

The Impact of Globalization on Integral Evangelization

- Fr Andrew G. Reception, S. TH. D. -

Introduction

The topic involves two fundamental themes of Catholic social teaching and the Church's mission. Given the breadth of the themes it is impossible to discuss all the aspects of human dignity and the new evangelization very extensively. However, it is my wish to indicate essential points that could be useful in ecclesial life.

The context has always opened a new horizon and given meaning to the value of human dignity and the urgency of a new evangelization. The waves of renewal initiated by the Second Vatican Council have been seen both as a point of arrival and a point of departure. Contrary to the traditional and progressive interpretations of Vatican II, with the former rejecting its teaching and the latter breaking away from anything not included in its documents, there is a new thrust towards *ressourcement* that locates authentic interpretation from a process of doctrinal continuity with the Church's tradition. Thus, developing human dignity through new evangelization has to find a new contextual mould without in any way disrupting the continuity with the tradition of the Church.

The process of globalization has changed the contours of our human landscape in contemporary society. In other words, the context, though always particular and specific, would have to account for the globalizing processes that influence the mission of the Church today and its involvement in the different worlds of culture, politics, economy, the arts and entertainment, sports and education. The question of developing human dignity through the new evangelization cannot be

dissociated from the context in which there is the constant interplay between the local and the global. Amidst the changing context, however, it is once again opportune to reiterate what *Redemptor Hominis* says: "the way of the human person is the primary and fundamental way of the Church" (n. 14). Thus, the human person remains in a way a "constant in context" that transcends history because God himself has made humanity a bearer of divine life through Jesus Christ. Similarly, we can also say that the way of the human person is the way of the new evangelization. Central to the new evangelization is the affirmation of redeemed humanity.

In this presentation my task is to affirm the centrality of the human person within the living Tradition of the Church and in the perspective of the present context to point out how the evangelizing mission of the Church can help in the integral development of the human person.

Understanding the new evangelization as integral evangelization

The new evangelization is actually integral evangelization according to Paul VI and John Paul II: "The sharing of our faith with others, needs to be holistic in approach so as to bring about a genuine transformation of individuals and society. This is the new or integral evangelization that each Christian is called to actively practice".¹ What is described as 'new' is actually not the evangelization process itself but the emphasis on what is integral. In the history of the Church evangelization has always been crucial to the proclamation of faith in Word, Sacrament and life. The novelty of integral evangelization is not in the content of the proclamation but the manner in which

the Gospel brings about personal conversion and effects a “total process of human development”.²

The process of transformation brought about by integral evangelization is an on-going commitment that does not stop in the personal realm of faith experience: “An authentic evangelization does not stop at the moment of conversion but allows the conversion experience to inspire one to an ever greater activity enabling one to respond more generously to the call of the Spirit ... for this (conversion) experience to be life-giving, it must be an on-going one, a continuing response to the Spirit in one’s life. This personal experience of the Lord should lead to an active involvement in the life of the Church and in the fostering of the human”.³ It is important to point out that personal conversion as the first step in the process of the integral or new evangelization leads to the full development of what is truly human not only individually but also communally.

Respecting the Context in Integral Evangelization

In doing theology today the context has been in the limelight. Proponents of contextual theologies have indicated quite extensively the need to take the context seriously into account in theologizing. The gamut of human experience in all circumstances needs to be present in any attempt to explain the faith meaningfully and forcefully.

The parable of the monkey and the fish can provide an important insight to understand the pivotal role the context plays in integral evangelization:

A monkey and a small fish lived in the farthest corner of a virgin forest known for its beauty, lush vegetation and animal life. The monkey was very good and was always ready to help other animals. No day was spent without the monkey’s search for the neediest animals in the forest. The monkey found himself near a river. Since it was not possible for him to swim, he decided to spend some time on the riverbank and observe the flowing river. He looked at

the river and saw a small fish swimming upstream. Wanting to help, he thought that the small fish might be feeling very cold and could drown in the long river.

The monkey decided to help the fish. He hopped onto a piece of floating wood and grabbed the fish as he floated by. As he held the cold fish in his hand, he felt sad at the thought that nobody had ever come by to help the fish get warm. He was happy that he, at last, had discovered the plight of this poor fish and been of some assistance. But the monkey was not content with simply rescuing the small cold fish. He decided he could help it even more, and decided to take it home and hold it close as he slept, warming the small fish with his own body.

