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EVANGELISATION AND MISSION

„Go to the whole world proclaim the good news to all creation“ (Mark 16:15)

1. Religion and the question of Meaning

Permit me to begin this reflection by sharing my experience which indicates that the gift of faith and the fascination for religion and its practice, often referred to as *“the extraordinary relationship between an individual person, a group or community with an invincible, all powerful, eternal creator and absolute being known as God”* continues to grow in our own time amongst the various nations and peoples of the world. At the same time, there are those who do not believe in any religion and refuse to accept religion and its tenets. These oppose religion in all its manifestations and spread their own understanding and secular sentiments on issues of faith, morality and religion, sometimes bothering on what one may term *“atheism”, “nihilism”* or even *“neutralism”*.

History teaches that the yearning for meaning and the search of the human soul for peace and happiness remains an essential part of the nature of humankind. Thus, in all generations, places and at all times, questions are often asked by children, adults and the aged such as: ***Who am I? What is life? Why do we suffer? Where do we come from? Where are we going? What happens after death? Why do we die?*** Through the study of various disciplines including nature, philosophy, culture and religion, attempts at useful answers are made to such questions. The sphere of religion emerges particularly as that domain which helps humans realize themselves in their search for truth, peace, happiness and meaning beyond the immanent realities of the material world. Within the sphere of religion therefore, and amongst the various human cultures and societies of ancient times, great spiritual leaders, teachers and personalities in history as we know them have emerged exuding the divine milieu within the human domain. For example, African, Asian and Latin American traditional religions are as ancient as their peoples and much of their content and teaching attempt through oral traditions to give meaning to the questions of life. Brahmanism also called Hinduism existed in India around 2500 BC; Buddhism developed much later in India around 500 BC, founded by a man called Gotama; In China around 551 BC, Confucius brought about the way of living and thinking we call Confucianism; Judaism emerged as the history of the people of God, epitomized in Israel as written down in the Old Testament with the entire life of people, portraying their struggles, betrayals and challenges which the prophets brought into focus. Islam came much later in Arabia through prophet Mohammed in the 7th century AD.

With Christianity however, something new happens, for here, the mystery of the incarnation which is God’s participation in human history by taking human flesh and form in Jesus Christ

and by dying on the cross out of love for sinful humanity to bring salvation for all creation radicalizes the entire role of religion and faith. Christian faith teaches very clearly that God dwells within and with us (Emmanuel). Jesus challenged and mandated his followers to preach the Good News everywhere. He sent them on **Mission for the Gospel** “*until the end of time*” (Mathew: 28, 19-20). Christian faith, different from the many other religions and faith groups we know of, offers with certainty, a blend of hope and reliasm which is resistant to disillusionment. Sensitive to the contrast between God’s promised future and the conditions of poverty, horror and despondency prevailing in our world of today, or at any other tiime, Christian believers are imbued with the motivation to do whatever they can to move the latter in the dierction of the former.

2. Mission understood as Evangelization

The use of the word “**Mission**” needs clarification for it has different connotations in different languages. Thus, Mission is used sometimes to convey the understanding of a “*Diplomatic Mission*”, “*Political Mission*”, “*Military operations*”, “*Economic Mission*” to mention but a few of its wide ranging applications. It is therefore necessary to explain in the context of this contribution that the use of the word Mission is to be understood as “*Evangelization*” (Greek Euangelion or Good News). It is the mandate of Jesus Christ to his followers before his ascension into heaven as his parting command, recorded in the Bible that the disciples “*go into the whole world and proclaim the good news of salvation to all creation.*” (Mark 16:15). The same authority for Mission is given to the disciples in Acts of the Apostles thus: “*you shall receive the power of the Holy Spirit which shall come upon you and you shall be witnesses in Jerusalem, entire Judea and Samaria and to the end of the world*” (Acts 1:8). Unlike any of the other and many religions of antiquity or thereafter, Christianity is unique in the sense of its Mission, that is, the Mission of its founder, Jesus Christ, who as a historical figure, lived amongst the people of his time, shared their experiences including joys and pains and suffered martyrdom following false accusations and the powerful interplay of the political class, the priests, elders and those who did not want any change in the status quo since they benefitted from it. The Mission of Jesus to a broken world was played out within an ambient of the complicity of the Roman judicial and colonial system joining hands with the evil tendencies of the elite and the ignorant masses who allowed greed, fear and obsession to kill the son of God. . Jesus was condemned to death on the tree of the Cross, because it was the will of his Father and he submitted.

