

# A DIFFERENT GOSPEL?

## Evangelization Among 'The People'

By CARL F. STARKLOFF

*I am amazed that you have been so quickly turned away from the one who called you in the grace of Jesus Christ to a different gospel – as if there were any other.*

Galatians 1:6

**I**N JUNE OF 1993 I PARTICIPATED in a gathering of some forty persons devoted to the healing both of the planet and of the relationships between Euro-American and Amerindian peoples. Inevitably in such conferences over the last two decades, the churches and missionaries receive more than the lion's share of shrill recrimination, and this conference was no exception. It was only when I joined a smaller gathering conducted by a Navajo Presbyterian minister that a more measured and more typically low-key native opinion came to the fore. The conversation did of course deal with the widespread historical obtuseness of missionaries towards aboriginal cultures, and the Euro-Americans in particular hastened to mount the denunciatory bandwagon. Nonetheless, our native group leader, having told his life story in a nutshell, was adhering rather serenely to his Christian vocation. 'May I inquire', I asked, 'why you choose to remain a Christian?' His response was quiet but immediate: 'The Resurrection'.

This should not have surprised me, since I have been aware that Navajo tradition, for all its remarkable richness and beauty, does not possess a hopeful belief in the after-life, as many aboriginal traditions do, and the Navajos have a special abhorrence, not for death itself, but for the dead. This minister of the Church, cutting through layers of apologetics and cultural debate, came straight to the point: in Jesus Christ we have the promise of a blessed life beyond the grave and in communion with all God's people. This is finally why the Christian message could be 'gospel' to one who knows both his own traditions and those of Christianity, even though for an entire half-millennium his people have not experienced much good news at the hands of Europeans. It is my recollection of this man's testimony that accompanies me in this response to the question, 'Why evangelization . . . and for what?'

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The 'other gospel' that fell under the invective of St Paul as heterodox and destructive of the young Christian mission was not one of those many saving messages circulating throughout the gentile Mediterranean world, although some scholars have wondered if perhaps some kinds of gnosticism were involved. No, the object of Paul's anger was within his own community; it was a reactionary message promulgated by 'Judaizing' Christians to the effect that salvation had to involve circumcision and an entire corpus of 'law'. For Paul, there was no other gospel than the good news of Jesus Christ and the life lived in obedience to him.

This story is marked by a complex irony. Those Jewish Christians, sprung from the people of Yahweh like the Pharisees with whom Jesus so often tangled, feared (probably in all sincerity!) the loss of their own cultural heritage in the universalist preaching of Paul and the 'Council of Jerusalem'. We must reckon with the presence of similarly profound attachments to cultural heritage in all the nations – *panta ta ethnē* (Mt 28:19) – if we are to understand and practise the inculturation now advocated by the Church. This principle must be applied to the many non-European cultures (to risk a negative definition) and especially to aboriginal cultures, whose original tribal names almost universally translate as 'the people' or a near equivalent. In the spirit of Paul, we have to ask ourselves in what ways 'another gospel' is still being imposed on them in the form of cultural requirements elevated to a religious imperative. This is a problem that both excites and baffles the imagination, boggles the mind, and often daunts the courage of all who seek to deal with it. But it is at the heart of the praxis of evangelization.

In the course of over three decades of ministry and friendship with many Amerindian persons and communities, I have witnessed ways in which many have sought consolation and good news by turning from the Church to various tribal 'revitalization movements'; in many instances people have simply maintained themselves at equilibrium by practising both Christian and native ways.<sup>1</sup> From the time of European colonization, many 'prophet movements' have grown up under the inspiration of charismatic dreamer-visionaries and helped a people under siege, restoring them to a life that had been snatched from them. I must resist here the temptation to enter into this dramatic history.

