

FUTURE MISSION: AN UNCERTAIN SOUND

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If the trumpet give forth an uncertain sound, who will prepare for battle?¹

THE MISSIONARY is dead, proclaims an article in a recent issue of *Christus*. An american missiologist tells an assembly of Missionary Societies: 'Go home. Disband. The mission era of the Church is over'. An elderly missionary from India, returning to his home church for inspiration and encouragement, hears all this and exclaims with tears in his eyes: 'I find myself shot down – from behind – by our own artillery'. Three events symptomatic of an agonizing re-appraisal taking place throughout the Church. In every continent and culture missionaries are finding themselves being expelled from some countries and advised to leave from others. Some simply pack their bags and ask to be withdrawn since they feel they are no longer wanted. And within the local churches themselves, many of the faithful are torn between conflicting emotions of gratitude for what the missionaries have done and resentment that they should have done it, between the desire to be loyal and the resolve to be themselves. It is scarcely surprising that both expatriate and indigenous personnel are emitting uncertain sounds as they try to assess the situation and decide what moves to make.

In his address to Missionary Societies at their recent general assembly in Nottingham, Fr. Musinsky, the Superior general of the Divine Word Missionaries, identified three main causes for the present uncertainty.² He spoke of 'the recognition by the Church in Vatican Council II that the grace of Christ is operative also outside the boundaries of the visible Church'. The implications of this for missionary effort are difficult to assess. Few have concluded to an abandonment of preaching Christ to non-Christians, 'but there is a larger group that speaks so optimistically of non-Christian reli-

¹ 1 Cor 14, 8.

² *The Way Forward*, privately produced by the National Missionary Council of England and Wales (London, 1973), pp 48–56.

gions, paints them in so favourable a light, that the only logical conclusion would be that we leave them to themselves'. A second cause is 'the strong emphasis today on human development'. Paul VI has said that development is a new word for peace; and the 1971 Synod of Bishops declared that it is a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel. But when, as all too often, it is understood in purely material terms, 'the plea for development becomes anti-mission propaganda'. Let the Church devote its resources to the social and economic betterment of mankind rather than preaching Christ and the world to come!

Fr. Musinsky's third cause is, perhaps, for the individual missionary the most fundamental and disturbing. He states:

Thirdly, there is the changed and still rapidly changing situation in the developing countries. The people in these countries have become aware of their dignity, their traditions, their culture. They would like to take their destiny into their own hands. And rightly so. They look back with anger on the age of colonialism. The missionary effort came to them from outside; it came together with colonialism; it has not yet completely freed itself of its colonial mentality.³

The crisis facing the missions is, of course, part of the crisis facing the universal Church, and must be seen in this broader context. But it is ironical that it should erupt at a moment when the Vatican Council has, to a large extent, redefined the Church in terms of mission. The very document on the Church is entitled *Lumen Gentium*, and it clearly proclaims that the Church

is founded by Christ for the communication of life, charity and truth. It is taken up by him as the instrument of salvation. It is sent on a mission to the world at large as the light of the world and the salt of the earth.⁴

The change lies in the meaning of the word 'mission'. It is here that the Council presents a completely new vision.

The old concept of what used to be known as 'the missionary movement' was of a complex and colossal world-wide operation wholly centralized in and directed from Rome. The Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith divided up the unevangelized world and assigned sections of it to the various missionary bodies. The many and varied missionary Institutes provided the field units for the operation. The faithful of the home churches provided the back-up in terms of prayer and material support. This is the

³ *Ibid.*, p 50.

⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, 9.

description of the Superior general of the Mill Hill Missionaries in the report referred to above, and he goes on to note: 'This was the missionary movement as we have known it, as it still exists in fact. This was the movement that set about winning the world for Christ in the wake of the colonialist expansion of modern times and achieved such remarkable results'.⁵ But, as Fr. Hanrahan goes on to point out, this movement, though highly professional in its personnel and approach, was exclusively clerical/religious and largely distinct from the life of the Church as a whole. As he rightly says:

There was the Church – in the Old World – and there were the missions. The missions were an extra, something superadded, something without which the Church could still be the Church. It was not realized that the missions were in a true sense the very thing the Church is all about . . . And so the individual missionary was looked upon, and looked upon himself, as a man apart, singled out by the holy Spirit for a task that did not belong to the general body of the faithful in any way.⁶

The Vatican Council has reminded us clearly that there is but one Church, and one mission which is entrusted to the whole Church. Inside this one Church there are 'particular' or 'local' churches. But, as Rahner has pointed out, these are not to be considered merely as administrative units of some 'religious megalomania' called the Church . . . This is where the Christian of tomorrow will apprehend the actual nature of the Church, for this is where the most original religious and theological experience of the Church will take place: in the local community'.⁷ In a recent and, as usual, authoritative study, de Lubac shows the depth of meaning this concept of 'local church' had for the early Christians and how it in no way diminished the vigour of the universal Church.⁸

