

Editorial	2
Approaching the Third Millennium <i>Maria Augusta Zandonadi, PIME</i>	3
Round Table: Where is the Mission 'Ad Gentes' Leading Us Today? (A View from Europe) <i>G. Zanchi, PIME</i>	4
Where is Mission 'Ad Gentes' Leading Us Today? (A View from the Americas) <i>Tom Ascheman, SVD</i>	11
Mission as in an Asian Context <i>Maria Ko Ha-Fong, FMA</i>	15
Christian Mission and the Millennium Development Goals <i>Donal Dorr, SPS</i>	24
Walking With My Neighbour in Faith Ten FABC Insights <i>James H. Kroeger, MM</i>	32
Parole de Dieu et cultures La Bible au risque de la rencontre des cultures <i>Lucien Legrand, MEP</i>	41
"Le tentatives de loi anti-conversion sont une intrusion injustifiée dans des domaines qui ne relèvent que de Dieu" <i>Card. Ivan Dias</i>	46
Coming Events	48

Editorial

A Blessed New Year to all our readers!

It is a new year with new challenges ahead of us. Hence we thought it might be of help to sit down together at the side of the road we have chosen to reflect on where this road is taking us. Globalisation has become a byword in our day and Multiculturalism and Internationalism are frequent topics of discussion at our gatherings.

It is in this context that we wish to ask: ***Where is the Mission 'Ad Gentes' Leading Us Today?*** with *Sr Maria Augusta Zandonadi, PIME*. The Missionarie dell'Immacolata, had reflected on this theme in preparation for their Chapter, and are willing to share it with us. Helping in the reflection were Fr *G. Zanchi, PIME*, who gives a ***View from Europe***, analysing the issue from the perspective of an Institute orientated to 'Ad Gentes' and Fr *Tom Ascherman, SVD*, who gives us an analysis from the perspective of ***the Americas*** while *Maria Ko Ha-Fong, FMA*, takes us to ***Asia***. The exchange of missionaries between the Continents offers an opportunity to increase solidarity in world mission as we reach out to one another, brothers and sisters, building the Kingdom.

Solidarity helps us to share what we have, especially the goods of our earth. In ***'Christian Mission and the Millennium Development***

Goals' *Donal Dorr, SPS*, explains why this is a specifically Christian mission and what the special characteristics of the Christian missionary approach to this issue are.

'Walking with my Neighbour in Faith. Ten FABC Insights' is a theological-missiological-pastoral reflection on the religions of Asia and the Church's interaction with these venerable faiths. The paper *James H. Kroeger, MM*, presented at the 2006 Asian Mission Congress introduces the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences and identifies "five missiological foundations" in the work of the Church in Asia.

Lucien Legrand, MEP, in ***'Parole de Dieu et cultures. La Bible au risque de la rencontre des cultures'*** offers us an analysis and some guidelines to understand better the technicalities involved when translating the Word of God into a language characterised by cultural diversity in today's world.

Issues of religious freedom are important in some Countries of Asia, as conversion to Christianity is sometimes punished by the law or by social costumes. In ***'Les tentatives de loi anti-conversion sont une intrusion injustifiée dans des domaines qui ne relèvent que de Dieu'*** *Cardinal Ivan Dias* responds to journalists in India regarding the Pope's statement on freedom of religion.

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Approaching the Third Millennium

- Sr Maria Augusta Zandonadi* -

Our Ninth General Chapter, which took place in Rome from 8 to 15 October 2006, had as its theme: ***“Journeying towards the Third Millennium with the Spirit of Jesus: evangelizing in dialogue”***.

At the time of summoning it, we invited all the Sisters to write us a personal letter expressing their hopes and expectations regarding the themes to be treated at the Chapter, as a practical way of actuating a real Chapter “in dialogue”.

Starting with the hundreds of letters we received, and the help of the working files, we began a personal and community study of our capacity for dialogue with the world (Inculturation, Ecumenical and interreligious Dialogue, Missionary Work, Lay and Charismatic participation), in Dialogue with our origins, in Dialogue with God, in Dialogue between ourselves, which lasted for a year.

The results of this study were summarized and then discussed at the organising committee meetings. At the end, the synthesis and the missionary projects were examined by the Pre-Chapter Commission and General Direction from which the Working Document was drawn up as well as other initiatives related to the work of the Chapter. One of these was the round table on: *“Where is the mission ‘ad Gentes’ leading us today?”*.

Where is the mission ‘ad Gentes’ leading us today?

This theme was chosen because the question had come up in various ways and in different situations during the preparatory phase of the Chapter. We wished to invite more people to speak on the subject with particular reference to Asia, Africa, America and Europe: in fact we are convinced that different points of view and outlook, which

are legitimate realities, can help to open the mind, provoke further reflection, enrich thought and broaden experience.

In the working document we stated:

The need to reflect further on the term *ad gentes* (that describes our mission), and two other terms: *ad extra* and *ad vitam*, derives mainly from the rapid developments in the world, since peoples, the Churches, the mission, theology of mission and the Missionary Institutes are going through a profound transformation. Besides, given the changes taking place, that are more or less obvious in the various spheres, and given the different methods of reflection developed in the various contexts, we are aware that at times we, and the Sisters who belong to these contexts or to different age-groups and therefore with a different formation, have a different understanding of these terms.

Undaunted by the complexity of the situation we think that in a debate free of prejudice and open to different perspectives, we can dialogue to advantage, sustained by our aim to achieve greater faithfulness today to the charisma that we have received in the Church and for the Church.

This is why we have undertaken to examine further the meaning of the mission *ad Gentes*, in the hope of being able to express it clearly to the young people of today, anywhere in the world, who feel drawn to our vocation. In fact we are pleased to note that our charisma *ad Gentes* is attractive, involves and always gives us new strength and enthusiasm to continue the mission to proclaim the Kingdom of God to all peoples.

The essays not only answered our expectations but offered us the material to reflect on and debate during the Chapter, and, we feel they are of great interest to those who are concerned about “where the mission *ad Gentes* is leading us today”.

Note.: * Missionarie dell’Immacolata (PIME)

Round Table: *Where Is the Mission 'ad Gentes'* *Leading Us Today?*

(Torre Gaia - 14 September 2006)

- G. Zanchi -

AN INSTITUTE SPECIFICALLY ORIENTATED TO 'AD GENTES' REPLIES

The Missionary Institutes that have specialised in mission for the last 40 years find it is time to reflect not only on their apostolic methodology, on the so-called new ways, but on their own *raison d'être* and on the actual validity of their original charisma today.

It is not any unimportant, secondary issue, as the vocations crisis or something else might be. If that were so, the problem would be much easier to solve, because once the cause has been pin-pointed one can patiently and systematically work out the best remedy.

The problem is far wider and more complex. It is structural to use lay terminology, because it involves the very identity and therefore the finality of the exclusively Missionary Institutes.

Your Congregation, like all the other exclusively Missionary Institutes and Congregations, has been invited to reinterpret its original charism at the updating Chapters in the light of the thought of the Second Vatican Council which reflected deeply on the nature and mission of the Church in a world that already in the 1960's was entering a phase of rapid religious, cultural, political and economic transformation.

We shall study the following points that directly concern the Missionary Institutes:

- 1) The concept and reality of the evangelisation 'ad Gentes'
- 2) The Church – local Church – missionary outreach

I think that an Institute's answers must be framed in this context, even if very simply.

1. Concept and reality of the evangelisation 'ad Gentes'

In addressing myself to a Missionary Institute, it should be easy to understand the terminology that in other contexts and situations may cause confusion. Unfortunately, it seems that even amongst ourselves everything is not always clear. For example, when we protest against the general and incorrect use of the term *mission*, almost feeling robbed of something that belongs exclusively to us. This is why the saying: 'all is mission', that the Church is mission, seems to us to be a watering-down of the true mission.

In fact, it is really only a question of understanding and accepting what the Second Vatican Council produced. The consequent Magisterium of the Church did not reduce the mission 'ad Gentes' to a generic activity, but, described and defined its nature and finality better. Indeed this became an incentive for the Missionary Institutes to renew themselves.

A brief explanation of the following terms is necessary, since:

Mission, missions, evangelisation, evangelisation 'ad extra', are often interchangeable, but actually stand for different realities.

MISSION: is everything the Church does in the name of Christ. It is an all-embracing term, to the extent that it becomes the equation: Church is Mission. Within this mission one can distinguish:

The **MISSIONS:** a term that is still currently used in the documents of the Magisterium, both to indicate the activity of evangelisation 'ad extra' which the

missionaries, sent to countries and churches in other cultures and religions, carry out, and the countless activities ‘ad intra’ to which the Church is committed, with the intention of helping the Christian Community mature in the faith (Liturgy, Catechesis) to serve humanity (Health Care apostolate, emigration, etc.). As regards the ‘foreign missions’, Blessed Fr Paolo Manna already objected to the term “missions” in the past. “We have founded the so-called Foreign Missions. The name points to the error: they are in fact, in the countries of non-believers, truly foreign organisations, conducted by foreign personnel, supported by foreign money, and all too often under the protection of foreign Governments” (*Osservazione sul Metodo Moderno di Evangelizzazione*, p. 40); and betray the very aim of evangelisation work, at the same time bringing the very method of evangelisation into crisis. The Apostles did not found missions but Churches. Therefore, *Redemptoris Missio* states that the missions must come under Mission, and this in Christology.

EVANGELISATION: stands for the actual proclamation of the Gospel to human groups, that do not yet know Christ, or whose social, economic, cultural environment have no reference to Christ. It does not refer to geographic criteria alone, but to human groups, the object of evangelisation activity. This work of evangelisation may also be necessary in traditionally Christian countries, which have more or less given up the Christian faith (*cf.* RM, n. 61; Acts 13:26).

Then, what is the essential fact/datum that underlies all evangelisation work that, so to speak, constitutes its authentic element? Paul VI stated it thirty years ago when he sought to define it and give it a methodology:

*“For the Church, evangelising means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence **transforming humanity from within and making it new**”* (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 18) *“... for the Church it is a question not only of preaching the Gospel in ever wider geographic areas or to ever greater numbers of people, but also of affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, mankind’s criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation”* (*ibid.*, n.19).

EVANGELISATION ‘ad extra’: is the *Missio ad Gentes*. It is that specific activity that is addressed to those countries, in which the majority of the population is not Christian and has not been Christianised, but of another religion and in which the Church is a small minority. This signifies leaving one’s specific church, cultural and geographical context to go to those places to proclaim Christ.

Redemptoris Missio uses the term ‘evangelisation’ selectively to indicate the proclamation of the Gospel to non-Christians, maintaining that this branch of the Church’s activity is current, valid and urgent, because two thousand years after the Redemption, the number of non-Christians has grown (*cf.* n. 35).

Another point brought up by the Second Vatican Council, and developed in *Redemptoris Missio*, is the interdependence of the Church’s various missions: “The boundaries between pastoral care of the faithful, new evangelisation and specific missionary activity are not clearly definable, and it is unthinkable to create barriers between them or put them into water-tight compartments” (n. 34).

The geographical criterion has not been surmounted, it continues to endorse the existence and the commitment of the exclusively Missionary Institutes, also understood in the traditional sense. I think that this element is clear and accepted. *“Nevertheless, there must be no lessening of the impetus to preach the Gospel and to establish new Churches among peoples or communities where they do not yet exist, for this is the first task of the Church, which has been sent forth to all peoples and to the very ends of the earth. Without the mission ‘ad gentes’, the Church’s missionary dimension would be deprived of its essential meaning and of the very activity that exemplifies it”* (n. 34).

If this were not so, we would be called to bring about a true and proper re-foundation of our Institutes. For some years now in order to face this situation precise orientations have been called for. We are under pressure too from our Churches of origin, which have repeatedly expressed in a simple, acritical way the need for the Missionary Institutes to do evangelising work on the spot with the slogan “Mission is Here” (India, Bangladesh, Thailand, countries in Africa) or “The Mission Has Come To Us” (Italy, countries in Europe, U.S.A., Brazil).

It is a question of making a choice, within

the areopagus of evangelisation, without denying any of those indicated by the Magisterium and theological reflection, and means being faithful to the Institute's original charisma, the only thing that confers on it its identity and *raison d'être*.

I know that other exclusively Missionary Institutes have considered Europe and the Western countries as mission territory in which to exert their efforts. They have their own reasons perhaps as well as a tradition.

As regards PIME, I should like to recall that the General Assembly, held at Tagaytay (1989), only agreed to become international on the absolute condition that its members, to whatever Church or country they belonged, i.e. also those with a Christian minority, be missionaries 'ad extra', that is not in their own country, culture or Churches. Neither the great number of non-Christians, nor the small number of personnel, nor the problems of the local Churches could constitute a valid reason to waive this original proviso as the basis of our apostolic family. To reason in any other way would put us on a par with those bishops whom we regard as having scant apostolic spirit, when they prevent their priests or lay people from going on the missions, because there is so much need of it here. Were a Mission Institute, oriented exclusively to the missions 'ad extra', to seek to convert every person in its own country first it would be useless, with no scope, since today all the members of the local Churches must be not only pastors, but evangelisers.

I tend to think that the exclusively Missionary Institutes should preserve their characteristic feature, it is not superseded, on the contrary, it is more necessary than ever today. They must be like the tip of an iceberg, the visible sign of a fully realised missionary thrust that serves to remind the local Church that its first duty is to proclaim the Gospel to those who do not know it. Therefore, it is not a matter of obtusely conserving an out-dated idea of mission, unable to discern the need to evangelise non-Christian countries. The Church is not an amorphous body in which everyone does everything, but each member, according to the charism and grace that he/she receives from the Spirit carries out his/her mission. The mission dimension, in the strict sense, cannot be absent from any Church for that would impoverish it, render it inert.

Rather, this new situation calls us to a

more specific task. Our communities' animation and formation services in our respective countries must become ever more specifically missionary in their life-style and in their choice of action. We must not relax and dully carry out ordinary pastoral work, but make our contribution to the Local Churches' missionary role in which we play a part.

Today two elements challenge us, as Missionary Institutes, and demand an answer:

- . What *Missio ad Gentes*?
- . What is our specific task in the effective universal responsibility of the Church and of the Churches in evangelising work?

The validity of our Institutes depends on these two issues today. We are called to a watchful and profound reflection and consequently to renew our availability, commitments and praxis.

1. What is the 'Missio ad Gentes' for us?

In order to respond to "what are the answers of an Institute to the *Missio ad Gentes*", one must first ask oneself the following question: "What is the specific goal of evangelising activity?"

The need to contextualise theology, inculturate Christianity and the Church, understand and achieve the mission of evangelisation in dialogue and solidarity with humanity, has produced currents of thought and mission praxis that are not easily compatible, but on the contrary are at times in latent opposition to each other. The relationship: Kingdom-Christ-Church-World, Christian identity and inculturation, the need for explicit proclamation and for dialogue, religious freedom and conversion, unity and the universal salvific mediation of Christ and the salvific value of other religions are still the object of research as no satisfactory synthesis at the theological level has been found. The problem is not the truth of each single precept, but is how to harmonise them, so as to avoid the absolutism of any one, with the grave consequences of impoverishing, distorting or betraying not only the work of evangelisation, but the specificity of Christianity. One must return to the essential, otherwise we shall be condemned to repeat formulae and slogans that lead nowhere.

a) In Jesus' time, the Hebrew people were

awaiting salvation in terms of changes that concerned the whole cosmos. Jesus' temptations express well these expectations: the bread received in the desert, prodigious signs and portents, political power over the whole world. The temptation of the Messiah in the desert – the Messiah of human expectations – is equivalent to the promises of consumerism and of power. If one reads the Gospel passage that relates Christ's temptations carefully, one understands that the Israelites represented humanity in general here.

If we were to make a plan of salvation for ourselves and for the world, it would not be different. In general, political propaganda nourishes these expectations with promises.

God used a different kind of logic. He consigned his own Son to death to give life to all. Jesus gladly underwent a violent death as a gesture of gratitude and offering to the Father for the salvation of the world. The Kingdom of God is realised by and on the Cross, "... but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (I Cor 1:23).

It is the task of Missionary Institutes, especially those of Consecrated Life, to witness to and proclaim the Kingdom of God according to his logic and example. This is an urgent duty in the face of the progressive secularisation of the *Missio ad Gentes*, as it tends to dull the missionary outreach on the agenda of this world.

b) In fact, the Kingdom we must proclaim is none other than Jesus himself.

"It is not therefore a matter of inventing a 'new programme'. The programme already exists: it is the plan found in the Gospel and in the living Tradition, it is the same as ever. Ultimately, it has its centre in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated, so that in him we may live the life of the Trinity, and with him transform history until its fulfilment in the heavenly Jerusalem. This is a programme which does not change with shifts of times and cultures, even though it takes account of time and culture for the sake of true dialogue and effective communication. This programme for all times is our programme for the Third Millennium" (Novo Millennio Ineunte, n. 29).

The answer that the Missionary Institutes are called to give consists in witnessing that the ***Missio ad Gentes* cannot continue to stress only or principally formulae, methodology and the planning of activities**, as happens in almost all the missionary bodies,

in the Young Churches and in missiological studies too. It is time that the evangelisers were called into question. It is urgent that they recover the true dimension of the proclamation of the salvation brought about by Christ. They must do it not only in theory, but by living the Gospel radicality as demanded by the Kingdom, that is also a substantial part of their consecrated life. An apostolic *sequela Christi*. This requires a true and painful inversion of trends, and the probing of the philosophy of our communities with their life-style and their prevalent interests; the structures of evangelisation with the necessary collection and use of funds, the recovery and renewal of the apostolic spirit, effectively able to make Christ's love for humanity visible. It is only in this way that peoples and religions will not close their doors to Christ, although they may find reason to close them to us if we do not follow the logic of Christ's love.

c) The salvation Christ proclaimed is universal, it is for all and for everything. Salvation must be desired and offered to all with the testimony and proclamation of Jesus Christ, "for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (*Redemptoris Missio*, n. 5; cf. Acts 4:10,12). This has become a duty for the whole Church, indeed it is the first and fundamental duty that no member of the Church can evade. But what answer does a Missionary Institute give, whose only concern is the *Missio ad Gentes*, that qualifies it?

