

RELIGIOUS RENEWAL AND THE MISSIONS

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IT IS CLEAR that the Decree on the Missions *Ad Gentes* and *Perfectae Caritatis* are complementary: this could hardly be otherwise since 'religious institutes of the contemplative and the active life have had and still have the greatest share in the evangelization of the world'.¹

But it would be an error to think that even in the specifically missionary context, the mind of the Council was that the religious life in the wide sense was a good thing because it contributed extensively to missionary endeavour. Rather, the point of departure is the intrinsic value of the religious life. Consequently, the development of religious life, as such, is included in the picture of a missionary Church: the more intimate consecration to God made in the Church which is the essence of religious life shows and symbolizes the interior nature of the christian vocation.

The religious institutes at work in the missions 'are generously endowed with the mystical riches which make the Church's religious tradition so remarkable': these riches they are to try to express and hand on, in accordance with the special disposition of each people, taking account of possible seeds, existing in local cultures, which may grow into true expressions of christian religious life.

The various forms of religious life are to be fostered, not only for their value as a contribution to the pastoral needs of the area, but with particular attention to the needs of the contemplative life. Here it is implied that a very considerable degree of adaptation of monastic rule, or rather adaptation by return to the simpler forms of ancient monasticism, is as welcome as the transplantation of an existing highly evolved monastic tradition.²

It may be taken for granted that the accent falls upon adaptation throughout, but this in turn is balanced by a reservation that there must be fidelity to the purpose of the institute. Thus, speaking of the missionary duty of religious institutes, whether these are exclusively

¹ *Ad Gentes*, 40.

² *Ibid.*, 18.

and strictly missionary or not, together with the exhortation to consider before God whether they could do more, or enter upon missionary work, or abandon some of their works at home, even if this should mean an adaptation of their constitutions, there is the qualification, 'though all this must be in keeping with their founder's intentions'.¹

It should not be imagined that the whole of the Decree on the Missions concentrates upon missionary institutes: in general it speaks of missionaries; and though it recognizes very handsomely the past and present contribution of the religious and missionary institutes, who have borne the 'burden and the heat of the day', and states unequivocally that 'these institutes remain extremely necessary',² it integrates very many prescriptions as equally applicable to all missionaries, by abstracting from the consideration of whether they are religious or not. These prescriptions touch the basic theology of missionary work, organization and training, the development of new churches, co-operation, relations with developed churches, and many other points. Most notably, the question of missionary spirituality receives attention as stemming from the missionary vocation itself; and the main emphasis is on the need for a most exacting spiritual and moral training of future missionaries.³ This, together with the recognition of adequate theological training, prompts the statement that 'all these things, though necessary for everyone sent to non-christian nations, can scarcely be attained in reality by individual missionaries . . . a common vocation has gathered these individuals together into institutes, in which, by pooling their efforts, they may be properly trained and perform this work . . .'.⁴ The vocation of the missionary, whether priest, religious or layman, whether from abroad or indigenous, must be lived out 'by a truly evangelical life'; and he is to 'be convinced that obedience is the hallmark of the servant of Christ, who redeemed the human race by his obedience'.⁵

Therefore, it could be said that the Decree recognizes adequately the fact that different religious institutes exist, that they have their individual purposes and spirit, that they are exceedingly necessary in the whole missionary context; and yet it insists that for missionary purposes all missionaries must measure up to a very high spiritual and ascetic standard, whether they are religious or not. This standard, a kind of spiritual highest common denominator, is a target

¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

² *Ibid.*, 27.

³ *Ibid.*, 24, 23, 25.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

which no one will quickly or easily attain. On the other hand, there is absolutely no point at which it clashes with the religious rule of any institute, at least in its spiritual outlook. Provision has already been made for the massive contribution that the contemplative and monastic life can make, even without 'activity'.

Of course, the particular manner of life proper to a religious institute will continue to be the means by which the religious realize their vocation: in the pursuit of their rule, perhaps adapted in some measure to meet the concrete requirements of their missionary situation, they would in fact realize the high ideal proposed to all missionaries. But this does not mean that there is no problem. From the nature of the case there is bound to be a measure of tension between the requirements of an institute, in its substantials, and the needs of the apostolate. Spirituality is incarnated in acts. The rule which is not observed ceases to be a rule, and the missionary situation at times does seem to militate against religious observance. Consequently it is possible for a religious to live an excellent apostolic and missionary life which is not exemplary by the standards of the rule. For example, many a missionary has little or no community life. For institutes bound to choir, choir may be impossible. Asceticism of rule may fall away, even though, frequently, incidental asceticism may far exceed what the rule prescribes.

