

The New Evangelization: New Life Bursts In

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The first evangelization of Latin America took place under the sign of subjection, because it took shape as part of the project of invasion and colonization. It gave rise to a colonized Christianity, which reproduced the religious models of the Iberian centres. From its very beginnings it was contradictory, because alongside the political and religious domination there were always prophetic spirits who denounced and resisted the perverse nature of the colonization in the name of the humanitarian spirit and liberating content of the Christian message, defending the Indians and condemning the evil of slavery.



The new evangelization puts down roots in this prophetic and pastoral tradition. It is taking place under the sign of liberation. It is giving rise to a unique Christianity, bearing the stamp of the ordinary people, brown, white, Latin, indigenous and black, pointing the way to new forms of church structure and also one of the forces for social change on the continent.

I. In what sense is this evangelization new?

Evangelization always occurs in a process of encounter between a given historical society and the Christian message. *Puebla*, in 1979, correctly traced for us the path of any evangelization worthy of the name:

The church has been acquiring an increasingly clear and deep

realization that evangelization is its fundamental mission; and that it cannot possibly carry out this mission without an ongoing effort to know the real situation and to adapt the gospel message to today's human beings in a dynamic, attractive and convincing way (85).

The premise of this statement is as follows: the good news is the result of a confrontation between a given historical and social situation, with its contradictions and potentialities, and Jesus' offer. What makes it good news is not simply the fact that the gospel is preached, but its capacity to transform a situation that is bad, inhuman and oppressive into one which is liberated, human and good. When this occurs, there is evangelization, and the message of Jesus is alive in the way people act.

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The lives of the peoples of Latin America are imbued with vast hopes emerging out of a sea of oppressions: oppressed cultures, humiliated races, exploited classes. The social fabric of Latin America is being torn from top to bottom. Confronting this anti-life we find mobilization of the oppressed, who, in a thousand different ways, are becoming aware, organizing, resisting and trying to advance towards better forms of life and freedom. Christians are present within this movement: important sections of the hierarchy (bishops, priests, ministers), of the base Christian communities, the pastoral organizations concerned with social affairs (land, indigenous peoples, slum-dwellers, marginalized women, young people, the handicapped, human rights, Bible circles, health groups, etc.), who ask themselves, 'How can we at the same time satisfy the people's hunger for God and their hunger for bread? How can we ensure that the gospel is not just a promise of eternal life, but also a force to enable us to attain here a dignified human life on earth as a result of the social transformation brought about by the oppressed themselves, those primarily interested in any social liberation?' In all the groups listed above, the new evangelization is taking place in the way Puebla described: dynamic, that

is, not the mere repetition of things said and taught in the past, but flexible and alive, showing the humanizing potential of the gospel; attractive, that is, structured in a form appropriate to the outlook of the impoverished and uneducated masses; and finally convincing, in other words, generating a new meaning for life by condemning the forms of historic oppression which still remain on the continent and by promoting a commitment to liberation which helps in the building of a society which is more participatory and life-enhancing.

Some features which make this evangelization new are:

1. It is new because its primary agents are the poor themselves. They evangelize other people and the whole church, especially bishops and priests, who are brought to make an option of solidarity for the poor and marginalized.

2. It is new because it is based more on the gospel than on church doctrine formalized in catechisms. The gospel is read communally in groups, interpreted in an environment of prayer and ecclesial communion and lived in the world of the poor, in confrontation with oppressive systems.

3. It is new because of the new audience, the culture of the people, the oppressed, black, marginalized women, abandoned children (about 23 million in Brazil alone), the landless and the homeless, the slum-dwellers; never in the history of Latin America have the oppressed been so central in theology and pastoral work.

4. It is new because it uses new methods based on those made famous by Paulo Freire in such terms as 'the pedagogy of the oppressed' and 'education as the practice of liberation'. In these methods catechumen and catechist enter a process of mutual learning of the faith based on an exchange of experiences which are recognized, criticized and developed in a global perspective, and which take into account the various dimensions of human experience: personal, social, affective, religious and cultural.

