

Considerations on the pastoral consequences of a dialogical understanding of mission

Pius Rutechura

Preamble

Right from its conception, the Church was meant to be dialogical in accomplishing its mission. Jesus the Word of God made flesh, brought God's own life into our midst through dialogue (Lk 1:26-56; Jn 1:1-14). Before returning to the Father, Jesus sent the Church to continue the mission given him by the Father and empowered her with his Spirit: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (Jn 20:21, *Lumen Gentium* No.1).

In the New Testament Jesus uses dialogue as a means of progressively revealing his divinity and the mysteries of the Kingdom. In the Gospel of John, this approach is evidenced in his dialogue with Nicodemus with regards to a new life from baptism in water and the Spirit (3:1-12); with the Samaritan woman with regards to Jesus as the source of living water for all nations (4:1-42); with regards to Jesus being the bread of life (6:26-69) and during the welfare discourse, when affirming being the way to the Father's House (13:36-14:11).

From Jesus' dialogical approach, Biblical scholars point out that for the Church, dialogue is not an alternative for evangelisation or a concept that is remotely separated from evangelisation. True evangelisation is accomplished by respecting and listening to one another. (See, *The African Bible*, Paulines Publications Africa, 1999, p. 1811). The Church, therefore, continues the mission of the Son and Holy Spirit by proclaiming to the ends of the earth the salvation Christ offers those who believe in him. We are faithful to the nature of the Church to the degree that we love and sincerely promote her missionary activity.

There are various schools of thought that tend to visualise dialogue and mission as conflicting and at times antagonistic in their approaches.

This paper focuses on Considerations on the Pastoral Consequences of a Dialogical Understanding of Mission drawing from experiences and inspirations mainly from the Eastern Africa region where I have had a privilege of serving as Secretary General for twelve consecutive years at National and Regional Catholic Bishops Conferences levels.

Prioritising the Ethics of Mutual Encounter

Global and African Church perspectives point towards nurturing the ethics of Mutual Encounter as one of the priority pastoral considerations of our times. Within the actual global settings, social-cultural and religious systems interact more and more with each other opening up more avenues for mutual encounters. On one hand, encountering concrete faith must go hand in hand with the willingness to face up to the reality of conflicting religious systems. On the other hand, there is need for openness to mutual enrichment, growth and healthy interactions.

Authentic dialogue in mission has to go beyond vague notions of respect for varying forms of faith trends. It must avoid compromising faith messages. Dialogue in mission must be rooted in dynamic people of faith who seek to grow in self understanding while aiming at appreciating other faiths.

The way we extend Christ's free invitation to others differs according to local circumstances. Dialogue is the norm and necessary manner of every form of Christian mission. Whether mission is envisaged in terms of witness, proclamation or service, dialogue is of utmost value.

From African cultural and social perspectives, dialogue has to be part and parcel of creating space for 'mutual being,' reaching out to the other in a spirit of mutual respect of each other's responsibilities and rights. True dialogue in mission calls for paying attention to values of concern, respect and creating room for the other person's identity.

When it comes to faith matters, mutual enrichment is expected in obedience to truth and respect for freedom. From that perspective, dialogue in mission calls for speaking and listening with the same intensity and sincerity. In this process, dialogue in mission must include: A forthright witnessing of one's own convictions while

nurturing honest sincerity in exploring others convictions. From a Christian perspective this calls for having a firm faith in the presence of God through the Word and the Spirit. It involves being guided by a firm belief in the presence of God's Spirit and respect to the human searching for answers to the deepest questions about life.

Refocusing Authenticity of Inculturation

Dialogue is a manner of being, acting and relating. It is an attitude, a spirit which guides one's conduct. Dialogue has something to do with one's culture and faith.

As it was well put in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, the split between the Gospel and culture is without doubt the drama of our time (EN 20). In Africa, the whole dimension of inculturation of the Gospel into the lives of people cannot be envisaged as a one time accomplishment.

Right from the Second Vatican Council, the dynamic relationship between the Gospel message of salvation in Jesus Christ and the various expressions of human culture in which the Gospel is planted has been among the priority preoccupations of the Church in Africa. (*Gaudium et Spes* 58).

On one hand, the Inculturation vocabulary permeates almost all levels of the Church in Africa. However, as a matter of fact, vivid manifestations of expressing Inculturation have been mainly limited to liturgical celebrations in terms of songs and dances. It should be noted that genuine inculturation of faith cannot be reduced to merely adopting the externals of a given culture. As revealed in the teachings of the Pope, true inculturation must be from within. It consists in a renewal of life under the influence of grace (cfr, African Traditional Religion, Popes Speak, <http://afrikaworld.net/afrel/atr-popes.htm>).

If at all we want to have authentic fruits of inculturation in Africa, it is necessary to refocus our understanding and approaches to inculturation and esteem of African cultural values. From the pastoral point of view, the rightful approach must be enriched by the teachings of St Paul to the Philippians 4:8 "Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." Everywhere, authentic

inculturation calls for respect of true values; primarily respect for the person who seeks to live these values at the same time enlightened by the light of the Gospel seeks to banish fear.

