

COLUMNISTS

Evangelization differs from proselytism

The *New York Times* announced on one of its front pages last month a story appearing inside on the pope's visit to India. The headline, "Pope Defends Proselytizing," was followed by a brief summary: "Pope John Paul II, on a visit to India, asked leaders of other religions to recognize the Catholic Church's right to evangelize" (11/8/99). It was the juxtaposition of the words "proselytizing" and "evangelize" that caught this writer's attention.

The actual report of the pope's remarks in New Delhi contained references to evangelization, which is a positive concept, but not to proselytism, which has negative connotations. It refers to often disreputable means (for example, bribery, intimidation or deception) to persuade adherents of one religious tradition to abandon their faith and embrace another.

By contrast, evangelization is simply the proclamation of the Gospel. It does not seek to wrench people away from their present religious commitments, but only to make them aware of Jesus Christ and his message of love, forgiveness, justice, mercy and compassion.

If those who are evangelized freely decide to embrace the Christian faith, that is their right in conscience. But no at-



essays in
theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

tempt should ever be made to persuade them to do so by creating doubts about, or casting aspersions on, their present religious faith. That would be proselytism.

The World Council of Churches condemned proselytism at its 1961 meeting, which was also held in New Delhi. Four years later the Second Vatican Council followed suit.

In its "Declaration on Religious Liberty," the council declared: "...in spreading religious belief and in introducing religious practices everybody must, at all times, avoid any action that seems to suggest coercion or dishonest or unworthy persuasion, especially when dealing with the uneducated or the poor. Such a manner of acting must be considered an abuse of one's own right to evangelize and an infringement of the rights of oth-

ers" (n. 4).

The pope's visit to India was surrounded by controversy from the outset, largely because of the church's increased efforts to "evangelize" the vast non-Christian population of Asia. The pope also called for religious tolerance for all faiths. But even moderate non-Christian religious leaders in India wondered how these two messages could be blended.

The Tibetan monk who shared the podium with the pope said they fear the line will be crossed "between indoctrination and anybody's inner-consciousness to choose his religion."

The Catholic missionary effort has been especially targeting the uneducated and the poor, the very groups that the Second Vatican Council explicitly mentioned in its warning against proselytism.

Do the church's charitable works on behalf of the poor and the uneducated constitute a form of "unworthy persuasion" (to use the words of the council)? Some say, "Yes." Others say, "No." But many would acknowledge it to constitute, at the very least, a gray area. And it is in this gray area that the problems arise.

At the Synod for Asia in May 1998, several bishops voiced criticism of Vatican officials for being insufficiently sensitive to this gray area and for failing to trust

and respect the pastoral judgment of those closest to the scene, namely, the Asian bishops themselves.

In their final synodal message (*Origins*, 5/28/98), the bishops presented an understanding of evangelization that underscored the need to respect the non-Christian religions of Asia, to enter into dialogue with them and their cultures, and to collaborate in the task of improving the quality of life for all people.

They also commended a missionary spirituality of "compassion and harmony, detachment and self-emptying, solidarity with the poor and the suffering, and respect for the integrity of creation."

They pointed out that one of the ways by which the church in Asia can become a credible sign of the Gospel is by promoting the dignity of women and by encouraging their active participation, with full equality, in the life of the church.

Pope Paul VI once reminded us that evangelization encompasses the entire mission of the church, not just the making of converts. It is a message, he said, that is "especially energetic today about liberation."

Proselytism has no place in that effort.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Advent is a season of returning, repenting

2nd Sunday of Advent (Dec. 5): (R3) Mark 1:1-8. (R1) Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11. (R2) 2 Peter 3:8-14.

During Advent, wherever we go we see signs of Christmas: festive decorations, colored lights, carols playing loudly at the mall, television specials reminding us of the jolly nature of the holiday. Yet on the Second Sunday of Advent a stern prophet, John the Baptist, greets us. We might think he is out of place.

His hair is wild and unkempt. His clothes smell of wild animals. His diet consists of honey-covered bugs. And his message reflects a fire burning in his soul, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths." Does John the Baptist fit in with the Christmas we have come to know and love?

First of all, Advent is about God breaking into our lives at unexpected times and places. Even though people of old were awaiting a Messiah, they were taken by surprise by John. For 300 years there had been no prophet in Israel. No word from God. Then John bursts upon the scene quoting from the Hebrew Bible: "A voice of one crying out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'"

People were excited. The whole Judean countryside and Jerusalem went out to him. John was an overnight sen-



a word
for
sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

sation. The Baptist was proclaiming that the time had come for God to act. The long-awaited Messiah was coming. But that was only a part of John's message.

Another part of his message was that to prepare for God's gift of salvation we need to turn our lives around. "John proclaimed a baptism of repentance."

"Repent" isn't a word we hear a lot these days. Repent means to turn our lives around: It means to turn away from those things that turn us away from God.

Lachlan Campbell had a daughter Flora, who left home and fell into the wrong kind of relationships. Soon she did not respond to her father's letters because she found it difficult to relate to him.

Maggie, Flora's aunt, wrote her a letter that finally melted her heart. At the end of the letter she wrote: "Flora, your Dad-

dy is grievin' ye. Come home for your own sake. Come home for your dear Daddy's sake. But, Flora, come home most of all for the dear Lord's sake!"

Christmas is a time for coming home. John the Baptist said, "Repent," turn your life around, come home because the Messiah will soon be here.

Finally, the reason we celebrate Advent and Christmas is Jesus. The people who had streamed out into the desert wondered if John might be the long-awaited Messiah. John was very clear about his role: "I'm not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals."

In World War II an officer made it back to America on the first Christmas Eve after the war was over. He'd been overseas for nearly two years and hadn't seen his family in all that long time. He called his wife and told her that he was home, and if everything worked out, he would be in sometime late that night.

When the children were gathered around the tree on Christmas morning to open their presents, suddenly the white sheet on which the presents had been placed stirred. And then from among the packages arose the children's father, like a Christmas present come to life. The children went crazy with excitement. They had expected only pre-

sents, but they found their father instead.

That is the meaning of Advent. God has come to us. God comes to us to bless us with his presence. Which means more: presents as in gifts or presence as in someone being there for us, as Jesus is!

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, December 6
Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 5:17-26

Tuesday, December 7
Isaiah 40:1-11;
Matthew 18:12-14

Wednesday, December 8
Genesis 3:9-15, 20;
Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12

Thursday, December 9
Isaiah 41:13-20;
Matthew 11:11-15

Friday, December 10
Isaiah 48:17-19;
Matthew 11:16-19

Saturday, December 11
Sirach 48:1-4, 9-11;
Matthew 17:10-13

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