

CONSECRATION AND MISSION

By EDWARD MALATESTA

IF WE SEARCH the scriptures in order to discover what the inspired word of God can teach us about sanctification and mission, surely one of the most pregnant passages we find occurs in the prayer of Christ which concludes the last discourses in St John's Gospel:¹

Sanctify² them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I sanctify myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.

The verb 'sanctify' (*hagiadzein*) is rare in the johannine writings. It occurs not at all in the epistles, only once in the apocalypse,³ and only four times in the gospel.⁴ Since three of these occurrences figure in the passage we are considering, we can readily see their exceptional importance.

The theme of 'mission' is a frequent one in the fourth gospel.⁵ John treats mainly the mission Jesus has received from the Father; he mentions only three times the sending of the disciples by Jesus.⁶ In two of these texts there is a parallelism between Jesus' mission and that of the disciples.⁷

The passage cited above contains three major ideas: 1) The Father sanctifies the disciples in the truth; 2) The mission of the disciples is

¹ Jn 17, 17-19. I wish to express my fraternal gratitude to Fr Ignace de la Potterie, S.J., professor of New Testament at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, for allowing me to draw copiously from the excellent study of these verses contained in his work on truth in the johannine writings, which is being prepared for publication.

² The same Greek verb (*hagiadzein*) occurs three times in vv 17 and 19. Modern english and american translators frequently render the greek word in all three cases by the word 'consecrate'. I have chosen to use the more general term 'sanctify', in accord with the findings of de la Potterie, since this implies both the holiness which comes through acceptance of the Father's revelation and the dedication to a particular service.

³ Apoc 22, 11.

⁴ Jn 10, 36; 17, 17, 19 bis.

⁵ See McPolin, J., S.J.: 'Mission in the Fourth Gospel', in *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 37 (1969), pp 113-122. The author studies each of the four missions treated in John: those of John the Baptist, Jesus, the holy Spirit, the disciples.

⁶ Jn 4, 38; 17, 18; 20, 21.

⁷ Jn 17, 18; 20, 21.

related to that of Jesus; 3) Jesus sanctifies himself for the disciples. The present article will treat of these ideas and then offer several conclusions regarding religious life and apostolate.

The Father sanctifies the disciples in the truth

a. *Sanctification*

Jesus asks the Father, who is called holy,⁸ and who sanctified Jesus himself for his mission,⁹ to sanctify the disciples. 'The Holy One' is one of the privileged rabbinic titles for God. In the Old Testament, sanctity is what characterizes God more than any other of his attributes. His holiness is his transcendence, his majesty which is revealed in glory.¹⁰ By the very purity of his person, the most holy is above all that is imperfect and sinful.¹¹

In later judaic and judaeo-christian texts, the Father is addressed as holy in a cultic context. He is asked to preserve the temple from profanation.¹² His holy name is said to inhabit the hearts of the faithful.¹³ The liturgy for the jewish new year contains a prayer which is related to the prayer of Jesus in John 17, since both contain the themes of glory, recognition of God by all humanity and, in particular, the themes of sanctification, word, and truth:

Our God and God of our fathers,
 reign in your glory over the whole universe,
 and be exalted above all the earth in your honour, and shine forth in
 the splendour and excellence of your might
 upon all the inhabitants of your world,
 and whatever has been made
 may know that you made it,
 that whatever has been created
 may understand that you created it,
 and whatever has breath in its nostrils may say,
 'the Lord God of Israel is King,
 and his dominion rules over all . . .'
 Sanctify us by your commandments,
 and grant our portion in your law;
 satisfy us with your goodness,
 and gladden us with your salvation . . .
 Purify¹⁴ our hearts to serve you in truth,
 for you are God in truth

⁸ Jn 17, 11.

¹⁰ Lev 10, 3; Ezek 28, 22; 38, 23.

¹² 2 Macc 14, 36.

¹⁴ 'Sanctify' is used here to translate *qādaš*, and 'purify' *ṭāhēr*.

⁹ Jn 10, 36.

¹¹ Isai 6, 3; Lev 11, 44-45.

¹³ *Didache*, 10, 2.

and your word is truth
and endures for ever. Blessed are you, O Lord, King over all the earth,
who sanctifies . . . Israel and the day of remembrance.¹⁵

A striking parallel to Jesus' petition 'Sanctify them in the truth' occurs earlier in chapter 17; 'Holy Father, keep them in your name which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one'. When John uses 'name' in reference to God, it is always to designate him as Father. Twice he uses the expression 'in the name of my Father',¹⁶ and in every other text, the Father is invoked in the words which immediately precede the mention of his name.¹⁷

The Father's name, that is, the Father precisely as Father, expresses the characteristic relationship of the Father and the Son, and therefore the very basis of their unity. The Father's gift of his name to the Son implies a revelation and a vital communication. Jesus, in receiving knowledge of his own relationship to the Father, receives life itself.¹⁸ Since the unity of Father and Son grounds that of the disciples, they will be united to each other to the degree that they live their life of sons of God. So Jesus prays that they be maintained in their sonship, in their communion with the Father,¹⁹ in order that they may be one with each other.

