

Considerations on the Pastoral Consequences of a Dialogical Understanding of Mission

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The underlying justification for speaking about mission as dialogical is to be found in the three persons of the Blessed Trinity. There is a dialogical, existential reality in God and His self-revelation – there is an exchange of life within the very being of God among the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. The pedagogy of God in His own self-revelation in the Old Testament is marked by stages, journeying, accompanying, teaching and celebrating in order to bring the people together, invite them into a relationship and to make them his own. A free response is evoked through this community experience of listening and relating to God. For the people of Israel there was a very gradual growth in understanding of the truth about God and neighbour and acceptance of God as the one and only Saviour. The same dialogical character is also imprinted in the human race and we grow via relationships, telling our stories and listening to the stories of others. Genesis proclaims that “God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.” (Gen 1:27)

In the New Testament, we have the fullness of God’s self-revelation and He is called the Word – spoken into our hearts and lives. Central to our whole faith is a Person and not merely a set of teachings. If faith is to be lived through a Person – the Person of Christ - then our faith expression is fundamentally an exchange of love and life. Christ showed us the way to dialogue with the Father and finally gave us the Eucharist to communicate through Christ with the Father and each other. “His will was that men should have access to the Father, through Christ, the Word made flesh, in the Holy Spirit, and thus become sharers in the divine nature. By this revelation, then, the invisible God, from the fullness of his love, addresses men as his friends and moves among them, in order to invite and receive them into his own company.” (Dei Verbum 2)

Jesus in the Gospels called together the twelve and made them his friends and apostles – walking with them, teaching from experience and witnessing. He often responded to questions or asked them. Of course Jesus also taught at length because the dialogical approach does not exclude proclamation and teaching especially when the people gather and thirst for the word.

To see more clearly the dialogical quality of the mission of Jesus, we can look at the story of the Samaritan Woman he met by the well. (John 4: 5-42) Before he revealed his own identity Jesus first restored to the woman her dignity. He rendered himself human and vulnerable and was ready to drink from the receptacle of a disreputable woman. He opened the dialogue with her by emptying himself of the greatness he bore as Son of God. He took her just where she was, in her particular situation and allowed her to discover the truth within a respectful dialogue. 'I am he'... the one you are looking for... Their conversation and her conversion would not have been possible without the interest Jesus took in her personally.

Look again at the two disciples on their way to Emmaus, the journey together, the sharing of hopes and disappointments; the explanation given in context and the presence of Jesus to his disciples. (Luke 24: 13-35)

Going back to the opening chapter of Luke's Gospel, let's take a look at the meeting of the two women of faith – Elizabeth and Mary. When Mary reaches out to Elizabeth, she is not only bringing words in speech but the person of Christ and the Holy Spirit into the exchange. There is deep joy. (Luke 1: 39-56)

When we speak about dialogue in faith we are not only referring to speech and ideas but the communication of the Person of Christ in whom we "live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28) We are communicating in the Spirit and God's Holy Spirit as the 'go between God' (John V. Taylor, 1972) who brings communion in dialogue and renders it fruitful.

The Pedagogy of Vatican II and the FABC

In the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the renewed self-understanding of the Church and its mission took its inspiration

not only from a new look at the Scriptures and Tradition but also from the Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical movements developing before and during the Council towards a more dialogical understanding of mission. In the aftermath of the Council, dialogue became the attitude rather than avoidance and condemnation of difference due to fear of deviation.

RCIA – the mode for handing on the faith

In the post-Vatican restoration of the catechumenate, (RCIA 1972), the guidelines strongly recommend that becoming a disciple and joining the Church community we need to learn from the witness of life of those already Baptised; we need to understand the faith within the context of our own lives and we need to be challenged to align our lives to the Gospel. The catechumenate journey is marked by stages with blessings and celebrations in the whole community. Sponsors / god parents play a very important part as companions on this journey of faith. The RCIA is a gradual and dialogical journey of apprenticeship, mentoring and witness. The Vatican Congregation for the Clergy in the General Directory of Catechesis 1993 has noted that all catechesis should take the mode of the RCIA. This means that wherever we intend to hand on the faith, formally or informally, or wherever we hope to evangelise, it is important to keep in mind that faith grows in stages – the preevangelised; enquirers; catechumens; elect and neophytes. Today we understand adults and youth as active agents of their own growth and as people who already have experiences of God who has been working in their lives and has been leading them to this point of conversion or re-conversion. When we work with young people we need to ask if they are ready for catechesis or if they are still in the earlier stages of enquiry. Bringing people to faith means that we have listened to their life's circumstances and questions and we assist them as they interpret these situations in the light of faith which gives meaning and fullness of life as they discover God who has been journeying with them.

