

# sedos

## Bulletin 2002

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## *Editorial*

As we present the November-December 2002 issue of the *SEDOS Bulletin*, we first want to inform our readers why this is a double issue. Dominican Father **Bernard East**, Executive Director of SEDOS since November 2000 and in charge of editing the *SEDOS Bulletin*, has been asked by his superiors to return to his home-province in Canada. We thank Father Bernard for the work he accomplished in service of the Church and mission. This means SEDOS is looking for a new Executive Director. Due to a temporary shortage of personnel, it was decided to publish a double issue of *SEDOS Bulletin* instead of one number for November and one for December 2002. We want however to inform you that, besides the articles printed in the *SEDOS Bulletin*, a collection of valuable material in English, French, Italian and Spanish, related to Church and mission, is available on our website [www.sedos.org](http://www.sedos.org). On a regular base, new articles will be added.

We thank all our members and subscribers to the *SEDOS Bulletin* for their understanding.

We want to begin our *SEDOS Bulletin* by commemorating **Cardinal François-Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuận**, who recently died in Rome. At last year's SEDOS Residential Seminar, Cardinal Van Thuận was invited to give witness about his courage and hope in view of the missionary Church of the third millennium. Although for health reasons, he couldn't be present, the presentation he prepared was delivered and much appreciated by all seminar participants. The Cardinal's witness full of inspiration has been published in *SEDOS Bulletin* (Vol. 34, no 6/7 - June/July 2002).

Fr **Martin Harun** (Olsthoorn), OFM, was born in the Netherlands in 1940, and specialized in Scripture at the Catholic University of Nijmegen and the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, Jerusalem. Since 1972 he has taught Scripture in Jakarta and Bandung, Indonesia, where he is also very much involved in the biblical apostolate.

The Asian reality is characterized by: 1) millions of committed followers of other religions, 2) ancient and rich cultures and 3) the crushing poverty as the oppressive daily lot of the majority of the people. In this context Churches are still challenged to interreligious dialogue, intercultural dialogue and dialogue with the poor. Jesuit Father **Thomas Michel**, SJ, in his article "Toward a dialogue of liberation with Muslims", states that interreligious dialogue should begin from the needs and concerns of the poor, oriented towards true human liberation.

Bishop **Olivier de Berranger**, of Saint-Denis, France, reflects upon the intercultural situation in the church of his diocese due to the presence of immigrants. His reflection appears in the article entitled "Une Église polyphonique, chance ou défi ?".

**We hope you enjoy reading this *SEDOS Bulletin*,**

**Pierre-Paul Walraet**, o.s.c.  
Executive Committee Member

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## *Cardinal François-Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuân décédé*

Le cardinal François-Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuân, président du Conseil pontifical 'Justice et paix' et ancien archevêque de Saigon, est décédé lundi, 16 septembre 2002, à 18 heures, à la clinique Pie XI où il avait été amené à la suite d'une grave opération à l'estomac. Originaire du Viêt-nam, il était en fonction à Rome depuis le mois de septembre 1991, date à laquelle, le gouvernement de Hanoi lui avait fait savoir que sa présence dans son pays n'était plus désirable.

### **Ancien archevêque de Saigon et Président du Conseil pontifical 'Justice et paix'.**

Né le 17 avril 1928, à Phu Cam, une très ancienne paroisse de Huê, le cardinal était l'aîné d'une famille de huit enfants et le neveu du premier président de la République du Sud-Viêt-nam. Après des études au petit puis au grand séminaire de sa ville d'origine, il fut ordonné prêtre en juin 1953. Il poursuivit des études de droit canon à Rome où il se forma à un certain nombre de courants spirituels et apostoliques qui se faisaient jour en Europe à cette époque. À son retour dans son diocèse, il travailla un temps à la formation des prêtres, puis, le 24 juin 1967, fut nommé évêque du diocèse côtier de Nha Trang.

En 1975, une semaine avant que Saigon ne tombe entre les mains des forces communistes, il est nommé par le Saint-Siège archevêque coadjuteur du diocèse de cette ville. Sa nomination est refusée par le nouveau pouvoir qui, le 15 août 1975, le convoque au palais de l'indépendance et le ramène *manu militari* dans son diocèse où il est placé en résidence surveillée dans la petite paroisse de Cáy Vong. Ce fut le début d'un long internement qui dura treize ans, au cours duquel il a connu, en 1976, le cachot de la prison de Phu Khanh, puis le camps de rééducation de Vinh Phu au Nord-Viêt-nam, la résidence surveillée dans la petite chrétienté de Giang Xa, et enfin les locaux de la Sûreté de Hanoi. Lorsque son internement prend fin le 21 novembre 1988, il n'a pas le droit de rejoindre son poste d'archevêque coadjuteur à Hô Chi Minh-Ville et est assigné à résidence dans les bâtiments de l'archevêché de Hanoi. Lors d'un séjour à Rome en septembre 1991, il apprend que le gouvernement ne souhaite pas son retour au pays.

Le 11 août 1993, pour assurer l'administration du

diocèse de Hô Chi Minh-Ville dont l'archevêque était âgé et malade, le Saint-Siège nommait un administrateur apostolique. Pensant qu'il s'agissait d'un stratagème destiné à garder vacant le poste de coadjuteur au profit de Mgr François-Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuân, le gouvernement s'est violemment opposé à cette décision. C'est en 1994 que le Saint-Siège a renoncé à maintenir Mgr Thuân à son poste de coadjuteur de Hô Chi Minh-Ville et l'a nommé à la vice-présidence de 'Justice et paix', tout en faisant savoir par la bouche de Mgr Celli que « *le Saint-Siège tenait la mesure prise contre lui par le gouvernement vietnamien comme une injustice manifeste* ». Le 24 juin 1998, le Saint-Siège annonçait sa nomination comme président du Conseil pontifical 'Justice et paix' en remplacement du cardinal Roger Etchegaray qui en assurait la présidence depuis 1984.

Pour le carême de l'année 2000, Mgr François-Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuân fut chargé d'assurer la prédication des exercices spirituels du carême du pape et des membres de la Curie. La raison de ce choix a été soulignée par le pape dans une lettre de remerciement où il révélait qu'il a souhaité qu'au cours du grand Jubilé une place particulière soit donnée « *au témoignage des personnes qui ont souffert en raison de leur foi...* ». Second sur la liste des 37 cardinaux annoncés par le Pape Jean Paul II, le 21 janvier 2001, Mgr François-Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuân était le quatrième cardinal, par ordre chronologique, de l'histoire de l'Église du Viêt-nam.

Mgr François-Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuân a témoigné de son expérience spirituelle dans une série de livres dont le thème commun est l'espérance. Le premier d'entre eux, traduit en de nombreuses langues, est intitulé *Sur le chemin de l'espérance*. Le dernier, où sont consignées ses conférences du carême 2000, a pour titre *Témoins de l'espérance*.

### **Hommage au témoignage de courage et d'espérance**

La messe des funérailles du cardinal François-Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuân, décédé le 16 septembre 2002, a été célébrée dans l'après-midi du 20 septembre 2002, en la basilique Saint-Pierre, à Rome. Présidée par la Pape, l'eucharistie était concélébrée par de nombreux cardinaux et par cinq évêques venus du Viêt-nam pour

cette occasion, le président de la conférence épiscopale, l'archevêque du diocèse de Hô Chi Minh-Ville, l'archevêque du diocèse de Huê, l'évêque de Phat Diêm et l'évêque coadjuteur du diocèse de Nha Trang. Une nombreuse assistance venue des cinq continents remplissait la basilique. Dans le même temps, un peu partout dans le monde, mais plus particulièrement au Viêt-nam et dans la diaspora vietnamienne dispersée sur les cinq continents, on a pu recueillir des témoignages de l'émotion qu'a fait naître ce décès. Ils proviennent des nombreuses personnes ayant eu l'occasion de rencontrer puis de fréquenter cette personnalité très attachante. Cependant, le témoignage le plus émouvant et le plus authentique fut à coup sûr celui donné par le Pape Jean Paul II au cours de l'homélie prononcée lors de la messe de la basilique Saint-Pierre.

Le Pape Jean Paul II, qui avait déjà envoyé des messages de condoléances à la Conférence épiscopale du Viêt-nam, à l'adjoint du cardinal à 'Justice et paix' ainsi qu'à sa mère, a puisé ses propos dans les souvenirs de ses relations personnelles avec le prélat défunt, plus précisément de la retraite que celui-ci avait animée pour la Curie romaine en l'année 2000. Visiblement, celle-ci a marqué le pontife romain surtout à cause de ses constantes références à l'expérience spirituelle et à la vie du cardinal. « *Ses exhortations sont restées dans ma mémoire, a dit Jean Paul II, en vertu de la profondeur des réflexions enrichies de souvenirs personnels constants, relatifs en grande partie à ses treize années passées en prison.* » Le rappel des divers thèmes des conférences de cette retraite a jalonné l'homélie du pape. De plus, le pape a su résumer avec bonheur l'essentiel de l'expérience spirituelle acquise par Mgr Thuân au cours de son incarcération : « *Il avait compris que le fondement de la vie chrétienne est de choisir Dieu seulement.* » Dans les confidences faites par lui lors de son premier voyage en Europe après ses treize ans d'internement, le cardinal Thuân avait souvent répété qu'il fallait savoir abandonner les œuvres, fussent-elles celles de Dieu, pour s'abandonner à Dieu lui-même. Cette conviction l'avait sauvé, disait-il, de tout désespoir. Un autre point souligné par le pape a été la cohérence et la simplicité de la vie chrétienne vécue par le cardinal. Paradoxalement, sa théologie de l'espérance l'avait amené à une spiritualité de l'instant présent. Il avait écrit, dans un des derniers chapitres de son premier livre : « *La minute succède à la minute et des millions de minutes forment une vie. Dessine soigneusement chaque point et la ligne sera belle. Vis dans la perfection chaque minute et ta vie sera sainte.* »

Au Viêt-nam, aucune fausse note n'est venue troubler l'hommage présenté par la population à l'enfant du pays défunt. Le gouvernement lui-même, oubliant un passé de conflit, la décision d'exil prise par lui, a voulu s'y associer. Au lendemain du décès, le porte-parole du ministère des Affaires étrangères, Mme Phan

Thuy Thanh, a déclaré que monsieur (sic) Nguyễn Văn Thuân était un officiel de haut rang de l'Église catholique et a exprimé ses condoléances aux parents du cardinal défunt. Elle a ajouté que le gouvernement s'efforcerait de faciliter le voyage des membres de sa famille voulant participer aux funérailles.

Mais c'est surtout dans l'Église catholique du Viêt-nam que se sont exprimés les sentiments suscités par le décès de celui qui était le second cardinal vivant du pays. Grâce au site *Vietcatholic News* en langue vietnamienne, chaque diocèse a pu annoncer la célébration d'une messe à l'intention du cardinal et exprimer ses condoléances à la famille, tout en relevant les liens spéciaux entretenus avec le défunt. Le diocèse de Hanoi a rappelé que le cardinal, qualifié de témoin courageux de l'Évangile, avait passé plus de dix ans de sa vie dans le diocèse, une partie en prison et en camp de rééducation, une autre partie en résidence surveillée, dans la paroisse de Giang Xa et dans les locaux de l'archevêché. A Nha Trang, on a mentionné les huit ans pendant lesquels le cardinal a été évêque du diocèse. Dans son avis de décès, l'évêque de Phan Thiêt mentionnait que son diocèse était issu de la division du diocèse de Nha Trang, organisée par le cardinal défunt. L'archevêché de Hô Chi Minh-Ville, dans son sommaire biographique du cardinal n'oubliait pas de mentionner que le défunt avait été nommé archevêque de Hô Chi Minh-Ville le 24 avril 1975, un poste qu'il n'a jamais pu tenir. Le communiqué de la Conférence épiscopale du Viêt-nam du 18 septembre annonçant la mort du cardinal le qualifiait d'enfant éminent (*con uu tu*) de l'Église du Viêt-nam.

Ressource : *Églises d'Asie*, n. 360, octobre 2002.



