

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

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Philippine Studies vol. 18, no. 4 (1970): 774–782

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Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

Notes & Comment

Reflections on the Purpose of Christian Mission

B. LOVETT

INTRODUCTION

The overriding insight which of necessity regulates all our thinking on the missionary task is that regarding the relationship between church and world. Unless this is clearly formulated, it appears inconceivable that sound missionary policies can be arrived at. (The questioning situation in which we now find ourselves as missionaries is largely due to the fact that, up to very recent times, the question of the relation between church and world has not been the focus of theological interest.) Again, unless the precise relationship has been hammered out by Christians, the Church ends up by accepting its role at the hands of a thoroughly secularized society which, while guaranteeing the freedom and rights of the Church, effectively banishes it from the real center of society.

Until this fundamental question concerning the mission of the Church to the world has been answered, the further question of the particular "missions" of the Church must remain unanswered, since the answer to the first question contains, in large part, the answer to the second. In accordance with this understanding of the situation, this statement of missionary goals and strategies falls into two main sections:

1. The framework of mission: an outline of the dimensions of the challenge facing the Church;
2. The appropriate response to this challenge.

I

THE FRAMEWORK OF MISSION

Church as Sacrament of the Kingdom in its Eschatological Phase

The revealed relationship between church and world turns on their respective relationships to the heart of the Christian proclamation, the kingdom of God. The Church is not identical with the kingdom of God. It is the sacrament of the kingdom of God in the eschatological phase of sacred history which began with Christ. The Church exists for the world. The world has a history which has entered on its eschatological stage through the incarnation, cross and resurrection of the eternal Word of God. The outcome of this history in its entirety is already decided by Christ in the depths of reality, even though that outcome is still hidden and is only grasped by faith. Hence the "aeon" to come is already present and operative in our world. The world constitutes the task for the Christian. It is in need of redemption but also capable of it, enveloped by God's grace despite its guilt and in its guilt, and its history will end with the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is not simply something due to come later, which will later replace the world, its history and the outcome of its history. The kingdom of God itself is coming to be in the history of the world wherever obedience to God takes place in grace. And this does not take place solely in the Church as the socially constituted, historically visible society of the redeemed nor in a secret inwardness of conscience. It takes place primarily in the concrete fulfilment of an earthly task, of active love of others, even of collective love of others. This thesis of the kingdom of God as "the world" is fundamentally implied by the fact that grace and justification are to be found outside the visible unity of the Church, by Catholic teaching on the inseparable unity of the material and formal elements of morality which demands meaningful activity in this world and, finally, it follows from the unity of love of God and the neighbour.

False interpretations of the Church's role

Contemporary society is willing, in some cases to the extent of actual encouragement, to allow the Church to function in the world. It is prepared to accept that the Church can usefully function in the areas, e.g., of the "personal" which is set over against the social-economic system in which we live. Faith is regarded as so transcendental that it occurs outside the context of any meanings and purposes which are socially and politically communicable and verifiable. Strangely enough, another function readily granted to the Church by our contemporary society is the task of creating community, but this again is understood over against society as the great sea of structures and rela-

tionships which one can do nothing whatever to change. The Church can be a kind of Noah's ark for us in our alienation from society. The Church only happens in the gaps of society, in the holes where we take shelter. Christian community is not seen as having an important critical and therapeutic role in humanizing *society*. Of course, the God-experience does occur in such privileged community-situations but the point of its occurrence there is not a refuge from the pressures of society but a stance of protest and critique against structures that prevent the diffusion of this experience. A third expectation of contemporary society is that the Church will function simply as institution. Institutions function to give security and stability. By encouraging stereotyped patterns of meaning, they tend to suspend the question of meaning. Christianity, in accord with this expectation, is seen as part of the milieu, not only not changing anything but actually confirming and conniving with the existing order of things.