The petition 'sanctify them in the truth' evokes not only the holiness of God himself, but even more directly the holiness of God's people, a prominent theme in the Old Testament. The holiness of Israel is a privilege and an exigency, because the holy one of Israel chose his people to be his own, to be a holy people:

Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.²⁰ You shall be holy to me; for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from the peoples that you should be mine.²¹

There were two aspects to the holiness of Israel, that of ritual purity prescribed in the law of purity,²² and that of moral rectitude proclaimed in the law of holiness.²³ In some twenty texts of the sep-

¹⁵ See Hertz, Joseph H.: *The Authorized Daily Prayer Book*, revised edition (New York, 1965), pp 853-855.

¹⁶ Jn 5, 43; 10, 25.

¹⁷ Jn 12, 28; 17, 5-6; 11-12; 25-26.

¹⁸ Jn 5, 26; 1 Jn 5, 11-12.

¹⁹ Jn 17, 11; and see 1 Jn 2, 24; 4, 16; 1, 3.

²⁰ Exod 19, 5-6; see Lev 11, 44-45; 19, 2; 20, 7.

²¹ Lev 20, 26.

²² Lev 11 - 16.

²³ Lev 17-26, especially 19, 1-37.

tuagint, God is the subject of the verb *hagiadzein*. These texts form two series. In one, the verb is in the intensive form, and means that God sanctifies Israel in a cultic sense, that is, by preparing the people to participate in the rites of worship.²⁴ In the other series, the verb is in the causative form, and stresses rather the aspect of belonging to God himself by means of sanctification.²⁵ Sometimes the verb is used for the consecration or election of certain men: for example, the prophetic consecration of Moses and Jeremiah.²⁶

In all the texts, it is clear that holiness comes from God alone. Only he can 'sanctify' and 'consecrate' men. As one scholar has observed, consecration is thus 'an actualization of the covenant . . . the fruit of God's active presence in the midst of his people'.

Apart from the text in John's gospel, the only New Testament text in which God is the subject and men the object of *hagiadzein* is in first Thessalonians:

May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.²⁷

The passage has an eschatological perspective. Even if Paul frequently calls christians 'the saints', their 'sanctification' will be fully realized only when they are called to meet the Lord face to face. While tending towards this encounter, christians must progress in holiness by a strengthening in them of faith, of the gospel message, of the truth.

The text of Paul contains a parallelism between 'sanctify' and 'keep' which is similar to that found in John.²⁸ Another pauline text expresses a parallelism between 'sanctification by the Spirit' and 'belief in the truth':

God chose you from the beginning to be saved through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.²⁹

There is a passage in Ephesians which expresses in a striking way the nature of sanctification and purification. The sanctity of the Church consists in being presented to the Lord as a bride to the bridegroom. Sanctity is identified with the eschatological presence

²⁴ E.g., Exod 31, 13; Lev 20, 8; 21, 8, 15; 22, 9, 16, 32; Ezek 20, 12; 37, 28.

²⁵ E.g., Num 3, 13; 8, 17.

²⁶ Sir 45, 4; 49, 7 (9); Jer 1, 5.

²⁷ 1 Thess 5, 23.

²⁸ Jn 17, 11, 12, 15, 17, 19.

²⁹ 2 Thess 2, 13.

of the Church to the heavenly Christ:

... Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might *sanctify* her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might *present* the Church *to himself* in splendour, *without spot or wrinkle or any such thing*, that she might be *holy* and *without blemish*.³⁰

The scriptural texts regarding holiness invite us therefore to see the sanctification of the disciples as a realization of the new covenant. To be sanctified by the Father means to become his possession, to be empowered to approach him and to dwell in his presence, as in a sacred milieu, in the intimacy of the covenant relationship.

b. *In the truth*

Here, as in the Jewish prayer cited above, truth and the Father's word are identified: 'Your word is truth'.³¹ The Father's word, which is his revelation of himself and of his saving design, has been explained by means of a parallelism between 'your name' and 'your word':

I have manifested *your name* to the men whom you gave me out of the world; they were yours and you gave them to me, and they have kept *your word*.³²

The name of the Father has been given to the Son as a manifestation of the Father to the Son, as a gift of life.³³ By reason of his mission, Jesus has shared with men this name, this manifestation, this gift. Therefore the truth in which believers are to be sanctified is not simply a revelation concerning the Father to which Jesus would somehow be extrinsic. John has a tendency to identify the word of revelation and the person of Jesus. The ancient commentators were right in affirming that both 'word' and 'truth' here indicate Jesus himself, the Father's Son and our brother.

