

Jesus Christ, a gift for Asia:

demands, tasks, and challenges of evangelizing today

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It is a joy for me to participate in this great Congress of Asian Catholic Laity, whose sole interest in coming together is evidently to PROCLAIM JESUS CHRIST IN ASIA TODAY! I thank very warmly, and congratulate heartily, His Eminence Stanislaw Cardinal Rylko, and all the members of the Organizing Committee, and the Cardinal Archbishop of Seoul, for this splendid initiative!

I begin with a true story. A Hindu grocery store-owner in my archdiocese, many years ago, asked the missionary who used to come to his shop for any book to read. The priest only had with him the New Testament in Hindi, and he gave it to him. Some days later, the Hindu excitedly asked the priest, "Is this true, Fr? It says Jesus rose from the dead. Did he really rise from the dead?" The priest said, "Yes, it is true! And he is alive today and active in my life! That is why I left my country and came here to India." The man replied, "But Fr., why didn't you tell us till now? This is wonderful news that Jesus Christ died and rose again and is alive even today!" This must be proclaimed.

Yes, my dear friends, this is the Good News that the great peoples of Asia are still waiting to hear! Jesus Christ is truly a gift for Asia, and you and I are called to proclaim it both by word and by deed, by sharing about and by witnessing to our faith in the Resurrection and Lordship of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of all humanity! The call to evangelize is a privilege and a gift of every Christian, at the same time it places demands on the way we live, and confronts us with various challenges which we must overcome, in the power of the Spirit of God.

To illustrate some of these demands, tasks and challenges of evangelization, let me first share about our own large Tribal Church of Chotanagpur, India. The servant of God, Fr. Constant Lievens, S.J. is known as the Apostle of Tribal Chotanagpur. He was the son of a

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poor peasant in Belgium, and was called by God, through Mary's intervention, to come and evangelize the poor, oppressed and exploited tribals in the central tribal belt of India. Moved with compassion, he came to India 125 years ago, to help, love and serve us. He learnt our language, entered into dialogue with our people, and worked with us for our liberation, transformation, and empowering in Christ.

Our tribals, Mundas, Hos, Oraons, Kharias etc., all belonged to the poor agricultural class. They had little hope of survival. To escape starvation they were forced to migrate from our State to the Assam teagardens, the Andaman forests, to the brick kilns along the Ganges, to Kolkata as coolies, etc.; their future was extremely bleak; they were of course totally illiterate; they were subjugated, dispossessed and reduced to slavery by the landlords (*zamindars*); they were in the clutches of the moneylenders; they had mostly lost faith in God; they were dead-scared of evil spirits who left them no peace.

It was into such a world that Fr. Lievens arrived in 1885. There were then just 56 Catholics in the area entrusted to him for evangelization. But just over 7 years later, and him already a broken man due to exhaustion and tuberculosis, there were more than 80,000 baptized Catholics!

What made this possible? How did he find a way to this poor people's heart? A wise Officer-in-charge of the local police station, whom he had befriended, explained to Fr. Lievens the root of these people's real condition and how he could help them. Lievens thereafter made himself available to the people who came in groups from far away villages, and readily listened to their tales of misery. He conversed with them in their own tongue and daily spent hours and hours with them, taking down notes and advising them. Occasionally, on invitation, he'd go on horseback to evaluate things on the spot. He studied the existing law of the land and soon realized how the people were being deprived of their rights deceitfully in the courts of law because the judges, who did not know the language of the people, were being misled by the landlords (*zamindar*).

Because the people lost their cases one after another, a mood of despair had set in among them. Finding no way out, many lost the will to live. People also came to believe that their "good spirits" were far inferior to the "spirits of the *dikus* (foreigners)." They felt abandoned by God. But Lievens taught the people to present their cases truthfully and honestly, took down the facts and proofs, put them in contact with trustworthy pleaders, and convinced them that justice could be obtained. Following his guidance and encouragement,

they began to win their cases. They regained confidence in themselves, in their rights, in God. They discovered by their own experience that Lievens and people like him were very different from other outsiders. These men were not “*dikus*.” They were men of God. And so, the people eagerly listened to Lievens as gradually he also began to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the unique and universal Saviour, who could liberate, transform and empower them through baptism in water and the Holy Spirit. Thus began the “miracle of Chotanagpur,” the one I personally know so well.

