

TO LOVE OR TO EVANGELIZE? (An outline)

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It is an honor and joy for me to join you in this summer university organized by the mission department of the Episcopal Conference of France. I thank Mr. Michel Roy for the kind invitation.

The theme given to me reflects a tendency that we find in today's mentality. Experts talk about the spread of binary thinking in our time. We are compelled to choose one thing only and reject at appear to be alternatives. Either this OR that. Never this AND that. Binary thinking destroys holistic thinking. When this thinking enters the Christian milieu, we see one of its manifestations in the temptation to choose between loving and evangelizing as though they were separate from each other and even contrary to each other. It would set an opposition between word and action, proclamation and service, and worship and solidarity, which would eventually destroy both evangelization and the service of charity. For my contribution this morning to your study days, I chose to concentrate on some biblical sources to retrieve its simplicity and freshness.

The Witness of Jesus

According to Mark 1:14, *"After John's arrest, Jesus appeared in Galilee proclaiming the good news of God: 'This is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at hand. Reform your lives and believe in the gospel.'*" For Jesus the proclamation of the gospel includes an invitation to faith and a re-direction of life. The proclamation is active and moves others to act.

Another text that I find instructive is Mark 1:23-28. *"Jesus rebuked the evil spirit: 'Be quiet! Come out of the man!'. . . All who looked on were amazed. They began to ask one another: 'What does this mean? A completely new teaching in a spirit of authority! He gives orders to unclean spirits and they obey.'"* Jesus' miraculous action is considered a teaching with authority. His words are not just sounds but accomplish what they signify. His words are active.

Jesus explains the nature of his proclamation in John 14:10. He said, *"The words I speak are not spoken of myself; it is the Father who lives in me accomplishing his works."* As the Son of God, Jesus speaks what he hears from the Father. The works that accompany Jesus' words are also the actions of the Father. The Father is the source of both message and works of Jesus. The Father guarantees that the message and work always come together as a unity.

Given the singular origin in the Father of Jesus' message and work, they do not negate each other but rather shed light on each other. Among many gospel texts, I choose John 11, the raising of Lazarus as a model. In John 11:25-26, Jesus tells Martha, *"I am the resurrection and the life: whoever believes in me, though he should die, will come to life; and whoever is alive and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"* After Martha's confession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God, Jesus goes to Lazarus' tomb and says, *"Father, I thank you for*

having heard me. I know that you always hear me but I have said this for the sake of the crowd, that they may believe that you sent me.’ Having said this, he called loudly, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out, bound head and good with linen strips, his face wrapped in a cloth. ‘Untie him,’ Jesus told them, ‘and let him go free.’” (John 11:41-43). Proclamation, prayer, and liberation from the forces of death form one unified whole in Jesu ministry.

It comes a no surprise that Jesus would give the following instruction to his disciples when he sent them on mission in Matthew 10:7: *“As you go, make this announcement: ‘The reign of God is at hand!’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, heal the leprous, expel demons...”*

N.B. [The Hebrew for ‘word’ is *dabar*, an active and creative word that accomplishes what it intends.)

The Witness of the Apostles and the Early Christian Community

After Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension and the sending of the Holy Spirit, the core of the disciples’ preaching was Jesus, who is the Gospel and the Reign of God in person. In Jesus’ name their proclamation was accompanied by powerful actions.

In the healing of a man crippled from birth, Peter said, *“I have neither silver nor gold, but what I have I give you! In the name of Jesus Christ, the Nazorean, walk!”* (Acts 3:6). In a similar way, Peter tells Aeneas, a paralytic who had been bedridden for eight years, *“Aeneas, Jesus Christ cures you! Get up and make your bed.”* (Acts 9:33). The word proclaimed by the apostles is the Eternal Word of God made flesh in Jesus. St. Paul declares: *“All were created through him and for him. He is before all else that is. In him everything continues in being.”* (Colossians 1:16-17). Jesus’ name re-creates humanity and the world.

As a testament to the how the proclamation of Jesus is tied to the birth of a new family, a new community, and a new humanity, we turn to the description of the early Christian community in Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 44:32-35. They gathered to listen to the teachings of the Apostles, the breaking of bread, and prayers. They shared things in common and ate their meals in common. No one among them was in need. Many wonders and signs accompanied the teaching of the Apostles. Day by day the Lord added to their numbers.

Here we see the interplay of proclamation and the active response that it generates in creating a “society” of compassion, sharing, and solidarity. The active force of the proclamation does not coerce people, nor does it curtail human freedom. People remain free to accept or reject the transforming power of the proclamation of Jesus. This was the experience of St. Paul in the Christian community in Corinth. Due to the division within the community caused partly by factional affiliation with apostles, prompting St. Paul to ask, *“Has Christ been divided into parts?”* (I Corinthians 1:13), their sense of solidarity became weak. The collection for the needy

brothers and sisters in Jerusalem did not get the attention it deserved (see I Corinthians 16:114). St. Paul presented the good example of the Church in Macedonia, who in their poverty showed great generosity for the Church in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8:1ff). But let us note how St. Paul presented the case to the Corinthians. He said, *"I am not giving up an order but simply testing your generous love against the concern which others show. You are well acquainted with the favor shown you by our Lord Jesus Christ: how for your sake he made himself poor though he was rich, so that you might become rich in his poverty."* (2 Corinthians 8:8-9). St. Paul proclaims Jesus again to the Church in Corinth to reawaken solidarity and communion among themselves and with other Churches.

Pitfalls to Avoid

Faith without good works. Faith without good works is exposed by St. James as dead. In his letter (James 2:14) he says, *"What good is it to profess faith without practicing it? Such faith has no power to save, has it? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and no food for the day and you say to them, 'Good-bye, and good luck! Keep warm and well-fed,' but do not meet their bodily needs, what good is that? So is it with the faith that does nothing in practice. It is thoroughly lifeless."* Before misusing St. James' word as an invitation to choose between faith and good work, let us listen to his words about Abraham, the father in faith. St. James says, *"Was not our father Abraham justified by his works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? There you see proof that faith was both assisting his works and implemented by his works."* (James 2:21-22). Faith assists works and is implemented by works: an interplay made possible by the Holy Spirit.

Good works for Publicity. Jesus talks about good works that are not pleasing to God because they are done not to proclaim the reign of God. In Matthew 6:1 Jesus says, *"Be on guard against performing religious acts for people to see."* He singles out fasting, prayer and almsgiving. Religiosity and the poor are used as instruments for self-promotion and public adulation. What is the antidote? Jesus says, *"Do not lay up for yourselves an earthly treasure. Moths and rust corrode; thieves break in and steal. Make it your practice instead to store up heavenly treasure."* (Matthew 6:19-20). He adds, *"Seek first the kingship of God over you, his way of holiness, and all these things will be given you besides."* (Matthew 6:33). In doing good acts, it is fundamental to ask whose kingdom we are seeking and building.

By Way of Closing

Our contemporary world is waiting for a word of "redemption" and hope. But it expects a word rooted in and verified in the authenticity and credibility of the proclaimers' motives, actions, and lifestyle. For us, our faith in Jesus, who is the Word and Kingdom of God in person should shape our solidarity with and service of the poor. Then our solidarity and service will become a living and interpretative word of our faith. We cannot dismiss our need for continuing formation in faith that sustains and is expressed in solidarity.