

WHAT CAN MISSIONS ACHIEVE?

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IN spite of a steady tradition in the official documents of the Church, there has long existed, and still persists, much vagueness about the aims of the Missions. This has its ill-effects on the methods and on the missionaries themselves, and on the support given to the Missions by the Church at large. A clear view of the matter is therefore of the first importance.

The encyclical, *Evangelii praecones*, of Pius XII, issued on June 2nd, 1951, and that of his predecessor, *Rerum Ecclesiae* (of which the first commemorates the twenty-fifth anniversary), have given powerful directives in regard to Missions, and their prescriptions should remove many misconceptions. A more precise theology of the Missions is in the course of development, namely a branch of theology dealing with the expansion of the visible Church.¹

The fact which dominates the whole subject of Missions must be the purpose for which they are undertaken. Missionary activity is not synonymous with deep religious conviction as such, for there are many religions which have the character of a closed national or caste group, not easily permitting expansion beyond its limits. Such are most primitive religions, and some others such as Hinduism. Catholic Missions have a definite aim, and this has been stated clearly in the recent encyclical: 'As everyone knows, these sacred expeditions have as their principal aim to bring the light of Christian truth more clearly to new peoples, to gain new Christians. The ultimate goal which they must strive to reach, and which must always be kept before the mind, is that of establishing the Church solidly among other peoples, and of giving it a hierarchy chosen from among the indigenous population.' The establishment of the visible Church is the aim of the Missions. The full implications of this statement, seemingly so obvious, will be apparent if all that it involves is analysed, and erroneous, but common, misconceptions contrasted with it.

'To know if the Church is established and made visible in a country, it is essential to consider whether the teaching of salvation

¹ cf. for example Pierre Charles, S.J., *Les Dossiers de l'Action Missionnaire*, 2nd ed. Louvain, 1938, to which the present article is deeply indebted.

and the sacraments are offered to all in a stable manner' (P. Charles, S.J., *op. cit.* p. 25). The solid establishment of the Church among new peoples is a complex thing, and it is not possible to define the exact moment when it is realised: the state of 'Mission' merges gradually into the state of solid establishment. But the two chief elements are those mentioned in the recent encyclical: new Christians and an indigenous hierarchy.

In regard to new Christians, or the material out of which the Church is built, there are many things to be considered. Firstly, numbers. The conversion of a whole country is not required. Long before this is accomplished, the Church, with all its normal organs, is morally accessible to all in the country. The idea, for example, that the Missions have 400 million Chinese to convert is false. The Missions have to establish a Chinese Church, and it is that which will convert the Chinese. Many conversions are necessary, and often a considerable time, but the work of the Missions is not endless, it is well-defined. In the present encyclical the Pope points out that when the Church has been set up in a stable way, the Missions should move on elsewhere. There may come a day when there are no more Missions, when the Church is firmly established. Or defections from the Church and persecutions may leave Missions with us until the end of the world. We do not know. In any case the work of a particular Mission, though vast, and perhaps often set back by persecution, is well-defined and has an end.

Secondly, these new Christians must be such as can support a stable Church. This supposes many things. They must belong to all classes, and include the educated and influential, as well as the poor and ignorant. The Church can never be established securely on a sole basis of a population of slaves, servants, the very poor, the illiterate. There are Missions (the West Indian Islands seem to offer examples) where this is the case. Owing to economic and social conditions the Church, though embracing a large percentage of the population, is dependent on foreign aid and manpower. Again, where primitive or sub-economic conditions persist, it will be very difficult to recruit an indigenous clergy. Those ordained will be liable to find themselves cut off by their training from the mass of their people, or else will be tempted to return to the primitive life and abandon their priestly office. No permanent Church is possible in such conditions. It therefore