Thomas Michel, SJ

## *Toward a Dialogue of Liberation With Muslims*

At their first continental meeting, in Manila in 1970, the Catholic Bishops of Asia noted three elements of Asian realities that form the societal context in which Christian faith must be lived. They are the undeniable facts: 1) that in Asia they live amidst millions of committed followers of other religions; 2) that they belong to ancient and rich Asian cultures of which they are heirs and stewards; and 3) that they live in societies in which crushing, oppressive poverty is still the daily lot of the majority of people. The mission of the Churches in Asia, they proposed, must be the task of dialogue of the Gospel — and thus of the people of the Gospel — with these three realities, that is, the triple task of interreligious dialogue, intercultural dialogue, and dialogue with the poor and marginalized.

In the decades that have passed since this declaration, the triple dialogue has been reiterated and elaborated in many forms by the various Christian Churches. In recent decades, new elements of the international situation have come to the forefront of our consciousness, most notably, the fact that Asian and African societies are part of a globalizing market economy, made possible by the technological and informational revolution, rooted in liberal philosophical values of modernity, and promoting a secularizing process that touches the life of every religious group and culture and every suffering individual. Globalization is a dynamic process that appears to be even stronger than individual nation states and national cultures, and adds a fourth element to the “triple dialogue”. This reality challenges Christians to involve themselves in dialogue with the “movers and shakers” of market economies, if more just, humane and harmonious societies are to be built.

My personal involvement in this task of the Churches has been in Asia, a region where I was not born but which I consider my home for the past thirty years, in the area of dialogue with Muslims. One thing that I have learned in the course of time is that Muslim-Christian dialogue must never be separated from dialogue with cultures, and, more important still, from the centrality of ongoing dialogue with the poor. Interreligious dialogue can too easily become an elitist exercise in which scholars and religious leaders create

among themselves a clubby brotherhood across religious lines to perpetuate and, in the worst cases, justify the economic and social *status quo*. Too often in interreligious gatherings, the daily concerns of the poor are simply ignored, as if they were non-existent; or mentioned and passed over, as though the indignities and injustices they experience daily were irrelevant, or even an embarrassment, in the context of the lofty religious concepts and ideals expressed. The excluded voices of the poor, of women, of indigenous peoples, and of children, undermine the whole effort of dialogue, and prevent it from becoming an effective means of social transformation.

I am convinced that what is needed today is an interreligious dialogue that begins from the needs and concerns of the poor, and is oriented towards true human liberation. In a world where decisions that affect the lives of millions are made on the bases of market policy, spreadsheets, *real-politik* and demographic projections, religious groups are challenged to provide an alternative reading of social situations, by drawing upon the liberative elements of our specific traditions. It is either in this area where the religious traditions can make a unique and much-needed contribution to the transformation of society, or nowhere. If religious believers fail to voice the genuine longing of the masses of the world's poor for dignity and justice, we simply contribute to the malaise of values that secular modernity inexorably propagates.

In dialogue with Muslims, Christians must not hesitate to draw upon the strong prophetic tradition of our Scriptures, exemplified by Amos, Jeremiah, Isaiah, John the Baptist, and Epistle of James; upon the sapiential insights of Job and Qohelet the Preacher; and most of all, upon the lessons of our Master's Sermon on the Mount, his parables of unjust stewards, foolish empire-builders, the rich man in Hell and his impervious brothers, as well as Jesus' observations on poor widows and repentant women; and his example of sharing food with lawbreakers and unwashed masses.

I have rarely heard — and must confess, to my shame, that I have too rarely expressed — such cen-



tral elements of the Christian tradition in situations of Christian-Muslim dialogue. One wonders why we are more inclined to formulate Jesus' relationship to the Father, of God's Trinitarian life, than to deal with basic Gospel teaching concerning the majority of our neighbours who daily "hunger and thirst for justice", whose demands, our Master teaches, *will* be satisfied. Part of the reason, obviously, is that most of those who engage in formal dialogue are well-fed, well-housed, well-educated, and well-placed in society.

These are the kind of things that we should be talking about with Muslims, the aspects of our faith that we need to be in communication about. Muslims need to know about the liberating aspects of Christian faith; and it is just as important that we Christians learn about the elements of liberation and transformation that the Muslim poor, who are far more numerous in Asia than Christians, find grounds in their Islamic faith for strength and hope and consolation. We need to discover the strong prophetic tradition carried on in the Qur'an, and the elements of liberation found in the pillars of Islam and in the *shari'a*, the Islamic way of life.

It is a sign of our ignorance that many Christians respond, "I didn't know that there were liberating elements in Islam. I thought Islam was oppressive of the poor, of women, of sinners. I have the impression that Islam is impassive and fatalistic in the face of injustice and wrongdoing". Yet 30 minutes in any Muslim bookshop will reveal titles such as: *Transformative Islam*, *Islam: the Religion of Justice*; and *Islam and the Liberation of Women*. It is sobering, but small consolation, to remember that Muslims are usually no better informed about our faith than we are about theirs; and are normally surprised to find that Christianity has any concern for human liberation. They often regard Christian faith mainly as a justification for power and wealth.

Christians also need to learn how to listen to Muslims, especially to poor Muslims. They often frame and phrase their hopes and struggles in terms different from ours. Throughout the Islamic world Muslim scholars and activists are rediscovering the liberative elements in the Qur'anic teaching, and in the *hadith* reports that stem from Muhammad. In the past, Muslim efforts to elucidate the social message of Islam were often hampered by a literalism that made it difficult to apply Qur'anic passages to the very different social and economic structures of today. However, what we find in Asia today, to speak of that region which I know best, in writings of Muslim scholars, like Ali Asghar Engineer of India, Chandra Muzaffar of Malaysia, Muslim Abdurrahman of Indonesia, or the feminist activist Mucha Shim Quiling of the Philippines; and what might

be called the co-operative projects of groups, like the Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN); may be properly described as attempts to draw out the societal and economic implications of the Islamic sources, and to implement them in modern Asian societies.

An obstacle that prevents Christians from appreciating and entering into dialogue with Muslims on elements of liberation is the sad fact that all too often Christians and Muslims are locked in confessional conflicts, in which religious affiliation, while not the cause of the conflict, plays an important role in pitting one against the other. This unhappy situation too often leads Christians to see "the Muslim" as a threat to our well-being, or even the enemy to be defeated; just as it leads Muslims to regard Christians as inimical to Islam and Muslims. An understandable concern with political Islam, the Islamic State, and the application of the *shari'a* can blind Christians to the reality that, for the vast majority of ordinary Muslims, Islam is first and foremost a response to God, a way to encounter the Creator, and to do God's will on earth. These Muslims are not interested in politics, or revolution, or communal conflict, precisely because they are far too busy trying to provide for their families, raise their children to be God-fearing people, and eke out a measure of God's abundant gifts, blessings for humankind, but very unequally distributed within the human family. It is with such Muslims that we must enter into dialogue concerning the One God, who is able to liberate people from sin and from the oppressive structures that we have fashioned.

Without pretending to do justice to the transformative exegesis done by Muslims today, I would like to point out some of the Qur'anic passages that are inspiring some Muslims to propose and carry out a liberative agenda in the context of the social realities of modern Asia.

The Qur'anic ideal which has influenced millions of Muslims down through the centuries is that of a simple, family-oriented life-style, that rejects both consumer-oriented displays of wealth and the piling up of material possessions. This, even critics of Islam are ready to admit. The Qur'an teaches that what God has given is good and can be enjoyed, but within strict limits of moderation. "Eat and drink", states the Qur'an, "but *do not be extravagant*. [God] does not love those who go to excess" (7:31, also 6:141). Wealth and property are considered blessings from God, but must be used properly. Those obsessed with seeking, multiplying and displaying wealth are even accused of being in the same family as demons who are not grateful

to God for God's gifts. The Qur'an teaches: "Do not squander [your money] extravagantly. *Spendthrifts are the devils' brethren* and Satan has always been ungrateful to His Lord" (17:26-27). The call to a modest way of life underlies, for example, the prohibition against men's wearing gold ornaments, such as rings, bracelets, chains, and the like.

The Qur'an was first preached to a people who were no less imbued with a dog-eat-dog mentality than our own modern societies. It teaches that aggressive economic activities, and amassing personal wealth, serve to distract people from what is truly important in life: to do God's will in all things, and to stand before God in patience and humility. "*Competition has distracted you, until you visit graveyards. Nevertheless, you soon will know*" (102:1-3). The message is clear: the day is coming when people will discover, too late, that their desperate passion for wealth had led them astray, and they will have nothing to show for their life's work. Whole civilizations have gone under because of their lack of restraint in regard to material possessions; and all that remains of them are deserted monuments and ruins. As the Qur'an states, "How many civilizations have We wiped out who were reckless in their way of living. Their dwellings have been inhabited only occasionally since then" (28:58).

The Qur'anic ideal of a virtuous life contrasts sharply with that of the "modern advertising ideal" of constantly pursuing fortune, power, beauty, prestige and eternal youth, and restlessly searching for new and exciting pleasures. A famous Qur'an passage sums up what Islamic life is about; it is about faith, generosity, effective concern for the poor, patience in times of distress, and fidelity:

"Virtue does not mean that you turn your faces towards the East or West, but [true] virtue means to believe in God, the Last Day, the angels, the Book and the Prophets; and to give one's wealth away out of love for Him to relatives, orphans, the needy, the migrant and beggars; and towards freeing captives; and to keep up prayer and pay the tax for the poor; and those who keep their word whenever they promised anything; and are patient under suffering and hardship and in times of violence. Those are the ones who are loyal, and those are the ones who are heedful [of God's message]" (2:177).

Islam constantly teaches that those who have been blessed with sufficiency or, *a fortiori*, abundance, have a serious obligation to those who are lacking the basic essentials. It is not merely a matter of good will or feelings of sympathy for the poor, but an obligation that corresponds to a divinely acknowledged right of

the poor. In more than one place, the Qur'an states unequivocally: "*The beggar and the destitute have an acknowledged right to a portion of people's wealth*" (70:24-25, see also 51:19).

The concept does not remain simply a good idea; but structures have been created in the religion itself to carry out this injunction. The *zakat*, the fourth obligatory pillar of Islam, is intended to provide for the poor of the community. Sometimes mistranslated as *almsgiving*, the *zakat* is more accurately understood as a *poor tax*. It is a tax of a specific percentage of a Muslim's income (2.5%) or harvest (10%), and is levied expressly for those classes of society who cannot provide for themselves. In the list of recipients of *zakat*, the Qur'an always puts in the first place near relatives, particularly one's aged parents; and goes on to list other categories of those whose circumstances put them at the mercy of others: the Biblical orphans and widows, beggars, and migrants. Addressing what has in recent times become a significant class of Asia's suffering poor, the Qur'an commands that assistance is also to be given to "*refugees who have been expelled from their homes and property*" (59:8).

While *zakat* is intended to provide for all members of the Muslim community, charity or alms to anyone in need, Muslim or non-Muslim, is highly encouraged in the Qur'an. Such free will offerings, called *sadaqa*, are to be used "for the poor, the needy, those working at [collecting and distributing it], those whose hearts are being reconciled, for [freeing] captives and debtors, for those [struggling] in God's way, and for the migrant, as a duty imposed by God" (9: 60). The Qur'an knows that charity can too easily be its own reward in that the giver is seen and praised as a person of means who is nevertheless bountiful to the poor. The true charity proposed by the Qur'an should be performed as faithful obedience to what God commands; and as such, it need be seen by no one but God. Thus, in a passage reminiscent of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount on giving alms, the Qur'an teaches: "If you give *sadaqa* (alms) openly, that is good; but if *you conceal it and give it [directly] to the poor, that is better for you*" (2:271).

*Zakat* is commanded of every Muslim; and in addition Muslims are urged to perform *sadaqa*. An example of how *sadaqa* can be used to supplement *zakat* can be found in the action taken by the Organization of Islamic Conference (O.I.C.) during the severe drought in the Sahel region of Africa in the 1980s. The O.I.C. used funds collected from *zakat* payments by Muslims to aid the predominantly Muslim nations affected; and then contributed \$1,000,000 in *sadaqa* or alms to Capo Verde, a mainly Christian nation. More

recently, a friend who is an aid worker in El Salvador, said that, after last year's earthquake in that virtually 100% Christian country, the most effective organizations in supplying fast and much-needed assistance were the Christian organization *Caritas* and the Islamic Relief Worldwide. Both were on the job within a week of the earthquake and offered their services to all in need, with no proselytism or other strings attached.

