

Sharing the Gospel in Asia: In Dialogue with Cultures

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Introduction

*“...even in the modern secularized city, in its squares and in its streets — where disbelief and indifference seem to reign, where evil seems to prevail over good, creating the impression of a victory of Babylon over Jerusalem — one can find a **hidden yearning, a germinating hope, a quiver of expectation**. As can be read in the book of the prophet Amos, ‘The days are coming, declares the Lord God, when I shall send a famine on the country: not hunger for food, not thirst for water, but **famine for hearing the word of the Lord**’ (8:11). The evangelizing mission of the Church wants to answer this hunger.” (No. 10, Final Message, Synod on the Word, 2008)*

I begin with an earnest appeal that we cultivate a **deep commitment** to the cause of sharing the Message of Life that Jesus has given to us. These are trying times when faith seems to be growing feebler in Christian hearts and sharing the Gospel is considered an expression of cultural chauvinism. Secular humanism has taken the place of Christian idealism and commitment. The promotion of ‘human rights’ is replacing the Christian missionary thrust. Togetherness at sports, entertainments and shopping centers seems to satisfy the human need for being together, which was expressed by Christians at a deeper level in the contexts of liturgy or service. Ideologies, political thoughts, social philosophies of all kinds find free expression, while sharing a religious message is considered obscurantist and out-fashioned.

There are Christian believers who are willing to share the fruits of their faith, but not faith itself which is the source of all good things that they do. The fact is that the people who would

greatly benefit from the fruits of your faith (e.g. works of charity, schemes for development, action for justice and peace), would profit even more if they were exposed also to the **sources of your inspiration and reasons for your conviction**; in other words, to your faith itself. They would become agents and promoters of all such noble services with double determination if they had the strength derived from faith. In the context of this total indifference to the sharing of the faith, anyone who is convinced that announcing the Good News that Jesus has shared with us is the central Christian concern, has a duty of jealously guarding this conviction and cultivating it in others.

1. Listen, Learn, and Come on the Wavelength of People

“In proclaiming the kingdom of God, Jesus never spoke over the heads of the people with a vague, abstract or ethereal language. Rather, he would conquer them by starting there where their feet were placed, in order to lead them, through daily events, to the revelation of the kingdom of heaven.” (No. 11, Final Message, Synod on the Word, 2008)

Few sharers of the Word are able to go beyond such Church-related areas of interest. They just do not know where to begin. Their discourses are loaded with internal vocabulary, Catholic theological and catechetical jargon. Their concerns are so centered around inner-Church debates that no one beyond the Catholic fold will understand what they are talking about. To such teachers, I am tempted to say, “It is better to keep silence.” Truly, we can safely affirm we shall never win a hearing, unless we have **first kept silence, listened, learned**, entered into our conversation-partner’s life and language, changed our attitudes to be attuned to his or her worldview and felt needs.

They demand **depth**. They can only spring from genuine religious seriousness, a co-feeling with the rest of humanity, a sense of commitment to the common good, an eagerness to build a common ground for sincere religious sharing. This is proved most of all by the **spirit of renunciation** and preparedness for sacrifice on behalf of society, qualities so greatly esteemed in all Asian

traditions. That is how Mother Teresa won the hearts of people instantaneously. She proved that what she was preaching, like other saints, was truly the 'Word of Life'.

2. Walk into the Lives of People

How do we begin this mighty mission? My suggestion is simple: **Begin with what is possible** at a given time, start from where you are, meet with people you know, win support from the people you are familiar with, use the methods you are acquainted with, begin with the work you are already doing. But let the work you are doing help you **walk into the lives of individuals and communities** in order to respond to their need. Jesus came into the lives of Zacchaeus, the Samaritan woman and others to offer them just what they were looking for.

That is what missionaries have always done while bringing the message of Christ through their relevant involvement in people's lives and dedicated service. St. Francis Xavier came to the aid of the fisherfolk of South India. Even while religious persons are involved in a specific form of social assistance, their deeper commitment is to the **central concerns of humanity** like justice, peace, mercy, love, forgiveness, honesty, sincerity, solidarity, generosity, responsibility...and they hold these positive qualities together with their sturdiness of faith.