The next morning, the monkey discovered that the small fish had died. He grew sad at the sight of its lifeless body, but felt somewhat better knowing he had done his best to help his friend. He concluded that the fish must have died of a cold, which he no doubt caught during the time he had been in the river, when no one else had stopped to help him.⁴

The monkey’s desire to help the fish killed it because he failed to know the very nature of the fish as well as the actual condition and needs of a fish. A genuine integral evangelization embraces the whole person in all its dimensions. In other words, not only the spiritual dimension is important to evangelization but also all aspects of life. Thus, integral evangelization is contextual because it embraces the human person holistically within the present condition of history.

Personal Conversion and Integral Evangelization

Conversion is first of all God’s initiative. From the standpoint of humanity, conversion is becoming more human in the sense that becoming human is being born anew from God. At the outset, we need to clarify that conversion is not just a matter of turning away from sin and all forms of selfishness but is the first step towards becoming fully alive in God.

In a recent theological colloquium at

the Catholic University of Paris, I was drawn to the idea of humanization proposed by Adrien Demoustier.⁵ The word-pairs used to describe the journey towards human fullness could indicate the dynamics of conversion as growth and transformation in integral evangelization:

1. Exteriority - Interiority

Authentic conversion is a journey from exteriority to interiority. The great challenge of conversion is how to enter more deeply into one's life and see it from God's point of view. In other words, the process of conversion as becoming more human entails a passage from a life governed by the senses and the desires of the flesh to a life rooted in the Spirit; a passage from a restless search for material goods to the serenity of the heart that abandons itself in God.

Integral evangelization renews humanity from within. Conversion as a journey towards interiority highlights that evangelization prioritizes *being* before *doing*; gives precedence to a way of life before structures.

2. Superficiality – Depth

It is not possible to quantify conversion. Nevertheless, it could be described qualitatively as a movement from superficiality to depth. Superficiality is not simply about useless chatter or a mere familiarity but it is the absence of a meaningful relationship. In the language of conversion, we can say that superficiality is the absence of God in one's personal experience, that is, God remains abstract, academic and distant from one's present life.

Depth is the personal presence of God in one's life that changes the very meaning of existence and relationships. Conversion is the intimate and personal experience of God that transforms existence from a succession of days to a progressive movement towards the fullness of freedom and love.

Integral evangelization transforms humanity from a mere biological existence into an experience of God as the centre of life and community. Conversion as a movement from superficiality to depth

emphasizes that human transformation is first of all an affirmation of God's presence in the humanization process. God's presence, however, brings out the real meaning of what is human and makes humanity capable of receiving God.

3. Communication – Communion

Communication is indispensable to human growth and transformation. There has been a breakthrough in communication due to the impact of globalization. In spite of advancement in communication technology, many people have remained isolated and incapable of intimacy. In fact, people have been slowly experiencing de-personalization because communication technologies have slowly taken over the more basic forms of human interaction. It is enough to cite as an example the impact of the cellular phone on contemporary men and women in order to illustrate how people prefer to send a text message than to speak to the nearest person even if the message was meant for that person. Communication has been contributing to human progress but then there is the danger of making men totally homeless even in his very life.

Wendell Berry illustrates the homelessness of men and women today in spite of modern means of communication:

The modern house is not a response to its place, but rather to the affluence and social status of its owner. It is the first means by which the modern *conquistador*, seated in his living room in the evening in front of his TV set, many miles from his work, can easily forget where he is and what he has done. He is everywhere and nowhere. Everything around him, everything on TV, tells him of his success.... Geography is defined for him by the virtual time and space of his computer – which is to say his geography is artificial; he could be anywhere, and he usually is.⁶

Communication, in spite of its merits and important contribution to contemporary society has contributed to many people's experience of homelessness, dis-integration, desolation and individualism. Homelessness "consists in

an abstract and mechanistic pattern of being, acting, and producing that makes human beings rootless, in a world stripped of its intrinsic creaturely order".⁷

Communication has to pave the way for communion if conversion is to be experienced as coming home. Communion rooted in the Trinitarian life brings about a transformation of the human person from dis-integration to integration, from desolation to hope, from individualism to community. Thus, communion becomes an experience of being at home with God and with others in the sense that home is not just a place but it is our very own humanity becoming God's dwelling place and the very space of our life with others. Integral evangelization provides the way to a fecund experience of communion that brings back to humanity its very identity as a being that is always longing for home in God and in others.

