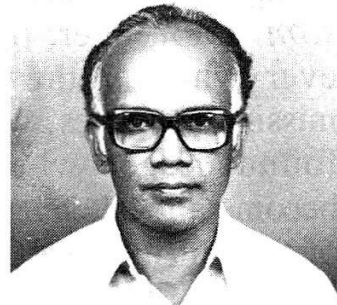


MISSION IN THE 1990'S

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Every Christian is on mission, called to witness, in word and deed, to the gift of God that he or she has received. But the situation of the world in which we are will condition the type of witness that we are called to render. Therefore, before we go on to reflect on the task of mission in the 1990s, it will be good to consider briefly the factors of today's world that are relevant to such a reflection.

Contemporary Challenges

The age of mission that took Christianity to Asia, Africa, and Latin America coincided with the colonial period. While the interests of the colonialists and the missionaries did not always coincide, the missionaries certainly profited by the logistics provided by the colonial structures. We are now living in a largely postcolonial situation, at least politically. With political freedom, there is a resurgence of religions and culture everywhere, providing new national identities, sometimes marginalizing the churches as "foreign" elements.

Our view of evangelization has been widening in two directions. We no longer think of mission as only the proclamation of a message that is assented to in faith. Today we also think of a faith that does justice. We think of faith as a commitment that calls to action for the integral liberation of the human being, for salvation is not merely for the "soul", but for the whole human person (Lk 4:16-21). Second, there has been a growing appreciation both of other religions as having a positive role in the divine plan of salvation, and of the freedom of each person's conscience even in matters of religion, so that interreligious dialogue has become an

integral dimension of evangelization. The very use of the word "evangelization" in place of "mission" is indicative of this difference in perspective.

Mission is no longer considered as the work of missionaries who leave their country to proclaim the gospel in strange lands. Mission has its origin in the Trinity, with the Son and the Spirit being sent into the world. The *whole church*, of God, *is in mission*. Moreover, the church seems to be in a mission situation everywhere in the world--in the six continents. In the former mission countries, while the church as an institution may have been founded everywhere at least in a small way, it has not really become a local church, transforming the local cultures in the power of the Spirit. The Christian countries, because of a wave of secularization, have become post-Christian, so that they are in need of a second evangelization.

It is to this world that we are sent. Looking at mission from these perspectives, I would like to point to just five areas that demand our serious attention in the coming decade.

Evangelization as Liberation

The most striking thing about our world today is the poverty of the majority of humanity. Christ came with the good news to these poor people. Missionaries have always been aware of this dimension of their work. Hospitals and orphanages, schools and developmental projects have always borne witness to Christian charity all over the world. But today we are realizing that the poor are not merely poor, but are made poor by unjust economic and political structures. A privatized, otherworldly religion may have become an alienating force. The media and other cultural forces may have created a spirit of dependence and resignation among the poor. The rich too become prisoners of structures that often they have not created but inherited. The word of liberation to the poor is at the same time a word of condemnation and prophetic challenge to the rich and the powerful. The division between the rich and the poor is not merely a problem among the nations, but also within each nation. A difference in ideologies--liberal capitalism or state socialism--does not really make any difference as far as the oppressive structures are concerned.

Proclaiming the gospel in this situation is to proclaim liberation--not merely economic and political, but also cultural and reli-

gious. These dimensions are interlinked. This would mean today conscientizing the people and helping them to organize themselves to struggle for their own liberation--for the kingdom of peace, freedom, fellowship, and justice that God has promised for all peoples. Evangelization that takes such an integral approach cannot but have a *political dimension*. The church and the missionaries will have to confront prophetically the powers that be. The church-institution may not become a political party. But the Christians, who are also in mission, can neither stand apart from politics nor bracket their faith convictions from political action. One can very well imagine groups of people witnessing to the Gospel in the first world while fighting for justice for the poor in the third world. After all the precautions have been taken--avoiding violence and so forth--liberation becomes an integral dimension of evangelization.

A Holistic View of Mission

In this activity of promoting justice and peace we may find in other religions allies rather than enemies as the event of religious leaders praying together for peace in Assisi, in October 1986, made evident. A deeper reflection on this event will show that while we have to be loyal to the revelation that we have received from God in Jesus Christ and to the mission to share it with all peoples in word and deed, we have also to be respectful not only of the freedom of the others, both as persons and as groups, to seek God sincerely in the best way known to them, but also of the freedom of God who is communicating to humankind in ways known and unknown to us. Such respect will be manifested as dialogue with believers of other religions. The mission of Jesus cannot be fully understood unless it is set back in the context of the history of all God's peoples. In Jesus we have an assurance of a new world. But this new world will have to be realized now and in the future. We have to build it up. It is God's gift, but also our task. The task of mission is precisely to make present the inspiration and power of Jesus and the Spirit in the movement of history toward its fulfillment.

