



Evangelization as Befriending and Building Relationships

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Abstract: In today's world, relationships in every aspect is collapsing. It is being measured in terms of money and production. The bold words of Pope Francis "Ours is a battered church. It is a church in a battlefield" assumes great importance and throws a great challenge to the whole church and to the entire human society. It is in the battlefield and when we are wounded and battered that even the helpless enemy becomes a friend and people begin to care for each other. That is the beginning of true evangelisation, where we begin to reach out to others and build bridges.

Keywords: Relationship, befriending, Pope Francis, poor, dignity of labour.

The most often heard and said words today are "I have no time," "I am busy, I shall get back to you". This applies to most people in every part of the world, in every walk of life. The race for success, the zest for excellence, the rush to outshine others and the cut throat competition that envelopes life in general, place people on a nonstop run. Parents have no time for children; husbands and wives have no time for each other, children have no time for parents and for their siblings. Priests and religious, men and women chose to minister to others too have been affected by this. They have no time for prayer, for the Word of God, for the community activities but

are affected by the standards set by the contemporary society. No one has the time to stop by and look at the wounded, the fallen, the defeated, the weak and the needy.

A father of three, recently was sharing with me his painful experience where the children look up at him only when they need money. In other words to many children the parents have become a portable ATM machine. Unfortunately, they were not made to realize that ATM will give money only if it is deposited earlier in the account! Relationships in every aspect is collapsing, it is being measured in terms of money and production. The bold words of Pope Francis “Ours is a battered church. It is a church in a battlefield” assumes great importance and throws a great challenge to the whole church and to the entire human society. It is in the battlefield and when we are wounded and battered that even the helpless enemy becomes a friend and people begin to care for each other.

Despite all that Jesus taught about His mission and the mission He left to us of being witnesses in words and deeds, and the renewed calls from the church to reach out to the people. Sadly, there are some in the church who confuse others through their opinions. They teach that we need not proclaim the Good News, we should not disturb others and so on. Even if many share such opinions, the Lord’s teachings cannot be altered. They are eternal. They are for all times and places, for all races and nations.

We call the Words of Jesus, the Good News. Every person has a right for the Good News. In this age where there is so much confusion, chaos, fear and exploitation, the need for the Good News is more than ever before. The daily reports that we get of the world matters convey to us more frightening, bad, shocking news than good news. Wars, communal clashes, missing planes, planes and trains blown up, rape, murder, robbery, bribery, unjust punishments, manipulated judicial judgments etc. haunt us making us wonder whether humanity itself

has been replaced by animality! These are but symptoms of a sick society. The absence of love, care, concern and willingness to share is the sickness. The society does not need preachers who are mere poachers feeding on the poor people, it does not need apothecary who have a remedy for everything but men and women who like the good Samaritan in the gospel, like Veronica who broke lines and wiped the face of the condemned Jesus and Mother Theresa in our own times can get down to the wounded, the aged, the orphan, the leper and all the marginalised and tell them not in words, but through courageous actions “I love you”. This language of relationship is understood by all even the most insensitive. In their teachings the three recent Popes tell us very clearly that “we cannot give what we do not have”.

By Evangelization I mean something much broader than the *Mission ad gentes* and the new evangelization. I feel, in many cases we have stooped far below in our relationships than the pagans or barbarians of old. Something worse than paganism and barbarianism has gripped our communities. While strongly believing in both the mission ad gentes and the new evangelization, I feel that we need to work on re-establishing the snapped ties.

1. In the Beginning

The Book of Genesis shows us an enviable life situation. Gen. 2: 15-25 presents a picture of perfect relationship. God, Man, woman and nature. God makes man in His own image, finds him happy with nature and everything in nature. But the loneliness he experiences impresses God and He provides man with the perfect companion, whom he welcomes saying “this at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh”! the book adds, “for this reason man leaves his Father and mother and becomes one with his wife”. The Lord walks in the garden in the cool of the evenings and man and woman who are such

a part of nature and experiencing such unbroken relationship with each other that even nakedness does not embarrass them.

