

FROM PREACHER-TEACHER TO LISTENER-SHARER: THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE FOREIGN MISSIONER



by Douglas F. Venne

To discuss the changing role of the foreign missioner one should study the whole history of the Church: Paul - and the house to house mission of the first 300 years - to Augustine, Patrick, Boniface and others. For myself, I think the first "modern" foreign missioner was Francis of Assisi who went to the Muslims in his poverty and weakness. His love and gentleness impressed them. The Church did not follow him. Today perhaps there is a deep desire in missioners to raise him up - the resurrection is always with us.

Taking another leap forward in time and in the perception of the role of a missioner abroad, we look to Asia. In China we see the efforts of Matteo Ricci and in India those of Robert de Nobelli. They caught the essence of where and the way the Seed was to grow -- in its own ground. Again the Sower, the Church, was not mature enough to follow the Holy

Spirit's signals. Was the Church too imbued with its own position of strength in its own culture and world?

From that time forward we know how "the Orient" was a constant concern of the Western Church. It sought to fulfill its mission by the slow, patient work of men and women who spent their lives trying to build Christian communities. The Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America, or Maryknoll as it is usually called, benefited from these labors. One of its founders, Father Thomas Frederick Price, set out in September 1918 for China. With him were Father Francis X. Ford and Father Bernard Meyer, early Maryknollers. Father, later Bishop, Ford caught that spirit and subsequently sent out Maryknoll Sisters, two by two, into the highways and byways. Later the energetic Father Meyer and the gentle and creative Vincentian missionary, Father Vincent Lebb, worked to plant the root of Jesus' message of love deep in the hearts of the Chinese people. Then their roles were to establish Churches, to instruct and baptize new members, and to "pastor" them, but that was never enough.

The Eternal Spirit was brooding over the waters for change. But in mission there is also a Rock that never changes, standing in constantly changing waters. And that is how it is today. Jesus and his message are the same - from this Rock we wade into the cultures of peoples, beckoning them to come to the Person of Jesus through us. "Through us" sounds so simple, yet what a stumbling block I can be for others. Is the gate of which Jesus speaks more narrow because of me?

Who am I? I am a middle class American Christian with the values of a working class family - faithfulness, loyalty, frugality - energetic, yes, and with a love for Jesus as I know Him and desire to make Him known.

That is how I arrived as a young priest in the Philippines in 1959. Along with those values came a cockiness in my strength and knowledge, an ignorance of other cultures and their value systems, and a pre-defined idea of what the Church was and was to do. And I stepped into a pattern of mission already well defined and practiced by those who had preceded me.

From that situation change was a slow process and is not yet, nor will it ever be, finished. As one can clearly see, not all those above mentioned personal traits were set in the Rock. I and my brothers and sisters in mission are being washed daily in the changing waters, secular and ecclesiastical.

Looking at my own role as a missionary arriving in the Philippines that August of 1959, I had to see myself working out of a parish. There were few other options. The Mass was still said in Latin - uniformity rather than unity was the prevalent attitude. The 57 priests of our ordination class went out like an army with plenty of reserves in the rear. There were vast numbers of "poorly" formed Christians needing our care. Baptisms, marriages and burials were by the hundreds and thousands. Transportation was difficult, though we travelled better than the local people. As a result, even though we had many fiestas among the people, we rarely stayed any longer than was needed. Our good vehicles allowed us to work from a center with more comfortable furnishings, thus "distancing" us from people and their conditions. Finances were not a problem. High schools were the order of the day and were built in most parishes. We were builders with all the buying power, bargaining rights and supervisory roles that it took to build. Prayer was a sideline. Community get-togethers, mostly of foreigners, were hale and hearty, but too brief and lacking in depth. We were busy people.

But the seeds for change had been sown in the seminary. Many of us were dissatisfied with that mode of mission. The documents of Vatican II were read and windows opened. Pope Paul VI cautiously ventured out into the world that John Paul II is now dashing all over. His Encyclical, Populorum Progressio, and the synod report "Evangelium Nuntiandi" are distributed and read widely, and the Church continues to open itself to the outside. Some bishops move along with the times; others drag their feet. The clergy moves a bit faster with the religious out front. Sisters are even farther ahead. But the laity moves swiftest of all.

In the scary 1960's, I am swept along. I find myself in cursillos with lay men who have experienced real conversion, knowing Jesus for the first time. Back in their parishes some of these become new leaders. Leadership seminars for women and men are held. Lay Institutes are formed. Reaching to the common people, parish seminars of two days are held in the villages. I am the only priest among 30,000 parishioners serving them with a lay team of 12. They are hungry for God's word and his ways.

The Word bears fruit. Some of the laity become active in social and political reform, living their new faith values. Now I find myself in a supporting role. They are implanting the message in their own culture. I am no longer the mover or voter. I am a companion, one who accompanies, strengthening them with Word and Sacrament on the way - as needed, with encouragement and admonition. All this shows the great growth of small Christian communities and lay leadership.

These activities are happening in many places and bring stirrings in the hearts of missionaries and mission Societies which now ask: Why are we here among all these Christians when they can care for themselves? Maryknoll, my society, decides to return to its roots, to go to missions where there is little or no Christian presence. They send forth a call for volunteers for Indonesia, Sudan, Nepal, Egypt, and Bangladesh. I volunteer to go to Bangladesh.

