

OBSTACLES TO EVANGELISATION



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In this talk I would like to draw attention to some impediments to the new evangelisation. The list is not intended to be in any way exhaustive. The topics are not listed in order of importance. We will look briefly at Five of them.

1. Universal salvation.
2. Relativism.
3. Scandal.
4. Loss of a sense of sin.
5. The Role of the Evil One.



1. Universalism

The scriptures give the impression that perhaps only a minority of people will be saved. Here are a few examples.

1. In Mt 7:13-14 Jesus said, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."
2. In Mt 22:14 he added, "For many are invited, but few are chosen."
3. St. Peter stated that, "It is difficult for good people to be saved; what, then, will become of godless sinners?" (1 Pt 4:18).



In spite of these scripture texts, many of our contemporaries believe that the road that leads to heaven is wide and that most people take it, with the possible exception of some extraordinarily evil people. Many priests seem to agree with this point of view in their preaching and avoid mentioning the possibility of forfeiting salvation and having to endure eternal separation from God. The late Cardinal Avery Dulles wrote,

"The mass for the dead has turned into a Mass of the Resurrection, which sometimes seems to celebrate not so much the resurrection of the Lord as the salvation of the deceased, without any reference to sin and punishment. More education is needed to convince people that they ought to fear God, who as Jesus taught, can punish soul and body together in hell (cf. Mt 10:28)."

As Pope John Paul II pointed out, some preachers, "no longer have the courage to preach the threat of hell. And perhaps even those who listen to them have stopped being afraid of hell."

For example a few years ago a very well-known Irish broadcaster died suddenly. It was clear that he had feet of clay like the rest of us. However, a well-known priest said on the radio that he was quite sure that the deceased was in heaven. Then he added, “and if he is not in heaven I have no desire to go there myself.” In other words, although the man who died had many obvious, public faults he had canonized him, thereby saying in effect, there was no need to pray that God might have mercy on his soul. One is reminded in this regard of a verse in Mal 2:17, “**You have wearied the Lord . . . By saying, “Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them.”** If people think that we are saved no matter what we believe or how we behave, why bother evangelising? Furthermore, it is not surprising that evangelisation, and the demands of Christian discipleship don't make much impression on people who think they are saved no matter what they believe or do.



2. Relativism

Secular culture is said to be *postmodern* in nature. This world view maintains that, rather than being an objective fact, our knowledge of truth is subjective and at best probable, partial and provisional. Pope John Paul II described it in par 91 of *Faith & Reason* in these words, “the currents of thought which claim to be postmodern merit appropriate attention. According to some of them, the time of certainties is irrevocably past, and the human being must now learn to live in a horizon of total absence of meaning, where everything is provisional and ephemeral.” Postmodernist relativism poses a very real challenge as far as evangelization is concerned.



Christians believe that God has revealed absolute truth in and through the person and teachings of Jesus Christ and that he is the sole mediator between God and human beings (cf. 1 Tim 2:5). There is no other name by which people can be saved (cf. Acts 4:12). However, people in post-modern modern culture find those claims very hard to accept. They tend to see Jesus as merely one outstanding religious leader among many others such as Buddha, Lau Tzu, Zoroaster and Mohammed. Any claim that Christ is unique and the sole means of salvation is considered to be arrogant, intolerant and unjustified. They consider all religions as equally valid paths to transcendence.



While many people in Western countries have parted company with institutional forms of religion they will often say that they are spiritual. That phrase covers a multitude. Usually it refers to an arbitrary mixture of beliefs drawn from different religions, psychology and the occult. Because of the current spirit of the age people like this often resist the Christian claim that Christ and his message are manifestations of absolute, revealed truth. So they often reject the truth claims of Christian evangelisers

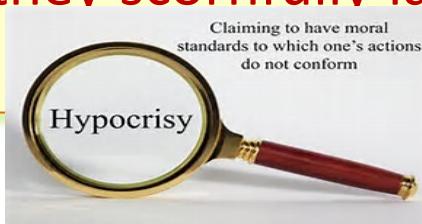


3. SCANDAL

Jesus said on one occasion, “your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.” The Popes have said much the same in their documents on evangelisation. For example in par. 42 of *Mission of the Redeemer*, Pope John Paul said, “People today, put more trust in witnesses than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, and in life and action than in theories. The witness of a Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission.”



The problem with the Church is that many of its members do not practice what they preach. There is nothing new about this. For example, in the *Second Letter of Clement* (A.D. 100 approx.) the anonymous author said that it was not too surprising that the name of the Lord was blasphemed by the pagans. “For when the pagans hear from our mouths the words of God, they marvel at their beauty and greatness. But when they discover that our actions are not worthy of the words we speak, they turn from wonder to blasphemy, saying that it is a myth and a delusion. For when they hear from us that God says, “It is no credit to you if you love those who love you, but it is a credit to you if you love your enemies and those who hate you,” when they hear these things, they marvel at such extraordinary goodness. But, when they see that we do not only fail to love those who hate us we even fail to love those who love us, they scornfully laugh at us, and the Name is blasphemed.”



