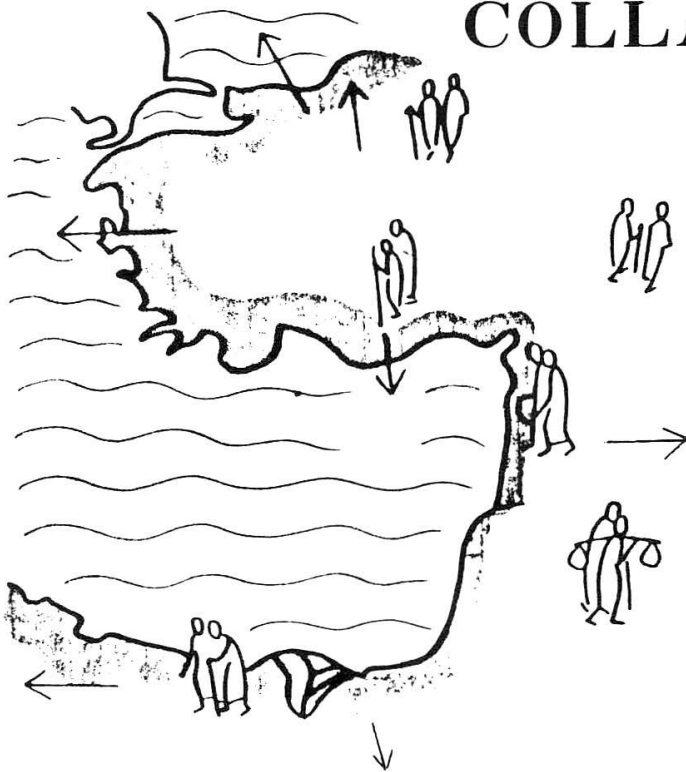


COLLABORATION IN MISSION



by Michael Amaladoss, S.J.

The International Mission Congress of Manila in 1979 spoke of a "new age of mission". It said that one could no longer think of mission as a one-way movement from the 'Churches of the old Christendom to the Churches in the colonial lands'. Every local Church is and cannot but be missionary. Every local Church is responsible for its mission, and co-responsible for the mission of all its sister-Churches.(1) It is in this context that one needs to rethink one's image of the 'overseas missionary'. But before such rethinking it would be helpful to explore the changes that affect both the way we look at mission and the context in which we engage in mission today.

A New View of Mission

The Second Vatican Council spoke of mission in broad Trinitarian and Christological terms.

The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it had its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit.(2)

This is certainly a move away from the traditional view of mission as the 'planting of the Church' in a place where it does not yet exist.

Pope Paul VI, in Evangelii Nuntiandi, spells out further the implications of this new-found breadth of view.

Evangelization means the carrying forth of the good news to every sector of the human race so that by its strength it may enter into the hearts of men and renew the human race... In a word, the Church may be truly said to evangelize when, solely in virtue of that news which she proclaims, she seeks to convert both the individual consciences of men and their collective conscience, all the activities in which they are engaged and, finally, their lives and the whole environment which surrounds them.(3)

It is in this broad context that the Pope situates what he calls 'first proclamation'.(4) Theologians in Asia have spelt out the implications of these orientations in recent years. It is enough for our purpose here to summarize these new perspectives.

First of all, mission or evangelization is seen as an integral project of building up a new humanity that involves various dimensions like proclamation, inculturation, inter-religious dialogue and liberation.(5)

Secondly, the focus of evangelization in the context of the pluralism of religions and ideologies (in Asia and elsewhere) is seen to be the Kingdom of God and the Church as the servant of the Kingdom. This means that evangelization is wider than building up the Church, even if it certainly also includes that. It is a participation in God's own activity, who, in Christ and in the Spirit, is making all things new and leading the whole universe to a unity - the unity of his Kingdom.(6)

Thirdly, mission is both universal and ongoing. If the Church is essentially missionary, it is on mission wherever it is. The tasks of evangelization are never finished. It is an ongoing process. It has to be renewed in every generation. It is not over with simply 'founding' a Church. A people, a culture, a situation has to be transformed and made new. This mission is nowhere finished. That is why sometimes one speaks of mission in six continents.(7) This is true even of what is called 'first proclamation' as Pope Paul VI reminds us.

