

# MISSIONARY WORK IN THE CONTEXT OF OTHER RELIGIONS (EXCLUDING ISLAM)

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If we take “the context of other religions” to mean those countries where the population is predominantly non-Christian, and further, if from this category, we exclude the Jewish state of Israel and the Islamic nations of the Middle East and Africa, then we find that we are referring to the greater part of South and South-East Asia, with the exception of the Philippines, and Muslim countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia. In other words, “the context of other religions (excluding Islam)” refers to countries such as India, Myanmar (Burma), Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, Japan and a few others.

In practical terms, we are talking about half of the world's population! And the non-Christian religions alluded to in the main are: Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Shintoism, and to a lesser extent, Jainism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, and others.

## I. A RAPID OVERVIEW OF THE MAIN NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS TODAY

Though different from each other in several respects, the major non-Christian religions have a lot of features in common:

All of them are ancient in origin, going back several centuries. The Hindu Vedas, for instance, date back to the second millennium B.C.; Buddha is said to have lived in the fifth century B.C., and Confucius in the fourth.

These religions were born and bred in Asian soil, even if they got transplanted from one country to another.

Buddhism, for instance, originated in India but passed on to the other countries of Asia, striking deep roots there but hardly developing in India itself.

Hinduism, though confined mainly to India, wielded a considerable influence on the other religions and philosophies of the East.

Shintoism in Japan was shaped by Buddhism from Korea.

All these religions have blended with the way of life of the people. In fact, religion in the East is not something apart from philosophy or culture. The culture in India is fundamentally a Hindu culture, while the culture in Thailand is Buddhist.

These are not "religions of the book" like Christianity, Judaism or Islam, but religions that are based on, and transmitted through, oral tradition and practice.

As a matter of fact, just in these days the Supreme Court in India is being asked to define who is a Hindu. To many in India, including legal luminaries and judges, Hinduism is only a way of life or a matter of social belonging, and nothing more. For when it comes to beliefs, there is such a wide variety of them, even in fun-

damentals, that it is difficult to determine what constitutes Hinduism and what does not.

(This way of looking at Hinduism has led some Catholic priests like H. Staffner and Julian Saldanha to ask whether there could not be a Hindu Christian; in other words, one who professes the Christian faith but lives according to the civic customs and social behaviour of the Hindu people.)

Because of their close links with people's cultures, the Asian religions tend to become somewhat identified with the state. To be Japanese is to profess Shintoism. You must have recently followed the television coverage of the enthronement of Emperor Akihito, which was celebrated according to the Shinto rites.

Similarly, to be Thai is to be Buddhist. I am told that there are laws in Thailand that impose the death penalty or imprisonment for one who converts to Catholicism, and that forbid the use of the Thai written language in religious books and ceremonies; these laws are still officially on the statute book, but no one pays heed to them today.

In this respect, India is in a happier position since it avowedly professes to be a secular state. In actual practice, however, there are powerful Hindu political parties that want to see India turn into a theocratic state based on the tenets of Hinduism. In the run-up to the elections which are due next month, they brazenly ask the Hindus to vote for them on the basis of their religious sentiment and affiliation.

And, within India itself, the Sikhs are demanding a separate state for themselves, Khalistan, on the basis of their religion.

The most striking feature of Asian religions is that they inculcate in their adherents a deep sense of the Transcendent, whatever be the name by which He is called.

Even in Buddhism, which supposedly does not believe in a personal God, there is, at least certainly on the popular level, an awareness and worship of a Supreme Being; and as for the impersonality of the Absolute, this is to be seen rather as an attempt to avoid

predicating of the Absolute that finitude which is normally associated with persons as we know them.

For the Hindus, God is formless. The only forms He has are our concepts of Him. He graciously accepts each one's worship, whatever be the form according to which that worship is offered. Here lies the root of the great tolerance that the Hindus show towards all other religions, and which they express in formulae like: "There are many paths up a mountain" or "Whatever be the colour of the cow, the milk is always white!" But here also lies the root of their intolerance towards any religion (like Christianity) which claims that its concept (form) of the Transcendent is unique (e.g., that the Transcendent is fully present in Jesus Christ).

But there is another notable characteristic of the Asian belief in the Supreme Being, and it is its pantheistic, or better, pan-en-theistic slant.

Japanese Shintoism sees the "kami" (gods, spirits) in all kinds of things of this world.

Buddhism conceives of the Buddha-nature as being inherent in everything.

Hinduism holds that the world as we know it has come from Brahman (God) and must return to Him. But, not having the concept of creation *ex nihilo*, it goes on to assert that the world of change and appearance which we ordinarily experience is an illusion – behind it all lies the "really Real", Brahman. Consequently, it holds that our greatest sin is ignorance, i.e., not knowing that there is the divine self in us. Our true liberation then consists in our becoming conscious of our oneness with Brahman. Until that takes place, there occurs an endless cycle of rebirths, each one's new situation in life being determined by the way he lived his previous life (= the doctrine of karma). Yoga is the means by which we attain consciousness of our identity with Brahman.

Absent from these religions then is the concept of life to be lived as a free and personal response to God. Instead, one is given a number of moral precepts to live by – precepts which can com-

pare quite favourably with the Ten Commandments – and it is this set of principles faithfully adhered to which accounts for so much uprightness and goodness that we see in the adherents of other religions, like, for instance, the gentleness of the Thai people, the tolerance of the Hindus, and the aesthetic appreciation of nature among the Japanese. In all this of course there is a “Pelagian” tendency since one’s liberation is seen as the fruit of one’s own personal endeavour; there is not much that corresponds to our Christian notion of grace.

In recent years, several factors, such as the inroads made by Western materialism, the religious indifference of the younger generations, and the fear of losing adherents to other religions such as Christianity and Islam, have led to *a movement of revival or renaissance of these religions*.

Perhaps this is best seen in India where the renaissance of Hinduism has been under way since the last century. While one reform movement, the Brahma Samaj, declares that Hinduism too, like Christianity, believes in *a personal and loving God* who rules the world He created with justice and mercy, another group, the Ramakrishna Mission, sees the worship of a personal God as only a preliminary step (or discipleship) that needs to be eventually subsumed in a non-dual experience of God.

I remember how amazed I once was when, as Dean of our theologate in Bangalore, I had organized a seminar on prayer and invited a Hindu monk, Swami Bhajananda – I think he belonged to the Ramakrishna Mission – to speak to us on the Hindu’s concept of prayer. The monk went up to the dais, sat crosslegged, closed his eyes for a couple of minutes in silent prayer, and then without a paper in his hand, began his discourse. And he began to expatiate to us on prayer in St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila! I was so astounded by his knowledge of our Christian spiritual writers that when question time came around, I told him of my surprise that he, a Hindu, should be so interested in what Christians had to say about prayer, whereas we Christians were looking over our

shoulders to learn what Hindus could teach us on prayer. And he answered simply that he and his fellow-monks had found that the Christian method of prayer was good for the masses, whereas if one wished to scale the heights of prayer – what we would probably call mysticism – then one needed to learn to make use of Yoga!

In recent years a trend has begun to make Hinduism a “religion of the book” by regarding the four Vedas as inerrant scripture. Today you will find Hindus *addressing Krishna as Lord* in much the same way as we address Jesus by the same title. Yet another important change that is taking place is the *shift in perspective*. For quite many years now, Hindus have begun *decrying the unjust discrimination in society* that has been a by-product of their religion, like, for instance, the division of people into castes and social classes, and the inferior position of women. They are no more afraid to fight against such evils in public. A classical example on this point would be Mahatma Gandhi.

