

Dialogal Mission

The voice said to him (Peter) : What God has made clean, you have no right to call profane (Ac. 10:15).

If there is perhaps a sad trait common to Catholics of whatever rite or rank anywhere in the world it is that they are individually and collectively more introvert than extrovert as far as their Christian message is concerned. If anybody should dispute this I would only point out how once they give up their religion and get affiliated to some other group they are often out to enlist new members starting from their former fold. If with all our Catholic concerns and commitments we are satisfied enough to be blissfully ignorant of our missing Christian outreach the missionary-minded among us - the ones who are Catholic enough to look beyond the usual bounds of Catholic life - would enlighten us on how God needs no mere worshippers but servants, ambassadors, and missioners who will go out and talk to others to whom God has not spoken in the way he has spoken to us. Further they would lay bare the danger we are exposed to :

“a real danger that the Church may talk so much to its own members that it will forget that its mission is to go out and speak to other human beings. It may end up talking and listening to itself, so that its mission and Church itself disappear”.¹

Inspired in this vein and provoked to thinking by the opening statements of *Gaudium et Spes* an American missionary has remarked how “committed Catholics held within a ghetto subculture could no longer consider their *evangeliza-*

1. J. Comblin, *The Meaning of Mission* (Maryknoll, 1966), p. 34; see also p. 36.

tion obligations to be coterminus with that subculture², but with the wider bewildering culture of religions calling for a dialogue.

Dialogue, ecumenical or inter-religious, is certainly a high point of the awareness of the modern Church whether the majority of Christians have awakened to it or not. For Arnold Toynbee the encounter of religions in dialogue is the most significant event of the century! But more than a century ago Keshub Chander Sen, a Hindu intensely committed to Christ, advocated and called for precisely such an experience of dialogue! So there is no reason for pride in our discovery and practice of dialogue. If anything, we should wake up to our rather late arrival on the scene and do humbly all that is necessary to make up for what has been lacking or lagging behind in this religious exercise.

A Judaeo-Christian failure

The most rudimentary element of dialogue is recognition of the others. The fact that we have begun now to talk about dialogue with our non-Christians means among other things that we have till now not even taken cognisance of their surrounding presence, except of course patronizingly or negatively. Perhaps later generations will register a shock at how we have, as a community of worshippers, ignored for ages the other worshipping households of faith around us and been willy-nilly unconcerned about their religious progress.

Perhaps one can draw a comparison between us and the Jews who ignored the non-Jews in their own rightful place in the Temple. The gentiles had their own court, the only court in the Temple where they could worship God. But the Jews could not care less for them or their religious

2. G. A. Arbuckle, *Strategies for Growth in Religious Life* (Homebush, N. S. W., 1987), pp. 12-13.

rights. After all they turned the court of the gentiles into a religious market of the Jews! And so Jesus chose to cleanse the whole unholy situation and institution of the Temple giving vent to righteous anger. For all the zealous care of some of them to convert others to their faith the Jews generally acted contrariwise because they would not notice them in their nearness to God and give them their due place in their own progress to God and reach out to them in minimal nurture of religious solidarity. We are no different from the Jews in so far as we too do not recognize and respect goodness in other religions!

Evangelical dialogue

Right at the outset it is worth emphasizing that the dialogue we have in mind is part of the "evangelization obligations" in the spirit of a sensibly enthusiastic Christian! Has not Pope John Paul said in his mission encyclical "Inter-religious dialogue is a part of the evangelizing mission"?³ Long before that the Asian Church had said as much officially.

From 1971 onward it has been affirmed - most clearly by the FABC General Assembly of 1974 at Taipei - that the "basic mode of mission in Asia" must be dialogue. Missionary dialogue of course.⁴

If we are to develop an evangelical dialogue with non-Christian believers we must needs have the engagement of dialogue with our own Christian believers not excluding the magisterium. The former must proceed from the latter. Unfortunately the leading few who have apparently blazed a trail in the field of dialogue with other religionists have not sought to dialogue equally fervently within their own

3. *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 55.

