CHAPTER FOURTEEN
THE EVANGELIZATION OF CULTURE

Pablo Richard

"Evangelization is an act of discernment that requires humility, silence, vulnerability. Above all, it demands faith in the presence of the God of history in the life and culture of peoples". Fr. Pablo Richard is a well-known Bible biblicist and pastoral theologian who is associated with the Departamento Ecuménico de Investigación (DEI) in Costa Rica. Born in Chile and the descendant of French Huguenots who settled in Ireland, he is dedicated to ministering to base ecclesial communities and the indigenous peoples of Abia Yala. This unpublished reflection is used with his permission.

In this short article I should like to reflect upon a concrete experience of evangelization of culture, after which I shall comment briefly upon several fundamental theological principles that guide and illuminate the subject.

A Concrete Experience in Kuna-Yala

In August of 1989 we put together a workshop on evangelization with the Kuna-Yala people who live in the San Blas archipelago, off the Atlantic coast of Panamá (within the Apostolic Vicariate of Darien). It was the third workshop of this kind. The participants were some fifty Kuna pastoral agents, about ten leaders of the Kina tradition (the name of their tribal religion), along with a handful of Claretian missioners that are working at a liberating evangelization in the region during the past ten years. The theme of the workshop was "The History of Salvation among the Kuna people and in the Bible".

We began by discussing together two hermeneutical principles—discussed by Carlos Mesters in his book, Defenseless Flower,¹ and based upon an ancient teaching of St. Augustine.

¹ Carlos Mesters, Defenseless Flower, A New Reading of the Bible, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1989.
First principle

God wrote two books—the book of life and the Bible. The Bible, God's second book, was written to help us decipher God's first book, the book of life. The Bible was written to give us back a faith understanding concerning the world and to transform all of reality into one great revelation of God. In this particular context, we said to them, God's first book was the cosmos of Kuna Yala and all of the life and culture of the Kuna peoples. It is there that God first revealed himself. This is God's first book. The Bible is the instrument to discern the Word of God in that first book.

In our role as Christian evangelizers we were offering them the Bible toward this end. If the Bible was useful to them as a means of discernment, then we could give them the Bible. But if the Bible, God's second book, did not help them to read God's Revelation en his first book—that is the life and culture of the Kunas—they were then free to reject the Bible. If they, within their culture and religion, were able to discern the presence of God and know him in his power and divinity, without recourse to the Bible, then they could, if they so desired, set it aside.

Second principle

If they accepted the Bible as the instrument for discernment of the Word of God in their own Kuna life and culture, they had to own the interpretation of the Bible. They themselves, within their culture and tradition, needed to appropriate the Bible and its interpretation. The first hermeneutical principle would be nullified if we were the ones to impose a predetermined biblical interpretation. Our task was simply to make the biblical text available to them, share its history and the tradition of interpretation, as well as create the ecclesial, community, and faith context that are necessary to interpret the Bible. Nonetheless, they had to be the authentic and real subjects of the hermeneutical process.

We must admit that at the beginning of the workshop, when we presented these hermeneutical principles, we were quite literally risking our mission and reason for being, as Christians and as evangelizers. We risked being put aside as just another matter for future discussion.