

THE EBB AND FLOW OF THE GOSPEL
WHEN THE EVANGELIZED POOR BECOME EVANGELIZERS
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The history of mission theology¹ has passed through different stages in recent times. The churches discovered that mission touched the very essence of the *ecclesia*, that going *ad gentes* was based on the original mandate of the community: "Go forth and make all nations my disciples" (Matt. 28:19).² From a spiritual "centre" the gospel goes out to the "periphery ." (We will call it the "ebb" of the message, the "going out to" the gentiles.) In a second stage, then, there is something like a return "flow" of the gospel; the evangelized become evangelizers and the "mother" churches at the centre receive the missionary challenge of the "new" churches at the periphery. This return "flow" is not the first in history, but it acquires special characteristics today on which we want to reflect.

The "ebb" of the gospel to the periphery

It is obvious that the gospel went out from Israel: from Jerusalem at Pentecost when Peter spoke up and began to convert the pilgrims in the holy city: "Fellow Jews, and all you who live in Jerusalem" (Praxis 2:14);³ the "utopian community" was born there (2:42-47; 4:32-35); Philip went out from there (8:4ff); the work of Peter began (10: 1ff) there and through "persecution"-and not through a secretariat or congregation-the gospel spread among the gentiles (11:19). Paul was also sent as "a minister of Christ Jesus *to the gentiles*" (Rom. 15: 16). This "centripetal" movement is well expressed in the saying that "salvation comes from the Jews" (John 4:22).

In the same way, not widely known, the gospel arrived in Ireland between the fourth and fifth centuries in the hands of monks who organized in the "island of

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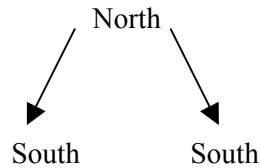
¹ Cf. Orlando Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom* (New York: Orbis Books), 1982 (bibliography pp. 195-227), D. S. Amalorpavadass, *Approach, Meaning and Horizon of Evangelization*, (Bangalore: NBCLC), 1973; *The Theology of the Christian Mission*, ed. G. Anderson (New York: Abingdon Press), 1961; J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publisher Company), 1960; Aylward Shorter, *Theology of Mission* (Indiana: Notre Dame), 1972; Oliver Barres, *World Mission Windows* (New York: Alba House), 1963; Choan-Seng Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction: An Asian Analysis* (New York: Orbis Books), 1977; Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 1978.

²Cf. Donald Senior, Carroll Stuhlmüller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (New York: Orbis Books), 1983; John Power, *Mission Theology Today* (New York: Orbis Books), 1971; Charles Couturier, *The Mission of the Church* (Baltimore: Helicon P.), 1959.

³ In Greek the book of the *Acts* of the apostles is entitled "*Praxis* of the apostles." We would like to quote it in this proper and adequate way.

the saints" a flourishing Christian community on the periphery of that on the continent.

As from the fifteenth century, Latin-Germanic and western European Christians, first from Portugal and Spain⁴ and later from Holland, France and England, culminating with the United States, set out to evangelize the third world. This was again a centripetal movement, from the north to the south this time:



These Christians went under the influence of a certain feeling of their "civilizing superiority" over the other peoples. From the time when David Livingstone (*Missionary Travels and Researches*, London, 1857), with his "missionary" eyes, opened the horizon of Africa to the greed of the companies that exploited the resources of the poor countries, the whole world came under the rapine of Europe and the United States. They, in turn, confused being Christian with being developed and technologically superior. Let me quote one example from the First American Catholic Missionary Congress:

I am convinced as a man who has been privileged to visit all the countries of Europe, many of Asia and Africa and the entire Orient, that there is no such Catholicity [like ours], ...the most generous, the most charitable, the most whole souled on the face of the earth. In other words, they are in reality ideal Catholics [here], and I cannot believe that when American Catholics learn of the great needs of our Holy Mother Church in our far-distant possessions [!], they will turn a deaf ear to their needs and their necessities.⁵

The attitude of spiritual "superiority," with which the missionaries of all churches went to the third world, is well-known, an attitude in which, for the sake of "Christianity" (Catholic Latin as well as Germanic, historically Protestant as well as in recent sects), they mixed up the gospel and their own culture.

