

Pastoral Approaches to Mission and the Role of the Gospel

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”¹. That is the great commission given by Christ resurrected, before He ascended into Heaven. This directive is utterly clear – to preach the Good News, with the goal of making new believers and followers who will do as He requires. The New Testament contains numerous mandates which the incarnated Son of God gave his disciples. This last one, as cited above, is however of particular significance since Jesus will no longer be physically present with his disciples. Therefore they must not only fully understand His words but must also be able to explain them in such a way that the listeners will likewise understand the message clearly.

From this point on, evangelization became necessarily understood as a substantial factor in the establishment and perception of the Church. The proclamation of the faith is one of the core tasks of the Church. On the one hand, it is continually challenged by the need to find currently appropriate means of doing this crucial work. And on the other hand, the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*² made it clear that the Church itself must also re-discover and re-learn its own message. This is a vital factor in the search for suitable signs of the times.

Sadly, the missionary dimension of the Church are often neglected by theology. This reluctance, sometimes even resistance would seem to be contrary to the Christian message, which is directed explicitly to all people. Mission is not a sideline of the Church; mission is its central job. Without mission there is no Church. Spreading the Good News is an essential facet of the Church’s very reason for being. The Church does not merely *have* a mission, the Church itself *is* mission.

For a starter, it is necessary to closely examine and even redefine the missionary nature of the Church as it must be in today’s world.

- Exactly what / who is the Church?
- Why is mission so important for its fundamental character?
- What are the consequences of this for the ecclesiastical practice?

¹ Mt. 28, 19-20.

² Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil, Pastorale Konstitution über die Kirche in der Welt von heute (Constitutio pastoralis de Ecclesia in mundo huius temporis »Gaudium et spes«), in: Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche. Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil, Teil III, Freiburg i. Br., Basel, Wien 21968, S. 465 – 467, Nr. 58.

- To whom is mission directed?
- How can mission and tolerance be reconciled?

The answers to these questions are the substance of the building blocks for a missionary ecclesiology which strives to satisfy the missionary character of the Church.

From the very beginning the Church needed to be focused on dialogue in order to fulfill its sacred obligation. Jesus, the Word of God incarnate, breathed the Life of God into our midst through dialogue. Before He returned to His Father, Jesus delegated the Church to continue the mission that His Father had given Him and invested the Church with His own spirit: "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."

In the New Testament Jesus uses dialogue as a means for revealing His holiness and the mysteries of the Heavenly Kingdom, step by step. In the Gospel according to John, references to what is coming can be found in His dialogue with Nicodemus concerning rebirth from water and the spirit; in the dialogue between Him and the Samaritan woman concerning Jesus as the source of living water for all nations; in the dialogue about Jesus as the bread of life and in His final conversation with his Apostles, in which He confirmed that He is the way to His Father's house. Based on Jesus' dialogue-oriented approach, Biblical scholars point out that for the Church, dialogue is neither an alternative to evangelization nor a concept which can be considered separately from evangelization.³ True evangelization is achieved only when those involved respect each other and listen to each other.⁴ Therefore the Church must proceed accordingly in its own efforts to continue the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit by proclaiming to the world the salvation Christ offers to everyone who believes in Him. We are faithful to the nature of the Church to the extent that we love its missionary function and honestly support it.

With that in mind, are there still new languages for God to discover? Since the Pentecost, mission has been intertwined with endeavors to achieve improved translations. The initial astonishment was vividly expressed again in dialogue: "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians — we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God."

³ Rutechura Pius, Gedanken zu den pastoralen Folgen eines dialogbasierten Verständnisses von Missionsarbeit, in: Mission und Dialog. Ansätze für eine kommunikatives Missionsverständnis, hrsg. von K. Krämer und K. Vellguth, Herder (Freiburg 2012) 290 -301.

⁴ See The African Bible, Nairobi 1999, S. 1811.

In this Pentecostal experience the emphasis is on hearing rather than speaking. Not the telling, but the understanding is the main point: the arrival, the absorption, the reception – in one’s own language! And the speakers, not previously proficient in these languages, are themselves just as surprised.⁵

The middle point and the goal of ecclesiastical activities is not furthering the Church with own interests, but first and foremost focusing on God’s universal presence. The Spirit of God, already in human beings, whether baptized or unbaptized, has always been at work and anticipates all our actions, bestowing His boundless mercy well in advance. From this mystagogic, life-directing understanding of ecclesiastical practice – and not from tactical or strategic considerations – it follows that the basic character of the Church’s missionary efforts is determined by dialogue and that the Church must always be alert for the “signs of the times” in which God’s voice can be perceived.

In missionary theology the christocentricity is unmistakable. Jesus Christ as the unique Word of God stands as the Living God in the middle point of the theological reflections. In Him and through Him the missionary mandate to the entire Christian community is manifested, and in Him the designation of God’s Chosen People in the Israelitic time can be understood: Everything before His incarnation and after His time on earth is as witness for Him and of Him understandable.