The choice of outreach is what may qualify the Missionary Institutes. The areas chosen must dictate the places and the scene of our endeavours to: "transcend" the geographical and faith border lines, lack of means, of justice, the poor people. Stationed on the frontier one must continue to work to open new ways of proclaiming the Gospel and witnessing to it. We still retain Fr P. Manna's words as valid, who lamented the establishment of religious Institutes and Orders on a territory without forging beyond it.

d) Salvation cannot be considered to be an external element, in the same way as one might give someone a sum of money. The Kingdom of God cannot come about according to knowledge of this world, and with one's own resources and strength. It is always a gift, it is love. Only because it is love, it is also hope. In the laboratory that is this world (Ernest Bloch) there is nothing

to hope for. Hope exists only where there is love. In Christ Crucified the love of God prevailed, death fled vanquished and a new humanity arose, reborn to a new life that will be completely realised with the resurrection of the body in the heavenly Jerusalem. The Kingdom of God, inaugurated by Christ, will come to complete fullness when the Body of Christ will contain all those who are to be saved and the entire cosmos with them.

The mission of the Church consists in making the Body of Christ grow to its fullness, when all will be one in Christ, and Christ in God; the full, total communion of mankind among themselves and with the Triune God.

Our entire apostolic methodology, the works that result from our charism, must be considered and built on the essential, inalienable foundation that cannot be renounced. Indeed this is what is asked of us in Benedict XVI's Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*.

2. Church – Local Church – Institutes

The answers the Missionary Institutes must give to the *Missio ad Gentes* are necessarily inserted in, and pass through, the Local Church which, as we know, is directly responsible for evangelising its own territory and environment. Ultimately one says that the *Missio ad Gentes* proceeds from communion, takes place in communion, and has communion as its finality. There is not doubt about this.

The **exclusively** missionary Institutes make a significant contribution to the *Missio ad Gentes*, on condition that “exclusively” implies relations and communion with the Local Church, aware that the *Missio ad Gentes* does not comprise the whole mission of the Church, but is a part of it, although the most necessary part which no member of the Church can evade. In brief, *the charism is read and takes place with the Local Church and with civil society*.

This requires an enterprising new thrust.

A move in this direction was already made when we understood that our evangelising work had to be submitted to the approval of the churches.

Now we must truly feel ourselves to be part of the ecclesial community with whom we must share the meaning and strategy of evangelisation. No longer is it either possible or tolerated that the areas of commitment, inculturation, dialogue, social

advancement be discussed and prepared by specialists and handed over in a neat packet to the Local Church. Rather it is our task to concentrate with continuous and urgent anxiety on the need to “transcend the borders”, to stimulate the Churches especially through apostolic witness, implying both consistent choices and life-style.

This also means being open and ready to enter into contact with all ecclesiastics, other congregations, lay people and all the groups working to bring about the life proclaimed by the Kingdom for all people.

Our international communities must become ever more credible signs of the new humanity, in which people of different races, tongues and cultures live in communion in Christ with equal dignity and rights. They must become a sacrament and anticipation of what God has in reserve for humanity. In any case they must be laboratories of evangelisation, where dialogue is learned and experimented and in which the true sharing of goods, respect for others with their cultural differences, come about in obedience to the Word of God, in whom we place all our trust, offering our respective lives in the service of love, to which he has called us.

If we are the critical conscience of the Church's missionary outreach, we must act so that our presence and our choice of pastoral commitments are clearly in line with our specific calling, otherwise our very missionary animation in the Local Churches will appear to be more a declaration of principles than a real missionary passion.

As you can see, more than discussing theory, I have talked about how we can be agents of evangelisation. In my view this change in perspective is necessary for our Institutes' vitality and creativity.

The Challenges of Evangelisation and the Missionary Institutes

The Missionary Institutes continue to be not only “prophetic types and signs” of the Church's missionary outreach, but are also the specialists of evangelisation, not because they are better qualified, but because over decades, and at times centuries, their evangelising work has been marked by their exposure to the religious, cultural, anthropological influences on the respective geographical borders.

They are like sentries that sight the transformations, and interpret and redeem them through their witness and the preaching of the Kingdom of God.

They are the first to be convinced that evangelisation is a dynamic activity, multiple, never definitive once for all, but always expressed in the modality of presence, testimony and proclamation. They must respond to the needs of contemporary humanity. To whom they must make the liberation of Christ comprehensible and credible.

The Institutes are no longer called to work in a substitutive capacity, but to act as the soul of the missionary dimension of the Church, prophetically directed to the world beyond their own faith community.

The Challenge of Other Religions

I believe that the exclusively Missionary Institutes have the specific task of:

1. giving credibility to the name of God by witnessing to his transcendence. They must bring the Spirit to the world. Missionaries, sent to proclaim the benevolence and fatherhood of God, are not the staff of an organisation or social workers, nor the promoters of development. Our mission is a "religious" mission, of which the Holy Spirit is the protagonist, the Spirit of Christ. Faced by the crisis of religious systems, it matters little whether it is a question of lapsed faith or of fundamentalism, our evangelising presence must make room for prayer, contemplation, the plan, which is Christ, known, contemplated, loved, imitated. This is the project, as stated in the Encyclical *Novo Millennio Ineunte* and followed up in the Encyclical on the Eucharist, *Mane Nobiscum Domine*. Perhaps oases of prayer and contemplation should be created, where, in poverty and simplicity of life, nourished by the Word and Bread of Life, missionaries can give an answer to humanity's hunger for God and anxious search for meaning.

2. To the Missionary Institutes in particular belongs the task of evangelising in the name of God. Not infrequently it is a controversial name that generates intolerance, division, opposition, conflict and war. The name of God is a Name of Peace. It is

necessary therefore that the Institutes, that are the best equipped and have a long-standing historical experience, assure the continuance of their presence and project by choosing interreligious dialogue as one of their priorities. I am not discussing the nature and modality of dialogue. I am only saying that the whole mission of the Church seeks to make peoples into a single family in Christ. The communion of peoples is the purpose and the result of all evangelisation.

Social Transformation

We are living in an epoch of change, a new world is being born. In this delicate phase that cannot be arrested, there are losers, the condemned, those who are labelled 'dry straw', to be burned.

Enormous, new masses of poor people and drop-outs are being created who are denied the very possibility of survival, and whose human dignity is wounded. The Missionary Institutes stand out because they have always chosen to live and work among the abject poor in the most difficult situations that can be very hostile and refractory, sharing a precarious way of life with them, a meagre diet, rejection by society, persecution, even to the point of death.

In these circumstances they must witness to the goodness, tenderness and love of God for every neglected man and woman who has no meaning and does not count. Here they must choose to stay on the frontiers of humanity, that are not only geographical but anthropological, to proclaim to the castaways: *Look up, your redemption is at hand. God is with you!*

We do not claim to denounce systems, or to have powerful means. The strong powers must be overcome with the power of the Gospel, of which we must be the living Tradition.

It does not matter where: whether in the sprawling outskirts of mega-metropolises, forgotten villages, in oppressive regimes, in apparently democratic countries, but which are discriminating and class-bound, or among refugees and exiles. The Missionary Institutes must project their presence wherever the culture of God is absent whereby man is no longer an end, but only an instrument to be exploited by others.

Globalisation

Even though this term is hackneyed we must take into account that this process is inarrestable today. But what can the Missionary Institutes do? What have they got to do with it? Is not there a risk of turning it into a merely theoretical issue?

Globalisation makes itself felt at the local level, in the societies in which we live, in the daily life of individuals and of society. In the emerging countries, the people feel globalised, deprived of their time, their background, their cultural systems, without reaping the benefits of globalisation.

The Missionary Institutes, who are the watchmen of humanity, have the primary duty to guard the dignity of the human person who must not be instrumentalised for capital; their ethnic, cultural, religious identity should be safeguarded by a culture of solidarity and communion. They must be in a position to offer alternative social models founded on the Gospel values, those expressed in the Beatitudes and realised and given meaning in the Eucharist. And this is achieved by contributing to create a new conscience by participating in all the positive breakthroughs that society produces in its various combinations and movements. As far as they can the Institutes must direct this global process to bring about the Kingdom of God, trusting especially in the power of the Word of God.

The social communications media

These are not negligible elements, nor should they be considered optional. Since they not only broadcast the news, but create opinion, culture, values or non-values, the Missionary Institutes, who by their nature are on the frontiers, are called not only to use the mass-media to spread the Gospel, but to evangelise the media themselves, so that they communicate and transmit authentic human culture. More than broadcasting by radio, television or the Christian-Catholic press, they should direct the Social Communications Media to serve the goal that they must propose, i.e. the truth about man and his integral development.

I have only outlined some of the challenges within the scope of the Missionary Institutes because of their specific charisma and their ability to be totally free for the Gospel. It is true that the whole Church must be engaged in it, but it is also true that not all have the same responsibility and the same vocation in the Church of God.

The task is superior to our strength. Nevertheless our conviction has deepened that it is God at work, and that in him our weakness becomes strength. Let us not forget that we have been saved in the weakness of God, that is the Cross.

Ref.: Translation of the Italian text.



Where Is Mission 'Ad Gentes' Leading Us Today? A View from the Americas

- Tom Ascheman, SVD -

The experience of the Church on the American continent is helping to fashion some useful ideas about the direction of world mission today. I believe that three of these ideas are particularly important – they are: *Liberation*, *Preferential Option*, and *Lay Ministry*.

The first idea, *Liberation*, says something about the overall purpose of mission – the WHY of world-mission. The second idea, *Preferential Option*, helps to give a clearer focus for missionary activity – it asks WHO are the people to whom we are sent and to whom we especially dedicate our lives. The third idea, *Lay Ministry*, suggests one very important pathway of mission – it considers HOW mission is to be carried out.

Before discussing the impact of these ideas for world-mission, it would be good to indicate a couple of significant factors that set the religious context for life in the Americas.

The American continent, from Canada to Chile, counts about 13.7% of the world population. This is slightly more than the population of Europe (11.6%) or Africa (13.1%), and much larger than that of Oceania (0.5%). But of course, it is also much less than the huge population of Asia (61.2%).

In terms of religion, the peoples of the Americas are overwhelmingly Christian. Nearly 90% are baptized as compared to roughly 77% of Europeans, 46% of Africans and 8.5% of Asians. The much smaller population of Oceania is about 83% Christian. This large American Christian

population amounts to roughly 37% of all Christians worldwide. For Catholic Christians the American context is even more significant – nearly one-half of all Catholics worldwide live in the Americas. Additionally, the people of the American continent tend to be fairly interested and active in their religious practice – not nearly as active as the people of West Africa, but considerably more so than Europeans. The churches are not empty in America.

But the situation is far from rosy in the American churches. A very large number of baptized Christians are poorly educated in their faith. This is particularly true for many Catholics who suffer the consequences of a long-term pastoral crisis – there simply are not enough pastoral ministers in the Catholic churches of the Americas. Simple demographics indicate that the situation is about to worsen dramatically. While the overall number of Catholics continues to grow (due to population growth) the number of traditional pastoral ministers is declining very rapidly. The pastoral workload — measured by the number of Catholics per pastoral agent – is much heavier in Latin America than anywhere else in the world. While in North America, Europe, Oceania and Asia the overall number of Catholics per minister is about 500, the corresponding number for Africa is nearly three times larger at 1,484. For Latin America the ratio is more than four times larger at 2,190 (in the year 2000). As a result, many communities are left with little or no pastoral care. Elsewhere huge numbers of the faithful are gathered into extraordinarily large pastoral structures. When I worked in Mexico City I helped staff a parish of more than 250,000 Catholics!

Against this background, the question of the relationship between ordinary pastoral care and missionary outreach becomes particularly acute. A key problem for missionaries in the Americas is to keep focused on missionary outreach when the pastoral needs of the Christian community are already large and growing.

Keeping this context in mind I want to highlight three ideas about world-mission: Liberation – Preferential Option – Lay Ministry.

1. Liberation and the Purpose of World Mission

What is the purpose of world mission? WHY are we involved in mission? Many people answer that the purpose of mission is to build up the Church – to invite people to become followers of Jesus. That is certainly part of the purpose of mission but the experience of the American churches shows that there are really two steps in mission. The first step is to build up a Church community. This first step has been largely completed in the Americas and happily there are well-organized Church communities almost everywhere.

There is an essential second step in mission though; that is, to encourage Church communities to give credible witness to the coming Reign of God. In particular, Christians committed to world mission should reach out to make sure everyone is invited to the feast and that they feel welcomed when they arrive. Ever since the time of Paul the Apostle, missionaries have stressed that everyone is included in God's plan and that the differences between the peoples can be gifts and blessings rather than causes of division and fear. The multiple liberation movements in the American churches in the second half of the twentieth century have especially focused attention on this second step in mission, opposing exclusion and oppression and insisting on invitation and welcome. The 1960's movement for civil rights for African Americans in North America was led by the churches and together they challenged an American system of *apartheid*, within the Church and society, and helped to build a more tolerant and open culture. The liberation movements in Latin America faced

down military dictatorships in the 1970's and 1980's and have continued to encourage a greater participation of the poor in the life of the Church and of the various nations. Currently the growing demands for greater participation of indigenous peoples in the life of Latin American societies is to a very large degree a movement inspired by people with deep Christian commitments.

Though these liberation movements today are not nearly as strong as twenty years ago, they have left a mark in the conscience of the American churches. They still serve as reminders that *the purpose of mission is not the Church*. Rather, *the purpose of the Church is mission*. The Church is not meant to look after its own internal concerns alone, it is meant to give witness to God's loving kindness and the dawning of salvation in the world. The Church's mission is to oppose exclusion and oppression as it proclaims the coming of a new heaven and a new earth. Jesus taught us to pray every day – 'thy Kingdom come, thy will be done'.

2. Preferential Option and the Focus of World Mission

What is the focus of mission? In the Americas, the concept of "preferential option" has helped many to form an answer to this question. The concept was first developed by the Bishops of Latin America during their General Conferences held in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968 and Puebla, Mexico, in 1979. They articulated a *preferential option* for the poor and for youth. This manner of thinking can be quite helpful in conceiving the direction of world mission today. In an earlier period the option of missionaries was largely geographic. They generously committed their lives to planting the Church in places where it was previously not present. Now the stress is much less geographic as there are local Churches already planted almost everywhere in the world. But, as noted above, mission does not end with church-planting – it moves on to church-witnessing. Nowadays, missionaries are called to make a commitment, not so much to a place as to particular peoples.

Over the past 20 years, we SVD missionaries have been working toward a consensus about the focus of our own

missionary activity. We now speak about reaching out in prophetic dialogue to four groups: to faith-seekers and those with no faith community, to the poor and marginalized, to people of many cultures, and to people of other religious traditions. In our recently concluded General Chapter we spoke of this commitment as a kind of *preferential option* with particular peoples, wherever in the world they may be found. The reason for such an option is not to exclude anyone. Rather, by reaching out to those who are excluded or oppressed, in the Church and in society, we can better give direct witness that the Reign of God is open and welcoming for all.

In the Americas this fourfold commitment has led SVD communities to stress solidarity with the poor and with indigenous communities in Latin America and to stress solidarity with cultural minorities and migrants in North America. This has helped us to get a clearer grasp of our missionary contribution in the Americas. We are not called to do everything that the Church does – we are not called to respond to every critical pastoral need. We are called to do *missionary* work in the Americas. In areas where a pastoral crisis now seems unavoidable, many hard decisions will be needed to assure our missionary commitment. One can imagine the struggle of missionary leaders trying to decide whether they should appoint another *confrère* or Sister for ministry among street children or for the care of a parish that is without a priest.

In all parts of the world, this idea of a preferential option for missionaries has reminded us SVDs that mission is a deep, loving commitment Ad GENTES, to the peoples – and not so much Ad REGIONES, to particular places.

3. Lay Ministry and the Pathways of World Mission

How is mission to be carried out today? What are the pathways of mission? In the experience of the American Churches, the role of lay people is crucial. In some ways it is a silver lining to the clouds of the gathering pastoral crisis. There is a fundamental recognition that the Church, the people of God, is 99.87 per cent lay. Only thirteen out of 10,000 Catholics are clergy and/or religious.

Traditionally the Churches of the Americas have been very clerical in their organization of ministries. This clericalism has been a barrier to more active missionary outreach. Most often it expresses itself as an exaggerated need to be in control. Note well, the attitude of clericalism is not only a problem for the clergy. Many members of the Church only accept ministry from a priest, sister or religious. They believe that only those initiatives taken by clergy and religious are trustworthy, everyone else should wait for instructions. Besides, even in many lay groups there is a struggle for privilege and control that looks suspiciously like what we would otherwise call clericalism.

This clericalism does seem to be breaking down somewhat. The large and growing presence of lay missionaries from the Protestant and independent Churches presents a strong challenge to Catholic evangelization. Additionally, the pastoral crisis itself is forcing the leadership of the American Catholic Churches to entrust increasingly important roles to lay leaders.

It is evident that missionary outreach in the Americas and perhaps also in other parts of the world will need to be reconceived from the point of view of the laity. For at least fifty years, missionaries in the Americas have been in the fore-front of promoting lay ministry in the churches for both pastoral and missionary concerns.

4. Two Troubling Problems

Before concluding I would like to mention two worrying problems in the experience of mission in the Americas.

First, in many cases there seems to be a *neglect of direct evangelization*. The reasons are many; obviously the biggest one is the pastoral crisis. Direct evangelization is time consuming and personally demanding and when one is already overburdened with the pastoral care of a community that is already gathered, it is difficult to find the needed time and energy. Additionally, the stress on working for liberation from racism and poverty in the Americas has led some missionaries to be rather quiet about how their personal experience of Jesus inspires them to move forward. Finally, some

evangelical groups show a marked hostility to Catholics and make continual personal invitations to follow Jesus and to reject the Catholic Church. This has helped to poison the environment for direct evangelization.

Second, even within the Catholic Church there is often *hostility between those stressing liberation and those stressing personal renewal*. This can result in the fragmentation of Catholic communities, with some lining up with the JPIC Groups and Base Christian Communities and others lining up with the charismatic movements. Instead of learning from one another and searching for ways to support one another, much energy and good-will is lost through gossip and destructive criticism.