The true interpretation

All of the roles mentioned above are postures into which the Church is placed by modern society. But the believing community cannot acquiesce in any roles forced upon it or demanded of it by society. The Church must fulfil the mission demanded of it by God. If the Church is to be the Church-for-the-world, this cannot mean that the Church must be the Church which the world wants, or even the Church such as the world will allow it to be. It has to be the Church with its mission to the world, to society, happening all the time in the context of the expectation of the coming kingdom of God. The Christian Church is not supposed to serve mankind so that this world may remain exactly what it is; on the contrary, the Church is supposed to serve mankind so that the world, society, may be transformed and become what it has been promised. In conciliar terms:

We show ourselves children of the promise when, strong in faith and hope, we redeem the present time and look forward in patience to future glory. But we must not conceal this hope in the depths of our hearts but on the contrary express it through the structures of ordinary secular life, in permanent conversion and in conflict with the rulers of the world of this darkness, the spirits of unrighteousness.

—*Lumen Gentium*, n. 35.

The Church understands that it exists at the service of God's plan which encompasses all mankind and is directed toward the bringing together of all mankind in some way that abolishes the divisions and oppositions that characterize our experience of life. As we read in the council document: "the Church is the sacrament or sign and instrument of the inmost union with God as well as of the unity

of all mankind" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 1). The Church is where God's purpose for the reconciliation of mankind becomes manifest and that purpose is the creation of unity among men. The Christian supernatural, what is extra-ordinary in the Church-experience, is this kind of relationship, this real union, between man and man because between mankind and God in virtue of what Jesus of Nazareth said and did. What the Church has to offer is a destiny for mankind: a state of honesty and a certain trust among people: "the Church offers a sign of that brotherliness which makes honest dialogue possible and encourages it" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 92). The Christian Church which follows Christ's mission to the whole world is engaged also in following Christ's service of the world. For this reason it is nothing in itself but all that it is, it is in existing for others. It exists for others by taking the society in which it lives into its own horizon of expectation of the eschatological fulfilment of justice, life, humanity and sociability, and communicates through its own decisions in history its openness and readiness for this future and its elasticity towards it. This kindling of live hope is the purpose of mission. The whole body of Christians is engaged in the apostolate of hope for the world and finds therein its essence—namely, that which makes it the Church of God.

It is imperative to think in terms of only one community, the community of mankind, with the Church functional within it. The Church is not primarily a community; it is first of all a movement within the community of mankind. The bishop's function is not primarily within the Church but in society. "Priests, as co-workers with their bishops, have as their primary duty the proclamation of the Gospel to all." The sacraments of the Church are precisely the imagery in which she speaks of the world of the future, the coming kingdom of God. What sort of relationship is there to be among men? The kind that is hinted at, symbolically, in the Eucharist; it is to be a political reality but not one that can be described in today's political terms. We live in a crucifying world. In so far as a man calls men to a deeper kind of humanity, in so far as he offers them, not just in theory but in practice, a more human mode of communication, he will be rejected by mankind. The Son of God did not come to us in order to be crucified, but since he comes to be a totally loving, totally human being, it was inevitable that he would be crucified. What he came to do, was to bring a new life, a new form of human communication out of this crucifying world. His resurrection means that this is possible. Christians exist to bring evidence of this possibility before men, to bring hope for the future of this world.

The life of the Church, with her sacramental liturgy and her proclamation of the Word, is necessary for the nourishment of eschatological hope, for the strengthening and celebration of this hope in the community of those who hope and for the taking of this message of

hope out to the world. In virtue of this, the community of the Church in the world will—in connection with man's commitment to the task of improving the world by means of science and technology—protest critically in faith against all forms of human society which fail to understand the dynamics of what is humanly desirable.

Conclusion

The expectation of the promised future of the kingdom of God which is coming to man and the world to set them right and create life, makes us ready to expend ourselves unrestrainedly and unreservedly in love and in the work of reconciliation of the world with God and his future. The social institutions, roles and functions are means on the way to this self-expending. They have therefore to be shaped creatively by love, in order that men may live together in them more justly, more humanely, more peacefully, and in mutual recognition of their human dignity and freedom.

