

Evangelization in a Chinese Environment

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When the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference (FABC) met for their fifth plenary conference in Bandung last July, the bishops chose as their theme: "Challenges Facing Asian Churches in the 1990's: Call and Response". An indication of the scope of the subject matter emerged in the preparatory committee which surfaced no less than 28 trends and challenges to present to the conference. Among those included were modernization, secularization, pluralism, democratization, scientific technology, humanism, glasnost, interdependence, fragmentation, multinationals, the debt crisis, ecology, fundamentalism, militarism and indigenization. Obviously, most of the trends listed are not confined to Asia, but challenges the rest of the world's churches face as well. Felix Wilfred, the noted Indian theologian, deftly gathered all these issues under five major headings; 1. macro vs. micro, 2. fragmentation vs. integration, 3. the modernization process, 4. the centrality of cultural progress and development, and 5. crisis and survival. In his presentation, Professor Wilfred also drew attention to those special characteristics peculiar to the Asian situation.



Whenever the particular issue of the Chinese unification of Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and the Mainland comes up, I am reminded of the old Chinese proverb: "Lengthy separation calls for more togetherness, but too much togetherness calls for more separation." And while reflecting on the long list of trends and challenges, it seems to me that some have a particular relevance for the Chinese Church, and that the Chinese Church is called to give a definite and sensitive response. Among these I would include: pluralism, democratization and interdependence; modernization, secularization and inculturation. Bearing all this in mind, I wish

now to address the larger but related question of evangelization in a Chinese context, approaching the problem from three different aspects; namely, 1) the need for an ecclesial communion; 2) the order and presentation of the truths of salvation; and 3) preaching the gospel in unity and harmony.

Evangelization for an Ecclesial Communion

If evangelization's object is the Chinese people, then its subject-agent is the Church. In a Chinese context, the subject-agent must be a church that is a communion and one which also represents a communion of all its members.

What characterizes and defines an ecclesial communion is its identity as a community of the people of God. While there exists within this community a hierarchical order based on function and responsibility, its members all share in the basic equality of the sons and daughters of the One Heavenly Father. All are united in the one vocation and share in the same mission. This ecclesial communion gives each of its members a sense of belonging and allows each to participate in and take responsibility for carrying out the Church's evangelical mandate, without prejudice to maintaining its hierarchical order. United in one body, the faithful carry out a plurality of functions based on their different ecclesial responsibilities and on the individual charism each member receives from God. Finally, this communion of members must be realized on the local church level, and extend beyond to include all other local churches in the universal Church.

The people of China yearn for freedom, for a fundamental equality, and for the realization of a love among brothers and sisters that is truly universal. The active presence among them of a church that represents a true communion of all its members would be an unassuming but powerful witness to the Gospel message. Also, given the particular circumstances of a China where different social systems are soon to be integrated under the one political reality, would not a church model that reflects both pluralism and unity be the ideal for the future evangelization of that country?

In a situation where the number of compatriots who have never heard of the name of Jesus is so vast that it cannot be compared with the handful of Christians among them, can the Church in China continue to tolerate members who are Christian in name

only but in no way reflect the Gospel by lives of faith? If an ecclesial communion is to be the model for the church of the future, all of its members will have to take responsibility for evangelization. Every Chinese Catholic will be expected to play his or her part.

What we see in China now is a local church that is very active in the pursuit of its stated goals of self-propagation, self-support and autonomy. But does this official church of China represent a true communion of all its members? And can it really be said with any degree of accuracy that its hierarchy is in communion with all its members?

Only a church that is indeed an ecclesial communion can be the subject-agent of evangelization in China. There is a consensus among ecclesialogists in the universal church, which dates back to the close of Vatican II, twenty-five years ago, that the church is both a community and a communion. This change in emphasis is not generally accepted on the mainland where the old *pyramid* model, with its stress on the hierarchical structures, is still quite prevalent. This traditional form of ecclesiology finds little favour in the rest of the church world today.

