

## MISSION, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND EVANGELISATION

Cardinal Ivan Dias

Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, Rome

“This is indeed the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (*Ps 118:24*). At the very outset, I want to thank His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury for his kind invitation to address this august Conference. I sincerely appreciate your warm welcome, which echoes the words of the psalmist: “How good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!” (*Ps 133:1*).

### CHRIST’S MANDATE TO EVANGELISE

The theme of this talk - *Mission, Social Justice and Evangelisation* - is very appropriate in this year which commemorates the two thousandth birth anniversary of the great evangeliser, converted from Saul, the persecutor of the Christians, to Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles. St. Paul lies buried in Rome, as well as St. Peter, the Prince of the Apostles. When Christian pilgrims visited their tombs in the first century, they would pray for a singular grace: to have the faith of Peter and the heart of Paul (*fides Petri et cor Pauli*). I beg this grace from the Lord for all of us here today.

The subject we are dealing with takes us back to the very dawn of the Christian era, when on the Mount of Olives Jesus Christ Our Lord, just before He ascended into heaven, gave a mandate to His disciples: “Go out into the whole world, and preach the gospel to every creature.” (*Mk 16:15*). He was thus commissioning the Church to continue His salvific mission on earth: “As the Father has sent me, so do I send you” (*Jn 20:21*). And the Father sent Jesus into the world he loved so much “so that whosoever would believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (*Jo 3:16*). In the synagogue of Nazareth Jesus paraphrased His mission by quoting the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, and has sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to bring deliverance to the captives, to give sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are bruised, to announce the acceptable year of the Lord” (*Lk 4:18-19*). We can see here a reference to the close relationship between the mission to preach the Good News and the necessity to be alert to the needs of our brethren relating to social and justice issues. It requires one to make one’s faith to flow into action, to pour out one’s love for God into works of love for one’s neighbour, both friend and foe. This is, in fact, the gist of the New Commandment of Love given to us by Jesus and by which we shall be judged on the Last Day. It is the basis of the “global solidarity” for which Pope Benedict XVI appealed a few weeks ago in his message to the

Food and Agricultural Organization in Rome, and which is referred to in the Holy See's recent correspondence with the British Prime Minister, Mr Gordon Brown.

Jesus, therefore, gave His disciples a challenging mission to renew the face of the earth by spreading the message of His salvation to all humankind. He wished His Church to be dynamic, not static, and to transform humanity from within by being the *salt of the earth, the light of the world and leaven in the dough*, in order to prepare the advent of a new creation, "a new heaven and a new earth" (*Rev 21:1*).

For a disciple of Jesus Christ, then, to preach the Gospel is not an option, but a command of the Lord. It is for this reason that St. Paul exclaimed: "Though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory about: for it is a necessity laid upon me, and woe unto me, if I preach not the gospel" (*1 Cor 9:16*). The urgency to preach the Good News is as true today as it was two thousand years ago, even if some scholars have naïvely declared God to be dead, forgetting that they are dealing with a God who found His way out of the grave; and notwithstanding the opinions of some theologians who blush at proclaiming the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the universality of His salvation, mindless of His stern warning that, if anyone denies Him here before men, He will deny him before His Father in heaven (*Mt 10:33*).

In fact, belief in the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the universality of His salvation has been handed down to us since the beginning of Christianity. St. Peter, who had healed the man crippled from birth "in the name of Jesus of Nazareth", proclaimed to the authorities and people who questioned him that "there is salvation in no one else but Jesus, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which they can be saved" (*Acts 4:12*). And St. Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, says: "In the name of Jesus let every knee bend in heaven, on earth and under the earth, and let every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father" (*2:10-11*).

The missionary mandate thus makes us enter into the very heart of God, who wills all men, women and children to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the Truth. After all, they are His children, the work of His hands, made in His own image and likeness, and Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, died for them all, saints and sinners.

A Christian must, therefore, consider himself as on a "mission" to proclaim the sacred person and salvific mission of Jesus Christ at all times and without any compromise whatsoever, and to spread Gospel values to every heart and home and culture. Our Lord's mandate - ever old and yet ever so new - is incumbent on every Christian; the more so on the leaders of the People of God, the Apostles and their successors, the Bishops.

It might interest you to know that the Roman Catholic Church has a special department in Rome, the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, founded in 1622, to monitor the implementation of Christ's missionary mandate and the endeavours being made to plant the Gospel seed in places where Christ is still an "unknown God". At present, that Missionary Dicastery cares for some 1.100 ecclesiastical units (dioceses and apostolic prefectures and vicariates) spread out in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania. It monitors, inter alia, the process aimed at choosing candidates to the bishopric, the animation of the clergy, the training of future priests and catechists, the formation of religious men and women, programmes fostering the missionary thrust of the lay faithful, including children, and initiatives in favour of the poor and the sick, widows and orphans, the illiterate and the marginalised.

