THE MISSION OF THE SOCIETY IN A DECHRISTIANIZED WORLD

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IN THE HISTORY of the Church, the sixteenth century was an age of strenuous activity. She was faced not only with the challenge of the reformers, but with the widespread and radical changes of life and thought effected by the whole cultural explosion of the renaissance. Furthermore, it was an age of unprecedented missionary output, the expansion of the Church's frontiers keeping pace with the colonists and explorers. To be sure, historical comparisons must not be given more weight than they can bear; but even so, the parallels with the Church of our own time are striking. Once again, new tasks are demanding radical interior change; and equally, a remarkable missionary *élan* in the Church arises from a new situation and a resulting new consciousness. The main features of our post-conciliar consciousness of mission have been described often enough: our richer understanding of the meaning of grace and faith, our malaise about much of the so-called christianity of christian countries, our realization that mission is not a geographical or juridical concept but a spiritual and theological one. All this, of course, belongs to the climate created by the second Vatican Council. The newness of this climate in regard to the tridentine and post-tridentine Church hardly needs emphasis. On the other hand, a sense of challenge amounting almost to crisis coupled with a quickening, a felt surge of fresh vitality in a Church striving to find its response, are features which bring us closer to the age of Ignatius than we were a generation ago. Hence a study of Ignatius's service to the counter-reformation Church, and of his impact on that Church, may have some light to cast on the sort of service the modern jesuit may hope to render to the Church of today and tomorrow.

A fundamental consequence of our situation is the urgency it gives to the process of conversion, the total turning of the heart to God. In the case of the jesuit, this involves recapturing in his own here-and-

now the original mystical experience of Ignatius. That experience, as evidenced particularly in his Diary, is characterized by a cosmic sense of the presence of God, a vision which sees 'God in all and all in God', and by a profound understanding, rooted in that vision, of the mystery of the Incarnation. Caught up as he is in this experience, Ignatius is completely clear as to his own spiritual standpoint. His 'way' will be forever that of the *acatamiento*, a richly blended combination of humility, wonder, reverence and submission; and above all, an astonished gratitude which finds expression in the disciple's self-effacing commitment as the graced companion of Christ in the task of building the Kingdom.[1]

The challenge that arises from the crisis of christianity, then, has its counterpart for us in the challenge, and the need, to rediscover in depth the original charism of Ignatius. Few would want to deny the conspicuous position of Ignatius among the forerunners of the second Vatican Council. His unremitting insistence on the need for discernment is completely in harmony with the emphasis laid by the Council on the need for scrutinizing the signs of the times. Further, his concern for discernment is always linked with another characteristic, the marked desire to think and feel with the Church. On all the main axes of his spirituality – the divine Majesty, Christ, the service of the Kingdom, Incarnation, the Church as mission, Faith – he would faithfully consult the Church's self-understanding.

It is with this sort of vision, discernment, and sense of the Church's self-understanding that the attitude in which to approach the modern unbeliever has to develop. Our task is to convey to him what we really are – men imbued with respect and reverence for the image of God in man, and in this man in particular who is the unbeliever. A true understanding of evangelization can proceed only from a profound reverence for God in his creature, combined with wholehearted involvement in the concern of the contemporary Church for the total development of man.

A fresh understanding of mission

Of all the insights which were given to the Church during the second Vatican Council, one of the most important was the far-reaching realization that Church and mission are inseparable concepts. The key to the Council's recovery and understanding of the

[1] See my own studies: 'El Camino de Ignacio', in *Manresa* 32 (1960), pp 45–66; and 'El Acatamiento en la Primera Semaña de los Ejercicios', *ibid.*, pp 127–138.

intrinsic missionary character of the Church itself lies in a truth which recurs frequently in the documents, namely, that the Church prolongs the mission of Christ himself, the 'Apostle of God',[2] the 'one who is sent' by the Father. Seen in this light, missions can no longer be considered as a valiant but in the last analysis peripheral venture of the Church. Nor can we continue to conceive the idea of mission in juridical or geographical terms. 'Mission' is now restored to its rightful place, the very heart of the living Church.