4. So I. C. G. Arevalo, "Mission in the 1990s," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, April 1990, p. 50.

religion. Preferring to plough their lonely furrow is not an imaginary problem with theologians; it is indeed quite a lived experience! Another concerns the tendency to turn or metamorphose the problem itself into a solution. For instance, when we are faced with the great world religions of Asia it is the easiest thing to disclaim all uniqueness about Christ and explain away the cry of Peter in Ac 4:12 about there being no other name save Christ by which salvation comes, as nothing more than a legitimate overflowing admiration of a lover for the beloved. Such a posture is a succumbing to the problem and involves no sensible, dialectical tension that is necessarily part of faith seeking and struggling to understand.⁵ In this background it is easy to understand the remarks made in the light of experiments of dialogue at the grass-root level conducted by a Protestant Christian Seminary in Tamil Nadu :

It is very difficult to convince some members of the Church that Christ's preeminence and central place are not sacrificed at any cost in dialogue... So it is our conviction that those who engage themselves in Inter-Faith Dialogue should not be merely liberal-minded but *responsible evangelists* whose task it is to witness to the joy of salvation.⁶

The "greater" misunderstanding

In our Christian dialogue with Hindu believers it has been claimed that there has been "the great misunderstanding" (Monchanin) on our part of their life and belief. Parikkar illustrates it by the proverb: "What is the first

5. A. Pieris speaks of "the evangelical need to affirm the absolute-ness of his religion with the dialogical imperative that demands an honest explanation of religious pluralism" in *Love Meets Wisdom* (Maryknoll, 1988), p. 6.
6. *New Approaches to Inter-Faith Dialogue*, ed. T. D. Francis as cited in S. Anand, "Universally unique and uniquely universal," *Vidyajyoti Journal*, 1991, p. 412.

requirement if you want to teach Gopal Sanskrit?" with the implied answer that it is not knowing Sanskrit but Gopal!⁷ However striking it may be to drive home the general historical failure of Christians to know their Hindu neighbours, the greater misunderstanding of Christians is perhaps not having known their God of mission and message, a misunderstanding that is perhaps shown in Panikkar's very comparison of Sanskrit to the object of Christian mission. Can we not say that this greater misunderstanding includes "the great misunderstanding"? The pathetic picture of Jonah comes to mind. If only he had known his God and God's word he was entrusted with for the Ninevites he would have known his people too!

Dialogue as an experience of God

If we are to guard ourselves against the greater misunderstanding in our dialogal encounter with others we need to know and appreciate a religious fact. Just as the mission entrusted to us for others is part of God's ongoing dialogue with us so also the mission on the way to fulfilment in them is God's continued dialogue with them. In other words it is one and the same God who is at work in us and in them in different ways. So dialogue is not simply sharing our experience of God with them and *vice versa* but is itself an experience of God then and there in the mutual encounter of the partners! It is in the spirit of a new commandment, a commandment of the universal salvific will of God (1 Tm 2:4; 4:10) based on the signs of the times, a commandment formulated thus: "You will acknowledge that the 'I AM HERE' is present among all peoples".⁸ In the light of such catholicity of salvation history an academic remark such as the one of the pope on Buddhism being "in a large measure

7. *In Spirit and in Truth*, ed. I. Viyagappa (Madras, 1985), p. 113.

8. W. Buhlmann, *With Eyes to See* (Bangalore, 1992), p. 90.

an "atheistic" system",⁹ though not very dissimilar to what the Dalai Lama has reportedly made in a Catholic school in Calcutta that "there is no need for God", was not welcome, to say the least, as was seen in the unwelcoming protest of the Sri Lankan Buddhist monks to the papal visit to their country in 1995. On the contrary a whole book on Buddhism was written by the Jesuit de Lubac with so much religious experience, empathy, and insight that a Buddhist monk could not only agree with what he found in the book but also learn more about his own religious heritage, as he confided to an American Jesuit in India.

The universal "I AM"

Here a question has to be faced, a question that Catholics fervent, but not well-read, come up with when they get to read the whole Bible. My father, for example, who was getting to know the Old Testament in his retirement, could not help remarking to me once: "Our God does not seem to love other peoples!" A scholarly way of raising the same question is whether we shall find anywhere in the Old Testament, at least a few pages detached from a Zionist centralism.¹⁰ Even if we may be not all scholarly enough to keep a sharp eye out, as Legrand suggests, to cull such few exceptional passages the familiar stories of Job and Jonah, if not Ruth, are enough to set us all, professional or lay, thinking! Both raise, as B. Vawter says, "doubt, perplexity, and unease"¹¹ over our settled notions and even basic beliefs regarding God's dealings with other peoples. In the live discussion of the crucial and live

9. John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (London, 1994), p. 86. For the following reference to Dalai Lama see S. J. Samartha, *One Christ-Many Religions* (Bangalore, 1992), p. 18.

