

Periodic Paper #1

Spring 2006

New Evangelization: A Pastoral Problem

The following is the text of two letters sent by the author, Dr. Edmund Chia, of a letter from a missionary. The name and place were changed. Both question and advice are relevant everywhere. Dr. Edmund Chia, a Malaysian of Chinese descent, is a Professor of Doctrinal Theology at Catholic Theologica l Union.

INTRODUCTION

Dear Brother Edmund,

Hope and pray that you are in good health and rejoicing in the many blessings that you receive from the Lord of Life. Brother, do you remember me? I am Gertrude, a missionary Sister working in Baboo. Some time ago I wrote to you asking for help. As I mentioned, my congregation has started a process of reflection on evangelization and I asked for your help in finding a way on how to go about in the reflection within our Baboo context and the reality of the province.

Today, I would like to ask you for an advice: Brother, could you please give me/us some advice on how to start/do first evangelization among people who practice Traditional Religions? Our question as missionaries here in this new place is how to start a new way/method of evangelization among the Baboan people. Up to this date, three Sisters are living in a rented house in the village among the people, they are learning the language, the culture, the history, customs... of the people. We have been there creating friendly relationships with local authorities and helping the people in their urgent needs. Alphabetization programs for children and adults were started two years ago and perhaps within a few more months a formal kindergarten for the children will be opened. With the help and guidance of local authorities we have contributed to provide clean water and spring protections in remote areas.

By now the Baboan people are friendly and they know that we are there for them. There are many villages and the elders of one of these villages have come to ask us

specifically to learn about our religion. How to start, from where to start? Which method to use to convey the Good News to a people who are illiterate? Is it advisable to use an interpreter since none of the Sisters know the language very well yet?

HOW CAN WE PROCLAIM THE GOOD NEWS IN THIS LAND AND THIS REALITY?

There are also some other challenges that we are facing: Ecumenism and Dialogue with Orthodox, Protestant and Muslims is difficult. Their members are moving very fast in preaching and converting people. This pressure us to do the same. However, our choice was to go slowly, learn the language, learn the ways of the people... prepare the way for the Lord. How can we proclaim the Good News in this land and this reality?

I hope that I am clear in what I am asking from you. Thank you for the time you will take to help us out. May the Lord of Life and Love bless you in your ministry.
Sincerely,
Gertrude

Dear Sister Gertrude,

Many thanks for your letter and for sharing with me your local context and especially the tension experienced in exercising your evangelizing mission. I must warn, however, that I am not really in a position to give advice, since I don't know what exactly is happening on the ground. Besides, my counseling background reminds me that the client normally knows what needs to be done. They are merely seeking validation for decisions they have more or less already made. In other words, I believe you already have the

answers. So, at best, I will share with you some reflections based on the information you shared with me and my own personal experiences in other contexts of religious pluralism. Then, I would encourage you to reflect on them, taking into account your own prior reflections and the reflections you and your sisters have been making over the years. Let me illustrate why I think you already have the answers.

**YOU ARE THERE
TO DIALOGUE
WITH THE
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THEM AS WELL AS
SHARE WITH
THEM.**

You make mention about what persons of other religions are doing. You suggest that they are moving very fast in preaching and converting people. I get a sense you seem to disapprove of what they are doing. But, you further add that there is some sort of pressure on you and your Sisters to do the same. I guess the one reflection I would like to offer here is the Golden Rule: do not onto others what you don't want done onto you. Besides, if you already seem to have a distaste for what persons of other religions and Christian denominations are doing, would you yourself do the same? Wouldn't you be stooping to a level which your gut-feeling (i.e. conscience) seem to suggest is not appropriate and even wrong? I guess that could be another definition for sin.

You then suggest that your preferred method is to go slowly. I can appreciate what you mean here but I wonder if the peoples whom you are serving, the Baboan, could appreciate that. I guess the question I would raise in this matter is, go slowly, and then, what? What are you going slowly towards? What do you see as the ultimate aim of your mission amongst the Baboan? You suggest it is to prepare the way for the Lord. By that, do you mean it is to convert them to Christianity? If that's the case, why are you doing it slowly? Is it so you will be more successful in your attempts to win them over without them realizing it? There is a popular anecdote about putting a frog in a pot of hot water. The frog immediately leaps out of the pot. However, if we put the frog in the pot filled with cold water and then slowly warm the water, the frog will not even realize that it is being boiled to be cooked! I suppose the ethics of conversion is a question which

must be discussed here. Again, the golden rule would be a valuable guide. Would you welcome missionaries of other religions to work in your own community if you knew their ultimate goal is the conversion of your Sisters and siblings to their own religions or Christian denominations?

Now, I suspect that what I am implying may seem radical and/or nonsensical for missionaries whose professed aim is the salvation of souls and the planting of churches. This is especially so for those who operate out of a theology which believes that salvation can only be effected through Christianity or the Catholic Church. On the basis of such a theology the only logical response is an enthusiastic sense of mission with the sole purpose of saving all those poor pagans and unbelievers from the fires of hell and bring them to the truth which is Christ and which is accessible only through the Catholic Church. To be sure, Catholics are not the only ones who make such claims. Most other religions have believers who are equally emphatic in such exclusivistic claims. It is not surprising then that competition amongst religion is rife. Each religion will wave its flag as if they are the only ones who possess God. God, as it were, becomes a commodity which is offered and the best sales-persons (missionaries) are those who can sell God most (or save the most souls).