3. Come to the Wavelength of Each Person, Respecting Each Person's Individuality

"This is what the deacon Philip would do on the way from Jerusalem to Gaza, when he spoke this emblematic dialogue with the Ethiopian official: 'Do you understand what you are reading? ... How could I, unless I have someone to guide me?' (Ac 8:30-31)." (No. 7, Final Message, Synod on the Word, 2008)

Every person is unique. We have to come on the wavelength of each person as individually required in each case. Jesus met the Samaritan woman when she was looking for water, Matthew at the height of his profit-making performance, the Roman centurion

while engaged in his duty of executing criminals. Philip caught up with the Ethiopian reading a scriptural text; Paul captured the attention of Lydia while she was trying to win new customers for her products. The list is long, but each can be studied with interest. Almost no two cases seem to match perfectly with each other.

*“In general, **narrative methods** akin to Asian cultural forms are to be preferred.” (No. 20, *Ecclesia in Asia*, 1999)*

While the core content of the ‘Word of Life’ will always remain unalterable, the **manner of introducing it will vary from situation to situation**. We would speak differently to children, youth, adults, and sick people; to businessmen, sports personnel, politicians, mountaineers, and tourists; people emerging from colonialism, those being free for the first time from communist domination, dominant groups, minorities; people with a tribal background or Hindu, Buddhist, or Islamic background.

4. Expose People, not to Your Skills, but to Your Faith

*“In this act (of preaching), the minister should be transformed into a prophet as well... make the question of conversion and vital commitment blossom in their hearts: ‘What are we to do, brothers?’ (Ac 2:37)” (No. 7, *Final Message, Synod on the Word*, 2008)*

But in every case the personality and **creative instinct of the teacher of the Word** seem to play a big role. Many a sharer of the Message is ‘insecure’ and afraid to let his dialogue partners come too close to him. His fear is that his partner’s scrutinizing eyes will size him up and give weight to his words accordingly. He feels that his personality is none too flattering. His worry is legitimate, for his words cannot have greater value than he himself. This is the reason why we are happy to expose people to our scholarship, our eloquence, our teaching skills, our organizing techniques, our institutional complexes, but not to ourselves and to our faith.

When we are less than God-centered, dedicated, egoless, other-oriented, generous, kindly and warm-hearted; we seem to be everything except what the Gospel wants us to be. That is the reason for our confusion. That is the reason why our words do not

have convincing power and we have long lost the *skill of persuasion*. **Mother Teresa's whisper** moved millions.

5. A Look at Paul

"Inculturation, the 'incarnation' of the Gospel in the various cultures, affects the very way in which the Gospel is preached, understood and lived." (No. 16, *Ecclesia in Oceania*, 2001)

Let us take a few lessons from the great apostle Paul:

1. Addressing the Word of Life to the Athenians, Paul began with the 'unknown God'. That arrested the attention of his listeners and aroused their curiosity. Likewise you should begin with the **world of interests** of the people to whom you are addressing the Word. For example, with youth you would begin with sports or discussions about their future; to businessmen you would speak of prices and profits; to soldiers about effort, discipline, victory; and to philosophers ideas and theories.
2. Start with your listeners' **world of ideas**. Paul borrowed concepts like '*logos*' and '*sophia*' from Hellenistic-Jewish thought. This strategy attracted the people of the Hellenic world who were philosophically bent. Similarly, the people in Hellenic society would understand Jesus as 'Lord' better than as the Jewish 'Messiah'.
3. Paul had an amazing skill in **weaving many strands of thought** of the age in which he lived into an integrated whole, such as from Stoicism, Judaic thought, mystery cults. But he never faltered in his orthodoxy or fidelity.
4. Paul drew images from the world of **Roman life** -- athletics, wrestling, military service. As Jesus had taken his images from the Galilean countryside, Paul did from Roman city life.
5. There was a change of attitude to religion among the Roman intellectuals in that period. Belief in multiple gods did not satisfy them; on the other hand, the philosophies proposed by the intellectuals were too distant from the world of the masses. Paul combined **what was best in both**: a personal God, ethical teaching, social codes, community worship, a dimension of mystery, and in-depth relationship with the Ultimate Reality.

