

MISSION, A JOURNEY OF HOPE

Mission is indeed a journey of hope in which we are all engaged and with us also the cosmos. God has set a goal for us – a goal that is more a horizon stretching to infinity than a fixed point. We have many images of this goal in the New Testament. My favourite ones are John's vision of a new heaven and a new earth: "God will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more." (Rev 21:3-4); Paul's "God will be all in all" (1 Cor 15:28) and the vision of Jesus, which I consider the best: "That they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us." (Jn 17:21) This may sound mystical. But Jesus has made it real for us in the Eucharist. The challenge is that we make our lives a continuing experience of the Eucharist. I would like to reflect briefly on the implications of this vision.

The Goal of Evolution: a Global Community

We, at least most of us, believe in evolution through which the Earth has become capable of supporting animal and human life and human life itself has been evolving. There is no reason to believe that the process of evolution has come to an end once the humans appeared on this earth. Teilhard de Chardin spoke about the 'Omega point' which he identified with Christ. I do not wish to go into his or other similar theories. I do not know whether the human body will evolve further. But I do think that human intelligence and consciousness may evolve leading to a greater personal and social integration. The forces of globalization may aid in such integration. I shall talk first about social integration before addressing the topic of personal integration.

I think, first of all, that humanity is called to become a world community. With the increasing possibility and speed of communications and its supportive technology, this is happening already and will continue to happen. This would not be a bland, colourless, monolithic community. It will be multi-cultural and multi-religious. Differences would be respected and appreciated. But exchange and interaction would lead to a convergent growth from all directions. Such a community would be a pluralism-in-unity. It will not be a structured and hierarchical unity with a centre and a periphery. It will be a communion characterised by freedom and creativity. The many borders that keep people divided today will disappear. The driving force of this convergence and communion will be love, commanded by Jesus and described by Paul in his letter to the Corinthians. Wars and tensions would progressively disappear.

It is true that human progress is not incremental as material progress is. Human effort has to restart at every birth, in every generation. People have to be educated and formed by the past before they venture into the future. Culture will provide a framework of continuity. We are not condemned to repeat the mistakes of the past. While destructive selfishness and freedom always remain possible a

collective will to live in peace and harmony can lead to an ongoing building up of ever renewed community. Every human is a new beginning. But we do not start from zero. We live on the shoulders of our ancestors. Apocalyptic visions always predict a deteriorating world. But they speak of a world without God.

Speaking of the Reign of God an Indian exegete calls it a permanent revolution.

The vision of Jesus is theological, not sociological. It spells out the values of the new society (freedom, fellowship, justice), not the concrete social structures through which these values are realized and protected. To elaborate these is our never-to-be-ended task – for no “perfect” society is possible in history. One cannot fully actualise the vision of Jesus: one can merely approach it asymptotically! Ultimately, then, the vision of Jesus indicates not the goal but the way. It does not present us with a static pre-fabricated model to be imitated, but invites us to a continual refashioning of societal structures in an attempt to realize as completely as possible in our times the values of the Kingdom. The vision of Jesus summons us, then, to a ceaseless struggle against the demonic structures of unfreedom (psychological and sociological) erected by mammon; and to a ceaseless creativity that will produce in every age new blueprints for a society ever more consonant with the Gospel vision of man. Lying on the horizons of human history and yet part of it, offered to us as a gift yet confronting us as a challenge, Jesus’ vision of a new society stands before us as an unfinished task, summoning us to permanent revolution.¹

Our goal then also becomes our way – the *Tao*, as the Chinese would say – and it is revolutionary.

In an unequal world divided between the rich and the poor, the poor become a privileged location from which we can read the signs of the times. They are the bearers of the hope of the community. We cannot imagine creating a community without a basic equality. We need not aspire for total equality. But we cannot feel as a community if some are in want and suffering. The poor also give us an insight into what is wrong with our community, what are the areas and directions for improvement. They offer us an occasion to go out of ourselves and think of the common good.

