



Conference on World Mission and Evangelism

Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship

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Perspectives on Evangelism as Contextual and Prophetic

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That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared, we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.

1 John 1: 1-4

The Priority of Experience

Evangelism is a natural, physiological, free, creative, gut impulse that is inevitably prophetic in a person who has turned to Christ. It arises out of the experience of responding to the invitation to live a life turned to Christ: 'Come and see!' (John 1:46).

Experiencing Christ as they do in the community – in the Church - Christians naturally wish to go out and share their experience with other people, their friends, their acquaintances, but above all with those who do not have this experience, so as to invite them to experience it. I stress the legitimacy of this basic, natural, Christian impulse as an implication, an extension of the actual experience of Christ. But the experience always precedes the subsequent impulse. You cannot give or communicate something you do not have, something you have not experienced. Direct experience of life, not in Christ, but of Christ is basic. Otherwise, the way in which the Church should be operating is reversed. I share what I have experienced: Christ himself. Sharing a mere belief or a theory about Christ is not communicating the Gospel but an ideology. It is not life: it is proselytism.

The failure of ideologized evangelism

People, and above all the younger generations, are sceptical about religious institutions at all levels. That is a fact, and it is to be regretted that it is not sincerely acknowledged. So any form of evangelism or mission done today in this ideologized context has minimal effect. That is unless, depending on the sectors of society that are targeted, those receiving it have major life needs that can be met by the organizations and thus get caught up in programmes of that type.

We are used to seeing mission and evangelism as ideas directly related to institutionalized forms of religion, particularly Christian forms. I believe it to be absolutely essential to understand that both of those ideas need to be reconnected to the original experience of the event that created the Church. That 'church event' in its most unadulterated form is free, creative, life-changing, liberating and revolutionary. The example is Christ. We have distanced ourselves from that experience and have constructed a recalcitrantly religious Christianity. We have become entrapped in an environment that has made slaves of us and how is it possible for us, from out of that environment, to change society, men and women and young people? Evangelism that changes things is based on the 'Christ event'. As we work day by day in each society and context, it is not imitating (imitating is a great trap), but in experiencing, as I am, where I am and with whom I am – it is experiencing the love that Christ invites us to live out. Evangelism is an exercise, a continuing training. It is part of the asceticism to which we are all called.

In my context, I can observe many forms of evangelism. Many of them are classic – outdated, I would say – structuralized, ideologized; others are more free, others targeted to particular groups, and yet others focus more on the tremendous social differences there are in South America. It is a pick-and-choose evangelism. On which sectors of society are our evangelizing techniques having greatest effect? Why? What impact are they having? But, can it really be measured? Should it be measured?

Inconsistency – one of the great obstacles

Lack of personal testimony – that is inconsistency – in those engaged in evangelism is key in this process of understanding. We are to pass on what we have experienced. Otherwise it is proselytism. People know who it is standing in front of them, what they do and what they preach. And, if there is no consistency between them, it is all useless.

Similarly, a stifling religious-ideological superstructure that suppresses the essential originality of the Gospel is a key obstacle in the process. I firmly believe that any sort of evangelistic work in such a context reduces its effectiveness exponentially. In such a case, it is reduced to mere spiritualistic, moralistic or liturgical propaganda. Obviously, that inconsistency I have just mentioned in my previous point has a direct reference here. I believe it is called pharisaism, is it not? And it has deep roots, going back to the time of Christ, if I am not mistaken.

We need to go back to the original dynamism of Christianity – communion, or fellowship, or community – face-to-face direct personal relationships. Free, open, creative, human, but reaching out to God, taking place in the here and now, reaching out to the transcendent. We need to go back to the original experience. And, for that to happen, it is very necessary to revitalize the primary eucharistic community, the parish. That is basic, the basic cell of the Church. And the whole Church in that small community of friends, brothers and sisters, human beings, all engaged in the same search, for God.

Evangelism and numerical church growth

According to the vision of the Holy Fathers of the Orthodox Church, the Church is born and ends with creation. Many of them identify creation with the Church because of their ontological presuppositions describing God's relationship with what is created. When the Fathers speak of 'Church' they constantly mention the reality of communion, fellowship and relationality. The glory of God, the infinite increate energy of God, is reflected in the whole of animate and inanimate creation. All is inter-related: the Creator with the created, all rational created beings, and similarly they with the natural creation. Everything is 'society', 'communion', 'fellowship'. Everything is Church. That is a vision of all that is, a basic, essential, prime vision. Everything else springs out of that.