When we talk about the establishment of God's kingdom, evangelization etc., what else can we mean than to establish this unbroken relationship between human beings, human beings and the whole of nature and all these leading to God, who is able to freely mingle with them? Just as Eve wanted to be wiser than God and live better than Him, fell to the vileness of the evil one, the desire to excel, to outdo others, outshine others, to have more degrees and possessions and positions blind most of us we fall victims to fanciful theories and pernicious invitations which may appeal to us in moments of thoughtless and in the absence of serious reflection. Once this begins, we make every effort to hide from God, from each other and from the society itself. We withdraw, mental, spiritual and physical ailments begin to haunt us and we push ourselves down into the valley of death from where a return is possible only if we become humble enough to admit our mistake and to restore broken relationships. Like our ancestor, most of us like that courage and humility and we indulge in a blame game where every one around, everything in nature and God himself gets blamed.

It is true that with the advancement of psychology and sciences, a lot of people are helped and a lot of healing process has been initiated and accomplished. At the same time, it is frustrating to hear many people finding flawed shelter under these very instruments of help. Many people these days fail to admit their sins and failures and weaknesses. They always find excuse for gross blunders and violations of natural laws of life and relationships and blame it on parents, on the circumstances when they were conceived, when they were in their mother's womb, their childhood and so on. Lack of responsibility should not be tagged as 'force of circumstances'! Jesus, in a number of instances made it very clear to His listeners that

we should not blame our ancestry but accept our own failures and reconnect ourselves with God and people.

Every page of the Old Testament presents us with instances of broken relationships and how they are restored. The history of Israel is one of a chain of such events. In other words, the breaking of relationships is not the issue but the refusal and failure to re-establish and reconnect. If every man and woman is humble and bold enough to say a bold “*mea culpa*” and do one’s part, there will be no more broken families, fragmented societies, misguided youth who pose great threats to families, lives and property. If the right relationship is established in society through the power of the Lord not through human manipulations, girls and women will be safe on our streets, the deserving will find jobs and helps, as the Prophet Isaiah said, “the lion and the kid will lie down together”.

2. In His Days

Jesus in His public ministry taught and worked a lot of miracles. In all these, never for once did he try to promote himself or to go against the society or its system. He used the harshest words possible against the rich and the powerful but never a word against the sick, the sinner and those marginalised by the society. He was bold enough to dine at the house of Levi and Zaccheus and say out loud “It is the sick who need the doctor not those who are well” and “I have come to call sinners”. He was bold enough to challenge those who brought the woman caught in adultery and to stand in her defence. He was not afraid to be seen alone with the Samaritan woman at the well and make the public declaration of the water of life. Much against all calculations, the Samaritan woman sees the new way and the entire village accept him not because she told them but they experienced his presence. A new bridge is built, a new community is won.

The marginalised had a special place in Jesus ministry. The woman who was healed of bleeding who was excluded from the society, Jesus making a hero out of the Samaritan who came to thank him from the ten lepers who were healed (Lk 17: 11-19), the transformation that came in the woman who was a sinner (Lk 7:36-50), the assurance to the woman who anointed his feet in the house Simon the Pharisee were all loud and clear points of the new manifesto he was presenting. “Go into the whole world ...” (Mk 16:15), Jesus still challenges us. But our lack of availability, our lack of preparedness, our fear, our shyness and above all our not wanting to be seen as disciples lead us to our hesitations, our new theories, our taking shelter behind the various explanations against proclamation and evangelization leave us lethargic, what the Book of Revelation calls “neither hot nor cold” (Rev 3:16).

3. The Disciples

We live in an age of elections, choices, selections, going for the best, setting goals and looking for the star. It is against this background, we find Jesus leaving his church to a bunch of fishermen, who today form one of the lowest strata of the human society especially in India. Economically and in many other aspects they are poor and unprepared for leadership. Jesus did not conduct a selection process or an election process. He just appointed Peter to lead the church. He called Saul of Tarsus the greatest enemy of the new way to be a greater missionary than even Peter. He inspired the doubting Thomas to travel the farthest all the way carrying his message.