Given this outlook, it is not surprising that the universal Church should be quick to appreciate a reality of which the 'foreign missionary' of the past had long been aware. In our relations with the unbeliever, the only valid point of reference is the faith of the adult, who has made his own, willingly and knowingly, the laborious road from unbelief to conversion, and so stands ready for baptism.

The crisis of conventional christianity

It is important to notice that the development outlined above is entirely recent. From our present position we find it almost astonishing to recall that now familiar attitudes have been current for barely a decade. Yet it was as late as 1962 (at the international catechetical conference at Bangkok), that the problem of adult faith, its demands, the various stages of its growth and the resulting pedagogical implications, were seriously confronted for the first time since the days when the adult catechumenate was the normal way for the Church to initiate her new members. (The insights then gained were later to be formulated and incorporated into the *Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church.*) The inadequacy of presuming without more ado the christian quality of those who happen to have been born into christian families in so-called christian countries became suddenly and glaringly apparent, and new questions began to arise. On what grounds do we go on assuming that our baptized infants – even with 'proper' religious instruction – will grow up true christians as a matter of course? How many 'baptized non-christians' do we have among us? The remark of Tertullian, 'Christians are not born; they have to become', takes on a new and disturbing relevance.

Having emerged into a more realistic and open climate, the post-conciliar Church is squarely confronted with the problems posed by conventional christianity. The indications are that conventional christianity is reaching a crisis point; the more outspoken, indeed,

[2] Heb 3, 1.

go so far as to proclaim its 'end'. At all events, it is clear that in traditional christian circles a widespread malaise is making itself felt, a malaise nowhere more evident than in the agonized self-recriminations of countless catholic parents: 'My son doesn't seem to believe any more. Where did I go wrong?' This is not the place to discuss in detail the incidence of real or apparent lapsing among the young, but there is one point that calls for consideration here. Piercing the surface of questions of this sort, we can detect one of the more deleterious effects of that 'christian culture' or 'cultural christianity' which so many are afraid to see disappear. When christianity becomes part and parcel of a culture, it tends to follow the dynamics of culture. To realise what this can mean in practice, we have only to consider how far-reaching is our natural tendency to take for granted whatever belongs to our own background. It is only the opportunity to become immersed in another culture, that brings the dawning realisation that it is possible to live quite differently. When we look back over history, the conclusion seems inescapable that through the centuries of christendom, and in the later cultures of the so-called christian countries, something similar happened to christianity itself. But a christianity that can be taken for granted has lost its very heart, for everything in christianity is grace: the absolute opposite of something to be taken for granted. The criterion of an authentic christian life is gratitude; the true description of the living christian is 'a man or woman who goes through life thanking God'. Such an expression would have appealed, of course, to Ignatius. His basic spiritual stance, from which all his apostolic planning and action sprang, was that of the *esclavito indigno* (unworthy little servant) of his Christmas contemplation in the Spiritual Exercises. Ignatius, in brief, is a man overwhelmed with astonishment at the generosity of his Creator: a man growing daily in the sense of awe and wonder at the divine Majesty whose most fitting name is Grace. His was a vision of christianity of a completely different order from cultural convention.

The challenge: a return to fundamentals

I do not want to underestimate or belittle the real losses brought about in and through the turmoil and confusion that besets the post-conciliar Church, but it needs to be said that the positive response to the challenge and call to authenticity far outweighs the negative balance of doubt, fear and despondency. Believing this to be true, I agree whole-heartedly with the following statement

proposed by the indian task force for the forthcoming General Congregation, in connection with 'Vocation and Mission in Society':

> To rediscover the jesuit identity we have to recapture the fundamental spiritual experience which, through the Spiritual Exercises, gave birth to the Society and has animated it from the beginning. This fundamental experience can be described in terms of personal encounter with and commitment to Christ, expressed in a total availability to his visible Church, lived in companionship, for the glory of God and the service of mankind.

Such was indeed the unique spiritual experience of Ignatius and his companions. Here lies the hidden powerful source of whatever lasting work the Society has been able to accomplish in the past four centuries.

