

EVANGELIZATION, CULTURE AND SPIRITUALITY

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THE DEADLINE FOR THIS ARTICLE COINCIDED with the end of the Synod of Bishops for Africa. This article considers the issue which in fact represents the dominant theme of that Synod – the relationship between gospel and culture and the need for a spirituality which should enable us to witness to God’s kingdom in the multi-cultural contexts in which we live.

‘Restorationist’ evangelization

There are many in the Church who view the present with trepidation. They see a Church in danger of being engulfed under waves of secularism and materialism, with a consequent loss of so-called traditional values and a weakening of the authority and influence of the Church. Many think that those trends must be reversed. This is the ‘restorationist’ position, which seeks to deny the irreversible consequences of secularization and the de-imperializing and de-territorializing of religion.

‘Evangelization’ in the context of this mind-set involves two complementary strategies: the re-evangelization of the old Christian countries by the restoration of Christian societies, and the exportation of that same societal model by the implantation of the Church where it is not yet present.

In this understanding of evangelization there is an a-critical identification of the gospel with one particular culture, and evangelization is identified with the rebuilding of that universally valid culture. In fact what is advocated is the return of Christendom: a theocracy where the Church controls public life.

This integrist outlook on evangelization, by identifying the Church and the gospel with one particular culture, precludes any meaningful discussion of the relationship between gospel and culture in a pluricultural Church.

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A lesson from Africa

If one had to identify the single most important theme debated in the Synod for Africa, it would be without any doubt inculturation. Africa witnesses to the consequences of an evangelization achieved by the imposition of a foreign cultural framework. The foremost concern of missionaries was the implantation of the Church in African soil, without taking into account African ways of life. This neglect has been the source of a lack of integration between the Church's life and the needs of African Christians – an uneasiness which causes deep pain.

It is in trying to ease that pain that we have discovered the need to dissociate the gospel from the cultural western dress with which it was transplanted in order to evangelize in a way which will take into account the variety of cultures.

A theology of culture

It is through evangelization that the Church reaches out and meets human beings who are already shaped by culture. A culture is a particular way of being human, of understanding the world and of structuring human existence, which is shared by a group of people. It expresses itself through a complex symbolic system in which language plays a central role, through a set of institutions and through ritualized behaviour. It is adaptable to changing circumstances and transmitted from generation to generation. But in order to understand the dynamic of the encounter between the Church and culture, we need more than that description. We need a theology of culture which applies also to the Church.

All cultures are ambiguous. They are at the same time 'sym-bolic' and 'dia-bolic'. These two words will be used here in their etymological meaning of 'uniting' and 'separating' respectively. On the one hand, cultures institutionalize, under the guidance of the Spirit which inhabits every heart, everything which helps to grow, to personalize and to build community; in this sense they are 'sym-bolic'. They bring together, they unite, they heal, they are life-giving and life-sustaining. On the other hand, like every human reality, cultures are under the inexorable law of death: they are continually threatened by corruption. In a word, they are 'dia-bolic'. This dia-bolic side of cultures is their potential for death and destruction, for exclusivity and intolerance, for institutionalizing oppression and injustice, for justifying the raw use of power, for exploiting the poor, for debasing women, for wasting the earth, for penalizing dissent, for idolizing the individual, for banning dreams and dreamers, for stoning and crucifying prophets . . . Open any newspaper and you will see that the list extends *ad infinitum*.

Every vision of the world and every faith has to express itself in a symbolic system and thus become culture. Even the Christian churches face a continuous process in which faith as the reception of the gospel searches for cultural expression. Therefore all Christian cultures continue to be sym-bolic (life-enhancing) in the measure that they are faithful to the gospel, but without ever totally neutralizing the dia-bolic.

This theology of culture brings us to an important conclusion. On the one hand every culture, Christian or non-Christian, religious or secular, is already 'evangelized' in the measure that it is open to the sym-bolic action of God's Spirit which reconciles and draws all mankind together. At the same time, every culture is in need of an evangelization which challenges its dia-bolic tendencies.

But do not be too quick to despise any culture because of its dark side. Things become even worse when cultures disintegrate, because when that happens they lose their sym-bolic side, their capacity for togetherness and community, and they dissolve into a jungle of individualism. This is what is happening in the rich countries of the world where community is being destroyed, where technology replaces values, where a flood of so-called information exiles wisdom, where 'society' is considered irrelevant and is systematically destroyed so as to give free rein to the individual, where lost social cohesion is replaced progressively by police coercion, where a small minority claims the total right to exploit the world, its peoples and its resources at the cost of suffering and death on an apocalyptic scale, and where individual is pitted against individual in a frenetic pursuit of the accumulation of wealth and power. All of this goes under the name of 'global culture', but is nothing other than dia-bolic anti-culture, intent on bulldozing all the richness and diversity of human living which lies in its path.

