IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY, EVANGELIZATION AND THE DECADE

By PAT JONES

The secret energy of faith is the sustaining power of the relationship to God.
The spirit master, John Shea

THIS ARTICLE IS A REFLECTION on my understanding of evangelization in relation to spirituality, especially as it has been illumined by areas of my own experience. It seems to me that spirituality is fundamental to evangelization, notably when both are seen in the light of Catholic theological perspectives, and that the relationship between spirituality and evangelization is insufficiently recognized or explored, and therefore little reflected in the ways we approach either in practice. Different traditions of spirituality will doubtless inform understanding and practice of evangelization in varying ways, but since my own perspective, and that of this journal, is Ignatian, I will try to suggest what Ignatian spirituality can offer to an understanding of evangelization that will reach beyond the rather narrow categories and language to which it is often reduced.

Alongside my own experience of Ignatian spirituality, there is also an area of my work experience which has challenged my thinking on these matters. The work for which I am responsible within the Bishops' Conference requires that I take part in a number of ecumenical groups concerned with helping the churches to engage in mission together, and with co-ordination of the Decade of Evangelization/Evangelism at national level. The members of these groups represent a wide range of Christian perspectives, including house churches and evangelism agencies as well as the mainstream churches. They are deeply committed to making maximum use of the Decade, especially by finding projects, campaigns and resources that will extend evangelizing activity. They are anxious to seek Catholic co-operation and shared sponsorship for projects such as a nation-wide noon prayer campaign and local community parties at Pentecost to invite potential enquirers to join in celebrating the Church's birthday.

Frequently, during discussion of projects, campaigns and resources in these ecumenical groups, I have found that my own assumptions and instincts have reacted strongly to what is proposed. I have become wary of evangelization as activism. I am rather anxious that activity directed at others seems to take precedence over discernment and deepening of our ecclesial and faith identity and purpose, and the sense of our whole life as mission which these imply. I have also become worried about where emphasis is placed: there seems more concern about maximizing the delivery of proclamation than deepening the process of how it takes place and evokes response. More energy seems to be given to marketing the gospel than engaging in dialogue in which the gospel is both offered and discovered more fully. Most worrying of all is the tendency to evaluate evangelizing by counting the numbers of people who are reached and who make some initial response. Without denying that conversion has the character of an event for some people, I suspect that at least equal attention is needed to those for whom it is a gradual and intricate process.

As we move through the Decade of Evangelization, I have become less interested in projects, resources and campaigns, and more interested in questions about who we are as communities of faith in a secularized and materialist culture and how we organize our life together in a way that communicates both questions and invitations to those around us. I have equally become convinced of the need to enlarge our theological framework for understanding evangelizing to take more seriously the whole of God's action in the whole of God's world. The fundamental framework for understanding evangelization must be the purpose and activity of God, drawing all people and all of creation towards and into the life of the Trinity. As the Church, we have the task of serving and enabling what God is doing, whilst recognizing that the mystery of God's activity is far greater than we can see or know, and makes all our projects and structures look rather small. But we can be sure that it extends beyond the confines of the visible Church and is probably most likely to be found in the most unexpected people and places.

If this is our framework, our evangelizing activity becomes much broader. We become as much concerned with listening and discernment as with witness and invitation, and the skill or art of evangelizing becomes that of recognition rather than persuasion. It also opens up many other dimensions to evangelization, since it invites us to recognize and serve God's purpose and activity within whole cultures and societies as well as individuals. At its heart, this framework reflects a sense of God's love and desire for the whole world, not simply for adding to the members of the Church or fellowship of Christians.

