

# THE CALL TO CHRIST'S MISSION OF LOVE:

A CATHOLIC RESPONSE TO BECOME GOD'S POOR, HIS CHURCH



by Little Brother of Jesus

"This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you." (Jn. 15:12) This "com-mission" of Jesus to each person who has accepted the gift of faith in the Son of Man is the touchstone of all that can possibly be called mission spirituality. There are certain aspects or elements of the discovery of Love and growth in Love which are essential ingredients of true spirituality.

To speak of spirituality is to speak of the human response to God who is Love. Mark's Gospel chapter 12, verses 28 to 34 is a good starting point, where Jesus replies to the question, "Which is the first of all the commandments?" Once we accept the fact that we and all human beings are creatures of GOD-LOVE, then it is not surprising to hear God telling us to return His Love with our whole heart and mind and strength and spirit. And to love our neighbor as ourselves. It is a statement of the reality of human existence, not some command in an external and arbitrary sense. This is the pinnacle or core, if you will, of the Old Testament revelation and teaching.

As for the New Testament, the manifestation of GOD-LOVE in Jesus Christ calls us to greater heights in this Mystery of Love. In, with, and through Jesus Christ we are called to truly become Beloved Children of the Father, and co-heirs by adoption in His Kingdom. The Good News that Jesus came on earth to proclaim assures us that we have a Father, all powerful in His LOVE-BEING, who gives us the Spirit of His Son Jesus. In accepting the reality of this Gift of Love we are both called and sent. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." (Jn. 20:21)

We are thus "com-missioned" by Jesus to live out and proclaim the Good News to others in the same Way, the same Mystery that Jesus lived and suffered and rose to in the fullness of glory in His Resurrection. "We ought to imitate and complete in ourselves the various states and mysteries of Christ....The Son of God plans to make us sharers in his mysteries, and, in a certain manner, continue them in us and in his Church by the graces which he has decided to communicate to us, and the effects which he wishes to bring about in us through these mysteries " (St. John Eudes, quoted from the 2nd Reading for Friday, Week 33 in the Prayer of the Church).

It is a fact, obvious to anyone with Faith, that not one of us can live out the Mystery of Love in the same fullness that Jesus did. As individuals we are "called-sent" as members of His Body-Church. To think of ourselves as one cell in one member of His Body would seem to be an even more accurate simile. And the reason, "Catholic Response" is used in the title of this article is to stress the fact that Jesus Christ can not be separated from his BODY-CHURCH. We are not "called-sent" as so many isolated individuals, or totally independent groups of individuals (cf. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, Chapter 4). To truly believe in Jesus Christ is to believe in His Body-Church as well.

Every spirituality worthy of the name gives due emphasis to the virtue of humility. "Your attitude must be that of Christ. Though he was in the form of God, he did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at. Rather, he emptied himself and took the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men...." (Phil. 2:4-10). If Jesus Christ in His coming to us chose to come simply and humbly, how much more reason do we have to go out to others emptied of self. As our experience of God's love deepens, we realize more clearly that every genuine grace from God is a sharing in His Goodness, Light, and Love while, at the same time, a sharpening of our awareness of the nothingness and sinfulness of our "self-self". Mission spirituality must carefully and conscientiously nurture our going out to others in a

simple and humble manner. Christ always chooses to seat himself on the "donkey" of our humility, never on the "high-horse" of our pride/power.

"Be made perfect-compassionate as your heavenly Father is perfect-compassionate " (Mt. 5:48 and Lk. 6:36). Another element of mission spirituality is the need to come to grips with our natural desire to solve all problems. How often we hear people expressing doubt about the existence of an All-Good God because of the presence of sin, evil, suffering and death in the world. And how often has every one of us - well-intentioned Christians, people with a mission - been motivated by the hidden desire to solve some, if not all, problems? What is the most frequent cause, the real source, of our repeatedly experienced frustrations and disappointments, if not this desire to eliminate all problems that put our own ideals in jeopardy? Wasn't the popular ideal of a conquering and ruling Messiah one of the main obstacles in his people's failure to recognize him in Jesus?

In recent years, Pope John Paul II has written on the meaning of mercy and suffering with great insight and detail, and their relationship to the Mystery of God's Love. GOD-LOVE reaches and touches us as Mercy precisely because we are suffering. This same GOD-LOVE chooses to grant us a redemptive share in MERCY - COM-PASSION which is the strength and courage to "feel-with", to "suffer-with" - rather than providing us with an instantaneous solution to human problems and suffering. Mission spirituality seeks to learn absolute trust and confidence in LOVING WISDOM, while seeking to absorb the Mercy of God.

The reality of GOD-LOVE "suffering-with" is manifested at every stage of the Presence of Jesus -- in Bethlehem, Nazareth, Judea-Galilee, on Calvary, and now in His Eucharistic Presence. This aspect of the mission reality is embodied and made quite dramatically visible in the life-style of several contemporary religious communities, such as the Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus and the Missionary Sisters and Brothers of Charity. Charles de Foucauld, who called himself the Little Brother of Jesus, seems to have been "called-sent" at the beginning of this century to



live this Mystery of the 'Nazareth-Eucharistic' presence of Jesus. His 'grain of wheat' planted in the totally arid soil of the Sahara, literally a thousand miles from nowhere, has sprouted and is bearing fruit in most unlikely places and hearts.

Mother Teresa and her Missionaries of Charity are another living testimony of GOD-LOVE as "suffering-with". Suffering-with indeed offers consolation, alleviation and accompaniment, which is not motivated by a problem-solving approach. And this is why some advocates of liberation theology strongly criticize Mother Teresa's work of mercy which, according to her own testimony, flows from Our Lord's Eucharistic Presence.