Islamic Relief Worldwide (I.R.W.) operates in some 22 countries, and offers not only disaster relief but development projects of water and sanitation, literacy, business loans, reintegration programmes for returning refugees, projects for women's economic empowerment, mother and child care, computer centres, mobile clinics, orphanages, homes for the aged, etc. It is significant that the projects in which I.R.W. is engaged reads very much like a list of projects by various Christian welfare agencies — and, one might add, international Jewish relief agencies. Should it be any cause for wonder that the same prophetic tradition, when its teachings are actually put into practice, would result in very similar approaches to the person in need?

*Zakat* is not intended only as temporary emergency relief for those brought low by personal familial or natural tragedies, but as a type of ongoing income redistribution. The Qur'an explicitly speaks of wealth being extended "to relatives, orphans, the needy and the migrant, so that it will not circulate merely among the wealthy among you" (59:7).

This goal of a periodic redistribution of wealth underlies the intricate Islamic laws of inheritance. The Qur'an states: "Men shall have a portion of whatever parents and near relatives leave, and women shall have a portion of what parents and near relatives leave. No matter how small or how large it be, a portion is stipulated for them. When near relatives, orphans and paupers are present at the division [of inheritance], provide for them from it and treat them politely (4:7-8)". Repeating the same injunction in the same words underlines the inadmissibility of ignoring female heirs, or cheating them out of their share. Still more surprising is the Qur'anic inclusion of "relatives, orphans and paupers", who also have a right to a portion of the inheritance. These latter are not to be treated as interlopers or unwanted guests, for they have a certain right to be present at the redistribution of funds. No doubt referring to the abuse to which such outsiders are commonly subjected, the Qur'an adds pointedly, "and treat them politely".

Not only are the pillar of *zakat* and the laws of inheritance oriented to reminding Muslims of their duty to the poor, but celebration of the central Islamic feasts

would not be complete without providing for the poor. At Id al-Fitr, the great feast which celebrates the end of the fasting month of Ramadan, Muslims are commanded to pay the *zakat al-fitr*, so that the poor of the community can also celebrate the feast properly. At Id al-Adha, the Feast of the Sacrifice, commemorating Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, Muslims are commanded to give one-third of the meat of the sacrificed animals to the poor.

The underlying view of wealth presumed by such Qur'anic teaching is that a person's wealth is not simply a private fortune to dispose of in any way one wants. God has a say in the matter and wants to ensure that the person's spouse, children, relatives, as well as helpless and dependent sectors of society, receive their proper share. Thus, along with the wealth that one has received from God goes a responsibility to provide for others, beginning with one's closest family ties and extending all the way to those whose claim is based solely on common humanity.

Wealth and inequalities in economic status are seen in the Qur'an as a test of one's fidelity to God. The Qur'an states: "He is the One who has placed you as overlords on earth and raised some of you higher than others in rank so that He may test you by means of what He has given you" (6:165). And again, "God has favoured some of you more than others in providing [for them]. Yet those who have been allowed to excel are not willing to hand over their provision to those under their control so that they become equal partners in it. Do they not thus abuse God's favour?" (16:71, see also 64:15; 8:28). In the God-centred universe envisioned by the Qur'an, the fact that some are wealthy, while many are poor, is not simply an accident of history, nor the inevitable result of economic determinism or class struggle, but a means by which believers are tested in their fidelity to God's word, in their generosity, sense of responsibility for the neighbour, and humility in recognizing that all that they possess comes from God's bounty.

The Qur'an saves some of its harshest warnings for those who are selfish and egotistic in using what they have been granted. "Announce painful torment for those who hoard gold and silver and do not spend them for God's sake" (9:34). And, "How terrible it will be for everyone who backbites and slanders, and for him who amasses wealth and keeps on counting it. He reckons that his wealth will make him immortal, but he will be flung into [Hell]" (104:1-4).

The Qur'anic warnings do not stop with personal selfishness, but extend as well to those who fail in their



responsibilities to teach generosity and social concern. “God does not love someone who is conceited and boastful, nor those who are tight-fisted and encourage others to be stingy” (4:36-37). One of the strongest condemnations in the whole Qur’an is directed at the person who refuses to believe God’s message and fails to teach the necessity of taking care of the poor. “Take him off and handcuff him. Padlock him to a long chain. Then let him roast in Hell. He *neither believed in God almighty, nor encouraged others to feed the needy*” (69:30-37).

The message is clear and uncompromising: God is deadly serious about the importance of “feeding the needy”, with all that is implied in that obligation; and about the importance of encouraging others to do likewise; and God will not treat lightly those who neglect this duty. We must not allow the hyperbolic language (reminiscent of some of the prophet Amos’ more stringent warnings, or of Jesus’ injunction to pluck out your eye or cut off your hand, if they cause you to sin) to distract us from the passage’s unequivocal message. Failure to integrate what we today call “social concern” into personal and communal religiosity is placed right alongside the refusal to believe in God. Both those who promote an unbridled consumerism, as well as theologians and other teachers of religion, might do well to hear this warning and tremble!

Given the force of the Qur’anic strictures against an unrestricted use of wealth, and the obligation to “give away a part of it” (2:177), it should come as no surprise that a disproportionate number of Muhammad’s early followers were women, slaves, and people without means, while his main opponents were the prosperous merchants of Mecca, whose financial comfort was connected with the city’s role as a flourishing pilgrimage site of the pagan religion.

The Qur’an, however, sees Muhammad’s rejection by the wealthy classes of Mecca as indicative of a more general unwillingness to accept the prophetic message on the part of those overly attached to material possessions, those whose security is based on what they “have”, rather than what they “are” before God. The Qur’an states: “Whenever we sent a warner to civilizations, the wealthy *élite* said: ‘We do not believe in what you have been sent with!’”. They say, ‘We have more wealth and children [than you]; we will not be tormented’” (34:34-35).

The Christian scholar from Sri Lanka, Aloysius Pieris, has called Jesus “God’s defense pact with the poor”. In Christ, he sees God displaying, to use the modern phrase, “a preferential option for the poor”, and a promise to defend them from the arrogant and

unjust use of power on the part of the rich. I agree with this view, but feel that it could be extended to cover the major thrust of the whole prophetic tradition since the time of Abraham and Sarah.

The Qur’anic attitude to an economic system in which “the big fish eat the little fish” is twofold. On the one hand, there are strict warnings against “devouring the wealth of others” through exploitation and manipulation. On the other hand, there are strong expressions of God’s commitment to defend the defenseless against those who would take advantage of their vulnerability. One passage displays a knowing awareness that economic aggressiveness and official corruption often go hand in hand and reveal the same Godless mentality. “*Do not devour one another’s wealth to no good purpose*”, states the Qur’an, “*nor try to bribe authorities with it*, so that you can aggressively consume a share of other people’s wealth, even while you realize [what you are doing]” (2:188).

Economic competition, where the only rule is that of profits and annual returns, is strongly condemned. What is foreseen, instead, in an Islamic way of life, is economic activity in which both partners freely consent, and which is mutually beneficial. “You who believe, do not use up one another’s wealth to no good purpose, unless it is for some business based on mutual consent among you” (4:29). The idea that in business affairs, one takes whatever one can get, is not the way that those who obey God’s word must deal with one another.

Profiting from the needs and weaknesses of others underlies the Qur’an prohibition of interest-taking. Debts that cannot be repaid should be postponed, or better yet, written off, rather than imposing unbearable burdens on debtors. The Qur’an states: “Listen to God and *write off anything that remains outstanding, from lending at interest* if you are [true] believers. If you do not do so, then be prepared to face war declared by God and His Messenger. If *any debtor suffers hardship, then postpone [repaying] it*, until conditions become easier [for the debtor]. And *if you treat it as an act of charity, it will be better for you*” (2:278-280, cf. also 2:275). In today’s world where crushing international debts are causing untold suffering for millions in poor countries, I need not elaborate on the relevance of this teaching.

The second aspect of the Qur’an’s teaching is the promise that God will punish those who exploit the weak and defenseless. Here again, the Qur’an is repeating the consistent prophetic tradition. From early prophets like Nathan confronting David, and Elijah condemning Ahab and Jezebel, through the writings of the Hebrew prophets, and into the teaching of John the Bap-

tist and Jesus, the prophetic word has consistently taken “widows, orphans and strangers” as paradigmatic of all those groups in society who are at the mercy of others. The widows and orphans must rely on the strength of God’s word to protect them from injustice, exploitation and oppression. The widows and orphans in Asia today include indentured labourers, factory workers, street children, sex-industry workers, child labourers, tenant farmers, *Dalit* sweepers, and fishing folk.

The Qur’an reiterates the prophetic word by calling for a change of heart in people, urging them to join the defenders, rather than the oppressors, of the weak. The Qur’an focuses particular attention on the plight of orphans. Many commentators have pointed out that this concern might well reflect some of the misery and indignities to which Muhammad had been subject as an orphan (cf. 93:4-5). If revelation is granted in the context of a prophet’s own life experience, this could well be the case. What is clear is the strong Qur’anic condemnation of those who would exploit the orphan and the needy. “Those who live off orphans’ property unjustly will only suck up fire into their bellies, and they will roast in the Blaze” (4:10).

There are too many passages in the Qur’an on this theme to cite them all, and any reader of the Qur’an will find justice to the orphan to be a motif that runs throughout the Sacred Book. For example, “*The orphan must not be exploited; and the beggar should not be brushed aside*” (93:9, cf. also 6:152, 4:36, 59:7, 4:5-6, 4:8, 2:215, 90:13-14). One might go so far as to say that, according to the Qur’an, a key indication of whether one is accepting or refusing the divine message is the way one treats the orphan and the pauper. The Qur’an states: “Have you seen *someone who rejects religion? That is the person who pushes the orphan aside and does not encourage feeding the needy*” (103:1-3).

Similar to the orphan is the unfortunate child whose parents are more interested in material comfort than in the divine gift and responsibility that are children. In passages that are often cited to oppose the practice of abortion, the Qur’an states: “Do not kill your children out of fear of poverty. We will provide for them and for you. Killing them is a serious sin” (17:31; see also 6:151, 6:140). A poignant passage notes that, on the Last Day, the baby girl who has been destroyed because she would be an economic burden “will be asked for what offence she had been killed” (81:8-9). The shameful practice of selling one’s children, particularly young girls, into prostitution, which is so prevalent in certain regions of modern Asia, was apparently also quite common at the time of Muhammad. The Qur’an categorically condemns this practice: “*Do not force girls,*

*if they want to preserve their chastity, into prostitution, so that you may seek worldly benefits*” (24:23).

Other social concerns which the Qur’anic teaching raises for Muslims include: *dishonesty* in business practice (“It will go badly for cheats who insist on full measure when they have people measure something out for them, yet whenever they measure or weigh things for others, they give less than what is due” (83:1-3); *manipulation of markets* and the use of power to obtain *unjust advantages* (“You use your oaths in order to snatch at advantages over one another, just because one nation may be more prosperous than another” 16:92); *partiality and favouritism* in judicial systems (“Whenever you judge between people, you should judge, on [the principles of] justice” 4:58); *racism and ethnic chauvinism* (“You who believe, do not let one group of people sneer at another set; perhaps those others are better than they are. Women should not ridicule other women; perhaps those others are even better than they are themselves. Nor should you debase yourselves by insulting one another and calling each other names. It is bad to use evil names [about others] after [entering] the faith” 49:11-12).

I conclude this introductory study with a few words on the duty of those who believe in God to work for *peace and reconciliation*. The Qur’an allows the Old Testament principle of “‘eye for eye, tooth for tooth’ [Ex 21:24] as a limit of strict justice, that is, one cannot require compensation greater than the crime (i.e., never demand two eyes for an eye or two teeth for one); but at the same time, the Qur’an encourages believers to go beyond strict justice and operate instead on principles of mercy and forgiveness ... to move beyond a legalistic mentality of demanding strict justice, to a God-centred spirituality in which people are invited and urged to treat others as God treats us. Here I call your attention to several passages of the Qur’an that point in this direction:

“The payment for an injury should be a proportionate injury. But anyone who pardons offences and makes reconciliation shall be rewarded by God.

“Those who defend themselves after being wronged will not be blamed for that. Only those who mistreat others and act arrogantly on earth, and have no right to do so, will be held blameworthy” (42:40-42).

