

ISSUES OF EVANGELIZATION

IN A CULTURE

In the film *Mission* one is given the "treat" of hearing Guaraní children singing European polyphony in such crystal clear voices, of seeing European art work imitated in the construction of building, and Greco-Roman concepts set forth as the vocabulary of faith. In missionary centers all over the world converts recited formulas that were the fruit of the lived faith struggles of Europeans, Byzantines, and Mediterranean local churches in the course of their respective inculturation of the Gospel. The stories of the power struggles of the first centuries of Christian communities and how these communities struggled to live out the gospel in their lives are the stuff of history. The struggles of the present day which are now a source of confusion as far as the issue of the Gospel and cultural context in which the Gospel has been presented, will become likewise the stuff of history. As other cultures and peoples dealt with their issues here and now, so must we. The end results –both past and present– of many of these struggles are and have been a disservice to the Gospel, to the world Church, and to the local churches. They have been a source of division among the believers in Jesus. Basically at the bottom of all of these horror stories –the *Mission* story is but representative– one finds the issue of control: who controls the language and the symbols by which the Gospel is made known. There is much that has happened in the local churches and the universal Church throughout the centuries that is not in the Spirit of the Gospel. In this article I would like to examine some of the consequences of this issue of control as far as evangelization and its cultural context are concerned.

When control becomes an unacknowledged and unadmitted issue in the events of human life, the Gospel and Gospel principles get short shrift. It seems that the power/authority issue and who is in control must be established at any price, including that of the Gospel itself. As in the *Mission*, when distant authority intervenes using its moral authority to establish control in ambiguous situations, the local worshipping community –the community of faith that is trying to deal

with life issues in the light of the Gospel and make its decisions accordingly – is caught in a bind. Local issues and possible ambiguous solutions that are judged as inadmissible by the international governing body are perceived as sources of division. It is the local Church that has to live in faith with the consequences of any decision made. Many times these local or regional communities find the decisions made at a distance –be it physical, spiritual, psychological, emotional, or cultural– very difficult to assent to and tend to dismiss them in practice if to do so openly and institutionally would be too painful. When control becomes the prime factor of decisions at the local level, the consequences at the community of faith level are even more wrenching because there are either no alternatives or the alternatives are too painful. The fruit of all of this is to set-up different levels of "reality". There is a church triumphant level which puts the institutional church as "always having recognized what has been the best for the human race and always having promoted what has been good, noble, and beautiful." There is the historical reality which has had churchmen on the side of empire and western colonialism –cultural, economic, social, intellectual and religious. Today as yesterday ecclesiastical authority, which is consciously or unconsciously identified as coterminous with the Church, says that since it has always been on the side of right, it should be listened to. It is the present day protector of revelation. Besides, what it says comes from God who protects the church, of which it is the protector here and now. It is a no-win argument with enough truth fused with control issues that it becomes a stumbling block to many educated believers. One of the crucial issues, then, is how to make the gospel reality of power/authority in the Church live in such a way as to diminish the temptation to substitute the death-giving use of control in the process of evangelization and Church life. Perhaps the multi-cultural reality of today's Church will call forth life-giving expressions of gospel authority in Church institutions as the Gospel interacts with the different cultural understandings of power and authority.

Another issue of missionary reality is that the Gospel is presented more as a tradition than the living reality that sheds light on concrete personal and community decisions taken in faith, which is indeed the Tradition of faith and faith communities. I have asked many religious men and women in various parts of the world involved in the area of religious education, «What are the basics?» Invariably I got the 10 Commandments, the Sacraments, the prayers, Catholic Social Doctrine, etc., as the basic things to evangelize about. I found it incredible that these things would be considered the basics about the good news of the Gospel. God's unconditional love, the relationship that Jesus showed with the poor, the outcast, women, children, as well as his completely new way of looking at authority and power, the freedom of life and con-

science, and the forming of community to share His Body and Blood, a sign of the covenant God is making with human beings were not even in consideration. Until these dimensions are presented in a way that will dialogue with the local culture and grow with it, the Gospel clothed in Western traditions will remain extraneous to the lived reality of the culture instead of being the leaven that transforms.

The inner freedom to grow in relationship with God –I will be your God and you will be my people (Ez. 36:27), the Spirit reveals to our Spirit that we are sons and daughters (Rom 8:16), I no longer call you servants but friends (Jn 15:15)– and the different cultural forms to express that are the issues of faith and mission practice today. Vincent Donovan in his recent book, *The Church in the Midst of Creation* (Orbis) develops some of Rahner's ideas about different critical times of the Church and points out that ours indeed is a critical time –passing from being basically a Church rooted and orientated in Europe to being a world Church. To be a world church asks people of faith to explore the images they use to understand their relationship with God, their operating sense of Church and community, and the sense of cultural boundaries rooted in self-knowledge and self-respect. These elements permit a culture to grow and develop while respecting the growth and development of other cultures. These are the elements that are needed to effect the kenosis in the leadership and in the communities that are the cutting edges of missionary and intercultural work today. Hopefully the serenity which is the fruit of these elements will neutralize the tendency to substitute illusory power of control for the power of the Gospel.

It is by images, conscious and unconscious that we understand things. These images are charged with emotions and values. The unconscious ones may or may not belong to the personal experience of an individual in the culture, but the emotive and value intensity can be just as strong, e.g. prejudice, national and regional stereotypes. When images are not accessible to the consciousness of the individual they are indeed more powerful because they reside in the person unacknowledged. Both the power of the media in the first world and the power of storytelling in the areas of the world where technology is not accessible give credit to the power of the image. It is by powerful images that we can communicate our faith and Gospel practice. Assent requires that these images be rooted in the Spirit of Jesus and free from need to manipulate and control others.

Without a chosen pursuit of the knowledge and love of God on the part of pastoral agents it is difficult to

establish an effective relationship with God that transforms life, and opens one to the Good News. Germane to this is the story of the guru, who after talking to his disciple about God and the significance of life, held the head of his disciple under water until he almost drowned; after he recovered, the disciple asked, "why?", to which the guru responded, "When you want God as bad as you wanted the air, you will have Him". It is this singleness of purpose that finds God in all human experience.

The sense of Church and Community and the images used to communicate this sense are crucial. The symbols and liturgies of personal, religious, and cultural self understanding are vital to establish a world community and a world Church that has significance on the local level as well as on the global level. The different cultural incarnations of gospel-rooted values in communion with each other, respectful of each other, calling each other to greater love, reconciliation, and fidelity need to develop as the world cultures learn how to live with each other. They will have to learn to provide and mutually share the resources of the earth for the benefit of all of the earth's inhabitants.

The sense of cultural boundaries rooted in self knowledge and self respect that permits one culture to grow and develop while respecting the growth and development of other cultures is what is needed to facilitate multi-cultural living in what is becoming a smaller and smaller world. As missionaries become aware of their own religious and cultural boundaries and are respectful of the host culture, they see that God can be found in their own heritage and in that of the host culture. Does this take away from the revelation of Jesus Christ or make it irrelevant? Of course not. Will this change the way of understanding the western Church of the past 450 years? Very much so. Just as it was, as Karl Rahner points out, when the Jewish Christian Church was supplanted by the romanization of the Gentile Church. As Church membership is less and less European, communities and local churches in communion with the world church are going to have to discern what is of the Gospel, what is of European western cultural heritage, and what in their local customs and institutions must enter into dialogue with the Gospel in order to be transformed by it. They will have to discern and choose what are the appropriate symbolic, liturgical, and cultural expressions of the Gospel and Gospel faith within a given culture. Then the Gospel will have been preached to all nations.

Bro. William McDonald