Another point which must be made here is that an ecclesial communion cannot be restricted to the local level, but must be in communion with all other local churches throughout the world. The official Catholic church on the mainland, while *local*, has yet to prove itself to be *catholic*. The preaching of the Gospel can only reach its fullness when the local church attains full communion with the universal Church. Faced with such trends and challenges as pluralism, democratization and interdependence, the Chinese church, if it is to respond to its own needs and the needs of the times, must pay particular attention to the indispensability of developing a communal ecclesiology where unity and communion are operational on the practical level.

The Order of Truths in Preaching the Gospel

The documents of Vatican II mention a certain "order of truths" to be followed when preaching the Gospel. However, this order varies from place to place and admits of different points of view. Generally, the order is determined by what constitutes objectively the fundamental truths of salvation. This would place the preaching of the Paschal Mystery at the top of the list, for this

is the very heart of all evangelization. It is also clearly the approach of the New Testament Scriptures. However, is this the only possible order for presenting salvific truths? History shows that in actual practice, when the Church moved away from the Jewish environment, especially as it came into contact with other Asian countries such as China, the preaching of the Gospel did not necessarily follow the traditional pattern, but ordered itself around the trends and challenges in society. Matteo Ricci spent a decade in Beijing. Ricci began his work of evangelizing by first establishing close ties with the Confucian scholars at the imperial court, to whom he introduced western science. He wrote books on such subjects as "Friendship" and the "True Doctrine of the Lord of Heaven", and only gradually followed with the introduction of the central truths of salvation. Most Church historians and missiologist today would agree with the approach of Ricci and his companions, and with the order in which they presented the truths of faith in their evangelical efforts. From this we can see that the fundamental truths of salvation need not be ordered in the traditional way when presenting the Gospel message. Moreover, what the Gospel truths reveal is Christ himself, and he is revealed not only through his words but through his actions. Evangelization is not limited to the verbal presentation of the message alone, but includes traditional Christian practice. Pope Paul VI in his Apostolic Letter, *Evangelization in the Modern World*, says that in preaching the Gospel, the practice of the faith through life witness precedes its doctrinal explanation. This is an important point to keep in mind when it comes to evangelizing in the Asian context.

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever" (Heb 13:8); he is the eternal Word who "became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14). A Chinese church now confronting the trends and challenges of increased secularization, modernization, and the need for deeper inculturation must, if it is to accomplish its mission, choose its own methods of evangelization based on conditions in the local environment.

Integrating the *Yin* and the *Yang* with Evangelization

The ancient Chinese believed strongly from their practical experience and observations that all the nations of the world, their historical personages and events resulted from the interaction of the two elementary principles of the universe: the *yin* and the *yang*.

All change was likewise due to the balance or imbalance of this dual relationship. The vital energies of the *yin* and the *yang* operating in inter-relationship are the transforming elements of all material reality. Furthermore, the *yin* is in the *yang* and the *yang* is in the *yin*. Confucianism maintains the doctrine of the "middle way" in dealing with the duality of this relationship, which is to say that neither principle is allowed to develop to an extreme degree, lest the pendulum swing back in the opposite direction. The Taoists advocate a *coming together* to form a unity which takes place at the borders where the *yin* and the *yang* meet. Thus, Laozi's famous words "great skill as if without skill is the coming together of skillfulness and unskillfulness."

Differences aside, both Confucianism and Taoism maintain that there exists a harmony between both principles, the *yin* and the *yang*. It does not suit our purpose here to say much more about these two principles, nor about the "middle way" or the "coming together in unity" which characterizes their relationship. But we do wish to propose that preaching the Gospel in a Chinese context demands that we pay more attention to both the Confucian and Taoist concepts of the *yin* and the *yang*.

