance. We have already seen how rigid forms of inequality lead to violent struggle for justice. In all such cases, if we swing fanatically in one direction in one generation, the pendulum swings in the opposite direction in the next. As in civil life, so in Church life. Perceptive persons stand for the middle path. They adopt a moderate approach to things. Just for example,

- I. they try to be with the changing times and accept all good ideas, but hold on to what is central to the Christian heritage;
- II. they insert themselves into the secular realities of their day, but their life is characterized by religious earnestness;
- III. they love their nation, but have a universal (Catholic) outlook;

We have lived through a few decades of tension arising from various ways of looking at things:

- I. with regard to our Christian faith;
- II. with regard to norms guiding Christian living, worship and organization;
- III. with regard to the nature of our mission in the world: our services both in the secular and religious spheres.

We have experienced pulls in different directions. We have seen good and creative ideas stretched too far till they become counter-productive. Is there the possibility of taking an intelligent, balanced and committed position in our choices amidst diverse opinions? With regard, for example, to:

- I. freedom of the individual—and responsibility to the family and the community;
- II. autonomy of the secular—and a vision of faith that qualifies even the secular;
- III. assertion of one's culture—and a sense of belonging to the wider human family;
- IV. concern for the environment and for ecological balance—concern also for the economy and economic development;
- V. inculturation of liturgy—and the sense of the sacred and respect for liturgical norms;
- VI. innovation in Christian life and ministry—and continuity of traditions and pride in Church's history and a heritage.

The list is endless. There is a way of harmonizing things that look like opposites. Asians believe that when we bring things into harmony, we lay the foundation for a sure future and give shape to our destiny. Buddha is said to have chosen the Middle Path between extreme austerity and a life of luxury.

May our good sense and sincere faith (reason and religion) keep us perceptive, alert and balanced. That is the way of equipping our “minds with those things that are good and that deserve praise: things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and honourable” (Philip 4:8).

5. RESPONDING TO GOD'S INSPIRATION IN CONTEXT

We have looked at the situation. Understanding the situation is already half the solution. It is in responding to God's voice in context that we become innovative. He raised great saints to respond to a particular need in their society, as he did with Mother Teresa in Calcutta (Kolkata) or Father Damien of Molokai. And today God places us in these fast changing situations in Asia and entrusts us with a great responsibility for the society of our times. Jesus must be announced in every context. This is the challenge before our Christian laity today.

One of the reasons why we fail may be that we are offering to the society in which we live answers to questions that they are not asking, holding out assistance that they are not searching for. We have made the Church irrelevant in our context. We can avoid making this mistake if we are close enough to people. How can we be present to people?

Pope Benedict XVI said to a group of bishops recently, “It is our task not to let it [faith] remain merely a tradition but to recognize it as a response to our questions”.²

a) The Art of Presence—being Present to People

Herein lies the secret of the success of most achieving evangelizers: being close to the people whom they wanted to help, the faithful, ordinary people, peasants, workers, migrants, refugees, slum children, people uprooted from their communities, people who are helpless, young at risk, everyone.

We complain of violence and corruption. Persons get radicalized and take extreme positions, go over boundaries, adopt aggressive postures or develop deceptive ways, when they have no sense of belonging (to a family, a community, a brotherhood, a solidarity group, a network of friends). Young people rushing to the cities to pursue their studies or in search of jobs can reach a position when they do not belong to anyone. Can the Church provide them with a sense of belonging and the motivation to live a purposeful life? Can the Gospel be brought to their contexts?

Radicalization itself is an expression of a hunger for solidarity and mutual belonging. People readily gather round an idea, a new ideology, an issue, a cause, a grievance, a programme of action, a campaign against perceived injustice.

However, you will be surprised to find that even radical groups grow attentive to a balanced point of view, they respect genuine wisdom even when they seem to ignore it.

“With your closeness [to people] and your words, with material aid and prayer, with the appeal for dialogue and in the spirit of understanding that always seeks the common good of the people...you want to bear a positive and visible witness to Christ’s love...”.³

² IDEM, Homily in the Holy Mass for the imposition of the sacred pallium on Metropolitan Archbishops. Vatican Basilica, Monday, 29 June 2009.

³ IDEM, Address to the bishops of Argentina on their *ad limina* visit, Consistory Hall, Thursday, 30 April 2009.

