

Contemporary Concepts of Mission¹

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It is a little late to speak of merely polarized or dichotomous views of mission. Fr. Ponsi identifies at least 5 current approaches to conceptualizing the Church's missionary task. He objectively describes these diverse models in terms of the socio-cultural experience of the proponents, their biblical emphases and theological assumptions, their goals, and their resultant strategies. He thus lays a helpful base for continuing the current debate with, hopefully, less heat and more light.

THERE MIGHT have been beautiful days when all the missionaries all over the world claimed to be engaged in basically the same work, guided by similar motivations and strategies. In today's church such a homogeneity of the missionary enterprise can no longer be assumed. On the contrary, at least five clearly distinguishable ways of articulating the concept of mission have crystalized and are espoused by different groups of missionaries: mission as evangelization, mission as liberation, mission as mutual assistance of local churches, mission as Church, and mission as fulfillment.

These "models" of mission can be logically identified in specific dimensions. Such dimensions were introduced after the sacred/secular and this-worldly/other-worldly dichotomies proved to be inadequate as a logical way to account for the five interpretations of mission. These dimensions are:

1. The socio-cultural experience of the proponents of the specific model.
2. The scriptural type or passage according to which they cast

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and articulate their missionary experience, and the theological assumptions on which this “missiologizing” is done.

3. The goals they identify for the missionary activity.

4. The strategy they suggest or imply.

A word of clarification is in order; my effort is strictly descriptive. Therefore, I will not try to explain why certain people choose a specific model rather than another one, nor what the implications of this choice might be for the individual churches or societies. Such a sociological analysis of mission ideology is beyond the scope of this paper. So also is any evaluation of the various models. It is quite possible that the number of these models in the real world of lived Christian commitment will turn out to be somewhat larger.

Mission as Evangelization

This first model has prevailed through the centuries as the official interpretation of mission (Henry 1962; Ohm 1962; Grasso 1972; Pope Paul 1976). Solidly organized ecclesial communities have perceived and continue to perceive as addressed to them Christ’s command:

Go out to the whole world; proclaim the Good News to all creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; he who does not believe will be condemned (Mk 16:15-16; Mt 28:16-20).

In their minds, there is no doubt that conscious faith must be present for salvation to take place, and “. . . faith comes from what is preached, and what is preached comes from the Word of Christ” (Rm 10:17). Hence, there is no substitute for evangelization that makes a direct confrontation between Christ and every human being possible. This sincere concern for the eternal salvation of people outside the visible boundaries of the Church was, and continues to be, one of the main motivating forces for evangelistic work, regardless of the alleged religious imperialism involved.

Even when this understanding of salvation is no longer deemed tenable in the light of recent biblical and theological reflection, it is this concern for salvation — this time the believers’ salvation — that remains the motivating stimulus for relentless evangelistic efforts:

Even if we do not preach the Gospel to them, through God’s mercy men can still find salvation by other paths; but can we find salvation if, through negligence,

fear, shame . . . or in consequence of false ideas, we fail to preach it? (Pope Paul 1976: no. 80).

Another important assumption associated with this interpretation is the dichotomy, or at least the marked distinction, between the religious and spiritual realm on the one hand, and the material and human realm on the other. Obviously, the priority goes to the religious and spiritual issues (Ohm 1962, vol. 3:65-66); and salvation is conceived mainly as religious salvation, salvation of the souls and preparation of human beings for eternal life. The following passage is often used to support this approach: "It would not be right for us to neglect the word of God so as to give out food" (Ac 6:2).

According to this theological world-view, the goals of the missionary enterprise are identified in the ministry of the Word to people who yet have not heard the Gospel:

The specific purpose of this missionary activity is evangelization and the planting of the church among those people and groups where it has not yet taken root (Abbott 1966; *Ad Gentes* ¶ 6).

