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Jean Landousies C.M.

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Jesus Christ, Alive in His Church, a Source of Hope for Europe

“Reflexions about the special Assembly for Europe
of the Synod of Bishops

by Jean Landousies C.M.
Paris Province

The second Special Assembly for Europe of the Synod of Bishops which was held in Rome, 1-23 October brought to a close the series of continental synods called by John Paul II in view of the Jubilee Year 2000. My intention here is not to give a general overview. Two of our confreres who participated (Mgr F. Rodé, Archbishop of Ljubljana and Mgr T. Gocłowski, Archbishop of Gdańsk) would be more qualified. I wish simply to offer some reflexions by an outside observer on a few of the themes which were treated and which concern us more closely as Vincentians. I will do this on the basis of documents issued by the Press Office throughout the Synod. Within a year an apostolic exhortation by the Pope is due to take up the essentials of the synodal reflexions.

1. A Realistic Appraisal

Several organs of the press, basing themselves especially on a certain reading of the *‘Relatio ante disceptationem’* (introductory report) of Cardinal Rouco of Madrid, have reported that the starting point for this Synod had been a pessimistic description of the situation of the Church in Europe. It is doubtless true that several bishops arrived at the Synod in this frame of mind. Nevertheless, it seems more balanced to read the interventions of the first days as a realistic appraisal of the grave crisis of faith which affects European society today, and especially as an acknowledgement of the great diversity of situations among the Churches in countries formerly referred to as of the East or of the West, as well as within these same regions.

By way of example, take the intervention of Cardinal Eyt (Bordeaux): “The idea that perhaps Christianity has failed in Europe is a widespread idea, resulting at times in programmes of distancing from each other: Church, Christianity and contemporary culture. There results therefore a sort of *‘quiet apostasy’* of the majority of Europeans, at least in the West and particularly amongst adolescents and the young. *‘Anima europea naturaliter jam non christiana.’* Mgr Rodé (Ljubljana) insists on the future of the faith in Europe. Certainly he would stress that religious practice is diminishing, Christian values are crumbling, in spite of the Council and the enormous effort for spiritual renewal in the Church. But “perhaps a turning-point is on the way. I see a proof of this in the failure of the atheism of this cruel century.... Having revealed its

radical negativity, it can permit us to hope that it will also appear in the eyes of European man like a prison for heart and intelligence, incapable of giving meaning to life or a future to humanity. Now, a humanity which lacks a future is a prey to despair or threatened with madness.”

The first part of the Synod was able to lead to a serious “stock taking” which opened up a new sense of optimism, since, in the words of Cardinal Tettamanzi (Genoa), “Christian realism which ought to animate our discernment cannot fail to open itself up to a radical optimism. It is the optimism which is born of faith in the presence of the Lord Jesus who has not abandoned the Church and humanity, and who continues to send his Spirit from the four corners of the earth with the aim of touching Europe and transforming it in its hidden depths. This is what continually happened throughout two thousand years of history. And numerous are the signs of this active and vivifying presence of the Spirit.”

It was already an appeal for a “vigorous hope” launched by John Paul II in the homily of the opening mass. The final message of the Synod, centred on “the Gospel of hope” would come to confirm this state of mind which would run through the Assembly. The group work sessions laid it bare that the context of mission in Europe today is that of a crisis of faith. Indeed, in the course of recent years society has undergone a deep secularisation. However, in spite of numerous negative aspects of this situation, it is not appropriate to hold a pessimistic vision of things, because there is noticeable almost everywhere a demand for faith. And so, it seems more just to interpret this crisis situation as being a sign, an invitation to gather together the energies of Christian communities in order to bring a renewal of true hope.