10. L. Legrand, *Mission in the Bible* (Pune, 1994), p. 21.

11. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. R. E. Brown *et alii* (Bangalore, 1991), n. 39:4, p. 581.

problem of God the conventional believers stand condemned by God himself as bigoted and blasphemous but Job, the unorthodox person and a pagan to boot, wins the approval of God in preference to the usual defenders of God (Jb 42:7-8). In the story of Jonah the prophet it is not the knowing Jew or the chosen Jew assured of his righteousness, that comes to know and find God first; rather it is the "ignorant" pagans, whether the God fearing sailors or even the ungodly and so cruel and so much hated Ninevites, who experience God in his typical divine quality of mercy that knows no barriers amidst his human creation! Can there be any doubt about the active presence of the "I AM" in peoples of whatever religion when God himself confronts us: "So why should I not be concerned for Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people?..." (Jon 4:11). And there is, as Buhlmann would say, the great mass of 2.874 billion non-Christians in Asia compared to mere 72.96 million of us Christians!

Christ's conviction

Someone greater than Jonah (Mt 12:42) challenged his generation to read the old sign of Jonah afresh and showed himself greater precisely in his sensitivity to divine activity in non-Jews,¹² unlike Jonah who failed to discern the faith of the detested Ninevites, though it was of the same kind as the faith of his own people (Ex 14:31).¹³ Jesus was always quick to detect faith in all people, the very faith that characterized the Jewish tradition starting from Abraham. At the very outset of his ministry he felt forced by the occasion to make his mind clear on the matter and so he challenged his audience to consider the privileged experience of two pagans, the widow of Zarepath and the Syrian Naaman, through the inspired activity of Elijah and

12. A. Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity* (London, 1984), pp. 80-81.

13. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, n. 39:15, p. 583.

Elisha (Lk 4:25-27). He certified on later occasions that there were pagans who experienced even greater faith than the so called people of faith (Mt 8:5-13; 15:21-28). He went one better than his precursor here. Whereas the Baptist declared that God could raise children for Abraham even from stones he publicized that God did so from the despised pagans! But surely such cases are not reportedly frequent in the gospel accounts. And yet significantly enough the pericope of the centurion's faith concludes with the surprised logion (apparently authentic) :¹⁴

And I tell you that many will come from east and west and sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob at the feast in the kingdom of heaven; but the children of the kingdom will be thrown out into the darkness outside... (Mt 8:11-12).

On the strength of this logion one may conclude with Dupont, "the story of the centurion ceases to be the account of an exceptional case... This pagan becomes the prototype of "many" another pagan who will sit at the banquet of salvation".¹⁵ But does not the logion look to the eschatological hope? Yes, and yet, as all eschatology since the time of Christ, it was already "inbreaking" enough for people who had eyes to see! That was arguably part of the message of the synoptic saying (most forceful in Mark) on the doers of the will of God belonging to the true family of Christ and God (Mk 3:35), like the Samaritan grateful to God for his healing (Lk 17:11-19) but unlike the religious Jews including the blood relatives of Christ who were all one in their rejection of Jesus.¹⁶ There can still be another

14. D. Senior and C. Stuhlmüller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (Maryknoll, 1983), p. 152.

15. As cited in Legrand, *Mission*, p. 54.

16. D. Senior and C. Stuhlmüller, *Biblical Foundations*, p. 222.

objection. The will of God as the observant Jews saw it, was found in the law of God; and the law was known only to the Jews; and so it was certainly the Jewish persuasion that the non-Jews had no way of belonging to God and so inherit life. Some such thinking was certainly at the back of the mind of the lawyer who raised the veiled question about the identity of the neighbour. The implication of the question concerned really the membership of God's people. So the question in plain words would ask: whoever belonged to God's family and so had a claim of neighbourly love? Jesus challenged the hidden agenda of the lawyer's question by his story of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37) and turned the loaded question on its head: "Don't ask about who belongs to God's people and thus is the object of my neighbourly attention, but rather ask about the conduct incumbent upon a member of God's chosen people... Because he did the law, the outcast Samaritan shows that he is a neighbour, a member of God's people, one who inherits eternal life".¹⁷ All this assured teaching of Jesus concerning the fact that the non-Jews as well as Jews are drawn by God by way of faith and inspired to act accordingly must become an integral part of our reading of the gospel in the Indian situation of other religious believers. A way of expressing this new-found portion of the gospel may well be in terms of God's own words relayed through Isaiah: I have let myself be approached by those who did not consult me, I have let myself be found by those who did not seek me (65:1). Does not such an attitude of appreciation of the unsuspected dialogue between God and his people of whatever religion constitute in itself a new stage of conscientization in the practice of the gospel mission?