5. It is new because it expresses new ideas deriving from the engagement of faith with social injustice. There is an emphasis on the tenet of revelation which is so relevant to the situation of Latin America, the essential connection between the God of life, the cry of the poor and liberation, the relationship between the kingdom of God which is beginning to establish itself through the poor, and the successful conclusion of history,

always bearing in mind the dialectic of the anti-kingdom, which also takes historical form and produces martyrs, abuse of the name of God and attacks on human life.

6. It is new because it is inaugurating a new way of being church characterized by community, by the involvement of all, by a distribution of functions, by the emergence of new ministries and charisms, by the new type of Christian, involved in the fate of society, in solidarity with the poorest and committed to major changes in society for the benefit of the oppressed.

7. It is new because it produces a new spirituality manifested in the community's daily life, in the celebrations which, in addition to the mysteries of faith, talks about the communities' struggles and joys, in the political holiness which is taking shape through involvement in community causes which often imply persecution and even martyrdom--the Latin American church today is a church of martyrs.

8. It is new lastly because it is creating a new relationship between the church and the world, abandoning the alliance with the powerful and joining with the oppressed sectors, defending their rights and showing that Christianity is not a prisoner of the capitalist system, but can be a powerful force for social mobilization to achieve a new society which is more open and participatory.

II. Challenges which renew evangelization

I should now like briefly to touch on the challenges which the Latin American churches are facing, since it is in these areas that the new evangelization is being worked out.

The evangelization of cultures

In first place is the problem of Latin American cultures. It is an extremely complex situation, because it is the scene of tension and conflict between the indigenous peoples, a majority in a number of countries, people of mixed race, black people, those transplanted by immigration, and currently the newly emerging peoples, the product of the whole historical process among the currently existing nationalities. We know that the arrival of the Spanish and Portuguese produced not a meeting, but a clash of cultures, a relationship of domination and destruc-

tion. The Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace's document *The Church and Racism* (1989) recognizes the fact with precision:

The first great wave of European colonization was indeed accompanied by a massive destruction of the pre-Colombian civilizations and a brutal subjugation of their populations. . . Soldiers and traders killed to establish themselves; in order to profit from the labour of the indigenous population and, later, of the blacks, they reduced them to slavery (3).

The idea of evangelizing cultures in Latin American only makes sense in relation to this trauma, and therefore from a perspective of liberation, that is, starting from the restoration, recognition and promotion of the cultures of the dominated. This applies in the first place to the witness-cultures of the indigenous peoples. It constitutes a huge challenge, to discover paths by which the indigenous can have access to the Christian message, disentangled from the cultural and denominational interests in which it has always been presented. For important segments of the church the new evangelization means a radical option, profound respect for the culture of each indigenous nation, including its religion, and encouraging its development. These parts of the church support indigenous organization for autonomy, and encourage any means which will restore their birthright. It is genuine good news (gospel) for the cultures of the Inca, the Maya, the Quechua, the Xavante, the Tupi-Guarani and others who were historically dominated, to know that they can count on the support of broad parts of the church in order to preserve their cultural and religious identity. Obviously the churches are attempting to improve the type of institutional presence they first established 500 years ago, but they cannot shake off the stigma of the conquest of souls which took place in association with the colonial enterprise of the conquest of bodies. The gospel of solidarity with the indigenous peoples creates the minimum conditions for the gospel of liberation. The five centuries of indigenous resistance must not remain in vain: the churches are accepting their share of responsibility for making this unspeakable suffering an element in the formation of the people of God in Amerindia, which must involve the re-establishment of the people.

Black people are a particular challenge. The churches owe them a debt of justice, because institutionally they were closer to the estate houses than to the slave-quarters. Large groups within

the churches are recognizing the originality of black culture and the legitimacy of their religions, and are accepting the process of syncretism which they have established over the years, as a form of resistance and inculturation of Christianity within the narrow limits of slavery. The value they give to the body, to dance, to the sacramental character of material elements, can enormously enrich Christian experience.

