

## **Proclaiming the Gospel in the world**

### **Introduction**

The Catholic Church has a very well kept secret to its faithful. No, it is not the wealth of the Vatican or the number of women religious orders, but its social teaching. The Church has a vast amount of resources regarding social, economic and political issues, indeed a coherent set of teaching related to these themes, that people in the pew know very little about. Although I had been a practising Catholic for a while, I only came to hear about the social teaching of the Church through my doctoral work in development economics, not even through the Church! Hence, I wanted to share with you a bit of that secret wealth and explore various themes of that teaching such as the vocation of laity, engagement in politics, being a Christian in the work place, the task of evangelisation, justice and peace and the integrity of creation. Today, we focus on theme of evangelisation: what it means to proclaim the Word of God in the context of the world in which we live, and how to proclaim the gospel message.

Let me begin with the story of a saint. He is not officially a saint yet, but the poor have definitely proclaimed him their saint. In March 1980, a high-ranking Church official was murdered in a troubled little country in Central America. Monseñor Romero, archbishop of El Salvador, received a bullet right in his chest while celebrating Mass at the moment he lifted up the chalice to God. Why such a tragic end? The answer parallels the death of Jesus: he spoke the truth and the truth was too hard to hear and he had to be silenced. Like Jesus's death, Romero's murder was political. Their lives and their preaching threatened the political order of the day. Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God. This threatened the religious, and indeed political establishment, of his days, and he had to be silenced.

Oscar Romero was made archbishop in 1977 precisely because the Church hierarchy and the political leaders thought he would not disturb the political order of the day. He was considered a psychologically weak person who could easily be manipulated to bend to the will of those in power. He had also never been seen making political statements regarding the delicate political and social situation of El Salvador. At the time, El Salvador was ruled by a US-sponsored dictator who bloodily repressed the numerous landless peasants who demanded land reforms. The repression was also widespread among all those middle-classes who supported their demands or who were demanding greater civil and political rights. Thus, Romero was a 'safe choice' that would not unsettle the established order. But the Holy Spirit had it otherwise. A few weeks after becoming archbishop, a close friend of him, a Jesuit priest who was the head of the seminary, was murdered on his way to celebrate Mass in a rural

community. With him, two children and a man to whom he was giving a lift in his car, were murdered. It was the first time that a priest was attacked. Romero was greatly troubled. He decided to have one single funeral mass for all in the big cathedral. There was great opposition, how could a venerable Jesuit priest receive the same funeral as peasants? This was the first break between the safe choice and the political and economic elite of the country. The funeral was the beginning of Romero's journey in his new role as shepherd of his flock. He started to listen to the people of El Salvador, visited them and heard their stories of poverty and repression. He listened to these peasant landless families whose sons, fathers and husbands had 'disappeared'. He made regular radio appeals, how could Catholic soldiers kill their brethren? How could the Salvadorian elite go to Mass, say they love God and deny food, shelter and basic human needs to their brothers and sisters? That was a message too hard to listen to for some. The status quo was better. Romero, like Jesus, was troubling the existing social and moral order by preaching the Gospel, and he had to be silenced.

Tonight, I would like to explore with you what was behind Oscar Romero's life, and what led him to such tragic death. Of course, Romero's life was sustained by a deep life of prayer and closeness to the Word of God. Like Romero followed the footsteps of Jesus in a life of constant dialogue with his Father through prayer, so are we to follow suit. Fortunately, our Holy Mother the Church gives us some signposts in order to walk the way Jesus opened for us. I would like to go with you through two major documents. The papal encyclical *Evangelii Nutandi* published in 1975 and the statement issued after the Synod of bishops in 1971 entitled 'Justice in the World'. Although written more than 30 years ago, these two documents have an amazing actuality for this world of 2007. I will read the major highlights of these two texts, and hopefully we can have a fruitful discussion afterwards about what these passages tell us for the way we live our own lives as Christians. I have tried to regroup the passages into various themes.

## **1. The evangelizing nature of the Church**

"The Church has a vivid awareness of the fact that that saviour's words: 'I must proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God' (Lk 4, 43) apply in all truth to herself. She willingly adds with St Paul: 'Not that I boast of preaching the gospel, since it is a duty that has been laid on me; I should be punished if I do not preach it!' (1 Cor 9, 16). The task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church. Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace.