Likewise, they are no more exclusively concerned with self-liberation but are *becoming more and more involved in the liberation of others* by establishing orphanages, widows’ houses, hospitals and other charitable works.

Moreover, Hinduism today has become *missionary-minded*. Considerable efforts are being made to win back those who have converted to Christianity and to gain new adherents. Today in the West you will come across movements like the Hare Krishna, or TM (= Transcendental Meditation), or the Krishna Consciousness Movement, or Bhagwan Rajneesh. Broadly speaking, they are a mixture of some fundamental tenets of Hinduism (like monism: God and I are one) and modern psychology, and they seem to be very successful in certain pockets in the West, but they have hardly any following in India itself, or for that matter, in Asia.

And so, there is perceptible today an effort on the part of Hinduism – and likewise of the other religions – to absorb new values and to adjust to the modern world and its challenges. But regrettably, in this process of adaptation, there is also – and perhaps this

is more noticeable in very recent times – a swing backwards towards the religious ideas and traditions of the past (*fundamentalism*) and a closing up of the ranks against other religions (*communalism*). Such a swing generally occurs when a group feels threatened in its religious and cultural identity. If to these two factors, you add a third one, viz. the *politicization of religious issues*, you have an explosive mixture. It is the mixing of religion and politics that is becoming in several Asian societies the cause of communal and ethnic tensions, and of exploitation and oppression, especially of the weaker sections of society. And to think that both politics and religion are supposed to work for the unity and integration of peoples, groups and tribes!

## II. THE CHALLENGES FACING US IN THE MISSION FIELD

After giving you a rapid overview of the main non-Christian religions of Asia, let me speak about *the four challenges we face in our work of evangelization against the background of other religions*.

### 1. *A correct understanding of evangelization*

Following the lead given by the Second Vatican Council, there is spreading everywhere in Asias a positive outlook on non-Christian religions. We are coming to discover the many good elements they possess and to recognize the workings of God's grace in their adherents.

But, the trouble is that the pendulum seems to be swinging from one extreme to the other. If before the Vatican Council we were rather negative about non-Christian religions and did not see the possibility of salvation for their followers unless they joined the Catholic Church, today we tend to become over-optimistic about their salvation and to wonder whether it is necessary at all for us to evangelize them. "Why not help the Hindus become better Hindus?" is a question sometimes asked in some of our Catholic circles.

And so, right now we are struggling to keep three things in a proper balance: the uniqueness of Christ and of the Christian faith; a deep respect and esteem for non-Christian religions; and the meaningfulness and urgency of evangelization.

Part of the problem, I feel, is that evangelization has often been understood in a limited way, and this has led to distortions and discouragement in our mission work. Far too many have taken it to mean the oral proclamation of the Gospel with a view to effecting a conversion to the Catholic faith. When evangelization is understood like that, two questions immediately arise: How many of our people in Asia are disposed to hear the proclamation of the Gospel? And, how many conversions have we to show for all our efforts? If the answer to both questions is "few", then a further question arises: In that case, are we evangelizing at all in Asia? Or still more radically: Is it at all possible to evangelize in Asia?

It is a fact that when we speak occasionally and in general terms about Jesus Christ, people by and large do not mind listening – after all, they are hearing something new and attractive. But should the discourse veer round to the topic of committing oneself to Christ by joining the Church, most people shy away from such talk, and some even turn hostile.

No doubt, there are certain peoples of Asia for whom we can say the hour of God has struck.

In Korea, for instance, there is a veritable "conversion-boom". The Church has increased five-fold in barely twenty years.

Hong Kong, though not showing a spectacular increase like Korea, has more than 4000 catechumens every year in a population of 5½ million, but the number may diminish due to an increasing exodus as 1997 draws closer.

In India, various tribal areas around the country and especially in the North-East have been very responsive to Christianity. The tribals believe in a personal God, omnipotent and good, and in some form of after-life, not in rebirth, but in some reward or punish-



ment. No wonder they are said to possess the “*anima naturaliter christiana*”.

In Myanmar (Burma) too, the tribals are said to be very receptive, as also the Sindhis in Pakistan, the mountain people in Taiwan, and the hill people in Thailand.

Recent reports speak of thousands of students all over China turning to Christianity in the wake of the brutal suppression of the pro-democracy movement last year.

These could be identified as the responsive areas that we find today across the face of Asia, but they represent only a small fraction of the immense population of this continent.

And so, when in mission countries we define evangelization as the oral proclamation of the Gospel to bring about conversions, we tend to get discouraged because on the whole we have not much to show by way of results. The Church in most countries of Asia remains a tiny minority oscillating between 0.5% and 2% of the population, and this has been the picture for the past 2000 years!

Consequently, we cannot help asking the question: If, humanly speaking, there does not seem to be much hope for conversions – and this appears to be the case in most of the Asian continent at the moment – then, is not evangelization an exercise in futility?

The crux of the problem, I think, is that we are not aware that *Evangelii Nuntiandi's* concept of evangelization is much broader than what we usually think it to be. According to EN, “evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within” (EN # 18). And “transforming humanity” is to be understood as affecting and as it were upsetting man’s criteria of judgment, his value-systems, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, and bringing them more in line with the Gospel (cf. EN # 19), be it on the level of the individual person or of society. And so, evangelization is not just a matter of getting numbers into the Church, but also of changing man from within and turning him into a “new creation”

In such perspective conversion is certainly included, for it is a particular and important aspect of the transformation of humanity, Christ now becoming formally in baptism the sole criterion of a person's life. But evangelization is not to be reduced to conversion alone; its horizon extends much further. And that is why it is possible, and necessary, to speak of an "evangelization of culture" (EN # 20). I believe that this is the understanding of evangelization that we in the missions of Asia need to pay much more attention to.

The Catholic Church, as we know, has everywhere invested so much in schools and hospitals. In India, for example, the Catholic Church constitutes only 1½% of the population but contributes around 15% to the nation's education and health care! About two-thirds, if not more, of the pupils in our schools belong to other religions! All this means that the Church has an enormous contact with non-Christian population at large, and therefore a sphere of influence that goes far beyond its own numbers: it is capable of a considerable evangelization of culture. And, if in addition it were to utilize the means of mass communication in a bigger and more effective way than hitherto, its evangelizing potential would be almost limitless.

And yet, if you were to ask many priests and religious in India how they evangelize in the school or hospital, they would answer you in the negative, or simply say, "Very little". They would instead see the tribal areas and the villages as offering better scope for evangelization. Why? Because there one can speak openly of Jesus Christ and can hope for conversions. But, that a Catholic school or hospital, if run in a way that Gospel values shine through it, can be a wonderful means of evangelization is the kind of vision they do not possess. And this, I think, is the pity of it. We have in our hands great opportunities for evangelization (correctly understood) in our institutions, especially in our towns and cities, but being diffident about their evangelizing efficacy, we are just keeping them going, running secular institutions, seeing in our work an important service that we are rendering to the poor and to the nation, but un-

fortunately not drawing out their full evangelizing potential – and all because of a rather narrow understanding of evangelization.

