

The Mission of Dialogue: The Roman Catholic Perspective An Introduction to John Paul II's Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*

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0. Setting the Stage

In order to set the stage for an introductory discussion of Pope John Paul II's Encyclical *Redemptoris missio* I shall begin by quoting two eminent Indians who in any ways do not share his views: M. K. Gandhi and Raimon Panikkar.

In the course of a long talk with an Indian Christian Missionary, Gandhi had the following to say¹:

That is why I say, let your life speak to us, even as the rose needs no speech but simply spreads its perfume. Even the blind who do not see the rose perceive its fragrance. That is the secret of the gospel of the rose. But the gospel that Jesus preached is more subtle and fragrant than the gospel of the rose. If the rose needs no agent much less does the gospel of Christ need any agent.

Panikkar in his closing address at the 1983 Baltimore National Congress of the U.S. Catholic Mission Associates on the Future of Mission said the following²:

The three key words of the parable of Mission theology are: salt, light and leaven. But should we not remember that leaven is subversive and that the leaven does not desire to convert everything into leaven? Should we remind ourselves that salt is bitter and does not desire to convert everything into salt, convert everything into something Christian, but rather that the omelet be a better omelet, the steak be a better steak, the Hindu be a better Hindu, the humanist become better humanist? And in this collective struggle, we must walk together and highlight the wisdom which consists in converting our destructive tensions into creative polarities. That is a spiritual path.

If John Paul II had been familiar with these two stances probably his encyclical would have been somewhat different, though perhaps not very different. Our two authors are Indians and display an innate Asianness which John Paul II himself characterized thus³:

All of this indicates an innate spiritual insight and moral wisdom in the Asian soul, and it is the core around which a growing sense of "being Asian" is built. This "being Asian" is best discovered and affirmed not in confrontation and opposition,

¹ Published in Harijan, 17.4.1937 and reprinted in M.K. Gandhi, *Christian Missions. Their Place in India*, ed. Bharatan Kumarappa (Ahmedabad: Navjivan, 1957), 162.

² Raimon Panikkar, "Transforming Christian Mission into Dialogue", *Interculture. Exploring the frontiers of cross-cultural understanding* (Fall/October 1987), 26.

³ John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation (06.11.1999) *Ecclesia in Asia* §6.

but in the spirit of complementarity and harmony. In this framework of complementarity and harmony, the Church can communicate the Gospel in a way which is faithful both to her own Tradition and to the Asian soul.

Many in the church are uncertain as to how dialogue can fit in with the 'missionary nature' of the church.⁴ Pope John II devoted an entire Encyclical *Redemptoris missio* (7. Dezember 1990) to the subject in which he states authoritatively the official position of the church. It is important for the Asian church to understand this teaching in its multicultural and multireligious context.

1. The Mission of Dialogue

Many who are strangers to dialogue because of their mostly monocultural situation do not grasp the urgency of dialogue. Pope John II who by speaking of the dialogue of religions and cultures almost to the last day of his life has firmly established it on the list of the church's priorities. Indeed he has removed all doubts about the role of interreligious dialogue by stating unambiguously in his Encyclical *Redemptoris missio* §55:

Inter-religious dialogue is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission. Understood as a method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment, dialogue is not in opposition to the mission *ad gentes*; indeed, it has special links with that mission and is one of its expressions. This mission, in fact, is addressed to those who do not know Christ and his Gospel, and who belong for the most part to other religions. In Christ, God calls all peoples to himself and he wishes to share with them the fullness of his revelation and love. He does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression, even when they contain 'gaps, insufficiencies and errors. All of this has been given ample emphasis by the Council and the subsequent Magisterium, without detracting in any way from the fact that *salvation comes from Christ and that dialogue does not dispense from evangelization.*

The Pope goes a step further when he states §56:

Other religions constitute a positive challenge for the Church: they stimulate her both to discover and acknowledge the signs of Christ's presence and of the working of the Spirit, as well as to examine more deeply her own identity and to bear witness to the fullness of Revelation which she has received for the good of all.

