

Integrating the Components of Mission: Are Not Your Hearts Burning?

Panel Presentation by: Shalini D'Souza, SCN, October 2007

I have often heard it said: If you want to make God laugh tell HER your plans! And so I did. A little more than 15 years ago, I spoke of my desire **to proclaim and witness to a God of love and hope to our world**. I also told God about my desire for a world that refuses to ignore violence, poverty, and discrimination and commit itself to addressing the social evils that create this suffering. This I said to **HER** is the **mission for me!** I believed that I could – with my energy and desire - bring about the reign of God in a world where one's worth is determined by one's very existence rather than possessions; where we all have what is needed for a life of dignity, as diverse as the expressions may be; where a culture of solidarity is developed; where one's gestures, thoughts and actions become intelligible only in relationship to the good of others; where the stranger is a gift, not a source of suspicion.

And so God humored me and inspired the Congregation to mission me for and with women engaged in commercial sex work – women sold into prostitution. I confess that I thought God would have given me something fancier.... I was terrified... **and in this fear faced the question of how do I proclaim and witness to a God of love in brothels where poverty, violence and squalor decry a loving, compassionate Divinity?** The answer was in the Jesus of the Sermon of the Mount, the Jesus who cleansed the leper, and healed the centurion's servant, stilled the storm and cast out demons. I quickly understood, though, that it was **not** only a proclaiming and witnessing of the miracles of Jesus, but a reckoning with the One who ate with tax collectors, interacted with the woman at the well, embraced the woman caught in adultery and said: "don't return evil for evil, love your enemy" in whatever form that the enemy came in! The personal work and power of Jesus and his disciples became inseparable from my own call to see, touch and hear the **Word** as I attempted to proclaim it so that others may experience the Reign of God.

The Context:

In placing my call and mission in a broader context, I was compelled to re-examine the dramatic developments in different parts of the world on issues related to mission and the **proclamation of the Gospel**. Some of these developments were:

- Competitive missionary activities especially in Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, often leading to the establishment of parallel ecclesial structures.
- Growing frustration among churches, especially in the South, whose members are being lured to other Churches by offers of humanitarian aid;
- The growth of religious fundamentalism and intolerance;
- The growing impact of sects and new religious movements in many parts of the world, including the United States; and Europe.
- Different understandings of the aim of mission, leading to differences in ethos and style of mission, particularly around those concepts of "church growth" and "church expansion" which seem to give priority to the number of converts.

I found myself in the midst of those who tended to focus on the **extension** of the Church as it existed rather than the **transformation** of the Church and world. It was at this time that I understood – really understood - that central to God’s mission is the life-giving presence of the Holy Spirit, who continues the mission of Christ through the church and remains the source of its missionary dynamism. Jesus identified with the aspirations of the people for a new age, but for him, the **Abba** experience of love was **vital; it** was the work of the **Spirit**.

And so I held fast to the model given to us by Paul, for whom mission meant the proclamation of a new state of affairs that God had initiated in Christ, a state of affairs that concerned the nations and all of creation and that climaxed in the celebration of God’s final glory. I also held on to the experience of the first Christians after Pentecost in which **witness to and proclamation** of the presence of the risen Christ and the Spirit in their midst was foundational. Word and deed belong together: “You are to be my witnesses in Jerusalem... (And) even to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8); “Go therefore; make disciples of all nations....” (Mtt.28:19). Witness and proclaim; authentic witness is necessary for Jesus tells the Emmaus disciples that it is written in the Scriptures that “the Christ would suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that, in his name, repentance and forgiveness of sins would be preached.” To which he adds: “You are **witnesses** to this” (Luke 24:47).

Mission: Liberative Solidarity

Proclaiming and living the Gospel in its full integrity was not always easy. The Gospel challenged me and the women I ministered to in so many ways. It challenged our complacency; frequently it upset our consciences; it unnerved us by demanding that we change our way of life. I was called **in mission** to the marginalized, I knew, but what I learnt along the way was that I was also called **to be on** the margins of the Church and society. Christ’s mandate to let people **see, touch and hear** the Word so that they could be transformed personally raised obstacles such as: rigidity, with its consequent sense of self-sufficiency and fear of disclosure; certain self-absorption, with an accompanying diminishment of “**burning hearts**” and a lack of commitment because of growing individualism.

For me **Justice** was the concrete direction of God’s **transforming and liberative work** in our midst. I understood that fragmentation and exclusiveness would only deny God’s creative purposes. I felt that for the women in prostitution to gain more justice the powerless –they - should have power. But if the structure and orientation of newly gained power follow the same pattern as that of the dominant groups, then these my sisters - the oppressed- would turn into tomorrow’s oppressors. History bears this out. I looked to **reconciliation** for it was Jesus’ way to avoid this pattern; and it is integral to **proclamation**.

