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The Implications of Vatican II for the Mission in Asia: Manila, 1967

MOST ASIAN COUNTRIES have gained political independence recently. Some remain friendly to the West; some, not; and the half of Asia under communist rule is closed to all foreign contacts. The Asian countries, generally poor, are besieged by a host of problems, the steady increase in population being one of the most significant. Rapid social changes have followed the spread of education, modern means of communication, and the new technology. Asia is becoming secular in many aspects of its life.

There is a blossoming of *local cultures*, a renaissance of old *religions*, and the rise of *new religions* alongside a process to secularize society under the influence of Marxism in its different forms. A new materialism is spreading fast among the educated and the wealthier classes. These trends also include a greater concern for such values as justice and freedom, which are crucial to human spiritual development.

Asia has awakened like a giant that has long slumbered. It is eager and impatient to find its identity in the world of today. Asia – with its population of about two-thirds of the human race – presents a most complex situation.

Any missionary work in Asia must begin with a deep understanding of the forces at work there and of the aspirations, thought patterns, and even sentiments of the Asian people as they emerge from a long period of relative insignificance.

Public Image of the Church

In order to bring the Word of God to the peoples of Asia, we should

(°) Rapport des échanges de groupe, in Source book for modern catechetics, edited by Michael Warren, Saint Mary's Press, Christian Brothers Publications, Winona, Minnesota, 1983, pp.57-64.

reflect on how the Church today appears to them and compare it with the ideals traced in the Second Vatican Council. The Church is admired for her great contribution to education and social services, especially during the past century. Many, however, felt that the Church is still by and large on the fringe of society; conversions were merely among culturally disintegrated or backward groups. She appeared glaringly foreign in her way of life, her liturgy, architecture, and even her mentality. Conversion meant a rupture with the cultural life of the country.

The churches often presented the image of a ghetto group that seemed more concerned with the defense of its privileges than the building up of the human community. In spite of their great services, the church institutions with their dominating network of educational and social services have developed into symbols of countersigns instead of signs of incarnated and redemptive love. Far from creating healthy, interpersonal relations, the churches have in some cases tended to promote antagonism, jealousy, and even bitterness.

Since the social teachings of the Church are almost unknown in Asia, the institutional Church is often identified with the rich.

The Church is seen as a source of material security, a distributor of services; this tends to encourage paternalism. The priestly and religious life does not seem to impress others as a sign of Christian poverty and detachment, a point of special importance, since Asian religions value these aspects very highly.

Vatican II Directives

In this context the fundamental directives of the Second Vatican Council come as a salutary reminder of the nature and mission of the Church. The Church is recalled by the council to her pristine awareness of being a people of God formed by the Word of God nourished by his bread and life. Christians are to live in personal communion with each other and to give unselfish service to all. Thus, their lives are a sign and manifestation of salvation offered to all mankind by God in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

The Church has to rediscover the dimensions of community dialogue, collegiality, freedom, and disinterested service. She is called to become incarnate in the local cultures, and to dialogue sincerely with all Christians, all believers, and also with those who do not profess any religion. From being a ghetto, the Church is called to give herself to the modern world, to share in its hopes and anxieties, and to collaborate with all people of good will for the building of human communities of fraternity, equality, justice, and peace. In so doing, the Church would

witness to the values of Christ in a manner intelligible and acceptable to people in our times.

Trends within Asia and the guidelines given by Vatican II indicate the manner in which the mission to Asia must be conceived today. It is particularly necessary to have a theology of the *plurality of religions* and of the mission of the Church in this context.

The resurgence of the Asian religions should not be considered only as an obstacle to the spread of Christianity; it could be, in the plan of God, a source of purification of Christians or a providential indication of the need for new approaches or a call for a different form of the Church's presence and activity in this part of the world.

Our attitude toward religions like Buddhism in many cases does not seem justifiable. In the past, conversion to Christianity meant often a total denial of one's religious and cultural tradition and a rejection of all that was Buddhist. It is now suggested that all the elements in Buddhism that are good should be maintained even when someone is converted to Jesus Christ.

Similarly, it was said that missionaries generally took it for granted that a follower of Confucius had to give up his loyalty to Confucius in order to be loyal to Jesus Christ. However, the well-known convert Dom Lou points out that this is a totally mistaken idea. He professes to be a Confucianist and a Christian. Brahmabhanduev Upadhyaya, a famous Bengali convert, stated: "I am Hindu by birth, I am Catholic by rebirth, I am a Catholic Hindu." And the Buddhist monk Vajrapanna quite recently expressed his conviction that his loyalty to the Buddha did not prevent him from following the teaching of Jesus Christ.