Presence stands for availability: availability when people seek us, availability when we go out with determination to meet people in their own life-situations. That is a method of evangelization that cannot fail. We find Jesus going out continuously; so does Paul; so did the missionaries. Presence stands for encounter, interactions, helpfulness, human nearness, not mere geographical nearness.

b) The Art of Understanding (Persons and Cultures)

We spoke of human nearness, which implies communication. Which in turn presupposes understanding. There can be no communication, no genuine encounter without mutual understanding. It is a great compliment for an Evangelizer to be described as an ‘understanding person’. Our reaching out to others cannot become effective until we understand persons in their own contexts and situations.

A missionary understands very well the need for recognizing diversity of character in different persons in order to be of assistance to them. Norms of psychology can help if we are not blindly trapped into them. An Evangelizer understands also the need for recognizing diversity of culture in order to assist persons of different cultural and civilizational background. Anthropology and other social sciences can help.

Let me add one more word on culture. We must go beyond admiring the artistic dimension of a culture to the understanding of diverse worldviews, mental attitudes, inherited prejudices; inner priorities, compulsions and inhibitions that spontaneously arise in persons of a culture, when entering into dialogue with them. The first thing to do is to recognize there is such a thing as a meaning-scheme by which people live. You have to identify the configurations of your own culture through self-awareness, translate your dialogue-partner’s meanings into your own meaning-system and help them to understand your meaning through intelligible explanations.

Giant missionaries who worked among the indigenous communities of Asia (tribal people) adapting themselves to their cultures, have been eminently successful in passing on the message of the Gospel. This is fertile soil is still a promising field for active lay Evangelizers.

“...every people must integrate the message revealed into its own culture and express its saving truth in its own language”.⁴

Inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue in recent years have sought to widen the common ground between communities and to serve humanity in a purposeful manner.

In today’s globalized world, one cannot be blind to the forces of economy if one is serious about helping persons and communities in their efforts to solve their problems. Our struggle for justice and rights, will have a future only if it does not ignore the way that economy works. Everyone has a vested interest in it. On the other hand the economy that ignores the rights of persons who have a stake in it or ignores the spiritual dimension of the human person, is bound to fail in the long term. Thus, our dialogue can make meaning only if we take into consideration also economic and other social realities.

Likewise, at no stage can ethical principles be ignored.

“We all know that a fundamental element of the crisis [economic crisis] is the ethical deficit in economic structures. It has been understood that ethics is not something “outside” the economy, but “inside” and that economy does not function if it does not include the ethical element”.⁵

c) The Art of Responding—to contexts, obstacles

An Evangelizer must remain creative and alert, responding to the needs and possibilities of the situations of our times. The possibility for sharing the Gospel in the different countries of Asia would be different: Democratic or non-democratic, majoritarian or those that respect minorities, countries where religious sharing is allowed and those that do not allow propagation of the faith absolutely. However, even in the midst of difficulties, there is a manner of responding to every situation, and answering to the need of every person. Even stiff opposition, as it happened in Orissa (India), has something to teach us. We learn, we respond, we change strategies, and make a break through.

We further need to translate the message to the needs of people of various categories: of children at their games, intellectuals in the university, politicians canvassing for the next

⁴ IDEM, General Audience, Saint Peter's Square, Wednesday, 17 June 2009

⁵ IDEM, Interview during the flight to Africa, Apostolic Journey to Cameroon and Angola, Tuesday, 17 March 2009

elections, young people searching for jobs, a person injured in an accident, and a dying destitute in a house of Mother Teresa. When we fail to adapt, we fail to win a hearing. We remain irrelevant.

Some have developed the art of ‘pointing beyond’ visible realities. Addressing the Pontifical Lateran University on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the use of the telescope, Pope Benedict XVI said “Those who look at the cosmos, following Galileo’s lesson, will not be able to stop at merely what is observed with the telescope; they will be impelled to go beyond it and wonder about the meaning and end to which all creation is ordered”.⁶

Even in the midst of the hustle and bustle of life, even amidst contradictions, a meaningful word, a kind deed, a helpful suggestion can capture attention, touch hearts, change lives. A message can transform entire communities, if it is relevant:

- I. in contexts of conflict, a message of peace;
- II. in situations of division, one of unity;
- III. where nature is ravaged, respect for the environment;
- IV. when the family is threatened, emphasis on family values;
- V. where the unborn child is in peril, concern for life;
- VI. in the context of genetic manipulation or euthanasia, an awareness of the dignity of the human person and a deep sense of responsibility;
- VII. where business ethics are forgotten, a reminder to give attention to the unchangeable principles of integrity;
- VIII. where there is an opportunity for ecumenical collaboration for the common good, an invitation to join hands together;
- IX. when questionable theological ideas crop up, responsible evaluation of the theories in true wisdom and faith.