Right Christian conviction

But ought not our mission to be out and out Christian, wholly characterized by Christ and referring to Christ, the

17. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, n. 43:126, p. 702.

one sent by God to reveal the knowledge of God? In whatever way we make bold to answer it with our knowledge of the Christian faith it is worth pondering the critical remark of a Hindu believer in Christ expressed thus :

They may proclaim "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God" (Jn 1 : 1), but few of them have translated this to mean that Christ the Word, has existed from the beginning of time and has been leading humanity into truth before he became flesh. Most Christians do not see anything before the historical Christ. ¹⁸

Perhaps he does not know anymore than most of us that the Christians of the early centuries did certainly know much more. For instance Justin could write with assurance:

Christ is the first begotten of God, his Word of whom all mankind partakes... (this is what we have been taught and said). Those who have lived by the Word are Christians, even though they have been considered atheists: such as, among the Greeks, Socrates, Heraclitus, and others like them; and among the foreigners, Abraham, Elias, Ananias, Azarias, Mishael, and many others whose deeds or names we now forbear to enumerate, for we think it would be too long. ¹⁹

And Augustine wrote in his fashion,

The very thing which is called the Christian religion existed among the ancients, nor was it absent at the beginning of the human race, until the coming of Christ in the flesh when the true religion which had already existed began to be called Christian. ²⁰

18. K. Gajiwala, "Liberating the Unlimited," *Vidyajyoti*, 1933, p. 108.

19. J. Dupuis, *Jesus Christ and his Spirit* (Bangalore, 1977), p. 7.

20. *ibid.*, p. 19.

The Church officially rediscovered this patristic heritage during Vatican II.²¹ How far it has continued with its rediscovery and kept up its momentum is a moot matter, as there has been repeated emphasis on the interpretation of non-Christian religious experience as only the human search for God²² which is a far cry no doubt from the bold faith of the Christian thinkers of the early centuries regarding the hidden activity of the Word and Christ in those who had not known Christ. If only the Church had all along its history preserved the memory of such ancient faith and cherished it and developed it—was the Buddha made into the mediaeval Saint Joasaph in this spirit?²³ - the whole world would have been leavened in the Christian way from within their religious milieu and therefore far more Christianized than it is today!

Christianizing

But what is Christianizing? It need not mean only or necessarily making people belong to the Christian body of the Church as members. Basically and simply it is letting the light of Christ shine or spreading abroad the fragrance of Christ, which is not exactly the same as sharing the values of the kingdom of God without any reference to Christ²⁴ however valuable it may be in itself. It is like what Christ himself did! Though he had formed a group of disciples around himself from among the Jews he did not seem to concentrate on, let alone canvas, formal enrollment of new members by way of baptism or any other initiation rite (Jn 4:2).

21. See *Gaudium et Spes*, nn. 11, 22, and *Ad Gentes*, nn. 4, 5, 11.

22. See for instance *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Bangalore, 1994), n. 843.

23. For the reference see A. Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom*, p. 25; also p. 4 where he mentions Marco Polo's remark about the Buddha: "Had he been a Christian, he would have been a great saint of Jesus Christ".

24. See *Redemptoris Missio*, nn. 17-18.

Whatever he might have intended for his chosen group of the Twelve in the future, his exercise of mission in his lifetime was to proclaim, to broadcast, to enact the gospel of God in speech and action and to associate his disciples in the same work. Even as he let his group of disciples share in his one mission he surprised them by allowing others too to do as he and they did! One would not be in the wrong to draw such a conclusion from the single incident of correction in which he disabused his disciples of their desire to stop a stranger, obviously not belonging to their privileged group, from using the name of their Master for a good work of exorcism (Mk 9:38-39). If the story was used in the early Church to correct the well-intentioned but unholy tendencies towards cliquishness or exclusivism it can still serve the same purpose whenever we are found wanting in the true catholic spirit of Christ's openness, inclusiveness and broadmindedness. It is important to observe that the story is followed by the saying, "Anyone who is not against us is for us" (Mk 9:40), as it enunciates a generalization of the more concrete teaching of the story.²⁵ This saying occurs in Luke with the variation: "Anyone who is not against you is for you" (Lk 9:50b), though the accusation of the disciples about the stranger being "not one of us" remains the same in both Mark and Luke. By changing the pronoun "us" into "you" and so contrasting himself with his disciples the Lucan Jesus might have hinted too that the man against whom they had brought a complaint had in fact a relationship to himself of which they were not aware.²⁶ In the same way the pagan Gerasene demoniac who was denied his request to be part of the group surrounding Jesus nevertheless was a true adherent of Christ, Christianizing his surroundings exactly in the way Christ had wanted him to (Mk 5:18-20).

25. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, n. 41:61, p. 616.