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⁴ Cf. my article "Expansión de la Cristiandad, su crisis y el momento presente:" in *Concilium* 164 (April 1981), pp. 80-89. Working Commission on Church History (EATWOT), *Towards a History of the Church in the Third World*, ed. L. Vischer (Bern: EAOS), 1985; Idem, *Asia and Christianity*, ed. M. D. David (Bombay: Himalaya Publishing House), 1985.

⁵ Sermon by the Rev. Joseph Carey, "The Philippines:" in *The First American Catholic Missionary Congress* (Chicago: Lyland), 1909, p. 285. The congress was held from 15-18 November 1908. For the Protestant tradition, see Charles Forman, "A History of Foreign Mission Theory in America:" in *American Missions in Bicentennial Perspective* (South Pasadena: William Carey), 1977, pp. 69-140 (bibliography pp. 115-140). Cf. Charles Chaney, *The Birth of Missions in America* (South Pasadena: W. Carey), 1976.

The "flow" of the gospel toward the centre

As the waters of the sea "ebb" off the coast and "flow" back toward the centre, the gospel also "flows" evangelistically to the centre. There are secondary movements that do not touch the centre of the church. For example, we speak of "reverse mission," or the evangelistic action of missionaries in the third world in their mother churches. Thus a North American missionary in Africa can explain the action undertaken in the "mission countries" to friends and neighbours at home. In an analogous way, in the time of the early church, the churches of the diaspora collected money for the "saints" of Jerusalem and thus, in part, gave thanks for the gift of the gospel (II Cor. 8-9). But this is not what is at stake. It is something more essential and profound.

If it is true that the gospel came from Israel, Israel gave a place to the gentiles all the same:

They are Israelites: they were made God's sons; theirs is the splendour of the divine presence, theirs the covenants. ...It is impossible that the word of God should have proved false. For not all descendants of Israel are *truly Israel* (Rom. 9:4-6). Those who were not my people I will call *My People*, and the unloved nation I will call My Beloved. For in the very place where they were told "you are no people of mine," they shall be called Sons of the living God (Hosea 1:10, quoted by Paul).

The tragedy of "Israel's rejection" has its logic. The Messiah was consecrated "to evangelize the poor" (Isa. 61:1; Luke 4:18). The "poor are evangelized" (Luke 7:22), and Jesus adds: "And happy is the man who does not find me a stumbling-block." Why? Because from the moment the poor are evangelized the "centre" is knocked off-centre and the "power" of the gospel is no longer exercised from "the palaces"-be they in Jerusalem or Rome-but from the "wilderness" and its "prophets."

It is certain that the community of Jerusalem began to be challenged by the communities in diaspora and to learn from them the universality of salvation, the overcoming of the narrow nationalism of Jerusalem, the fact of a gospel for all nations and not only for the Jews: "There is no distinction between Jew and Greek, because the same Lord is Lord of all, and is rich enough for the need of all who invoke him" (Rom. 10:12).

In the same way the Irish periphery was transformed into the new missionary centre which, like a centrifugal flow, returned to the "continent," which needed the faith, to evangelize it. Like Columba in the fifth century, Winfrid (675-755) then evangelized the Teutones under the name of Boniface. The gospel was "flowing back": from the gentiles to Israel, from Ireland to the continent. In the same way we begin to see this movement at the present time. After five centuries of evangelization of the periphery, of the third world, of the poor, there begins a return flow to the mother churches to remind them of the *essence* of the gospel, somewhat forgotten in the triumphalism, the riches, the pride of

being the first, the most ancient, the most knowledgeable, the most "punctual," the most disciplined, the most orderly, the cleanest, the most civilized.

From Russia and Poland, to western Europe and the United States, Catholics and Protestants begin to be challenged by their brothers and sisters from the south, the "poor" churches of Latin America, Africa and Asia. This return "flow" is not easy. There is resistance, deaf ears, defence, or, finally, "control" of the message when it has found an opening. This secret, obscure, not well defined opposition to the "poor"-from Rome to Constantinople or Moscow, via Paris to New York-is a certain fear of losing power: it is again a fear of universalism, like the fear of the Judaists of Jerusalem in face of the gentiles evangelized by Paul. It will not be possible, however, to contain this return "flow" of the gospel because the poor live the gospel in a vital way, like something natural (something that "goes without saying," is evident, without effort). The gospel is theirs, their property. The hopes of the kingdom are the hopes of the poor for food, clothing, housing, health, security, justice. ...for "their" God, because they are *his* people. Now the saints at the centre, if they want to be saints, have to stand in solidarity with the poor of Africa, Asia, Latin America, or with the Afro-Americans, or the Latin Americans in the USA, or the foreign workers (from the poor countries of southern Europe or North Africa) in Europe. The poor, subjects of the kingdom and objects of the gospel, are the necessary reference for being *authentically* Christian. And when these poor are Christians, the return "flow" mentioned above begins.

