

NEW EVANGELIZATION APPROACHES: Proclaiming the God Who Cares

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“Caritas Christi urget nos.” (2 Cor 5:14): It is the love of Christ that fills our hearts and impels us to evangelize. Today as in the past, he sends us through the highways of the world to proclaim his Gospel to all the peoples of the earth (cf Mt 28:19)... In rediscovering his love day by day, the missionary commitment of believers attains force and vigour that can never fade away.” (**Porta Fidei**, # 7)

Sing it to them: the love of Christ impels us.

“Go out and search on the highways, look round every bend;
Go to the end of the byways till you find my friends –
All the children of light who never saw the day,
All the sons of the Father, gone so far away;
Go out and search till you find them and bring them
To their home, to their God!

On the day that I died I gave you a word,
Love each one as a brother/sister; but what have you done?
For today what I see are my people chained by fears,
Crying out in the dark but no one hears.
Go out and search till you find them and bring them
To their home, to their God!

On the day that I died I gave you a gift: peace and justice
From my Father, but what have you done?
For today what I see are my people who are poor,
Groaning under a strain no one can endure;
Go out and search till you find them and bring them
To their home, to their God! To their God!

Our students of the mid-1960s and the 1970s used to sing this song with two or three guitars burning with fire. They expressed their relationship with **their** personal God in songs like The Singing Nun’s “I’d like to be like a guitar taut with desire; I’d like to be like a guitar burning with fire.” They loved to sing songs of social and personal renewal at the start of Religion or Theology classes, do song or movie analysis and move into the message of God for the day in Scriptures and the teaching of the Church. They carried their religious values right on to the alumnae Silver Jubilarian Batch homecoming. But there were also jaded students in the 1970s such as one Theology class telling their instructor, “Sister, we’re taking this Theology course only because we’re required to do so.”

In the 1980s there were new songs of religious and social relevance, making it easy to recognize the hand of God in a peaceful exercise of people power. In the 1990s millions of youth and their families sang “Fill the World with His Love.” Seeking to establish ties with the youth of a rural-poor barrio adopted by an exclusive school, a group of students could not establish rapport for months, until recently a group from the barrio high school shyly approached the immersion group for help; they

wanted to form a choir. Not only have they established ties. Singing practice is now a venue for meaning-giving reflections and introducing to them the basics of the faith.

Up in the remote mountains of the Bondoc Peninsula of south Quezon province, one fine day in 1987 I was startled to hear the strains of Rachmaninoff float from a *nipa* hut a stone's throw from my path. "*Kasama yan, Sister, tuwing nagpapahinga, ganyan,*" (It's a comrade, each time he's resting, he does that), my peasant guide explained. If the world's great composers are with him, I mused, can God be far behind? I met the guy by chance and briefly exchanged courtesies several days later in another barrio. Seven years after I unexpectedly ran into him in a small eatery in Laguna. He had left the Communist movement and yes, had returned to the Catholic faith.

From "*Silayan*" to "*Kumbaya*" to "God So Loved the World," "*Hindi Kita Malilimutan,*" and "*Umanhi Ka;*" from Eduardo Hontiveros to Josh Groban, Burt Bacharach to Johann Sebastian Bach, may the evangelized evangelizer let it be known, let it be felt, *madama*, the word of the Lord: "You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything that I heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another." (Jn 15:14-17)

About this incredible friendship, this being chosen, how did it happen, where is it leading to? Humanly inconceivable idea—a God who became human, a limitless Being putting on limitation, born in the smelly company of animals in someone else's stable, died from the most cruel torture ever inflicted by humans and buried in someone else's tomb, rose from death to make you and me live forever. This question and this assertion strike the guts of all the lonely and lovelorn and burdened which is most everybody on this planet, the sweat-smelling, the Great Unwashed populations in cities and countrysides everywhere, all the marginalized people in today's alienating world; this is their gospel. Who doesn't want to be special? But this God-authored *me-special! gospel*, does it come across?