Before we comment on the passage let us briefly reflect on an important phrase, *witness to the fullness of Revelation*. Witnessing is not advertising, as modern Christian groups seem to believe. Witnessing, from the Asian perspective, speaks the same language as the following biblical (mission) text.⁵

⁴ See *Redemptoris missio* §1.

⁵ See George M. Soares-Prabhu, "The Church as Mission. A Reflection on Matthew 5:13-16" in: Francis X. D'Sa (ed.), *The Dharma of Jesus* (Maryknoll/New York: Orbis, 2003), 259-267.

You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. [Mt 5:13-16]

In view of the aggressive missionary activity of foreign missionaries in India, Gandhiji advised them to follow the gospel of the rose. The very *being* of the rose witnesses to its scent and beauty. It does not need any advertisement.

There is a great deal of difference between witnessing and advertising. Witnessing is not a doing, not a making, not a manipulating. It is being. It is being on the same or similar wave-length. It is being in solidarity. Advertising informs whereas authentic witness transforms. Advertising is aggressive and rarely straight-forward but almost always calculating and self-centred. Authentic witnessing is not self-centred but personal, hence societal and structural because person is a network of relationships with the Divine, the Human and the Cosmic. Authentic witnessing is straight-forward, never calculating but ever open to taking risks. It moves, touches and transforms.

2. The Challenge of Other Religions

John Paul II boldly asserts that the challenge of other religions is positive because it stimulates the church:

- a) to discover and acknowledge *the signs of Christ's presence*
- b) *and the working of the Spirit,*
- c) and to examine more deeply her own identity
- d) all this in order to bear *witness to the fullness of Revelation* which she [the Church] has received for the good of all.

2.1 Discovering and Acknowledging the Signs of Christ's Presence

This is an important mission-theological statement. John Paul II unambiguously speaks of the signs of Christ's presence in other religions. One of the tasks that mission-theology and mission-theologians have is to discern and discover these signs. The missionary nature of the church consists, among other things, in such a discerning activity. Discovering and acknowledging the signs of Christ's presence are primarily and eminently a discerning activity that pertains to the mission of Christ's church. In this process of discernment the bottom-line "whatever you did to the least you did it to me" (Mt 25) suggests itself as one of the surest signs of Christ's presence. With growing familiarity with the other religions other criteria might suggest themselves.

In this connection we might give vent to our curiosity and ask about the function of the two verbs: *To discover* and *to acknowledge*. Wouldn't the first verb 'to discover' have sufficed to state what one wanted to say? Keeping in mind that the context is an encyclical on "mission", the importance of 'acknowledge' should not be underestimated. Discovering

is a centripetal activity whereas acknowledgement is centrifugal. To acknowledge is to do so before others and for the sake of the others. One can discover something and keep it to oneself. But when one discovers something then one acknowledges it before others. Acknowledging is a kind of public announcement and has a kind of missionary nuance.

2.2 Discovering and Acknowledging the Working of the Spirit

Similarly important is the statement about acknowledging and discovering the working of the Spirit which *Redemptoris Missio* fortunately expounds in some detail. *Redemptoris Missio* is an important encyclical because of its profound theology of the Spirit. Gathering together various strands from the documents of Vatican II and the papal encyclicals, *Redemptoris Missio* articulates principles that are fundamental for a right understanding of the Trinity, Christology and above all, missiology. It is not easy to summarize *Redemptoris Missio*'s teaching regarding the Holy Spirit. At the risk of omitting important aspects I hesitatingly formulate it in the form of the following theses:

