# MISSION AND THE EARLY JESUITS

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THE WORD 'MISSION' IS POPULAR today. Schools, humanitarian institutions and sometimes even businesses use it to designate what they are about. They have a 'mission'. They issue 'mission statements', and they ask their clientele to judge them (and contribute funds) according to their success in living up to them. This secular usage derives ultimately from the ecclesiastical, where the term is of more venerable vintage. The apostles spread the gospel on their 'missionary' journeys. Through the centuries 'missionaries' established 'missions'. Until quite recently preachers preached 'missions'. Today 'missioning' ceremonies send ministers on their way – even if sometimes not much farther than across the street. We can hardly speak of Christianity without using the word.

It comes as a surprise, therefore, to learn that the term was generally not used in our contemporary sense until the sixteenth century.[1] Instead of missions and missionaries, the traditional expressions were 'propagating the faith' or 'journeying to the infidel'. Despite the Vulgate's employment of various forms like *missus* and *missio* in connection with the apostles and other early disciples of Jesus, during the Middle Ages those forms were used almost exclusively for the 'missions' internal to the Blessed Trinity. They were not applied to efforts at evangelization.

The Jesuits were among the first to inaugurate the new usage and were the group initially perhaps most responsible for its widespread propagation. In the first official document of the order, submitted to Pope Paul III and incorporated by him in the bull of approval *Regimini militantis ecclesiae* of 1540, the first Jesuits spoke of this aspect of their goals as 'propagation of the faith', but later in the document used 'missions' in that same regard. In subsequent years in their correspondence among themselves, they employed 'mission', 'journey' and 'pilgrimage' almost as synonyms to designate travel for the sake of ministry.[2]

The Jesuit *Constitutions* were substantially completed by Ignatius with the help of his secretary Juan de Polanco about a decade after Paul III's bull of approbation. Part Seven concerned 'the distribution of members in the vineyard of the Lord'. In this Part 'missioned' (being sent) emerged with prominence, and referred both to the pope or to the

superior general of the order. The term was about the same time further codified in the formula for the famous 'Fourth Vow' that the fully professed pronounced, which was specified as being 'about missions' (*circa missiones*). It was by now well on its way within the Society of Jesus to acquiring its contemporary meaning.

What accounts for this shift in vocabulary in the sixteenth century? Such shifts in ways of speaking usually indicate deeper shifts in culture, deeper shifts in awareness and sensibilities, and they therefore do not admit facile or fully satisfactory explanations. Historians can simply point to certain congruences, nothing more.

In this case, the great voyages of discovery of the late fifteenth century form the backdrop, but they do not principally account for the change. We do better, I believe, to look at the transformation of the ideal of the 'apostolic life' (*vita apostolica*) that already had such a long history in Christianity. The ideal had taken on new significance from about the twelfth century onwards as different individuals and groups began to break with the monastic ideal of Christian perfection. Ideas about what 'the life of the apostles' was like varied considerably, due in large measure to the unsophisticated historical sense that operated in the Middle Ages. By the fourteenth century the 'Spiritual Franciscans', for instance, thought that the apostolic life consisted essentially in absolute poverty, and they felt the wrath of the Holy See for their obstinacy in that conviction. In the opening decade of the sixteenth century Giles of Viterbo, Prior General of the Order of Hermits of St Augustine, envisioned the apostles as living like hermits, since that was supposedly the ancient pattern of life followed by members of his order.

But at the very time Giles lived and wrote, the textual and philological labours of scholars like Erasmus and other humanists enabled the discovery of an historically more objective picture of the early Church and engendered a greater sensitivity to the vocabulary of the New Testament. The word 'apostolic' continued to be variously interpreted, as for instance a pipeline of authority from the original Twelve to later bishops and popes. But now when people of some education wanted to be 'apostolic' by *imitating* the apostles, they almost perforce had to reckon with 'being sent' to do ministry.

