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Creativity in Mission
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Introduction

When we speak of the role of art in mission, the tendency is to think immediately in instrumental terms. Mission itself is understood as communicating a message - the Good News. Art then becomes a mediation for such communication. One would even say that art is really superfluous for straightforward communication, for what is communicated is a creed - a set of propositions to be believed. Therefore accuracy is more important. Art forms, however, can help in making the communication attractive through embellishment. They can also play an illustrative role evoking either scenes from the Bible or mysteries of the faith like heaven, hell, etc.

At the Second Vatican Council

The Second Vatican Council speaks of art on two occasions. It does so, as a matter of fact, in the first and the last decrees passed by the Council. In the decree on liturgy we have two chapters on music and on the arts. The focus of the discourse is already narrowed down when it speaks of sacred music and sacred art. The purpose of sacred music is defined as "making prayer more pleasing, promoting unity of minds, or conferring greater solemnity upon the sacred rites" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 112). The chapter on sacred art specifies that, by its very nature, it is meant to turn people's mind to God by evoking the "infinite beauty of God in works made by human hands" and by making the object set apart for divine worship "worthy, becoming, and beautiful, signs and symbols of things supernatural" (*Ibid.*, 122).

The Council turns back to the arts again when it speaks of culture in its last decree on the Church in the Modern World. In keeping with the thrust of this decree which acknowledges the autonomy of the human, it starts with a reflection on the human purpose of art and literature. It says: "They seek to give expression to man's nature, his problems and his experience in an effort to discover and perfect man himself and the world in which he lives" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 62). Then it goes on to say that they must be brought into the sanctuary so that "the knowledge of God will be made better known; the preaching of the Gospel will be rendered more intelligible to man's mind and will appear more relevant to his situation" (*Ibid.*).

One can see here a dichotomy between the secular and the sacred. Art is considered relevant only in so far as it promotes the sacred. In the sacred sphere it has a twofold role: to better communicate the message in preaching and in ritual and to provide a more beautiful atmosphere for the celebration of the rites that reach out to the supernatural. The Document on the Church in the Modern World, as it highlights the relative autonomy of culture, tries to extend it also to the arts. But the context of the sacred soon takes over. Given the prevalent dichotomy between the secular and sacred, art is subordinated to the necessity of ritual and celebration. There is no wonder then that sacred art, when it moves out of the area of objects that used to surround worship, is largely illustrative either of stories from sacred history, both biblical and ecclesiastical, or of abstract themes like the virtues. Even the images of the patrons formed part of a sacred setting.

Such an instrumental view of art still continues today. Ecclesiastical patrons encourage the arts mostly for decorating the Churches. A few spiritual elite may ask for pictures or other instruments for meditation. Is it possible to get out of this narrow dichotomous and instrumental perspective on art? I think that it is possible. But we have to adopt a two pronged strategy. On the one hand, we have to develop a new vision of the goal to which all human activity is directed. On the other hand, we have to break down the wall between the sacred and the secular and reaffirm, not only the relative autonomy of art, but also its human-divine purpose in human and social life. The two prongs of the strategy will intersect each other in many places.

A New View of Mission

Traditionally mission is seen as Church extension. The Gospel is proclaimed in view of making converts to the Church. The whole world is seen as belonging to two camps: the members of the Church who have access to all the means of salvation and the others who do not have such access. While salvation is not kept

out of their reach, it can be obtained only through all sorts of indirect means. The Church itself is opposed to the world as the sacred to the secular. Through the mission and activity of the Church the sacred reaches out progressively to bring the secular sphere under its control. Such an image of the Church's mission to the world, sketched here very briefly, will appear like a caricature only to those who are not in touch with many enduring currents in contemporary mission reflection. Even people who have moved away from such a view of mission intellectually, may still react instinctively from such a point of view.

The Church, however, has been slowly moving away from such narrow perspectives of mission starting with the Second Vatican Council onwards. In its decree on mission, the Council rediscovered mission as a Trinitarian process that embraces the whole world and the whole of history. In a project of sharing God's boundless love and life with humanity, God missions the Son and the Spirit (*Ad Gentes*, 2-4). The Word of God becomes human in Jesus and proclaims the Reign of God as the goal of this mission. The Reign of God is a new human community of freedom and fellowship, of justice and love, that lives integrated with the cosmos and with God. Jesus outlines the conditions and demands of this new community in his teaching, illustrates it in his table-fellowship with the poor and the outcast and realizes it in his miracles of healing and forgiveness.

Jesus sends out the Church into the world to be the symbol and the servant of the Reign of God. It is in building up the Reign of God in the world that the Church too builds itself up as its servant. God also sends into the world the Spirit, who is active with her charisms not only in the Church but in the world, in the other religions and even in the cosmos. But in the course of history, the Church tended to set itself up as the Reign of God, ignoring the presence and action of the Word and the Spirit even outside its boundaries. The Council and later documents of the Church have sought to redress the balance. But the new vision has not yet been assimilated widely.

