

BLESSED JOSEPH GERARD

HIS RELEVANCE FOR THE CHURCH IN SOUTH AFRICA

Fr. B.J. Tlhagale O.M.I.

BACKGROUND

Joseph Gérard is at a century's remove; and yet there is a deep-seated desire to undertake a spiritual journey, cutting through time, in order to reach the village of Ma Jesu at Roma where he laid the foundations of the Christian faith.

Such a journey is fraught with a number of difficulties. First there is the problem of overcoming the temporal distance between Joseph Gérard's life experience, his missionary endeavours and the South Africa of today. Secondly the journey purports to be a political reading of the apostolic life of Joseph Gerard, an attempt at "rescuing" the socio-political message of his writings in order to demonstrate his relevance for the South Africa of today, to draw inspiration and garner strength from his own commitment, to make our own that which has become estranged over the last 100 years.

The third difficulty is to read into the text something that was neither intended by the author nor by the text he left behind - principally his diary and letters. His teaching revolved around the Church's doctrine, personal conversion and personal faith in God and in the Saviour, Jesus Christ. Joseph Gérard is silent on the social implications of the christian message.

There is also a deafening silence on the social conditions prevalent at the time. There is, however, an abundance of reference to the cultural aspects of life of the Basotho, namely the rites of passage, divination, polygamy, ancestor cult. etc. It is inconceivable that the social fabric of the mountain kingdom that created privileges through a system of chieftainship where positions are ascribed by virtue of blood-relationships, irrespective of personal ability would have been devoid of social evils. This system, in some cases, generated instances of violations of justice. Rampant deviations, especially with regard to land distribution, the use of labour and contributions to the chiefs - were not uncommon. On these issues the writings of Joseph Gérard remain silent. This is also the case with regard to the violent relationships brought about either by the skirmishes between the Boers and the Basotho as a result of cattle rustling or land expropriation. (Saunders 1975:ch. 16).

The fourth drawback at attempting to make a political reading of Joseph Gérard revolves around the fact that the Catholic church of his time was very much caught up in the traditional perception of its role in society. The role of influencing the economic and social orders of society in the light of the Gospel message did not loom large.

The advent of the “aggiornamento” (new awareness) church came some forty years after the death of Joseph Gérard. The modern world had brought along with it new forms of oppression which demanded new orientations and responses. The social teachings of the church took a new turn with the impact of Pope John XXIII's *Mater et Magistra* and *Pacem in Terris*. These encyclicals and the documents of Vatican II emphasised the aspiration to equality and participation. They highlighted the dignity and freedom of the human person. (See Curran 1985:ch. 1).

The church of Joseph Gérard's time had not yet been preoccupied with the new concerns and yet he upheld and propagated truths whose significance resounds even in the South Africa of today.

THE FREEDOM OF THE TEXT: BASIS FOR A NEW INTERPRETATION

The next point of departure has been inspired by Paul Ricoeur's *Interpretation Theory*. He writes that “with the written discourse, however, the author's intention and meaning of the text cease to coincide. The text is freed as it were from the “captivity” of its author: the text's career escapes the finite horizon lived by its author. What the text means now matters more than what the author meant when he wrote it. (Ricoeur 1976:30)

It is this semantic autonomy, this uncoupling of the diary and letters from the person of Joseph Gérard, without denying his authorship, which allows for an exploration of the meaning of his writings for the contemporary South African situation. The text has been liberated from the dialogical situation of Joseph Gérard and the Basotho of his time. The interpretation of his diary gives new meaning to what he has written. But the new meaning does not derive from the diary of Father Gérard alone. His text shares the common meaning embedded in both the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the tradition of Eugene de Mazenod.

“PAUPERIBUS MISIT ME”

Today the expression “option for the poor” has gained much currency. But this has been so because of the ever-increasing complexity of social relations brought about by industrial development and the consequent new forms of social violence. Increasing repression in both the economic and political fields brought about a new awareness of human dignity and freedom. The church has increasingly become involved in the defence of the rights of the voiceless - particularly since Leo XII's **Rerum Novarum**, through the second Vatican Council, right up to Pope John Paul's **Laborem Exercens** and **Rei Socialis**.

