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## EDITORIAL

### MAY THE LOVE AND PEACE OF THE RISEN LORD BE WITH ALL OF YOU

Love is the main trait that identifies the citizens of God's Kingdom; it is the life-line that nourishes and supports the foundations of this 'earthly' Kingdom. Forgiveness is the key that opens the doors of the Kingdom and makes Peace and Harmony possible.

May Your Kingdom come. May Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven (*cf.* Mt 6:9-10)... As disciples of Jesus our task is to proclaim by word and deed that God's Kingdom has indeed come, and it is here and now that it has to be realized. As disciples, it is our task to work boldly, becoming instruments of the Spirit that makes us children of the same Father.

**Michael McCabe, SMA**, in *"New Perspectives on the Historical Jesus and His Mission"*, reflects with us on Jesus' mission and his coming to help us discover that God is dwelling among us and continuously creating new life. The 'YHWH' of the Old Testament comes to life in Jesus to show people the creative power of love that destroys evil.

**José Cristo Rey García Paredes, CMF**, in *"The Energies of Love in Mission. Towards a Civilization of Love"*, reflects on a new paradigm of mission. He focuses on the 'mission of the Spirit' as a complement to the 'mission of Jesus', Son of God. The 'Mission *ad Gentes*' complemented by the 'Mission of Love' helps us to enter into communion, to participate in the Great Covenant.

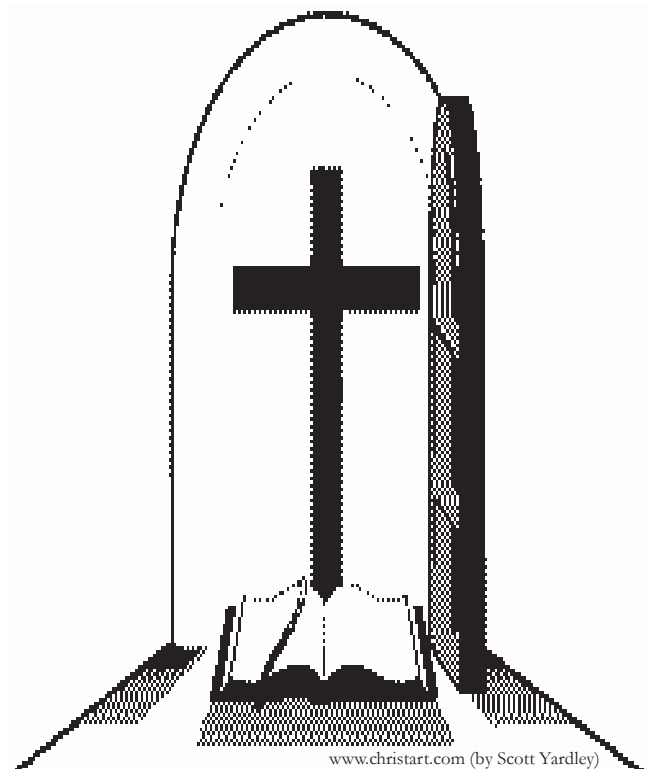
**Lode L. Wostyn, CICM**, offers us his reflections on how religious shape and build the Kingdom of God in the context of a world in transition. In his article, *"Trajectories of Renewal in Religious Life and Mission"*, he challenges all religious to 'recreate' Religious Life by transforming it into 'a sacrament and parable on the Reign of God'.

**Albert-Désiré Ngelese Nangaa** presents an example of how to build up the Kingdom. *"L'Église active dans l'histoire des homes – Cas des*

*communautés ecclésiales vivants de base"* compares the life and work of the Basic Christian Communities in Congo to the earth where the fertile seed of the Kingdom grows.

**Fr Indunil Kodithuwakku (IACM Member)** in *"Mission, Dialogue and Conversion: Sri Lankan Case"*, reflects on the basic aspects of the life of a Sri Lankan Christian. Forgiveness is the key to the Kingdom. But this implies the healing of the sins of the past and the acceptance (inculturation) of the other. Only through true conversion of the heart can we participate in the building of the Kingdom.

Man and woman, male and female, were created in the image and to the likeness of God (*cf.* Gn 1:26). Their loving relationship proclaims the coming of the Kingdom. **Hélène Mbuyamba, SMNDA**, shares with us the life of the African women. *"Les femmes dans l'Église d'Afrique – A Missioner's Reflection"* brings into focus the essential role of the woman in Africa as she is an important 'partner' in proclaiming the Good News of Salvation.



**Michael McCabe, S.M.A.**

## ***New Perspectives on the Historical Jesus and His Mission***

### **Introduction**

**A**s a study theme for my sabbatical year (2007-2008) I decided to focus on the person of Jesus. I began by reading Pope Benedict's recently published *Jesus of Nazareth*. While I found Benedict's portrait of Jesus insightful and spiritually uplifting, I wanted to delve a bit further into the Jesus of history. Intending to spend part of my sabbatical in the Holy Land, I wanted to get a clearer picture of Jesus as a first-century Jew. On the recommendation of an SMA colleague, I turned my attention to N.T. Wright, one of the leading New Testament Scholars. Wright, who is currently the Anglican Bishop of Durham, was professor of New Testament studies at Oxford University for many years. He is the author of over 30 books, including major studies on Jesus and Paul. I chose to focus my own reading and study on two of his books: *Jesus and the Victory of God*, a monumental work of almost 700 pages, published in 1996, and *The Challenge of Jesus*, published in 2000.

### **Taking the Jesus of History Seriously**

Wright is one of the leading exponents of the renewed quest for the historical Jesus which began about 25 years ago. According to Wright this quest is essential for the health of the Church. If we ignore the historical Jesus, he says, we re-invent 'Jesuses' to our own liking, or end up with a gnostic or docetic Christ, a Christ who is not human at all. Moreover, "if we really believe ... in the incarnation of the Word, we are bound to take seriously the flesh which the Word became" (*The Challenge of Jesus*, p. 12). While it is true that previous attempts to discover the Jesus of history were seriously flawed and generally unsuccessful, biblical scholars are now in a position to correct the mistakes of the past. For Wright, recent studies of Second-Temple Judaism shed fresh light on the Gospel records and enable us to arrive at a reasonably accurate picture of the kind of person Jesus was, of what he taught and did, and why his disciples were prepared to die so that his mission could continue.

Unlike some Scripture scholars (e.g., the members of the 'Jesus Seminar' Group) who approach the Gospel records of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John with great scepticism, Wright is convinced that these records, critically examined, bring the real historical Jesus to life. "Far from undermining our faith in Christ, as the fundamentalists fear, historical research may be the means 'whereby the Church in our own day will be granted a new vision, not just of Jesus, but of God'" (*The Challenge of Jesus*, p. 16). Wright's approach combines the skills of the sober historian with the passion of the committed believer. He begins by contextualizing Jesus within the politics and culture of first-century Palestine.

### **Jesus: A First Century Jew**

The faith of the Jewish people was based on the conviction that God had chosen them as his people, that he was their Lord, and that in and through their history he was enacting his plan of salvation for them and for the whole world. God (*YHWH*) was their sovereign Lord and he would establish his rule of justice, truth and love among them (the Kingdom of God). However, at the time of Jesus, the Jews were subject to Roman rule. Indeed they had been ruled by foreigners (pagans) for several centuries before Jesus was born. This was an intolerable situation for all pious Jews. It was like living in exile. But what could they do about it? To simplify matters a bit there were three options open to them:

1) They could separate themselves from the wicked world and wait for God to act. This was the option of the Essene community of Qumran.

- 2) They could try and get along with their overlords as best they could – the option of the Chief priests and the Saducees.
- 3) They could resort to armed revolt in the hope that God would give them victory over their enemies. This was the option of the zealots.

### Jesus' Ministry and Message

Jesus addressed his ministry and message directly and explicitly to this situation. He was not a teacher of timeless truths about life, but a prophet who first enacted and then explained what the Kingdom of God truly meant. He took issue with the three Kingdom visions mentioned above and personally modelled a radically different vision. Far from separating himself from the wicked world, he mingled with tax collectors and sinners. Instead of armed rebellion, he chose the path of turning the other cheek and loving enemies. Against the compromises of the Jerusalem aristocracy, he called for a renewed People of God. His parables were like dramatic plays in search of actors. He was inviting his hearers to audition for parts in his Kingdom drama.

Jesus also challenged the key symbols of Jewish identity – or what Wright calls “ancestral codes” – in his day: the Torah, the observance of the Sabbath; the land; the temple; family ties, purification rituals and dietary regulations. These symbols kept Israel separate from the pagans (foreigners), and passions rose high when they were called into question. Jesus not only questioned them and the manner in which they were misused by his contemporaries: he subverted them and replaced them with symbols pointing to his own work and agenda. In place of traditional family ties, Jesus formed a new family around himself (Mk 3:34,35). He presented himself as the new Torah, the keynote of which would be the forgiveness of sins. His table-fellowship with ‘outcasts’ and sinners replaced food regulations. He put himself in place of the Temple and, in his Last Supper with his 12 closest Disciples, on the Feast of Passover, he inaugurated a new exodus and a new covenant. Is it any wonder, then, that he came to a nasty end?

As I was reading Wright I kept asking myself what did Jesus want to do? Some theologians have argued that Jesus had no social or political agenda, that he did not wish to make the world a better place. Wright reaches a different conclusion. Jesus, he points out, clearly had a political agenda. In the Judaism of his day religion and politics were inseparable. As his contemporaries would have expected, Jesus wanted to bring God’s kingly rule to bear **on earth on the present world**. In the *Our Father* he taught his disciples to pray: “Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done as it is in heaven”. His words, his works, his prayers, all had immense social and political implications. He was not proclaiming a private or personal reign of God’s spirit in the souls of individuals. He was launching a revolutionary movement which would turn Israel and the world up-side-down. He wanted to establish God’s Reign of justice, peace, truth and love in Israel and (through Israel) among all nations on earth. What he rejected were the ways in which his contemporaries envisaged God’s rule being established. He rejected the politics of violent revolution, of easy compromise, and of narrow nationalism and chose instead the path of redemptive suffering. His way would be to turn the other cheek, to walk the second mile and to take up the Cross. He would defeat evil by letting evil do its worst to him, by suffering evil in love and forgiving his enemies (cf. *The Victory of God*, pp. 564-565). The event which vindicated Jesus’ way and which manifested God’s decisive victory over evil was the Resurrection.

### How did Jesus see himself?

For Wright, the weight of historical evidence supports the view that Jesus saw and presented himself as Israel’s Messiah. His sense of having a messianic vocation and his understanding of what this would mean for him (including suffering and death) emerges from his central symbolic actions and his many cryptic and teasing sayings. Jesus believed he would win the messianic victory over evil and build the true Temple by taking Israel’s fate upon himself and going to the Cross. And he believed that, in doing this, he was not just pointing to the Kingdom of God, but was, in his words, deeds and person, actually embodying God’s kingly rule. What seemed like defeat would be, in truth, God’s ultimate victory: “Unlike his actions in the Temple and the Upper Room, the Cross was a symbol not of praxis but of passivity, not of action but of passion. It was to become the symbol of victory, but not the victory of Caesar, nor of those who would oppose ‘Caesar with Caesar’s methods’. It was to become the symbol, because it would also be the means, of the victory of God” (*The Victory of God*, p. 610).



### Was Jesus then aware he was God?

If Jesus was aware that he was enacting God's Kingdom agenda, was he also aware that he was God? Wright's answer is cautious. The historical Jesus, he says, would not have thought of himself as God in the Nicene Creed's sense of being "consubstantial with the Father". However "as part of his human vocation grasped in faith, sustained in prayer, tested in confrontation, agonized over in further prayer and doubt, and implemented in action, Jesus believed he had to do and be, for Israel and the world, what only *YHWH* himself could do and be" (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 651).

For Wright the main problem with our thinking about Jesus as God is that we tend to operate with a particular understanding of God and then try to fit Jesus into this understanding. What we need to do, argues Wright, is to reverse this process. Start with the historical, earthly Jesus, and we will meet the true God of Israel and of all people. "In Jesus ... we see the biblical portrait of *YHWH* come to life: the loving God, rolling up his sleeves (Is 52:10) to do in person the job that no one else could do, the creator God giving new life; the God who works *through* his created world, and supremely through his human creatures; the faithful God dwelling in the midst of his people; the stern and tender God relentlessly opposed to all that destroys or distorts the good creation, and especially human beings, but recklessly loving all those in need and distress" (*The Challenge of Jesus*, p. 90). According to Wright, after centuries of thinking about God in overly exalted and detached categories (especially the categories of Greek thought), we need to redraw our portrait of God around the figure of the crucified "king of the Jews". Once we have glimpsed in the historical Jesus the true portrait of God, our essential task, as disciples of Jesus, is to reflect it both as individuals and as a community.

### The Mission of the Church Today

For Wright, study of the historical Jesus should "energise the Church in its mission to the world" (*The Challenge of Jesus*, p. 16). But what is that mission? Essentially it is to build on the foundation established by Jesus, not simply to repeat what Jesus did. What God did in Jesus, the Messiah, was unique, climactic and decisive, and hence unrepeatable. Wright uses a striking image to capture the relationship between us (members of the Church) and Jesus. "We are", he says, "like musicians called to play and sing the unique and once-only-written musical score. We don't have to write it again, but we have to play it" (*The Challenge of Jesus*, p. 140).

We are called, not so much to imitate Christ but to live by his Spirit and reflect his light to the world, so that God's will may be done on earth as it is in heaven. Wright deplores the spiritualization and privatisation of the Church's mission which has characterised Western culture since the eighteenth century, and he stresses the earthly and public relevance of that mission. Mission in Christ's name is directed towards the integral transformation of this world in which we live. There was nothing escapist or private about the message and ministry of Jesus. He lived and died and rose again in order to establish God's Kingdom on earth, and our task is to continue that work.

The view that God's Kingdom is not concerned with this present world may be based on the words of Jesus to Pilate in John 18:36, often mistranslated as: "My kingdom is not **of** this world". Wright points out, in a recent interview, that Jesus did not say this. What he said was "My kingdom is not **from** this world". This means that his kingdom did not start with this world. It started with God, but it is meant **for** this world. As disciples of Jesus, our task is to announce in word and deed that God's Kingdom has indeed come and, in the power of the Spirit, to act boldly to shape our world in accordance with that Kingdom.

While Wright insists on the social and political relevance of the Church's mission, he is also keenly aware that the way of mission is not any humanly devised programme for the betterment of the world. It is inescapably the way of the Cross. Far from "sitting smugly on the sidelines, knowing all the answers", we are challenged to enter prayerfully into the places of pain and puzzlement in our world "so that the crucified love of God may be brought to bear healingly" upon these situations (*The Challenge of Jesus*, p. 146). Paradoxically, when we respond to this challenge, "when we stand in pain and prayer, following Christ and reshaping our world, we are not only discovering what it means to be truly human; we are discovering what the Eastern Orthodox Church refers to ... as "divinization" (*The Challenge of Jesus*, p. 149). And we can take up this challenge only because we are energized, guided and directed by God's own Spirit.

**José Cristo Rey García Paredes, CMF**

## ***The Energies of Love in Mission Towards a Civilization of Love***

### **I. TOWARDS A MORE HOLISTIC MODEL OF MISSION**

**S**ometimes I ask myself: What is the contribution of the Catholic Church to the main challenges humanity has to face now in our time? It cannot be denied that our Christian community is very sensitive to them and it is trying to do its best to give practical and real answers.

#### ***1. We are not the only ones***

Nevertheless, we are not the only ones, neither are we the main protagonists. We are often not the ones who lead this process of solving the problems of humanity. The Pope, as representative of the Catholic Church, is not the only one who demands the human rights and the involvement in justice, peace, and care of Creation; there are other leaders of different religions and civil societies who are asking the same. The voice of the Church is one in the midst of the choir of other voices. In the context of dialogue it is conceited and presumptuous to proclaim our social and moral doctrine as the only one, the best, the most unique.

In our time different movements are asking for a dialogue among civilizations (*Damascus Declaration*), or an alliance of civilizations. Some groups are proclaiming that “another world is possible”. They try to be concrete and practical in their declarations. It is amazing how women and men of different cultures, religions, and civilizations, are able to dialogue and to express together their own dreams for a better humanity. They are able to mobilize the population, the youth, in programmes of solidarity, of peace and justice. From a planetarian context we have to redefine the meaning of “mission”, and the place we occupy in it. I have defended in “other religious life week” that we, the Catholics, do not have the monopoly of mission. If we understand mission in the right way, as “*missio Dei*” with all its consequences, then we are not alone in mission, we are partners of the whole of humanity. In this holistic mission we highlight the profile of a mystic as a follower of Jesus, as a believer in his Father and as anointed by his Spirit. Mission exceeds the limits of the Church. In these last years the understanding of mission — from a theological perspective — has been deeply reviewed. We need to be aware of that. Mission does not depend exclusively on us; mission is shared with all of humanity. We need not be overloaded with an excessive responsibility, or be conceited, thinking we have the best social doctrine and the key to solve all the problems. The Asian Churches are able to manifest to the whole Catholic Church how humble and solidary we should be in mission, because the Asian Churches have a pneumatological understanding of mission and they believe that the Spirit of God and of Jesus hovers beyond the frontiers of the Church.

#### ***2. The Johannine Paradigm of Mission for our times***

In the past we have underlined too much the centrality of the mission of Jesus, the Son of God, and too little the mission of the Spirit.

The common, current paradigm of mission in the Catholic Church is that of “the *missio ad gentes*” taken from the Gospel of Matthew and Mark:

*“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Mt 28:19-20).*

This “*missio*” implies the three tasks of teaching everybody the Gospel, baptizing them in the Name of the Trinity and in instilling the Christian way of life (morals). We know very well

how this model of mission has been carried out, with a lot of generosity, sacrifice, even martyrdom and sometimes success, but certainly with a lot of hesitation:

- Will that day come when all human beings are converted to our faith and enter into the Church through Baptism?
- Will that day arrive when all the religions, all the Christian confessions and churches will be only one, under only one Shepherd?
- Will the mission be understood mainly as “teaching” and consequently as “learning”? Does it not narrow the perspective of indoctrination?

This model of mission is necessary. It continues the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. It comes from Our Lord. But it is not the only one.

It is another aspect or model of mission that we find in the Gospel of John. It offers us new insights: “Love one another as I loved you”. The commandment of love is missionary, expansive. The project of God for the earth is going on with the energies of love and it will be accomplished in love. The main goal of mission is not only to understand, to know, but above all, *to love* and in this way to enter in communion, to participate in the Great Covenant. In this model the Spirit is the “cornerstone”: God’s dealings with the world are seen primarily in terms of the Spirit. Asian Christian theologies in particular recognize “the inexhaustible aspect of the divine mystery which St. John expresses laconically: ‘God is spirit’ (Jn 4:24), ‘God is love’ (I Jn 4:8).

We ask ourselves today — what kind of relationship is there between the mission of the Son and the mission of the Spirit? We ask ourselves, where is the Spirit in action, in mission? What happens, if we apply a pneumatological approach to a range of missiological questions?

The energies of love are necessary for mission. If God is love, then the “*missio Dei*” is a mission of love. If we share the “*missio Dei*”, we are called to do it with the energies of love. Love appears in three forms: as *eros*, as *philia* and as *agape*. This is the threefold aspect of Mission as an exercise of love.

## II. THE ENERGIES OF EROS: “I BELIEVE IN GOD, MOTHER-FATHER, CREATOR OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

*“For this reason I bend my knee before the Father,  
from whom every family in heaven  
and on earth takes its name” (Eph 3:14-15).*

### **1. Overpopulation: impossible mission?**

Every hour more than 8,800 children are born on the earth. The clock of life is inexorable. The World Population has reached at this very moment — 12 January at 17.00 hrs — the number of 6,679,876,080.

This super-abundance of life raises the problem not only of overpopulation, but also of how to evangelize this ever increasing number of human beings. Pope John Paul II stated in his Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*:

*“The number of those who do not know Christ and do not belong to the Church is constantly on the increase. Indeed, since the end of the Council it has almost doubled. When we consider this immense portion of humanity which is loved by the Father and for whom he sent his Son, the urgency of the Church’s mission is obvious” (n. 3).*

This urgency of mission could lead us to schizophrenia, to madness. What can we do — in our generation — to stop the increasing number of people who until now do not know Jesus, do not believe in Him and are not baptized? This tension is manifested in different passages of *Redemptoris Missio*.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Procreation or the energies of eros: as “*missio Dei*”

But from another point of view the population of the earth is the fruit of the ongoing fecundity of our God, Father and Creator. God the Father-Mother through his Spirit is the source of life, of this surpassing number of new men and women:

*“from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name”* (Eph 3:15).