By God’s power he resurrected from the dead and just before his ascension, Jesus mandated his followers to carry on the Mission he had started, namely the spread of the good news of salvation to all ends of the earth. Death from thence had no more power over those who believe and there is salvation in Christ. In Christianity, *God assumes human nature, lives and teaches human beings and identifies himself with sinful humanity in all things but sin.* The mystery of the incarnation and the shameful death of an innocent citizen, namely Jesus Christ on the cross manifested God’s mystery of Love for humanity. During his earthly life, Jesus identified himself with the poor, the needy, the rejected, the sinners and those who

had nothing else to depend upon except their faith in God who is always there and is able to heal and lift up. The entire New Testament is filled with the concern of Jesus for the people of his time. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, consoled the broken hearted, taught the ignorant, used parables and allegories to teach about the end of time, encouraging people to share their wealth and resources so that all may have some fill: *"I was hungry and you gave me to eat, thirsty and you gave me drink; naked and you clothed me; a stranger and you made me welcome; homeless and you gave me shelter; sick and you visited me; in prison and you visited me"*; (Mathew 25) St Peter's testimony in the house of the Roman pagan Cornelius makes the point clearly: *"God does not make distinctions amongst peoples but anybody in any nation that fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him"* (Acts chapter 10.Vs 34 – 37).

Evangelization is the continuation of the work, the teachings, deeds and lifestyle of Christ; in witness to his love and service; his death and resurrection; unequivocal in its clarity and meaning, namely the spread of his Mission, the Good News to all peoples and nations and through all the generations until the end of time. It is the Good News that God loves his creation, has given it meaning and salvation and will always be there to lead and govern, guide and protect, elevate and shower his graces of truth and love upon all those who believe in him. *In the context of this short reflection therefore, Evangelization, understood as the Mission of Christ continues to this day through the followers of Christ, the Church which he founded, so that the world may believe. It is the work of the Church to teach, to lead and to sanctify (Documents of the Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church).*

3. Mission and Evangelization in the Universal context

It all began in Jerusalem with the early morning witness of the pious women, some disciples of Jesus amongst whom were Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of Cleophas and some of the Apostles of Jesus including Peter and John who went at early dawn to his place of burial. The grave was empty. It was from thence, another story. The question of the angels as recorded in John's Gospel resonates to this day: *"Why do you look for the risen among the dead. He is not here. He is risen"* (John 21). Those words changed the hopelessness of the disciples into a new horizon of life, a future that was until then considered unimaginable, a newness and freshness in their faith, something extraordinary which held them dumbfounded as the events continued to unfold. They lacked words but would soon gain the courage to die, professing the resurrected Jesus as the Lord and saviour. It formed the background upon which the news of his resurrection spread like wild fire everywhere and has reached the ends of the earth. A dead man who was confirmed dead by all the eye witnesses was buried and later declared risen from the dead. Such had not happened since death held the last word for human beings. In this case, this dead man who was announced raised from the dead had been seen by many as the Bible records. St Paul goes so far to state that *"if Jesus did not rise from the dead, then we would be the most despondent of men and our faith would be futile"*. The Jews and their elders and leaders tried in vain to contain

the news by bribing the soldiers and telling them to tell some lies that *“whilst we were sleeping, his disciples came and stole him”*. Funny, for how does one know what is happening around one when one is fast asleep? From Jerusalem and at those early times, the good news spread through Israel down to the gentiles of Greece and all of Asia minor, to the continent of Africa through Egypt, Ethiopia and the entire northern parts of Northern Africa with a flourishing faith and belief in the message of Jesus. Soon, the whole of the Nubian regions of Sudan and other parts of Africa would receive the Good News. Through the great work of the apostles, especially of Peter and Paul, Rome the centre of power received the news willy-nilly and as persecutions continued and martyrdom Through the generations, the history of Christianity and its Mission which is the Mission of Christ spread throughout the world, carried on by the Church, One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic (Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church). Throughout the entire period of two millennia, the numbers of those who believe have continued to increase and God takes the glory. The Church, founded on Peter the Rock (Mathew chapter 16) has carried the Mission of Christ to all the continents of the universe with a tale of martyrdom in most of the cases as the master himself foretold of those who believe.

Christian religion and its Mission in the World is to give hope, not hopelessness. Yet, let it be said that people of hope are also hardened realists, recognising the limitations of what can be achieved in today's struggles for justice. Faith can provoke a sense of urgency while at the same time recognising the penultimate character of the contemporary struggle and returning to the ultimate vision of fresh inspiration and energy whenever this is needed. In this way, the Mission of Christ and of Christianity can bring a passionate urgency to the great moral challenge presented by extreme poverty while also having the staying power generated by the large eschatology which frames this religion. It is this Mission and passion of Christ that moved the early disciples to “go forth and carry the good news to all creation”.