1. The Holy Spirit is indeed the principal agent of the whole of the church's mission. RM §21.
2. The mission of the church, like that of Jesus, is God's work or, as Luke often puts it, the work of the Spirit. RM §24.
3. The Spirit manifests himself in a special way in the church and in her members. Nevertheless, his presence and activity are universal, limited neither by space nor time. RM §28.
4. ...the Spirit is at work in the heart of every person, through the "seeds of the Word," to be found in human initiatives - including religious ones - and in mankind's efforts to attain truth, goodness and God himself. RM §28
5. The Spirit offers the human race "the light and strength to respond to its highest calling". RM §28
6. ... the Holy Spirit offers everyone the possibility of sharing in the Paschal Mystery in a manner known to God. RM §28
7. The Spirit, therefore, is at the very source of man's existential and religious questioning, a questioning which is occasioned not only by contingent situations but by the very structure of his being. RM §28
8. The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only the individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions. Indeed, the Spirit is at the origin of the noble ideals and undertakings which benefit humanity on its journey through history: „The Spirit of God with marvelous foresight directs the course of the ages and renews the face of the earth.“ RM §28
9. Again, it is the Spirit who sows the "seeds of the Word present in various customs and cultures, preparing them for full maturity in Christ." RM §28
10. Thus the Spirit, who "blows where he wills" (cf. Jn 3:8), who "was already at work in the world before Christ was glorified," and who "has filled the world... [and] holds all things together [and] knows what is said" (Wis 1:7), leads us to broaden our vision in order to ponder his activity in every time and place. RM §29
11. This is the same Spirit who was at work in the Incarnation and in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and who is at work in the Church. RM §29
12. Moreover, the universal activity of the Spirit is not to be separated from his particular activity within the body of Christ, which is the Church. RM §29

13. Every form of the Spirit's presence is to be welcomed with respect and gratitude, but the discernment of this presence is the responsibility of the Church, to which Christ gave his Spirit in order to guide her into all the truth (cf. Jn 16:13). RM §29

Briefly the Holy Spirit is at work everywhere and in everyone, in every age and every moment, in individual persons as well as in society and history, peoples, cultures and religions. St Ambrose seems to have grasped this very well when he said: *Omne verum a quocumque dicatur a Spiritu Sancto*. [Whatever is true, irrespective of who utters it, is from the Holy Spirit.] St. Augustine takes it from his teacher and St. Thomas quotes the saying a couple of times.⁶ We could further extend this saying to whatever is good, whatever is beautiful, whatever has to do with justice and peace, etc., as deriving from the Holy Spirit.

Equipped with this assurance that the true, the good, the beautiful, whatever heals, forgives and reconciles, whatever promotes love, mercy and compassion, and whatever contributes to peace, justice and community-formation derive from and are the work of the Holy Spirit alone, Christians are ready to collaborate with people of good-will anywhere and everywhere.

When Christians discover this truth they will openly acknowledge the presence of the Divine. This acknowledgement should show the other religions that we take them and their traditions seriously and that we have to collaborate with one another in order to enrich and correct our approaches especially to the work of justice and peace.

2.3 To Examine more deeply her (= the Church's) own identity

Discovering and acknowledging the signs of Christ's presence and the working of the Spirit in the other religions, *Redemptoris Missio* rightly concludes, makes the Church go into herself and examine more deeply her own identity. Clearly this has to do with her relationship to the other religions and traditions. John Paul II is right here. Every time we discover signs of Christ's presence and the working of the Spirit in other religions the Church acquires a deeper insight into the Divine Mystery and its mysterious ways (which cannot be manipulated) as well as a better understanding of its relationship to them. From this emerges a clearer understanding of its mission.

What *Redemptoris Missio* seems to be saying is this: The Church can never rest satisfied with the way she has expressed her identity. She has always to keep on refining her expressions every time she encounters the signs of Christ's presence and the working of the Spirit in other religions. For us in Asia this is a fruitful observation.

