

APOSTOLATE: BEING OR DOING?

By SISTER MARY MILLIGAN

SEVERAL YEARS AGO it was not uncommon to hear sisters speak of 'doing apostolic work' on weekends or during summer holidays. What was remarkable in the statement was not the phrase itself but the context from which it was usually spoken. Sisters actively engaged in teaching in schools, for example, would look for apostolic work after school hours; sister-students sought, or were expected to seek, some form of apostolic involvement, of apostolic activity. The implication usually was that the task which occupied the greater part of their days was not really seen as apostolic; that the 'apostolate' was to be looked for outside the things that one spent most of one's time doing.

This situation still exists to some extent and there seems to be some value in reflecting upon it, since it points up serious difficulties in the understanding of what we call 'apostolate'.¹ Why did this compartmentalization of apostolic work arise? It seems to me that there are a variety of reasons. For some religious, a first opening of the doors to the outside held a fascination, so that what was outside had *a priori* more value than what was inside. The very terms 'outside' and 'inside' reflect a certain way of seeing religious life which lends itself to dichotomies.

Perhaps, on the other hand, situating apostolic work beyond the day-to-day tasks reflects a disenchantment, a justified malaise with the tasks being performed. The identification of the apostolate with what lies beyond the sphere of everyday activity implicitly expresses a questioning of that activity in terms of the gospel.

It may be that an excessive stress on professionalization has led some sisters to see their work as a job, and so the frequent question: 'But how am I different from my lay colleagues?' Finally, the phenomenon we are describing may be a reaction against an identification of the works of the congregation with the apostolate. When

¹ For our purposes here, the words 'apostolate' and 'mission' are used interchangeably. The apostolate referred to is within apostolic religious congregations and therefore implies being sent.

certain tasks disappear, when certain works are suppressed, the sisters feel that their reason for being religious disappears as well.

Whatever the reasons for the 'apostolic work on weekends' complex, it points up the existence of a very real dichotomy in the lives of religious in apostolic congregations. Today a polarity which seems to present difficulties for the apostolic woman religious and which is linked to the above situation is that of 'being-doing'. Is the mission of the religious to be or to do? It is evident, I think, that the question is poorly posed. To choose the second term to the exclusion of the first leads to an activism which is not necessarily apostolic; to situate the mission of the religious solely in being, on the other hand, could encourage a passivity whose conclusion might be that all works are equally valid – even no works at all – or could lead to a sort of personality cult.

We will always be faced with the temptation to resolve the tensions of our lives by suppressing one of the poles of the tension. What we need to discover today is a meaningful axis of integration in our apostolic religious lives, a new and unified way of looking at the mission of the religious. It is in the area of integration that ignatian apostolic spirituality finds an echo in religious communities seeking to understand and live what it truly means to be a congregation, where 'charitable and apostolic activity is of the essence of religious life', as *Perfectae Caritatis* states.

In explicating that the Society of Jesus has a single aim, the glory of God and the service of the neighbour,² Ignatius departed from the traditional vision of his time which invariably mentioned the spiritual welfare of the members themselves as an end of the congregation. This unified vision of the apostolic end can be a liberating force in religious congregations of women whose constitutions most often state a double end, one term of which is personal sanctification.

The apostolic Church is the privileged place to nourish reflection on the apostolate, to see the unity between mission and sanctification, between doing and being. Is there an apostle whose missionary activity does not have its source in an encounter with the God-Man Jesus Christ, in an encounter which radically affects his whole being? Andrew and John came and saw where Jesus lived and then shared their experience with others.³ To Paul, the Son was revealed

² Cf *Supplement to the Way*, 14 (autumn 1971), pp 46–61.

³ Cf Jn 1, 35ff.

'in order that' he might preach him among the gentiles.⁴ The meeting with Jesus Christ, an adherence to him in faith and love, is the basis of the apostolate. The good news which the apostle announces is the good news of Jesus Christ, a good news of salvation which he himself has experienced. The apostolate thus becomes the sharing of one's own faith in Jesus Christ. Convinced of the reality that God has raised Jesus from the dead and that Jesus is Lord, the apostles proclaim this belief to those they meet. It is the risen Christ, present, active and experienced, whom the apostles preach. They have nothing else to offer: 'I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk'.⁵ It seems to me that this is what the first epistle of John tells us in its opening verses:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us – that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his son Jesus Christ.

It is what the apostle has experienced of Jesus Christ that he announces in all simplicity and urgency. The disciple's experience of Jesus Christ seems to be the witness of the Spirit of Truth within him. Only because the Spirit himself bears witness to Christ within him is the apostle also a witness. His witness is rooted in the witness of the Spirit.⁶

In the old testament, the call to mission follows the same pattern. Moses meets Yahweh in the burning bush as a prelude to his mission of liberation of his people. Though he has been consecrated from the womb, Jeremiah's call to mission is explicitated at a certain moment in a familiar dialogue with the Lord. It is from the encounter with the living God that mission flows.