Confronting every individual human being with Christ and his message is the fundamental duty of every established church, so that every man can respond to him in faith and be baptized. "Discipling" and "planting the church" are the long range objectives of missionary work. With baptism, the local church is planted. This church in turn has the duty to reach out and carry on the missionary duty at the local level (Ohm 1962:273-284; Tshibango 1972). According to a variant of this interpretation, the establishment of the local church in every society and among *every people* would suffice (Hillman 1966:6), rather than preaching the Gospel to *every human being*. Once the Church as the sign of salvation is set up, the goal of the missionary work is achieved.

The strategies adopted to achieve these goals may vary considerably. A first strategy consists of sending missionary specialists to non-Christian lands (Ohm 1962, vol. 2:129-172). The missionaries preach to them the Gospel of Christ and share with them their understanding and interpretation of that Gospel (Ohm 1962, vol. 2:227-285). People respond to the Gospel through faith and are eventually baptized, thus forming the local church. This is seen as an extension of the mother church (*ibid*, vol. 3:187-189). The process of indigenization and

“inculturation” takes place after the local church is established and once it has grown to a certain maturity (Smith 1967).

Catholic strategy will emphasize the setting up of the basic structures of the church and of the sacramental life. The neophyte will first become a Catholic and then, through a progressive intensive formation he will grow as a Christian. The Protestant approach, on the contrary, emphasizes individual conversion as a prerequisite for a redeemed society (Horner 1965). Both approaches insist on “witnessing” as the ordinary means of proselytizing.

An alternative strategy will concentrate on forming local ministers, catechists and evangelizers, who will then form the local churches by winning converts. In all cases, the mission churches will sooner or later become self-supporting and autonomous, both in their leadership and financial base.

The strategy involved in this interpretation of mission does not exclude involvement with economic development, social justice education and the progress of people. These are, however, considered a form of pre-evangelization, a preparatory effort for the announcement of the Gospel (Grasso 1972:107). Alternatively, they may be considered the natural fruit of the salvation brought by the Gospel. They never become the focus of missionary activity.

The following papal encyclicals have incorporated and officially proposed this interpretation of mission: *Maximum Illud, Rerum Ecclesiae* (1964), *Evangelii Praecones* (1951), *Fidei Donum* (1957), *Princeps Pastorum* (1959), and the main thrust of *Ad Gentes*. See also the Declaration of the 1974 Synod of Bishops (Anderson 1975:259-267), and *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Pope Paul 1976).

Similar views are, also to be found in “The Evangelistic Witness of Orthodoxy Today” (Anderson 1975:268-276); in the various commissions on missions of the World Council of Churches prior to the Fourth Assembly (WCC 1968); and in evangelical documents such as The Wheaton Declaration (Lindsell 1966) and The Lausanne Covenant (Douglas 1975:3-9).

Mission as Liberation

A radically different definition of mission is given by a new wave of theologians and intellectuals. These young voices (average age is well below fifty) are sympathetic observers or

participants of revolutionary movements and guerillas (e.g., Gutierrez, Freire, Dussel, Segundo), of development and assistance projects (e.g., W.F. Ryan and J. Komonchak), and of dialogic ventures with official Marxist intellectual elites (e.g., J.B. Metz; Girardi). They conceptualize mission as liberation. The word "development" is alternatively used. However, the latter meets with less success, both because it is not a biblical category (Boberg 1972:41) and because of its implicit uncritical acceptance of the myth of progress (*ibid.* and Gutierrez 1973:21-37).

Matthew 25:31-46 is the key biblical text in which this approach to mission finds its justification and inspiration: ". . . I was hungry and you gave me to eat" is perceived by these thinkers as the essential paradigm of Christianity, and hence as the meaning of mission.

The selection of this biblical text for a foundation of mission theology is prompted by its intrinsic affinity with the writers' concerns for violated human rights and dignity and by the pervasive social injustice by which it is contradicted. This selection emphasizes the Gospel's basic thrust against concrete blasphemous structures of heteropraxis (Gutierrez 1973:10) that deny and destroy God's concept of man and society.

