

MISSION, WITNESS, SERVICE AND THE PROBLEM OF PROSELYTISM

Archbishop Khajag Barsamian

The topic for our consideration at this fourth annual meeting of the International Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches is considerably broad. It covers three major areas that have always been of vital concern for the Church ever since the rise of Christianity or the inception of the faith we hold so dear: Mission as to both Jews and Gentiles, Witness as in the *kerygma* or the proclamation of the faith, and Service especially through the ecclesial ranks as of the Diaconate. The second part of our topic, “the problem of Proselytism,” is largely a contemporary issue, an acknowledgement of a predicament that seems to run counter to the “mission” of the Church; indeed, a paradoxical juxtaposition when we consider the first and last words of our topic side by side.

1. Mission

The Church’s mission is the same as the Church’s commission, the great commandment with which Matthew’s Gospel closes and which is the marching order of the Church: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (28:19); so too the order of Jesus to his Disciples before he ascended to his Father, as recorded at the beginning of Acts: “You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (1:8). Thus our witness begins at home, to our people, in our respective countries and abroad. We also bear witness to the world, even to our enemies.

We should persevere in seeking new ways and means of closer collaboration in carrying out our common mission of evangelization, as circumstances of time, place and culture permit. As the Church in the world, we have a mission to challenge government decisions that are contrary to the Christian charter of peace; to remind ourselves and our faithful, and our elected representatives as well, of our affinity with the poor and the oppressed; and to cry out with victims of religious persecution anywhere in the world. And given the environmental concerns of our times, as stewards and guardians of God’s

creation – for the redemption and restoration of which he came, to advocate concern and care for the earth and its inhabitants; for the Gospel teaches opposition to the ways of the world, those ways that contribute to its corruption.

2. Witness

It was Jesus' commandment that his followers should be his witnesses. The great characteristic of the witness is that the person has to speak at first hand, what one has personally seen and heard and what is known from experience to be true. This we have wonderfully stated in the prologue of the 1st Epistle of John: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – the life that was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it..." (1:1-2). The Apostle goes on to declare in the prologue that the point of his testimony or witness is that we "may have fellowship" with one another, and enter into that fellowship with the Father and the Son Jesus Christ (vs. 3).

St. John had a twofold burden for his believing community: that they should know the basics of the Christian faith and, based upon that, how to relate to one another as well as to the world. Notice his reaffirmation of faith in statements introduced by the phrase "this is...":

- (1) "This is the message (i.e., the Gospel)... that God is light" (1 John 1:5). "For this is the message... that we should love one another" (3:11).
- (2) "This is the promise... eternal life" (2:25).
- (3) "This is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another" (3:23).
- (4) "This is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be propitiation for our sins" (4:10). "This is love... that we keep his commandments" (5:3).
- (5) "This is the victory... our faith" (verse 4).

- (6) “This is the testimony of God, that he has borne witness to his Son” (verse 9).
“This is his testimony, that God has given us eternal life” (verse 11).
- (7) “This is the confidence... that, if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us” (verse 14).
- (8) “This is the true God and eternal life,” referring to Jesus Christ, the Son of God (verse 20).

St. John reduces the *kerygma* of the Gospel to a twofold message in his 1st Epistle: “God is light” and “God is love.” The applied theology of these two cardinal teachings is that they ought to manifest themselves in the loving relationship among believers. Johannine theology knows no other witness to the world. The apostle says, in effect, that there can be no outreach without in-reach. Based on the theology of 1st John, we dare say that our ecumenical fellowship could well be our best witness to the world.

The building of community and fellowship, more so through our joint ecumenical endeavors, means that we make others’ conditions our own; that we mourn together just as we rejoice together; we weep together just as we delight in each other. This community of faith, the Body of Christ, advances the Kingdom of God through its commitment to love and truth, the light of God. It draws others into relationship with the Lord, the personified Truth in our midst.

Notwithstanding the inherent joy of witnessing, there is often pain and suffering in witnessing, and these are inherent in the very word *marturia*. Jesus was clear about the cost of discipleship when he gave charge to his disciples to witness for him (Mt. 10). Jesus himself paid the ultimate price as he bore witness before Pontius Pilate (1 Tim. 6:13). Following in the footsteps of the Lord, we too have borne our witness and have suffered the cost of discipleship. Our Oriental Churches have traveled long and faithfully in our respective, historical journeys along the *Via Dolorosa*.

