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Chapter 13

Evangelizing from Inside Out: Intercultural Community in Mission

The Spiritan vocation presumes that the divine Spirit of God is already operative in all dimensions of creation and in every humanly created way of life. Our Congregation, therefore, carrying forth the vision of our founders, Father Poullart des Places and Father Francis Libermann, serves all people by calling forth the movement of the Spirit in their lives and inviting them to full participation in the church as the People of God and the Body of Christ. As Spiritans we elicit the gifts of the Spirit in ourselves, each person and communities of peoples for the building up of the Reign of God found in its fullness in the Risen Christ. The utmost dimension of our missionary life is that we give witness to the working of the Spirit through the gifts that we share in the quality of our communities. We are ministers of the mission of God who is Love, because we have come to believe, to know, and to practice that Love through Jesus Christ and the sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit of Love in our lives.

In this reflection, I rely on my missionary experience and my journey of faith to reflect on two essential elements that, I believe, are at the heart of Spiritan intercultural community living as it lives Christ's mission in the church: 1) the converted subject (evangelization from the inside), and 2) intercultural evangelizing community committed to on-going dialogue through which it experiences both on-going formation and transformation.

The Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples stated:

The missionary nature of the church is founded on the fact that the church, inasmuch as it is the People of God, is the sign and instrument of salvation, and has received from the Risen One the mandate to announce the Gospel and to baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (cf. Mark 16:15–20). The missionary nature of the

church is Trinitarian and has, as her primary and central reference, Jesus the Good Shepherd, the Way, the Truth and the Life, the Gate of the Flock, and the Light.¹

This presumes that both personally and as community we have encountered the Risen Christ and are undergoing a process of transformation by living the Paschal Mystery. Each of us must put our fingers in his wounds and side and be marked by those wounds in order to carry the aroma of Christ's resurrected Body.

1. The Converted Subject (Evangelization from Inside Out)

Thomas Merton insightfully reminds us of the importance of having an integrated and unified life. He writes,

to unify your life, unify your desires. To spiritualize your life, spiritualize your desires. To spiritualize your desires, desire to be without desire. To live in the spirit is to live for a God in whom we believe, but whom we cannot see. To desire this is therefore to renounce the desire of all that can be seen. To possess Him who cannot be understood is to renounce all that can be understood. To rest in Him who is beyond all created rest, we renounce the desire to rest in created things.²

Merton's insight strikes at the core of my missionary experience. Working in Taiwan for over ten years, I experienced the same separation between faith and daily life in society that is evident in western countries. People of faith are shaped socially and culturally by fashionable utilitarian and pragmatic approaches to moral and ethical issues such as abortion, same sex relationships, contractual marriage based on mutually satisfactory goals, divorce as the solution to marital conflicts, and the acceptance of religious pluralism in a completely relativistic way. Bringing the Catholic faith perspective to the dialogue with the people whom I was sent to evangelize required that I looked deeply

1. XIX Plenary Assembly: Ecclesial Awareness and *Missio ad gentes*: The Service of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples at Fifty Years since the Conciliar Document *Ad gentes* (November 30th to December 3rd, 2015) no. 1.

2. *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1958) 56.

into my faith perspective and conviction. I became aware that I had to go much deeper. It caused me to look into the teaching of the Second Vatican Council rooted in the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation, the God of Love, at the heart of all evangelization and pastoral ministry. What I experienced was my spiritual, pastoral, and missionary poverty. The invitation was clear. I had to launch out into the deep to rediscover my relationship with Christ in God and through that relationship appreciate anew my relationship with the local church, with the Congregation and with the universal church. Only in this way would I be able to encounter the local church and Taiwanese culture as it is and accompany it, enter into dialogue with it, and be in an ongoing process of discernment required to understand the implications of the Gospel for people's lives where they are.

Relating the Gospel-vision contained in the teaching of the Council provided the medium for my being evangelized, while I sought to evangelize people and their culture. Both went hand in hand. It required ongoing effort to learn the cultural worldview that shaped the people and the institutions that formed them, the way that the local church itself reflected the cultural mores, and a growing awareness of the windows of opportunity to show how the Gospel was a liberating force in the culture. Everything that I experienced rings true in the words of Pope Francis:

A true missionary, who never ceases to be a disciple, knows that Jesus walks with him, speaks to him, breathes with him, works with him . . . The passion and conviction for evangelization and mission conviction are essentially sustained by our own constantly renewed experience of savoring Christ's friendship our commitment to remain docile in the hands of the Holy Spirit like that of the clay in its potter's.³

I set out, therefore, to prepare courses in which I would be able to share the teaching of Vatican II and thereby offered Catholics, both in Taiwan and later in China, a new window on the world. It focused on finding meaning through an encounter with God, with the self, and with the world. This was the best way that I knew, as a missionary, that I could love people who struggled in their faith life within a cultural context that did everything but offer them a path to the blessedness of the Beatitudes. I had to live what I preached.

3. Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium* On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World (Vatican: Nov 24, 2014) 266, 255.

Pope Francis further reminds us that,

a person who is not convinced, enthusiastic, certain, and in love, will convince nobody and mission is at once a passion for Jesus and a passion for people . . . to be evangelizers of souls, we need to develop a spiritual taste for being close to people's lives and to discover that this is itself a source of greater joy.⁴



It was for me a time of renewal and reawakening. Thanksgiving constituted the essence of my daily prayer. My work as a parish priest, Dean, Director of the Catholic College of Education, and Vicar General of the diocese became my works allowing me to engage in on-going conversion, and context for ongoing dialogue. They provided me a *kairos*, and the “opportune moment” to grow in my capacity to relate lovingly to God, to myself, to others and to the world as our common home. I also became conscious of the depth of Fr. Liberman’s teaching of *practical union with God*. I was in the process of growing actively receptive to the unfolding action of the Spirit in the narrative of my life.

St. Paul’s life journey and narrative in conforming to the life of the Master sheds light on the essential elements that continue to shape and prepare me to evangelize. First and foremost is his understanding that Christ’s love has no frontiers. It is that Love, whom we call Spirit, that enables us to love universally

4. Ibid., 268.

in such a way as to forgive and reconcile what is broken, and unbinds us from all that impedes us from being one. This is foundational to our being, living, and evangelizing as a community that thrives on diversity of gifts. Paul proclaimed this oneness in diversity, life, and freedom, which bears the fruits of love, peace, and joy. That love is the foundation and facilitating force in bringing us together as the intercultural community in mission, that is, being evangelized in order to evangelize.

Paul becomes a model of what it means to be evangelized from inside out. The mission is God's activity in the missionary! I only unfold when the Spirit takes the lead in my life. This is why I speak of it as being evangelizing from the inside out. The fundamental formation or shaping takes place interiorly in the experiences undergone in all circumstances that offer the opportunity for development and integration. It demands receptivity, flexibility, and availability. It provides the opportunity to be both God-anchored and mobile at the same time and hold the two in healthy tension. I have been stretched in my capacity to listen and the discipline that is required by true dialogue. I have had to learn fluidity, the ability to change course and plans when running into the various stops and starts. It is not surprising that one of the major metaphors we use for the action of the Holy Spirit is water. It flows and is able to penetrate the smallest crack in a container.

In Gen 22:2, God commanded Abraham, "Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him up as a burnt offering on a height that I will point out to you." On the surface, this request seems to be irrational and cruel. How can God demand from a father that he kill his only son begotten in his advanced age? The only son on whom further progeny and descendants depended. It called Abraham to abandon the concrete plan of life and security that he had been promised. But is that not what faith and hope demand—readiness to go the route of the unseeable, at least given the limits of the vision of our mind and heart? Especially when this comes to ideas and plans that we have conceived and created on our own? My plan, my creation, my ideas, my "intellectual property!" That is why we have always taught that faith is reasonable but not rational or proven by the intellect. At times, what it demands from us seems "crazy," but if we follow the lead of the Advocate, who "will lead you progressively to the whole truth" (John 16:13), the mission unfolds before our eyes and we can sacrifice the "ram" instead. Thereby, the essence of evangelization, the unfolding of the divine message of love, takes place in us and in our encounter with others at all the strata of existence.

This insight also echoes in Psalm 115. The psalmist invites us to let go of idols who “have mouths but speak not; have eyes but see not; have ears but hear not; have noses but smell not” (vv. 5–7). They are dead and cannot relate. Ours is the living God, the God of Encounter. Paul knew this Psalm as well as Psalm 149. Yet, on his journey into freedom, it was only through the revelation of love in Christ that he let his “idols” go. It was at that moment that he knew what it was to be evangelized. This journey to evangelize others had begun.

Paul became real for me in Taiwan and China. The revelation that he experienced and his subsequent conversion, as recounted in Acts 9, invite us to reflect on how Christ has made himself real in our lives. Without that encounter our missionary efforts are in danger of becoming social work or political activism. Paul teaches us how to hold in tension a God-anchored stability and fluidity of heart, thought, and action. He never lost awareness of the action of the Spirit and Christ in every aspect of his life or what life brought him. The God who created all light manifested himself within an even greater light. Paul links all of God’s great creative actions in the Old Testament with what has happened in him—a profound burst of light whose source is the glory of Christ himself, in the light of which all else pales (Acts 26:14–18).

In and through his encounter with the Risen Christ, Paul was led to a total detachment from what had formerly seemed most important to him (Phil 3:7–8) and experienced a completely new vision of things. He was loved and fell in love. He speaks of revelation, because seeing from a new point of view—that of Christ—everything now appears different to him. He judges his life in a new way. This clarified his mission! He understood his call to a new mission, “God was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles” (Gal 1:16), and “Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power” (1 Cor 1:17).