I suggest four themes that the challenge of an inculturated evangelization presents to us. First, there is the very nature of evangelization or evangelism, especially as this has been promulgated by Pope John Paul II under the title of 'the new evangelization'. The second theme is summed up under the ways in which liberation theology and the

theology of interreligious dialogue have appealed to marginalized aboriginal peoples. Third, I shall discuss the challenges thrown up to Christians, calling them to a renewed and more inclusive spirituality of evangelization. Finally, I shall briefly argue for the importance of a sound theology of inculturation, and dare to suggest that evangelization has a very necessary 'left brain' dimension.

*Evangelism and the new evangelization*

While some authors distinguish evangelization (the practice of proclaiming the gospel) from evangelism (as an attitude or mentality), the late distinguished South African theologian David Bosch fused the two in this definition:

Evangelism is the proclamation of salvation in Christ to those who do not believe in him, calling them to repentance and conversion, announcing forgiveness of sins, and inviting them to become living members of Christ's earthly community and to begin a life of service to others in the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

Bosch's definition is carefully worded to avoid any sign of 'exclusivity', that is, of an attitude that those outside the Christian fold are lost. Nonetheless, 'pluralists' (those who hold that there are many ways of salvation and that no way is privileged) are quite uncomfortable with such a definition. 'Inclusivists' (those who hold that salvation can be found in other traditions but that this occurs basically through Jesus Christ) will nuance the definition. Both groups will refrain from proselytizing among believers in other religions, but they (inclusivists at least) do not hesitate to invite seekers to join Christian communities. I place my own thinking within this latter group, even though the remainder of the present essay does not deal with 'other religions' but rather with a form of 'the new evangelization'.

The globe-trotting campaign of Pope John Paul II has given a very special colouring to the concept of re-evangelization, of particular relevance to my concern with Christians among the ranks of native communities. In his 1991 encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, the Pope reaffirms the Church's mandate to proclaim to all 'the nations' an unmistakable christocentric message, even as he insists that any acceptance of this message must be a free acceptance. The Church thus understood is the sign and instrument of salvation, and its witness is 'inclusivistic' in holding that salvation in Christ is available to all, whether Christian or not.<sup>3</sup> In this document, the Kingdom of God is the central focus of the preaching of Jesus and of the Church, whose sign-actions heralding the

Kingdom are healing, forgiveness and transformed human relationships.<sup>4</sup> While the Pope emphasizes that all healing and transformation has finally a transcendent horizon, that horizon includes the quest for temporal well-being.<sup>5</sup> Chapter III proclaims that the Holy Spirit is the 'principal agent of mission', primarily through gathering people to hear the gospel. Thus, in summary, the mission to the nations includes personal witness in the lives of Christians, followed in due order by proclamation, conversion and baptism, ensuing ultimately in the local church.<sup>6</sup> The missionary vocation is summed up in the symbol of incarnation of the gospel in cultures, or 'inculturation'.<sup>7</sup>

My own reading of the encyclical, however impressive its careful explanation of terms and however wide its coverage of essential themes, left me dissatisfied in my desire to understand what evangelization must be today among the world's aboriginal peoples, especially in my own ministry in North America. While the Pope cautions readers that inculturation is necessarily a slow and painstaking process,<sup>8</sup> the encyclical does not in itself address the problem of the many 'false starts' in the evangelization of aboriginal peoples, and of the errors and sins of the Church in its history of mission, especially its entanglements with European 'Christendom'.

However, *Redemptoris missio* is only one of many statements by Pope John Paul II on evangelization. For the purpose of this article, I rely on the serviceable essay by Claude Champagne, who has carefully summarized papal teachings on evangelization, and thus introduces some important elements into our search for a deeper understanding of the Church's witness.<sup>9</sup> This lengthy article highlights what seems to be the Pope's primary concern – the question of *re-evangelization*. This theme includes five major points: 1) the presupposition of a 'first evangelization', 2) the emergence of a new situation and the need for a new evangelization (*nouvelle annonce*), 3) the theory and practice of inculturation, 4) concern for the baptized who have abandoned the faith, and 5) a call for renewed 'ardour, method and expression'.<sup>10</sup> All of these concerns are deeply pertinent to the context of native North American ministry, although the primary papal concerns seem to be the losses to the Church in secularized western Europe and North America, and the post-Communist revitalization of the Church in eastern Europe. One does find frequent reference in papal documents to new styles of mission in Africa, and several speeches there, in Australia and the Americas, touch my present concerns.