I would like to illustrate what I have been saying with an example. Father F.G. is a Salesian who works atop a hill in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. When Father set foot in the place over 25 years ago, the Hindu Mahasabha, a radical group, vowed that it would prevent him from establishing himself among the 5000-strong population of the area. In his early years, in fact, Father had to face a lot of difficulties and harassments; he was even beaten up on one or two occasions. But he persevered.

In true Salesian fashion, he went all out to win over the youngsters; he set up a boarding for them, and eventually a school. If you happen to visit his work, you will find that Father is alone with only two lay helpers to assist him. But the atmosphere in the House is serene and happy. The boys keep silence by themselves in the study room; they respect each other; they do not shout at or quarrel with each other during games; they pray; they learn Indian dance as a mean of disciplining their mind and body; in short, they are very well behaved, even better, I would say, than most of the boys in our Catholic boardings and schools.

Now, the point I want to make is this: not one of the boys has been baptized so far! When I spoke to Fr. G. last year, he told me that his idea of missionary work was not simply that of pouring water on a person's head. Instead, he believed in inculcating a Christian manner of living so that the transition to Christianity through baptism came not as an abrupt event in their lives, but as a spontaneous movement from within. In fact, the youngsters – and all the people on the hill – know and love Fr. G. so very much that they would be ready to defend him were he to be attacked by radical elements from outside. They love the priests, brothers and sisters who visit them; they esteem the Catholic Church; they come to the church to pray by themselves. Father told me that the time was nearing when, God willing, they themselves would ask to be bapti-

zed and received into the Catholic Church. This is how he understood mission work or evangelizing, and found fulfilment in it.

When I have quoted the example of Fr. G. to some of my fellow-Salesians on different occasions, many have simply scoffed at the whole idea as a waste of time, just because there have been no conversions to show for over 25 years of work. Father G. did not see Christianity as a matter of individual belief (conversion) having nothing to do with culture or with the shared life in a community or society. Instead, he saw the evangelization of culture as the way to a personal conversion to the Christian faith.

But, evangelization is not the only word that is badly understood. In mission countries in recent years, an oft recurring theme is that of the "Kingdom of God". Jesus came to establish the Kingdom of God, it is said, and the Kingdom is not to be equated with the Church, but is bigger than the Church. The Kingdom of God is His reign over mankind – in truth, holiness and grace, in justice, love and peace (cf. the Preface for the Mass of Christ the King). From this, the conclusion that is sometimes drawn is: it is not so necessary to proclaim the Church and to require that people enter it through baptism. It is enough that we work together with the adherents of other faiths to establish the values of the Kingdom.

Such an approach obviously seems to create a lot of common ground with other religions and to give a great impetus to inter-religious dialogue. I have had both a Buddhist monk in Thailand and a Catholic priest in India argue with me along the following lines: The essence of Buddhism, as taught by Buddha, is selflessness. The essence of Christianity, as taught and practised by Jesus Christ, is also selflessness (giving one's life for others). Both religions therefore teach the same thing: fundamentally, all religions are the same. Hence, why can't the followers of the various religions work together to spread the value of selflessness everywhere, and in this way, all would be helping to build up the Kingdom of God that Jesus came to establish?

Attractive as it may sound, the argument contains several inherent weaknesses:

First, a value as practised by two different religions cannot be the same because the motivation and the spirit behind the value in each case are different, and consequently change the complexion of the action.

There is a book on Mother Teresa with the title quoting her own words: "We do it for Jesus". Not long ago, The Illustrated Weekly of India carried an interview with Mr. Deoras, a prominent Hindu radical. Mr. Deoras was asked what he thought of Mother Teresa. He replied: "She had once said in a book, 'I do it for Christ'. Why not for humanity, I ask". Had she done it for humanity rather than for Christ, would it have been the same?

Secondly, Christianity, or the Gospel, cannot be reduced to a value lived by Jesus of Nazareth. Christianity, or the Gospel, is an action by which Jesus changed the human situation irreversibly. We do not say in the Creed, "I believe in the value of selflessness" (or, for that matter, in any other value), but our faith is in the person of Jesus Christ and in what He did to liberate us from sin. Consequently, evangelization cannot simply be a matter of "value-education", however noble and attractive the value may be.

Lastly, the Church cannot simply be left out of the reckoning for it occupies an essential and central role in announcing and inaugurating the Kingdom. Jesus did not simply leave behind Him a body of teaching; no, He created a community that would represent (not substitute), proclaim and build the Kingdom until the end of time (cf. *Redemptoris Missio* # 18).

There are others who pursue what they call a "theo-centric" rather than a "Christo-centric" approach to evangelization. What the evangelizer must communicate, according to them, is not so much the person of Christ as the divine reality, God, by whatever name He may be invoked. After all, they argue, won't this be the final reality when Jesus Christ will hand over everything to His Father and God will be all in all? So why insist so much on Jesus

Christ, who would be only one way among others to the final reality called God?

One can see that such an approach offers plenty of ground for a meaningful dialogue with other peoples, cultures and religions. Its basis – according to its proponents – lies in the mystery of Creation, which is reflected in the variety of cultures and beliefs.

The trouble is that it bypasses the mystery of Redemption completely; nay more, the very mystery of Christ becomes of little or no consequence. How, we ask, can such an approach square with the very meaning of the Gospel as the “Good News” identified with Jesus Christ?

Yet another expression that is bandied about without being properly understood is the word “salvation”. We do believe, with the Second Vatican Council, that “those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do His will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation” (*Lumen Gentium* # 16).

Now, if the adherents of other religions can attain salvation, some argue, why should we be so preoccupied with evangelizing them? What prompts this line of thinking, I’m afraid, is the other-worldly and disincarnate meaning given (unconsciously) to the word “salvation”, viz. the escape from hell-fire and damnation. Here salvation is being defined by negating its opposite.

But, if one were to define salvation by its positive content, it would comprise all that makes up the future life – perfect union with Jesus face to face, universal brotherhood, the filial encounter with Mary our Mother, personal fulfilment, joy and peace – realities, all of them, which are to be enjoyed in their fullness and perfection in the next life, but which God wants His people to possess already in an inchoate state in this life. If this is the real meaning of salvation, then would we be justified in holding back from enabling all people to experience it already in this life?

Added to all these points of confusion is the fact that we do not as yet have a satisfactory and universally accepted theology of non-Christian religions. Much research has been done in a comparative study of religions, but we have still to resolve some basic questions, such as: What is the relationship of Christ (and Christianity) to non-Christian religions? Is Christ present in non-Christian religions? Are the other religions a "praeparatio evangelica", and if so, in what way? What does it mean to say that the other religions have "seeds of the Word"? Can the other religions be considered "ways of salvation" for their adherents in some measure, or not at all?

The upshot of all that I have been saying is that, theologically and pastorally, we are groping for answers, and this affects the work of evangelization of our non-Christian brethren. When Pope John Paul II wrote *Redemptoris Missio*, he stated that "there is an undeniable negative tendency... Missionary activity specifically directed 'to the nations' (*Ad gentes*) appears to be waning" He alluded to the fact that there are not only external but also *internal difficulties* that have weakened the Church's missionary thrust towards non-Christians, and he added this telling phrase: "In the Church's history, missionary drive has always been a sign of vitality, just as *its lessening is a sign of a crisis of faith*" (RM # 2; italics mine). Maybe, the real underlying problem in the Church in our mission countries is that the Catholic faith is not deep enough and this may be the area which we as a Church may have to pay much greater attention to in the future.

