

Synod of Bishops – 2012.10
Intervention by Adolfo Nicolas SJ
[General of SJs]

Coming from a Missionary Order, I feel the obligation to reflect on our past history. We can hardly think of a New Evangelization, unless we are sure we have learnt something from the First Evangelization, from the things we did well and from the mistakes we committed as well as the insufficiencies we suffered in our desire to communicate the Gospel.

I come from a Tradition where we are encouraged, and trained for this purpose, to ***find God in all things***, in all events, in all situations. Saint Ignatius took this point, without doubt, from the New Testament, where, for instance, Saint Paul in his famous speech at the Areopagus quotes one of the Greek Poets as saying: “In Him (that is, in God) we live, and move, and have our being” (Act 17:27-28). God is present and active in every human community, even if we do not readily see the how or the depth of this presence.

Well, I am afraid that we, missionaries, have not done it with sufficient depth, and, thus, have not contributed with these discoveries to the life of the Church. I am not projecting any kind of blame on the missionaries in general; I am only speaking from my own tradition, my own experience and my own missionary group. I am sure that many missionaries, even other Jesuits, have done better than I have done.

We have certainly tried to be positive in our view of other cultures and traditions. But I am afraid that we have seen mostly Western, European signs of Faith and Sanctity (even the Instrumentum Laboris, speaking of the fruits of Faith, indicates in Numbers 122 to 128 a few signs that are excellent in themselves and easily recognizable by the Western Churches.).

We have not entered with sufficient depth into the cultures where the Gospel was proclaimed in order to see that part of the Kingdom of God that was already there, rooted and active in the hearts and relationships of people. We have not been very willing to find ***the “surprise factor”*** in the work of the Holy Spirit, who makes the seed grow even while the farmer is asleep or the missionary is absent.

I am convinced that this can be applied to the Missio ad Gentes as well as to the New Evangelization in the modern World. As far as I know, every generation has complained about the next generation and considered that something of the wisdom of the past was being lost. And yet the Spirit of God has not been idle, but working in the hearts of people

and the insights of its sages. It is for us to listen with greater attention and with an immense humility to recognize the voice of the Lord where we did not expect that it could be heard. In my Seminary years I remember being greatly impressed by a study that the then Professors Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger published about Revelation in the Council of Trent. According to them, when the Council of Trent spoke of Scripture, it referred to the Old Testament; while when the Council spoke of Gospel it considered that the Gospel was present in two places: In the writings of the New Testament and – here was the surprise – in the hearts of the faithful.

By not paying sufficient attention to how God was present and had been working in the peoples we encountered, we missed important clues, insights and discoveries. It is now, therefore, the time to learn from this history, from what was missing in the First Evangelization, before we move ahead in the New.

Many good things have happened, that we want to keep, develop and celebrate. At the same time, we know that many mistakes have also taken place, particularly in terms of not listening to the people, in judging with great superficiality the merits of old and rich cultures and traditions, in imposing forms of worship that did not, in the least, express the relationship and sensibility of the people in their turning to God in prayer and praise. The fullness of Christ needs the contribution of all peoples and all cultures. There are many lessons that we can learn from the past, and that can be of great help in any New Evangelization. Allow me just to, briefly, mention a few before I finish:

1. The importance of **“The way of humility”** to communicate the Gospel.
2. The need of stating **“the truth of our limited and imperfect humanity”** in everything we say and proclaim, without any trace of Triumphalism.
3. The **simplicity of the Message** we try to communicate, without complications or excessive rationalizations that make it opaque and not understandable.
4. **Generosity** in acknowledging the work of God in the life and history of people, accompanied by sincere **admiration, joy and hope** whenever we find in others **goodness and dedication**.
5. That the **most credible** message is the one that comes from **our life**, totally taken and guided by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
6. That **Forgiveness and Reconciliation** are the most helpful shortcuts to the heart of the Gospel.
7. That **the Message of the Cross** is best communicated through **the death** (to the self and to limited goals) **of the missionary**.

Thank you for your attention.

Adolfo Nicolás s.j. 10/10/2012