

PROPHETIC EVANGELISM

By Alistair Ross

Alistair Ross talks to Father Pat Lynch, founder of the Sion Catholic Community for Evangelism and author of *Awakening the Giant*

AR. Could you say a bit about yourself and how you came to be an evangelist in the Roman Catholic Church?

PL. I am a bona-fide Roman Catholic priest who was ordained in 1975. My first appointment was as chaplain to a grade 'A' high security prison at Gartree in Leicestershire. Following that I went to teach philosophy at St. Peter and St. Paul's High School in Lincoln and I subsequently became curate at St. Peter and St. Paul's church. It was a very good education because from a very early point in my priesthood I was forced to minister to difficult situations. For example, on my first Christmas Eve at Gartree, in every single confession I heard, the person had committed at least one murder. Now this is not the normal run of the mill experience of a pastor. What I was confronted with very quickly was the question 'how do I proclaim good news into very complex situations?' Eventually I went to my bishop and asked him if I could be released for full-time work in evangelism.

Maybe it is necessary for me to explain to you how difficult it was for my bishop to comprehend the word 'evangelism'.

For Roman Catholics there is a tremendous difference between the word 'evangelism' and the word 'evangelisation'. Evangelism can be understood in a very narrow sense as just 'saving your soul'. I have difficulty with that sort of terminology. I am not saying it is wrong, it just doesn't go far enough and is not biblically oriented enough for me. Catholics want to broaden the word 'evangelism' to include personal conversion to Christ and the conversion of the 'whole strata of society' to Christian principles.³² I asked the bishop to release me to be a full-time evangelist because that was what I was doing in parish work, teaching work and prison work. I was proclaiming good news in very difficult situations and into a

³² See section 18 of John Paul II's *Evangelisation in the Modern World* 1976)

society that didn't want to hear good news and is more adept at coping with bad news and tragedy. The Bishop asked me 'Why?' I replied, 'Because it is the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that our primary function, orientation, deliberation and being church is geared toward proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord.'³³

AR. That must have been a shock.

PL. It wasn't a shock for him because it is the teaching of the Church and he knew that as well as I did. What was a shock for him was the question, what role was he going to put me into to achieve this? The role of evangelist is a very non-conformist free church model; the ministry of evangelist doesn't lie easily with those in a catholic tradition. We debated this word 'evangelist' and eventually he gave me his blessing, to do two things. First of all, to be an evangelist proclaiming Jesus Christ and bringing people into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as the first step in the process of evangelisation. The second was to integrate the work of priests, nuns and lay people in proclaiming the good news. A consequence of Vatican II has been the highlighting of the role of lay people as proclaimers of the gospel and as ministers in the Church as in the priesthood of all God's people, alongside the continuing sacramental role of the ordained priest.

I, together with three married couples and one nun helped bring about the birth of a new community in 1984. A decade later the community consists of thirty people, based in Birmingham and Brentwood, who are involved in evangelism in parishes, schools and universities at home and internationally. An important part of this work is teaching, training and discipleship through the centre at Brentwood where bishops, priests, nuns, deacons and lay people are equipped to be involved in evangelism. There has been a renewed emphasis on evangelism, evangelisation and mission in recent Church teaching. Contemporary documents, including John Paul II *The Mission of the Redeemer*, have refocused the Church on the need to evangelise because the Church did not come before evangelism, the Church came as a result of evangelism. It was out of the evangelising activity of the twelve that the Church was born and high emphasis is put within our Church, and among bishops and priests today to make the primary emphasis that of

³³ See the Vatican II document *Ad Gentes*.

evangelism. However it needs to be recognised that there can be a tremendous gap between what any church teaches and what it practises. The desire of any church is to narrow this gap, which is what we are working towards. We want to do this in conjunction with the Church, to motivate and to proclaim, from the roof-tops to other people. This needs to be done, so that our Church can get back to its central function, that of proclaiming the gospel and not the proclamation of institutionalism.

AR. You said earlier that all strata of society need evangelising; how do you see this coming about?

PL. Let's begin with conversion. When conversion takes place, it needs to affect seven areas.