Within the past four decades, the pope have consistently invited the Church in Africa to refocus both the understanding and praxis of inculturation. It is basic that the power of the Gospel has to transform and regenerate the path of culture which is the path of man. The Gospel has to facilitate encounters with the one that embodies the values of all cultures and fully reveals the man of each culture to himself. A real aspiration as was well presented within the AMECEA region is the search to be fully Christian and fully African (See, John Paul II, DRC, 3rd May 1980; *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 20; CT 53)

Africa needs mature reflections which seek to bring harmony among the Africans, in union with the universal Church and with the Holy See. Inculturation for all the people, can only be the fruit of a progressive maturity in the faith. Within African Church settings, efforts towards inculturation must be guided by theological lucidity, spiritual discernment, wisdom, prudence and time. The benchmark aim of local churches is to guide the faithful living through, with and in Christ. Inculturation must be a true reflection of the Incarnation of the Word, whereby cultures are transformed and regenerated by the Gospel leading to original expressions of Christian life in celebration and thought.

From the AMECEA Church point of view, inculturation must not remain a mere concept; it needs embodiment. The appropriate line approach was made clear by Pope John Paul II in 1980: "It is through respecting, preserving and fostering particular values and riches of African cultural heritages that Africans can be in position to lead a better understanding of the mystery of Christ which is lived in concrete daily experiences of African life." Refer: John Paul, *Visit to Kenya* 1980).

Thus, pastoral Inculturation initiatives must aim at bringing the message of salvation into the lives of the people. Africa needs a holistic approach to inculturation: liturgical expression, catechesis, theological formulation, ecclesial structures and ministries.

Hence, approaching Inculturation of the Gospel as a pastoral

priority calls for uplifting cultures of peoples, transforming and permeating them with Christ's original message of divine truth, without harming what is noble and dignified in them. The Gospel has to be brought into the heart of peoples and their cultures: brought forth from cultures original expressions of Christian life in celebration and thought.

In conclusion, pastoral orientation must aim at preserving carefully African roots, and values. Knowing and being proud of one's own cultural values: respect of life, family solidarity and support for relatives, respect for the elderly, hospitality, judicious preservation of traditions, taste for feasts and symbols, attachment to dialogue and palaver to settle differences (Ivory Coast 1980). It is through dialogue that Evangelisation can truly help cultures to bring forth from their own living tradition original expressions of Christian life in celebration and thought.

Communion of Life: The Relevance of Small Christian Communities

The Church in her mission must make discernment with openness and objectivity on moral and religious values that aims at promoting communion of life. To succeed in this endeavour, these are some of the key African traditional values that must be enhanced:

The Spiritual view of life: Primacy of the idea of God as the first and ultimate cause of all things. This concept, perceived rather than analysed, lived rather than reflected on, is expressed in many cultures. The presence of God, the higher being who is personal and mysterious which permeates African life, must be highly promoted. Despite embracing Christianity, a good number of Africans continue to have recourse to God on solemn and more so during critical moments of life at times making intercession through other intermediary unavailing. More avenues need to be explored whereby the faithful can encounter and evoke the living God. Communion of life within the human society has to be linked primarily to this communion of life with God.

Respect for human dignity: this is conspicuously and consistently evidenced in traditional ways of educating within the family, in initiation of passage rites, in participation of traditional patterns

of social life. The respect and promotion of bonding with the living and the ancestors need to be refocused. Emphasis on respect for human dignity which takes roots from the family as the natural environment in which a person is born, thrives, finds protection and security through union with ancestors and continuity beyond earthly life.

Pastoral care has to create room for family life mode and imparting of values as part of catechesis and on going formation. Only when Christian families have been truly evangelised and are aware of their evangelising role, can we really talk about an effective evangelisation of culture, an effective encounter between the Gospel and culture.

Within the Eastern African Church perspectives, it is almost forty years since a pastoral option of being Church that is anchored on foundations of Small Christian Communities was made. These communities have contributed to enhancing communion of life not only among the faithful but to wider communities at large. Participation in the life of the community, considered as a precise duty and right of all, needs to be more nurtured. Initiation into community has to be part of forming character especially that of children and the youth. Values which have been handed down, ought to be respected as cultural legacy from the past, be given a new meaning and new expression.

Consolidating Solidarity in Action

Beyond considerations of manners of acting and attitudes as expressed in treating people and cultures, dialogue in mission has bearing on solidarity in action. Sharing in faith and mutual enrichment are more and more becoming necessary modalities at various levels of the Church. Faith must lead to positive responses to joys and sufferings of humanity. Solidarity with others and faithfulness to the gospel demand that we respond to people's genuine needs and hungers, even those of which they may be unaware.

