Dialogues vs. Evangelization?

In a pluralistic society, do we still convert people? Love can bridge two apparent opposites and avoid the pitfalls of aggressive proselytism.

By Amy Uelmen

There seems to be no clearer mandate: “Go and make disciples of all nations,” Jesus instructed, “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Mt 19:20). “The Church must be missionary,” the 2001 document Dominus Iesus explained. “It is fascinating to note that when John Paul II was asked to articulate a spirituality not of mission, but of dialogue, he placed at the core the same description of Christ’s self-emptying love. In a 2001 address he explained: “It is in the measure that, like Christ, we empty ourselves that we shall truly be able to open our hearts to others and walk with them as fellow pilgrims toward the destiny that God has prepared for us.”

Chiara Lubich, a pioneer in interreligiously dialogue, explained the dynamic like this: love leads to a complete emptying of oneself, and as a consequence others can “open up, reveal themselves to us, express and explain themselves, and share something of their being Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist or Christian. Some of their immense, even unexpected richness will shine in us, too.”

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Love Is the Soul of Dialogue

First, in his life, death and resurrection, Jesus lived an “emptying of self which is permeated by love and expresses love.” Imitating this love, the one who hopes to evangelize is called to “renounce himself and everything that up to this point he considered as his own, and to make himself everything to everyone.”

Second, the missionary is called to love everyone, bearing in oneself “the Church’s spirit, her openness to and interest in all peoples and individual, especially the least and poorest.” In this way one can “overcome barriers and divisions of race, cast or ideology” in order to be “a sign of God’s love in the world—a love without exclusion or partiality.”

Third, love is concrete. As John Paul II explained, loving as Jesus loved “takes the form of concern, tenderness, compassion, openness, availability and interest in people’s problems.”

Finally, Jesus himself described the powerful witness not only of love of neighbor, but more specifically of mutual love, the love that Christians have for each other. By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35). Mutual love helps us to understand “that we are missionaries above all because of what we are as a Church whose innermost life is unity in love, even before we become missionaries” (Redemptoris Missio).

Dialogue in this spirit moves far beyond helping people to become kind, tolerant and appreciative of religious difference. It results in a genuine reciprocal exchange and growth. At a November 2000 gathering of 5,000 Christians and mostly African-American Muslims in Washington D.C., as she highlighted the parallel teachings on love in the Qur’an and the Gospels, Lubich encouraged the participants by observing that “we can already appreciate what is taking place among us … is not a mere dialogue of words … what we are experiencing is communion in God.”

In an atmosphere of mutual trust, what John Paul termed a “respectful proclamation” of the truths of the Christian faith is welcomed as a gift. For example, at the Washington gathering, in response to Lubich’s address, Imam Warith Deen Mohammed, the leader of many of the Muslims present, reached for an image from the Gospel to express the depths of his own experience at the gathering: “I read in the Bible when Jesus Christ, peace be upon him, invited his followers to wash each other’s feet, and I think that’s just what we are doing. We are washing each other’s feet.”

How can I be sure that my conviction in the uniqueness and salvific universality...
of Jesus Christ and the Church does not become arrogant or devolve into disrespectful proselytism? The imitation of Christ, who showed the depth of his love for each person by emptying himself, leaves no room for arrogance or coercion. At the same time, the emptiness of love is not a relativistic void but rather a space for the Holy Spirit, the real protagonist of evangelization, to act and speak, suggesting in each circumstance what actions or words might help the person in front of me to grow in truth and love.

“Unless You Change and Become Like Little Children...”

And when love suggests that it is the moment to speak more explicitly about Christ? The “new evangelization,” John Paul II urged, requires a “clear and emphatic proclamation of the gospel, which is directed to every person.” But what is the content of the proclamation? Lubich suggests that we should begin “not so much with catechizing our neighbors, but with our own experience with Jesus.”

Some of the most powerful examples of this kind of “proclamation” I know of are based on the experiences of elementary school children. What is striking is how easily and naturally they move to a “proclamation” of the Gospel message, often to friends their same age. For example, two small children were walking by an African street vendor, and as they passed one said to him: “You are not supposed to be here because you are black and we are white.” As they continued walking, the other responded: “You can’t talk like that! Don’t you know that Jesus said we are all brothers and sisters?” His friend went back to apologize, and from that day on they always greeted each other on the street.

Another little girl was telling her grandmother that a boy at school had pushed her. “Did you push him back?” the grandmother inquired. “No Grandma, I want to act like Jesus!”

Kanna from Nagasaki, Japan, just completed kindergarten. At the end of the year the teacher was greeting each of the children, she said to Kanna: “Thank you for telling us about Jesus. When you talked about him we could feel that he was close to you. You taught us the prayers that you learned at home and they are beautiful. This morning I saw you give the prize you won to one of your classmates, and I was moved. I am about to get married, but first I want to get baptized and I am already preparing for it. I want to believe in Jesus the way you do.”

The stories of these small children capture well the insight of Pope Paul VI, “Humanity today would rather hear witnesses than teachers, and if teachers are heard, it is because they themselves are the example of what they teach.”

To paraphrase the Gospel of Matthew, perhaps if we change and become like little children we may find the root of love in both evangelization and dialogue, and like them, understand how to share our experience of the Kingdom.

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