For this new outlook a new vocabulary has arisen. The Vatican Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church tends to avoid the word missions, and still more foreign missions, and speak rather of 'young' or 'new' churches. The word 'adaptation' has been replaced by clumsy terms such as 'localization', 'indigenization' and 'inculturation'. In other words, the task is no longer to take the Church, as it has already grown up in one culture, and adapt it to fit into another. The gospel is more like a seed which must be allowed

⁵ Hanrahan, Noel: 'The Missionary Societies and the Home Church', in *The Way Forward*, p. 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

⁷ Rahner, Karl: *The Church after the Council* (New York, 1966), pp. 48–9.

⁸ de Lubac, Henri: *Les églises particulières dans l'Eglise Universelle* (Paris, 1971).

to grow in each culture according to the nature of the place. Each culture needs to develop a theology and a spirituality proper to itself. This does not mean that there can be no sharing or that dogmas will differ. But it does mean that we should expect the encounter with God and Christ to differ according to the climate, the natural surroundings, the temperament, the thought patterns, the language and the culture of each people. As Lonergan has stressed, the task of the Church is to spread the christian message in such a way that it becomes 'not disruptive of the culture, not an alien patch superimposed upon it, but a line of development within the culture'.⁹ This is a far cry from the mere change of externals or personnel. People used to think that once the bishop and clergy were locally born and a few changes made in liturgical celebrations more in line with the culture, then the Church and the gospel would truly be indigenized. But the true localization of a church is not some quality added on to what already exists, a new flavour thrown into the soup, the superstructure of the house once the foundations have been firmly laid. It is rather an attitude, a way of looking at things, a cultural stance. And it has to begin at square one, with the first question in the catechism.

This applies to the locally born member of a church, clerical or lay, just as much as it does to the foreign missionary. The vast majority of indigenous clergy are still trained abroad, where they tend to assimilate patterns of thought and attitudes that are inapplicable in their own countries. And when they do study at home, they find a theology and even pastoral methodology that are still dominated by and orientated towards european or north american needs. A positive effort has to be made to strip the gospel message of the cultural accretions with which it usually comes to us. For the process of decolonization applies not only to the structures of the Church, but to its teaching as well. There are encouraging signs that it is already beginning to take place. In the theology of liberation, the Church in latin America is developing a school of thought that is unmistakably its own. There was once a time when Rome was worried about 'chinese rites': the wheel has now come full circle. The asiatics are very worried about roman rites – and are pressing their point without losing their oriental cool!

Where does all this leave the Missionary Societies and the Church 'at home'? A long time ago Ivan Illich, in a now notorious article,

⁹ Lonergan, B.: *Method in Theology* (New York, 1972), p 362.

suggested that the Church in north America cease sending missionaries into south America.¹⁰ In the address already quoted, Father Hanrahan sums up: 'From all that has been gathered from the new insights of the Council, it has to be said that our Missionary Societies in their traditional structure belong to a movement or an era that is past'.¹¹ He immediately adds that this is not to say they have had their day, but that drastic changes are required if they are to continue to serve a useful purpose. One important new role stems from the universal obligation to mission that had already been mentioned. If each christian has a duty to spread the Good News (note that this does not necessarily mean going abroad), diocesan and national missionary movements should be taking shape, which send 'ambassadors of Christ' to other churches. Such a development will require a new relationship with the international missionary societies which, for the time being, still have a monopoly control of the missionary movement. And this, as Fr. Hanrahan notes, involves a new perspective. 'We must see ourselves as particular instruments or channels through which the local church may want to express its missionary concern. The perspective is quite different: we are at their service, not they at ours'.¹²

Another corollary of the universal christian obligation to mission is that there is no reason why the exchange should be one way only. We can no longer speak only of giving to the young churches: we must begin to see how we can receive from them. Why must we only send missionaries? Cannot we also send 'students'? There is real opportunity to explore the possibilities that the best training experience for evangelizing Bermondsey or Boston is to be had in Bombay.

This relationship of 'home' and 'mission' is only one of the many fruitful topics open to the missionary societies to explore. There are many more. Decolonization is not restricted to the political, economic or cultural fields: it has to happen in the Church too. National identity, which is a concern of young nations, must likewise be a concern of young churches. Ecumenism of the narrower and wider variety creates a new atmosphere to work in, and a new attitude to work out. Secularization, particularly where the state is taking over functions previously assigned to the Church and missions (schools, hospitals, and so on), imposes a search for new ministries and pastoral methods. All these are vital for future mission. There is no way of

¹⁰ 'The seamy side of charity', in *Celebration of Awareness* (London, 1971), pp 53-68.