Recent Catholic documents, notably *Evangelii nuntiandi* and *Redemptoris missio*, draw out the implications of such a broad theological understanding of evangelization very clearly. They describe evangelization as a process with many dimensions, all of which are interrelated, and which are to be seen as 'complementary and mutually enriching'.[1] These dimensions include personal witness through care for others, work for justice and prophetic action, proclamation of Christ, the process of conversion and baptism, the formation of local churches and small communities of faith, the incarnation of the gospel in cultures, dialogue with other faiths and the development of persons and society.[2] The challenge of a Catholic understanding of evangelization is precisely that each of these activities must always be seen in relation to this broader process. *Evangelii nuntiandi* goes even further, saying that partial definitions of evangelization risk impoverishing it or even distorting it.[3]

In the light of this framework and understanding, evangelization does not seem to be about projects at all. Rather, it is concerned with the whole of who we are as persons and as a Church, and how we interact with our world. It is not one category of activity, in which we sometimes engage when we are not doing other things, or which we assign to a special group or committee, still less a special priority only for a decade. It is a perspective which should pervade and offer a critique of all that we do; when we discuss whether Catholic schools should become grant-maintained, when we consider how to use the new Catechism, when we are deciding how to comment on proposed legislation about immigration; in these and other actual situations it offers a central criterion for judgement and reflection: how well does our life and activity in this matter enable the gospel to be known?

It is at this point that the essential contribution of spirituality begins to emerge. The task of discovering how particular aspects of our life and activities can serve the purposes of God and co-operate with God's action is essentially a spiritual one, requiring the gift and skill of discernment and the horizon of the ultimate relationship with God which spirituality presents. The situations which we face as individuals and as a Church are complex; they contain tensions and ambiguities which often threaten to obscure rather than reveal the gospel. It may be an individual journeying through the RCIA who suddenly realizes that she faces a question about whether she can continue working in a Royal Ordnance factory, but realizes also that she may not get another job; or it may be the demand to respond to the election of a British National Party candidate in local elections, both recognizing the evil of racist attitudes and listening to the genuine fears that partly cause such

attitudes. These and so many other situations defy the neat categories that the documents delineate and demand a discernment that reaches beyond moral judgement into the arena of spirituality. They demand that spirituality also is understood in a broad and contemporary sense as not merely about perfection and interior life but rather 'surveying the complex mystery of human growth in the context of a living relationship with the absolute' and seeking 'an integration of all aspects of human life and experience'.[4]

The insights which spirituality offers to the process of evangelization are those which will help to make it sensitive to the dynamics and patterns of God's activity, which are infinitely varied and extend far beyond our perceptions and grasp, whether within our personal lives, within the Church at large or within the whole of society. They caution any tendencies towards activism or grand strategies, suggesting instead the need to pay attention to the hints and guesses of our experiences, to be better at noticing what is already there rather than planning something new. It is likely that this will mean that apparent certainties need to be overturned, and that neat patterns can collapse into chaos and standstill; but there will also be unexpected gifts and illuminations, and even contradictions can uncover truths. The possibility that spirituality offers is that God's call and continuing invitation can be discovered in all of these. Indeed, Ignatian spirituality specializes in precisely this task.

The demands of God's life within us

There is another fundamental contribution which spirituality makes to evangelization, which is concerned with identifying the source and motivation for evangelizing. One of the most compelling phrases in *Redemptoris missio* is where it speaks of the motivation for mission. It says that 'the Church's mission derives not only from the Lord's mandate but also from the profound demands of God's life within us'.[5] This seems to me to suggest that whilst the external theological motivation is fidelity to the gospel task, the inner basis and energy for evangelizing is found in our experience of God's life and the dynamics which that experience uncovers in our lives. Those very dynamics – of knowing I am loved, of recognizing my ambiguities and confusions, of struggling to discover my deepest self and desires, and letting my fears become integrated into 'the more powerful dynamism of love'[6] – are the dynamics of all evangelizing, of all conversion, whether it is concerned with persons and communities or entire cultures and societies.