The gospel as sym-bolic

It is because we recognize the dia-bolic in all human societies and cultures that we need to find an energy that can counteract it. In our Christian experience we trust in the gospel as constituting the sym-bolic system capable of overcoming the dia-bolic in the world.

The Christian gospel is the proclamation that in and through Jesus all brokenness can be healed, enemies can be reconciled, devils and the dia-bolic can be exorcised, and that this happens not only to those who are aware of the life-giving Spirit of Jesus living in their midst, but to the whole world which groans to be freed of its slavery. What we proclaim is the reality of a new life and a new humanity in Jesus. This new life is not proclaimed by the instantaneous and magic disappearance of all the

dia-bolic in the world. It is proclaimed by the emergence of realities which are symbols of the healing of a broken world. Jesus Christ is the sym-bol who dispels all that is dia-bolic; in exhaling his Spirit, Jesus reconciles, reassembles humanity from the four corners where it has been scattered.

The gospel is the proclamation of liberation. It is not surprising, therefore, that it will be those in most need of liberation who will be the hearers of the gospel: the poor, the captives, the lame and the crippled, the prostitutes, tax collectors and sinners. It is the unloved, the broken, that is the dia-bolic, who will be able to hear the gospel as gospel. The righteous, the satisfied and the rich are scandalized by a God who bypasses them and prefers the oppressed and the sinners. It is by converting all those who are 'no-people' into a people that the gospel proves that it is really liberating, reconciling the irreconcilable.

But from the beginning the mystery of the triumph of life over death could only be expressed and transmitted by the symbolic systems built up through the ages in different cultures. The 'pure' gospel does not exist. The gospel comes to us in fact through its interplay with at least three cultural strands, the Aramaic, the Jewish and the Greek, bursting out of them and stretching the possibilities of the languages to breaking point. Fortunately, the reality of the kingdom shapes a new reality that is greater and more mysterious than the words in which it is expressed.

The community as gospel

The good news had become flesh in Jesus, in the signs that he performed and in his sacrificial love. The kingdom was already present in Jesus and what he proclaimed was not himself but the coming of a kingdom of justice, peace and love. When he went, his symbolic Spirit – received through faith which in itself is a sym-bolic mode – gave birth to another historical reality which would take up the challenge of demonstrating to the world that the new life received through Christ could overcome the dia-bolic. That new historical reality, which is symbol and instrument of the emerging new life and of the coming of the kingdom, is the community of believers.

The New Testament is an historical proclamation of the faith of the early Christian communities in the coming of the kingdom and takes the form of a diptych: the coming of the kingdom is proved both in Jesus' life and ministry and in the life of the Christian community.

The Christian community becomes then, after the death of Jesus, the means and the content of the message: the community witnesses by its communion to the liberating and reconciling potentiality of the gospel.

Communion is the proof that the Spirit bequeathed to the believers can sufficiently overcome the dia-bolic which exists in all of us, that is, everything that keeps us apart, and can bring us into one community, into one people of God. The Church becomes the symbol of the kingdom in a double way: it points to the fullness of the kingdom and it continues to give it birth.

The presence of the sym-bolic Spirit in the Christian community is not self-evident. It is clothed in ambiguity because of the persistence of the dia-bolic in all Christian cultures. Christianity can only exist as communities enmeshed in human culture. Even the New Testament is not simply gospel; it is already a complex set of emerging Christian cultures with their own structures and meanings, their rituals, social institutions, practices and prohibitions.

In fact, the New Testament describes a paradigmatic process of evangelization. In this process there is a profound challenge by the Christian faith to many aspects of the surrounding cultures, but there is also a failure to detect the dia-bolic in many of the attitudes and practices adopted by the community. See for example the defence of slavery by Paul, the position of women in the Church, the rituals borrowed from Judaism and Hellenism . . . The Church has continued through the ages to develop its own particular cultural characteristics by borrowing from the surrounding cultures; in many cases this has happened a-critically. History shows innumerable examples of how the Church risks being absorbed by the surrounding culture when the gospel ceases to be the driving force in the intercultural encounter.

The Christian community is addressed by, and witnesses to, the symbolic creativity of the gospel, but in its ambiguity it continually demonstrates its own need of being evangelized. Christian communities are earthen jars containing a treasure. Mysteriously, some succeed in catching a glimpse of the treasure in the presence of these communities, while many never see beyond the earthen jar.