Like so many Christians of their generation, the early Jesuits were inspired by a sense of the immediacy of the New Testament and by the direct relevance of biblical realities and events for their own lives and their age. In this appreciation the Spiritual Exercises schooled them in an especially vivid way. Ignatius began to engage in ministry within a few months after his conversion in 1521, and he inspired his later disciples with a similar desire 'to help souls'.

More to the point, he early set out on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, where he in fact wanted to remain in order 'to help souls', as he recalled in his *Autobiography*. When at Paris in 1534 he and his companions vowed to head for ministry to the same city, they were 'journeying to the infidel'. They thus took a vow to be missionaries, although the word itself was not in their vocabulary at that time. Within a few years, however, they had begun to use *missio* to describe this aspect of their lives, influenced in that regard certainly by their keen desire to be faithful disciples of Jesus as indicated in the meditations in the *Exercises* on the Kingdom of Christ and the Two Standards, but probably also by the humanistic reappropriation of the vocabulary of the New Testament.

Early on they became quite specific about how their ministry was modelled on the 'apostolic' pattern. They saw it fundamentally outlined at Jesus' commissioning of the Twelve in the tenth chapter of Matthew and the ninth chapter of Luke: 'And he called the twelve together . . . and sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal. And he said to them, "Take nothing for your journey".'

For the Jesuits the pattern indicated in those passages consisted of four essential components: first, seeking out persons in need, by *being sent* for this task in at least some general way by their superiors; second, *preaching* the Good News by word and deed; third, *healing* the soul through confession and other means but also alleviating physical and material ills, as indicated by the so-called corporal works of mercy; fourth, doing all these things *without seeking financial recompense.*[3]

In 1552 Ignatius commissioned Jerónimo Nadal to promulgate and explain the recently completed *Constitutions* to Jesuit communities in Sicily and then in Spain and Portugal. This was the first of Nadal's many journeys throughout Europe to tell Jesuits about the organization they had joined and to inform them about the nature of their vocation. Ignatius could hardly have made a better choice, for Nadal was not only a faithful communicator of his ideas about the Society but also had gifts of eloquence and imagination that Ignatius lacked.

Nadal saw the 'apostolic' pattern as the essential definition of what it meant to be a Jesuit, in which 'being sent' (being 'missioned') or 'being on journey or pilgrimage for ministry' was the key component. He put the matter succinctly in a passage in his spiritual journal:

> Our vocation is similar to the vocation and training of the apostles: first, we come to know the Society, and then we follow; we are instructed; we receive our commission to be sent [on ministry]; we are sent; we exercise our ministry; we are prepared to die for Christ in fulfilling those ministries.[4]

'Apostolic' – once again we come back to words. Today Catholics use 'apostolic' and 'apostolate' as simple synonyms for ministry. 'She is a very apostolic person' means that the person is fervent in ministry. This watered-down usage makes it difficult for us to recover the freshness, the dynamism, and the sense of venture and adventure that Nadal and other early Jesuits felt when they identified their task with the apostles' and saw themselves as similarly 'sent out' from safe havens – sent out either physically or in some metaphorical sense by beginning new and untried enterprises.

For them 'apostolic' of course meant ministry, but not just *any* ministry. After Jesus himself, Paul was their ultimate model. As Nadal said, 'Paul signifies for us our ministry'.[5] Suggested in that identification was the intense zeal of Paul that knew no limits in the hardship and suffering it was willing to undergo, but there was more to it than that. It also meant going forth and seeking the lost sheep, not waiting for them on the doorsteps of the church. It meant being missionaries. Nothing was more fundamental to the original inspiration of the Society of Jesus.

As we know, however, in less than a decade the Jesuits began to found and staff schools, so that this essentially missionary organization soon became in fact also the first 'teaching order' in the history of the Catholic Church. Schools drastically curtailed the mobility of many members of the Society, for Ignatius and other superiors soon learned that, if these institutions were to succeed, they had to have a certain stability in the teachers and administrators assigned to them. To some extent the ordinary pattern of life originally envisioned for the Jesuit seems to have been a continuing series of short-term 'missionary' assignments, but with the schools that pattern suffered for most Jesuits a mortal blow.

