

New Evangelization : A Theological Appraisal

Introduction

The world, as we are aware, is marching towards the dawn of the third millennium, a crucial period in the history of humankind. Today winds of change in the socio economic and political spheres are sweeping through all the nations. In particular, the Third World is emerging with its immense potential and its irrefutable claim for equal rights and status. At this juncture, there is a clarion call to build up a new humanity marked with the characteristics of fraternity, equality and justice. To be more specific, God invites all people to live together harmoniously as one human family, whatever might be their colour, language, ethnic origin or religion. Relentless efforts are on the way to realize this call, fighting against every form of oppression, deprivation and exploitation. The call for a new humanity is pregnant with immense potentialities which should be unearthed and brought into limelight so that the Church could fulfil her mission in a new way as willed by God.

It is in this context that the whole understanding of New Evangelization, a new project announced by Pope John Paul II, has to be placed for a serious theological reflection. In this article an attempt is made to delve into the various implications of New Evangelization in the context of the ongoing struggle for fuller human life.

Emergence of New Evangelization

The project of New Evangelization is of recent origin. While inaugurating the 9th Assembly of the Latin American Bishops' Conference (CELAM) on 9th March 1983 in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Pope John Paul II invited for the first time

the people of Latin America to launch single-mindedly New Evangelization in view of celebrating the 500th anniversary of evangelization of the continent in 1992. According to him, it is the proclamation of the same Good News of salvation, but marked with *new method, expression and fervour*.¹ He made an earnest appeal to the Latin American Church to put aside her colonial past and to enthusiastically step into an era of Christian commitment and witness which is new and which inspired harmonization of freedom and truth, justice and solidarity. Today the world community is awaiting a renewed witness from Christians - an energetic witness - neither uncertain or weak, but one which is just, strong and truly Christian.² The appeal of the Pope for New Evangelization promptly drew the attention of the European Bishops, who in a special synod held in 1991 in Rome, declared that the New Evangelization was the *kairos* of the Lord calling the people of Europe to rediscover their Christian roots and to establish a more profound civilization, more Christian and richly human.³

As the Church is becoming more and more global in character since the time of Vatican II, the project of New Evangelization cannot confine itself to Europe or Latin America. It must be, on the contrary, capable of involving all Christians, since it is the call of God to the entire Church to make a honest assessment of the mission carried out in the past, and also to renew and revitalize it in the light of emerging situation in the world. Thus, Pope John

1. Cfr. Address of John Paul II to the 19th Plenary Assembly of CELAM, Haiti on 9th March 1983, published as, "At the Service of the People of God," *L' Osservatore Romano* No: 16 (18 April 1983), p. 9.
2. Address of Pope John Paul II in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic on 12th October 1984, published as "Building a New Latin America," *Origins* 4 (1 Nov. 1984), pp. 307-310.
3. "To be Witness of Christ who has set us free," (Final Declaration of the Synod of Bishops) published in *Catholic International* 3 (1-14 March 1992) pp. 211-222.

Paul II has extended his call for New Evangelization to every Christian community. For him, it is the evangelization of the world in view of the forthcoming third millennium.⁴ Therefore, the New Evangelization cannot remain merely a renewal programme effecting some changes in the pastoral ministry of the Church. It must be, on the other hand, capable of widening its horizon involving people of all religions and ethnic origins to realize God's plan of renewing the face of humanity.

Arising of New World Order

The New Evangelization, first of all, acknowledges that we are at the threshold of a new era in human history. Never before in the whole of history has so much newness appeared at any one time and on such a large scale, as at the end of this century. The newness primarily consists in the emergence of a new humanity.

Looking into the eyes of the world, one can easily comprehend the fact that the whole humanity is groaning in travail for fuller life (Rom 8:22). Liberation from disintegration and establishment of harmony is the longing of every authentic human community. The rays of hope for a new human order are already seen in the world. For instance, there is a new determination among people to get actively involved in establishing a new congenial order of love, peace and justice, fighting against every form of exploitation which stifles their harmonious living. The emergence of this newness in the world around us is manifested in many ways.

