THE PLACE OF MISSION

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IF WE ENVISAGE THE PLACE WHERE God lives as a heaven of fluffy clouds, the chances are that God will have little place in our daily lives. If the place which we give to the poor within our imagination is the remote jungle of a foreign country, they will not impinge on our lives. For the way we imagine places affects the importance we give to what we place in them. If our image of place is remote or unattractive, we shall have little time for what we have placed there.

So my article about the place of mission will begin by asking what place we give it in our imagination. Then I shall reflect on the reasons why our image of place sometimes possesses, and sometimes lacks, the power to move us to enthusiasm and action. That will lead me to examine the qualities of the Ignatian understanding of mission.

The image of mission to which I often return is one of a church service within which Australian Jesuits used formally to be sent to our Indian mission. It was held at evening in a large Jesuit parish church. The missionaries were easily distinguished because they wore white cassocks, and at the climax of the ceremony were presented with mission crosses. This ritual followed a sermon given by the Jesuit Provincial, in which he usually emphasized the generosity of the young missionaries, the lifetime commitment which was involved, the qualities of the place to which they were being sent, and the depth of our Australian commitment to it. Indeed we knew this part of India as 'the Australian region'. The service usually finished with a ringing motet on the text, 'Going therefore teach ye all nations . . .'

Thirty years ago this scene would have been familiar to religious of many congregations and countries. It echoed representations of the sending of earlier missionaries to the place where they preached the gospel. Paintings indicated that this, in broad outline, was how Gregory sent Augustine to England, and Ignatius sent Francis Xavier to the 'Indies'.

The sense of place embodied in this image of the mission farewell is complex. For it suggests a journey between two places. The place from which this journey of mission begins is a church in which all the participants are ceremonially dressed. In the traditional paintings, too, Gregory and Augustine are normally represented in a church, wearing full episcopal dress. The formality and splendour of the church setting,

too, marks off the place of sending as richly endowed in faith and other resources.

The country to which the missionaries are sent is also represented in the image, although more indirectly. It was evoked in the sermon, when the history of the mission and the rigours and activities which awaited the missionaries were described. It was usually depicted as a strange land, less well endowed in every respect than the country from which the missionary went. In paintings, the place to which the missionary was sent was often represented by forest scenes in which the missionary was busy baptizing oddly dressed people.

The sense of place evoked by the mission farewell, however, was even more complex than this description suggests. For this latest sending was laid upon the places in the gospels where Jesus sent out the disciples and where the Father sent Jesus. These stories were also commonly evoked in the sermon for the occasion and in the motets. They suggested the purpose of the journey: to preach the gospel, baptize and build the Church. So the place of mission was composed by the story of Jesus' life and the story of contemporary mission, as an image on an overhead projector can be composed by two transparencies, each bearing part of the picture.

This was how I represented the place of mission in my early years. It was then a powerful image, which could attract generous and adventurous young people to missionary orders, to work as lay missionaries, or to a lifetime of commitment to the foreign missions. For many it remains a powerful image today. But for many other people it now has a slightly faded and discredited air. It is an old-fashioned place, which one may respect as the home of another generation or of unworldly souls, but which makes no claim on one's life. The mission localized in this place is a thing of the past.

We may wonder how it is that the same image of the place of mission can be powerful, energizing and attractive to one group of people, while to others it is alienating or lifeless. The core of any genuine and powerful image of Christian mission, I believe, is the tension or paradox by which the place of sending and the place of arrival are linked.

In these stories the place and community from which people are sent are precarious and lie on the edge of society. Jesus' mission moves towards its climax when, with a raggle-taggle group of frightened disciples, he sets out for Jerusalem from the backblocks of Galilee. He has been rejected by his own people. He follows his mission without having secured his base. Similarly, Paul is sent to the Gentiles by an obscure Jewish sect which lives precariously even in this remote outpost

of empire. The place from which mission begins is not one in which the missionary feels at home. It is a precarious place.

If Jesus and Paul leave from precarious and marginal places, their destinations are places of power which form the centre of their world. Jesus goes to Jerusalem and Paul goes to Rome. These are the places where the struggle between the God whom they preach and idols, between good and evil, is fought decisively. What is done there is decisive for people's lives, and it is there that the Good News must be preached. These are fearful places, places of temptation, places of battle. In the Apocalypse, Rome is the home of the beast, the scarlet woman, and the dragon. It is the bastion of power and of opposition to the gospel.

When missionaries go from the precarious margins of society to its dangerous centre, the paradox continues. For they do not find a home with the leaders of society but with those who live on its margins. Paul, the wanderer, finds himself at home in the cities of the empire among people who are marginal in society. Jesus finds support among the people when he enters Jerusalem, but not among the religious leaders.