26. See note on Lk 9:49 in *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, 1985), p. 1558.

Hindu Christians

Like the anonymous exorcist and the Gerasene and the Samaritan, among all proclaimers of Christ who did not belong to the visible and countable group of Christ there are many a Hindu who cherish Christ without however linking or bonding him with any of the Christian Churches. Theologians who are particularly conscious of the vast majority of non-Christians in India are not equally informed of such believers denominationally unattached who constitute a small, but no insignificant, minority. A Lutheran Christian Research Institute in Madras has made a survey and numbered thousands of such Christians in Madras alone.²⁷ One hears of some among such Christians confiding to their children their secret belief in Jesus as their preferred God (*Ishta Deva*) or even the supreme God,²⁸ and of some others forming biblical prayer groups even as Gandhi had organized biblical classes for his trainees in *satyagraha*, and of still some others who must needs express their invading faith in poetry or prose either for their own private devotion or public impact. At times one meets with some of those who disseminate their new found faith by distributing Christian literature. What is more surprising, one comes across simple Hindu men and women who are proud of their allegiance to Christ and preach him in public platforms in the same spirit, even if not with the same intellectual depth or oratorical flourish, as K. C. Sen used to more than a century ago eulogizing the irresistible influence of Jesus Christ on Indian hearts and declaring once in the town hall of Calcutta, "None but Jesus, none but Jesus, none but Jesus ever deserved

27. See H. Staffner, *The Significance of Jesus Christ in Asia* (Anand, 1985), p. 233.

28. An elderly Christian woman of Indian origin in Trinidad once shared with me how her Hindu father confided to her at his death bed his conviction about Christ being the true God. Such stories do not seem to be rare and isolated.

this bright, this precious diadem, India; and Jesus shall have it.²⁹

A recent and last witness which I cannot resist quoting, is of Ramesh Chandra Dwivedi. In an inter-faith live-together he is reported to have shared his "Christian" faith thus:

I have nothing against Rama or Krishna. But Jesus is the Lord, Lord of India, Lord of the Universe. Ultimately there will be only one religion, the religion of Christ which is the religion of love.³⁰

Mission to Hindu Christians

Who of us can dare say that such people have missed Christ? One of them has, on the contrary, expressed his bold self-perception thus: "Missionaries have missed us, but Christ has reached us".³¹ In relation to such lovers of Christ, who by choice are not explicit Christians, what can mission mean for us Christian lovers of Jesus? Whatever it might have meant in the past it cannot continue to address a "pagan world", as Legrand says.³² It addresses rather this world, this supposed, non-Christian world, and yet the world that God has so loved in and through Jesus. In the process this concrete world of our mission must be for us what it is for God. Since God has loved this world of others any of our Christian dealings with them must be in continuation and consonance with the love of Jesus that they too have known as we do, though of course in a different way. The experience of the Muslim mystic, Rumi, "The lovers of God can have no religion but God alone," has a lot to say to us in this respect.

29. See H. Staffner, *The Significance*, p. xiii.

30. See the report of C. Valiaveetil in *Jivan*, August 1993, p. 26.

31. So P. C. Mazoomdar as in H. Staffner, *The Significance*, p. 72.

32. L. Legrand, *Mission*, p. xii.

When we really care about our mission to others we would not be primarily bothered about our way in the mission but how our way of the mission reflects and tallies with God's own way in mission because all mission is first and foremost of God. Further it is important to realize that even as we engage in mission to others God is in mission not only to others but to ourselves! There are no two Gods in mission! It is one and the same God who reaches out to them and to us for one and the same ultimate purpose of real glory! In his reaching out to us engaged in mission he cannot—does not—leave us to our own insight or inventiveness alone but trains us in his varied paths of mission, in his particular ways of entry into their midst, in his characteristic manner of drawing them to himself, etc. Did not Christ do so in his formation of his apostles as occasion demanded? He remains the same as he was then, all in all and monopoly of none. So, as Panikkar has said, unless we settle for belonging to a sect that existed for so short a period of time of mere twenty centuries in a small corner of the earth, "we must admit that the Christ who confronts Hinduism is the same Christ as the one who confronts Christianity",³³ shedding his light on one and all through their historical, contextual, personal prisms.

Such refracted light of Christ has its own glory and revelation. It takes courage of truthfulness to declare as Neill did.