## THE CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES OF EVANGELISATION TODAY

The theme of evangelisation must be considered in the wider context of the spiritual combat which began in the Garden of Eden with the fall of our first parents, in the wake of fierce hostilities between God and the rebel angels. If this context is ignored in favour of a myopic world-vision, Christ's salvation will be conveniently dismissed as irrelevant.

The spiritual combat, described in the Books of Genesis and Revelation, has continued unabated all down the ages. St Paul described it in very vivid terms: "We are not contending against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (*Eph 6:12*). This combat rages fiercely even today, aided and abetted by well-known secret sects, Satanic groups and New Age movements, to mention but a few, and reveals many ugly heads of the hideous anti-God monster: among them are notoriously *secularism*, which seeks to build a Godless society; *spiritual indifference*, which is insensitive to transcendental values; and *relativism*, which is contrary to the permanent tenets of the Gospel. All of these seek to efface any reference to God or to things supernatural, and to supplant it with mundane values and behaviour patterns which purposely ignore the transcendental and the divine. Far from satisfying the deep yearnings of the human heart, they foster a *culture of death*, be it physical or moral, spiritual or psychological. Examples of this culture are abortions (or the slaughter of innocent unborn children), divorces (which kill sacred marriage bonds blessed by God), materialism and moral aberrations (which suffocate the joy of living and lead often to profound psychic depression), economic, social and political injustices (which crush human rights), violence, suicides, murders, and the like, all of which abound today and militate against the mind of Christ, who came that "all may have life, and have it in abundance" (*Jn 10:10*). Two vital institutions of the human society are particularly vulnerable to such a culture of death: the family and the youth. These must, therefore, receive

the special attention, guidance and support of those whom the Holy Spirit has placed as shepherds of the flock entrusted to their pastoral care.

Whereas, in the past, the traditional areas of evangelisation were the heart and the home, health and education, care of the sick and the aged, we cannot ignore the new horizons which must be illumined by the light of Christ. Recalling St. Paul's preaching about the "unknown God" in the Areopagus of Athens, we must be aware of the many modern Areopagoi which need to be evangelised today: among these are notably the mass media, the world of science and technology, of politics and social communications, of refugees and migrants, and others.

Then there is the vast gamut of non Christian religions and cultures, with their varied scriptures and sages, prayers and symbols, places of worship and ascetical practices, each exerting a deep influence on the thoughts and life-styles of its followers. This mosaic of religious and cultural -isms is now complicated by a deep questioning about man's identity and purpose in life, rising from the human and social, as well as the physical sciences. While this soul-searching questioning about human life and purpose could be an appropriate context for the proclamation of the Gospel, many answers being proposed in our post-modern world have become disconnected from authoritative sources of moral reasoning, ignoring the transcendental dimension of life and seeking to make God irrelevant. In the Western world, which is increasingly becoming distanced from its Christian traditions and roots, a context of moral confusion has ensued, and sound Christian ethical and moral principles and values are under threat from various quarters.

In the face of such a world context, we Christians - and Bishops, in the first place - can ill afford to remain on the sidelines as passive spectators, or to fall back on a purely maintenance mode, trying to cling on to worn-out clichés, and hiding our light under a bushel (*cf Mt 5:15*). True to our mission to be "salt of the earth" and "light of the world" and "leaven in the dough", we must be proactive, and not merely reactive, in reading the signs of the times and projecting our missionary thrust, firmly convinced that He who holds the destinies of humankind in His hands has promised to be with His disciples till the end of time. And hence, as a Chinese proverb goes: "Instead of cursing the darkness, let us light a candle".

## **AVENUES FOR EVANGELISATION**

In the first place, we must recall the prime importance of *exemplary Christian living*. Our Lord has said: "By this shall all know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another" (*Jn 13:35*). In the first Christian era, the pagans were attracted to the Christian faith because of the way Christians behaved, and they remarked: "See, how they love each other". This Christian

witness is well described in the *Letter to Diognetus*, written by a Christian apologist in the second century. I deem it wise to quote some excerpts of this Letter, which would make many a Christian pastor to think, and some even to blush:

*“The difference between Christians and the rest of mankind is not a matter of nationality, or language, or customs. Christians do not live apart in separate cities of their own, speak any special dialect, nor practice any eccentric way of life. The doctrine they profess is not the invention of busy human minds and brains, nor are they adherents of this or that school of human thought.*

