Communicating The Word of God

by J. N. M. Wijngaards

The Word of God is addressed to people, to individuals and communities. To understand what this means in concrete circumstances, consider for a moment the following typical communities in Andhra Pradesh, India.

Mutluru in Guntur District: 1350 persons, practically all Catholics; caste people, mainly Reddy. The village was founded by a Catholic community that goes back to the 18th century; now parish headquarters with primary school, high school and dispensary. Community composed of small farmers; literacy 37%; per capita income a month Rs 32. Personnel: one priest, five sisters, 16 lay teachers.

Kavuluru in Krishna District: of the population of 3000 only 312 are Catholics, baptized in 1974-1975. The Catholics belong to the lower castes: Malas and Gollas. They form their own community. The village can be reached by bus once a day. Literacy 25%; per capita income a month Rs 25, earned as coolie on paddy fields and sugar plantations. Personnel: occasional visits by a priest and a team of sisters, one resident catechist.

Gunfoundry: Catholic neighbourhood in St. Joseph’s parish, Hyderabad city (2 million). The community consists of 160 families, 829 persons; Tamils, Anglo-Indians, Telegus, Goans. Most children attend school: 166 primary, 49 high school, 47 college. Men work in factories, workshops or government offices; women take up casual labour. Average per capita monthly income Rs 63. Attendance at Sunday Mass is low; in spite of a high literacy rate (80%), very few are regular readers of Catholic books or newspapers. Personnel: the parish priest, sisters, lay teachers, members of various apostolic organizations.

The ten dioceses of Andhra Pradesh contain more than 7000 such communities, some old and well-established like Mutluru, many recent and in the throes of formation like Kavuluru. To bring the fulness of Christ to these communities will require, among other things, that they be taken up in a new process of communication between God and man, between one believer and another. This process has many aspects: it includes general education; it presupposes a self-discovery and an awareness of one’s own potential; it demands a discussion of values and a judgement on actual situations. Being a process, such communication will grow only gradually; at first more in some than in others, more in one field than in the next. Being a process aimed at the fulness of life, it will eventually have to involve the community at all levels. Much needs to be done in many different ways before communication reaches the target set down by Paul: “So we shall all come together to oneness in our faith and in our knowledge of the Son of God; we shall become mature people, reaching to the very height of Christ’s full stature” (Eph 4, 13).

Within this total process, one important element that should never be neglected is the effective communication of the Word of God. The other social and educational aspects of the process, however valuable in themselves, lose their Christian inspiration

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and their truly liberating force if the message of the Gospel is not understood and internalised. This is not defending something that missionaries have always done. It is asking for more. The people of Mutilure, Kavuluru and Gunfoundry have to be given access to Scripture itself, to the inspired Word of God. Only then will the Word of God have been effectively communicated to a community when its members can freely draw on it for their own inspiration; when they possess it as a treasury that provides "things old and new" (Mt 13,52); when it is seen to be sharp as a double-edged sword that judges man's desires and thoughts and penetrates to where spirit and soul meet (Heb 5,12). As the Plenary Assembly of the World Catholic Federation for Biblical Apostolate stated in April 1978, "Only through a deeply rooted biblical spirituality can Christians play their specific role in the world and contribute towards the building up of a new society based on Christian vision and values."

During my thirteen-year stay in India I came to appreciate more and more the part which Sacred Scripture should play in building up a genuinely Indian, creatively Christian society. To ensure success, dynamically equivalent translations of the text in the vernaculars will have to be produced; literature aimed at cultural assimilation of the message will need to be published. But most of all, we need to give a better formation to the communicators on whom transmission of the message mainly depends: priests, sisters, lay teachers and catechists. I found that the communication of Scripture is almost a science of its own, with its own principles and techniques. If I report here on some of the initiatives in which I was involved I do so with the hope that it may benefit others engaged in the same kind of work.