6. Be Prepared for Opposition

"...as witnesses and martyrs they tell us of 'the power of the word' (Rom 1:16), origin of their faith, of their hope and of their love for God and for men." (Conclusion, Final Message, Synod on the Word, 2008)

Let us look at the reality that confronts Church workers in Asia today. Aside from the trend of secularization in the economy-led globalized world (look at the media, political arena, social life), there is in many Asian countries a **strong opposition** to what is described as 'proselytization'. The word 'conversion' is identified as the most heinous organized crime in which Christians are systematically engaged.

The first temptation we have in the face of such opposition is to give up sharing the Word and limit ourselves to whatever is acceptable to the forces that control the destinies of communities. But that is not the Christian solution. It is precisely in such situations that people need a Word that gives Life, energy, and motivation. The Apostles in their time acted differently. Many great missionaries in the past had the skill not only of blunting opposition and warding off persecution, but also of continuing their work in **creatively new ways**.

They remained intelligent and alert. They knew that they should **not invite persecution**. That is exactly what we forget to do through our own imprudence, lack of cultural insertion, lack of cultural sensitivity, personal arrogance, taking exaggerated stands in justice struggles or in expressions of charismatic zeal. They knew how to **elicit support even from opponents**. There are always persons with good will even among those who hold opinions radically opposed to ours. If we know how to build bridges, create a common ground and broaden it, we may find an amazing number of helpers even in the hardest circumstances.

We may not be able to do everything that these giants of faith have done, but we can **keep alive our missionary fervor**, we can build up relationships with people around us, we can be involved with them in various types of human undertakings, we can work toward building a common ground of understanding, we can work toward the common good in society, we can share values that will

enhance human worth and help cooperative effort toward shared goals, we may lead things to such a stage of relationship that we are able to share our inmost motivations, convictions and... our faith.

7. Crossing Cultural Borders

*"...that future priests, deacons and catechists be thoroughly familiar with the **culture** of the people they are to serve ... They are called to a service of inculturated evangelization..." (No. 17, *Ecclesia in Oceania*, 2001)*

We have said earlier, begin from where you are. But we must go beyond, attempt new things, have courage, and even try the impossible. And when we try to go beyond the set borders, we become aware of the reality of 'culture' and the challenge of cultural differences. Notice how the **Gospel crossed cultural borders** in different periods of history: Jesus speaking to the Samaritan woman, the Syrophenician woman, and the Roman officer; St. Paul addressing the Athenians, Roman officers, indigenous people of Asia Minor and the islands; etc. Missionaries who quickly identified themselves with the community to whom they were addressing the Gospel won a hearing; they led several to the Christian faith and built up self-reliant Churches. Faith developed new forms of expressing itself in thought, art, music, organization and other cultural self-expressions that edified the rest of the Universal Church.

We need to give more attention to the multi-cultural scenario that Asia presents in most places when sharing Christ's Message. That is why the Inculturation of the Word is important. Let us give a brief thought to this important theme.

8. Inculturation is about Touching the Inner Genius of a Community

*"It is the Church's task to bring the Good News of salvation to **all cultures** and present it in a way that corresponds to the **genius** of each people." (John Paul II, Delhi, 1 February 1986)*

Asia is known for a multiplicity of little cultures, even under the shadow of our great and ancient civilizations. Therefore, our eagerness to share God's Message will need to pay attention to the cultural assets of even smaller ethnic groups and tribes, just as we take into account the civilization heritage of the larger societies. This will mean offering the Gospel according to the **native genius** of each community so that people receive and express their faith in a manner fully in keeping with their own cultural identity.

When this process takes place successfully, the original genius of the community is awakened to new possibilities, culture is further enriched, and Faith finds expression in amazingly new and beautiful ways. In this process the lay faithful evidently play an important role. It is in them that culture is vibrant.