Specific assumptions concerning the meaning of the natural and supernatural order, the secular reality and salvation are operative in determining the choice of this biblical paradigm and in shaping the basic features of this mission theology.

These writers operate on the premise of the unity of the natural and supernatural order. They take for granted M. Blondel's, Yves de Moncheuil's and Henry de Lubac's claim that historical man is moving in a world permeated by the supernatural, and they reject the dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural orders as an abstraction devoid of any analytical and practical use.

Another closely related assumption accepted by these writers is Teilhard de Chardin's and Bonhoeffer's contention that the secular life of mankind holds an intrinsic interest for Christian faith. Some of them even subscribe to Arend Van Leeuwen's view that secularization is actually sweeping away the superstitions of the various religions and preparing men to accept Christ, by forcing them to ask those questions about salvation and meaning for which Christianity has answers.

More directly, however, it is these writers' concept of salvation that to a large extent shapes their interpretation of mission. For them the debate whether there is salvation outside the church is a scholastic luxury, since it has overlooked the basic biblical fact that salvation refers primarily to this world and to the integral human being, body and soul, individual and society, person and cosmos. Christ is not satisfied with "guaranteeing heaven" (*ibid*:255) to human beings who prepare themselves for eternity by suffering and toiling in the anguished span of time allotted them. Neither should the church indulge in escapes from the reality of salvation even through a meritoriously irenic concept such as "anonymous Christian". For these authors, salvation is a concrete communion of men with God and of men among themselves. It is a gift and a task that embraces the whole human world, transforms it, and brings it to its fullness (Ep 4:13; Gutierrez 1973:198; Dussel 1970:144).

This integral salvation is the goal of the church's mission and of the missions. Anything short of proclaiming and bringing into effect Christ's salvation to today's suffering human beings does not do justice to the concept of mission. This goal is twofold. Negatively, the Church should strive to liberate men from all that exploits them and enslaves them, making them less than human (Lk 7:22-23). Positively, the church should strive to create a new man, a new society (Jn 1; Ga 16:15; 2 Co 5:17). Jesus Christ is what God means by man (Gutierrez 1973:146). He is the measure of the mature manhood to which every individual is called to grow. The achievement of his fullest potential should be the limit. The Church as true eucharistic and ecclesial community is what God means by society. As it happens in the Eucharist, brotherhood and community – *koinonia* — should be both proclaimed and brought into effect wherever the Church claims to be present (*ibid*:255-279; Beaver 1973:139ff).

While these goals for missionary activity appear to be rather well established among these authors, less agreement is to be found concerning the strategies that should be adopted to achieve them. They are listed here in what appears to be a logical order:

1. Continual conversion to the neighbor. Since each man is the living temple of God, we meet God in our encounter with men. Love of God is love of man (not to be equivocated as love of man because of love of God) (Gutierrez 1973:194). There can be

no conversion to God or true reform of self without a permanent process of conversion and identification with the suffering neighbor in whom God dwells, and without gratuitous sharing of community and joy with them (*ibid*:205).

2. Conscientization (Freire 1970). By adopting this unalienating and liberating cultural action we can make the oppressed and the exploited aware of their human dignity and potentials and motivate them to become active participants in their liberation process.

3. Church as an institution of social criticism and of social prophetism (Metz 1969:16; and Ryan in Dulles 1972:45). We can sensitize the Church to all the issues of social justice and human dignity. We may also succeed in mobilizing her to take sides in favor of the poor and the oppressed and to call for appropriate liberating policies (Gutierrez 1973:236; Latin American Bishops Conference 1970).

All the listed strategies are to be considered forms of indirect evangelization, rather than simply acts of pre-evangelization (Rayan 1976; Anderson 1975:87-105). They are deeds that make the words of direct evangelization credible when and where they are pronounced. They are means of bringing the Church into existence as an effective instrument of salvation and as Christ's continuing presence in this world.