The primary mission of the human being, given to him/her by the Creator, is procreation, generation:

*“So God created humankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it’”* (Gn 1:27-28).

This fundamental mission is carried out through the energies of love; but, above all, with the energies of sexual love, of eros. Eros is the source of families, clans, races. “*Missio Dei Patris et Matris*” is manifested in the “*missio*” of procreation. God the Father acts through procreators, progenerators. Women and men become living instruments of God in this wonderful mission. Men and women, who are attracted by sexuality, are able to be fertile through sexual intercourse. This is the way in which God multiplies his children in all the parts of the earth and at all times. Marriage is as old as humanity. It has been configured in very different and astonishing ways. From an impersonalized sex relationship to the more sublime relationships between human beings. Anyway, in all its forms marriage has a sacramental character: manifestation of the generative power of God.

Eros comes from heaven.<sup>2</sup> It is an incarnation of Love, of generativity, of love as attraction. Our eros is not something diabolic, but heavenly. Although we affirm that the Angels do not have sex, nevertheless, we affirm that our God has the eros of humanity. This is the only way of explaining incarnation: “Because God so loved the world...!” (Jn 3:16).

This is a great and sublime service: to be mother and father of new children of God, of people absolutely original and unrepeatable. There are no clones, neither is there a serial reproduction, or mere copies. In each human being, coming into existence, there is newness. Thanks to human fertility, humanity is always renewed. But also, thanks to eros we are creative, we desire transcendence, we fall in love and become creative and revolutionary.

The sexual instinct maintains the increasing number of human beings. Thanks to it our society is always renewed and it receives authentic surprises of extraordinary new human beings. Sexual love or eros is not only instinct, or a divine intoxication.<sup>3</sup> Sexual love or eros is the main source of creativity we, human beings, have at our disposal: generative creativity of course, but at the same time, sexual love has an enormous influence on all the forms of artistic, intellectual and scientific creativity. Even more: *eros* is specially present in the spiritual journey, at the mystical level.

*Eros* is not to be circumscribed to the procreation of biological generation. *Eros* is desire, a power that inclines us to pursue the whole, which we are not. It is a hunger within us for self-completion in the desired or loved object. While it can be expressed in sexual desire, that is not the only expression of *Eros*.

We have to be very thankful and recognizant of the energies of eros. They are energies for generative mission, for creativity, for father- and motherhood. Thanks to *eros*, humanity is more habitable, it is a place for love, for encounter, for intimate emotions, for commitment.

The rediscovery of this kind of “*missio Dei*”, through eros, will help us to perceive how much the Holy Spirit is present everywhere, even before the evangelizers proclaim the Gospel. The couples are sacred spaces in which the *missio Dei* is in action. Their homes are sanctuaries of love and fecundity. The Church has to proclaim and to recognize this.



### 3. *The negative energies of death*

It seems that the Creator was not able to perfect his Creation. The author of Genesis certainly wrote that on the seventh day: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (Gn 1:31). But, was it so? Immediately came a lot of problems, original sin included.

The will of God, the Father and Creator, has brought this humanity, so large, so plural, and so complex, into being. The Creator took a lot of risks when He planned a humanity with the gift of freedom and a nature open to hazard. We know very well its ambivalent consequences. The overabundance of new human life is put in a very dangerous environment. The new lives are vulnerable and powerless in a very dangerous milieu: they do not find the hospitality they might expect: neither hospitality in nature, nor in our cities or villages, in society or even in their own families. Many a time those called to welcome and take care of life are irresponsible; they deny their children education, human development. Sometimes they are a threat because of their innocence. The parents are often separated, divorced, and the children have to survive in a very hostile context. Violence, poverty, slavery are negative energies, struggling against the positive energies of love.<sup>4</sup> The energies of *eros* were demonized and became destructive energies of discrimination, enslavement and death. Violence is like an anti-mother, antigeration, destruction. And famine and poverty too contribute to the premature death of millions of people. The consequences of original sin, or of the sins of humanity, are evident in these cases. We can understand Job's lamentations very well (3:3-12), when he cursed the day of his birth, saying:

*"Let that day perish in which I was born, and the night that said, 'A man-child is conceived'. Let that day be darkness!"* (Jb 3:3,7).

The need of salvation, of redemption is evident. What can be done, so that the earth may become a hospitable home and not a field of hostility and death?

We confess in our faith that another mission of God took place: the redemptive mission of the Son of God.

*"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life"* (Jn 3:16-17).

From this perspective, how do we understand the mission of the Son? Was the Father sending his Son to do an impossible task?

### III. THE ENERGIES OF *PHILIA*: "I BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST ... YOU ARE MY FRIENDS"

*"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends...because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit"* (Jn 15:13-16).

The missionary commandment in the fourth Gospel is this:

"I appointed you to go and bear fruit". Jesus has chosen his disciples and he has appointed them "to go" and "to bear fruit". Jesus sends the disciples. The energy for this mission comes from that kind of love that is inside the heart of Jesus: the love of "friendship", what Jesus defines as "the greater love". But, what kind of energy and power lies in friendship? What appearance has mission when it is moved by friendship?

#### 1. *The power of Philia*

Friendship is a strong bond existing between people, a kind of *relationship* grounded in a special and mutual concern each has for the other for his sake and not for one's own. Friendship

is a covenant of love, a case of reciprocal love; and because of that, unrequited friendship is senseless. Friendship is “*life enhancing*” in that it makes us “feel more alive”. In friendship the friends “become a unique community with a being and value of its own”. What is the value of that “unique community?”. Desire is part of the relationship. We choose our friends; we desire to be with them and delight in what we share.

This kind of love involves significant interactions between the friends: mutual care, mutual influence, self-disclosure and shared activity.

- *Mutual caring*: A necessary condition of friendship is that the friends each care about the other.<sup>5</sup> Caring about someone for his/her sake involves both sympathy and action on the friend’s behalf. That is, friends must be moved by what happens to their friends to feel the appropriate emotions: joy in their friends’ successes; frustration and disappointment at their friends’ failures.

- *Mutual influence*: Friends influence each other’s conception of value and how to live.

- *Mutual self-disclosure*: Friendship involves a desire for a more psychological identification; a friend is concerned for the welfare of the other and that involves some degree of intimacy. Intimacy of friendship should be understood in terms of mutual self-disclosure.<sup>6</sup> I tell my friends things about myself that I would not dream of telling others, and I expect them to make me privy to intimate details of their lives. The point of such mutual self-disclosure is to create the “bond of trust” essential to friendship. Such enhanced trust can lead to “a high degree of empathy”, “sense of bond” and “solidarity”.

- *Shared Activity*: friends engage in *joint* pursuits. Without friendship, many advances in society may never have been embarked upon. If you have a friend you are not “the only person who sees this”; if you have a friend you verify that two heads are better than one.

## 2. *Philia in the mission of Jesus*

Surprisingly Jesus underlines that love of friendship is the energy and the power of mission. The disciple who goes on mission and bears fruit is a man, a woman, who is a friend of Jesus. Friendship is explained by Jesus with the allegory of the vine and the branches:

*“I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.... My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples”* (Jn 15:5-8).

The disciples are branches of Jesus; they, as friends, share the same mission and the same life of Jesus. The fruits of that mission are sure. The goal of such a mission is to expand the love that comes from God:

*“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love”* (Jn 15:9).  
*“This is my commandment: love one another, as I have loved you”* (v. 12).

Jesus shares with his disciples the mission of creating a net of friendship and love in humanity. His disciples have to go and spread the net of love and friendship everywhere. The challenges of mission Jesus had to face, were countless. The devil has presented him — during the three temptations in the desert — a way of solution: to worship power, to become famous, to take advantage of his messianic role (Mt 4:1-11). But Jesus has rejected the proposal of the Devil. For Jesus it was always essential to maintain the covenant of Love with the Father, but at the same time, to create a net of love, a covenant of love, with the people.

Jesus renounced bringing about a spectacular transformation of humanity; instead, he opted for a radical healing of human hearts through love and friendship.

Jesus turned friendship into his best energy for mission. He was sent by the Father to offer us the gift of becoming his friends.

Friendship with Jesus is a process; it requires time. There is no friendship “at first sight”. It could be the first step, the starting point but, after that, friendship requires ongoing care and the experience of mutual concern.

The relationship of Jesus with his disciples, male and female, was being dominated by the evangelists' "friendship". Many people have been friends of Jesus according to the Gospels:

- The Disciples are "his friends", because He has made known to them everything (Jn 15:13,14,15; also Lk 12:4).
- John the Baptist is also called by Jesus "the friend of the Bridegroom" (Jn 3:29); like Lazarus whom Jesus called "our friend" (Jn 11:11).
- We can also say that Nicodemus (Jn 3:1-11), the samaritan woman (Jn 4:39,42), Martha and Mary (Jn 11:1-3), the beloved disciple (Jn 13:23), have become "close friends of Jesus". They have been granted the intimacy of Jesus, his revelation, and Jesus himself has enjoyed their gifts of faith, love, hospitality, missionary service.

It is striking to know that Jesus was called by the people "a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Lk 7:34). Nearness to them, concern for their problems, compassion and forgiveness are the main characteristics of this kind of friendship. Only from this perspective can we understand the meaning of that expression of John the Baptist:

*"There is the Lamb of God, who takes away – carries – the sin of the world!"* (Jn 1:29).

### **3. Philia in the mission of the Church**

Mission in the Church should also be understood and practised from the perspective of the paradigm of friendship.

As catholic — *kata holon* — the Church has to offer her friendship to everybody, like Jesus, without discrimination.

When friendship is the best energy in mission, then:

- Mission is guided by friendship, mutual concern, mutual affection and self-disclosure, shared activities and shared lives;
- Mission renounces hostility and superiority complex.
- Mission becomes dialogue of life, and dialogue among friends; and not mere theoretical debate or indoctrination.
- Mission is relationship among equals and renounces any kind of superiority.
- Mission expresses a mutual concern and a marvelous respect for the dignity of others.

Friendship's love is the only way of giving life to the world, according to the Gospel of John. Beyond desire, *eros* and passion, there is love, friendship. Every man or woman can be embraced by friendship. The Church, community of Jesus, maintains her dream: the emergence of a humanity of friends; where nations, States, groups, religions, cultures, can be correlated in friendship. "One heart", "one soul", "everything in common" is the utopia of the Covenant with God, with humanity, with nature. This is truly the alternative global society we desire. In this context, the Church continues to be a living and permanent memory of this dream.

### **4. When friendship fails...**

But the experience of friendship is at times disappointing. We search anxiously to find others who respond to our friendship as we believe they should. Few are those who live by a code of confidentiality and reciprocal kindness. Some find a companion with whom to share life's sorrows and joys. Many struggle with how to respond to their longing for connection, particularly in a culture whose almost exclusive model is the sexual expression of that desire. Jesus, also, had the same experience. He invited a lot of people to enter into a friendly relationship with him:

*"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,  
and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for  
I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls"* (Mt 11:28-30).

But many people had rejected his invitation, even in the close circle of the Twelve, like Judas. The Gospel of John reports that, after the Discourse of the bread of life: "Many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him" (Jn 6:66).

The power of friendship is limited. We can do nothing with a person who is totally closed to a relation of friendship. Jesus offered it in many ways, until his self-giving, until shedding his blood for everybody. The only way for free salvation is to offer love and to seduce the heart of the others out of love, as Jesus did offering us his Bread and his Cup of the covenant. His last resort to seduce our free will was “to give his life for his friends” (*cf.* Jn. 15:10,13). Jesus had the power of love. Not the power of coercion. Before the Resurrection, Jesus had not received from the Father the whole authority and power. He was not yet able to send the Spirit. Jesus died with feelings of desolation of being forsaken by God without seeing the coming of the Kingdom of God.

The unsuccess of his mission appears paradoxically in his words on the cross: “*consummatum est*”, “Father, forgive them for they do not know ...” (Lk 23:34). Humanity was not able of recognize the visitation of God. Jesus died. His life was, certainly, a paradigm of goodness, love, compassion, forgiveness. Jesus gave all he had and was. But, did the Kingdom of God come really? Apparently the mission of Jesus was unsuccessful, a failure. He inaugurated the Kingdom, but the Kingdom is not yet totally present on the earth.

Today the Church has the same experience as Jesus. She does not gain the friendship of many people. She is at times rejected and persecuted. When she understands mission as the evangelization of the whole world, then she is disappointed because her enterprise is less of a success. How to convert a growing humanity with millions and millions of people to the Gospel, without the necessary evangelizers? Like Jesus, it seems that the Church has received an unattainable mission. Like Jesus, she is able to connect with a small group of believers or of people open to the Gospel; but the majority of men and women are outside of her sphere of action. In the meantime God the Father continues his mission generating thousands and thousands of his new children. Problems grow in humanity. Jesus seems to be powerless to solve such a quantity of problems.

#### **IV. THE ENERGIES OF AGAPE: “I BELIEVE IN THE SPIRIT ...” TOWARDS A CIVILIZATION OF LOVE**

*“God’s love is poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us”* (Rom 5:5).

We need a broader perspective to understand the concern of God for humanity. Jesus was not the total solution. Jesus himself explained to his disciples — during the Last Supper — how it was to their advantage that He go away (*cf.* Jn 16:7). At a certain moment of his life Jesus stated that he was not able to accomplish the whole mission received from the Father.

For that he announces the coming of another: the Spirit. But, at the same time, Jesus announces his coming again but together with the Spirit, “in Spirit”. And he added: “for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you”.

##### **1. The Spirit of ‘Agape’**

*The Spirit is presented by Jesus as:*

Another Advocate, intercessor, comforter, Helper,<sup>7</sup> who will be with the disciples “forever” (Jn 14:16) and who will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment (Jn 16:8).

The Spirit of truth, unknown to the world; but known to the disciples (Jn 14:15-19). The Spirit will teach everything, reminding the disciples of all that Jesus had said (Jn 14:25-26); it will testify on his behalf (Jn 15:26).

The one who comes from the Father is sent by the Father in “his Name”; or even sent by himself.

The mission of the Spirit is not an alternative to the unsuccessful mission of Jesus, but the total accomplishment of it.

For Paul in the Letter to the Romans, the Spirit is “God’s love poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rom 5:5). The meaning of this kind of love that the New Testament calls “agape” is different from erotic love or friendship. *Agape* is a kind of love connected with a covenant relationship. It is the manifestation of the spirit of communion. *Agape* is a kind of love what comes from God. Love is known in its ultimate depth as the mystery of personal communion. The relationship of Father and Son is the image of that communion in God.

Love is the very being of God in an eternally outgoing, creative life. The Spirit makes itself manifest as the form of personal communion. *Agape* is first and primordially the spirit of communion.

This is a communion with everybody without discrimination; it is a universal love in which every human being is included. Its pattern is the Love of the everlasting covenant of God with humanity.

“For the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being” (*Deus Caritas Est*, n. 25, a).

## ***2. The mission of the Spirit as creation of a Civilization of Love***

The Spirit is sent to us. We are in the period of the Mission of the Spirit. And because of that, we are in the times of *Agape*.

If we are involved in the mission of the Spirit, it means that we are engaged in a mission of love. We are not only friends of Jesus. We are beloved by the *Agape* of God. *Agape* is our main energy in mission.



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*“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing” (I Cor 13:1-3).*

### *a) A civilization of love*

The Popes, since the Vatican II, have articulated and disseminated with tireless tenacity that the mission of the Gospel is to create a *civilization of love*.<sup>8</sup> This is also a significant undertaking for our world. It is a political agenda for all heads of government and an electoral activity for the citizens of every country. Moreover, who among us would not rally around this project? Who would not want to make their way, individually and as a society, towards greater love and justice? A civilization of love demands nothing less than a change of life-styles. For the establishment of true peace in the world, justice must find its fulfilment in charity. Justice has to be complemented by love. Justice and love sometimes appear to be opposing forces. In fact they are but two facets of a single reality, two dimensions of human life needing to be mutually integrated. Historical experience shows this to be true. It shows how justice is frequently unable to free itself from rancour, hatred and even cruelty. By itself, justice is not enough. Indeed, it can even betray itself, unless it is open to that deeper power which is love.



Forgiveness is needed for solving the problems of individuals and peoples. There is no peace without forgiveness! It is necessary to transcend the logic of simple justice and to be open also to the logic of forgiveness.

Christians know that love is the reason for God's entering into relationship with us. And it is love which he awaits as our response. Consequently, love is also the loftiest and most noble form of relationship possible between human beings. Love must thus enliven every sector of human life and extend to the international order. Only a humanity in which the "civilization of love" reigns will enjoy authentic and lasting peace.

"Omnia vincit amor" (Love conquers all). In the end love will be victorious! Let everyone be committed to hastening this victory. For it is the deepest hope of every human heart.<sup>9</sup>

*b) From the "clash of civilizations" to the "alliance of civilizations"*

A civilization of love has to overcome the "clash of civilizations".<sup>10</sup> This is a theory to explain the main political and cultural movements of the history of humanity. These movements are not due to the clash of nation-states and ideologies but to the confrontation of different civilizations. The sentence "clash of civilizations" was introduced by Arnold J. Toynbee.<sup>11</sup> But it was reintroduced by Samuel Phillips Huntington in a famous article written in 1993.<sup>12</sup> According to Huntington, conflicts between civilizations will supplant the conflicts between nation-states and ideologies that characterized the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Striking is the statement that the lines of fracture among civilizations would be religious, especially between the Christian civilization and the Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist civilizations.<sup>13</sup> Huntington had defended that the main conflicts in the world have happened on the boundaries of civilizations and not in civilizations. At the same time he affirms that such conflicts are unavoidable, inevitable, because each system of values is significantly different. Nevertheless, these civilizations present internal fractures. Many people do not accept that the conflict among civilizations is inevitable. The majority of people prefer a friendly coexistence. The relationship between the civilizations is not simple, but very complex.

The proposal of a "dialogue of civilization" (Mohammad Khatami, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1999) or an Alliance of Civilizations (José Luis Zapatero, Prime Minister of Spain) defends the Alliance between the Western and the Arab world to fight international terrorism in a non-military way. The programme favours cooperation against terrorism, the correction of economical inequalities and the promotion of cultural dialogue.

*c) Moving towards a civilization of Love and Justice*

Every day we see in the media or with our own eyes the misery and suffering endured in different parts of our world. The faces of all of these marginalized people of our society, in large cities and those in the remotest of areas, are a living criticism of our 21<sup>st</sup> century, a century that rightly prides itself on so many scientific and technological breakthroughs and progress. The Spirit of God gives us sentiments to serve those who are poor. In the prophesy of Isaiah as read by Jesus in Luke's Gospel it is said:

*"The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me.  
He has sent me to bring the good news to those who are poor..." (Lk 4:18).*

This is a call that has been taken up throughout the centuries by the Church. This is the mission of *Agape*, of the Spirit. The Church must incarnate in her pastoral initiatives the solidarity of the universal Church towards those who are poor and of every kind of outcast. Concern for those most in need springs from a decision to love them in a special manner. The Church is committed to help build a "civilization of love and justice". The hallmarks of education for charity/love, justice, service and advocacy, inherited from the past, are already moving us towards a civilization of love and justice. Let us make the goal of moving "towards a civilization of love and justice" our first, our primary commitment in life.

The Spirit calls believers to the mission of spreading love in social relationships, at every level and in every area. Jesus teaches us that “the fundamental law of human perfection, and consequently of the transformation of the world, is the new commandment of love” (cf. Mt 22:40; Jn 15:12; Col 3:14). Only love can completely change men and women. *Agape* in social relationships is at the heart of the mission of the Church. The Church does not only teach; she also learns. She does not have to present her social teaching as the superior one, but with humility shares with others her experience. The Social Doctrine of the Church is also under the commandment of dialogue and service.