“A good deed and an evil deed are not alike: *repay [evil] with something better (absan)* and see how someone who is separated from you because of enmity will become a bosom friend!” (41:34). “Repay *evil with something that is finer*” (23:96).

“Let those among you who have wealth and resources give something to relatives, paupers and those who are refugees, for God’s sake. They should *forgive*

and be indulgent. Do you not want God to pardon you? God is forgiving and merciful" (24:22).

"Co-operate with one another for virtue and heedfulness, but do not co-operate with one another for the purpose of vice and aggression" (5:2).

Concluding this brief review, I hope that for Christians listening to these elements of the Qur'anic message, many of the phrases and attitudes expressed will ring bells with Gospel passages that we are struggling to live out in our Churches in Asia. Some readers might be thinking: "These are lofty ideals, but we do not see them put into practice by Muslims. Muslim political leaders seem to be as rapacious and unconcerned about the plight of the poor as non-Muslims. Muslim scholars seem less interested in teaching these elements of the Qur'anic message than in preaching domination and intolerance. Muslims with economic power act with the same ruthlessness and greed as those of other religions or of no religion".

The reactions are similar, when I teach Christian theology to Muslims. My Muslim students repeatedly say that they have no quarrel with the teachings of Jesus or with the way he lived, or what he preached. He is, after all, considered "the Seal of Holiness" by Muslims, but they regret that this is not what they see when they look at the behaviour of Christians around the world. Gandhi's famous phrase: "Christianity is a beautiful thing; it's just never been tried" is a challenging accusation, although it does not express the whole of Christian reality and history.

The sad reality is that both Christians and Muslims are constantly struggling to live in obedience to the prophetic message we have received. We are constantly failing, constantly being called back to repentance (Bible: *metanoia*, Qur'an: *tawba*) and God's forgiveness, constantly standing in need of God's grace which alone can transform our personal and communitarian lives. Moreover, we must not overdraw the picture. I could point to countless examples of Muslims and Christians who concretely seek to care for the poor, to support their just causes, to oppose dehumanizing and unjust systems of economy and government, and to work for true human liberation. There are millions of Muslims and millions of Christians around the world who are striving, often together, to put into practice the message contained in the prophetic word.

But is this not exactly what Christians and Muslims ought to be talking about together — our magnificent ideals and our all-too-often sad realities; our sincere efforts as well as our shameful failures; our wonderful experiences of God's love and our selfish refusal to share that love with others? I suggest that this is what dialogue is all about. I conclude with a verse from the

Qur'an: "If God had wanted, He could have made you one community. So compete with one another in doing good deeds, so that He may test you by what he has given you" (5:48).

## Note

1. The data in the paragraph are based on the *World Investment Report* (1999).

Ref.: *FABC Papers*, n. 103, 2002 (pp. 12-25).

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## *Une Église polyphonique, chance ou défi ?*

Quand j'ai été ordonné évêque de Saint-Denis-en-France, j'ai choisi ma devise en m'inspirant de l'Épître aux Éphésiens : *"vous n'êtes plus des étrangers mais des frères"* (cf. Ep 2, 19). Il suffisait, le jour de ma consécration, d'observer la physionomie de l'assemblée qui remplissait la cathédrale dans sa variété polyphonique et arc-en-ciel pour vérifier la justesse de cette parole apostolique au sujet de ce diocèse. En même temps, c'était amusant de penser que les gisants des rois de France, qui prennent tant de place à la hauteur du chœur, étaient comme rendus témoins à titre posthume de ce qu'il en était advenu du royaume de France l'espace d'à peine deux siècles ! Bourg de trois mille âmes à la fin du 18<sup>e</sup>, la seule ville de Saint-Denis, transformée au 19<sup>e</sup> par l'industrialisation, au point de devenir une citadelle ouvrière au 20<sup>e</sup>, est maintenant une cité cosmopolite où se croisent une centaine d'ethnies différentes... Le pari civil de la paix repose, pour une part, sur cette intention ecclésiale de ne jamais regarder l'autre en "étranger", ou bien de nous regarder tous de la sorte. Selon l'Épître à Diognète, ne sommes-nous pas tous des migrants sur la terre ?

### **De bonnes raisons d'être perplexe**

J'ai donc banni le mot "étranger" de mon vocabulaire, et les catholiques m'ont imité. Je n'emploie guère non plus le terme "multiculturel", que je trouve un brin réducteur, au moins en puissance, comme celui, pourtant si à la mode, d'"interreligieux". Qu'on me pardonne, je soupçonne ces néologismes d'une certaine indigence de pensée. Sous couvert d'ouverture et d'altérité, ils tendent plus à la confusion qu'à la reconnaissance et à la réciprocité. Il ne suffit pas en effet de multiplier les petites encyclopédies sur les cultures et les religions pour rendre compte du phénomène de la *rencontre*. Très pratiquement, j'ai fait cette expérience dès ma première visite pastorale à travers les quarante villes de mon département. Quand je demandais le plus gentiment du monde à quelqu'un dont la couleur ou la tenue pouvait me laisser deviner une origine africaine ou asiatique : *"D'où êtes-vous ?"*, j'obtenais la plupart du temps une réponse charmante du genre : *"Nous venons*

*de St Jean-Baptiste"* (de Noisy-le-Sec), ou *"Je travaille sur Pantin mais je pratique ici, au Christ-ressuscité"* (de Bondy-Nord)....

Il serait évidemment trop facile d'en conclure que "l'intégration" est donc un état de fait en Seine-Saint-Denis, qu'au moins dans l'Église les gens se sentent chez eux. Oui et non, faut-il nuancer. Oui, des adolescents antillais ou camerounais, ainsi que leurs parents, n'auront aucune réticence à venir à la paroisse et à y passer des heures, comme sur leur territoire. Non, les personnes marquées par de longues histoires d'itinérance et de course d'obstacles dans les préfectures avant d'obtenir des papiers en règle (je ne parle pas des Antillais sur ce dernier point) ne se sentent pas immédiatement chez eux chez nous !

À l'observation, deux problèmes apparaissent. Du côté des admirables chrétiens de nos vieilles provinces, montés ici depuis trois ou quatre générations, le fait d'avoir tenu à bout de bras les communautés catholique locales contre vents et marées semble leur avoir donné comme une sorte d'instinct de propriété sur elles. Ce n'est pas du jour, au lendemain qu'ils sont prêts à laisser l'animation liturgique à ces nouveaux venus aux rythmes chaloupés. Surtout, ils tiennent, quelquefois à un âge avancé et avec des comptes d'apothicaire à... garder les cordons de la bourse.

Quant aux nouveaux venus, s'ils sont généreux en temps et heureux d'apporter le concours de leurs voix et de leurs musiques à "des messes plus vivantes", beaucoup, même sortis de la grande pauvreté, n'ont encore guère le réflexe de soutenir de leurs deniers l'Église diocésaine. Pour nombre d'entre eux, originaires des Caraïbes, de l'Afrique ou des anciens comptoirs français de l'Inde, l'idée d'une Église coloniale paraît si bien ancrée... que "la quête" a plutôt valeur symbolique. Ce qui ne les empêche pas de verser des honoraires de Messe dans les sanctuaires qu'ils visitent plus fréquemment que les Européens moyens... Les Portugais ou les Polonais, eux, ne rechignent pas à signifier leur sens des responsabilités dans l'entretien de l'immobilier sur leur paroisse d'accueil. Ils le font souvent mieux que les provinciaux dont je parlais. Mais,

au fond, même à la deuxième ou troisième génération, pour la plupart, leur catholicisme reste lié à leur pays et à leurs coutumes. L'Église locale est tout au plus un cadre consolant pour temps d'exil. Ils sont un peu *suspirantes et gementes in hac lacrimarum valle*.

### Quelques pistes de travail

Très vite, une opportunité s'est offerte à moi. Il existe dans ce diocèse, outre "l'église Notre-Dame-des-Vertus", à Aubervilliers, célèbre depuis Ollier et Bérulle, un autre site de pèlerinage beaucoup plus ancien, en lisière de la forêt de Bondy, à Clichy-sous-Bois, à deux pas du lieu où Victor Hugo a imaginé ses *Misérables*. C'est le sanctuaire Notre-Dame-des-Anges. Les pauvres aiment à venir y prier la Vierge noire : *nigra sum sed formosa, black but beautiful...* Le diocèse y vénère la Mère de Dieu en la fête de sa Nativité, ce qui correspond à peu près à la rentrée. J'ai donc tenté, avec mes proches collaborateurs, de redonner à ce rendez-vous annuel la dimension d'un événement. Il a fallu un peu ramer face à l'intellectualisme déguisé des uns, au scepticisme des autres à l'égard de la "religion populaire". Mais, le Jubilé aidant, ce rendez-vous est de plus en plus adopté par l'ensemble de la communauté diocésaine. Les familles de toutes origines s'y retrouvent volontiers. La "pastorale des migrants", celle des "vocations" ou des "jeunes" y apportent tour à tour leur concours. Bref, la Nativité de Marie est presque "un temps fort" de la vie du diocèse, comme on aime à en avoir en ces temps de dispersion... et de jeûne dominical, si j'ose dire, bien que le mot ne rende pas compte de la vitalité des paroisses les plus populaires le jour du Seigneur.

Je viens de faire allusion à la "pastorale des migrants" et à celle des "jeunes". Je ne dirai pas qu'il y a chez nous un pléonasse. Mais il est évident que si ce département est si jeune (le dernier recensement l'a confirmé), c'est grâce aux populations venues en France ces trente dernières années. Elles n'ont pas toutes jeté aux orties leurs traditions, heureusement. Mais il leur faut bien composer avec la République et la laïcité, deux aspects d'un paysage difficilement transposables dans leur idiome natal. Le défi, pour l'Église, est de prendre résolument ce défi *comme* une chance, pour "aujourd'hui" et surtout pour "demain". Nous nous disons souvent, ici, que la pastorale des migrants est la pastorale du diocèse. Et pour cause ! Et alors, celle des jeunes aussi, celle des vocations aussi, car s'il y a quelque part un gisement de nouveaux ouvriers de l'Évangile, c'est bien là. Mais il faut aussitôt s'exhorter à la patience du "demain" en question. "*À tes yeux, dit le Psaume, mille ans sont comme le jour d'hier une fois passé, une veille dans la nuit*" (Ps 90, 4). Quand je pense que les familles de tradition chrétienne, portugaises ou polonaises, n'ont

pas encore donné de séminariste, je crois que cette patience divine s'accorde assez bien aux mutations longues des déplacements de notre temps. En attendant, il nous faut accepter de jouer sur plusieurs claviers à la fois. Permettre aux ethnies les plus représentées de se retrouver dans leur langue, leurs rites, leur mémoire. Les inviter sans cesse à élargir l'espace de leurs tentes respectives en s'ouvrant aux autres ethnies et en partageant avec elles le pain et le sel (ou le riz et le piment). Composer une symphonie diocésaine d'où nul, même les membres des ethnies les moins nombreuses, ne se sentent les exclus de la fête. En logique cartésienne, cela pourrait paraître comme la quadrature du cercle. Dans la catholicité de l'amour, "*rien n'est impossible à Dieu*" (cf. Lc 1, 37).

### Quand les proches sont loin

Sur ces pistes à débroussailler, une inquiétude s'est fait jour. Elle pourrait se formuler de la manière suivante. "*Au fond, n'est-il pas trop facile de se cantonner dans les franges migrantes des populations de nos villes ? Encore marquées par une culture sacrale, la plupart ont une foi spontanée et ne s'embarrassent guère de notre esprit critique ni même des méditations rationnelles auxquelles nous avons recours en France. Mais alors, que deviennent ces gens du pays de France, les jeunes surtout, pour qui c'est 'Dieu' qui est un étranger, c'est 'l'Église' qui est étrange ? Et pendant ce temps-là, ne voyons-nous pas que les jeunes venus des autres pays mordent peu à peu, bon gré mal gré, à cette indifférence, entrent à leur tour dans la cité séculière et la modernité ?*"

Inquiétude fondée. Il suffit de constater avec quelle rapidité se creuse le décalage des générations, par exemple, chez les Chaldéens venus de Turquie. Tandis que leurs parents ne manqueraient pas la Messe de leur rite, hommes d'un côté, femmes de l'autre, avec les petits enfants, les adolescents, eux, adoptent la mode vestimentaire de leurs camarades de lycée, oublient la langue liturgique et commencent à se poser des questions qu'ils n'osent pas exprimer en famille. Les prêtres orthodoxes qui vivent chez nous nous disent qu'ils sont affrontés progressivement au même écart. Que faire ?... Inquiétude missionnaire, car, si, heureux de remplir nos églises grâce aux gens venus de loin, nous perdons tout contact avec ceux qui nous sont le plus proches, le Maître nous tirera les oreilles. "*Qu'as-tu fait de ton frère ?*" nous demandera-t-il.