2. Recentring the Mission on Christ

This synod was in a way a strong encouragement to cast out into the deep. In a period of doubt, of anxiety about the future where confidence and hope are sorely tested, it is an appeal to stretch oneself, to throw oneself into the following of Christ by refusing to be put off by appearances on the surface of things in order to get back to essentials. And so, in order serenely to face up to the difficult spiritual situation which is traversing the continent, there is an urgent need to come back to the very origin of mission, to fill oneself again with faith in Christ in order to proclaim him and lead people to him. Because once again John Paul II was to say “Jesus Christ is alive in his Church and continues from one generation to the next to ‘draw near’ to people and to ‘journey’ with them. It is particularly in moments of trial, when disappointment threatens to cause a wavering of confidence and hope, that the Risen One joins in on the wandering paths of humanity and, even if he is not recognised, he becomes the companion of our journey” (*Opening Homily*, p. 2).

It is therefore necessary to re-establish at the centre of mission the mystery of Christ, source of hope, while not separating him from the Church which ought to be a

living witness to the gospel message. The Church possesses no other treasure than that of announcing Jesus Christ as dead and risen again. That is the kerygma which should be at the heart of mission, convinced that the salvation brought by Jesus is necessary for our times and for our culture. When it is received this message brings about a progressive moral change of the whole of existence and of its liturgical celebration.

Proclamation of the kerygma takes on even greater importance when faced with the considerable number of our contemporaries who no longer are aware of the essential Christian message or who simply reduce it to a list of values learned or maybe even outdated. For most people therefore is Christ still perceived as the Son of God? Is he our Saviour? Besides, does the asking of such questions still contain any meaning since one no longer knows or one no longer understands from what or why one should be saved by this man who died 2000 years ago? Thus for example, has the celebration of the Jubilee, or more precisely the 2000 date itself, any meaning for most people apart from the symbolism of its digits? In a world where a democratic spirit rightly fashions people's mentalities more and more can faith be anything more than the fruit of common opinion based on opinion polls? Can it still be a real expression of commitment?

It is therefore urgent to propose to European man a renewed proclamation of Jesus Christ our unique Saviour and of the salvation which he brings to all people and all nations, especially to the poorest of them, and to give witness of a faith which stirs up a durable hope. This proclamation should make it clear that Christ reveals man's true identity and makes possible a communion between man and God. The conception of man which Christ reveals is the pre-eminent response to the search for the dignity of the person which is one of the highest aspirations of the people of today. Indeed it affirms to us that the existence of each human person has meaning in the eyes of God, that communion between persons is historically possible and that diversity can become richness. It also indicates that the power of the Kingdom is at work in history and contributes to the building up of the city of man according to God, that charity gives an eternal value to every humanising gesture, and that suffering, freely accepted, is transformed into an instrument of redemption. It is in the long run the certitude that life triumphs over death.

3. Transmitting the Faith

The transmission of this faith in Christ who died and rose again and is always acting in our world is a crucial question. But it must be noted that this problem is not peculiar to the Church. It is our present age which seems incapable of transmitting its spiritual, moral and cultural heritage to the generations which follow. Besides, evangelisation today takes place in a new cultural context which represents an immense challenge for the faith and the behaviour of Christians. It has been said that Europe is a sort of laboratory where confrontation is being played out between faith and modernity. In fact the transmission of faith must take account of a process of

secularisation which limits man's horizon to what is concrete and visible, thus excluding God and the invisible.

However, even in this context man experiences a strong need for hope and certainty. Hence, transmission of the faith demands that the mystery of Christ should be proclaimed in its entirety. Otherwise it is impossible to reply to the serious questions which people ask themselves. This is all the more important because many of our contemporaries no longer succeed in judging what distinguishes Christianity from the numerous currents of spirituality of every kind which invades their minds. Christian faith is not a vague religious feeling which makes few demands. To announce Christ and to bear witness to him requires a fearless showing forth of what is Christianity's specific identity. Consequently how can one not feel the necessity of giving proof of courage by proclaiming one's faith. Certain synodal Fathers characterised as Pauline this audacity which displays such fine enthusiasm.