1. Among the recent political developments in the world are peoples' spontaneous uprising for independence and democracy. By dethroning ruthless despots, sending back home the domineering power groups and greedy bure-

4. Pope John Paul II, "Address to the College of Cardinals," on the 23rd Dec. 1991, published as, "New Evangelization Needed Everywhere," *L'Osservatore Romano* No : 1, (8 Jan. 1992), p. 5.

aucrats, people are more and more proving to the world their power in effecting transformation in society. For instance, after several years of intense struggle of the oppressed masses, the white settlers' divine right to rule came to a happy end with the election of the first democratic, multiracial government in South Africa in 1993.

2. The struggle of the minority ethnic communities for asserting their status, identity and independence has gained momentum in the world at large. They are opting to give up their lives rather than allowing themselves to be dominated. This is what happens in countries such as Ireland, Burma, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India, Philippines, Iraq etc.

3. A new awakening is spreading fast among the poor and the oppressed to fight for a better and fuller human life. For instance, the *dalits* are progressively learning to identify the forces and various power structures manipulating their lives and to call into question the systems that have legitimized their oppression. They have resolved to struggle for their liberation and get back their right to live in dignity as human beings in society.

4. There is a growing consciousness among women to claim for dignity and equal status at all levels of social living. The various women's liberation movements and voluntary organizations are making strenuous efforts to accord women a new sense of identity by calling for the complementarity of male and female and by attempting to abolish the most open remnants of feudal patriarchy.

5. A new awareness is emerging to save nature from destruction and to preserve the environment from pollution. At present a number of ecological movements is rising up in many countries and is challenging the emphasis laid on domination and control of humankind over nature. They underscore the necessity of bringing harmonious relationship between them.

6. Today a new consciousness is spreading slowly among people of different religions to get united with a view to promote peace and harmony, collaboration and participation in the face of religious fundamentalism, a growing phenomenon which threatens the unity and integrity of the human community. Some inter-religious groups are already working together towards the realization of this goal.

It becomes obvious from what is outlined above that people are waking up to the demands of a new humanity marked by human dignity, interpersonal relationship and a holistic vision of a more abundant life. This awakening of people cannot be sidelined or ignored, since it is a significant break-through in the history of humankind. It is becoming day by day a powerful force challenging not only the irrelevant traditions, unjust political systems, oppressive social structures etc., but also the Church and her mission carried out for centuries. It calls for a new understanding of evangelization in response to the newness blossoming forth all over the world. Against this background let us continue our reflection on the various features of New Evangelization.

Renewing the Face of Humanity - The Heart of New Evangelization

One of the remarkable features of the God of the Bible is newness. He always acts in a new and unprecedented manner in the emergence of every new historical circumstance: "Remember not the former things nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Is. 43 18-19); "Behold I make all things new" (Rev. 21:5). It may be pertinent to indicate that the word "new" is found quite often in the Bible: a new song (Ps. 40:3; 96:1; 149:1; Rev. 5:9), a new heart (Eze. 36:26), a new spirit (Eze. 36:26), a new life (Rom. 7:6), a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17.)

a new covenant (Jer. 31:31; 2 Cor. 3:6), new things (Is. 42:9; 43:19; 48:6), new wine (Mk. 2:22), a new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 21:1).

What are the new things that God is trying to achieve for the present generation? Today the human community is longing for new life. In particular, the poor and the marginalized are struggling to get liberated from the fetters of unjust structures and oppressive powers. In every nook and corner of the world we perceive an overwhelming outburst of their innermost longing for identity and affirmation. This longing of the least is exactly the longing of God. He is, "at work through his own free choice, in the struggle for justice and expectations of hope."⁵ He is determined to bring together the present generation as one human family - a family of love and solidarity, due to the fact that all people belong to Him. His, "providence, evident goodness and saving designs extend to all human beings."⁶ In other words, restoring harmony once again as found during the creation of the universe is His mission. The same Spirit of God, who was responsible for the creation of the universe (Gen. 1:2), is now hovering over the present humanity in order to release it from the perilous grip of destruction and disintegration, and bestow it with a new heart of love and a new spirit of justice (Eze. 36:26). The New Evangelization, therefore, is an urgent appeal to work in intimate union with God to renew the face of humanity. It is to mend the brokenness of creation, to overcome the fragmentation of humanity and to heal the rift between humanity, nature and God.⁷