The thinkers responsible for this interpretation of mission claim Jacques Maritain and the worker-priests of France as their own forerunners. They see in *Rerum Novarum*, *Quadragesimo Anno* and *Mater et Magistra* the sources of their basic themes, and they point to *Gaudium et Spes*, *Populorum Progressio* and sections of the Declaration of the 1974 Synod of Bishops (Anderson 1975:259-267) as authoritative versions of their approach.

The Uppsala Report (WCC 1968) and the Nairobi Assembly document the existence of the same interpretation of mission in official statements of the World Council of Churches.

Mission as Mutual Assistance of Local Churches

The proponents of this interpretation of mission have lived and labored in traditional mission countries. They have witnessed the vitality of mission churches, and they know their aspirations and sensitivities. Furthermore, they are capable of standing back and looking with critical eye at their mother churches. They can detect forms of paternalism in the policies of

their mother churches, as well as urgent pastoral needs that could be met by evangelists from young mission churches.

In this context, the suggestions offered by Bishop Joseph J. Blomjous, W.F., Charles Curry, M.M., and John Coonan are highly inspiring (quoted in Dulles 1972; Coonan 1975:285ff). They like to articulate their awareness of the contemporary situation of missionary life by referring to Acts 16:9: "Come over to Macedonia and help us," as well as to the totality of the early church life documented by that book.

Although the biblical basis for this interpretation of mission may appear insufficient to some, it is undeniably true that the church in mission territories has already been planted. In some sense, there are no longer mission churches. There are only churches faced with varied and ever-changing pastoral needs in different geographical situations. This fact, together with the post-Vatican II heightened awareness of the predominant role of local church leadership in setting up pastoral policies, is the major premise for this view.

Accordingly, the goal of mission is clearly identified as mutual assistance of local churches. Missionary activity becomes a function of the Church's catholicity. The help provided by older and younger churches to each other expresses their deep unity and the universality of their pastoral concern. The strategies suggested for the achievement of this goal of missionary activity are already implemented in a number of churches:

1. Personnel exchange between younger and older churches according to the skills needed to meet specific pastoral needs.
2. The initiative for personnel re-allocation should therefore belong to the receiving church, rather than continue to reside with any of the mother churches or with Rome, or with mission boards, since there is a limit to the amount of personnel and capital a local church can realistically absorb.
3. From this perspective, there is room for temporary limited assignments and exchange of personnel.
4. Lay people can play a major role in providing the needed skills for the required time.
5. International ecumenical teams of specialists can be formed and deployed according to demand.

This interpretation of mission has found official expression in the third chapter and sections of the sixth chapter (e.g., no. 38) of *Ad Gentes* (Abbott 1966). Furthermore, this interpretation of

mission was the driving force behind the merger of the International Missionary Council with the World Council of Churches at New Delhi in 1961, and of the enslavement of the evangelistic missionary enterprise to the stifling syndrome of church growth present in subsequent conventions (Underwood 1974:23-30).

Mission as Church

A number of theologians and church leaders, painfully aware of the reality of the de-christianization, have undertaken a thoroughgoing rethinking of the concept of mission. The socio-cultural matrix from which this interpretation arises is post World War II France. However, the message proposed by Godin, Chenu, Retif, Chavasse, Suhard, Suenens and others has found extensive acceptance in countries similarly imbued in Christian tradition, and similarly affected by the process of de-christianization.

The Gospel of Saint John (especially chapters 1 and 20) and Ephesians 1:4-6 are the preferred scriptural references to which these thinkers return for inspiration. From the perspective they have thus gained, they then proceed to recast the whole theology of missions. Accordingly, the missions and the idea of mission itself are seen as a manifestation of the reality of the Holy Trinity. Mission is first of all the dynamism of God's inner life. It expresses itself in the community of the Trinity, and thanks to Christ's activity, in the ever-growing ecclesial community.