Conclusion

The ideas of Liberation, Preferential Option and Lay Ministry have helped missionaries in and from the Americas to do mission in new ways. Some of these ideas have already made an important impact on other parts of the Church. As a Catholic from the Americas I am happy that our experience and ideas can be of some use in other parts of the Church.

But I am also aware that the churches in the Americas need to learn from the experiences of the churches in other parts of the world. We can easily forget that our own local experience is not the same as that of other places. Though we complain from time to time about “the Vatican” being too turned in on itself, sometimes we in the American churches are just as insular in our own thinking.

By continuing to exchange missionaries between the Churches of Asia, Africa, Oceania, Europe and the Americas we can work to assure a greater solidarity in world mission. Jesus invites all of us to reach out to one another as we proclaim the Good News that the Kingdom of God is at hand – that all people are invited to share in the banquet and the gifts they bring are welcome at the feast.

Ref.: 14 September 2006 - Talk given at the General Chapter of the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate (PIME).



Mission as in an Asian Context

- Maria Ko Ha-Fong, F.M.A.* -

I would like to begin with a biblical icon. On a desert road between Jerusalem and Gaza, a man was sitting in his carriage, reading Sacred Scripture as he travelled along. He was not a Hebrew, but a eunuch coming from far away Ethiopia, a region on the edge of the Roman Empire. The Spirit urged Philip: "Go over and join up with that chariot" (Acts 8:29). Phillip ran up to this foreigner. The meeting developed into a dialogue, that finally led to Baptism.

"Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza'. (This road crosses the wilderness). So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, Queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over to this chariot and join it'. So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?'. He replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?'. And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this:

*Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
or like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.*

In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth' .

The eunuch asked Philip, 'About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?'. Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this Scripture, he proclaimed to him the Good News about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?'. He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip

baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the Good News to all the towns until he came to Caesarea".

We all recognize this story so vividly told by St Luke in the Acts of the Apostles (8: 26-40). This story, besides being very inspiring in itself, marks the beginning of *Missio ad Gentes* of the first Christian community. That is why I focused on it when I started to prepare for this encounter with you. On the occasion of a General Chapter, it is good to look back at our origins and to the Scriptures in order to draw from the Word of God and from the experience of our ancestors in faith wisdom for our future. The Prophet Jeremiah invites us to do so: "Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it" (Jer 6:16). As it always happens, the assembly of a General Chapter stands at the crossroads, trying to discern, to look back in order to look forward. Let us contemplate this icon.

As we know, Luke based his account of the early Church on the last words of Jesus to his Disciples before ascending into Heaven: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). In fact the Acts of the Apostles describes in an orderly sequence the stages of the growth and spread of the Good News under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 1-7 describes the preaching of the Apostles and the growth of the Christian community in **Jerusalem**.

Acts 8-12 focuses mainly on the spread of the Gospel to other parts of **Judea and Samaria** (and nearby **Syria**).

Acts 13–28 deals with the expansion of Christianity to “the ends of the earth”, especially through *Asia Minor*, *Greece*, and eventually to *Rome*, the capital and largest city of the Roman Empire.

In **Acts 8:26-40**, we have the first case of the conversion of a gentile, which is paradigmatic for the missionary endeavour of the Church. Let us try to apply it to our mission today, especially in the Asian context. Let me place before you some points for your reflection.

1. “An angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza, the desert road’”.

In Chapter 8 we find the early Church standing at a crossroads. The time has come to go beyond Jerusalem. After the first period of necessary consolidation the Church had to set off, to cross the borders. In doing so she followed the word and the example of her Master. When the people of Capernaum tried to prevent Jesus from leaving them, Jesus said: “I must proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God to other cities also” (Lk 4:43). The Good News of salvation is not reserved for a small privileged group, but is destined for all.

But where to launch off? The early Church was convinced that openness to the whole world did not signify a vague, abstract, dispersive universality. Great dreams are realized by taking little steps. As a Chinese proverb says: “Every journey, no matter how long, begins with the first step”. The primitive community did not work in a disorderly fashion, urged on by a spontaneous generosity. Rather, they discerned, chose priorities, studied the signs of the times, thought and planned. All, however, was done under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The mission of the Church is indeed the work of the Spirit. John Paul II states this in his Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* talking about the mission of the early Church: “When the first evangelizers go down from Jerusalem, the Spirit becomes even more of a ‘guide’, helping them to choose both those to whom they are to go and the places to which their missionary journey is to take them” (n. 24).

Where did the Church take her first steps? Reading the Acts of the Apostles and the

Letters of St Paul we can identify some criteria that have been followed: beginning in Jerusalem, opening up to other regions of Palestine and of the Roman Empire; starting in the urban centres, from where the missionary work could spread to the less populated and less influential localities; entering the Roman world, using its structures and traditions to the advantage of evangelization.

Now, step by step, in two thousand years the Church has worked out a sort of “geography of salvation” according to the divine plan. Let us highlight this geography and trace the main stages of the Gospel journey.

It started in Asia, the continent on which Christ chose to be born, where he lived, died and rose from the dead. “Asia is the birthplace of Jesus and of the Church” affirms *Ecclesia in Asia* (n. 5). “It was in Asia that Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit upon his Disciples and sent them to the ends of the earth to proclaim the Good News and gather communities of believers” (*ibid.*, n. 9). Asia is also the land where the history of the Chosen People ran its course before the coming of Christ. “It was in fact in Asia where God revealed and fulfilled his saving purpose from the beginning” (*ibid.*, n. 1). Almost all the texts of the Bible, except perhaps some of the Letters of St Paul were written in the cultural context and mentality of the East. The first missionary journey departed from Asia, where the first Ecumenical Councils took place, as well as the first theological formulations, the first forms of spirituality, the first traditions of the Church, etc. All have their origins in Asia. The Church of the third millennium is in the process of rediscovering with greater awareness, “the Asian roots of Christianity” (*ibid.*, n. 4). After all, Jesus is not a foreigner to the Asians and Christianity is not so much a religion imported from the West as it appears to be.

However, Divine wisdom wished after the first hours, that evangelization should go to the West, where the Word of God spread rapidly (*cf.* II Thes 3:1), facilitated by the social and political unity as well as linguistic and cultural homogeneity of the Roman Empire. The Good News of Christ from the

East penetrates ever deeper into the cultural structure of the West and from there, it spreads further to Africa and America. While in Asia itself, the same journey remains slow and difficult. The majority of the population in Asia came into contact with Christianity only in the second half of the second millennium.

In the 16th century, the Christian faith, after a long and tortuous journey, came back to Asia heavily burdened: rigid uniformity, defensiveness of the counter-reformation period, the general superiority complex of Western culture, with little desire to understand the ancient religions and cultures of the East, ties with colonialism, etc. Nonetheless, we cannot but admit that the Christian faith which Asia received is also rich and fruitful, transmitted by generations of holy men and women missionaries. The past has no doubt its burden, but it has also assets. The new evangelization of the East should be built on the rich inheritance that the Church has acquired in the first two millenniums in the West. The Church of Asia cannot look back on her history with resentment or polemics but with gratitude and a healthy critical spirit and with the wisdom of one who knows how to read God's history of salvation and geography of salvation.

The pendulum is swinging back to Asia. All eyes are turning to Asia these days. No doubt, about 2/3 of the world's population lives on this vast continent. Economists think that the future of the world economy is here. Also for the Church, Asia presents a big challenge and a great hope. John Paul II does not hesitate to affirm: "the Church in Asia will cross the threshold of the Third Christian Millennium marvelling at all that God has worked from those beginnings until now, and strong in the knowledge that 'just as in the first millennium the Cross was planted on the soil of Europe, and in the second on that of the Americas and Africa, we can pray that in the Third Christian Millennium a great harvest of faith will be reaped in this vast and vital continent'" (EA, n. 1).

Today, God might give us a signal telling us: "Get up and go to Asia!" It is not necessarily going there physically, anyway,

it can be heard as a call to give special attention in our missionary endeavour to this very continent, on which Jesus was born and on which, paradoxically, less than 3 per cent of the population is Christian. The mission journey on this continent, with its very complex political, economical, cultural and religious realities, is slow. The Church in Asia is and shall remain for a long time a "little flock" (Lk 12:32). Yet far from being a closed and timid minority, she is lively in faith, full of hope and vitality. Being evangelized at a later stage the Church of Asia has the advantage of the lessons learned from the West, where the Church has penetrated amid trial and error, conflict and tension, failure and reorientation. As a young Church in a continent with ancient cultures, she will advance with patience, wisdom, courage, confidence and realism, without ambitious pretence, undue fear or exaggerated caution. She does not expect massive conversions, but seeks to be "a prophetic sign" that transforms cultures from within.

2. The Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join up with that chariot"

Luke emphasizes that it is the Holy Spirit who directs the mission of the Church. But the Holy Spirit does not give explicit commands. He manifests himself not through clear messages but rather as "strength" (*dynamis*), as impetus, as power. Jesus himself presents the Spirit in this way. "See, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" (Lk 24:49). He compared the Spirit with the wind (*cf.* Jn 3:8), you experience its effect, its work, but you cannot see it, nor catch it, much less determine its course or its direction. The Spirit is the mysterious moving force that empowers the Church and her missionaries throughout the ages.

Before concluding his earthly sojourn, while his Disciples were eager to know when "the reign of Israel would be rebuilt", Jesus assured them: "The exact time is not yours to know.... You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1: 7-8).

Generally, we, like the Disciples, are very

much preoccupied with immediate solutions, worried about practical problems, anxious to see clearly, judge rightly and act efficaciously. We ask God many questions: “when”, “where”, “how”, “why”, while God expands the horizons of our expectations and gives much broader answers to our little questions. We need to get involved, to approach the chariot courageously, then a chain of signs of the Divine providence will guide us gradually and often in surprising ways.

We have many examples of men and women in the Bible who, surprised by God with a mission which greatly transcended their capacity, placed urgent problems before God. God usually does not give direct answers or immediate solutions, but opens the person to a higher and wider perspective. He does not guarantee them his instant assistance, but assures his constant presence. To anxious Moses who invoked God’s guidance: “If I have truly found grace in your eyes, show me the way”, God did not give him a map with clear indications of the way from Egypt to the Promised Land, instead he responded: “I will walk with you” (Ex 33: 12-14). To Jeremiah who was timid, inexperienced, disoriented, God said: “I am with you to protect you ... I place my words in your mouth” (Jer 1: 7-9). When Mary, aware of her own littleness before the greatness of God’s proposal asked how this was to come about, the Angel told her: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (Lk 1:35). Mary believed, abandoned herself, offered free space to the divine strength, allowed herself to be invested by the power of the Most High and pronounced her *fiat*, even if she did not know how God was going to work in her.

In our text the Spirit did not tell Philip exactly what to do, but just to approach the chariot. The dynamic of the Spirit is mysterious, surprising, unpredictable. Even today the Spirit is given to us as “strength”, in a form which is always new, always vital. We have to “be open to the new and surprising ways” (*EA*, n. 20) with which the Spirit operates. We are used to make projects, to plan ahead, to establish methodologies and strategies. All these are necessary. But we have to acknowledge that mission is not so much our work and our achievement, as it is God’s work, we are but agents of God, carrying out

his work according to the guidance of the Spirit. We can say with the psalmist: “If the Lord does not build the house, in vain do the builders labour” (Ps 127[126]:1), but since we are sure that he works marvels in us and through us, we can also sing with trust the words of another psalmist: “With God we will do great things” (*cf.* Ps 108 [107]:14). The awareness of being part of a greater design, of collaborating in God’s plan, gives us a sense of discretion, of serene realism, of humility and of gratitude.

In order to be able to do the divine work faithfully and authentically, we must have that kind of bond with God which permits us to be sensitive to his signs and to the “wind” of the Spirit. We put great energy into our missionary activities, but this must be balanced by a quiet prayerful turning to God. Contemplation is about learning to wait on God, about becoming deeply sensitive to the slightest movement of God in our lives and in the world.

This has a particular relevance in Asia, where prayer and spirituality play a big role in shaping the lives of the people. There have been various expressions of contemplation and of holiness existing on this continent from time immemorial. John Paul II is a witness to this, recalling his personal experience: “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/she cannot proclaim Christ in a credible way” (*Redemptoris Missio*, n. 91). From its very beginning in Asia, the Catholic Church was known and admired for its magnificent organizational structures and efficiency, for its works of charity, for its splendid churches, for its European style of religious practices, for its great missionary figures but not so much for its spirituality. This must be changed. *Ecclesia in Asia* insists on it. “In Asia, home to great religions where individuals and entire peoples are thirsting for the divine, the Church is called to be a praying Church, deeply spiritual even as she engages in immediate human and social concerns” (n. 23). Talking about the clergy, the document noted: “people in Asia need to see the clergy not just as charity workers

and institutional administrators, but as men whose minds and hearts are set on the deep things of the Spirit” (n. 43); and of religious men and women: “All who have embraced the consecrated life are called to become leaders in the search for God, a search which has always stirred the human heart and which is particularly visible in Asia’s many forms of spirituality and asceticism” (n. 44).

Philip in our text played the role of a “leader in the search for God”. He did so under the impulse of the Spirit: “Go up and join this chariot”. It is not obvious that one can listen to the voice of the Spirit and perceive his lead. The Spirit works in a surprising way. One has to be open and to set one’s heart in harmony with God’s heart.

3. “Seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah”

In the chariot there was a man. The chariot was not the ultimate aim to which the Spirit led Philip, but the man seated inside. The external structures are in function of the person.

Now let us focus our attention on this Ethiopian Eunuch. The fact that he was an African, not Asian, does not make him less significant for our context. In ancient geography, Ethiopia was the extreme boundary of the habitable world in the hot south. This was a man from far away, a man on the periphery. Yet he went to worship in Jerusalem and was reading the Bible on his return. His efforts were sincere, his openness of heart was admirable, his search for the truth very attentive. The scroll of the Scriptures lay there in his hands, open, fascinating, welcoming, stimulating and promising. The Sacred text presents itself unconditionally to its reader, whoever he/she may be. The Word of God was not plain to this Gentile. It did not oppose or impose itself. It was mysterious, but not obscure, attractive yet not immediately gratifying.

The Spirit also operates in the heart of every single person, regardless of race, gender, religion, social and cultural background. When Jesus said, “I tell you, I have never found anyone in Israel with faith like this” (Mt 8:10) he was not addressing his praise to the most faithful of his Disciples,

but to a Roman centurion, who did not belong to the believing community. On another occasion Jesus was moved by the faith of a Canaanite woman and praised her publicly: “You are a woman of great faith” (Mt 15: 28). These non-Israelites, like the Ethiopian Eunuch, and many more coming from the East and the West to feast in the Kingdom of Heaven will sit close to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (*cf.* Mt 8:11). There are millions of people on the Asian continent who are worthy to join this assembly.

Returning to our text, when Philip came close to the chariot and met the Ethiopian reading the Scriptures, he realized with surprise that he was called not to start the work but to crown it, not to sow the seeds but to reap its fruit. God had preceded him and prepared the way for him. Mission is not a one-way activity but an encounter. The Spirit works on both sides, on the missionaries’ and on those to whom they are sent. He teaches the Church to be wise in discerning, to be creative in finding adequate and effective ways to enter into dialogue with the different religions and cultures. And at the same time, he moves the hearts of the people, creates a yearning for the fullness of life “guiding [them] in the ways of truth and goodness” (*EA*, n. 15), preparing them “for the saving dialogue with the Saviour of all” and “for true maturity in Christ” (*cf.* n. 17). Philip, and with him the Disciples of the first Christian community, did not attribute the success of evangelization to themselves, they did not swell up with pride or self-complacency. They were aware that it is the Lord who prepares the hearts. Already at their arrival they found the people open and disposed. When Paul was going to preach in the big city of Corinth, the Lord said to him: “Do not be afraid, but continue to speak and do not be silent, for I am with you ... for there are many in this city who are my people” (Acts 18: 9-10). God did not wait for the people to be evangelized so as to consider them his own.

It is God himself who prepares hearts. Luke reveals this divine work particularly in women, rendering them available to accept the Gospel: whether they be ordinary women (*cf.* Acts 16:14) or noblewomen (*cf.* Acts 17:4,12), they stand out for their quick and enthusiastic faith. We know some figures

who were named explicitly. For example, the mother of John Mark, who placed her house at the disposition for community meetings (*cf.* Acts 12:12-17); Tabitha, who “was devoted to good works and acts of charity” (Acts 9:36), Lydia a generous and welcoming woman, whose heart the Lord opened “to adhere to the words of Paul” (Acts 16:14), then there was Priscilla, who, together with her husband Aquila, helped and sustained Paul in his mission (*cf.* Acts 18:2-3).

Even today the missionaries are not alone. The Gospels create a community of love. God continues to “multiply the number of the disciples” (Acts 6:1) and to attract collaborators into his vineyard.

A missionary community is an open community. The early Christians did not present themselves as an *élite* class, separate and detached. After the departure of their Master, they could have continued to remain “within closed doors”, reserving for themselves a privileged and protected place. Instead, they went out to the world to announce their message to others. They could have been content with welcoming those who, eventually, would have knocked at their door. No way. The community was open, serene and unpretentious, desirous of sharing their treasure with all. Like Jesus, the early Christians lived and worked among the people.

An open community accepts pluralism in its members and in those to be evangelized. It is seen as a blessing and an opportunity for mutual collaboration and enrichment. It calls to transcend differences of all aspects in order to build a “civilization of love” in Christ. Furthermore, it strives to break down the unjust barriers that powerful self-interest groups put up to protect their privileges and to keep the poor marginalized.

Mission includes genuine friendship, *affective and effective* solidarity with people, particularly with the suffering and the oppressed. The FABC's Institute for Social Action recommends the method of “exposure” and “immersion”. It is part of the four-stage “pastoral cycle” together with social analysis, contemplation and planning. Exposure brings the missionaries closer to the people, while immersion seeks to experience the reality from the perspective

of the people with whom they live, in particular from the perspective of the poor. One has to announce the Good News of life as a friend, as a neighbour, sharing joys and sorrows, problems and dreams, preoccupations and hopes. This is very important in Asia.

In our icon the Ethiopian invites Philip to come into his chariot and to sit with him. This is a symbol of immersion, of hospitality, of respect, of mutual trust and friendship. The evangelizer sits beside the person to be evangelized in a cordial dialogue. It is the Spirit who has brought them together. Here faith is transmitted not from the pulpit, but on the road, not through abstract theories, but through encounter, through experience and the dialogue of life in an atmosphere of simplicity. This is also very Asian.