The self-understanding of the Church today

Ignatian spirituality particularly lends itself to development along post-conciliar lines. With his desire to be at one with the Church – *sentire cum ecclesia*, as he puts it – Ignatius would have been the first to adjust his own vision where necessary to the self-understanding of the contemporary Church in its endeavour to discern the signs of the times. In much of the Council's most characteristic teaching, however, he would have found not so much new directions as new depths, further penetrations into realms already familiar to him. It has often been pointed out that his vision was a cosmic one. He saw the world suspended, as it were, from the hands of the divine Majesty and consistently held in Christ, whose banner was to provide his companions with their rallying-point. Against this background, he saw his mission as a whole-hearted and joyful companionship with Christ in the struggle to build the kingdom. And these are surely the dominant themes of the Council. Hence Ignatius would have found clarification of his own insights in the language in which the Council enlarges on its vision of the Incarnation, whose history, in the truest sense, begins with the creation of the world, made through the Word. Again, the fathoming of the mystery of Christ and its inspiration for humanity, in the following passage from *Gaudium et Spes*, would only have expressed for him hitherto unsuspected breadths of his own mystical experience:

> The truth is that only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light . . . Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals man

> to man himself... He who is the 'Image of the invisible God' (Col 1,15), is himself the perfect man. To the sons of Adam he restores the divine likeness which had been disfigured from the first sin onwards... In him God reconciled us to himself and among ourselves... He blazed a trail, and, if we follow it, life and death are made holy and take on a new meaning.
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> The christian man, conformed to the likeness of that Son who is the firstborn of many brothers, receives 'the first fruits of the Spirit' (Rom 8,23), by which he becomes capable of discharging the new law of love... linked with the paschal mystery and patterned on the dying Christ, he will hasten forward to resurrection in the strength which comes from hope.

Theology has moved on, however, and much that is fundamental for ourselves would have fallen strangely on sixteenth-century ears. Formed as he was by the theologians of the Sorbonne, Ignatius might well be surprised (though no doubt agreeably) by the boldness with which the above citation goes on:

> All this holds true, not only for christians but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. For, since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the holy Spirit, in a manner known only to God, offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery. Such is the mystery of man, and it is a great one, as seen by believers in the light of christian revelation.[3]

The mission of the Church according to the second Vatican Council

Thinking with the Church means, then, assimilating the open and universal outlook to which the Council testifies. This holds particularly of the field that concerns us here, the Church's self-understanding as mission. First we need to recognize that the 'People of God' is the sacrament of salvation, not in the sense that only those are saved who belong to it explicitly, not even in the sense that they are in some way 'better' saved. The People of God is the sacrament of salvation because in this people the salvation that mysteriously permeates the breadth and length of human history finds fully explicit expression and continues down the centuries. Equally, our attitudes must correspond to the multi-dimensional character of the Church's life. While the second Vatican Council did not develop a particular ecclesiology, it demonstrates in a variety of contexts the different and complementary aspects of the Church as she is meant

[3] *Gaudium et Spes*, 43.

to be. By combining the main elements contained in the Constitutions *Lumen Gentium*, *Dei Verbum*, and *Gaudium et Spes*, together with the decree *Ad Gentes*, we arrive at a rounded picture of the Church's self-understanding, well summarized by an american catholic theologian as follows:

> The Church is the community of all those who confess the lordship of Jesus Christ, who ratify that faith in baptism, and who thereby commit themselves to service and mission within that community of faith.
>
> But the principal reality is the Kingdom of God, and the existence and functioning of the Church makes no sense apart from it.
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> That mission is three-fold in relationship to the reign of God: to proclaim in word and sacrament the definitive arrival of the Kingdom of Jesus of Nazareth (*kerygma*), to offer itself as a test case of its own proclamation, as a group of people, transformed by the Spirit into a community of faith, hope, love and truthfulness – a sign of the Kingdom on earth and an anticipation of the Kingdom of the future (*koinonia*), and finally to realize and extend the reign of God through service in the socio-political order (*diakonia*).[4]

The reference here to service in the socio-political order is of crucial importance for the contemporary christian. But it is equally crucial to place this service in its true relationship to the nature and total mission of the Church. In this perspective, the task of building the human community is in no sense diminished but, on the contrary, acquires a deeper significance. The position of the Council in this matter is made clear in a number of texts. To quote one passage from *Gaudium et Spes:*

> Christ, to be sure, gave his Church no proper mission in the political, economic or social order. The purpose which he set before her is a religious one. But out of this religious mission itself comes a function, a light and an energy which can serve to structure and consolidate the human community according to the divine law.[5]

The point is made more forcefully still:

> The earthly and heavenly city penetrate each other . . . the Church knows she can contribute greatly towards making the family of man and its history more human.[6]

I would fully concur, then, with the splendidly balanced preliminary remark of the north american task force to their commentary on the Contemporary Apostolic Ministry of the Society:

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[4] McBrien, Richard: *Church: the Continuing Quest* (New York, 1970), p 73.