We need to develop the “creative imagination of Charity”. The social concern belongs to our *Agape*-mission. We proclaim that God is love, through actions of love. The Spirit is manifested in our *agape* (I Cor 13). Without love and social friendship the community bonds between human beings grow weak and uncertain.

We proclaim love as the very essence of God. We proclaim love as the very essence of the images of God. Our love has to be liberated in all the levels of our personality: *eros*, *philia*, *agape*. Love creates covenant.

### CONCLUSION (AN EXAMPLE)

It is male and female together (Gn 1:27), humans in a loving relationship, who are the image of God, of the “*missio Dei*”. *Eros* is a desire to share in the loving relationship of the Father, Son, and Spirit. This desire for mutuality impels us to work for justice, solidarity, and a civilization of love, which is indicative of the postmodern mindset.

Jesus described his mission as friendship of *Philia*. In an alliance of civilizations, friendship is the mediation that will overcome all problems and divisions. The New Testament describes the mission of the Spirit as *Agape*, gratuitous and transforming love.

*Eros*, *Philia* and *Agape* are the three main energies in mission. Oftentimes, these three energies have not been recognized as such.

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> “The fact remains however that the “ends of the earth” to which the Gospel must be brought are growing ever more distant. Tertullian’s saying, that the Gospel has been proclaimed to all the earth and to all peoples, is still very far from being a reality. The mission *ad gentes* is still in its infancy. New peoples appear on the world scene, and they too have a right to receive the proclamation of salvation. Population growth in non-Christian countries of the South and the East is constantly increasing the number of people who remain unaware of Christ’s redemption” (RM, n. 40). “The number of those awaiting Christ is still immense: the human and cultural groups not yet reached by the Gospel, or for whom the Church is scarcely present, are so widespread as to require the uniting of all the Church’s resources. As she prepared to celebrate the Jubilee of the Year 2000, the whole Church was even more committed to a new missionary advent. We must increase our apostolic zeal to pass on to others the light and joy of the faith, and to this high ideal the whole People of God must be educated. We cannot be content when we consider the millions of our brothers sisters, who like us have been redeemed by the blood of Christ but who live in ignorance of the love of God. For each believer, as for the entire Church, the missionary task must remain foremost, for it concerns the eternal destiny of humanity and corresponds to God’s mysterious and merciful plan” (RM, n. 86).

<sup>2</sup> “Love looks to the eternal. Love is indeed ‘ecstasy’, not in the sense of a moment of intoxication, but rather as a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery — and indeed the discovery of God” (*Deus Caritas Est*, n. 6).

<sup>3</sup> “The Greeks — not unlike other cultures — considered eros principally as a kind of intoxication, the overpowering of reason by a ‘divine madness’ which tears man away from his finite existence and enables him, in the very process of being overwhelmed by divine power, to experience superior happiness” (*Deus Caritas Est*, n. 4).

<sup>4</sup> It is not easy to explain the origin of the powers of death we have to face. This mysterious and negative energy was called by Paul “*hamartia*” or “*sin*” in singular. It was for him like the apocalyptic dragon attempting the new life, as soon as it is born. This dragon or *hamartia* has many faces and different clandestine ways of acting.

<sup>5</sup> According to just about every view (Telfer 1970–71, Annas 1988; Annas 1977, Annas 1987, Badhwar 1987, Millgram 1987, Sherman 1987, Thomas 1989; Thomas 1993; Thomas 1987, Friedman 1993; Friedman 1989, Whiting 1991, Hoffman 1997, Cocking and Kennett 1998, and White 1999; White 1999b; White 2001).

<sup>6</sup> To begin, Thomas (1987; 1989; 1993).

<sup>7</sup> *Parakletos* is a title for the Holy Spirit — one who helps, by consoling, encouraging, or mediating on behalf of — Helper, Encourager, Mediator. The principal difficulty encountered in rendering *parakletos* is the fact that this term covers potentially such a wide area of meaning. The traditional rendering of ‘Comforter’ is especially misleading because it suggests only one very limited aspect of what the Holy Spirit does. A term such as ‘Helper’ is highly generic and can be particularly useful in some languages. In certain instances, for example, the concept of ‘Helper’ is expressed idiomatically, for example, ‘the one who mothers us’ or, as in one language in Central Africa, ‘the one who falls down beside us’, that is to say, an individual who upon finding a person collapsed along the road, kneels down beside the victim, cares for his needs, and carries him to safety. A rendering based upon the concept of legal advocate seems in most instances to be too restrictive. Furthermore, there may be quite unsatisfactory connotations associated with any word which suggests a lawyer, especially since in so many societies, a lawyer is thought of primarily as one who ‘bribes the judges’ or ‘can speak two truths’ or, as in one language, is ‘a professional liar’.

<sup>8</sup> Paul VI in his Encyclical Letter *Populorum Progressio* (On the Development of Peoples, 26 March 1967), section 83. John Paul II in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (On Social Concern), section 33 and *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (At the Beginning of the New Millennium) section 58.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. M. Fethullah Gulen, *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, The Light inc., New Jersey 2004.

<sup>10</sup> The meaning of the word “civilization” is not clear, evident. It has a number of meanings, and its use can lead to confusion and misunderstanding. However, “civilization” can be a highly connotative word: **1)** *A hierarchical world view*: civilization is understood as the progression from a simple state to a superior, civilized state. John Wesley Powell classified all societies as Savage, Barbarian, and Civilized. This view brings to mind qualities such as superiority, humaneness, and refinement. Indeed, many members of civilized societies “have” seen themselves as superior to the barbarians outside their civilization. In this view, the concept of “civilization” has been the justification for colonialism, imperialism, genocide and coercive acculturation. **2)** *A cultural relativistic view*: complex societies are not by nature superior, more humane, or more sophisticated than less complex or technologically advanced groups (cf. the

writings of Franz Boas). **3)** *The postmodern view*: many postmodernists, and a considerable proportion of the wider public, argue that the division of societies into ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized’ is arbitrary and meaningless. On a fundamental level, there is no difference between civilizations and tribal societies; that each simply does what it can with the resources it has. **4)** Many scholars today avoid using the term “civilization” as a stand-alone term; they prefer to use “‘urban society’” or “‘intensive agricultural society’”, which are much less ambiguous, more neutral-sounding terms. “Civilization” however remains in common academic use when describing specific societies, such as “Mayan Civilization”.

<sup>11</sup> *A Study of History* (Vols. I-III, 1934; IV-VI, 1939; VII-X, 1954), *Greek Civilization and Character* (1924), *Greek Historical Thought* (1924), *Civilization on Trial* (1948), *The World and the West* (1953) and *An Historian’s Approach to Religion* (1956).

<sup>12</sup> He is a professor at Harvard University, political scientist and a controversial conservative. He maintains that the central political actors of the 21st century will be civilizations rather than nation-states.

<sup>13</sup> There are: **1)** a Christian civilization (including the Orthodox world and Russia and the Latinamerican world), **2)** a muslim civilization of the near East, north Africa, Malaysia and Indonesia, **3)** a sinic civilization of China, Vietnam, Singapore, Taiwan and the chinese diaspora in the Pacific and West. **4)** An African civilization. **5)** A Buddhist civilization: north India, Nepal, Bhutan, Mongolia, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Tibet. **6)** A Japanese civilization.

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**Lode L. Wostyn, CICM**

## ***Trajectories of Renewal in Religious Life and Mission***

At the time of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (1991), the Commission on the Religious of which I was a member, presented a paper on the trajectories of renewal in religious life. The situation of the religious has been changing very fast, and I believe that what was written at that time needs to be reformulated in the light of the changes that happened in the world and the Church in recent decades. As religious missionaries, we live our life and bring our message in the context of the contemporary world. This world is in the process of being transformed through the complex phenomenon of globalization. The main force of change is certainly the development of a global economy. But globalization is also manifested in other aspects of our lives in society: politics, science and technology, means of communication, education, plurality of religions, mobility, and so on. The underlying ideologies that give meaning to our changing world are also in transition: the “rational” ideologies of modernity are replaced by a postmodern cacophony of ideas and visions that somehow try to express the human search for something unreachable, truth.

This short introduction would need an elaboration. It can be found in an article I wrote earlier, and in the hundreds of studies that have been written on globalization and postmodernism. The changes in our world have deeply affected the traditional inner working of the Church. The Church is in turmoil. Its whole hierarchical structure is questioned. New issues ask for a resolution: male-celibate priesthood, the emancipation of the laity, the role of women, the decline of churchgoers, the rejection of traditional morality, the search for a “new age” spirituality, and so on. Religious life also seems to evoke more questions than answers. What is the purpose of religious life now “the cheap labour force” of the religious is not needed any longer in countries where the Government took over their services in education, medical care, and social services? Is there still a need for religious life in our time?

Things are changing very fast, and yet, and this is a paradox, “change can only be sustained when the human person sees the direction, when s/he sees some values that direct and define his/her life”. What is its direction? We have to recall the very basic elements of religious and missionary life.

At the heart of religious life is discipleship of Jesus of Nazareth. Religious commit themselves to follow Jesus in a radical way. Yet, do we not have to say the same thing about all Christians? We do. Does the specific character then lie in the acceptance of the evangelical counsels for one’s life? The three important areas of a person’s life: sexuality, power, possessions and use of things, must be consciously organized by all Christians in accordance with the values of the Kingdom. What is then specific? Religious commit themselves to organize their Christian life through the mediation of the three traditional vows within the context of the Church and the Religious Institute. They experience this commitment as a response to the call of God’s Spirit, and their response is accepted by a religious community, involving the Spirit. The three vows are in fact a response to a single reality. Religious profession is the total donation of a person to the love of God, and each of the vows is a dimension of this donation. It is this commitment to God and to God’s Kingdom that is recognized by the Church as a gift of the Spirit, a charism, and, at the same time, a free human act.

Religious life is the total donation of a person to the love of God, experienced as a charism, a particular gift of the Spirit. This is done through radical discipleship of Jesus. What is at the core of Jesus’ life, what defines him? What made Jesus the man he was? The answer is found in the Gospels: Jesus was a man of God — a Spiritual man — he was “possessed” by the experience and presence of God. Throughout the story of Jesus’ ministry we meet this constant reminder of the presence of God: his retreat in the desert, his Baptism, his first message in



Nazareth, the nights he went to pray, the transfiguration, Gethsemane.

When we reflect on the origin of our religious-missionary life, I believe that all religious, disciples of Jesus, can point to a personal experience of God — a call — as the first and most basic element of their life. At times religious may wonder whether God is really the centre of their life. For me, the centre has certainly been my work, my teaching and my availability as a teacher. And yet, most of the time, I succeeded in putting some time aside to be reminded of what Father Arrupe describes as the absolute priority of God in religious life: “I proclaim the absoluteness of God and the relativity of everything else”. Chittister puts it in the following way: “at the heart of religious life is a single-minded search for God, within the struggle of self to come to wholeness. What is needed is not possession of truth (perfection), but fidelity to a direction. We seek to be passionately alive within the faith, carried forward by a passionate, forgiving, and gracious God”.

A search and experience of God is the most basic element of religious life. A second is community life. Jesus was not a lonely prophet, shouting his message from a rooftop. He was a community man, gathering around him a community by breaking through all the barriers of his society and religion. Everybody who shared with him the dream of the Kingdom was welcome. After his death, community life was continued and when the Church had to serve a large number of people, it was somehow preserved in the development of religious life.

A third basic element is mission. Jesus’ disciples participated in the mission to proclaim and to witness to the gift of God’s Kingdom. Religious continue to offer their small contribution to bring God’s Kingdom closer to all. We will briefly consider the how of this missionary contribution in the second part of my reflection.

## I. THE TRAJECTORIES OF RENEWAL OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

Religious life is based on an experience of God — on community life — and on mission. The way these basic elements have been understood went through considerable changes in the post Vatican II period. I should like to take you along on a pilgrimage, on a road that some of us have walked during and after the Council, opening at the same time some vistas for the future. These new horizons have been described in the books of O’Murchu and some other sources.

My quotations of Vatican II texts have to be qualified. Many critical studies of the Vatican II Documents point out that to a certain extent the Council produced “compromise texts”. A selective reading of Vatican II can present a vision of the Council in terms of a radical renewal, yet an alternative selection throws us back into the pre-Vatican II theology. The reason is simple, when 2,400 Bishops have to arrive at a consensus you may expect compromises. The classical example for ecclesiology is the charismatic, salvation-historical view of the Church in Chapters I and II of *Lumen Gentium*, followed by the hierarchical view of Chapter III. For religious life, the call to holiness is a call to all Christians (Chapters IV to VI). And yet, the description of the laity in *Lumen Gentium*, n. 31, reaffirms a three-partite division of the Church in Holy Orders (priesthood), Religious State, and Laity. Religious life is a separate state in between clergy and laity. We will not enter into a detailed exegesis of Vatican II texts. In what follows, we make a selection of texts that express the new perspectives introduced by the Council.

### **a) A first road, opened by our experience(s) of God: from self-sanctification to becoming a Christian to a lay spirituality**

The first draft of *Lumen Gentium* (abbreviated: *LG*) treats religious life as a superior way of being a Christian. It is a “narrower path”. Lay people try to become Christians in the world. Religious are a step further because they have chosen to abandon the evil world and are on the way towards sanctification, offered to them within the structures of religious life. The call to holiness seems to be the privilege of the religious!

The final draft of *LG* rejects this approach by elaborating on religious life within the context of the call to holiness of the whole Christian community. Religious life is one way of becoming a Christian. Its structures (the religious vows, Constitutions, spirituality) are vehicles towards an authentic human life. Religious do not “possess” faith and sanctity. They are on the way, together



with the whole Christian community, in becoming believers and disciples of Jesus of Nazareth.

*Perfectae Caritatis* (abbreviated: *PC*) elaborates this point by putting as the “supreme rule” of religious life, not a law or Constitutions but Jesus himself. The basis of religious life is a “following of Christ”. The first issue of all renewal of religious life is authentic “evangelism”. What is needed is a constant re-evangelizing of all our structures. “Since the fundamental norm of the religious life is a following of Christ as proposed by the Gospel, such is to be regarded by all communities as their supreme law” (n. 2, a).

In discussing the evangelical counsels, *PC* refers each time to: “in imitation of Christ” (nn. 12-14).

What are the more recent additions to this new vision on religious life? A first one, not mentioned on your roadmap, is the fleshing out of what it means to follow Jesus. After the Council, we had plenty of books on the Church. This shifted in the 1980’s. Theology, exegesis and spirituality focused on rediscovering the historical man of Nazareth. We cannot follow an angel — or God — or the second person of the Trinity. We are humans, and hence we can only follow a fellow human. We, however, lost Jesus in the theological speculations of Christology. We need to reconnect with the Master of Nazareth, a human being like us, who became fully human through struggle, making mistakes, connecting with others, discovering friendship, and so on.

“Jesus of Nazareth is the most forgotten person among the very people who claim to be his disciples. He lies buried under the weight of accumulated layers of rituals, rubrics, laws, concepts, legends, myths, superstitions, and institutions. He lies bound hand and foot by innumerable cords that tradition has cast around him. His voice is smothered, his spirit stifled. If he still acts and makes his presence felt in history, it is less through the Official Church than through the honest dissenters among Christians. Therefore, it is the duty of all who cherish the vision and hope of Jesus to set him free from the prison house of cult, dogma, and institutionalism so that he can freely go about pointing, as of old, his accusing finger at the scribes, Pharisees, Elders, priests, and the Herods of today. To this end it is necessary to remove the many veils that historically conditioned faith and tradition have put on him, and let his visage shine forth in its original splendour and his words ring out in their untamed incisiveness” (Sebastian Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1977).

A second new vista is the stress that as religious, we are “lay”. We have to reclaim our lay-identity, refusing to be set apart or to somehow belong to an exclusive club, the clerical family. “Clericalism is the original sin of the Church”. Religious belong to the club and have to cover up for one another. The result of such an attitude has been the sex scandals in the U.S. in which many male religious were involved. Our mission as religious does not just belong to the Church but to the world. We are Christians who seek to collaborate with people in engaging the challenges, offered by our contemporary, globalized planet. We are not only accountable to the Church. We belong to the whole human community. The search of some religious groups to incorporate lay people in their communities and endeavours is based on this awareness of our lay status.

***b) A Second Road, opened by our experience(s) of God: from a State of Perfection to the awareness that we received a divine gift, a charism, and moving further on to the partly unexplored road of liminality*** Religious Orders and Institutes in the past had the tendency to separate themselves from the main body of the faithful because they believed that they lived in a State, which was essentially superior to the married State. Religious were on the road towards perfection. This is a very dangerous path. Perfect people make other people into martyrs! I already showed that Vatican II corrected the idea of “a superior state” by seeing religious life as a form of discipleship, a form of being a Christian. The reaction against the idea of “perfection” adds a second perspective. Religious life is placed back within the Church’s mission with its many charisms and ministries. The Council wavered between two visions of the Church: the static, legalistic vision of the Church as a hierarchical society *versus* a salvation historical perspective, seeing the Church as a charismatic community. Hierarchy certainly does not belong to the New Testament understanding of the Church. Saint Paul sees the Church as a body, functioning as a harmonious whole because of the many ministries and charisms, gifts of the Spirit (See: I Cor 12). *LG* follows the Pauline vision when it describes religious life as a “charism”, a gift of the Spirit, to “forward the saving mission of the Church” (n. 43). *PC* puts it in the following way: “these Christians spend themselves ever increasingly for Christ, and for his

body, the Church” (n. 1). This charism of the religious has to be understood within the total life of the Church with its many charisms: being a missionary, a proclaimer, a healer, a leader, a teacher, and so many more.

In recent reflections on religious life, a new perspective has been added by stressing the liminality of God’s call to religious. O’ Murchu has many pages on the theme of liminality in religious life. I highlight some of them. The word “liminality” itself is new in the vocabulary of religious life. Prophetic is the nearest to it, but liminality brings out much stronger that the whole of religious life should be situated at a threshold, at the cutting edge, inviting people to make the jump to enter into a new state. Liminality is a vocation that is called for by the whole human community because it constantly needs liminal witnesses for its health and growth. All human communities need people to live in a counter-cultural way, radiating values that challenge human relationships, and call people to grow into the fullness of life. The vows, when lived in a radical way, send us to that “liminal edge” where the three basic values of human life are challenged: power, sexuality, and possessions.

Liminal witness is untidy by its very nature. What makes it authentic is not the development of neat, clear procedures, carved out in the prayerful and orderly culture of the monastery or convent, but the messy process, the engaging struggle, to make sense of reality amid the challenges and confusion of our daily lives in a fast-changing world. A search to live values cannot be caught in clear-cut laws, but through dialogue and mutual exploration, discerning how best to apply a particular set of values in a particular context. Authorities, both secular and religious, are quick to denounce a liminal witness, as somebody capitulating to relativism where effectively anything goes.

Let me give an example from my own context. Theologians in the 1980’s and 90’s, who invited Christians to rediscover the historical Jesus and stressed Jesus’ revolutionary political stance got into trouble with Church authorities. The day before his election, Pope Benedict, warned in his sermon at the opening of the Conclave, that the Church was threatened by relativism. Indeed, it feels so much safer to have a *Catechism* with statements we can learn by heart, even if we do not understand them. The latest theologian victimized by Rome is the Jesuit Jon Sobrino who narrowly escaped martyrdom in San Salvador 20 years ago.

Liminality is untidy for a neatly organized Church and for a religious life, safely entrenched in laws and regulations. It is untidy because the God of the Bible herself is an untidy God. He/She is a God of surprises who so often is met, not in the law and the Temple, but outside, in the suffering, untidy neighbour at the side of the road.

***c) A third road, opened by the search for community life, leads us from the holy rule, binding together a community to a process of refounding, to the birth of a new sense and new forms of community and communion***

In the pre-Vatican II vision of religious life, the charism of the Founder and the particular rule of a religious Institute have often been turned into absolutes. In fact, although the Gospel was nominally accepted as the ultimate norm of religious life, the Founder became the ultimate criterion for vision-mission statements. At the time of the Council, Rome or local bishops had to intervene in situations where the holy rule was invoked to continue some practices that were almost unchristian, e.g. practices of self-mortification and total isolation. In Europe, there was a religious Order that took care of the lepers. No leper was around, but the Order continued to restate its charism. Many religious somehow absolutize the spirituality of their Founder, when in fact this spirituality is determined by a time-bound theology, by particular devotions that existed in European countries in the 18-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, by a Jansenist morality, and so on.