¹¹ Hanrahan, Noel: *loc. cit.*, p 7.

¹² *Ibid.*, p 9.

devising *a priori* guidelines. And the days of referring back to base for further instructions are gone, because the people there are not the ones who know. There is much joint study, experiment and consultation to be done. The missionary societies will serve the Church best at present, it seems, if they give much of their time and effort to this pioneering task, rather than to bolstering up old structures. A recent pastoral study was entitled *Mission or Maintenance*. For missionaries the choice is obvious, or should be.

If the missionary societies are re-thinking their role, so also are the local churches. And the main contribution they seem to be making is an attempt to give a voice to the people. In the past there has been much lip-service paid to the injunctions of the Vatican Council on the new role of the laity in the Church. There are now signs that things are changing in deed. There seem to be two reasons for this. One is that the expatriate missionaries are taking a close look at the results of many years of endeavour. And the ones who are looking the closest are the newer, younger missionaries, who are not content to do 'what has always been done', unless this can show itself to have been effective and to be still suited to the present needs of the people. Secondly, and perhaps more important, is the fact that the indigenous clergy and people are doing their own assessing, and raising questions or making evaluations that have never been made and, it must be said in fairness, could not have been made before.

A good example of the first process is the assessment made by the Maryknoll Fathers of their work in southern Peru over a period of twenty-five years.

From the start, our men put great effort and dedication into education. The minor seminary which we established for indian boys from the *altiplano* was run with north american efficiency and in accord with roman regulations, with little adaptation to the local situation . . . hoping to produce numbers of celibate clerics like ourselves – men who would establish catholic parishes of the type we were accustomed to in the Bronx, Boston or Chicago. We trained lay catechists, but our approach to them was hierarchical and paternalistic . . .

We closed the minor seminary at Puno in early 1969. The end result of all the effort we had put into it had been disappointing. Of the eight hundred or so boys who had gone through the seminary in twenty-five years, only twelve or so by 1969 had achieved ordination as priests. And, as of 1969, less than half of the twelve were still active in the priesthood.

The priests who had been ordained seemed in several cases to be

maladjusted, alienated from their original indian backgrounds, and unhappy about serving in or preaching in the language (quecha or aymara) of the cultures from which they had sprung. The new theology of the laity . . . led us to place more emphasis than previously upon training adult lay people, in addition to seeking new approaches to training clerics . . . Our former lay catechists in Puno have now developed, in an impressive number of cases, into men with a deep faith in themselves and in their own capacity, who understand that they and their people *are* the local church (with us only in an ancillary position to help them), and who even now and without formal imposition of sacred orders are carrying out all the once exclusively clerical functions, other than saying Mass and hearing confessions.¹³

We have quoted this particular example at some length because it is typical not only of what the same Maryknoll Fathers found in other aspects of their work but also of what other missionaries in other parts of the world have also discovered. A missionary from Africa lists five priorities on the basis of his experience since renewal hit the continent.

1. Put your money, efforts, personnel into building up people, not schools, houses, churches or hospitals.
2. Build them up into self-convinced, self-supporting communities that can make their own way as soon as possible in christianizing themselves and others.
3. Centre that community on a living Eucharist.
4. Let them be creative of their own style of Church rather than imposing our own western style.
5. Cultivate family as the unit of handing on the faith. This upside-down Church, built on a Eucharist of ordinary folk with their own spark of liveliness, their own genius of race, *is the threshold at which the missionary now stands*.¹⁴

This new missionary, standing on his new threshold, shading his eyes against the warm glow of a setting, or maybe a rising, sun, is not going to give future mission its certain sound on his own. The belgian jesuits of *Lumen Vitae* are not the authorities they might like to be on liberation theology and conscientization in latin America; the dutch or american anthropologists cannot be the bearers of true indigenization to the churches of Africa; the pastoral researches of the multi-national and multi-lingual staff of the east asian Pastoral Institute are important beginners but not the finishers of the job. They and we must, as Paulo Freire has reminded us, 'have faith in the people, solidarity with them'.

¹³ McIntire, William J.: *An Address to the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States* (January, 1971). Cf *Gisra*, June–September, 1972, p 29.

¹⁴ Sullivan, Desmond: 'A Church of the Grass Roots', in *The Outlook* (Spring, 1974), p 7.

Indigenization is less an intellectual exercise and more a brave and humble experiment. It is more a listening than a teaching. It is more an act of faith in the universal salvific will of God and an expressed hope in the power of Christ to incarnate himself and his Church in all cultures. Renewal of mission is coming 'not so much from the preaching of radical christian leaders but from the faith of the little ones, and the fierce wind of the Spirit blowing among them. Somehow or other they are the little flock to whom it is our Father's good pleasure to give the Kingdom'.¹⁵ What Sullivan described above as 'this upside-down view of the Church' has within it the potential to clarify the direction for future mission. Culture comprises all the basic elements that make a people themselves. The peoples and races of what are no longer to be categorized as 'mission lands' are standing 'at the threshold of the genius of their races', confronting and being confronted by the gospel. Time, history, evangelization in all its varied forms, from the positively inspired to the positively absurd, political, technical, social and theological education in all its vagaries, and renewed understanding of the nature of the Church, have all conspired to bring about a tremulous pause, while local churches begin to think for themselves.