## 2. *The non-christian attitude to christianity*

On this point, I shall confine myself in the main to the attitude of Hindus towards Christianity, and particularly towards conversion, firstly, because I am more familiar with the Indian reality, and secondly, because I feel that the Hindu attitude is somewhat unique – I don't think there is anything like it in the other Asian countries.

There is no doubt whatever that Hindus (and, for that matter, all peoples of other faiths) hold Jesus Christ in high esteem; they reverence Him, admire His example of self-sacrificing love, and deeply appreciate His teaching, especially His Sermon on the Mount.

Moreover, it is not unusual to come across a picture of Jesus side by side with a picture of Krishna or of other deities in a Hindu home, office, vehicle or shop. The significance of this pictorial display, however, is that the Hindus are willing to accept Jesus, but on their terms. Jesus, for them, is an "avatar" like Krishna, and an "avatar" is an appearance of God in the garb of man (deotism), not God become man (incarnation)

Likewise, the Hindus have a great esteem for Catholic schools and hospitals, priests and religious. They admire the dedication of missionaries like Mother Teresa and others. They want to put their children in Catholic schools because they know that there they will receive a good education. But, they do not want Christianity to be taught to their children. They are on their guard lest they be roped into the Catholic Church through our educational and charitable works. (How different is the situation in our schools in Hong Kong, for instance, where we get converts to Catholicism every year from our pupils and their families!)

I remember an experience we had at our novitiate and post-novitiate in Nasik a few years ago. Our young Salesianas used to go out on Sundays into different parts of the city for what we call the "Sunday oratories". They would reach out to over a thousand youngsters each week. And then, all at once, there was a slump – we were down to a hundred or so. What had happened was that a fanatic Hindu group had gone round telling the boys to beware of us, that we would suddenly pour water on them and make them Christians. As a result, they simply stayed away, or rather, their parents kept them from us. The problem lasted a few months until finally we got a breakthrough. We organized a cricket tournament at our place and invited various teams from the city; then we followed it up with a Summer Club for the youth of the locality. Both ven-



tures turned out to be very successful: people began so see us differently; the boys started coming to us once again. Believe it or not, in a short while, we began to have even more contacts than we had before, so much so that one day to commemorate an important event we mobilized several schools to take part in a peace march through the city streets. Some time later, to our delight, the Rotary Club of Nasik awarded us a certificate for the meritorious service we were rendering the youth of the city!

Why, we may ask, are our Hindus so sensitive to the matter of conversion? I think there are many factors that account for it.

Mahatma Gandhi used to maintain that all religions are equal and that it did not matter which religion one professed. One might have thought, therefore, that Gandhi was open to the idea of conversion. Not so. For Gandhi, to seek to change one's religion was like seeking to change one's parents! Did that mean therefore that he was against a conversion out of genuine conviction? No. But, he did not like what he saw – he saw converts being uprooted from their social, cultural and religious tradition, adopting European language, manners and customs, even in dress and diet! Hence his dislike for conversion.

Today, in many Indian novels and films, you will find Christians frequently portrayed as people who drink liquor, dress in Western style, and hardly able to speak the language of the local people.

One has to go back into the mission history of the colonial period to understand why this came about, and especially in North India, not so much in the South. The problem has considerably diminished today, but the stigma remains.

Again, one must consider that Hinduism has for centuries stratified people in social groupings or castes. When one becomes a Christian, he breaks away from his relatives and from his social class, and for many Hindus such a step is anathema.

In this connection, let me tell you that when a Hindu converts to Catholicism, he forfeits the Scheduled Caste status he had, which means that he is no more entitled to the subsidies and job quotas

reserved by government for the uplift of the lower caste people. Should he re-convert to Hinduism, however, he regains his Scheduled Caste status forthwith.

This is why the Catholic Church has in recent years protested against the discrimination meted out to Scheduled Caste converts, because, notwithstanding their conversion, they remain economically backward and therefore much in need of government help. But so far the Church's plea has not evoked a change of policy on the part of government.

Since over the last few decades a considerable number of untouchables and low-caste people have converted to Christianity, a suspicion lurks in the mind of many a Hindu that they have been allured to Christianity by various material inducements; they wonder how semi-illiterate and poor people could undertake a comparative study of different religions before deciding to change over! (Reading between the lines, one can perceive here the Hindu's rather intellectualistic approach to religion).

Similarly, he looks askance at our Christian works of charity and wonders what it all has to do with religion. For him, religion is something wholly spiritual and other-worldly: man finds liberation by escaping from his body and the world. No wonder then he sometimes tends to see our works of charity as a clever stratagem to gain converts.

Finally, we must take cognizance of the political overtones involved in conversion. Everyone knows that in a country which is only 2.6% Christian, there is in some of the North-Eastern states (where the population is small, 27 million, and mostly tribal) a percentage of Christians that rises as high as 50% in one state, and even 90% in another. (The overall percentage of Christians in all the North-Eastern states put together stands at 12%).

Just consider the amazing development of our Salesian missions among the North-Eastern tribal people. From about 5000 Catholics when we took over the mission territory in 1922, we have gone up

to 800,000 today, and in 8 dioceses! And the picture would not be very different, I think, in most of the other tribal regions of India.

Now, it is this very success we have had in our mission work that is creating a backlash against us. The Hindus are afraid that they are losing ground to the Christians. Hence the rise of Hindu fundamentalist or radical groups who seek to re-convert Christians and to establish an India that is Hindu. Hence too the laws passed in some states barring conversions by force, fraud or inducement – which laws are then sometimes used to harass missionaries and newly baptized Christians or to intimidate potential converts. Hence again the tendency to blame the missionaries for secessionist movements in the country, and particularly in the North-Eastern region; sometimes missionaries have been expelled without any reasons given them.

Several states too have attempted over the years to wrest control of our Catholic schools by enacting legislation, but these laws have been struck down in the High Courts and in the Supreme Court because of a provision in the Constitution which guarantees minorities the right to administer institutions of their own choice.

There I have given you a quick sketch of the Hindu attitude to Christianity, and particularly to conversion. No doubt, conversion always remains a human right, even before it can be considered a right of the Church but, as you can see, we are dealing with a delicate problem, a matter of Hindu sensibilities, and we Catholics can ill afford to ignore these aspects in our missionary work.

### 3. *Inculturation*

One of the obstacles in our missionary work is the perception people sometimes have of Christianity as a foreign religion. And this, despite the fact that Christianity has existed in some of our lands for a few centuries. St. Thomas the Apostle is believed to have come to India and established Christian communities that even today call themselves “St. Thomas Christians”.

The reasons that account for the “foreign” nature of Christia-

nity in our Asian countries are many: and they are mostly rooted in mission history. I do not intend to go into these reasons here. My concern instead is about what we are doing today to break out of that mould and to incarnate the Christian faith in the cultures of our lands.

No doubt, in all our churches of Asia, a lot of steps have already been taken over the last few decades since Vatican II to give expression to our faith in the culture of the people. The Bible, the liturgy and the sacraments, prayer, music, art and architecture are among the more notable areas where inculturation has taken place.

But, there is still a long way to go. Let me give you an idea of some of the *difficulties* that we encounter in the process of inculturation.

In our Asian countries, culture is almost always intertwined with religion; it is for all practical purposes a *religious* culture.

Moreover, within each country, you will generally come across a kaleidoscope of *different* cultures.

