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Globalization with a Twist



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The figure of John the Baptist forms the link between the Advent during which your servant is writing this article, and now, when you, dear confrere, will be reading it. The son of the desert who radically called for conversion, gets into a deep crisis when he becomes a caged bird, because his cousin Jesus whom he pointed out as the Messiah, contrary to his expectations, does not brandish the hatchet, but performs and proclaims Good News to the poor. Thus Jesus manifests how God's reign takes hold and in this merciful way he shows the face of his Abba. Moreover, he calls "blessed" the one who takes no offense at this behavior of his! (Mt. 11:6) With you I would like to reflect on how Church mission and civil society interact today.

GOD'S REIGN BREAKING THROUGH THE RIFTS

In today's world where God so often seems absent and where Christianity is perceived as irrelevant in shaping postmodern value systems, while the Church has mostly lost its worldly power and a great deal of its social influence, the Lord also now challenges his precursors—among others, we religious missionaries—to recognize his saving presence at a level that might well be contrary to our expectations. For indeed, wherever people are friendly, attentive and do care for persons who have somehow been hurt, at times unto death, and whenever the deepest joy of life is utterly shared with any poor at whatever frontier, then God's reign has come near into our midst. Or, in final judgment words, the making tangible of Christ's Glad Tidings constitutes the most decisive norm (cf. Mt 25). Yet, it

is our daily pain to know and experience that people including ourselves, so often become resigned or indifferent to the suffering of fellow human beings, thereby causing devastating rifts.

"The dominant setting for conflict is a world in which the rich and the poor live in full sight of one another. If, in addition, the poor are voiceless, they may well be induced to speak through violence. Particularly so if their predicament is aggravated by the environmental carelessness of the rich. To avoid a tragic outcome we shall be forced to do what we should have done previously. That is, to recognize the right of all to food, shelter, education and freedom of expression. This is a revolution in thinking that is already under way.

What is lacking is a sense of urgency."¹ Why is this need for change not yet felt by "the silent majority" as being really acute?

PROMISES OF SURROGATE SENSE DECEIVE

Globalized culture has turned consumerism into a quasi-religion. Let us recall how. In the eighties it was discovered that simple advertizing doesn't work anymore, for every concurrent relies on it. In order to capture attention, a product has to beam forth an added value, an image. Due to the failing of communities and ideologies, companies can actually function as dispensers of surrogate sense; they create images with plenty of promises which cannot possibly be realized. At the root of today's business culture which is based upon brands, the contradiction looms that companies aren't selling what they advertize (Naomi Klein).

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Avowedly, the average consumer, even in poor countries, still gets a kick out of shopping for global brands. However, people are becoming more aware of other options. A balance is being struck between the convenience plus pragmatism of globalization, and the personal tone from dealing with the maker of local brands. An example of such an attempt is the McToyko campaign, launched by the city's McDonald's, which now offers fast foods like morning veggie soup, baguette sandwiches and Chinese teas. The whole idea is to depart from the hamburger-and-fries image and let people know they have options. Eventually, however, whatever the availability of choices, people experience that buying does not make them happier; they get depressed or seek escape in addictions. "Mental health will be a bigger problem the next 20 years than corporal health", the UN warns.

Dreams then have to seek refuge in a runaway proliferation of sects, after societies also religiously have become "deregulated" (Mark Vandervoorde). In Latin America, shopping around between different evangelical sects or Catholic lay movements is now the norm for practicing Catholics. Around 10% of them identify with these new movements, especially with Charismatic Renewal, which appeal to the emotions, offering a quick-fix of high intensity spirituality and hand-clapping, instead of the politico-religious commitments demanded by the basic Christian communities (CEB) of the past. These are now attended by fewer than 3%!

On the other hand, a survey by the University of Central America reveals that the biggest loss from Catholic ranks in San Salvador has been not of people defecting to evangelical sects, but of Catholics who now describe themselves as having no fixed religious affiliation. Lack of time in the face of the struggle for economic survival is cited as the chief reason for not going to Mass (Marianne Johnson).

A VALUE CRISIS BOTTOMS OUT

A sort of schizophrenia symptomatic of deeper problems

has been diagnosed by the 3rd European Research on Values (Karel Dobbelaere/Lilliane Voyé). While people nurse a profound aversion for all social institutions such as media, political parties, churches and the judiciary, they do display at the same time a strong yearning for values such as family, leisure, religion and soundness, notwithstanding that these coveted values are brought alive in an organized way precisely by these very institutions. Behind their "Certitude Lost"—the significant title of the study—Europeans appear to repress unfulfilled desires, as they scorn permissivity and have rediscovered decency. Indeed, ethics have come back on all levels and a no-nonsense approach instills the new awareness that society badly needs a "spirited interconnectiveness" (Hendrik Marsman)

Although the Church in Latin America has been re-romanized by the Curia, and though its liberation theology is in decline, and since social engagement of the grassroots has lost its momentum, in widespread resignation the faithful yet seem to await effective leadership from their bishops in order to be missioned

once more. In less affluent countries, civil society is visibly organizing itself to monitor human rights abuses, while Church leaders continue to denounce corruption as the all pervading evil (cf. their recent statements in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Congo, Cameroon, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, Philippines and South Korea).

ASTONISHINGLY RESILIENT CIVIL SOCIETIES

A humanism that is consistent with itself promotes those effects of

human behavior which diminish human suffering and increase human happiness. It assumes that a greater control on traditionally unpredictable factors, such as drought, epidemics, incursions, dictatorships, leads to a better life (K. Devolder & J. Braeckman).