Fundamental Aspects of Integral Evangelization for Developing Human Dignity

Integral evangelization embraces the whole person, the whole of that person in society, in community and in relationship with other people and with society's institutions. In other words, integral evangelization always seeks to promote the full development of the human person in different contexts and relationships.

In contrast to the traditional approach that focuses on the individual but is lacking in a social transformative dimension; and to the secular approach that is more concerned with improving the life of the person and society, than with that person's relationship with God, the integral approach to evangelization is holistic: its impact is spiritual as well as social, transforming the individual as well as the society around him.⁸

Allow me to indicate three fundamental aspects of integral evangelization and to draw from these aspects some insights for developing human dignity.

1. Evangelizing Presence

The need to give witness to God is urgent

in our world today. Nevertheless, the need for witnessing cannot be dissociated from a life that has been totally renewed and transformed, that is, converted. The first aspect of integral evangelization is its evangelizing presence, which consists of radiating the presence of Christ to people around us by a lifestyle in keeping with the Gospel. Proclamation is done quietly but truly through the witness of life.

The story of a Bangwa Tribe in the heart of the forest in Cameroon, Africa, is worth narrating. The *Fon* or King of the tribe, approached the bishop of the nearest place to the forest to beg him to pray for all the children of the tribe who had been dying of the sleeping sickness. He explained to the bishop how his magicians had complied with all the rituals but had still failed to prevent the children from dying. He told the Bishop after offering him some gifts, that he was taking a chance in asking him to pray to the Christian God to stop the death of the children in his tribe. In so happened, that the bishop was going to Rome. Aside from simply praying for the children, he asked assistance from a group of lay people to go to the tribe and find out what could be done to help the king. Two nurses and three medical doctors volunteered to go to Fontem, Africa, and assist the tribe. In spite of the very difficult situation at the beginning of their humanitarian work, the nurses and doctors who were all Catholics pursued their work with dedication and commitment. The death toll of the children decreased. Twenty years later, a hospital has been built in the heart of the forest and a school for the children of the tribe. Roads were constructed. Water and electrical systems were set up in the whole village. One day, the king asked the volunteers why they chose to suffer with his people and help his tribe without asking for anything in return. The Catholic volunteers finally found the moment to speak about Jesus Christ after twenty years. The king asked to be baptized as a Christian. Soon after all the members of the tribe were also baptized.

The evangelizing presence is not simply an occasional show of kindness and goodness to people who do not believe in Christ or to people who have lost their faith

in Christ but it is a “convincing testimony of a consistent Christian life, wherever the Lord calls us to be his witnesses”.⁹

Developing the dignity of people does not begin with a blueprint of action and project proposals but with a convincing witness of Christian life that enkindles the desire for God and in turn effects authentic personal and social transformation. Human dignity is not a question of *having* but a question of being *capax Dei*, that is, being capable of participating in the very life of God.

2. Building a Community of Dialogue

Creating ripples and building bridges captures the very image of a community of dialogue. The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences has pointed out that dialogue is at the heart of the Asian Church that lives amidst the world's major religious traditions. The three dialogues that the Asian Church is called to live are: dialogue with the poor, dialogue with culture and dialogue with religions. The second aspect of integral evangelization is building a community of dialogue, which consists of entering into a respectful and nourishing relationship with the partner in dialogue, be it with the poor, with the faithful of other religions, or with people of other cultures.

A Buddhist monk from Thailand went to stay for six months with a group of priests in Northern Italy. It was winter and the cold winter made the community of priests worry about the monk who did not have thick robes since he came from tropical Asia. The priests made a point of turning up the thermostat so that the monk once inside the house would not feel very cold. They also gave the monk more blankets. Every morning the monk would find that his robe had been washed and pressed. They also tried to eat the food that would make the monk feel at home. After six months, when the monk was about to return to Thailand, he wanted to share his experience with the community of priests. He surprised everybody when he stated that he finally understood the Cross (Buddhists cannot understand why a Christian God has to suffer and die on a

cross) and he revealed that the love shown to him by the community of priests made him think that only a loving God could actually die on the Cross.

What a powerful experience of dialogue! More than an exchange of doctrinal explanations, dialogue involves the very lives of the people in dialogue. Integral evangelization builds a community of dialogue not primarily through activities but through life-giving experiences that deepen reciprocal appreciation of values and traditions.