And, to cap it all, these cultures are not static entities; they are *continually evolving*. And if you were to go by the educated classes or by the younger generation in the big cities, where a new culture or style of living is being forged, the trend is what I would prefer to call "universal" rather than "Western".

Faced with such a situation, it is obvious that inculturation is no easy task.

Still, the process has got under way and perhaps nowhere is the progress it has made more noticeable than in the area of the liturgy.

Today we make use of indigenous languages and music. In India, for example, we may wear a saffron shawl instead of a chasuble, use a tray instead of a corporal, oil lamps instead of candles, and a simple incense bowl with a handle instead of a censer. We have special Masses approved for the Christian celebration of Indian festivals, like, for instance, Masses for Christ the Light of the World and of Christ the Wisdom of God, a Mass for harvest festivals, and special Masses for the national feasts of Republic Day and Inde-

pendence Day. We also make use of the non-biblical readings of other religions in our prayer and worship.

However, there are several problems and questions that stand out in the very inculturation of the liturgy; and I think, it is a good thing to take a look at them because they give us insights into the kind of difficulties we run into in practically all other areas of inculturation as well.

For instance, liturgical inculturation is seen as primarily the work of a few experts, who then endeavour to get the other members of the Church to adopt certain indigenous styles of worship. Inculturation, we know, must be the expression of the community's life and mature within the community itself (cf. *Redemptoris Missio* #54). The work of experts is certainly needed, but the people must come to feel the need for an inculturated way of worship and be at home with the changes proposed. Otherwise, as has happened in India, the movement meets with suspicion on the part of a sector of the laity, and even opposition at times.

Similarly, we have come to realize that in a pluri-cultural nation like India, it is not possible to have a set pattern of the liturgy for the whole country; hence, with the acceptance of a certain liturgical pluralism, the responsibility for liturgical adaptation has now been devolved by the Conference to the Regional Councils of Bishops.

There was a move at one moment to have the non-Christian scriptures read in the Christian liturgy, but that was eventually put on hold by the Conference of Bishops. And rightly so because it would have been hasty and premature to launch the Church on a particular course of action when there is still no theological consensus on the relationship of other religions (and consequently, of their books or scriptures) to Christianity. Here you can perceive the need that is being felt for study and scholarly research. We are already taking the first steps in this direction: we Salesians have a Missiological Institute in Shillong, and the Divine Word Missionaries, an Institute of Indian Culture in Bombay. Likewise, there is a Catholic Research Center at Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, and a Cen-

tre for Research and Encounter in Sri Lanka. Still, much more remains to be done by way of study and reflection to assist the Church in the delicate process of inculturation. Inculturation cannot remain a mere adaptation of externals, but must enter into the thought-patterns and value-systems of the people.

Again, by concentrating our inculturation efforts chiefly on the liturgy, we seemed to consider the liturgy as the means whereby to bring the Christian people to inculturation in all the other areas of their life. But, the liturgy is never in the order of means; it is an end in itself. I would see inculturation in the liturgy therefore as the culmination of an inculturated life, or at least progressively keeping pace with the inculturation that takes place in daily life. It is obvious, then, that a lot more of inculturation remains to be done, and perhaps more urgently, on a number of fronts other than the liturgy, as, for example, in the formation of Church personnel, catechesis, the study of language and literature, life-style, "incarnation" among the people, and insertion in the mainstream of national life.

Lastly, we must recognize that inculturation is not always well accepted by people of other religions. In Thailand, the Buddhists and the Thai government oppose it. They simply see it as a ploy to gain converts surreptitiously.

Sometimes the question is asked whether inculturation as a process of missionary action should not be subordinated to liberation. It is argued that inculturation without involvement with the less privileged people in their struggles results in an inculturated Church identifying with the elitist culture of a Third World country.

I remember what a visiting Dutchman once told me after he had seen an Indian-style liturgy in a religious House. "Doesn't that kind of liturgy smack of compensation?" he asked. He meant that since we religious are not living on the level of the poor people of India, we salve our consciences by celebrating the liturgy in Indian style, and so feel we are one with them. That was a rather harsh and excessive comment to make, but the point he was driving at was correct. There should be no dichotomy at all between incultura-

tion and liberation; in fact, true inculturation takes the socio-economic reality of people into account, and in Asian countries the vast majority of the people are poor. From this point of view too, it follows that real inculturation is not possible if it does not assume social and political implications.

Another question that arises at times is whether we have not misplaced the focus of our inculturation efforts. Considering the deep religiosity of our people and the esteem in which a life of contemplation is held in the Asian religions – it is enough to consider the number of monks and ascetics in all the Asian religions – it is argued that we will not make much headway in evangelization unless and until we are able to bring out and develop the contemplative side of Christianity. No doubt, efforts are being made in this direction through what are known as “ashrams” – there are about 40 of them in India – but the fact is that the contemplative life has not caught on in a big way among Catholics in India and in the other Asian countries.

Inculturation is not an easy process. It requires a great sense of balance, which means: avoiding the two extremes of alienation from one's culture and its over-estimation; living the faith in close harmony with one's cultural traditions and at the same time in communion with the universal Church.

Perhaps I could close this section with an example to show up the difficulty of inculturation on the practical level. In the field of architecture, very few of our churches are built in the Indian style. But then, how does one go about transforming a temple (dwelling of God) into a Church (gathering of God's people)? Moreover, Indian religious architecture has consistently made use of stone. To use stone today to build a church would be a costly affair. At the same time, how would one go about using the latest building teches and material (like concrete) in a strictly Indian style of architecture?

#### 4. *Inter-Religious dialogue*

Closely connected with inculturation is what is known as “inter-religious dialogue”.

Way back in 1966, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India established a Commission for Dialogue with Other Religions. Since then, we have witnessed a growing number of inter-religious meetings and “live-together” sessions in India.

I am told that in Thailand, our own Fr. Ulliana used to hold a regular and fraternal dialogue with the Buddhists.

In Sri Lanka, on the occasion of feasts like Wesak for the Buddhists and Deepavali for the Hindus, the National Commission for Dialogue publishes messages in all the secular newspapers and greets all the adherents of other religions, expressing the joy and solidarity the Catholics feel with their non-Christian brethren.

On an Asian level, the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) has conducted about ten Bishops’ Institutes for Inter-religious Affairs (BIRA) since 1979: these have been mainly study-sessions for bishops and priests to assist and strengthen inter-religious activities in Asia.

These are only a few examples of what is taking place in inter-religious dialogue in Asia today. Still, we have to admit that we are only at the beginning, taking our first steps, and that we have a long way to go. In fact, inter-religious dialogue is a fairly new undertaking for our Churches in Asia; it presupposes a changed outlook on other religions, an acknowledgement of the presence of “seeds of the Word” in them. And because of our positive frame of mind towards those whom we consider our brothers and sisters, we relate to them, we share with them, and we learn from them.

Through dialogue we become aware of our own shortcomings, and acquire new insights and inspiration to practise our faith better. We break down the walls of prejudice that exist, and while we come to love and respect those of other faiths, we in turn are loved and respected by them. We not only begin to admire the working of God’s Spirit in our non-Christian brethren, but they too come to



be enriched by what we share with them of the treasures God has given us in Jesus Christ.