Popular culture has created its religious expression; it does not mean the decadence of official Christianity, but is the way in which the oppressed people assimilated, in their symbolic categories, the Christian message. Today, with very many Christians active in the ecclesial base communities, in trade unions, in popular movements, in the politics which is searching for an alternative to the current forms of domination, a new type of Christianity is appearing, with its own reflection (the source of the theology of liberation), its celebrations, its songs, its historical references, its martyrs and its capacity for mobilization. This type of Christianity is recovering the social, political, liberating and eschatological dimensions of the gospel. Liberation is not a category which evaporates in spiritualism, but points forward to a process by which the oppressed gradually organize and open spaces of social freedom. To those who believe, these achievements are part of the fullness of the kingdom of God.

Evangelization and economic challenges

Latin America is struggling with a serious economic crisis, of which the foreign debt is only the most visible expression. This fact directly affects evangelization, because it brings on to the scene the huge reality of the poor. They make up the great majority of the population all over the continent. Since the 1960s the Latin American churches have developed a carefully thought-out pastoral policy to face this challenge. They have abandoned handout methods, a charity which encouraged no participation on the part of the recipients, and adopted the preferential option for the poor, which is today the trademark of the Latin American pastoral approach. The option for the poor means a belief in the historical power of the poor and is an attempt to replace poverty through the involvement of the poor themselves in changing their conditions, in their communities, by involvement in trade unions, in political parties rooted in the mass of the people and with a liberation approach. The poor

are only freed from the oppression of poverty when they themselves are the agents of their liberation. The sectors of the church committed to liberation insist on the challenge posed to evangelization by the real poor, the economically poor, in distinction to groups on the whole remote from the hardships of the people which prefer to talk about evangelical poverty. It is true that the term 'evangelical poverty' refers to others besides the economically poor, but it cannot be used to dilute the scandal of material poverty, because this directly affects the biological substance of the poor. If we do not attack this type of poverty in the name of the gospel of Jesus, as a challenge to evangelization, we will be mocking the real poor by giving them a version of religion that is in fact opium, a religion cynical in the face of the cry of millions of oppressed. It is no accident that James, Cephas and John, the pillars of the primitive Christian community, after confirming the orthodoxy of Paul's gospel, stipulated that he should show concern for the poor, something the apostle 'was anxious to do in any case' (cf. Gal. 2:10), from the beginning of his missionary work. The evangelization of the poor through and with the poor themselves inevitably takes on a political connotation: when they attack the causes of poverty, evangelizers discover the social system which prioritizes capital over labour and exploits workers, and feel the urgent need for a structural transformation of society. In this way aware and critical Christians become agents of social change, inspired by the gospel itself lived in a context of oppression.

Evangelization and politics

Having been a colony, Latin America is heavily marked by state authoritarianism and violence. Its democracies are all 'guided', strong states supervised by military to ensure the order required by national and transnational capital. Historically the churches were accomplices in this situation because they helped to consolidate this form of politics. However, in the last thirty years, as a result of their growing insertion in the world of the poor, most of the churches have turned into spaces of freedom, critical awareness opposed to abuses of power, and sources of condemnation of human rights violations. Ecclesial base communities provide practice in the democratic exercise of power, and in mass-based pastoral work there is a deliberate effort to stimulate participation from the bottom up. There are

political parties who rely on the active presence of these new Christians to take into the political area respect for ordinary people, the vision of society changed in accordance with the hopes of the oppressed, and a sense of the value of human subjectivity and moral and religious ideals. Popular culture, including black and indigenous culture, encourages forms of social structure which point towards democratic and participatory socialism. This evangelization is whole, since it does not deal only with typically religious issues; without reducing itself to politics, it engages with politics, enabling politics to be seen as one of the principal areas in which the blessings of the kingdom are made real, to the extent that it is a means of organizing the common good.