Thomas Stransky notes a purely *numerical* fact when he says that "by the year 2000 from fifty-five to sixty percent of all Christians (seventy percent of all Catholics) will be living outside North America and Europe";⁶ but the question is a *qualitative* one as we shall see. This led to the proposal of a "moratorium"⁷ by Pius Wakatama, which at first was only a restriction: "...Rather, national leaders should be given responsibility and only a select number of *key* missionaries should be allowed to stay in direct teaching positions."⁸

But it is much more than a numerical matter. **In** Asia, as in the early church, Christianity teaches how to be Christian in a predominantly non-Christian world of high religions (Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist). **In** Africa, Christians teach how to bear in mind, liturgically, the high non-Christian cultures in order to reinvent the Christian celebration. **In** Latin America, the Christians teach how to opt for the poor in the midst of the economic and political struggles for liberation. All these are "new" local churches (with the exception of North Africa or Ethiopia and Kerala, India), poor and in need...but full of the

⁶ "Ecumenism from 1960 into the 1980s," in *Witnessing to the Kingdom, Melbourne and Beyond* (New York: Orbis Books), 1982, p. 68.

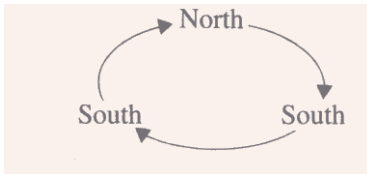
⁷ *Independence for the Third World Church. An African perspective on Missionary Work* (New York: Orbis Books), 1978.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 112. "I question the sincerity of those who have no concern at all for the salvation of pagan American blacks, chicanos, white, Indians and others, but will cross oceans to reach and love these same people in other parts of the world" (p. 21). It is necessary to send missionaries only "to come but for teachers at high levels" (p. 112). Cf. II Tim 2:2.

renewed strength of the Spirit. What they learned in the gospel-through the scandal of the expansion of European-Anglo-Saxon Christianity-from the *poor and crucified Christ*, they now live as a paradigm and give witness to the "centre" in this way of living their Christianity. The martyrdom of Mgr Oscar Romero in El Salvador, the heroic poverty of someone like Mgr Pedro Casaldáliga in Brazil, the example of Bishop Tutu in South Africa, of the "fishermen" in Kerala, or the Christians in the Philippines, are "universal" evangelizing facts today that have an undeniable "spiritual," paradigmatic and missionary impact on the world of "central" Christianity.

"Solidarity," the present-day name of catholicity and mission

The present-day missionary stage of Christianity is undergoing a change. It is the end of the "era of missions" and the beginning of "solidarity" (of *koinonia*, II Cor. 9:13) among the "local" churches. The centripetal movement (north-south) is transformed into a circle: it forms a circle around the Christian life. Rome now learns from Latin America; Geneva from Africa; New York from the Philippines or China. It is the hour of a new universality.



The "circulation" of the Spirit is not only from the south to the north. It is also from the south to the north and to the south. In Latin America, in 1984 the Mission Department of CELAM (Latin American Episcopal Conference), under the influence, among others, of the missionary work of Marins and his team, who founded base communities allover the world (I remember that we met, by sheer coincidence, in Tokyo airport in 1981; I was coming from the Philippines and he was on his way to India. ..and we were talking all night about south-to-south "missions" and about our mutual responsibility), published a document entitled *Ha llegado la hora* (The Hour Has Come); "the hour" in which the Latin American (African and Asian) churches affirm their missionary duty with a view to the other continents of the third world (south-to-south) and, why not, with a view to the "mother" churches (south-to-north).

Christian "solidarity" is the co-responsibility of the Christians with a view to the other "local" churches (and the churches of Rome or of Geneva are as much "local" churches in the unity of the same Spirit); co-responsibility in the liturgical, economic and church life in general; a "circular" co-responsibility of all for all.⁹ We thus move from a model of *dominating uniformity* (bureaucratic catholicity) to the model of pluriformity of the time of Vatican II and of

⁹ Cf. John Sobrino, J. Hernandez Pico, *Theology of Christian Solidarity* (New York: Orbis Books), 1985.

