

A Light to the Nations

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We always look forward to something new. Any form of change, by its very nature, draws our attention. It may be a change merely in words, but we look up and listen. It may be a proposal for new pastoral methods, and we are eager to experiment and see if they work. It may be a discussion on new ideas and the need for a new theoretical foundation in some area of our work, and we are absorbed in the very novelty of the entire matter.

We can even be so excited about new things, that we lose our bearings and fall for the latest. But we can also avoid such exaggerations, and be discerning and selective, and become capable of integrating the *new with the old*, adding fresh potential to the proven worth of prevalent traditions. In this process an entire apostolic venture we have in hand may be totally transformed for the better.

Human society is in constant evolution, and humanity's collective perceptions and their varied local expressions are always changing. No sooner do we think we have said the last word on any topic, than it is challenged by other savants who base themselves on other findings, and who call for further reflection. While we have sworn to keep striving for the best, we suddenly notice that we have strayed a great deal from our goals. *We need to evaluate.* How far have we as missionaries diverted from our professed objectives and goals? Let us re-examine a few areas of our apostolate.

Overcoming Imbalances

Let us take just one or two examples. There are times when we allow our short-term goals to become our all-absorbing long-term or even life-long goals, thus confining ourselves to the margins of the main tasks to which we have made our explicit commitment. There are times too when we allow the *means we use to grow into an end* in itself, e.g. self-sufficiency of our institutions or public recognition for our works, allowing ourselves thus to be distracted from our ultimate goals and compromising our long-term interests. That is why we say, a new look is legitimate.

Are we at our central tasks? Are our priorities correct? Are we able to create the *right atmosphere* around us that is educative, formative, and evangelizing? Are we individually so well-organized, motivated and set, as to perform in proportion to our abilities, training and experience, or are we internally scattered personalities, under-performing in reference to what we are able to do? Do our communities enjoy cohesion, inner strength and intelligent guidance? Do we put our ministries in healthy relationship among themselves within the dioceses and provinces in which we work? These and similar questions may be relevant.

Bridging Distances

When distances between our professed intentions and actual reality grows, we begin to move forward with a limping foot. Let me hastily refer only to a few possible instances. We claim to be at the service of the "poor", the "poorest of the poor", the "needy", the "less privileged". But if at some stage of the development of our works we find that a major section of the people we serve are not in any sense poor....and even, over the years we have lost touch with poorer communities and have not retained even the skill to come on their wavelength, we shouldn't be surprised if people around us grow cynical about the ideals we claim to uphold.

The same may be said about the way we live out our *poverty*. If people don't notice even a trace of sacrifice, adaptability, accommodation to hardships, happily forgoing several conveniences in life, we need not be surprised that people make demands from us monetary or otherwise. We need not be surprised if our words do not carry convincing power, since people have seen that what we say does not generally correspond to realities. The same about *celibacy*, and the freedoms we take and the prudence we do not take. The same too about *obedience*; we know that people in the secular world accept the word for its ordinary meaning. The same further about *common living and collaboration*, and the joys and rewards attached to such a noble experience. If sharing life and work with others is something terrible, we will not derive the needed stamina to do our work and to face the difficulties that come on our way in the apostolate. If certain religious codes of conduct and evangelical style of functioning do not qualify our life, we live without the support and protection we deserve and need.

When distances grow between claims and realities, between professed intentions and actual performance, we are bound to lace cynicism on many fronts. Some expressions of it we have already witnessed around the country. We called them "atrocities against Christians". And truly they were atrocities. But when we come closer to some of them, we discover how easily they could have been avoided with a bit of prudence, a measure of authenticity, just being what we say we are. I would not like to generalize. But of this we are certain: we grow shallow, turn weak, exhaust energies, lose effectiveness, miss direction, cease to impress, fail to recover, until the above mentioned distances are bridged.

Giving priority to People

Let us pursue the matter further. A missionary is happy to keep himself/herself available to people. Getting closer to the masses is a pleasure and a privilege. For a person who is evangelically bent, human beings occupy the centre of his/her attention, love and care. They certainly have precedence over financial security, personal comforts, rigid timetables, vaulting ambition, and longing for self-fulfillment. When we are inwardly *committed to people* under our pastoral care, we become creative in finding resources, discovering unlimited energies and developing innovative ideas in their behalf. When an apostolic team finds pleasure in pursuing such goals, God sends them help through unforeseen channels. Financial resources and human support come like God-sent surprises.