If we get some idea of the community offered in the promise God has made, then we must be shocked by any existing or imaginable social-political order. Christianity is hope and expectation which inaugurates and stimulates critique and transformation of the existing order of things, whatever it may be, in view of the city of righteousness, the true human community, which God has promised in the resurrection of Jesus—the promise that self-sacrifice for others prevails in the end, despite all evidence to the contrary, over violence and hatred.

To live out this critique is the task of every Christian. The priest is doubly committed to it. Firstly by baptism and then in the institutional sense of having been dedicated to it by the community. It is the function of the priest to be representing to the Christian people and to the world the evangelical, revolutionary significance of their Christian, secular lives.

II

MISSIONARY OPTIONS: THE APPROPRIATE RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGE

Introduction

The specific purpose of missionary activity in the traditional sense is evangelization and the planting of the Church among those peoples and groups where she has not yet taken root (cf. *Ad Gentes*, par. 6). The Church is bound to strive to be present to the whole world. What is required of this presence is that always and everywhere it be authentic. Only where a true witness of hope is being given can the Church be considered truly present in a particular region or country.

"The chief means of this implantation [of the Church] is the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ." The gospel can never be preached in a vacuum. It too must be incarnated. The interpretation of the hopes and aspirations of people in their ultimate depths is the proclamation of the gospel. These hopes and aspirations must have a secular embodiment and lack of concern or involvement in this secular dimension inevitably means that the message of the gospel will be distorted and misunderstood. Believers will have to show, in their total commitment to life, where the richest springs are that can overcome the evil that deprives man of his joy and improve the world by really caring for man. In their total commitment, they will have to show who they are who have the power to protect the constantly threatened dignity of man and to bring salvation here and now.

To "plant the Church" means, primarily, to form men of true Christian hope, men of their own world, who can really function as the Church in and for the world. In the perspective which has been outlined, we have certain guidelines for determining concrete missionary options. Only a certain limited number of topics will be discussed.

The "professional" nature of missionary activity

In the light of our current understanding of the Church, the missionary task—to *establish* the Church—is clearly different from the task of developing an already established church. For one thing, the concept of an already established church leaves no room for the activity of foreign missionary personnel. To speak of the church as already established is to imply the existence of the church as truly incarnate in a particular place, i.e., rooted in the living culture of the people, involved in their aspirations and taken care of by a local hierarchy. Where one or more of these elements is lacking, there is still room for missionary activity. But the work of development, concerned with increase of numbers to the already established church or with the problem of coping with already existing numbers, is not a specifically missionary task. If this is not understood it becomes quite impossible to understand the attitude of some Latin American bishops who judge that any foreign assistance, even financial, merely puts off the basic solution to their church's problem, and reject it accordingly. The majority of the Latin American bishops do not take such an extreme stand on the situation but even they are very careful to stipulate the conditions under which foreign assistance will constitute real help. These conditions show that the task is understood by these bishops as being essentially missionary in the sense outlined above. One of the main reasons given for the present need of foreign personnel in Latin America is that "the evangelization was not always done in a thorough way. The gospel message was not fully and dynamically conveyed. Sometimes people were merely given an immediate prepara-

tion for the essential sacraments, the gospel was not presented vividly so as to engage the people's enthusiasm. The prophetic function, in its genuine sense, was never at all accepted."*

With regard to the type of man needed it is stipulated that "his going should meet a concrete need (e.g. for specialists in theology, pastoral planning, campus ministry, workers' groups), and not simply *plug empty holes*." He should "regard himself as coming—this is in itself a valid reason for his presence—to help reveal the vital energies of our Church and to facilitate the creation of authentically Latin American pastoral programs." The training given to him should enable him to

- form earnest, involved laymen;
- vitalize various apostolic movements;
- establish and inspire parish and other basic communities.

He must strive for integration on three levels:

1. *With the clergy.* He should find a fraternal community with the native priests. Together, and in union with the bishop, they should work out the imaginative program they will follow. . . .

2. *With the whole Christian community.* He should have genuine liking for the people entrusted to him, a respect for the values they esteem, with no attempt to impose on them an alien culture however valid it might be, and without any impatience for immediate results or even for immediate elimination of existing evils. . . .