The new heaven and the new earth towards which the present human race is marching is not to be thought of as an

5. Jan Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach*, SCM Press, London, 1978, p. 5.
6. *Nostra Aetate* No. 1.
7. Stanley Samartha, *One Christ - Many Religions*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1992, p. 149, Cfr. Jürgen Moltmann, *Creating a Just Future*, SCM Press, London, 1989.

obscure and remote reality remaining at the level of an illusion or a dream or an utopia, but a concrete phenomenon which is in the process of being actualized already in this world. For, the transformation of humanity by the power of the self-giving God manifested through His Son Jesus Christ is the innermost truth of our Christian faith. Only the basic trust in this creative power of God can accord a deep sense of hope and commitment to all those who relate themselves with any Movement which is working for new life.

New in its Method

As pointed out at the very outset, the New Evangelization, as envisioned by Pope John Paul II, must be new in its *method*, in its *expression* and in its *fervour*. Let us make a brief reflection upon these three key words in continuation with our exploration.

First of all, a change in the method and approach to evangelization is of crucial importance. The traditional missionary method was principally a matter of planting of the visible Church (*implantatio ecclesiae*) wherever it was not yet established, that is, to bring the means of salvation within the reach of all souls. This missionary approach *from above* was to a large extent unmindful of the historical situation of the people, particularly the joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of the alienated masses. While speaking of the old model of mission, Gutierrez raises the question whether one can claim to be concerned over the eternal salvation of those who are in danger of being lost and at the same time withdraw from the responsibility for the injustice, hunger and temporal misfortune of people in the world.⁸ Contrary to this, the New Evangelization emerges from below, as it is deeply concerned with concrete problems and issues of every human community. It proceeds from a

8. Cfr. Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1983, p. 77.

vigorous and vital encounter between the Gospel message and the human persons living in a particular community at a specific historical moment. The Gospel message becomes a new and dynamic force, whenever a new historical circumstance arises.⁹ It speaks of the new and marvellous things that God wants to achieve for every new generation and, therefore, takes the shape of a prophetic message with the power of transforming, "the situation that is bad, inhuman and oppressive into one which is liberated, human and good."¹⁰

A prophetic message is always derived from a reading of the signs of the time. Signs are the means of God's revelation, which happens through concrete events of human history. The reading of the signs of the time means, to "scrutinize the aspirations, the yearnings, and the often dramatic features of the world in which we live."¹¹ The prophets of the Old Testament and Jesus, the prophet par excellence, adopted this method (Mt 16:1-3; Lk 12:54-56). As the Gospels tell us, Jesus carefully observed the stark realities of poverty, unemployment, sickness, and misery of the marginalized which are coupled with their great expectations of a Messiah and the dawn of a new age.¹² He could discern not only the presence of God in all these human realities, but also his mission to be carried out as desired by the Father. Likewise, the concrete realities seen and experienced in today's world, as well as the innermost longing of the people discerned from them are the signs through which

9. Cfr. Albert Nolan, *God in South Africa*, WM. B. Eerdmanns, Grand Rapids, (1988), p. 16-17.; Gustavo Gutierrez, "New Evangelization: A Theological Reflection on the Latin American Church-Santo Domingo," *Sedos Bulletin* 24 (1992), pp. 182-188.
10. Leonardo Boff, "The New Evangelization: New Life Bursts," in *Concilium* 6 (1990) p. 131.
11. Gaudium et Spes no. 4; also cfr. no. 11.
12. Cfr. Gerd Theissen, *The First Followers of Jesus: A Sociological Analysis of the Earliest Community*, SCM, London, 1978, p. 33 ff. Schottoff, L. and Stagemann. W. *Jesus and the Hope of the Poor*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 1984, p. 7ff.

God reveals His will for the present generation. The New Evangelization is exactly born out of this encounter between the Gospel message and the aspirations and hopes of the human community.

