

TOWARD A NEW EVANGELIZATION

- Some Reflections regarding the Congregation of the Mission -1

Have you dreamt any dreams lately? Have you had any visions? In times of renewal, "young men see visions and old men dream dreams," the prophet Joel tells us.² In this time of renewal in the Congregation, I ask the Lord to stimulate all of us to new dreams and to new efforts at making them come true.

TOWARD A NEW EVANGELIZATION

Pope John Paul II has made the expression "new evangelization" part of the contemporary Catholic vocabulary. Few topics have received more attention in the Church in recent years. He speaks of an evangelization that is new in its ardor, in its methods and in its expression.³

But John Paul II's teaching has many antecedents over the last several decades. Noteworthy among these is John XXIII's opening address at the Second Vatican Council, where he called for a new expression of the Christian faith:

*The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another.*⁴

In the same discourse he also stated: "...at the same time she (the Church) must ever look to the present, to the new conditions and new forms of life introduced into the modern world which have opened new avenues...."⁵

The Medellín document, which had dramatic effects in Latin America, called for a re-evangelization of human existence.⁶ It envisioned a Latin American Church that would be an Evangelizer of the Poor, committed to living in solidarity with them.⁷ The final document at Puebla continued this analysis of a renewed evangelization.⁸ The Santo Domingo document, building on the experience of two decades, provides an extensive development of the contents of "new evangelization."⁹

¹Talk to members of the Eastern Province of the Congregation of the Mission in Philadelphia, June 1993.

²Jl 3:1; cf. also, Acts 2: 17.

³Discourse at the 19th Ordinary Assembly of CELAM, Haiti, March 9, 1983; also, in the Dominican Republic, October 12, 1984.

⁴John XXIII, Opening Address, October 11, 1962. Cf. Walter Abbot, ed. *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York, 1966) 715.

⁵*Ibid.* (Abbot, 714).

⁶Medellín, VIII, 8.

⁷Medellín, XIV, 8.

⁸Puebla, 340f.

⁹Santo Domingo, Conclusions 23ff.

Almost all commentators agree that Paul IV, while not using the term "new evangelization" is one of its principal architects. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* provides some of the richest source materials for the new evangelization¹⁰:

Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life.

Naturally, like many popular expressions, "new evangelization" has taken on a variety of meanings. Also, some controversy has arisen over the terms "new evangelization" or "re-evangelization," the role of the charismatic movement in the process of "new evangelization," the relationship in the past between "evangelization" and "colonization." Apart from these controversies, today I want to focus on the positive implications of a new evangelization.

SOME REACTIONS

1. *"Nothing is new."*

Of course, there are those who, like Qoheleth, feel that nothing is new under the sun.¹¹ There is a hidden truth in this assertion, but one that needs to be balanced by another truth. The New Testament provides a basis for those holding this position. "Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever."¹² The fullness of revelation has broken into history in the person of Jesus and the announcement of the Reign of God. So, "guard the deposit of faith."¹³ "If I preach any other gospel, let me be *anathema*."¹⁴

This fundamental stance emphasizes the *already*, sometimes at the expense of the *not yet*. It accents the basic creed, while being slow to acknowledge that there is development in credal statements.

2. *"Everything is new."*

Some are always in process. They are uneasy with the stable, the structured, the given. They are eager for the old things to pass away and for the new to emerge.

There are ample grounds for this position in the New Testament. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation."¹⁵ "Behold, all things are new."¹⁶ "I will create a new heaven and a new earth."¹⁷ The good news is *news*.

¹⁰*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 63.

¹¹Ecc 1:9.

¹²Heb 13:8.

¹³2 Tim 1:14.

¹⁴Gal 1:8.

¹⁵2 Cor 5:17.

¹⁶2 Cor 5:17.

This fundamental stance emphasizes the *not yet*, sometimes at the expense of the *already*. It accents the Church as mystery, as fathomless, as always revealing the inexhaustible riches of Christ. It cites the many historical instances of development of doctrine. It focuses today on the continually changing interface of Christ and culture.

Of course, the truth lies in a tension between these two views. As Matthew's gospel reminds us: "the wise steward brings forth from his storehouse new things and old."¹⁸

3. "What's new?"

Pope John Paul speaks¹⁹ of an evangelization that is new in its:

a. ardor

Here the emphasis is on the conversion of the evangelizer. "We have found the Messiah, the Christ," the disciples cry out in John's gospel.²⁰ Only someone who knows the Lord and loves him deeply can proclaim the word of God with joy, enthusiasm, conviction.