3. *With the people in general.* He must identify with the world he lives in, take on its mentality and master its language. He should understand its dreams and disappointments, involve himself in priestly fashion in its search for total human development.

What is true of the missionary's function in Latin America is true, a fortiori, of the more obviously missionary areas in which we work. It is professional in the sense that the missionary is expected to perform a very specific task—to adjust himself to a world that is not his own in order to become a creative catalyst for the emergence of a local church. One very important point, however, which differentiates work in an area where the church is partly established from work in "purely" missionary areas, is the presence in the former of a local hierarchy. Before a missionary society undertakes to work

* All references and quotations referring to the position of the Latin American bishops derive from the address of the General Secretary of the Conference of Bishops of Latin America (CELAM) to the Executive Board of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America (CAL). The occasion was the fifth annual meeting of CAL, June 18-21, 1969.

under such a local hierarchy, basic agreement about the function of the missionary personnel must first be achieved. This problem is relevant to the question of the appropriate areas of involvement of missionary societies. It can be treated under the following heading.

Priorities in the Deployment of Missionary Personnel

Ideally, only two factors control discussion on the question of deployment: firstly, the area of greatest need; secondly, the number of men available. Working under the direction of the Congregation for Evangelization, we naturally tend to let the judgment concerning the area of greatest need be decided for us. Some would say that this has resulted in a rather anomalous missionary situation since Asia has a population nearly twice that of Europe, Russia and the Americas and yet only 4.5 per cent of Asians are Christians. This criticism may derive from a preoccupation with the numerical. To be a catalyst in the process of world history, to be always at the heart of things, ensuring love, justice and true humanity, Christians in Asia may seem statistically insignificant. But numbers are not the most important thing in order that Christ should enter a situation and fill it with his redemptive and uplifting presence. What is needed in order to be the catalyst in the Asian process is that Asian Christians belong fully to the Church and fully to Asia.

Apart from the very obvious difficulty of lack of personnel, the only ground for rejecting a particular area of work is the lack of appreciation there of our missionary function. The Latin American hierarchy in the words of the document mentioned above recognizes that "in a few cases Latin American bishops may have leaned too heavily on the ease of finding priests abroad, rather than devising new pastoral techniques, agencies and structures that would be less clerical and more truly ecclesial There has not always been complete integration of foreign personnel in the pastoral program of Latin America. Often this has occurred because the receiving country or diocese has *no* pastoral plan. We improvise too much; we tend not to formulate precise goals. As a consequence foreign priests are sometimes used just to fill holes, without any over-all pastoral planning, and they consequently feel confused, frustrated and misplaced It is undeniable that the Latin American hierarchy has not always provided these priests the scope they need for their work. Either we had no pastoral plan in which they could integrate their priestly zeal, or we did not have enough supernatural initiative to seek out with those priests the new apostolic ventures the Lord expected of us."

A basic condition for the acceptance of new tasks or the continuation of old ones must be that the missionary be allowed to work as a missionary.

Implications of True Adaptation

Unless the missionary priests, religious brothers and sisters and lay workers identify with the peoples of Asia and consider their individual destinies to be linked with the destiny of Asia, they will not be able to participate in the fulfilling of the role of the Church in Asia and should return to the lands which are their only real home. All that has been said above in the first section leads to the conclusion that "adaptation" has been too narrowly conceived in the past. The true meaning of adaptation is creative participation: to be Christian is a creative act of participation in a community in motion. Christianity, therefore, has to come to Asia with its message expressed in a language which grows out of such participation and conveyed in terms of sympathy with the community's striving for self-fulfilment. This participation involves poverty in the sense of effective detachment from material possessions and the actual elimination of all luxuries. Christian religious leaders in the new Asia must lead lives which both are, and appear to be, closer to the masses than they are at present. Otherwise the Church in Asia will not be the instrument of societal change which so many in Asia of all political persuasions desire but will merely continue the feudal stratifications of the past.