Interestingly neither Peter nor Paul, neither Stephen nor any of the early apostles and church members were taught theology, philosophy, logic, psychology or any of the allied subjects. They had never heard of software and hardware, they had no classes in management, they had never been to forty days retreats and one year courses, but had just attended a few

talks but accompanied and lived with Jesus on his mission. That prepared them for their task. They had no fear, no shyness, no hesitation. They were able to stand up and ask the highest authorities of their days; “can we stop telling what we have seen and heard?” “It is not through our power but by the power of His name that this blind man stands before you healed”. They had seen and heard and the Lord and his message had become a part of their lives. No wonder Paul could say “woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel”. In his eternal ode to love in Corinthians he makes it clear that love surpasses all (1 Cor 13).

Coming down to the days after the apostolic days, we find convinced men and women who dared to stand for Jesus and establish the new order. Francis of Assisi was called to rebuild the church from the level of spiritual decadence it had fallen into. His was an immediate yes and embracing a life against the expectations even of his family. Ignatius Loyola and a host of others heard the inner call and had the emphatic answer YES. Like Peter and Paul, they have changed the world. In a time not very different from ours, a world turned topsy-turvy by the industrial revolution and the moral degradation and poverty which resulted from it, the number of families and youth that it adversely affected, a young Priest from Turin, who could have been bitter all his life because of the hostile situation he grew in, boldly came onto the streets, literally swimming against the current and became the father of the youth on the streets. Don Bosco who wanted to be a missionary in some distant land gave more missionaries to the church than he could ever have dreamt of. I am sure that the even the lowliest follower of Francis, Ignatius or Don Bosco and all the great saints who made a mark on the church are more qualified than them today. Leaving the so called Christian countries aside, in a multi religious country like India, the alumni organizations of these groups, consisting mainly of non Christians have been so active and have contributed a

lot to building a better society by being willing to reach out to the needy. This was possible only because, their educators built up a healthy rapport with them and inspired them. In spite of the mightier, better equipped and numerous institutions, the efficacy of these in transforming lives is obviously much less because of the lack of personal contact and inspiring presence among them by religiously motivated leaders among them. As I move around and meet some of the senior leaders in Arunachal Pradesh, who decades ago studied in Don Bosco School Dibrugarh, still speak about a certain Fr. Visentin. I have not known him. But they say, he never taught them in school, he was the Parish Priest always moving around in the villages but whenever he was back home, he spent a lot of time with the boys, playing with them, chatting with them and listening to them. The relationship he had established with them left indelible impressions on their minds.

To put all these into a nutshell, the Apostles never missed a chance to relate with people of all kinds so that their Lord would be known. Philip did not hesitate to go upto the Ethiopian's chariot and enter into a conversation. He could have left that stranger from a foreign land to himself. Paul never missed an opportunity to get in touch with new people, new groups, venturing even into the areopagus or public spaces.

4. In Our Own Days

Whatever be the conclusions drawn, the whole world is puzzled at the disappearance of the ill fated M 370, the Malaysian flight with full passengers, all because it had lost its connectivity. Hardly any one stops to think of the tragedies that take place daily on earth just because of the absence of proper connectivity. Connection to God, to nature, to family, and in other innumerable ways! In his *Laudato Si* and through his call for "the care for creation" Pope Francis places the need

for the connection at the centre of modern social, economic and ecclesiastical life.

St. John Paul II reached out to every land and nation. His was not a campaign but missionary journeys. The world youth days, mission congresses, reaching out to the poor and children without being shy or afraid, endeared him to the world. The church began to have a less worn out face. The charm that Pope Francis has brought to the world and the acceptance he has gained in the world is a clear proof that our world of broken relationships and broken lives is eager for repairs. Only the love and active presence of the Lord can make this happen. Only a deep love springing from the heart and inspired by the Lord can make us reach out to the others.