Catechizing through story-telling

Early in 1974 Bishop Thumma Showry, then chairman of the Andhra Pradesh committee on catechetics, requested me to find a totally new approach to instructing adult catechumens. I was at the time lecturer of Scripture at St John's Major Seminary and director of planning at Amruthavani Communication Centre, Hyderabad. In the ten dioceses of Andhra Pradesh an average of 20,000 adult catechumens enter instruction every year. The Bishop, who was himself actively involved in giving instructions, had found the current programme highly unsatisfactory. He wondered if a new approach through story-telling on traditional Indian lines might not be more effective.

To understand the situation, it may be worthwhile to briefly sketch the system as it then prevailed. Once a group of Hindus in a particular village such as Kavuluru had expressed their desire to become Christians and proved their determination in concrete ways (for instance, by providing land for a community prayer hut), the parish priest would appoint a catechist to that village for a number of years. The catechist would call people together on evenings twice or three times a week for prayers and instruction. Being normally poorly educated himself, he would rely heavily on the penny catechism of ready-made questions and answers, with the standard catechist handbook for further explanations. His ultimate aim would be to make people learn some of the questions and answers by heart. He would also teach everyday prayers such as the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Creed and the Glory-be-to-the-Father. The parish priest, who typically would have twenty or more outstations and catechumen villages on his hands, would drop in once or twice a month to supervise the instruction and supplement it with his own teaching. During the final months before baptism the priest would come more frequently, examine the people regarding their knowledge and prepare them for the liturgy.
Both the penny catechism and the catechists’ handbook were straightforward translations in Telugu of French books imported by missionaries one hundred years ago. The books fail in many respects. Their scholastic treatment of Christian doctrine, which may have had its use in post-Reformation Europe, is completely out of place in the Indian context. Much of the instruction consists in explaining new terminology specially coined to accommodate the old scholastic concepts. Within the section on original sin, for instance, the converts are presented with more than twenty new terms, many of which have been artificially composed. The word for “original justice” is a Sanskrit compound of twelve syllables: parishudhdhamunubhagyamainasthiti. Unnecessary difficulties arise from the insistence on scholastic distinctions that cannot be readily understood and that have little theological relevance. The words used for “will” and “intellec” are synonymous in Telegu. This preoccupation with notional terms and with making people learn phrases by heart frequently made such instructions a soul-destroying business, not unlike forcing people to eat indigestible glue. There was little regard for the real needs and thinking of the audience; there was hardly any feedback; there was no scope for engaging emotion or imagination. That the system did produce results at all may be ascribed to the commonsense of the priests and catechists who made up for some of the obvious deficiencies by adapting the presentation.

Through the collaboration of the catechetical centre, the multi-media communication centre and a group of theological students of St John’s Seminary, a whole new approach was developed, which received the name of “Mukti Margam” (the path to liberation in God). The approach incorporates some new features, revolutionary from the point of view of both catechetics and communication.

In rural India, story-telling is still an influential social form of communication. Indian tradition possesses a treasure of thousands of stories, preserved in epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and in the thirty-six major and minor Puranas. Professional actors and narrators bring these stories in traditional forms: the harikatha, kathakalakshepam and burakatha. The stories have the outspoken purpose of instilling religious and social values. Indian narrative has another distinctive feature in that it often presents stories within stories. A treatise on moral virtues, the Pancha Tantra, offers a long narration about the animal kingdom which is frequently interrupted with smaller stories to illustrate individual points. Against this background, Mukti Margam was designed to contain twenty-five units, each of which consisted of one main story (from Scripture) and three sub-stories (from everyday life).