*"The Church respects the religions and **cultures** of peoples, and, in its encounter with them, wishes to preserve everything that is noble, true and good in their religions and cultures." (No. 8, Pastoral Attention to Traditional Religions, Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, 21 November 1993)*

During the first stages of sharing the Gospel, the effort is to make its content *intelligible and acceptable* to the community to which the Gospel is being addressed. The announcer of the Word acquires competence not only in the local language but also in the use of images and symbols that provide meaning to the local community. He/She immerses himself/herself into the **inner world of the community** (worldviews, mindsets, collective psyche, depth, perceptions) and learns to look at the world from a new perspective.

The teacher of the Message does not ignore even the **prejudices and social weaknesses** prevalent in that community, seeking to evoke thought and self-criticism in the community, thus assisting them to move to self-correction. *"When that power (of the Gospel) enters into a culture, it is no surprise that it rectifies many elements."* (No. 53, *Catechesi Tradendae*, 1979)

The illustrations and examples he uses are drawn from local cultures. He recognizes subtle differences in the meaning of words in different cultural contexts, and is aware that idioms and images can be loaded with significances that he is not familiar with. He studies, consults the community, seeks opinion of the leading

members of the faithful, and remains ever self-critical. He chooses words, phrases, images, figures with the skill of an artist in such a way as to **evoke the desired emotional response** from his audience.

9. Drawing from the Cultural and Historical Heritage and from the Ethical Traditions of a Community

*“...the translation of biblical texts cannot, however, ensure by itself a thorough **inculturation**. Translation has to be followed by interpretation, which should set the biblical message in more explicit relationship with the ways of feeling, thinking, living and self expression which are proper to the **local culture**. From interpretation, one passes then to the other stages of **inculturation**, which leads to the formation of a local Christian culture, extending to all aspects of life (prayer, work, social life, customs, legislation, arts and sciences, philosophical and theological reflection). The **Word of God** is, in effect, a seed, which extracts from the earth in which it is planted the elements which are useful for its growth and fruitfulness (cf. Ad Gentes, 22). As a consequence, Christians must try to discern ‘what riches God, in his generosity, has bestowed on the nations; at the same time they should try to shed the light of the Gospel on these treasures, to set them free and bring them under the dominion of God the Savior’ (Ad Gentes, 11). This is not, as is clear, a one-way process; it involves, “**mutual enrichment**”. On the one hand, the treasures contained in diverse **cultures** allow the Word of God to produce new fruits and, on the other hand, the light of the Word allows for a certain selectivity with respect to what cultures have to offer: harmful elements can be left aside and the development of valuable ones encouraged. Total fidelity to the person of Christ, to the dynamic of his paschal mystery and to his love for the Church, make it possible to avoid two false solutions: a superficial “adaptation” of the message, on the one hand, and a syncretistic confusion on the other (Ad Gentes, 22)” (Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, pages 117–119).*

The strength and sturdiness of the **dominant cultures** will continue to remain a challenge and an assistance for the sharer of

the Good News in Asia. Their philosophical and spiritual wisdom, religious traditions, ascetic practices, and patterns of life are of immense value for humanity. Their resistance today to secularization, their nearness to Catholic ethical principles in the area of bio-ethics and social and family values, tell us that we have much in common with them. They are not rivals or competitors, but **partners**. Dealing with them we are stepping on sacred ground, and we need to go ahead cautiously and respectfully. They can help us to preserve abiding values for the whole of humanity.

As the believing community moves ahead, the lay people play even greater role seeking to express the more profound religious truths it has been accepting and personalizing in concepts derived from its own cultural heritage. Inculturation “must involve the whole people of God, and not just a few experts, since the people reflect the authentic *sensus fidei*...” (No. 54, *Redemptoris Missio*, 1990). And I may add that it is precisely in the community that culture is most vibrant. People will be inclined spontaneously to express their faith and worship in **symbols that appeal to their collective psyche**. This would open doors for new persons who are beginning to show interest in the faith, too.

“Missionaries, in fact, cannot help bringing the Word of God in the form in which it has been inculturated in their own country of origin. New local churches have to make every effort to convert this foreign form of *biblical inculturation* into another form more closely corresponding to the *culture* of their own land.” (*Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, pages 117–119)

10. Many Persons are Culturally Uprooted in this Globalized World

In this globalized world, you will find too many uprooted people, such as many of our Asians who have generally had a Western education; those whose reading, training, updating, association (through travels, contacts, discussions, domicile) have been from the same source; those driven excessively by **alien**

philosophies and ideologies or programs of action; those of the clergy and religious who have studied or worked for a long time abroad; those whose congregations are laboring in other countries in a big way.