Through the years I had been impressed by Charles de Foucauld. I think no man has influenced the concept of modern mission more than he. I said to myself, perhaps, like him I, too, can live and work among the Muslims. My plan, my prayer, my foolish dream comes true. After language study we, 5 Maryknoll priests, move into a simple rented house in a town in Bangladesh living among people where there is no Christian presence. The Archbishop gave us his permission, but he and other clergy members feared for our lives. How wrong they were.

At first we were invited by government officials to participate in an adult literacy program. From there some branched out to help the sick-poor, some worked with farmers in the fields, visited orphans, gave to beggars. We lived as a fraternity in prayer and service. This renewed form of community life was not easy for us. After 8 years, only 2 of us remained. My companion went to care for the sick-poor in another area. I was invited to live in the village where I had been working for 8 years. I accepted.

Tonight, I am sitting on a dirt floor, writing by lantern-light at a 12 inch high table, in a house made of jute stick walls and covered by a tin roof in but one of Bangladesh's 85,000 villages. There are no Christians here save me. Because of the context of my living, I often ask myself, "What kind of Christian sign am I?" I do ordinary field labor with the poor farmers who ask me. I do my own cooking and house chores. Except when I am at prayer or asleep, my door is left open for anyone to enter, or stand at the threshold and stare in at me. I teach in homes where adults want to learn to read and write their own language.

A great joy for me is celebrating with my neighbours their important times. Perhaps my most frequent activity is swinging the children on my arm - there is no end of children here. Yet often I feel my witness is far from what it could be.

I repeat that each step of this process has been by invitation, though many persons have not understood why I have come. Because of the

flow of events, I feel I have been invited by the Lord. My most important activity is liturgy and prayer for which it is necessary to rise early. And so here I find myself on the fringe of the Church, the only Christian in this part of the Kingdom of God, in a role very different from my former ways.

From Sacrament and seminars to prayer and presence - that is the way mission life has changed for me. And the change is not only one of mode but also of motivation. My role has broadened itself out from serving and encouraging those in the Church, the disciples of Jesus, to living with and listening to those within, or eligible for, the Kingdom of God - the theme of Jesus in the Gospels. All Christians are called to be missionaries - to be signs of the Kingdom for others to see - but we are not necessarily the path they will follow to that kingdom.

In the Gospel Jesus told the cured demoniac not to come along with him but rather to return home and tell of the good things that God had done for him (Mk 5:19). He was not called to be a member of the band of those disciples surrounding Jesus, the infant church community. He was told to go and announce the coming of the Kingdom. Perhaps I can say the same about myself. And here we come to the crux of the question of the role of the missionary today. As missionary, it may be my task merely to simplify the way and be a source of encouragement to people and communities of good will to follow the ways of the Kingdom of God as it was proclaimed by Jesus and as it is to be found in their own faith and traditions. Must I strive for their full initiation into our Church when they do not as yet feel that call?

I feel I am fortunate to have been led by the Lord to this moment. Is it too presumptuous of me to think that the seeds of the mode and motivation of mission change are to be found in my own experience, even though dimly? But how could I write this if I did not believe it to be true?

I remember standing with a group of young missionaries in 1974 in a back street of Macau looking across the river into China. We waved at the border guard and he waved back. How thrilled I was, and am still today, with that encounter. It seemed as though for a brief moment, I had made contact with the huge mass of people in that shut-in country. Ten years later I waded into a very cold fast flowing little stream on the Nepal border trying to cross over into Tibet, just so I could say I was there; I had "spanned" China! - just a missionary's foolish gesture symbolizing a deep desire to be present to a people even in such a ridiculously small way.

But how different is the relation of China with the world since 1974. And the Church is in that world, a light to the nations. Many of the world's great religions have a strong footing in China. How is it that a people can absorb so many rich heritages unless in its own right it is rich in the understanding of what is deepest in humankind? As difficult as the task may be, the missionary of today and the Christians of China have to find together the root of the people's spirit, they have to look at and listen to the voices of Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Islam, Communism, capitalism, non-alignment. To really do this the Church in China has to become Chinese and at the same time be a truly well-formed disciple of Jesus. The foreign missionary as missionary, being a well-formed disciple of Jesus, is a link in the local Church to Jesus and the universal Church. As a foreigner he is also a link to another local church and culture. Bringing with him these qualities, plus his own personal study and experiences, he accepts the invitation of the local Church and gradually finds his role within it.

There is a role for the foreign missionary today even though that role is changing. Formerly we went uninvited, bringing a message mixed with triumphalism. The world has unmasked the latter. Now we have to learn to humbly await their call. Then we brought with us our foreign life-styles with all their trappings; now we must live among them and be like them as we carry the message, trying to understand it from their perspective. Before it was we who formed the local Church; today, we come as servants to be formed by them as we offer them our personal and communal charisms. In days past we often set the time frame and practical plan, but now we come as guests, listening to the local Church's story, serving as long as they want us to serve, leaving when they ask us to leave.

Tomorrow? Perhaps in another time and place the foreign missionary will have to take again the leadership of a local Church, or be an adventurer for Jesus out on the fringes of or within the dimly lit inner areas of humankind. He or she may be a dedicated African returning the Gospel to Europe, or a Latin American or Asian re-enkindling the light of love in the United States. The Lord, the Holy Spirit, like the wind, blows where it wills. Yet the Rock who is Jesus remains ever the same, drawing all to love and forgiveness.

The foreign missionary thinking of himself more as a local and the local missionary seeing himself as really foreign to the present reality, both point the direction to that Rock to which all peoples are called. The people will respond according to their own understanding, guided by the Lord, the Holy Spirit, living the example given them by the Church.