Anyone who re-reads the New Testament the origins of the Church, follows her history step by step and watches her live and act, sees that she is linked to evangelization in her most intimate being. The Church is born of the evangelizing activity of Jesus and his disciples. She is the normal, desired, most immediate and most visible fruit of this activity: ‘Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations’ (Matt 28, 19). Having been born consequently out of being sent, the church in turn is sent by Jesus. The Church is an evangelizer, but she begins by being evangelized herself.” (EN14-15) From this paragraph of *Evangelii Nutandii*, I would like to highlight two points: 1) evangelisation is the identity of the Church, that is, of every Christian. The Church is not the bishops and priests but you and me, every Christian. Our deepest identity as Christians is that of being evangelizers. 2) the task of evangelizing others cannot be separated from being first evangelized oneself by others. The Church is *semper reformans*, always reforming herself because she is made of sinful human beings who are in constant need of conversion. One of the biggest examples of this is that of slavery. The Church took ages to condemn the institution of slavery. It slowly came to an awareness that slavery was a sinful activity, even if landlords treated their slaves well, that contradicted God’s love. So, in order to evangelize, we need to always let ourselves evangelize, that is, let ourselves be touched again and again by God’s grace and recognize our sinfulness, for the essential task of evangelization is that of bringing something new.

## **2. Proclaiming a new creation**

“For the Church, evangelizing means bringing the good news into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new: ‘Now I am making the whole of creation new.’ (Rev 21, 5) It is about transforming humanity in its aspects that are in contradiction to God’s word and His/Her love for humankind. (EN18) Others cannot be transformed without being confronted to something radically different from what they are used to: “To evangelize is first of all to bear witness, in a simple and direct way, to God revealed by Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit; to bear witness that in his son God has love the world. Evangelization will always contain a clear proclamation that, in Jesus Christ, the son of God made human, who died and rose from the dead, salvation is offered to all human beings, as a gift of God’s grace and mercy. And not an immanent salvation, meeting material and even spiritual needs, restricted to the framework of temporal existence and completely identified with temporal desires, hopes, affairs and struggles, but a salvation which exceeds all these limits in order to reach fulfilment in a communion with the only one and divine absolute. Consequently evangelization cannot but include the prophetic

proclamation of a hereafter, the profound and definitive calling of all men and women. Evangelizing therefore also includes the preaching and hope in the promises made by God in the new covenant in Jesus Christ, the preaching of God's love for all people – the capacity of giving and forgiving, of self-denial, of helping one's brother and sister – which springing from the love of God, is the kernel of the Gospel. (EN26-7) From this passage, we distinguish two spheres: the here and now of our existence in this earth, and the life eternal. The encyclical tells us that evangelising has to bear on the final destination of all men and women, in the new Creation when each will meet their Maker face to face. However, there is a big however. It is not a matter of preaching only life eternal, for eternal life begins here and now.

### **3. Transforming unjust structures**

The encyclical goes on, “But evangelization would not be complete if it did not take account of the unceasing interplay of the gospel of man's concrete life, both personal and social. This is why evangelization involves an explicit message, adapted to the different situations constantly being realized, about the rights and duties of every human being, about life in society, about international life, peace, justice and development. [...] The Church, as the bishops repeated, has the duty to proclaim the liberation of millions of human beings, many of whom are her own children – the duty of assisting the birth of this liberation, of giving witness to it, of ensuring that it is complete. This is not foreign to evangelization. Between evangelization and human advancement there are in fact profound links. These include links of an anthropological order, because the person who is to be evangelized is not an abstract being but is subject to social and economic questions (EN 29-31). Let us explore a bit further what these bishops said in their synod in 1971.

They began by saying: “Scrutinizing the signs of time and seeking to detect the meaning of emerging history, while at the same time sharing the aspirations and questionings of all those who want to build a more human world, we have listened to the word of God that we might be converted to the fulfilling of the divine plan for the salvation of the world.” I love these words: ‘scrutinizing the signs of time, we have listened to the word of God that we might be converted.’ These are words that archbishop Romero lived in his deepest being: looking at the society around him, and letting himself be converted by the word of God who speaks in that context. The movie of his life shows this constant dialogue between Romero listening to the people and his listening to God in silent prayer. And the bishops go on: “Listening to the cry of those who suffer violence and are oppressed by unjust systems and structures, and hearing the appeal of a world that by its perversity contradicts the plan of its

creator, we have shared our awareness of the Church's vocation to be present in the heart of the world by proclaiming the good news to the poor, freedom to the oppressed, and joy to the afflicted." Again, I am deeply moved by these words: 'Hearing the appeal of a world whose perversity contradicts the plan of its Creator'. Is it the plan of the Creator that 1,200 children die every hour of easily preventable diseases, that one fifth of humanity lives with less than £1/day?

This is what leads the bishops to affirm that: "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel, or in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation. [...] In the face of the present-day situation of the world, marked as it is by the grave sin of injustice, we recognize both our responsibility and our inability to overcome it by our own strength. Such a situation urges us to listen with a humble and open heart to the word of God, as he shows us new paths towards action in the cause of justice in the world."