*Lumen Gentium* gives us a general framework for the renewal of our Constitutions. Religious are part of the wider Church, a Church on pilgrimage, holy and sinful, always in need of conversion and renewal. This Church and its religious have the Bible and Jesus of Nazareth as “the” reference point for renewal. *PC* then presents a few principles for the renewal. N. 2 encourages religious Institutes to keep the heritage of the Founder, yet at the same time, to have an awareness of contemporary human conditions and of the needs of Church and world. N. 3 goes on by

telling religious to renew the different aspects of their life: “The manner of living, praying, and working should be suitably adapted to the physical and psychological conditions of today’s religious and also, to the extent required by the nature of each community, to the needs of the apostolate, the requirements of a given culture, the social and economic circumstances anywhere, but especially in missionary territories”.

In recent years, we have become more strongly aware that our renewal of Church and religious life got stuck halfway. What we need is much more than renewal. We need a refounding to incarnate religious life in “a new world that is being born”. In the past, community signaled stability and conformity. This kind of community has made way for various experiments. First, there is a new sense of what community life could signify for its members. A community could become a place where religious develop and nourish friendship. Both psychology and spirituality in our time emphasize the relational dimension of human and spiritual growth. Second, the exploration of the relational dimension of religious life is not possible without being open to different kinds of arrangements towards community living: associational arrangements, intentional communities consisting of religious and lay people united around a shared ministry, single living with regular sharing of life at weekends and so on. Finally, communities developed or have to develop more egalitarian forms of leadership, supported by communal discernment. This will be further explored in the next trajectory. The decision to stop all experimentation, taken by Rome in the 1980’s, may have come too early in a world that is immersed in discovering new possibilities of living and relating.

***d) The fourth road, also opened by the search for community life, considers the way we look at leadership: from an authoritarian to a ministerial leadership, and moving on beyond patriarchy towards inclusivity***

When I entered the novitiate, novices were not supposed to question the decisions of the Novice Master. The quality of a novice was measured in terms of docility. The religious adopted the hierarchical and authoritarian structure of the Church, destroying a long tradition of communal life. The voice of God was the voice of Father or Mother Superior, or the voice of the parish priest. Some religious, among them Josemaria Escriba, were firm believers in the validity of this authoritarian system. We read in *The Way*: “Obedience the sure way. Blind obedience to your superior, the way of sanctity. Obedience in your apostolate, the only way: for, in the work of God, the spirit must be to obey or to leave (941).

*LG*, which is the framework for the renewal of religious life, affirms the basic equality in the Church, based on Baptism. We are a people of priests, prophets and kings, all responsible for the mission in the Church and the world. The forms of leadership should be rethought, based on our common responsibility: collegial leadership, subsidiarity, *diakonia* (service). These ideas are followed up in *PC*. N. 15 points to the primitive Church as “an example of community life when the multitude of believers were of one heart and one mind” (*cf.* Acts 4:32-37). Religious should reintroduce complete equality in their communities and remove the distinction between monks/priests and brothers, sisters in teaching and “working” sisters taking care of the household. N. 14 describes the role of the Superior in terms of “service” and insists that “responsible obedience” encompasses the contribution as human persons of all members.

We should, mention here two new perspectives on leadership, which were opened by the feminist movement. The first one is the critique of patriarchal governance. The Church was and is still a patriarchal Church, in which leadership is seen in terms of a patronizing role. The members of the community are forced into a childish subservience. Sisters got a patriarch spiritual director who taught male spirituality to innocent novices. They had lived in a patriarchal society and continued to live on in the patriarchal rule of Mother Superior, learning the male virtues of courage, strength, discipline, hard work, and unbending decisiveness, and so on. A lot has already happened to correct this patriarchal situation but our Church still has to start the deconstruction of patriarchy. Hans Küng says it in a very naughty way: “We (the Church) are one of the few surviving dictatorships in the world”.

After this deconstruction or perhaps better, during this deconstruction, we have to open a second road, the road of reconstruction of our Church and religious life in terms of a discipleship of equals. O’Murchu repeats the words of Chittister: “Religious women should be outstanding and outrageous feminists”, and I would add, male religious should declare their solidarity and also

be willing to reconsider the whole structural set-up of our Church in all its aspects: governance, teachings, guidelines or laws, rituals, spirituality and so on. In this reconstruction, sisters have to confront a number of issues: the reshaping of the institutional lifestyle, the development of their own feminine workforce refusing to be the servants of the holy bishop and priests, solidarity with the feminist movements in society, the re-evaluation of feminine sexuality, and so on. I conclude with O'Murchu: "What is at stake is not rebellion but assertiveness. (...) The retrieval of recent decades has not been in vain and has reclaimed for women (and men) that what has been so brutally suppressed for so long, namely the uniqueness of feminine wisdom. The need to sustain and deepen this recovery — a new feminine paradigm — must become a primary task for all religious in our time, and for women religious in a unique way".

**e) A fifth and last trajectory of renewal is our understanding of mission: "from strangers to citizens of this earthly city — opening a new horizon: we need to embrace God's creation, and to become co-creators on God's wonderful masterpiece, planet earth, surrounded by an ever expanding universe"**

The greatest challenge for religious life in today's world may be a sentence of *LG* n. 46: "Let no one think that by their consecration, religious have become strangers to their fellow human beings or useless citizens of this earthly city". The parallelism with *Gaudium et Spes* is obvious: "They are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come, think that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities" (n. 43). "Not everyone who cries: 'Lord, Lord!' will enter into the Kingdom of heaven, but those who do the Father's will and take a strong grip on the work at hand" (*cf.* Mt 7:21). The Christian tradition has been strongly influenced by a Platonic dualism: spirit-body, soul-matter, supernatural-natural, spiritual-worldly. The religious were at one end of this duality: in the spiritual, the supernatural, the things of the spirit and soul. The laity were at the other end, in the world. Religious, being on the side of the spiritual should, however, constantly be reminded that they are sinners. Plato and Jansenius are certainly the companions of Josemaria Escriva when he writes: "do not forget that you are just a trash can", "a vile worm, ugly and miserable in the sight of that God who puts up with so much from you" (*The Way*, 592 and 598).

*PC* gives a more positive evaluation of the human condition and of the task of the religious by suggesting that something should be done about the training of religious to make them competent in the field of their apostolate, "even to the extent of winning appropriate degrees" (n. 18). "Communities ... should resort to suitable techniques, including modern ones, and abandon whatever activities are today less in keeping with the spirit of the community and its authentic character" (n. 20). In *PC*, we have some daring suggestions yet the introduction of the eschatological perspective (religious as signs of the eschatological character of the Kingdom) seems to re-affirm the dualism between active and contemplative religious life.

Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes* and the subsequent long-winded Encyclicals of John Paul II, are still anthropocentric and fail to address a reflection which in the meantime developed in science: a **new cosmology and ecology**. The whole of Creation is understood as a live organism in which we as human beings have our home, being interconnected with all life around us. We live in "interbeing" (*Thich Nhat Hanh*). In Christianity, we have been caught in the anthropocentric view which casts us in the role of the possessors and exploiters of the planet. We have to recover the broader picture and develop the critical values taught by Jesus of Nazareth in his proclamation of the coming of the Reign of God. I shall simply sum up some themes, mentioned by O'Murchu, without developing them:

1. Universalism: We need to think globally, interdependently, inclusively.
2. As interdependent creatures, we have to cultivate our mutual co-responsibility for the life of our beautiful planet.
3. Wholism: mutual relationality is the driving force throughout the entire universe.
4. Ecological Health.
5. An earthly spirituality: reclaiming our rightful place in Creation and acting responsibly as co-creators on the earth is becoming the single most urgent spiritual challenge now facing us. As religious, we are bound by our allegiance to the Church, yet we should learn to look beyond: "the world is bigger than the Church".



## Conclusion

Some years ago, the first year theology students of Maryhill School of Theology organized a consultation around the theme: “is there a perennial theology?”. The same thing could be done for religious life: “is there a perennial religious life? Are our religious Institutes perennial?”. I believe Vatican II answered: No! Our institutes are part of the Church on pilgrimage in history, part of a Church that tries to be a sign of salvation, of the Kingdom in constantly changing historical contexts. We are on a trajectory, on a road, which means we have constantly to renew ourselves, following the principles suggested by *PC* n. 2:

- Our fundamental norm, the supreme law, is Jesus of Nazareth. At the deepest level, we have constantly to refocus religious life to bring it into conformity, at a particular stage of history, with the Gospel of Jesus.
- Secondly, we need to be loyal to the spirit of our Founder, which does not mean that we have to follow texts and prescriptions of the Founder that may be time bound.
- Thirdly, the charism of our religious Institutes directs us to a particular mission in the world. This mission should also be constantly rethought in the light of the challenges of our contemporary world.

Are we on the right track? We constantly have to repeat the reflection-action spiral: see-discern-act, a discernment that links us with all disciples of Jesus. Are we, as religious, signs of authentic humanity, signs of loving kindness, compassion, freedom, peace, justice, being inspired by the Spirit of Jesus of Nazareth?

## II. THE TRAJECTORY OF THE RENEWAL MISSION

The Spirit of Jesus quite shook the understanding of the mission of the Church during the Council and the years of crisis that started in the 1970's. We would like to leave this crisis behind, yet the fast-changing world forces us to move on and rethink and reframe our vision-mission. I can only give a short survey.

At the time of the Council, the most revolutionary statement was perhaps in *LG* n. 16, that affirmed that there is salvation outside the Church. Without intending it, the Council Fathers caused the collapse of a particular mission enterprise that planted or transplanted the Church in non-Christian countries, to baptize people and bring them to salvation as new members of our Church. The “planting of the Church” vision is still present in the Document *Ad Gentes* while the first elements of a new mission theology appeared: mission as participation in the *Missio Dei*.

After the Second Vatican Council, we went through a crisis: a moratorium on mission, mission is everywhere, mission on the six Continents, and the most shocking: “missionaries go home”. When I arrived in the Philippines in 1969, some missionary priests told me to go home. This was not a very encouraging start.

In the reformulating of a mission theology, the two Encyclicals, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of Paul VI and *Redemptoris Missio* of John Paul II offered some new ground. This resulted in three lines of thought:

- Mission is a participation in the *Missio Dei*. By its very nature, the Church is in mission because it participates in God's mission, God's reaching out to humankind. It is ultimately the God of all peoples who calls the disciple-community and it is the same God in Jesus who accompanies us on this mission.
- Mission is *a proclamation of the Gospel* and an invitation to conversion in terms of Baptism and joining the Church. I have some problem with this understanding of mission, especially in Asia where we see or have to see mission in terms of dialogue. On the other hand, a dialogue is only meaningful if we bring to this dialogue the Gospel and our conviction that we received liberation and salvation in Jesus, crucified and Risen. Others, a Buddhist, a Hindu, a Muslim is supposed to do the same for his own beliefs.



- Mission as *liberating service to the Reign of God* is a vision that was strongly supported by the FABC for the Asian context. As members of the Church, Christians and religious have to immerse themselves in the Asian reality and as disciples witness by their life to Jesus of Nazareth, work for justice, peace and harmony among the peoples of Asia. Mission should start from below, from discipleship that tells the still story of Jesus. Because of the Asian context, explicit proclamation mostly ends up in proselytism that becomes a counter-witness. The Churches of Asia have to “discover and live their own identity”, as communities of disciples of Jesus, or “they will have no future” (FAPA I, 70). But in pluralistic Asia this identity will always be that of a “little flock” in the sea of diverse religions and cultures. It is a *Missio Inter Gentes* that allows our Master, Jesus of Nazareth, to enter into dialogue with the Asian reality of poverty, cultures and religions.

In conclusion, I should like to give an example of such a dialogue with Jesus, told by Anthony de Mello. In his story, Jesus meets a “proclaimer” of the Good News. Jesus can be very naughty! A Christian once visited a Zen master. “Allow me to read to you some sentences from the Sermon on the Mount”. “I shall listen with pleasure”, said the master. The Christian read a few sentences and looked up. The master smiled and said, “Whoever said those words was truly enlightened”. This pleased the Christian. He read on. The master interrupted and said, “Those words come from the Saviour of humankind”. The Christian was thrilled. He continued to read to the end. The master then said, “The sermon was pronounced by someone who was radiant with divinity”. The Christian’s joy knew no bounds. He left, determined to return and persuade the master to become a Christian. On the way back home, he found Jesus standing by the roadside. “Lord”, he said enthusiastically, “I got that man to confess that you are divine”. Jesus smiled and said, “And what good did it do you, except to inflate your Christian ego?” (*Amen*).

## Conclusion

I have tried to describe the road that religious will probably have to follow in the coming years. In our fast changing world and Church, we can only present a very tentative trajectory for the future of religious life. On this road religious will have to move towards a new praxis. According to Chittister, we are confronted with seven issues in this new praxis:

1. Viability by our willingness to rebuild religious life from scratch. In order to bring the Reign of God now, we have to face the issues I mentioned, the issues of globalization and the issues of Asia (“a triple dialogue”),
2. Face the issue of the value of religious life itself: how to be come fully alive to the will of God, to the Reign,
3. Face the issues of the institutional Church,
4. Face the women’s issues,
5. Face the issue of new ministries (the homeless, the desperate the victims of violence, etc.),
6. The need of a new spirituality, discarding a privatized spirituality,
7. The question of value definition: the new virtues we need in our contemporary world.

The Congress on Religious Life, held in Rome in 2004, suggested we develop seven contemporary virtues on our journey. “The following of Jesus which we intend to realize through consecrated life in our time calls forth in us certain attitudes to which we have given the symbolic title of ‘seven contemporary virtues’. With these, we assume the new face of consecrated life as ‘a sacrament and parable of the Reign of God’”.

1. Depth: Gospel discernment and authenticity
2. Hospitality and gratitude
3. Non-violence, meekness, loving kindness
4. Liberty and spirit
5. Boldness and creativity

6. Tolerance and dialogue
7. Simplicity: Valuing the resources of the poor and despised

(*Passion for Christ, Passion for Humanity*, 249-250).

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The text of this study is a reworking of talks, given in the 1990's and then recently at the occasion of a series of retreats. I was not able to retrace all the references, hence I opted for a general bibliography of the sources I used. For the more recent books (Chittister and O'Murchu) I mentioned the authors I quoted hence this will allow the reader to retrace the references. I also took some material from my articles (see 14 and 15).

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**Albert-Désiré Ngelese Nangaa\***

## **L'Église active dans l'histoire des hommes Cas des communautés ecclésiales vivantes de base**

### Introduction

**D**es grands érudits, théoriciens et praticiens, de la Pastorale ont laissé couler de l'encre à profusion ciblant les Communautés Ecclésiales Vivantes de Base, CEVB en sigles<sup>1</sup>, en tel point qu'un article – en forte raison d'un étudiant – de cet étalon ne puisse nullement jouir d'aucune position éprouvée. Connaissant cette juste vérité, je me suis tout de même résolu de rédiger ces quelques lignes pour tenter de dire haut, combien est grande la contribution de ces petites communautés ecclésiales dans la vie sociale et dans la croissance de l'Église, Corps Mystique du Christ, Dieu fait Homme ; dans l'histoire à la fois tranquille et tumultueuse des hommes.

Loin de nous ni le rêve ni la prétention d'offrir des recettes théoriques et théologiques, d'ordre pastoral sur les CEVB, mais juste un essai de témoignage de ce que deviennent jour après jour ces communautés ecclésiales dans la zone Est de la République Démocratique du Congo (RDC) dans les Diocèses d'Isiro-Niangara et de Wamba. Une zone où le conflit sanglant des Grands Lacs africains s'est taillé résidence. Ce terroir pris en considération n'est nullement celui au sein duquel les églises locales susmentionnées ont une expérience exemplaire des CEVB dans l'univers ecclésial, mais nous en parlons pour souligner l'emprunte du rôle que les dites communautés ecclésiales jouent dans la vie des fils et des filles de ce pays, Congo, désormais déchiqueté par une dizaine d'années de guerre, avec une multitude de victimes.

Ce travail ne sera d'aucune grandeur bibliographique et scientifique, car il se veut simplement un partage d'expérience chrétienne et missionnaire qui ne cesse de se réaliser dans le quotidien du peuple chrétien congolais, contexte où la guerre décennale et une pauvreté matérielle et anthropologique dévorent les gens. Alors il s'agit de vivre ensemble cet «être-église» dont ces communautés ne cessent de faire preuve. Mais qui sont-elles au juste ?

### Elles naissent ...

Comme disait Bernard Ugeux, théologien et anthropologue, missionnaire d'Afrique (Père Blanc), d'expérience pastorale au Congo-Kinshasa et en Tanzanie, « *la pastorale des communautés de base est redevenue à la mode au cours du Synode des Évêques africains, ... en 1994* »<sup>2</sup>. Nombreux ont cherché de savoir comment et où sont nées ces CEVB. Certains distinguent celles issues de la base, comme en est le cas du Brésil, des autres nées de la hiérarchie ecclésiale – à partir des prêtres et des évêques – comme en est le cas en RDC. De cette distinction on pense que l'origine des CEVB soit brésilienne. Mais Ugeux soutient qu'on considère à tort que le modèle de ces communautés est inspiré de l'Amérique latine. Car, dès 1961, au Congo-Kinshasa, à l'assemblée plénière de l'épiscopat et dans le contexte de troubles qui suivirent la proclamation de l'Indépendance, une décision fut prise pour la création de ce qu'on appelait alors les « communautés chrétiennes vivantes ».<sup>3</sup>

On peut – sans peur de se tromper – affirmer que les deux expériences sont originellement distinctes, même si elles produisent souvent les effets semblables dans la vie de la société et dans l'expression de la vocation missionnaire des laïcs dans l'Église. D'ailleurs, « *les communautés de base en Afrique ont été créées à l'initiative du clergé, avec une large participation des laïcs, dans le cadre des paroisses, sur une base territoriale.... L'idée de « base » renvoyait plutôt au voisinage, à la proximité, qu'à une opposition de classes* »<sup>4</sup>, contrairement au cas du Brésil.

Elles naissent donc comme des communautés ecclésiales capables d'être le levain dans la pâte d'une société en mutation.<sup>5</sup> Ainsi, vue la situation actuelle dans laquelle est plongée la

nation congolaise, nous pouvons soutenir encore la présence des CEVB ; qui doivent perpétuer leur vocation en donnant une saveur ecclésiale dans notre société. Concrètement elles constituent l'unité de base de la structure territoriale de notre église. Les CEVB sont nées pour soigner l'Église de l'anonymat, posant ainsi les laïcs dans la perspective de la nouvelle évangélisation,<sup>6</sup> étant qu'agents évangélisateurs dans l'Église et dans la société ; rendant ainsi leur vie en une « véritable inculturation ». À suivre l'analyse qu'en fait Léonard Santedi, les CEVB se situent entre les paroisses et les familles. Elles se présentent comme un ensemble de plusieurs familles, des cellules vivantes de la paroisse.<sup>7</sup>

Le terminus de leur naissance est bien exprimé par Benoît XVI lors de la visite *ad limina* de l'épiscopat congolais en 2005. En effet le pontife déclare : « Vous soulignez la nécessité de travailler à une évangélisation en profondeur des fidèles. Les Communautés Ecclésiales Vivantes, présentes en tout point de vos diocèses, reflètent bien cette évangélisation de proximité qui rend les fidèles toujours plus adultes dans leur foi, dans un esprit de fraternité évangélique selon lequel tous s'efforcent de penser ensemble les divers aspects de la vie ecclésiale, notamment la prière, l'évangélisation, l'attention aux plus pauvres et l'autofinancement des paroisses ». Continuant dans la même ligne que le pape, Mgr Nicolas Djomo affirmait : « nous devons arriver à consolider les CEVB, en tant que noyau de la nouvelle évangélisation en profondeur ».<sup>8</sup> Ces interventions magistérielles éclairent que les CEVB naissent en vue de l'évangélisation : elles sont désormais la nouvelle piste qu'apprête la Bonne Nouvelle pour s'introduire dans le monde des hommes, le noyau ecclésial primordial d'où doit naître et grandir tout procès d'inculturation dialogique.