A two-way evangelization

Evangelization in this framework is witnessing to the liberating, reconciling, sym-bolic love of God for a sinful (dia-bolic) world. Evangelization is an essential stage of the outpouring of agape, which transforms the world into the kingdom of justice, peace and love. Believers witness to the liberating and reconciling efficacy of the kingdom by being a community where faith and life, gospel and culture are in the process of being integrated. It is this process of integration which allows a community to be a witness and an agent of liberation and reconciliation for all.

The Christian community witnesses to the kingdom primarily by demonstrating that it is possible to overcome the dia-bolic in the world where it lives. The gospel challenges the different forms of slavery that people endure: the slavery of foreign domination and cultural imposition, the slavery of the powerful and their oppressive economic and political structures, the slavery of consumerism and individualism, the slavery of male domination. But the community is only credible when it challenges those forms of slavery in itself before addressing the world at large. It is only a community in the process of conversion which has the right to denounce the dia-bolic in the world.

This is the fundamental ministry for which Christian communities are sent into the world. The communities are the administrators of God's all-embracing love. God's hidden plan is made manifest in our days in and by the Christian communities. The invisible becomes visible in symbols: in ritual, in representation, in remembrance, in celebration, in anything by which the community expresses itself as community.

The Christian community challenges the world to conversion on the strength of the gospel, but because the community itself is in continual need of conversion, evangelization cannot be simply a one-way affair as it was traditionally understood and as the restorationist would like us to believe. It is possible to uncover the dia-bolic in one's own culture by introspection and self-criticism, but it is my contention that the privileged way in which evangelization happens is by the encounter between different cultural mind-sets.

This in fact has been the surprising experience of myself and others who went to encounter other cultures with a one-sided idea of evangelization. In the process of evangelizing we have found ourselves 'evangelized'. The sym-bolic in the peoples and cultures that we have met in the missionary context has made us aware of how much there was in us which needed radical criticism: our individualism, our cultural and religious superiority complex, our lack of hospitality, our paternalism and power games . . . It is in the measure that we accept the life-giving Spirit which lives and acts in other religions and cultures that we can claim the right to challenge their dia-bolic sides.

Re-evangelization of the Christian community, if understood in a restorationist sense, is an illusion. However, there is a need for continuous self-criticism by communal discernment of the spirits and a sustained effort of exposure to the gospel in the search for greater fidelity, transparency and quality of witnessing. Our efforts of fidelity to the gospel are undertaken fundamentally for the sake of a more transparent transmission of the gospel to the world.

Evangelization, inculturation and liberation

This reflection brings together two theological strands: inculturation and liberation theology. Both liberation theology and the theology of inculturation have sprung from the same dynamic: the encounter of Christian communities with the world to be evangelized. The gospel is necessarily liberating and there is no doubt that the Latin Americans are right to indict the oppressive character of their political and economic structures as the most dia-bolic aspect of their situation. Those promoting inculturation, mainly in Africa and Asia, experience the superimposition of foreign cultures, at both the social and the religious level, as that which oppresses them most. The basic concern of both theologies is common: liberation from the dia-bolic as experienced in their own situation. And in fact both look for a language, for an integrated Christian culture, which will make the gospel understandable and credible. In their own ways both theologies look for an integration between faith and life for the sake of the credibility of the gospel and both see in the community at ground level the agent of evangelization.

Christians meeting the poor neglected by the institutional Church have been challenged to a radical 'option for the poor'; other Christians, meeting the traditional cultures and religions of Africa and Asia, have been forced to question radically their previous identification of the gospel with their particular western culture.

A spirituality for evangelization

This view of evangelization challenges us to convert from an individualist spirituality fundamentally concerned with an other-worldly salvation, to a communitarian spirituality which, free from the concern for salvation, is concerned with structuring the Christian community in a way that fits it for liberation, integration and reconciliation.

Salvation spirituality

I grew up in a Catholic Church which instilled in us an overriding concern for individual salvation. That salvation had to be assured by fidelity to the teachings of the Church and by faithful church practice. There was a concern for personal avoidance of sin and individual growth in holiness by the personal imitation of Christ in order to attain a state of perfection. The main tools which maintained that tension towards holiness and salvation were individual 'spiritual exercises': personal prayer and devotions, the individual examination of conscience with individual spiritual direction for the privileged few and the individual approach to the use of the sacraments. All this corresponded

to a paradigm which saw the Church as being the exclusive 'ark of salvation' in an evil and sinful world, with the monopoly of the means of salvation.

This is not a deforming caricature of reality. Many years of pastoral work and experience in the renewal of religious proves to me that this kind of spirituality was shared by the overwhelming majority of Catholics previous to the Second Vatican Council and continues to have an enormous influence. Still now the energy of many, religious and lay, is directed to this gaining of salvation after death.