Thus in the scriptures the places touched by mission always have a paradoxical character. This gives the stories of mission their attractiveness and their power. Before turning to more modern examples, I would like to examine briefly an episode which has become normative for the Jesuit sense of mission. This is Ignatius' vision at La Storta, which occurred at a critical time for Ignatius and his companions.

In October 1537, Ignatius and his friends had come together after failing to fulfil their plan of going to Jerusalem. In the course of the year they had met in Venice, and most except Ignatius had been ordained as priests during the year. Then they scattered through the cities of Italy, with Ignatius, Peter Faber and James Lainez to go to Rome. Ignatius had declined to go there earlier because he had powerful enemies there. On this journey, they stopped at a chapel where Ignatius prayed and had his celebrated vision. In his *Autobiography* he gives an account of this vision and of the circumstances preceding it, of which I shall give an abbreviated version.

> It fell to the pilgrim to go with Faber and Lainez to Vicenza. There they found a certain house outside the city, which had neither doors nor windows. They stayed in it, sleeping on a little bit of straw that they had brought. Two of them always went out to seek alms in the city twice a day, but they got so little that could hardly sustain themselves. They usually ate a little toasted bread when they had it, and the one who remained at home took care to toast it. In this way they spent forty days not attending to anything other than prayer.

> After the forty days Master Jean Codure arrived, and all four decided to begin to preach . . . Their preaching caused much talk in the city, and many persons were moved with devotion, and they received in great abundance the necessities for their bodily welfare . . .
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> At last, at the end of the year, as they had not found passage, they decided to go to Rome, even the pilgrim, because on the occasion when the companions had gone, those two about whom he had doubts had shown themselves to be very kind . . .
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> After he became a priest he had decided to spend a year without saying mass, preparing himself and begging Our Lady to deign to place him with her Son. One day, while still a few miles from Rome, he was praying in a church and experienced such a change in his soul and saw so clearly that God the Father had placed him with his Son Christ that his mind could not doubt that God the Father had indeed placed him with his Son.
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> After arriving at Rome he told the companions that he saw that the windows there were closed, meaning that they would have to meet many contradictions. He also said, 'it is necessary that we be very careful of ourselves and that we not enter into conversations with women unless they are prominent'.

In this story, the place from which Ignatius and his companions leave to go to Rome is a deserted house on the edge of a foreign town where they live in poverty. Rome, their destination, is a fearful place, the centre of the Church where the future of Ignatius' own mission to work for the good of souls and the reform of the Church would be decided. It was a powerful place, where the battle between good and evil was critical, and for that reason for Ignatius and his companions it was a dangerous place. It was natural in this context that on his arrival in Rome Ignatius should go to the hospitals and the places where the poor lived. There with the marginalized he could be at home in the powerful centre.

The tension in Ignatius' journey is heightened by the way in which he measures it continually against the story of Jesus. The excerpt which I have quoted displays marked similarities with Jesus' story as it is narrated in the Synoptic Gospels. The forty days spent in prayer and fasting by Ignatius and his friends recall Jesus' forty days in the desert. Afterwards they, like Jesus, begin preaching and receive a good hearing. Their preaching is followed by the vision and the journey to Rome, which recall Jesus' transfiguration and journey to Jerusalem. In the Synoptic account of the transfiguration, Jesus' disciples (and implicitly the readers of the Gospel) receive a vision of Jesus in glory, which prepares them for the coming journey to Jerusalem where he will die.

In his vision, Ignatius finds confirmation of a mission which he had desired. His mission is also given a precise shape, as he is placed with

Jesus as a servant, and is to follow Jesus in suffering and toil. He now follows Jesus confidently to the dangerous centre, which he had once identified with Jerusalem and now recognizes to be Rome. It is to be a place of many contradictions.

It is perhaps significant that in his elaboration of the vision of La Storta, Ribadaneyra, his first biographer, develops more dramatically the parallel with the transfiguration. Ignatius' vision is now accompanied by a blinding inner light, and he is made to speak of possible opposition in Rome in terms of crucifixion or death on the rack. In Ribadaneyra's hands, too, the story is given an explicitly wider reference to Ignatius' companions. All these details evoke more vividly the dramatic context of the transfiguration. While almost certainly Ribadaneyra, like Ignatius, was unconscious of the parallels with the transfiguration story, the shaping of the narrative indicates how naturally both men aligned stories of mission to Jesus' story.

