

Missionary Thinking in the Context of Today

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An approach to this theme must be very tentative. Enormous shifts in emphasis and sense of direction are taking place in the Church today and it is not easy to see the effect they can have in fields of thought and action which have of late been less explored. It is strange that one of these should be the missionary field, but it seems true. The Council's preoccupations hitherto have been elsewhere. The outright rejection of the schema on the Missions in the third session was evidence not only of its own inadequacy but also of a possible general consciousness among the Fathers that this crucial subject had not yet been considered by them with requisite seriousness. The great project on 'The Church in the Modern World' will obviously also be of the deepest significance for missionary thinking. To attempt any sort of a rounded statement on the subject at the moment would seem then to be out of the question. All one can do is to present some of the intellectual problems behind mission work today and also to gather together what new insights into the meaning and strategy of our work already published conciliar decrees and current theology can offer us.

Certainly mission thinking today must undergo a thorough renewal; our work cannot continue to be carried on with the attitudes and methods that have prevailed with relatively slight changes over the last century. Doubtless the need for this renovation has not been recognized as yet sufficiently or at a deep enough level by those engaged in the work. Consequently there is a gap between the sort of mission thinking and church structures we need today and the actual pattern that does exist. At the home end it is clear how much of the propaganda still produced in this country in the hope of obtaining vocations and support is divorced both from the real situation in mission countries and from the interests of youth here at home.

There are four groups of different but related factors which are altering the character of mission work today. There is first of all the very great social, political and mental change that is going on in most of the receiving lands of the missionary apostolate – Asia, Africa, South America; there is, secondly, a more subtle, related change of mentality in western countries, or rather in the whole climate of world opinion, and this new *Zeitgeist* is on the whole decidedly anti-missionary; thirdly, we have the ecumenical movement into which the Catholic Church has now

entered and which cannot but affect her missionary attitudes ; fourthly, and much connected with the preceding, is the whole theological renewal within the Church and its new insights into the nature of mission. In this study we will not speak of the first factor, except in so far as it enters into the others.

It may be noted first that there has nearly always been a very considerable and regrettable gap in the Church between the work of theologizing and the work of the missionary. The theologian sits at the centre of the Church, usually in some well established Christian citadel with a chair of theology upon which to sit ; seldom has he personal experience of the missionary context, while the missionary far away on the frontier of the Church has had little time or inclination to express himself. There has been almost no dialogue between the two, hence a certain lack of missionary perspective within almost all the tradition of Christian theology. Only St Paul himself really combined the life of the missionary with that of the theologian. Since apostolic times, with the exception of St Athanasius, it would be difficult to name a Christian theologian of the first rank who has really had a personal commitment to the Church's contemporary mission to the non-Christian world.

The gap between Christian thinking and the mission to the world beyond was certainly greatest among the Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century, with most of whom there is no glimmering of a consciousness of the Church's world missionary dimension. They could blandly deny that universality was a characteristic of the Church ; 'go into the whole world' was a command given only to the first apostles, it does not bind the subsequent Church, while instead Matthew 23. 15 – 'Woe upon you, scribes and pharisees, you hypocrites that encompass sea and land to gain a single proselyte' – was applied to the Catholic missionary effort of the time. Certainly in the sixteenth century the divorce between the new theology and mission was almost absolute, as modern Protestants will sadly admit. Catholic theology could never go to these lengths, though the sense of world mission had largely disappeared from the ecclesiology of the later middle ages and that helps to explain its continued and accentuated disregard by Protestant theologians. But in the sixteenth century the Counter-Reformation was not only a theological revival but also a missionary one. The Jesuits took the lead in both and there was a genuine cross-fertilization. There is a real sense of theology with seventeenth-century figures like Matthew Ricci and Francesco Ingoli, the first secretary of *Propaganda Fide*, but even then little sense of mission seemed to penetrate back the other way into contemporary Catholic ecclesiology.

