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Mission and Dialogue: Dialogue with the Modern World

The crowd jammed around the television set in Abong-Mbang erupted into wild cheering as they saw their hero Roger Milla boot home the first of the goals that sent their beloved Lions into the quarter finals of the World Cup. They were a tiny segment of the estimated 26.5 billion (many enthusiasts tuned in to several, some to all, of the games) who watched the soccer extravaganza on sets ranging from solar-powered in the mountains of Papua New Guinea to high definition screens in Rome's Hilton Hotel. Even the Pope altered his schedule to adapt to the reality. Both the instant diffusion of information and the very medium through which this is achieved are characteristics of, and contributors to, the structures of the global village.

At about the same time that Roger was scoring his goal, Raimundo Vitor de Oliveira was born in a modest home on Rua dos Junquillos in São Paulo. He doesn't know it yet, but by the year 2010 he will be one of the predicted 24.9 million people searching for sustenance in the city of his birth. Nor will São Paulo be the largest conurbation; Mexico City is expected to have grown to 32.1 million, with Shanghai and Beijing not far behind. The move towards the cities seems to be inexorable and the exploding population is a fact of modern life, a fact that, like it or not, will continue to be a major concern for political, economic and religious leaders. It, too, is part of the contemporary scene and a challenge. How does one proclaim the good news in a city of thirty-two million people, the majority of whom are below the poverty line?

In Berlin, Tobias Piniex lives in a room overlooking Bornholmer Street, which until recently had been a deserted blind alley ending at the "Wall". Now that the Wall has gone, he wanders freely in the area that for years was a heavily mined no-man's-land. The destruction of the Wall symbolised the collapse of an ideology. The critique of ideologies long held sacred, and even the questioning of their very relevance, is an aspect of modernity.

On Wednesday, March 14th, 1990, Faleh Mohammed Hussein Ali read from the Kor'an as part of an interfaith service at the Royal College of Surgeons,

Dublin. He was joined by Jews, Christians, Hindus and Sikhs, all reading from their sacred books and all praying together in a service that reflected on the sanctity of life. The fact that it was the first time that Faleh Mohammed joined in prayer with other religions added to the significance of the occasion. Interfaith dialogue is becoming a characteristic of the modern world.

The modern world: a cultural reality

The Christian message is not bound to any particular culture. It is potentially universal. It can both challenge and be assimilated by any culture without destroying either the message or the culture.

The values introduced by modernity invite the Church to rethink the presentation of the Gospel message in a manner that will enable genuine contact with modern men and women. The task of evangelisation cannot limit itself to a simple adaptation of the expressions of Faith, such as are contained in rituals, liturgy, external signs, structures and sources of authority. It must go deeper, promoting committed and alert dialogue between the Church and the modern world in a "God-language" that can be understood. As the members of the Extraordinary Synod of 1985 put it in their Message to the People of God: "The Council had been convoked to promote renewal of the Church with a view to evangelising a radically changed world" (Sec. IV).

Some characteristics of modernity

Technology, however primitive, has always played a part in the human condition. In the past it has tended to develop at a leisurely pace. In the world of today, however, the rate of progress has quickened enormously. One has only to think of the dependence on computers, the breakthroughs in the biotechnical field, global communications, the information explosion, nuclear power and transportation facilities (to mention but a few) to realise that the human being is immersed in a sea of technology. This is most evident

in, but by no means confined to, the western world. Sophisticated technology has penetrated even the most remote areas and is sometimes the factor permitting contact, for better or for worse, with peoples otherwise out of reach. Technology is in itself neutral (a plane can bring relief supplies or drop bombs) and can humanise or destroy, depending on how it is used. One thing is clear, it cannot be ignored.

