

The Laity's Role in Evangelization

Chen Gong'ao

Translated by Peter Barry, MM

Father Chen Gong'ao wrote this thesis during the theology course held at the National Seminary in Beijing from March to December 2003. Due to limitations of space, only extracts have been translated and published here. Used with the permission of the author.

Foreword

Since China's opening up, the religious policy has been implemented step by step. Our Catholic clergy have been rehabilitated, and have returned to their churches to take charge of church affairs. For the first ten years, the Church was busy re-starting religious activities, getting back church properties, opening seminaries and convents, and training the next generation of Church leaders. In the last ten years, the Church has been busy re-building

Father Chen Gong'ao with the late Bishop Huang Woze of Nanchong Diocese, Sichuan Province, who passed away on March 22, 2004, at the age of 98.



churches and fulfilling the requirements of the Catholics' spiritual life. Physical temples have been rebuilt, but the temples in souls have been neglected. This is seen in a lack of concern for evangelization. According to available statistics, there are now six million Catholics in our country, but there are only 1,600 priests. In Sichuan Province there are 400,000 Catholics, but only 60 priests. According to these statistics, then, each priest is responsible for pastoral work among 7,000 Catholics. According to the *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, priests are the loyal cooperators of the bishop, and their first duty is to preach the Gospel of God to the masses. "They are to arouse faith in the hearts of non-believers, and nourish the faith in the hearts of believers. Thus through faith the Christian community begins and grows." (PO2) This shows that each priest has the duty to preach the truths of the Gospel to all persons. The priest also in a special way shares in the priesthood of Christ. "In carrying out the sacred liturgy, they act as other Christs... They serve God's people by giving them the sacraments and the Eucharist... They take all the church's work and its missionary activity, and bring it to the altar of the Eucharist... The priest is the leader of God's people, the representative of Christ and the head and pastor of the Christian community." (PO2) The word pastor describes how the priest is the leader of God's people and how he should exercise his authority. The priest should remember that he is a good shepherd, and that his authority is not like that exercised in other social organizations. He should use the virtues of love, humility, holiness, warmth, friendship and simplicity to carry out his duty of supervision. This is as Jesus said: "I am among you as one who serves." (Lk 22:27) and "If I your lord and master have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." (Jn 13:14) The priest should motivate everyone to be united in love and friendship. Besides this, he must coordinate many different thoughts and attitudes, so that the Christians have a safe and stable social environment for practicing their religious life. At the same time, the priest is the protector of the public good. In the name of the bishop, he oversees the Church and helps it to develop.

From the above discussion we can see that it is very difficult for the priest to carry out his duties to the complete satisfaction of all. His burdens are very great. Moreover, in China, where Catholics constitute a small minority of the population, it is

even more difficult for priests to satisfactorily perform their priestly duties. There is also an imbalance in the distribution of Catholics throughout the country. In the plains of the north the Catholics are comparatively more concentrated, whereas in the mountains of the south, the Catholics are more scattered. When one priest was describing his pastoral experience, he said that in mountainous regions, it often takes a whole day's journey to go to administer extreme unction to a person. In the present situation of our Church, looking at things from a human point of view and from the standards of supervising a social organization, the Chinese Catholic Church is almost in a situation of dealing only with what is needed to administer the sacraments to the Catholics. It is in the critical situation of not being able to meet the requirements of the times. By only depending on the bishops, priests, Brothers and Sisters to preach the Gospel, can we meet the requirements of a rapidly developing society? On the other hand, let us look at the situation of the Protestant Church. According to some information, at Liberation there were only 400,000 Protestant Christians. But now there are over 30 million. On what do they depend to preach the Gospel? They count on trained catechists from among the Christians. They release the positive spirit in the Christians to carry out evangelization. Some scholars have made a comparative analysis of the numbers of Catholics and Protestants. Afterwards they came up with a thought-provoking humorous phrase, which has some truth to it. "The Protestant Church depends on sheep to produce sheep, and the sheep do give birth to sheep; the Catholic Church depends on shepherds to produce sheep, but the shepherds cannot give birth to sheep." However, our country has so many people who do not yet know God, have not been converted to Jesus, and have not entered the Church. Should the great mass of our Catholic believers not reach out a sympathetic and friendly hand to help them?