Today, again, we live in an age of a 'new theology', and the word 'mission' is certainly a key one in it. But there is often a change or extension in concept. Whereas, before, the Church's missionary charac-

ter had implied her task in relation to the non-Christian world, it has now with a good deal of reason been bent back upon what used to be the Christian community itself. The *France, pays de mission* school seems in a way to have undermined the sense of the primary mission to peoples among whom the gospel has not yet been preached. Hence a modern theology of mission is not always of much direct help to the missionary, however stimulating it may be to the home worker: it seems more concerned with pastoral work in places where the Church is already established. The gap still remains. Our great theologians lecture in the universities of Germany, France, the United States and elsewhere; they have seldom the experience in depth of the missionary situation in a world where the environment does not share in that of traditional Christendom. Certainly the new theology has much to offer the missionary today, and even precisely in his missionary perspective – as is obvious when one thinks of names like de Lubac, Teilhard de Chardin, or when one reads the very important two-volume work of Fr Le Guillou on *Mission et Unité* – but one still feels the need for the Catholic theologian not only to lecture about mission but to share, himself, in the missionary experience, in the growing of the Church in the world of Afro-Asia. Perhaps this will not happen until these lands themselves bring forth theologians sharing the confident possession of the Catholic tradition with the new look of their own lands. But of course they too may come to enter and dwell in new Catholic citadels of their own rather than share a living participation in the mission to the beyond! Being a missionary is not ultimately a matter of being in a particular continent, though it is more difficult to obtain the right perspective in the old Christian lands. At least we must say that it is necessary for the health and balance of the new theology that the missionary not only receives but gives as well, that he insists that his own type of work for the body be fully integrated into the new ecclesiology, which must grow not only out of an experience of communion but also out of one of mission.

Missionary work does not appeal much to the modern mind. There is a passion for giving help without 'strings', while all the missionary's work seems one of imparting strings – strings of the mind. He does not only intend to give help of an educational or material kind, but also to win belief, loyalty, a new commitment. The world today seems divided between the internationalist and the nationalist, and neither has much time for the missionary. The nationalist sees him as trespassing on the cultural and ideological autonomy of his own nation, denying the legitimacy of the totalitarian state he may be in the course of building. The internationalist sees the missionary as a little absurd, a survival from the past: international harmony is not going to be promoted, he argues, by people in one group trying to convert those of another. The missionary

may be of some value in helping to establish an educated and orderly society among primitive conditions, but his primary aim is simply ruled out of court. If these religious beliefs have any validity at all, the modern approach is to recognize them as all of more or less equal value; and so we are back at a syncretism which seems to appeal far more to the tolerant, uncommitted modern mind than the ultimate exclusiveness of the Christian missionary.

There are many Catholics who surely feel a good deal of sympathy for this attitude. One senses a certain *malaise* even among believers where missionary work is concerned. There are a number of reasons for this besides the general one of infection by the climate of opinion surrounding them. There is with some a feeling of irritation at the naive approach of much missionary propaganda, at times carried on by priests who have never been on the mission at all, while a fair number of their hearers may have worked in Africa or Asia and know a good deal about actual conditions there. At a deeper level there is a change in beliefs and attitudes. In fact it must be admitted that much of the missionary incentive in the past came from the belief that it was either impossible or next to impossible to be saved without baptism, faith and explicit membership of the Church. The reason for evangelization was then extremely obvious: countless souls were constantly falling into hell throughout Africa and Asia because there was simply no missionary there to instruct and baptize. Altered attitudes towards salvation outside the visible Church and towards the whole positive content of non-Christian religions has changed this and may seem for many to knock the very stuffing out of missionary work. In practice, moreover, people brought up in an old Muslim or Buddhist society may be deeply religious and spiritual, while many Christians in these lands who have received baptism and some meagre instruction in mission schools have little religious sense at all. As a matter of practice it could be argued that the arrival of the Christian mission often as a big organizational unit – providing inevitably a mere minimum of personal contact between the Christian missionary and his new converts, breaks up traditional religious attitudes and provides little real substitute. Baptism may be the passport to schooling rather than to eucharistic fellowship with Christ and the members of his body.