"Even as committed Christians, we go forward in the Christian life, we are from time to time humiliated to discover how little we have really known our Master. So if, when Christ appears, my partner sees in him things that I have never apprehended, and beholds a Christ in many ways different from the Christ to whom I have given my allegiance, this should be a

33. So Panikkar as in *In Spirit and in Truth*, ed. I. Viyagappa p. 121.

cause for rejoicing rather than for dismay. It has always been our hope that, when the Hindus and the Buddhists turn to Christ, they will convey to us indispensable help in tracing out... the "unsearchable riches of Christ" (Ep 3:6). If his Christ differs in some ways from mine, that should be taken as evidence not of subtle heresy, but the authenticity of his vision.³⁴

There was much good sense therefore in the wish of K. Gibran : "Keep me from the man who says, "I am a candle to light people on their way; but to the one who seeks his way through the light of the people, bring me nearer" ".³⁵ If we cherish such a humble, because divine sentiment we can recognize the genuine voice of dialogue in a passage like the following coming from the mouth of a Hindu owing allegiance to Christ :

Can there be any form of goodness or holiness which is not Christian? I do believe that whatever is true and good and beautiful is of Christ. It is absurd, preposterously absurd, to talk of two meeknesses, two humilities, two purities, two chastities, two asceticisms, one Christian, the other heathen. No, there is but one truth possible, one love, one purity which is of God, and therefore of Christ. It follows then as an irresistible and necessary inference that in entering upon a Broad Church alliance with the diversified forms of goodness and purity in other sects, we do not leave Christ behind, but bring to him all that is his Father's in other churches. Believe me, Asia's appeal to Europe is a Christian appeal.³⁶

Cannot one find in the above appeal the voice of Paul the apostle of the gentiles though he may not be associated

34. S. Neill as in S. Anand in *Vidyajyoti Journal*, 1991, p. 418.

35. I am sorry that I have not succeeded in locating the source.

36. K. C. Sen as in Staffner, *The Significance*, p. 60.

with the idea of dialogue at all? Anyway his public speech in the public square in Athens can be credited with initiating a dialogue with the alien Europeans assuring them of their experience of salvation being more than a crust from the table of Israel because of its source in God's own saving care for all.³⁷ As Legrand explains,

In the encounter between the gospel and Greece, Greek thought grows in breadth and depth; but Christian thought takes on new dimensions, as well. The gospel no longer responds only to the expectation of the prophets and their Israel. Now it is thrust into the heart of a cosmological and metaphysical search and dons new mystical aspects. "In him we live and move and have our being... for we too are his offspring" (Ac 17:28). Continuity with Israel is now fitted into the larger continuity of the history of the nations. The Word finds new echoes in this larger context; it encounters the fundamental questions of being and the one, and takes a universal value, for the West immediately, and for other metaphysical civilizations, such as India, indirectly.³⁸

Dialogue and conversion to Christianity

The Athenian dialogue of Paul resulted in the conversion of a few to Christianity even from the upper classes, though the majority did not take to him seriously. That can lead to the discussion of dialogue in relation to conversion to Christianity. While dialogue is by no means a strategy, much less a manoeuvre for outright conversion³⁹ and has its

37. So Hahn as in D. Senior and C. Stuhlmueller, *Biblical Foundations*, p. 272.

38. L. Legrand, *Mission*, p. 104.

39. See Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences as in *34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus* (Anand, 1995), p. 47.

own rightful place in the situation of Christian Diaspora it cannot be closed to conversion. Dialogue inculcated by Ashoka (avoiding the disparagement of other faiths while extolling our own and so honouring all faiths), and nurtured by Akbar (with his creation of *Din-i-lahi*) is surely a great attainment even today for us Christians; but that cannot define or prescribe wholly the Christian practice of dialogue. For one thing dialogue has in some, if not all instances, led people to seek baptism in the apostolic era (as in the case of the anonymous Ethiopian eunuch in Ac 8:26-39), or in this century (as in the case of some, if not all, of the famous converts from the Jesuit Colleges in the South). And even among those who did not choose baptism and join any Church it was not because they did not value conversion sealed by baptism but because they were scandalized by the division between Churches. Further the typical behaviour of Christian converts would seem to be to share the joy of their conversion with others, though not all of them would have passed for models of dialogue. However some of our extraordinary Indian converts, stalwarts like Bramabandhab Upadyaya or Pandita Ramabai, knew dialogue and yet burnt with one overwhelming desire to convert their country to Christ.⁴⁰ Christian specialists in dialogue who are not moved by, and stop short of, the desire of converting others, may go the whole hog in experimenting with the novelty of dialogue but not in experiencing the ever new "evangelion" in faith! I remember having heard about an Indian Christian seeking to become a Buddhist and asking a Buddhist guru to ratify his conversion to Buddhism only to be told that he who has understood his own religion does not convert to another religion, something perhaps Gandhiji too came up with in his own way. Whatever might have been the reason for such a pronouncement in spite of the fact that Buddhism is a missionary religion, a knowledgeable and committed Christian cannot but be having

40. See H. Staffner, *The Significance*, p. 164.

another conviction! For a Christian, other things being in place, conversion too has its own rightful place!