While the first proclamation will be directed primarily towards those who have never heard the good news of Jesus, or to children, it will always be needed nevertheless on account of the extent of dechristianization today.(8)

While the whole Church is on mission and the universal mission is the responsibility of the universal Church, this universal Church is really a communion of local Churches.(9) This means, according to the International Mission Congress in Manila:

For every local Church this (i.e.mission) is a primary task. ...For as living communities of the one Church of Jesus Christ, every local Church must be a sending Church, and every local Church (because it is not on earth a total realization of the Church) must also be a receiving Church. Every local Church is responsible for its mission, and co-responsible for the mission of all its sister-Churches.(10)

If each local Church is the 'incarnation' of the Gospel in a particular people and culture, then the catholicity of the Church tending to unity and integration, not only calls for mutual respect of each one's identity, but also for sharing and mutual influence and enrichment, so that there may be a converging movement towards a catholic unity to which God, who is the one origin and goal of all, calls all peoples.(11)

A Changed Situation

Not only theology, but history also has brought about changes in the situation of the Church in the world. First of all, after centuries of evangelization, one can say that the Church, even if it is a tiny minority in some places, is now established everywhere.(12)

Secondly, we are living in a post-colonial era. There is a real desire on the part of the local Church to become truly local, authentically incarnating the Gospel in the culture and context of its life. There is a feeling that in the past they have not been allowed to do so and that now they must be free to become their authentic selves, as Church.(13) One even speaks of a 'moratorium' on mission,(14) understood in the traditional sense. This is not simply misplaced nationalism, but a real desire to be oneself, before becoming capable of receiving and integrating in a creative way the riches that others have to offer.

But this desire of each people/culture for its identity notwithstanding, thanks to the ease and speed of communications, as well as to growing interdependence, especially economically and politically, there is a desire to work together. While economic collaboration, social influence, cultural enrichment and an international political order are taken for granted, I do not see any reason why collaboration at the

religious level requires any elaborate justification. On the one hand, objections to such religious collaboration are often due to the suspicion that behind religion there may be an attempt at economic, political, social or cultural domination. In the light of history such suspicions may not be simply imaginary. On the other hand, religion, when it is relevant and prophetic, has its impact on the other spheres of life and, in periods of tension, the foreign collaborator does become vulnerable. The 'foreigner' has to learn to adjust to varying situations in the religious as in the other spheres of the life of the community.

In the light of these changing situations I wonder whether we should still speak about the "overseas missionary". It may be more meaningful today to speak of international collaboration, or even of international apostolate. I hope it is clear that I am not objecting to people who hear the call of God - which may often take the form of the call of the other - to go out of their own culture and people to be at the service of another people and culture. Such cross-cultural service is even to be welcomed. I even wish that, besides being a West-East, North-South affair, it becomes also an East-West and South-North, i.e. a truly international, affair.

A Call to Serve

The person who sets out to be at the service of another culture and people must be answering a call. Such a step cannot be merely the result



of a spirit of adventure or the response to a personal need - much less the fruit of a global strategy. The local Church is responsible for its mission; it assesses needs and opportunities, discerns movements of the Spirit, determines priorities. The foreign helper is there at the service of the local Church. The term 'local Church' is of course a generic term. It could be concretely a community, an institution, a local unit of a religious congregation, a diocese, a country, etc. I suppose there would be structures of coordination that link all

these various elements of a local Church. But it is the local Church that specifies or particularises the 'mission' of the helper who has come from abroad. He may be working in an area where the Church community is not yet present. Still, given the contemporary cultural and political conditions, the local Church is responsible. This does not exclude coordination at regional or international levels. But such coordination does not bypass the local Church. This supposes on the part of the helper an attitude of humility and availability. In the context of today he might also need a particular aptitude or training for the special work that is asked of him. The era of 'general practitioners' may be over.