Such considerations, not perhaps formulated as clearly as that, tend to make many thoughtful Christians somehow question the Church's 'foreign' mission, as it has in fact been carried on. The approach of the '*Consecratio mundi*' is appreciated, but that of evangelization, of direct conversion, seems alien to the modern mentality. It is given the dirty name of 'proselytism'. It will be agreed that if an individual wants to change his religion, he must of course be free to do so, but should we make a vast and deliberate effort to multiply such cases? Many modern

Christians would prefer to give their money to OXFAM, to the non-denominational assistance of men's bodies, rather than to a missionary society whose primary object is to convert their souls.

The ecumenical approach to other Christians seems to offer a new solution. It is thought almost incompatible with deliberate attempts at their conversion, though an individual's change of allegiance is recognized as possible. But instead of proselytism the requisite attitude is one of dialogue, and the two are held as opposites. Is the ecumenical attitude to separated Christians to be applied analogously to other groups of equally convinced people: to Islam, to the Buddhist and Hindu worlds, to agnostic liberalism? Is dialogue to replace direct evangelism everywhere? There is a feeling that it should. Even distinguished theologians can suggest that the only satisfactory approach to people of other great religions may be a sort of diaconate of mental and material service with the aim of drawing truth slowly out of their own traditions rather than the producing of any manifest confrontation with Christ.

Let it be noted that this has not been the traditional attitude of the ecumenical movement itself. Its thought, on the contrary, has been that Christian unity is needed precisely for evangelism. There has been a very clear differentiation between one's attitude towards other Christians who believe that Christ is the Lord, the Son of God, and therefore have 'the root of the matter' in them, and all others who do not. The tragedy of Christian differences in the eyes of the ecumenical movement is that they are minor, and preoccupation with them is blocking the really important thing: the evangelization of the non-Christian world. Ecumenism in the Protestant context has always been for the sake of mission: only a unified Church can bear adequate witness to the One Lord. It cannot be said that Catholic ecumenism hitherto has shown much of this mission preoccupation. One almost feels that some Catholic ecumenists may be coming near to joining in the anti-missionary consensus of the modern world! Certainly while nearly all the great Protestant ecumenical figures have a personal missionary background and are acutely conscious of the over-riding demands of unity for mission and in mission, Catholic ecumenical figures are mostly personally untouched by any missionary experience; and they are far more western-minded than their non-Catholic counterparts. This appears true also of the thinking of the Ecumenical Council itself in comparison with the World Council of Churches. Despite the large number of bishops from Africa and Asia present at the former, the concern for the Church's evangelical mission to the world seems up till now to have been a far more subsidiary thing in Rome than in the World Council. As has been said, the very rejection of the schema on the Missions may suggest that the bishops themselves felt that there had been a lack here – not only

of words, but of preoccupation – and that some deeper rectification was needed. Anyway the ecumenical movement itself, in the form and with the thought that it has held hitherto, gives no countenance to a rejection of evangelism. There is a difference, an essential difference between one's attitude towards separated Christians and that towards those beyond. What is suitable to one situation cannot simply be applied to the other: at least such is their belief.

There would have been a great deal in favour of not having a separate conciliar schema on the missions at all. Indeed one feels that not only its rejection but also the very fact of its production somehow indicated a lack of thinking in depth about the missions. Just as the schema on the Virgin Mary was integrated into that of the Church, so could the treatment of the missions have been with great advantage. Their importance lies in the way they express the Church in her deepest purpose, for they signify by their very being, not a static community but the extension of the dynamic mission of the Incarnate Word to the world. Their character and needs cannot be considered apart from the Church as a whole and the constitution *De Ecclesia* does of course refer to them. If this part had been more extensive, it would have obviated the need for a separate constitution on the missions. The positive danger of the separate constitution is that it seems to perpetuate the old dichotomy between Christian lands (Europe, etc.) and mission lands (Africa, Asia, etc.). One imagined that Europe was somehow of its nature Christian, the rest pagan; Europeans became missionaries and went to convert the pagans of Asia century after century, and yet Europe always remained Christendom, Asia always a land of mission. The whole ecclesiastical regime of the Church in these two parts has been different.

