

# THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

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**I** BELIEVE in the apostolic Church'. This profession of the creed has great theological depth. The Church is apostolic not simply because it teaches doctrines handed down from the apostles; not simply because the sacraments, especially holy order, have been passed down in unbroken succession from the apostles; nor even, primarily, because Christ's commission to his apostles to make disciples of all nations is renewed for the Church in each succeeding age. The Church's apostolic mission must be seen in connection with the calling of the Old Testament prophets and with the vocation of the whole chosen people. Above all, it is a sharing of Christ's own mission on which he was sent by his Father.

An apostle is one who is sent, an envoy, a representative. In this sense, the Old Testament prophets were apostles. The standard Old Testament formula, 'I send you', with which the Lord gave the prophets their mission, finds its echo in the New Testament when Christ sends his apostles.<sup>1</sup> In other passages too, though the formula is not used, Christ is clearly performing an official and authoritative act of sending the apostles on a mission. 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . .'<sup>2</sup>

Christ makes it plain that this commission is to last 'always, to the close of the age'.<sup>3</sup> It is, in fact, the commission, not merely of the bishops or of the clergy, but of the whole Church. Similarly in the Old Testament it was not only the prophets who were sent; the whole people of the Lord had its mission. This is implied, though not expressly stated, in the terms of God's call of Abraham: 'I will make of you a great nation . . . and by you all the families of the earth will bless themselves'.<sup>4</sup> It becomes explicit in the exilic and post-exilic writings. In second Isaias, for example, the Lord sends

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<sup>1</sup> Cf Jn 13, 20; 20, 21; Mt 10, 5, 16, and parallels.

<sup>2</sup> Mt 28, 18-19. Cf Lk 24, 46-48. Acts 1, 2 and 8.

<sup>3</sup> Mt 28, 20.

<sup>4</sup> Gen 12, 2-3.

the chosen people (sometimes referred to as 'my servant') to be his witness and messenger.<sup>1</sup>

So the sending of the christian Church is the continuation of the sending of Israel; but, far more important, it is also the continuation of the sending of the Son by the Father. In the Epistle to the Hebrews Jesus is the apostle *par excellence*.<sup>2</sup> In John's account of the healing of the man born blind, the pool whose waters give light to the blind man and which symbolizes him in whom 'was life and the life was the light of men',<sup>3</sup> is called *Siloam*. The name, St John explains, means 'sent'.<sup>4</sup> 'As the Father has sent me, even so I send you',<sup>5</sup> Christ said to his apostles on Easter Sunday. The apostles, and therefore the Church, share Christ's apostleship. The Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, from all eternity, 'proceeded from', or is 'related to', the First Person, as a word springs from a thinker or speaker, or as a son owes his being to his father. The Holy Spirit is the link of love between the Father and the Son, the link by which the Son proceeded from the Father from all eternity, the 'Spirit of them both'.

The words procession and relation belong to the technical terminology of the theologians, which often mystifies where it ought to clarify. But even the two scriptural analogies, Word and Son, though divinely guaranteed, are necessarily inadequate expressions of this basic and incomprehensible mystery. Speaking about the Trinity is rather like trying to render a Beethoven symphony on a dust-bin lid. But there is a way in which the mystery of the Trinity has been brought within the experience of mankind: 'no one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known'.<sup>6</sup> 'The Word became flesh';<sup>7</sup> the incarnation is the translation into human dimensions of the Son's trinitarian life. The mission on which our Lord was sent by his Father is the same mission, the same procession, as the procession of the Son from the Father from all eternity; but now it is projected into history. Christ's mission is not just a job he was given to do; it is bound up with his very being as a person of the Trinity. Not that the incarnation had to happen; the eternal procession need not have been put into human terms. But when it did happen, it happened and it had to happen as a realization or projection (one can only

<sup>1</sup> Isai 42, 19; 43, 10 and 12; 44, 8. Cf Wis 18, 4; Prov 9, 3ff.

<sup>2</sup> Heb 3, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 1, 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Apostalmenos*, from the same root as *apostle*: Jn 9, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Jn 20, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Jn 1, 18.

<sup>7</sup> Jn 1, 14.

multiply metaphors), in temporal terms, of the eternal procession of the Son. The divine Word is translated into the language of human experience.