Attitude Toward Other Religions

Our attitude toward other religions should be one of deep respect motivated by love, the essence of Christianity. In the past we may have been sometimes wanting in this respect, especially in the manner in which Christianity was first introduced to several Asian countries. These religions are sensitive to our want of respect, and our approach should be one of delicate charity and disinterested service.

As a basis for a Christian approach to the religions of Asia, we may examine the various phases of the realization of the Christian mystery, Incarnation, Redemption, and Fulfillment. Just as Christ was incarnated, Christianity too should incarnate itself in these religions in everything except sin. Then, just as Christ purified and transformed humanity by his death and resurrection, the religions of Asia must undergo a mystical death and resurrection in Christ and find their fulfill-

ment in the Church. The followers of all religions have to relive the paschal mystery. Here it is good to remark that in the past, in spite of Roman documents, we in our actual practice stressed too much the aspects of rupture, judgment, and condemnation. Today, we should stress Christianity as continuity and fulfillment.

First Approach to Persons of Other Faiths and Unbelievers

We must endeavor to work in solidarity with the people of our time unreservedly in all that is good. We must make common cause with all men and women of goodwill in the task of building the human community as recommended by the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World." While doing so we love others in their otherness.

Through commitment to human values, especially the struggle for social reform, Christians must bear witness to their spirit of loving service. They should, through such common work, endeavor to reveal to others the deepest nature of the Christian mystery which motivates them. Christ could, where opportunity presents itself, be presented as the fulfillment of human aspirations.

If this is at the level of human values, we have another approach at the level of religious values. To discover the religious values it is not enough to study Asian religions in the books. We must study them as practiced by people, by living with the followers of their religions, by closely observing them, and by sympathetically understanding their religious practices and life. Then our approach will sometimes take quite another turn. Theoretically, for example, we may have the impression that we should condemn Buddhism as atheistic, but at the practical level a good number of Buddhists have a devotion to a personal God.

In our approach toward Buddhism, Hinduism, or other oriental religions, we feel that Christianity would do well to meet them not vertically but horizontally, for in the former approach there could be only confrontation and not dialogue. We could therefore start by discovering common values and living them in practice. Opportunities will offer themselves to us, at a certain stage, to lead others to discover and to recognize what is unique and specific in Christianity, and this is needed for the fulfillment of these religions. In other words, it is through immanence that we lead them to transcendence. This can be better understood and further clarified through the stages of mystical experience. Thus, an encounter of religions at the level of experience of God can be recommended as an approach.

However, our problem is to know how the followers of other religions may come to recognize Christ as the only Incarnation and the culmination of revelation and intervention of God in human history. It was felt by the participants in the workshop that it was not so much by verbal assertions as by deeds and Christian witnessing that the uniqueness of Christianity would be understood and recognized. Kerygma as the verbal proclamation of the Good News has to be accompanied by signs; these signs could be physical or moral miracles. The universal, unequivocal, and infallible sign of Christ as the only Incarnation and final intervention of God in history is still fraternal love: "By this will all men know that you are my disciples if you love one another." This love or this witnessing can take various forms, e.g., disinterested social service, etc.

Religion and Culture

A question was raised as to the type of culture which should be taken into consideration in the adaptation of the Church to the local cultures of Asia. Local cultures are continually changing. Consequently, adaptation to local culture nowadays means adaptation to the present culture of a nation which has roots in the past and is open to the assimilation of what is best in the technological and scientific culture of the West.

It was strongly urged that an *institute* be set up for the study of religion, culture, sociology, and anthropology. The bishops and religious superiors should plan the initiation of the new missionaries into the language, history, culture, customs, and traditions of the country they will work in. The Congregation of the *Propaganda* should be requested to grant subsidies to such a project.

It was suggested that those Asians who are sent for studies abroad be sent preferably after their ordination and, if possible, after two or three years of ministry. If they are sent out as seminarians, it may happen that, during the formative ages of eighteen to twenty-five, they may lose contact with or even interest in their own culture.

It was proposed to request *Asian bishops* to *foster* and *accelerate* the means of cultural adaptation as part of their missionary activity and, thus, to promote the love of their own cultures.

Priests should be helped to renew themselves, according to the Vatican council, by seminars of about two weeks' duration. Priests should be trained to become sensitive toward others, to be capable of loving the men and women of our time, and to render disinterested service.