The vision of the Church as an institution is different from that. That is an undeniable reality. But the Church is not an end in itself. It is only a means. The end is Christ. The mission of the Church is to enable the healing of the relationships of all men and women to take place – to make them 'christs', that is 'anointed ones' – by means of God's grace. The Church is God's natural sphere. It is wide in scope, it is liberating. In the true Church, people are really what they are meant to be, because their relationships with God, with their neighbours and with the creation are being healed. The growth of the Church, microscopically, is identical with the awareness that people have of God, that is, how and how much they experience the Gospel. That growth is relative, it comes and goes, since macroscopically speaking, it is identified with the dramatic – and sometimes tragic – evolutionary journey of humankind towards God.

Orthodox Evangelism in South America

'Come and see!' That is a key concept in evangelical and missionary work. It is an invitation, an invitation to live, to live all together in a different, original, free, new, creative way, in awareness that atomization, individualism and isolation are not situations that lead us to God. The Gospel, the Good News, is lived

out in community, all together, with one another, and in one another, sharing the life-giving Word and food, just as the apostles and their successors did.

‘Come and see!’ When I am asked about Orthodox Christianity in Argentina or another South American country, by many acquaintances, friends, and above all strangers, some of them curious, others interested, others in some need, I simply say to them, ‘Come and see!’ Perhaps it can be explained or described. But a description in words will never convey the actual experience. Experience is basic. The doors of the Church, of our church, are open to all men and women, irrespective. All are welcome to ‘come, and see, and taste’ the sweetness of the Lord and how different it is to live in accord with the love that he practised. ‘Come and see.’ It is a challenge, above all to the younger generations, whose awareness is different, more pluriform, more wide-ranging, more free. That is an awareness that cannot easily surmount the barriers put up by a Christianity that has become a religion.

Sometimes people prefer to ‘go and see and taste’ elsewhere. Pseudo-churches abound in South America. It is a proselytism based on the needs of the persons targeted, people seeking miracles, an exercise in marketing, exploiting the psychological, educational and cultural weakness of the most vulnerable, so as to manipulate them with a crude fetishism. Their meetings are packed with people who want to be cured, who are hoping for the miracle of finding a job or the love of their life. Everything is guaranteed in those meetings that are craftily manipulated by the clever managers of faith. Their fortunes flourish and their growth is enviable. Meanwhile, our churches are more and more empty. That is true. We are realistic and self-critical. Only the religious zeal of former immigrants – Arabs, Armenians, Russians, Greeks, Serbs, English, Germans, Swiss – is the driving force for their worship services and other activities. And the later generations? Has the Church become the cultural enclave of a particular ethnic community? But the flow of immigrants from Europe ceased long ago! Is motivation lacking? Are ideas lacking? Are bearers of the message lacking? What shall we do to come out of the religious ghetto that we ourselves – Orthodox, Anglicans, Reformed – have created in the diaspora? Perhaps we have fallen into a trap of our own making. How can we resist this painful phenomenon of religiosity? How can we confront truth with the Truth? With more fanaticism, more dogmatism, more moralism?

In South America, there is widespread, genuine religious freedom. It is a fact. It has been given us. And it is also a challenge. But, beyond all the disagreements, all the difficulties, the false prophets, the exploiters, the manipulators, we Latin Americans always have the sure certainty that ‘God is with us’, always and everywhere, always faithful to God’s promise. So, ‘we go and see’ and we share and live all together in diversity, knowing that God’s love is the only way to live in our land, so diverse, so manipulated, so complex, but so criticized, put down and underestimated. We are the South of Faith, the ontological south of the world, with our face bearing the marks of the suffering of centuries. But also still with a freshness and freedom of spirit, we demonstrate that we are of value, decent, happy and joyful, optimistic and spontaneous, with a heart wide open, always prone to falling, but always raising ourselves up again. Because, perhaps in our collective unconscious it is as clear as clear can be that it is only in community, fellowship and communion can we go forward.