All apostolate is a sharing in the one work of Jesus Christ: to reveal the Father, to proclaim the good news that the Father is love, that we are sons. This is the mission of the Church, it is the mission in which each congregation shares. Having met Jesus Christ, the apostle's life is transformed; the Spirit of Jesus Christ within him allows him to love not only in word or speech but in

⁴ Gal 1, 16.

⁵ Acts 3, 6.

⁶ Cf Jn 15, 26-27.

deed and in truth. The more the apostle becomes one with Christ, the more the 'mind of Christ' becomes his own; so that he feels an urgency to express the Lord's love of all men, to incarnate the infinite compassion of the Saviour, to be as he was: a man who goes about doing good.

While it is true that the apostolic *élan* of the religious expresses itself in acts, in works, it is likewise true that each life has its own rhythm – a rhythm to be discovered, recognized and respected. At certain times, withdrawal from activity becomes a necessity for the apostolic religious – withdrawal for intensive periods of prayer in order to deepen her relationship with the Transcendent, upon which depends the quality of her mission. At other times, the withdrawal may be an invitation to participate more concretely in the paschal mystery through sickness or old age. These periods of 'non-activity' are moments in a life which is totally given to God and to others.

The quality of the mission is determined by the quality of our faith, by what we are as christians. The religious dimension of the life of the apostle is itself already a response to the needs of the world. Living fully a relationship to the Transcendent, the consecrated person witnesses to the religious dimension in man, a dimension often obscured in a technological world. His life becomes a response to mankind's thirst, recognized or not, for the Transcendent, for contemplation and gratuity. And yet the mission is not totally accomplished by the being of the apostle. His faith necessarily expresses itself in a movement outwards, towards others; or rather the movement outward towards others is a part of what he is.

The sharing in the one work of Jesus Christ concretizes itself in particular tasks. It is in the concretization of the work of Jesus Christ that we encounter the richness of the diversity of the Spirit. To some is given the task of healing, to others teaching, to others comforting the afflicted. The expressions of the apostolate will be determined by the needs of persons and of society in general, by the particular charism of an apostolic group within the Church and by the specific gifts of the persons within the apostolic group.

It seems important to recognize the real needs of man as the first element to be considered in the determination of works. Apostolic religious congregations exist for others. As charismatic groups within the Church, they are by definition a gift given for others. They are called upon to live and witness to certain values, to assure certain services within society. How important it is then to be aware of and sensitive to the real needs of persons, needs which are not always

verbally expressed or even recognized; needs which are truly those of others and not a projection of our own, or a reflection of those we might have if we were in the same situation as those to whom we proclaim the good news. The needs of others are to be met, while not encouraging a perpetual dependence on the apostle, but in view of the day when those in need can assume their own necessities, strengthened by their faith in the presence of the risen Lord among them.

The particular charism of the apostolic congregation is another element in the determination of the concrete expressions of the apostolate. The evangelical preoccupations of the founder or foundress, his vision of the work of redemption, his response to the needs of his times, have found an echo in those who share the mission of the congregation. It is important for congregations, in response to the call of the Church, to deepen their understanding of the intention of the founder, to recapture the evangelical dynamism present at the foundation of the congregation, to live the spirit of the founder in today's world. This does not mean that the works of the founder will be the works of a congregation in 1973. What it does mean is that the founder's vision of the needs of his time and his response to those needs can sharpen our own vision of the way to respond to the needs of our own time.

The apostolic group does not exist in the abstract; it is a community of persons, each having particular gifts and talents. If the Lord has called certain persons to a particular apostolic group, it is not so that they can conform to a pre-existing and immutable structure, but so that, sharing in the particular faith-vision of the group, assuming its past, present and future, throwing in their lot with other persons who have expressed their total consecration to the Lord within the same group, they might bring a unique expression of service to the congregation. Sharing in the common mission of the congregation, they freely choose to make their apostolic choices in terms of a community. The determination of the tasks expressing their love for others benefits by a communal discernment of needs and capacities, by 'being sent' in the name of the Church.

Apostolic communities should assure that their works really are expressions of the mission of Jesus Christ, really do reveal the Father to mankind. Do the works of the apostolate, for example, manifest the same concern for persons that Jesus manifested? Do they take people where they are and develop their own riches as we know that the Lord did with Nicodemus, with the samaritan

woman? Is it evident that they are for man rather than for the sabbath? Is it really through fidelity to the Lord's command that we preach his gospel? Is the word we preach the word we have heard, kept in our hearts and contemplated?

The apostolic discourse which Matthew gives in his tenth chapter offers us a wealth of elements against which to measure our own apostolate. It answers no concrete questions perhaps, but transmits to us a word which cannot be ignored. Why, for example, the strong insistence on poverty as a fundamental exigency of the apostolate? Why the allusion to persecution as an almost natural consequence of the apostolate? Why the constant refrain: 'Fear not!'

