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Spirituality for Mission

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SPIRITUALITY FOR MISSION. Michael Collins Reilly, S.J. (*Logos* 12).
Quezon City: Loyola School of Theology, 1976. 254 pages.

The occasion and context of Father Reilly's book is what he calls — like many others in recent years — the crisis in missions, a crisis that is partly cultural and partly theological. The author's aim is to help Christians engaged in mission in the present crisis situation, not by solving doctrinal controversies or proposing new methods, but by focusing on their personal, interior lives, by giving them a "spirituality" for mission in the changed cultural and theological climate of today (p. 19). Such a work is very welcome.

It should be noted right away that Reilly's book does not belong to the traditional genre of spiritual books. It is not, and was not meant to be, directly inspirational. It is rather a theological work. As expressed clearly in the subtitle, the book is concerned with the "factors" (cf. p. 237, "foundations") that go into the making of a contemporary mission spirituality.

The fundamental thesis of the book runs this way: "Because the context of mission work has changed and because the theology of mission is developing and changing, the motivation, inspiration, and spirituality of those engaged in missionary work must also change" (p. 19). Throughout the book the author insists that spirituality, in order to be helpful, must correspond to the respective contemporary cultural and theological context.

Despite his insistence on the importance of contemporary culture and theology, the author, however, leaves no doubt that these are not the only determining factors of missionary spirituality. In his outline of Christian spirituality in chapter 2, Reilly says that there are four sources or determinants of spirituality: Scripture, theology, culture, tradition. Spirituality itself is defined as "the basic, practical, existential attitude of man which is the consequence and expression of the way in which he understands his existence and the meaning of reality. It is the way he acts or reacts habitually throughout life according to ultimate objectives which flow from his world view" (p. 24). As far as the missionary is concerned, spirituality refers chiefly to his motives, goals, and inspirations. Evidently, the book rests on the assumption that there is such a thing as a distinct missionary spirituality. Its basic justification lies in the fact that there are "different ways of living the Christian faith and various means towards union with God" (p. 44).

To develop a missionary spirituality for today in line with the author's theory of spirituality, one has to consider the four determinants of spirituality cited above. The body of the book is devoted to this. In a certain sense, Scripture is presupposed as the ever valid and unchanging norm of Christian spirituality; hence the author limits himself to indicating some few basic principles. The second determinant, tradition, refers to what has grown in the past; this is the "historical" factor mentioned in the subtitle. Chapters 3 and 4 are devoted to a survey of the history of missionary spirituality. The

very important third factor, theology — contemporary theology — is discussed in the following three chapters in an approach which calls for extensive and profound changes, particularly in missionary motivation. The cultural factors are taken up in chapter 8; on the basis of a survey of the major cultural trends, the author reflects on implications for missionary spirituality. The last chapter (chapter 9) outlines the foundations of a missionary spirituality that is responsive to the contemporary cultural and theological context, but also in harmony with the scriptural norm and mindful of, though not simply bound to, the great traditions of missionary spirituality.

The two chapters on the history of missionary spirituality are rich in inspirational material. The author selects outstanding missionaries and focuses on the spirituality which animated these men (Catholics: Columban, Boniface, Raymond Lull, Francis Xavier, Charles de Foucauld; Protestants: Zinzendorf, William Carey, Hudson Taylor). While not minimizing the differences between these men and their dependence on a theology that is now outdated, the author finds certain constants in their spirituality that seem to be perennially valid: fascination with the love of God and Christ, personal holiness and the witness of Christian living, trust in God, humility, and loving service.

Evidently, the distinctiveness of missionary spirituality depends on whether there is a distinctive Christian reality called mission. What or who is a missionary? Does he have any meaningful place in the world and Church of today? In chapters 5 to 7 the author tackles the many hotly debated issues in today's mission theology with great competence and specifies the spiritual implications of his theological options.

Reilly places missionary endeavor squarely within the context of the whole Church (e.g., p. 139). But he goes even further. The missions are inserted in the "Missio Dei," i.e., in the plan of salvation of the Triune God. This plan embraces the whole history of mankind; its goal is God's "shalom," i.e., peace and salvation. Although this implies a certain "un-centering" of the Church, the author makes it quite clear that the Church as a visible community is an essential part of the concrete realization of God's plan. In this context, too, the local Church as true realization of the Church is strongly emphasized. Among the spiritual consequences of this view concerning missions, one should mention trust in God, the universal Christian duty of mission, concern for all dimensions of human life, and loving service.