The belief or conviction to opt for the poor had already been crystalised in the Oblate motto of: “Evangelizare Pauperibus Misit Me”. *Pauperes Evangelizantur*”. The mission of Joseph Gérard was to translate this motto into living reality. His directive from the founder of the Oblate Missionary Society, Eugene de Mazenod, was to work among the natives of South Africa. It was a radical choice, inspired by the gospel that exalted service to the least of the brothers (Mt.25:40) Once the choice was made, like Ruth of the Old Testament, Joseph Gérard never looked back. His became a life commitment to the Basotho. He was a

remarkable pioneer who blazed a trail, walked into dead-end paths such as the Natal mission, but never turned back.

Joseph Gérard chartered a new course for the Basotho people. Though he severely criticised their 'wicked customs' (which was not out of malice - but because they were in conflict with his own beliefs) he was completely integrated and at home in a totally alien cultural environment. He had eventually become a Mosotho who advocated new ethical choices rather than the passive acceptance of traditional customary life patterns.

NEW LIFESTYLE - NEW ETHIC

Joseph Gérard preached a radical exodus from an ethnic moulded by the native culture to an ethnic profoundly informed by the teachings of Christianity. His presence and teaching were a source of deep provocation to the Basotho who were challenged to abandon their "freedom" to engage in polygamous unions, discard their belief in the myths of divination and to embrace a new sense of justice in human relationships. He preached liberation from the compulsions of tradition, freedom from the oppression of customary expectations hitherto uncritically accepted by the Basotho. In so doing he introduced and even heightened the awareness of the freedom and dignity of the individual vis-a-vis the oppressive community bond of traditional life; the good news of the Gospel subverted the "carceral" environment traditionally reinforced by endless reenactments of rituals. In this sense he championed the cause of the ignorant, the poor and the oppressed against diviners and against the dominant, mercenary menfolk.

The thrust of the tireless missionary labours of Joseph Gérard were doubly aimed at the formation of a new Christian conscience and also at the raising of a new consciousness. He irrevocably dethroned the Basotho ancestors as the authors of the moral code and replaced them with Christ as the way, the truth and the life. Joseph Gérard engaged in a liberation catechesis of sorts. Those who accepted his message of redemption and the possibility of a new life-style had to make a fundamental choice. South Africa has yet to see a fearless and uncompromising church that has radically taken sides with the poor and the politically oppressed people after the fashion of Joseph Gérard. Taking sides with the poor and the oppressed necessarily entails a stance against the exploiters and the oppressors. Such a stance inculcates a deep sense of closeness and identity with the aspirations of the oppressed. The possibility of a just future and democratic socio-political order must be demonstrated and anticipated in the active rejection and opposition to the apartheid system.

The outright rejection of the apartheid system includes not only condemnatory press statements but also advocacy of a variety of pressures such as economic sanctions and the total isolation of the oppressive regime. There are those among the oppressed who have opted for the use of violence as the last resort in order to destroy apartheid. Compromise and patience can only create a breathing space for the evil regime. And such patience can only be advocated by those who hardly feel the pain of discrimination or who enjoy the benefits

of the racial domination. The 'wicked customs' of the apartheid system, namely the denial of citizenship rights to the black people, segregated residential areas, arbitrary detentions, denial of freedom of speech and freedom of association, etc - must be uncompromisingly opposed: not only in the way in which Joseph Gérard opposed 'wicked customs' of the Basotho, but with more harshness especially in the light of the fact that there is a worldwide rejection of the apartheid political system.

THE CHURCH IN SOUTH AFRICA AND ITS OPTION FOR THE POOR

Judging by the church's statements, its long track-record of the rejection of government discriminatory policies, its commitment to non-racial education, its work among the dislocated people, the detainees and their families etc. there is no doubt that the church leadership on the whole desires and works for an alternative kind of society. And yet there are disturbing factors with the nature of the church's commitment to the poor and the politically oppressed.