To show how it works in practice, consider unit twenty-one on forgiveness of sins. The instruction is based on the story of the leper Naaman who is cured by the prophet Elisha. The story is interrupted three times to allow for explicit instruction on: the need for acknowledging one’s own sinfulness; forgiveness of sins through the sacrament of penance; renewal of life. Each of these three items of instruction is promptly illustrated by a sub-story: about a beggar who became a thief; about Ananias and Sapphira; about the conversion of a rich man who had exploited his fellow-villagers. With examples from the Gospels thrown in, the whole unit is welded into one big story with instructions and illustrations intermingling in true Indian fashion. To tie in with existing catechetical practice as much as possible, each unit leads up to a portion of the prayers that have to be learnt by heart. The first six units, for instance, lead up to successive parts of the Our Father so that the catechumen can associate the Our Father with the stories heard and the lessons learnt.
The whole approach will eventually incorporate the following aids: a catechists' handbook; a parallel correspondence course; cassettes with Telugu Christian songs related to the various units; a series of slides at four key points within the course; posters to accompany the stories of each unit; training courses for catechists in the Mukti Margam approach; dramatised versions of the Mukti Margam stories to be broadcast in the Telugu radio programmes of Radio Veritas. Mukti Margam was launched for experimentation in six dioceses two years ago. It has found a very favourable initial response.

Focus on communicators

A system of communication as outlined in the Mukti Margam approach will have little effect unless we tackle at the same time the formation of those communicating Scripture. From a study of what actually goes on in communities such as Mutluru (M), Kavuluru (K) and Gunfoundry (G), we may identify the following activities:

- reading Scripture in the liturgy M K G
- preaching by the priest M (K)G
- catechumen instruction G
- religious classes in school M G
- Biblical introductions in group work G

In all of these the leader – whether priest, religious, catechist or lay teacher – plays a key role. Success or failure in transmitting the message depends mainly on him or her.

When I started teaching Scripture I concentrated on exegesis as, I am sure, most of my colleagues do. Soon I discovered that religious instructors need to be given much more than static information about the text. I came to see that the lack of training in communication was a serious deficiency in the syllabus. With their heavy emphasis on academic formation, Scripture courses often fail to teach future priests, teachers and catechists how to pass on their knowledge. The students are taught how to think critically, not how to express themselves creatively. They are given information about Scriptural texts, not shown how to communicate these texts effectively to different audiences. An analysis of sermons preached by young priests showed unexpected anomalies. The Old Testament, which constitutes 75% of the volume of Scripture and to which much instruction had been devoted, was hardly ever referred to. The use of Scripture was generally restricted to a thematic approach or a citation of examples. Many priests ignored the new exegetical insights learned in the seminary and reverted to their own high-school sources for ideas and inspiration. It was clear that if the teaching of Scripture was to have any meaning at all, it would have to include a course on its effective communication.

It is not just a matter of communication as such that is needed so that someone good at teaching will automatically do the right thing. There are elements of scriptural communication that require specific attention. Take, for example, the question of narration. It is not by accident that most of Scripture is made up of story. Many religious instructors are inclined to present Christianity in the form of "argumentation", a category that belongs to the realms of philosophy and science. Scripture, however, uses "narration" and by this fact itself places the Word of God in the category of history and experience. It will have to be communicated as such.

We live in an age in which the art of story-telling is said to have been eclipsed and which consequently has been called post-narrative. Perhaps the Word of God has a special task in our age. It could free us from the closed circle of endless speculations...
and put us back where we belong in a history of salvation. Communicators of Scripture should learn how to narrate: not only to present a story well, but especially to bring it in a way relevant to a present-day audience.

To help communicators of Scripture prepare for their task, I gradually developed a course on attitudes and techniques. These include: forms of narration; presentation of portraits; the exposition of motifs; models of public Bible reading; witness and prophecy; theological perspective and other imaginative forms of elaboration. The course has now been published as a book in slightly adapted publications for India and Great Britain under the title: "Communicating the Word of God". Opening a new field, its defects are many and future reviewers will not fail to spot them. My one justification for defending its value is the fact that it grew from a real situation. The techniques discussed and recommended in the book arose from actual experience.

Conclusion

Christian faith has the nature of a response. The Christian believes that he owes his existence and his salvation to a loving Word spoken by God. Both in creation and redemption God communicates. He discloses himself with power and grace. Christ himself meets us as the Word to seal our relationship with the Father through sacramental realities. In theology communication lies at the root of things; it is a privileged concept for understanding God's inner relationships as well as his deeds ad extra.

