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# An Indigenous Initiative

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Paul Finch

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*Beyond the missionary venture there are some steps the missionary himself cannot take. Readers are here introduced to an Italian initiative for grounding indigenous evangelism in theology.*

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Rene Padilla movingly describes an episode in a plenary session during an international congress on the communication of the gospel in Latin America.

Someone made the observation that without theology, evangelism becomes proselytism and faith becomes an ideology. A response was not long in coming. A well-known evangelist spoke up to make what he undoubtedly regarded as a 'defence' of evangelism against theology. 'What sense is there in spending time and energy on theology, when the pressing need today is to preach the gospel?' That for him was the question.

That unforgettable episode throws into relief a fact that cannot be denied: *the church in Latin America is a church without theology* (italics mine).<sup>1</sup>

The missionary task is devoted to evangelism. The unspoken presupposition of missions, missionary agencies and missionaries is that they are called to evangelise, and the above quotation vividly illustrates that dedication. The question that Padilla is raising, however, is: 'Can that be done without a proper theological base?' And, as is implied above, in the following pages of his paper on *The Contextualisation of the Gospel* he argues for a grounding of evangelism in theology:

The church in the Third World needs a theology that answers to its own needs.

From western missions it has received the gospel reduced and wrapped in cultural clothing that robs it of much of its transforming power. This is its greatest tragedy and its greatest challenge.<sup>2</sup>

Rene Padilla is writing with concerned passion. He is himself the beneficiary of western missions. His own conversion lies at the door of the intense evangelistic missionary fervour in Argentina. He would not be writing had the missionaries not sacrificed, laboured, and given themselves to the preaching of the gospel. And yet he is aware that the missionary task has not been able to go beyond its own productivity. The gospel has been imported into South America — but it has not taken root there, because it has not been taken with a theological base. As a result Latin American evangelicalism is growing up without affecting society:

Neither Roman Catholicism nor Protestantism...has rooted deeply enough in Latin American human reality to produce creative thinking. In other words, both churches have remained on the fringe of the history of our peoples.<sup>3</sup>

As a result, Padilla contends that the evangelical church is unable to withstand the ideologies of current society, and there is strong proof of the fact as the churches repeatedly lose their own children to secular society.

What the church was unable to give them in terms of a purpose in life and an adequate perspective from which to understand history, they have found in a secular ideal that in the end destroys their 'inherited faith'.<sup>4</sup>

What Padilla graphically describes from his third world context is, however, also sadly true of **Italy**, a first world missionary context. Here, too, the gospel has been preached. Some have been converted. There are pockets of Italian Christians. The evangelical church in Italy does exist. Numbering less than one tenth of one percent of the population, it is still a very tiny minority, but it has arrived.

The issue which Padilla raises is: 'But has it taken root?' And when the questions are posed in his terms: Is creative thinking going on? Is the church at the centre of Italian history? Is there a developing theology from within Italy? Has the missionary endeavour, from without and within Italy, put down roots which see an Italian fruit sprouting from Italian soil? sadly the answers have to be 'no'. The great preponderance of Italian evangelical literature consists of translated titles from abroad. Most of the instruments of evangelisation have been created, and are still maintained, by foreign currency. If Padilla should ask: 'Where is the Italian John Stott?' I would have to say I don't know. Worse still would be if he should ask: 'And where is the Italian J I Packer?'. Italian evangelical theology is a nameless, anonymous waif.

**Until now**, almost the whole enterprise of Italy has been done without a theological base. As Padilla would say: 'There has not been a new reading of the gospel from within the historical situation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.'<sup>5</sup> And as Italian society tends to follow patterns forged in the USA, so too, the Italian evangelical scene tends to imitate American evangelicalism. Her evangelistic methodology, her approach to Christian music, her growing number of large congresses all are assimilated from their foreign inheritance. They are forms of evangelicalism which have arrived, but they fail to produce an Italian fruit from Italian biblical creative nutrition.

The words 'until now' stand at the head of the former paragraph because perhaps there is now a **new beginning for Italy**, a beginning which is uniquely 'hers'. It consists of a theological library/research centre which has been inaugurated last autumn in Padova (Padua) by a group of earnest and committed Italian believers. Known as IFED — Istituto di Formazione Evangelica e Documentazione (literally translated: **Institute for Evangelical Formation and Documentation**), the centre is dedicated to the formulation of a biblical conscience which expresses itself dynamically in all areas of life, or as Padilla would frame it: 'Theological thinking is not basically an intellectual exercise, but rather a discovery of the will of God regarding the practice of truth.'<sup>6</sup>

The chief expression of such thinking is the already well known theological magazine **Studi di Teologia**, a monograph of about 130 pages which comes out twice a year. The magazine, now in its 12th year, is unique in its kind in Italy, and the editor of the magazine, Prof Pietro Bolognesi (a product of Vaux-Sur-Seine), was undertaking a brand new step when he first began, back in 1978, with an edition on Biblical Hermeneutics, a step which previous missionary endeavour had failed to take.

IFED is really that step which missionaries from overseas cannot take. For the first time in Italy, of Italian origin, of Italian creativity, a study-centre, geared to the maturation and expression of evangelical theology has been born. The three-windowed locale, already housing some 3,000 volumes, is pleasantly situated in a quiet neighbourhood near to the centre of Padova.

Besides being a library and central office for **Studi di Teologia**, IFED is also promoting two theological seminars per year. The first of these, in May 1989, focussed on the concrete necessity of solid theological foundations, and was introduced by Stuart Olyott. God willing, the second one was to be held in October on the whole question of Fundamentalism, endeavouring to articulate the categories behind the word which is so often controversial.

IFED's desire is to promote biblical study and research in all areas of life, and not being a Bible School which 'requires continuous residence by the student, is available to all who want to involve themselves seriously in the research of God's truth as it applies to life.

While the birth and development of the centre is a very significant step forward on the evangelical scene in Italy, it is very obvious that IFED must develop ties with the worldwide church community. Although Prof Pietro Bolognesi himself serves on the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship, this is not sufficient. Ties with God's people and like-minded institutions around the world must be developed in a real and meaningful fashion. Even when God has graciously raised up an Italian Dr Packer and an Italian Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Italy's theological and evangelical growth must mature within the healthy confines of God's global church!

The small, growing evangelical church of Padova, the churches in the immediate region, as well as other churches and believers scattered more to the south, covet God's blessing on this new initiative. The vision is that IFED should exist not only for their benefit and welfare, but that in God's economy Italy might have her own centre of growing creativity, fertile biblical and theological research, something Rene Padilla longed for in the continent of South America, and something Italy so vitally needs too.

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## References

1. MISSION BETWEEN THE TIMES, Rene Padilla, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1985, p95
2. *ibid*, p 99
3. *ibid*, p 102
4. *ibid*, p 105
5. *ibid*, p 104
6. *ibid*, p 107