Consequently, Christ owes his incarnate life, just as the Word owes his trinitarian life, to the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the relationship of love between the Father and the Son; so too the Father sends the Son, the Word is made flesh, by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is clearly St Luke's understanding of Christ's mission. Gabriel tells our Lady: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God'.<sup>1</sup> The Spirit works through Christ: John the Baptist prophesies the coming of one who 'will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire'.<sup>2</sup> 'The Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove, and a voice came from heaven, Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased'.<sup>3</sup> The Holy Spirit is here the link between the Father and the Son; he is also the power of the Father working through the incarnate Son. Thus, 'Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil';<sup>4</sup> 'and Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee . . . and he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all'.<sup>5</sup> In the synagogue in Nazareth he read the prophecy of Isaiah that the Messiah is to manifest God's mercy by the power of the Spirit: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord'.<sup>6</sup> Then Christ applied the prophecy to himself: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing';<sup>7</sup> the Spirit is the force of the Father's mercy, acting through Christ's mission.

The Acts of the Apostles re-echo these same themes, but with a difference. Now the Holy Ghost comes down, not on Christ himself, but on his Church. Before the ascension, Christ promises the apostles that they will receive the power of the Holy Spirit to enable them to fulfil their mission as his witnesses.<sup>8</sup> At pentecost, in the visible form of fire, the Holy Ghost comes down upon them, as upon Christ at his baptism. In the power of the Holy Spirit the

<sup>1</sup> Lk 1, 35.

<sup>2</sup> Lk 3, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Lk 3, 22.

<sup>4</sup> Lk 4, 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> Lk 4, 14-15.

<sup>6</sup> Lk 4, 18-19; cf Isai 61, 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> Lk 4, 21.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 1, 2 and 8.

apostles, like their master, cure the lame,<sup>1</sup> heal the sick, cast out devils<sup>2</sup> and bring the dead back to life.<sup>3</sup> In the power of the Spirit they speak 'in other tongues';<sup>4</sup> their words have 'great power'.<sup>5</sup> On the day of pentecost alone three thousand received Peter's words and were baptised.<sup>6</sup> The Church, then, like the apostles and prophets and the chosen people, is sent by God on a mission; this sending is a sharing in Christ's eternal and incarnate mission, and a prolongation of it; and like Christ's mission, its inspiration and impulse is the power of the Holy Spirit.

Christians receive this apostolic power of the Spirit at confirmation. Isaiah had prophesied the coming of the Spirit on the Messiah: 'There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord'.<sup>7</sup> In the sacrament of confirmation the bishop clearly refers to this prophecy when he prays that the candidate may receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes upon the christian, to work in him and through him, with the same power that supplied the drive for Christ's apostolic work. Our Lord told the apostles that the Holy Spirit would give them power (*dynamis*);<sup>8</sup> St Paul extends the idea and speaks of the power (*energeis*) of God in all who believe.<sup>9</sup> This power impels us to be Christ's witnesses; we have received the Holy Spirit to enable us to 'renew the face of the earth', to co-operate in the redemption. Every christian is thus empowered and called to share in Christ's redemptive work. The laity may not leave this duty to priests and religious, nor should priests and religious seek to monopolize it. It is the work of the whole Church.

We shall now attempt to answer the question: 'How will the Church fulfil this mission in the twentieth century?'

The imitation of Christ, in its most fundamental sense, does not consist in using his life as a blueprint by which to shape our own, but in allowing his life and grace to develop freely in us. The question, 'How do I imitate Christ's first century, oriental life in a twentieth century industrial and materialistic society?' is not one that the christian is called upon to answer. Our task is not to copy Christ's earthly life, but to refrain from obstructing or distorting

<sup>1</sup> Acts 3, 1-10.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 5, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 9, 36ff.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 2, 4ff.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 4, 33.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 2, 41.

<sup>7</sup> Isai 11, 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> Lk 24, 49; Acts 1, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Eph 1, 19; cf Phil 2, 13.

his growth in our lives. If we let his life grow unimpeded in us, it will grow according to the essential pattern of his earthly life; for, as christians, we live by his life.

It follows that the essential characteristics of Christ's mission will be present in our own missionary activity. Perhaps the chief mark of Christ's human life, his total redeeming act, is that it was a passage, a movement away from his Father, into the fallen world and back again. This *transitus Domini*, the Lord's passage, was prefigured in the events of one night of the exodus, when the Lord passed over Egypt, killing the first-born and rescuing the israelites from bondage.<sup>1</sup> So John, in his introduction to the account of the last supper (significantly coincidental with the feast of the Passover) writes: 'Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father . . .'<sup>2</sup> Our Lord's own words, 'I am going to him who sent me'<sup>3</sup> express most succinctly the idea of this 'two-way' journey, which demands careful analysis.