In the Acts of the Apostles Luke presents the early Christians as a community “immersed” in the daily life of the people. They were externally indistinguishable from others: they lived a simple life in their midst. Because of their integrity of life, “they enjoyed the esteem of all” (Acts 2:47; 4:33). They had a serene and cordial rapport with outsiders. Their preaching to the crowds, especially to the Gentiles, usually received an enthusiastic welcome. They had a serene vision and an optimistic attitude. Christians are convinced of people's goodness, capacity for transcendence, openness to God and sincere desire for salvation. The Acts reveals a reciprocal openness and trust. Gentiles, in general, are open to the proclamation of the Good News and Christians were ready and desirous to offer them salvation. Christ unites all people, but genuine human experience also unites, prepares, makes fruitful and beautifies this union in Christ. Mission would then become a form of alliance with groups of other people, of other beliefs, other world views, to strive to be genuinely human and to take the cause of mankind seriously.

Openness and optimism are also expressed through a sincere appreciation of cultural and religious values. Asia is rich in this regard. *Ecclesia in Asia* spells out some of them: “love of silence and contemplation, simplicity, harmony, detachment, non violence, the spirit of hard work, discipline, frugal life, the thirst for learning and

philosophical enquiry, respect for life, compassion for all beings, closeness to nature, filial piety”, “family centredness”, “a highly developed sense of community”; “a powerful sense of solidarity”; “spirit of religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence”; “a remarkable capacity for accommodation and a natural openness in the mutual enrichment of peoples in the midst of a plurality of religions and culture”; “great vitality and a capacity for religious renewal”; “deep thirst for spiritual values”, “an innate spiritual insight and moral wisdom in the Asian soul”; “yearning for peace and harmony”, etc., (nn. 6,8). All these build up the fertile soil for the seeds of the Word and for the “harvest of faith” in Asia, to which the Church is looking forward in this new millennium.

4. “How can I understand, unless someone guides me?”

It was surprising enough that a high official from Ethiopia should be reading the Book of Isaiah on his way home from a visit to Jerusalem. And even more surprising that he should be ready to accept a mere passerby, Philip, as someone sent by God to enlighten him. “How can I understand unless someone explains it to me”, he said (Acts 8:31). The same question is asked by many Asians today. Someone who can explain is essential. How can people “believe if they have not heard the message? And how can they hear if the message has not been proclaimed” (Rom 10:14). “Then Philip began to speak; starting from this passage of Scripture, he told him the Good News about Jesus” (Acts 8:35).

The first important thing, then, is that there should be someone who explains. The second is that, the Evangelizer starts from where the Inquirer is: his doubts and his dreams, his difficulties, his state of mind, the level of his understanding, the aspirations of his heart, the configurations of his culture, the limitations of his horizon and vision.

Archbishop Thomas Menamparampil, S.D.B., of Guwahati, India, who was General Secretary of the Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops, said in an FABC meeting on evangelization in Asia: “In recent years one notices a disinclination in most missionaries to assume the role of Philip. One may wonder why. We can only probe

for the reasons for such timidity or apathy. The people in traditionally Christian countries, looking back with questioning minds on the hurtful events of their own history, including the wars of religion, two World Wars, colonial adventures, with their Christian convictions unable to help them to prevent such disastrous events, have been led to severe self-criticism and a ‘general loss of self-confidence’ – a loss of self-confidence in their ideologies, their systems of thought, their concept of progress, their civilization, their religion. Such a state of mind is reflected in the emergence of Postmodernism. And something of it is reflected in the current theological thinking as well, ripples whereof reach even as far as our actual missionary field. When such diffidence comes face to face with the self-confident self-assertion of Asian religions, the uncertainty is redoubled. Very many people in our missionary team suffer from this sense of ‘the loss of self-confidence’, proceeding from guilt feelings about the past and uncertainty-complex with regard to the future. But such attitudes do not originate in the Gospel. In fact, it is the Gospel alone that can bring healing to those who have hurt and those that have been hurt. It is the Gospel that enables them to put history behind their backs and move forward with confidence and take their future in hand. Today more than ever people stand in need of this assistance from the Gospel”.

The Gospel has to be proclaimed “with boldness” (Acts 4:29). Peter and John declared: “for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). We know that we have a great gift to share, “The question is not whether the Church has something essential to say to the men and women of our time, but how she can say it clearly and convincingly!” states *Ecclesia in Asia* (n. 29). And again: “The great question now facing the Church in Asia is how to share with our Asian brothers and sisters what we treasure as the gift containing all gifts, namely, the Good News of Jesus Christ” (n. 19). The Church, under the guidance of the Spirit, should never cease to learn the art of proposing and offering her treasure, inviting and fascinating, involving with gentleness and respect, in friendship and in the spirit of dialogue.

We know that Asian people like to think in symbols and images and do not indulge so

much in analytic reasoning or speculation. They prefer evocation to demonstration, intuition to argumentation, wisdom to science. The proclamation of Jesus to Asian people has to meet these tendencies. It is the person of Jesus who fascinates and not the doctrine about him. The Good News of salvation has to touch the heart and not only the mind. A few years ago in China, I had an interesting conversation with a Taoist philosopher. Something he said made a deep impression on me. Being a man of religion and a profound thinker he had studied Christianity and had great esteem for our faith. Once while talking about our different religions, he declared: "You Christians know too much about God". When I asked what he meant, he explained: "You know through revelation who God is; you can describe his nature, his works, his plan of salvation from beginning to end. And as if these were not enough, the Son of God made himself visible and tangible by assuming the human nature. More so, he founded the Church, instituted the sacraments, left his words and his example. The Church knows very well what each member must believe, must do to obtain salvation.... You know so much that there is hardly anything to discover. I fear that so much knowledge will lessen the desire to stand before the mystery and diminish the joy of tending constantly towards the ineffable".

The Church has to try hard to present the mystery and fascination of Jesus to Asian people according to their cultural patterns and ways of thinking. *Ecclesia in Asia* has given several methodological suggestions in this regard. For example: "an evocative pedagogy" in accordance with the characteristics of religious communication in Asia, "a narrative method" akin to the Asian cultural form. No matter what methodology we use or what strategy we develop, one thing is indispensable: The proclamation of the Gospel should be done by "speaking the truth in love" (Eph 4:15). Only then can evangelization reach the heart of the Asians. The creativity of love, the passion for the Kingdom of God can suggest many opportune ways to reach the inner chambers of the Asian soul/heart. All the more for us, consecrated women, our innate gift of "feminine 'genius'" (*Mulieris dignitatem*, n. 31) empowered by our consecration and by the charism of our congregation is a source of

creative ways to speak to hearts and to draw them to Christ.

5. The eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing

Luke insistently highlights the joyous reaction of those who welcome the Good News. It is joy that fills the hearts of those who proclaim and those who receive. After listening to the discourse of Paul, "those who were not Jews rejoiced and gave praise for the message regarding the Lord" (Acts 13:48). The missionaries, Paul and Barnaba, were also excited and happy. The Acts of the Apostles affirms "they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers" (Acts 15:3). It is only logical that the Good News should be announced with enthusiasm and welcomed with joy. Mission is in fact about radiation and fascination. "We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ", writes John to his fellow Christians with joy (I Jn 1:3).

Ecclesia in Asia has a very eloquent symbol: A fire can only be lit by something that is itself on fire. The spread of the Good News is to be realized by people "who are themselves on fire with the love of Christ and burning with zeal to make him known more widely, loved more deeply and followed more closely" (n. 23). Missionary strategies and activities are important, but above all, men and women with burning hearts and joyful and grateful spirits, eager to make their treasure known and loved through their lives, their witness and their work.

Paul confessed to the community of Corinth: "I do not mean to imply that we lord it over your faith; rather, we are workers with you for your joy, because you stand firm in the faith" (II Cor 1:24). A missionary could not and should not share the faith as if he/she owned it. His/her approach to the mission will be to share the faith received from God through others, conscious that this faith has made his/her life more meaningful and beautiful and he/she wants to involve others in the same joy. The Eunuch saw Philip no more, and went on his way rejoicing. The evangelizer does not establish dependent

relationships. He/she works for the joy of his brothers and sisters. He/she can disappear, yet the fire continues to burn, he/she can move out, yet the joy remains in the heart of those who have received the Good News.

This joy is diffusive, communicative, it has a communal dimension. Already in the community of Jesus we are acquainted with the scene of the disciples upon their return from the mission, they recounted with joy to Jesus and to each other the marvels God has done through them (*cf.* Lk 10:17). The same experience happened to the first Christians in the community in Jerusalem (*cf.* Acts 15:3). Even today, joy and family spirit should characterize every Christian community. More so our communities of consecrated women. The Encyclical *Vita Consecrata* makes a challenging affirmation: “The Church entrusts to communities of consecrated life the particular task of spreading the spirituality of communion, first of all in their internal life and then in the ecclesial community.... Placed as they are within the world’s different societies – societies frequently marked by conflicting passions and interests, seeking unity but uncertain about the ways to attain it – communities of consecrated life, where persons of different ages, languages and cultures meet as brothers and sisters, are signs that dialogue is always possible and that communion can bring differences into harmony” (n. 51). The fecundity of our mission depends very much on the capacity of our communities to radiate joy, harmony, and fraternal/sisterly love. Asian peoples are particularly perceptive and these qualities are highly appreciated in their cultures.

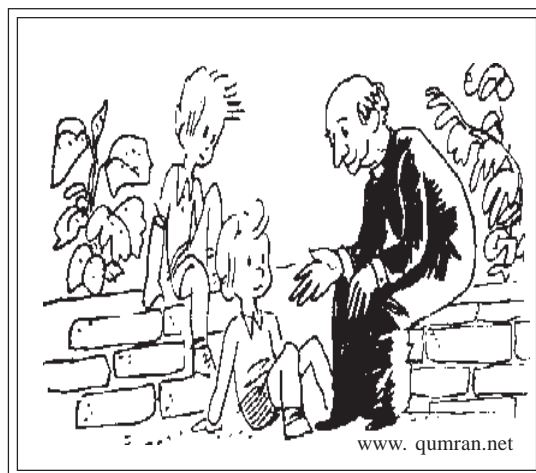
Our joy can also be a prophetic sign, pointing to its ultimate source. When the disciples rejoiced in the success of their missionary work, Jesus rejoiced with them but at the same time he elevates their joy to a higher level: “Do not rejoice because the spirits submit to you; rather rejoice for your names are written in heaven” (Lk 10:20). Our following of Christ in consecrated life makes us signs of a different and fuller future. As such, we have to witness to a foretaste of the future even in the present times. We need to acquire a prophetic art to silently announce that something valuable and beautiful can be aspired to and that the

absolute awaits us. It requires a creativity able to produce in daily life moments of such high quality, of such pure joy as to give us a glimpse of eternity.

Note

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Ref.: Text sent via e-mail by the author in November 2006.



Christian Mission and the Millennium Development Goals

- Donal Dorr, S.P.S. -

The following are the eight Millennium Development Goals set by the United Nations:

- Goal 1.** Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- Goal 2.** Achieve universal primary education
- Goal 3.** Promote gender equality and empower women
- Goal 4.** Reduce child mortality
- Goal 5.** Improve maternal health
- Goal 6.** Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- Goal 7.** Ensure environmental sustainability
- Goal 8.** Develop a global partnership for development.

In this talk I shall attempt to answer two questions:

1. What is the *specifically Christian missionary reason* for commitment to the Millennium Goals — as distinct from moral reasons on which Christians will agree with humanists and people of other religions?

2. Is there a particular *focus or emphasis or flavour* which is characteristic of the Christian missionary approach to this issue?

Response to Question 1: 'The human one'

The single most important aspect of Christianity is, of course, the Incarnation — the fact that we believe that Jesus is not just a revelation of God but is God embodied in a human person. At the heart of this mystery of the Incarnation is the title which is most commonly given to Jesus in the New Testament. This title was not 'Son of God'. Rather it was 'Son of Man'. In fact the phrase 'Son of Man' is an inaccurate and misleading translation of the New Testament phrase *'ho*

huios tou anthropou'. A more accurate translation would be 'the Human One'. The equivalent phrase in Hebrew and Aramaic (*ben-'adam, bar-'enos*) appears quite frequently in the Old Testament as a synonym for 'human person' (e.g. Pss 8:4,5 80[79]:17,18; 144[143]:3; Ez 2:1,3). In the Book of Daniel the same phrase is used to designate a very special human person, one who represents all of his people and who also has a certain numinous aura about him (Dn 7:13).

Why would Jesus choose to call himself 'the Human One'? It is quite likely that he deliberately chose this title because of its ambiguity and its range of meanings. It was ideal for Jesus' purpose partly because it suggested a certain mysterious and heavenly character, while at the same time not carrying with it the 'baggage' which had come to be attached to the title 'Messiah'. It was a title which could imply that Jesus was a chosen instrument of God. However, it is important not to allow these overtones of meaning to distract us from the most obvious meaning — the fact that Jesus chose to emphasise his humanity. The very frequent use of this title in the New Testament suggests that the distinctive characteristic of Jesus was precisely that he was human. The title may even hint that Jesus is 'THE human' — one who is the epitome of humanity.

So, we can say that the title means first of all that Jesus is saying that he is one of us, in solidarity with all other humans in the world. Secondly, it implies that Jesus is in some way a special kind of human, perhaps a model for what it means to be human — even, perhaps, a *representative* of all humanity and the *fulfilment* of humanity's highest aspirations. Thirdly, I suggest that it also implies, indirectly, that his main concern was to help people to live a fully human life.

The way to God is through being fully human

The fact that Jesus called himself ‘the Human One’ indicates that the way to come close to God is not to try to escape from this world — not to run away from everyday human issues and problems but rather to live fully authentic human lives. By taking this title Jesus is inviting us to avoid the mistake made by many Christians in the past, and which many still make today, namely, the undervaluing of life here on earth and seeing this present life simply as a kind of test to see whether we deserve the reward of Heaven in the next life.

Since Jesus the Human One invites us to live a fully human life as he did, we his followers should commit ourselves wholeheartedly to living an authentically human life. In practice this means living by the values of respect, compassion, justice, personal integrity, ecological sensitivity, and other moral and ‘this-worldly’ values. The crucial point here is that the living out of ethical and political values is fully integrated into our following of Jesus and our developing a personal relationship with him. It has become customary to make a distinction between the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of spirituality. But these two dimensions were already convergent in the Old Testament — above all in the call of the prophets. In Jesus, the vertical and the horizontal dimensions meet and overlap. This means that we cannot claim any authentic relationship with God unless we commit ourselves wholeheartedly to the welfare of those who share the world with us.

This idea is supported by a key passage in Matthew’s Gospel where Jesus is describing the coming of “‘the Human One’ at the Last Judgement. Matthew puts these words in his mouth: ‘I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me drink ... in prison and you visited me.... As often as you did it to one of these the least of my brothers or sisters, you did it to me’” (Mt 25:35-40). Clearly, Jesus is here identifying himself with any human person who is in need, and especially with those who are neglected, outcast, or left on the margins of society. We may adapt to today’s world the words of St John’s First Epistle: “If any one says, ‘I love

God’, and ignores the structural injustice which brings suffering and death to millions of fellow-humans, that person is a liar; for those who do not love their brothers and sisters whom they can see, cannot love God whom they have not seen” (*cf.* I Jn 4:20).

From all this we can see how important it is to abandon once for all the kind of dualistic distinction that was made in the past between the spiritual and what is ‘merely’ human or worldly. John Paul II was the Pope who took this on board most fully and clearly. In his very first Encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* he said:

“The human person in the full truth of his or her existence and personal being and also of their community and social being ... this person is the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission ... the way traced out by Christ himself” ... (n. 14).

This means that whenever John Paul made statements emphasising the primacy of the spiritual he was *not* reverting to an old-fashioned dualist theology that would justify an ‘escape’ by Christians from social and political involvement. What he envisaged was just the opposite: an integral humanism embracing all dimensions of life, including the economic, the political, the cultural, and the religious. Within this humanistic vision, ‘the spiritual’ meant for him those dimensions and aspects of human life that are deepest.

By calling himself ‘The Human One’ Jesus was emphasising the fact that he came to be in solidarity with *all* human beings. In doing so he was calling all of us to recognise that we have a fundamental solidarity with all other people, and he was inviting us to live out that solidarity.

The use of the title ‘The Human One’, together with the identification of Jesus with the least of his brothers or sisters, challenges chauvinistic nationalists to adopt a more universal outlook. It challenges those who are racially prejudiced to overcome their bias. It challenges people who have a patriarchal outlook to move to gender equality. It challenges business people — and all of us who are their customers — to see the inhabitants of less developed countries not as a source of cheap labour but as human

beings with a fundamental right to decent wages and good working conditions. All these challenges come together in practice in the challenge to commit ourselves wholeheartedly to the Millennium Development Goals; and we find in Jesus' title 'The Human One' the *specifically Christian reason* for this commitment.

Response to Question 2: The Christian missionary emphasis: option for the poor

I move on now to attempt to answer the second question which I posed at the beginning of this paper, namely: Is there a particular *focus or emphasis or flavour* which is characteristic of the Christian approach to this issue? The answer is that the particular emphasis which characterises the commitment of the Christian to the Millennium Development Goals is, or at least should be, a preferential option for the poor.

I should add at once that in my opinion Christians today are also called to make 'an option for the earth'. Like the option for the poor this is also a vitally important commitment; and the two options are closely related to each other. However, in this paper I shall deal only with the option for the poor — mainly because the option for the earth is one which *all* humans are called to make and it is not so obvious at present that it is particularly characteristic of Christians as distinct from people of other religions or none.

The phrase 'option for the poor' emerged only within the past generation. The word 'option' implies that there is a personal choice. While emphasising this personal aspect, I wish to insist that the choice in question is not essentially an act of private asceticism or even of face-to-face compassion for a poor person. It is specifically a response at the level of the wider society as a whole, a response to the unjust ordering of society. Therefore it makes sense only in the context of an awareness of how unjustly society is structured and of the urgent need to work for structural justice in each society and in the world as a whole.