Melbourne; and from there to a model of *authentic solidarity* where the pluralism of indifferent coexistence is subsumed in the *co-responsible unity of universal solidarity* of a church that is *one*, not under the command of an extrinsic and authoritarian obedience (*imposed unity*), but through the organic structure of mutual responsibility in solidarity (unity from the *interior life* of the Spirit of Jesus and of the Father); "community" (*koinonia*).

In this case the churches of the "centre" are open to the witness of the poor churches at the "periphery." They do not want to *control* their testimony (e.g., the case of a missionary organization that cannot publish certain works coming from the periphery because they are too advanced, or of an "uncertain" doctrine; in this way the word of *protest* and *criticism* of the poor is *controlled* . The recent confrontation between the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith and the theology of liberation coming from the periphery has to be interpreted along this line. The "centre" fearfully protects itself from what the poor at the periphery are doing (and in this sense the beautiful and ancient slavian church of Poland is also part of the "centre"). It feels attacked, humiliated, forced to change. ..and resists. It does not take into account, however, that the Christianity at the "centre" is the product of an ambiguous identification with the Mediterranean and European culture and a later identification with the capitalist system. Today both identifications are "prisons," "straight-jackets," which the church must break through in order to open to a greater universality (beyond western culture and capitalism as a necessarily historical system). It is in this stage of conversion to go beyond (the essential transcendence of the gospel) both limitations (Eph. 2:14-15) that the poor who were evangelized from the fifteenth century onward become evangelizers at the end of the twentieth century: "You who once were far off have (now) been brought near through the shedding of Christ's blood. For he is himself our peace" (Eph. 2:13).

The prophetic-evangelizing "church of the poor"

The Melbourne Conference (1980) begins with an option: "Good News to the Poor" (Section I).¹⁰ I remember the first preparatory meeting when we had to defend this thesis "The Kingdom of God and the Poor":¹¹

God identified with the poor and oppressed by sending his Son Jesus to live and serve as a Galilean speaking directly to the common people.¹²

I also remember one day in Nazareth, where I worked as a carpenter from 1959 to 1961, when Billy Graham came to preach in English to the poor Arab

¹⁰ Witnessing to the Kingdom, p. 105.

¹¹ Cf. *International Review of Mission* (Geneva: WCC), 1980, pp. 115-130. I remember that the Roman Congregation responsible for ecumenical matters objected to my name because of my stand in relation to the Puebla conference. We had to defend the "poor" even against the position of some in our mother church.

¹² *Witnessing...*, Sect. I, 1; pp. 105-106.

Christian workers in Jesus' own village. How surprised I was when I saw how this western "missionary" preached the gospel to these men and women! The security and pride with which this rich foreigner spoke of the gospel to these poor men and women from Jesus' own "native area." Should not the preacher rather have knelt down on that ground and asked those *poor* people to preach the gospel to him? To me who had been working together with them ten hours a day and had never opened my mouth because I was learning modern Hebrew and did not speak Arabic, this seemed like the prototype of western Christian *missions*: aggressive domination of other persons.

Melbourne recognized that "the concept of mission being from *sending* to *receiving* countries has long been replaced by a mutuality in shared missions involving a two-way flow between the churches in the industrialized countries and the so-called third world" (IV, 23).¹³ But it is more than that. "Solidarity" is enabled from a "nucleus," from a "community" where the gospel flows more clearly, more prophetically, more profoundly, more spiritually. This evangelizing "place" par excellence is the "church of the poor," or *the part* of the churches that is planted among the "objectively" poor: among the poor nations, poor classes, among the marginalized in the cities, the minorities, the tribal and ethnic groups, the "condemned of the earth"-as Franz Fanon would say.¹⁴

When a "base community" meets in Riobamba, for example, where Mgr Proaño was bishop until recently, when these poor hands, marked by heavy daily work, injured by the cold of the Andes, prematurely aged through exploitation. *...hold the Bible*; when these eyes weakened by malnutrition and illness. *...read the Bible*; when these mouths whose lips are split from the dryness, from the beating by the "masters," from the irregular food supply... *open to explain the gospel*; when these men and women, youth and children form a *community*, all of them together, putting what they have at the disposal of the others, breaking the eucharistic bread at the table where they assemble the bread and prepare the beans for their miserable meals, or where the mothers give birth to their children. *...who could make a comparison? Is the big cathedral of St Peter a more sublime place than the poor hut of these Andean indigenous people?*¹⁵