En vue d'une synthèse, on peut dire avec Ugeux, qu'« à l'origine, ces communautés étaient essentiellement de type ecclésiales. Contrairement à l'Amérique latine, il ne s'agissait pas de raisons économiques, sociales ou politiques.... Les communautés de base en Afrique ont émergé avec la difficulté de gérer les paroisses, la question de l'influence et de la présence de l'Église à la base, dans le voisinage qu'est la famille élargie, le village, les quartiers urbains, ou les périphéries ».<sup>9</sup> Le souci majeur de leur naissance consistait à associer de plus en plus des laïcs à la responsabilité apostolique et pastorale, en articulant subsidiarité et coresponsabilité ; c'est-à-dire laisser à la communauté locale tout ce qu'elle peut assurer elle-même ; et exprime la volonté de transmettre une partie du pouvoir du clergé à un noyau d'animateurs. C'est ce que le feu Joseph-Albert Cardinal Malula qualifiera de « bombardement des paroisses ». Quel est le but de leur existence ?

### Pour ...

Les CEVB, disions-nous, sont de petites églises qui se veulent le levain dans la pâte du social quotidien de nos concitoyens, elles veulent « porter haut le flambeau de la foi ».<sup>10</sup> La force de leur activité pastorale et apostolique naît de la Parole de Dieu, qu'elles se partagent une fois la semaine au cours d'une réunion dans une des familles composant la CEVB ou bien dans une chapelle expressément construite pour ces rencontres. Celles-ci sont aussi un moment de prières et d'expression de la charité en vue de la prise en charge des besoins spirituels et matériels de la communauté et du milieu.

Comme disait Mgr Fulgence Muteba – parlant épistolairement à ses fidèles – « les communautés de base sont le socle de l'accomplissement de l'Église chez-nous. Je connais à quel point vous y attachez une importance capitale. J'ai entendu beaucoup de témoignages sur votre assiduité aux réunions hebdomadaires des communautés ecclésiales de base. Vous y faites l'expérience d'une Église réelle, vivante et dynamique. La méditation de la Parole de Dieu y tient une place de choix. Elle réchauffe les cœurs des uns et des autres et apporte un éclairage nouveau sur le cheminement de la vie de chacun ».<sup>11</sup> La question de la Parole de Dieu a été également abordée et celle-ci fut mise au centre. Pendant trop longtemps, la Bible n'était pas accessible à la plupart des chrétiens. Maintenant, elle est présente au cœur de la réunion des communautés. Cela facilite un accès à la Parole de Dieu, le peuple de Dieu ayant le droit d'en parler, d'en discuter, de prier à partir de cette parole, qui a pris une place grandissante dans beaucoup de familles et dans les quartiers.

L'Évêque de Kilwa-Kasenga met au centre de toute l'activité des CEVB, l'Eucharistie, *culmine et fons* de la vie chrétienne : « Bien que faisant partie des indices de la pratique chrétienne, la participation aux réunions de quartiers ne remplace pas la fréquentation des sacrements, en l'occurrence l'Eucharistie. L'on veillera à ce que la hiérarchie des valeurs soit sauvegardée. **La communauté**



**eucharistique ne peut être négligée au profit des réunions du quartier.** *La raison est simple : l'Eucharistie, mémorial du sacrifice du Christ (Cf. I Co 11,25), source et sommet de toute la vie chrétienne, fait l'Église. Bien entendu, l'Église est faite des communautés. Elle est communauté, mais une communauté eucharistique* ». <sup>12</sup> En effet, la finalité de toute vie chrétienne, individuelle et communautaire, réside dans son rapport avec le Sacrifice Eucharistique. On est vraiment CEVB si on veut rendre palpable la donation christique à l'avantage de l'Église et de ses frères et sœurs qui sont dans la société.

Les activités de chaque CEVB, en RDC confluent toutes vers l'Eucharistie, célébrée en paroisse, et en elle elles prennent de l'énergie nécessaire pour se réaliser. Elles se réunissent – on l'a dit plus haut – une fois par semaine pour partager la Parole de Dieu. Le cri des lectures à partager est guidé soit par le souci de repenser l'évangile du dimanche passé soit en vue de la préparation du dimanche prochain. Après le partage au cours duquel presque tous les présents disent ce qui a touché l'intimité spirituelle de chacun d'eux ; se célèbre l'offertoire durant lequel on offre ce qu'on a et le recueilli sera géré par le conseil économique. Ce dernier est chargé de s'occuper des besoins de la CEVB (table, chaises, Bible, lectionnaire, ...), des pauvres qui se trouvent en son sein (vieux, enfants-orphelins, malades, ...) et de la paroisse. Au centre de tout il y a donc la charité qui naît de l'Eucharistie. Ces communautés regroupent donc des personnes qui accueillent la Parole de Dieu, se laissent convertir par elle, rassembler par elle et envoyer par elle dans le monde pour y collaborer à l'avènement du Royaume. Et comment fonctionnent-elles ?

### **Elles nécessitent ...**

Le bon fonctionnement des CEVB est fruit d'une collaboration pluridimensionnelle : de l'évêque au tout dernier fidèle de la périphérie de la dernière paroisse. Toute la famille chrétienne d'un diocèse est appelée à donner sa contribution dans l'être de l'Église locale, à travers les églises domestiques dites CEVB. Cette collaboration de tous peut donner lieu à une recette pleine d'efficacité. En plus de la grâce de l'Esprit, la compétence est de rigueur. C'est pourquoi il est très nécessaire que les catéchistes, ou mieux les animateurs des CEVB, soient suffisamment formés pour porter de poids de leur vocation.

Voilà pourquoi aux Évêques congolais Benoit XVI n'hésite de dire, « *Dans cette perspective, je vous encourage à veiller avec une attention extrême à la qualité de la formation permanente des responsables de ces communautés, notamment les catéchistes dont je salue le dévouement et l'esprit ecclésial* ». <sup>13</sup> Déjà au Diocèse de Tshumbe il a été constaté « *que les Catéchistes sont les piliers de nos jeunes Églises africaines. Les prêtres, même s'ils sont nombreux, sont dans l'impossibilité de proclamer de manière permanente la Parole de Dieu dans toutes les Communautés Ecclésiales. Pour enseigner le Catéchisme, pour entretenir d'une manière permanente la vie chrétienne dans les Communautés Ecclésiales et pour présider les assemblées dominicales à l'absence du prêtre, indispensables sont les Catéchistes* ».

Dans ce contexte, fut prise, en 1976, l'initiative de l'Évêque d'ouvrir l'École catéchétique de Tshumbe. Un projet qui visait à la fois la création des communautés chrétiennes vivantes, comme cadre approprié pour l'engagement des laïcs, et la formation intellectuelle, pratique, humaine et spirituelle des laïcs appelés à diriger ces communautés. Quant à la durée, trois sections de trois mois chacune par an sont prévues, entrecoupées par des stages suivis et effectués dans les Communautés Ecclésiales Vivantes (CEV) sous le regard du Curé et des formateurs, et cela dans l'espace de trois ans. Les élèves sont au nombre de 60 divisés en 3 groupes de 20. Le recrutement se fait au niveau de chaque paroisse et par le Curé. Les Catéchistes contribuent très efficacement à l'éveil de la foi et à l'animation des communautés. Dans l'avenir la formation des Catéchistes sera assurée également par des sessions dans les différentes paroisses. Celles-ci constitueront non seulement un moment de formation doctrinale, mais elles seront aussi un temps de retrouvailles et de partage des expériences de la vie quotidienne des animateurs des Communautés Ecclésiales.

Des pareilles expériences ne sont pas mises au jour dans tous les diocèses de la RDC, mais au moins dans chaque province ecclésiastique. Ce sont des hommes et des femmes, témoins de la foi au sein de leurs communautés : des parents, des époux (ses), des oncles et tantes, cousins et cousines qui acceptent de mettre leur expérience religieuse et chrétienne au service de l'Église locale et de la société. Ils s'engagent, en dépit de la pauvreté qui sévit la région, à

donner de leur temps, de leurs talents pour que Dieu vienne habiter dans leur quartier, que Dieu soit leur Dieu et eux soient son peuple.

### **Elles deviennent totalement ...**

Les CEVB sont des cellules vives de l'Église ; elles la représentent dans le monde à travers une évangélisation, non seulement en paroles mais aussi et surtout en actes. Elles en sont le sel représentatif dans la société. Elles ont été créées dans le contexte de la théologie de l'Église-famille ; où les familles africaines sont composées des gens qui vivent ensemble, matériellement et spirituellement. On se rend compte qu'il n'y a pas de communauté (*Gemeinschaft*) sans un « vivre-ensemble » d'une certaine densité, et sans des relations de type immédiat (personnelles, de voisinage, de parenté) ; où chacun collabore pour la construction et le bien de toute la famille. Tous sont éduqués à la responsabilité d'ensemble. Par la création des CEVB, l'Église d'Afrique a créé un nouvel idéal communautaire.

Elles se réalisent petit à petit comme des **communautés de foi**, réunies au nom du Seigneur, dans l'esprit des Actes des Apôtres et ayant au cœur la Parole de Dieu. Leur façon de vivre la foi apparaît éclairante dans la vie de tous les jours. La CEVB est une communauté qui vit sa foi et éduque ses membres à la foi. Une foi qui se fait vie et témoignage de vie ! Quand par exemple des Lendu accueillent dans leur maison des Hema,<sup>14</sup> sans privilégier les conflits séparant les deux fractions sociales et tribales, on se rend subitement compte de l'efficacité que la fraternité évangélique imprime dans les cœurs des hommes. Ce témoignage de foi est souvent incompris par ceux qui ne croient pas ou ceux qui vivent leur foi à moitié : ils considèrent souvent les chrétiens comme des déments. Oui, en effet, ils le sont, mais de « déments de Dieu » ; des déments capables d'accueillir, de nourrir, d'offrir asile à un « ennemi », à une personne appartenant au rang opposé. La force qui stimule de tels gestes naît de la foi, et de la vie liturgique au sein des communautés. Le partage de la Parole, la prière d'ensemble lors des deuils, de la visite des malades (blessés et/ou mutilés de guerre), pendant le carême, pendant le mois marial, sont autant des voies qui fortifient et alimentent la foi du peuple de Dieu réunit en CEVB et le conduisent à un témoignage concret dans la vie. Réaliser l'extraordinaire dans l'ordinaire, sous l'égide de la foi.

La CEVB est aussi une **communauté d'espérance**, c'est-à-dire une communauté qui veut vivre et faire vivre au-delà des vicissitudes sociales. Elle lit les signes des temps et agit sur son milieu avec la conviction de n'avoir aucune intention de céder au découragement. La CEVB est une famille qui se caractérise par son attention ; elle est attentive à ce qui se passe autour d'elle. Elle n'est pas une communauté où l'on entretient des dévotions, ou qui permet de se retrouver entre chrétiens, pour le plaisir d'être ensemble, mais une communauté qui se met à l'écoute de ce qui se passe autour d'elle et s'adresse à l'Esprit Saint. Dans les CEVB les sinistrés des guerres trouvent des maisons et surtout des frères et des sœurs qui les accueillent et qui leur redonnent la joie de vivre. Elles apprennent aux membres à vivre, non plus dans l'anonymat en attendant la décision du Curé, mais à être prêts à prendre des initiatives qui encouragent les jeunes, les vieux et les abandonnés de guerre à espérer en un futur toujours meilleur, car « Dieu n'oublie jamais ses enfants ». En RDC, participer aux activités d'une CEVB, en être membre effectif fait oublier les souffrances quotidiennes en familles, suite au partage d'expériences et d'encouragements avec les autres membres. Quand on sait qu'au sein de la même communauté ecclésiale on n'est pas le seul à vivre cet état de chose, ou encore qu'il y en a qui ont été démunis de leurs biens par des soldats-pillards mais qui, curieusement, sont contents et joyeux, on a simplement le droit d'espérer et de se sentir allégé le poids de sa souffrance. C'est l'Évangile qui donne cette force.

Pendant ce moment de guerre incessante qui a rongé l'histoire de la RDC et qui a privé le pays de ses forces vives tant humaines, matérielles, culturelles que psychologiques, les CEVB se sont caractérisées par une identité : elles se sont faites connaître comme **communautés de charité**. Toutes ses autres caractéristiques étaient tournées vers la réalisation de la CEVB comme une communauté de fraternité. On se mettait ensemble à l'écoute de la Parole et au partage biblique (communauté de foi) et/ou on était attentif aux signes des temps et aux besoins du milieu (communauté d'espérance), pour pouvoir agir. C'est à travers la charité que les CEVB ont pu justifier leurs rencontres ; c'est en aidant les pauvres, les étrangers, les veuf/s (ve/s), les orphelin(e)s, les sinistrés qu'elles ont donné sens à leur raison d'être. On peut – sans peur

de se tromper – dire que les CEVB, au Congo et en ce temps de guerre, ont beaucoup fait dans l'ordre caritatif. C'est dans la pratique de la charité que se vit l'idéal de l'Église-famille ou de la fraternité tant voulue par l'épiscopat africain ; et cela implique que les membres se connaissent. Chacun y a sa responsabilité ! Comme dit B. Ugeux, « *une communauté chrétienne peut donc être présente en assumant le maximum de responsabilité et en s'assurant sur le plan des ministères, sur le plan financier et sur le plan de l'engagement évangélique. Ensuite, puisque ces communautés se réunissent dans les quartiers, il y existe une dimension de visibilité de l'Église* ». <sup>15</sup> Avant donc n'importe quelle intervention de la Caritas diocésaine, nationale ou internationale, les besogneux se voyaient aidés d'abord par cette petite église.

Ce moment de guerre a rendu un peu plus visible l'Église, dans le grand Congo, déchiqueté par la guerre. C'est dans la pratique de la charité que les CEVB confirment la présence de l'Église dans le monde : comme le Christ elle doit être *gaudium et spes* et *lumen gentium*. Et dans ce contexte Benoît XVI dit aux Évêques congolais en visite *ad limina* en 2005 : « *Soyez aussi attentifs à ce que ces Communautés Ecclésiales Vivantes soient vraiment missionnaires, soucieuses non seulement d'accueillir l'Évangile du Christ, mais aussi d'en rendre témoignage devant les hommes. Nourris par la Parole du Christ et par les Sacrements de l'Église, les fidèles trouveront la joie et la force nécessaires au témoignage courageux de l'espérance chrétienne. Puissiez-vous notamment, en ces temps particulièrement décisifs pour la vie de votre pays, rappeler aux fidèles laïcs l'urgence qui est la leur d'assumer le renouvellement de l'ordre temporel, les appelant à « exercer une influence sur le tissu social, pour transformer les mentalités et les structures de la société de telle sorte qu'elles reflètent toujours mieux les desseins de Dieu sur la famille humaine »*. <sup>16</sup>

L'expérience concrète et positive de Kilwa-Kasenga vaut la peine d'être mentionnée : « *tous ceux qui visitent nos communautés ecclésiales vivantes sont bien accueillis et nourris. Comme prêtre itinérant pendant trois ans à la campagne, nous avons vécu la recommandation du Seigneur : "mangeant et buvant ce qu'il y aura chez eux" (Lc 10, 7). Personne ne meurt de faim ni de soif, à moins de faire des caprices. Aussi, la simplicité et le partage nous paraissent comme une bonne façon de vivre le vœu de pauvreté en Afrique* ». <sup>17</sup>

Les CEVB aident suffisamment leurs paroisses d'appartenance dans leur croissance économique. Avec le moyen qu'elle détient chaque CEVB subvient aux besoins de « ses » nécessiteux et de tous ceux qui s'y présentent manifestant la volonté de se faire aider. L'organisation financière de chaque CEVB est connue de tous les membres. A un délai fixé par la communauté, le conseil chargé de la charité dans la CEVB donne le compte rendu des entrées, des sorties et des besoins qui se sont présentés. Et si probablement il a pu intervenir, sans attendre l'accord de la communauté, celle-ci sera informée. Dans le cas contraire, c'est toute l'assemblée qui indiquera à son conseil économique les pistes à suivre pour des éventuelles futures interventions. Et cela est positif pour le fonctionnement des paroisses. Car celles-ci, étant dans l'incapacité de joindre dans un temps record tous les pauvres de leur territoire, elles se confient aux interventions rapides des CEVB.

À l'heure qu'il est la vie de l'Église au Congo tourne autour des CEVB. Mgr N. Djomo insiste en disant : « *L'heure est venue, mes chers frères et sœurs, de restituer à nos CEVB leur rôle de noyaux du développement des paroisses.... Prenons l'exemple des premières communautés chrétiennes que Saint Luc dans les Actes des Apôtres et Saint Paul dans ses Épîtres louent pour la maturité de leur foi et leur capacité à se prendre en charge, à pourvoir aux besoins des indigents et à penser aussi aux communautés chrétiennes les plus défavorisées. Par la création d'un petit bétail, la culture des champs et d'autres initiatives locales, nos communautés se révéleront une grande force et s'affirmeront comme fer de lance pour l'économie de notre Église* » <sup>18</sup>. Et il poursuit : « *C'est ici le lieu de rappeler une évidence : la prise en charge de l'Église par ses propres fidèles passe par le nécessaire désapprentissage d'une mentalité, celle d'assistés* ». <sup>19</sup>

Cet enseignement de la prise en charge matérielle de l'Église par ses propres fidèles est un appel à la conscience et à la responsabilité des fidèles, de porter sur les épaules les poids de la communauté, sans attendre que les frères des organismes étrangers puissent perpétuellement nous venir en aide. Par ce cri les évêques avaient justement pensé au changement de mentalité dont fait écho le message de Mgr Djomo : partir d'assisté à assistant. Et – nous pouvons fortement affirmer – les CEVB sont le lieu où cette prise de conscience et ce changement de mentalité est très explicite. Ces communautés sont des structures bien organisées économiquement, à la limite des possibilités des membres : elles ont un service financier pour les besoins de la CEVB et un autre pour l'apostolat de la charité envers les besogneux.

Et en ces temps qui sont les derniers, caractérisés par le tumulte de la guerre ce service de

la charité a été efficace. Autour des CEVB les localités villageoises se sont organisées pour intervenir en faveur des victimes de déplacement de guerre : leur nutrition, leur habillement, même leurs soins médicaux. Là où les possibilités le permettent des CEVB ont récolté des médicaments pour aider les sinistrés de guerre. Les récoltes des vêtements ont été organisées par des services *Caritas* locaux pour subvenir aux besoins. La bonne organisation des CEVB a dernièrement soutenu la charité sans attendre l'ordre paroissial. Même ceux qui ne prennent pas activement part aux activités de la CEVB y trouvent un lieu sûr pour verser leur contribution en faveur des sinistrés, car le faire chez les organes étatiques, par ces temps qui courent, on risque de tout perdre : les gens sont ultra-corrompus.

### Des Communautés de fraternité universelle ...

Il nous semble urgent d'aller à la fibrille avant de piquer la dernière baguette sur cet article. Il n'est pas normal qu'en temps de guerre on s'engage à accueillir, à loger, à nourrir, à protéger des gens appartenant au camp ennemi. On sait combien les Africains tiennent à l'appartenance clanique ou tribale : l'expérience montre que si l'on veut diviser l'Afrique – fusse-t-elle ecclésiastique – il suffit de parler de la tribu et tout le monde est derrière toi ou contre toi, selon les lignées d'appartenance.