Mother Teresa did not launch her mighty undertaking in behalf of Calcutta's poor because someone assured her of unflinching support. Her commitment to the poor was so evident that people vied with each other to come to her assistance, including a Marxist Chief minister. The more we keep our eyes fixed on our *evangelical goals*, the more creative we become in finding our way towards them, and the greater our chances of attaining them. Resources can always be found for a sick person in the neighbourhood, needy children in the hostel, a good book for someone interested in the faith, an extra bit of time for religious instruction or spiritual guidance, some additional energy for hearing confessions or reaching out to homes and villages, because our goals are clear ...and they are dear. People and their needs come first. They certainly before structures, and well before our own carefully planned and meticulously drawn up lime-schedules.

Experience will prove that the greater the *risks* you take in behalf of people (I am referring to prudent risks not irresponsible ones), the surer you are to get done what you want; for, it is God's work, and in such a case, even a failure becomes a success. And further successes lie ahead.

Giving attention to what is central

We are too often lost in the midst of what is peripheral and ephemeral. Much apostolic energy is wasted on *ego-struggles*. Even legitimate collective pride of a Diocese, Institution or Province, when exaggerated, can become a stumbling block, and distract us from what is central. There is hardly any need to be grabbing when glory for a work well done is being shared. Very often people take note of what we have done precisely because we make no claims for it. A good work is a reward in itself. No matter who gets the glory for it, we rejoice.

Today, we grow apologetic about what inspired our founding fathers. Some think mottoes like "Ad majorem Dei gloriam", "Da mihi animas", "save souls", etc. oldish and outdated, but those Giants of Faith who launched immense missionary ventures or founded congregations knew what was central to their work: sharing of the Faith and *spiritual animation* of believing communities.

Let us take the example of an educational institution. I would not like to think that academic excellence or good performance in sports, games and other extracurricular activities are in competition with our religious services. It is not as though under-performance in these areas of educational activity is a sign of keen interest in deeper issues. On the contrary, it is precisely by getting young people to do such things well that we give glory to God. But there ought to be a healthy relationship between different activities, one stimulating the other, so that what is central remains always central. Everything else must contribute to unity and meaning in the one central task of announcing God's Kingdom.

Being Creative

Creativity is important in our apostolate. Do something new. Do the same thing in a new way. Stir your unconscious. In your community discussions, bring out something new from your collective unconscious. Draw from your experiences, but go beyond. As a Church group, *diversify your ministries*. Can all your creative thinking lead you only to opening another English Medium School? Can there be a Bible School? A training centre for social workers? Something in the line of communications? Publications? Social activities? For Catechists' training? Some form of activity untried still?

Be creative in building, in the construction of presbyteries and religious houses. Seek advice. Be creative in developing and utilizing the land you own. Be creative in your house arrangement, not only keeping it neat and tidy (alas, how fast our new houses grow dusty and old, and begin to decay for want of maintenance!), but beautiful and attractive. Be creative in organizing your scholastic year, your time-tables, examinations, your feasts, your retreats, decoration of the church, organization of church functions, visit to the villages as a missionary, relationships with people, services to youth or women. Be creative in learning to control your temper, to forgive, to make up after quarrels, to begin all over again. *Be creative* from year to year doing something refreshingly new and inspiring.

Being Effective

Unfortunately too little *intelligent planning* goes into our work, into our missionary effort: too little personal thinking and community reflection. Almost all of us are under-performing for failing to bring our God-given genius to problems. That is why problems break us. Let us only take the example of the VHP threat that, we say, looms over our work. Often we try to confront excitement with excitement, anger with anger. Would that we could meet hatred with intelligence, anger with calm reflection! There are times when silence can be more eloquent than loud speech, because it is an intelligently planned spell of silence.

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If we like to get more out of our land, more out of our limited resources, more out of our time, we need to be alert and planning. If we were earning through hard work every rupee that we handle, we would have learned a lot more about *how to spare*. But we grow up as irresponsible children in a wealthy joint family, because the money in our hands correspond to somebody else's exertion, and we remain immature. Skilled hands get several times more from the same amount of money because they organize the work more efficiently.