There are those in the Church today who seem to demand that all mission spirituality, all church work in fact, be directed toward the changing of social structures so that the problems of human existence on this earth might be eliminated once and for all. This is certainly consistent with God's original plan and purpose in creating the world and human beings, and the whole of creation is moving toward, or in Paul's language, groaning for "restoration in Christ". In one sense it is natural that we experience frustration with life as it is. The fact is that is the source of this alienation, and the frustration resulting from it is sin. Eliminate all social and individual sin, and we can eliminate the frustration. Simple enough? Yes, perhaps too simple.

To face the "who, when and how" of elimination of sin and the injustices of evil is to return us to where mankind has always been historically. It is where we are right now, everyone of us, in whatever country or society we find ourselves. Little Brother Carlo Caretto rightly delineates the concern and effort to change and improve social structures as belonging specifically to the Old Testament dimension of our mission. But this level of mission of itself does not reach the height/depth of the New Testament message of Jesus Christ.

"You have heard the commandment...What I say to you is...." (cf. Mt. 5). When oppressed and victimized people seek justice, they must demand their rights -- their right to the basic necessities of life, such as better food, clothing, housing, education, medical services, improved working conditions, etc., etc. Jesus did not come to lay this aside. But what is unique in His Gospel is the call to trust so fully in our Merciful Father that we are enabled to willingly forgo all claim to our most basic human rights -- the right to marriage and family, the right to property and possessions, even the right to life -- for the sake of Jesus Christ and His Good News.

Related to this apparent dilemma between living the Gospel in its fullness and advancing the conditions of human life is the matter of cultural values vis-a-vis revelation. Abraham's call to faith in the One, True God was actualized in his being sent to a Promised Land distant and distinct from his own land and native culture. With the passing of centuries, Old Testament revelation and Hebrew culture did become intricately intertwined. And currently most people in mission, especially those in a transcultural situation, discern the loci of revelation within the cultural context and values of the peoples and nations in which they live. This is true enough. But there is a further dimension that Jesus explicitly points to when he says: "Do not think that I have come to abolish them, but to fulfill them." (Mt. 5:17), and: "You people worship what you do not understand, while we understand what we worship; after all, salvation is from the Jews" (Jn. 4:22). From the experience of the early Church onwards, it is clear that most of the actual humanized, time and circumstance delimited details of the Jewish Law did drop by the wayside. The revelation of God found in non-Jewish cultures is real and of great value, but it is always in preparation for the fullness of revelation which is properly found only in Jesus Christ. In addition, as far as I can see there is no such thing as a specific 'Christian Culture' in any absolute sense. No cultural values that I know of can be equated with what is truly unique in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We receive the Gospel by the grace of Jesus Christ in a unique and existential way. No one that I know of has absorbed it from a Christian family, home, or culture. Which is not to say that nothing of value comes from one's home and culture. What I am saying is that none of this is outside of God's grace, but grace itself moves us BEYOND all cultural values to a personal encounter with the Risen Lord, who is the Beginning and the End of our being "called-sent" in an inexpressibly personal way.

"For the sake of Jesus Christ and His Gospel...." Genuine spirituality needs to foster spiritual motivation. Two different people can live and experience the same kind of life externally with vastly different results. Two prisoners may sit in the same prison cell and eat the same food and suffer the same restrictions and indignities. One may become more bitter in his hatred, while the other might well arrive at a deep spiritual experience of God's Merciful Love. While human life is always a complex and inexplicable combination of events, the grace of God, and personal response, the key factor in human response is one's motivation. Jesus often asked those who came to Him, "What do you seek/want?" and, "Do you believe?" Jesus Christ is always inviting us and leading us step by step to become those who "worship the Father in Spirit and truth" (Jn. 4:22-24). When our seeking corresponds with



God's seeking, then we are living for the sake of Jesus Christ and His Gospel.

By desiring/striving/seeking to trust absolutely and totally in GOD-LOVE, we most easily, simply, and quickly become more lovable and loving. This simple way demands that we direct ALL of our human inclinations beyond (not necessarily apart from) human means, material things, and sexual love. As a called-sent Catholic one needs always to pray for, to ask for, purity of heart and motivation. That is the truth that the Spirit teaches (cf. Jn. 16:13). One seeks God for God's sake, not for better health or long life, not for reputation or security, not for any of "this and that", but for GOD ALONE. There is no point in our journey where we can rest totally secure and satisfied in what we have been given to give. However, the more relevant and ardent our seeking, the deeper our rest, secure our peace, and worthwhile our giving in love for one another.

Behind all that has been said about mission spirituality so far is PRAYER. And not 'my' prayer or 'your' prayer, but the prayer of Jesus Christ, who has prayed and is praying for us right now. He has given us His own Spirit to pray in us and through us, leading us into the depth of the Prayer of Jesus. For what is prayer if not that vital communication of persons - first of all the PERSONS of GOD, and then our own insertion into that COMMUNICATION? To give in detail some approaches to prayer with all their human limitations would require too much space. Let us, instead, place all of these limping reflections in union with the prayer of one of our Little Brothers of Jesus, Charles de Foucauld.

"Father, I abandon myself into your hands; do with me what you will. Whatever you may do, I thank you; I am ready for all, I accept all. Let only your will be done in me, and in all your creatures...I wish no more than this, O Lord. Into your hands I commend my soul; I offer it to you with all the love of my heart. For I love you, Lord, and so need to give myself, Lord, to surrender myself into your hands, without reserve, and with boundless confidence, for you are my Father."

Only the Spirit of Jesus, the Beloved of the Father, can possibly enable one to utter such words in true simplicity and sincerity of heart. To even have the sincere desire to move towards this total abandonment of oneself in faith is enough to verify the fact that we have been "called-sent" by Jesus Christ.