

New papal encyclical charts course of optimism for Asian missions

by Maria Cristina Fiocchi

The *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II's eighth encyclical, which deals with the "permanent validity of the missionary mandate," has been rightly defined the encyclical of hope and optimism.

There is in the document the mark of the traveling Pope, who calls the Church to mobilize to relaunch missions as "primary, essential, and never concluded work. In fact the Church cannot subtract itself from the permanent mission of carrying the Gospel to those who do not yet know Christ." The urgency of this task was illustrated by Josef Cardinal Tomko, the head of the department for the Evangelization of Peoples, who presented the encyclical to the press. Out of 5 billion people, the cardinal said, only one-third are Christians and Catholics, less than a fifth. In the year 2000, the Muslims will be 1.2 billion, or 100 million more than Catholics, and demographic trends above all in Asia, where Muslims predominate along with Hindus and Buddhist, are not in favor of the Christians.

"But to give evangelization a new impulse, it is necessary to clear up doubts and ambiguities regarding missionary activity *ad gentes*," and the Pope lists them. "Some ask: 'Is missionary work among non-Christians still relevant? Has it not been replaced by interreligious dialogue? Is not human development a goal of the church's mission? Does not respect for conscience and for freedom exclude all forms of conversion? Is it not possible to attain salvation in any religion? Why, then, should there be missionary activity?'"

"While respecting the beliefs and sensitivities of all," the Pope replies, "we must first clearly affirm our faith in Christ, the one savior of mankind." He specifies that "outside of Christ Jesus there is no salvation," and in Him, man is freed from all confusion and alienation. Therefore we must beware of the temptation to "reduce Christianity to merely human wisdom, a pseudo science of well-being. In our heavily secularized world a 'gradual secularization of salvation' has taken place, so that people fight for the good of man, but for a man who is truncated, reduced to his merely horizontal dimension."

As to dialogue with other religions, the Pope stresses: "There must be no abandonment of principles or false irenicism, but instead a witness given and received for a mutual

advancement on the road of religious inquiry and experience, and at the same time for the elimination of prejudice, intolerance, and misunderstandings."

In the Church's general commitment to missions, the encyclical looks eastward. The Pope writes: "Particularly in Asia, toward which the church's missions *ad gentes* ought chiefly to be directed, Christians are a small minority," and he adds: "Population growth in non-Christian countries in the South and the East, is constantly increasing the number of people who remain unaware of Christ's redemption. We need therefore to direct our attention toward those geographical areas and cultural settings which still remain uninfluenced by the gospel." This task is particularly urgent when one considers that in Asia, a continent where more than half of humanity lives, the Christian presence hovers around 2%, of which Catholics are less than 1%.

Many theologians in recent years have tried to respond to the numerous questions which are raised by being Christians in Asia. The Chinese theologian of Taiwan, Song, in his essay, "Theology of the Third Eye," proposes looking at the Revelation with Asian eyes, the third eye being the Buddhist eye—the eye of the heart which transcends reason and knows how to look in the direction of mystery. Others have subordinated Asian-ness to Third World-ness, attempting to postulate a dimension of liberation not unlike Latin American theology. But everyone recognizes the need for deepening the unique and revealing element of the Gospel message, and to hence bring out its revolutionary content so that it may be received in a society where religion is experienced by different mentalities and tendencies.

"We must not underestimate," explains Father Joseph Hoang Minh Tang of the Vietnamese program of Vatican Radio, and a longtime collaborator of Radio Veritas, the station which broadcasts all over Asia from Manila, "that all the great religions come from Asia: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Taoism. These respond already to the demand for religiosity of the Asian peoples. Hence the Christian message, so that it may be effectively received, must be announced in an adequate way. The missionaries must know the language, the history, and the culture of those peoples in depth."

Also, we should not forget that Judaism and Christianity

arose out of Asia Minor. Therefore it should not be hard to transmit the Gospel to Eastern peoples. It is merely a question of "translating" it, keeping in mind the culture and the environment into which it is being announced, to avoid useless misunderstandings.