Thus, theological principles of unity and bonding have always affirmed human inter-dependence. Today bonding and being there for each other are complemented by fast growing realities of political, economic and environmental interdependence of the world as manifested in the whole range of international issues.

Through dialogue, the Church is called upon to respond to the anxiety of contemporary humanity. Divine love, which is her life, impels her to a true solidarity with everyone who suffers. Concrete manifestations of solidarity in action include presence to the oppression, working towards stabilising an atmosphere of peace and justice. In a human being, in a society, in the world, when one member suffers all suffer.

Dialogue in mission requires action. Jesus did not talk merely about freeing the poor from sin and other forms of oppression; he actually tread the way of humanity to save humanity, Jesus accompanied humanity to an extent of suffering and dying to alleviate their miseries and sufferings.

Increasingly, within realities of the Church in Africa, there is a paradigm shift towards enhancing pastoral solidarity in action. During the 16th Plenary Assembly in Lusaka Zambia mid 2008, the Bishops of AMECEA put emphasis on the need for consolidating regional solidarity in addressing issues of reconciliation, justice and peace. Being a prophetic Church in solidarity implied an invitation to be vigilant and proactive in mutually supporting each other to respond to issues of reconciliation, justice and peace in the region (See Proceedings of the 16th AMECEA Plenary Assembly, Lusaka Zambia 27th June – 7th July 2008, Nairobi, AMECEA Secretariat, 2008, 35-58). As a result of this commitment, there have been bold steps towards manifestations of solidarity in action. Three key ones included joint preparations for the Second Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops in 2009; joint AMECEA-USCBC Needs Assessment Workshop in Kampala Uganda June 2010 and SECAM-AMECEA Pastoral Solidarity Visit to Sudan in November 2010.

Consolidating solidarity in action requires paying attention to these key areas:

Fundamental Option for the Poor: In its openness to all, the Church's mission makes a special option for the poor and powerless. The special option for the poor, far from being a sign of paternalism, must aim at empowering the poor to raise their voices. This special option is deeply rooted in the mission of Jesus, who rejected no one but was especially sensitive to those who needed him most. The poor, destitute and powerless of the world help us see and

evaluate the evils of our society and the evils that one society or nation inflicts on another.

Proactive Accompanying Secular Leadership: Within actual settings in Africa, as it is emphasised in the deliberations of the Second Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa, there is need for evangelising the political milieu and those who influence policy making. If the Gospel's call for conversion has to reach the hearts of political and policy makers, the Church has to rethink its approaches and shift paradigm from merely criticising of secular leaders to accompaniment and imparting of values based from the Gospel and the Social Teaching of the Church. In Proposition 25, the Synod Fathers made it clear that there is need for offering, to present and future leaders in political and economic life, a fitting doctrinal, pastoral and practical formation as well as spiritual support by setting up chaplaincies. The Bishops puts emphasis on the need for establishment of parliamentary liaison and faculties of political science in which values from the Social Teaching of the Church could be easily accessed and assimilated by secular leadership. I see in this line of thought which aims at formation of a social conscience at all levels, one of the major pastoral contributions that the Church can offer to modern secular leadership in Africa.

The Church in Service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace: In the continuing presence of Jesus, disciples of all ages find the courage to follow him. To follow Jesus Christ implies continual conversion in one's own life as one seeks to act in ways which are consonant with the justice, forgiveness and love of God's reign. Discipleship reaches out to the ends of the earth and calls for reconciliation among all peoples so that God's purpose, "to be carried out in the fullness of time: namely, to bring all things in the heavens and on earth into one under Christ's headship," (Eph 1: 10) will be fulfilled.

These principles affirm the dignity of the human person, the unity of the human family, the right of all to share in the goods of the earth, the need to pursue the international common good, and the imperative of distributive justice in a world ever more sharply divided between rich and poor.

Ecumenical Cooperation: We have to rejoice that Christians of

other churches share and participate in the mission of our Lord. John Paul II has urged that those who share Christ's mission "must show forth his unifying love in action."²⁹ Today the dangers from proselytising are real. Nevertheless, where there can be mutual respect among the different religious traditions, there are increasing opportunities in mission work for collaboration in prayer, good works, the use of media, community service and social action. Such collaboration is itself a witness to the reconciling spirit of God.

Conclusion

A dialogical understanding of mission invites us to be deeply immersed and participate in the mission of the Triune God who created and sustains the world as an expression of love; God who sent Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit to save and reconcile humanity and the entire creation. Mission is not primarily an activity of geographical expansion but it is within the frontiers of belief, conviction and commitment. A dialogical understanding of mission must lead us to be more focused on facilitating the encounter of the people with the Good News within their cultural milieu so that they witness God's transforming presence and activity in society. Within the Church contexts in Africa, dialogue in mission must enable people to do the will of God, rediscover and appreciate their cultural values, promote communal life and pro actively get involved in restoring the wholeness of humanity.

MISSION AND DIALOGUE

Approaches to a Communicative Understanding of Mission



Edited by

Klaus Krämer and Klaus Vellguth