3. Service

Witnessing is a form of sacrificial service, just as sacrificial service is a form of witnessing, indeed its ideal form.

Our view of service grows out of the biblical command to love one's neighbor, which Jesus links with the command to love God (Mt. 22:34-40). This constitutes his divine will for the ethical conduct of his followers, whereby they become his approved disciples. St. Paul, who received his message from the Lord, wrote the same thing. "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law... Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom. 13:8-10).

No wonder, the favored word for service in the New Testament is *diakoneô*, for it carries a stronger approximation to the concept of service with love. Jesus himself brings dignity to service, as he says: "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve" (Mt. 20:28), and as he demonstrates in the reversal of roles, when those who have served are themselves served by the Lord (Lk. 12:37; 22:27), who condescends not only to wait at table but also to wash the feet of his disciples. We therefore serve because the love of Christ and his example constrain us more than the command. Service is, in effect, integral to our mission and witness, indeed the most tangible part of both mission and witness.

Jesus placed a variety of activities under service: such as giving food and drink, extending shelter, providing clothes and visiting the sick and prisoners. The notion of service embraces the full sense of active Christian love for others. We serve Christ by serving others, beginning with our neighbors: understandably, not only our brothers and sisters in the extended household of God but also those outside, including the "Samaritans" (Lk. 10:29-37). Such service is a mark of true discipleship (Mt. 25:40; Jn. 12:26; 13:35). Christian service is inspired by – and oriented to – the Gospel; it defines the mission of the Church and is, in turn, defined by it.

We also serve him through the advancement of social justice, human rights, and world peace, just as we emphasize the need for individual salvation and cry out against the decline in moral standards among the public.

The Church collectively and administratively ought to practice what it expects of the faithful to do individually, personally. The Church ought to be caring, giving sacrificially, serving indiscriminately. If I may dwell on the synonymous use of the word “service” for “liturgy” in the English language, allow me to remark that our service to God, our worship, is incomplete without serving the people of God. After all, the Greek word *leiturgeô* means serving God publicly and public service to the people. While we acknowledge all humanity as the people of God, our understanding of the New Testament compels us to begin with the household of God, the community of faith, the believers – by way of propinquity: from our brothers and sisters and on to the rest of humanity.

4. Proselytism

Christian service has as its goal the initiation and strengthening of faith in our Lord; it has no ulterior motives, no hidden agenda such as proselytizing – a recurring word in our former dialogues that requires no definition.

There is substantial concern on the part of many of the clergy in the Oriental Orthodox Churches about the Roman Catholic Church’s proselytizing activities in areas where the Christian populations are at least nominally members of the home Orthodox Church. Such activities are perceived – whether rightly or wrongly – as encroachments, endeavors on the part of the stronger to engulf the weaker, especially when times are dire for the latter communities. Some of our clergy suspect Catholic designs to eventually see our Oriental Churches become what the Uniate churches are today. Perhaps part of our mission today ought to be the breaking down of such mistrust. We have come a long way since accepting unity in diversity and have long ago embraced all who confess Jesus Christ as Lord. Let us continue to counter the centuries of separation (and suspicion) through mutual respect and dialogue.

Oriental Orthodox Churches, like our sister churches in the larger Orthodox family of churches, consider Catholic missionary activities in historically Orthodox lands and jurisdictions as proselytizing. Some so consider also the support given to Uniate Churches outside of Rome. In our view, this is an ecumenical challenge for the Roman Catholic Church.

There should be no attempts to encourage Christians who belong to a church to change their adherence. Such efforts to proselytize diminish trust in the common mission and witness of the church, making it a divided mission and witness: one mission and witness for Christians of other persuasions, and another mission and witness for non-Christians. Over and over again, proselytism has been condemned by all churches and at various ecumenical meetings. Yet, unfortunately, it persists.

We seek co-operation, not competition; for admittedly, we are not in a position to compete – nor should we, even if we could. Together, we are the Church, the Kingdom of God upon the earth. We are the object of his constant attention, and it is through us, collectively, that he is working out his purpose in the world.

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