Here were people that were “no people”. They were mercilessly trampled underfoot. Their will to live was crushed to powder and dust. But once they accepted Jesus, they rose again with him in baptism. Now they are God’s people, a people with a voice, with self-respect and confidence, able to stand up for their rights. As a Catholic community they have increased and multiplied. They have secured for themselves a place under the sun, as “children of the light.” Again and again I have heard Catholic aboriginal/indigenous children proclaim: “*ham krusvir kissi se kam nahin* – We are Eucharistic People and not inferior to anyone!” These people now serve their country and earn a name for themselves in war and peace. Besides the people are serving their society and their country by becoming heads of their own communities. Others do so by becoming teachers and catechists, and move out to different parts of the country. Looking at their service also through their associations we can say that the Church of Chotanagpur is in great part the church of the laity.

The missionaries were inspired then to promote priestly vocations among the Tribal boys. In 1903 an Apostolic School was opened. Then the Jesuit Archbishop of Kolkata approached the Holy See, and thus St. Albert’s Seminary, Ranchi was opened in 1914. It is this seminary, of which I am a product, and this tribal church, that has produced in less than 100 years thousands of priests, even more thousands of religious sisters, and innumerable religious brothers and seminarians scattered in many parts of the world. Within a period of 54 years (1873-1927), the number of Catholics rose from zero to 2,69,724. That was their number in 1927 when Ranchi was made a diocese. Now 83 years later, we can no longer count them, because they have become 12 dioceses with their own indigenous Bishops, and are also to be found in large numbers in another dozen dioceses, several of which too have Ranchi-linked adivasi or tribal Bishops in five neighbouring States of India.

With such a beautiful case study, who will ever again be able to question the wisdom of serving the poor, as part of the effective evangelization of Asia? *Ecclesia in Asia* is very emphatic that “human beings, not wealth or technology, are the prime agents and destination of development. Therefore, the kind of development that the Church promotes... begins and ends with the integrity of the human person, created in the image of God and endowed with a God-given dignity and inalienable human rights”.¹

I believe that our story, and other similar historic experiences in Asia, like here in S.Korea itself, where in a short time, 10% of the population is already Catholic, form part of the background for what *Ecclesia in Asia* declares about evangelization as service of the poor today. Behind this “today” there are 2000 years of history, ever since Jesus founded the Church, in Asia itself. It is certainly very sad that even after such a long period of time the overall percentage in Asia remains so meager. Yet *Ecclesia in Asia* opens in a spirit of exultation, praise and thanksgiving. In its very first paragraph, Venerable Pope John Paul II re-affirms his anticipation that the third millennium will see a great harvest of faith in Asia.

One of the reasons for thinking so is no doubt the fact that Asia is the continent of the poor. God cannot but feel compassion for us, and will intervene to come to our help. As *Ecclesia in Asia* notes: “the majority of Asian peoples are subjected to suffering, violence, discrimination and poverty”.² This realization calls all of us to “a new commitment to mission”.³ Therefore the Pope expressed his prophetic conviction that the Church’s “character, spiritual fire and zeal will assuredly make Asia the land of a bountiful harvest in the coming Millennium”.⁴

The Church offers her service to all people, but does so especially to the poor, and preferentially so. To this, Blessed Mother Teresa of Kolkata bore particular witness, one that focused the attention of India, Asia, and the world, on Jesus. He is present among us, and him personally we can serve, in the disguise of the poor. That also had been the very spirit of the Servant of God, Fr. Constant Lievens, the Apostle of Chotanagpur, who has remained an icon of the service of the Church to indigenous/tribal populations. These people

¹ JOHN PAUL II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 33.

² *Ibid.*, no. 4.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

have been found especially responsive to the Gospel, more than any other group. *Ecclesia in Asia* recalls that the poor “often feel drawn to the person of Jesus Christ and to the Church as a community of love and service... Herein lies an immense field of action in education and healthcare, as well as in promoting social participation. The Catholic community needs to intensify pastoral work among these people, attending to their concerns and to the questions of justice, which affect their lives. This implies an attitude of deep respect for their traditional religion and its values; it implies as well the need to help them to help themselves, so that they can work to improve their situation and become the evangelizers of their own culture and society”.⁵

These thoughts do not refer to a mere futuristic utopia. They actually find their verification in what has happened in several countries of Asia (the list of these countries being too long for me to mention each one here). However, since this is a Laity Congress, let us not forget that the back-up to the first evangelizers in many countries were and are all laity! When the Jesuit Fr.Lievens started his missionary service to the tribals of Chota Nagpur, there were a mere 3-4 priests and not a single nun available to work together with him. But the Holy Spirit brought him wonderful partners, laymen and women, who became catechists and helpers in a number of ways. The success-story of our now vast Tribal Church is due not only to Lievens’ pioneering work but, in large part, also to the devoted and committed tribal laity! A similar assertion can be made also of the Church in the 7 States of N.East India (especially Arunachal Pradesh), where Jesus Christ has become a gift to the people in that part of India mainly because of the heroic and admirable work of the laity! May this Congress be a catalyst for more and more such laity in every Asian country, for *Ecclesia in Asia* correctly states: “To bear witness to Jesus Christ is the supreme service which the Church can offer to the peoples of Asia, for it responds to their profound longing for the Absolute, and it unveils the truths and values which will ensure their integral human development”.⁶

I now summarize what we must keep in mind in the following days: evangelization is two-dimensional; one dimension is “going out” as a missionary (a “Go and tell” dimension); the other is the dimension of a “life-witness” to the

⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 38.

⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 20.

Good News (the “Come and see” dimension), “Come and see that the Good News is not empty theory, it really works, it is working in our own lives, it has transformed us.”

As *Redemptoris Missio* reminds us, “The witness of a Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission. Christ, whose mission we continue, is the witness par excellence, and the model of all Christian witness. The first form of witness is the very life of the missionary, of the family, of the parish community, which reveal a new way of living. Everyone in the Church can and must bear this kind of witness. In many cases it is the only possible way of being a missionary”.⁷

Not every Christian in Asia can be a missionary in the sense of going out to tell the Good News, but every Christian in Asia can be a missionary by witnessing to a change in lifestyle, values and behaviour. This is true for bishops and priests as much as for the religious and laity! For all of us, the following three areas of witnessing are especially important.

First, “The evangelical witness which the world finds most appealing is that of concern for people, and of charity towards the poor, the weak, and those who suffer”.⁸ The first area is that of charity: to take initiatives of love. Mother Teresa received a State Funeral in non-Christian India because she was revered as “an angel of mercy and of love” by all.

Secondly, “The Church is called to bear witness to Christ by taking courageous and prophetic stands in the face of the corruption of political or economic power”.⁹ This stresses that Christians are not only called to religious activity but also to be “salt,” “light,” and “leaven” for the world. St. Paul therefore exhorts us all: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2).

⁷ IDEM, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio*, no.42.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 43.

Related to this is the third area which touches each Christian deeply: that of “imitating Christ’s own simplicity of life”.¹⁰ This is a very vast area wherein the first Beatitude must become the Christian’s motto: “Blessed are the poor” (Lk.6:20) or “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (Mt.5:3). It calls for a radically new attitude (among all Christians) towards money and other worldly goods. Among the early Christians, the Spirit achieved something mind-boggling: “there was not a needy person among them,” because those with more gave generously and gladly to their new family members, to their fellow Christians in need (Cf. Acts 2:44ff; 4:32ff). In this context, I am reminded of a document of the Congregation for the Clergy in Rome which pointed out a few areas of witnessing for the clergy, such as: “stop wearing expensive gold watches; don’t drive the latest flashy cars,” etc.! Bishops, priests, religious, laity and youth must all take heed!

The power of the Spirit for direct evangelization and indirect witnessing go together. Matthew 28:19-20 records Christ’s mandate in these words: “Go make disciples of all nations... and I am with you always.” Mark (15:20) has similar words: “Go, preach the good news to the whole creation ...and the Lord worked with them and confirmed their message with the signs that followed.” Two elements are common to these texts: the universality of the task, and the assurance that the Lord is with us. The task of spreading the Good News is not ours alone, but the Lord is with us in the task. Let us go ahead confidently, in the power of the Holy Spirit!

I end with the stirring words of The Second Vatican Council about the uniqueness and centrality of Jesus Christ for the world, and for Asia: “The Church believes that Christ, who died and was raised up for all, can through his Spirit offer man the light and the strength to measure up to his supreme destiny. Nor has any other name under heaven been given to man by which he is saved. She likewise holds that in her most benign Lord and Master can be found the key, the focal point, and the goal of all human history. The Church also maintains that beneath all changes there are so many realities which do not

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

change and which have their ultimate foundation in Christ, who is the same, yesterday, today, and forever. Hence, in the light of Christ, the image of the unseen God, the Council wishes to speak to all men and women, in order to illuminate the mystery of man, and to cooperate in finding the solution to the outstanding problems of our time”.¹¹

We too must continue to speak to all men and women of Asia about the gift that Jesus Christ is to humanity. To quote Pope Paul VI, “Let us preserve the delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing, even when it is in tears that we must sow. May it mean for us an interior enthusiasm that nobody and nothing can quench. And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the Good News not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ, and who are willing to risk their lives so that the kingdom may be proclaimed and the Church established in the midst of the world”.¹²

I pray that as Asian Christians, through the special intercession of Mary, Queen of so many of our countries, we all will have the joy of seeing the world become the Kingdom of our God, a Kingdom of justice and peace, of truth and love, of beauty and happiness, through, with and in Jesus Christ the Lord, Amen.

¹¹ SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, no. 10.

¹² PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 80.