Practicing Mission as Dialogue

In many of the churches in Asia since Vatican II and with significant influence from the FABC, there has been a notable shift from a strictly hierarchical teaching Church to a Church of Dialogue and a church of Small Christian Communities where the laity together with the clergy

and religious share and try to live out their faith. Here faith deepening and growth comes through the agency of other baptised adults as well as the traditional source of bishops, clergy and religious. The FABC through its Office of Laity and Family since 1993 has promoted an adaptation for Asia of the Lumko method which was named AsIPA (The Asian Integral Pastoral Approach). AsIPA is a process for building awareness, providing opportunities of encounter with Christ through his word shared in the community and generating interest in the mission of the laity to be builders of the Kingdom of God. It is a process used to develop SCCs in parishes and is aimed at forging communion; encouraging laity to take up their mission and do away with dominating leadership in the Small Communities enabling all to participate equally under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the mission of Christ. It assures all that they are equally able to minister to neighbours and families - however poor or uneducated. There is no one who is incapable of loving and caring no matter how small the gesture. All are capable of hearing the word and sharing its meaning for their lives and living out the word. In the Small Communities and catechumen communities, those who share their faith for the benefit of all in the group learn a kind of 'self-emptying' which is crucial for growth. The word of God listened to and reflected upon brings Christ into the centre of the exchange. The word 'quasi-sacramental' sign means that Christ is present in his word. "I must decrease so Christ can increase". (John 3:30) Learning to see Christ in the other means that I empty myself of all prejudice or self-interest and share Christ. Here I can learn to love and act only because of my intense listening to the word. In the Singapore Pastoral Institute, from the 1980s, there was a strong conviction that the mission of the Church belonged to every member of the Church and until this time was very much monopolised, due to historical developments and a pre-Vatican understanding of the role of the Laity, by the clergy and religious. A very deliberate decision was made by the Institute leadership to align the understanding of the mission of the laity to the development of Small Christian Communities. In the early years of the growth of SCCs in the archdiocese, the teaching mode continued within the communities and was a place for priests, religious or other experts to give talks and lead the study of various kinds. Some groups bought video study kits and underwent long and demanding studies with

the help of an expert. The members of these communities grew in friendship with each other but continued to be passive receivers of the faith.

With the 1990 Bandung statement of the FABC Plenary Assembly there was a greater impetus to build a 'Communion of Communities' and this went hand in hand with the understanding that such a communion can only be built out of a more participatory and collaborative Church. In this "New Way of Being Church" the understanding of Mission was that it belonged to all the baptised and the role of the clergy included assisting the laity play their part more fully. With this in mind we set out to design all our Lenten, Advent and other formation materials raising the spirituality, skills and awareness of the laity to be able to share the Gospel, exchange faith and understand their mission. Through these humble neighbourhood communities the people learn to serve and reach out. (In Malaysia and the Philippines these communities are named "Basic Ecclesial Communities" which reflects their essential nature more accurately). These formation materials had four main features. Firstly, they did not require any expert to lead the group but a simply trained facilitator; secondly, to get any real benefit from the material it was necessary to have a community involved; thirdly, scripture texts were central to the experience and provided an opportunity for a prayerful encounter with Christ; lastly, the word led to action and pointed to the poor or marginalised. The whole process was essentially dialogical and relational. The catechetical office of the SPI also provided programmes that were aligned to a more dialogical approach. Parents were given much more support to journey with their children in sacramental preparation. Parent meetings were occasions for building up the faith of the adults through dialogue, conversations and discovering together how to hand on the faith to their children. Talks or presentations were kept to a necessary minimum.