Tell them the story, God's Peopletory – the Chosen People, the Gospel of Jesus, the Church.

Everybody, of whatever age, loves a good story. All messages are best heard, all lessons best learned when in a story. Any Grade School teacher knows that. College teachers don't unless they learned what it's like to be a Grade School teacher. Except Literature teachers and the Read Along readers of Philippine Daily Inquirer; they know, so they are as good as Grade school teachers.

More potent even than songs as a New Evangelization approach is storytelling. But this is not new. It is as old as Homo Sapiens--the Neanderthal Man of Europe or even the older Tabon Man of Palawan who told the story of their passing on to the next world sculptured in a stone jar cover; and the latter-age Mesopotamian or Australian cavemen who etched their stories on rock. The incomparable evangelizing medium of Rabbi Jeshua (Jesus, in Latin) of Nazareth ("What good can come from Nazareth?") is storytelling.

Watch him in movie versions of his life and mission. He just walks and walks all over Galilee and beyond, dishing out stories right and left spiced with his wit and charm while walking his talk, telling all who have ears to hear, and those who don't have, the startling good news that the God of the unburned Burning Bush the sight of whose face is fatal, is *pala* actually a Father with an incomprehensible prodigality and is now facing them as the great miracle-working controversial storyteller from Nazareth,

who is here to save as the hated Samaritan in his parable saved a crime victim, who loves all his friends to death literally, and after rising from death will send the Holy Spirit of Father and Son to work miracles inside them to proclaim that great Good News to all nations. This is the tried and tested way of presenting Jesus and his Gospel to the society of this age.

Why is it that our students at St. Scholastica's College, struck numb by their Theology classes according to most of them, dutifully make their pre-graduation retreat and right after graduation they make a bee-line for a retreat with Bo Sanchez? Watch him on television and learn about New Evangelization approaches. Like Cardinal Tagle, and Karl Gaspar of Davao who never appears on television, he nearly approximates Jesus in vitality, wit and gospel charm, unerring in his pedagogical target. Like them, like Jesus, he hits them where they are at, these non-daily Mass goers and occasional Sunday Mass goers toiling seven days a week to be like the Joneses. For a grassroots theologian like Karl Gaspar walking up and down the mountain paths of the *lumad* (indigenous peoples of Mindanao) or the byways of peasant and fisherfolk barrios with no access to the gadgets of information technology, the time and clime tested audio visual aids are those of Jesus Christ: sparrows and orioles twittering, wild lilies and orchids, wind through the trees, ripening grain, still-clean mountain creeks, stormy seas.

And who can beat the evangelizing charm of Pope Francis who, after praying the Angelus with the crowd gathered before him on July 14, 2013 at the papal summer residence of Castelgandolfo, addresses them, making it personal in acknowledging and greeting every group that came, speaking to them about the Good Samaritan and how his kindness "simply imitates the mercy of God," cites the Saint of the day, St. Camillus de Lellis, founder of the Ministers to the Sick, patron of the sick and healthcare workers, "a man who fully lived the Gospel of the Good Samaritan." He then concluded with something totally un-theological but totally humdrum pastoral: "I wish everyone a Good Sunday and a good lunch!" So Filipino, by the way, so Third World. It is likely that his audience went home telling everyone they knew the good news of how the Pope personally reached out to them, OMG!, simply imitating the caring ways of God. And everything he said. Pilgrims with camcorders, but of course, must have recorded the address. Some netizen was so taken up by it s/he translated the Italian message into English and circulated it on the internet. From a house in a small Swiss village the message got into the information highway unintended, the gospel-ness of it and the gospel witness of his person inspiring people of all walks of life in the Global Village.