Various answers to these and similar problems may be suggested. Prescinding from those institutes which are specifically missionary, and therefore have from the beginning made suitable provision for the problem by ensuring that the rule really fits the situation, one has the option generally between dispensation and adaptation. Dispensation for the most part is not a long-term solution: where it is general and protracted eventually it destroys the rule, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it generates a local rule. This is one sort of adaptation, but it may be a rather uneasy compromise: no one has wanted to go far enough for fear of going too far. Adaptation normally would imply a notable measure of change in the constitutions of an institute. If the change brought the rule into agreement with the local missionary needs, it might also dislocate the missionary practice from that of the institute as such; and if many different mission areas were served, the end could be a fragmentation of the institute. This would not be advantageous if the missionary part of the institute continued to depend upon the parent body for its reinforcements in trained men and for general support.

But even in relation to institutes which have been specifically designed for one area, or which are governed by constitutions which are in themselves sufficiently flexible to allow for adaptation without violence to unity, there are problems. Adaptation according to the spirit of the institute and the mind of the founder is a complex thing: in the first place, it is not an accurate analysis of the problem if the missionary situation is presented as static. There really is no question of studying merely a traditional local culture, because very often it is just this culture which is under pressure to change. Obviously, the influence of a traditional culture must be allowed for, but it would be fatal if the missionary became a defender of antiquarian lore, instead of adapting to what the people with whom he is working are and will be. Not every race is completely satisfied with its cultural past, although not a few anthropologists are inclined to mourn the adulteration of the original culture, be it rich or impoverished.

This means that the religious institute which is readily adaptable must not only adapt, but in many things continue to adapt. It is perhaps because of the difficulty of a changing culture that even institutes specifically designed for a missionary role find themselves not sufficiently attuned to the actual circumstances. Clearly, an adaptation to a social reality of one time, and often of one place, is at the root of almost all religious foundations. At the same time, there is something perennial in the vision of the great founders, something that will not grow old or become irrelevant to a later age, something truly universal. The benedictine *pax*, franciscan poverty, dominican preaching, express a universal value not only in time but in place. The adaptation of these perennial values, and the means taken to achieve their realization, means more than a missionary body meeting and accommodating to a local culture. The local culture will most probably itself be in a fluid state towards an unknown end, but one deeply influenced by the impact of other cultures and civilizations.

To meet these problems, it is clear that a very considerable measure of internal liberty must remain to missionary institutes. The Decree envisages, it seems to me, both a transplantation of existing forms of religious life, to be somewhat modified in the new soil, and the development of new forms and strains more suitable to local circumstances. Both of these expectations require experimentation, and this means freedom within the structure of, respectively, the constitutions and the essential elements of religious life. It may

be that the 'exotic' forms of religious life may sometimes prove to be better adapted than the quasi-indigenous, either to the contemplative or the active life. The temptation to dogmatize *a priori* is strong. It is easy to conclude that this or that venerable form of religious life is the obvious means of accommodating to a local need, providing, let us say, that we allow people to beat drums in church. Similarly it is easy to conclude that we should not do anything about the religious life until we are completely sure that some form decided upon completely fits the genius of the local people. In fact the genius of the people will itself be massively influenced by the form of religious life as such. The operative concepts of chastity, poverty and obedience voluntarily accepted, are revolutionary; but they will take better upon some minds than upon others 'naturally'; and some cultures, rather than others, are resistant to them or comparatively open to them. It would be no good service, either to the Church or to the new people of God, to debase the currency of religious life in order to make it more readily acceptable; and yet it is the gold that would count, not the finish of the coins.

It will devolve upon religious to work out in patience and humility where the qualities of their own loved institutions answer the needs of the field in which they are working, and where something else might serve better the needs of those who aspire to the religious life; whether modification of some particulars will achieve adaptation, or whether adaptation would be just another name for the creation of a new institute. Perhaps sometimes their greatest work could be to assist in the evolution of such a new institute, while remaining in complete loyal union with their own.