In one parish in Singapore, the formation of young adults took the form of monthly 'network nights' where young working adults met over some snacks, exchanged on their questions and challenges and had a chance to talk to mentors or clergy who were present. Information was offered but talks were kept to 5 or 10 minutes at most. Another example of mission understood as dialogical comes from the experience of many churches who use the pastoral strategy of Exposure / Immersion and Dialogue as a process for bringing about transformation and change

in socio-economic and pastoral arenas. In the 1980s, the FABC Office of Human Development was aware that many bishops were focusing on the inner life of the church and the larger more pressing issues of poverty, human rights violations and refugees was not high on their list of priorities. In order to bring about change of heart and agenda, they organised programmes which included two or three days in which groups of bishops and pastoral leaders would share the home and circumstances of a poor family; or they would visit refugee camps and interact with the refugees; or they would visit the working places of people who were obviously being exploited and so on. This resulted in a large number of bishops who became champions of the poor and marginalised and led to much greater social awareness among the conferences of the FABC. We find the same effort is made by the German Bishops' Conference to help leaders in economics, politics and in the church to make policies and decisions that are friendly towards the less fortunate. The EDP approach is effective precisely because we want to make the world a better place not out of some idea of the numbers of poor but because we feel in our hearts the difficulties of the poor and they have a face and a name.

Implications & Consequences

What is the impact on our pastoral approach when we discover in the foundations of our faith a communitarian God who speaks his Word in order to be known and loved? First we realise that mission and the communication of faith is personal. While the role of the priest presiding at Eucharist brings all present into the intimacy of the Body of Christ, the experience of the Body of Christ must be unpacked and lived for the rest of the week. The relationship with Christ cannot remain between me and the Christ I receive in Holy Communion, it must extend to the community but not in an abstract way. The question for the ministry of the priest will be always – how can these people meet Christ personally.

Recent research has shown that Gospel Sharing effectively carried out in SCCs brings people to an encounter with Christ which leads them also to personal prayer and prayer in the family. There are many other ways of bringing people into a relationship with Christ which can be explored elsewhere. The mission of the church belongs to everyone. The main difficulty here in our Asian context, is that

in the Catholic Church, the dependence on clergy for direction and teaching, continues to leave the laity in a passive mind set. Participation in the mission of Christ can very easily become 'doing what the priest tells me to do'. Ownership of mission and understanding the Gospel message to bring about the Reign of God are areas for a paradigm shift on the part of the laity and where pastoral approaches are needed that can create a more responsible laity.

As a priest in charge of a parish the consequence of this understanding of mission would push me to know my people personally – at least as many as possible. I would be convinced that in order to activate my people for mission I need to know and care about them first. Pastoral visits are a key to effective ministry. As I visit people in their homes and listen to their stories, share faith and show concern, I bring Christ to them and motivate them for mission to do the same. Secondly I would form a strong parish team of those who can share a vision and assist the Small Christian Communities as well as influencing every aspect of my ministry – whether journeying with catechumens or pastoral visits or catechesis of children and adults or preparing liturgy or designing social projects. Thirdly I would put a strong spiritual foundation on everything we do together so that each one grows in personal prayer and relationship with God. My whole pastoral ministry would be characterised by my 'listening stance'. This is so that my teaching, guiding, pastoral strategies would be speaking into the actual lives of people because I have heard so many of their life stories and I speak or act in response to their faith questions and challenges. This same 'listening stance' is taken by the people in the SCCs and they learn to share hope and their reasons for hoping with neighbours and friends.

The conviction that the incarnation, passion, death and resurrection of Christ, now means for the lay person that he/she is able to 'be Christ' for others even when not able to utter a word about Jesus. The assurance is that the people I care about or move out to help can meet Christ in me. My dialogue of life and love is in action. This act of faith among the laity would enable them to be conscious on mission even when no verbal proclamation is possible. The insistence on ownership and expression of faith, through being church in a Small Christian Community, helps those who belong to it, understand that the Holy Spirit can inspire all who are baptised to carry out the

Mission of Christ as Priest, Prophet and King. This does not mean that the Church does not have a role to teach and guide. It simply means that in the context of today the teaching and guiding modes need to activate the baptised to accept and own their discipleship and mission rather than keep them as passive receptors of doctrines.