Je sens que nous ne pouvons pas faire l'impasse sur cette interrogation. Elle n'est pas seulement sociologique ou circonstancielle. Notre premier Synode diocésain (1998/2000) sur "l'Évangile dans la Ville" a eu, entre autres mérites, de nous apprendre à nous connaître, de nous encourager à mettre la lumière en

haut du candélabre, de nous inviter à entrer en dialogue avec les autres chrétiens et avec nos voisins juifs, musulmans ou bouddhistes... Mais sur cette inquiétude là, malgré quelques trouvailles dans le texte d'orientation ouvrant les propositions et résolutions en vue d'un meilleur accueil, d'une meilleure communication, d'une solidarité plus forte et d'une formation plus exigeante, avouons qu'il nous a laissés au pied du mur<sup>1</sup>. Certes, grâce au Synode, je vois davantage de migrants dans les équipes d'animation pastorale par exemple. Mais le Seigneur ne nous a pas seulement envoyés pour "animer". Il nous appelle à "évangéliser toute la création" (Mc 16, 15). Avec cette modulation déjà pointée par Paul VI dans *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1975). Il s'agit, disait-il, "d'atteindre et comme bouleverser, par la force de l'Évangile, les critères déterminants, les points d'intérêt, les lignes de pensée, les sources inspiratrices et les modèles d'humanité, qui sont en contraste avec la Parole de Dieu et le dessein de salut" (n. 19).

Quel chantier ! Le défi, et donc la chance (ou plutôt la grâce) de "demain", dans les banlieues du monde comme dans les centres de décision et de création de l'après-demain, sera de conjuguer si possible le sens de l'homme et le sens de Dieu enclos dans les traditions et les cultures, chrétiennes ou non, qui montent du plus lointain passé et viennent se côtoyer mutuellement dans nos stades ou nos tours de vingt-cinq étages... et cette modernité même, avec son côté rouleau compresseur, mais aussi sa part d'utopie mondialiste. Rien n'est gagné d'avance.

L'Église, je le crois, a de beaux jours devant elle pour la créativité évangélique.

### Note

1. Un peu en vrac : "Minoritaires avec l'ensemble des chrétiens dans la société, nous souhaitons que l'Église ne cherche pas à être triomphante mais vivante et joyeuse, servante et universelle... Nous vivons l'Église de la communion, dans le débat et la diversité, en écoutant celui ou celle qui ne pense pas comme nous... La vie est désir de partage. La nôtre doit donc se faire proposition et annonce de l'Évangile, alors que tout repli sur soi serait signe de dessèchement et de mort... Nous aspirons à ce que les biens économiques élèvent plutôt qu'ils ne dégradent, à ce que l'ingéniosité financière serve le bien commun plutôt que quelques intérêts particuliers. Nous cherchons à confirmer notre foi dans tout partage des richesses et du travail... Même si dire non à l'inacceptable s'impose parfois, nous aspirons à une Église qui appelle, éclaire et guide plutôt qu'elle ne refuse et rejette, etc."

Réf. : *Mission de l'Église*, n. 137, octobre-décembre 2002, pp. 53-57.



*Dear SEDOS Member,*

*We would like to remind you to send us your name if you wish to come to our Christmas Party, to be held as usual at :*

Collegio del Verbo Divino, *Via dei Verbiti, 1.*  
***Thursday, 19 December 2002, 19:00 hrs***

*Don't forget to prepare a song or any other contribution to add to our Christmas Celebration.*

*Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to all!!!*





## *Reaching out Across Religious and Cultural Boundaries Reflections on the Acts of the Apostles*

During the last few centuries, there has been an intensive movement of Western Christianity crossing over to other continents. The great question remains: in how far did this missionary movement reach out across religious and cultural boundaries, or did it just pass geographical frontiers while pushing back local religion and culture? In how far has Western Christianity just been duplicated on other mainlands, or has the Gospel entered new religious and cultural environments, both enriching them and enriched by them? This question becomes all the more urgent, because Western Christianity itself is now faced with the same problem at home. Its ceremonial way of presenting and living the Gospel seems to have lost track with its own changed religious (secular), cultural and ethical environment. The question of reaching out across boundaries has become very urgent for all.

The main title of this paper is a modification of the title suggested by the organizing committee: “*You will be my witnesses to the end of the world*” — *Going beyond the frontiers — Reflection on the Acts of the Apostles*. The present title has been taken over from the fourth chapter of Howard Clark Kee’s excellent *Theology of Acts*,<sup>1</sup> which has been used intensively in this paper.

### **1. Starting from Jerusalem**

The story of the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost, with representatives from all parts of the known world (“Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judaea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs”, Acts 2:9-11), anticipates a movement that is much more than a merely geographical extension of the People of God. It is meant as a symbolic scene that speaks about “the reconstitution of the covenant people in such a way as to bridge over ethnic, cultic, social, cultural and religious distinctions”.<sup>2</sup> It anticipates “a process of transformation which builds on the heritage of Israel’s past toward the creation of a new and inclusive community” (*ibid.*).

It is therefore essential that this development starts in Jerusalem (Acts 1:4, 8), the city where God is believed to dwell in the temple, and Jews from all over the world come to offer sacrifices and receive forgiveness; where the religious leaders of Judaism interpret the law of Moses, and the leading citizens meet as a council to determine regional, social and religious policies (4:5). It was in Jerusalem’s temple courts, in Solomon’s Portico, that the Apostles had to go and preach the Gospel to the crowds (5:12, 20).

The significance of the Gospel for the future of the covenant people is brought out sharply when the apostles are brought before the council (5:27-42). The council is told that the God of their ancestors raised up Jesus, whom they had killed, and that God exalted Him at His right hand as Leader and Saviour that He might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins (vv. 30-31). Gamaliel, reminded the council that they will not be able to overthrow the Jesus movement if it is of God (“You might even be found opposing God”, 5:39). After that reminder, the apostles are able to continue to preach and teach in the temple concerning Jesus as the Messiah (5:42). Jerusalem and its temple, therefore, serve as the launching platform for the movement that will soon reach across the Roman world, not just geographically but socially and culturally.

### **2. Reaching out to the Hellenists**

The first step in this socio-cultural outreach is described in Acts 6. There is a division along cultural and linguistic lines between the Hebrew speaking and the Greek speaking Jewish Christians. The occasion for the dispute is inequality in food distribution to the Greek-speaking minority. The problem is answered wisely by sharing responsibility: all seven deacons who are chosen have Greek names (6:5). The effect of this shared responsibility will be far reaching, not just for food distribution but for the transmission of the Gospel in the Hellenistic world (cf. 11:19-21). This appears from the fact that Diaspora Jews bring charges against Deacon Stephen that they are dismantling the

temple and the law: the items that are most central to Jewish religious identity (6:14).

The main thrust of Stephen's speech in Acts 7 is that localization has never been the basis of God's relationship with his people, as was held by temple-oriented Judaism with its concern to preserve Palestinian land and culture. Stephen makes clear that the worship of God has been localized in Jerusalem and the temple only temporarily. To lay the basis for the covenant relationship, God first appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia (7:2). Abraham's descendants were "aliens in a land belonging to others". It was in the land of Sinai that God appeared to Moses, and it was in Egypt and by the Red Sea that God manifested his power. Throughout the early history, the tabernacle as the place of God's presence among his people was mobile in the wilderness and in the land, until David decided to give it a permanent location and Solomon actually built the temple as God's house (7:45-48). At that point Stephen quotes Trito-Isaiah who challenges the very notion that God's dwelling can be localized even in the splendid temple in Jerusalem (Is 66:1-2 = Acts 7:49-50). The universal reign and presence of God are affirmed in the quotation from Isaiah. Stephen's colleagues, who live and work after his martyrdom, will seek to make that message available across geographic, ethnic and social barriers.

Acts 6-7 raises important questions for reflection. Do our present multi-cultural Christian communities/Churches proportionally share both material supplies and cooperative responsibility among all cultural groups within the community? Do our communities tend to bind the Lord's presence and His saving work principally to areas, ceremonies and actions that mirror the traditional majority culture only? What new incentives have been given to the distribution of the Gospel by minority groups in the Church?

### 3. Reaching out to Samaritans and Eunuchs

Stephen's death and the persecution of the Church in Jerusalem do not stop the revolutionary views and efforts of the Hellenists. On the contrary, their activities are reaching beyond Jerusalem, as they are "scattered throughout the region of Judaea and Samaria" (8:1).

Samaria is not just another geographical district in Palestine. It should be remembered that Jews and Samaritans "had competing claims to be the true heirs of the covenant, competing versions of the Pentateuch, and competing shrines where God was said to be in their midst". In Jewish eyes, the Samaritans were perverters of the worship and the law of God, so that contact with them had to be avoided.

In sharp contrast, the members of the Church who had been driven out of Jerusalem now are addressing

their message to the Samaritans. Despised as they are as violators of the covenant, the Samaritans are invited to share in the redefined covenant people. Peter and John travel to Samaria to survey the new development there, and the confirmation comes through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. As a sign of their own approval, Peter and John "preach the Gospel to many villages of the Samaritans" (8:25).

A similar development in a different direction, geographically and ethnically, is depicted in 8:26-40, the story about the Ethiopian eunuch. Eunuchs were highly valued in ancient monarchic palaces, but in Mosaic law, however, prohibited from entering the assembly of God's people (Dt 23:1). The eunuch reading aloud from the scroll of Isaiah in his chariot provides an image of an earnest seeker after the God of Israel. Isaiah 53 serves as the point of departure for Philip's proclamation of the Gospel. The eunuch enters the new community, being baptized along the Gaza road. The pattern of inclusion of disdained non-Jews as hearers of the Gospel and therefore as potential participants in the new covenant is being considerably extended.

Acts 8 prompts reflection on questions like: How does our preaching of the Gospel and our communal life reach out to rival Christians and competing Christian communities? How do our communities reach out to faithful and spirited people who do not fulfill the ritual requirements of our traditional Church regulations (e.g. the divorced, unmarried couples, gay and lesbian couples).

### 4. Conversion of the Apostle to the Gentiles

Directly following these first accounts of the Gospel crossing over ethnic and cultural boundaries, Acts 9 describes the most radical transition of all: the conversion of Paul. Acts portrays Paul as totally committed to the preservation of ethnic and cultic boundaries for the People of God.<sup>3</sup> Though said to be born in Hellenistic Tarsus in the province of Cilicia (Acts 9:11, 21:39), Acts speaks exclusively of Paul's training in the interpretation of the Jewish law in Jerusalem under Gamaliel, a strict interpreter of that law (22:3). Paul's devotion to "the law of our fathers" inflamed him to bring before the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem any Christian believers, male or female, he might find in Damascus (9:1-3). The three accounts of Paul's conversion in Acts provide additional details about Paul's attempts to stamp out the Christian movement, motivated by his strict reading of the Jewish law.

Acts and Galatians agree on this basic point: the former Pharisee and persecutor of the Church has become the primary witness to non-Israelites (Gal 1:23; cf. Acts 9:15). In all three of the Acts' accounts of Paul's conversion, the divine purpose behind this event

is said to be the outreach to the Gentiles, although the Jews are to be hearers of the Gospel as well. Initially Paul bears testimony to the Jews in Damascus that Jesus was the Christ (Acts 9:12), but very soon Paul leaves via Jerusalem for Tarsus, a thoroughly hellenized city and major centre of Stoic learning (9:30).

The fundamental shift in the account of Paul's conversion prompts reflection in two directions. First, in what way can people of faith today be blinded to the truth by their religious and cultural preconceptions<sup>4</sup> and mistaken privileges; and what harm and infliction does it bring to others? Second, what (faith/spiritual/other) experiences are beneficial to free faithful people from "privileged exclusivism" and open up for sharing the Good News and communal life with any people earnestly longing for it?