There's nothing really new about New Evangelization approaches. They are timeless. They are the old, tried and tested ways of going about the *habilin* of Jesus just before his Ascension: "...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

What is new is the recognition that the former keepers of the tradition, the basics of the faith and its nurturance in the Christian community, lost it as they lost community, having been smothered by the world-view of the northern hemisphere that dominated the global media as the post-modern purveyors of consciousness. In the 1980s Time Magazine featured on one of its front covers a caricature of the post-modern French philosopher saying "God is dead, Marx is dead, and I am not too well myself." In the previous decade the Beatles boasted that they were more popular than Jesus Christ. But the Holy Spirit was powerfully moving in the *ecclesiae* at the grassroots base of the Third World Peoples. They wielded the old, tried and tested ways. That was new to the northern hemisphere. It was new to Rome. We are all familiar with Cardinal Tagle's views. To European, American and Canadian watchers his views, his presence itself was new, spell-binding. Calling him *papabile* was wishful thinking. The Holy Spirit startled the world with a Brazilian pope of the grassroots whose presence to it is spell-binding.

Retelling God's Peoplestory, Mystory, Mystery.

Those of us who can look back on a tradition of praying the Rosary as a family, and stopping on our tracks at 6:00 PM as the church bells orchestrate a whole town's praying the *Angelus* or *Regina Coeli* can see by hindsight how in early childhood we simply, effortlessly absorbed into our wakening consciousness the Story of Salvation, the basics of our faith, with some help from the elders by reciting in unison, wide awake or half asleep (yes, at that powerful alpha state of the brain!) the Mysteries of the Rosary. Some or many of us may even see this as one of the factors of our vocation story. Little wonder that the Filipino nation is *Pueblo Amante de Maria*.

Once upon a time a little Grader named Isabel, best reader of her class, kept stumbling on the words while reading to the class. Finally she stopped and sat down to cry. She was reading the story, "Joseph and His Brothers" retold from Genesis 37-48 by Camilo Osias' **Philippine Readers**. In the public schools of the 1930s and '40s, patterned after the American public school system, religious instruction was officially forbidden due to the separation of Church and state. But creative public school teachers found ways and means. That textbook would still be very useful today in public schools that do not encourage religious instruction.

In the 1950s and all the decades before it Bibles were scarce. Many Catholic schools, ours among them, popularized Bible stories with the so-called Schuster Bible that re-told in storyteller idiom all the narratives of the Old and New Testaments. Students who could not afford to buy books could rent the "Schuster Bible" for a whole school year. It would be a landmark project if CBCP or CEAP were to produce something like the "Schuster Bible" twinned with Bishop Morrow's beautifully illustrated **My Catholic Faith** as a two-in-one textbook for CLE.

The impact of storytelling and re-telling, its capacity to elicit response is reinforced when it is sung as in Psalm 136, or Filipino folk religiosity's singing of the "*Passion*," acted out as in the Oberammergau Passion Play, or Fr. James Reuter's stage production of "The Lady's Lash" or the cinema productions of the Life of Jesus. Much more so when it is both sung and acted out as in "Jesus Christ Superstar." How a student audience winced and hid tears of contrition at a school play presentation of Jesus being scourged, mimed by two student actors in total silence except for the sound effects of lashing!

We have not even touched on the media, both the mainstream and the social media as venues of evangelization. Text it to them, google, blog, twitter it, be-"friend" them, upload/download it on YouTube, make it "like"-able on Facebook. Much has been said and written about this. Or just download Cardinal Tagle's talk to the International Eucharistic Congress of 2012 in Dublin, and to the 49th International Eucharistic Congress in Canada, June 2008; and you get goose bumps seeing how the New Evangelization is Word on Fire. But more than his words, as the international media's "WORLD STAGE" audience appraises his impact, the Asian Cardinal's person himself is evangelizing. The medium is the message, as Marshall Mc Luhan puts it. Or as Sr. Fe Andrea Collantes used to tell her students, "The medium is the massage." Let us get "massaged" at the Philippine Conference on the New Evangelization in October this year.

Suggested Focus for Shared Reflections?

1. Share your own experiences or practice of New Evangelization approaches.
2. Share how someone "massaged" into your consciousness some facet of Jesus' personality or his words.

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