Budgeting time is an art by itself. *Economizing energies* is an equally important art. Un-planning communities are like people at loggerheads, wasting their precious energies on trivial issues. With a bit more of plan and self-organization, they might achieve tenfold.

Good planners develop a sense of strategy. As a team of apostolic workers, when we open houses with a *sense of strategy*, e.g., when we begin the right type of work in the right place, the work flourishes. If we yield to excessive pulls or tempting financial offers, we rust forever in compensation in the wrong place. When we are choosing a *locution*, if apostolic advantages could inspire us more in making a decision than other considerations, we would not repent even when we have to struggle hard to make both ends meet, because we would be doing just what zealous missionaries have always done in the past. One of the reasons for the fast expansion of missions, dioceses, congregations, and Ecclesial movements was precisely the keen sense of strategy that founders and pioneers cultivated.

As there are strategic places for the growth of the Church and for the effectiveness of a particular church service, so too there are *times* that have a strategic importance. At a particular period of our mission history what gave special advantage may have been a catechists' training centre, or a teacher training institute, or a publishing venture. There was a specific era when a particular work was specially valuable. There are times when a particular activity offers additional advantage over others. We miss big opportunities when we go for more remunerating endeavours, giving them priority over other apostolically rewarding activities.

And last of all there are *persons* who have the capacity to play a strategic role in the progress of any work, including the growth of God's kingdom. Among youth you will find opinion makers who provide the philosophy and vision needed for a youth movement and give it a direction. In the wider society you will notice those who exert special social influence and shape public opinion. Such people are innovators and trendsetters, and can introduce new concepts into their group or society, create or solve major social problems, and change the course of history of their society for better or worse. We should identify such potentially important individuals from among our students and build them to play their legitimate role in society.

We should make it a point to keep close to such gifted persons among our acquaintances and cultivate warm relationships with them. Through them and with their help, we can accomplish unbelievably great things for God and for society. Rather than keep our old students at a distance, including ex-seminarians, we should involve them in ministry, in pioneering ventures and for breaking new ground.

Cultivating relationships

Much of all that I have said amounts to developing and strengthening *relationships with people*. A people-centered ministry is all about relationships. Christ evangelized through his relationships, i.e. with Peter, John, Lazarus, Martha and others. The very personality of Paul was evangelizing; because he communicated, he related with people. So did our pioneering missionaries.

When the right people combine in a ministry together, wonders take place. We begin building our relationships within our immediate apostolic team. Difficulties do arise

when we work together, but we to learn to accept and cope with differences with increasing skill. liven with many difficulties, if we do' not come to enjoy the company of the other members of our team, there is something imperfect about our way of working. On the contrary, if we do rejoice in the *stimulating company* of our co-workers, associates, fellow-travelers, work emerges as a consequence and miracles begin happening. It all depends on the way in which co-workers put their character-peculiarities and competences in complementary relationship and happy harmony. Everyone contributes something, and that something in relationship with others redoubles our effectiveness. There are times when we should concentrate for a while only on or relationships, even forgetting about our work. The work comes as a consequence.

Insertion into a Culture and a Community

When we are working across cultures, as our relationship with those whom we serve grow stronger, we will notice the need for understanding and accepting a new set of attitudes and values. It is true, we can remain total outsiders at a place and in the heart of a another community, especially in city institutions and formation houses. Many do so. That is not certainly conducive to our apostolic effectiveness. Unless there is an insertion into another cultural world and identification with another way of thinking and acting according to the *local culture*, we may look like aliens in a particular society.

Some of the reported harassment of Christians in different parts of the country was also due to a sense of non-belongingness in our personnel in a given situation and a feeling of emotional distance that others came to have about our presence in their neighbourhood. This form cultural insertion we are speaking about becomes even more difficult if we are living and working among many different tribes and ethnic groups at the same time. But with constant effort, careful study, great humility, a learning attitude, on-going reflection and an eagerness like Paul's to become *all things to all men*, much can be achieved.

The need for this cultural insertion urges the use of local cultural symbols in our institutions, participation in local festivities, frequent interactions with the leaders and intellectuals of that society, appreciation of the values, traditions and memories cherished by the people, prizing the art and literature which form the part of their historical heritage, understanding with sympathy the weaknesses that have clung to their society in spite of self-criticism and constant effort and many other similar things. It is not possible for us to communicate the Gospel or anything else in a worthwhile manner without the adequate cultural insertion of the missionary team into the society within which it works.