This means that the primary task I face, if I wish to be an evangelizing person, is not that of how much energy I give to reaching out to other

people to tell them about the gospel, but rather to learn to attend more fully to the demands of God's life within me, and how these transform my self and open the whole of my 'life-world'[7] to the divine life. It is by living truly and fully what I am called to be that I will evangelize, rather than by specific activities. My whole self is my primary way of making Christ known. This is captured in Hopkins' poem:

> Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
> Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
> Selves – goes its self; myself it speaks and spells,
> Crying What I do is me: for that I came.
>
> I say more: the just man justices;
> Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
> Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is –
> Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
> Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
> To the Father through the features of men's faces.[8]

To the extent that I fulfil and act 'what in God's eye' I am, I am drawn into God's life and purpose, and I share in disclosing what it means to other people. This is true of each person, and each community and indeed the Church as a whole. This is perhaps what Paul VI means in the frequently quoted phrase where he says that evangelizing 'is the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize.'[9] It is worth testing this out by reflecting about what takes place in Ignatian retreat. My own experience in the Spiritual Exercises and in shorter retreats circles around two sets of dynamics and their interrelationships: the encounter and conversation with Christ and with the Father, and the exploration of my own self and experiences. I rarely find myself coming away from retreat burning with desire to tell others about Jesus; the experience of that encounter feels too personal and demands a certain reserve; but I do want to live differently, and make different choices and decisions. I hope that my responses to life will in some small ways make the gospel that I have experienced become flesh in my own culture and society as well as in my life, and perhaps people will notice. And if the way I live should prompt anyone to ask me to explain, then perhaps a conversation will follow.

Catholics often struggle to find a style of explicit proclamation with which they are comfortable. They lack confidence because they do not feel that they know enough. And in many evangelism projects, the emphasis is on training Christians to teach people about Jesus. Both probably need to pay greater attention to the source of the desire to

evangelize, which comes from the experience of God's life and its gradually unfolding effects in our lives. The challenge is that of learning to articulate that experience and those effects. This is not easy because we live in a culture which tends to edit out religious language and reduce its scope. The new forms in which Ignatian spirituality is being introduced to people, notably weeks of guided prayer and various kinds of retreat in daily life, have a most significant contribution to make to evangelization.

Irresistible questions

Some time ago, at a parish RCIA meeting, I listened to enquirers describe what had prompted them to seek to belong to the Church. One woman, single and in her forties, explained that when a close neighbour and friend died, she went to her funeral, barely even aware that the church she was entering was Catholic. She had known vaguely that her friend was Catholic, but had never paid much attention, and she had herself never belonged to any church, although she had been baptized in her local Anglican church as a baby. As she sat through her friend's requiem mass, listening to the words spoken and watching the ritual unfold, she found herself transfixed not by the loss of her friend but by what she discerned of the faith of the people present. She said that she found herself thinking, 'Whatever these people have, I want'. Some time later, she asked about becoming Catholic, and was drawn into an RCIA group.

Evangelii nuntiandi suggests that Christians, by the way they live, their actions, motivations and values, should 'stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them?'[10] This suggests that the dynamic in which evangelization begins is that of attraction, not compulsion or fear or psychological need. It is when we are fascinated by an encounter, by some way of responding to life or to other people which attracts us and in some way speaks to our deeper desires, that we find ourselves with irresistible questions. John Shea describes this thus:

> What we immediately experience are the attitudes, outlooks and actions of people towards one another and their situations. If these attitudes, outlooks and actions are of a particular quality, we judge they must be supported and encouraged from a relationship with a deeper reality. But this deeper relationship is for the most part private, unavailable to everyone but the person involved. We may catch him or her at prayer but we cannot eavesdrop on the interior dialogue. Our access to a

> person's faith in God comes mainly from his or her faith relationship toward us, the neighbour. We surmise a relationship to God because of the quality of the relationship toward us. We see the relationship to neighbour; we guess at the relationship to God.[11]

He goes on to explain how responses to life that fascinate us lead us to 'apprentice ourselves' to the people who make them, and then gradually to 'the energizing power of their liberated lives', in other words, the reality of God. Whether these responses are everyday ones – the capacity to see good in people, or to endure persistent pain – or 'landmark' responses – an act of forgiveness that is so amazing that it makes us see things differently – they are liberating, because they show us a possibility of thinking, feeling and acting which evokes our amazement and praise, and uncovers our desires. This could be described as the dynamic of incarnation; it is a pattern reflected in so many of Jesus' encounters with people, and continued in the lives of his first followers; the story of Peter and James healing the lame man at the Beautiful Gate (Acts 3:1–10) is but one example.