Just as we say that a long journey starts with one little step, a cosmic community is built up from below. The people in Latin America have made us familiar with the basic communities. Theologians in Asia have spoken of Basic Human or Neighbourhood Communities made up of everyone in the neighbourhood whatever

¹ George Soares-Prabhu, “The Kingdom of God: Jesus’ Vision of a New Society,” D.S. Amalorpavadass (ed), *The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society* (Bangalore: NBCLC, 1981), pp. 600, 601, 607.

their ethnicity or religion. Such communities will have a threefold agenda: mutual help, meeting each other's needs; a collective reading the signs of the times or discernment about what needs to be done locally or at a wider level and engaging in collective action to promote the common good; and finally, common prayer, where we encounter each other in depth, even if its only form is silence. Such silence seeks to penetrate veils. As a matter of fact, words may be a superfluous and distracting hindrance, whereas a soft musical background may be helpful. If a group of people can be comfortably silent together they will be capable of acting together effectively in common projects

The Work of the Spirit

We believe that while the humans continue to abuse their freedom as the children of the old Adam, the new Adam has overcome evil and death in his resurrection and has poured out the Spirit on the world. We are now living in the era of the creative Spirit. Somehow our Christianity has taught us to look back to the past, to Christ on the cross. But Christ is risen and the Spirit has been given to us. This spirit is in each one of us, freeing us and enabling us to call God our 'Abba' – Father. The cosmos itself is groaning to join us in this movement of liberation. The Spirit help us in our weakness, interceding for us with sighs too deep for words, working in everything for our good. "Neither death, not life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom 8:38-39) This same spirit links us together with his many gifts given to us for our service to the community. The one Spirit unites us as one body of Christ. This is more real for us than all that divides us. The fruits of the Spirit are "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." This is our hope. We should fix our eyes on the future that the Spirit will enable us to achieve, neither on the past nor on the present with all our shortcomings. The new Pentecostal communities have a lesson for us. They are alive with praise, thankfulness, joy and hope in a way that our staid liturgical communities, oppressed by a sense of sin and suffering, are not.

Our journey of hope will be a journey in the Spirit. I think that we have domesticated and imprisoned the Spirit in our hierarchical structures. Hierarchical power seeks control even of the Spirit which is seen as destabilizing. The Second Vatican Council did tell us to read the signs of the times. We cannot of course ignore the times in which we live. But to read it as a sign requires a perspective, a framework. It is then, whether we look towards the past or towards the future in hope becomes relevant and important.

Personal Integration

Our evolutionary future is also calling us to a growing personal integration. St. Irenaeus said that the glory of God is the human alive. So our journey of hope also involves how we grow as human beings. If we are better humans we will be better members of the community. The male and the female, besides sexual, are also cultural categories. The male is supposed to be dominant, aggressive, rational, while the female is said to be receptive, creative and emotional. Let me repeat that I am taking them as cultural categories. We speak of 'Mother Earth': it receives the seed, the water and the heat and it generates. The male is said to dominate and exploit the female and the earth by its rationality, science and technology. The female complements this with affectionate care-giving. In the human, one talks of the left and the right brain. The left brain is supposed to be rational and calculating. The right brain is said to be imaginative and artistic. It is obvious that I am talking of cultural types. But I think that they are not incorrect. Any way for integral human development we have to integrate the male and the female in each one of us. This is the only way that we can liberate women. But it is a liberation that each one of us, male or female, requires. We have to grow beyond the cultural stereotypes that have shaped us, our lives and our relationships.

The second area of integration has to do with energy. When we think of ourselves we see ourselves as spirits in bodies. The Asian traditions, especially the Yoga, have discovered the field of energy that mediates between the spirit and the body. The reason for the attraction of Asian traditions of spiritual practice is precisely the experience of energy. Breathing and touch are ways of experiencing this energy. While a mishandling of energy can lead to psychosomatic diseases, energy can also be used to heal. Many of the healing systems available today operate on the same principle. Just as energy can be used to heal, it can also be used to harm. Healing and harming depend on the intention and this is what humanizes energy, though it is also present in nature. The Greek Fathers of the Church spoke of the energies of God to explain how the infinite God is reaching out to the creatures. Personal integration at this level has two dimensions. First of all we have to integrate our spirit with our body. We often tend to use our body as an instrument and mistreat it in many ways. I do not want to elaborate this. So our concern should be how we can live in harmony with our bodies. The second dimension is our integration with our energies. This is done through breathing and meditation. There are many methods of available. The one of John Main is simple and accessible to everyone.