2.4 Bear Witness to the Fullness of Revelation

In order to do this we need to have recourse to dialogue. Dialogue helps us to come in touch with what and, more importantly, how the others believe. Only when we are touched by the faith-experience of the others will we be able to discover and acknowledge the signs of Christ's presence and the working of his Spirit in other religions. A positive attitude is

⁶ Thomas von Aquin cites St Ambrose (Glossa Lombardi, P.L. 191, 1651): „Omne verum, a quocumque dicatur, a Spiritu Sancto est.“ Summa Theologiae, I-II.q.109,a.1, ad 1. Quoted in Raimon Panikkar, *Der neue religiöse Weg*. Im Dialog der Religionen leben (München: Kösel, 1990), 177.

necessary to approach the other religions *because* Christ is present and his Spirit is at work! Like Moses we have to remove the shoes of our prejudices. This is holy ground indeed.

However the signs of Christ's presence in other religions will not necessarily be the same as the signs of his presence in the Christian traditions. It will be similarly so with the working of the Spirit. That is why we need to listen to the others; more precisely, to listen to the working of the Spirit in other religions.⁷

There is also the equally and if not more daunting task of discernment. No religion alone will be in a position to discern fully the working of the Spirit. Discernment has to be done with the help of the whole believing community, that is, not only the believing community of the Christians but also the community of believers of all religions. Only here can real discernment take place. Only here can we really correct and complement one another. Only in such a community of believers can we discover our true identity and get an intimation of the fullness of truth. Finally, only here is a glimpse possible of what Scripture asserts: "God was in Christ reconciling the whole world to Godself..." (2 Corinthians 5:19). It is along these lines that we have to understand mission in a religiously pluralistic world; it is in such an interaction of cultures that we have to share the good news.

5. An Asian Theology of Mission

However, only in the Christ⁸ who embodies the Divine, the Human and the Cosmic, can the passage of John Paul II ("Other religions constitute a positive challenge for the Church, etc." RM §56) make real and full sense. Complementarity and harmony⁹ are guaranteed not by human wisdom but by the Mystery in whom we live, move and have our being and whom we Christians call the Logos or the Christ.¹⁰ It is this encounter with other

⁷ At the recent Synod on "Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church" the SVD General Fr Tony Pernia made this observation: „Evangelization“, he said, „is never a one-way street, in which the church speaks and the world listens. To be true to its mission the church must also listen to the searching of faith-seekers, the cultural and religious traditions of people of other faiths, the aspirations of the poor and marginalized.“ John C. Allen Jr. in 'National Catholic Reporter', October 11, 2008. Quoted from MISSION SCAN # 69, ISHVANI KENDRA – Institute of Missiology and Communications, Pune – India, October – 2008.

⁸ The cosmotheandric (kosmos+theos-aner) Christ, as Panikkar calls this Mystery. See his *Christophany. The Fullness of Man* (Maryknoll/New York: Orbis, 2004), especially his first sutra „Christ is the Christian Symbol for the Whole of Reality“, 144-148.

⁹ See John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia* §6: „This „being Asian“ is best discovered and affirmed not in confrontation and opposition, but in the spirit of complementarity and harmony. In this framework of complementarity and harmony, the Church can communicate the Gospel in a way which is faithful both to her own Tradition and to the Asian soul.“

¹⁰ Michael Amaladoss, "The Trinity on Mission", in: Frans Wijzen & Peter Nissen (Hrsg.), *'Mission is a Must'*. Intercultural Theology and the Mission of the Church (Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 2002), 106: "To preserve the unity of the Trinity on the one hand, to affirm a certain articulation between the mission of God and of Jesus on the other, Indian theologians point to a distinction between the Word and Jesus. Jesus is the historical, incarnate manifestation of the Word. But his activity is not coextensive with the activity of the Word as such. Whatever Jesus does, the Word of God does because Jesus is the incarnate Word. But the presence and action of the Word is not limited to its manifestation in Jesus. Such a distinction makes it possible to distinguish the action of God, the Father, the Word and the Spirit in the world and in history from the action of Jesus in

religions in listening and discerning that we can really examine our own identity. It is in such an encounter alone that we can get an intimation of the *revelationis integritatem*, which the official English version translates as “the fullness of Revelation”.