From an analysis of the above paragraphs, we can see that the Chinese Church is very much in a situation of "the harvest is great, but the laborers are few." The present problem of the lack of clergy is difficult to solve. We must send forth the Catholics to do evangelization. The most important duty of our Chinese Church is to motivate our Catholics to positively participate in the work of evangelization. In this essay, I introduce a few ideas about the role

of the laity in evangelization. If there are any mistakes, I hope my colleagues and brothers and sisters in the Church will correct them.

I. The Consciousness and Mission of Evangelization

Above I have pointed out that at the present time the Chinese Catholic Church is lacking in clergy, but that the pastoral work is abundant. Therefore the laity's involvement in evangelization can make up for the "insufficiency" of the involvement of the clergy. Actually, the laity's consciousness of evangelization and its mission regarding it are far greater than the reason of insufficient clergy. The real reasons for lay involvement in evangelization are the requirements of the Gospel itself and of the Second Vatican Council.

(Translator's remark: The author here cites many references from the Bible and from the documents of Vatican Council II to prove that the laity should be involved in the Church's mission of evangelization.)

II. The Objective and Duty of Evangelization

Although we realize the importance of lay involvement in the work of evangelization, we also must be clear about the objective and duty of evangelization. If we have a target, then we can make efforts in its direction. We must avoid two things in our evangelization work: blindly rushing into it, and a once for all action. This would be like blowing bubbles; in five minutes they would disappear. Pastoral experience tells us that it is a mistake to think that running a few formation courses is evangelization. Some people think, "We must baptize as soon as possible. To make the catechumens undergo an eight-month or one-year catechumenate means that most likely there will be no one around to baptize at the end of it. Evil spirits will have scared them off. Therefore we must immediately baptize those who believe in the Lord." Such people plausibly argue that Jesus said: "Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved." (Mk. 16: 15-16) They point out that on Pentecost, after the Holy Spirit came down upon the apostles, Peter

openly preached the Gospel, and the apostles immediately baptized about 3,000 believers. (Acts 2: 38-41) That was the situation at that time. Perhaps many of the 3,000 already knew about the dead and risen Lord for a long time. I think that we ought to follow the teaching of the Church in carrying out evangelization. Therefore I think that to initiate the laity into their duty to do evangelization work is a long and arduous task for the Universal Church. We should make this the most important aim of our pastoral work. We should seize upon this, and urge the Church authorities to give it their highest attention. They should judge the standards of a diocese or a parish on their achievements in evangelization. Achievements in evangelization should be the measure for examining the clergy, the Catholics or the parish management committee. I think the objectives and tasks of evangelization are the following:

1. *To preach the Gospel and to sanctify people's souls.* The Church's mission is to bring people to faith in Christ, and through Christ's grace to obtain salvation. Therefore, in the first place, the Church and its evangelical workers should preach Christ's Gospel by word and deed, and spread Christ's grace. Actually the mission of the Church is not only to spread Christ's good news and give His grace to others, but also to introduce the spirit of the Gospel into the present world order and make it more beautiful.... Regarding this point, many people think that the first task of evangelization is for the Church to reform the world. In today's social environment, the Church should be especially concerned about the material needs of the poor, and those with a low standard of living and on the fringes of society. The main task for some people in the Church is not the preaching of the Gospel and the sanctification of souls. Rather it is that the Church set up welfare institutions. If the task of concern for the poor is carried out to the extent that the preaching of the Gospel is neglected, then this will lead to a repeat of the phenomenon of "people entering the Church for bread and work." It could even mean that the people who are helped do not come in contact with the Gospel at all.... Rather, those institutions should be a means or a method for spreading the Gospel. Their

purpose should be to help people to better accept the Gospel.

2. *To lead people to convert to the Lord is to help them to be saved.* In the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*, the word “apostolatus” is used to describe evangelization. It means the work of an apostle. It points to the work and actions of an apostle. Whatever action and works that lead people, either directly or indirectly, to the Lord and help them to obtain salvation is considered apostolic (evangelical) work. In this definition evangelical work is not limited to teaching the doctrine or introducing people to the Church. It includes all activities, which in a Gospel spirit a Christian does to make reality conform to the spirit of Christ.
3. *To witness to the Lord is to witness to the faith....* The Christians have many opportunities to get involved in the work of evangelization and of sanctifying people. The Christians bear witness by living a holy way of life, and by carrying out good works with a supernatural spirit. This is a kind of force to attract people to believe in the Lord and to be converted to the Lord.
4. *To preach the Gospel is to plant the Church.* The *Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church* speaks of “Missio.” The meaning is that the Church sends missionaries all over the world to preach the Gospel. They are to plant a local Church among the races and peoples who do not yet know Christ. This work, of course, is to be carried out primarily by priests, who are sent forth to preach the Good News. However, lay Catholics, who have the time and the ability, should also receive training in “preaching,” and help priests to spread the Gospel.