As Jesus’s proclamation of God’s Kingdom, so also does the Church’s mission serve Life – that is, the transformation and the renewal of the earth in the perspective of God’s New World. God’s reign and a God-filled life begin here and now, wherever people dedicate themselves to God, living their lives day by day according to His will. The message of the Gospel – truth, righteousness, freedom – which the Church as a whole desires and should bring to all people, are however not the sole property of the Church. John Paul II justified dialogue as a type of relationship arising out of the very essence of God, Who is a God of Dialogue: “Through dialogue we let God become present in our midst, because when we open ourselves to each other through dialogue, we also open ourselves for God.”⁶ Mission as dialogue cannot be just an empty formula, an appeal with no results. It is much more a matter of whole heartedly becoming involved in the living circumstances and means, the yearnings and aspirations of people today. That is the only way that the

⁵ Kohler-Spiegel Helga, In einer Kultur der Begegnung. Grundhaltungen missionarisch-dialogischer Pastoral und Katechese, in: Kirche als Mission, hrsg. von A. Bünker, Ch. Gellner, Beiträge zur Pastoralsoziologie (SPI Reihe)14, TVZ Theologischer Verlag Zürich; Auflage: 1., Aufl. (29. September 2011), 156-166.

⁶ Gioia, Francesco (Hg.): Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue: Interreligious Dialogue. The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church. From Second Vatican Council to John Paul II (1963-2005), Boston 2006, 85.

Church can make contact with people, with what moves and stirs them, in order for them to experience the redeeming light of the Gospel.⁷

In mission work the importance of biblical instruction should always be emphasized. The Bible must be understood as the Holy Spirit's tool, which enables the continuing schooling of Believers in His sense. Jesus Christ is the center of Christian life. Therefore missionary theology requires a constant concentration on Him and the message of the Gospel which is inseparably coupled with Him. On the one hand He must always be the foundation of prayer, of preaching and of catechesis as well as the remaining activities in daily Christian life. On the other hand, for missionary theology the concentration on Jesus Christ is an obligation to abandon the boundaries of the Christian community and in service and witness to live among other people.

In the process it must always be kept in mind that how we communicate Christ's invitation to others is strongly dependent on the particular local circumstances and customs. Dialogue is the common standard and a mandatory prerequisite for every type of Christian missionary work. Regardless whether the Evangelization is perceived as witness, proclamation or worship, dialogue is of great value.⁸

It is furthermore very important that the relationship of Bible and mission be regarded from two different perspectives. Firstly it is a matter of re-discovering missionary-theological texts in the Bible. All too often the biblical foundation of the Church's missionary work is not sufficiently appreciated. And in the few cases where it is, the matter commonly tends to be confined to Jesus's missionarization dialogues. The universal dispatching of Christians for missionary work can however be found in numerous other biblical scriptures – not only in the New but also in the Old Testament. At first it may seem that missionary zeal and God's choosing are difficult to reconcile with each other. Why should we expend great effort to bring the Gospel to people, when God's choices already stood fast before the world had even been created? The following points should be mentioned in that respect:

- God's call to repentance and His offer of salvation truly are valid for each and every person (Acts 17:30; Rev. 22:17).
- Jesus Christ will welcome everyone who comes to Him (John 6:37; Mt. 11:28)
- God wants everyone to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9)

⁷ Hünnermann, Peter: Theologischer Kommentar zum Dekret über die Missionstätigkeit der Kirche "Ad gentes", in: Hünnermann, Peter/Hilberath, Bernd Jochen (Hg.): Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil. Bd. 4, Freiburg i. Br. 2005, 217-336.

⁸ Rutechura Pius, Gedanken, 296.

- God wants each and every person from every nation to hear the Gospel (Lk. 24:47). When He called His disciples to do this (Mk. 16:15), he also called us.
- We know that God has chosen certain people, but we neither can nor should know who they are. Therefore we no longer need to be concerned about the subject of God's choices when we answer His call to evangelization. The question as to the identities of God's chosen people can be answered thusly: *(2 Tim. 2:19) But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity."*
Only God knows the chosen. Our standard of comparison is this: The release from sin is the proof of the choice. We can apply this assessment for ourselves as well as for others. At any rate, we can never know if someone won't one day turn away from sin and instead turn to Christ.
- The fact that conversion depend neither on the evangelist's powers of persuasion nor the personal background of the listener but on the power of God is the only hope for evangelization. Why otherwise would for instance missionaries go to Muslim countries, where they are not only persecuted but also find the worst possible pre-conditions as far as the receptivity of the biblical message is concerned.
- Today many Christians make a decisive mistake here: They radically apply standard marketing methods to the evangelization process. They thereby remove God from the center and push the human towards the center. The message becomes weakened and diluted in order to "gain new customers". That the Gospel is not merely an offer but – primarily in fact – a divine commandment is overlooked. That has nothing to do with Marketing. With this approach the method and thus the secular humanness stand in the foreground.
Methods have their place as servants of the message. They help get people's attention and explain to them God's unadulterated truth as clearly and understandably as possible. God will abide by His word and bless it. The success however – whether and how many listeners repent – is not within our power to determine. Therefore we pray to God, that He will in His mercy open the doors for His Word (Coll. 4:3) and let it flow in (2 Thess. 3:1).⁹

Summary

The Gospel which is centered on God and the evangelization which is concentrated on God work together in a balanced way to assure God His commensurate amount of space

⁹ <http://www.evangeliumszentrum.at/bs/archiv/Gottimzentrum.php>.

1. as almighty Creator, Ruler and Judge of human beings and as the constructor of history;

2. as infinitely merciful and loving God, Who wants to save everyone in His creation and Who woos everyone in it by appealing to their common sense and their will.

In our missionary activities we must be careful not to please the people instead of God, since in evangelization itself the highest goal is God's glory and not the number of conversions. God's glory will be held high when we

- as **His** emissaries
- proclaim **His** truth
- in **His** love.

May God make of us the kind of emissaries who represent their King worthily. ✠