The Unity of the Sacred and the Secular

Another consequence of the Trinitarian dimension of mission according to the Council is not often reflected upon. But tracing the origin of mission to God's initiative at the very start of creation, the whole process of creation is included in the plan of God. It was customary to oppose creation to redemption and to think of creation as natural/secular and of redemption as supernatural/sacred. Natural history was also distinguished from salvation history which was limited to the special interventions of God that did not include the ongoing creation of God. The other religions were considered as natural, opposed to Christianity as revealed. Natural revelation was contrasted with supernatural revelation.

The impact of the Trinitarian vision of the Council was to do away with all these dichotomies. Within the one plan of God for the universe that is at the root of creation itself, there may be various stages and further interventions. But these interventions are related to the one plan. They further it with a new impetus. The whole cosmos becomes suffused with the divine presence, of God, the Word and the Spirit. The whole world is basically united in God and this unity is fundamental and prior to any division. John Paul II insisted on this unity on the occasion of the symbolic multi-religious prayer for peace that he organized in Assisi in October 1986.

If it is the order of unity that goes back to creation and redemption and its therefore, in this sense, 'divine', such differences - and religious divergences - go back rather to a 'human fact', and must be overcome in progress towards the realization of the mighty plan of unity which dominates the creation (Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, *Bulletin* 22, 1987, 56-57).

In his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* Pope John Paul II underlined the universal action of the Spirit, not only in the hearts of people but also in their social and religious structures (Nos. 28-29).

If this fundamental unity of all things in the plan of God is taken seriously, then the distinctions between the sacred and the secular have no meaning. There are no purely human, secular actions. There may be sub-human actions. But if an action is human, it also acquires a sacred dimension. In this context all art has a sacred dimension and has more than a merely human and natural significance. It makes no sense therefore to speak of sacred art. Some specimens of art may be used in ritual contexts. But they are not more sacred than others which are not so used. The context in which a particular object is used specifies its meaning. But this meaning cannot be totally different from the original meaning of the object.

Such an observation makes us take a second look at a theology that considers religious ritual as sacred and opposes it to life considered secular. It is human life that gives a meaning to its ritual celebration. Without life, the celebration will be empty. A theology that isolates ritual from life as a sort of mystery makes it a gesture without substance, as it makes life an event without meaning.

The consequence of such an integration between the sacred and the secular, or rather the refusal to dichotomize the secular and the sacred, is that mission is a dimension of the whole of human and social life. It is not an activity superimposed on life for a particular purpose. Mission is the very dynamism and process through which life is moving towards its fullness.

What I have said about life we can say also about art which is the expressive and creative aspect of life. But before I start talking about art again I would like to explore a little more what we consider the goal of mission. I have said earlier that the goal of mission is the Reign of God. What is our vision of it?

The Reign of God

The place we give to art and to human effort generally depends also on the idea we have of the Reign of God which is our goal in accordance with the plan of God. Talking in paradigmatic terms I can think of three paradigms: soteriological, creational and eschatological. The soteriological paradigm is what we are usually familiar with. The world and human life are experienced as fundamentally marked with sin and evil. The aim is to be freed from it. Liberation from slavery is the human model. Liberation comes as the end of a conflict between the principles of good and evil. Therefore there is a dichotomous outlook on the world. Renunciation of the world or of the flesh which is evil is called for. Penance is expected as satisfaction for sin. One has to engage one's will. The end will be a victory or conquest.

The creational paradigm underlines the basic unity of all things. Everything is related. Evil is the upsetting of the relationship. Such upsetting is the result of ignorance and desire. But true knowledge can root out desire. The goal of life is the experiential realization of the relatedness of all things and the consequent integration of created reality. One regains the sense of totality that one had lost. The totality is all there to be regained. What is wrong with us is that we do not see it. Once our eyes are opened, we will recognize Reality as it has always been.

The eschatological paradigm stresses creativity. God has created the humans with freedom. The goal of our lives is to create a communion of free persons, human and divine, in the mutuality of love and self-gift. Such communion is possible because of the basic unity that links us all together. But the freedom to come together is also the freedom to stay apart. One could be selfish, locked up in oneself, refusing to be open to the other. Relationship is therefore something to be achieved. But it is not simply the restoration of something that was pre-existent. It is not the conquest of something that is inevitable. It is the creation of a new communion in freedom and love. One needs imagination and creativity. One has to be inventive. The result can be predicted, but not foreseen.