L'adhésion à l'évangile et son incarnation dans la vie des hommes caractérisent les chrétiens et font d'eux le sel de la terre et la lumière du monde, et sont à la base de l'agir au sein de chaque CEVB; en Afrique en général et en RDC en particulier. C'est seulement la fraternité évangélique qui peut pousser les gens à agir en faveur des ennemis du clan et de la tribu en un moment de guerre. C'est seulement l'adhésion au message du Christ qui peut justifier l'attention réservée aux autres, à ceux qui appartiennent à d'autres peuples. Les CEVB sont le lieu où se réalise la vraie identité chrétienne, telle que décrite dans la « Lettre à Diognète » : **1.** *« Car les Chrétiens ne se distinguent des autres hommes ni par le pays, ni par le langage, ni par les vêtements. 2. Ils n'habitent pas de villes qui leur soient propres, ils ne se servent pas de quelque dialecte extraordinaire, leur genre de vie n'a rien de singulier. 3. Ce n'est pas à l'imagination ou aux rêveries d'esprits agités que leur doctrine doit sa découverte ; ils ne se font pas, comme tant d'autres, les champions d'une doctrine humaine. 4. Ils se répartissent dans les cités grecques et barbares suivant le lot échu à chacun ; ils se conforment aux usages locaux pour les vêtements, la nourriture et la manière de vivre, tout en manifestant les lois extraordinaires et vraiment paradoxales de leur république spirituelle. 5. Ils résident chacun dans sa propre patrie, mais comme des étrangers domiciliés. Ils s'acquittent de tous leurs devoirs de citoyens et supportent toutes les charges comme des étrangers. Toute terre étrangère leur est une patrie et toute patrie une terre étrangère ».*<sup>20</sup>

Cet écrit des débuts du christianisme trouve sa réalisation quotidienne dans les CEVB. Pendant la longue période de guerre qui n'a fait que répandre des morts en RDC, les chrétiens ne se sont jamais distingués par l'appartenance tribale, linguistique ou nationale. L'unique singularité qui était la leur fut celle de la charité fraternelle envers tous ceux qui étaient dans les besoins. Et, à notre humble avis, c'est cette charité qui naît de l'Évangile et de l'Eucharistie qui est l'identité des chrétiens. Des cas isolés ne manquent jamais – juste pour confirmer la règle.

Les CEVB sont aussi **un lieu de la réconciliation**. En elles des groupes en conflits trouvent l'opportunité de se rencontrer face à face et de découvrir qu'ils sont avant tout des frères, cherchant ce qui peut les unir. En elles on est convaincu que les fils des assassins ne sont pas des assassins, ils ne sont que des enfants. Ce sont des découvertes, des perspectives nouvelles qui s'ouvrent sur l'avenir, l'idée que la haine, la vengeance, le conflit n'est jamais un destin, mais on peut toujours décider de changer de route et de s'acheminer vers la réconciliation fraternelle.

C'est à travers et autour des CEVB que l'Église de la RDC, unie aux organisations non-gouvernementales, se préoccupe de la situation des victimes de guerre. A cette fin, elle a mobilisé les moyens pour une grande action de collecte et d'assistance sans précédent.

A l'issue de la guerre que le pays vient de traverser, les blessures restent profondes et le bilan est très lourd. Ne pouvant plus rester insensible face à cette situation, l'Église veut intervenir avec efficacité en vue de soulager la souffrance de ces frères et compatriotes.

Avec le slogan « Pourquoi attendre de l'étranger ce que je puis moi même donner à mon frère? » ; il est question de toucher tout congolais à donner le peu qu'il a.



### Par conséquent ...

Nous voulons nous limiter ici, espérant avoir partagé avec vous ce que les CEVB font et sont capables de faire au quotidien de la vie sociale ; et réaliser ainsi leur être-église domestique. Etant domestiques, tous ceux qui y habitent collaborent au bon fonctionnement de la famille entière : les chrétiens ne sont plus des personnes anonymes, mais des fidèles qui se sentent accueillis et responsables. Ils sont partie intégrante, en communion de vie avec le Christ et avec tous les frères.

Elles engagent leurs membres dans une prise de conscience progressive de la responsabilité dans la communauté et de la solidarité avec tous, surtout les pauvres, les plus démunis ; dans une fraternité totalement universelle. C'est la cellule base de l'Église pour un engagement des chrétiens aux différents aspects de la vie de la paroisse et à l'attention aux signes des temps dans la vie sociale. En elles les chrétiens sont de plus en plus transfigurés, parce qu'éclairés par la Parole de Dieu qu'ils partagent communautairement.

Même si d'une part certains membres des mouvements d'action catholique<sup>21</sup> ont de difficultés à s'intégrer dans la vie des CEVB ; estimant celles-ci de valeur inférieure à leur apostolat et leurs rencontres et d'autre part la moindre participation des hommes aux activités des CEVB, par rapport aux femmes et enfants ; nous pouvons affirmer que ça vaut la peine d'expérimenter ce que c'est une CEVB et ce que veut dire exactement appartenir (effectivement) à une CEVB ; car elle est le jardin où sont plantés deux arbres : celui de la science (formation) et celui de la vie (amour/charité). Il ne faut pas que le premier puisse évoluer sans le second. On peut volontiers se permettre de conclure en citant cet auteur de la première chrétienté ; tout en souhaitant que les CEVB : **1.** « devient un jardin de délices. Un arbre chargé de fruits, à la sève vigoureuse, grandit en eux et ils sont ornés des plus riches fruits. **2.** Car c'est là le terrain où ont été plantés l'arbre de la science et l'arbre de la vie .... **3.** Car il n'y a pas de vie sans la science, ni de science sûre sans la véritable vie : c'est pourquoi les deux arbres ont été plantés l'un près de l'autre. **4.** Ce sens, l'Apôtre l'avait bien vu quand, blâmant la science qui s'exerce sans obéir aux préceptes de vie que donne la Vérité, il dit : « La science enfle, mais l'amour édifie ». <sup>22</sup>



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<sup>2</sup> Conférence Épiscopale du Congo, *Les Actes de la VI<sup>e</sup> Assemblée plénière de l'Épiscopat du Congo*, Léopoldville 1961.

<sup>3</sup> Dulles, *Pourquoi les Catholiques n'évangélisent pas et pourquoi doivent-ils le faire ?* Bulletin de liaison, Port-au-Prince/Haïti, n. 1 (3 octobre 1996).

<sup>4</sup> P. Kalilombe, *Building Christian Communities*, in *Lumen Vitae* (1977).

<sup>5</sup> ———, *From Outstations to Small Christian Communities*, in *Spearhead* (1984).

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<sup>7</sup> P. Lefebvre, *Une Église qui naît de nouveau*, CEP, Kinshasa 1981.

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<sup>10</sup> J. Vankrunkelsven, *Vers les communautés de base. Éléments d'analyse et expériences pastorales*, Éd. Diffusion de l'Évêché, Bobo-Dioulasso 1978.

<sup>11</sup> Synode des Évêques. Assemblée spéciale pour l'Afrique. *L'Église en Afrique et sa mission évangélisatrice vers l'an 2000, «Vous serez mes témoins» (Actes 1,8). Instrumentum laboris*. Vatican 1993.

## FOOTNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Nous avons mis ensemble deux appellations : il y en a qui parlent seulement des «Communautés Ecclésiales Vivantes (CEV), d'autres utilisent par contre «Communautés Ecclésiales de Base» (CEB). La première nomenclature est courante chez les francophones, et la deuxième par la Conférence Épiscopale Brésilienne. Tandis que les évêques anglophones préfèrent l'appellation «The Small Christian Communities» (= Des Petites Communautés Chrétiennes).

Dès maintenant jusqu'à la fin de ce travail, nous utiliserons la forme abrégée: CEVB.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. B. Ugeux, «Les communautés de base en Afrique», p. 39. Celle-ci est un texte dont nous

ignorons les dates et le lieu de publication. Mais ce qui est dit peut se retrouver dans un ouvrage précédent du même auteur : *Les Petites Communautés Chrétiennes. Une alternative aux paroisses ? L'expérience du Zaïre*. Cerf, Paris 1988, 9-54, surtout 39-44.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17. Voir aussi les *Actes de la VI<sup>e</sup> Assemblée plénière de l'Épiscopat du Congo*, Léopoldville 1961, p. 164.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. la conférence citée plus haut, p. 41.

<sup>5</sup> Cela nous rappelle le moment d'agitation politique, avant, durant et après l'Indépendance ?) politique du Congo.

<sup>6</sup> Une évangélisation attentive aux signes des temps et à l'évolution de l'histoire de la société, et qui considère ces signes comme des nouveaux aréopages pour la mission. La nouvelle évangélisation consiste donc à annoncer le Christ dans le monde d'aujourd'hui, avec une nouvelle ardeur, des nouvelles perspectives et méthodes : une évangélisation nouvelle en expression (cfr. "The Task of the Latin American Bishops", in *Origins* 14 (1<sup>er</sup> novembre 1984), 305-310. 661; cité par Dulles, *Pourquoi les Catholiques n'évangélisent pas et pourquoi doivent-ils le faire ?* Bulletin de liaison, Port-au-Prince/Haïti, n. I [(3 octobre 1996), p. 1].

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. Jean Paul II, *Redemptoris missio* n. 51. Voir L. SANTEDI, *Les défis de la nouvelle évangélisation en Afrique contemporaine*, 127.

<sup>8</sup> Mgr N. Djomo, *Lettre pastorale pour ses dix ans d'épiscopat* (09 novembre 2007), n. 36 (inédit).

<sup>9</sup> B. Ugeux, *op.cit.*, p.45.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. Message de présentation de l'importance de la formation des catéchistes au diocèse de Tshumbe en RDC (inédit).

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. Mgr F. Muteba, *Lettre pastorale pour le diocèse de Kihwa-Kasenga*, le 24 décembre 2005, n. 5 (inédit).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, n. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. la visite *ad limina* déjà citée plus haut.

<sup>14</sup> Lendu et Hema sont les deux peuples de l'Ituri, au N.-E. de la RDC, qui ont combattu ces dernières années pour se disputer des terrains et l'hégémonie territoriale à Bunia et ses environs.

<sup>15</sup> B. Ugeux, *op.cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>16</sup> Jean Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 54.

<sup>17</sup> Mgr F. Muteba, *Lettre déjà citée*.

<sup>18</sup> Mgr N. Djomo, *Lettre déjà citée*, n. 35.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, n. 37.

<sup>20</sup> *Epist. ad Diognetum*, V. 1-5. C'est un écrit apostolique du deuxième siècle de l'ère chrétienne.

<sup>21</sup> Ceux du "Renouveau dans l'Esprit" ou les "Charismatiques" par exemple.

<sup>22</sup> *Epist. ad Diognetum*, XII, 2-4.

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## **Mission, Dialogue and Conversion: Sri Lankan Case**

At the heart of Christianity is the “Gospel” which derives from the Greek word euangelion (good tidings, good news) and its proclamation is called evangelization or evangelism. Jesus is the first missionary of the Gospel. In other words, he was revealing the *missio Dei*. “God, the triune God, was seen to be the initiator, missionary and fulfiller of Mission”.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, God’s mission in this world is a God-sized, complex reality, too gigantic for the human person to grasp fully. Nevertheless, there is an open invitation from God to human beings to participate in the *missio Dei*. Accordingly, “The way of the *missio Jesu* is also the way of the *missio hominum*”.<sup>2</sup> The core message of Jesus was the Reign of God. “Everything Jesus said and did was said and done in the light of the Kingdom of God that was coming with him and through him”.<sup>3</sup> Thus, when one becomes a Christian, one is automatically called to mission through baptism. Therefore, *missio hominum* consists of participating in the life of the Triune God and thereby in the life of humanity. Accordingly, a Christian is a person chosen by God who is “holy, consecrated, set apart”. But that happens for a specific purpose: to “be sent out” (Mk 3:13-15), to engage actively in God’s mission, to become a co-worker with God for the salvation-transformation of the world into God’s final design”.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the complex reality of mission can roughly be unravelled into six operative elements: **1.** Witness and Proclamation; **2.** Liturgy, Prayer and Contemplation; **3.** Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation; **4.** Interreligious and Secular Dialogue with women and men of other faiths and ideologies; **5.** Inculturation; **6.** Reconciliation.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, if God is the very *origo et fons* of mission, (the origin and constant source of its power), then naturally mission will go on until the final epiphany of the Kingdom of God with the second coming of Jesus.<sup>6</sup> It is true that Christians will not build the Reign of God by human hand. Yet, they are invited to set up signs of its coming. A Christian supports this conviction: in mission, one “builds” the Kingdom of God.

Nevertheless, mission takes place in time and space. Today, there is a stiff resistance and animosity to Christian mission. Nowadays, in the minds of the followers of other faiths, the concepts mission-conversion-baptism have become like a red rag to a bull. It is no exaggeration to say that to a certain extent this hostile and suspicious attitude has been shaped by bitter historical experiences and prejudices. Historically the deviation of mission from building the Kingdom of God to building earthly kingdoms and empires tarnished its sacred duty during the colonial era. Since such moves are contrary to the *missio Dei*, the purification of historical memories may lead to reconciliation. There is another aspect. It is a historical fallacy to conclude that “baptism and membership came to assume spatial and geo-political proportions”.<sup>7</sup> It is a fact that sometimes mission-conversion-baptism led the converts to assume alien garb. Yet, it is also true that some missionaries not only contributed to the nourishment of the local cultures<sup>8</sup> but also shed their sweat and blood to serve and emancipate, especially, the downtrodden and uncared-for of society. I would like to speak of five points, which may contribute to the local Church’s search for missiological answers to the conversion debate in Asia/Sri Lanka.

### **1. Urgency of healing past sins and the radical inculturation of the Gospel message and ecclesial structures**

#### **A) Urgent need to seek healing for the sins of the past**

Bitter colonial memories are still raw in the minds of the believers of other religions especially

among Buddhists in Sri Lanka.<sup>9</sup> Often, the Christian response tends either to negate such charges or to gloss over the problem. Instead, this paper repeats that the local Church ought to seek reconciliation and healing after a thorough historical analysis. The very mission of the Church binds her to tread the path of reconciliation. “Let us ask pardon for the divisions which have occurred among Christians, for the violence some have used in the service of the truth and the distrustful and hostile attitude sometimes taken towards the followers of other religions”.<sup>10</sup> Thus, to heal the collective memory, to build bridges and to establish happy and collaborative relationships, reconciliation is the way out of this labyrinth.

***B) Urgent need of radical inculturation of the Gospel message and ecclesial structures***

The Catholic Bishops’ Conference in Sri Lanka accepts that “Christ in Sri Lanka came in a foreign garb. Hence, inculturation is becoming part of the missionary mandate for us”.<sup>11</sup> Actually, this is not divorced from the above point, namely, reconciliation. Besides, the conversion controversy comes into being here. Does mission-conversion-baptism still uproot a people’s historical identity and replace it with an alien one? How to reconcile belonging to the Sinhala Buddhist/Tamil Hindu culture and belonging to the Church? How can one be an authentic Sri Lankan and a Christian at the same time? Is the convert now at home with the existing Church culture? Why do some see the Church as European and foreign, even after 60 years of Independence? Are they merely malicious allegations of the enemies of the Church or do they, in some way, correspond to the reality? Thus, as the Sri Lankan Catholic Church observes that radical inculturation needs to go beyond the sheer external icing. The conversion debate provides Christians the opportunity for soul-searching. The debate invites the Christians to take stock of the way in which they have been carrying out the *missio Dei* in establishing the Kingdom of God. The *missio Jesu* lays the foundation for the inculturation of the Church. The Christological foundation – incarnation, Paschal Mystery, ascension into glory and recapitulation of all things in Christ – serves the local Church to be fully at home. In the incarnation of the eternal Word, the Son of God assumed a particular culture in a particular society. The historical Jesus had a preferential solidarity with the least: the poor, the marginalized, and sinners. Notwithstanding, he embraced the Jewish culture, he wielded a prophetic critique of all cultural perversions and called the people to conversion and to a new culture of love. As *Ecclesia in Asia* and the First Asian Mission Congress highlighted, the local Church needs like Jesus to adopt the “narrative theology”— folk wisdom, parables, riddles, stories, etc., — to retell the story of Jesus to Sri Lankans. Thus, it is indispensable for the local Church to assume their cultures with an eye to communicating the Good News of salvation. The Incarnation leads to the Paschal Mystery. Sri Lankan society, including the Church, ethnically and religiously divided and marred by violence and injustice, is really in need of liberation. Jesus assumed our distorted human nature in order to save it and raise it to its original status. The mission of the Church is thus to follow the same path as the Master. “Societal cultures, the ones that transmit the ecclesial faith as well as those that receive it, need to die to all that is sinful and unworthy of humanity, to their limited vision and anti-values and rise to the full stature of humanity modelled after Christ”.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, today the homogeneous Catholic identity of the colonial era is split into ethnic lines. Sinhala and Tamil Catholics see themselves first as Sinhala and Tamils and only secondly do they identify themselves as Catholic. Thus, even though, the incarnated Word assumed a particular culture, the Risen Lord becomes trans-cultural, and thereby he is not tied to one culture, place or time. Likewise, the process of incarnation of the local Church must not be bogged down in local conflicts. Instead, it ought to lead the people to a new, redeemed, exalted status of life where originally everyone was a brother or a sister. The vision of harmony of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences sheds much light on it. In fact, Christ’s ascension into glory paves the way for the realization of a New Creation, a new glorified existence. Since the movement toward the New Creation and New Humanity is common to all religions and ideologies, the Church needs to collaborate with the converging aspects of this journey. The Church’s eschatological hope, namely the recapitulation of all things in Christ motivates the Church to



cooperate with the people of other beliefs in transforming and liberating the world. Therefore, the “indigenization of clerical dress or church architecture or music will not suffice. The very heart of a culture needs to be embraced and transformed by the Gospel”.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, due to radical inculturation: “Conversion to Christ does not isolate the convert from his or her community: it brings the conversion of that community”.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, radical inculturation will resolve the problem whereby Jesus and Christianity are still seen as foreign (*cf. EA* nn. 09, 20, 21). As John Prior notes, a radically incultured Church will no longer be “a banana Church or a coconut Church — yellow/brown (Asian) outside yet remaining white (foreign) on the inside. We are working towards a ‘mango Church’ — yellow (Asian) through and through”.<sup>15</sup> Thus, this process of rediscovering and re-identifying with the ‘Asian/Sri Lankan roots of Christianity’ will bring about “genuine Christian communities in Asia — Asian in their way of thinking, praying, living, communicating their own Christ-like experiences to others.... If Asian Churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future”.<sup>16</sup> The search for the roots leads the Church to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.

## 2. Urgency of Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue

The theology of conversion for Christian mission in Sri Lanka ought to pay attention to the ecumenical as well as interreligious dialogues. The motto of mission in Asia ought to be, “*not without my brother and sister*”. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that the ecumenical dialogue is related to the interreligious dialogue. The conflicting ways of understanding conversion in different Christian Churches and ecclesial groups affect not only the ecumenical dialogue but also the interreligious dialogue. Therefore, the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka has to pay attention to this dual dialogue.

It seems that the local Catholic Church does not make a distinction between New Religious Movements (NRMs) and sects and the ecclesial Communities. As the *Directory for the Application of the Principles and Norms of Ecumenism (DE)* 25 March 1993, notes, “when Catholics use the words ‘Churches’, ‘other Churches’, ‘other Churches and ecclesial Communities’, etc., [they] refer to those who are not in full communion with the Catholic Church...” (n. 17). It is true that the proliferation of Christian groups poses not only a serious pastoral challenge but also an obstacle to the search for Christian unity. Nevertheless, there exists between the Catholic Church, Churches and ecclesial Communities a real though incomplete communion founded on common Baptism (*cf. Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 3). In Sri Lanka, besides the National Christian Evangelical Alliance there are other Pentecostal communities. Yet, the Catholic Church has no official dialogue with these ecclesial Communities. The simple reason is that some Christian groups are not only hostile and disrespectful toward the Catholic Church but also their methods of evangelization aim at winning Catholics over to their groups. As the 1984-86 study on sects and NRMs notes, “we must not allow any preoccupation with sects to diminish our zeal for ecumenism among all Christians”.<sup>17</sup> At the universal level, there has been ecumenical dialogue between the Catholic Church (The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity), the World Evangelical Alliance and Classical Pentecostal Churches. Thus, it is vital for the local Catholic Church to make a distinction between sects and NRMs on the one hand, and the Churches and ecclesial Communities on the other. Therefore, the conversion controversy has widened and distanced the Christian unity. On the eve of Jesus’ Passion, the burden of disunity and division among his Disciples pierced and tore his heart. “May they be one, just as, Father, you are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me” (Jn 17:21). Accordingly, the disunity among Christians is perhaps the greatest counter-testimony to the message of the Gospel. Moreover, ecumenical cooperation, dialogue and common witness boost the interreligious dialogue. As the *Directory for the Application of the Principles and Norms of Ecumenism* 1993, highlights “Christians cannot close their hearts to the crying needs of our contemporary world. The contribution they are able to make to all areas of human life in which the need for salvation is manifested will be more effective when they make it together, and when they are seen to be united in making it” (*ibid.*, n. 162). Thus, Christians need to collaborate with believers of other faiths in areas of human promotion (*cf. ibid.*, n. 210).