First, many Christians today are content with the 'born again' mentality. Now whatever terminology you want to use for that - 'coming to faith', 'born again' or 'renewal of faith' -it describes spiritual renewal. I think that if we stop there, we sin against the individual to whom we proclaim the gospel and we do not provide the platform from which the person is called to exercise their particular ministry. Jesus Christ did not come to save 'souls' in the English understanding of the word; he did, in the Hebrew understanding of the word, meaning literally the whole person -the whole being. So in our English understanding he came to save people and there are a number of areas that need to be converted.

Second, spiritual conversion needs to lead on very quickly to mental conversion and if it doesn't, we end up with sloppy religion. Paul made this clear with his emphasis on a renewed mind (Rom.12:1). There is a tremendous emphasis today on the emotional and on the spiritual and the experiential and that is very good but I think we need to move very quickly into a renewing of our thinking. That should then take us then on to moral conversion. There is a desperate need in our society for moral conversion because as far as standards, ethics and morality go, we are pretty abominable.

AR. That of course has been highlighted in the recent allegations of 'sleaze' amongst the Government.

PL. Yes. Leadership at all levels is important. I am critical of my own Church first. The call to moral leadership has been highlighted in our sinning, so I don't want to single out any church

or any individual. We are all weak, we are sinners, we all need a lot of compassion but there is a need to proclaim good moral living.

Third, unless the life of Christ is seen to be lived out in a correct way, one becomes a counter witness. Right living must be a consequence of real faith and renewed thinking.

Fourth, there is a need for physical conversion as our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit, so it does matter what I do with it and how I treat it.

Fifth, we also need emotional conversion. A great deal of rubbish has been written since the 1960's that has people focusing inwardly on their lives through self-actualisation. What we are doing is we are trying to make ourselves okay. This is an impossibility unless it is empowered by the Spirit of God. God looks at us and says 'I'm okay, you're not okay, but that's okay'. So we need to stop trying to make ourselves okay, through inward analysis, which has the effect of paralysing us from getting on with what God wants us to be and do. We cannot make ourselves into something that God did not intend us to be.

I see this influencing the church in this way. Alistair, if you or I put on a healing service, I guarantee that we could fill a church. If we put on a service where we were encouraging people to evangelise and to go out and change the whole strata of society we would be lucky to fill the front two pews. What is that saying? Possibly that our society is a hurting place. I believe that we should speak into that hurt as prophets, as preachers. We should be able to speak in with the compassion of God but not leave them there since the church would then be no better than an extension of the NHS. People need to be touched, renewed and healed, so that they in turn can be witnesses to the gospel and build the kingdom. Surely this is why evangelism, healing and deliverance go together in the scriptures?

AR. So conversion touches every area of a person's life?

PL. It has to. The *sixth* and *seventh* areas of conversion are the social dimension -how and where and what I live matters -and political conversion. It does matter who I vote for. Most people vote for the party that they like or the one that will give them more money in their pocket. That is not godly voting. If I live in a poor area I need to be converted socially and politically to the area and people around me. From a world-wide perspective it is important

that the person understands that they don't just belong to a little clique but to the whole of humanity.

AR. Elsewhere you have written about the importance of the prophetic ministry. How do you see this relating to these various areas of conversion?

PL. I see the prophetic ministry, either as an individual prophet or as a church leader speaking with a prophetic voice, having three dimensions that are important for today's church and society.

First of all there is the prophet of desolation as we see in the Old Testament. They warn God's people that if they do not live correctly then they are going to lose the promised land and be forcefully taken over because of their sinfulness. It is that kind of prophet that the world does not like today because the prophet of desolation calls people back to rightful living, saying such things as 'Adultery is wrong'. It is prophetic not in God's will, it is not in God's mind for you to be an adulterous person. Here are the knock-on effects that this sinful behaviour is going to produce. 'I think our world is getting more and more egotistical and the only way one can evangelise this world is through community living out the fullness of the conversion I have talked about. A community living out gospel values will be prophetic. It goes against the egoism or consumerism that we see in our society. The prophetic leader needs to stand in the pulpit and to say 'I want to talk to you today about the sheer love of God that he has for you. Yet because God has that sheer love for you he wants to create standards for you. Standards that work because he loves you. If you go against those standards it's not that you are smacking God in the face, you are adopting standards that don't work.' That's why society is in chaos. We're losing family life and the attributes and stability that it brings and the politicians are worried about the state of society. They are complaining that the church is not doing its job, but maybe there are not enough leaders in the church willing to stand up and be prophetic. That is why I respect John Paul II. He will go down in history as someone who stood up for principles, often with a lone voice.