Religious communities too have felt, with mixed consequences, the impact of rapidly developing technology. Television has assumed a central place in many communities, and in some religious houses mealtimes and hours of prayer are scheduled around the News, often viewed in a stillness more solemn than the former "Great Silence". Evangelisers are part of a world fashioned not only by the content of television but by its very pervasiveness. Television is used beneficially for diffusion of information, recreation, catechetics, and provides for the aged a pleasant way of spending hours that might be otherwise subject to loneliness. It can also become an addiction. Similarly word processors and computers are becoming more and more integral to the organisation of the apostolate and are used positively in the preparation of homilies, the organisation of parishes, religious studies and other aspects of pastoral work. But the computer, too, can become an obsession. And, when considering the impact of technology on religious communities, can one omit reference to the car and the phone with their myriad uses and abuses?

Secularisation and its consequences constitute one of the most direct challenges offered by modernity to evangelisation. Secularisation can be defined as the gradual disintegration of mythical and religious legitimations of society. It is not secularism, which is a type of atheism; nor is it materialism. Secularisation is rather the explanation of the universe through rational and scientific methodology. It does not deny the existence of God but interprets more and more through secondary causes. As *Gaudium et Spes* puts it: "With the help of science and technology man has extended his mastery over nearly the whole of nature and continues to do so... Many benefits once looked for especially from Heavenly powers, man has now enterprisingly procured for himself".

Some concomitants of secularisation are the privatisation of belief and practice, selectivity and pluralism about doctrines and moral behaviour, questioning of religious institutions and authorities, decreasing religious influence in the public sector and less direct impact by the churches on civil decision-making. Secularisation is challenging us to find a new presence of God, one which penetrates ever more deeply into the realities of creation.

Today the individual receives a flow of information and options to such an extent that it becomes increasingly difficult to give oneself totally and unquestioningly to any institution, system or conceptual framework. Previously accepted "certitudes" are no longer embraced wholeheartedly, and authorities once held

sacrosanct are challenged openly. A consequence of pluralism is that no institution, including Christianity, can dominate a society. The churches find themselves competing with other institutions to gain the ear of modern men and women. If this role is properly understood, accepted and prepared for, evangelisers can become a true leaven in the modern mass.

While the rise of individualism has helped to promote democracy, freedom (including freedom of religion) and human rights, it has also left the door open to the accumulation of power and wealth in the hands of a few. Modern economics seems to be moving towards control by economic "blocs" (Europe, North America, Japan, perhaps later the Pacific Rim) in the determination of which weaker elements of society have virtually no say. Even more destructive can be the multinationals, which owe allegiance to no blocs or national governments but freely transcend all boundaries, including the ethical. The effects of the accumulation of power in the hands of a few has had, and is having, disastrous consequences on poor societies and individuals. The gap between the other great "blocs", the rich North and the poor South, grows ever wider, giving rise to crushing debts, rampant inflation and the deaths of millions annually from famine and preventable childhood diseases. "Progress" has not eliminated selfishness and injustice. Far from it.

Secularisation, while clearing away many false concepts, has also led to a collapse of systems of meaning, symbolic structures, institutional cohesiveness and relationships, especially those of the family. In the modern world, many of the traditional family relationships are coming apart. The extended family is largely a thing of the past, but even the nuclear family composed of mother, father and 2.2 (+ -) children can no longer be presumed. The incidence of single-parent families is rising significantly and in many places is now accepted as relatively normal, as indeed are non-heterosexual unions. All of this has led to alienation and loneliness but also, on the positive side, to a fresh search for new forms of community, the animation of which can be a fruitful apostolate for the modern evangeliser.

Modernity, in its varied expressions is in itself neither totally good nor totally bad. Much like any culture, it is a mixture of positive and negative elements. What is certain, though, is that modern culture is a fact and must be taken into account in the context of proclaiming the "Good News" and in the preparation of evangelisers.

Modernity and Dialogue

Dialogue means many things to many people and, indeed, can be legitimately defined in different ways depending on the contexts in which it is used. As a basic minimum, dialogue, in whatever environment it finds itself, demands openness to others, willingness (and the ability) to listen, a realisation that one does not possess the entire truth and a desire to search

and work with others for the benefit of the human race.

In honesty it must be admitted that dialogue has not always been a strong suit of Christian leaders. Those who differed or opposed were often met with reprobation, hostility or, in milder moments, pity. Competing claims frequently took the form of invective, denunciation, the trading of insults and even physical violence.