In his dialogue with Gandhiji, Stanley Jones longed for the great Hindu's conversion and once plainly expressed to him his much cherished desire as a Christian missionary. And Gandhi wrote to him with much appreciation and openness: "I cannot grasp the position by the intellect; the heart must be touched. Saul became Paul not by an intellectual effort, but by something touching his heart"⁴¹. Christians involved in the best kind of dialogue will not rest till they can reach the heart of their partners in dialogue. Meanwhile all that they can do is to keep searching and praying their way to their hearts always intent on listening and even hearing in their own heart the call to God that arises from the depth of others' hearts.⁴² What this means is that they do not only listen to others in their common external sharing of experiences but vibrate sensitively to the hidden, unsuspected and perhaps inexpressible groanings sensed in the others' hearts. What is more, in the intensive moments of dialogue they will feel the unerring urge to challenge others to attend to what is going on within their hearts perhaps unknown to them. The reason for this is their conviction that true dialogue is not a dialogue occurring as an exchange of words between two human parties each giving the other one's own word. Authentic dialogue, on the contrary, is the experience of their words going through (*dia*) them, by virtue of their belief that, their words are not only theirs but God's.⁴³ Genuine dialogue then happens between human interlocutors in so far as the divine reality envelops and invades and informs them. To quote Swami Abishiktananda,

41. See H. Staffner, *What does it Mean to be a Christian?* (Allahabad, 1979), p. 63.

42. See L. Saux, *The Eyes of Light* (Denville, 1983), p. 59.

43. See G. Gispert-Sauch in *In Spirit and in Truth*, ed. Viyagappa, pp. 97-98.

“there can be no genuine communication between human beings which is not first of all communion in the Spirit at the deep level of “heart” “ 44 There where either party understands and encounters the inner reality of the other beyond the appearances which, at one and the same time, hide and disclose the persons concerned, the Christians can offer the willing others the unexpected divine word that invites and urges open discipleship of Christ or conversion sealed by baptism.

It is tempting to interpret the mission imparted to the disciples by the Matthean Jesus (Mt 28:19) in terms of dialogue that opens itself to conversion. The mission of making disciples is evocative of a master initiating his disciples in the Jewish rabbinic style or the Indian guru style and therefore may be indicative of distance between the master and disciples. But in the best of masters and disciples the distance is certainly bridged by love. And in the context of Christian style in imitation of Christ himself the relationship between the master and the disciples ought to be one of love and so lends itself to dialogue or even “biologue” in the context of “live-in”. It is in such an atmosphere of a whole new way of being together involving mutual sharing with one another that the Christian missionaries dare call others to conversion, i.e., a new way of being in Christ visibly symbolized by baptism in the Church the body of Christ.

There is a great danger that Church people can woefully fail to honour dialogue when it involves at times the celebration of conversion. Here is a poignant story that should set us all thinking, a story of a Hindu lawyer, worth telling in his own words.

I went to the house of the Anglican Bishop. His secretary made me fill in an application for interview and

44. L. Saux, *The Eyes of Light*, pp. 59-60.

wait. The Bishop was having tea. When he came, he told me he had to go to a committee meeting and was already late. Another day, I knocked at the door of a convent. A sister opened the door. I told her I wanted to become a Christian. I thought she would be overjoyed. 'This is a girls' school', she said; 'Sorry'. And she closed the door. I went into a church compound and saw a priest who was handing out blankets to the poor. I came back another day but the priest was supervising the distribution of milk-powder. I told him I wished to be instructed and become a Christian. 'Can't you see that I am busy?' he said. 'Man does not live by bread alone', I attempted mildly, but to no avail. Again I tried another church, but the Christian door keeper told me, 'This is a place for Christians; please move along'. Finally I succeeded in getting a hearing from a priest.⁴⁵

No less poignant than the above story is the untold story of the thousands of simple, humble people of other religions who come on pilgrimage to our shrines of Infant Jesus or our Lady or St. Anthony, not unlike the Canaanite woman humble enough to be satisfied with the crumbs that fall from the table of the Master (Mk 7:24-30). They provide a normal and natural opportunity for us not to throw some crumbs of our choice, but to initiate a dialogue of faith by the very fact of their approaching us and expecting a blessing from our prayer of faith. While one may wonder how to practise and exercise dialogue in our surroundings of nameless faces and faceless masses, the pilgrims frequenting our shrines are only ready and willing to be initiated into dialogue and 'catechised', i.e., made to hear the word. How many of us have faith enough to respond to their obvious but un verbalized need of dialogue for enlightenment