There are many ways of conversion. The focus in new evangelization is not on any particular path, like the charismatic movement, the neo-catechumenate, or the many new forms of community springing up in the Church, though many, in fact, are converted in and through new communities. One must surely be converted. Finding the way is the challenge.

In this light, the new evangelization raises a series of questions for us. Have I really found a way of conversion myself? Has the Congregation as a whole been genuinely converted? Has live contact with the poor been for us, as it was for St. Vincent, the path to conversion? Have the poor revealed to us how God sees the world's priorities?

b. methods

There are many new means at hand. They too pose enormously challenging questions to us.

Do many in the Church, or the Congregation, really use the mass media (TV, radio, movies, the press) as a means for evangelizing? Are there many provinces that have trained even one person in the use of the media and have organized one good media project? Do many in the Congregation use computers to full advantage in pastoral activities?

¹⁷Is 65:17; cf. Rev 21:1.

¹⁸Mt 13:52.

¹⁹Discourse given in Santo Domingo, Oct. 12, 1984.

²⁰Jn 1:41.

In our pastoral methodology, do we work not only *for* the poor, but *with* them?
Do we regard base communities as a peculiarly Latin American thing, or do we work at forming Christian communities wherever we evangelize?

c. expression

Every era and every place has its own language and its own culture, or its own languages and cultures. Today, differences in culture pose an increasing challenge, since we live in an information society, where rapid communication brings us into contact with the global community.

In the Church, we live in an ecumenical era. In philosophy and theology, hermeneutics play a very significant role. There is strong emphasis on the need for the inculturation of theology.

In fact, in contemporary Church documents, there are some accents that are quite new. I do not mean that they are completely new. Actually, you can find almost all of them, at least in some form, in the Fathers of the Church. But as the Church interfaces with contemporary societies and contemporary cultures, there is a new emphasis on:

- the preferential option for the poor
- the effects of sin on social structures
- the systemic aspects of justice and injustice
- life issues (war, peace-making, abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment)
- the erosion of family structures and sexual morality
- integral liberation
 - ecology

Beyond these new emphases in Church documents and contemporary theology, one can also discern in our 1984 Constitutions and in the official documents of the Congregation in recent years a number of significantly new accents:

- on Christ as the Evangelizer of the Poor
- on the link between Evangelization and action for justice
- on searching out the causes of poverty and concrete solutions
- on specializing in the Church's social teaching
- on investigating the new forms of poverty
- on being evangelized by the poor
- on the poor as not merely the object of Evangelization, but its subject
- on forming basic Christian communities
- on a global world-view.

A DESCRIPTION OF EVANGELIZATION AND SOME CRITICAL DISTINCTIONS

As a basis for the reflections that follow, I offer you this description of Evangelization²¹ used by Paul VI:

Evangelization is a complex process made up of varied elements: the renewal of humanity, witness, explicit proclamation, inner adherence, entry into the community, acceptance of signs, apostolic initiative. These elements may appear to be contradictory, indeed mutually exclusive. In fact they are complementary and mutually enriching. Each one must always be seen in relationship with the others.

From the writings of Paul VI and John Paul II, it is evident that evangelization has many facets, all of which play a significant role in the overall picture. Within that context, let me highlight two critical distinctions that play a significant role in describing Evangelization in the Vincentian tradition:

a. *we evangelize "by word and work"; we serve "spiritually and corporally"*

St. Vincent was deeply convinced of the link between what we say and what we do. Again and again, therefore, he spoke of Evangelization by "word and work." He calls both the Vincentians and Daughters of Charity to serve the poor "spiritually and corporally." When speaking to the members of the Congregation, he warned us²²:

If there are any among us who think they are in the Congregation of the Mission to preach the gospel to the poor but not to comfort them, to supply their spiritual but not their temporal wants, I reply that we ought to assist them and have them assisted in every way, by ourselves and by others.... To do this is to preach the gospel by words and by works.

He tells the Daughters of Charity again and again that their works must be accompanied by words of faith.²³

First, do. Then, teach. That is St. Vincent's rule for "effective" evangelization. In other words, St. Vincent sees preaching and human promotion as complementary to one another, and as integral to the evangelization process.

b. *evangelization can be direct/indirect*

Neither St. Vincent nor the history of the Congregation provide any grounds for a fundamentalism in regard to evangelization of the poor. St. Vincent clearly recognized that not all could serve the poor directly and that some would necessarily serve them indirectly. He handled this dispute in his own lifetime. As

²¹Evangelii Nuntiandi, 24.

²²SV XII, 87.

²³SV IX, 59; IX, 593; XI, 364; XI, 592.

examples, he cites seminary teachers and directors of the Daughters of Charity. He saw their role as necessary if the poor were to be served well. There will always be cases like that.