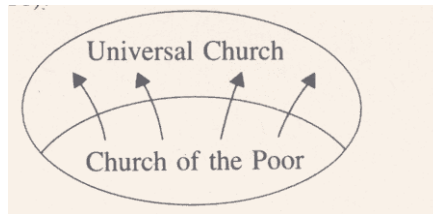
This "church of the poor," an integral part of the one church, but its most undefiled, most prophetic and most tormented "part," is the part that today turns prophetically missionary and evangelizing. It is the one that can convert, that can move the hearts of the young people, of the men and women of good will, at the "centre" and at the "periphery." Now the evangelized poor *become evangelizers*: "God says, 'This will happen in the last days: I will pour out upon

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹⁴ Cf. my article "*Populus Dei* in populo pauperum. Del Vaticano II a Medellín y Puebla," in *Concilium* 196, November (1984), pp. 371-382.

¹⁵ When in Rome, I have always gone down to the catacomb of St Peter (which is below the big basilica) and remembered in prayer a small church on the lake of Tiberias, near Capernaum and the Mountain of the Beatitudes (during my stay as a fisherman in the kibutz of Guinosar) by the name of "Church of St Peter," no bigger than seven metres. I think Peter would feel better in that church close to his poor fellow fishermen.

everyone a portion of my spirit; and your sons and daughters shall prophesy; your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Yes, I will endue even my slaves, both men and women, with a portion of my spirit..." (Praxis 2:17-18).



Gerald Anderson was right in writing that "the focus at Melbourne was on *the poor* in relation to the kingdom,"¹⁶ and for this reason the final message declared that the poor will mean "in many cases. ...a radical change in the institutional life of the missionary movement."¹⁷ More, this presence of the poor "as a church" in the churches (Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox) is a challenge to change not only the missionary institutions, but *the mother churches themselves* in their own life at the "centre." The churches at the "centre" defend themselves against this change. I remember the opposition of some members of the Roman curia when meetings of third world theologians were or are being organized. A theology of the third world, how is that possible? Is theology not *one* and *universal*? There is, therefore, opposition to the voice of the poor reaching out to the "centre" and the other churches at the poor "periphery ." There is mistrust, fear , doubt. In reality, however, the fear is of overcoming identifications that tie the church to the past: to western culture, to capitalism, to power, to domination. It is a challenge of poverty, simplicity, hope. The "spirit" of John XXIII, who had experienced a poor and oppressed "periphery" in Turkey, teaches us how to learn from the others, from the poor, from other "local" churches.

It is clear that in order for the poor to *evangelize* it is necessary to listen to them, to regard them as worthy carriers of the gospel, as subjects of the kingdom, as "Jesus himself" in history among us. But for that it is necessary to keep the "windows" open. How could the Samaritan *see* the poor person who was thrown own and robbed at the wayside if there had been a wall separating the path from the poor? It is necessary to pull down the walls, or at least to put in *windows* to see the poor. What is needed in addition, however, is humility, poverty, openness -spiritual positions that are very difficult in today's world of the "centre." In movements like "sanctuary" in the United States, where Christians from the "centre" open themselves to the poor who have come to their country from the periphery and who are received even if this means counteracting laws against foreigners (especially those who are poor and come from capitalist countries and do not serve as propaganda against socialist countries) , these Christians are evangelized by the poor and become an evangelizing "church of the poor" in

¹⁶ Introduction to *Witnessing...*, p. 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

the midst of the churches at the "centre."¹⁸ These conversions to justice are the fruit of evangelization, the mission of the poor: they teach how to live a more demanding, real, global, true gospel.

In this way, the return "flow" of the gospel has begun, only begun. In the near future, as the crisis intensifies, as the exploitation of the poor countries becomes more inhuman, as the confrontation of capitalism and socialism becomes irreversible, the Christian communities among the poor (poor countries, poor classes, poor groups and persons) will become more and more exemplary and evangelizing. They will suffer in their flesh the oppression of the poor and the same tortures as Jesus. They will evangelize.

¹⁸ The United Methodist Church Board of Global Ministries in the USA is to be congratulated on a programme in the framework of which pastors from the periphery (Latin America, Asia, Africa) preach in US communities about the life of their poor churches (cf. *Like unto a Mustard Seed. The struggle for community*, General Board of Global Ministries, UMC, Cincinnati, 1985). But it is still necessary to do much more.

