

RB 72 – In the Workshop of the Monastery
EVANGELIZATION AND GOOD ZEAL
Miriam Alejandrino OSB

Introduction

Sr. Aquinata has treated the theme of our Symposium: “RB 72 - in the workshop of the monastery,” with great care by way of the synchronic and diachronic analysis of RB 72 and an erudite nuancing. Sr. Aquinata’s scholarly and insightful exposition of RB 72 has laid a good foundation for the topic assigned to me for this Symposium.

The original title of the topic assigned to me was “Evangelization – the fruit of good zeal.” At first I accepted the topic without much ado. However, after my readings of pertinent materials, I asked Mo. Maire if we could drop the word “fruit” and rephrase the title simply as “Evangelization and Good Zeal.” Fruit evokes the image of a tree, which bears fruit at a proper season. Like good zeal, evangelization should not be seasonal.

Good zeal, described by Sr. Aquinata as the ardent love for Christ expressing itself in our love for all people, has been stamped in the heart of every Christian at baptism. As St. Paul writes: “The love of Christ has been poured out in us through the Holy Spirit.” With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in us through the sacraments of baptism and confirmation, the baptized Christian shares this love by participating in the evangelizing mission of Christ to proclaim God’s love for all peoples.

Evangelization is inherent in the life of every baptized Christian as *Redemptoris Missio* (RM) points out clearly:

The missionary thrust belongs to the very nature of the Christian life...Missionary activity is a matter for all Christians, for all dioceses and parishes, Church institutions and associations...It is in commitment to the Church’s universal mission that the new evangelization of Christian peoples will find inspiration and support. (#1 & 2)

My presentation is divided into 3 parts:

- I. I. Evangelization: meaning, source, goal, content, means of evangelization and the evangelizer.
- II. II. Evangelization and RB in history: Monastic community as a community in and for evangelization.
- III. III. Benedictines and Evangelization in the Third Millennium

I. Evangelization: source, meaning, goal, content, means of evangelization and the evangelizer.

The very foundation of the Church is mission because the Church is missionary by its very nature. “The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father. This decree, however, flows from the ‘fount-like love’ or charity of God the Father” (*Ad Gentes* 2). The Trinity is the source of evangelizing mission. Christian life itself originates in Trinitarian mission activity, and the evangelizing missionary thrust finds its rightful place in ordinary Christian life.

The term evangelization has different nuances. For example, in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN), it means “to bring the Good News into all areas of humanity, and through its impact, to transform that humanity from within, making it new” (EN 18). The Church accomplishes her evangelizing mission through a variety of activities. This is a broad concept of evangelization. In the same document, evangelization is recognized to mean more specifically “the clear and unambiguous proclamation of the Lord Jesus” (EN 22), which the Pope admits is only one aspect of evangelization, but, at times, seems to have become synonymous with it.

Evangelization must be seen as the totality of its varied elements. Any partial, limited or fragmentary understanding of evangelization risks impoverishing and distorting it (EN 17, 24). Evangelization or evangelizing mission must refer to the mission of the Church in its totality.

In my presentation, I will be using the term evangelization in its broad meaning. The broad meaning of evangelization encompasses already the goal and content of evangelization. The goal is the transformation of humanity. The content is the good news of the kingdom, or Jesus Christ himself.

Evangelization will always contain, as the foundation, the center and the apex of its whole dynamic power, this explicit declaration: in Jesus Christ, who became man, died and rose again from the dead, salvation is offered to every person as the gift of the grace and mercy of God himself (EN 27).

The Church has received its mandate from Christ to evangelize, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28, 19). The evangelizing mission is at the center of the life of the Church based on the words of Jesus, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (Jn 20:21).

Evangelization is carried out through an integral development of the person, in her/his relationship with God and the community. “Evangelization takes the person as its starting point, coming back to its interrelationships between persons and their relation with God.” (EN 20).

We may summarize the means of evangelization into witness or presence, proclamation, conversion and baptism, forming local churches, inculturation, dialogue, and integral human development (RM 42-59). RM discusses the details in Chapter Five on the Paths of Mission, the ways and means by which we can carry out the work of evangelization.

II. Evangelization and RB in History: Monastic community as a community in and for evangelization.

This second part of my presentation is divided into 3 sections:

1. 1. Biblical models of good zeal and evangelization
2. 2. RB 72 – how it is lived in history
3. 3. RB 72 and the Church’s teachings

1. Biblical models of good zeal and evangelization

Abbot Jerome has already given us an individual, in the person of Barnabas, as a model of good zeal, which influenced and transformed a Christian community. The Book of

Acts relates that it was at Antioch, where Barnabas and Saul taught and lived for a year, that the believers were first called Christians.

From an individual biblical model, let us have a look at the first Christian community described in the Book of Acts (2,43ff.):

“The believers lived together in close fellowship and shared their belongings with one another...Day after day they met as a group in the temple and they had their meals together in their homes, eating with glad and humble hearts, praising God and enjoying the good will of all the people.”