In contemporary thought and culture, great attention is paid to the self and the search for fulfilment and personal authenticity. As Charles Taylor points out in a recent book,[12] this is not merely negative and narcissistic, but rather contains the potential for a new kind of personal ethic. At a popular level, there is immense interest in personal stories of any kind, within which the power of those who evoke the kind of amazement described above is evident. The accounts given by Brian Keenan and the other former hostages in Beirut are examples of what prompts irresistible questions, and more ordinary examples abound in every neighbourhood. Behind all these a genuine search for 'horizons of significance'[13] can be seen, and the possibility of conversations and encounters that lead towards the gospel must exist.

The Spiritual Exercises also reflect and enable this dynamic of liberating attraction very powerfully. They lead people to live 'at balance' with all created things and to be at home inside themselves, knowing their fears and their desires. They are centred upon the fascination of Jesus and the invitation to apprentice oneself to his ways of dealing with people and responding to life, choosing new possibilities because they offer a greater freedom than previously known or glimpsed. The experience of the Exercises has an outflow in the ways that people are empowered to respond differently to experiences and events. As they then live out of the freedom they have discovered, they can evoke desires and questions in other people.

Spiritual conversation

There is a third area in which Ignatian tradition and a broad theological framework together suggest a shape for evangelizing which responds to our present multi-faith and pluralist context. We cannot, in evangelizing, omit to introduce at some point the one who fascinates and liberates, the person of Jesus Christ, in whom and through whom God's life is known. But neither can we leave aside the conviction that the same mystery of God has been active in some way in the lives and experience of those with whom we are engaged in some encounter or process. At this point, a broad theological framework makes a very specific demand. Models of evangelizing which reduce it to one-way delivery of a message will not do. Instead, our approach must be open to, and even assume, the 'secret presence of God' which is to be found in the truth and goodness 'sown in the hearts and minds of people, or in the rites and cultures peculiar to them'.[14]

A model or image of evangelization which captures some of these aspects is to see it as spiritual conversation. This is of interest from an Ignatian point of view, since it is an activity to which Ignatius attached great importance. It was the means by which he gathered many of his followers and which he recommended frequently to others. Polanco described Ignatius at work thus:

> And because they (these divine truths) had a great effect in his soul, he wanted to assist others by means of them. And he always had these desires to communicate to others what God had given him, finding by experience that not only did he not lose what he shared with others, but his store actually grew.[15]

And the autobiography tells us that when replying to Dominicans who were doubtful of his orthodoxy and who asked what he preached, Ignatius replied, 'We do not preach, but we do speak familiarly of spiritual things with some people, as one does after dinner, with those who invite us'.[16] His advice often centred around the principle that 'We have to go in by our neighbour's door and come out by our own'.[17]

The model of evangelization as conversation does not apply just to interpersonal encounters, but also to the larger-scale relationship of the Church to the society and culture in which it is found. It is interesting to compare Ignatius' approach with the equally profound and simple approach of Pope Paul VI in *Ecclesiam suam*, describing the dialogue which the Church should desire and work to establish with the world:

> We will strive, so far as our weakness permits, and God gives us the grace, to approach the world in which God has destined us to live. We

> will approach it with reverence, persistence and love, in an effort to get to know it and to offer it the gifts of truth and grace of which God has made us custodian.[18]
>
> We must be the first to ask for a dialogue with men and women, without waiting to be summoned to it by others . . . Our inducement to enter into this dialogue must be nothing other than a love which is ardent and sincere . . . Neither should we set limits to our dialogue or seek in it our own advantage.[19]
>
> Before speaking, we must take great care to listen not only to what men say, but more especially to what they have it in their hearts to say. Only then will we understand them and respect them, and even, as far as possible, agree with them . . . Dialogue thrives on friendship, and most especially on service.[20]