An option for the poor is a commitment by individuals, communities, or agencies to disentangle themselves from serving the

interests of those at the 'top' of society and to begin instead to come into solidarity with those at or near the bottom. Such solidarity means commitment to working for structures which promote the interests of the less favoured sectors of society. In the sense in which it is used here 'the poor' include not only those who are economically poor, but also groups that are politically marginalised or oppressed, people discriminated against on sexual grounds, peoples that have been culturally silenced or oppressed, and those who have been religiously disinherited or deprived.

When we look in the Bible for a basis for the phrase 'option for the poor', it may be helpful to make a preliminary distinction between an option for *justice* and a specific option for *the poor*, and then to see how the former is transformed in the light of the latter. In much of the Bible there is an emphasis on social justice. We see the outrage of God, expressed by the prophets, and later by Jesus, about the mistreatment of the poor and the hard-heartedness and arrogance of the rich. This is the option for *justice*.

The specific option for *the poor* is located within this wider context, but here the emphasis is different. From a biblical perspective the phrase 'option for the poor' suggests a spirituality inspired by the belief that God chooses the weak to confound the strong, and chooses the foolish to put the wisdom of the wise to shame (*cf.* I Cor 1:27-8). Time after time we see in the Bible that God chooses weak and unlikely people, in order to show that what is important is not human power but trust in and reliance on divine initiative and power. We see that God chose Moses who was a poor speaker (Ex 4:10-12) and David who was the least likely of all his family to be king (I Sm 16:6-13). It is clear that God's choice of Israel to be the Chosen People was not intended to make political sense but rather to undermine conventional political wisdom. Furthermore, it was not by accident that Jesus came from a despised village in a despised province: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (Jn 1:46). All these examples show that the option for the poor is first of all an option made by *God* — a choice to give a privileged status to 'the poor'. The option for the poor made by us individually or collectively is merely our attempt to come in line with the prior option of God.

Marxist?

When the concept of an option for the poor was first proposed by liberation theologians, many opponents of the idea (including some important Church leaders) accused these theologians of being Marxists. It is true that a Marxist-style ‘class option’ and an option for the poor have something in common. Nevertheless there is a notable difference between them. The Marxist notion of a class option makes sound political sense; and that is why it was seen as a serious threat by those who held power in the West. For instance, it is quite easy to believe that if a significant number of educated middle-class people make common cause with the poorer classes, then they could provide the masses with the analytical and organisational skills required for a successful revolution.

A biblically-inspired ‘option for the poor’ is different. It cannot be seen as a shrewd political choice to take the side of an oppressed but potentially powerful working-class. It is rather a matter of taking the side of those who are the most marginalised and weakest people in any particular society or in the world as a whole. It is by no means likely that the widows, the orphans, the ‘strangers’ (that is, the refugees), the prostitutes or the tax-collectors will ever become major political powers in society. Consequently, to opt for the poor in the biblical sense is not to make a shrewd political gamble but to throw oneself on the mercy of God. It involves renouncing any likelihood of political success in the conventional sense. In fact it means that one has radically re-defined the very notion of success, and the purpose of human existence. It is a decision to seek one’s fulfilment and joy in ways that are incomprehensible in terms of the prevailing culture, and that represent a fundamental challenge to the assumptions of current society.

Redefining justice

From all this it is clear that to make an option for the poor is not something added on to other virtues and other aspects of the Christian faith; rather it is an option which radically transforms all aspects of the Christian and moral life. So it also changes one’s understanding of an option for justice.

It means that justice is no longer to be seen simply in terms of ensuring that available goods and favours are fairly distributed. It goes further than that, recognising first of all that people are not all equally endowed; and, secondly, taking account of the unfortunate legacy of oppression and despoliation in the past.

This means that, if the world is to become a place of true justice, peace, and human fulfilment, it is essential that many individuals and whole classes, nations, even continents be given *preferential* treatment, to compensate for their disadvantaged position. This point was already expressed quite well by Pope Leo XIII in the first of the great social Encyclicals, *Rerum Novarum*:

“... where the protection of private rights is concerned, special regard must be had for the poor and weak. Rich people can use their wealth to protect themselves and have less need of the State’s protection; but the mass of the poor have nothing of their own with which to defend themselves and have to depend above all upon the protection of the State” (n. 29).”

SOLIDARITY WITH THE POOR

An authentic option for the poor has two equally important aspects — a ‘solidarity’ aspect which is about life-style and a political or quasi-political aspect which has to do with analysis and action. The solidarity aspect involves a deliberate choice to enter in some degree into the world of those who have been left on the margins of society — to share in a significant way in their experience of being mistreated, by-passed, or left helpless. This choice of a different life-style springs from compassion — a word which means, literally, suffering with others. It involves a choice to deepen this compassion by sharing to some extent, in the suffering of the poor. By entering the world of deprived people one extends and deepens the experience of ‘suffering with’ those on the margins. And by doing so one comes to share not only their pain and struggle but also their hopes and their joys.

When I speak of choosing, to some extent, the life-style of poorer people I am referring to the kind of food we eat, the clothes we wear and the way our homes are furnished. But much more significant than

these are our choices about the friends we cultivate, the area in which we live, the kinds of work we undertake and the attitudes and style that go hand-in-hand with these aspects of our lives. These are the really significant choices made by most missionaries.

By sharing in the life of marginalised people one begins to have that sense of 'togetherness' which frequently characterises such groups. This is the primary situation in which people can have what I am calling the *experience* of solidarity, which is the matrix out of which the *virtue* of solidarity can develop. Without this experience of solidarity the would-be reformer cannot help thinking about the poor not as 'us' but as 'them', merely the objects of one's sympathy. The person who is not living in solidarity with 'the poor' can scarcely avoid being paternalistic. And when it comes to working for change, such a person is tempted to be manipulative — trying to get 'the poor' to take the actions which seem right to the 'do-gooder'. Poor people will sense this, no matter how well it is disguised. To become an effective and respectful agent of change one must become part of the group in some degree and one must be able to experience oneself — and be experienced by others — as 'one of us'.

Of course the person who is making the option has probably come from a different background and may retain a different accent or even have a different skin colour. In that sense the person may always be seen as distinct; but the group with whom he or she has come to live or work may nevertheless choose to accept this person as 'one of us' — or at least 'one with us' — one who shares their interests (in both senses of that word). In this fullest sense solidarity is a gift which those who are poor or marginalised may freely offer to the person who opts to share their life in some degree. It is a gift which cannot be presumed or demanded from them. They give it in their own time and in their own degree, and never to those who come to them with an attitude of superiority or paternalism.

From solidarity to political option

I move on now from solidarity which is the first aspect of the option for the poor to the second aspect which has to do with

political or quasi-political action. This involves beginning with a *discernment* and *analysis* of the situation. It leads on to a fundamental choice to ensure that one is not consciously or unconsciously *colluding* in this injustice and marginalisation. The next step is joint action to *challenge* structural injustice and marginalisation of people. However, it is not enough for privileged people to protest *on behalf of* those who have been marginalised. The challenge must come *from the group themselves*, since it is only in this way that they can overcome internalised oppression and regain psychological power. Those who are making the challenge may include some who, having come from a different background, now make common cause with them — and this is where privileged people make their option for the poor.

At each stage of this process those of us who have made an option for the poor must not assume that we know the answers or even that it is for them to set the agenda. The people who have been marginalised must be empowered to speak and act on their own behalf. This is the only way they can overcome the sense of helplessness and dependency which is such a basic part of their plight. This means that those of us who have opted to be in solidarity with them often have to 'hold back'. And when we do intervene it should be to encourage or facilitate the disadvantaged people themselves in articulating their own experience, in reaching an understanding of the root issues and in planning realistic action to overcome their marginalisation.

The final stage of an option for the poor is to find realistic *alternatives* to the present state of marginalisation and to begin the process of putting these alternatives into effect. Those who have made an option for the poor, and those with whom they are now in solidarity, must not imagine that this can be done easily or quickly. They may have to face a life-time of effort with no guarantee of short-term success. What spurs them on is not a naïve optimism but a hope based on trust in the power and promises of God. For the Christian the ultimate sign of this hope is the Cross — which, paradoxically, is a reminder that success may come only through what seems like ignominious failure.

In the light of the account I have just given of the major components of an option for the poor it is easy to see why there is a certain ambivalence in some Church authorities in relation to such an option. There is no doubt that the whole idea of a genuine option for the poor was and is too much of a challenge for some Church leaders. This accounts for various attempts which have been made to ‘tone down’ the very concept, and even to undermine it in practice — for instance, by the appointment of leaders who are unsympathetic to this whole approach.

Who is called to make an option for the poor?

The call to make an option for the poor is addressed explicitly to individual Christians, to communities of Christians, to Church leaders at all levels, and to the Church as a whole. We should not assume, however, that this call is addressed only to Christians. We may assume that non-Christians also experience a perhaps less explicit Spirit-inspired urge to respond generously to the plight of the poor and the marginalised.

I now recall again what I have said about the way in which justice has to be re-defined as not just the promotion of equality but also as giving preferential treatment to the poor. A consequence of this is that the whole concept of solidarity with the poor and the option for the poor must be taken very seriously by Church organizations such as missionary or mission-sending congregations, justice and peace commissions, or welfare and development agencies. This applies not just to the individuals who work for these organisations. It applies also to the corporate ethos of the organisations themselves.

Since my topic in this paper is a strictly theological one, I refrain from offering any practical suggestions about what it might mean in practice to experience solidarity with the poor and to live out an option for the poor. I merely note that, in relation to the solidarity aspect, what matters most is not so much the length of time spent in sharing the life of the poor as the degree to which one’s affectivity has been transformed to be able to reverberate empathetically with the experience of the poor and the marginalised.

And, in relation to the option aspect, what is most important is a heightened political awareness which leads to the designing of effective strategies for change — and especially of ones which give a very high priority to the burning concerns of poor people ‘on the ground’.

Church agencies vis-à-vis political agencies

A key part of the Christian and missionary commitment to the promotion of justice and integral human development is the exercising of influence on governments and inter-governmental agencies. There are very different conceptions of how this should be done. One of the best-known models is what might be called ‘the Maritain model’, since it was worked out in the 1930’s by the French Catholic philosopher, Jacques Maritain. A recent example of this approach is found in Benedict XVI’s Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 29. There the Pope says that the Church has a direct duty to be involved in charitable activities but does *not* have a direct duty to work for a just ordering of society, since “the formation of just structures is not directly the duty of the Church...”. He says that “the direct duty to work for a just ordering of society ... is proper to the lay faithful”, who “are called to take part in public life in a personal capacity”. The key words here are the final three words of the quotation, namely, ‘in a *personal* capacity’. According to the ‘Maritain model’ the task of the official Church is to educate its members to exercise their political responsibilities responsibly and wisely in the secular sphere. But the *Church as such* should not be involved in the political process.

A weakness of this ‘Maritain model’ is that it seems to take little or no account of the quasi-political activities engaged in by Church leaders and by organisations which are under the direction of Church authorities and which represent the Church. For instance, the work of Church human rights agencies or Church reconciliation projects must surely be seen as part of the action of ‘the Church’. And the lobbying by official Church organisations such as *Caritas*, Cafod, SCIAF, *Trócaire*, etc., must also be seen as an action of ‘the Church’. Furthermore, Pope

Benedict's Encyclical does not seem to take account of the quite strong and explicit stance which Pope John Paul II took on many issues of justice. Benedict XVI himself has taken on the political issue of whether or not Turkey should be allowed to join the European Union (see: November 2006).

In sharp contrast to this 'Maritain model' is the liberation theology model whereby Church leaders and Church agencies are expected to take a strong and direct stance on key issues of social justice. This model is so well known that there is no need for me to spell it out here.

A Spectrum of approaches

Looking at what actually happens in practice, we can envisage a spectrum along which we may situate the various ways in which the Church and Church agencies exercise an influence on political decisions:

(1) At one point of the spectrum is the Church's education of its own members on issues of social justice.

(2) A little further to the left along the scale we can locate the general development education programmes through which Church NGOs seek to educate the wider public, including non-Christians.

(3) Further along again come the more targeted public awareness campaigns of these agencies — for instance, the Lenten Campaigns which focus on such issues as, say, child labour, or human trafficking; the aim here is more overtly political.

(4) The next stage would be direct campaigning and lobbying of government for changes in official policy on specific issues, for instance, on such issues as the 'dumping' of agricultural products.

(5) Still further to the left on the spectrum, comes the kind of direct confrontation which takes place when repressive governments are openly challenged by liberation-minded Church authorities — for instance, Oscar Romero's call to the soldiers not to obey the orders of their officers to shoot their fellow-citizens, or Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns' support for protest groups by making churches available for their meetings.

(6) Looking more towards the right on the spectrum we can locate a move by Church agencies towards a more cooperative approach; it is the situation where a Church agency sets up a pilot programme of

development, with the intention of handing it over to government when it has 'got off the ground', or with the hope that it will be a model which governments will follow.

(7) Where cooperation is taken a stage further there is an on-going partnership with the civil authorities, where Church-sponsored programmes are co-funded by government.

(8) Finally, there are situations whereby Church organisations have become more or less implementing agencies for government-funded programmes; we see examples of this in the way in which Church-owned schools and hospitals in some European countries are funded by government and have become more-or-less an integral part of the national educational and health system.

Church-run development and justice agencies have to make strategic decisions about where are the best places to locate themselves on this spectrum. In practice, different programmes of any particular Church or missionary or NGO agency may well be located at different points on the spectrum. This is quite acceptable — provided the challenging dimension of one programme is not being played down in order to ensure co-funding for another programme. It is particularly important that the agencies re-evaluate their decisions on a regular basis, in order to ensure that partnership and co-funding have not led to them being 'tamed' and acquiescent on key issues.

I believe that there is room for a variety of different options in the stance any Church agency takes *vis-à-vis* governments. But one point is important: whatever style of challenge or cooperation it adopts, the Church agency should insist as far as possible that decision-makers in government and in supra-governmental agencies give extra weight to the experience and the views of the countries or the groups of people whom they are aiming to help in development. And this means also that they should emphasise the importance of these decision-makers having at least some minimal experience of real solidarity with the poor or marginalised people who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of their programmes.

Cultural arrogance

As I noted earlier, God has a special

concern for the poor and the marginalised. Furthermore, God “has chosen what is weak in the world to shame the strong; chosen what is low and despised in the world ...” (I Cor 1:27-8). This implies that the weak, the poor, the marginalised, and the disadvantaged are privileged instruments of God in knowing what needs to be done to overcome poverty and to bring about a just society. In addition to this argument based on our Christian faith, there is also a very practical argument for taking particular account of the experience and the views of those who are poor.

I lived for several years among very poor urban and rural communities in Africa. While there I found that the long history of colonialism had caused many of the White people there to assume that they were superior to the local people — not just better educated but also more efficient and more morally upright than the Africans. This kind of unconscious ‘cultural arrogance’ can be noticed only ‘from below’ not ‘from above’. It would be picked up immediately by the local Africans but seldom by those of us Europeans or Americans who had taken on this collective superiority complex.

The crucial point is that privileged people have a blind-spot in relation to these kinds of cultural assumptions and prejudices. This is the psychological basis for giving a particular value to the experience of poor and disadvantaged people. If more privileged people do not make a serious effort to come into solidarity with the poor by sharing their experiences — at least in some degree — it is almost certain that their reading of social and political situations will be incorrect or inadequate.

A notable example of this blind spot is the way the IMF experts read the situation in many poor countries, demanding Structural Adjustment Programmes which, as the famous economist Stiglitz has shown, not only cause immense suffering to the most vulnerable people in these countries but which also have turned out not to be in the best economic interests of these countries.

I bring this paper to a close by proposing two practical guidelines which need to be taken up very seriously by missionaries, by

Christian development or justice agencies and by governmental or inter-governmental agencies concerned with development:

(a) When evaluating social, political, cultural, or religious issues it is necessary to take account of, and give special weight to, the view and the experience ‘from below’, that is, from the perspective of those who are disadvantaged. This is because those who see things only ‘from above’ are generally unaware of the blind spots which arise from their privileged position. Consequently they are unable to understand the situation correctly, and therefore they cannot work out a correct solution.

(b) Disadvantaged people must be involved from the outset in any decision-making which affects them. Decisions which affect people who are disadvantaged from an economic, political, cultural, or religious point of view, no matter how good these decisions seem to be from the point of view of economists or political or theological ‘experts’, are not really good decisions unless they are made with the active participation of those whom they affect. This participation cannot be ‘tacked on’ at the end when the decisions have already been effectively made.

Ref.: Conference held for SEDOS at the Brothers of the Christian Schools, on 6 December 2006.



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Walking With My Neighbour in Faith

Ten FABC Insights

- James H. Kroeger, M.M. -

The 2006 Asian Mission Congress, sponsored by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences through its Office of Evangelization and hosted by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Thailand is an important milestone in the journey of the local Churches in Asia in the Vatican II era. To gather over 1,000 Catholics from all parts of Asia and beyond is a momentous undertaking. Done for the purpose of renewing Asia's Christian communities in their mission of evangelization, this congress can validly be compared to an ongoing "Asian Pentecost".

This presentation is a theological-missiological-pastoral reflection on the religions of Asia and the Church's interaction with these venerable faiths. It unfolds in two major stages. After a brief introduction to the FABC, the missiological foundations of the Church's approaches and attitudes to other religions are presented. Drawing upon the insightful literature of the thirty-five year FABC experience, five missiological foundations are identified; they are basic to a constructive encounter of the Church with the followers of Asia's religions. This is followed by a second major section that speaks of mission praxis in the Asian context. Emerging from the rich reflection anchored in the pastoral practice of the local Churches of Asia, five operative guidelines are presented; they can facilitate the practical dimensions of genuine interfaith dialogue. Finally, faithful to the methodology of the Asian Mission Congress (narrative theological sharing and faith reflection), a story of a Bangladeshi beggar woman will be included. The presentation begins with an overview of the content of the material to be covered.

OUTLINE

A. An FABC Introduction.

B. Missiological Foundations.

1. Church's Commitment to Missionary Evangelization in Asia.
2. FABC's Vision of Integral Evangelization.
3. Announcing the Person and Promises of Christ.
4. Interfaith Dialogue as a Key Dimension of Mission.
5. God's Saving Design is at Work in the Asian Reality.