- * The Church's commitment seems to be conditioned by its concern for the white community which is equally under the church's pastoral care. The church goes to great lengths not to seem to condemn the privileged white community in its condemnation of the apartheid regime. The approach of the church is extremely conciliatory thus undermining - in the process - its very commitment to the politically disadvantaged. There is a fear of losing the loyalty and support of the white Christians. The avoidance of extreme positions, the shunning of condemning whites whose votes perpetuate the unjust socio-political order - is compatible with the semblance of unity within the Church. The truth is that the church is as deeply torn apart as the apartheid society is. The suspicions and tensions prevalent in society in general equally permeate the church community. Option for the poor therefore not only means the championing of the cause of the oppressed but also demands a head-on confrontation with the white Christians who uphold the discriminatory and exploitative socio-economic system.
- * Historically it is with extreme difficulty that the Church's clear option for the politically oppressed can be demonstrated. It is much easier to show how the Church conformed to the racial patterns of the society even though missionary activities have always been carried out amongst the poor and the oppressed black people. It is therefore hardly strange that the Church headquarters have invariably been located in exclusively white areas. The Cathedrals, those majestic, towering symbols of the presence of Christianity and the seat of church leadership - are firmly built in the cities of privileged classes of people appearing as it were, as massive symbolic signatures of "Christian civilisation". And yet apartheid society by definition and practice stands for the denial of Christian values and the defiance of the beliefs of the entire civilised world.
- * The headquarters of religious societies - including those who embrace the religious vow of radical poverty are to be found in the suburbs of the materially wealthy white people where the blacks are excluded by law, save those blacks who are employed to ensure the comfort of the rich. For years the religious who worked among

the poor have operated from the suburbs using the Group Areas Act as an excuse for not pitching up their tents amongst their native converts after the fashion of Joseph Gérard.

- * Equally disturbing is the church's commitment to the army which now includes people of colour. The role of the military is to protect the 'Christian civilisation' which essentially places the poor and oppressed beyond its reach. The army is essentially deployed to curb the activities of those who seek to bring about the downfall of the apartheid regime. In the black townships the army's role is to act as a deterrent or to prevent any resistance on the part of the oppressed. It is indeed tragically bizarre for the church to be interested in the spiritual needs of soldiers whose function is to uphold the unjust political order, while at the same time ignoring the violence perpetrated by the army. For the church that does not believe in violence, its seemingly spiritual association with the military arm of a virtually totalitarian state remains a massive scandal for those without citizenship rights.
- * Furthermore the church acts as a restraining force in its rejection of radical solutions, such as economic sanctions, or even the consideration of the use of violence as a last resort. There is no indication that the Government envisages a one man one vote system of government. Advocating perseverance and patience can degenerate into the acceptance of the status quo.

The above points raise questions about the fundamental choice made by the Church in favour of the poor and the politically oppressed. Thus option for the poor appears as an attitude of mind rather than a practical commitment to undo the mischief of apartheid once and for all. A more critical and radical stance is called for - especially in the light of the ever increasing repressive measures taken by the state in order to retain power over the voteless black majority.

CONSENT AND EQUALITY

Joseph Gérard was forthright in his relationship with the Basotho. He was guided by the internalised christian values and principles which he sought to impart to the Basotho people. His attitude towards marriage custom and belief is a case in point. Whereas he saw nothing wrong with the custom of giving cattle on the occasion of marriage to the girl's family, he nonetheless firmly believed that it would be sinful to treat the girl as mere property to be sold to the highest bidder. The girl needed to be consulted about her love for the person who wishes to marry her and that it was indeed imperative that she gives her consent. Acceptance of a marriage partner out of fear or compulsion or desire to please one's parents was a violation of one's freedom of choice and therefore unacceptable. (Gerard 1978:44-45)

Such a message had a strong emancipatory effect in a patriarchal society where male domination entrenched itself by means of custom and tradition, where reverence for custom and tradition had become identical with religious practice, where secularisation or the stripping off of the religious aura of the customs would have been anathema.