There is a need for caution in using the direct/indirect distinction. It must be evoked with great moderation. Unless a very large number of our members is involved in direct evangelization we will hardly merit the name "missionaries."

TOWARD A NEW EVANGELIZATION IN THE CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION

Our most recent General Assembly calls the Congregation to make six commitments:

1. **Remembering that St. Vincent's encounter with the poor was a decisive factor in his life, we will have personal contact with people whom our society has disinherited and abandoned.**

This is the peculiarly Vincentian way of conversion. It is not the only one, of course. But it is the way that St. Vincent trod and the way in which he calls the Company to walk. If the new evangelization is one that is to be new in its ardor, then it must rest upon the foundation of a genuine conversion.

Let me simply add here that the controlling *spiritual* force that will enable us to live out this first commitment of the General Assembly is the lived conviction that we who are Vincentians follow Christ *as the Evangelizer of the Poor*. Focus on, and commitment to, *this* Christ is the heart of Vincentian spirituality.

Is it really possible for everyone to have first-hand contact with the poor? The Superior General surely does very little in that regard. Certainly not everyone can have as his principal ministry one which brings him into direct contact with the poor. But I would suggest that for most of us it is possible to have at least *some* direct contact, even if not every day.

2. **Recognizing the complexity of our world today, we will investigate and urge others to study the root causes of poverty in order "to promote long and short term solutions, which are concrete, flexible and efficacious."²⁴**

The *direct/indirect* distinction comes into play here. Does one do more good by ministering directly to the hungry person, giving him food, or by investigating the causes of famine, and working toward a resolution of the problem? The pope calls on us as Vincentians to use our gifts not only in direct service to the poor, but also in the kind of indirect service that will be even more beneficial in the long run.

The Congregation can play a very significant role here. We have formidable educational and financial resources for investigating the causes of poverty.

²⁴Address of John Paul II to the delegates at the General Assembly of 1986.

Recently, I met with the presidents of three of our Vincentian-sponsored universities to encourage them to mobilize the energies of their faculties, staff, and students to study the root causes of poverty and search for solutions. Through two very generous donations, the University of St. John's in New York has now established a Vincentian Chair of Social Justice.

In our preaching, we can also encourage others to develop a global world-view, and challenge them to make their own an ethic in which justice is a foundation stone.

Are there ways in which we can engage in a critique of contemporary society from the point of view of justice? Anyone living in Italy, as I do, is very conscious today of the need to evangelize economic and political life, since gospel values and ethical values have given way to wholesale corruption. The same is true in many countries.

This kind of critical, prophetic role of the Church and of theology, of course, creates a new relationship between the Church with the world, not one of alliance with the powerful, but of solidarity with the oppressed and defense of the rights of the poor.

3. **We will give a privileged place in our own formation and in the formation of priests and laity to a spirit of dialogue and collaboration with contemporary society, in the light of the social teaching of the Church. The goal will be to promote creative solidarity in favor of the poor, who long for their own liberation and personal well-being.**

Let me make three points here:

- a. The General Assembly speaks of dialogue with contemporary society. I hereby appeal to all candidates for the Congregation, and as many members as possible, to become bi-lingual. Dialogue and mobility in contemporary society demand it. In the United States, for example, almost 50% of the Catholics do not speak English as their first language. Spanish has become an essential tool for a missionary there.

St. Vincent felt strongly about the need to learn other languages. He told the confreres²⁵:

Now the diversity of languages is very great, not only in Europe, Africa and Asia, but also in Canada. For we see by the reports of the Jesuit Fathers that there are as many languages as there are tribes. The Hurons do not speak like the Iroquois, nor the latter like their neighbors. And a person who understands one group of Indians does not understand the others.

²⁵SV XII, 26-27.

How then can Missionaries, bearing these differences of language in mind, go throughout the world announcing the Gospel if they know only their own language?

b. The statement also speaks of the social teaching of the Church. Are there ways in which not just our educational institutions, but all of us, can communicate the Church's social doctrine more effectively. Pope John Paul II writes very forcefully in *Centesimus Annus*²⁶: "The 'new evangelization' which the modern world urgently needs and which I have emphasized many times, must include among its essential elements *a proclamation of the Church's social doctrine.*" The Church has been proclaiming this doctrine in a rather clear way now for more than 100 years. Are Catholics really well evangelized in this regard? Is this social doctrine part of their explicit consciousness? Are we Vincentians "experts" in teaching this social doctrine?

c. Do the clergy and laity in whose formation we assist really become "experts" in the Church's social doctrine? Do they look back on their Vincentian teachers and directors with gratitude for having moved them to drink deeply from this rich source?