If Jesus is the truth, how are the disciples sanctified *in him*? Johannine usage of the preposition 'in' invites us to understand the expression in a locative sense. Very often 'in' is used by John to describe the *spiritual milieu* in which Christians live out their lives. Man is, dwells or walks in the darkness or in the light.³⁴ Believers walk in

³⁰ Eph 5, 25-7.

³¹ Jn 17, 17 b.

³² Jn 17, 6.

³³ Jn 17, 11.

³⁴ Jn 8, 12; 11, 9; 10; 12, 35; 1 Jn 1, 6-7; 2, 9-11.

the truth, in the commandment of Jesus.³⁵ They are or dwell in Christ's word,³⁶ his teaching,³⁷ his love,³⁸ in Christ himself,³⁹ in God's love,⁴⁰ in God.⁴¹

The disciples are sanctified by contemplating and participating in the mystery of Jesus by faith, by sharing in the revelation which has been made to them in his person; that is, by entering as adopted sons into the communion of the Father and Son. We can apply to verse 17 what Theodore of Mopsuestia observed of verse 11:

We are united to Christ as his flesh and as his members because by faith we receive spiritual communion with him. Thus, since we are united to Christ, we receive a familiarity with the Father. See then what he says: '... grant that, by the grace of the Spirit, we may be united to you as sons and that we can call you 'Abba, Father'.

In the parallel petitions of these two verses, Jesus prays that his disciples be kept in a filial life, in communion with the Father, by reason of their communion with himself who is united to the Father as his Word and as his Son.

We may ask ourselves why there is no mention of the holy Spirit in this passage, for elsewhere in the New Testament christian holiness is related to the presence and activity of the Spirit.⁴² Although the Spirit is not explicitly named here, several reasons lead us to affirm that his role is presupposed. The prayer of Jesus here is made in the hour of his glorification, which is the time of the gift of the Spirit,⁴³ and in the context of the post-easter life of the Church, which is the age of the Spirit.⁴⁴ According to John, for the Church, both Jesus⁴⁵ and the Spirit⁴⁶ are the truth. If the 'in Spirit' and 'in Truth' of chapter four are joined together,⁴⁷ we may suppose that the role of the Spirit is to be understood in the only other occurrence of *en alētheia* ('in truth', without the definite article) in all the fourth gospel. Finally, in several texts the Spirit himself is called 'holy'.⁴⁸ We might make our own the observation of J. H. Bernard: 'Truth would be the medium of their consecration, as (although this is not

³⁵ 2 Jn 4, 6.

³⁶ Jn 8, 31.

³⁷ 2 Jn 9.

³⁸ Jn 15, 9, 10.

³⁹ Jn 6, 56; 14, 20; 15, 4 bis. 5, 7; 17, 21; 1 Jn 2, 5, 6, 24, 27, 28; 3, 6, 24; 5, 20.

⁴⁰ 1 Jn 4, 16.

⁴¹ 1 Jn 2, 24; 4, 13, 15, 16.

⁴² Rom 15, 16; 1 Thess 4, 7-8; 2 Thess 2, 13; 1 Pet 1, 2.

⁴³ Jn 17; see Jn 7, 37-38.

⁴⁴ See the five promises of the holy Spirit in Jn 14, 15-17; 14, 25-26; 15, 26-27; 16, 6-11; 16, 12-15.

⁴⁵ Jn 14, 6.

⁴⁶ 1 Jn 5, 6.

⁴⁷ Jn 4, 23-4.

⁴⁸ Jn 1, 33; 14, 26; 20, 22.

expressed in the present passage) the 'Spirit of Truth' would be the agent (cf 16, 13).⁴⁹

We can conclude, then, that the sanctification of the disciples by the Father in the truth, for which Jesus prays, is growth in faith, in truth itself, in their participation in the Spirit of the very life of the Father and the Son.

Jesus sanctifies himself for the disciples

'And for their sake I sanctify myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth'.⁵⁰

The first part of this verse is frequently understood in a sacrificial sense: it is taken to refer to Jesus' consecration of himself for his death on the cross. This interpretation derives from the antiochian school, and in particular from John Chrysostom. However, to restrict the meaning of *hagiadzein* to this sense is contrary to the usage of the word in verse 17 and in the Old Testament generally.