Developing the dignity of the person entails an appreciation of one's personal and religious identity *vis-à-vis* the diversity of social status, religion, and culture. Dialogue is built through life-nourishing relationships that give priority to the value of the human person more than anything else. Friendship goes beyond preferences because it goes straight to the very worth of the person independent of the conditions imposed by culture, religion and poverty. Reciprocity is experienced not as a fruit of dialogue but as its very foundation.

3. Authentic Efforts for Human Development and Liberation

“If the Church preaches without significant action, she preaches an empty word”.¹⁰ The credibility of the Church's proclamation needs to be supported by action that addresses issues of social justice. The third aspect of integral evangelization is authentic efforts for human development and liberation. It has been reiterated that it is not the competence of the Church to provide for the needs of the poor due to Government inaction but it is within the mission of the Church to safeguard and uphold human dignity.

As a seminarian in Tagaytay City, the Philippines, in the 1990s, I saw how the scenic and quiet city overlooking Taal Volcano was being transformed into a getaway city for busy people in Manila and the neighbouring areas. An international resort was being built on the other side of the ridge just below the highest peak of Tagaytay and the developers wanted the people living near the area to leave the place

because they would be eyesores to the guests of the resort. The people were helpless because they did not have land titles but they had stayed in the place since the 1950s. When we were approached to help them, we did not know what to do and we were afraid that we would lose our benefit of going to the resort free. But the situation challenged us to work for the cause of the poor people. We fought for them and negotiated with the developers for a better scheme to help the people not to be displaced. We prayed with the people for God's help. We thought that nothing would happen. But our advocacy made the owners of the international resort build concrete houses for the people near the resort and give them job opportunities as golf caddies, janitors and waiters. We did not know what changed the heart of the resort developers. But we felt that our concerted effort to safeguard and uphold the human dignity of poor people in Tagaytay made us appreciate even more the real meaning of the preferential love for the poor.

Authentic efforts for human development and liberation do not require changing the plight of the poor in a grand way. We have to start with the poor nearest to us. Realistic Solidarity with the poor would have to confront the context of the poor and see that context from the world of the poor, from somebody who is poor.

Developing the dignity of the person must avoid any paternalistic concept of solidarity and a top-down charity. What is crucial is to give the poor a chance to see their situation, to detest their misery, and to search for solutions and to work with others in bringing about change. The poor should never be instrumentalized in our evangelization work. We cannot use the poor to justify our mission. The poor are partners and not dependents. Much of the efforts for human liberation and development are focused on the emancipation of the material poor in our society. Nevertheless, we should never promote the culture of dependence in our efforts for social transformation. Instead we need to involve the poor in their process of liberation by highlighting their strengths and by tapping their potentials.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by telling you a story from Thomas Friedman's *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. A strange disease of a contagious amnesia afflicted a village. The adults in the village were the first to get sick, and then the disease that caused the loss of memory of everything including the names of common objects infected almost all the villagers. Fortunately, there was one woman who was immune to the disease and she tried to help cure the disease by giving labels to objects: "This is a table"; "this is a window", "this is a cow". At the entrance to the village by the main road, there were two sign boards. The first signboard read: "This village is called *Macondo*"; the second signboard which was much bigger and read: "God exists".

The story makes us realize that we could actually forget everything that we have known so far but this would not constitute a great loss. If we forget that God exists we would lose everything that is profoundly human.

Developing the dignity of the person through integral evangelization involves discovering what is profoundly human from our experience of who God is.

Footnotes

¹ Nancy R. Catan, "Integral Evangelization: Creating Ripples and Building Bridges", *Evangelizing Presence: The Challenge of Social Transformation* (Makati City: Set Graphics, 2004), 7.

² *Evangelizing Presence*, 8.

³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴ Adapted from Rogerion Santos de Aguiar, "Are WE Monkeys?", *Together Magazine* (April-June 1996), 22.

⁵ Adrien Demoustier, "Devenir Homme, C'est Achever de Naître de Dieu", International Theological Colloquium, Catholic Institute of Paris, 27 February 2007.

⁶ Wendell Berry, "Living in the Future: The Modern Agricultural Ideal", in *The Unsettling of America* (New York: Avon, 1977), 53.

⁷ David Schindler, "Homelessness and the Modern Condition", *Communio: International Catholic Review* 27 (Fall 2000): 415.

⁸ *Evangelizing Presence*, 46.

⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 85.

¹⁰ *Evangelizing Presence*, 17.

Ref.: Text from the author. November 2007.