[5] *Gaudium et Spes*, 42.

[6] *Gaudium et Spes*, 40.

> Accordingly, the Church must accept a responsibility not only to preach the word and administer the sacraments to its own members with a view to their salvation beyond the grave, but must seek to contribute to the full development of human persons in their life on this earth. The reform of political and social structures where this is required in the interests of the Kingdom of God lies within the scope of the Church's mission and is integral to the proclamation of the gospel. The Church, however, is not merely a humanitarian agency of social reform: it has a mission that is specified by its faith in Christ. In all its works it must directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly, proclaim and celebrate the Lordship of Jesus as the one in whom God is already establishing, and will at length fully establish, his Kingdom. A joyful and confident reliance on the Lord Jesus must characterize the work of the Church and therefore that of the Society of Jesus, in all its apostolates.

Words and deeds

Between the lines of all these citations there is an implication which might be expressed as follows. In recent centuries the word 'mission' evoked mainly, if not exclusively, the idea of preaching; today we are growing increasingly aware that words alone are not capable of the work we once expected them to do.

To say this is in no way to disparage the need for proclamation. More than ever before we are conscious of the urgent need to purify our vocabulary, to seek out ways of translating the gospel into language comprehensible to other cultures or sub-cultures than our own. But in order to be credible, words depend heavily on their counterpart, deeds. If deeds without words remain at best ambiguous, words ring hollow and fail to carry conviction without supportive action. Seemingly the most precise and accurate of our signs, words are also the most fragile and capricious. Ideally vehicles of truth and channels of communication, in practice they serve all too readily to conceal and deceive, as our own world has learnt from painful experience. Furthermore, words possess an inherent limitation arising from the fact that they are common property, and this alone makes them inadequate to reflect the uniqueness of the person. Hence the claim made by anthropologists that the greater part of human communication passes through non-verbal channels.

Modern insights such as these serve to confirm the re-affirmation by the Council of a truth that the biblical writers already knew. God, who 'out of the abundance of his love speaks to men as friends', does so through signs which both reveal and conceal his presence.

These signs are of two kinds:

> . . . deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them.[7]

A familiar scriptural illustration of this is provided by the gospel incident narrated by Matthew in which John the Baptist sends his disciples to pose the question to the Lord:

> 'Are you the one to come, or have we to wait for someone else?' Jesus answers: 'Go back and tell John what you hear and see: the blind see again, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is proclaimed to the poor, and happy is the man who does not lose faith in me'.[8]

To the 'hearing and seeing' of the gospel correspond the 'words and deeds'. The two signs are complementary, not antithetical; each is essential to the inner dynamism of the total sign, whether this be the Jesus of the gospels, or the Church as the 'epiphany' of Christ, showing him forth in her nature and mission. Hence, proclamation retains its urgency and primordial importance. As the decree *Ad Gentes* puts it:

> Wherever God opens a door of speech for proclaiming the mystery of Christ, there should be announced to all men with confidence and constancy the living God, and he whom he has sent for the salvation of all, Jesus Christ.[9]

Nevertheless, *for the very sake of making proclamation credible* it is imperative that the Church give increased attention to the other two tasks of her mission – community and service. For the Church's relationships, as for the individual's, what she is (or appears to be) is as decisive a factor as the things she has to say.

Approaching the unbeliever: new bearings

Against the background of these developments in the Church's self-understanding, the broad lines of a truly contemporary christian approach to the phenomenon of unbelief begin to emerge. First, in response to the invitation of the second Vatican Council and the special commission entrusted to us by Pope Paul, the Society of Jesus should consider atheism in all its forms as a challenge. These forms are various, and much has been written about the analysis of them contained in the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. But whatever its shape,

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[7] *Dei Verbum*, 2. [8] Mt 11, 2ff; cf Lk 7, 18–23. [9] *Ad Gentes*, 13.

atheism confronts us in the first instance with the task of examining our own conscience. As we know it today, it is a typical post-christian phenomenon, and we have to ask why it came about.