One of the central purposes of mission is to bring people together in hearing the Gospel, in fraternal communion, in prayer and in the Eucharist. The first Christian community, made up of glad, generous and humble hearts (Acts 2,46), were open and missionary. Even before activity, evangelization means witness and a way of life that shines out to others (EN 31-33; 41-42). “The ultimate purpose of mission is to enable people to share in the communion which exists between the Father and the Son. The disciples are to live in unity with one another, remaining in the Father and the Son, so that the world may know and believe (cf. Jn 17:21-23). This is a very important missionary text. It makes us understand that we are missionaries above all because of *what we are* as a Church whose innermost life is unity in love, even before we become missionaries *in word or deed*” (RM 23).

The New Testament indicates that evangelization, which was directed first to Israel and then to the Gentiles, develops on many levels.

First, there is the group of the 12, which as a single body, was called by Jesus Christ to be with him and then sent to preach (Mk 3,13ff.) the Good News. Then, there is the community of believers, which in its way of life and its activity, bears witness to the Lord and converts the Gentiles (Acts 2,46f.). There are also special missionaries sent out to proclaim the Gospel. The Christian community at Antioch sends forth its members on mission to evangelize: “Having fasted, prayed and celebrated the Eucharist, the community recognizes that the Spirit has chosen Paul and Barnabas to be sent forth” (Acts 13: 1-4).

Biblical texts show that in its origins, evangelization is a community commitment, a responsibility of the local Church. In the Book of Acts, the mission *ad gentes* was considered the normal outcome of Christian living, to which every believer was committed through the witness of personal conduct and through explicit proclamation whenever possible.

Monastic life is a concrete lived experience of evangelization. This leads us to the second section of this part – RB 72 in history

2. RB 72 – how it is lived in history

Sr. Aquinata rightly points out that good zeal is intense love of Christ and for others. It is clearly stated in RB 72 that the goal of good zeal is the love of God and the desire for eternal life (vv. 2 & 12). This good zeal finds expression in the monastics ardent love to show respect to others, bear each others’ infirmities both of body and character and in obedience (vv. 3-6). The monastics could surmount every difficulty and bear one another’s burden if they are focused on the goal, which is union with God and desire for eternal life.

The first task of the monastic community is, therefore, to evangelize itself, that is, to manifest this ardent love through service and acceptance of one another in our respective community, our mission *ad intra*.

Sr. Sonia has described well in her presentation how love can be demonstrated “in all the apparently little things of daily in the monastery. Love makes demands... that we make relationships a priority in our lives...demands that we collaborate in building community in our time and place.”

Evangelization has to start from within, *ad intra*. A classical example of this is the community envisioned by St. Benedict. He has clearly described how a monastic community should be in the Holy Rule. Here, we see St. Benedict’s wisdom in exhorting the monastics to first of all intensify love for God and the members of the community (RB 4), for this would serve as a foundation and at the same time the springboard for reaching out peoples outside the walls of our monastery, this is mission *ad extra* (AG 11; RM 34). From the 6th century, the time of St. Benedict, let us go to the 8th century through the writings of Bede the Venerable.^{1[1]}

Bede the Venerable describes how the group of monks sent by Pope Gregory the Great in the year 596, under the leadership of Augustine of Canterbury, set about their task of evangelization in England:

As soon as they had occupied the house given to them, they began to emulate the life of the apostles and the primitive Church. They were constantly at prayer, they fasted and kept vigils, they preached the word of life to whomever they could. They regarded worldly things as of little importance, and accepted only necessary food from those they taught. They practised what they preached, and were willing to endure any hardship, and even to die for the faith which they proclaimed. A number of heathen, admiring the simplicity of their holy lives and the comfort of their heavenly message, believed and were baptized.

We are all familiar with Benedictine history that the primary task in any foundation is to solidify community life first before engaging into mission *ad extra*. Monastic communities evangelize when members live together and persevere in faith, prayer, joy, unity, forgiveness, hospitality and harmony. They become a witness, then, to our world of division and violence that it is possible to live together in spite of individual, racial, and cultural differences.

Mother Henriette has shared to us a contemporary example - her community. I am sure each one of us present here could cite our respective community’s experience on this matter. I believe this will come out during our sharing in our small groups.

Let me now come to the third section of this part, which is an examination whether the Benedictine practice, or we may call it custom, is in keeping with the Church’s teachings.