In general, according to Champagne, the Pope is calling for a deepening (*approfondissement*) and a new affirmation of the faith in this

renewal of effort to transform cultures.<sup>11</sup> Especially for Latin America, the terms 'ardour, method and expression' of evangelization are again affirmed, as typified by more priestly vocations, lay ministry formation and liberation of the oppressed in the creation of a 'civilization of love'.<sup>12</sup> The components of such evangelization in the Third World (and, I add here, in the 'fourth world' of North American aboriginal peoples) are: a spirit of enterprise or perhaps 'adventure' (*entreprendre*), deepening (*approfondir*), and renewal (*renouveler*).<sup>13</sup> Understood in such a dynamic are: deeper penetration into culture by the gospel, promotion of justice and development, just distribution of wealth, and a new assertion of human dignity.<sup>14</sup> We find here, therefore, not an individualistic witness, but an emphasis on 'group evangelization'.<sup>15</sup> Champagne sums up the papal teaching: the new evangelization must occur 'where the different religions and cultures meet, at the very crossroads of social, political and economic forms of today's world'.<sup>16</sup>

#### *Liberation and dialogue*

Among theological books which address the situations of Amerindian peoples, and might serve further to 'deepen' the papal teaching (albeit that some fail to find acceptance within ecclesiastical circles), have been works by Juan Luis Segundo, Leonardo Boff, Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann, each from a particular focus that touches themes either of liberation or dialogue. It has been more than two decades since the appearance of Segundo's *The community called church* as one of five volumes of his *A theology for artisans of a new humanity*.<sup>17</sup> Central to this work is Segundo's approach to the problem of salvation outside the Church, as he asserts the availability of salvation to all who practise justice and charity. But realizing the concern among countless Catholics of the time, accustomed to thinking in the exclusive mind-set of the Council of Florence, Segundo unfolds a forceful teaching that responds to the question, 'Why then bother to be a Christian, if one can be saved in other ways?' For Segundo, the reason for being a Christian is that the way of Christianity is a challenge, a call to become an authentic sign-community and sacrament of salvation.<sup>18</sup> Quite simply, it is not the 'church of the masses' or of passive 'flocks', but a community responding to the urgency of the world situation with the message typified in all its activity: 'No love is lost in the world'. This vocational call best represents the theology and spirituality informing a vigorous gospel among Amerindian peoples, who were told so repeatedly that they would not be able to share heaven with their ancestors because their 'idolatry' had damned them forever.

A second liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff, introduces two important dimensions into the conversation through his controversial book, *Church: charisma and power*. The first is represented by the basic ecclesial communities, which he calls 'the Church from the poor'; the second is his reconsideration of the centuries-old and often acrimonious dispute over 'syncretism'. For Boff, syncretism, or the mingling of disparate elements within one religion, is an incarnational reality present within Christianity, especially where the faith takes root among the poor and marginalized.<sup>19</sup> This practice of the faith may fail to satisfy and may even terrify many church officials and scholars, but the syncretic development of the faith illustrates the catholicity of Catholicism. Boff is far from cavalier about this discussion, however, painstakingly detailing suggested criteria for discerning a genuine Christian synthesis with other religious experiences and symbols.<sup>20</sup> Boff's argument addresses a vital issue now being debated among aboriginal peoples and in the wider theological world.

Hans Küng, in typical fashion, has ventured a variation on evangelization among different religions which belongs both among the pluralists in its refusal to 'proselytize' other believers, and among evangelicals in its proclamation of the value of Jesus' life and teachings for helping Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and others to live more fully by their own beliefs. Küng expects, and in this book receives, corresponding evangelical witness from representatives of the other world religions.<sup>21</sup> Whatever one's theological position, this treatment typifies the frankness and integrity that must prevail within all religious dialogue, and would apply today to conversation between 'mainstream' Christians and aboriginals.