'... him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world': in this context, Jesus is accused of blasphemy, because he made himself equal to God.⁵¹ He answers by citing the psalm: 'I said, you are gods'.⁵² According to the interpretation then current among the Jews, these words were addressed by God to Israel on Sinai. By the gift of the law, the israelites became gods and sons of the most high. The passage therefore describes the sanctification of Jesus' humanity by his union with the Word of God, the Son of God, and by the plenitude of the Spirit who dwells in him; it is a unique parallel to our text. This union of divinity and humanity in Jesus is understood by John not in metaphysical but in functional terms (which ultimately have ontological implications). The mission of Jesus is oriented towards the function of revealing the Father.⁵³ The works which Jesus accomplishes have as their purpose the revelation of his person and of his relation to the Father.⁵⁴ The sanctifying action of the Father in Jesus realizes his sonship, arousing and maintaining in him the life and attitudes of the Son of God.

The only time *hagios* ('holy') is used of Jesus in the fourth gospel, it designates him as the Messiah, but especially under the aspect of his revelatory function: he alone has the words of eternal life.⁵⁵ In the first epistle of John, and in the Apocalypse, the term is applied

⁴⁹ Bernard, J. H.: *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St John* (Edinburgh, 1928), Vol II, p. 574. ⁵⁰ Jn 17, 19.

⁵¹ Jn 10, 34-6. ⁵² Ps 82(81), 6. ⁵³ Jn 3, 34; 5, 38; 6, 29.

⁵⁴ Jn 5, 36; 9, 3-4; 10, 37; 17, 4, 6. 8. ⁵⁵ Jn 6, 69; see 6, 29, 38, 40, 41, 63.

to Jesus in a similar context of revelation of himself as Son and Word of God.⁵⁶ Throughout his life on earth, Jesus sanctifies himself *in the truth* by living his sonship and by revealing this sonship to others. As Beda Rigaux has observed: 'Jesus sanctifies himself in presenting himself before the Father to be one with him and before men as the revealer and the perfect revelation'.⁵⁷

To speak of Jesus' sanctification of himself is to stress the personal and active aspect of his holiness, to highlight in particular his obedience towards and perfect communion with the saving will of the Father.⁵⁸ According to the fourth gospel, to be son and to be obedient are correlative. For Jesus, living out his sonship meant total conformity to the Father's designs, and obedience was the highest expression of his sonship. His obedience was itself a *revelation* to his disciples. In seeing him submissive to the Father in a unique way, in seeing his sanctification lived out as communion with the Father, the disciples discovered in him the Son of God.

Because Jesus sanctifies himself 'for their sake', his sanctification has for his disciples a salvific effect. However, our text does not refer exclusively to the sacrifice of the cross, because the other words which usually accompany the preposition *hyper* ('for') to express the saving purpose of Jesus' death are absent.⁵⁹ The present passage includes the cross, for the obedience of Jesus to the Father's will is consummated in this ultimate sacrifice; but the context refers as well to the entire life of Jesus.

From the foregoing we can conclude that there are three causes of christian sanctification: the Father (v 17); the truth (v 19); Jesus' sanctification of himself (v 19). The Father sanctifies by being the source of revelation, by revealing his name to his Son and through the Son to all disciples. Jesus is the exemplar of all sanctification by living his sonship in loving obedience to the Father, and therefore by manifesting the mystery of sonship in which all believers share. He mediates this sonship by introducing his disciples, by means of his paschal mystery and his sacraments, into a similar communion with the Father. The truth is the spiritual milieu in which and by means of which the sanctification of the disciples is realized. As de la Potterie remarks:

⁵⁶ 1 Jn 2, 20-27; Apoc 3, 7-8. 12.

⁵⁷ Rigaux, B.: 'Les destinataires du IV^e Evangile à la lumière de Jn 17', in *Revue théologique de Louvain*, 1 (1970), p 310. ⁵⁸ Jn 5, 19; 8, 28-29.

⁵⁹ E.g., 'die', 11, 51-52; 18, 14; 'lay down life', 10, 11. 15; 13, 37. 38; 1 Jn 3, 16.

If the truth is interiorized in the believer⁶⁰ by the action of the holy Spirit, if the truth constitutes the christian's spiritual and interior 'milieu', it is precisely in this 'milieu' that charity is nourished. 'In the truth' describes, then, both the interiority of the truth, its localization in us, as it were, and its effectiveness for action.