follows that the work of the general education of the people is essential to the establishment of the Church, and those taking part in it, Sisters, Brothers and teachers, contribute directly to the aim of the Missions, and are no less missionaries than the priests and catechists. The Missions must therefore not seek merely for quick results among the depressed classes, but must at all costs make converts among the educated and civilised. Such work may be slow in showing results, and seem to compare unfavourably with activities which give a greater immediate return in souls saved, but it is absolutely necessary for the establishment of the Church, and without it all other work may be jeopardised. Pope Pius XII enlarges on the need for influencing educated youth, even non-Christian, through schools and colleges, since it will control the future. This is a present problem in Africa. The Missions, admirably organised for the evangelisation of primitive peoples, are finding some difficulty in retaining a hold upon the educated. The difficulty is not mainly of the Missions' making, but is the effect of the general impact of Western civilisation upon the primitive African cultures. The state of the educated African, often suffering both from an isolation from the mass of his own people, still largely primitive, and from a lack of outlet for his education and talents, presents indeed a difficult problem. But it is a problem which demands the fullest attention, for the future of the Missions will depend very much on its solution. Hence those forms of aid to the Missions, such as are sponsored by University Students and other groups, are Mission work in the fullest sense. Aid given to the educated Catholic African, in whatever form, is a most direct contribution to the firm establishment of the Church in Africa. The problem is peculiarly complex in Africa, since the culture at which the African aims is Western culture. The ideal solution, in which a cultured people gradually takes over the Church and the missionaries retire, is more difficult of application here. The missionaries tend to remain in control of the institutions, since they are the masters in the culture to which they belong, and the Africans will still, for a long time, be largely immature. The need to hand over control, even the possibility of doing so, becomes obscured. This causes dissatisfaction among the more educated Africans. Whatever the difficulties, in all work for educated Africans, the ultimate ideal of handing over the property, institutions and management to the indigenous peoples

should be kept in mind, and some beginning made in that direction. This, being the end to be aimed at, will modify all the steps taken towards it, and it is necessary for all those, even in Europe, who undertake mission work or mission aid, to keep it before their minds.

Another requisite for the firm establishment of the Church is a certain standard of physical health and social welfare. The Church cannot be solidly set up where disease is universal, as it still is in parts of Africa. The work of medical missionaries is thus directly contributory to the purpose of the Missions, and is a necessary preliminary where there is no one else to provide it. It is also a requisite in the building up of a healthy Christian family life. Social justice is also a necessity. The Pope urges the propagation of the social teaching of the Church in the Missions, and the establishment of institutions and organisations for the promotion of social justice. It is clear that in the face of Communism and its propagandists a lack of social justice is a fatal obstacle to Christianity. Charity, as the Pope remarks, is not enough: justice must be sought. A particular problem which is arising in Africa is that of Mission property. In the past the Missions have been given or have acquired much land, and they have frequently been developed on the products of farming, etc. Institutions, schools and buildings of every kind have been erected. As the Africans develop they begin to criticise the holding of so much and such essential property by foreigners, or even by the Church at all. Yet the welfare of the Missions seems to be still dependent to a large extent on these properties. It would seem that some reduction of holdings of land by Missions will have to take place, and also eventually some transfer of buildings and institutions to the indigenous people. This is really implied in the establishment of an indigenous hierarchy and religious congregations, who would become the holders of the Church property. But in Africa the problem is complicated by the poverty of the African people and the dependence of the Missions on outside support.

From all these elements necessary for the production of new Christians, it is evident that the term Missionary must be taken in a wider sense than is often understood. It includes not only the foreign priest and sister, but all those engaged in building the Church. So long as the Church remains to be established properly, the indigenous clergy, too, are missionaries. The name must be

applied in a full sense also to all those, clergy, religious or laity, foreign or indigenous, who are engaged in social, educational or medical work. Their labours are altogether necessary for the foundation of the Church, and, without them, the work of those who teach Catholic doctrine and administer the sacraments will never result in a permanent Church. In the Missions specifically Catholic schools, hospitals and institutions are as necessary as, or more necessary than, in settled lands. The general Catholic formation of the whole of life, and a Catholic approach to all problems, is vital to the building up of a thoroughly Catholic population upon which the Church can be based.