*They pass their lives in whatever township - Greek or foreign - each man’s lot has determined, and conform to ordinary local usage in their clothing, diet, and other habits. Nevertheless, the organisation of their community does exhibit some features that are remarkable, and even surprising. For instance, though they are residents at home in their own countries, their behaviour there is more like that of transients; they take their full part as citizens, but they also submit to anything and everything as if they were aliens. For them, any foreign country is a motherland, and any motherland is a foreign country. Like other human beings, they marry and beget children, though they do not expose their infants. Any Christian is free to share his neighbour’s table, but never his marriage-bed.*

*Though destiny has placed them here in the flesh, they do not live after the flesh. Their days are passed on the earth, but their citizenship is up in the heavens. They obey the prescribed laws, but in their own private lives they transcend the laws....*

*To put it briefly, the relation of Christians to the world is that of a soul to the body. As the soul is diffused through every part of the body, so are Christians through all the cities of the world.... Such is the high post of duty in which God has placed them, and it is their moral duty not to shrink from it.”*

This is, in short, what Christian witness is all about, and what the world needs today. It needs the credible witness of simple Christians who live *in* the world, with its joys and sorrows, its hopes and tribulations, but are not *of* the world. In fact, our contemporaries believe more willingly in witnesses, than in teachers; and if they do believe in teachers, it is because they are witnesses. Bishops, therefore, should encourage their faithful to “give witness to the hope which is in them” (1Pt 3:15), so as to impress one and all that Christians as a whole are God-fearing, peace-loving and law-abiding. The world today needs Christian apologists, not apologisers; it needs persons like John Henry Cardinal Newman, G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, Hilaire Belloc and others, who brilliantly expose the beauty of the Christian faith without blushing or compromise.

Besides the witness of an exemplary Christian living, there are two ways which could help further the cause of evangelisation today: they are *inculturation* and *inter-religious dialogue*.

*Inculturation* is the process by which the Gospel message is incarnated into cultures and local contexts, so that it is meaningful to the members of a given Christian community and is easily understood by those outside it. This would imply a twofold thrust: to evangelise the cultures and to inculturate the Gospel. Hearing the Gospel can lead to a purifying of cultures, while different cultural expressions can enrich the proclamation of the Gospel message. Evangelisation and inculturation are closely related to each other. In fact, inculturation should be the cultural expression of one's faith and the faith expression of one's culture. One of the great tragedies of our times is the divorce between Faith and Culture. Bishops must, therefore, encourage initiatives which aim at blending Faith and Culture harmoniously together through art, music, dance and liturgy, making something beautiful before God and men.

As for *inter-religious dialogue*, we are all aware that the Holy Spirit works also outside the visible confines of the Churches, and that there exist in other religious and cultural traditions elements which are true, good and holy. We should not reject them, but rather regard with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones we hold and set forth as Christians, nonetheless are seeds of the Word and often reflect a ray of the Truth which enlightens all human beings. Of course, we must always be alert to proclaim Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life (*Jn 14:6*), in whom everyone may find the fullness of religious life, and in whom God the Father has reconciled all things to Himself.

For a Christian then, a dialogue of religions entails the discovery of the relationship between the working of the Holy Spirit in the Christian faith and His persevering action in other religious traditions. It forms a part of the mission of proclamation entrusted by Christ Himself to His disciples. The spiritual patrimony of non Christian religious traditions is a genuine invitation to dialogue, not only in those things which they have in common with Christian culture, but also in their differences. Dialogue, in fact, is never an attempt to impose our own views upon others, since such dialogue would become a form of spiritual and cultural domination; nor does it mean that we abandon our own convictions. Rather, it means that, holding firmly to what we believe, we listen respectfully to others, seeking to discern all that is good and holy, all that favours peace and co-operation.

Inter-religious dialogue can express itself in various ways: in a dialogue of life and action, of ideas and experience. A *dialogue of life* would see Christians exuding the sweet odour of Jesus Christ and Gospel values in their day-to-day contacts with persons of other faiths. *Dialogue of action* would urge Christians to make their love of God visible through concrete deeds of love of neighbour, in

the fields of education and health-care and in socio-humanitarian initiatives in favour of the poor and marginalised. *Dialogue of ideas* would demand a frank exchange of notions on God and religion-related topics which should result in mutual respect and enrichment. And, finally, a *dialogue of experiences* would lead both Christians and their non Christian partners to learn about each other's spiritual practices and mystical encounters.

All of these should be conducted bearing in mind that Christ Our Lord did not come to abolish, but to fulfil, to bring to fruition the seeds planted by the Holy Spirit in the various religious traditions (*Mt 5:17*). Heeding St. Paul's advice to appreciate "whatever is pure, just, noble and honourable" (*Phil 4:8*), we must pick out those values in non Christian traditions which are compatible with Christian thought and behaviour and use them as starting points for a fruitful inter-religious dialogue leading to an explanation of their fulfilment in the divine person of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Some of these starters could be, for instance: a search for union with the Absolute, the importance of silence and contemplation, honesty and simplicity, the spirit of asceticism and discipline, frugal living, the thirst for learning and philosophical enquiry, love of nature, as also compassion for all beings, filial piety towards parents, elders and ancestors, love for the family and solidarity within the community.