Such persons may discover that they are a partially or wholly uprooted people as far as their relationship with their own cultures is concerned. While they too can make very effective contributions to the cause of inculturation, they need to make sure that they are **culturally reinserted** into their society and share *emotional vibrations* with the masses, and more specifically with the believing community at whose service they are.

"...mobility and the migratory phenomenon, which opens new prospects of evangelization..." (Proposition 38, Synod on the Word, 2008).

"...it is hoped that in each cultural region centers of formation will be established for the laity and for missionaries of the Word, where they learn to understand, live and proclaim the Word of God." (Proposition 33, Synod on the Word, 2008)

11. Difficulties may be Many, yet Consensus is Possible

We need not deny the difficulties that lie ahead. Persons who are specially endowed with creativity in thought may not be equally gifted when dealing with a sensitive issue like culture. *Social activists* and *justice-fighters* (feminists, environmentalists, Marxists) not rarely develop a blind eye to the niceties of cultural differences. They find it difficult to enter into the *emotional world of culture* and listen to the *language of the heart*. *Charismatic* preachers at times take their message to extremes and hurt quite unconsciously the cultural sensitivities of different communities.

In a multicultural society one needs to be particularly careful. There are situations where many ethnic groups live side by side in a given area of a parish; where one cultural group is in a dominant position, is oppressive toward another, or where two are in tense relationships. While theoretically borrowing elements from a local culture is a welcome idea, in a situation of complex relationships one needs to proceed with care. An effort

toward *mutual concessions* and *ultimate consensus* will be most useful.

This is another area where the lay people excel, for much assistance comes from a community's *artists, poets, composers*, or other **culturally sensitive persons**, especially those *who can stir the collective unconscious* of their communities. For they have developed their *imaginative faculties* and keep them *in tune with the cultural waves* that are going through their society and constantly cultivate their *intuitive skills*. They can open new doors for people searching for the Faith, because they inculturate the Faith, first of all, in their own hearts and minds.

From them, initiatives for inculturation flow spontaneously. Even when they break from tradition and move in new directions, they retain their roots in the deeper cultural identity of their society, and consequently win its wholehearted support. They are able to **dialogue with the subconscious** of their society and **whisper the Gospel to its soul**. In this way, inculturation turns out to be a *stimulus to evangelization*, not an obstacle. It does not become a contentious issue, placing religious beliefs in question and leading communities on the way to uncertainties, but an experience of communicating joy in the Faith and confidence in the Message. *Serenity* qualifies the entire endeavor.

12. The Present 'Anti-Christian Force' is not merely a 'Political Force' to be Resisted, but a 'Cultural Force' to be Handled with Care

"For a genuine inculturation of the evangelical message, the formation of missionaries with adequate means must be ensured, to know in-depth the vital ambience and the socio-cultural conditions, so that they can be inserted in the environment, the language and the local cultures. It corresponds to the local Church in the first place to achieve a genuine inculturation of the evangelical message, paying attention of course to the risk of syncretism." (Proposition 48, Synod on the Word, 2008)

In the context of the recent harassment of Christians in different parts of Asia, I would like to make a brief reflection, not

merely on the immediate issues connected with the happenings, but on the long term strategies for the Church in the fulfillment of her great mission.

The so-called 'anti-Christian force' emerging strong in some countries of Asia is not merely a political force to be resisted, but a '**cultural force**' to be handled with care. While it seems to have developed basically in opposition to conversions and to the Christian work of uplifting the poor, it may also be considered a *cultural self-affirmation of a society* 'taken to fanatical extremes'.

This form of **cultural self-affirmation** is a conservative reaction of a civilization (society) to things that seem to threaten its central identity by appealing to its own original sources of inspiration and motivating traditions. Unfortunately, as it is, such movements are often captured by politically motivated people, who in turn hand it over to muscle-men trained systematically to harass and oppose their imaginary 'enemies', the Christians. Even if we win many legal battles in the court or international forums through publicity, these may bring some immediate relief but will not offer a lasting solution. The force will remain, and if humiliated, it will grow in strength and aggressiveness.