However, even before the end of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI gave dialogue a boost through his encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* in which he says: "The Church must enter into dialogue with the world in which it lives. The Church becomes the word; the Church becomes the message; the Church becomes dialogue." As an outcome of the Second Vatican Council, "dialogue" is becoming an accepted form of evangelisation at least at the theoretical level. It comprises the encounters, large or small, in which one side discusses and debates with the other; it is a quality of relationship built upon contacts and conversations, on tolerance and on understanding, on a willingness to accept a common humanity and to join forces with disparate elements of the global village to bring the Good News to modern men and women.

Dialogue and specific issues

The world of scientific exploration and discovery is moving forward at breakneck speed. To take just one example, the **biotechnical field**, replete with a myriad of ethical overtones, has, within a generation, greatly altered concepts about generation. The once assumed inevitable connection between sex and conception is no longer valid. There are now at least a half-dozen ways in which conception can take place and as many in which it can be prevented: and this is simply one of the facets of genetic engineering. To dialogue effectively with the genetic engineer it is necessary to know not only theology, but to have some sense of the breakthroughs in this branch of science.

The struggle of **women** for equality has been defined as one of the major challenges facing both society and the Church today. That it concerns Church leaders is clear from the attention given to it by Pope and bishops. Several modern developments have brought about a change in the status of women; the possibility of controlling fertility has been a major factor, but also playing a significant part has been the widespread education (including theological) of women, their entry into the work force and the discrediting of a number of myths about their relationship to men and their role in society. Dialogue with and an attempt to understand the slightly more numerous part of the species is important for the contemporary evangeliser.

The **increasing population** already alluded to, poses challenges to civil and religious leaders alike. While many demographers hold, probably rightly so based on abstract models, that the world is capable of

sustaining an even more rapid growth in the numbers of people, no one has yet found a way to ensure an equitable distribution of goods; consequently malnutrition (sometimes starvation) continues on a massive scale with all its attendant physical and moral problems.

That the Church has entered the field of **environmental preservation** is scarcely surprising given the traditional stress on natural law, which at one time tended to be confined to personal morality but is now seen to encompass relationships between the human being and the natural environment. Clearly the salvation of the physical world and the integrity of creation must be part of any programme of Justice and Peace.

The **sanctity of life** has had few stronger defenders than the Catholic Church. However, the defence has not always been even-handed, sometimes tending to stress certain aspects of life to the neglect of others. The "seamless garment" approach insists on respect for all human life from conception to the grave and opposes abortion, inhuman conditions, morbid poverty, starvation caused by environmental destruction and economic manipulation, the threat of wholesale annihilation posed by nuclear and chemical weapons, the execution of political prisoners and neglect of the elderly, while promoting integrated human development and peace based on justice. To accomplish this mission, it will be necessary to have at least some idea of the economic and social forces at work in society and some techniques for preparing people to deal with them from the Gospel perspective.

Modernity and non-Western society

Much of what has been said up to now has been based on the impact of contemporary society on the Western World. For missionaries it is important to ask whether the same or similar conditions will apply in other parts of the world which find themselves at different stages of scientific and technological development. While some will attempt to transpose the Western experience, with a few modifications, to developing areas, others recognise that different historical and social elements can in fact generate quite a different situation.

AFRICA. Sub-Saharan Africa has largely embraced Christianity but its conversion is relatively recent. Christianity, while bringing the Gospel, has also been a co-agent with the colonial powers in the introduction of modernity and secularisation through its health, education and business ventures. Despite the rapid growth of membership in mainline churches, packed places of worship, an abundance of vocations to ministries and the proliferation of sects, Africa has not remained immune to those influences that have been instrumental in shaping the West.

In many places one witnesses the erosion of the identity of peoples and the gradual disintegration of village life the individual emerging against group

solidarity. Efforts are afoot to build national consciousness and promote intercultural relationships transcending traditional boundaries.