When the word became flesh, he assumed, not the limitations of human nature as such, 'taking the form of a servant',<sup>4</sup> but of fallen human nature: 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin'.<sup>5</sup> Adam's sin had put the world in the power of the devil, the 'ruler' and 'god' of this world,<sup>6</sup> and a man comes fully into the devil's power if he sins seriously. But the disharmony in man's aspirations, the 'war' in man's personality, which arises from his drive both towards God and away from God towards himself,<sup>7</sup> indicates that the devil has a partial hold on him, even if he resists deliberate sin. Christ, of course, being God, could not choose the slightest sin; nor could there be any division in his will, for his human will could never contradict the divine. Yet there was in Christ something akin to the internal conflict described by St Paul. He could be tempted; though what the temptation of God made man can mean we cannot conceive, any more than we can conceive what it feels like to be an animal. It may even be misleading to apply the word temptation to Christ at all; as the word used of Christ in the New Testament may mean no more than affliction. But when all these reservations are made, it remains true that, in so far as Christ 'in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet

<sup>1</sup> Exod 12.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 13, 1; cf F. X. Durrwell, *In the Redeeming Christ* (London, 1963), p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 16, 5; cf 7, 33.

<sup>4</sup> Phil 2, 7.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Cor 5, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Jn 14, 30; 2 Cor 4, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Rom 7, 13-25.

without sinning',<sup>1</sup> he has shared fallen human nature. In addition, he suffered in his human nature the other consequences of the Fall: pain and death, and even ignorance.

The Word's passover consisted in his entry into the fallen world by assuming fallen human nature in obedience to his Father, and his triumphant return to his Father. The descent from the Father he makes alone; but on his triumphant ascent he draws with him all who believe in him. His death, the moment when the devil seems to triumph over him, is on the contrary the precise moment of his triumph, when he leaves the fallen world and returns to his Father; but not alone. As the pioneer (i.e. pathfinder, leader, *arch-gos*)<sup>2</sup> and forerunner (*prodromos*)<sup>3</sup> he draws up with him a long train of followers. When he became man he emptied himself<sup>4</sup> by assuming fallen human nature. When he rose again he retained human nature, but it no longer entailed this *kenosis*: he is now exalted.<sup>5</sup> We share in this exaltation. St Paul, after saying 'for our sake he made him to be sin', continues: 'so that in him we might become the righteousness of God'.<sup>6</sup> Hence St John's systematic ambiguity in his use of phrases like 'lifted up': 'I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself'.<sup>7</sup> For the moment of Christ's apparent defeat, when he was lifted up on the cross and died, was in fact the moment when he was raised triumphant from the devil's fallen world to his Father and with him all the redeemed. The same coincidence of apparent defeat and real triumph is hinted at in Isaiah's vision of the suffering Servant: 'Yet it was the will of the Lord to bruise him; he has put him to grief; when he makes himself an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand'.<sup>8</sup> The Servant's triumph is shared by others.

Such is the passage of the Son from and to his Father. His redeeming act is precisely this passage. Therefore, as we relive his life, our apostolic mission is also a passage. 'Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go forth to him outside the camp, bearing abuse for him. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come'.<sup>9</sup> We are perhaps too ready to limit our vision of this our march towards the city to come. It is not only the individual pilgrim's progress through this life to heaven. The Church as a whole,

<sup>1</sup> Heb 4, 15.

<sup>2</sup> Heb 2, 10.

<sup>3</sup> Heb 6, 20.

<sup>4</sup> Phil 2, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Phil 2, 9.

<sup>6</sup> 2 Cor 5, 21.

<sup>7</sup> Jn 12, 32; cf 3, 14; 8, 28.

<sup>8</sup> Isai 53, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Heb 13, 12-14.

throughout the whole of time, is marching towards the heavenly city in expectation of Christ's second coming at the end of time.

We must now try to draw some practical conclusions from this fact that the Church's mission is, like Christ's, essentially, a transition.