### 5. The Transition to the Gentiles Begins through Peter

Up to this point of Acts, the activity of the Apostles and the Spirit is primarily in Jerusalem and the nearby regions of Judaea and Samaria. The crucial figure through whom the transition to the wider world of the Gentiles will occur is Peter on his visit to the cities of the coastal plain, an area strongly influenced by Graeco-Roman culture.

The supreme example of Romanization in Palestine is Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast. The name Caesarea, the Roman culture, the residence of the Roman Governor and the military power base in Caesarea symbolized for Jews in Palestine the cultural, economic and political dominance of a pagan power over their land. "It was most fittingly, in Caesarea, therefore, that a major shift occurs in the strategy of the Apostles to fulfil their commission by the risen Jesus" (Kee '90:51).

Cornelius, a clear agent of Roman power and presence, was also a person well prepared for his transitional role in Acts. He was devout (*eusebes*) and feared God, gave alms to the people generously and prayed constantly to God (8:2, 22). He represents a large group of Gentiles who were drawn to the Jewish understanding of God as one, imageless and morally demanding, but who did not accept circumcision and thereby become proselytes.

The account shows how difficult it was for Peter to grasp the message that he was to approach a Roman military officer in the name of Christ. Prepared by a vision, Peter is "inwardly perplexed" (10:17), but having had three times the experience of the celestial tablecloth with unclean birds, reptiles and animals and the order to eat, he is ready to accept the invitation to visit Cornelius. Upon entering Cornelius' home, Peter explains the norm of Jewish covenantal identity: that it is contrary to established principle for any Jew to as-

sociate with or enter the dwelling of someone of another nation. In Pharisaic understanding, to enter the house of people who did not observe the ritual requirements, and above all to share a meal with them, was to lose one's own purity which had to be restored by proper atonement and purification. Peter's new conviction overthrows these purity principles, however. God has told him not to call *anyone* — Jew or Gentile, ritually pure or not — "profane or unclean" (10:28). What is depicted here is a total change in criteria for participation in the People of God.

Peter's sermon speaks about God's concern for people from any nation who are willing to hear and obey his word. The sermon concludes with the declaration that the exalted Jesus is "ordained by God to be the judge of the living and the dead" (10:43). This is not limited to Israel since forgiveness of sins through his name is finally said to be available to "everyone who believes in his name" (10:43). Confirmation of this open invitation is provided by God through the outpouring of the Spirit "on all who heard the word" (20:44).

To underline the message of the open invitation across ethnic and ritual boundaries, the story is told once more by Peter himself in Jerusalem, under direct challenge from those who want to insist on circumcision as an essential condition for covenantal participation (11:2-3). It is not Peter but God who stops separating humanity into groups on the basis of ritual or dietary regulations; "What God has cleansed you must not call profane" (11:9). This was confirmed by the Spirit, who told Peter to go to the house of Cornelius, "making no distinction" on ethnic or purity grounds (11:12). With the Spirit poured out on these non-law observant Gentiles, Peter asks, "Who was I that I could withstand God?" (11:17). The Apostles agree with Peter's assessment of what has happened: God has granted repentance and new life to the Gentiles (11:18). The basis is now established for further outreach across the traditional boundaries that marked off the covenant people of Israel.

Acts 10-11 prompt us to reflect on more than just a crossing of boundaries at the periphery, which is often and easily done. Are the leaders at the *centre* of our Christian communities reaching out to the *heartland* of non-Christian society; and are they open to the signs of the times by which God tells us that standard criteria for acceptance may have to be reconsidered and reviewed? Also, how is our understanding of the Gospel and its inclusiveness changed by our encounter with genuine people from other cultures/religions, and by the Spirit who works in such encounters?

### 6. Wider Outreach: Geographically, Ethnically and Culturally

Some Christian fugitives from Jerusalem went as



far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. Besides witnessing about Jesus to Jewish hearers, they started also witnessing to Greeks (11:19,20), with remarkable results: “a great number” joined. Barnabas, sent to Antioch by the Jerusalem apostles to investigate this new development, not only approves this outreach but promotes it by his own preaching to Gentiles with much result (11:24). Paul was brought from Tarsus, and Evangelism of Gentiles is now in full process through the activity of Barnabas and Paul (11:25-26).

The leadership of the Church in Antioch is shown to be mixed also (Acts 13:1). Included are Barnabas (a Jew from Jerusalem), Simeon called “Niger” (perhaps ethnically of Black origin), Lucius of Cyrene (a Roman name, from North Africa), Manaen (a transliteration of the Semitic *Menachem*; a close friend of Herod Antipas). All are called “prophets and teachers” — across regional, ethnic, and political boundaries. God’s Spirit urges them to commission Barnabas and Paul for the next phase of the outreach of the Good News to the ends of the earth (13:1-3).

On this wider mission, Paul and Barnabas keep to the strategy of always going first to the gatherings of Diaspora Jews in the cities. This strategy is exemplified in the account of their mission in Antioch-in-Pisidia (13:13-41). Paul’s sermon in the synagogue emphasizes again that Israel’s origins were outside the land of Canaan, which was only given to the nation by God shortly before the establishment of the monarchy under Saul and David. The descendant of David, who is expected as Israel’s saviour, has now come — Jesus. Through him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed and everyone who *trusts* in him, whether Jew or Gentile, is *freed from the Law of Moses*. Many Jews and pious proselytes are eager to hear this and become followers of Paul and the new community.

This successful proclamation of the Gospel evokes two kinds of reaction. “Almost the whole city” — which would be predominantly Gentile — came together on the following Jewish holy day to hear the word of God. The Jewish leaders, however, were troubled by this enormous response to this revised version of God’s word. Hence, they sought to discredit both Paul and his message (13:44-45). Both their hostile attitude and the light brought to the Gentiles is seen by Paul and Barnabas to be in fulfilment of Scripture. The Jews are to have the priority in hearing the message, but since their leaders reject it and judge themselves “unworthy of eternal life”, the Apostles now turn to the Gentiles. On hearing this prognosis, the Gentiles glorify the word of the Lord, and are filled with joy and the Holy Spirit — even though the Apostles left (13:51).

At Iconium the results are similar. At Lystra, however, a new kind of response and a new difficulty emerges when Paul preaches and heals there: Barnabas

and Paul are acclaimed as the Greek gods in human form, Zeus and Hermes (14:8-18). The priest of Zeus is ready to offer sacrifice to them as the gods in their midst. What is implicit here is one of the difficulties that the messengers of the Gospel encounter in preaching about Jesus in a Greek culture. Paul answers the difficulty by describing the divine ordering of the universe and the providential provision for the sustaining of human life (14:15-17). Paul’s use of the concepts of natural law as maintaining the natural and social systems of the world are wholly in agreement with Stoic philosophy, and make these two messengers of Christ even more venerable in a Hellenistic urban setting. In these details the author of Acts shows that the Christian view of God and the world shares certain basic elements with the cosmic concepts expressed in Hellenistic philosophy. A similar experience will soon be described in the story of Paul in Athens (Acts 17).

Acts 13-14 raises crucial questions for reflection: Are our Christian communities and especially its leadership ethnically and culturally mixed enough to be ready to reach out effectively to groups and areas with differing cultural and ethnical milieu. Do we see and enjoy still now the “blessing in disguise” of opposition and refusal of the establishment toward a new way of preaching and living the Gospel: it does not *per se* close, but could as well open the door to the Gospel for different groups. What points of contact and what obstacles do we meet when sharing the Gospel with people in other cultural/religious settings?

## 7. Settling the Principal Issues

Acts 15 is the literary and theological centre of the book. The progress of the Gospel to the ends of the earth is recessed temporarily so that the issues involved can be debated and a justifiable conclusion reached. The issue is raised in Antioch by some Christians from Judaea, who assert that all males must be circumcised if they are to be saved (15:1). Paul and Barnabas set out for Jerusalem, where — in keeping with the strategy of Acts — the issue is to be debated and a common decision has to be reached by the “apostles and elders” there (15:2).

Some members of the community of the new covenant keep to their old pharisaic convictions: they insist on circumcision for all male Christians and on the keeping of the law (15:5). Peter articulates what becomes the official apostolic policy. When the Gentile Cornelius and his household through him had heard the word, God gave them the Spirit and cleansed their hearts without demanding conformity to the Mosaic Law. He welcomed the Gentiles without legal demands (15:10). All humanity is allowed to receive the unmerited blessing of God through the Lord Jesus. The va-

lidity of this point of view is reinforced when Barnabas and Paul report the signs and wonders which “God had done through them among the Gentiles” (15:12).

James formulates his view on the inclusion of Gentiles with a quotation from Amos on God’s eschatological action. God will rebuild the dwelling of David, the structure through which God’s chosen agent exercises rule on God’s behalf. Omitted by Luke from this quotation of Amos is the phrase which declares that the kingdom will be restored “just like the days of *old*” (Amos 9:11). What is happening in Christ is seen as transformation rather than merely restoration of the Israelite monarchy. Further, the original Hebrew text promises that the Davidic heir will *possess* “what is left of Edom and of *all the nations* who were once named as mine”. This reading is already modified in the LXX, which reads: “So that the rest of humanity and *all the nations* upon whom my name is called upon them *may seek*” [no object expressed]. The point here is that the nations that belong to God will begin to inquire about Him. Acts 15:17 reads instead, “so that the rest of humanity *shall seek the Lord*”, applying it to Gentiles now looking for the Lord Jesus Christ. An added phrase from Second Isaiah in v. 18 makes the point that the invitation to the Gentiles to share in God’s new structure is no innovation, but has been “made known by God since long ago”.

The requirements spelled out by James for Gentile Christians (abstinence from idolatry, from sexual impropriety, and from murder = shedding of blood) do not involve the Mosaic Law specifically. The circumcision requirement was not imposed on Gentile believers, nor were ritual or dietary obligations as required by the Law of Moses (cf. Gal 2:1-10). The importance of this common resolution is underscored by the written form of this corporate apostolic decision, in the letter addressed to the members “who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia”, which is sent along with official representatives of the Jerusalem leadership (15:22).

Questions for reflection: the crossing of boundaries normally starts by the inventiveness of pioneers at the periphery and may be continued by individuals at the centre. Does the whole community bother and take time to gather in order to share the experiences and the signs of the time, and to draw common resolutions on the acceptability or conditions of such new outreaches? What serious conflicts at this moment would force us to do so? How do signs and experiences together with a contextual reading of Scripture give supplementary support to new outreaches today?

## 8. Christian Encounter with Graeco-Roman Religion and Political Order

Chapter 16 of Acts marks a major transition in the

progress of the Gospel. The scene shifts from the eastern Mediterranean world and predominantly Jewish audiences for Paul to the mainland of Europe and various forms of engagement with Graeco-Roman culture. Prevented by the Spirit from visiting the north-eastern provinces of Asia Minor, and inspired by a vision, Paul understands that God is calling him to preach the Good News in Macedonia. The symbolism is powerful. Macedonia was the power base from where Alexander the Great launched his Hellenistic world empire. Paul’s primary destination is the Roman provincial capital, Philippi, called “little Rome”.

The first persons to be met by Paul are a group of Jewish women gathered at a meeting place, on a riverbank outside the city (16:11-13). The most interested listener was a businesswoman, Lydia, a worshipper of the God of Israel, though not a full member of the covenant people (16:14). Moved by the Lord to believe what Paul said, both she and her household were baptized. And her home became the base of the new community. It sets the pattern for proclaiming the Gospel across cultural, ethnic, social, economic and sexual boundaries, from city to city in Macedonia and other districts of Greece.

Another woman plays a prominent role at Paul’s first European mission, a young woman with oracular power. She had been daily annoying Paul and his co-workers by identifying them as “servants of the Most High God” (16:17),<sup>5</sup> just as in Luke 8:28 the demons identified Jesus as “son of the Most High God. This provides an occasion for Paul to expel the demon (Acts 16:18) and free the young woman from being exploited by her owners

The owners being angry for having been deprived of their source of profits bring a charge against Paul before the civil authorities, which goes beyond the economic issue. The accusation is that Paul and his associates are disturbing the city and advocating customs that are *unlawful* for Romans to accept or practice (16:20-21). Accordingly, they undergo corporal punishment, and are placed in prison (16:22-23). But when an earthquake shakes the foundations of the prison, opening all the doors, the jailer, about to commit suicide, is saved by his new trust in the Lord Jesus (16:30-31). Nothing is able to stop the penetration of the Roman people and their power structure by the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Not satisfied with reporting only the deliverance of Paul, Acts shows interest in the public apologies of the political authorities. They had beaten Paul and Silas — both Roman citizens — without a proper trial. Because of this severe violation, Paul refuses to leave the prison quietly and without public apology (16:35-40). Acts thereby wishes to stress that there is no basic conflict between the Roman system and the faith of the new community. Stated negatively, Christians are not

political subversives and deserve the protection of Roman civil law.