One cause of scandal are the divisions both within and between Christian Churches. Jesus prayed that his disciples would be one, so that the world would believe that it was the Father who sent him. In the 1970s, when the troubles were at their worst in Northern Ireland, the Rev. Cecil Kerr of the Church of Ireland, told me that there was a museum in Moscow which promoted atheism. Apparently, it had one section devoted to Ulster. The general gist of the display was this, “Have nothing to do with Christianity, it is a sickness that mistakes itself for a cure. See how these Irish Christians hate, maim and kill one another.”



Is it any wonder that when he spoke to ecumenical leaders in Dublin in 1979, Pope John Paul II said,

“Dear brothers: with a conviction linked to our faith, we realize that the destiny of the world is at stake, because the credibility of the Gospel has been challenged. Only in perfect unity can we Christians adequately give witness to the truth.”

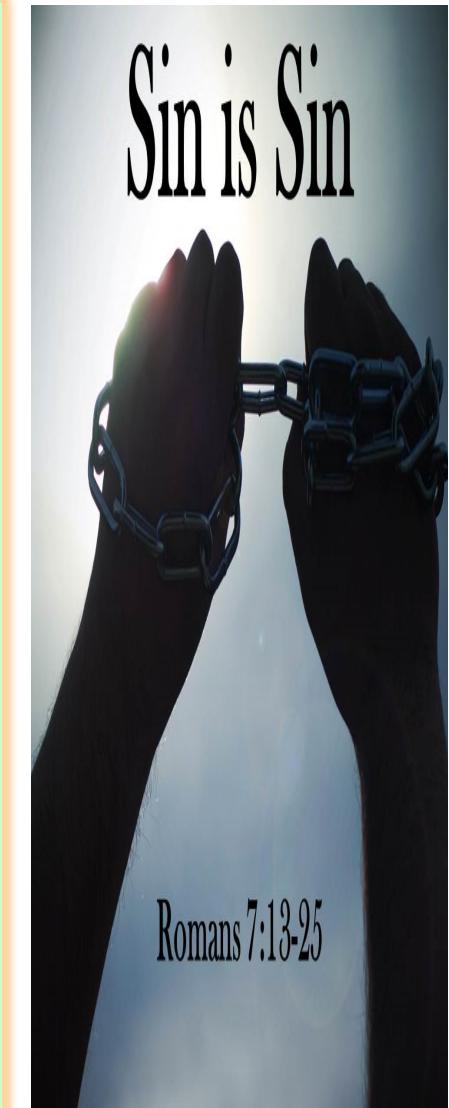
Not surprisingly, the public's perception of widespread clerical abuse and financial dishonesty also acts as a stumbling block where the credibility of the Gospel message is concerned.



4. Loss of a Sense of Sin

Explicit or implicit awareness of sin is a prerequisite for openness to the message of salvation in Christ because Christ died for the forgiveness of sins. But as Pope Pius XII famously observed in the mid 20th century, “the sin of the century is the loss of a sense of sin.”

Pope Benedict XVI wrote “the word "sin" is not accepted by many, for it presupposes a religious vision of the world and of man. If we eliminate God from the horizon of the world, we cannot speak of sin. Just as when the sun is hidden the shadows disappear and the shadows appear only if the sun is there, so too the eclipse of God necessarily brings the eclipse of sin.”



The core Christian message is about God's willingness to forgive sin, in virtue of Christ's saving death on the cross. But often, due to a lack of a sense of sin, people fail to see the relevance of the Christian message. They have little or no sense that they need to be saved from their own guilt.



5. The Role of the Evil One

The New Testament says that one reason that evangelisation is not always successful is the malign role of the devil.

- In the parable of the Sower Jesus said in, “When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart” (Mt 13:18-23)
- In 2 Cor 4:4 St. Paul said something very similar, “The god of this age [i.e. Satan] has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

It is clear from these scripture texts that the devil can prevent worldly people from hearing the life-giving word of God. Arguably, the devil has a hand in the four obstacles already mentioned.



SPIRITUAL COMBAT

However it is important to remember that in Jn 12:31 Jesus said, “now shall the *ruler of this world* be cast out.” Ever since His saving death and resurrection, that is already true in **principle**. But how can Satan’s power be overcome in **practice**? As far as the evangelising person is concerned he or she intercedes with confidence for himself and others believing as St. Paul said, “For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds [of Satan in the mind]. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor 10:4-5).



Intercession

Those who are familiar with the ministry of intercession appreciate the fact that it takes place within a context of spiritual conflict. As St Paul once warned: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12). Sometimes we have to pray for people, such as relatives, friends and acquaintances that they may be freed from the spiritual oppression that currently prevents them from hearing and understanding the word of God. Knowing this to be true, the New Springtime Community, to which I belong, says in its mission statement, We will “encourage intercessors to pray on our behalf that we may be delivered from all evil and empowered to proclaim the Good News effectively.”