Ecclesiology is then radically re-thought from the perspective of this Trinitarian concept of mission. Mission is the supreme regulative and dynamic principle of all ecclesial activity (Congar 1937). It is a permanent reality, co-extensive with the life of the Church, which is missionary by essence since: "The Church is Jesus Christ always renewing himself, reappearing in human form; she is the permanent incarnation of the Son of God" (Moehler 1843:6-7). Rooted in the reality of the Trinity from which it draws its life, the Church has a sign-giving nature at every phase of its development; it announces the community of God's Persons and invites people to become part of that community (Tshibango 1972). It is missionary during every phase of its life, and can be described as the expansion of the Trinitarian mission in time and space (Journet 1951; A. Retif 1966 and L. Retif 1966). So essential is the concept of mission for

an understanding of the Church that it can be said that mission is the Church.

Besides re-formulating ecclesiology, these thinkers also insist on concepts of human development and growth of humanity that are consistent with patristic thought and contradictory of the prevailing optimistic views associated with Teilhard de Chardin and Bonhoeffer. According to Congar, for instance (1937), as history evolves, men become more and more heterogeneous. The growth of mankind is complicated by division, separation and dispersion.

These biblical, ecclesiological and philosophical premises are clearly operative in the way these authors define the *goals* of missionary activity. Mission is Church, and the Church exists to go out to men, to the world, and to gather them up into community with God and with one another by evangelizing them. Two mutually complementary goals can be identified: 1. Incarnation, i.e. the process by which the Church becomes fully present to the men of today. The context of this effort is human space defined by human needs rather than by geographical boundaries. The continuity of societies and culture through time is seen as problematic, since every new generation is a new world that has never been Christianized. 2. Assumption, i.e. the process by which the Church gathers up men and incorporates them into a community of believers through evangelization.

The strategies suggested to achieve the goals of missionary work vary according to the specific human situation in which the Church had to be made fully present. There are, however, some guidelines that appear to be generally valid:

1. *Cooperation*. It enjoins dialogue with the non-Christian and a-Christian world, as well as the adoption of its legitimate aspirations, hopes and goals. A necessary condition for successful cooperation is the freedom of the Christian spokesman (men) to be true to human encounter and dialogue with non-believers.

2. *Accommodation and assimilation*. The Church modifies her behavior patterns wherever possible.

3. *Reform*. The Church is aware of the intrinsic tension that exists between what she is in Christ and what she is in the world, and of the persistent need to rediscover her identity and her mission by reflecting and contemplating on the person and mission of Christ. Contemplative communities are an

indispensable factor of missionary effectiveness because they constitute a dramatic reminder of this never-ceasing need.

4. *Mobilization of the whole Church.* The whole Church is in mission. Every member of the Christian community is called upon to continue Christ's work in today's world. The primitive Church described in the book of Acts is seen as the model for contemporary Christians.

5. *Openness to the Holy Spirit.* Charisms are gifts of the Holy Spirit who continues to lead the church. They are not restricted to the authority of the hierarchy. There should be room for acceptance of all these gifts as well as for the formation of *communautes de base*.

Vatican II itself as an event could be considered a convincing example of the validity of this interpretation of mission. The theoretical formulation of this approach, however, was pointedly rejected by *Ad Gentes*, although its theology of the Trinity and its contention that the whole Church is missionary by nature were incorporated by that document — and by the first chapter of *Lumen Gentium*. Later documents of the Church — such as the Declaration of the 1974 Synod of Bishops and *Evangelii Nuntiandi* — continue to emphasize the missionary nature of the Church and the missionary duty of every Christian, but it is obvious that this interpretation as a whole does not enjoy official approval. The *communautes de base* are explicitly criticized in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Pope Paul 1976, no. 58).

Mission as Fulfillment

A small group of brilliant historians of religion (e.g. Raymond Panikkar, Britto J. Chetimattan), systematic theologians (e.g. Paul Tillich, K. Rahner, H.R. Schlette), and social critics and philosophers (e.g. Ivan Illich, R.C. Zaehner) are responsible for giving renewed plausibility to an interpretation of mission originally proposed by Justin Martyr and, later on, by Abelard and Nicholas of Cusa. Some of these intellectuals grew up as members of small Catholic communities (e.g. Panikkar and Chetimattan) surrounded by well established and philosophically sophisticated religious systems. Others are leading figures of the ecumenical movement (e.g. Gregory Baum).