Africa, too, is a battleground of competing ideologies, some of which are imported. Its businessmen compete with the outside world and its citizens aspire to the "good life" in common with their contemporaries in other parts of the globe. There is rich scope here for the evangeliser who on the one hand is committed to helping his people towards a more just share of the world's goods while at the same time maintaining traditional cultures and avoiding excessive materialism. It is a delicate balance.

LATIN AMERICA. The impact of modernity on the "most Catholic" of continents is complex and even contradictory. It would seem that an upper-class elite, for the most part nominally Catholic, has followed patterns of secularisation similar to those characteristic of the West. On the other hand, at the grassroots level, religious commitment seems if anything to have strengthened in recent years. From the point of view of Catholicism this is the result, in large measure, of the Church's option for the poor and the stance taken by the Church (or portions of it) against injustice and exploitation. As a result a liberating "popular Christianity" has been born and, in resisting the new forms of oppression created by capitalism in the seventies and eighties, the peoples did not deny their religious traditions, rather they reformulated them.

Furthermore, although Latin America is to the fore in the rush towards urbanisation, it has lacked the capacity and the time to absorb these migrants as was done in Europe and the States. The unskilled, low paid, non-unionised workers with little social future need a survival strategy and many have found it in Pentecostal movements, Afro-American cults and expressions of popular Catholicism, which have transformed but not diminished their religious fervour. Thus, contemporary Latin American society has tended less towards secularisation than to a plurality of religious expressions.

Modernity and Formation

The challenge of bringing the good news of Christ to a modern secularised culture, and of doing so in a spirit of dialogue rather than polemics, has implications for Formation programmes, which must prepare evangelisers in a realistic way for contact with today's society. As a very minimum, Formation programmes and formators should be thoroughly aware of contemporary society and especially of its expressions in those areas in which their particular candidates are likely to exercise their evangelical efforts.

An effective Formation programme will aim to help candidates not merely to cope with the world as it is but to transform it. It will be particularly sensitive to the needs of the poor, that is, those who are virtually

powerless in the contemporary world.

Our SRL emphasises the need for significant periods of pastoral involvement in the course of initial Formation during both cycles and more specially during the period of apostolic experience. Properly organised, these periods can be of immense value, enabling both those in Formation and Formators to work together in dialogue with the contemporary world and in the promotion of justice for the disinherited. Realistically speaking, this aspect of Formation can be taught only by example and experience subsequently reflected upon. Today it is not sufficient to give Formation based on models or on ecclesiastical formulas that have little relevance to today's society. Nor can it be assumed that after a theological and spiritual Formation seminarians will be able to absorb, almost by osmosis, the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the challenge of a contemporary society. To cite a simple example: we cannot presume the ability to dialogue; it is a skill which has to be learned.

Spirituality for today will be one of searching, evolving, discovering, of uncertainty and transition, of parting and of letting go. Old images and concepts crumble as God through His creativity beckons us forward in trusting love, to search for unity in a world in danger of being fractured; unity between Christian and non-Christian, between Christians themselves, between the material and the spiritual and surely between woman and man. "There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither slave nor freeman, there can be neither male nor female - for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

Conclusion

The modern world, or at least the western segment of it, is sometimes referred to as "Post-Christian". It is an infelicitous choice of phrase. Certainly the overt influence of Christian churches is less obvious today, but a world that has been privileged to receive the Incarnation and to be redeemed by Christ can hardly be spoken of as "Post" Christian.

It is a world that has altered dramatically in the twentieth century and will, according to the experts, change even more rapidly in the future; many feel dislocated by the bewildering pace of development. Nevertheless, it is the only world we have and we are committed to announce to it the good news, adapting our approach to the culture in which we find ourselves. In this we can identify with Libermann when, facing new social realities, less dramatic perhaps than ours but nevertheless real, he counselled his followers in the well known letter of March 1848 that "... we should not forget that we are no longer living in the system established in the past... we must do good and fight evil in the state and according to the mentality of the age in which the world lives... let us frankly and simply accept the new order and bring to it the spirit of the Gospel" (N.D. 10, 151).