Coming down from these lofty heights of theological reflection to everyday life, we find that much more down-to-earth forms of communication, too, play their role within the Christian community. Sacred Scripture stands chief among them. It conveys inspired words that may spark off in the believers a living contact with God. It enshrines the sacred traditions on which faith and the Church are founded. It is proclaimed afresh through every generation and provides the source material for every new theology. Sacred Scripture shares the ambiguity of all Christian realities – while possessing a dimension that cannot easily be defined (in as far as it comes from God or leads us to God), it also has dimensions that fall within the scope of ordinary human management.

The Word of God is addressed to people, to individuals and to communities. As in every form of communication, it is the recipients who complete the process and bring it to maturity. Muluru, Kavuluru and Gunfoundry may not be left out of consideration. It is there that the Word of God happens again, there that its meaning is reborn. "But how shall they hear it, if it is not proclaimed?" (Rom 10,14). That is: if it is not communicated effectively?

Notes:

1 The information is derived from case studies undertaken by Jyotirmai, the pastoral planning commission for Andhra Pradesh; unpublished manuscript, Secunderabad 1975.
The catechist manual discussed here is the *Sathyopadesha Vyakhyanam*; my edition Nellore 1950.

Ibid. pp. 124-129; see also: Purvaveda Charitra Sanksepanam (Bible History), Nellore 1947, pp. 6-8.


Mayhew-McCrimmon: *Great Wakening 1978; Theological Publications India, Bangalore 1979.*

**ZUSAMMENFASSUNG**


La communication de la parole de Dieu s'accomplit, selon le cas, dans des situations déterminées. L'auteur, à Hyderabad, a été prié par son évêque, en 1974, de trouver un nouveau début pour la catechêse des adultes. Jusqu'à présent, il était courant d'apprendre par cœur les prières et les réponses du catéchisme, ce qui s'est avéré totalement insuffisant. Ainsi, on adapta la façon indienne traditionnelle de compter des histoires pour une méthode catéchistique et communicative nouvelle qui obtint le nom de „Mukti Margam“ (Chemin de la liberté en Dieu). On développa un manuel pour catéchistes, un cours de correspondance marchant parallèlement, des cassettes avec des chants telegu, des diapositives, des affiches, des cours de formation pour catéchistes et des pièces radiophoniques. Les programmes furent introduits en 1977 dans six évêchés; ils eurent un bon écho. La foi chrétienne est réponse. Dieu communique en création et en rédemption. Le mot Christ exige réponse. Cette expérience théologique joue dans le quotidien de la communauté chrétienne en tant que communauté communicative un rôle dans lequel la Bible se trouve au centre. De façon durable, la Bible se compose de récits et offre des expériences qui veulent, en tant que telles, continuer à servir d'intermédiaire. L'auteur développa à ce sujet un cours propre qui est apparu sous le titre "Communicating the Word of God" (cl: le compte-rendu des livres dans le cahier suivant).

RESUMEN

La transmisión de la Palabra de Dios se realiza cada vez en situaciones concretas. El autor en Hyderabad fue encargado por su obispo en 1974 des encontrar un nuevo método para la catequesis de adultos. Hasta entonces era habitual, pero insuficiente, aprender de memoria oraciones y respuestas del catecismo. Se adoptó el sistema tradicional hindú del narrador de cuentos para fijar un nuevo método catequético, que recibió el nombre de "Mukti Margam" (Sendero de la libertad en Dios). Fue elaborado un manual catequético, un curso por correspondencia paralelo, cassettes con canciones, diapositivas, carteles murales, cursos de formación para catequistas y seriiales radiofónicos. Los programas fueron adoptados en seis diócesis en 1977; encontraron eco positivo. La fe cristiana es respuesta. Dios se comunica en la creación y en la Redención. La Palabra, Cristo, exige una respuesta. Esta experiencia teológica juega un papel en la cotidianeidad de la comunidad cristiana como sociedad transmisora, en la que la Biblia ocupa un lugar central. La Biblia consta en gran parte de relatos y ofrece experiencias que pueden ser utilizadas. El autor desarrolló además un curso propio, que apareció bajo el título "Communicating the Word of God" (ver la Revista de Libros en un ejemplar siguiente).