The role and responsibility of the laity

There are many who still believe that faith is mainly about knowledge – knowing the commandments and doctrines laid down by the Church. Mission in such a case is to preach and teach while others listen and learn the doctrines. Whether in visits to families, in SCCs, from the pulpit or on the journey of catechumens, the mode would be teaching & explaining – from one who knows to those who need to know. Faith thus is to be absorbed and remembered. Where this is the case, the clergy and laity tend to be very involved in programmes of study and the emphasis given is on correct catechesis and faithful carrying out of the rituals. The structures of a Church can be participatory in appearance but one finds a monologue in the manner of operating whether in Parish Pastoral Councils, Small Christian Communities or the Diocesan Pastoral Council. Over emphasis on the correct delivery of doctrine and intellectual assent to all Church teachings gives little opportunity for outreach and initiatives by the laity.

At the other end of the spectrum there are those who emphasise the community experience and the relationship aspects of faith almost to the exclusion of any knowledge of it. They favour the Small Christian Communities because friendship and community is all important and it would seem that the laity do not need much teaching or guiding. In this type of community the role of the priest may be reduced to only sacramental provision. Many churches find themselves somewhere along the spectrum with clergy and laity ranged on both sides. In some cases polarisation has occurred between the two forms of pastoral action and a hardening of positions. What is badly needed is a well integrated pastoral strategy in which the ordained play a crucial role to preside over the Eucharist and the Body of Christ, to teach and guide within the dialogical context of the SCCs and other professional groups and families. Those clergy who seem to be ‘successful’ are those who are able to work well in teams, able to join in training and seminars and are comfortable in the company of adults who may not always

agree with them. They are able to share the ambiguities and challenges facing the laity today and search together for wisdom and truth. With this type of dialogue and conversation between the clergy and laity many are greatly inspired to raise more questions in their efforts to integrate their faith with their lives more effectively. The triple dialogue of life, dialogue with the poor and with people of other faiths called for by the FABC takes place every day for many of the laity who go out to work or who relate with their neighbours. They learn the way to dialogue, to self-empty without losing their identity and to share Christ with the help of their Small Christian Communities. The work of pastoral leadership is to give continuous support and formation as the laity encounters opposition or difficulties externally or within the Christian communities. In communities where the dialogue has been rather inward looking for many years, the work of pastoral leadership is to lead by example in the way parish projects are designed. Liturgies and prayers of the faithful for example, should be highlighting the needs of the wider society and the priorities of the Church. Visitors or guests of the parish can be invited to share their lives with parishioners in various ways to widen their scope of concerns.

Capacity building among the SCCs to journey with the sick, to pray with the lonely, to care for the elderly, to connect with the youth etc. implies a bigger budget for training and less centralised parish organisations. The term 'ministry' may need to be broadened to include work done by communities or individuals with the poor, marginalised, families, housebound people and so on.

Subsidiarity is the principle that should govern the way ministries are organised in parishes. The intention of all parish based organisations should be to strengthen ministries and mission from within the SCCs and the neighbourhoods.

Conclusion

Dialogue means that someone is speaking and someone is listening but the listener will soon become the speaker and the other will listen. Dialogue is rooted in a strong sense of the identity of the ones who are in the exchange. Mission today needs pastors who can inspire and enable their people to be listeners in a world that is so connected digitally but so isolated humanly speaking.

The God who listens also speaks but always God speaks into the heart of our lives to our reality. Understanding Mission as dialogical brings us into the heart of God who wills to befriend all people of all time. The temptation may be to look for big numbers and to try and generate great attendance in our churches. The work of the Spirit is personal and relational and this requires small groups and time for conversation and care of persons. We are challenged, in a society that counts as important the number of 'hits' you receive on your 'facebook' account or website, to be people who still dare to appear insignificant as we seek out the lost, lonely and confused to listen and to speak and to act from the heart of love.

MISSION AND DIALOGUE

Approaches to a Communicative Understanding of Mission



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