4. Africa on Mission and Evangelisation in the continent

The Good news of Christ which the Catholic Church proclaims has come to Africa, early enough in the first centuries, then later in the 15th centuries and much later in the 19th and 20th centuries through the great work of missionaries from Europe and America. The Christian religion is at home in Africa and has come to stay. Pope John Paul II announced it many times that *“the hour of Africa has come... Africa is the new homeland of Christ”* and Pope Benedict XVI at his opening sermon at the Second Special Assembly of Bishops on Africa held in October 2009, called the Church in that continent *“the spiritual lung of the universal Church”*. Africa, the new homeland for Christ, has within the last one hundred years grown in potential and quantity of the numbers of adherents to the Christian religion, the growing number of priests and missionaries and the witness of the martyrdom of its peoples, faced with aggressive religious islamism, globalisation and its effects, modernism, horrendous poverty, dictatorships of all sorts and social concerns based on structural injustices, colonial history, and man made injustices both from outside and from inside.

Africa has accepted the good news of Christ and is now willing to carry the same news to other continents of the world, even at a time that the western hemisphere is tired of religion and the fruits of Mission. The hour of Africa has come to supply what is needed by

the rest of humanity, values that are indeed Christian and therefore at the centre of Christ's Mission on earth, namely: The family as the first cell of society; community consciousness, sharing of faith and life, respect for creation and the environment; respect for the elders and the aged; solidarity with the suffering; humanity and the support and respect for life, every life; the search for truth in its fullness; Africa at this time is ready and willing to carry on this Mission which entire humanity needs and continue its spread to ends of the earth. This, in short was the summary of the 57 propositions and the Nuntius read and presented to the universal Church at the Second Special assembly of the Synod of Bishops held in Rome in October 2009.

In 1994, the entire *"Church which is in Africa celebrated with joy and hope its faith in the Risen Christ during the four weeks of the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops. Memories of this event are still fresh in the minds of the whole ecclesial community. Faithful to the tradition of the first centuries of Christianity in Africa, the pastors of this continent in communion with the successor of the Apostles Peter and members of the Episcopal College from other parts of the world, held a Synod which was intended to be an occasion of hope and resurrection, at the very moment when human events seemed to be tempting Africa to discouragement and despair"* (John Paul II: Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, No. 1). No single event affecting the life of the entire Catholic Church in Africa since the time of the historical Jesus has had such an impact, interest and world wide attention as the Africa Synod of 1994 in Rome did. It was at that Synod that Hyacinth Cardinal Thiandoum, Archbishop of Dakar, Senegal and Relator at the gathering asked the now famous question: *"In a continent full of bad news, where lies the Good News for Africa that the Gospel brings?"* The Bishops of Africa in union with the Holy Father and the universal Church asserted at that Synod that Evangelization today in Africa must present the image of the Church as Family. Evangelisation is five pronged.

Evangelization in Africa today must be seen as proclamation of the Good News of salvation which is Jesus Christ himself. Jesus Christ, no other, is the Mission of the Church and of the people of our times, of all times. Evangelization implies also dialogue. It is the dialogue with non believers, with persons of other Christian and religious faiths, with secular elements and the world at large, *ad intra and ad-extra*. Evangelization as Mission also implies the inculturation of the Good News, so that Christ and context is united, and all is *reconciled in God*. The Mission of the Church in the present times must also be seen as taking a fundamental position that is both prophetic and founded on truth and charity (**Veritas in Caritate**, Pope Benedict XVI), for where there is truth, there is love and there is peace.

Thus issues of justice and peace are important for the daily lives of peoples all over the world and within the continent of Africa torn between poverty and unjust structures. There is urgent need to see the application of *Gaudium et Spes "the joys and hopes, but also the sorrows and pains of the people of each age, all these are the joys and hopes, the pains and sorrows of the Church"* (GS Nr 1. 2) The application of the above position statement by the Fathers of that great Ecumenical Council is the strong assertion that the contexts of

political, social, economic and cultural realities are to be scrutinized in the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the promotion of the human dignity and human rights of all persons, created in the image of God (Genesis1;26). Thus global issues Justice and Peace are in need of the Mission and evangelizing effects of the Gospel of Christ. The Synod also looked into the world of social communications and maintained that its impact on the world of the audio visual but also the print media are all in need of evangelization. With this perspective, the Church of Africa in its Mission and evangelizing work must become *“the light of the world and salt of the earth”* (Mathew 6).

Today, Mission and Evangelization whether it is in Africa or in any other place is no more to be understood as something of *“go there”* but *rather making Jesus Christ present wherever you are, in all things and through all means for the greater glory of God and the salvation of mankind.*