A second prophetic voice is that of the prophet of consolation. This is the prophet of encouragement and compassion. This is a pastoral prophet who says 'Now we are in this mess through our rebellion and sin, how can we help God and humanity to restore you to your former essence or being?'

The third prophetic voice is one of restoration that builds Church and society. This prophet has warned the people, yet they still rebelled. He or she then stays with the people, consoling them and reminding them of God's demands on their lives, but they are still with the people, walking, suffering with them. The time will come when such a prophet can say to such a people, 'We cannot stay like this, let's do something.' That's why prophecy and evangelism go so closely together. The proclaimer of the gospel and the prophetic visionary together, see the world as God sees it and bear witness to the good news, for all strata of society, about where we have gone wrong, how God will encourage and help us and how as people in community we can be restored.

AR. Do you see ordinary church leaders speaking with these various prophetic voices?

PL. It doesn't surprise me that most prophetic preachers are itinerant. Home grown preachers tend to be economical with the truth. It will always be difficult to tell unpleasant truths to people. To speak the Gospel in love isn't easy. It could be said that most budding prophets are tamed in time and often become harmless leaders. There is always going to be a terrible tension between being a leader and being a prophet. The kind of love and truth that is necessary for the building of community demands a prophetic voice. Surely we as Christians have Jesus as our model. We will always need prophetic leaders to challenge us to see God's will and to live out our Christian calling in faithfulness. It could be argued that once the community hears the prophetic word and takes it on board then it too has a prophetic voice. Maybe our Christian communities do not hear the prophetic voice which results in placing the prophet into isolation.

However, to say that an individual church is prophetic does not exclude the critical dimension of the individual prophetic role. The prophet as leader must still deliver the word of encouragement, rebuke and judgement. The leader must challenge those who think that their power can save. The leader cannot close his or her eyes to injustice in whatever form it comes. Yet we leaders must be transformed by the Christ story so that our prophetic voice is authentic. Within caring leadership it is important to be prophetic. If we aren't, then all too often the solutions that we advocate serve no more than to perpetuate the malady. I know of no magical solution to reconcile the leader as compassionate counsellor and

prophetic discerner. The only solution I can offer is that as leaders we find the courage to challenge our people to live out our commitment to Christ.

AR. How do you see prophecy underpinning the role of leadership?

PL. In a variety of ways. First, the leader stands in the breach for the Christian community. Government to some extent is upon the leaders' shoulders. The prophetic leader has to hold before the whole community of God the Christ story that determines its existence and makes it possible.

Second, there can be no more prophetic task than preaching the Word. It is in prophetic preaching that the Church is constituted as God's people in the world. This will make the community prophetic.

Third, the prophetic leader in the day to day pastoring of the community lets the world know the great mercy and care God has for His people. Thus the leader cares for the marginalised and the persecuted acts prophetically. It can be clearly seen that the Church does not provide comfort but rather ministers the comfort of Christ.

Fourth, when the voice of the prophetic leadership is raised in truth, the world can realise that there are standards beyond itself. This surely is the call to conversion that we see in St. Paul; the Passion of God and the destabilising word that ultimately brings security and love.

Last, in prophetic leadership the Church is seen not just as a haven in the storms of life or a protection from the ravages of secularism and materialism but a people who refuse to be anything other than a truthful and loving Body.

AR. Thank you Pat for those thought provoking and challenging ideas. The call to be prophetic is one that affects us all in ministry and one I must confess we sometimes find uncomfortable. I hope that God will encourage you and use you prophetically within your Church tradition and further afield too.

For Alistair Ross' profile, see *Ministry Today* 1.