



### **How do we follow the footsteps of Paul into mission today?**

A recent visit to Rome and Hong Kong (now part of China) encompassed the control centre of the Church and its most important new frontier.

One might think of the Vatican as out of touch and not fully appreciating the challenging issues facing the Church. In fact, at least in the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, which oversees around 1,100 dioceses, one quarter of the world's dioceses in "mission" areas, this was not the case at all. They had strong research and understandings on all the issues facing the Church world-wide, from the growth of Protestant and independent churches in Africa and Latin America to the increasing attacks on Christians by Muslim extremists, to the opportunities open to the Church in China.

One key need of the Church, explained by Congregation head Cardinal Ivan Dias, perhaps its most pressing, was for talented and well-trained leaders for the dioceses that come under his supervision, and the importance of education and formation in developing these leaders.

Paul was in his own way the missionary leader par excellence. He worked from very little; a position of distrust as a former persecutor of Christians, no apparent resources and not having the status in the Church as an Apostle who had known Jesus. Yet by the force of his passion and leadership skills he grew the Church and became the most influential individual other than Jesus in the history of Christianity.

In Acts 17, we hear of Paul in the Areopagus,

*Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and after receiving instructions to have Silas and Timothy join him as soon as possible, they left him. 16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens,.... 17 he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. 18 Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, "What does this babbling want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities." (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.)*

*19 So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means." 21 Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new. 22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 23*

*For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.*

Paul had a multi-faceted strategy of expanding the Church; from his own work in starting churches, from partnerships with other missionaries, working in conjunction with the Apostles and the Church in Jerusalem and in supporting and cajoling existing churches through his letters and people he sent.

To share the Gospel in Athens Paul used his cultural understanding of the gentile Greeks to introduce Christianity through the “unknown God”, his strong Jewish base to share his faith amongst the Jews and the large group of gentiles who were associated with the Jewish Diaspora. He worked with other Christian leaders, who had actually brought him to Athens. And Paul was successful, with Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris amongst Paul’s converts.

China is the greatest opportunity for the growth of Christianity today. Already we have seen the Church grow from around 10-12 million Christians at the time of the Communist victory in 1949 to perhaps 52 million in 2009. In 1949 Catholics made up 50-80% of Chinese Christians, today it’s perhaps 20% or 10-12 million.

In speaking to Bishop Tong of Hong Kong and Cardinal Dias, both are hopeful that relations with China are improving and that more freedom will soon be allowed to all Catholics. There are many Catholics already involved in China, both Chinese Catholics involved with underground, open and official parts of the Church, and others supporting the Church or working in humanitarian roles within China (missionary work is forbidden).

However, as noted above, the Catholic Church in China is growing far more slowly than the Protestant Churches. There is a shortage of priests and a declining number of seminarians in China including Hong Kong. Although, as Cardinal Dias noted, Catholic priests are better quality than their counterparts from other churches in China and in the developing world, in that they have much longer training in theology and philosophy, however they appear less able to effectively reach people with the Gospel message than independent or evangelical Protestants. This also appears true for every other country in the world.

So where are the St Pauls of today, especially the Catholic ones? What needs to be done? Although the Vatican is across the issues, it largely does not have answers to concrete pastoral issues that arise around the world. For those answers it is looking to talented local leaders- Bishops, lay people, nuns, brothers and importantly priests to find local solutions which will re-energise the Catholic Church.

But it appears that Catholic training does not provide the skills needed by a new generation of St Pauls, a new generation of effective missionary leaders. Some Catholics say “let’s just pray and hope, the Spirit will save us” - but that is to misunderstand the situation. It’s not Christianity that is fading or growing slowly, it is traditional Protestant Churches but most of all the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church is mostly flourishing in remote locations where it is not competing with increased prosperity or evangelical churches. Our leadership training through seminaries is longer than that of most Churches but does not provide skills in inculturation, co-ordination, sharing and explaining your faith and meeting the spiritual needs of either Catholics or those outside the Church.

A Nigerian priest who had been working until this week near the earthquake hit city of L'Aquila and who had been training in Pastoral Theology in Rome noted to me, "in Italy there are no young people in Church. That's because there is no inculturation of the liturgy. It doesn't relate to the young people's culture at all. In my own country, the music, the movement, these make the liturgy something the people love, its part of their culture."

We need to accept the frail reality of our fading Church, recognise the disparity between the progress of our own and other churches and immediately re-evaluate the pastoral and leadership training in the Catholic Church world-wide. An incultuated, relevant Christianity offers hope by more effectively relating the message of the Risen Lord. This will be following in the footsteps of St Paul.

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