The conversion controversy in Sri Lanka has revived the bitter old colonial memories and suspicions. It has retarded the interreligious dialogue. Just as not all of the new Christian groups fall into the category of NRMs and sects, all Buddhists are not extremist fundamentalists. In the conversion debate, unfortunately, a minority extremist group is often vociferous and dominant on the national scene. Therefore, as recommended by *Mission Orientations and Priorities*, of the First Asian Mission Congress, through dialogue, the Catholic Church needs to “make similar efforts to remove misunderstanding and prejudice from the people of other faiths in regard to the Christian faith and practices”.<sup>18</sup> “Can we dialogue with the extremist groups?” is a moot question. Yet, if the majority of the Buddhists are moderates, using the FABC theology of harmony and the “Spirit of Assisi”, the Catholic Church together with other Christians and believers can pull Sri Lanka out of its present crisis. In fact, the urgency of the interreligious dialogue does not come as a tactic of conflict resolution and coexistence among different religious communities. Instead, it is rooted in the *missio Dei*, understanding the mystery of the trinitarian God at work in other religions. “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 expressing our own Christian faith”.<sup>19</sup>

Period	Socio-economic and Political System	National identity distinguished by Religion
Pre-Colonial	Monarchic Feudalism	Sinhala=Buddhist=nation Ethnic identity=Religious identity=national identity
16 <sup>th</sup> Century	Colonialism and Conversion	Sinhala=Sinhala Buddhists/Sinhala Catholics/Sinhala Protestants
20 <sup>th</sup> -21 <sup>st</sup> Centuries	Globalization and Conversion	Sinhala identity is further fractured into Sinhala Evangelicals/Pentecostals, etc.

### 3. National identity, religious identity and conversion controversy in Sri Lanka <sup>20</sup>

The Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka relies on Buddhism as the source of identity. Besides, according to the Sinhala-Buddhist ideology, the custodian of Buddhism but also of the country are the Sinhala-Buddhists. As shown in the above table, the Buddhists’ conversion to Christianity has fractured the Sinhala identity as a universal concept by splitting it into three separated Sinhala identities distinguished by religion during the colonial period. During British colonialism, the Christians became the “far other”: alienated from Sinhala culture thus “non-Sinhals”. The Sinhala-Buddhist resistance movement placed Christianity, Westernization and British Rule on one continuum.<sup>21</sup> All three had to be rejected. Moreover, even today, the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists, as during the colonial period tend to condemn all conversion to Christianity as proselytism, thus *unethical and forced*.

In this era of globalization, the aggressive missionary campaign by some Christian Fundamentalists, with millennialism and messianism, made the whole country flare up again in a conversion controversy in the early 1990s and at the beginning of 2000. During colonialism and globalization there is both continuity and discontinuity in mission during colonialism and globalization. Many of the new Christian groups are motivated by the old axiom “extra ecclesiam nulla salus”. Accordingly, this exclusivist mission theology tends to demonize other religions in search of “soul-saving”. Thus, the mushrooming Christian groups with aggressive missionary campaigns, sometimes even with material enticements, seek to convert not only the followers of other faiths but the baptized Christians as well. The main discontinuity with the colonial period is the absence of a local political patronage for Christian fundamentalism. Besides, the Census Report 2000 reveals that the religious ratio in the country has not been subject to

radical changes. Therefore, the Sinhala-Buddhist identity has not been radically fractured producing considerable demographic changes as occurred during the colonial era.

If this is the case, is the anti-conversion campaign a storm in a teacup? There is no smoke without fire. Since the 1990s, with globalization, the mushrooming Christian groups with an exclusivist mission theology, embarked upon an aggressive conversion campaign. Catholics, Buddhists and Hindus were the targets of this mission. Thus, conversion has further split the Christian identity: Catholics, Protestants and Evangelical/Pentecostal/Fundamentalist Christians, etc. As it was during colonialism, in this era of globalization some Christians fight among themselves to win converts (baptized Christians and other believers) to their folds.

If this is so, can we justify the anti-conversion campaign by Buddhist fundamentalists? It is true that the smoke has a fire. Nevertheless, there is no volcanic eruption. The Sinhala-Buddhist fundamentalists, as during the colonial resistance movement, place all Christians: Catholics, Protestants, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and Christian Fundamentalist Sects on one continuum. The Sinhala-Buddhist ideology with the dramatization and mythologization of enemies and with the purity and impurity demarcation, perceives all Christians as “aliens” and the enemies of the motherland and Buddhism. Furthermore, all conversions to Christianity are interpreted as proselytism because the Christians hoodwink the majority of the poor and the ignorant with material enticements. Hence, conversion to Christianity is “forced” or “unethical” and therefore is a crime. Buddhist Fundamentalists indiscriminately brand all alleged conversions to Christianity as having ulterior political motives. With conspiracy theories, all Christians are accused of being agents of foreign powers. The malicious and the biased propaganda of the Buddhist Fundamentalists spreads a distorted image of Christianity and of all the Christians. *Beware of Christians and their mission; they are trying to convert you by offering material inducements. They are foreign agents with foreign money and are a threat to the nation.* Thus, since the colonial era, the politicized Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism has failed to produce an inclusive national identity assimilating religious or ethnic minorities.

#### 4. Religious Liberty and Conversion

The Sri Lankan Constitution guarantees the right to practice and propagate one’s religion. Moreover, Sri Lanka as a member of the UN and a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) treaties is legally bound to protect the freedoms of belief, speech, worship, and assembly. Accordingly, if the proposed anti-conversion bills had been enacted, they would have egregiously violated the two distinct aspects of religious freedom: **1)** the freedom to adopt a religion or belief of one’s own choosing; and **2)** the freedom to manifest that religion in public or private. Thus, two absolute principles of human rights came into direct conflict in Sri Lanka. The Buddhists identify Christian conversion as proselytism and seek to ensure the liberty of conscience right (leave us alone on our own territory). The Christians resort to the fundamental rights, and demand the freedom to share and expand their faith. The constitutional guarantees do not reflect the practical reality. Christians may have won the right to conversion constitutionally, but they have failed to win the confidence of Buddhists. Thus, the constitutional guarantees alone will not solve the conversion row. As I have mentioned throughout this paper, interreligious and ecumenical dialogues, ceremonies of reconciliation, liturgical healings and so on may also positively contribute to reach amicable solutions to the present conversion dispute. Such gestures of goodwill may also serve as methods of conflict resolution because people with some spiritual and religious background are often involved in the conversion controversy, even though, sometimes the whole issue has been hijacked and politicized by a minority group with ulterior motives. Accordingly, I strongly argue that all: Buddhists as well as Christians are in need of a conversion. We all need to go back to the roots of our respective beliefs, to fundamentals without being fundamentalists.

Furthermore, all International Treaties on religious liberty ought to be subject to the ancient golden rule: *do to others what you would have them do to you.* The Christian right to evangelize must pay attention to the cultural, religious, historical and sociological sensibilities of the hearers. Accordingly, Christian mission needs to avoid a sense of superiority, using exclusivistic and triumphalistic language



and giving the impression that Buddhists are the target of a Christian conversion campaign. The intra-Christian and interreligious debate on conversion must abandon the polemical, apologetic and defensive methods and embrace fraternal, spiritual conversation. All must abandon the marketplace type of conversion with its noisy, competitive, promotional and tactical language and retreat to the forest in search of silence, reflection, contemplation, and discernment.

Such soul-searching may help the Christians themselves to recognize the right to intra-Christian conversion and changes of denominational allegiance not as proselytism but as deeper commitment to God. Thus, it is inaccurate to label all conversions of Evangelical/Pentecostal groups as proselytism. Just as many Catholics during the Dutch period as well as in times of harassments by local leaders did not relinquish their faith, many members of the new ecclesial Communities despite persecution and violence continue to be adherents of Evangelical/Pentecostal Christian groups.

As the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka notes, "We do not believe that legislation can bring about religious harmony", passing the Anti-Conversion Bills and criminalization of conversion will add fuel to the fire. Yet, as Catholics have voiced their protest against the so-called unethical conversion, the Buddhists also were victims of an aggressive conversion campaign. It again invites all parties to practice religious liberty with responsibility. *Dignitatis Humanae* (DH) highlights "all men should be immune from coercion on the part of individuals, social groups and every human power so that, within due limits, nobody is forced to act against his convictions nor is anyone to be restrained from acting in accordance with his convictions in religious matters in private ... or in association with others" (*ibid.*, n. 2). *DH* thus guarantees the freedom to search for the truth and to be bound by it when it is found. Furthermore, *DH* condemns any action, which "seems to suggest coercion or dishonest or unworthy persuasion, especially when dealing with the uneducated or the poor" (*ibid.*, n. 4). The reduction by the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists of all conversion

to Christianity as a purely human enterprise, and not a spiritual transformation, clashes with the very philosophy of Buddhism.

Mission as the story of Jesus, story of God, and as the master storyteller of the Reign of God will definitely go on in Sri Lanka in spite of hardship and persecution. We are not the masters of the mission rather servants of the *missio Dei*. Hence, it does not belong to us but to the trinitarian God. "Nothing could stop him (Jesus) from telling his story, even on the Cross. His humiliating death should have been the end of His story. But *Abba* has something more to say: "My Son – He is truly risen". Pouring his gift of the Holy Spirit into our hearts, Jesus entrusts His story to us".<sup>22</sup>

## 5. Globalization, Fundamentalism and the Kingdom of God

I refuse to treat the conversion debate as a mere local religious issue. I reiterate that it has



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wider local and global factors. Mismanaged globalization coupled with other factors contributed

to the birth of fundamentalism in Sri Lanka. The conversion controversy is an ill effect of globalization. It has contributed to sow the seeds of suspicion and hatred among religions. Such divisions contribute to veil the real social evils of globalization: egoistic and exploitative anti-human systems. Moreover, interreligious and intra-Christian conflicts prevent solidarity with the victims of globalization. Furthermore, it hinders the resistance against the dehumanizing forces of globalization and the reaffirmation of the dignity of each person. It gives the impression that religions today, fight among themselves and not against Satan and Mammon. "Conversion was seen as turning away not primarily from the evil powers of Satan but from other religions".<sup>23</sup>

The mission of the People of God must nurture the seed of the Word and the seed of the Reign of God present among all the People of God rather than trying to uproot and reroute it by spreading the seeds of silly divisions and petty disputes in the name of God and his mission. I reiterate that in Asia, mission can be carried out, mainly, through dialogue. As John Prior notes, "Many Asian Bishops do not separate proclamation from dialogue; in Asia we proclaim in and through dialogue. Dialogue is the best and, often enough, the only viable means of proclamation ...".<sup>24</sup> The Christians will receive the ultimate authority of evangelization in Asia only with a bullock-cart missiology and not with a helicopter one.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, in Asia, mission must not be *counter-mission* or mission *against*, rather mission *with and mission for*. In this perspective, the globalization of the Reign of God tallies with the positive aspects globalization can bring about. The mystery of God is universal/global. God wants the salvation of all people (I Tm 2:4-5; Ti 2:11). God's vision and mission of salvation is thus universal. This can be named globalization of salvation, since it embraces the entire human race and the whole of Creation. "Mission means, therefore, first and foremost God's turning towards the world in creative love, redemptive healing and transforming power".<sup>26</sup> The Holy Spirit is also present and active in every time and place, hence universal<sup>27</sup> and thus, operates globally. The salvation won by Jesus through the Paschal Mystery is unique and universal, hence global. The inchoate reality of the Kingdom of God exists beyond the confines of the Church (*cf. Redemptoris Missio*, n. 20). Since the Holy Spirit is universally active in all times and in all cultures, the Reign of God is global. Besides, salvation in Jesus Christ is available to all outside the Church in a mysterious manner (*cf. Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22). However, "the Church is necessary for the world at large as a sacrament, an efficacious sign and instrument of God's redemptive activity in Jesus Christ, leading towards the final Kingdom of God".<sup>28</sup> If the Church exists to continue the mission of Jesus Christ and if the central message (mission) of Jesus was the Kingdom of God,<sup>29</sup> then the mission of the Church is the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. "Mission, in other words, is what it means to be church, because to be church means to share in the mission of Jesus, which was to preach, to serve and to witness with his whole heart to the Kingdom of God".<sup>30</sup> Besides, the Kingdom of God and the *Abba* though distinct are complementary. "The Kingdom explains God's being *Abba* and the fatherhood of God provides a basis for an explanation for the Kingdom".<sup>31</sup> According to the vision of Jesus, God is the Father of the entire human family and all human beings are brothers and sisters. Thus, it is logical to conclude that the mission of the Church by its very nature is global. Moreover, the Kingdom of God is neither totally an otherworldly nor a this-worldly reality, rather it is both. The dream of God is a vision of *Shalom*.

"It means well-being in a comprehensive sense. It includes freedom from negatives such as oppression, anxiety, and fear, as well as the presence of positives such as health, prosperity, and security. *Shalom* thus includes a social vision: the dream of a world in which such well-being belongs to everybody. As the story of the interaction between the dream of God and the rejection of the dream through what happens in history, the Bible is a tale of two kingdoms: the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of this world".<sup>32</sup>

The Kingdom-based mission also has the potentiality to contribute to resolve not only the conversion row but also the other social problems the Sri Lankan Church and society are entangled with. "The Kingdom aims at transforming human relationships; it grows gradually as peoples slowly learn to love, forgive and serve one another.... The Kingdom's nature, therefore, is one of

communion among all human beings — with one another and with God” (*RM*, n. 15). The Church is the presence of the Kingdom in history insofar as the Risen Christ is present in this community of believers. However, she is not the Kingdom insofar as the Kingdom is still to be realized eschatologically in its universal dimension. She is the sacrament of the Kingdom in the sense that she is a sign and instrument of the Kingdom’s appearance and realization in history. “That the Reign of God is the very reason for the being of the Church. The Church exists in and for the Kingdom”.<sup>33</sup>

Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder make a synthesis of the mission as *prophetic dialogue*. “Mission is dialogue. It takes people where they are; it recognizes the validity of their own religious existence and the integrity of their own religious ends”.<sup>34</sup> The Church becomes *prophetic* in two senses. “On the one hand, the Church in mission must speak out clearly for the world’s excluded, against human and ecological violence, and on behalf of God’s Reign of justice and peace. On the other, even in the face of the “rays of divine truth” within the world’s religions, it must be proclaimed unhesitatingly, faithfully — and yet respectfully — the name, the vision and the Lordship of Jesus Christ”.<sup>35</sup>

In Sri Lanka torn apart by ethnic, religious and political conflicts and the untold human misery and tragedy, the Church needs to recognize that Jesus’ ministry of reconciliation and peace has been entrusted to her (II Cor 5:18-19). The Church ought to be a voice for the voiceless, hope for the hopeless, shelter for the homeless, liberator for the oppressed and a pointer/sign to a new heaven and earth. “Mission ultimately is witness to the hope of a new heaven and a new earth, where every tear will be wiped away (Rv 21:1-15), every tongue from every nation (Rv 7:9) will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil 2:11), and God will be all in all (I Cor 15:28)”.<sup>36</sup> We, as Disciples of Christ, who have been entrusted with his peace (peace I give you), must be ambassadors, witnesses, pioneers of peace and reconciliation in this world. “For he (Christ) is our peace” (Eph 2:14).

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> THEO SUNDERMEIER, “‘Missio Dei’ Today: On the Identity of Christian Mission”, *SEDOS Bulletin*, Vol. 36, nn. 2/4, (March-April 2004), p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> JOHN FUELLENBACH, *Church, Community for the Kingdom*, Logos Publications, Manila, the Philippines 2001, 22.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. STEPHEN B. BEVANS, SVD, “Unravelling a ‘Complex Reality’: Six Elements of Mission”, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, *SEDOS Bulletin*, Vol. 27, n. 2 (April 2003), pp. 50-53.

<sup>6</sup> *SEDOS Bulletin*, Vol. 36, nn. 3/4, p. 56.

<sup>7</sup> ANTO KAROKARAN, “Cultural Alienation of Converts and Radical Inculturation of Faith”, in JOSEPH MATTAM – SEBASTIAN KIM, *Mission and Conversion A Reappraisal*, St Pauls, Bandra, Mumbai 1996, p. 155.

<sup>8</sup> In Sri Lanka the Indian missionary, Fr Gonsalves wrote 42 books: Sinhala 20 including dictionaries, Tamil 15, Portuguese and Dutch 07. See, VITO PERNIOLA, *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka, The Dutch Period, Volume I, 1658-1711*, Tisara Prakashakayo Ltd, Dehiwala, Sri Lanka 1983, pp. 351-356.

<sup>9</sup> “As for Christianity, it should be admitted that, for centuries, missionaries and colonial administrators in Asia have tried to ‘convert’ the ‘heathens’ by imposing Western ways of life and thought, barring some laudable exceptions”. See, *EABC* Vol. II, 255. Among the challenges to harmony in Asia, one is the burden of the Christian mission history. See *Ibidem*, 240. “Prejudices are very much alive in Asia. As a social institution, the Church is perceived as a foreign body in its colonial origins while other world religions are not”. See, *EABC*, Vol. I, p. 337. “Too often missionary expansion was allied with imperialism and resulted in the destruction or suppression of the cultural identity of those converted”. See DONALD SENIOR-CARROLL STUHLMEUELLER, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 1999, p. 346.

<sup>10</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Homily*, Sunday, 12 March 2000, n. 4, *L’Osservatore Romano*, English Edition, 22 March 2000, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS’ CONFERENCE IN SRI LANKA, “The Church’s Evangelizing Mission”, in Peter C. Phan, *The Asian Synod, Texts and Commentaries*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 2002, p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> FRANCIS-VINCENT ANTHONY, *Ecclesial Praxis of Inculturation*, Libreria Ateneo Salesiano, Roma 1997, p. 62.

<sup>13</sup> NORMAN E. THOMAS, “Radical Mission in a Post-9/11 World: Creative Dissonances”, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 29, 1 (Jan 2005), p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> SEBASTIAN C.H. KIM, *In Search of Identity, Debates on Religious Conversion in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, India 2003, 193.

<sup>15</sup> JOHN MANSFORD PRIOR, “Faith and Culture in Dialogue: A Reflective Theological Synthesis”, *Word and Worship*, 39, 5 (Nov-Dec 2006), p. 325.

<sup>16</sup> *FABC*, Vol. 1, 70.

<sup>17</sup> THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN UNITY, “Sects and New Religious Movements: Pastoral Challenge”, *Information Service*, 61 (1986/III), p. 150.

<sup>18</sup> MISSION ORIENTATIONS AND PRIORITIES, *FIRST ASIAN MISSION CONGRESS*, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 18-22 October 2006, Document 2, in *Vidyajoti — Journal of Theological Reflection*, Vol. 71, n. 1 (Jan 2007), p. 75.

<sup>19</sup> *FABC*, Vol. 1, p. 16.

<sup>20</sup> Here, I have not taken into consideration Tamils and Muslims and Hinduism and Islam since this work is mainly limited to Buddhists and Christians.

<sup>21</sup> “The Buddhist fundamentalist worldview, in short, is absolutistic and one-dimensional rather than relativistic and multidimensional. Western Christians were the prime target during the opening decades of the twentieth century ...”. DONALD K. SWEARER, “Fundamentalist Movements in Theravada Buddhism”, in MARTIN E. MARTY – R. SCOTT APPLEBY (ed.), *Fundamentalism Observed*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1994, p. 639. See also, TESSA. BARTHOLOMEUSZ, “First Among Equals: Buddhism and the Sri Lankan State” in Ian Harris (ed.), *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth-Century Asia*, pp. 173-193. TESSA. BARTHOLOMEUSZ - CHANDRA R. de SILVA (eds.), *Buddhist Fundamentalism and Minority Identities in Sri Lanka*, State University of New York Press 1988.

<sup>22</sup> LUIS ANTONIO G. TAGLE, “Mission in Asia: Telling the Story of Jesus”, in *Word and Worship* 39, 5 (2006 Nov/December), p. 307.