Jürgen Moltmann, the pre-eminent theologian of Christian hope, takes an eschatological approach to dialogue and evangelization. Adhering to his faith in the centrality of Christ, Moltmann refuses to read the 'truth' of Christ as a religion that possesses *all* truths; the fullness of truth lies only beyond the horizon of death and the end-time. As we await in hope the final revelation of God, we open ourselves to the truth that each belief, and even non-religious world views, might offer us on our historical pilgrimage.<sup>22</sup> With Segundo, Boff and Küng, Moltmann proposes the kind of creative synthesis of personal loyalty to a tradition and openness to others that should characterize conversations with aboriginal peoples.

#### *Toward a spirituality of evangelization*

The kind of evangelization that seeks to communicate the gospel of Christ rather than cultural imposition calls for a profound spiritual

freedom. Within the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola I have found three 'moments' which have helped me both to hear and share good news within the context of native symbolism. The first of these moments is the instruction stated so unobtrusively (and thus neglected by most spiritual writers) as 'Presupposition'. The second moment is the universally recognized Contemplation for Obtaining the Love of God. The third, taken out of textual order for the sake of emphasis on concrete history, is the Third Mode of Humility.

Rather than directly quote a translation of the Presupposition (Exx 22),<sup>23</sup> I offer a paraphrase: it is expected that a Christian, ready to 'believe all things' according to St Paul, prefers to defend the truth of another's 'proposition' rather than to condemn it. The missiological dimension of this principle lies in one's position on the condition of human nature and of creation in the light of what is traditionally called 'original sin'. Missiologists still have much work to do to in order to mediate the argument among 'liberal' and 'evangelical' Christians on this doctrine about the 'human condition'. My own fundamental position is to hold the ongoing goodness of creation within a tension of 'hermeneutical suspicion' in individual contexts.

We are not, however, talking about a wide-eyed, Pollyanna-ish acceptance and uncritical absorption of everything one hears and sees. The response, according to Ignatius, should be to question carefully what the other person 'intends', since communication is likely to have been defective, either in the telling or the hearing and seeing. Consequently, if I have exhausted all efforts to accept someone's position and still cannot, I must say so. But Ignatius nuances even this response: my efforts must not be to condemn, but to 'save the truth' in the other's position.

Over the years, I have found this exercise unparalleled (and certainly have at times failed at it!), not only in 'propositional' discourse, but in 'symbolic' conversation as well. There is only one way to practise such a symbolic discourse, and that is to become, where possible, a 'participant observer' – a practice that has grown more difficult over recent years with the onslaught of busloads of curiosity seekers on Indian reservations. Actual participation, of course, might have to follow upon previous conversation about the purpose of the action, since religious symbolism can be used for evil purposes as well as good, but the basic Presupposition applies. For the Christian who shares such symbolic life, learning includes letting oneself be evangelized by those conducting the ritual. I have found consistently that there often ensues a dialogue that turns on possible 'equivalences' between symbols. I think especially of

how one tribal spiritual leader suggested to me that the tribe's sacred pipe is, far from a mere 'fetish', rather the people's 'Ark of the Covenant', or of a sweat-lodge leader who once asked me to describe how this rite would figure in the traditional Catholic sacrament of reconciliation.

Following upon a process such as the above, a deepening of dialogue-evangelization can occur through the 'peak experience' of the Ignatian Exercises, the Contemplation for Obtaining the Love of God. After a prelude that the Catholic tradition shares with aboriginals – our common presence within a world of spiritual companions – the instruction points out two givens: that love shows itself in deeds rather than in words, and that love consists in a mutual sharing of goods – in the case I have described, a sharing of 'knowledge'. It is a fascinating and a melancholy reflection to dwell on what missionary activity might have been had such counsel been carefully followed.