The eschatological dimension of proclaiming the faith, often underdeveloped in preaching, manages to find a basis of support in the secret aspirations of the heart of European man, haunted by the questions of suffering and of death. This eschatological endeavour concerns also the present life. The coming of the Reign of God in this world is not the fruit of our human efforts alone, often rather despairing, but above all it springs from the gratuitous grace of God.

It is therefore urgent for each Christian, each Christian community to regain a missionary spirit for proclaiming the kerygma with the strength which the Spirit is already giving to the task, seeking at the same time new methods which will enable us to meet man where he is "making" himself and expressing himself today. Announcing the Gospel is a task which concerns all Christians. This calls for communities and persons who are authentic believers. Personal testimony is an absolute necessity. In order to evangelise, it is necessary to take note of the shortcomings of the agents for evangelisation and those of communities, at the level of faith and its expression. These would be a faith based more on custom than on convictions, a routine religious practice or a lack of concern for the challenges of contemporary culture. In a world which is loathe to accept abstract doctrines, it is through individual and communitarian witness by authentic believers, through companionship and listening in daily life, that the Gospel is often announced with most authenticity and impact. On the other hand if the knowledge of fundamental truths cannot be left aside – having done this at times may have led to the present situation – there is no evidence that transmission takes place. Only credible apostles who have themselves met the living Christ the true evangeliser, can have the transparency of witnesses who lead others to follow them towards Christ. Only a person who has been evangelised can evangelise, only a person who has been sanctified can become an instrument of sanctification. The evangelizer is the person who allows himself to be fashioned by the charity of God to the point of becoming an earthly reflexion of God's merciful love for people.

Revitalising communities so that the Church should become a source of hope in Europe, passes through a sort of spiritual awakening, a renewed recognising of the Lordship of Christ, Son of God made man; that is, by vigorously confessing that Jesus Christ is truth and life, the only worthwhile hope down through the ages and not merely a mentor, however worthy he be.

As a consequence, the evangelizer will be seen as a prophet, a sign of contradiction who, in a spirit of dialogue and of service, with more emphasis on questioning than on denouncing, discerns and welcomes the positive signs of culture. At the same time he confronts and vigorously points out whatever goes against the interest of humanity and its destiny.

4. Evangelising the Poor

If this theme was not explicitly presented as major topic of the Synod, it was however present in many ways in the interventions of the synodal Fathers. Thus, from the opening days, Mgr Kenney, Auxiliary of Stockholm, in the name of the Scandinavian bishops, expressed several aspirations which seem to me significant because they were subsequently taken up many times:

- “In the first place, we ask the Synod to promote concrete moves to aid the poor of Europe, whatever be the reason for their poverty. This means showing greater signs of solidarity with the poorest countries of our continent. At the same time we cannot forget the poor in other parts of the world. In other words, we should be more generous than we are today.” In their forceful reminder that Europe should not become closed in on itself, the Fathers made solidarity a key point in their reflexions both regarding the internal life of the Church (solidarity between the Churches of the West and of the East for example), and also for relations between the nations of the continent in order to reinforce the process of constructing Europe. Several bishops strongly insisted on the responsibility of Europe and of the Churches towards the poorer peoples and on the urgent need for an examination of conscience by the richer Churches. The presence of delegates representing the five continents, but especially perhaps the fact that numerous European bishops have effective relationships with the poorest Churches, brings it about that this preoccupation is experienced more and more as a pressing appeal for solidarity and for a change from consumerist habits in developed societies. “Without sobriety we cannot develop a spiritual life which is authentic in solidarity.”
- “Secondly, we ask that the Church should place more emphasis on the problem of clandestine immigrants present in many of our countries - which have now amounted to several millions on our continent. We should not allow these sisters and brothers to be forgotten.” The question of welcoming the stranger and, to go beyond that, of meeting others who are different, was repeated in numerous

interventions. Obviously we ought to recall all the discussions which began to find expression concerning the meeting of cultures even within the continent. I shall confine myself here to two elements which are today burning issues in several countries: immigration and Islam.