### **ECUMENICAL THRUST OF EVANGELISATION**

This presentation would be incomplete if we did not touch on the ecumenical dimension in the thrust for evangelisation which animates both the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church. Someone has rightly said in a humorous vein: "If Christians do not hang together, they will hang separately". It is obvious that a united effort would certainly strengthen the implementation of Christ's mandate to preach the Gospel to every creature. We must gladly recall here the Agreed Statement on *Growing Together in Unity and Mission* published in 2007 by the International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission (IARCCUM). The document thoroughly examines various aspects and prospects (worship, study, ministry and witness) for a common mission thrust. The more Anglicans and Catholics are able to study issues together and to discern an appropriate Gospel response, the stronger will be the impact of their mission endeavours. They could start with the points which unite the two Churches, and slowly strive to clarify their approaches and to perfect their attempts to harmonise their mission efforts.

Evangelisation is the unique prerogative of the Holy Spirit, who needs channels through which He may flow unhampered. This will be possible in the measure in which there is unity and cohesion between the members of the Church, between them and their shepherds, and, above all, between the shepherds themselves, both within the community as well as with the other Christian confessions. For, in the present ecumenical framework in which

Providence has willed to engage the Churches, a unity which binds them together in the apostolic faith is intrinsic to the Church's mission of speaking and spreading the Gospel. Hence, when they are of one mind and heart notwithstanding their diversity, their missionary thrust is indeed enhanced and strengthened. But, when the diversity degenerates into division, it becomes a counter-witness which seriously compromises their image and endeavours to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Much is spoken today of diseases like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's. By analogy, their symptoms can, at times, be found even in our own Christian communities. For example, when we live myopically in the fleeting present, oblivious of our past heritage and apostolic traditions, we could well be suffering from spiritual Alzheimer's. And when we behave in a disorderly manner, going whimsically our own way without any co-ordination with the head or the other members of our community, it could be ecclesial Parkinson's.

### **MARY, STAR OF THE NEW EVANGELISATION**

Among the many points of the Christian creed, which the Anglican Communion and the Catholic Church share together, is their love and devotion to the *Blessed Virgin Mary*, the Mother of God, as has been spelt out in the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission's (ARCIC II) 2005 Seattle Statement: "*Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*".

As, in God's Providence, the Blessed Virgin Mary had the unique privilege of giving the Saviour to all humankind, her assistance would be indispensable to evangelisers who seek to continue her mission of giving Christ to the world. She is the Star of the New Evangelisation. Besides being a subject of religious piety, she can be called upon to teach Christians how to be truly Spirit-filled and Spirit-led by imitating her singular virtues of *Fiat*, *Magnificat* and *Stabat*: *Fiat*, saying "yes" always to God's plan for us; *Magnificat*, praising God for His many mercies to the human family; and *Stabat*, living our Christian commitment with courage, coherence and perseverance till the very end. These three virtues can be powerful incentives to genuine Christian living and strong antidotes against whatever opposes it. And since Mary, the most blessed of all women, is profoundly revered even by persons of other faiths, she must be considered an important point of reference for inter-religious dialogue as well.

The role of shepherds which Bishops are called to play in the Church requires that they continuously discern whether their pastoral endeavours are inspired by God, or motivated by human criteria, or prompted by the Evil one. In this the Blessed Virgin Mary should be their model, guide and intercessor, to teach them to have "the mind of Christ" (*Phil 2:5*), to discern His presence, His word and His will, and to avoid being cunningly deceived by one's ego or by

God's adversary and ours. This is important for the spiritual combat in which we are all engaged.

In a beautiful poem entitled "The Robe of Christ", the famous poet Joyce Kilmer explains how easy it is to detect the devil when he "comes in his proper form" and to drive him away with the Sign of the Cross, but how difficult it is to discern the genuineness of a robed Christ who appears with a sad face, a crowned head and wounded hands and feet. He turns to Mary for sure guidance, for "Christ's Mother knows her Son". She tells him: "This is the Man of Lies, disguised with fearful art; he has the wounded hands and feet, but not the wounded heart".

In communion with the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the Angels and Saints, I commend this Lambeth Conference to God Almighty, and I pray that, through it, He may shower countless blessings on the Anglican Communion all over the world. With Cardinal John Henry Newman, an important figure for Anglicans and Catholics alike, I join you in praying the Holy Spirit:

Lead, kindly Light, amid th'encircling gloom,  
Lead Thou me on!  
The night is dark, and I am far from home:  
Lead Thou me on!  
Keep Thou my feet: I do not ask to see the distant scene:  
One step enough for me.