I think there are several points that need mentioning here. In the first place, the major religions of Asia do not attach as much importance to doctrines, or have an elaborate doctrinal system, as Christianity. It is not that they do not have doctrines or that they consider them unimportant. Rather, they are fundamentally experience-oriented religions: they do not equate religious experience with doctrinal belief. Truth, for them, can never be fully "en-fleshed" in propositions or formulae. Instead, it is something that appears and is grasped intuitively as we grow in wisdom. Hence, we should not expect too much from intellectual dialogue or give it that much importance.

Secondly, the easiest and best area for inter-religious dialogue seems to be the practical field of common social concerns such as peace, justice, freedom and brotherhood. Korea offers us a good example of Catholic priests, Protestant ministers and Buddhist monks working together for a democratization of the political system. All religions in the world, we know, share certain basic moral values, such as the dignity of the human person, truthfulness, love, forgiveness, freedom, justice and peace. And so, it is on this practical level of praxis rather than theory, morality rather than doctrines, that we all experience the deeper unity of mankind which transcends all religious denominations.

Thirdly, inter-religious dialogue is most challenging and rewarding at the experiential level, for religious experience constitutes the deepest dimension of religion. It has always been a problem to penetrate to the deepest level of any religion, to reach those invisible realities of faith, hope, love, fortitude, joy and mystical union. When a Christian conveys to his interlocutor what Christ means to him as the centre of his life, and when his interlocutor speaks to him about what it means to him to live his faith – this is the kind of sharing that brings people of different religions closer together. At the same time, we cannot forget that the reality we are all sharing with one

another is the same God, known and experienced differently by each religion.

(Cf. Hee-sung Keel, *The Unity of Ultimate Reality*, in: *Living and Working with Sisters and Brothers of Other Faiths in Asia*, Singapore 1989, 65-67).

A problem that crops up every now and then and is the subject of much discussion is the relationship between dialogue and evangelization. As a matter of fact, Hindus and Buddhists are suspicious of dialogue with Catholics – they see it as a clever ruse to convert them. Again, very few of them seem to be really interested in, or feel the need of, dialogue, although many would be prepared to lecture Christians on Hinduism or Buddhism.

On our part, we tend to take an either-or stance: either we dialogue or we evangelize. Probably because of the meaning we attach to the two words, we are not able to see that it is a matter of both-and. Dialogue and evangelization are compatible with each other, and in the present context of mutual fear and suspicion, perhaps the best way forward.

Furthermore, among Catholics, dialogue with other religions is generally seen as a matter for the scholar and the expert, not for the rank-and-file Catholic. By and large, we Catholics tend to keep to ourselves as a community. No, we are not hostile to the others; we communicate with them when necessary, say, in the office or workshop, but there is not much of a movement on our part to engage with them in a “dialogue of life”, i.e., in the daily practice of brotherhood, helpfulness, openheartedness, hospitality and joint commitment to whatever leads to unity, love, truth, justice and peace.

In this connection, we read in the Declaration of the International Theological Conference on Evangelization, Dialogue and Development held at Nagpur in 1971: “In our personal relations with men of other beliefs, dialogue will be truly religious when, however different its object, its partners share a religious concern and attitude of complete respect for one another’s convictions and a fraternal openness of mind and heart. Religious dialogue, therefore, does

not necessarily mean that two persons speak about their religious experiences, but rather that they speak as religiously committed persons with their ultimate commitments and religious outlook, on subjects of common interest". (J. Pathrapankal, ed., *Service and Salvation*, Bangalore 1973, p. 7).

Apparently, the crying need of the hour is to *form all the members of the Church to engage in dialogue*. Such a formation will entail: a deeper grounding in, and love for, our Christian faith, a learning to appreciate the workings of God's Spirit in other religions, and a training in the principles and methods of dialogue.

For instance, a Catholic who intends to enter into a dialogue with a member of another faith will invariably ask: In dialogue, should I speak of my belief in Jesus Christ as the full and final revelation of God, as the Way, the Truth and the Life, or should I pass over this belief in silence or play it down so as not to give offence to my interlocutor? And, if I believe that in Jesus Christ I possess the full Truth, then how can I engage in a search for truth in dialogue with my non-Christian partner? Obviously, these and other such questions have to be answered satisfactorily before a Catholic can be launched in the field of dialogue. But more than this, I believe that stress ought to be laid today on formation to dialogue as a life-style, which means: living in harmony with people of other faiths, having an open attitude to other religions, sharing religious experiences and working together with people of other faiths.

And for those of us who are so accustomed to preaching to others, we have to remind ourselves that preaching, while still meaningful in its proper context, remains eventually a monologue, a one-way traffic, and that is why a better way of proclaiming the Christian message today is by sharing our Christian religious experience with others in an open and friendly atmosphere.

To move the Church in India forward in this direction, the CBCI Commission for Dialogue and Ecumenism recently produced a handbook entitled "Guidelines for Inter-religious Dialogue". In it

are laid down the theological bases for dialogue, and practical guidelines are offered for both "interior" dialogue (i.e., instruction and prayer, by which we come to know and appreciate the religious values and categories of other religions) and "exterior" dialogue, which can take any of the following forms: sharing in common enterprises, common study and reflection, sharing in common prayer, dialogue in "live-together" sessions, and participation in inter-religious associations.

### III. SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR A POSSIBLE JOURNEY TO FAITH IN THE CONTEXT OF OTHER RELIGIONS

One of the things that stands out in the missionary situation of Asia is that we lack a comprehensive plan for evangelization in every country. No doubt, now and then we have certain orientations emerging from meetings and study-sessions, but we do not as yet have a coherent and overall strategy which can direct and inspire the evangelizing efforts of all the members of the Church, say, in a diocese, a country or in Asia as a whole.

I do not propose to offer such a plan here, but only to offer some *suggestions* for a possible journey to faith in a non-Christian context, suggestions that could eventually find their way into an overall plan of evangelization.

Let me preface my suggestions with a couple of *preliminary points* which I consider extremely important:

1. I would like to state that I do believe in what the Church teaches us on evangelization. I hold that evangelization is the bringing of the Gospel with a view to transforming man (man as an individual, man as society), and that such a transformation does include conversion.

But, in the non-Christian context, even if the above expressions are correct in themselves, they smack of a certain superiority on our part, and point up a negative view of people of other faiths; the

word “transforming” sounds threatening to non-Christian ears, for it implies that we have what others lack, that others are not what they should be, and that they need to change.

I would much prefer therefore to speak of evangelization in different terms, viz. as “the light and life (of Christ) we seek to share”. This was the theme of a seminar on evangelization in India many years ago, and I believe it is more respectful towards other religions and more positive. (You will appreciate this point especially in the context of inter-religious dialogue where the focus should not be so much on transforming the other as on sharing with the other).

2. Secondly, I believe that whatever be our suggestions, plans or strategies for evangelization, there ought to be an underlying thrust which inspires, governs and unifies all our evangelizing endeavours, and this fundamental thrust is CHARITY.

In the non-Christian context, evangelization ought to be nothing but a work of love. If charity is not the cornerstone of all our evangelizing efforts, then we run the risk of succumbing to human calculation, manipulation, or sheer horizontalism.

Now, this basic thrust of Charity would have to be a *two-pronged drive* – charity among ourselves as a Catholic community, and charity towards our brethren of other faiths.

### 1. *Charity within the Catholic community*

To evangelize others, the Catholic community must grow and live in charity. This it can accomplish in the following ways, and all of them have a bearing on evangelization:

*Strengthening and deepening the faith* of the Catholic community, for charity flows from faith. Our own people must come to experience a joy and pride in being Catholics, sons and daughters of our heavenly Father in Jesus Christ, members of the family of the Church, a people nourished by the sacraments and the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is only when they become enthusiastic about their faith and grateful for what they have freely received, that they will

feel impelled to share their joyful Christian experience with others, and to show them how much God loves them too.