C. Mission Praxis in the Asian Context.

1. Basic Attitudes Essential to Dialogue Practice.
2. Specific Attitudes toward Asia's Venerable Religions.
3. Necessity of a "Spirituality of Dialogue".
4. Dialogue Serves a New Humanity and the Kingdom.
5. Local Church: Identity, Ministries, and Service.

D. Narrative of a Bangladeshi Beggar Woman.

INTRODUCTION to the FABC

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) is a transnational episcopal structure that brings together fourteen Bishops' Conferences from the following countries as full members: Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Laos-Cambodia, Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei, Myanmar (Burma), Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. The FABC has eleven associate members drawn from the ecclesiastical jurisdictions of East Timor, Hong Kong, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Macau, Mongolia, Nepal, Siberia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Thus, in total, twenty-eight countries are represented in the FABC, which grew out of the historic gathering of 180 Asian Catholic Bishops with Pope Paul VI during his 1970 Asian Visit.

Aside from a modest central structure, there are nine FABC offices, which carry out

many concrete initiatives and projects. The offices, purposely scattered among various Asian nations, focus on evangelization, social communication, laity, human development, education and student chaplaincy, ecumenical and interreligious affairs, theological concerns, clergy, and consecrated life. Each of these offices sponsors a wide variety of activities that promote the growth of the Asian local Churches.

The supreme body of the FABC is the Plenary Assembly, which convenes every four years. The themes, places, and dates of the eight plenary assemblies have included the following: “Evangelization in Modern Day Asia” (Taipei, Taiwan: 1974); “Prayer — the Life of the Church in Asia” (Calcutta, India: 1978); “The Church — Community of Faith in Asia” (Bangkok, Thailand: 1982); “The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World of Asia” (Tokyo, Japan: 1986); “Journeying Together toward the Third Millennium” (Bandung, Indonesia: 1990); “Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life” (Manila, Philippines: 1995); “A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service” (Samphran, Thailand: 2000); and, “The Asian Family toward a Culture of Life” (Daejeon, Korea: 2004). These and other materials are available in the three (soon to be four) volumes of *For All the Peoples of Asia* (Manila: Claretian Publications).

The FABC has been the most influential body in the Asian Church since the Second Vatican Council. It has strengthened the bonds of communication among the bishops in the region and has contributed to the development of a shared vision about the Church and her evangelizing mission in Asia (copious FABC quotes in this presentation will reveal the depths of this FABC vision). For the Church in Asia to truly discover its own identity it must continually engage in a three-fold dialogue with the peoples (especially the poor), the cultures, and the religions of Asia. This programmatic vision has guided the FABC for over three decades and it formed the basic structure of the 2006 Asian Mission Congress. One can validly assert that the FABC is truly “Asia’s Continuing Vatican II”.

MISSIOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

CHURCH’S COMMITMENT TO MISSIONARY EVANGELIZATION IN ASIA.

The Catholic Church in Asia is

committed to bring the Good News to Asian peoples. However, local Christians are not always committed to this mission; this is precisely one reason for the efforts made to sponsor this continental mission congress. The FABC documents assert that: “... the preaching of Jesus Christ and His Gospel to our peoples in Asia becomes a task which today assumes an urgency, a necessity and magnitude unmatched in the history of our Faith in this part of the world. It is because of this that we can repeat the Apostle’s word, and repeat it joyfully, ‘Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel’, (I Cor 9:16) for it is ‘the love of Christ which presses us’ (cf. II Cor 5:14) to share with our peoples what is most precious in our hearts and in our lives, Jesus Christ and his Gospel, the unsurpassable riches of Christ (cf. Eph. 3:8)” [Source: FABC I (Taipei): 8].

Asian Christians believe that: “... it is as *servants of the Lord* and of *humanity* that we Christians share the same journey with all the Asian peoples. The Church was not sent to observe but to serve — to serve the Asian peoples in their quest for God and for a better human life; to serve Asia under the leading of the Spirit of Christ and in the manner of Christ himself who did not come to be served but to serve and to lay down his life as a ransom for all (Mk 10:45) — and to discern, in dialogue with Asian peoples and Asian realities, what deeds the Lord wills to be done so that all humankind may be gathered together in harmony as his family. As servant of Yahweh and of humanity, the Church will seek above all faithfulness to God and to the Asian peoples, and will also invite to full participation in the Christian community those who are lead to it by the Spirit of God” [Source: FABC V (Bandung): 6:3].

The Church in Asia admits its limitations: “... how insufficient for the most part has been our missionary consciousness and responsibility. We have so frequently forgotten that the summons and challenge to make known the person and message of Jesus Christ to those who do not know him is a mandate addressed to even the youngest Christian community” [Source: FABC III (Bangkok): 9:9]. “Unfortunately for many Catholics, faith is only something to be received and celebrated. They do not feel it is something to be shared. The missionary nature of the gift of faith must be inculcated in all Christians” [Source: FABC V (Bandung): 3.2.3].

FABC'S VISION OF INTEGRAL EVANGELIZATION. This task of evangelization is holistic and comprehensive in its scope; Pope Paul VI noted: "For the Church, evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new" [Source: Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 18]. FABC describes missionary evangelization: "Mission, being a continuation in the Spirit of the mission of Christ, involves a being with people, as was Jesus: 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (Jn 1:14)" [Source: FABC V (Bandung): 3.1.2]. "Evangelization is the carrying out of the Church's duty of proclaiming by word and witness the Gospel of the Lord" [Source: FABC I (Taipei): 25].

The **content** of evangelization is noted: "... mission includes: being with the people, responding to their needs, with sensitiveness to the presence of God in cultures and other religious traditions, and witnessing to the values of God's Kingdom through presence, solidarity, sharing and word. Mission will mean a dialogue with Asia's poor, with its local cultures, and with other religious traditions (FABC I)" [Source: FABC V (Bandung): 3.1.2].

"Local Churches, servant and inculturated, are the subject of the evangelizing mission.... The principal elements [are] as follows:
1) simple presence and living witness;
2) concrete commitment to the service of humankind; ... 3) liturgical life ... prayer and contemplation; 4) dialogue in which Christians meet the followers of other religious traditions; ... 5) proclamation and catechesis.... The totality of Christian mission embraces all these elements" [Source: CTC (Hua Hin, 1991): 36].

"Integral Evangelization requires that we become witnesses in our lives to the values and norms of the Gospel based on our baptismal consecration" [Source: SFMWA (Hong Kong): 28].

The FABC has also spoken about the **motivation** for missionary evangelization:

"Renewal of a sense of mission will also require a renewal of our motivations for mission. There has been perceived in some way a weakening of these motivations so necessary to persevere in this demanding

task. Why indeed, should we evangelize? ...
a) We evangelize, first of all, from a deep sense of *gratitude to God*.... b) But, mission is also a *mandate*.... c) We evangelize also because we *believe* in the Lord Jesus....
d) We evangelize also because we have been *incorporated by Baptism into the Church*, which is missionary by its very nature.... e) And finally, we evangelize because the Gospel is *leaven* for liberation and for the transformation of society" [Source: FABC V (Bandung): 3.2].

ANNOUNCING THE PERSON AND PROMISES OF CHRIST. The Churches of Asia see a clear Christological component to evangelization; they assert: "While we are aware and sensitive to the fact that evangelization is a complex reality and has many essential aspects — such a witnessing to the Gospel, working for the values of the Kingdom, struggling along with those who strive for justice and peace, dialogue, sharing, inculturation, mutual enrichment with other Christians and the followers of all religions — we affirm that there can never be true evangelization without the proclamation of Jesus Christ. The proclamation of Jesus Christ is the centre and the primary element of evangelization without which all other elements will lose their cohesion and validity" [Source: BIMA I (Suwon): 5-6].

"It is true that in many places Christ cannot yet be proclaimed openly by words. But He can, and should be, proclaimed through other ways, namely: through the witness of the life of the Christian community and family, and their striving to know and live more fully the faith they profess; through their desire to live in peace and harmony with those who do not share our faith.... Our proclamation of Jesus must also be urgently directed towards the workers, the poor and needy, and the oppressed...." [Source: BIMA III (Changhua): 10-11].

FABC continues: "... challenged by the stark reality of millions on our continent who have not yet been evangelized, we welcome ... this opportunity to face with a sense of urgency the task of making Christ known, loved and followed by the vast multitude of our brothers and sisters" [Source: BIMA I (Baguio): 2]. "More than two billion Asians have perhaps never encountered the Person of Jesus in a knowing and conscious way; more than two billion Asians have never really heard His message. While this fact fills us with

sorrow, it also spurs us on to longing and hope, because we know He will accompany the ways of all those whose footsteps are lovely because they bring the Good News of His mercy and love” [Source: BIMA III (Changhua): 4].

“We affirm ... that ‘the proclamation of Jesus Christ is the centre and primary element of evangelization’. ... But the proclamation of Jesus Christ in Asia means, first of all, the witness of Christians and of Christian communities to the values of the Kingdom of God, *a proclamation through Christ-like deeds*. For Christians in Asia, to proclaim Christ means above all to live like him, in the midst of our neighbours of other faiths and persuasions, and to do his deeds by the power of his grace. Proclamation through dialogue and deeds — this is the first call to the Churches in Asia” [Source: FABC V (Bandung): 4.1]. “The local Churches of Asia will proclaim Jesus Christ to their fellow humans in a dialogical manner” [Source: CTC (Hua Hin): 51].

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AS A KEY DIMENSION OF MISSION. Asia’s bishops have a deep appreciation of the role of dialogue in the evangelization process. They hold: “Interreligious dialogue is another integral part of evangelization which in the situation of our Churches needs to become a primary concern. We live in the midst of millions of people belonging to the great religious traditions.... In this context we believe that interreligious dialogue is a true expression of the Church’s evangelizing action in which the mystery of Jesus Christ is operative, calling us all to conversion.... We would wish to see interreligious dialogue become a reality at the grassroots level of our Church, through greater openness and reaching out of all their members towards their brothers and sisters of other religious traditions” [Source: BIMA II (Trivandrum): 14].

“The Church, the sacrament of God’s message in the world, continues Christ’s work of dialogue.... The Church is particularly concerned with man’s religious experience, the motivating and leavening agent in his culture. This means that the Church must constantly be involved in dialogue with men of other religions (cf. *Nostra Aetate*, n. 2). The Christian finds himself continually evangelizing and being evangelized by his partners in dialogue (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*

n. 13)” [Source: BIRA II (Kuala Lumpur): 11]. Therefore, “It suffices for the present to indicate here the continued building up of the local church as the focus of the task of evangelization today, with dialogue as its essential mode ... through interreligious dialogue undertaken in all seriousness” [Source: IMC (Manila): 19].

Indeed, since the Church in Asia is a “small flock”, the FABC insightfully asserts: “Mission may find its greatest urgency in Asia: it also finds on our continent a distinctive mode: [dialogue]” [Source: FABC V (Bandung): 4.1]. “From our experience of dialogue emerged the conviction that *dialogue was the key we sought* — not dialogue in the superficial sense in which it is often understood, but as a witnessing to Christ in word and deed, by reaching out to people in the concrete reality of their daily lives....” [Source: BIMA I (Baguio): 5]. “In the context of dialogue we tried to penetrate the meaning of the uniqueness of Christ — in our own inner experience, in our contact with others; ... we realized that there is still much to be discovered, and much that is already discovered but not sufficiently integrated in our lives and in our missionary effort.... We feel that the Christian experience in contact with the age-old religious experience of Asia has much to contribute to the growth and the transformation in outlook and appearance of the Universal Church” [Source: BIMA I (Baguio): 12].

The FABC adds an important point of clarification: “Dialogue does not call for giving up one’s commitment, bracketing it or entering into easy compromise. On the contrary, for a deeper and fruitful dialogue, it is even necessary that each partner be firmly committed to his or her faith” [Source: BIRA IV/7 (Tagaytay): 10].

GOD’S SAVING DESIGN IS AT WORK IN THE ASIAN REALITY. The FABC documents are premised on a broad vision of God’s loving plan of salvation; thus, “Christians believe that God’s saving will is at work, in many different ways, in all religions. It has been recognized since the time of the Apostolic Church, and stated clearly again by the Second Vatican Council (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22; *Lumen Gentium*, n. 16), that the Spirit of Christ is active outside the bounds of the visible Church (cf. *Redemptor Hominis*, n. 6). God’s saving grace is not limited to members of the Church,

but is offered to every person.... His ways are mysterious and unfathomable, and no one can dictate the direction of His grace” [Source: BIRA II (Kuala Lumpur): 12].

“God, the Father of all, has called all men to share in his life and love through his Son Jesus Christ. The Risen Christ and his Spirit are active in the world making this love a present and growing reality, making all things new. This same love urges us on to dialogue with people of other religions, because we have, especially since the Second Vatican Council, an increasing awareness of the positive role of other religions in God’s plan of salvation” [Source: BIRA III (Madras): 2].

The FABC continues: “In Asia especially this involves a dialogue with the great religious traditions of our peoples. In this dialogue we accept them as significant and positive elements in the economy of God’s design of salvation” [Source: FABC I (Taipei): 14]. And again: “... a clearer perception of the Church’s mission in the context of the Asian reality helps us discover even deeper motivations. Members of other religious traditions already in some way share with us in the mystery of salvation” [Source: CTC (Hua Hin): 50]. Furthermore: “We are glad that Vatican II affirmed the presence of salvific values in other religions. We are grateful for the timely insights.... The Gospel fulfills all hopes, a Gospel which Asia and the whole world direly need” [Source: BIMA I (Suwon): 7].

On this theme Pope John Paul II has written: “The Spirit’s presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions....”. “The Church’s relationship with other religions is dictated by a twofold respect: ‘Respect for man in his quest for answers to the deepest questions of his life, and respect for the action of the Spirit in man’” [Source: *Redemptoris Missio*, nn. 28-29]. Within the awareness of the Holy Spirit’s action and their commitment to dialogue, Asia’s Bishops boldly state: “... we shall not be timid when God opens the door for us to *proclaim* explicitly the Lord Jesus Christ as the Saviour and the answer to the fundamental questions of human existence” [Source: FABC V (Bandung): 4.3].

MISSION PRAXIS IN THE ASIAN CONTEXT

BASIC ATTITUDES ESSENTIAL TO DIALOGUE PRACTICE. The commitment

of Asia’s Bishops to interfaith dialogue is clear and consistent; the FABC enunciates foundational attitudes essential to this dialogue. “In Asia, the emphasis on interreligious dialogue falls not so much on academic or theological discussions, as on the sharing of life at all levels. Christians carry out the mission entrusted to them by Jesus Christ when they participate fully in the social and cultural life of the societies in which they live, enriching others by the values they have learned from the Gospel, and finding themselves enriched by the spiritual treasures of their neighbours of other faiths. Thus, the ‘dialogue of life’ is central to Christian life in Asia.... Christians in Asia are called to live their faith deeply, in openness and respect for the religious commitment of others” [Source: FIRA IV (Pattaya): 4].

Dialogue demands transformed attitudes: “... to be able to engage in genuine interreligious dialogue, we need to deepen our self-knowledge and continuously discover our personal identity ... we need to be continually healed of negativities like suspicion and fear ... in order to go deeper into ourselves in this inward journey to the God of the Ongoing Dialogue, we need to integrate Asian forms of prayer.... We acknowledge here the tremendous opportunities we have of learning from the other religious traditions of Asia, especially from the mystical traditions” [Source: FIRA I (Ipoh): 3.2-3.3].

“Any dialogical enterprise requires certain basic attitudes, as exemplified in Christ: — a spirit of humility, openness, receptivity, and ... for what God wishes to tell us through them [Asia’s religions]; — a witnessing to the saving grace of Christ, not so much by the proclaimed word but through love in the Christian community, so that its universal validity is seen and felt as such; — a placing of priority on fellowship ... so that we are led spontaneously and naturally to deeper religious dialogue” [Source: BIRA I (Bangkok): 18].

The FABC promotes a balanced appreciation of dialogue: “... for a deeper and fruitful dialogue, it is even necessary that each partner be firmly committed to his or her faith.... While firmly adhering to our commitment to Christ, it is indispensable for dialogue that we enter into the religious universe of our dialogue

partner and see his or her sincere and unflinching faith-commitment. More than that, we should appreciate the commitment of the other.... That is why listening attentively with our heart to the personal commitment of faith and witness of the other partner can not only facilitate dialogue, but also enrich us and make us grow in our faith, and help us to reinterpret it" [Source: BIRA IV/7 (Tagaytay): 10-11].

"Dialogue is a crucial challenge to the Churches in Asia in their growing commitment to the building of the Kingdom. This challenge is fraught with risks.... However, with the confidence that the Spirit is with us and helps us in our weakness (Rom 8:26), we commit ourselves to this task of dialogue...." [Source: BIRA III (Madras): Conclusion].

SPECIFIC ATTITUDES TOWARD ASIA'S VENERABLE RELIGIONS. The FABC in its first plenary gathering enunciated a profound — even poetic — appraisal of Asia's religions: "In this dialogue we accept them as significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation. In them we recognize and respect profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values. Over many centuries they have been the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength. They have been (and continue to be) the authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts, and the home of their contemplation and prayer. They have helped to give shape to the histories and cultures of our nations" [Source: FABC I (Taipei): 14]. "How then can we not give them reverence and honor? And how can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them?" [Source: FABC I (Taipei): 15].

"Only in dialogue with these religions can we discover in them the seeds of the Word of God' (*Ad Gentes*, n. 9). This dialogue will allow us to touch the expression and the reality of our peoples' deepest selves, and enable us to find authentic ways of living and expressing our own Christian faith. It will reveal to us also many riches of our own faith which we perhaps would not have perceived. Thus it can become a sharing in friendship of our quest for God and for brotherhood among His sons" [Source: FABC I (Taipei): 16]. "Finally, this dialogue will teach us what our faith in Christ leads us to receive from these

religious traditions, and what must be purified in them, healed and the whole, in the light of God's Word" [Source: FABC I (Taipei): 17].

Asia's Bishops continue: "On our part we can offer what we believe the Church alone has the duty and joy to offer to them and to all men: oneness with the Father in Jesus His Son; Christ gives us the ways to grace in His Gospel and His sacraments, and in the fellowship of the community which seeks to live in Him; an understanding too of the value of the human person and of the social dimensions of human salvation — a salvation which assumes and gives meaning to human freedom, earthly realities, and the course of this world's history" [Source: FABC I (Taipei): 18].