The Church, being in transit, must not identify herself with any particular culture. We should not, for example, look back wistfully to the middle ages as the realization *par excellence* of the christian ideal. The cultural *milieu* in which the Church must fulfil her mission in any particular age is never part of the Church's own essence, even though this culture may have derived its inspiration from christianity. Therefore we should not imagine that we are serving the Church by trying to re-create, or retain in fossilized form, the political, philosophical or aesthetic fashions of another age. (The same is true of art: each age has its own style, and the artist of integrity cannot and will not try to work in the style of earlier times). So we should not insist on what Karl Rahner calls 'folk-costume christianity' or 'pseudo-gothic decor'.<sup>1</sup> We are not true to the spirit of the Church's worship if we insist on a liturgy celebrated with medieval architecture, music, language or ceremony. We are all aware that we must not impose a european form of christianity on missionary countries; but are we equally aware of the more insidious danger of clinging to archaic forms in our worship?

The same is true about our philosophy. People talk glibly about the Church's 'perennial philosophy', forgetting that philosophy, if alive, develops in each age. It is not the philosopher's main task to define areas of truth once for all, so that subsequent generations can use this conquered territory as a base from which to make further conquests. Philosophical truth is not so easily pinned down. It is much truer to say that each generation of philosophers experiments – with new concepts or new groupings of old concepts, trying to express by them the never totally expressible reality, so as to produce a new interpretation of human experience. It is fashionable, and not so very misleading, to compare different systems of philosophy to different methods of making maps. The round earth can never be perfectly represented on a flat map; each projection is only partially accurate and has its merits and shortcomings. It is true that not

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<sup>1</sup> In the following paragraphs I am indebted to Fr Rahner's *Mission and Grace* Part I (London, 1963).

every philosophy is acceptable: some are inconsistent; some distort the facts, just as Mercator's Projection distorts the areas near the poles. But christians should not feel themselves committed to the philosophical system of Aristotle and St Thomas as if this alone were consistent and illuminating; especially as this system was worked out to fit scientific ideas that are now only of antiquarian interest. As the secular world changes, philosophy must change – *nos et mutamur in illis*.

Theology must evolve at the same time; for theologians must use philosophical concepts (unless they restrict themselves to an exclusively biblical vocabulary). Indeed, perhaps the chief task of the theologian is to re-interpret revelation in contemporary terms. For categories, lines of thought and perhaps even formulations of doctrine, that were vital and illuminating when they were devised may now be without relevance in our own age. Christianity must be shown to be relevant in every age. Nobody now feels that the proposition, 'the soul is the form of the body', is a vital religious truth, but this was defined at the Council of Vienne in the 14th century.<sup>1</sup>

There is another way in which the Church should be detached from its *milieu*: it should not identify itself with any particular social class or political party, or cling to whatever relics of temporal power may be left in the hands of Church authorities. There are still countries where the Church seems to be linked or identified with an unjust or repressive political system.

The Church in transit is therefore a detached, adaptable Church, which can reproduce Christ's life in any situation. A second quality such a Church has is its tendency to arouse opposition. Karl Rahner maintains that the modern Church is necessarily a scattered Church in a 'diaspora situation', in the midst of an indifferent or hostile society. In the middle ages Europe was christian, but the rest of the world was pagan. Today there is no part of the world in which christianity does not exist; but on the other hand there is scarcely any country completely christian. Today opposition to the Church does not come only from outside, from anti-christian countries; most christians live among unbelieving and often materialistic neighbours. It seems that the christian must expect to have to face opposition; and this is hardly surprising, when we reflect on the words of Christ: If the world hates you . . .<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf Denzinger 481.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 15, 18–20.



Consequently, to christians in most countries, the practice of the faith is now not a matter of convention or convenience, but of conviction. One does not remain a christian because this is the line of least resistance. Our christianity – and we can thank God for it – is a matter of deliberate choice. Like David we can be glad that we do not offer sacrifices that cost us nothing.<sup>1</sup>

Now, if the Church exists in a secular society, it is a mistake for it to try to insulate itself from that society by building itself a ghetto. For the foreseeable future we have the non-christian always with us. In most cases to try to construct specifically Catholic political parties or humane societies, or even universities, is worse than misguided effort: it is loss of apostolic opportunity. The christian should rather try to penetrate secular institutions and make them operate in a christian way, rather than construct a parallel set of christian organizations.

We can therefore add another detail to our picture of the Church on its march to the Father, unattached to any particular historical circumstances, facing indifference and opposition. We can now see that this march is not a timid retreat through unfriendly territory, but a conquering progress in which the secular world is confronted and conquered for Christ.