Another traditional Chinese concept we might well make use of when comparing the relationship of Jesus and his Church is that of *taiji* (which is often translated as "great ultimate" or "great extreme" or even at times "the absolute" or "the infinite"). *Taiji* also includes both the *yin* and the *yang*, but the mean between the two and their coming together to form a unity in the *taiji* ultimately leads to a harmonious whole. When applying this analogously to the Church in a Chinese context, one cannot help but feel that the masculine element (the *yang*) is too dominant. And this may be one reason why the Chinese find it difficult to accept a Gospel when preached by a Church where in the masculine (*yang*) is in imbalance with the feminine element (*yin*). As an example, we need look no further than how decisions are made in the Church. Clearly they are made in large part by males. Evangelization usually stresses that attaining salvation requires a heroic spirit that must pass through great trial and tribulation. Generally, the need for the more delicate attitude of attentive listening and calm dialogue are seriously lacking. Among the Church's theologians and evangelizers men far outnumber women. As a result, the approach of evangelization tends toward rational analysis, logical deduction, and muscular arguments over terminology. Such an approach can

be intimidating to say the least. It may win victories, but it will never move hearts. Nor can one hope by such means to alleviate human suffering or reach out to embrace the fullness of life. The Church has Our Mother Mary as its model; it must learn to preach her Son's Gospel with a mother's compassion.

Faced with injustices in society and corruption in politics, the Church is called upon to assume the prophet's role in words and actions, but this must be done within a Chinese context. Must the western style of confrontation also be emulated? This approach is not always understood by Orientals. What is more readily comprehensible to them is the non-violent strategy of the Indian holy man, Ghandi. Do we not find here an example of *yin* controlling the *yang*, the soft and pliant overcoming the hard and unyielding, achieving a middle way and the coming together of the *yin* and the *yang*, which is found in Chinese tradition? And further, does this not resonate well with the Sermon on the Mount? With regard to matters concerning justice religion should have its own style of response.

The Church like *Taiji*, contains the two elements *yin* and *yang*. Evangelization is both an internal and external activity of the church which also has aspects of both the *yin* and the *yang*. The Chinese church should follow the *yin-yang* principle of the "middle way" and "coming together with" when preaching the Gospel in the face of the trends and challenges of its environment. The 28 trends and challenges listed by the Asian Bishops' Conference are also present in the Chinese environment. But the Chinese church's method of responding to them need not be the same as that of other churches. Evangelization in accordance with the "middle way" and "coming together in unity" of *yin* and *yang* is more suited to our Chinese culture.

Conclusion

At the FABC plenary session in Bandung, Antonio B. Lambino, a theologian from the Philippines, presented a paper in which he examined the documents issued by FABC conferences since 1974, as well as material from the "International Evangelization Assembly" held in Manila in 1979. He pointed out that "dialogue, discernment and deeds" is the method to be followed in facing the challenges besetting Asia today. He said this was the common consensus of the Asian bishops over a 20 year period.

This article has attempted to follow a "dialogue, discernment and deeds" methodology, but it seems to me that given the present situation of the Chinese Church and in preaching the Gospel in the face of today's trends and challenges what is most important is to establish a church that is an ecclesial communion.

In an age of pluralism, democratization and interdependence, only the communal model of church can attract people with its life style and respond to their needs through its evangelizing activities. On the other hand, today's Chinese church, no matter where it exists, is too preoccupied with its many difficulties to have any energy left to work to achieve communion, especially a hierarchical communion.

Moreover, evangelization in a Chinese context, while faced with so many of the Asian trends and challenges, must still respond in a Chinese way. The second and third parts of this article, regarding Gospel truth and the way of evangelization, tried briefly to present some opinions by way of experiment. But basically, they are much like the "dialogue, discernment and deeds" methodology.

Finally, the two essays by the Asian theologians presented at the Conference were concerned with evangelization in an Asian setting. But because I have chosen only particular areas directly related to similarities found in the Chinese situation, I have not given much attention here to a description of the overall background. Readers are, therefore, urged to read the original papers of these two theologians, for they are also most helpful in understanding evangelization in a Chinese context.

References

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