The vision of La Storta quickly assumed great importance in the Society of Jesus. In the frequent debates and perplexities about Jesuit identity and mission, it was taken to embody the authentic Ignatian vision. It explained clearly why the Society was named after Jesus; it made the path of humble service central to Jesuit identity; it grounded the character of the Society in a vision of Jesus.

The story of La Storta also suggests the broader qualities that any Ignatian understanding of mission should have. It is based on the following of Jesus, and so has the patterns of the stories of the Gospels. It therefore embodies a tension between the place from which we leave and the places to which we go. Mission goes out from a precarious place and not from a base which we have carefully shored up. It goes to a powerful and even intimidating place where decisions that affect the welfare and salvation of human beings are taken. Because this is a place of power, it is also a place where the battle between good and evil is critically fought.

And finally, those who go on mission seek and unexpectedly find a home among those who are marginal in the central place to which they go. Because they go empty-handed, they have nowhere else to go.

The tensions and paradoxes involved in mission can be seen in the stories of the early Jesuits. Indeed Jerome Nadal, one of Ignatius' companions, defined the characteristic Jesuit home as the journey.

The places from which Jesuits were sent on mission were often much more precarious than they appear today. In Reformation Europe, Rome was much weaker and less reputable than we may imagine it, and Europe itself was in mortal fear of Islam. Moreover, whatever the power

of their place that sent them, foreign missionaries left their power when they boarded the boat. They travelled sea-sick, and if they arrived – 500 out of 1,500 Jesuits sent to China died on the way – they arrived out of place. Other missionaries, like those of the Elizabethan Jesuits to England, left a precarious community of *émigrés* and exiles.

The places to which people went on mission were characteristically places of power and danger. Ignatius had dreamed of Jerusalem, symbolically a centre both of Islam and of Christianity. His thoughts switched to Ethiopia, the kingdom of Prester John. When Francis Xavier arrived in India to care for the converts of the Fishery Coast, he soon set his sights on the powerful kingdom of China, which continued to exercise its fascination over the early Jesuits. Ricci, Acquaviva and others went to the places which had power over human lives. These places were the more formidable to those who saw their task as setting the true faith in opposition to idolatry which was inspired by the devil. These were not only strange civilizations but centres of the devil's legions.

Within Europe, the London to which John Gerard and others went was clearly a place of power and danger. But so in more hidden ways was Trent, where the reform of the Church was at stake, and also the universities of Europe where the struggle for faith was fought.

Finally, when they went on mission Jesuits characteristically went to exiles in these places of power. So Lainez and Salmeron worked at the Council of Trent, but spent their spare time working in the hospital and teaching children. These chose their home. Others had the choice made for them. One of the most moving stories of early Jesuit missionaries was that of Bartolomeo Bergoncio, who was sent from Goa as Rector of the College at Colombo to sort out problems within the community. He was captured by the King of Kandy before his arrival, and spent the rest of his life as a captive in Kandy. Robert Knox, an English sailor, who also spent almost twenty years imprisoned in Kandy before escaping, wrote of him:

> I never knew anyone who inclined to the ways of the heathen, except for one old priest named Padre Vergonse, a Genoez born, and of the Jesuits Order, who would go to the temples and eat with the weavers and other ordinary people of the sacrifices offered to the idols; but with this apology for himself, that he eat it as common meat, and as God's creature, and that it was never the worse for their superstition that had past upon it. But however this may reflect upon the Father, another thing may be related for his honour . . . The King one day sent for Vergonse, and asked him if it would not be better for him to lay aside his

> old coat and cap, and to do as the other two priests had done, and receive honours from him. He replied to the King, that he boasted more in that old habit and in the name of Jesus, than in all the honour that he could do him. And so refused the King's honour.

Within the Ignatian tradition, then, the places from which mission begins and where it goes are related to one another with considerable tension. While the examples I have given are taken from Jesuit life, the same qualities are found even more notably in lay appropriation of Ignatian spirituality. Tension and paradox are less easy to avoid in lay mission, because there is less opportunity to see and use the Church as a strong base. We are therefore inevitably confronted with the fragility of our personal centres.

The tension and paradox in these images of mission correspond to the stories of the Gospel. As images grow old, however, they lose tension. The loss of paradox is patent in many pictures and stories of missionaries being sent out, including the sending of Augustine by Gregory. Gregory and Augustine, for example, wear splendid vestments, sit with assured power in magnificent churches, and are painted in the pride of their male leadership. They are men fully at home in this world, who enact in it the actions of the glorified Jesus sending out his disciples at the end of Matthew's Gospel.