We are not alone in this mission. There are many voluntary agencies ecclesial movements today with which we can join hands, and thus our persuasive power increases.

⁶ IDEM, Message to Archbishop Rino Fisichella, Rector Magnificent of the Pontifical Lateran University, on the occasion of the International Congress *From Galileo's telescope to evolutionary cosmology. science, philosophy and theology in dialogue*, 26 November 2009.

Peers can evangelize peers

d) *The Art of Persuasion*

Some think that we do not succeed to evangelize the world because there are not enough people to proclaim the truth loud and clear. I would add something more: there are not enough people who have developed the skill of persuasion. We succeed to persuade:

- I. when truth is combined with love;
- II. expressed in concern, commitment and in warm relationships;
- III. combined also with respect for people's individuality and their culture;
- IV. combined again with contextual wisdom that is relevant, re-shaped to suit the need;
- V. combined further with beauty. For, as Dostoevsky says, "Man can live without science, he can live without bread, but without beauty he could no longer live..."

Persuasion is all about love. When we are close enough and intimate to someone, even a whisper communicates. I once wrote an article "Whispering the Gospel to the Soul of Asia". Many found in it a powerful idea. I was not rejecting the concept of 'proclaiming on house-top' where it was possible and useful. But if we get across the barrier of cultures and of national and ethnic identities and are close to someone or some community, even a whisper can mean a lot.

We know that it is not logic alone that communicates or convinces. Life in its fullness offers something more:

- I. there is the natural eloquence of dedicated, self-forgetting service;
- II. there is the power of example;
- III. there is the power of religious symbolism;
- IV. there is the gentle persuasion of religious art. Hermann Hesse said, "Art means revealing God in everything that exists";
- V. there is the attractiveness of religious practices;
- VI. there is the pull of devotional chants;
- VII. in many places in Asia, shrines and pilgrim places have the power of attraction;
- VIII. Many are impressed by the favours they receive in answer to prayers;
- IX. Many are touched by the depth they see in a religious believer.

VI. The Art of leading people to Conviction and Commitment

One step further is the art of convincing. A person who is deeply convinced himself has definitely an advantage, but that is not everything when it comes to the sharing of the Gospel. People are not always religiously bent. Most are busy with their own day-to-day affairs, complacent in their secular convictions or happy with their own religious traditions. How do we draw them from where they are to a deeper level of religious conviction and commitment, and to Christ? We will always have to begin with the problem he (or his community) is facing, the doubt he has, the emotions he is trying to handle, the despair he would like to emerge from.

“...the possibility of conversion demands that we learn to read the events of life in the perspective of faith, animated, that is, by holy fear of God. In the presence of suffering and bereavement, the true wisdom is to let ourselves be called into question by the precarious state of existence and to see human history with the eyes of God...”⁷

There are serious moments even in the life of the most superficial persons. They question themselves in moments of crisis, anxiety, tension; a Tsunami, cyclone, earthquake.

Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone had these moving words at L’Aquila after the earthquake, “Death makes tangible the fact that everything can cease in an instant—things and projects. Everything ends; only love endures...and triumphs over everything. Only God who is love endures”.⁸

There are young people who never put any serious questions to themselves until they are caught in an accident, or their best friends betray them, or there is a family crisis, or they are in trouble in some other manner. They look for a person who understands. At times silence can communicate more than words, sympathy more than flattery, sharing in anxiety more than wise suggestions for solution. Even a poor man is desirous of something deeper than quick-fix solutions; there is in him a hunger for God.

That was what Pope Benedict XVI was referring to when he said, “In this desert without God, the new generation feels a deep thirst for transcendence” (to the bishops of

⁷ IDEM, Angelus, St Peter's Square, Third Sunday of Lent, 7 March 2010.

⁸ CARD. TARCISIO BERTONE, SDB, Secretary of State, Homily in the funeral mass for the earthquake victims in Abruzzo, L’Aquila, Good Friday, 10 April 2009.

Brazil, *Osservatore Romano* 16.9.09).⁹ Every human person longs for a brief moment of prayer, of encounter with God. He draws nourishment from the authenticity, religious seriousness and profound convictions of the Evangelizer who points to Jesus.

May millions more of people in Asia come close to Him through the creative effort of our laity, and say with the centurion, “Truly this man was the Son of God” (Mk 15:39).

⁹ BENEDICT XVI, Address to Bishops of the Episcopal Conference of Brazil (West 1 and West 2 Regions) on their *ad limina* visit, Papal Summer Residence, Castel Gandolfo, Monday, 7 September 2009.