Our societies which were deeply family oriented have sadly begun to lose that characteristic. Our tribal societies that were very much community based have unfortunately become fragmented. Exploitation of all kinds abound in all the settings of life. In societies where orphans and uncared for old people were unheard of, these abound today. In communities where suicide was not known, it has become a common event. Places where houses had no doors have to have iron gates today. It is not an enemy from outside who have brought these evils into our midst, but our growing selfishness, our forgetfulness of God leading to ignoring human beings and abandoning relationships preferring gain or profit over them leads to these tragedies. Instead of multiplying counselling centres, speciality facilities and superstructures, it is time that we all embark on a journey along with Pope Francis to evangelise the world. It is not to preach but to live. It is not to give but share. It is not about showing the way but walking the way. We are not expected to give explanations or excuses, we are not called upon to give scientific and psychological solutions but prayer from the heart, that can give meaning to every situation both tragic and joyful.

Like Jesus, we need to be inventive enough to make every interaction of ours catechetical. The interactions of Jesus never sounded jarring to his listeners to viewers but appealed to the core of their heart. At the tomb of Lazarus he communicated the most important teaching of all “I am the resurrection and the life.....” Though he incurred the wrath of the Jewish authorities, all those who were present and many who heard of it became believers. The billions we spend on education, academic, technical, medical and to help the poor, the thousands of man hours that we spend on courses and events produce results that are no where in proportion to the effort and expense. Is it because the listeners are bad? Though not easy to admit, the only reason we can cite is that unlike Jesus who was on His father’s mission, we are not on a mission but on duty.

5. Reaching Out

Reaching out to the people in their own setting has been the greatest success of mission. In the Acts of the Apostles we hear of the people being scattered by the persecution. It helped the spread of the faith. They shared not their sad story to evoke pity in the listeners but shared the story of Jesus. They did not go as defeated people but as people who were scattered with a mission and a people whom the Lord would never fail.

When the Lord said, “I must go to the other villages too” or “there are other sheep that do not yet belong to the fold,” it was not just curiosity that he manifested but the zeal for his father and the urge to fulfil the mission he came to accomplish. His going to the houses of Peter’s mother in law, Levi, Zaccheus and the Samaritan village. These numerous visits he made always ended up with the people coming to the Father. If we put all the miles that the church men and women fly today, if we count all the miles that they drive, if we calculate all the money that they spent on fuel and the precious hours that they spent in social gatherings and community building exercises,

the figures will be staggering and ruthlessly scandalous when we look at the visits of Jesus, of the Apostles and of the missionaries of yester years. The standards we set in our institutions under the name of preparing people for life, all done in the name of the carpenter from Nazareth and the fisherman from Galilee whom the Lord entrusted with the “keys of the kingdom” and the power “to bind and loose on earth”...is often awe inspiring. It makes us wonder often if the boy Jesus were to seek admission in any of our Catholic schools today, he would get an admission. Joseph was the migrant worker, with no permanent address, phone number or email to give, Mary was a village girl and Jesus had never been to a play house or kindergarten. In the interview of the student and the parents both would be disqualified! How many Joseph’s and Jesus’s we must be turning away each year!

The first question asked by our forefathers was “am I my brother’s keeper”? When the Lord chided and questioned Adam and Eve, they only had excuses but no questions. For Cain, who initiated envy and murder, there was no answer but a counter question. Is this enveloping our minds and lives today? Like Cain, is our brother, sister and neighbour a threat to us, an obstacle on our path of self aggrandisement and self promotion?

I would like to conclude in the words of Archbishop Dom Helder Camara of Olinda and Recife in North East Brazil who through his talks and interventions created a slot for the church in the third world at Vatican II and let the idea of the church of the poor develop. “There is no need to talk, thinking is enough. During my vigil I try to recover unity with Christ. And with him I relive the meetings of the past day. I think for instance, about the mother who told me about the problems she has with her husband, with her children, and how hard she finds it to feed them. And, through this very real mother whom I know by name, I think about all the mothers throughout the

world throughout the ages: the poor ones, the rich ones, the happy ones, the unhappy ones. Or I think about the man I saw working in the street, emptying dustbins. I had caught his eye. He didn't dare offer me his hand. I virtually had to force him: Work isn't what soils our hands, friend. No hand was ever soiled by work. Self centeredness is what spoils them. This man, Francisco or Antonio as he may be, reminds me of working men throughout the world throughout the ages. Then I say to Christ our brother, 'Lord, two thousand years after your death injustices are growing worse and worse. Reviewing the day like this, I find time passes very quickly'.