

TO EVANGELISE THE POOR...**TO EVANGELISE EVERYBODY****Jesus evangelised everybody**

When people who are obviously inspired by the Gospel say that the Church has made "a preferential option for the poor", we feel reassured because we know that it is the poor who are called to the Kingdom of God. This was what was meant by the parable of the guests who were invited to the wedding feast but who did not come because their hearts were full and "rich" with other concerns.

And yet, when Our Lord sent his Apostles to evangelise he told them quite clearly: «All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you» (Mt 28, 18-20). «Go out to the whole world; proclaim the Good News to all creation. He who believes and is baptised will be saved; he who does not believe will be condemned» (Mk 16, 15-16). «You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and then you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judea and Samaria, and indeed to the ends of the earth» (Ac 1, 8).

Jesus evangelised all those he met on his way. Some had no material possessions, probably most, in fact. Others, like Zaccheus for example, had possessions. He called even one of the better off people of the time to be his Apostle – Matthew the tax collector. He evangelised the centurion who had great wealth and which he had invested profitably... And one cannot doubt that his evangelisation bore good fruit.

However, when he wanted to give John a proof of his divine mission, he said to him: «The Good News is proclaimed to the poor» (Mt 11, 5). Were not "all" evangelised?

All must be evangelised

Yes, all were evangelised; but in some the Word did not produce any fruit because they "were rich", because their hearts were already filled, occupied. «The one who received the seed in thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this world and the lure of riches choke the word and so he produces nothing» (Mt 13, 22). The ones who bear fruit are the poor, those whose hearts are ready to receive

the Word of God; «Go back and tell John.. the Good News is proclaimed to the poor».

And whom are we, the disciples of Jesus, to evangelise: the poor or everybody?

I think the answer is given very clearly in the Gospel: we must proclaim the Word of God to all without distinction. The fruit that God produces in the hearts of all will follow. If a person does not produce fruit, it is a sign that he is not poor and that it will be difficult for him to enter the Kingdom: «It will be hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven» (Mt 19, 23).

It should be quite clear, however, that riches are not only money and material goods. There are persons who have neither money nor goods, and yet they are rich in worries, desires, dreams and ambitions! In these too the Word does not grow because «the worries of this world... choke the word». On the other hand, there are people who have money and goods but whose hearts are not blinded: they are capable of receiving the Word of God, and it produces fruit. For example: Matthew, Zaccheus and the centurion.

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The Christian school evangelises without discrimination

When John Baptist de La Salle founded his schools they were schools for the poor. They were free schools which provided education and evangelisation for those who could not afford to pay for the teaching they received. As for the others who had money, they already went to other schools and paid for their education.

De La Salle's free schools, however, soon became known for the quality of their education: the children in them learnt and made progress. When people became aware of this, they said to themselves: "Why spend money in fee-paying schools when you can learn the same things and even more in the Brothers' school which is free?" And so children began transferring from the fee-paying schools to the Christian schools.

This gave rise to conflict: the Brothers' school was beginning to take in pupils who were not poor and who could pay tuition fees. At school, no one was asked if he could pay or not. This meant that the fee-paying schools were losing their clientele. There were complaints.

The solution arrived at by the authorities was that pupils had to be poor to be able to attend the Brothers' school (Decision of the Grand Chantre of Paris, February 14th 1704, during the third court case against their schools). The parish priest was to provide a certificate of poverty. This solution did not satisfy De La Salle. His schools were free, of course, but they were open to all who wished to come. De La Salle did not want any discrimination. It was the court decision which imposed it, and not the Brothers.

For John Baptist, gratuity was the key principle. The Brothers of the Christian Schools conducted "free schools". They consecrated themselves to God «in order to conduct gratuitous schools, together and by association, in whatever

place, even when in order to do this I were to be obliged to beg for alms and to live on bread only, or to do in the said society the work I am given...» (Formula of perpetual profession, June 6th 1694).

It is obvious that the poor will go to a free school, since they cannot go to a fee-paying school. But what is to prevent those who are not poor from going there also?

This is what happened in the Brothers' schools and what caused the writing masters of Paris to bring court cases against the Founder (1690, 1698, 1704-1706).

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When gratuity is impossible...

Throughout the history of the Institute, gratuity has been a subject that has been fought about.

«The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is a Society in which profession is made of conducting schools gratuitously» (first Rules, ch. 1, art. 1). «The Brothers will conduct schools gratuitously everywhere, and this is essential for their Institute» (first Rules, ch. 7, art. 1).

That is the will of the Institute. Unfortunately, the social and political situation in many countries makes this unfeasible or impossible. The only schools that are free are those organised by the public authorities, using money contributed by all the citizens. Schools run by other people must be self-supporting, that is, charge tuition fees. Citizens who do not choose the State schools are aware of this and are resigned to the fact they have to pay. A few countries give equal financial support to all teaching establishments, recognising thus that they all provide the same public service.

What is the consequence of this politico-social attitude? If you want to be able to provide teaching, very often there is no other solution than to charge fees. This is against gratuity.

So this is the dilemma: give up schools or give up gratuity... If you have no schools you cannot evangelise. If you have schools without gratuity, access to them, is often barred, or very restricted, where the poor and the most needy are concerned. And if there is no gratuity, how do you put into practice the preferential option for the poor?

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Contradiction or realism?

What the Institute has done in such cases throughout its history has been to get as close as possible to gratuity. Quite often this has been done by asking for a token payment only for tuition, or by making it free by means of scholarships set up by the schools themselves. However, some had to pay.

This is something of a compromise which causes problems for those who would like a radical solution: complete gratuity, «even if it were necessary to live on bread alone...»; a gratuity which would make possible total and absolute commitment to the most needy and the most poor.

Could this be possible?

Let us return to the point we started from: should we evangelise and educate only the poor, or everybody?

The answer is not complicated: everybody!

If social situations do not make it possible to do so gratuitously, at least let us not stop evangelising and educating. While waiting for these socio-political situations to change (because one day they will have to change!), we cannot indulge in discrimination as we sow the Word of God.

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The preferential option for the poor

The preferential option for the poor does not mean that the "non-poor" have to be excluded from evangelisation. It means that the poor are a priority, but not that the "less poor" should be abandoned.

My "preferential" option for the poor means also finding the poor wherever I evangelise. Discovering the poor means finding those lacking something: affection, parents, intelligence, qualities, human resources... If I look for them with the eyes of faith, I will find the poor in all groups.

This is not an escape clause to tranquilise our conscience. The Declaration on the Brother of the Christian Schools in the world today says the following: «This fidelity requires in the first place a change of attitude so that we can see, for example, in our ordinary classes how many poor students there are and how we can help them or, even more importantly, how we can better direct our teaching of religion so that all our students become sensitive to the problems of the poor» (Nº. 29, 2).

If this is our attitude, then the following words of De La Salle will make sense: «We are poor Brothers, forgotten by the world and esteemed of no importance. Only the poor come to us, and they have nothing to offer but their hearts prepared to receive our instructions» (Med. 86, 2).

Let us proclaim our message to all without discrimination as Jesus did. God will produce fruit in the poor of hearts, and we will be able to say constantly: «That is the sign of our ministry: the poor are evangelised».

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