III. The Spirit of Evangelization

In the third chapter of the *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People*, the following sentence appears: “Love is the soul of the apostolate.” The meaning is that love for God and for other people is the motive for all apostolic activities. If there is no real love, or if

the promotion of love is not the objective, then even if surface evangelical work receives great praise from the people, in the eyes of God, it is worthless.

IV. Methods for Evangelization

(Translator's note: Here the author gives a general background of what Jesus said in the Bible about our role in spreading the Good News. We are to be the light, salt and yeast in the world, etc. Then the author moves on to cover methods of spreading the Gospel.)

Regarding evangelization, from my many years of pastoral experience, we can distinguish many levels of audience. There are three levels in regard to age: old persons, middle-aged persons, and youth. Concerning education, there are intellectuals and uneducated. In terms of geography, there are city dwellers and those who live in the countryside. No matter what, a preacher of the Gospel must be familiar with the audience he is addressing and with the environment. As Jesus said to Peter: "Launch out into the deep and lower your nets for a catch." (Luke 5:4) To "launch out into the deep" means to have a profound understanding of society, of its culture, history and customs. It is to be like "yeast" in flour. I think that this is most important, because if one knows the social environment and the times, then one can decide on the suitable method of evangelization. He will choose the correct means to move people's hearts, and he will be in tune with the pulse of the times. He will help people to more easily accept the Gospel, and will show them how the Church is beneficial to them. Therefore the evangelizer must choose from a variety of presentations the ones most suitable to the audience he is addressing in order to preach the Gospel in a lively way.

My parish has Catholics from the center of the city and from villages in the countryside. Therefore I will share some methods of evangelization among both kinds of people, with the purpose of soliciting valuable opinions from everyone.

Methods for preaching the Gospel to city people

Because present day China is just entering into a market economy, and one that encourages private enterprise, both the

economy and the cultural ideology are undergoing a time of special change. Now is a time of high unemployment, so people's thinking is confused, and they are suffering a crisis of faith. The Church should accompany society, and help the people get through this difficult time, by promoting a situation of stability and unity. The Church can thus stand with the people and fulfill their spiritual needs. Our Nanchong parish makes use of Saturdays to introduce the Church to outsiders. We have established a "Catholic Waist Drum Team," which carries out its activities in shopping malls and parks. The Catholics take this opportunity to share their faith with the non-Catholics, and tell them the benefits of entering the Church. Many unemployed people have not yet found work, and they have nothing to do at home. So they go to the church to watch the ceremonies and to listen to the doctrine. The Catholics tell the unemployed people not to be anxious about their situations; rather, they should arouse their zest for life. One Catholic shares his experience of being unemployed, and how after being influenced by the "Waist Drum Team," he entered the Church, and his zest for living returned. The unemployed people are usually aged between 40 and 55, with elderly and young ones to care for. They include people who suffered during the Cultural Revolution. Their thoughts and feelings are gloomy. After some advice and enlightenment, they are able to discard the heavy burden of their thinking, to put aside their pride and to find a job. I think we should encourage our Catholics to advise the people they meet in society to remain calm, and to show them love and sympathy. This is a subtle way of carrying out the work of evangelization. Of course, there are many other ways of preaching the Gospel in the city. The city Catholics should stir up their apostolic spirit, and suggest other ways of sharing their faith with non-believers. I have an incipient idea that the Church ought to encourage the city Catholics to go into the countryside to preach the Gospel. It is possible that this "city enfolding the countryside" kind of strategy will get twice the result with half the effort. Most people think that conditions in the city are somewhat better than in the countryside. So, the people in the countryside can more easily accept the faith experience and religious activities of the city dwellers.