It may be pertinent to observe, at this point, that the new method also demands to devise *a new hermeneutics* which will take into account the socio-politico and cultural traits, as well as the priorities of the downtrodden.¹³ The biblical scholarship nurtured and developed in the Western countries was unmindful of peoples' experience of hunger, sickness and exploitation. But, as demanded by the new method of evangelization, the word of God is to be read, reflected and interpreted through the grief-stricken eyes of the poor and the powerless with the view to transform the prevailing situation which oppresses them. Hence, any reader or interpreter of the Bible must be fully immersed in the life and experience of the poor, especially the conscientized and organized poor struggling for justice. This immersion is essentially needed, "to experience the religio-cultural dimension of the presence of God among the poor" and, "to experience the evangelizing power of the poor."¹⁴ The new hermeneutics should involve the whole Christian community and has to be done at the grassroots level. Therefore, the New Evangelization, instead of being imported from outside, must emanate from within, namely from the faith experience of the living community which is concretely transparent in the religious, socio-politico and cultural milieu. In this way, one can speak of New Evangelization proper to each conti-

13. Cfr. Stanley Samartha, *The Search for Asian Hermeneutics In Asian Christian Theology*, Senate of Serampore College, Serampore, 1987. R. S. Sugirtharaja (ed.) *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible from the Third World*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1991. Felix Wilfred, "Towards a Subaltern Hermeneutics," *Vaiharai*, 1 (1996), pp. 61-81.

14. "Asia's Religio-Cultural Heritage and Human Development, BISA VII FABC Office of Human Development, Manila, 1986 pp. 22-23.

ment, to each country and still further to each believing community.

New in its Expression

In the by-gone centuries the Christian mission, being associated with colonial expressions such as *domination, confrontation and imposition*, was always looked upon with suspicion by people of other religions. None can deny that the mission in Asia, Africa and Latin America was predominantly linked to colonization of the innocent masses by the European traders to quench their greed for wealth and power. The whole gamut of missionary thinking was shaped and expressed within the powerful colonial structure. The uniqueness of Christianity and superiority of European culture was upheld in an uncompromising way and a negative and pessimistic attitude toward non-Christian religions and non-European cultures was maintained.¹⁵ The Bull *Inter Caetera* released in 1493 by Pope Alexander VI clearly expresses the understanding of mission in the colonial regime: "Let the Catholic and the Christian religion, especially in our times, be extended, and everywhere spread and propagated. Let the salvation of souls be procured. Let the barbarian nations submit, and let them be reduced to the faith".¹⁶ It is to be noted, however, that some missionaries reacted at times very strongly against the scandalous practices of our colonizers, and raised their voice in support of the liberation of the colonized. But unfortunately they went unheeded.

15. Cfr. Jacob Dharmaraj, *Colonialism and Christian Mission: Postcolonial Reflections*, ISPCK, Delhi, 1993; S. Manickam, *Studies in Missionary History*, CLS, Madras, 1988, Immanuel David, *Reformed Church in America: Missionaries in South India, 1839-1938: An Analytical Study*, Asian Trading Corporation, Bangalore, 1986.

16. Quoted in Leonardo Boff, *New Evangelization: Good News to the Poor*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1990, p. 64.

The New Evangelization, on the contrary, is gradually being seen as an expression of *dialogue, cooperation and participation*. This new expression is an outcome of the paradigm shift.¹⁷ Indeed, a paradigm shift is emerging in the theology of mission since Vatican II. Accordingly, the focal point of the mission is no longer the establishment of the structural Church, but the Kingdom of God which is a web of human relations - a communion - *koinonia*. It is a new communion and fellowship with God as Father and human beings as brothers and sisters and with the whole of nature as God's wonderful gift. The Kingdom of God as communion is already present among the people through their words, deeds and witnesses (Lk 17:2). The New Evangelization is to make alive the reality of the Kingdom in the life of the people, their words, deeds and witnesses.¹⁸ The All India Seminar on *The Indian Church in the Struggle For a New Society* makes a pertinent observation in this regard:

Her (the Church's) mission requires that she herself embodies in her own life and structures the Kingdom values of freedom, fellowship and justice. It also requires that she contributes to the promotion of those values in the ordering of human society. The struggle for a New Society is therefore a constitutive element of Church's evangelizing mission.¹⁹

When the Kingdom of God becomes the focal point of the evangelizing mission, the Church should no longer

17. Michael Amaladoss, "Mission: From Vatican II into the Coming Decade," *Reprint* 417 (1990) p. 212.

18. Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, No. 8.

