

Conscience in Developing Countries

The Role of the Christian Conscience in the Promotion of Life in Relation to Developing Countries (Comments by Cardinal Ivan Dias)

It is advisable to clarify at the outset the terms of this paper. First of all, reference is made to "promotion of life" which, for a Christian, embraces the various dimensions of the human person: the intellectual, spiritual, mental, physical and social dimensions.

The Lord Jesus, who came into the world so that everyone "may have life, and have it abundantly"[1] invites us to promote it as a whole and to promote its components.

Secondly, the present paper addresses action for "developing countries," but it is principally intended for donor countries so that they may help developing countries to achieve their own overall progress by receiving the yeast of the Christian values of justice and love and service.

I would like to begin with a personal testimony. I come from India, an "emerging" country with a non-Christian majority. Indeed, out of a population of 1.2 billion people, 80% are Hindu, 13% are Muslim and only 2.3% are Christian.

The rest are made up of Buddhists, Jainars, Sikhs, Parsees and Jews. Despite this fact, Christians are responsible for 20% of all primary education in India, provide 10% of health care and literacy programs in rural communities, direct 25% of institutions for orphans and widows, and are responsible for 30% of homes for the mentally and physically handicapped, for lepers and for people living with AIDS.

Most of those who benefit from these services are not Christians, and this is a fine example of the role of Christians in a developing country in the promotion of life. Non-Christians appreciate this genuine witness of Christians, but they are at times scandalized by the behavior of certain governments, bodies and people of the Christian faith who at times impose conditions that are in contrast with Christian values.

For example, there is a famous international bank which grants aid to developing countries on the condition "sine qua non" that they must adopt birth control programs based on artificial contraceptive methods.

This is why the father of the Indian nation, Mahatma Gandhi, who admired Jesus Christ and believed that the Sermon on the Mount was the most beautiful sermon ever given in the world, said: "I love Christ, but not Christians, because they do not do what Jesus taught and commanded."

Beginning with such realities, I would like to outline three fundamental principles - by way of an orientation -- that should guide the role of Christians in the promotion of life in developing countries.

The primacy of charity

The Church, which is a subject for the promotion of human life, through her individual believers and aid bodies, prolongs in history the presence of Christ, the Good Samaritan.

"As our previous reflections have made clear," writes Benedict XVI in his encyclical "Deus Caritas est," "the true subject of the various Catholic organizations that carry out a ministry of charity is the Church herself -- at all levels, from the parishes, through the particular Churches, to the universal Church."^[2]

A primary task of a Christian involved in overall development is thus the "witness of charity" and "charity without pretense"^[3] which is lived to begin with within ecclesial communities. In fact, Christ says: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."^[4]

This witness of love makes the prophetic mission of the Church credible only if it is open to the entire world.^[5] Indeed, prophecy, as a proposal of values to be followed and goals to be achieved, is sterile if it is not accompanied by the witness of concrete facts. This is because "faith without works is dead."^[6] In this way, prophecy makes witness clearer and witness makes prophecy more credible.

The preaching of the "Gospel of life" becomes persuasive if it is followed by gestures of welcoming and service. Even though, in fact, responses to emergencies continue to have value, the complexity of today's problems means that a broader horizon of action is required. Thus, although it is necessary to respond to what is urgently needed, it is no less essential to remove the obstacles that are often its cause, unless we want to run the risk of institutionalizing situations of acute poverty that wound the dignity of human life, as though such situations were unavoidable and not, as in fact they are, the outcome of personal and social responsibilities.

The belief that "politics is an eminent form of charity" maintains all its importance,^[7] but it is necessary to intervene in relation to conditions that make offenses to life possible. This is a matter of preparing the ground so that bad fruit is replaced by good fruit.

At times, however, a commitment to dealing with emergencies makes more of an impact and is more gratifying than humble and laborious action designed to defeat the culture of death.

The recent encyclical of Benedict XVI[8] throws light on the relationship between justice and charity, and in particular when this document declares: "The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice.... A just society must be the achievement of politics, not the Church. Yet the promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good is something which concerns the Church deeply."[9]

The Supreme Pontiff thus invites us to make charity the constitutive and permanent core of the person, even where the conditions to assure justice are already present.[10] Thus, the commitment to human life in developing countries is based upon the witness of charity.

The formation of conscience

A second, less-visible path in supporting life requires that efforts be made in the formation of consciences. Such a task should be seen in relation to the relational dimension of the person.