The same basic issues come up in the Thessalonica account (17:1-9). As usual, Paul visits first the Jewish synagogue. Among those persuaded by his preaching of the Gospel were some Jews, and “a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the *leading women*” (v. 4, also vv. 10-15). The distinctive role of women in the Jesus movement and in the spread of Christianity throughout the empire is a consistent theme in both Luke and — something less — Acts. Once again, some Jews react by bringing public charges against the apostles for “turning the world upside down”, *violating Roman law* and claiming that there is another king than Caesar: Jesus. The issue of confrontation between the Christians and the political structure of Rome is once more evident, before it will reach its climax in the arrest and extradition to Rome of Paul. Only when Jason — host to Paul — pays the local officials a security fee, the Apostles are freed.

Questions for reflection: How do we communicate the Gospel message within/to societies which have a different majority religion and a political order which is suspicious of the subversive intents of the Gospel movement? What is our attitude and reaction towards public mistreatment undergone because of our Christian convictions and mission? What does Acts 16-17 imply concerning the issue of equal rights, chances and responsibility of all without regard to gender.<sup>6</sup>

## 9. Encounter of the Gospel with Greek Wisdom

It is in Athens that Acts gives the most extensive description of the encounter between the message of Christ and the wisdom of the Greeks. Besides arguing in the synagogue with Jews, Paul publicly preaches the Gospel in the *Agora*, the centre of commerce and common life. His message is challenged and misunderstood by local Stoic and Epicurean philosophers. Taken to the Areopagus, where the civic council on intellectual matters uses to convene, Paul is invited to explain his new teaching.

His speech begins with the highest praise for the Athenians as very religious people (17:22). Impressed by the sacred places and objects in their city, Paul even saw an altar with an inscription, “To an unknown god”. He says that they are actually worshipping God, without knowing who He is. Paul’s criticism of locating deities in idols or shrines was in accord with Stoic criticism (17:24).<sup>7</sup> God also does not need human offerings, on the contrary, He provides life and breath, habitation and time frame for the whole human race (17:25-26). The right human response to this divine order is to seek to know him, while recognizing that God is the one in whom all human beings exist (17:27-28). This insight is confirmed by quotations, not from the Jew-

ish scriptures but from pagan poets who affirm that god is the locus and origin of all human life (17:28). In true religion there is no place for idolatry. Rather, everybody has to care about the right mode of life, conscious that God will call all to account (17:29-30). Up to this point, what Paul is saying has its counterpart in the writings of Stoics, such as Seneca (4 BCE - 65 CE) with the emphasis on the divine penetration and ordering of the creation, and the ultimate divine judgment of humanity. Moreover, the basic pattern of creation, preservation and redemption set out in the Areopagus speech is found also in Jewish and early Christian writings.<sup>8</sup> Paul is pictured here as establishing a broad common ground with his hearers, regardless of their religious background. The crucial shift in Paul’s argument comes at verse 31: the criterion for human accountability is not law — either Stoic natural law or Jewish revealed law — but a human being appointed by God, the unnamed Jesus. This claim has been guaranteed, in that God has raised him from the dead.

The strategy of this speech is noteworthy. The choice of Stoic principles as a point of entry and the quotation of familiar Greek writers virtually guarantees attention and a sympathetic hearing — at least initially. The amount of overlap between the concepts in this popular philosophy and the basic Christian worldview is striking. It demonstrates what can be done in opening the Gospel to those who are not familiar with the Jewish scriptures.

The reported results are mixed, ranging from intellectual scorn, through expressions of interest in further information, to faith on the part of some. Only two of them are named. It is significant again that one of them is a woman — pagan and willing to appear in public at such a gathering — and that the other, Dionysius, was a member of this noble intellectual body of the Areopagus. It indicates how the Gospel was able to penetrate an alien culture and evoke a response of faith when a suitable method of approach was employed.

Acts 17:16-34 prompts reflection on present attempts of encounter between the message of the Gospel and current popular philosophical thought. How do we in our cultural milieu express as much as possible of the Gospel in a language that is not bound to our own or any specific religious teaching, but understandable for society at large. How do we try our best while conscious of the reality that not everybody (not many?) will be convinced in this way as such, since essential elements of the Gospel message escape the grasp of popular philosophical reasoning?

## 10. Mounting Tensions with Civil Authorities and Established Cultural Institutions

In Corinth, Paul’s initial strategy remains the same.



His audience in the synagogue likely includes both Jews and seeking Gentiles (18:1-4). But when the Jews turn against him, he turns to Gentiles as the primary focus of his mission (18:6), while moving to the house of Titius Justus next to the synagogue. In Ephesus too the first arena for proclamation of the Gospel is the synagogue, but following rising Jewish opposition there, a public hall is hired, just like the philosophical instruction of Stoics or Epicureans would be propagated in public lecture halls (19:8-10).

An important precedent for the future is set at Corinth: what is at issue between Paul and his Jewish opponents is apparently a matter of *their* laws, not violations of Roman laws or religious customs. Gallio refuses to take action against the movement — which is a significant example to refer to when later Christians are suspected by the State as a potentially subversive movement (18:12-17).

Another type of cultural adjustment is taking place in Ephesus, when crowds are attracted by the hearings and exorcisms performed through Paul (19:11-20). Jewish exorcists are punished for exploiting the name of Jesus to expel evil spirits, and many magicians are converted praising the name of Jesus and destroying their books of magical formulae. This fascinating power of the Gospel gets a negative response from the silversmiths of Ephesus who produce images of Artemis, the goddess of the city. They mount a campaign to discredit Paul before the civil authorities. It is significant that among those seeking to protect Paul from the attack of the hostile mob are some Asiarchs (19:31), men of wealth and power representing the cities across Asia Minor on the provincial council — unusual persons to serve as supporters of Paul and the Gospel. Also the town clerk comes to Paul's defense, pointing out that the charges against Paul and his followers are unsupported and that there is an established legal process if they have instigated civil disobedience or violated the laws of the State. It is his opinion, however, that the accused "are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers" of Artemis. The town assembly, not an impromptu mob scene, is the place to air such complaints. It is the accusers, not the accused, who are violating the public peace. The author of Acts is obviously making a case for due process to be observed when charges are made against the Christians.

Similar unfounded charges are brought against Paul in the Jerusalem temple by Jews from Asia (21:27): that he has violated the sanctity of the temple by bringing an unclean Gentile into its courts (21:28). Protected by the Roman soldiers from the violence of the Jewish crowd, Paul is taken into custody (21:35) and is given an opportunity to offer a public defense. He affirms that his Jewish credentials are faultless (22:1-5) and that he is also a Roman citizen and therefore protected by due legal process (21:39, 22:25-29). At a

second occasion for an apology Paul shows that the real violator of Jewish law is the high priest (23:3) and that his own views are firmly within the Pharisaic tradition, especially as concerns belief in the resurrection — a statement which evokes support for him from the Pharisees (23:6-9). In the series of apologies which occupy the next three chapters of Acts, the basic themes recur: (1) the charges against Paul are brought by Jewish opponents, and are based on their interpretation of the Jewish scriptures; (2) the Romans at every time in the past have protected Paul, recognizing that he has not violated Roman civil law; (3) Paul has been faithful to the Jewish law and has acted properly in the temple, although he is convinced that the Jewish scriptures point to Christ.

There is a powerful apologetic factor implied in the point that a leader of the young Christian movement repeatedly appeals for justice to the head of the pagan State, Caesar (25:8-12, 21; 26:32; 28:19). It underscores that Christianity is not politically subversive. The divine sanction for this appeal is given in the angelic vision that came to Paul in the midst of the storm at sea: "Do not be afraid, Paul: you must stand before Caesar" (27:24).

The closing scenes of the book make the point that the proclamation of the Gospel to the Gentiles is fully in accord with the Jewish scriptures. And at the same time the Roman authorities permit Paul to dwell in private quarters while preaching the Gospel, with a military guard — presumably more for protection from his enemies than to keep him under arrest (18:16). There is said to be no ground for either Jewish religious or Roman civil charges that have been made against Paul.

Meanwhile, at the political and symbolic centre of the pagan world, Paul preaches the Gospel to the Gentiles who are receptive to his message about Jesus as Lord and Christ (28:28): "Let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles: they will listen".

Acts 18-28 prompt the question of our attitude toward civil society. How can our Gospel message be critical of society and its culture without being politically subversive? If establishment opposes the Gospel movement and tries to make it suspected as overturning the law or as politically subversive, how do we value due legal process before civil authorities in order to put things right?

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> H.C. Kee, 1990, *Good News to the Ends of the Earth: The Theology of Acts*, Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, pp. 42-69. Most of this paper is an “abridged quote” from this forth chapter of Kee’s work, without continuously offering specific references.

<sup>2</sup> Kee, '90: 42; also M.Harun, 1986, *Kamu akan menjadi saksi-Ku*, Yogyakarta: Kanisius, pp. 43-44.

<sup>3</sup> Unlike the evidence from his Letters, which show how deeply Paul was influenced by Hellenistic culture, especially Stoic philosophy.

<sup>4</sup> Ana Langerak, 1996, *Spirit, Gospel, Cultures, Bible Studies on the Acts of the Apostles*, Geneva: WCC Publications, p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> The term *hupsistos* may refer to Zeus or other pagan deities, as well as to the God of Israel.

<sup>6</sup> Ana Langerak, *Spirit, Gospel, Cultures*, pp. 37-42, pays special attention to this issue.

<sup>7</sup> Although it would have raised major difficulties for Jews who thought God dwelt in the temple in Jerusalem.

<sup>8</sup> The Sibylline Oracles, I Clement, Apostolic Constitutions, Prayer of Manasseh.

Ref.: Text from the Author. October 2002.

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*SEDOS Secretariat*

<p style="text-align: center;"><i>ANNUAL REPORT TO THE SEDOS GENERAL ASSEMBLY</i></p>
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**I. INTRODUCTION**

Once again we take this opportunity of the Annual Report to greet you all, wherever you may read it. It is a link between the *SEDOS Secretariat* and our Generalates here in Rome, but it is also a greeting *to all the missionaries in the field* who usually read these lines in the *SEDOS Bulletin*. It presents an opportunity for us to thank you for the contacts we have had during the year and for the many words of encouragement we received. It should give you an idea of the main activities SEDOS has organized in Rome, the publications and services of our Secretariat and of the projects we have for the future.

**II. STRUCTURE****1. EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

The members of the Executive Committee for the year 2001 were:

**President:**

**Piero Trabucco**, IMC, Superior General of the Consolata Missionaries.  
Elected to the Executive in 1997.

**Vice-President:**

**Mary Wright**, IBVM, Superior General of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary.  
Elected to the Executive in 2001.

**Treasurer:**

**Eric Manhaeghe**, CICM, General Bursar of the Cong. of Immaculate Heart of Mary.  
Elected to the Executive in 2000.

<b>Filo Hirota</b> , MMB, Mercedarian Missionaries of Berritz	since 1997
<b>Enrique Marroquín</b> , CMF, Sons of the Heart of Mary	since 1999
<b>Eileen Cummins</b> , OLA, Our Lady of Africa	since 1999
<b>Bernardine Mullaveetil</b> , RNDM, Rel. Our Lady of the Missions	since 1997
<b>Pierre-Paul Walraet</b> , OSC, Order of the Holy Cross	since 2001
<b>Josephine Olagunju</b> , SHCJ, Society of the Holy Child Jesus	since 1999

**Executive Director:**

<b>Bernard East</b> , OP, Order of Preachers	since 2001 - October 2002
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## 2. CHANGES IN THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

During the year **Sr Bernardine Mullaveetil**, RNDM, who served SEDOS for five years on the Executive Committee, four of which as President, completed her term here in Rome. **Fr Bernard East**, o.p., Director of SEDOS since January 2001, also left Rome in October 2002, to begin his new task as Rector of Saint Jude Sanctuary in Montreal, Canada.