19. D. S. Amalorpavadoss, ed., *The Indian Church in the struggle for a New Society*, NBCLC, Bangalore, 1981, P. 62; cfr also Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, No: 29; "Justice in the World," (Declaration of the Synod of Bishops) published in *Vatican II* (Vol. II) ed. by Austin Flannery, New York, p. 695.

the individual. In recent times, the undercurrent of social concern in the Hindu Scriptures and spiritual traditions has been brought to limelight thanks to the efforts of the Hindu reformers who have testified through their writings and their radical commitment to social change. Thus, interreligious dialogue must primarily be a mutual sharing of spiritual resources in order to build up common human communities which bring together people of different religions committed to the cause of justice and equality.²⁴ The paramount importance of this inter-religious collaboration was underlined by Pope John Paul II in his address in Madras at a meeting with leaders of non-Christian religions :

"The Catholic Church has time and again expressed the conviction that all people, both believers and non-believers, must unite and collaborate in the task of bettering this world where all live together. "This certainly cannot be done without a dialogue that is sincere and prudent" (Gaudium et Spes, 21). Dialogue which proceeds from the "initial drive of charity" (cf. Ecclesiam Suam, 64) is a powerful means of collaboration between people in eradicating the evil from human life and life of the community, in establishing right order in human society and thus contributing to the common good of all men in every walk of life."²⁵

It is to be kept in mind, at the same time, that the interreligious collaboration for a new humanity demands in no way diluting the fundamental faith claim of the partners. While they are rooted in their own religious traditions from which resources and strength are drawn, they collaborate

24. Cfr. Michael Amaladoss, "Liberation as an Inter-religious Project," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 28 (1991), pp. 4-33.

25. Address delivered on 5 February 1986. The above cited text can be found in *The Pope Speaks to India*, St. Paul's Publications, Bombay, 1986, pp. 84-85.

with one another in evolving a new human family of one and the same God.

New in its fervour

The last key word which deserves attention is *fervour*. In the early Church the Apostles went to far away places and worked with real commitment for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They were able to say courageously: "We cannot keep quiet! We must obey God rather than men." (Acts 4:19-20). So also the fervour for mission impelled so many missionaries to undergo tremendous physical suffering and mental agony. The New Evangelization calls for a new fervour glowing in every human heart, which is constantly encouraging to carry out so enthusiastically the mission of God. A new fervour is needed considering the urgent appeal made by God to collaborate with Him to renew the entire humanity.²⁶ Hence, no one can remain idle except making a definite choice in response to God's call and getting fully involved for the cause of new humanity.

The new fervour is a welling up of innermost feelings of courage and determination to undergo trials and tribulations for the sake of new humanity. Today there are many faceless and nameless persons who are sacrificing their lives because of their commitment to the liberation of the poor and the oppressed. Martyrdom, therefore, is an integral part of New Evangelization. The martyrdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El-Salvador is a beckoning example of this missionary fervour.

Conclusion

The above reflection shows that the New Evangelization is the prolongation of the mission of God in creating a new humanity for which the poor and the powerless are

26. "Bible and the New Evangelization" (Final Statement of the VI Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation) published in *Catholic International* 2 (15-31 July 1991) pp. 689-696.

longing with hope. It consists in establishing a new life for the lost and the least, the oppressed and the defenseless, for whom the message of the Kingdom of God was particularly announced and with whom Jesus identified himself totally during his earthly life. So the New Evangelization has to be shaped and developed in response to the aspirations and hopes of the oppressed masses.

The renewed understanding of mission is based on the Gospel rather than in propagating Church doctrines. It aims at establishing the Kingdom of God rather than a powerful structural Church. It also calls for interreligious collaboration aiming at empowering the masses to strive together, putting aside all the differences and prejudices, to build up a new humanity. Finally it demands involvement of all people with an indomitable courage. This is the grace we urgently need today.

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