- It has been pointed out that in certain countries the Church and its organisations are often the sole source of assistance and support. An important emphasis should be placed, with realism of course, on the welcome given to immigrants, while being aware of the difficulties and the necessary financial commitments. The assistance offered to these people ought to enable them to bring about their own development and to become established through a partnership with the Church and the country from which they come. Faced with the diversity of people's situations, economic immigrants, refugees fleeing from their country to save their life or through despair, it has been suggested that the different Church organisations involved could elaborate a serious critique of European policies in this domain.

- Our relationship with Moslems who are not all immigrants or foreigners has been focussed on by the press as a particularly difficult matter. Even if a few interventions failed to display much openness, it could be said that broadly speaking, the Church's involvement in dialogue with Moslems was forcefully reaffirmed. Moreover it is not without significance that a few days after the Synod, at St. Peter's Square in the Vatican, John Paul II himself was presiding over an interreligious Assembly organised as a follow-up of the 1986 Assisi meeting and declared: "The task which now awaits us consists therefore in promoting a culture of dialogue.... I am convinced that the growing interest in dialogue between religions represents one of the signs of hope which is present in this last part of the century. It must however continue. Greater mutual esteem and growing confidence should lead to an even more effective and coordinated action in common in the name of the human family." Certainly the Pope knows the concrete difficulties of this dialogue. However "it must continue," because it is an irreversible option of the Church (Cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 55-57). Confronted with the reality of Islam in Europe, the Church no longer has any other options than to propose a sincere dialogue, and it must engage in every effort to instigate this and cause it to progress without naïveté but also without prejudice. Dialogue with Moslems demands from Christians a Gospel attitude of charity and graciousness. But in the same spirit they must also require from Moslem-majority societies in which Christians are living proper respect for the fundamental rights of persons, one of which is religious liberty. So that interreligious dialogue might progress it is also necessary that Catholics should be firmly grounded in their faith and that they should rediscover the richness of their own spiritual tradition.

- Another of the Synod's requests concerning evangelisation of the poor touched on the social doctrine of the Church. It is clear that to find Christ is at the same time to serve one's brothers and sisters, each one personally and in their life in society. The doctrine and the activity of the Church go hand in hand. It is a matter of credibility. Many Bishops stressed that the Church cannot remain silent in the

presence of certain situations of injustice and contempt for humanity, for the Gospel calls us to humanise society. In the face of evolving society the social doctrine of the Church ought to take account of the new forms of poverty. It is necessary to alert Christians and the whole of public opinion to the importance of such areas of action and thus to contribute to the diffusion and appreciation of the social doctrine. And of course we are aware that, in recent months ago a “catechism of the social doctrine of the Church” is being drafted.

5. Formation of the Laity

The laity's place in the Church was at the centre of many interventions. Particular emphasis was placed on the importance of their involvement in the life of society. A serious worry was manifest that a social conscience has not been formed during this present generation, and it was noted that this generation has adopted a more and more individualistic attitude. The call to become involved in public life is based in the Gospel. To make an appropriate response to their vocation and to allow them to reflect on their role in the light of the Gospel it is necessary to provide for a Christian formation of the laity in which the social doctrine of the Church must occupy prime of place. A solid theological and spiritual formation is showing itself to be more and more indispensable if they are fully to assume their baptismal responsibility. The values on which a sane society can be built can only come from the convictions of individuals. And so, special attention must be paid to laity who occupy important responsibilities in the areas of culture, economics and politics, since they are often subjected to much pressure or temptation.