But then, such was the freedom-charged message of the good news disseminated by the intrepid French pioneer. At the core of Joseph Gérard's argument were the principles of consent and equality. These principles were later to be unambiguously enunciated by "Gaudium et Spes". Marriage is to be seen as a life-long partnership of one man and one woman. Marriage is "rooted in the contract of its partners, that is, in their irrevocable personal consent. (Gaudium et Spes No. 48) It is a union of equal partners based on the equal personal dignity of man and woman. (See Charles 1982:115).

It is against this background of monogomy and the inherent right of consent and the principle of equality that one grasps the total opposition to polygamy by Joseph Gérard.

Joseph Gérard's discourse on consent, human dignity of women and their equity to men is in reference to the bond of marriage. The intention here is to free the text from the "tutelage" of the author and also to free it from the situational reference. The attempt is to "rescue" the principles at stake and to put them in a new closeness to the contemporary South African situation:

EQUALITY AND PARTICIPATION

The church took an inordinately long time before it acknowledged and taught with the power of its authority the principles of equality, responsible decision making and participation. It was long after Joseph Gérard had left the scene that the socio-political implications of the message of Jesus of Nazareth began to dawn on the church community. The socio-economic conditions of society had become more complex and therefore demanded fresh responses. In 1971 Pope Paul IV in his **Octogesima Adveniens** stated that "two aspirations persistently make themselves felt in these new contexts and they grow stronger to the extent that people become better informed and educated; the aspiration to **equality** and the aspiration to **participation**, two forms of man's dignity and freedom. (Paul VI:496)

These fundamental aspirations continue to be denied by the South African state. The state moves from one crises to another. Attempts are made to overcome the acute problem of the state's illegitimacy in the eyes of the black majority. These attempts are in the form of participation at the third tier of government even though the structures continue to be segregated. Cooptation of black participation is intended to consolidate the power base of the ruling white dominant groups. Protection of the individual rights continues to be flatly denied and, opposition to government is virtually outlawed by the regulations of the state of emergency which has been declared since 1985.

Though human rights issues loom large in the social teachings of the church since Vatican II, the teachings remain by and large a body of information and knowledge with little visible impact on the church community. There is no compelling authority behind the teaching even though "every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, colour, social condition, language or religion is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent (Gaudium et Spes No. 9)

There is a profoundly disturbing “festina lente” approach on the part of the South African church, a failure to grasp the impatience and anger of the oppressed as shown in intermittent acts of violence and total opposition to the state and to the supporters of the state apparatus.

The challenge to the church is unmistakable. There is need to oppose the denial of equality and participation publicly. But then such an opposition, if it is truly fundamental, ought to be an integral part of the liturgical rights of the church's practice. Liturgical practice, where the essential doctrines of the church are repetitively rehearsed, ought to be the “locus classicus” of the denial of the evil in its generic form but also in its particular form of apartheid. Not only should faith in God the Father be reaffirmed but also in the consequences of faith - the belief and commitment to the equality of God's children and that this belief is politically understood in terms of one man one vote within a non-racial unitary democratic society. At present the liturgy remains “privatistic” and overspiritualised. The local church is enslaved by the universal practice. Particularly our national experiences are completely ignored in favour of a universal application. Thus the liturgy remains politically irrelevant, for it fails to embody the aspirations, fears and concerns embedded in particular histories of given situations. The harshness of the apartheid system has indeed encouraged the oppressed to abandon traditional liturgies and to create new symbols, new songs, new rituals, in order to confront their own experiences. These new vibrant liturgies can be observed at “political” night vigils and at funerals, at the meetings of trade unions and political gatherings and at commemoration services. Traditional liturgies are non-confrontational. They speak the same language to both the oppressed and the oppressor. They intentionally blur the boundaries of conflict situations and are excessively preoccupied with man cut-off from his socio-cultural and historical experiences.

Apartheid, in its old or new guise, remains the embodiment of the contemporary form of paganism. Its devastating impact is felt on a daily basis. Its renunciation and exorcism must necessarily be part of the daily liturgical celebration. The gap that exists between the social teaching of the Church, the pastoral ministry and its liturgical practice ought to be eliminated so that the full impact of the church's social teaching increasingly becomes a daily experience inexorably aimed at the destruction of the unjust socio-economic order.