Two priests were once discussing why many irish people, though excellent Catholics at home, were less than exemplary in England. The first priest, himself an irishman, said: 'If I pour a drop of milk into my tea, it just merges with its surroundings. This is what happens so easily to an irishman transplanted into a pagan society'. But the second priest asked: 'What about the parable of the leaven?'

How does the leaven act? How does the christian transform his surroundings? Not by despising them, but by giving himself totally to his life in the world for God. When our Lord says that the second commandment is 'like' the first,<sup>2</sup> he is teaching us that our love of our neighbour need not subtract anything from our completely whole-hearted love of God; in fact we love God precisely by loving our neighbour. Similarly we need not be slowed down on our journey to the Father by complete engagement in our secular lives, provided that our attachment is not selfish, but integrated with our love of God.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 2 Sam 24, 24.

<sup>2</sup> Mt 22, 39.

<sup>3</sup> This is the message of Teilhard de Chardin's *Le Milieu Divin*. And cf G. Hughes, *Renouncing the World*, THE WAY, Jan. 1962, pp. 44ff.

So the Church on its march is a paradox. It is detached from historical circumstances; yet the individual christian is completely committed to his secular work. The Church exists necessarily in hostile surroundings; yet the individual christian must penetrate these surroundings and win acceptance in them. This, of course, is pre-eminently the task of the laity. Thus we have returned to the point we made earlier: all confirmed Catholics, cleric and laymen alike, have received the Holy Spirit, and so share Christ's mission. It is in his everyday working life that the layman will perform his missionary duty by the power of the Spirit.

This truth should be evident in the life of a parish, and particularly in its liturgy. It is to be hoped that most Catholics in this country are now aware that the congregation at Mass is not a mere gathering of spectators. But many of us are probably not so aware that there is a close connection between the laity's liturgical and apostolic functions, as the Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* emphasises:

For the liturgy, 'through which the work of our redemption is accomplished', most of all in the divine sacrifice of the eucharist, is the outstanding means whereby the faithful may express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church . . . The liturgy . . . marvellously strengthens their power to preach Christ, and thus shows forth the Church to those who are outside . . .

In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit.<sup>1</sup>

An adequate understanding of the liturgy implies an adequate understanding of the lay apostolate. In the liturgy Christ acts through his Spirit on those who share the same bread,<sup>2</sup> uniting them with himself and with one another; the Spirit is the persuasive force of Christ's revelation repeated and explained in the scripture readings and the homily. The same Spirit is the power of the christian's apostolic work; and this work is not an individual effort,

<sup>1</sup> Sect. 2 and 14. Translation by Fr C. Howell, S.J. (Whitegate Publications), pp. 5 and 11.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor 10, 17.

but part of the Church's, and therefore Christ's mission. In both liturgy and apostolate the Spirit unites the faithful, in the one case for worship, in the other for action. When the members of a parish come together for Mass, they are receiving their mission again, renewing their share of the Spirit who is the power of their mission. At the end of Mass, as the congregation prepare to go out again into the world we may legitimately see in the words '*Ite, missa est*' not a simple dismissal only, but a reminder of the divine sending: 'Go into the world: your mission is renewed'.

If the parish is the unit entrusted with Christ's mission in this particular place at this particular time, parish worship and parish life should reflect this fact. The liturgy, especially the Mass, should express in its prayers and ceremonies the fact that this is an apostolic community. And all parish activities should be organized in such a way that the layman has a function that is in keeping with his apostolic status. The layman must not be simply a subscriber or collector or even an administrator of money. One would hope rather to find small groups of laymen who share apostolic activities – perhaps because they are members of the same profession or work in the same factory – meeting regularly, receiving theological and spiritual training from a priest, but choosing their own field of action and making their own decisions. Yet there must always be a parish spirit which has nothing to do with geographical boundaries: the members should be conscious of a shared purpose in worship and missionary activity. Nor should the priest be a dictator, directing this activity according to his own ideas; his task is to try to train the laity to the point where he can leave the decisions to them, where his function is truly a spiritual one – the function of a priest, not of a social worker.

To sum up: the Church's mission is the extension in time of the Word's eternal procession and incarnate mission, and therefore it is a mission by the power of the Holy Spirit. It belongs to all the Church, clergy, religious and laity; confirmation is the sacrament of the mission. The Church's mission, like Christ's is essentially a passage – towards heaven and the *parousia*. The Church should be both detached from and attached to the world through which it marches. And this missionary character of the Church will find its chief expression in the parish-liturgy as strengthening and renewing the power of the Spirit imparted to each member, to preach Christ.