A sym-bolic communitarian spirituality

One of the most impressive and moving effects of the second Vatican Council is the spread among many Catholics of a profoundly liberating salvational optimism. All of a sudden we finally realise that we can trust God to take care of our salvation because he is a merciful and compassionate father who loves his sinful children and has taken exceptional steps to prove that to us.

Our main concern therefore is not our salvation, but rather to be compassionate and merciful towards a broken and sinful world, offering to it healing and wholeness. The spirituality that we need therefore is a 'sym-bolic' spirituality. In fact this spirituality can be defined in the terms in which we have defined culture. The spirituality that we need is an integrated system of meanings and values subsisting in symbols (including language), institutions and rituals which enables us, as communities, to witness to the fulfilling, liberating and reconciling possibilities of the kingdom in ways that can be understood by the peoples that we meet.

The main concern here is not salvation, but the structuring of the believing community for evangelization. Spirituality is thus not for salvation, but for the sake of others.

In the vision that I have tried to outline it is clear that the responsibility for evangelization does not fall on individual missionaries but on the basic Christian communities. The overriding characteristic of the spirituality needed for evangelization is that it must be *communitarian*. The Christian commitment is necessarily personal, but it can only be lived in the context of a communitarian project and commitment. We are talking of a spirituality that demands co-responsibility, collaboration and sharing in decision-making at all levels. This communitarian spirituality is not based on an individualistic 'imitation of Christ', but on the paradigm of the Jerusalem community.

Because the community gathered as an answer to the gospel is symbolic, that is, it witnesses to the reconciling dynamism of the gospel and

offers that dynamism to all, Christian life becomes necessarily a *communitarian ritual life*. Ritual is an acting out by a group of the vision that drives it and gives it cohesion. But rituals are not an aim in themselves. Their aim is to motivate the participants to act out in their daily life what the ritual celebrates. Rituals remind us of the need to live a ritual existence. The eucharist, in which we 'play' at being the kingdom, sends us into the world with renewed commitment to be in the midst of the world a Christian community which is seen as reconciling and liberating by the way it lives. In the midst of the world we are called to be a symbol of the kingdom of justice, peace and love.

This ritual existence integrates faith and life. Faith is a sym-bolic mode, an artistic look at the world which enables us to see the unseen in the seen, to interpret events as the proof of a God who cares. Christian communitarian life is the acting out of faith: the sym-bolic event which grows out of the sym-bolic Christ event. The communitarian spirituality is therefore a spirituality which totally integrates religion with daily living: its aim is to structure daily living as a proof of the coming of the kingdom.

It should be clear by now that the spirituality of the Christian community should be a spirituality which enables inculturation as the essential condition of a commitment to liberation. *Inculturation* demands a listening to the Spirit that works in all human hearts and cultures, respecting it and appreciating it, but also a boldness which can denounce the narrowness and the dehumanizing aspects of all cultures while letting those cultures challenge our own dia-bolic sides. *Liberation* demands a total commitment to freedom, to life and to peace, together with the readiness to endure oppressive structures while denouncing them in the name of the kingdom. This spirituality is essentially a 'political' spirituality, because it is rooted in the reality of people's needs.

In the writing of these lines I have found myself battling with the difficulty of finding a consistent language. A new paradigm has to become a new culture, and a new culture and spirituality need a new language. We need a *theologically correct language* which expresses the communitarian option for evangelization as a service to the world. Just as a hint, we can say that basically we need a mentality expressing itself easily in the kind of language which in Greek uses the prefix 'syn', in Latin and Latin languages the prefix 'con' and in English the preposition 'with'. In the communitarian model we are, live and work 'with': with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and with one another.

We should also research the consequences of these changes for *training* for ministries. At the moment, the greater part of this training is

individual and therefore quite unsuitable for encouraging and assessing collaborative learning. There is also the difficulty that the community model requires the development of feminine qualities of nurturing and unconditional acceptance, whereas the previous model favoured male characteristics of order, government and control.

The continuous structuring of the Christian community as a symbolic reality has as its privileged tool *communitarian discernment of spirits*, which is not simply an intellectual exercise but takes the form of a ritual harmonizing event. The discernment of spirits – whether it be called the hermeneutical circle or the pastoral cycle, or the ‘see-judge-act’ method – is by its own nature a healing ritual. It enables the community to grow as an agent of inculturation and liberation for the sake of the total reconciliation of the world and the annihilation of all the dia-bolic by the final triumph of that love which is not only in the heart of God, but which is God himself.