Evangelization and the world of symbol

Christianity was the religion of the whites, of the invaders, the dominant. Despite this it penetrated deeply into the culture both of the élites and of the masses. At the official level, Latin American Christianity produced no innovations in relation to European Christianity; it simply reproduces it. However, at the popular level Christianity acquired distinctive features; perhaps it is the most important cultural creation on the continent, made possible because it escaped the social and religious controls which affected the other Christianity. The ordinary people were able to create their feasts, express their vision of God, Christ, the Spirit and the saints, their understanding of nature and human destiny. The so-called church of the poor, made up of the vast network of Christian communities and popular movements influenced by them (the land movement, blacks, indigenous, women, etc.), provides the space in which popular culture can express itself. One of the most beautiful and convincing features of the church of the poor is the way ordinary people participate in the commentary on the word of God, the way celebrations are organized, the importance in them of rhythm, dance, and bodily expression, the way in which the people, influenced by the African and indigenous traditions, organize communal work, the meaning they give to death, and the depth of religious experience. It cannot be denied that a new face of Christianity is appearing in Latin America, typical of the fusion of races and cultures, synthesized through popular culture.

Evangelization and ecclesiogenesis

The penetration of the gospel into popular culture has made possible the beginning of a genuine ecclesiogenesis, that is, the genesis of a church born of the faith of the people. Human groups, poor and Christian, which were previously neglected by the ecclesiastical organization (pastoral organizations and parishes) are now beginning to come together around the reading of the word of God, read, that is, against the background of real-life problems. This is the origin of ecclesial base communities. Connected with each other, and with the presence of priests, religious and bishops who take part in their journey, they form the popular church, the church of the poor, with a particular style of living the faith, distributing sacral power among their members, organizing the celebrations of the sacraments and the struggles of the community. This model of the church makes it possible for women to exercise leadership, and is not felt as a break but as in communion with the model of the church which has come from the tradition and persists down to today. We cannot say what will be the future of this type of communitarian Christianity, but it represents the expression of Christianity appropriate to the new culture emerging on the continent, a Christianity which is ecumenical, democratic, militant in the struggle for a new society, incorporates the feminine dimension and is in communion with other historical forms of Christianity.

Evangelization and the process of personalization

Evangelization always holds out a personal utopia, the vision of the new man and the new woman. The new evangelization which is taking place in Latin America is an attempt to achieve a new integration of the human person around the values of participation, freedom, creativity, conviviality open in all directions, all possibilities historically denied to the great majority of the population. These personal values are built on solidarity and in communion with the struggles of the oppressed who are denied the possibility of personhood. Because of this, individual liberation only retains its human and gospel stature if it is able to engage with social liberation. In the communities there is an insistence that the new life should be lived here and now, of course only in germ but nonetheless genuinely; otherwise the old model will dominate and liberation will continue to be a mere utopia without its historical anticipations.

Evangelization and pedagogy

How do we ensure that evangelization is really liberating? This is a constant concern in the church of the poor. The challenge is educational. The missionaries always had this concern. They would learn the languages of the indigenous peoples; they would use theatre and music to impart the elements of the Christian message. But there was never a process of dialogue with the religion of the indigenous peoples or the blacks; instead they were considered works of the devil, to be destroyed. Education served exclusively for the transmission of doctrine--a Roman Catholic circumcision for indigenous peoples and blacks--and not to produce a synthesis from the meeting of cultures. This explains the constant complaint of the missionaries that they learned little or nothing. Education was training in Iberian culture. Today there is a growing awareness that education must be liberating in the sense of involving evangelizer and evangelized, recognizing the presence of the Word and his Spirit in different cultures, accepting differences as legitimate, and being prepared to learn from each other the context of the same mission of service to the world and the sub-world (the gospel redeems humanity by starting with the victims).