Of the three paradigms, if the first centres round Jesus Christ, the second centres round the Father and the third is focussed on the Holy Spirit, which is the spirit of newness, of creativity, of the unforeseen. The third paradigm also involves the free creativity of human beings, energized and animated by the Spirit, but still free. It supposes the first as a basis and the second as a necessary preparatory process. But it goes beyond them to look at the new heaven and the new earth that God has in store for God's people. It is neither a reintegration, nor a recreation, but a new creation. It is the fruit of freedom and love, imagination and creative action. It creates relationships and communion. In such a fellowship of the humans the cosmos itself becomes a mediation of their fellowship. It is the paradigm that Paul has in mind when he speaks of the Spirit in his letter to the Romans (ch.8). It is an expression of hope.

Art and Mission

If the goal of mission is the creation of a new world of human-divine communion then art has an indispensable role in it. I understand art as the creative self-expression of an individual or of a community in story, song, image or dance. Mediated by symbol it reaches beyond the rational to the emotional and the imaginative spheres. It is born out of and communicates human and social experience. *As a vehicle of the imagination it can also be projective and persuade to action.* As I have suggested above, art can be made an instrument of what is primarily a rational discourse. I am not interested in it here. I am rather focussing on art as an expression of human life in its struggling march towards the goal set for it by God in the very act of calling it into existence.

I think that artistic productions can be classified into four broad categories. There are productions that represent the human condition as it is experienced. There are others that relate to one of the three paradigms I have evoked above. The symbolic mediation of the self-expression may be life-situations themselves or a cultural image that is drawn from a historical/mythical tradition. For example, a community that is in the midst of a painful crisis may express itself through an image either of its own life or of a martyr who is remembered in the community or of Christ suffering on the cross. A person or community may move from one to the other area or live in many areas at the same time. For example the various paradigms may find expression at various seasons in the year in the form of festivals so that they form a cycle: prayer for help, thanksgiving, victory over evil, celebration of hope. The paschal season, for instance, moves from suffering through victory to hope. An intense devotion to the passion and cross of Christ among a suffering and oppressed people may coexist with an equally intense devotion to the mother of God, sometimes taking the place of a mother goddess, as a source of blessings and the joyous celebration of the *fiesta*. Let me now take a look at the four categories one by one and see how they relate to mission as walking towards the Reign of God.

Suffering and a sense of helplessness is a universal experience. This may take the form of lamentations as we see in the Psalms of the Old Testament. It may be also experienced vicariously as the suffering and passion of Jesus or the martyrdom of Husain or the exile of Rama and the Pandavas. Sometimes these histories are allegorically related to the contemporary situation so that every one knows who the oppressors are. In reliving these images one feels understood and this takes away half the pain. But more than the relief, one feels that one is part of a cosmic/historical process. This sense of solidarity is encouraging and sustaining as one faces the difficulties and sufferings of life. The favoured art form is the narrative, either recited, sung or dramatized, but not excluding images, especially in the context of ritual. The paradigm of creation seems active in festivals of thanksgiving related to the harvest or the monsoon. The bounties of God through nature are celebrated. This may also be linked to the devotion to mother figures, whether proper goddesses or not. People turn to them for their needs. Some of the charismatic movements may invoke the Spirit. The image evoked is that of God as giver, the bounteous one. Creation myths and miracle stories may strengthen the experience.

The soteriological paradigm is much more integrated in religious ritual. Passion plays as well as liturgical celebrations stress the conflict leading to victory. The popular Ramayana and Mahabharata serials in the Indian television are significant for the widespread interest they have created at very popular levels. The Haj of Muslims includes a rite in which stones are thrown at images representing evil spirits. The struggle between good and evil takes on a personal dimension in popular rituals like fasting and other penitential practices. Saviour figures, sometimes violent, are common in all religions. People experience the reality of struggle in their lives and they are happy to relate it to a cosmic struggle and to identify with the victorious Saviour.

The eschatological paradigm is not strong in many societies. The one occasion where it seems to be present is the annual festival which becomes an occasion for the coming together of family and friends and for the affirmation of new life. Divali as the festival of lights has some of it. In the Christian tradition, the Pentecost must carry this significance. But in practice Christmas may have taken over the symbolism. One problem of course is that one cannot easily symbolize a future of which one has no clear idea.

I think that it is on this area that artists in mission should concentrate. As representatives of the community they should dream and imagine a future for humanity and the cosmos that will enthuse and challenge people. Art must become an expression of hope. The Biblical and other religious models of the future are apocalyptic. We should rather create joyous images of the future that will both offer an inspiring vision and motivate commitment. Religious and secular ritual refer to the past and base hope on memory. Without losing this foundation in memory, we must be inventive to create visions of the future community. We must move beyond ritual to human and social life to celebrate community in all its creativity. We must develop a sensitivity to the Spirit and be open to her surprises. We must translate our dreams into images so that we will be challenged to create a new world that will be beyond all our dreams.

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