On the other hand, the place to which they go is depicted as poor, uncultivated and uncivilized. They are scantily dressed, are presented as a crowd of individuals rather than as persons, include women, and are baptized by the larger than life missionary in forest settings, with no evidence of village or culture. While Gregory may have been insistent that the people to whom he sent Augustine were *Angeli* rather than *Angli*, the paintings left no doubt that they were pretty primitive. But they are blessed by the arrival of the missionary, who is presented as beginning to build a little basilica, just like the ones in Rome.

Thus, the movement entailed in mission is from centre to periphery, from power and high culture to an isolated, poor and uncivilized group of people. Once missionary work became safer and was no longer seen dramatically as despoiling the devil's lair, it could easily be understood as bringing the light and civilization of Europe to those who live in uncultivated darkness at the margins of the world. It was sometimes celebrated, more often rejected, as spiritual colonialism.

If we live by this image of mission, we shall conceive of ourselves as being, as well as bringing, a great gift to the people to whom we go. We shall find a home among the people to whom we go only to the extent to which they become like us. Indeed, if the people fail to recognize us and

our culture as gifts, we may even come to resent them. They have let us down.

If we hold this view, too, we may be surprised, even shocked, by the suggestion that Christians from churches in underdeveloped nations leave their own cultures to come to us as missionaries. The thought is repugnant because to receive missionaries suggests that we are somehow uncivilized and marginal.

The fact that some images and stories of mission can possess or be denuded of tension suggests that we should examine the evangelical credentials of any form of mission commended to us. In both Latin America and in the developed world, for example, it has been suggested that the Church should emphasize above all the evangelization of culture. To evaluate such a proposal, we should ask whether in each region the paradox of the gospel is maintained.

Sometimes this form of mission is identified with a disciplined church, united under strong episcopal leadership, meeting the challenge of atheism within the national culture. If we had to imagine the place of this mission, it would be that of clerically and religiously garbed leaders despatching loyal Catholics to the media and places of influence to ensure that they respect the faith and moral standards of the nation.

In much of Latin America this image is unattractive because it depicts mission as going out from a secure place to the fringes. Within Catholic cultures it is a safe move to focus upon secularization, because the powerful centre is occupied by riches and the institutions which safeguard their unjust distribution and the degradation of the poor. If priority is given to secularization, the gospel will not be preached in the dangerous centre of wealth and power, where good and evil meet and where the decisions that affect people's salvation are taken.

In Latin America, it is the base communities that give mission its proper place. They go out from a precarious people where their faith has made them exiles and widows, to the capitals where they find with other exiles a God of freedom. The numbers in which they have been murdered indicates that in their societies they have entered the dangerous and proper place.

So in Latin America any proposal to evangelize culture while bypassing the option for the poor lacks the paradoxical element central within mission. But in western societies the same proposal to go first into the secular world of culture may well embody a proper form of mission. For here – in the media, universities and political centres – the decisions which affect people's salvation are taken. Moreover, to enter this place is fearful because the Church is a precarious starting point for the journey.

In the eyes of this world the Church is often seen as the natural home of people who oppress women and gays, abuse children, infringe on human freedom, stand in the way of meeting challenges like population, and take comfort in superstition. Hardly an assured base from which to advance!

Thus to go first to evangelize culture may be a proper form of mission in some circunstances but not in others. It is the absence or presence of paradox that makes all the difference. The same is true of other contemporary forms of mission. To go from door to door, for example, and form small, devoted groups of Christians within an area is evangelical when we go out from small and beleaguered congregations in a milieu hostile to us and find there a home with exiles within that milieu. It is not so when a powerful organization sends out its representatives to target the weakest members of a fragmented society. The tension that is present in the first place of mission is lacking in the second.

I began this article with an image of place: the mission farewell of thirty years ago. This year, a similar mission farewell took place in the same inner-city church. This ceremony, too, celebrated the sending of Jesuits to different parts of Asia. In thirty years, though, much has changed. Then the church was the centre of a strong working-class parish. Now it is marginal in a suburb of trendy re-development.

Now the Australians, who thirty years ago enjoyed their relative wealth unreflectively in the midst of poor Asian societies, worry about their children's future. This will depend largely on the economies and policies of the Asian Economic Tigers.

At the ceremony, Laotian children played near the sanctuary while Vietnamese refugee families supplied spring rolls for supper. Those being sent out spoke of how the gospel had come alive for them among the people to whom they were being sent. These people were the refugees and the marginalized. That is the natural place to find a home when you leave a precarious place to make an assault on newly privileged centres.

In this ceremony mission appeared to have reoccupied its proper, and dare I say, Ignatian place.