Certain general suggestions

Before I end this sharing, let me make a few general suggestions. They may be briefly phrased and unrelated to each other. You may take them for what they are worth.

1. Constant *village tours* and frequent pastoral visits to people in their homes still remain very valid forms of apostolate even today.

2. Our boarding houses used to be like '*Seminaries for the Laity*' training convinced and committed lay people, from among whom there arose leaders in our communities and vocations to priestly and religious life. It would be a mistake to divert from this tradition. Children from new Christian communities and those who offer hopes for new contacts also used to be given special preference.
3. Let us give importance to the *wisdom* that comes *from the periphery*. Certain suggestions that come from a junior member of our apostolic team, a student, an illiterate villager, or someone who differs seriously with you, even an actual opponent, may offer you the light you need for the solution of a long-standing problem.
4. Before the launching of any work and when evaluating it from time to time, let us take its *apostolic fruitfulness* as the main criterion for judging its importance, not the remunerative possibilities it offers.
5. It would be good to evolve regional *strategies* for the culturally different areas where your apostolic team works. However, if it has to be useful, we should avoid trying to excessively influence the process of reflection and unduly pulling it in a particular direction, so that there would be objectivity and balance in the final decision.
6. Real apostolic effectiveness and long-term benefit of all people concerned can be ensured only when different Church bodies in an area work in *close collaboration* under the guidance of ecclesiastical authorities. We should faithfully live by this norm.
7. We should spare our energies for the mighty external challenges that seem to confront us today, and not waste them on internal differences. In fact, it is only by building up further our *internal strength* shall we be able to stand the hard days ahead.
8. Joining hands with *members of other churches* also have become important in our common effort for survival as Christians in this country and to be effective in serving the varying needs of our society. In times of crisis, they are more likely to be with us than others. But relationships with them have to be consciously cultivated.
9. Though we cannot afford to spare too much time for formal inter-religious dialogue, it would be fruitful to keep in touch with *persons of social influence* like professors, writers, poets, public leaders, including religious leaders of other Communities. Our schools and other institutions provide situations for encounter, discussion, reflection and for identifying areas of collaboration.
10. Increasingly, *peace-making* has become part of our mission in areas of conflict around us which seem to be widening as years go by, *Ecumenical*

and inter-religions collaboration is absolutely necessary to achieve any success in this area. We will also have to learn to join hands with *Government agencies* in different areas of service. We need to build up a theoretical base for our reflections on peace and even a firm theological foundation. The absolute value of life and the respect that is due to people of other communities and cultures need to be specially emphasized.

11. Persons who have a natural *gift for writing* should shake off their pen-shyness and exercise their skills, not merely in our own publications but also in others, including secular journals. Talented youth should be encouraged and assisted to begin contributing.
12. There are many other types of services that can easily be added to those that we already have in hand, e.g. visit to prisons, hospitals, hostels run by other agencies, collaborating with other youth services. We should build up relationship with related wings of the Government and *committed NGO's* who are engaged in similar tasks we are busy with.
13. We should develop the special skill needed to reach with the Faith to *new tribes* and ethnic groups, and reserve fresh energy, talent and resources for cultivating young Christian communities in new geographical regions and new social groups.

Strengthening our spiritual motivations

There are times when everything seems lost. We run out of our resources, human, psychological, administrative, and financial. Our individual and collective strength and wisdom seem to fail us. We do not know how to proceed. Such anxieties may arise over minor problems, sometimes over major. The difficulties that we face may be those that naturally arise in all human enterprises, or those that others have created for us, or even those that we have unwittingly created for ourselves. No matter what the cause, the nature or the size of the problem is, there is an unfailing source of strength which we constantly under-use.

Being mechanically faithful to our practices of piety is one thing; tapping the rich resources that spring from our constant *interactions with God* is quite another. We must learn to go beyond the routine and the monotony originating from mere set forms. We spoke of being creative. As a community we ought to look out for new ways for relating with God together, till our community becomes a "*school of spirituality*". It seeks to stimulate creativity in every member. There is nothing that encourages creativity in us as our encounter with the Supreme Creator of all things. There is nothing as strengthening as falling back on the Source of all Strength. There is nothing that yields greater joy than our bondedness with the Source of all Joy.