The controversy around the ancestor cults, for example, set back the expansion of the Christian faith in China and other Asia countries; after the first Jesuit missionaries, who rightly compared ancestor worship to the veneration of saints in the Catholic Church, came missionaries of other orders who interpreted that form of devotion as superstition and witchcraft, and thereby triggered centuries of persecution of the Christians.

In the encyclical, John Paul II defines the missionary as a "contemplative in action," stating that his "contact with representatives of the non-Christian spiritual traditions, particularly those of Asia, has confirmed me in the view that the future depends to a great extent on contemplation."

"Contemplation," continued Father Tang, "is a basic aspect of Hinduism, and also in Buddhism the path to salvation corresponds to a state of inner happiness, to be reached via contemplation; often in these countries the exaggerated stress on the mystical-contemplative aspect is an obstacle to social progress."

"The Holy Father," Tang continued, "wishes to underline that missionaries must understand the Asiatic soul, and must try to announce Jesus Christ by using all the positive religious elements present in Asian culture, of which contemplation is a fundamental element. Through the prism of contemplation it will be possible to propose, then, certain values of liberation and overall development of man which are those of the Christian message. These values also have to do with material well-being, economic development, the defeat of poverty, solidarity, and progress."

In his encyclical, the Pope notes that "in certain countries missionaries are refused entry. In others, not only is evangelization forbidden, but conversion as well and even Christian worship," a statement many have read as referring to Islamic countries. Father Tang adds that hostility to Christianity is manifested wherever religion is deformed into fanaticism.

"There are great difficulties even in India," Father Tang says, "where Christian preaching on equality among all men is seen as a threat to Hinduism, which upholds the division into castes. In other countries, like China, the problem is political. There, it is communism which does not allow the Catholic Church to announce the Gospel."

The element of novelty, the force, and the warmth of the *Redemptoris Missio* is precisely the reaffirmation of the perennial validity of missionary activity: "The Pope has given great relief to the activity of the young churches," Father Tang concludes, "involving them as protagonists in the evangelization of non-Christian peoples. It is a mission we have been awaiting for years, and this encyclical is coming at the right time."

North Korea could go either way

by Lydia Cherry

North Korea watchers are divided over whether the massively armed hermit kingdom will "exploit the military vacuum" created by the Gulf war and attempt to launch an attack over the demilitarized zone (DMZ), as South Korean leaders fear, or whether the rulers in North Korea's capital, Pyongyang, have instead begun to move in a very different direction: to ally with the rapidly developing countries of Asia in a bloc which it hopes will become free of U.S. control.

There are strong indications backing both propositions. What is indisputable, is that the country will be forced to move one way or the other, as the status quo has become untenable. A sharp drop in imports of crude oil from Iran since the Gulf war began has reportedly plunged metal and machinery industries into stagnation, and the regime has put into motion a "two meals a day" campaign to attempt to deal with acute food shortages.

The combination of the Gulf war and the resurgence of the hardliners in Moscow has the South Korean (R.O.K.) government's "northern policy" in tatters. That policy had envisioned that by getting closer to Moscow and Beijing, they could obtain a direct opening to Pyongyang. The initial South Korean hope of a reenactment in Korea of the German reunification process no longer seems possible.

South Korean confidence in Gorbachov's inclination or ability to help this process is waning. At a Jan. 22 press conference, Soviet Deputy Prime Minister Maslyukov announced that North Korea would continue to get weapons from the Soviet Union, but that the weapons were "defensive." Ridiculing the term "defensive," the South Korean newspaper *Choson Ilbo* described the scene: "The reporters in the crowd had the feeling that our expectations of the R.O.K.-U.S.S.R. relationship were falling apart. There was this great contrast between the attitude of the Soviet Union, which seemed to swagger even as it received the \$3 billion loan [from Seoul], and the attitude of our government which seemed to be a patsy."

There are unconfirmed reports of a policy split within the North Korean leadership. After the Ceausescu regime was toppled in Romania last year, a former Romanian official said that an anti-establishment organization exists in North Korea, comprised of at least three (unidentified) members of