4. **We will give to all our pastoral activity a clear missionary character, attending to the most abandoned and marginated and fostering the effective participation of everyone in the life of the Christian community. We will be ready to hand our work over to others when we consider our mission completed.**

The key here is mobility. The missionary's goal is the formation of new or renewed local communities. He is aware that there are "other villages where the gospel must be preached"²⁷ and that therefore his time commitment in a given place is limited. When the Christian community is self-sufficient, the missionary moves on.

The statement speaks of the effective participation of everyone in the life of the Christian community. Today we are aware that the poor are not just the *object* of evangelization, but its *subject*. The poor themselves evangelize. Our evangelization is *with* and *for* them.

Consequently, the new evangelization calls for a new way of being for the missionary. His ministry is characterized by community-building, by the active participation of all, by the distribution of functions, by the emergence of new ministries and charisms, by solidarity with the oppressed.²⁸

I must raise a question here that pertains to Vincentians in many parts of the world. There are now hundreds of thousands of basic Christian communities

²⁶*Centesimus Annus*, 5.

²⁷Cf. Mk 1:38.

²⁸Leonardo Boff, *Nova Evangelização. Perspectiva dos Oprimidos* (Fortaleza: Vozes, 1990) 122-26. In this very interesting work, the author also mentions new *contents* in the new evangelization: a new kind of spirituality, a new relationship of the Church with the world. In regard to *method*, he focuses especially on the poor as the *subject* of evangelization.

throughout the world. More and more in these communities, the gospel is read together and meditated on, interpreted in an environment of prayer and communal sharing, and lived in relationship to the problems within the people's culture. Has this mode of evangelization been sufficiently explored and put into practice in the Congregation?

What is being described here, in the second, third, and fourth commitments cited above, is a very demanding pastoral methodology,²⁹ which had already been outlined in the document "Visitors in Service of the Mission":

- *to work within the world of the poor (the poor as a class), not just with isolated persons (Lines of Action 1986, 4 and 11);*
- *to work on the level of structures, not just in responding to particular situations (Lines of Action 1986, 6 and 11);*
- *to work to confront injustice, not just to meet the needs of individual poor people (Lines of Action 1986, 4 and 11);*
- *to work with groups (small communities), so that the poor person is an agent, and not simply an object, of evangelization (Lines of Action 1986, 4 and 11).*

5. **We will foster the work of the popular missions and the missions *ad gentes*, working for the creation, the growth and the maturity of Christian communities, which will be both evangelized and evangelizing and which will promote the integral development of persons.**

Centesimus Annus puts the challenge very clearly³⁰:

Present circumstances are leading to a reaffirmation of the positive value of an authentic theology of integral human liberation.

Integral development and integral liberation are two key phrases in our own documents and in those of Pope John Paul II. Integral human liberation embraces all the aspects of people's lives: personal, social, intellectual, affective, cultural, religious.

Renewed popular missions and missions *ad gentes* will develop new methods for fostering integral liberation, a new pedagogy that is adapted to the oppressed,³¹ where the educator and those being educated learn mutually, where we not only evangelize but are evangelized by the poor.

As in Jesus' ministry, so also in the new evangelization there will also be new recipients of evangelization: the culture, popular religiosity, marginalized women, prostitutes, street people, AIDS victims, those without housing.

²⁹Cf. "Visitors in Service of the Mission" (Jan. 25, 1990), 16.

³⁰*Centesimus Annus*, 26.

³¹Cf. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

6. **Our Congregation commits itself in Eastern Europe to at least one missionary project as a concrete sign of our community's participation in New Evangelization.**

As you know, we sent three missionaries to Albania last year and two more this year (there are also three groups of Daughters of Charity). Although one hears less of Albania, it is probably the poorest country in all of Europe. Nothing functions and nothing is available. The economic and political structure of the country was utterly devastated during the years of communist domination.

We now also have missionaries working in the Ukraine, in Byelorussia, and Lithuania. We hope to send more.

Let me conclude by asking these fundamental questions. Can the Church, as it commits itself to a new evangelization, really become a church of the poor, as Pope John XXIII called it to be in his opening address at Vatican II? Will we, the members of the Congregation of the Mission, really be followers of Christ *as the Evangelizer of the Poor*, as our Constitutions call us to be? Will our provinces really be communities of priests and brothers evangelizing the poor and leading others to evangelize them, as their apostolic plans envision? The answer can surely be *yes* to all these questions.

And if we succeed in undergoing a profound conversion, and in engaging in a new evangelization, will all this result, as Jaroslav Pelican suggests, in "new persecutions"?³²

³²Cf. Jaroslav Pelican, *Jesus through the Centuries* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985) 51.