Here I see an important role to be played by the Basic Christian Communities, by various Catholic associations, and by courses of renewal – in short, by all those initiatives which aim at a revitalization of the Christian vocation.

*Creating a caring community.* This means: fighting against discrimination among ourselves on the basis of caste, social status or nationality; concern for the needier people among us – the poor, the sick, the elderly, the lonely, the unemployed, the marginalized; growing in a sense of co-responsibility for each other and for the Christian community.

We have to remind ourselves again and again that the essence of our Christian faith is love. God has reconciled the world to Himself, making us brothers and sisters to one another in Jesus Christ. When therefore the members of the Church show their love for each other, in the words of Paul VI, “it is by her own manner of life, that the Church can most effectively evangelize the world” (EN 41).

*Praying and worshipping as a family of God's people.* We cannot ignore the fact that the people of other faiths who surround us have a deep sense of God, and this consideration makes us aware that caring alone is not enough to make an impact on our non-Christian brethren.

*Giving expression to the Christian faith in the culture of our people.* To reveal His love for man, God chose to give His Son as a gift incarnate in a human culture. Today, inculturation, in a certain sense, extends the Incarnation. Christ's love for us in Word and Sacrament is “given flesh” in the language and thought-patterns of our people, their prayer-forms and symbols, their art and music. Christ comes to feel at home in their culture.

*Taking a stand as a community on social and moral questions, and injecting our values into the fabric of our society (= the social dimension of charity).* We must defend the sanctity of human life, our Cat-

holic values of marriage and sexuality, our concern for the poor, the weak and the exploited, and our Catholic principles on the nature of the person and of society, the priority of labour over capital, the universal destination of goods and their ownership, the values of justice, peace and ecology, the means to avoid armed conflict, and the solidarity of mankind.

This is best done not only through official pronouncements of the Church, but by launching our Catholic lay people to be apostles in society, committed to the service of the poor, and even holders of public office, should they have the necessary ability.

One of the reasons given for the success of the Church in Korea is its commitment to the cause of social justice, the rights of farmers and workers, and the democratization of the nation.

The fact of being a minority Church should not worry us unduly. The Church has in most cases been a minority Church down through the centuries. That was Israel's role vis-à-vis the many other people who lived on the face of the earth; that was the role too of the early Church in the religiously plural world of the Roman Empire.

*Training to communicate the faith to others.* Among other things, this would imply instilling clear ideas about the meaning of evangelization, salvation, the Kingdom of God, the role of the Church in the world, the lay apostolate, an appreciation of other religions, and inter-religious dialogue.

Some initiatives that could be helpful here are:

– studying the Acts of the Apostles: there we find that the evangelizing mission was seen and lived as a community commitment, a responsibility of the local Church;

– creating an awareness of the situation and needs of the Church in different countries, including one's own;

– keeping in touch with missionaries, praying for them and supporting them;

– setting before our Catholic people the lives of great missionaries – not only a St. Francis Xavier, but also a St. Therese of

Lisieux, the patroness of the missions;

– urging our people to be an outward-looking Church, to be generous and sacrificing;

– inviting volunteers to engage in work on a temporary basic in some responsive areas or in some well-planned evangelizing activities.

*Ensuring that the values of the Gospel inspire and shine through our works of the apostolate.* We are aware today of how enormously important is the *climate* of a school, hospital or any other work. The climate takes in everything: persons, space, time, relationships and activities.

Accordingly, we recognize the need to promote in all our works a climate that is permeated by the values of the Gospel. As the document on *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* indicates, “From the first moment that a student sets foot in a Catholic school, he or she ought to have the impression of entering a new environment, one illumined by the light of faith, and having its own unique characteristics” (# 25).

In practical terms, this means that he experiences at firsthand a sense of community, a deep pervading presence of God, an atmosphere of joy, a serenity of relationships, a feeling of concern for those who are poorer and weaker, sentiments of duty, fairness, honesty, and hard work, a spirit of service and a commitment to work for a more just and society. No doubt, these are all human values, but they become Catholic (and evangelizing) when the inspiration and spirit behind them comes from Jesus Christ and His Gospel. In this manner, we are able to give everyone a daily experience of Christianity, of a faith lived in action, and this is certainly one of the most effective ways of evangelizing available to us.

The success or failure of our works of the apostolate is not measured by the number of conversions we have been able to secure – after all, conversion remains a free gift of God – but by how far we have been able to affect the way others think and act, their value-systems and criteria of judgement, and to bring them more in line with the Gospel.



Of course, to evangelize in this way requires that all of us, including our Catholic teachers, recognize and live our *vocation*, viz. that of being educators to the faith: there is, we know, a world of difference between instructing and educating, and between educating and educating to the faith.

Finally, *redoubling our efforts to promote a greater openness and dialogue with the other Christian churches*, and, to the extent possible, taking part with them in joint initiatives of prayer and the apostolate. We recognize today that the witness of our charity and holiness must not remain confined within our Church, but must embrace the other churches as well. We realize that the divisions among us are detrimental to our work of evangelization, and especially when prejudices and misunderstandings exist and are even voiced in public.

## 2. *Charity towards our brethren of other faiths*

By growing in charity as a Catholic community we are certainly bearing witness to our non-Christian brethren of the reality of the Gospel in our own lives – and this is already an evangelization.

But it is not enough. We must also take some direct and positive steps to reach out to the believers of other faiths. Such steps, if they are to have any evangelizing effectiveness, must aim at bringing *them* to experience how much God loves them in Jesus Christ.

But, since God has chosen to make use of human channels by which to communicate His love, this experience of God's love in Jesus Christ will only come about when the charity of Christ moves *us* in such a way that *we* love them deeply and personally as our brothers and sisters, notwithstanding the fact that they belong to other faiths.

Our love for them may not always result in making them Christians – faith always remains God's gift, not ours – but we love them *because we are Christians*.

What are the concrete ways by which they could come to experience the love of Jesus Christ through us?

Here are a few suggestions that echo the first two steps in the process of evangelization according to *Evangelii Nuntiandi*:

– Wordless witness

*Accepting our non-Christian brethren as they are*, that is to say, whatever be their faith and beliefs, their views and feelings towards us. Love always means accepting the others as they are, just as we were accepted by God, sinners though we were.

*Appreciating the workings of God's grace in them*, recognizing in them “the rays of that truth that enlightens all men” (*Nostra Aetate* # 2). Hence, we show them that we esteem their religions and we seek to understand them; we acknowledge with joy the many good values they profess in their lives.

*Breaking down the distance between them and ourselves in the matter of culture* (= *acculturation*) and taking steps so as to avoid appearing as a threat or as strangers to them; for this purpose, we attach special importance to learning and adopting their language, custom and mentality.

*Establishing a warm, personal contact with our non-Christian brethren*, reaching out to them in genuine friendship and warmth, treating them with respect and love, making them feel at home with us, and taking part in joint ventures with them that promote better understanding and closer cooperation. We Catholics cannot and should not attempt to form a ghetto among ourselves to the exclusion of the others who are not of our faith. As a matter of fact, in recent years several groups of religious men and women have chosen to live in the midst of the poor people in the slums of the big cities and in rural areas.