The parables that liken Christ's disciples to salt and light (Mt 5:13-14), and the Gospel to leaven (Mt 13:33) and to wheat

among the weeds (Mt 13:1-30), are consistently used as the relevant matrix for any discussion of the Church's missionary activity. They argue that Christ did not come to found a religion, much less a new religion, but rather to fulfill all justice and to bring to its fullness every religion of the world (Mt 3:15).

Freedom of conscience, revelation understood as the opening up of human consciousness in contact with the divine, universality of salvation even outside the visible communion with the Church, these are three themes strongly emphasized in the world-view shared by these thinkers. According to their perspective, the *goal* of missionary activity therefore cannot simply be the extension of the Church as it already exists in America and Europe (Illich 1970:195). Rather, it is to be seen as the fulfillment of every true and authentic religion through conversion:

The process of conversion implies a death and resurrection, but, just as the risen Christ or the baptized person is the same as previously and yet is a new being, likewise converted Hinduism is the true risen Hinduism, the same and yet renewed, transformed (Panikkar 1964:168).

Conversion in the sense of a confessional transition to the Catholic religious community is, of course, a possible option. However, it should be encouraged only in exceptional cases when the individual ceases to be able to find God and worship him in the religion of his ancestors.

Open dialogue can sum up the *strategy* recommended by this group of thinkers. Missionaries should be convinced that they must learn before claiming any right to speak. They should find out what there is in the religious heritage of other people that authentically expresses their experience of God. Above all, they must convince themselves that this is something that they should on no account destroy or replace. The role of the missionary is one of midwife and catalyst, seeking to assist in the birth of something he cannot himself produce: a new community of God (Illich 1970:105). He cannot prescribe in advance the ritual and the institutions of this new church; he must allow himself to be told what these should look like by his hearers. They are the Church, they already have God in their midst.

A moratorium of traditional missionary activity is understandable, and perhaps long overdue, according to this approach to mission.

Elements of this interpretation of mission have been officially

adopted and proposed by the Decree of Ecumenism, and by the Declarations on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions and On Religious Freedom.

Conclusions

The five meanings of mission discussed in this paper are well documented in recent Catholic missiological literature. Attempts have been made to press this rich variety into one or another of the five interpretations. While official documents have tried to harmonize the divergent views under the synthesizing theme of evangelization, individual theologians have delivered scathing critiques of opposing approaches (Damboriena 1971; Hillman 1966).

One obvious objective of those efforts was practical in nature. They attempted to eliminate the confusion of contrasting interpretations besetting the field of missiology and to give a unitary direction to mission workers. Mobilization of personnel and of huge resources needed for traditional missionary work obviously cannot be achieved when frustration and uncertainty reign.

However, it is likely that these various interpretations of mission will not be easily exorcised away. Without the previous disappearance of the matrices from which they stem, these interpretations are likely to persist.

Note

1. This paper was prepared as background documentation for a questionnaire on attitudes among U.S. religious women towards the missionary activity of the Church. It was sponsored and financed by the U.S. Catholic Mission Council. Special credit goes to Avery A. Dulles' successful book (1974).

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NOTICE

The 1978 annual meeting of the American Society of Missiology will be held in conjunction with the meeting of the International Association for Mission Studies at Maryknoll Seminary in Maryknoll, New York, August 21-26, 1978. The theme of the meeting will be "Credibility and Spirituality in Mission." Details about the program have been published in IAMS Newsletter, No. 11. Attendance will be limited to 200 participants. For further information, write to: Dr. Frans J. Verstraelen, General Secretary of the IAMS; Department of Missiology, I.I.M.E., Boerhaavelaan 43, Leiden, Netherlands.



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