An attractive example of this education of liberation through insertion into the alien culture is available at the very beginnings of evangelization in Latin America, the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe to the Aztec Indian Juan Diego in 1531. Mary adapts totally to the cultural world of the Aztecs: she doesn't speak Spanish but Nauhatl; uses Aztec theological language ('the most true God, through whom there is life, the Lord of the near and immediate'); expresses herself in the significant symbols and colours of indigenous culture (her clothes, the sun, the moon, the stars, the angels); appears, not as Spanish, but as a woman of mixed race, on the mountain (Tepeyac) where the Aztecs already worshipped the 'venerable Mother'. The church could only see the miraculous character of the event, not its form, the language, the relationship implied between centre and periphery, the symbolic function of Uncle Juan Bernardino: that is, the educational and evangelizing significance of the event. The current new evangelization attempts to prolong the intuitions present in Guadalupe--the most popular devotion in Latin America--and develop an evangelization which penetrates the cultural structures of the peoples of Latin America.

Evangelization and the safeguarding of the sacred gift of life

The first effect of liberation is to produce life for all and liberation for the poor. This is the essential aim of the new Latin American evangelization. It has helped us to understand that today this cannot be reduced to liberation understood simply in terms of Latin America. The whole earth is threatened. As a result, the basic question is not how far cultures and peoples are evangelized, but how far the gospel and the churches who regard themselves as the historic bearers of the gospel help to save life and all ecosystems from total destruction. Paraphrasing Bartolomé de las Casas, we may say: 'We prefer a human race pagan but alive to a human race Christian but dead, because God is a living God whose glory lies in seeing human beings alive.' In any part of the world, to take up the cause of life, of the means of life, to help to develop a full ecological consciousness, one of respect, love and protection for every type of life (everything that lives deserves to live), is already to carry out the basic intention of the gospel of the one who said, 'I have come that they may have life, life to the full' (John 10:10).

III. The new evangelization and the rediscovery of theology

Doing evangelization from a people's, liberational perspective has encouraged the rediscovery of fundamental theological themes. So, for example, Latin American theology has explored the idea of God as the God of life, who takes sides with all those who cry out for life and reveals himself as the liberator of the oppressed. The experience of the church as a network of communities has made it easier to understand the true concept of the Christian God as a God who is a communion of divine persons. The true nature of God is the communion (*koinonia*) between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit which radiates out into creation and history and finds its reflection in Christian communities, which have often proclaimed in their meetings, 'The Blessed Trinity is the perfect community.' The practice of evangelization has made us discover the practice of Jesus as something which produces gospel, that is, good news, insofar as the poor were given priority, the sick cured, the sinners forgiven and the dead raised. It is through the poor and the victims of

discrimination that we discover the historical meaning of the kingdom of God which is beginning to be established in the transformation of their situation. If we do not proclaim Jesus as liberator, we are not being faithful to the tradition of the evangelists and apostles. The church of the poor has discovered the Holy Spirit as a force of cohesion in the community, as enthusiasm and happiness in work, as courage to face the powerful, as consolation for the many who despair because of poverty, as the intelligence which appears in the commentaries of the people of God on words of the gospel, extracting new meanings which bring the message of Jesus up to date in the contexts in which they live and suffer. The new evangelization has made it possible to build a church as an active community, meeting to celebrate faith and life, organize witness in society as service to life and liberation. Finally, the new evangelization gives new importance to the gospel utopia of a reconciled world of brothers and sisters, but one already starting now to the extent that relationships are built which ensure genuine human society in justice and solidarity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the new evangelization which is under way in Latin America does justice to the oppressed, the indigenous peoples, blacks, half-castes, women and the poor, who today have the opportunity to hear a complete gospel, and not one mutilated by the interest of colonial power. This gospel does not merely promise them life and freedom; it has become a historical force through the poor as they organize in their communities, able to produce, in alliance with other forces, life and freedom here and now. This is the continuing mission of Jesus, the force of his Spirit made present in this process. Are these not the works which the Father wants to see performed by his sons and daughters in Latin America?