The second element mentioned in the encyclical of 1951 is the indigenous hierarchy. The new indigenous Christian body must have its own organs for teaching, ruling, and administering the sacraments, for these functions are essential to the Church. While the establishment of the hierarchy, or the presence of an indigenous clergy in large numbers, does not necessarily mean that Mission conditions have ceased, it often heralds the approach of that end. But in some Missions there has been a hierarchy from the beginning. Even when foreign missionaries are no longer needed, or are expelled by the civil power, mission-status may continue for a long time. As the Pope suggests in the last encyclical, when the Mission is handed over to the indigenous hierarchy and clergy, the foreign missionaries can often remain and play an important auxiliary rôle. This is especially true in Africa, where so much educational and other development is still required, which, in the present circumstances, will necessarily be directed by those from abroad. Apart from the not unlikely expulsion of foreign missionaries, through wars or nationalism, the rapid development of an indigenous clergy is urgent. Tension between the foreign and indigenous personnel of the Missions is steadily on the increase owing to a multitude of causes. Of causes internal to the Missions, one concerns the very question of the establishment of an indigenous hierarchy. While the Africans advance in education and political consciousness, and desire to take a greater part in managing their own affairs in the Church, the foreign missionaries are acutely conscious of the insufficiencies under which these newly cultured people labour, and fearful of the great damage which could result to the Church through a too early, or too sudden, transfer of responsibility. Yet the Holy See presses this

transfer in view of the dangers of the world situation. As it has been put: the Africans must have the privilege of making mistakes, and so of learning responsibility and administration. The whole question of the control of the Missions, of the property and institutions, of their schools and colleges, is thus becoming an acute one. The policy of the establishment of an indigenous hierarchy (and not merely of an indigenous lower clergy) as laid down by the Holy See does seem to determine the policy to be aimed at: one of transfer. But the question of the laity also comes in. There are frequently many secular and material activities bound up with the Missions, from school-teaching to the management of farms and industrial projects. The Pope has an important section on Catholic Action and the work of the laity in the missions in the recent encyclical, and perhaps part of the solution will lie here, in an increasing share of the indigenous laity in the Mission work. In Africa the catechist has largely been replaced by the school-teacher as the leader of Christian society. There is often little outlet for an educated African except in some kind of work connected with the Missions, and the openings available tend to be in subordinate positions, under foreign clergy or religious. The development of lay auxiliaries to the Missions may assist in solving this problem.

In the meantime the essential weakness of the foreign missionary is becoming evident. Whereas the first missionaries, compelled to live among the people and share their ways, usually attained to close contact with them, later comers, finding a highly organised body of foreign missionaries living their own lives, have made less contact. In recent years in Africa, also, the demand for education has been so great that in some parts as much as half the priests, and the greater percentage of the sisters, from abroad have been absorbed in educational and other work through the medium of a European tongue. They have never found the opportunity to make real and close contact with the people. Thus, while the vast task of higher education and training in Africa still requires the foreign mission-worker, the indigenous clergy are needed to take over the ordinary pastoral work, and to keep in close contact with the people. It must, however, be realised that this task of higher education and direction is essential Mission-work, and that without it the position of the African Church will be precarious.

The indigenous clergy is thus part of the establishment of the

Church. The idea that a Mission can be conducted by a handful of zealous priests with an army of catechists is not true. This may be a good and necessary start, but alone it will never produce a stable Church. This requires priests to administer the sacraments within reach of all in the territory. Only an indigenous clergy, with sufficient seminaries, and with a state of Catholic society where vocations are enough, can secure this. The policy outlined by Pius XI aimed at this. He prescribed that a territory should first of all be occupied fully: that mission-stations should be set up so that no part of the territory was out of reach of one of them. Conducted at first by travelling priests and resident catechists, these are to grow eventually into fully developed groups, with their own priests and institutions.

Besides the new Christian people and their clergy, there are certain other conditions which are needed to establish the Church, and which must be sought for. One of these is that there shall be at least a minimum of tolerance from the civil government. The Catholic Church is a visible and highly developed institution, and cannot exist fully without a certain amount of external peace. The Church has always prayed for it. Highly organised persecution, as possible in the modern totalitarian world, can destroy the Church in a country, as it did in Japan. The suffering of persecution may call down the grace of God on a later age, but while it lasts it at least renders the Church precarious in its hold on a country. Many flourishing churches have been founded without persecution at all. Whether the present extensive Catholic institutional, educational and organisational element is absolutely essential to the establishment of the Church and to its full life in a country, may not be certain; it may prove possible in the future to reach some sort of *modus vivendi* where these are to a much larger extent in the hands of the civil power alone. But, since the Church is a visible and organised society, some measure of independence and peace is necessary for its full life, and if these are lacking it remains in a missionary state. The relationship between Church and State, and also between clergy or religious and laity, is an important one in the Missions, and many problems have yet to be solved.