A good deal about this division was always mistaken; it grew out of a quasi-identification of the Church with the West and also out of defective missionary methods and a rigidity of approach to the problems of young churches which imposed upon them norms only suitable for mature churches. Today the division is coming to an end. The churches of the former mission lands are recognized as equal brothers, both as a matter of ecclesiastical organization and in the public opinion of the Church. The condition of the two areas is in fact becoming much more similar. For the most part both in and out of the West the believing Christian community is a minority and can no longer be practically identified with any society as such. What Karl Rahner calls the 'diaspora situation' is common to the Church almost everywhere. In the past it was a fact that in some relatively small areas of the world everyone or almost everyone was visibly a member of the Church, whereas in most of the rest of the world there were no Christians at all. There was an obvious fundamental geographical and social foundation for the ecclesiastical division into Christian and mission lands, though the

failure of long continued missions outside Christendom to form whole, healthy new churches shows that the geographical and social fact not only expressed but also had somehow come to control the theological fact. But all that has changed today. The practising church community is now a minority in Paris, London, Bombay, Tokyo. Its fundamental condition does not seem so different from one of these places to another. There are few countries or areas where the gospel now is not preached at all nor some sort of Christian community existing, and there are few too whose integrally Catholic character could seriously be maintained.

If all this is so it might seem that the missionary himself, even in Christian thinking, has indeed become an anachronism. If the missionary perspective seems to enter little into the work of some modern theologians, the answer may be that there is no more a specifically missionary perspective, in the traditional sense, now that the Church is existing in a universal diaspora.

To a considerable extent this is true and it does certainly involve the necessity of a psychological revolution upon those engaged as missionaries. Nevertheless we must not exaggerate. The Church exists in history and history does not deal in the *idée claire*. It is easy to overstate the character of a consecrational Christendom as it did in fact exist in Europe some hundreds of years ago, and it is easy by contrast to over-stress the uniformity of the modern diaspora situation. Historically we may all be moving in this direction, though it would seem dangerous to impose an *a priori* pattern on future developments. But the historical condition of the Church in different parts of the world today varies so much that these differences must enter into the very planning of the Church's mission and pastoral work and in the way her image is expressed in different localities. There are enormous areas where the Church cannot be said to be established as yet in any meaningful way, and these areas are not only ones of Muslim domination. The fact that the Church does exist in one part of a large country does not mean that she is genuinely established in it as a whole. And where the Church can truly be said to be established, in a rather bare way, the difference between this and the complex life of a great Christian community in some other part of the world may remain very striking. Even a strong church like Bombay, with its many faithful and numerous local clergy, still remains a tiny island in the enormous non-Christian sea round it. There is simply no equivalence between the numbers of priests working among the millions of Africa, Asia and South America, and the numbers working in Europe and North America. The gospel is not brought anywhere within reach of the vast majority of the people of Asia, as it is brought near to those of Europe. Hence a real difference between the two remains.