In the name of all the member congregations we would like to take this opportunity to thank the members leaving SEDOS for their generous service in the different functions of the Executive. Wherever they may be, the *SEDOS Bulletin* will remind them of their time with us in Rome. At the next meeting new members will be elected to the Executive Committee to replace the outgoing members.

## 3. SEDOS SECRETARIAT STAFF

Many of you have had an opportunity to get to know our secretaries, be it at the activities or in the Secretariat. **Mrs Margarita Lofthouse** continues to be in charge of the subscription department and the office finances. **Ms Ilaria Iadeluca** works on the publications and layout of the *SEDOS Bulletin*. She also prepares all the texts for our homepage. **Ms Federica Pupilli**, who began to work at SEDOS in September 2001, continues to be in charge of the Documentation Centre, on a part-time basis.

**Ms Philippa Wooldridge** continues with us as the proof-reader of the English part of the Bulletin. The French part is taken care of by **Ms Sophie Guichard**. **Mr Stefano Cacace** and **Ms Emanuela Gismondi** two young computer experts, are still collaborating with us part-time, to keep our homepage up-dated.

## III. ACTIVITIES OF SEDOS

### A. SEMINARS AND CONFERENCES

#### 1. MORNING CONFERENCES OF THE ANNUAL GENERAL ASSEMBLY

The two morning conferences given at the Annual General Assembly held on 4 December 2001, were part of an extensive SEDOS activity. The first conference was titled: *The Pertinence of the Mission "ad gentes" at the Start of This New Millennium, Especially in an Era of Interreligious Dialogue*. **Cardinal Crescenzo Sepe**, Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, was the Guest Speaker.

The second conference was held by **Brother Yves Bériault**, o.p., a promoter of the Internet for the Order of Preachers and master of the website. This lecture was particularly interesting, because he lectured on the connection between *Evangelization and Internet*.

#### 2. RISK TAKING: THE FIRST CHALLENGE OF A MISSIONARY

On 26 February, SEDOS was able to hold a conference in Spanish by **Father Daniel Wankun Vigil**, o.p., on a Peruvian Missionary's Experience of Evangelization in the Amazon, Koribeni.

#### 3. ARICCIA ANNUAL RESIDENTIAL SEMINAR FOR SEDOS MEMBERS

The Councillors and Superiors General from about 50 Members Congregations assembled in Ariccia for the Annual Residential Seminar for four days of study, reflection and group sharing. This year the Seminar was a follow up of the Ariccia 2001 meeting.

### ***Our Vision of a Missionary Church From Dream to Reality, Vision in Action***

• **Cardinal François-Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuận**, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. Due to health problems, the Cardinal was unable to attend personally, but fortunately, we were still able to present his paper.

• **Fr Robert J. Schreiter**, C.P.P.S., Professor of Theology at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and President of the American Society of Missiology and of the Catholic Society of America, spoke with foresight on: *Towards the Missionary Church in 2025* and on *The Missionary Church in 2025*.

• **Fr Enrique Marroquín**, C.M.F., Sociologist and Promoter of Justice and Peace for the Claretian Fathers, addressed the members on: *Año 2025: Macrotendencias*.

### ***4. LIVING MISSION TODAY IN CONFLICT AND WAR SITUATIONS – THE PASTORAL AND SPIRITUAL CHALLENGES –***

On 12 September 2002, **Archbishop Luis Augusto Castro Quiroga**, I.M.C., of Tunja, Colombia, addressed the SEDOS Assembly in Spanish.

### ***5. THE HEART OF MISSION: COMFORTING AND BEFRIENDING***

This Conference was given by **Fr Chrys McVey**, OP, in English, on 17 October 2002. We are happy to say that, although other activities were being held in Rome on the same day, we had a good audience and his conference was greeted with enthusiasm.

## **B. SEDOS WORKING GROUPS**

### ***1. CHINA***

In 2002 the SEDOS Working Group on China pursued its stated goal to reach a sympathetic understanding of the current situation of the Church in the People's Republic of China, as well as to discover the needs of the Church and society there and to discern how the Church and religious institutes can respond. It has met approximately every six weeks with the participation of five to ten members. We welcomed **Fr Angelo Lazzarotto**, PIME, who offered some background information on the sixteenth meeting of the Communist Party in the PROC and the government's attitude toward religion in general and the Church in particular; and **Fr Hermann Schalueck**, OFM, who briefed us on the programmes of China-Zentrum, Sankt Augustin, Germany. Members shared their personal and community experiences and visits to the PROC. When there was no guest speaker or reporter we discussed an article on the Church and religious life and ministry in China. The group extends a welcome to all interested.

### ***2. BIBLE AND MISSION***

The *Bible and Mission Working Group*, coordinated by **Fr Ludger Feldkämper**, SVD, held three meetings since it started in March 2002. Five to six members attended each time. Of the different aspects this topic presents the group decided, for the time being, to look at "How the Bible Has Functioned in Roman Catholic Mission" (a paper prepared by one of its members for an ecumenical meeting in India) and then, on the role of the Bible and the biblical apostolate in different contexts. We started with **Latin America** and will continue with other contexts. During the last session we dealt with a topic of some actuality: the Final Statement of the Catholic Biblical

Federation's Sixth Plenary Assembly, held in Beirut in September 2002: "The Word of God – A Blessing for All Nations: Biblical-Pastoral Ministry in a Pluralistic World".

### **3. WORLD DEBT**

The SEDOS Working Group on Debt continued to focus the attention on this problem and promote advocacy on the cancellation of the unjust debt of the world's poorest countries during 2002. The group collaborates with other debt cancellation campaigns in different parts of the world. The SEDOS Working Group on Debt and Africa, Europe Faith and Justice Network (AEFJN) combined efforts and together invited members of 90 religious congregations to write to the governments of the G8 countries urging debt cancellation. Material was provided by AEFJN and the SEDOS Working Group on Debt to those congregations who participated. The group also monitors the effect of debt cancellation in those countries where some debt cancellation has taken place.

## **C. SEDOS PUBLICATIONS**

### **1. SEDOS BULLETIN**

Our *SEDOS Bulletin* has a long tradition. The first Bulletins were published in 1965. We continue to prepare about 320 pages of material a year. In fact, the preparation and publication of our *SEDOS Bulletin* with articles in English and French, is one of our main occupations. We think it can be said that the Bulletin receives very positive reactions. On the *one hand*, we publish our own conferences held in Rome and on the *other*, we try to select the best material on *mission and related topics* available. We are printing 1.100 copies at the moment, of which about 250 go to the Generalates and the rest to the subscribers directly. The fact that many important theological and missiological reviews agree to make an exchange with our Bulletin enables us to receive a good number of theological reviews which we would not be able to pay for otherwise.

### **2. SEDOS INTERNET HOMEPAGE**

SEDOS is well aware of the manifold possibilities of the Internet. In 1995 we were among the pioneers to open a missionary homepage (<http://www.sedos.org>). At the moment we can say that our homepage has become a *missionary meeting point* for people in the whole world looking for helpful contributions on different fields of mission. The homepage offers a *members' address list* which we try to update every month. The four language menus *now offer over 500 articles* in English, French, Spanish/Portuguese and Italian. We are trying to put out new articles every month. This year the image of our homepage has changed, for example, with new colours, each month. We advertise the front page of the Bulletin in order to encourage new subscribers, in addition the reference material is coordinated better to help our readers as much as possible. The responses we get encourage us to give our full attention to this new form of missionary publication and service, a direct expression of SEDOS' founding idea: **to be a cooperative missionary effort at the service of all.**

### **3. SEDOS DOCUMENTATION CENTRE**

The **Documentation Centre**, began when SEDOS opened about 35 years ago. Over the years, we have always tried to offer help and collaboration to all those interested in research and studies, and we hope to continue to provide



the best service possible.

Every year, SEDOS receives books and reviews from all parts of the World mainly in the following five languages: English, French, Italian, Spanish and German. Occasionally, some reviews come in the original languages of their country of origin (e.g. Chinese, African dialects, etc.).

During the last year, we have been able to reorganize a good amount of the material and consequently, this has allowed us to print out a new catalogue and update the documents. All this has required a lot of time and, of course, there is still a lot to do which we hope to complete in the near future. In the *SEDOS Bulletin* of September 2001, as a special issue, we published a list of all the reviews in the library.

We would like to encourage everybody to consult our Documentation Centre at any time during the office hours: (Monday-Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.).

#### ***IV. LOOKING TOWARDS THE FUTURE***

##### **OPEN SEMINAR 2003 — ROME**

There will be no Residential Seminar in Ariccia this year. Instead, to enable more lay people and non-member Congregations to attend, the sessions will be held in a bigger hall in Rome. The Seminar is being organized by a group of SEDOS Members and it should take place in the course of five afternoons in the month of May. More details will be provided as soon as possible.

SEDOS SECRETARIAT

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**ENCOUNTER WITH THE WORD**  
*Word of God: A Blessing for All Nations*  
**- 12 PATHS OF THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES -**

Korean **Sr Maura Cho**, SOLPH (Sisters of Our lady of Perpetual Help), was one of the main speakers during the 1996 SEDOS Residential Seminar in Ariccia on the topic “Bible and Mission”. In line with her paper on “Reading the Bible in an Asian Context” (cf. *SEDOS Bulletin*, vol. 28, n. 6/7, 15<sup>th</sup> June 1996) she promised the participants to produce an Asia reading guide on the Acts of the Apostles. She has now accomplished this task in connection with the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation, held in Lebanon in September 2002 as a help for the daily Encounter with the Word.

The booklet she produced for this occasion and purpose is called in Korean *Gong-Chaek*, meaning empty-book, *tabula rasa* in Latin. It is entitled: *ENCOUNTER WITH THE WORD — Word of God: A Blessing for All Nations — 12 Paths of the Acts of the Apostles*.

The 12 paths referred to in the title are 12 scenes or icons in the Acts where people in different contexts encounter the Word which becomes for them a path to life (cf. Acts 2,28). Each of these scenes or paths is presented according to the same scheme.

Let us take an example. On page 34 we read “Path Six” and underneath it in bold print and a different font: **“To bring my name”**. On the following page: **“Text 9,3-19”**, underneath: **“Theme: Proclaiming the Word”** and **“— In Damascus —”**. On the third page of each Path there is a Korean-style drawing of Ananias laying his hands on Saul, by artist Sr Regina Choi of the same Congregation. Finally, on the fourth page we read these words: “He is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring My Name before the Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel (9,15)”. Aside from these headings and the picture, the pages are absolutely empty — maybe to the surprise or disappointment of the Westerner who might have expected an Asian commentary on the Book of Acts.

For Sr Maura, the empty space is of “profound significance for the Word of God. In the midst of the flood of words nowadays, it is our task to recognize the Word of Life which enables us to live”. “The empty space indicates ‘the poor in spirit’ (Mt 5,3) as well as ‘the pure of heart’” (Mt 5,8). “We are all invited to listen to the Word speaking in silence and wanting to write both in the empty space within ourselves and on this work-book, the Gong-Chaek”.

For this to happen, Sr Maura proposes “Guidelines on the Path”, a method of listening and encountering the Word together, following five simple steps: Greetings and opening prayer; Reading the text aloud taking turns; Meditation on the text; Dialogue with companions; Group gathering and closing prayer. On three introductory pages of the booklet, Sr Maura elaborates these steps.

I asked one of the African participants about his peak experience during the Plenary Assembly. His immediate and spontaneous answer: “The encounter with the Word in the morning according to Sr Maura’s method”.

Sr Maura is offering complimentary copies, which are available at the SEDOS Office.

**Fr Ludger Feldkämper, SVD**

## *Coming Events* ---

### SEDOS Open Seminar

***Call to a new vision of others and of ourselves***  
***– Search for peace through interreligious dialogue –***

Rome

19-23 May 2003

5 afternoon sessions from 04.00 p.m. to 06.45 p.m.

The Seminar will not be residential. Further information will be given as soon as possible.

### *Working Groups*

Monday, 18 November, **Debt Group** 15:30 hrs at **SEDOS**

Monday, 16 December, **Bible and Mission Group** 15:30 hrs at **SEDOS**

Wednesday, 22 January, **China Group** 15:00 hrs at **SEDOS**