It is no help towards answering this question to brush aside the modern and nineteenth-century atheists' presentation of religion in general, and christianity in particular, as a caricature. Elements of caricature may well be present, even to a marked degree. But the question of the source of atheism – where the distorted picture comes from in the first place – still stands. That the explanation has much to do with the quality of christianity itself is now generally acknowledged; differences of opinion bear not so much on *whether* atheism has christian origins as whereabouts in christianity these are to be found. For some, the roots of the trouble lie in the strongly rationalist trends which bedevilled the catholic philosophy and theology in the past two centuries. I would suggest, however, that the basic scandal goes deeper, and may be traced to the cleavage in so-called christian lives between the two aspects of word and work. It is the division between the things the outsider hears and the things he sees that ultimately constitutes the credibility gap. And on this level, it is clear that the problem admits of no solution short of spiritual renewal in the fullest sense.

With regard to dialogue with the unbeliever, it is probably true to say that the militant and apologetic approaches once in vogue are disappearing fast. But it would be facile to infer from this that the comprehending, faith-inspired dialogue typified in the Council documents and in such encyclicals as *Ecclesiam Suam*, has as yet taken the place of the older attitudes in any profound sense. The point still needs to be emphazised that the Church's present positions are neither tactical nor diplomatic, but theological. In articles 13–16 of *Lumen Gentium*, six categories of persons are listed as in one way or another open to salvation, and therefore related in some sense to the People of God, to the Kingdom. Of these, four have explicit knowledge and acceptance of Christ as Saviour. That these people cannot be saved without some kind of conversion (and this is a new insight) throws into fresh relief the double aspect of faith; the cognitive or noetic (the aspect of knowledge and the admission of truths), and the attitudinal aspect (conversion, submission of the heart). No catholic would claim that it is the mere knowledge of truths that is vital for salvation. However correct or complete this knowledge may be, it can never suffice for salvation. Only submission to God, or a sincere concern for neighbour containing some stirrings of a self-transcend-

ing and open love, enables a man to live eternally. It is a fact, though one which the atheist may sincerely deny, that in him, too, self-transcending love is somehow patterned after Christ, and in it Christ's grace is operative. In the gospel account of the Last Judgment, it is clear that the blessed were not explicitly aware that Christ was present when they helped their fellow men. The point is decisive: it is not what people say and think, but what they are and do that is the basis of judgment.

Hence the christian is not merely permitted but positively urged to join the atheists in their work and projects, in whatever activity their deepest convictions are embodied and put into practice. The christian who is rooted in Christ, the man *par excellence*, should never be afraid to be too human. Rather, he can never be human enough. Consequently, the approach to the post-christian, as to the pre-christian, cannot be to start from the things which divide and separate us. In our relationships with the pre-christian we have come to see this principle as axiomatic. In his case, we have learned to build on the foundations of what unites us: the real values, of whatever kind, which can be shared. We must learn to approach the post-christian, too, with the same sense of acceptance and discovery, in the search for a common understanding and action. Only in those terms can we hope for the day when he will reach the end of his own road only to find it opening onto another, the open-ended hope which not only answers the deepest and widest yearnings of man but 'infinitely surpasses them all'.[10]

In conclusion, then, when we reflect on our proclamation, our very witness to the faith we hold, we are brought to recognize that the very least we can do (which is also the best) is to purify our signs. Our prime constant concern must be the blending of our words and deeds into a single credible identity. Faith needs not to be defended – it has been defended too intransigently and for too long already – but to be lived in the conviction that even for the unbeliever only love selfless and disinterested, is ultimately credible. This love is nothing less than the living out of the law which the Spirit writes on our hearts, as Ignatius reminds us at the very outset of the Constitutions; and its flame must be kept burning even when the weight of unbelief threatens to dull or even to quench it. Or, as Fr Pedro Arrupe once put it in a lecture he gave us as scholastics: 'In a highly technical, secularized society, keep your fire burning under the ashes'.

[10] *Ad Gentes*, 13.