Dialogue and Witness

Proclamation or witness that respects the freedom both of the

individual and of God cannot but be dialogical. Correspondingly, the aim of dialogue is not merely to promote mutual knowledge and understanding, but also to witness to one's deepest faith convictions and thus provide a challenge to mutual growth toward the common end, namely, God. It does not suppose that all religions are the same or that everything is true. But it demands a respect that discerns God's presence and action wherever it is found and a humility that does not have any exclusive claim to God's truth and love.

It is in such a holistic perspective of the plan of God for the world that we have to spell out what it really means to be a disciple of Christ, what is the specific identity of the church and its mission in the world, what is the dynamism that moves world history in hope, in the context of the creative freedoms both of God and of the people.

A Humble Witness

It is one thing to be aware of the privilege of having had an experience of God's self-manifestation and to bear witness to it boldly and clearly. It is another thing to pretend to be an exclusive messenger of God and not be attentive to God's continuing action in the world. One thinks of how Peter would have felt at the house of Cornelius of Joppa (Acts 10). Another reason for humility is the respect that one should have for the freedom of the other person. What is important is the relationship between God and this other--and I am only a humble facilitator of this relationship.

With the end of the colonial era, missions no longer have the backing of the political power. One wonders whether the economic backing that many missions have even today is not an unmixed blessing. This could be one reason why mission witness is not taken as seriously as we would like. The example of China in recent years shows that poverty and even persecution are not obstacles to mission, but may be advantages. They make it credible and authentic. That was the way of Christ, who came not in power but in humility, and was obedient even unto death (Phil. 2:6-11). Once we see the Gospel not only as a message to be assented to but as a call to commitment and change of life and structures, then the credibility of our witness is also affected by the behavior of the people identified as Christian, both in the colonial era and in modern times.

A Spiritual Humanism

The challenges of the modern world will, I think dominate the agenda of mission in the 1990's. Science, while it helps us to discover the secrets of nature, seems to encourage an empirical and positivist spirit that promotes experiment and verification as the only criterion of truth, thus denying transcendence. Technology that helps us to make use of scientific knowledge to control nature and to produce goods falls a prey to consumerism. When empiricism and consumerism are uncontrolled by human and spiritual values we have all the evils of modern society.

What is the challenge of the good news in this situation? One should avoid the temptation to blame science and technology, or industrialization, for all these ills. They are tools in our hands. We have been misusing them for our personal and collective selfish ends. The gospel, in collaboration with other religions, can certainly promote a spiritual humanism. It is a humanism insofar as it affirms the priority of human values like love, freedom, fellowship, and peace over inhuman ones like the pursuit of power and pleasure, exploitation, selfishness, the subordination of the human to the machine, and the subjugation of the common good to market forces. It is spiritual insofar as such a humanism will be authentic only when it is rooted in God, in the meaning of life and the plan of salvation God has for each one and for humanity.

Collaboration in Mission

We spoke above about mission being a reality in six continents. The church is a small community everywhere in mission. Even in the so-called Christian countries the true believers are in a minority. It is in this new context that we should rethink the traditional idea of "foreign" missions. Today we would rather say that mission anywhere is primarily the responsibility of the *local church*. But every local church, being in communion with all the other local churches, is also responsible for universal mission. Therefore it must be open to go out and help, when there is need, with the mission of the universal Church.

This means first of all that in every place the church has to be really local. The missionary efforts of the recent centuries may have succeeded in planting the church-institution everywhere. But

it has not really favored the emergence of the local church, which is the incarnation of the Gospel in a particular people, culture, and reality. One speaks very much about *inculturation* today. But that is a task that is still before us. It is more difficult to inculturate a church that is already established than to let a local church emerge. But we do not have a choice in the matter. The church has to become local, not only because otherwise the Christians themselves will feel alienated from the reality of their lives, but also in order precisely to be on effective mission in the local situation. Otherwise the church will be proclaiming a disembodied message. It has to confront the realities of the local situation and show concretely in life and action the relevance of the Gospel. Besides, in a postcolonial situation, with the growing self-affirmation of many countries, only the local church can be sensitive and responsible for an authentic and effective proclamation of the gospel in many difficult situations.

If mission is primarily the responsibility of the local church, then cross-cultural mission is at the service of the local church. This service is not merely a help in need but also a witness to a different cultural appropriation of the Gospel so that a living dialogue between these various appropriations may lead to growing convergence and communion among the churches through mutual enrichment. From this point of view one should think in terms of cross-cultural mission not only from the North to the South and from the West to the East, but also from the South to the North and from the East to the West.

In a divided world searching for peace and justice, the task of mission is not only to build up countercultural communities as a foretaste of the kingdom, but also to animate peoples' movements that will re-create the world in the power of the Spirit (see Rev 2:1-8).