NECESSITY OF A "SPIRITUALITY OF DIALOGUE". Over three decades the FABC has asserted that spirituality is linked to authentic dialogue: "In Asia, home to great religions, where individuals and entire peoples are thirsting for the divine, the Church is called to be a praying Church, deeply spiritual, even as she engages in immediate human and social concerns. All Christians need a true missionary spirituality of prayer and contemplation" [Source: FABC VII (Samphan): C-2].

"At the center of this new way of being Church [in Asia] is the action of the Spirit of Jesus, guiding and directing individual believers as well as the whole community to live a life that is Spirit-filled — that is, to live an authentic spirituality. It is nothing more and nothing less than a following of Jesus-in-mission, an authentic discipleship in the context of Asia" [Source: FABC V (Bandung): 9:1].

"To risk of being wounded in the act of loving, to seek to understand in a climate of misunderstanding — these are no light burdens to bear. Dialogue demands a deep spirituality which enables man, as did Jesus Christ, to hang on to his faith in God's love, even when everything seems to fall apart. Dialogue, finally, demands a total Christ-like self-emptying so that, led by the Spirit, we may be more effective instruments in building up God's Kingdom" [Source: BIRA IV/7 (Tagaytay): 16].

"In Asia, the dialogue of prayer and spirituality is highly valued. Prayer together, in ways congruent with the faith of those who take part, is an occasion for Christians and followers of other faiths to appreciate better the spiritual riches which each group

possesses, as well as to grow in respect for one another as fellow pilgrims on the path through life. Human solidarity is deepened when people approach the divine as one human family” [Source: FIRA IV (Pattaya): 8].

The Asian Bishops have a “friend of dialogue” in the person of John Paul II (see *Redemptoris Missio*, nn. 55-57); elsewhere in the same document the pope has written: “... the interreligious meeting held in Assisi was meant to confirm my conviction that ‘every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in every human heart’” [Source: RM, n. 29].

Asia’s Bishops face the challenge of dialogue with realism: “Interreligious dialogue is never easy, it calls for its own spirituality. It is our resolve, therefore, to live and witness to this spirituality of dialogue....” [Source: FIRA I (Ipoh): 4.2]. “... credible evangelization demands from us Christians in Asia a life of authentic contemplation and genuine compassion.... Only an ego-emptying, and consequently powerless, Christian community has the credibility to proclaim the folly of the message of the Cross. Such a process of evangelization fosters a culture of dialogue in Asia” [Source: FEISA I (Pattaya): 7.4.1-2]. Finally, “The call of the laity to holiness and consequently, to the apostolate of the Church ... is a demand of their Christian identity in virtue of the Christian’s full incorporation into Christ and in the Holy Eucharist” [Source: BILA III (Singapore): 6].

DIALOGUE SERVES A NEW HUMANITY AND THE KINGDOM.

The FABC asserts that dialogue is always oriented outward in service to people and God’s Kingdom. “Dialogue is a crucial challenge to the Churches in Asia in their growing commitment to the building of the Kingdom. This challenge is fraught with risks arising out of confusing socio-political tensions, besides other causes. However, confident that the Spirit is with us and helps us in our weakness (Rom 8:26), we commit ourselves to this task of dialogue in order to unite the whole universe in Christ so that God may be all in all (I Cor 15:28)” [Source: BIRA III (Madras): Conclusion].

“We build the Church in order to build the Kingdom in our Asian societies and cultures.... Our mission therefore must be a dialogue with those of other religious ways

that will require us both to proclaim and be proclaimed to, to speak and to listen, to teach and to learn. Through such a dialogical mission, God’s Reign will grow in Asia and the Church will become more truly an Asian Church, inculturated in Asian realities” [Source: FIRA II (Pattaya): 3.5].

“The Kingdom of God is therefore universally present and at work. Wherever men and women open themselves to the transcendent divine mystery which impells them to go out of themselves in love and service to fellow humans, there the Reign of God is at work.... This goes to show that the Reign of God is a universal reality, extending far beyond the boundaries of the Church. It is the reality of salvation in Jesus Christ, in which Christians and others share together. It is the fundamental ‘mystery of unity’ which unites us more deeply than differences in religious allegiance are able to keep us apart” [Source: CTC (Hua Hin): 29-30].

With clear resolve, Asia’s Bishops state: “Therefore, we commit ourselves: ... To take every opportunity to make Jesus Christ and his message known in a way that is acceptable to Asians, presenting him to them with an ‘Asian face’, using Asian cultural concepts, terms and symbols; ... To present the Gospel message as humble servants of the Kingdom of God, always sensitive to the religious and cultural traditions of the people where the Spirit leads us to make Jesus known” [Source: AMSAL I (Tagaytay): 2].

“This common spiritual pilgrimage demands that we take inspiration from the praxis of Jesus, especially his table fellowship with publicans and sinners, wherein we discover the primal form of the Church of Christ. Before Christianity got established as a structured religion, it was a spiritual movement: Jesus’ journey with the poor towards the Kingdom of God. In close dialogue with the poor and the religious cultures of Asia, the Church would be able to rediscover its pristine dynamism which demands a radical emptying (*kenosis*) in its thought patterns, ritual forms and community structures. This age of journeying with sisters and brothers of Asian religions is a privileged moment (*kairos*) for the Church to return to its original call” [Source: FEISA I (Pattaya): 7.5.1].

LOCAL CHURCH: IDENTITY, MINISTRIES, AND SERVICE. To

promote and concretize this dialogical vision, the FABC links its implementation with Asia's local Churches and their ministries.

“Each local Church is determined by her human context and lives in a dialectical relationship with the human society into which she is inserted as the Gospel leaven. Since each local Church should embody into the context the task entrusted to her by the servant Lord, she has to discover time and again what ministries and what ministerial structures she requires in order to fulfill her mission to offer to human society the salvation brought about by Jesus Christ....” [Source: AACC (Hong Kong): 25].

“The renewal of our sense of mission will mean ... that the acting subject of mission is the *local Church* living and acting in communion with the universal Church. It is the local Churches and communities which can discern and work out ... the way the Gospel is best proclaimed, the Church set up, the values of God's Kingdom realized in their own place and time. In fact, it is by responding to and serving the needs of the peoples of Asia that the different Christian communities become truly local Churches” [Source: FABC V (Bandung): 3.3.1].

The FABC forcefully asserts: “Asian Churches then must become truly Asian in all things. The principle of indigenization and inculturation is at the very root of their coming into their own. The ministry of Asian Churches, if it is to be authentic, must be relevant to Asian societies. This calls, on the part of the Churches, for originality, creativity and inventiveness, for boldness and courage” [Source: AACC (Hong Kong): 26].

“Now — as Vatican II already affirmed with all clarity and force — every local Church *is* and cannot but be missionary. Every local Church is ‘sent’ by Christ and the Father to bring the Gospel to its surrounding *milieu*, and to bear it also into all the world. For every local Church this is a *primary task*.... Every local Church is responsible for its mission....” [Source: IMC (Manila): 14].

With great conviction, Asia's Bishops state: “... the decisive new phenomenon for Christianity in Asia will be the emergence of genuine Christian communities in Asia — Asian in their way of thinking, praying, living, communicating their own Christ-experience to others. The consequences will be tremendous ... [in] all aspects of their life....

If the Asian Churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future” [Source: AACC (Hong Kong): 14].

“Each local Church has its own vocation in the one history of salvation, in the one Church of Christ. In each local Church each people's history, each people's culture, meanings and values, each people's traditions are taken up, not diminished or destroyed, but celebrated and renewed, purified if need be, and fulfilled ... in the life of the Spirit” [Source: IMC (Manila): 15].

A BANGLADESHI BEGGAR WOMAN

In light of the foregoing presentation of the FABC's profound understanding of the Church's mission of fostering relationships and dialogue with Asia's religions, this presentation concludes with an integrating quote and the narration of a true experience. Pope John Paul II, speaking in Manila during his 1981 Philippine Visit, asserted that the goal of interfaith dialogue should be altruistic (not focused only on personal enrichment); he stated: “Christians will, moreover, join hands with all men and women of good will [and] work together in order to bring about a more just and peaceful society in which the poor will be the first to be served”. Yes, the Asian way of mission is dialogical service of the needy; this approach can clearly reveal the face of Jesus in Asia today. This was poignantly brought home to me in a transforming experience that I consider a gift of the Lord to me.

During the Lenten season some few years ago, while I was a visiting professor in Dhaka, Bangladesh, I had a “graced moment”, a “defining experience” in my missionary awareness and perspective. It has remained seared in my consciousness and has forced me to ask many foundational questions about faith, mission and my own commitment. It involves a Bangladeshi beggar woman.

I saw her on the road, in front of the large walled compound of a wealthy family dwelling. I could not clearly see her face, as she was several hundred feet ahead of me. Her tattered clothes covered a malnourished body; she was alone, although other beggars were walking ahead of her on the road. I was proceeding along the same path, leisurely taking a late afternoon walk.

Suddenly a luxury car approached with its horn blowing. The driver probably wanted the beggars to disperse and also wanted the gate of the compound opened by the servants. The woman appeared startled as the car turned sharply in front of her and the gate swung open. Within seconds two large dogs emerged from the compound and jumped at the woman, knocking her to the ground. She screamed and cried both from fear and the pain caused by the dogs nipping at her. I stood frozen, horrified at the sight.

A well-dressed lady promptly emerged from the chauffeur-driven car. She ordered the driver to take the car into the compound; the dogs were called to return inside; the servants were commanded to close and lock the gate. And, the beggar woman? She was left alone on the ground — outside the gate. I stood helpless, gazing at this appalling scene.

Only the other frightened beggars came to the aid of the woman. Only they showed mercy and compassion. I stood at a distance and wept at this scene of crucifixion. I admitted to being a guilty bystander. My fears and inadequacies left me paralyzed. I had not one *taka* coin in my pocket to give; I could not offer one word of consolation in the Bengali language which I did not speak; I did not approach the woman for fear of misinterpretation that a foreign man would touch a Bengali woman in public in this strictly Islamic culture. I simply wept in solidarity. I wept long and hard. And, in succeeding years, I have frequently returned to that scene and prayed to God: “Do not let me forget that experience. Allow it to shape my life and mission vision. Permit it to remain a ‘defining moment’ in understanding my mission vocation”.

My Christian faith provides me with a vision to interpret this experience. I believe in a God who is radically compassionate to everyone — Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian. Thus, relying on God’s grace, I look forward to meeting once again that Muslim Bangladeshi beggar-woman — she who so deeply shared in the Paschal Mystery — in the resurrected life with Christ the Lord in heaven. I am confident she will be there!

ABBREVIATIONS

- ACMC** - Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church
AMSAL - Asian-born Missionary Societies of Apostolic Life
BILA - Bishops’ Institute for Lay Apostolate
BIMA - Bishops’ Institute for Missionary Apostolate
BIRA - Bishops’ Institute for Interreligious Affairs
CTC - Conclusions of Theological Consultation (Hua Hin - 1994)
EN - *Evangelii Nuntiandi*
FABC - Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences
FEISA - Faith Encounters in Asia
FIRA - Formation Institute for Interreligious Affairs
IMC - International Mission Congress (Manila)
RM - *Redemptoris Missio*
SFMWA - Statement on Filipino Migrant Workers in Asia

NOTE: All these abbreviations used in the text refer to FABC documents found in the three volumes of *For All the Peoples of Asia*, produced by Claretian Publications in Manila.

The *FABC Papers* are available on the UCANews website with its *FABC Papers* link; see number 100 for a comprehensive index.

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Ref.: Text from the author. Sent by e-mail for the SEDOS Publication (2006).

Parole de Dieu et cultures

La Bible au risque de la rencontre des cultures

- P. Lucien Legrand, MEP -

[NDLR – Lors du Congrès international de la Fédération biblique internationale sur l'Écriture Sainte dans la Vie de l'Église, organisé pour le 40^e anniversaire de Dei Verbum à Rome du 14 au 18 septembre 2005, le P. Lucien Legrand, MEP, professeur émérite à la Faculté de théologie du séminaire St Pierre (St Peter's Institute) à Bangalore, a donné quelques clés permettant de mieux comprendre les enjeux de la traduction de la Parole de Dieu dans un monde caractérisé par sa diversité culturelle].

Le rapport entre Parole de Dieu et cultures peut s'envisager sous deux angles différents : d'une part, à l'intérieur de la Bible elle-même, on peut regarder le texte biblique comme l'expression d'une rencontre entre la Parole et une variété de cultures diverses, cananéenne, égyptienne, babylonienne, perse, gréco-romaine, etc. C'est l'enquête que j'ai faite dans mon livre sur la Bible et les cultures.¹ D'autre part, une fois la Bible donnée, on peut réfléchir sur la façon dont la communication du message doit tenir compte de la variété des cultures rencontrées au fil des temps, à travers le monde. C'est de ceci qu'il s'agit, je crois, dans le cadre de ce Congrès.

Une grande distance sépare le langage et le milieu bibliques des multiples cultures du monde actuel. Pour ce qui est de l'Inde, ce décalage peut être illustré par un monument dédié à l'harmonie interreligieuse que je visitais à Madras il y a quelque temps. Il se présente sous la forme d'un vaste portique dont chaque pilier, consacré à l'une des religions présentes en Inde, porte en bas relief les symboles typiques de cette religion. Les piliers consacrés respectivement à l'hindouisme, au bouddhisme, au jainisme, au parsisme, à l'islam, étaient artistiquement modelés. Par contre le pilier consacré au christianisme représentait un crucifix plutôt grossier : on avait sans doute proposé au sculpteur le modèle d'une croix quelconque empruntée à l'église voisine.

Le contraste entre le raffinement des symboles indiens et la vulgarité de l'imagerie chrétienne révélait l'écart encore béant entre le message chrétien et la culture indienne.

Mais il ne faut pas en rester au niveau des représentations artistiques. La culture plonge plus profondément dans le fait humain. On peut entendre culture au sens de l'« ensemble des aspects intellectuels d'une civilisation » (Petit Robert), au sens plus large que lui donne l'anthropologie, de « l'ensemble complexe qui inclut connaissances, croyances, art, éthique, coutumes et toutes les compétences et habitudes que l'homme partage comme membre d'une société déterminée ». ² Cela inclut aussi bien nourriture et boisson, attitude à l'égard du travail et des loisirs, rythmes de vie, etc. En ce sens, « le fait culturel est commun à tout être humain : les différences ne portent que sur les modalités particulières de cultures ». ³

Culture et traduction

En fait, il faut remonter au langage lui-même. C'est l'une des racines les plus profondes et des formes les plus élémentaires de la culture. La première rencontre de la Parole avec les cultures se fera à travers la traduction. On prend trop souvent la traduction de la Bible comme une donnée acquise. Dans l'usage courant, à part les milieux académiques, on présume la Bible comme on la trouve en français ou en anglais, en chinois ou en hindi et on en fait la base de notre discussion, de notre échange ou de

notre prière, etc. Même les documents ecclésiastiques, au moins jusque au Vatican II, ne semblent s'intéresser à la traduction biblique que par le biais du problème de l'autorité de la Vulgate.

En fait, le travail de traduction en général et de traduction biblique en particulier est lourd d'implications linguistiques, philosophiques et théologiques à chaque étape de son développement.⁴ La traduction de la Bible sera le premier pas que prend la Bonne Nouvelle pour accéder à la plénitude de la richesse culturelle de l'humanité. C'est un voyage fascinant à travers la variété des paysages humains mais c'est aussi un voyage aventureux exposé à bien des risques. La traduction n'est pas simple décalque. Passer d'une langue à l'autre c'est aussi entrer dans des perspectives et des émotivités nouvelles, aborder des psychologies individuelles et collectives différemment conditionnées, des systèmes symboliques nouveaux. Le langage est porteur de millénaires d'expérience humaine, de rapports divers avec le monde ambiant et l'au-delà. C'est pour cela qu'il est chargé d'un poids émotif considérable. Il peut être facteur d'unité, comme en Chine où une écriture commune rassemble plus d'un milliard de gens appartenant à des groupes ethniques et linguistiques différents. Mais il peut aussi être source d'antagonisme comme en témoignent les conflits linguistiques en Inde, au Sri Lanka, sans parler de l'Espagne et de la Belgique. Bref, la traduction est un condensé d'interaction culturelle, politique et religieuse.

1. Options fondamentales

Avant que la traduction ne commence, des options fondamentales doivent être prises en considération.

D'abord le projet même de lancer une traduction peut constituer une option critique. Les cultures dominantes tendent à être monopolitiques et à subjuguier les cultures subalternes. Nombre de pays asiatiques comptent des groupes autochtones importants qui ont leur langue propre dont la survie est menacée. Revient-il au traducteur de la Bible et aux autorités qui les patronnent de venir à la

rescousse de ces langues et cultures menacées, inventer au besoin un alphabet pour que la Parole soit mise à la disposition de tous les peuples dans leur langue propre ? Ou au contraire faut-il encourager l'intégration de ces groupes minoritaires dans le courant dominant et lancer plutôt chez les aborigènes des écoles en hindi, vietnamien ou chinois ? Un de mes amis se vit autrefois expulsé d'un pays, pourtant reconnu comme démocratique, pour avoir embrassé, de façon peut-être un peu trop militante, la cause d'une certaine ethnie marginale. A l'inverse, on a l'histoire affligeante du Patriarche de Goa, invité en 1811 par la Société Biblique de Calcutta, à prendre part à un projet de traduction des Écritures en Kannara. Il répondit que les chrétiens parlant Kannara ne savaient pas lire et que ceux qui savaient lire pouvaient aussi bien lire la Bible en portugais.⁵ Dérobade ou courte vue ? En tout cas un projet de traduction œcuménique se vit étouffé dans l'œuf par un colonialisme arrogant.