3. RB 72 and the Church’s teachings

Our Holy Father John Paul II echoes the importance of the presence of a Christian community for an effective evangelization in his encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio*

It is necessary first and foremost to strive to establish Christian communities everywhere, communities which are a sign of the presence of God in the world...Responsibility for this task belongs to the universal Church and to the particular churches, to the whole people of God and to all its missionary forces...Every church is missionary by its very nature, and is both evangelized and evangelizing...The evangelizing activity of the Christian community, first in its own locality, and then elsewhere as part of the Church’s universal mission, is the clearest sign of a mature faith. A radical conversion in thinking

^{1[1]} *The History of the Church in England*, Book I, Ch. 6.

is required in order to become missionary, and this holds true both for individuals and entire communities. The Lord is always calling us to come out of ourselves and to share with others the goods we possess, starting with the most precious gift of all – our faith. (#49)

The law of the Church provides for the role of women religious in evangelization:

Members of the Institute of Consecrated life, because of the dedication to the service of the Church deriving from their very consecration, have an obligation to play a special part in missionary activity, in a manner appropriate to their Institute. (CIC 713)

John Paul II also acknowledges this important role when he writes:

History witnesses to the outstanding service rendered by religious families in the spread of the faith and the formation of new churches: from the ancient monastic institutions, to the medieval orders, up to the more recent congregations.

We are to bear glorious witness to the majesty and love of God, as well as to unity in Christ (AG 40), in a total gift of self to God and in complete readiness to serve humanity and society after the example of Christ (EN 58f.).

This is precisely what St. Benedict advocates in his Holy Rule, particularly in RB 72 – on good zeal that monastics should have.

We see that St. Benedict's insights are contemporary because they are the fruits of *lectio divina* and *lectio vitae*. The Holy Rule was a product of his *lectio, ruminatio, meditatio*, and *contemplatio* of the Word of God coupled with his experiences in the school of the Lord's service. This must be the reason why until the third millennium and I believe in the coming millenniums, the Holy Rule is and will still be vibrant and relevant.

This brings us to the last part of this paper, wherein we will examine what are the challenges of evangelization in the third millennium and how we, women Benedictines, can effectively respond to these challenges.

I. III. Benedictines and Evangelization in the Third Millennium

In this part, I would be posing some questions to which I do not claim to have ready-made answers.

Today, we face a religious situation which is extremely varied and changing. Social and religious realities, which were once clear and defined, are today increasingly complex. International terrorism, extreme poverty, migration (among them largely refugees), economic globalization, secularization of values, a new morality without any religious or biblical underpinning: all these phenomena pose a serious challenge to the evangelizing mission of the Church in general, and to us Benedictine women in particular.

How do we sustain and promote good zeal in the face of all these realities? How do we evangelize people who idolize terrorism and consider suicide bombing as heroism? How do we evangelize the process of globalization so that it would really benefit the poor? How do we evangelize the means of social communication so that the values that are transmitted would be in consonance with the Gospel? How do we combat secularization in private and

public life? How do we promote the family, the basic cell of society, so that it may be Gospel leaven in society?

These questions challenging our faith and good zeal certainly involve the monastic community and every monastic. How do we, as Benedictine women and monastic communities, filled with good zeal as St. Benedict meant it, contribute to the resolution of the above issues?

The above questions all deal with renewal. It is our task to renew ourselves so that we may be credible in our evangelizing mission. This renewal will require profound conversion of mindsets, of values, of ways of relating and acting, of lifestyle.

Our Holy Father John Paul II exhorts that “the missionary must be a contemplative in action” (*RH* 91). He goes on to say that “the future of evangelization depends to a great extent on contemplation. Unless the missionary is a contemplative, she/he cannot proclaim Christ in a credible way.”

The consecrated person has a special way of expressing her love for the Church and the world, by sharing our spiritual richness. We, Benedictines, are heirs of a rich spiritual tradition. How do we communicate this to the Church and the world today?

We are all called to be evangelizers (cf. Mk 3,16ff). The aim of our evangelizing mission is an integral development of a person. We are all called to an integral evangelization.

Our first task is to be a community of disciples, a community that worships and celebrates the Eucharist together, to be a witness of Christian living, to bring a message of hope and optimism for a humanity which is always threatened by egoism, racism and terrorism.

Good zeal enables us a radical exodus from our egoism, to open a space for God to enter into our heart. We stretch out to God in our neighbor. God is utterly inward and utterly other; thus, to love God we must love others and ourselves.

We cannot evangelize what we do not love. We must, therefore, learn to love this world with all its minuses and pluses, just as God so loved the world that He sent His only Son (Jn 3,16).

This love is very risky. Giddens claims that in this dangerous world careering toward an unknown future, the only solution is to take risks: “A positive embrace of risk is the very source of that energy which creates wealth in a modern economy...Risk is the mobilizing dynamic of a society bent on change.” This is the risk of love, the risk of living for the other who might not like me or misunderstand me, the risk of allowing an unknown God to direct my life.

Conclusion

Evangelization in the third millennium calls for zealous women who can be an active contemplative presence and ring out a prophetic voice in our chaotic world.

If we could live to the full our vocation as Christians, more so as Benedictines, then we could make a difference, we become a counter culture to a world seeking for a meaningful existence.

If St. Benedict were standing before us now, I could imagine that he would tell us “My daughters, continue to be a light to the world.”

THANK YOU.