I would strongly urge, **never threaten the selfhood of communities**. Selfhood is the most precious treasure they have ... their individuality, their self pride, their unique heritage. It is important to show absolute respect for this selfhood. If anything we do appears like a threat to the selfhood of a community, resistance is inevitable. However, what stands at the heart of this selfhood is not easy to define. Is it ethnicity, culture, language, lifestyle, cuisine, philosophy, or religious system? Threat (real or perceived) to the selfhood of a community can lead to tensions, conflict, even war. In the religious context, it has led to heresies and schisms. Inculturation is about constant attention to this selfhood and contributing to its enhancement.

What lies at the heart of sharing the Gospel is precisely this: taking it not only to individuals but to the Soul (Self) of a community, society, culture, civilization. When we learn to share the Good News in Asia in a way that does not seem to threaten its inner identity (its Self), we shall be at a turning point in our mission

history. Inculturation has something to do with working toward that goal.

13. In the Difficult Day, We fall back on Our Culture, Our Faith

*“...this Synod reaffirms the **urgency of the mission** ‘ad gentes’ also in our time — a proclamation that must be explicit, made not only within our churches but everywhere and must be accompanied by a coherent testimony of life, which makes the content evident and reinforces it.” (Proposition 49, Synod on the Word, 2008)*

There are times when many problems come together and our springs go dry. When the sources of inspiration exhaust themselves, we need to search how to replenish them. The Indian philosopher and economist Amartya Sen frequently dips into his Asian cultural resources – Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic and others. We certainly have our own common civilization resources as Asians and we refer back to them in search of inspiration and rootedness. This is our common heritage, a shared patrimony. Persons of every tradition in every part of the world return to their cultural resources for the renewal of their motivation and the recharging of their collective energies.

It is in this context that we Christians, while tapping the cultural resources of our ancient civilization, have the possibility of drawing strength also from the **ultimate sources of our religious faith**. When people discuss current problems and subject them to **public reasoning**, it may be that we have **something unique to offer**, unique to us as Christians. What we feel is unique according to our convictions, is happily offered to our fellow-citizens as an option that is worth considering. It is not a question of imposing ideas, but of proposing possibilities.

*“Moreover, the reality of the **new ecclesial movements** is an extraordinary richness of the evangelizing force of the Church...” (Proposition 38, Synod on the Word, 2008) **The Fathers of the Synod spoke of announcing the Word with conviction and passion.***

14. Offer a 'Come and See' Invitation

This is the time when you may make a 'come-and-see' proposal. You suggest, "Come, let us explore these ideas deeper. Weigh reasons and make your decision. Come and see the person who has inspired these ideas. His name is Jesus of Nazareth." Allow persons to go beyond the superficial levels of relationships with you, and make it possible for them to enter into the **inner chambers of your personal convictions**.

*"While using the historical-critical method for research and study, the theological study of the Biblical texts should not be neglected. Or else it develops in the student a positivist attitude, making him look at it as mere historiography or history of literature, not as **God's Word**" (Proposition 26, Synod on the Word, 2008). If exegesis is separated from theology in formation courses, it can weaken the faith dimension of the formees" (Proposition 27, Synod on the Word, 2008).*

15. Speak about Jesus

*"In an age of images particularly provided by the dominating means of communication, such as television, the privileged **model of Christ is still meaningful and evocative today**" (No. 11, Final Message, Synod on the Word, 2008). "The guards replied, 'No one ever spoke like this man.'" (Jn 7:46)*

Here is the essence of sharing the Good News. Speak about Jesus. Let people experience the power of his words. Let them be charmed by his personality. Help them to reshape their inner world and personal conduct after his central teachings. Let them gaze on him who is crucified. Let their hearts exult in wonder at the experience of the power of his resurrection. **Jesus is irresistible**. Despite all that we may do, the definitive choice of Jesus is always a miracle. But miracles do happen. And they happen through you and me!