It remains furthermore at the level of the cultural milieu. In Europe, North America, Australia, even in South America, the cultural and social background is shared by Church and society. They have grown up together. The Church can use a language and concepts which she herself has helped to form. A non-Christian of the West in turning back to his own tradition and roots from the storm and strain of living today, as people must from time to time, finds the Church in front of him. He can refuse her but he can hardly ignore her. She is still there, a living part of the world he has inherited even if that world is changing drastically today. In Morocco, in India, in Japan this is not so. The Church is there not only a tiny minority, she is also an outsider, trying to grapple with a society and an approach of mind she herself has had no part in creating. Her dialogue with the world she wishes to inform must proceed far more tentatively. Of course, again, this cultural division of the world has no longer anything of the absoluteness of the past. We do indeed live today in a planetary society heading towards a fantastically complex uniformity. The young Japanese is not solely a product of the cultural tradition of Japan. Shakespeare, Shaw, Graham Greene, may have formed part of his reading. Nuclear physics does not vary from country to country. Marxism, a western philosophy, is now a universal phenomenon. The culture and social structure of the modern west are imposing themselves upon every part of the world, at the same time as they suck up into themselves whatever seems of value in other more localized traditions. In Africa this is particularly obvious and the missionary to the educated can make use of the culture of Europe, specifically of England or of France, just because that and practically only that has been imbibed there in school and university.

The condition of the Church in what used to be called mission countries is far, then, from being wholly different from that in old Christian lands – and the two will in the future doubtless become more and more alike – but there still remain, at least for the present time, vast practical differences both on the spiritual level and on the material. These differences require recognition within the Church's structure, for the places where she is most able and most needed to perform her essential mission of witness to Christ and of help for the poor and the suffering are just those where the local church either does not yet effectively exist or is quite unable to carry out the task unaided. Inter-Church aid is an essential in the nature of the Catholic communion but the present age requires that that essential be adequately expressed in her contemporary structures. The need of the young churches must be generously responded to: 'They beckoned to their partners in the other boat to come and help them' (Lk. 5. 7.).

The duty of mission, of proclaiming the gospel outside the fellowship throughout the world, is something which belongs to every church and

every one of her members. The quality of catholicity is not to be obtained as an aggregate of individuals who are themselves not Catholic. The disciple, and the local church he belongs to, have to share in the universality of the Lord. One cannot limit one's concern to local needs. Today this duty binds even more than ever, for the very universality which is becoming a characteristic of secular society would otherwise put the universal Church to open shame. But, as we have seen, owing to the new condition of things, this duty can often best be fulfilled *across* another church: the older churches must evangelize through the younger churches. In the words of the constitution *De Ecclesia*: 'Bishops must be willing, in a universal fellowship of charity, to offer the assistance of a brother to other churches, their needier neighbours in particular, after the admirable example of antiquity' (par. 23). If the character of the missionary work of the greater churches is now to be more and more an inter-Church one, this certainly requires of it an added delicacy for, young churches are sensitive and on the look out for some sort of ecclesiastical colonialism. In the modern development of mission work from the mid-nineteenth century on there was inevitably a domination of the home based mission society and of *Propaganda Fide* over the missionaries in the field and over the first shoots of the young church. Today the pattern has to be a quite different one, of respect for the new church and its authority, and yet at the same time of help in making up its deficiencies. Such a task is no easy one. And it needs to be performed not only by specifically missionary societies but also more and more by the whole Church herself in her properly ecclesial and Christian character. There has been a certain split (though not nearly so great as among Protestants) between church and mission society, even if the existence in many countries of a national missionary society originating from the secular clergy has helped to control this. But today the work cannot be left to specialized societies of any kind: the local church as diocese is called upon to manifest its Catholic concern, its interest in mission beyond its own frontiers, and a number of dioceses are already doing this very well. Similarly, the lay church member, simply because he is such, has to try to integrate a living missionary concern with his personal Christian life: he may do this in a great variety of ways – by prayer, by voluntary service overseas, by participation in the work of OXFAM and so on. But he needs to do it as the deliberate expression of the mission character of his own eucharistic life.

But the spearhead of the Church's mission must be today the young churches themselves. It is they – little Christian islands amid the vast non-Christian masses of Asia and Africa – who have to be the prime evangelizers of the people of their own continents. And one of the most serious things in the Church today is that just where this fire should be, it is too often lacking. Often the young churches seem to be rather

inward-looking, concerned with the preservation of their own institutions and sectional interests, rather than on fire to carry the gospel they have received themselves to other tribes and localities. Missionary concern is not absent among them, but it is not nearly as strong as it should be to make of them what they ought providentially to be – the very centres of today's missionary effort.

