

ECUMENISM WITH EVANGELICALS

Lanckorona: January 23 - 25, 2015

Talk 2: Outer & Inner, Sacramental Signs & God's Grace

In the next three teachings, I want to look at areas of difficulty where there have been major differences between Catholics and Evangelicals and where the Evangelicals present the Catholic Church with an important challenge. With relations to Evangelicals and Pentecostals becoming more important, we can expect these challenges to be more discussed in a positive and constructive way. The first area covers a number of applications, but all concern the relationship between the outer and the inner, between the body and the spirit, between the sacramental and the spiritual.

Evangelical Christians insist on the centrality of personal conversion. They expect a local church to consist of converted believers. They have a problem with mixed congregations where some people are clearly converted, some may be but it is not very clear, and some show no signs of being converted at all. Personal conversion means conviction of sin and a change of heart through the grace of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. Pope Francis has called for a pastoral and missionary conversion of the Church (*Evangelii Gaudium*, para. 25). This means making sure that there is a clear preaching of the Gospel of salvation, a clear presentation of the person of Jesus, and of his saving death and resurrection, of death to sin and rising to new life. "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 6:11). We have to start talking again about sin, not to focus on sin, but so that real repentance can take place. We can expect more encouragement for programmes like the Alpha course.

Evangelical Christians expect every converted believer to give a convincing testimony to their conversion. This is something Catholics can learn. Often Evangelicals expect conversions to be dramatic with a big difference between the "before" and the "after." By contrast, Catholics have often seen conversion as a process. Is this difference something Catholics can learn from or is it primarily cultural? Can conversion happen through a series of small decisions for Jesus or should it be one big decision that changes everything? Before commenting on this question, there is an important principle in ecumenical relations. We have to move from arguing with one another to seeking God's way together, from trying to prove the other wrong to seeking understanding and asking what we can learn from them.

Clearly, Evangelical Christians are more accustomed to people having clear-cut conversions than are Catholics. If we ask why, one answer would seem to be that in general Evangelicals preach the cross more strongly, and call for conversion more clearly. In other words, there is a direct connection between the message that is presented and the experience of people who receive that message. In other words, preach the cross and conversions will happen. Does this mean that every conversion should be dramatic? Evangelicals are more likely to have dramatic preachers. There are some famous examples of dramatic conversions - most obviously the conversion of Saul of Tarsus into Paul, the apostle of Jesus Christ. It was the result of the Lord's direct intervention, not of Christian preaching. I suggest that whether a conversion is dramatic or not is more a question of suddenness as with St Paul and of dramatic change from fanatical opponent of "The Way" into most committed apostle; and reflects how deeply a person was involved in sin and opposition to the Lord. A famous example of Evangelical conversion is John Newton, a slave trader who after conversion wrote the song *Amazing Grace* and was ordained an Anglican priest. That song expresses a common Evangelical sense "that saved a wretch like me."

But in *The Story of a Soul*, Theresa of Lisieux tells of her obedience to the Lord from a very young age: definitely conversion, but not dramatic. A conversion is more likely to be dramatic when it is deliverance from a very sinful way of life.

Evangelicals emphasize the importance of “Decisions for Christ.” At Evangelical evangelistic campaigns, like the Billy Graham crusades, those wanting to give their lives to Jesus are invited to make a decision for Jesus. In a totally different context, the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius are organized to lead to decisions: which master am I going to serve? We can insist on the necessity of decisions without trying to capture everything in an instant. “He [God] always invites us to take a step forward, but does not demand a full response if we are not yet ready.” (Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, para. 153). On the need for decisions, see also saying Yes and on saying No (EG, paras. 78 - 101). But the need to present the Gospel, the need for a clear choice between Jesus and the world (Mammon, Satan, pleasure, power), presents a big challenge to the kinds of Catholic sacramental practice that assume it is enough to take people through a sacramental preparation programme (with more explanation than proclamation).

The Visible and the Invisible

This reflection leads into the important question of the relationship between the visible and the invisible. The differences between Catholics and Evangelicals clearly flow from the differences between a sacramental and a non-sacramental pattern of Christian life. The more positive exchanges between the two now taking place should help everyone to understand better our strengths and our weaknesses. As Catholic and Evangelical practice and theology developed in opposition to each other, the Word of God played little part for the Catholics and was central for the Evangelicals. The Evangelicals were negative towards liturgy and a sacramental faith, seeing this as empty formalism and lifeless ritual. Catholics defended the sacraments as part of the apostolic tradition rooted in the Jewish Scriptures. The renewal of Catholic teaching and life through the Second Vatican Council has led to Word and sacrament being brought together again. But this belonging together of Word and Sacrament has not yet fully reached the popular level of how priests and people think and speak. Here the contact with Evangelicals can remind us always to give first place to the Word. When we promote sacraments without mention of the Word of God, we are promoting external practice without inner vitality.