6. The Mission “ad gentes”

The universal dimension of the mission of the Church was very much present in this Synod. The representatives of other continents often forcefully recalled the urgency of ecclesial solidarity. Thus Cardinal Tomko, Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, recalling that two-thirds of humanity still do not know Jesus Christ in a relationship of faith, declared: “If in certain countries and certain European groups there exists a crisis of faith, this will not be resolved through European Churches turning inwards on themselves but rather through their opening up to their universal mission. However none of those who believe in Christ, no Church institution can evade this supreme task: ‘to announce Christ to all peoples’ (*Redemptoris Missio*, n. 3).” And the Cardinal asked more specifically for the courageous pursuit of the mission *ad gentes* through the promotion of missionary vocations *ad vitam*, the development of sending priests *fidei donum* and a special care for the mission with immigrants who find themselves in Christian communities in Europe. “The European Churches ought to be dynamic communities who are evangelising, rather than maintenance communities dedicated to conservation.” This last affirmation seems to be of great importance for us at a time when the small number

of priests leads to their being used in a more and more limited way for the already gathered community to the detriment of the mission to those who are furthest from the Church. Besides, there has been insistence on the need to renew missionary theology, giving their proper foundational place to Christology, pneumatology of mission, inculturation, ecumenism and interreligious dialogue.

7. Vocations to the Priesthood and Religious Life in Europe

Everyone knows how most of the countries of Europe are preoccupied today with this question. The crisis is linked with the crisis of Christianity in general which is noticeable in the same countries. It is important to continue calling people to ministries and to the religious life with foresight and insistence, and with this in mind, to develop a pastoral policy for vocations which is begun at the right moment, giving the greatest visibility possible to instances of awakening vocations and readying for ministry. Young people need to know very early which are the religious communities pervaded by an atmosphere which assists the living out of the Christian faith. It can also happen that the vocations crisis might be due to an inadequate vision of the Church, to a lack of clarity about priestly identity and the specific and intimate connexion which exists between the ministerial priesthood and the priesthood of Christ.

8. European Unity

One cannot speak of this Synod without making reference to the preoccupation it showed for the spiritual unity of Europe. On the continent, the Church has the mission once again to pass on the hope given to it in Jesus Christ. The peoples of Europe still suffer today the effects of totalitarian ideologies, the after-effects of war and civil disorders. Also noticeable is the failure of European institutions when faced with the horrors of the ethnic cleansings of recent years. These events represent an urgent call to the Church to promote a new culture of readiness to come together, and new forms of solidarity and participation.

In this context, reconciliation becomes a major element of evangelization which appeases memories and suggests possible ways ahead for the future.

9. A Message of Hope

The Synod's final message, addressed to believers and to all citizens of Europe, is focussed on a powerful appeal for hope. The document insists first of all on the fact that man cannot live without hope, or his existence would be condemned to insignificance and would become unbearable. However, it is clear that this hope finds itself confronted by various challenges, to diverse forms of suffering, anguish and

death. And so, Christians must be ardent and prophetic witnesses to *the Gospel of Hope*, establishing themselves on the certainty that the Spirit of God is victorious over every kind of despair.

The bishops therefore invite Catholics to confess their faith in Jesus Christ, the true and unique hope for Man and for History. Let them rest assured that hope is neither a dream nor a utopia, but a reality. Concrete signs of the work of God in the European Churches and society are there. And the document enumerates a certain number which make of the Church a community of hope: signs of hope, the martyrs whose faith was stronger than death, the sanctity of those who lived in generous fidelity to the Gospel; signs of hope so numerous in the daily life of ecclesial communities and of every disciple of Christ.

All this is both a gift and a responsibility for communities and for individuals, leading also to a courageous examination of conscience. In this perspective the Fathers of the Synod throw out a confident appeal: “Allow yourself to be converted by the Lord and respond with a renewed fervour to the apostolic and missionary vocation you have received through Baptism.”

“Let us proclaim, celebrate and serve the Gospel of hope.” That will be so to speak the vigorous appeal which will come out from this second European Synod. And so it will be possible to look at Europe in a new perspective which recognises numerous signs leading to hope.

The conclusion from the Bishops, which is also ours, is a prayer to the God of life, of hope and of joy: “European Church, fear not! Our God is faithful, the God of hope is not abandoning you. Hope in the Lord and you will never be confounded.”

(STANISLAUS BRINDLEY, C.M., translator)