The insufficiency of other ideas about the purpose of Missions will now be clear. The romantic idea of the missionary, so prevalent (and beneficial to the Missions) in the last century, is still

exercising a great influence for good or evil. But it is seen to be wrong. The imaginative picture of forests, deserts and tropical scenery, of beards and solar topee, must yield to a vastly more complicated image of the beginnings and growth of a Church with the same organs and characteristics as in lands where it has reached full stature. The romantic dream is still a fruitful cause of disappointment and disillusion to the missionary, though also a source of zeal and energy.

The general aim of the Church is also sometimes confused with the special aim of the Missions, to the detriment of the latter. The Church is to bring souls to God, and too much emphasis on the salvation of souls causes the aim of founding the Church to be forgotten. The Missions have to found the Church, the Church will save souls. But since it is the Church which founds the Church in new lands, the work of salvation of individuals goes on while it is being founded. The objection, not infrequently voiced, that there are plenty of souls to save at home, is thus answered. It is true that souls are in plenty, and that there are no barriers of language and culture to prevent a ready harvest. But the Missions aim at establishing the Church where it is not, and so saving not only the present, but endless future generations. Again, emphasis on saving souls can lead to too much concentration on works of immediate effect on the greatest numbers, to the neglect of more permanent works. The approach from the angle of saving souls can also establish a false relation between the missionary and those he comes to save. He may regard himself too much as their saviour and benefactor, and is led to expect a personal reward in the docility and gratitude of his converts, and is pained when it is not forthcoming. An attitude savouring of patronage may antagonise pagans of high culture. Whereas if the missionary task is approached from the angle of founding the Church, the task is one of co-operation with the indigenous people in building up something new. Both the Mission or growing Church, and the indigenous or adult Church, will save souls; but the precise task of the Mission as such is to establish the means of salvation permanently.

Pope Pius XII has also written in his encyclical on the need of adapting the Church to indigenous cultures, and of perfecting them and elevating them by the gospel. This is an important problem in countries of ancient culture like China and India, and

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is receiving much attention. In Africa the problem is involved. The indigenous cultures are usually primitive, and in a state of dissolution under the impact of Western civilisation. The Africans on the whole look to Western civilisation for their future. The problem is principally one of attempting to make this process of adaptation as gentle and as fruitful as possible. Here again the heavy work of establishing a solidly trained élite of clergy and laity is of the greatest importance. Only with such an indigenous body of Catholics and clergy, firmly grounded in principles, can the new Church in Africa survive the spiritual disarray which is rapidly coming upon the continent.



SOME AFRICAN 'CHRISTIANS'

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IF there is a 'problem' of adapting or accommodating African rites and beliefs to Christianity, it is one to which missionaries best know the answers. Students of primitive people are better employed in saying what does happen, rather than in speculating as to what might or should happen. The problem posed in theory, in which abstract African rites and beliefs encounter an abstract Christian teaching, can scarcely be the problem which has to be answered daily in practice. This impersonal encounter between two abstractions then becomes a very personal encounter between two people, one Christian, one pagan. Each is held to his religion by something more than the arguments he could produce for it; while the Christian may sometimes find himself nearer to the pagan than his arguments against him suggest. The difference between them makes for uneasiness, if only because it will not remain constant. Christianity and paganism, in the abstract, have a clear line of division, beyond which they are not required to meet on equal terms. A Christian and a pagan, two individuals, cannot so easily remain each on his own side of a formal division. They are bound to feel the strain of sometimes seeming to belong to different worlds, while at other times belonging so palpably to the same. I think that to try to find common 'human' ground between them is to misconceive the difference. This common human ground, in so far as the expression means anything, is