But the broader ideal survived in at least two ways. First, the schools became an instrument of ministry that the Jesuits carried with them as they set out to new places either in Europe or elsewhere, and in that way the geographic sense of 'mission' continued to be fulfilled. Second, the schools were themselves a great innovation for a religious order, and hence can be understood as going out to meet a challenge rather than sitting passively on the sidelines. Constitutive of the idea of 'mission' was 'seeking out', as Paul had done. The schools were simply one more instance of the inventive proliferation of new ministries in the sixteenth century that the Jesuits promoted and exemplified – signalling a great break with the highly formalized and ritualized service offered by the local clergy. This was all part of being 'apostolic'.

This is of course a more metaphorical interpretation of the Jesuits' missionary and apostolic character, but it is not far-fetched. There were

in the sixteenth century two groups whom the Jesuits superficially resembled but whom they knew they differed from in important ways. The first was 'monks' who, although they pronounced vows of poverty, chastity and obedience like the Jesuits, were bound by a vow of stability. Even the mendicant friars were bound to a certain place many times a day by the obligation of communal recitation of the liturgical hours.

The second group was the diocesan clergy. These priests were also 'local' like the monks, even if they had no vow of stability. Moreover, although they of course performed works of ministry according to the office they held, it was not 'apostolic' ministry. That is to say, it was ministry in the local situation according to established patterns and for an established 'clientele'. Theirs was not to seek out but to care for those already in the fold, and to do so after the time-honoured rhythms of ritual and sacrament.[6]

There were many reasons why the Jesuits needed to make clear that they were not ministers of this kind, not least of which were the benefices invariably attached to these offices. But surely among the most important was the different *style* of ministry they considered proper to themselves – an 'apostolic' ministry, a 'missionary' ministry. This was a ministry 'on the move' not only physically and geographically but also in the other sense I have described.

As by now should be clear, no treatment of 'mission and the early Jesuits' would be complete without some comment on the 'Fourth Vow'. The formula, as given in the *Constitutions*, runs as follows:

> I, [name], make profession, and I promise to Almighty God . . . poverty, chastity, and obedience; . . . I further promise a special obedience to the sovereign pontiff in regard to missions, according to the same apostolic letters and the Constitutions.[7]

Seldom in the history of religious life has something so central to an order's identity been so badly misunderstood. The vow is often referred to as the Jesuits' 'vow to the pope'. This elliptical manner of speaking is misleading in the extreme for it seems to indicate that the vow is made not to God but to a human being. 'Vow to obey the pope' is in that regard an improvement, but in every other way misses the point by misconstruing what the vow is all about. The vow does not concern the pope; it concerns 'missions', as the formula clearly states. The pope of course figures in the vow, but, as these 'missions' were interpreted in the Jesuit *Constitutions*, the superior general of the Society also had a similar authority 'to send' members.[8]

Ignatius once referred to the vow as the 'beginning and principal foundation' of the Society.[9] It was the 'beginning' because he and his

companions had pronounced its equivalent in Paris in 1534 as the fall-back alternative to their vow to go to Jerusalem. It was the 'principal foundation' because it concerned what was utterly central to the Jesuit calling – 'apostolic' ministry.

At the time when Ignatius, Nadal and others were trying to explain to new members of the Society and to outsiders what this vow meant, the vocabulary that would have best hit the nail on the head was in only an inchoate stage of development. The word they needed was 'missionary', for it was essentially a vow to be a missionary, a vow to travel for the sake of ministry. If the vow of stability made the man a monk, then this vow of mobility – a vow of readiness to travel anywhere in the world for 'the help of souls' – made the man a Jesuit. It was thus a most powerful symbol of the essence of the Jesuit vocation and of how that vocation broke with the monastic tradition. The irony that pronouncing it came to be restricted to only the solemnly professed members could hardly be greater.

Nadal provided the clearest and most eloquent articulations of what the vow symbolized, in which the evangelizing Jesus and, at least implicitly, the evangelizing Paul acted as the ultimate models. As I pointed out earlier, for Nadal as for his confrères, 'missions' and 'journeying for ministry' and sometimes even 'pilgrimage' were synonymous. In his exhortations to Jesuit communities he described such missions and journeys as 'the principal and most characteristic "dwelling"' for the Jesuit, as their 'most glorious and longed-for "house"'.