Our interrogation suggested by the apostolic discourse causes particular anguish for many religious today: to whom are we sent? There are congregations founded for the poor and needy which find themselves one hundred years later almost exclusively among the wealthy and the middle class. It is true that there are the intellectually poor and the spiritually poor and that the gospel is to be preached to all. Perhaps a return to the sources can also be helpful in the discernment of the persons to whom we are sent. What were the needs which sparked the response of our founders?

We see in the same chapter of Matthew's gospel that the apostles were bound to a particular group by Christ's own commission, and before the resurrection their preaching was to be limited to that group: 'Go nowhere among the gentiles, and enter no town of the samaritans but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'.⁷ Certainly the good news was eventually to be destined for the gentiles as well: 'Go and make disciples of all nations';⁸ but the disciples were to go only where the word of Christ sent them.

Though before his resurrection Jesus himself limited the concrete expression of his love for man to the israelites, we never find him refusing to enter the world of those he meets – be they gentile or jew. He is clear about the mission he has received from his Father; he knows to whom and why he is sent.

The apostles were also told: 'Preach as you go . . . Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons'.⁹ They were to preach as they went – in the present moment, in all circumstances of their lives. If they met a leper or a blind man on their way, what were they to do? Meet his needs: cure him, heal him, share their

⁷ Mt 10, 5-6.

⁸ Mt 28, 19.

⁹ Mt 10, 7-8.

faith in Jesus Christ the Lord with him. This was what Jesus himself did, this is what they were to do. Participating in the mission of Jesus Christ, in fidelity and love, they revealed the Father's love to all whom they met.

It seems to me that this same sort of dynamic is required of apostolic religious. Recognition of the fact that no one congregation can meet all the needs of all men demands that the congregation have a clear vision of those needs it is called to meet, of those to whom it is sent. And yet fidelity to the Lord and imitation of him dictates as well that the neighbour be received and loved as the Lord himself would have received and loved him. Our attitude towards those we meet unexpectedly, towards those who are constantly with us, is the test and measure of our love for those to whom we are specifically sent. Perhaps the question to be asked is not: 'Lord, who is my neighbour?', but 'Lord, who should be my neighbour?'

It is evident, I think, that the process of discernment is capital in determining the concrete expressions of the Lord's mission today. More than ever before is a continual attitude of discernment necessary to religious – as individuals and as communities – in order to be obedient to the Lord's word in the contemporary situation. The discernment which seeks to determine how to respond in faith and love to the word spoken in scripture, and in the concrete situation here and now presupposes an asceticism far more demanding than any other which might be external. The freedom from fear and selfishness which is necessary for discernment already associates the apostle very closely with the mystery of the cross.

The reality in which we are called to live and share our faith in the risen Lord is complex. We are aware of many urgent needs around us today and can let ourselves be paralysed by their enormity and their urgency. We are aware as well that situations and needs change rapidly and we must be sensitive to those changes at the risk of being a voice crying in the wilderness.

As our vision of the apostolic life becomes more unified, the 'action-contemplation' dichotomy disappears. It becomes more and more obvious that an openness to and involvement in the human reality of our times – in its suffering, its searching, its rejoicing, its weeping, its celebrating; in its failures and achievements, its hopes and its uncertainties – an openness to all this is a part of the apostle's radical fidelity to the Word who was made flesh. It also becomes evident that it is in the apostle's contemplation of the Word that

this complex human reality is confronted by the one who is truth and nourished by him who is life. Jurgen Moltmann has said in *The Lord of the Dance*¹⁰ that laughter can serve as a mediator between the unlimited character of the tasks to be accomplished and the very real limitation of our own capacities. I think that prayer also can serve this function, especially a prayer which is adoration of the one whose love for each of us and for all of mankind is sheer gratuity.

There are many other elements of the apostolate we could have treated here. The proclamation of the word, for example, implies a dialogue, a negative or affirmative response on the part of those to whom the word is addressed, a response which is formative of the apostle. But we have reflected on only the first of these aspects.

The communitarian nature of the apostolate within religious congregations has likewise been left untouched. Our purpose here has been merely to point up the importance of an integrated vision of mission. Perhaps the following citation from Paul Evmokidov could conclude and resume these reflections:

Being a messenger is not something one can invent overnight. The approach to man, to modern man, is an art. What is essential is the marvellous power to put oneself in his place, to look at the world with his eyes, to savour things with his tastes and to bring slowly to the surface what slumbers in him: communion, to efface oneself and to let Christ speak.¹¹

¹⁰ (Paris, 1972), p 54.

¹¹ *L'amour fou de Dieu* (Paris, 1973), p 173. 'On ne s'improvise pas messager. Approcher un homme, l'homme moderne, est un art. L'essentiel est dans ce pouvoir merveilleux de se transporter à sa place, de regarder le monde avec ses yeux, d'apprécier les choses avec ses goûts et lentement de faire remonter à la surface ce qui est en sommeil: la communion, de s'effacer et de laisser le Christ parler'.