A Call to Witness

If mission today is seen as mutual collaboration among local Churches, then a foreign helper is not simply on his own. He is sent by his local Church. He carries the Gospel with him and witnesses to it, not in its abstract purity, but as interpreted, inculturated and lived by the people to whom he belongs. He brings with him all the riches of one, concrete, historical incarnation of the Good News. He has a double role of mediation. First of all, it is his task to share with the people whom he is serving the riches that have shaped him. In order to do this effectively he will have to acculturate himself to the local situation: learn the language, live with and like the people, share their struggles and their celebrations. The inculturation of the Good News is the task of the local Church, but in dialogue with the other local Churches, and thus grows towards the convergent unity of the catholic Church. In this intercultural dialogue the foreigner has also a prophetic role to challenge the local Church in areas in which it needs to grow, but in which it may tend to be blind for various reasons.

The foreign helper has also a reverse responsibility to the local Church which he comes from. He introduces to it the riches of the Gospel as incarnate in the local Church which he has come to serve. He is therefore



a means of mutual enrichment among the local Churches. This view of the foreign helper supposes that he does not pretend to somehow get out of his 'skin', so to speak, and become a 'native', but keeping his identity, though acculturated in his life and work, he plays the role of a mediator. He is certainly closer to the Church which he is serving than to the Church from which he comes. But he remains a precious link. Given the speed and frequency of modern communications this is an advantage that he must exploit to the full. He helps the local Church to grow precisely by being the challenging other, but one who challenges not by confrontation, but in understanding and participation. In his own person he embodies the rich integration of both cultures. He is one of the concrete symbols of the communion of local Churches, an expression of their mutuality and co-responsibility in mission.

Mutuality

If this is the role of the 'foreign helper', then every local Church must be prepared to send out helpers to other local Churches as an expression of their concern for all the Churches. One is happy to hear the Bishops of Latin America declare:

The time has come for Latin America to intensify works of mutual service between local Churches and to extend them beyond their own frontiers "ad gentes". True, we ourselves are in need of missionaries; but we must give from our own poverty. Besides, our Churches have something original and important to offer all: their sense of salvation and liberation, the richness of their people's religiosity, the experiences of the basic ecclesial communities, their flourishing diversity of ministries, and their hope and joy rooted in the faith.(15)

If such mutuality is taken seriously, then one can say that one should not send, if one is not ready to receive. Whatever be the difficulties that may attend such an effort in practice, the principle at least must be clear. The practical difficulties may actually point to the one-sided or uni-directional manner in which 'overseas mission' is still seen by many.

The identity and role of the 'overseas missionary', therefore, should not be explored in itself, but as one element in the ongoing dialogue between the local Churches that is an expression of the Church as a communion.(16) Necessary structures of facilitation and of

organization and coordination must develop and function within this context, if they wish to contribute, under the guidance of the Spirit and of the Church, to the building up of the Kingdom.

Notes

1. Cf. Towards a New Age in Mission, Book I (Manila, 1981), p.24.
2. Ad Gentes 2.
3. Evangelii Nuntiandi 18.
4. Ibid. 52.
5. Cf. FABC, Evangelization in Modern Day Asia, (Taipei, April 1974). Also Towards a New Age in Mission.
6. Cf. M. Amaladoss, "Evangelization in Asia today: A New Focus?", Vidyajyoti 51 (1987) 7-28.
7. An Ecumenical Affirmation on Mission and Evangelism, No.37.
8. Evangelii Nuntiandi 52.
9. Extraordinary Synod Final Report, C.2. Cf. Christus Dominus 11 and Lumen Gentium 23 and 26.
10. Towards a New Age., Book I, p.24.
11. Cf. Joseph A. Komonchak, "Towards a Theology of the Local Church", FABC Papers 42 (1986).
12. Emmio Mantovahi, "missionary Societies of the 80's and 90's", FABC Papers 43 (1986), p.16.
13. See T.K. John, "The Pope's 'Pastoral Visit' to India: A Further Reflection'", Vidyajyoti 51 (1987) 58-66.
14. Cf. The Ecumenical Affirmation, No. 38.
15. Puebla, No. 368.
16. Komonchak, "Towards a Theology", p.41.