Our mission then is to discover and acknowledge the signs of the presence of the Logos or the Christ and the working of the Spirit in the religions and cultures of this world. It is this that gives us our true identity because our full identity cannot be apart from our relationship with other religions and cultures. The fullness of revelation refers to the revelation through the Christ in the Spirit everywhere and at all times. “The Spirit manifests himself in a special way in the Church and in her members. Nevertheless, his presence and activity are universal, limited neither by space nor time” (*Redemptoris Missio* §28). Discovering and acknowledging this then has to do with our identity, on the one hand, and with the fullness of revelation, on the other.

This first aspect of the Logos or the Christ is to be discovered and discerned in and through dialogue and reconciliation. On our Christian side we still have a lot of homework to do. The Christian doctrinal self-understanding was articulated several centuries ago on the background of the Judeo, Graeco, Roman cultural worlds. This self-understanding finds no resonance today – neither in the countries of traditional Christianity nor understandably in other cultural worlds. Throwing up our hands in despair is not the solution. We have to reformulate our doctrines – each local church in its own cultural region – vis a vis the problems that we face; and then dialogue with one another on the global level. The Catechism of the Church is not a great help on the path of inculturation. Add to it the negative attitude of the congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith which far from being helpful is a great deterrent in this regard.¹¹ Much greater freedom has to be allowed to theologians who can fight it out among themselves in their efforts to make the person, work and words of Jesus Christ relevant for our times and our cultures.

Furthermore there is, for example, hardly any serious encounter of Christianity with the increasingly secular way of thinking which appears to have been simply written off as being godless and anti-Christian. Raimon Panikkar is one of the few thinkers who has taken the challenge of secular thinking seriously and speaks of sacred secularity.¹²

and through the Church, and not reduce one to the other. The presence and action of Jesus in and through the Church then can relate creatively to the presence and action of God in other religions as well as in human, ‘secular’ history as such.”

¹¹ A solitary exception seems to be the instruction of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (1622) which among other things says: “Do not regard it as your task, and do not bring any pressure to bear on the peoples, to change their manners, customs, and uses, unless they are evidently contrary to religion and sound morals. What could be more absurd than to transport France, Spain, Italy, or some other European country to China? Do not introduce all that to them, but only the faith, which does not despise or destroy the manners and customs of any people, always supposing that they are not evil, but rather wishes to see them preserved unharmed... Do not draw invidious contrasts between the customs of the peoples and those of Europe; do your utmost to adapt yourselves to them.” Quoted in Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context. A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll/New York: Orbis, 2004), 192.

¹² R. Panikkar, *Worship and Secular Man* (New York: Orbis; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973). See also my “Religion and Secularism. An Exploration into the Secular Dimension of Religion and the Religious Dimension of Secularism”, in: *Jnanadeepa*. Pune Journal of Religious Studies 1/1, (1998), 106-126.

The second aspect of this Christ is to be realized today only in and through a vision of a new world order which is animated by the Spirit of justice and peace (Matthew 25.31-46). This is going to be the Asian Aeropagus, the centre, the meeting-point of Asian Religions and Cultures where dialogue and collaboration can begin.

All the more reason then that in our commitment for justice and peace we do not neglect sociological, economic and political analyses of our respective situations. In a postmarxian age we cannot ignore structural sin and structural injustice. Again, it is not the vocabulary that is important but the ability to read the signs of the times and to act accordingly.

However one may understand mission in the culturally pluralistic context of Asia the Christ who embodies the Divine, the Human and the Cosmic remains central because he presents us, his missionaries, with a two-fold task: One, discovering and acknowledging the signs of his presence and the working of his Spirit in all our religions and cultures; and two, discovering Christ in the hungry, the thirsty, the lonely, the needy, prisoners, refugees, the marginalized, the Dalits (Matthew 25.31-46). Without this two-fold vision our mission will ultimately turn out to be mission impossible.

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