Methods for preaching the Gospel in the countryside

China is largely an agricultural country. Since the opening up of China, villages in the countryside have undergone great changes. The number of people from the countryside going outside of their area to work increases everyday. When these migrant workers return to their villages, they bring new knowledge, ideas, experience and skills. It cannot be said of today's peasants that their present way of life is "limited to farming," or described as "work when the sun comes up, and rest when the sun goes down." Now they farm scientifically, and science has brought riches. Leisure time is more plentiful. More than 80% of our Catholics live in the countryside. Therefore, evangelization in the countryside is the focus of our apostolic efforts. The vitality of the Church is also there.

In a country where agriculture plays such a large role, one of the main tasks of the Church is to carry out evangelization of the Catholics in the village, to establish the Church well at the village level, and to raise the standards of the village Catholics' faith and culture. The Church should exercise its prophetic role in its work in the countryside. To call the people to believe in Christ and to join the Church is the moral obligation of each of our Catholics. It is a task of the greatest urgency to investigate how evangelization can be carried out in the countryside. I think that it is possible to follow the way of "villages enfold the city" in evangelization work. An effective measure to be taken by our Church is to motivate the Catholics to go out among the masses.

First the Catholics must learn how to preach the Gospel, and understand some techniques of preaching. We must organize training sessions for catechists, and send them out in teams of two or three persons each to evangelize. They will mutually support and encourage one another. When there are problems, they will talk them over together. They should not fear that they have no knowledge, education or preaching ability. Rather, they should rely on the power of the Holy Spirit. Their hearts should be full of love for God and love for other people. If they have this love, the fire for preaching will be aroused in them. There is a saying: "If there is love, then preaching will certainly come forth." If God is in their hearts, then from their own experience they will be able to preach to others about "their belief and faith in God." They can speak about

the happiness they have in their hearts, which they have from faith in God. They can exchange and share this faith with everyone, and encourage others. The Holy Spirit will then make stronger the faith in each one's heart. And as the faith gets stronger, the Catholics become even more willing to preach the Gospel to others.

Secondly, make use of Spring Festival and other leisure times to evangelize in the countryside. When people are at leisure, they talk about family matters, or even their troubles and problems. At such times, the Catholics can use the excuse of visiting friends and relatives to carry out evangelization work. As they more deeply exchange feelings, they should not lose the opportunity to introduce their Christian faith. They can both address the listeners' minds and move their hearts. If one can preach to ten, then ten can preach to a hundred. Relying on the power of the Holy Spirit, the seeds of the Gospel can produce abundant fruit. The preacher is the servant of God; the master of the harvest is God.

Finally, the Catholics can also make use of funerals to preach the Gospel. In the countryside, funerals often attract lots of people. Many neighbors come to help, including friends and relatives (most likely they are non-Catholics). Many observers also come, just to watch the activities. This is a good opportunity for evangelization. The priest and the Catholics should make every effort to perform the ceremonies in a solemn and holy manner. They should explain the meaning and the value of life. In my experience, at such times, many people take the initiative to talk to the Catholics about the faith. Oftentimes, after holding just one funeral service, many people begin to believe in God. The Church can also make use of big feasts, like Christmas or Spring Festival to hold cultural events. We can invite non-Catholic friends to attend, and use the occasion to explain our Christian faith. In the midst of the happy celebration, the warm welcome of the Catholics will make a deep impression on the hearts of the non-Catholics, and they will feel the effects of the Gospel.

Conclusion

In the above text we have seen that from the command of Christ in the Bible and from Church teaching, Christians have the mission and duty to carry out evangelization work. We have also

studied the objective and importance of evangelization. We have analyzed and discussed to some degree methods for doing evangelization work in our country. We have understood that evangelization is not only the responsibility of bishops, priests, Brothers and Sisters in the Church, but also that each Christian has the duty to spread the Kingdom of God. I believe that if the Church heightens the awareness of Christians concerning their role in evangelization, and wholly brings into play the initiative and potential of Christians regarding it, if Christians show forth their fervor for "loving God and loving their neighbor," if the Church at all levels is imbued with the spirit of evangelization, and a good image is created for it, and if Christians work earnestly together to undertake evangelization anew, and to act as "light, salt and yeast" in society, then the seed of the Gospel of Christ will be planted throughout China's vast land, and it will sprout, flower and produce much good fruit.