Renewal of Content of Catechesis

The theological orientations given by Vatican II, and further elaborated since then, call for a development of the content of *catechesis* especially with reference to the mission in Asia. The Asian churches have been built and inspired by a theology which has severe limitations, a theology which the Second Vatican Council has ordered us to remedy and elaborate.

Theology determines the content of catechesis; catechesis builds the thought patterns, relationships, and structures within any Christian grouping. We can evaluate the catechesis and the theology in terms of the type of Church they generate. Our missionaries in Asia have in the past done wonderful work; this is never in question. They were, however, inspired by an earlier theology, the limitations of which were not due to a want of generosity on the part of the missionaries. Vatican II has indicated the guidelines of renewal . . . and we must courageously apply these to Asia.

Theology and catechesis must be reoriented to give the *universal dimension* of the reality of God revealed in Jesus Christ. The deepest truths of Christianity have the whole of mankind as their participants and beneficiaries whether these be aware of it or not. God is the Creator and Father of all; Christ is the Lord of history and Redeemer of mankind; and the Holy Spirit works in every human heart from the first moment of creation. These truths can make Christians aware of the spiritual riches of all humankind and at the same time make others see in Christianity the fulfillment of their own highest aspirations. These truths must be put in the *forefront* of our theology and also in our catechesis.

This requires a renewal of theology and catechesis, which had tended to present God in Christ almost unconsciously, as a particularist God conceived of according to the philosophies and religious traditions of a Hebraic and a Greco-Roman civilization. The Christian worship of God in liturgy thus came to Asia as a set of unintelligible signs – be they language, rite, ritual, or even dress. The liturgy, still very Roman, needs a divesting of what are only religious rites of a particular culture; only then will it be able to become incarnate in Asia.

The Practical Renewal of Catechesis

These considerations indicate the need for a wide change in the ways of thinking among all levels in Asia and among those who train priests and religious in Asia. Textbooks need to be better adapted; the method

of the catechumenate should be reconsidered in order to seriously take account of the environment from which neophytes come. Catechumens should be required to give up only what is positively and clearly wrong or superstitious.

The previous methods of the catechumenate were rather pitifully lacking in cultural or religious sensitivity, so much so that the extent of the conversion to Christianity tended to be also the measure of the success of cultural and religious segregation. We must not demand of catechumens what Christ does not demand.

The content of catechesis should be gradually presented in such a manner as to be expressed in the terminology and cultural context of the Asian countries.

Social Dimension of Catechesis in Asia

The discussions revealed that the Church all over Asia is a most important agency of education and social service. However, there is *little commitment to social reform* and to the struggle for social justice. Indeed, social justice seems to be neglected generally, even in adult catechesis, in preaching, and in the media of mass communication. Hardly anywhere does the Church appear as the champion of social justice even though it helps with assistance of the poor. Social dynamism is more evident among the Marxists, liberal communists, and socialists than among the believers in Jesus Christ.

Our social service approach tends to perpetuate the mentality of paternalism-infantilism with reference to rich and poor and even clergy and laity.

The liturgy which has the possibility of instructing the Christian community does not seem to inspire a consciousness of the needs of social justice. In many countries we do not find any planned communication of the social teaching of the Church on a fairly wide scale. The sacramental catechesis of children seems to engage most of the energies of personnel and funds in almost all the countries.

Reevaluation of Apostolic Methods

The changed circumstances demand changes in apostolic methods. It was often mentioned that the Church in its institutional aspects sometimes presented itself as a countersign to the Christian profession of poverty and respect for human personality. Dialogue within the Church should go side by side with dialogue with those outside the Church.

It was suggested that smaller groups might be a better method of witnessing to the Gospel than big institutions.

The ecclesial dimension of the apostolate should manifest itself by rallying all the pastoral activities around the bishops, the heads of the local Church. The religious should keep themselves at the disposal of the bishop and look to him for guidance in all their undertakings while the bishops should primarily regard themselves as servants of their people and as members of that college of bishops which is responsible for the whole Church and her mission.

Religious poverty and obedience should take new forms, and the relations between clergy and laity should be more fraternal.

Recommendations

1) That an All-Asian Bishops' Conference be established for Asia. This conference could hold regular meetings or general plenary sessions in order to give detailed and concerted guidelines for the apostolate in Asia.

2) That institutes for the study of culture and religions in Asia be established in mutual collaboration between bishops and religious orders.

3) That regional institutes be set up to initiate new missionaries in the language, culture, and religious customs of each place.