<sup>23</sup> MICHAEL AMALADOSS, “Identity and Harmony, Challenges to Mission in South Asia”, in ROBERT J. SCHREITER (ed.), *Mission in the Third Millennium*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 2001, p. 32.

<sup>24</sup> JOHN MANSFORD PRIOR, “Unfinished Encounter: A Note on the Voice and Tone of *Ecclesia in Asia*”, in PETER PHAN (ed.), *The Asian Synod: Texts and Commentaries*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 2002, 239.

<sup>25</sup> The metaphor of the helicopter used by Indian theologian Stanley Samartha serves to illustrate the coming of Christianity during the colonial period (Roman Catholicism and Protestant Churches) and the new Evangelical/Fundamentalist groups to Sri Lanka/Asia today. Samartha argues that the helicopter Church has created much missiological noise and kicked up much theological dust on landing on Asian ground. He further says that the noise and the dust prevented people from hearing the voice and seeing the vision of the descending divinity. Samartha concludes that the helicopter theology still survives in Asia. Cf. STANLEY SAMARTHA, *One Christ Many Religions*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll 1991, p. 115.

<sup>26</sup> JOHN FUELLENBACH, *Church, Community for the Kingdom*, Logos Publications, Manila 2001, p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> SECOND ECUMENICAL VATICAN COUNCIL, Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church *Ad Gentes*, (7 December 1965) nn. 3, 11, 15 in *AAS* 58 (1966) 947-990; SECOND ECUMENICAL VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, n. 5: *AAS* 57 (1965); SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World of Today, *Gaudium et Spes*, (7 December 1965), nn. 10-11, 22, 26, 38, 41, 92-93: *AAS* 58 (1966).

<sup>28</sup> JOHN FUELLENBACH, *Church, Community for the Kingdom*, p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 80: *AAS* 68 (1976); SECOND ECUMENICAL VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, n. 5: *AAS* 57 (1965).

<sup>30</sup> STEPHEN B. BEVANS – ROGER P. SCHROEDER, *Constants in Context, A Theology of Mission for Today*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 2004, 306.

<sup>31</sup> JOHN FUELLENBACH, *Church, Community for the Kingdom*, p. 22.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 25.

<sup>33</sup> *FABC*, Vol. I, p. 252.

<sup>34</sup> STEPHEN B. BEVANS - ROGER P. SCHROEDER, *Constants in Context, A Theology of Mission for Today*, 285.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> STEPHEN B. BEVANS, “Unravelling a ‘Complex Reality’: Six Elements of Mission”, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 27, n. 2 (2003 April), p. 53.

**Sr Hélène Mbuyamba, SMNDA**

## **Les femmes dans l'Église d'Afrique - A Missioner's Reflection -**

### **L'ÉGLISE EN AFRIQUE AU SERVICE DE LA RECONCILIATION, DE LA JUSTICE ET DE LA PAIX**

*Ecclesia in Africa* avait comparé l'Afrique d'aujourd'hui à cette personne qui, descendant de Jérusalem à Jéricho, tomba entre les mains de brigands qui la laissèrent à demi morte sur le bord du chemin, après l'avoir dépouillée et rouée de coups. En effet, tel était le spectacle douloureux et insupportable qu'offrait l'Afrique : d'innombrables êtres humains blessés, malades, marginalisés, abandonnés... ayant besoin d'un bon samaritain pour leur venir en aide.

Plus de dix ans après la publication de ce document, force est de reconnaître que la situation s'est plutôt aggravée.

Il m'a été demandé de parler des femmes dans l'Église d'Afrique. D'entrée de jeu, j'ai voulu aborder la question en la regardant du point de vue de la collaboration entre hommes et femmes. Cette collaboration, me semble-t-il, a tout à voir avec le thème qui nous occupe, à savoir : « L'Église en Afrique au service de la réconciliation, de la justice et de la paix ».

J'aimerais tenter une autre comparaison. L'Afrique actuelle, ne pourrait-elle pas faire penser à cette jeune fille de 12 ans, dont le père Jaïre, chef de synagogue, vient supplier Jésus pour qu'il la sauve car elle est à toute extrémité ?

Les paroles et gestes de Jésus me serviront de trame dans cette petite causerie.

Jésus serait-il l'ultime recours pour ce père au bord du désespoir ? Jésus pourtant ne fera rien sans mettre aussi la mère de la petite à contribution (... *Mais les ayant tous mis dehors, il prend avec lui le père et la mère de l'enfant ... et il pénètre là où était l'enfant* Mc 5, 40). Il a besoin d'elle comme partenaire responsable, tout comme le père, de son œuvre de libération. Il sait que face à toute situation de violence et de mort, la vocation de la femme est d'être sacrement de l'espérance. La femme est gardienne de la vie. C'est souvent dans des situations où la vie est en danger qu'elle déploie son savoir faire pour soigner, protéger, nourrir. Les cas sont nombreux en Éthiopie, en Angola, au Rwanda, en RDC, où des femmes, silencieusement, mais efficacement, ont fait et continuent à faire vivre le pays, la société. C'est pourquoi Jésus sort cette mère de l'ombre afin qu'elle devienne, elle aussi, partie prenante de la vie nouvelle qu'il redonne à l'enfant.

La manière de se situer de Jésus par rapport à la femme rappelle celle de notre Fondateur, le Cardinal Charles Lavigerie. En 1867, il écrit aux membres d'une association ce qui suit :

« Malgré le zèle des Missionnaires (hommes), leurs efforts ne produiront jamais des fruits suffisants s'ils ne sont pas aidés par des femmes apôtres auprès des femmes : Ce ministère, ils ne peuvent le remplir par eux-mêmes : seules des femmes peuvent approcher librement des femmes païennes, entretenir avec elles des rapports de charité, panser leurs maux, toucher leurs cœurs....Cet apostolat ne s'arrête pas à la femme. La femme est à l'origine de tout, puisqu'elle est la mère. Ses enfants sont ce qu'elle les fait. Elle dépose dans leurs âmes des semences que rien ne détruit, et qui germe malgré toutes les forces contraires. Donc, peu à peu, par les femmes, on a la famille, et par la famille, la société ».

Ailleurs, il dit : « Vos filles vont être de véritables missionnaires, plus utiles et plus efficaces que les prêtres eux-mêmes, parce qu'elles feront aux enfants un bien plus solide et plus durable.



Elles vont commencer véritablement la conversion de l'Afrique dans sa portion la plus essentielle, dans les femmes, qui deviendront, elles, mères et chefs de familles chrétiennes ».

A l'instar de ce que cette jeune fille malade représente aux yeux de son père et *de sa mère*, l'Afrique actuelle est, selon Benoît XVI, « la grande espérance de l'Église », à cause de tous les signes positifs jalonnant la dernière décennie, ainsi que le montrent les numéros 6 et 7 des *Lineamenta* pour la deuxième assemblée du synode.

En dépit de cela, l'Afrique est toujours et encore à toute extrémité, comme la jeune fille de 12 ans. Celle-ci est comme morte avant même que Jésus n'arrive sur les lieux.

De quoi se meurt l'Afrique à l'heure actuelle ? Plutôt que de reprendre la série de maux si bien énumérés dans les *Lineamenta*, je me contenterais de citer quelques statistiques :

Selon Robert Zoelick, un des présidents de la banque mondiale, la crise financière a déjà fait replonger 100 millions de personnes dans la pauvreté et le recul des exportations va en mettre des dizaines de millions au chômage. Et le même de conclure que les pauvres des pays africains n'ont pas à payer le prix d'une crise qui est née aux USA.

Nous apprenons aussi de Paul Collier, un professeur d'économie à l'université d'Oxford, que parmi les 58 pays les plus pauvres du monde, dont l'Afrique abrite les 2/3, les habitants vivent comme au XVI<sup>ème</sup> siècle : ils subissent conflits violents, épidémies, pauvreté, espérance de vie faible – ils savent que le XXI<sup>ème</sup> siècle existe et qu'ils sont laissés au bord de la route. Ces pays vont souffrir de la baisse ponctuelle des matières premières et de la réduction de l'aide aux pays en développement qui va probablement découler de la récession. Il ajoute que l'inégalité économique dans un monde globalisé va devenir un cauchemar.

La FAO, quant à elle, attire l'attention sur le fait que la crise financière ne doit pas faire oublier la crise alimentaire toujours présente.

Les derniers chiffres présentés par cette organisation sont éloquentes :

- Plus de 900 millions de personnes souffrent de faim dans le monde.
- Près de 89% d'entre elles, soit 750 millions de personnes, vivent en Afrique et en Asie.
- 36 pays situés, pour la plupart en Afrique, dépendent d'une aide extérieure plutôt insuffisante, pour nourrir leur population.

Dans un tel contexte, est-ce surprenant d'apprendre la mort d'une centaine de personnes au Kenya, sans compter des blessées graves, dans l'explosion d'un camion citerne accidenté, alors qu'elles essayaient de récupérer un peu d'essence pour s'aider à survivre ?

Le viol comme arme de guerre a atteint son niveau le plus élevé. WILDAF-Zambie et Victim Support Unit (VSU), l'unité de police qui traite des abus contre les femmes et les enfants en Zambie soutient que c'est la loi du silence qui expliquerait cette hausse.

Que ce soit en temps de paix ou en temps de guerre, la violence contre les femmes et les filles prend une ampleur de plus en plus inquiétante. En Côte d'Ivoire, en Zambie, en RDC, en Afrique du sud, au Libéria au Cameroun, au Burkina-Faso et ailleurs en Afrique, on assiste, presque impuissants, à la montée de ce fléau.

Ce qu'en dit l'écrivain congolais Boyla est très éclairant : « loin d'être une fatalité, la violence sexuelle de masse présuppose une 'stratégie délibérée' ; les femmes sont devenues des cibles dont le corps correspond à un territoire. Les viols collectifs, les grossesses forcées et l'esclavage sexuel sont des instruments de génocide et de nettoyage ethnique ».

Avec de tels problèmes, l'Afrique n'est pas près de se relever. Aux yeux de bien des gens, africains ou non, elle est même morte, qu'est-ce qu'on peut faire d'autre sinon accepter cette fatalité ?

Le chef de la synagogue entend un discours similaire au sujet de sa fille : « Elle est morte, pourquoi déranger encore le maître ? ». Mais Jésus, qui a entendu, dit au papa : « sois sans crainte ; aie seulement la foi ».

Plus tard, il dira cette parole surprenante aux gens qui se lamentent: « ...elle n'est pas morte mais elle dort », parole accueillie par les moqueries. Est-il fou ou quoi pour tenir de pareils propos ?

Pendant toute cette scène, la mère, encore dans l'ombre, n'en est pas moins présente ( ... *Mais les ayant tous mis dehors, il prend avec lui le père et la mère de l'enfant ... et il pénètre là où était l'enfant* Mc 5, 40).

La présence du couple aux côtés de Jésus n'est pas sans signification. En choisissant de ne prendre avec lui que cet homme et cette femme pour les faire assister au retour à la vie de leur enfant, Jésus pose un acte prophétique. Les trois disciples, aussi témoins de cette vie nouvelle, comprennent-ils toute la portée du choix de Jésus ? Probablement pas, ne parlons pas de ceux qui se sont moqués de lui et de tous ceux qui sont resté au dehors.

Cet homme et cette femme, c'est l'image de notre Église qui se veut sacrement du Royaume de Dieu. C'est à l'homme et à la femme ensemble que Jésus confie sa mission de contribuer à faire advenir le règne de justice, de paix et de réconciliation dans le monde. Que d'obstacles pourtant sur le chemin de la collaboration véritable entre les hommes et les femmes, aussi bien dans l'Église que dans la société.

Une étude faite en 2004 sur la situation des femmes au Burkina nous révèle que ce n'est pas l'absence de textes protégeant les droits des femmes qui est en cause. Le problème, c'est bien l'ignorance de l'existence de ces textes ou les difficultés de leur mise en application résultant de la conception patriarcale de la société. Un autre problème, non moins important, est le vide juridique constaté dans des situations telles que la violence faites aux femmes et aux enfants ainsi que l'inexistence d'une obligation de placer des femmes en position éligible pour les partis politiques.

Ailleurs, comme en RDC, c'est le fondamentalisme religieux qui gagne du terrain avec, comme résultat, une régression en matière des droits des femmes. Ceci oblige les organisations féminines à s'organiser et à rechercher des soutiens politiques. Elles sont, en effet, sujettes à l'exclusion de la part de leur milieu en cas de non adhésion à ces fondamentalismes.

Reconnaissons aussi que dans bien des cas, surtout en milieu rural, la femme peut devenir l'obstacle majeur à son propre développement, quand elle demeure sous l'emprise de la tradition et des coutumes rétrogrades. Elle trouve tout naturel de se voir reléguée au second plan et figée dans le rôle de mère et femme au foyer.

Dans l'Église catholique, le clergé était et est encore un monde d'hommes. Rien d'étonnant dès lors que la culture catholique soit une culture essentiellement masculine dans ses institutions et son organisation très hiérarchisée. Pourtant, dans cette tradition catholique, des femmes, religieuses pour la plupart, mais aussi des laïques, se sont fait une place et ont réussi à trouver des espaces d'expressions et de liberté.

Actuellement, l'Église catholique continue de présenter un visage très traditionnel sur plusieurs plans. Ainsi, elle reconnaît l'égalité essentielle entre homme et femme mais maintient celle-ci en situation de subordination et d'infériorité. Il est aussi beaucoup question de la dignité des femmes dans les textes pontificaux, mais le partage effectif des tâches dans l'Église entre les hommes et les femmes fait que la parole officielle du monde catholique reste très masculine. Il est clair que le système patriarcal dans lequel prennent racine les structures ecclésiastiques donnent lieu à une lecture de la tradition et du magistère qui se pose en contradiction avec les Écritures et les signes des temps.

L'intégration de l'approche genre manque cruellement dans l'Église et les sociétés, en Afrique et ailleurs. Et si la femme est, pour ainsi dire, absente des cercles où se prennent les décisions concernant la vie à différents niveaux, comment apportera-t-elle sa contribution spécifique ?

Pourtant, les prises de position de Jésus par rapport aux femmes ont eu et continuent à voir un pouvoir de transformation toujours à découvrir. Ainsi, elles mettent en lumière le caractère, dirions-nous, antiévangélique de la répartition des tâches dans l'Église, une répartition qui confie aux hommes les structures et aux femmes les infrastructures. Des voix prophétiques s'élèvent, heureusement. Des évêques, prêtres et laïcs travaillent activement selon l'esprit de Vatican II pour

que l'Église, peuple de Dieu, devienne de plus en plus cette communauté de frères et de sœurs, disciples égaux en dignité devant Dieu, rendant ainsi crédible la Bonne Nouvelle du salut pour tous.

Revenons encore à la scène de l'évangile qui nous sert de trame.

Jésus, au grand étonnement des participants, fait se lever la fillette qui se mit à marcher, car elle avait 12 ans. Il dit aussi de lui donner à manger. Ce sera au père et à la mère d'y veiller, chacun à sa place.

À travers cet épisode, ce que Jésus nous dévoile relève de la nouveauté de l'évangile. La mission



de nourrir l'enfant est confiée à la fois à la mère et au père. Mission prophétique, qui rejoint l'affirmation biblique en Gn 1, 27, selon laquelle nous sommes créés à l'image de Dieu, homme et femme. Et que dire du message de Paul aux Galates ? : « Vous tous en effet, baptisés dans le Christ, vous avez revêtus le Christ : Il n'y a désormais ni Juif ni Grec, ni esclave ni homme libre, il n'y a ni homme ni femme ; car tous, vous ne faites qu'un dans le Christ- Jésus ». Ne vient-il pas confirmer ce qui précède ?

Et qu'en est-il de l'Église ? Dans quelle mesure s'approprie-t-elle cette nouveauté ?

Parlant de Jésus dans son épître aux Ephésiens, 2, 16, Paul dit : « En sa personne il a tué la haine ». C'est en effet lui, Jésus, qui est venu détruire les murs que nous, humains, érigeons sans arrêt entre nous, par nos envies, nos jalousies, nos ressentiments... Bien évidemment, il veut aussi renverser les barrières entre l'homme et la femme. C'est dans ce sens qu'il convient de comprendre la phrase de Paul : « ... il n'y a ni homme ni femme, car tous, vous ne faites qu'un dans le Christ Jésus ».

Il ne s'agit pas, bien sûr, de méconnaître la singularité de chacun d'eux, car elle existe et Jésus lui-même en tient compte. Le défi est que si l'Église d'Afrique doit se mettre au service de la réconciliation, de la justice et de la paix en allant rechercher les racines des haines, des injustices et des guerres qui minent

le continent, elle n'a pas 36 chemins. Elle doit absolument promouvoir une véritable collaboration, non seulement avec les laïcs et les croyants des autres religions, mais aussi entre hommes et femmes en son sein.

Les exemples d'une telle collaboration ne manquent ni dans l'Église ni en Afrique.

En Afrique du Sud, *One man can campaign* est une initiative d'un réseau appelé *Sonke gender justice*. Il travaille avec des hommes, des femmes, des jeunes et des enfants d'Afrique du Sud, d'Afrique de l'Est et d'Afrique Centrale, notamment dans le domaine de la violence faite aux femmes et de la réduction de la pandémie du SIDA.

La campagne soutient l'idée que chacun de nous a un rôle à jouer et peut contribuer à créer un monde meilleur, plus juste et plus équitable. En même temps, elle encourage hommes et femmes à collaborer en vue d'actions visant à améliorer notre monde.

Elles exhortent les organisations religieuses à prendre position en vue de soutenir les efforts qui visent à mettre fin à la violence faite aux femmes.

En outre, elle a listé une série d'actions que les leaders religieux peuvent entreprendre en vue de mettre fin au fléau.

« L'Afrique pour les droits des femmes » est une autre campagne qui débutera le 8 mars 2009. Elle est lancée par des organisations régionales et internationales de défense des droits de l'homme et des droits des femmes présentes dans toute l'Afrique. Son but est de ratifier les instruments africains et internationaux de protection des droits des femmes et d'aider à les respecter en droit et en pratique. Des personnalités masculines éminentes ont déjà manifesté leur désir de collaboration en soutenant cette campagne.

C'est à ce rôle prophétique qu'est appelée l'Église. C'est ainsi qu'elle peut voir avec les yeux de Dieu, écouter avec les oreilles de Dieu, sentir avec son cœur et parler avec sa bouche. « *Talitha koum* »... Fillette, je te le dis, lève-toi ! », articule Jésus. Aussitôt la fillette se leva et elle marchait, car elle avait douze ans. Et ils furent saisis aussitôt d'une grande stupeur » (Mc 5, 41-42). Afrique, je te le dis, lève-toi !

Si l'Afrique actuelle doit se mettre debout et marcher, la femme a sa partition à jouer dans cette mission, en tant que partenaire de l'homme.

« L'avenir de la planète dépend de la capacité et de la compétence des femmes, non seulement à protéger la vie mais à promouvoir la totalité et l'intégrité de toute la création », nous dit Rose Fernando dans un article paru dans *Spiritus*.

« *Talitha koum* ... Fillette, je te le dis, lève-toi ! ... et il dit de lui donner à manger » (Mc 5, 43).

Le Dieu de Jésus-Christ un Dieu de la vie. Or, dans la situation concrète de l'Afrique actuelle, les problèmes relatifs à la justice, à la paix et à réconciliation au niveau social, politique, culturel économique et religieux sont en opposition avec sa volonté.

Dans la vie de l'Église, la femme est doublement concernée par le défi que lance cette situation. D'abord à cause de sa nature même, ensuite parce qu'elle est chrétienne engagée avec d'autres dans la construction de la société en général.

C'est d'elle, la femme que naît la vie. C'est à elle qu'incombe la mission de transmettre les semences que nul ne peut détruire, comme l'affirme notre fondateur. La femme a donc le défi « de nourrir » l'enfant avec des valeurs du Royaume.

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#### Notes

- II<sup>ème</sup> Assemblée spéciale pour l'Afrique. « L'Église en Afrique au service de la réconciliation, de la justice et de la paix. Vous êtes le sel de la terre. Vous êtes la lumière du monde » (Mt 5, 13-14). *Lineamenta*. Cité du Vatican 2006.
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Réf.: Text given by the author to the SEDOS Conference held on 27 March 2009 at the Brothers of the Christian Schools.



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