In the modern world we must indeed be involved in a deep and constant dialogue with the world about us, with the beliefs and ideologies that today move men. This does not replace the work of conversion in intention but it does place it in its true setting. Conversion implies coming to a supernatural conviction; it is a work of the mind and the heart. In many places in the past Christian missionaries have worked in a sort of ideological vacuum, for there was little credible alternative to what they offered, except perhaps the teachings of some other group of Christian missionaries. Conversions could be rapid but they had their disadvantages. Anyway the world is growing different today, and men are faced not only with the Church but with many alternatives that have weight behind them. In Asia this was always true, though the great eastern religions may have seemed to be in a somewhat dormant state. Today they are all awake and there are new ideologies too and the adult mind is not brought so easily to Christian conviction. We will no longer be able to make conversions on the cheap.

Even before – in spite of the quiescent state of other religions and great missionary superiority in education and medicine – our success in Asia was decidedly limited, and one chief reason for this was surely the ignoring of the positive content of Asian religion. We failed to make of their religious background any sort of a bridge to Christ, or to refigure Christian dogmas in Asian dress. Only in the seventeenth century was that really attempted, and the attempt was stifled by Church authority itself. What was wrong was not only the westernness of the Church but the practical ignoring that there really was another mental world to enter into contact with. Now the dialogue is being recommenced, and its immediate aim is not one of conversion. The approach must be more similar to that of the White Fathers with Islam in North Africa. It is one of pre-evangelization, of preparation of the ground, a contacting of minds where hitherto deep antipathies have made a conversion to Christ almost unthinkable. Mental and social situations vary so enormously from Morocco to Japan that it is quite impossible that there should be any one norm of apostolate except that everywhere we must convince the world in the language of the world, and to do that we must know it. The work of evangelization must grow out of one of interpretation, of dialogue, of the contact of minds. In some places there is plenty of room for direct evangelization, but in others little or none.

At the end of it all, however, our goal remains the same. We do preach

Christ and we must. 'It would go hard with me if I did not preach the gospel' (I. Cor. 9.16). The Church, in the Council's words, is 'under the compulsion of the Holy Spirit to co-operate in giving effect to the design of God, who set up Christ as the principle of salvation for the whole world' (Constitution *de Ecclesia*, 17). We are like St Peter, 'We cannot but speak the things which we have heard and seen' (Acts 4.20). The essential character of missionary work cannot change. It is to bring Christ to the world and the world to Christ. We respect the truth in other religions, we recognize that in them men have found something of the fatherhood of God, and that God has worked through all these things for the sanctification of mankind, but we have to hold that there is a qualitative difference between Christ and all the rest. We believe that Christ is the saviour of every man: so simple is the justification of our missionary work. It is a position of faith, but it is indeed the core of being a Christian. That God can save men apart from the ministrations of the visible Church we do not doubt for a moment, but that he has also confided to us his prime and universal plan for mankind we are equally certain. All our dialogue, all the works of mercy, the Church's diaconate of the world must still lead back to this: to know Jesus Christ. The conditions of the world in which our task of evangelism is to be carried out, the methods to be used, the structures the Church erects for its implementation are all changing today, but the task itself is of the essence of ecclesial life. For the Church in her deepest nature is a communion on mission. She is a sacramental fellowship of faith and love, visibly and invisibly united by the breaking and eating of the bread which is the body of the Lord, but this fellowship is a sharing in Christ's mission to the world. Gathered together in the upper room, the apostles were driven forth to witness in many languages. 'Do this in commemoration of me', but, 'go and teach all nations'. Communion and mission, these are the two fundamentals in the being of the Church and if the organization of her missionary work can and must change, its necessity remains as ever. Together we have broken the bread of life but not for ourselves alone in an inward-looking community, for the life of the bread is the life of the world and the Lord who has given us his flesh to eat has died and has given it not for us only but for many.