Such dynamics have been strikingly illustrated by the emergence of democracies in former East block countries. Vaclav Havel, the Czech playwright and later president, wrote as early as 1978 in *The Power of the Powerless*: "The root cause that maintains Communist

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power depends on acquiescence—on not enough people willing to say ‘No’ to the thick anti-culture of lies that holds the whole sorry apparatus of Marxist-Leninist repression together.” Havel’s genius was his insight that, before enough people could say ‘No’, they had to have something to which they could say ‘Yes’. In 1979 John Paul II provided the Poles with that something to say ‘Yes’ to: the truth of who they are as individuals and as a nation. Thus, the Pope empowered them to say ‘No’ to the Communist culture of lies.

Over a decade, out of a second “Yes to living in the truth”, grew the non-violent dismantling of a huge system of tyranny, and democracies did emerge from under the rubble of totalitarianism. Indeed, free politics and free economy ultimately depend on a vibrant public moral culture. A critical mass of democrats is needed—of men and women who have internalized the habits of heart and mind that change us from the tyrants we are at birth, into civil, tolerant, democratically engaged citizens, disciplined by virtues such as a willingness to give up certain things and to delay gratification, the prudent taking of risks and the ability to cooperate with others (George Weigel).

It is precisely the restored self-respect of such democrats that lies at the root of success stories like, for example, the Grameen and the Oikos Microcredit Associations. In the same vein Frédéric Cardinal Etsou is seen channeling the generous dedication of singers and artists toward monthly public concerts which take turns at various sites in Kinshasa in order to empower them to culturally foster civil society’s longing for democracy.

CHURCH MISSION AND CIVIL SOCIETY NEED ONE ANOTHER

Redemptoris Missio in n. 37 identifies new words, social phenomena, cultural sectors and areas of activities toward which the Church’s mission ought to be directed today: megacities, youths, migrants and refugees, structural poverty and social exclusion, mass media culture, commitment to peace, development and liberation, to the rights of individuals and peoples, especially of minorities, to the advancement of women and children, and to the safeguarding of the created world. All these areas, which are barely or not at all

influenced by the Gospel, require an outreach which is quite beyond the ordinary means of pastoral work. Hence, they constitute legitimate new frontiers for mission *ad gentes* today (Michael McCabe).

“Research tells us that civil wars have often resulted not so much from ethnic diversity—the usual scapegoat—as from a mix of factors, in which poverty is the main ingredient. We know that exclusion can breed violent conflict. Central then to conflict prevention and peace-building must be strategies for promoting social cohesion and inclusion, ensuring that all have opportunities for gainful employment, that societies avoid wide income inequalities which can threaten social stability and that poor people have access to education, health care, and basic services such as clean water, sanitation and power”, declared World Bank president James Wolfensohn last October!

In social economics, beginning with the communal movement, “work” aims to build community by reembedding economic activity in social relationships. The economic practices put forth by representatives of religion, as a rule, implement such “reordering of relationships” (Karl Polany). Proponents insist that long term social economics should be accompanied by

political action on a world scale in order to effectuate a globalization by the poor. Such a perspective creates a solidarity among secular and religious movements (Gregory Baum).

After a sharp analysis of the way humanitarian agencies, including Christian ones, respond to emergency situations, Oxfam manager Tony Waux in **The Selfish Altruist** concludes that “all too easily the desire to help becomes a desire for power”. In taking up the same topic, Ian Linden of the Catholic Institute for International Relations urges the non-governmental organizations (ngo) to clarify their stand as to which camp they belong, by changing their names into civil society organizations (cso).

Sociologically speaking, faith communities along with other groups, are deemed able to contribute modestly to an elaboration of a collectively shared “sense” in today’s society of individuals (Danièle Hervieu-Léger).

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Because otherwise, as soon as values disappear, group egoism thrives, tribal and regional strife abound. Theologically then, Church mission ought to be focused on implementing social cohesion and inclusion as a response in faith, hope and love in God's intruding reign.

WANTED: A QUALITY PRESENCE IN CHURCH MISSION

Yet, "What is important isn't apostolate, it's rather that you be fully a human being", writes Jean Vanier of the l'Arche communities in *Becoming Human*, "that means: family, community, openness to others and commitment to and respect for the poor. To be human is to make clear options above money and promotion about those things that help me be a good father, a good husband, a good wife, a good neighbor. Jesus' spirituality is about being human, loving people and accepting people that are different. It's about building community and learning about forgiveness, and about creating these centers of radiance called parishes, which encourage people to make these 'heavy' choices."

The skills, knowledge and experience needed to bring integral development, like those informing good political science or economics, cannot simply be learned in, or derived from, the Gospels. Moreover, such skills are unlikely to be the special prerogative only of Christians. Even so, quality mission, while combating injustice and restoring wholeness, will reflect an evangelical vision of "just relationships", so that those who encounter Jesus' disciples on mission will praise

the heavenly Father. "We reconfirm that evangelization is the most precious gift we can offer our people", resolved 8,000 participants of the Congress of the Laity, representing Korea's 4 million Catholics, in October 2000.

Since pressures from the religious Right and dominance of a defensive and pessimistic antagonism between progress and the values of the spirit will render it increasingly difficult in future years for the Church mission to play a significant role in civil society, a quality presence of missioned Christians is highly wanted. If the objectives of social justice and the strategies of "advocacy", i.e., lobbying for governmental policy change while proposing an alternative way forward, are to transform Church communities into mature schools for solidarity as an integral part of discipleship, a firm catechetical base and spiritual formation are urgently required. For, in spite of all self-righteous fundamentalism and plain greed, which is idolatry, we hold that in this globalized society, God's reign is nevertheless acting as a leaven, mysteriously, but decisively.

Note

1. From *The Statement*, a draft coordinated by John Polanyi among more than 100 Nobel Laureates issued at the Nobel Peace Prize Centennial Symposium, December 2001 in Oslo

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