

WORKSHOP: EVANGELIZATION IN THE WORLD CHURCH

The moderator's presentation emphasized the Incarnation as the theological point of departure for our understanding of evangelization; also for our understanding of the Church as an instrument of God's word in the world. What God has done in Jesus of Nazareth is paradigmatic for what the Church is supposed to do among the peoples of different times and places. Instead of using such terms as "adaptation," "indigenization," "contextualization," or "inculturation," it is most appropriate to speak of the "incarnation of Christianity" throughout the world. This terminology is consistent with the usage of Vatican II, Paul VI and John Paul II. The focus is not upon aggregates of individual persons as though they existed outside of their historico-cultural situations.

"What matters is to evangelize . . . cultures not in a purely decorative way by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to their very roots . . ." (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, 20). But this can be done only to the extent that the cultures are accepted and assumed by the Church in accord with the original incarnational model; only to the extent that the new Christian communities are allowed to come forth among each people in the terms of their respective historical contexts and their own cultural enfleshments. No cultural system is foreign to the Holy Spirit; nor is there any reason to believe that the Spirit speaks more efficaciously in Judiac, Greco-Roman, Teutonic, Gallic, Celtic, or Anglo-American terms than in African, Indian or Chinese terms. What is most needed in the Church today is more pluralism: not less. "Real pluralism is the most profound unity," as Pedro Arrupe said during the 1977 synod in Rome: "The crisis of unity, in many cases, is due to insufficient pluralism which fails to provide the satisfaction of expressing and living one's faith in conformity with one's own culture."

As an instrument of this incarnational mission, the Church, reaching out to the whole world in its rich diversity, must also empty herself of her ephemeral historical accretions and cultural baggage; thus opening herself to ways of understanding and modes of expression that were not hers previously; thus humbling herself in order to assume, experience and celebrate new life among the nations; thus becoming, however gradually, a world Church. In other words, the Church is to become completely at home among each people in the same radical and authentic way that Jesus was at home in Nazareth, fully accepting the limitations of the human condition in all things except sin; in this way creating anew from the inside, after the manner of a leaven, through the power of God's "good news" — not by the power of some bad news borrowed from various European folk religions (e.g., Monophysitism, Jansenism, Pelagianism, Polytheism, Legalism, Triumphalism).

Instead of following the way of incarnation, which would have allowed non-Western Christians to be themselves in everything except sin, the Church has been busily establishing throughout the world a network of European spiritual colonies, more or less exact replicas of the European experience, expression and celebration of Christian faith. In the words of Karl Rahner, the Church's missionary activity has been reduced to that of an "an export firm, exporting to the whole world a European religion along with the other elements of this supposedly superior culture and civilization" ("A Basic Interpretation of Vatican II," *Theological Studies* 40 [1979], 716-27.) The problem is not at bottom theological; it is anthropological.

European cultural arrogance, combined with a stubborn ecclesiastical paternalism, has made it almost impossible for missionaries to take a radically incarnational approach to non-Western peoples. Those who have attempted to do so have learned that the way of incarnation is apt to end in crucifixion. Since the time that Paul withstood Cephas to his face on this very issue, the evangelizing mission has been hindered by the chronic ethnocentrism of the sending churches. This has been dramatically illustrated throughout the history of the Church: e.g., Rome's termination of the incarnational approach initiated by DeNobili in India and Ricci in China.

Even after Vatican II, in spite of its clear reaffirmation of the incarnational approach, the mission to non-Western peoples (the vast majority of humankind) is still dominated by what Bernard Lonergan calls the classicist mentality which sees European culture as universally normative. There is nevertheless a hopeful minority body struggling for the establishment of a culturally plural, authentically catholic, world Church. The experience of Vincent Donovan in Africa, set forth in his book *Christianity Rediscovered*, represents this minority, as do the efforts of the so-called liberation theologians in Latin America.

During the discussion period a number of concrete questions were asked with reference to the moderator's presentation and his practical missionary experience over many years in Africa. Almost all of the questions on the level of practice could be summarized in one general theoretical question: whether or to what extent could the Church accept and assume non-Western cultures as totalities, with their various questionable elements, which might (or might not) be transformed or purified only gradually and from within? As a general answer it was noted that God asks his people to turn away only from sin, from what is evil: not from where they are historically or who they are culturally.

So the Church, as an instrument of the one incarnational mission, must meditate more on the patience of God, and His way of making His Word present in the world. New Christians might then be permitted to be themselves in everything except sin. Adequate time might be allowed for questionable cultural elements to be transformed or purified from within through the leaven of the Gospel. Further reflection on the historical

enfleshment of Christianity in European cultures, which included an acceptance of such socio-economic institutions as slavery, should give pause to those who demand a more rapid transformation or purification of other cultural worlds.

EUGENE HILLMAN, C.S.Sp.
Newport College-Salve Regina
Newport, R.I.