If the primary image or model for evangelizing is conversation or dialogue, certain implications follow. It must be seen as a process which is mutual and reciprocal; in evangelizing, we give and receive, and all those conversing are willing to learn and to grow. It is also a relationship in which there must be genuine love for the other person in the whole of their reality, not just as another potential member or statistic. This has implications for the scale of evangelizing activity; it questions the purpose of large events and points towards domestic scale, community-based approaches. Large rallies, or use of the mass media may be able to raise some questions, but they need a framework of personal encounter and relationship, in which there can be life-sharing as well as word-sharing.

Furthermore, if evangelizing proceeds as a conversation does, the pace cannot be programmed and the outcome must be open. But it can be encouraged and worked at, as conversations often are, when we are trying to get to the bottom of something. It is likely too that we will find that getting to the heart of the matter requires great clarity about ourselves and what we bring to any conversation or relationship: our history, our gifts, our truths.

One particular advantage of this model of evangelizing is its appropriateness and integrity in relation to interfaith dialogue. It does not compromise what either requires. Rather, it shows how dialogue and proclamation can indeed be held together, since both are 'legitimate and necessary. They are intimately related, but not interchangeable . . .'.[21]

The Ignatian tradition has much to offer here as well. The Ignatian use of scripture in contemplation suggests patterns for catechesis in which personal story, scripture text and their interaction can be

explored. The image of becoming one of the companions of Jesus which lies at the heart of the Exercises leads to the heart of the ecclesial dimension of evangelizing: we do not lead people into faith-belonging to our own small group, but rather to the whole company of faith. And the Ignatian pattern, as a whole, assumes that the process will carry on; there is no end to the process of conversion, only the continuing invitation.

Conclusion

It is difficult not to be ambivalent about the Decade of Evangelization as a project, not least because it seems to encourage activism rather than depth. There is, I would suggest, another way of using the opportunities it offers to assist Christians to evangelize more deeply and effectively. This other way depends upon greater attentiveness to spirituality. This should not be confused with prayer campaigns, which are an entirely different kind of activity. If people are enabled to discover and live from spirituality in a more explicit way, I believe they will evangelize, not as a project or activity, but because it happens naturally, as an outflow of their faith. So to those who ask what they should do for the Decade, my answer is simple: arrange a retreat.

NOTES

[1] Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi* (London, 1975), no 24.
[2] Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio* (London, 1991), nos 41–60.
[3] Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi* (London, 1975), no 17.
[4] Sheldrake, P., *Spirituality and history* (London, 1991), p 50.
[5] Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio* (London, 1991), no 50.
[6] Barry, William A., *Spiritual direction and the encounter with God* (New Jersey, 1992), p 67.
[7] Wickham, J., 'Ignatian contemplation today' in *The way of Ignatius Loyola* (ed Philip Sheldrake, London, 1991), p 146.
[8] G. M. Hopkins *The major poems* (ed Walford Davies, London, 1979), p 87–88.
[9] Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi* (London, 1975), no 14.
[10] Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi* (London, 1975), no 21.
[11] Shea, J., *The spirit master* (Chicago, 1987), p 30.
[12] Taylor, C., *The ethics of authenticity* (Cambridge and London, 1991).
[13] *Ibid.*, p 39.
[14] *Ad gentes*, no 9.
[15] Clancy, T. H. SJ, *The conversational word of God* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978), p 9.
[16] *Ibid.*
[17] *Ibid.*
[18] Pope Paul VI, *Ecclesiam suam* (London 1965), p 67.
[19] *Ibid.*
[20] *Ibid.*
[21] Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, 'Dialogue and proclamation' in *Briefing* vol 22, no 1 (January 1992).