**DIALOGUE
IS
MISSION.**

This, of course, is what can be called the colonial model of mission. Like the colonialists whose primary purpose was the plunder of the lands and resources of the colonies, the missionaries aim is also to plunder the souls of those whom they have come to serve. Believing they have a superior culture, faith and religion, the missionaries then venture into mission territories to conquer all for Christ. Success, therefore, is measured in terms of the number of baptisms and the number of churches built. The persons whom they serve are merely objects of Christian conversion. In some instances, the end justifies the means and hence we witness plentiful examples of less than ethical means employed to lure and to entice the pagans and unbelievers to Church functions. One can think of the numerous accusations of what in Asia we call rice Christians, where church attendees are literally offered a bag of rice to take home with them after the service.

What is the alternative, then? I would suggest, Sister, that you already know what that is as you are already practicing it. You make mention of your Sisters learning from the peoples: their language, their ways, their culture, their history. You also make mention of your Sisters living with the people (as one among them), in a rented house (not having your own palatial residence surrounded by barbed wires and divorced from the peoples). I see this as precisely the new way/method of evangelization which you refer to. It could also be referred to as the dialogue model of mission. You are there to dialogue with the people, to learn from them as well as to share with them. You do not go there because you are better or have a superior culture or religion. Rather, you go there because you believe building relationships and bridges across cultures and religions are inherent to living as Christians in pluralistic contexts.

**YOU START BY
ACKNOWLEDGING
THE BEAUTY
AND WORTH OF
THEIR CULTURE
AND RELIGION.**

Dialogue IS mission. It is sufficient justification for your missionary existence. You don't need any hidden motives for engaging in dialogue with them. Your participation in this dialogue of life ought to be fulfilling and enriching enough. I am sure there is much that the Baboan people learn from your Sisters and there is also much that your Sisters are learning from them. This is the mutual enrichment which the Vatican's 1991 document Dialogue and Proclamation speaks about. In fact, the document defines dialogue as all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment, in obedience to truth and respect for freedom. I would therefore invite you to consider, also, how you would respond when the Baboan elders ask you to specifically teach them about your religion. You ask: "How to start, from where to start?" My suggestion is: ask them (the Baboan) to also teach you about their religion. That would be a very good start. You start with respect. You communicate to them that your religion is one of respect. You start by establishing your reverence for what they believe in. You communicate to them that God is already with them. You start by acknowledging the beauty and worth

of their culture and religion. You communicate to them that your religion is not one which aims to annihilate their religion, but one which seeks after truth and beauty no matter where and how that is expressed. Only then do you begin to share with them your own beliefs and traditions. That way, you teach them about Christianity while they in turn teach you about the Traditional Religions.

There is much, I am convinced, that they will be able to learn to enhance their lives as they learn more about the central and core message of Christ. At the same time, there is much that your Sisters can also gain and which could be life-transforming as they learn more about the Traditional Religions. As Christians, we do know quite a bit about what God has done for the world and for humanity through Christ and through the Church. However, it would do us well to discover more about what God has done for the world and for humanity through the other religions, including the Traditional Religions. Refusing to be open to what God has done through other religious traditions is tantamount to idolatry. Idolatry, as you know, is often defined as attempting to capture the whole of God in an object, such as a stone or an image. Likewise, attempting to capture the whole of God in one single religion, even if it be Christianity, is similar to idolatry.

**BUILDING
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The next question, as you have also asked, is how do we then proclaim the Good News in such a context. While you specifically asked that question, you have also answered it on your own. You make mention of your Sisters building relationships and helping the people in their urgent needs. You make mention of alphabetization programs, kindergarten, providing clean water, etc. I see all these as variations of the Good News which Jesus came to preach, as pronounced in the manifesto which he read from the

scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Luke 4 records Jesus saying that he was sent to set the captives free, to be good news to the poor, to bring sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free. I therefore suggest that in all your good works for others you are already proclaiming the Good News loud and clear. Moreover, people tend to listen more attentively to concrete acts of service and love than to loud words and preachy messages. One can only think of Mother Teresa's example. This new method of evangelization would, therefore, be one of giving (giving until it hurts, in the words of Mother Teresa) without thinking of the benefits one would reap. In other words it is a giving which is free and unconditional and with no concern for returns and rewards. The returns and rewards I am alluding to is the eventual conversion of the peoples you give to. The colonial model of mission would expect such returns, without which they wouldn't have come to serve the peoples. It is as if in return for their money and service, they expect the people to give of their souls, expressed by the desire for baptism.

Now, such a detached and unconditional attitude towards mission might make you look like a fool. Others, especially those who are competing for the souls of the Baboan people, would consider your Sisters stupid and naive for not wanting to convert the people. Your superiors might also ask you why there are few conversions even after all the time, energies, resources and money spent on the village. Your Sisters may think of

themselves as failures for not being able to bring about more baptisms. While other Christians may be celebrating the triumph of larger membership and building bigger churches, your community might have to live humbly, realizing that you are merely in the service of building God's Kingdom and not your own, or the Church's. Be consoled, however, that if you belonged to the world, the world would love its own; but because you do not belong to the world, and I have chosen you out of the world, the world hates you (Jn. 15: 19). Moreover, it is not those who call Lord, Lord who will attain God's Kingdom, but those who do the will of God. In this regard, Matthew 25 is clear and unambiguous as to who will earn a place in God's Kingdom: when I was hungry, you gave me to eat,... when I could not read, you began alphabetization programmes,... when my children had no schools, you gave them kindergartens,... when my people did not have clean water, you worked with the local authorities for spring protections.

Such is the new method of evangelization, Sister. I wish you and your Sisters well.

Sincerely,
Bro. Edmund

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