The third area of personal integration, that is also relevant to society, is our living in harmony with nature. If the humans were to disappear from the earth, the earth would survive. But if the earth were destroyed in some way I do not think that the humans can survive. We depend on it for air, food, heat, water, etc. Our living in harmony with nature also has two dimensions. Our technology may be making us live in a world of machines of our own making, alienating us from our roots in nature. Our health and wholeness demand a return to life in link with the earth. The second

dimension is the need to protect nature from human depredations. A lot is being written today about ecology. To share the earth equitably with everyone and to preserve it for future generations we have to consume less. It is not merely an economic problem of exploring alternative sources of energy. It is a question of living responsibly as humans without abusing the resources of the earth.

Some might wonder what has all this to do with mission. If mission is a journey of hope and if our hope is to create a new heaven and a new earth where we can live as humans-in-community all these are relevant and necessary dimensions of realizing that hope. If our aim is only to save souls then all this is indeed irrelevant. But God's plan calls us to promote personal, social and cosmic integration till God is all in all.

Walking Together

I would like to conclude my reflections with an important remark. We are indeed happy to continue our journey of hope. But let us be humble enough to accept that we are not the only people in the world who have hope. While we are able to give a good reason for our hope (cf. 1 Pet 3:15) let us acknowledge that others too have their reasons for hope.

A young Hindu girl of 16, Gitanjali Ghei, died of cancer in Mumbai in 1977. She left behind a bunch of poems. Here is one of them:

I trust you still, oh my dear, dear God.
Though the sorrows keep falling like the rain drops.
I trust Thee yet, though you have betrayed my trust
And refused me all that I yearn for...
This mighty unknown sea of death
Does pass a shudder through me I confess.
I sway at the thought of it.
But dear God, your nearness holds me in a grip.
Isn't it amazing, for I trust you still!

The Bhagavad Gita, a Hindu poem considered older than the New Testament, presents Krishna, the divine avatar as telling Arjuna, the human devotee:

Always think of Me, become My devotee, worship Me and offer your homage unto Me. Thus you will come to Me without fail. I promise you this because you are My very dear friend. Abandon all varieties of religion and just

surrender unto Me. I shall deliver you from all sinful reactions. Do not fear.
(18:65-66)

Nammalvar, a Hindu poet of the 9th century sings:

Rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice!

The persisting curse of life is gone,

The agony of hell is destroyed,

Death has no place here. (Thiruvaymozhi, 5.2.1)

We do not believe in many gods. There is only one God. It is the same God who inspires these people, but through different symbols, stories, experiences. If we focus on this one Goal then we discover these other people as co-pilgrims to the same Absolute. The Bishops of the Philippines said on the occasion of the Asian synod:

In the social context of the great majority of Asian peoples, even more use should be made of the model of the Church as servant, a co-pilgrim in the journey to the Kingdom of God where fullness of life is given as a gift.²

I can quote more Asian Bishops and theologians. In our journey of hope, therefore, we encounter many co-pilgrims. We will walk along with them, enlightening and enriching each other. Our journey will become more exciting and fruitful. I shall leave the final word to John Paul II. Addressing an inter-religious group in Chennai, India, in February 1986, he said:

By dialogue we let God be present in our midst; for as we open ourselves in dialogue to one another, we also open ourselves to God... As followers of different religions we should join together in promoting and defending common ideals in the spheres of religious liberty, human brotherhood, education, culture, social welfare and civic order.³

Michael Amaladoss, S.J., Chennai, India.

² *Ibid.*, p.39.

³ *Origins* 15 (1986) 598. For similar sentiments see John Paul II's address to leaders of other religions in New Delhi after the publication of *Ecclesia in Asia*: "The Interreligious Meeting", *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 63 (1999) 884-886.