Sanctification and mission

In the prayer of Jesus, there is a striking parallelism between his petitions⁶¹ and his affirmations regarding the world.⁶² In particular, just as in verses 21-23 there is a relation between the unity of believers and the conversion of the world, so in verses 17-19 there is a relation between the sanctification of believers and their mission to the world. Verse 18 describes the sending of Jesus by the Father as the model and source of Jesus' sending of his disciples:

As you have sent me into the world,
so I have sent them into the world.

Verses 11 and 23 present the mission of Jesus as what the world is to come to believe and recognize. These various aspects of the mission of Jesus, when viewed together, lead us to affirm with de la Potterie:

The world will be converted only in discovering in the mission of the disciples that which constitutes its transcendent foundation: the mission of Jesus given by the Father. Consequently, the mission of the disciples will attain its effect in the world only if it presents itself as the prolongation of that of Jesus. This shows us the importance of the disciples' faith for their mission. The source of their apostolate is in God.

I would add, in the light of what we have seen previously, that the source of their apostolate is in God precisely as *Father*. Just as the divine origin of Jesus' mission was discovered by the disciples, by reason of his filial obedience to and revelation of the Father, so the world will be led to recognize the same divine origin of every christian apostolate, to the degree that the christian community lives in a spirit of loving, filial obedience.

Just as sanctification (vv 17-19) is necessary for unity (vv 21-23),

⁶⁰ Cf 2 Jn 1-2: 'The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth, and not only I but also all who know the truth, because of the truth which abides in us and will be with us for ever'.

⁶¹ Jn 17, 11b. 15. 17. 20-21. 22-23.

⁶² Jn 17, 11a. 18. 21. 23.

so mission (vv 17-19) is necessary for conversion (vv 21-23). Similarly, sanctification is a presupposition of being sent (vv 17-19), and unity is a presupposition of conversion (vv 21-23). Therefore the root of all unity, mission and conversion is sanctification; that is, communion with the Father through the revelation of Jesus Christ the Son, in the holy Spirit.

Conclusion

The rich theological content of our text suggests several reflections regarding the apostolate of religious communities. I mention a few, and invite the reader to develop others for himself in the light of his own particular circumstances.

(1) *The religious community must manifest itself as authentically religious.* Such a community is meant by its very existence to witness to a striving by radical means⁶³ for communion in faith and charity of the members with God and with each other. To the degree that it proclaims by its choice of values and life-style a sonship gratefully accepted and joyfully lived, the community reveals and attracts others towards this same sonship. The specifically apostolic community will seek in all of its endeavours to develop and increase the community of believers.

(2) *The apostolic mission of each community depends upon the Father and draws its life, strength, and efficacy from him.* No form of service will be truly efficacious for extending God's reign in individual hearts and in society, unless its origin is in the revelation of the Father's saving design, and unless it perseveres in faithful and loving response to his word. Every apostolic community is called to exercise continual discernment of those spirits that impel it to various kinds of activity, in order to choose those which are truly in harmony with the Father's will and which thus respond to the real needs of those it seeks to serve.

(3) *The Father mediates all his gifts to us through his Son.* All fidelity to his will and all service to his people derive from the saving grace which Jesus himself exemplified in his life and ministry upon this earth, and which he now shares with us principally through the sacraments of his Church, contemplation of his word, and other forms of prayer and sacrifice.

⁶³ See Tillard, J. M. R., O.P.: 'Le Fondement Evangelique de la vie religieuse', in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* (Novembre, 1969), pp 916-55.

(4) *Each apostolic community should be grounded in and patterned after Jesus' own fulfilment of the mission he received as the Father's Son.* By its vows, and especially by its spirit of obedience, the community proclaims that it is, in a particular and public way, 'with Jesus' for the service of the kingdom of God. An intense love for and humble imitation of Jesus the risen Lord present in its midst, should be the bond that unites all the members of the community with each other by uniting them with Jesus himself.

(5) *Sharing in the sanctification and mission of Jesus will include a sharing in the suffering and joy of his paschal mystery.* The religious community must reckon its incorporation into this mystery as the very heart of its apostolic mission. Where merely human wisdom falters and human strength fails, the folly of the cross and the power of the Lord's resurrection can triumph for his greater glory.

(6) *Sanctification and mission mutually influence each other.* Profound personal experience, both by individuals and by the community as a whole, of the mystery of our sonship necessarily impels those who are called to it to ever more creative and generous efforts for announcing this sonship to a world desperately seeking the meaning of life and peace, of person and community. Apostolic work itself, when engaged in by those sensitive to the action of God's holy Spirit in our midst, reveals ever more deeply humanity's need of and aspiration towards communion with Jesus Christ, the giver of true freedom, and through him with the Father, while enabling one to experience at the same time the gracious mercy to men of the faithful Father who is love.