One of his rhetorically most powerful statements is the following:

> [Journey] is altogether the most ample 'place' and reaches as far as the globe itself. For wherever they can be sent in ministry to bring help to souls, that is the most glorious and longed-for 'house' for these theologians. For they know the goal set before them: to procure the salvation and perfection of all women and men. They understand that they are to that end bound by that Fourth Vow to the supreme pontiff: that they might go on these universal missions for the good of souls by his command, which by divine decree extends throughout the whole church. They realize that they cannot build or acquire enough houses to be able from nearby to run out to the combat. Since this is the case, they consider that they are in their most peaceful and pleasant house when they are constantly on the move, when they travel throughout the earth, when they have no place to call their own, when they are always in need, always in want – only let them strive in some small way to imitate Christ Jesus, who had nowhere on which to lay his head and who spent all his years of preaching in journey.[10]

Even if the vow is about ministry (indeed, a certain *kind* of ministry!), the pope is prominent in it. This raises the question of the ecclesiological framework of the early Jesuits' idea of mission, an obviously crucial aspect of it. It is an extremely complex and relatively unstudied subject, and most of what has been written about it has been methodologically narrow. There is no denying the fact, however, that the early Jesuits tended to ascribe to the papacy greater authority in certain areas than some of their Catholic contemporaries. This has led to the incorrect impression that they operated out of a basically 'institutional', even hierarchical, model of the Church.

Those elements surely were present in their understanding, but did not dominate it. Their most pervasive metaphor for where their 'missions' were exercised was 'the vineyard of the Lord'. The metaphor is richly suggestive. In the first place, it indicates a fundamentally *pastoral* ecclesiology. It indicates an *outgoing* ecclesiology. Even more intriguing, it indicates *fuzzy lines of demarcation*, for surely included in the 'vineyard' were infidels, heretics, schismatics and pagans – for it was often to these people that the Jesuits were sent. Being missioned for the vineyard of the Lord did not necessarily mean being sent to the people already in the pews! Moreover, 'being missioned' always needs to be understood in its wider meaning of journey (physical or metaphorical) for ministry – whether one is explicitly acting under commission or not.

Ignatian and Jesuit spirituality are often described as apostolic. In this article I have tried to explore this apostolic character by an examination of mission, an inseparably related reality. I have tried to portray how vivid these realities were for the early Jesuits, as indicated by their freshness in the Jesuits' vocabulary. The words themselves suggested venture and openness to whatever exists 'out there' – in the vast vineyard of the Lord.

## NOTES

[1] See F. Bourdeau, 'Le vocabulaire de la mission', *Parole et mission* vol 3 (1960), pp 9–27, and Adriano Prosperi, 'L'Europa cristiana e il mondo: alle origini dell'idea di missione', *Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica* no 2 (1992), pp 189–220.

[2] See Mario Scaduto, 'La strada e i primi gesuiti', *Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu* vol 40 (1971), pp 323–90, and John Olin, 'The idea of pilgrimage in the experience of Ignatius Loyola', *Church History* vol 48 (1979), pp 387–97.

[3] See my *The first Jesuits* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), especially pp 84–90.

[4] See Jerónimo Nadal, *Orationis observationes*, ed Miguel Nicolau (Rome, 1964), no 379.

[5] *Ibid.*, no 414.

[6] See my 'Priesthood, ministry and religious life: some historical and historiographical considerations', *Theological Studies* vol 49 (1988), pp 223–57.

[7] *Constitutions*, no 527. See my 'The fourth vow in its Ignatian context: a historical study', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* vol 15, no 1 (January 1983).
[8] See *Constitutions* nos 618–632.
[9] See my *The first Jesuits*, pp 298–301.
[10] See my 'To travel to any part of the world: Jerónimo Nadal and the Jesuit vocation', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* vol 16, no 2 (March 1984), especially pp 6–8.