EVANGELISATION OF CULTURE

There is also need to learn from what Joseph Gérard failed to do - the evangelisation of the local culture. He lived during the time of Pope Leo XIII who identified European culture with the western civilisation. In his **Inscrutabili** (1878), Pope Leo wrote:

In every truth it is the glory of the supreme Pontiffs that they steadfastly set themselves up as a wall and bulwark to save society from falling back into its former superstition and barbarism. (Leo VIII 1985:17).

Joseph Gérard saw the Basotho as a superstitious barbaric people who embraced “wicked customs”, such as circumcision, polygamy and divination. Father Gérard failed to grasp how transcendence was symbolised in the culture of the Basotho, how their “pagan” spirituality

was an integral part of their "wicked customs", how their customs acted as a mechanism of social control and how the dignity of the person - however limited - evolved within the specific cultural world in spite of the serious shortcomings which have been shown up by Christianity.

Like any other non-christian but religious people, the Basotho revered the Holy who dwelt in their hearts, whose love is revealed in men and in one's neighbours. (See Heiler 1959:132-160) But his was apparently missed by Father Gérard. John Colenso, a contemporary of Joseph Gérard had a totally different attitude. He believed that missionaries "should meet the heathen halfway as it were, upon the ground of our common humanity instead of seeking to uproot altogether their old religion, scoffing at the things which they hold most sacred". (Grey 1983:45)

Local cultures are to be allowed to grow and flourish rather than to be compelled into a subterranean existence. Culture is an expression of a people's pride and sense of achievement, hence also an expression of their dignity. On the other hand, culture should not be abused as has been done by the South African regime. The government seized upon the cultural differences among the oppressed people in order to create ethnic units and declare these units as separate "nationalities" for purposes of political domination.

Secondly, the concept of culture has shifted from the classicist definition that understood culture as a standardised behaviour or as forms of traditional behaviour. The concept of culture entails development - economic growth and participation. The challenge in South Africa is to encourage and to create opportunities for productive participation in the economy and in the political processes of the land. Training and education must be made accessible to the black majority. In the process of destroying the apartheid system there is also the challenge to create common national symbols as distinct from ethnic cultural symbols. In the absence of "shared aspirations and identifications" a new South Africa will not emerge" (see Greenberg 1987:6-9). It is against this background that the African National Congress in its new constitutional Guide Lines states that "it shall be state policy to promote the growth of a single national identity and loyalty binding on all South Africans. At the same time the state shall recognise the linguistic and cultural diversity of the people ... (Weekly Mail 1988:7).

The challenge in this context is particularly directed toward the Church so abundantly endowed with the symbolisms of unity. The church must truly become the light even to those who are outside the church. She "shines forth" as an example of "a people made one with unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (Lumen Gentium 4) Not only is the church a sign of unity of all mankind but she is also an instrument for the achievement of such a union and unity" (Lumen Gentium No. 1). It is this image and instrumental function of the Church that should increasingly loom large in the deeply divided South African society.

Granted that at present the church serves different groups but this need not deter the church from "shining forth" as a "home" for all and as a compelling example that mankind can and does share common

convictions and identifications.

CONCLUSION

Today, not only is Joseph Gérard the founding father of faith in Lesotho, but he is also now a permanent living symbol of faith. Blessed! The pilgrimage was not in vain. Through him we inhabited the alien past not just for the sake of doing so but in order to retrieve, to rescue the message he had for the Basotho and then translate and appropriate that message for our present situation. Through him we have sought to rediscover the prophetic power of the Gospel so as to experience anew the freshness of the original impetus of the Good Tidings.

The reading of Father Gérard defies ethical neutrality. It invites the reader to take sides - to be on the side of the poor, on the side of those who oppose injustice passionately. The "wicked customs" of his time have been replaced by the more "wicked customs" of modern times. Today's evil apartheid customs deserve a harsher treatment. For out of the debris of apartheid edifice, a new homeland, a new nation must emerge. This then is the challenge that faces not only those who are haunted by the memory of the extraordinary Oblate pioneer but also those who claim the fatherhood of God.

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