Further clarification comes with the first point of the contemplation, the recollection of the blessings of creation and redemption. The assumption of a good creation is shared by both Christian and aboriginal tradition; there is some difference about the human place in creation, though not nearly so much discrepancy as some 'ecological' theologians would have us believe. While it is true that Genesis seems to grant humans a more pronounced 'over-againstness' in creation, and that aboriginal mythology describes a more intimate participation of humans *within* nature, the discussion cannot end here. Tribal mythology points to beliefs analogous to the Judaeo-Christian myths of alienation. First of all, there are stories of how humans acquired an ascendancy over animals, and thus a certain authority respectfully to employ their services, even to the point of killing them. Second, there are tribal stories that show the pathos of suffering and death and how they came about, sometimes through human misconduct. There is nothing here to preclude shared reflection on the combined traditions of creation and 'redemption' (which aboriginal people generally refer to as 'healing').

The second point of the contemplation presents the traditional Christian analogue to the 'animism' or 'dynamism' that characterizes aboriginal spirituality. These terms are not used here in the pejorative sense so often given them. Dynamism refers to the belief that divine 'power' (a concept thoroughly developed by Gerardus Van der Leeuw) permeates all of creation, and especially privileged beings, while animism is the belief in indwelling souls or spirits within created forms. While one need only read the Acts of the Apostles to understand the New Testament emphasis on the pervasive power of the Holy Spirit, the

animistic principle calls for closer examination. This would apply especially to the question whether all beings have an indwelling spirit or soul. But Catholic tradition has never condemned this line of thought that has fascinated thinkers from Augustine to Teilhard de Chardin. A point of agreement between most contemporary native and Christian interpretation is that, whatever the truth about a spiritual indwelling, the ultimate power belongs to one Creator. For Christian aboriginal people, the self-gift of God in the incarnation is 'good news' that speaks in the traditional idiom. For contemporary 'post-modern' Christians, this suggests that divine incarnation should not be dismissed as pure myth simply because it fails to speak to 'modern man'.

The third and fourth points of the Contemplation serve to deepen what has gone before, especially from an aboriginal perspective. That God 'works' or 'labours' in creation is a corrective to the aboriginal tradition that God is only a 'high god' or an aloof father-figure in the sky – a constant temptation in the Judaeo-Christian tradition as well. Ignatius would have us aware that God is not absent to even the most minute particle of the physical world or to all of the spirit world.

While the fourth point seems somehow to alter the imagery in the third point by describing divine blessings as descending from above, a harmonization of the two points combines images of transcendence and immanence. It is here perhaps that the contribution of earth-centred aboriginal spirituality as highlighted especially by many feminist theologians enriches the sense of divine presence. 'Mother Earth' and 'Father Sky' are metaphors for the One who both envelops and permeates all things to give them being and life. The point, finally, is that all is gift.

It may seem inappropriate to end this trilogy of Ignatian themes on a negative note, but history and contemporary experience indicate that this is only fitting. I refer here to the Third Mode (or degree, or kind) of Humility, but with a contemporary twist.<sup>24</sup> The twist is highly significant, and one for which I am indebted to my colleague Michael Stogre SJ, who has suggested that in this context we should envision a 'fourth degree of humility'. According to the third degree, the Christian should seek to desire humiliation and rejection if it can be done without one's causing it, and in union with the suffering Christ, as long as 'the praise and glory of the Divine Majesty would be equally served'.

Stogre's ironic twist renders this a more deeply social meditation. Missionaries and pastoral workers of European background involved today among aboriginal peoples must not be too ready to believe that the anger and at times rejection that they receive from native persons is

entirely 'undeserved'. Even though we have renounced earlier imperialist policies, the most enlightened missionary still shares the collective 'social sin' of the past. As weary as one may become of this litany of reproaches, one cannot be involved in this ministry without an asceticism to deal with it. The entire process of the Exercises is a redemptive one that can free the Christian from needless personal guilt, and this freedom, we may hope, can sustain ongoing involvement in the social tensions. Once one does reach the point that is almost inevitable in such ministry, where 'burnout' ensues upon such assaults, it may well be time to withdraw from the context and leave the field to others. This does not mean *passive* endurance: an appropriate response to repeated denunciations can be creatively pragmatic. That is, once one has listened for a time, it may be fitting to say: 'I grant the pain of this history, I regret it and if I have done anything personally, I ask forgiveness. If my presence here is still oppressive, I will withdraw from this discussion or this place and allow you to make your own way rather than add more burdens.' This is not 'going away mad'; it is simply the willingness to cut off oppression at the roots if necessary. But in any case, an attitude of a 'fourth degree of humility' is a challenge to take risks.