Evangelical Christians expect to see converted lives. This expectation has intensified among Pentecostals and charismatics, not always in a healthy way. We can challenge each other here. Catholics have paid more attention to numbers and external practice: how many people at Mass? Have people made their Easter confession? So how should we see this in a biblically renewed way? I suggest that it is right to recognize that our inner spiritual condition is made manifest in our behaviour, in our words and our actions, and is often visible to some degree in our faces and our deportment (do we stand upright? Do we look people in the face?). But it is wrong to imagine that we can fully read other people. Obviously, the more alike we are to Jesus, the more we are moved by the Holy Spirit, the better discernment of others we will have. But it is dangerous to assume that we can know all that is going on deep in other people. It is a temptation for truly converted Christians to judge other people harshly. After conversion, judgmentalism may be one of our strongest temptations. We have to distinguish between discernment (see others and situations as God sees them) and harsh judgment. With the light of the Holy Spirit, Catholics have to wake up and recognize that the spiritual state of the Catholic people is often not that healthy. Pope Francis is recognizing this. So he has written: “I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and

missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are. ‘Mere administration’ can no longer be enough.” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, para. 25).

This approach to the visible and the invisible is grounded in our Catholic understanding of God’s action in history, in the Incarnation, the sending of the Spirit, and the coming Kingdom. In the Incarnation, God has made himself visible. People who met Jesus of Nazareth during his earthly life, particularly after he was filled with the Holy Spirit at his baptism and began his public ministry, they could see something of God’s character and holiness before them. With the resurrection of Jesus, and the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the grace of God has been made visible. “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life - the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us - that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.” (1 John 1:1-3). We have seen, we have heard ... but we have not seen everything. We have seen the outward signs, we see something of the spirit that animates these signs, but we cannot see his divinity, his full glory. That will only become visible on the last day, when Jesus comes in glory.

Because Evangelical Christians have focused on conversion of the heart in protest against apparent dead outward religion, they tend to be suspicious of liturgy and sacraments. So they often dismiss all ritual and regard words like “ritual” and “tradition” negatively. The answer to this can only be living liturgy, the liturgy celebrated in faith by priests and people who have experienced a conversion and who love the Lord Jesus Christ. When Catholics demonstrate in their lives a love of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, then the biblical argument that an incarnational faith requires that faith express itself in communal (ritual) acts will become convincing. Here the Catholic teaching that the Word has to be followed by effective signs (sacraments) follows the pattern of Jesus.

Catholic renewal of the liturgy has included a revalorization of the sacramental signs. The traditional teaching is that sacraments are effective as signs, because they are signs. They are signs of faith, of a shared faith, biblical signs renewed today.¹ The renewal of the liturgy is not just a matter of changing some details of a ritual. It requires the renewal in faith of all those celebrating the liturgy, so that the way everything is done is a living manifestation of faith in Jesus Christ. When Catholic liturgies are celebrated in this way, then we will not hear any more talk of dead ritual.

Honesty, Humility, and Confession

When Catholics can recognize that many Catholics do not have a living relationship with Jesus, we have moved out of the pattern of triumphalist apologetics into spiritual reality. This is a major break-through, and it is embodied in the stance of Pope Francis. He gives interviews to the media very readily, and he answers their questions without prior censorship and with honest answers that are not trying to hide anything. This honesty is an essential element in the real renewal of the Church.

The honesty calls for a confession of sin before God. It is not enough to admit that many Catholics do not have a living relationship with Jesus, that they have been sacramentalized but not evangelized. If we recognize this, we need to confess before God as Church that we have failed to preach the Gospel as we should, and that we have been satisfied with

¹ See *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paras. 1114 - 1130.

low standards. There is a need for ways in which we as church communities can express before the Lord our sorrow and our grief over these failures. The child abuse scandals in many countries have produced sincere apologies from bishops and church leaders, though this sorrow has not always found expression in common prayer before the Lord. The Jewish people had this in prayers, psalms and liturgies of lamentation (see Ps. 73, 79; Lam. 1 - 5), particularly in the liturgy of the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippour). The Church needs to rediscover the prayer of lament, as in the Renewal we have been rediscovering the prayer of praise and rejoicing. Originally this was present in the penitential seasons of Advent and Lent, which have now become largely privatized.

A policy of openness and transparency is really necessary for relationships of trust and friendship to develop with other Christians. Some of the problems of Evangelicals and Pentecostals with the Catholic faith come from ignorance and prejudice, but many arise from genuine spiritual insight, knowledge of the Scriptures, and love of the Lord. But openness and transparency apply both ways and must be accompanied by love and respect. The way to Christian unity is by respecting each other and by being open to the work of the Holy Spirit in the other; in the language of Pope Francis being open to reap what the Holy Spirit has sown in another church (see *Evangelii Gaudium*, para. 246). We stop making accusations against other Christians, and we examine ourselves. We encourage them to do the same.