45. See L. Joly *Witnesses to Christ* as in C. Hargreaves, *Asian Christian Thinking* (Delhi, 1979), pp. 129-130.

and commitment and community? They are reminiscent of the Greeks who went to Philip and conveyed to him their wish to see Jesus! As Jesus seized the opportunity to announce his paschal mystery by which he would draw all people to himself, so should not our shrine-keepers lead the simple seekers to know Christ and his saving activity of which they have had an implicit experience. Has not Vatican II made the very bold assertion that the paschal mystery is open to all people, and not only Christians, for participation in a manner known to God alone?⁴⁶ If we hold this is it not incumbent on us to reveal to the unknowing seekers drawn to our place of worship the secret of the mystery they want to share, how are we justified in keeping them in the dark about ecclesial fellowship with us in sacramental worship that concretizes and builds up our fellowship with the divine? Should we not have the heart to say at the opportune time like the first apostles :

We are declaring to you
 What we have seen and heard,
 so that you too may share our life.
 Our life is shared with the Father
 and with his Son Jesus Christ.
 We are writing this to you
 so that our joy may be complete (1 Jn 1:3-4)?

Such a Christian action was something that the great Ambedkar heartily and seriously espoused even against the great Gandhi.

I wonder if all theologians would be particularly impressed by the limited and contextual advocacy of conversion, especially if they are of the kind who could even pooh-pooh the sacrament of reconciliation when an 'ordinandus' asked him for it during a preordination retreat he himself was con-

46. See G. Gispert-Sauch, "A Note on GS 22," *Vidyajyoti Journal*, 1995, pp. 126-131.

ducting! But I cannot but cherish and admire the simple faith I witnessed once long ago in my mother who, while walking one day back home found on the way a poor mother with her child seriously ill and so accosted her and heard her story and realizing the dying condition of the child out of reach of any medical aid offered to bless it and so with the consent of the mother happily baptized it, knowing full well that she could not do anything better for it at that moment.

Perhaps some may find it jarring that conversion has been tagged on to dialogue. But may be, some others will hopefully see it as integrating an age-old Christian experience with a newly developing experience as indeed some of the Church Documents have pointed out.⁴⁷ After all falsity creeps into religion whenever there is one-sided emphasis and consequent failure to integrate the whole, and truth reigns in religion when it makes room for inclusivity and consequent integrity of all its elements. But if some were to insist that dialogue and conversion are not experiences likely to be integrated some others could point out that such an integration involves a paradox and as such sounds true. For the argument about paradox is this:

If the concept is paradoxical, that itself should suggest that it smacks of integrity, that it gives off the ring of truth. Conversely, if a concept is not in the least paradoxical, you should be suspicious of it and suspect that it has failed to integrate some aspect of the whole.⁴⁸

A last word that should be added in dialogal mission whether it comes at this place logically or not-dialogue like

47. See *Dialogue and Proclamation* (Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, May 19, 1991), nn. 37, 81 as in *Vidyajyoti Journal*, 1995, p. 119.

48. M. S. Peck, *The Different Drum* (London / Sydney / Auckland / Johannesburg, 1988), p. 238; also p. 240.

life not simply logic-is silence, silent communication, perhaps best driven home by an incident which happened in an international symposium of theologians. After a lecture about the suffering God there was discussion on it in small groups. In one group a man from Ghana who was a teacher of an African traditional religion, remarked how unbelievable and even ridiculous the idea of a suffering God is! When others argued otherwise he continued vehemently to reiterate his rejection till one sane participant pointed out how they were all caught up by conspiracy of clamour and asked for communication of silence. After three minutes an American began sharing about his hurt and pain whenever he saw his children suffering for whatever reason. Soon after that the Ghanaian who had stuck to his guns earlier relaxed and agreed readily on that type of suffering in God arising out of love. Silence to be sure is divine and so should reign in any dialogue about the divine.⁴⁹

Can we not recognize such dialogal mission in the historic day of prayer at Assisi organized at the initiative of the pope? Conversant with the complexity and vastness of dialogue he has formulated his hope thus: "Dialogue is a path towards the Kingdom and will certainly bear fruit, even if the times and seasons are known only to the Father".⁵⁰

A. Paul Dominic S.J.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 213-214.

50. *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 57.