*An ongoing theology of inculturation*

It may be another irony that I conclude this essay with a plea for a more 'cerebral' or 'left brain' attitude in evangelization, but there is much work to be done to find the spiritual dimension *within* intellectual activity. All evangelical dialogue today calls for critical work, especially in such areas as cultural anthropology, history, phenomenology of religion, social analysis and systematic theology. It is a work of genuine love if the primary evangelizer can equip the 'younger churches' with the gift not only of deeper devotion, but also of the ability to carry on the work of critique and analysis.

The aboriginal peoples of the world are now a part of the wider 'history' of the world. So much of that history has been unkind to them and has destroyed much of their traditional value systems. In the face of all this, I would simply repeat the counsel I so constantly heard from Arapaho elders during my years of conversation and shared projects with them. 'Remember this,' they always repeated, 'we can't go backwards, we have to go forwards.' These old people live on in our memories as well as in the ways in which their descendants become 'agents of their own history'. In this way, they encounter the Lord of history precisely as members of a unique historical culture, and thus stand free from the imposition of 'a different gospel' of cultural imperialism.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For a survey and commentary dealing with this question, see Carl F. Starkloff, 'New religious movements in native North America: the contemporary call to mission', *Missiology*, vol XIII, no 1 (January 1985), pp 81-101.
- <sup>2</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming mission: paradigm shifts in the theology of mission* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1991), pp 10-11.
- <sup>3</sup> Pope John Paul II, 'Redemptoris missio: encyclical on missionary activity', *Origins*, vol 20, no 34 (31 January 1991), paragraph 10.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-19.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 52. For those still befuddled by the ongoing unsettled state of the terminology, I suggest the clear set of definitions provided in the early issues of the (Roman) Gregorian University's series: Ary Roest Crolius (ed), *Inculturation: working papers on living faith and cultures* (Rome: Gregorian University Press). These articles are consistent with the seminal paper of Pedro Arrupe SJ, 'Letter to the whole Society on inculturation' in *Studies in the international apostolate of Jesuits* (Washington DC: Jesuit Missions, June 1978), pp 1-10, and the papers that follow in the same issue. For a more concise summary of this terminology and argumentation, see J. Peter Schineller, *A handbook on inculturation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990).
- <sup>8</sup> Pope John Paul II, *op.cit.*, 52.
- <sup>9</sup> Claude Champagne OMI, 'La nouvelle évangélisation: la pensée de Jean-Paul II', *Kerygma* (Ottawa: St Paul University), 26 (1992), pp 247-270.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p 249.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 256-257.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p 254.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p 255.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p 259.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p 261.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p 265.
- <sup>17</sup> Juan Luis Segundo (trans John Drury), *The community called church* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1973).
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, ch 4.
- <sup>19</sup> Leonardo Boff (trans John W. Diercksmeier), *Church: charism and power: liberation theology and the institutional Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), ch 12.
- <sup>20</sup> An excellent collaborative treatment of the problem of syncretism can be found in Jerald D. Gort (ed), *Dialogue and syncretism: an interdisciplinary approach* (Grand Rapids MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1989).
- <sup>21</sup> Hans Küng et al. (trans Peter Heinegg), *Christianity and the world religions: patterns of dialogue with Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1986).
- <sup>22</sup> Jürgen Moltmann (trans Margaret Kohl), *The Church in the power of the Holy Spirit: a contribution to messianic ecclesiology* (London: SCM Press, 1977), esp. p 64.
- <sup>23</sup> For the actual text, I have always simply employed Louis J. Puhl SJ, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1951).
- <sup>24</sup> Exx 165-168.