Here is the local church of Trinidad thinking for itself on the 'Indigenization of the Church: What it is and what it is *not*'.

It is *not* merely a national or cultural phenomenon with no intrinsic relevance for the Church.

It is *not* a superficial identification with the tastes and the customs of the people.

It is *not* a wholesale acceptance of every national trait.

It is *not* parochialism or insularity – a home-made Church.

It is *not* an uncritical rejection of what is non-indigenous.

It is a genuine love of the people.

It is putting on the national mind and knowing the soul of the people.

It is concretizing, in preaching, worship, catechesis and life-style, this love and knowledge.

It is an appreciation, free from condescension, of national culture and its forms.

It is creating wholeness from the social fragmentation and healing divisiveness.

It is the labour of studying the record of the nation, its history, literature, art, family patterns, social habits etc.

It is labouring to create fraternal communities throughout the country, where each community will be the Church in microcosm.

¹⁵ Taylor, J. V.: 'Small is beautiful', in *The International Review of Mission* (1971), p 328.

It is the foreign clergy helping the local church to become itself.
It is the creation and implementation of a diocesan policy suited to the Church's needs.¹⁶

Where is the foreign missionary in all this? Has he still a role to play? Can he make any contribution towards the building of a local church where the emphasis is on indigenization and increasing lay participation? Cardinal Zoungwana of the Upper Volta answered these questions in the name of the african bishops when addressing Superiors general of missionary Institutes in Kampala in 1972:

I wish to speak above all to the missionary institutes and to tell them how much we would be indebted to them if they would not fall into the mistake of some missionaries who think they have to leave Africa in order to enable the Church of Africa to become african. What an illusion! They should rather stay on, simply changing their mentality into a spirit of service to the Church of Africa.¹⁷

But the 'changing of mentality' is not so simple. It requires a conscious effort that can prove to be both exacting and painful. In a paper written after an extensive tour of Africa, Fr. Victor Mertens, assistant for Africa to the General of the jesuits, mentions five areas where radical changes in attitude will be necessary. First, a new attitude of service, inspired by the words of John the Baptist before Christ, 'He must increase, but I must decrease',¹⁸ must be motivated by a conviction, on the part of the missionary, that his future role is to help the local church and no longer manage it. This may entail, in the short run, being less efficient and seeing things done at a slower pace. Secondly, and as a corollary to the above, is a willingness to learn from others. The missionary of the future comes not only to teach and give, but to learn and receive. This attitude is that of St Paul: 'I long to see you; I want to bring you some spiritual gifts to make you strong'. Then he immediately adds, as if correcting himself: 'Or rather, I want to be among you to be myself encouraged by your faith as well as you by mine'.¹⁹ Thirdly, the missionary will have to accept feeling himself, on many occasions, more tolerated than wanted. Fourthly, he will have to accept to live on in insecurity with the possibility that his apostolate may suddenly be stopped after many years. Finally, and as a result of the above, is the impossibility of long-term planning.

¹⁶ *Indigenization: an inescapable challenge for proclaiming the gospel of Christ effectively in Trinidad and Tobago today and tomorrow: a report to the Priest's Conference of 1974 (cyclostyled in Port-of-Spain, 1974).*

¹⁷ *The Way Forward*, p 56.

¹⁸ Jn 3, 30.

¹⁹ Rom 1, 11-12.

Obviously such changes in attitude call for a great degree of humility and flexibility. They also require an openness of mind and acceptance of change to a far greater degree than was considered necessary in the past. But if the missionary of the future can stand up to this challenge, if he or she can really identify with the aspirations, goals and dreams of the local church, then there is no reason why the missionary should either disappear or go home. What must disappear is the old mentality.

In the final analysis however the task of evangelization and future mission lie more in the hands of the local church than of the foreign missionary. And while local churches may still speak with uncertain voices, the fact that they have begun to speak is perhaps the most important and encouraging development of all. In their 1973 annual conference at Lourdes, the french bishops declared: 'This journey towards a Church based on the responsibility of all its members opens up immense perspectives. This journey is possible and urgent. To embark on it is to commit oneself to a road of hope'.²⁰ The hope for future mission is that the emerging local churches, truly indigenized and with full lay participation, will re-tune the trumpet of St. Paul and give it a certain sound, a catholic sound.

²⁰ *N.C.W.C. New Release* for November 7, 1973.