Il faut aussi cibler la traduction, ce qui est aussi une option culturelle qui ne va pas sans incidences politico-religieuses. La traduction doit-elle viser le langage poétique, élitiste au point d'être ésotérique, qui est souvent le langage religieux en Asie ? Ou au contraire, tenant compte de ce que la Bible, Parole de Dieu, s'adresse au commun du peuple, dans le cadre de leur vie quotidienne, faut-il opter pour un style populaire au risque de tomber dans la vulgarité ? Faut-il opter pour la langue religieuse archaïque ou pour le langage moderne de la presse populaire et de la télé ? Ainsi, dans un passé encore récent, les traductions tamoules, suivant l'option jésuite brahminisante de Robert de Nobili et d'autres, employaient un vocabulaire lourdement chargé de mots sanscrits. La tendance actuelle, portée par un mouvement politique issu des castes dites « inférieures », entend plutôt retourner aux racines dravidiennes du « pur tamoul », quitte d'ailleurs à retomber dans une autre forme de préciosité archaïsante. Le style n'est pas innocent d'implications politiques.

2. Le travail de traduction

Vient ensuite le travail lui-même de traduction. On peut multiplier les exemples de décalage culturel que révèle la traduction. La symbolique des couleurs varie selon les cultures : ainsi le blanc peut être symbole de mort en Extrême Orient ; en Inde également, c'est la couleur imposée aux

veuves. Le vent du Sud, en Luc 12,55 annonce une chaleur torride car il vient du désert ; en Inde du Sud, il vient de l’océan Indien et apporte la fraîcheur : le mot tamoul *thendrel* (vent du sud) est un cliché du langage poétique exprimant détente et paix, associé au plaisir paisible des amoureux folâtrant dans la brise du couchant. On est loin des menaces apocalyptiques du texte évangélique ! Chose plus grave, le « *pain quotidien* » et le « *pain* » eucharistique perdent beaucoup de leurs portées symboliques dans les cultures du riz, du mil ou du maïs. Quant au « *vin* », considéré comme boisson enivrante, il a des connotations de débauche en Inde puritaine.

La traduction du nom divin est particulièrement délicate. C’était déjà le cas pour la traduction grecque des Septante, la fille aînée des traductions bibliques. Le tétragramme hébreu YHWH était le nom qu’on ne pouvait prononcer. Il évoquait le mystère insondable. C’était aussi un mot typiquement hébraïque aux consonances barbares pour des oreilles grecques. Les Septante choisirent le mot *kyrios*, Seigneur, suivant d’ailleurs l’usage synagogaal qui lisait *Adonai*, Seigneur. Cette transposition donnait au nom divin une portée universelle. Non seulement ce n’était plus un barbarisme mais le mot exprimait clairement ce qu’est la divinité. YHWH ne pouvait s’adresser qu’à l’adoration des Juifs. Le « *Seigneur* » s’adressait à toute l’humanité. Mais ce que la traduction gagnait en précision conceptuelle et en universalisme, elle le perdait en force d’évocation du mystère.

Bien des langues asiatiques ont à affronter le problème difficile de dire Dieu : d’une part, comme en Inde, il y a trop de dieux et la difficulté vient de trouver un terme pour désigner l’Unique. D’autre part, comme en Asie de l’Est, le contexte culturel et religieux répugne à l’idée d’un Dieu personnel et il faut avoir recours à des manipulations sémantiques autour des thèmes du Ciel, de l’Esprit, etc.

Il ne s’agit pas que de théologie abstraite. Le langage est aussi l’expression d’une façon de vivre en société. Il touche les fibres les plus profondes de l’être humain dans ses rapports avec les autres. Un exemple significatif est celui du « *pluriel honorifique* ».

En Occident, le langage courant suit le mouvement de démocratisation et prend ses distances à l’égard du vouvoiement aristocratique. Dans le monde actuel, le tutoiement se généralise de plus en plus. La culture asiatique, au contraire, hindoue ou confucéenne, a développé un sens poussé de la hiérarchie et a élaboré un système raffiné d’expressions correspondantes proposant des formes de pluriel honorifique non seulement pour la seconde personne mais aussi pour la troisième voire la première personne. L’usage biblique, basé sur l’égalitarisme de l’Alliance, ne connaît pas l’honorifique. La traduction biblique doit-elle suivre la lettre du texte biblique et employer un tutoiement général, faisant par là le jeu de la démocratisation à l’occidentale ? Faut-il faire un absolu de la « *culture hébraïque* », imposer aux langues asiatiques le lit de Procuste des cultures sémitiques et occidentales ?

Culture et diffusion

La traduction achevée, vient la diffusion. Celle-ci peut se faire de différentes manières. La communication par l’écrit a été privilégiée dès les temps bibliques suite à l’emploi répandu du parchemin et du papyrus dans le monde méditerranéen. La Parole s’est faite Bible. L’importance de l’écrit s’est vue renforcée par la suite sous l’influence convergente de la Réforme et de la découverte de l’imprimerie. Mais l’écrit n’est pas la seule forme de communication. Je me suis trouvé curé d’un village en Inde où la majorité de la population était illettrée. Ce n’était malheureusement pas un cas unique en Inde et dans le monde. La communication de la Parole doit tenir compte de situations pré-littéraires. Pour s’adresser aux illettrés, la culture populaire tamoule – comme certainement aussi en bien d’autres langues — a un riche répertoire de chants bibliques ainsi que de saynètes, danses, et autres formes de récital populaire.

Si ces formes traditionnelles populaires tendent à disparaître, elles sont remplacées par les types de communication de notre âge post-littéraire, radio, cinéma, télé, CD et DVD, Internet, etc. La Parole doit pouvoir s’insérer non seulement dans le cadre de l’écrit mais aussi dans celui des cultures pré- et post-littéraires. C’est un aspect important des rapports entre l’Écriture et la Tradition.

Culture et interprétation

La Parole demande aussi à être interprétée. Le document récent de la Commission Biblique sur l'Interprétation de la Bible dans l'Église (1993) passe en revue le large éventail des formes d'interprétation. Encore omet-il de faire état des approches africaines et asiatiques⁶ pour la raison peut-être qu'elles n'ont pas encore trouvé de formulation suffisamment claire et cohérente. Pourtant ces approches existent et se développent. Même si cela reste encore inaperçu dans le monde académique occidental, une science exégétique authentique se développe en Inde et sans doute en bien d'autres lieux. On a maintenant en Inde des dictionnaires grec et hébreu, des concordances, synopses, dictionnaires et commentaires, revues bibliques en différentes langues de l'Inde. Les Facultés de Théologie offrent des programmes de spécialisation biblique. Il en sort des mémoires de maîtrise et des thèses de doctorat ouverts à l'inculturation tant pour leur questionnement que pour les méthodes exégétiques proposées. On notera d'ailleurs que, pour ce qui est de l'Inde, ce travail d'interprétation va de pair avec un mouvement d'intérêt pour la Bible au niveau de la base. On peut espérer que cela débouchera sur des formes d'interprétation biblique qui feront face aux défis de la pauvreté et des structures oppressives en même temps qu'elles renoueront avec la riche tradition herméneutique de l'hindouisme et du bouddhisme.

Culture et témoignage de vie

En dernière analyse, c'est le témoignage de vie qui donne l'interprétation la plus authentique. Les mots qui font la Bible ne sont pas tombés du ciel. Ce sont des mots ordinaires, appartenant au cadre culturel de la vie courante. Leur sens biblique spécifique leur a été donné par l'histoire à laquelle ils sont été associés. Le mot 'El' s'appliquait aux divinités du panthéon cananéen. Le mot vint à désigner le Dieu biblique en se référant au Dieu d'Abraham, d'Isaac et de Jacob, au Dieu de l'Exode et du Sinaï, au Dieu et Père de Notre Seigneur Jésus Christ. Les mots 'baptême', 'cène' se rapportaient aux ablutions et aux repas de

la vie quotidienne. C'est l'usage rituel qui leur a donné leur sens sacramentel. Le sens chrétien du mot 'agapé' est manifesté sur la Croix. La signification du langage n'est pas déterminée simplement par les dictionnaires. Le langage émerge de la vie d'un peuple et les significations sont spécifiées par la façon dont le langage est contextualisé et vécu. Toutes les formes de communication de la Parole resteront vides de sens si elles ne sont pas portées par un témoignage authentique, authentiquement humain pour porter un message authentiquement divin.

C'est donc finalement le saint qui est l'herméneute de la Parole par excellence. Le saint représente cette authenticité d'une vie qui est porteuse d'authenticité à la fois humaine et divine. La sainteté est évidemment un événement spirituel mais elle est aussi un événement culturel dans la mesure où elle exprime une réponse aux aspirations plus ou moins conscientes de toute une génération. Le saint représente une inculturation à la fois spirituelle et culturelle : il projette l'image la plus transparente de la rencontre entre Parole et culture.

Conclusion

On dit de la politique que la pire politique est celle de ceux qui prétendent ne pas en faire. De même la pire manière de répondre aux réalités culturelles serait de prétendre ignorer les cultures et ne connaître que la Parole de Dieu pure et dure. Cette «pureté» n'existe pas : le Verbe s'est fait chair. Jésus est Parole de Dieu incarné dans la réalité charnelle d'une culture juive. Il est l'expression ultime de l'engagement divin avec le monde, lancé depuis la création.

L'interaction entre Parole et culture est complexe. Le mot «*inculturation*» souvent utilisé en missiologie moderne ne suffit pas à rendre compte de cette complexité. Ce mot présume une culture monolithique et homogène, ce qui est une façon de privilégier fut-ce inconsciemment les cultures dominantes. Elles tendent à subjuguer les cultures subalternes. Elles peuvent être oppressives, porteuses de préjugés de caste, d'éléments racistes, sexistes, colonialistes. La pierre de touche d'authenticité évangélique reste le respect pour les petits et leurs cultures, qu'elles soient cultures alternatives ou contre-cultures.

La contextualisation de la parole dans les cultures du monde s'articule donc sur un double pôle :

- D'une part le pôle d'incarnation où se continue l'entrée du Verbe fait chair dans un monde animé par l'Esprit. C'est l'aspect qui correspond à notre foi au Dieu d'amour qui, par Création, Alliance et Incarnation, s'est fait partenaire de l'histoire humaine.

- D'autre part le pôle de distanciation prophétique qui soumet les cultures au glaive à deux tranchants. C'est l'évangélisation des cultures qui implique l'appel à la conversion, à la mise en cause de toute injustice. C'est l'aspect qui correspond à notre foi en un Dieu dont la sainteté transcende toutes les mesquineries humaines, en Celui dont les voies ne sont pas nos voies, ni les pensées nos pensées (Is 55, 9).

Ces deux pôles autour desquels se situe la rencontre de la Parole et des cultures ne peuvent pas être dissociés que ne peuvent l'être les deux faces du Dieu auquel nous croyons, immanent et transcendent, tout Amour et trois fois saint.

Notes

¹ *The Bible on Culture: Belonging or Dissenting?*, New York: Orbis Books, 2000.

² Cl. Geerts, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973, 89. Cf. la définition du Larousse: «Ensemble des structures sociales et des manifestations artistiques, religieuses, intellectuelles qui définissent un groupe, une société par rapport à une autre».

³ J. Bennett - M. Tumin, *Social Life*, New York: Knopf, 1948, 209.

⁴ Du point de vue philosophique, voir, par exemple G. Mounin, *Les problèmes théoriques de la traduction*, Paris, NRF, 1963. On trouvera un essai de théologie de la traduction dans C. Buzetti, *La Parola tradotta*, Brescia, Morcelliana, 1973. Les traducteurs de la Bible doivent une dette de reconnaissance à l'égard de E. Nida et de la Société Biblique Américaine pour leurs travaux sur l'application des principes de la traduction à la Bible.

⁵ Cf. J.S. Hooper, *Bible Translation in India, Pakistan and Ceylon*, Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1963, 96.

⁶ Si ce n'est sous la forme de vagues exhortations à l'inculturation, adressées aux «missionnaires» (IV B). L'exhortation apostolique *Ecclesia in Asia* de Jean-Paul II, présentant les résultats du Synode des évêques pour l'Asie (6 novembre 1999), en reste à ces termes généraux (§ 25).

Réf. : *Dossiers et documents*, n. 7/2006, Supplément EDA (*Églises d'Asie*), n. 447, septembre 2006, cahier du document n. 7 C/2006.



«Les tentatives de loi anti-conversion sont une intrusion injustifiée dans des domaines qui ne relèvent que de Dieu»

- Cardinal Ivan Dias -

[NDLR – Le 23 mai 2006, le cardinal Ivan Dias, archevêque de Bombay, a répondu aux critiques faites au pape, après les commentaires de ce dernier au sujet de lois restreignant la liberté religieuse en Inde. Nommé préfet de la Congrégation pour l'évangélisation des peuples le 20 mai 2006, le cardinal Dias a indiqué que toute opposition à une conversion sincère était «une intrusion injustifiée dans des domaines qui ne relèvent que de Dieu», en précisant que, dans l'Église catholique, toute conversion par fraude, séduction ou par la force est invalide. Voici le texte intégral de sa réponse. La traduction du texte anglais est de la rédaction d'Églises d'Asie].

Pendant l'audience durant laquelle Benoît XVI a reçu la lettre de créance du nouvel ambassadeur d'Inde près le Saint-Siège, le pape a émis l'observation suivante au sujet de la liberté religieuse en Inde : *«Les signes inquiétants d'intolérance religieuse qui ont touché certaines régions de la nation, dont des tentatives répréhensibles de porter atteinte au droit fondamental de la liberté religieuse, doivent être fermement combattus, non seulement parce qu'ils sont anticonstitutionnels mais également parce qu'ils s'opposent à l'idéal des pères fondateurs de l'Inde, qui croyaient en une nation basée sur des principes de coexistence pacifique et de tolérance mutuelle entre les différents groupes religieux».*

Devant les critiques d'une fraction politico-religieuse minoritaire, qui ne représente pas la majorité religieuse en Inde, il me semble important de rappeler certains éléments :

1. La conversion d'une religion à une autre est un sujet d'ordre personnel entre Dieu et les personnes concernées. La liberté de conscience, le droit de professer sa foi librement, de la pratiquer et de l'annoncer a été mis en valeur par la Constitution indienne, et est un droit fondamental pour tout homme, toute femme, et tout enfant. Par conséquent, les conversions ne peuvent se faire ni par la force, la séduction ou la fraude, ces dernières étant considérées

invalides par l'Église catholique. Toutefois, toute opposition légale ou *de facto* à une conversion véritable est non seulement une atteinte grave au respect des droits de l'homme et à l'esprit de la Constitution indienne, mais est, par-dessus tout, une intrusion dans des domaines qui ne relèvent que de Dieu.

Afin de prouver la bonne foi du groupe, il est, par conséquent, impératif de lui demander de produire des preuves évidentes que l'Église catholique a bel et bien réalisé eedes conversions forcées. Toutes les affirmations faites jusqu'à présent se sont révélées être complètement fausses, comme celle de l'année dernière déclenchée par un fonctionnaire du ministère de l'Éducation contre une école catholique de Nashik, lorsqu'il s'était vu refuser un service qu'il avait demandé de manière très arrogante. Lorsqu'il a été interrogé par ses supérieurs hiérarchiques et qu'on lui a demandé des preuves, il a rapidement retiré sa plainte et a publiquement présenté ses excuses pour son comportement hautain.

2. Les chrétiens en Inde ne représentent que 2,3 % de la population, et 1,8 % d'entre eux sont catholiques. Malgré cette minuscule minorité, les chrétiens gèrent 20 % des écoles primaires du pays, 10 % des programmes d'alphabétisation et de santé, 25 % des structures accueillant des veuves et des

orphelins, et 30 % des centres pour personnes handicapées, lépreux, ou malades du SIDA. La plus grande majorité des personnes fréquentant nos institutions ne sont pas de religion chrétienne. Ces structures sont grandement appréciées par les hindous, les musulmans, et les personnes d'autres religions, qui admirent les chrétiens pour leur dévouement auprès des malades, des rejetés de la société et des opprimés.

Le groupe mentionné ci-dessus ferait mieux d'examiner ce qu'il réalise pour l'éducation et l'élévation sociale du peuple indien, au lieu de mal prendre le fait que des personnes issues de la communauté religieuse majoritaire en Inde (et également d'autres communautés), se sentent attirées par la religion de Jésus-Christ, qui a dit à ses disciples qu'Il était venu non pas pour être servi mais pour servir, et à qui Il a demandé de s'aimer les uns les autres comme Il les avait aimés. Ce groupe pourrait également se demander pourquoi beaucoup de personnes d'autres religions, dont des membres du gouvernement, insistent pour que leurs enfants soient scolarisés dans des « écoles-couvents », ou souhaitent que leurs malades soient soignés dans des hôpitaux ou des centres catholiques.

3. Ce même groupe pourrait également mener une étude sur les millions de personnes qui sont passés par l'éducation, les institutions sociales ou de santé catholiques – dont entre autres des juges et des avocats célèbres, des médecins et infirmières, des responsables politiques et religieux, et même certains personnages importants du dit groupe ! – afin de savoir s'ils ont été convertis au sein de ces structures, ou s'il leur a été demandé de se convertir au christianisme. Ils comprendraient alors pourquoi après 2000 ans de présence chrétienne en Inde et les activités audacieuses de ses membres en faveur des populations locales, le nombre de chrétiens en Inde reste extrêmement faible.

4. Si ce groupe ne peut répondre à ces points de manière satisfaisante, il ferait alors bien de reconsidérer ses jugements envers la communauté chrétienne, et d'être confus des attaques verbales et physiques, perpétrées par certains de ses membres contre des personnalités ou des institutions chrétiennes, dans différents États de l'Union. Un tel

comportement est inconvenant de la part de personnes civilisées et met sérieusement en danger les principes séculiers et démocratiques de notre bien-aimée mère patrie, dont les catholiques indiens sont fiers d'appartenir en tant que citoyens respectueux des lois.

(EDA, UCAN, juin 2006)

Réf. : *Églises d'Asie*, n. 442, 1^{er} juin 2006, document annexe n. 1.



www.cruzblanca.org/hermanoleon

SEDOS Coming Events

Seminar 2007

“International Formation for ‘Missio ad Gentes’”

Please, take note of the dates:

24 - 28 April

Basic structure proposed for the themes to be treated:

- 1. Multicultural Formation***
- 2. ‘Ad Gentes’ Today***
- 3. Experiences of Multicultural Spirituality***

- Ariccia (Rm) - “Casa Divin Maestro”