Reconciliation challenged us to a transformed way of being, doing justice, creating community and tending to the most feminine aspects of our lives. The Gospel as it is embodied and witnessed carries much more credibility and power than all our dogmas

and reasoning. The challenge for me was to be a prophet of a new world order and along with that I needed to witness and proclaim a spirituality born of **contemplative** relationship with God, a spirituality that would lead me, and the women with whom I ministered, to prophetic involvement with God's wounded world. This contemplative stance has led me many a time to understand where Christ is in agony; into the slums of Delhi, to the inner cities of Louisiana, to the dilapidated village huts of Darfur, to the hungry and violated women and children of Iraq, to the AIDS victims in Africa, and today, to the fires of California., to everyone in need. Mother Teresa's words echoed often in my heart: "I fear for you, dear sisters that you will go to the poor without having first experienced Jesus in your hearts..." **Contemplation** was essential I knew – it kept my heart burning!

Mission and Community:

As I look at mission today I know that I must still be possessed by Paul's urgency for witnessing to and proclaiming Christ – "for an obligation is laid on me and woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel." (1 Cor. 9:16; see Rom 1:16 and 2 Cor. 5:14). And in the annunciation of the gospel we- the Church- must be equally passionate about its denunciation of injustice and evil. The gospel is good but disturbing news in a profoundly sinful world. It has been contended that the "**who**" of mission is not in doubt, what concerns mission today is the "**how**," the way mission is conceived and lived out, the method of mission. My primary role as a missionary, I have learnt, is to provide corrective glasses through which believers see their own lives or experiences through the eyes of faith, discerning in the midst of evil 'what is good and acceptable and perfect' and what God is doing as fulfillment of HER promises.

Jesus entrusted His **mission** of establishing the Reign of God to His community of disciples with a promise of His abiding presence with them. In a world of intolerance, exclusion and individualism our lives lived in **community and communion** is a powerful witness to an alternative model of social life – rootedness in the "Kin- dom" values of Jesus. Community is to be seen in the context of a shared spirituality focused on a shared **mission and a shared journey into the future**. St. Paul saw the Church not as an efficient organization but rather as a community which is a communion of believers, filled with the Holy Spirit, enriched by multitude of gifts, all engaged in the transformation of the world into the reign of God. (1Cor. 12, 4-7) Has not our experience embraced persons who have crippled mission because of individualism, consumerism and excessive professional efficiency? As Christians we have co-opted many values of the world in the name of efficiency, prudence and common sense. We know that Jesus was not particularly known for His prudence, efficiency or strategic planning. But his intimacy with **Abba** as well as His compassion led and empowered His mission to the end.

Personal Experience of Mission:

In choosing to minister with and for women engaged in commercial sex work, I lived on the margins of society, and coped with the fear and insecurity of the women as they dealt

with the justice system in our nation. For seven years I visited brothel after brothel, drinking as much as 16 cups of coffee a day, for that is what all had to offer with pride and generosity. I had no agenda except that of establishing relationships of trust and care with women who had lost both. I wanted to be there for them, care for them and was willing to fight the system for them. During those years I had many experiences of God's providential care. The women took me into their hearts and trusted me with their stories. I experienced the pain of their rejection from their families, the betrayal of those who sold them into the system and the constant threat of their children being taken from them by the law.

My experiences with these women changed my own understanding of my call to religious life, community and mission. I experienced how community and communion empower me for mission. I have developed a regular prayerful reflection on the meaning and the consequences of living my consecrated life in this context. I have learnt what it meant to be in **dialogue with persons of other religions**. I learnt also what it was to move from the brothels to administration in my Congregation. Indeed the **laughter** of God permeated my life. In the Gospels I **always** found the answer. It was this experience that gave me the inner freedom to keep going forward although I lacked the "power" to change their choice of profession. I felt compassion grow in me; propel me to work for justice and peace and solidarity with them. And this experience led to the foundation of the **House of Hope**- a residential program for the children of commercial sex workers.

Conclusion:

My work with women on the margins has left me with many questions. I still grapple with them. We live in a globalized world with all its consequences and challenges. Can our response to mission give **soul** to globalization? Will our mission nurture global love, global concern for the other, global justice and peace? Can our institutions and ministries become agents of globalizing the Good News of Jesus? The prophetic challenge of mission needs to prepare our Church for what Pope John Paul II called "Globalization without marginalization, globalization in solidarity." (**World Peace Day, 1999**).

The future of **MISSION** depends on our commitment to the Gospel challenge to **be** more and to **have less!** More than ever before, my real challenge is a radical return to Jesus to discover anew my identity in him and in His **mission**. Time and again I have pondered on the question of: **How I can find the inner energy, the fire within to live my consecrated life and consequently our mission with a passion?** I have realized that it is not possible to live a relevant and authentic consecrated life without having a deep **Abba** experience like Jesus and living in the awareness of being sent to be Christ to our world. We may be the only face of Christ many will ever see in their lives. Participating in the liberating **mission** of Jesus requires a spirituality of radical Gospel living, a spirituality that is holistic and transformative, a spirituality that is clearly in the service of life in all its forms, and a spirituality that leaves us open to change and desirous of any sacrifice that will witness to the power and beauty; and yes the **humor** of a loving God in the unfathomable mystery of the Gospel!