To get an idea of how God-anchored and flexible/fluid Paul could be, we only have to look at his description of experiences he underwent as he sought to evangelize. “We know that God works with those who love him, those who have been called in accordance with his purpose, and *turns everything to their good*” (Rom 8:28, emphasis mine). Not even the hardships or distress, or persecution, or lack of food and clothing, or threats or violence can cut him off from the love of Christ (Rom 8:35–36). “Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked; I spent a night and a day in the open sea” (2 Cor 11:25). He changed travelling mates, challenged communities he

had first established when they veered from the faith, was as wise as a serpent and gentle as a dove when interacting with the Sanhedrin and Roman officials. Always so that the love of God in Christ would be proclaimed. That is faith lived and proclaimed. Never did he forget his weakness. Everything he had he had received. Everything was given to him so that he could be for all peoples a sign of the merciful God, whose initiative always precedes human seeking.

Paul has been my teacher. From him I have learned what it means to engage in and commit oneself to the on-going process of evangelizing from the inside of our minds, hearts. Giving up our idols opens us up to a Master Plan and story of redemptive love that heals, liberates, and transforms. Sometime this only happens through our kicking and screaming. But come it must, if it is to be evangelization from inside out.

In my relationship with Paul, I was confronted by questions such as the following:

1. How and in what way is Jesus (who for Paul is the revelation of divine mercy) the fundamental reference point for me to understand who I am, what I am, where I came from, and to what I am called?
2. What about my experience of being evangelized from the inside is similar to, different from, or analogous to Paul's experience?
3. To what extent have I experienced the ongoing action of the Spirit who gives life and leads to freedom?
4. To what extent am I able to hold in tension a God-anchored stability and flexibility or fluidity in the experiences that life brings me?
5. What are my "dreams/idols" that block me from freely responding to the divine initiatives toward me?

2. Intercultural and Evangelizing Community

The evangelizing community is committed to on-going dialogue through which it experiences both on-going formation and transformation. Jesus formed a community, an apostolic community, under the guidance of his Spirit and gathered around the table fellowship of the Eucharist. This guidance and gathering goes beyond being groups of likeminded people, which are often created to satisfy one's need to be needed, to find a response to one's emotional need, to reinforce one's ideological stand toward life, and to provide a comfort zone which never ask you to change. Community presumes

diversity and inclusiveness. Those who gather on the basis of sameness end up becoming a life-style enclave. True community presumes diversity in all of its forms, gender, intellectual creativity, diversity of thought, ethnicity, culture, etc . . . Living in such a community demands openness to otherness and the presumption that change and adaptation are of the essence of life shared and lived. This is what is at the heart of Jesus's prayer that "They may be one," and Paul's metaphor of the body and its members. It is a communion of participants who presume that they will be in an ongoing state of reform (*semper reformanda est*) as each participant enters the transforming Paschal Mystery of Christ. It means letting our minds be changed (conversion) as the Spirit continues to lead us to the truth of love.

In intercultural community we consciously invoke the Spirit to bring about this transformation (*epiclesis*). Without this focus in our common prayer life, our ability to accept each other's human frailty, different cultural idiosyncrasies, personality differences, and our sinfulness soon become intolerable. These impede us from seeing each other as gifts to be shared; they become forces that are centrifugal rather than centripetal. Living the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit binds us into community in such a way that we move beyond the separation because of distance, temperament, race, color, gender, ideology, social status, history, creed or even death. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul clearly describes the effects of living centrifugal self-indulgence and its opposite in bearing the centripetal fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:16–24). The results of the centrifugal are factions, conflict, antipathy, rivalry, etc. Union in the power of the Spirit produces fruit from branches that are attached to the Vine: love, joy, peace, patience, etc. Again, life in community rests on our expectation and choice. Do we expect to live in the narrow confines of a lifestyle enclave? Or do we cherish living a common project that gives us the freedom of the children of God, both in our personal life and community relationship, which then enable us to be a community of evangelizers?

Our mutual commitment to follow the Spirit is the basis of trust in each other. Without this trust no community or relationship can survive. Without trust, there is no possibility of sharing the Good News. As trust in the unfailing loving presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in one another is gradually deepened and solidified, we then simultaneously become more willing to submit ourselves with all of our limitations, weaknesses, and brokenness to the Spirit for ongoing transformation. Consequently, we are more actively participating in the process of evangelization from the inside out. This process, thus, enables us to be



missionaries who are convinced, enthusiastic, certain and in love, joyful and effective in addressing the thornier cultural, formational, ecclesial, pastoral and historical questions relating to our Spiritan mission.

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