#### **4. Loving God and one's neighbour**

It is not some leftist movement in the 1960s which suddenly decided that action for justice could not be separated from preaching the Gospel but Christ himself: "By his action and teaching Christ united in an indivisible way the relationship of man and woman to God and the relationship of humans to other fellow human beings. Christ lived his life in the world as the total giving of himself to God for the salvation and liberation of men and women. In his preaching he proclaimed the father and motherhood of God towards all and the intervention of God's justice on behalf of the needy and the oppressed (Luke 6: 21-3). As he stated: 'As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me' (Mtt 25:40). [...] From the beginning the Church has lived and understood the death and resurrection of Christ as a call by God to conversion in the faith of Christ and in fraternal and sisterly love, perfected in mutual help even to the point of a voluntary sharing of material goods. According to the Christian message, therefore, the relationship of every human to his or her neighbour is bound up with his/her relationship to God; his response to the love of God, saving us through Christ, is shown to be effective in his love and service of fellow human beings. Christian love of neighbour and justice cannot be separated. This is why the Church has the right, indeed the duty, to proclaim justice on the social, national and international level, and to denounce instances of injustice, when the fundamental human rights and the very human salvation demands it."

## 5. Not by bread alone

Although proclaiming justice and peace is the duty of every Christian, the Christian mission cannot be reduced to a pure matter of justice. What would then differentiate then what Oxfam, or the UK Department for International Development does from what the Church does? The encyclical is careful in reminding us that human life cannot be satisfied by bread alone: “We must not ignore the fact that many are frequently tempted to reduce the mission of the Church to the dimensions of a simply temporal project. They would reduce her aims to a man-centred goal; the salvation of which she is the messenger would be reduced to material wellbeing. Her activity, forgetful of all spiritual and religious preoccupation, would become initiatives of the political or social order. But if this were so, the Church would lose her fundamental meaning. Her message of liberation would no longer have any originality and would easily be she would have no more authority to proclaim freedom as in the name of God. This is why we have wished to emphasize the need to restate clearly the specifically religious finality of evangelization. This latter would lose its reason for existence if it were to diverge from the religious axis that guides it: the kingdom of God, before anything else, in its fully theological meaning” (EN32). But the kingdom of God is both a matter of life eternal and life here and now, for the kingdom of God is among us here and now, although not yet expressed in its fullness, but groaning towards a new creation not yet fulfilled. This is why the encyclical *Evangelii Nutandi* reasserts that preaching the Gospel has to be both in the religious and temporal field: “When preaching liberation and associating herself with those who are working and suffering for it, the Church is certainly not willing to restrict her mission only to the religious field and dissociate herself from the temporal problems of people. Nevertheless she reaffirms the primacy of her spiritual vocation and refuses to replace the proclamation of the kingdom by the proclamation of forms of human liberation; she even states that her contribution to liberation is incomplete if she neglects to proclaim salvation in Jesus Christ. [...] The Church considers it to be undoubtedly important to build up structures which are more human, more just, more respectful of the rights of the person and less oppressive and less enslaving, but she is conscious that the best structures and the most idealized systems soon become inhuman if inhuman inclinations of the human heart are not made wholesome, if those who live in these structures or who rule them do not undergo a conversion of the heart and of outlook (EN34-36).

## **6. Prophetic witness**

So far, I have spoken a lot about the contents of evangelization, but what about the means? How to evangelise? The encyclical is very clear: “For the Church, the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life: ‘Modern people listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.’ It is therefore primarily by her conduct and by her life that the Church will evangelize the world, in other words, by her living witness of fidelity to the Lord Jesus – the witness of poverty and detachment, of freedom in the face of the powers of this world, in short, the witness of sanctity. [...] One can never sufficiently stress the fact that evangelization does not consist of only of the preaching and doctrine. For evangelization must touch life: the natural life to which it gives a new meaning. (EN 41-7)” The bishops in their synod in 1971 have perfectly understood this when they said: “Given the demands of prophetic witness, the Church is obliged to live and administers its own goods in such a way that the gospel is proclaimed to the poor. If instead the Church appears to be among the rich and the powerful of this world its credibility is diminished. Our examination of conscience now comes to the lifestyle of all: bishops, priests, religious and lay people. In societies enjoying a higher level of consumer spending, it must be asked whether our lifestyle exemplifies that sparingness with regard to consumption which we preach to others as necessary in order that so many millions of hungry people throughout the world may be fed.”

## **7. Some questions**

The bishops invite us to re-examine our lives in the light of the Gospel. What message do I preach with my life? What are the situations of the world today which contradict the Word of God? In a world where billions of people are denied the basic necessities to live, in a world where our lifestyle is such that it threatens the very existence of humankind itself, what does my life tell?

To guide into some reflections, here are a few questions:

- What have I learned from the encyclical?
- What struck me most?
- What challenged me?
- How do I currently preach the Gospel with my life?
- Where do I need to be evangelized?