Although one cannot deduce a political model of society from the Gospel, it emerges with clarity, however, that charity should be the engine-principle of every political institution. Thus, to form consciences means to learn to direct choices beginning with charity, taking into account the historic concreteness within which man lives.

In this framework, it is necessary to form consciences to that sense of responsibility that is born from the relationship between the life of the individual and the life of other people. This is an invitation to exit from individualism so as to open oneself up to others.

The dominant culture, which is called postmodern, has recently developed a tendency which absolutizes a partial element such as the market and makes it become a unifying factor of all the experiences of life. Indeed, globalization tends to homogenize the lives of people and countries in line with a standard dictated by economic requirements, and it ends up by reducing local cultures to a stage part.

Here is the root of responsibility for the unfair structures that are now working against those very forces that produced them.[11] In this way the lives of people are subjected to the effects of an injustice that has become institutionalized. To promote life in this situation means to begin a path of conversion that contemporaneously brings back man to God and his neighbor.[12]

Globalization itself, with its world network of distribution, could be a new

opportunity to serve the cause of life. In order to promote life in developing countries, attention must be turned to countries which are already developed, forming a conscience that goes beyond the immediate interests of a group or a multinational. This must be done without, however, forgetting about the formation of conscience to solidarity, in developing countries as well.

To form conscience means to be convinced that as long as in some part of the world people are dying of hunger, there will be elsewhere those who eat for two, not because they are hungrier than others, but because they have greater abundance.

God is the Lord of human life

Lastly, I would like to suggest a renewed commitment to the preaching of the absolute and universal lordship of God over the world and men as a concrete path for the promotion of human life.

"God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can, in any circumstance, claim for himself the right to destroy directly an innocent human being." With these words the Instruction "Donum Vitae" sets forth the central content of God's revelation on the sacredness and inviolability of human life. God proclaims that he is absolute Lord of the life of man, who is formed in his image and likeness (cf. Genesis 1:26-28). "Human life is thus given a sacred and inviolable character, which reflects the inviolability of the Creator himself." [13]

At least two consequences derive from this statement. The first concerns the call to man to share in God's lordship over the world and life. [14] The second concerns the responsibility due to such participation. [15] Thus, as lord, man cannot be subjected to any other man and any other human reality. Because it is shared in by God, his lordship should be carried out in obedience to God's will. It follows from this that only obedience to God guarantees human life against every shameless abuse. No anthropology is secure when God is removed and replaced with absolute claims of a political or market character.

The lordship of God, in which man participates, is revealed and made present in the words and work of Jesus, who conceived his mission as obedience to the Father and as a response to the needs of men, beginning with the poorest and the last.

Here we are dealing with the law of the grain of wheat: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If any one serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also; if any one serves me, the Father will honor him." [16]

Human procreation remains impossible outside a context of love. It is not enough to have procreated life to generate it. It is necessary to love it because only love gives life. At times exaggerated procreation, sought for at any cost and with any means, makes people forget that love can "re-generate" people who are already born, but humiliated in their dignity as children of God.

When the lordship of God over human life is obscured, some people are tempted to end their own lives and request that euthanasia be made legal.

Others tend to give emotive opinions on the question of the death penalty and ignore the cruel realities of thousands of children who are brutally killed every day in their mothers' wombs, a crime often camouflaged by so-called civil laws which are in reality totally "uncivil" because they condemn innocent and defenseless children to death.

Conclusion: the Gospel of hope

More than a real conclusion, I have taken the liberty of offering two approaches for a rereading of the subject that has been examined.

The first is that the promotion of human life in developing countries goes beyond the questions and issues of genetics and forms of reproduction. The ethical question calls into the debate the political and economic structures of the world that produce conditions that are adverse to the development of the life of man.

One could venture the conclusion that what injures the dignity of life is not so much a couple that wants a child through artificial procreation at any cost, but cultures and markets that are obsessed with finding responses to desire and at times to the whims of individuals or nations and forget about the real needs of the majority of mankind.

A second approach is that the Gospel of charity and life invites everyone to live a vigilant waiting for the return of the Lord. One cannot crush hope of a better future on our experience of life today.

However, many efforts we may make, we will never be able to respond in an exhaustive fashion to the request for fullness of life. This is because only Christ is the answer.

"The expectation of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one. For here grows the body of a new human family, a body which even now is able to give some kind of foreshadowing of the new age.... For after we have obeyed the Lord, and in his Spirit nurtured on earth the values of human dignity, brotherhood and freedom, and indeed all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise, we will find them again, but freed of stain, burnished and transfigured." [17]

The Gospel of life, in fact, is entirely bound up in its preaching with the Gospel of charity and hope.

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