*Joining with them, to the best of our ability, in their struggle for a more just and human life*. Whether they need to be liberated from illiteracy or sickness, poverty or oppression, or any other form of slavery, we assist them in every way we can. And this we do, inspired by and in union with Jesus Christ who came to redeem the world from sin and all its manifestation in the lives of men, and to

build a world where we can live as brothers and sisters in peace, justice and harmony.

*Practising Christian charity*, which comprises solidarity with the poor, involvement with them, volunteering for service to those who are needy, aid for development and self-help projects, and in general, a meaningful option for the poor. We know that right from the beginnings of the Church, Christian charity has been a powerful form of witness to the faith. And in fact, the history of the missions has always been a history of love and charity.

– Proclamation

But, the charity of Christ must reach our non-Christian brethren not only in deeds but also in words. As Paul VI said, “Even the finest witness will prove ineffective in the long run if it is not explained, justified... and made explicit by a clear and unequivocal proclamation of the Lord Jesus” (EN # 22). And indeed it is an exquisite act of charity to communicate to others the Good News that they are loved and saved by God.

But, our problem is that there are many people who will come to a missionary and say, “Father, tell me about Jesus Christ and His Church,” or “What must I do to become a Christian?”

Hence, the challenge we face is to *prepare the ground* through dialogue, gently leading up to an eventual proclamation of Jesus Christ that will be well received and even welcomed.

How can this be done?

*Training them to search for the truth*, wherever it may be found. One of the weaknesses we notice in our Asian countries is the uncritical stance adopted by the followers of other religions towards their own beliefs and attitudes, and sometimes the blind acceptance of false and distorted ideas instilled into them from an early age about the Church or Christianity.

If only we could, say, in our work of education (which is not the same as instruction) adopt a methodology that does not hand out all the answers but helps the pupils to think for themselves and

search for the truth (be it physics, history or in any other subject), we would be preparing them, however remotely, to be open to the Gospel, for we know and believe that the real and full truth about man is to be found in Jesus Christ.

*Bringing them to share their experiences and aspirations, and to discern therein questions of a transcendental nature.* We know that beneath every aspect of human reality, be it the meaning of life or the existence of others, the experience of suffering or the drudgery of human work, the pain of sickness or of death, the discussion about ecology, peace, human rights or socialism, there lie questions about God and religion. We must help our brethren of other faiths to evaluate the solutions they already have to all their questions and problems, and to search for answers that they find meaningful and convincing.

*Pointing out the vaster horizon of the destiny of man and the loving purpose of the Creator in whatever kind of formal instruction we give them* (e.g., classroom subjects, agricultural training, socio-political education), without however diverting the subject of instruction from its proper objective. In other words, in every aspect of formal instruction, it is possible to highlight the religious dimension.

*Making use of well-thought out experiences to form their consciences, especially by instilling values that have a distinct Gospel flavour, such as,*

– the dignity of the person: people of other faiths are strongly attracted to this value, especially when their background has been one of discrimination;

– the dignity of mind and truth: this value has much to say to people who feel frustrated or uncomfortable with an outmoded worldview;

– life as God's gift, entrusted to our creative and responsible freedom – as a counter-weight to a fatalistic attitude prevalent in some Asian religions, like Hinduism;

– involvement in the world and the dignity of work: in other words, an awareness that the world is important in God's plan; we

do not reach salvation by fleeing from reality but by facing up to it and, through our work and suffering, making it more human and the place of encounter with God.

*Purifying and strengthening their religious attitudes and convictions*, e.g., the meaning of prayer, the concept of God, the purpose of ritual, sin, future life, morality, truthfulness, the place of religion in daily living, authority in religion, religious experience, the need of the spiritual and its primacy in our lives.

*Joining with them in prayer*. In a mutual respect for the sentiments of each one, we can pray with the scriptural texts of various religions, join in songs, the use of certain symbols (like flowers), and vocal prayers, and share our spiritual insights and reflections.

*Explaining Christian events, objects, places, gestures and symbols*. While we always strive to underline and reinforce the positive aspects of other religions, we make use of occasions that come our way, e.g., the approach of an important feast to explain to others the event we Catholics celebrate. Similarly, we give them an understanding of certain Catholic practices and symbols they are familiar with, e.g., the cross and the Christmas crib.

*Engaging in inter-religious dialogue*. With respect for each one's religious convictions and without offending or attempting to manipulate the religious sentiments of others, we willingly share our own convictions with them in a fraternal openness of mind and heart, with humility and with a readiness to learn from their religious traditions, values, insights, and experiences. Such a dialogue also helps to dispel some of the misconceptions they may have of our Christian faith. Dialogue can indeed be an eminent form of charity.

*Teaching the Bible*. Some people are quite open to read the Bible and are interested in learning more about it.

A fortnight ago at our Salesian national centre in Bangalore, we had a course in Management for our future Superiors, and one of the professors, a non-Christian gentleman, astounded us all by quoting profusely from Sacred Scripture and drawing up an analysis of the qualities and role of Jesus as leader!

Very shortly, a 39-episode serial on the Bible produced in India will be aired on our national television network.

Wherever therefore we find the openness or opportunity, we should not lose the chance to bring our people into contact with the Bible.

*Presenting Jesus Christ* when we have the opportunity and our people are open to hear about Him.

As to how we should present Him, we have to do it in a way that speaks to our people and is at the same time authentic – Jesus was not just a holy man, not just a guru (teacher), but above all, Someone who saved us!

Personally speaking, I would be in favour of presenting Jesus as the concrete expression of the Father's love for the world and each one of us. So great was this love that He became one of us in our humanity, and endured the pains and sufferings of the poor and oppressed. But through all this, he brought about a new way of living as sons and daughters of the heavenly Father and as brothers and sisters to one another (the Church), people committed to serve God and neighbour in truth, love and justice. In this way, He launched us on the way to building a universal family around God forever in heaven.

Similarly, we would have to present the other truths of our faith (sin, grace, salvation, etc.) in a way that is appealing and easy for our hearers to understand, making use of their language, examples, signs and symbols as far as possible.

Finally, when God's grace touches a person and induces him to accept Jesus Christ and His Church, we are only too happy to *prepare him for baptism* and to welcome him into the embrace of the Church. We know that we cannot separate the Church from Christ; hence, the full adherence to Christ must necessarily include an acceptance to belong to the Church. We must also ensure that the newly-baptized Catholic finds a genuine welcome into the Christian community and comes into contact with a life that is good and fer-

vent, despite the inevitable imperfections which are a part of human frailty.

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To evangelize in the face of non-Christian religions is a daunting task, and the missionary Church is struggling to find a suitable and effective way to meet the enormous challenge. In his recent Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, the Holy Father singles out Asia as the continent “towards which the Church’s mission *ad gentes* ought to be chiefly directed” (# 37; cf. also # 40).

Indeed, there is a ferment in Asian society today – a desire for freedom and human rights, justice and brotherhood, a growing awareness of the dignity of women, and a quest for a better life. With more than half the population made up of youth, Asia is heading towards rapid changes in the near future.

As we approach the Third Millennium, though there are many great challenges and problems to be faced, we can only hope and pray that, if we can capture the opportunities the Lord opens to us today, we may one day witness the joy of our non-Christian people as they come to accept Jesus as their Lord and Master. We trust in the Holy Father’s prophetic words, “God is preparing a great spring-time for Christianity” RM # 86).