The most controversial issues are taken up in chapter 6 entitled "The Goal of Missions and the Identification of the Missionary." The author uses the notion of salvation as his main theological concept: salvation as the purpose of God's plan, and the Church as the servant and instrument of salvation. The traditional "aims" of missionary activity are actually the ways in which the Church fulfills its servant role in God's salvific plan for mankind. As for the nature of salvation Reilly repeatedly states that it is a multidimensional

reality: a personal, social, cosmic event, with material and spiritual dimensions, concerned with present and future, both worldly and other-worldly, totally God's work and yet in some continuity with human history. On the basis of such an understanding he considers conversion, Church-planting, presence, and humanization as valid aims of missionary activity. It is up to the local Church to determine the specific aim in its respective area.

It is most instructive to see how the author applies this general principle to the much debated question of the respective place of evangelization, proclamation, and development in the Church's mission. Is development work as such, without any explicit mention of Christ, legitimate and authentic mission work of the Church? Father Reilly answers with great care. As far as the overall mission of the Church, abstractly speaking, is concerned, silence about Jesus Christ is untenable. But in concrete circumstances the Church may work for human development without introducing the Gospel directly. However, the author hastens to add that even in such circumstances, the personal life of the Christian missionary as well as his ultimate intention must always be animated by the conviction that without God man is essentially incomplete.

The "ultimate intention" just mentioned is the key to Reilly's definition of the missionary. Although he refuses to identify the missionary by what he does or by where he works, he maintains that there is something truly distinctive and specific about the missionary. Agreeing with L. Newbigin, he finds the distinguishing mark of the man of mission in "the intention he has of bringing others to cross the frontier between faith in Christ the Lord and unbelief." The essence of missionary spirituality lies in the fact that "the interior life of the missionary and his life style are oriented to non-believers" (p. 180).

The deepest reason why a Christian wants to dedicate his life to bringing others to faith is "the traditional theocentric motive – the glory of God" (p. 181). Gratitude and love for having the privilege of participating in God's mission moves the Christian to bring others to live for the same end. Obedience to the mission command of Christ comes next as a motive for mission.

Another area of theological controversy with considerable implications for missionary spirituality and motivation is the meaning of the non-Christian "Religious Traditions of The World." Making critical use of the theories that try to give a truer picture of God's universal salvific will – e.g., Rahner's idea of the anonymous Christian – and rejecting the Barthian idea of a radical discontinuity between Christianity and world religions, Reilly sees these religions as manifestations of God and modes of the presence of Christ in history. This understanding rules out a traditionally strong motive for mission, namely rescuing non-Christians from the power of Satan exercised through the pagan religions. The missionary's spirituality must now be one of

“humble openness to the fullness beyond Christianity” (p. 205) and a readiness for dialogue.

In his theory of spirituality the author puts great emphasis on the importance of contemporary culture. Consequently, he devotes chapter 8 to a survey, albeit a brief one, of contemporary cultural influences and the demands they make on mission spirituality. Referring to such phenomena as the unification of the world, secularization, local diversity, and widespread oppression, the author calls on the missionary to develop a spirituality that would make him a “conservative initiator of change,” a man of respect for everything human, a worker for reconciliation.

Although the main purpose of the book is not to draw a complete spiritual portrait of the missionary of today, one finds in its pages the elements and outlines of such a portrait. The item “missionary qualities” in the Index of Subjects gives a telling summary: “asceticism, courage, dialogue, discernment, fidelity, gratitude, holiness, hope, humility, imitation of Christ, joy, love of God, service, trust in God, witness” (p. 253).

The book is a rich one. This reviewer felt that Reilly’s statements on evangelization and development, on the aims of mission, and other questions are clearer than many other statements published in recent years. Although written from within the Catholic tradition the book includes much material from non-Catholic mission theology and spirituality, thus providing rich information for the Catholic reader. The book is open to contemporary emphases like development, liberation, secularization, but keeps a fine balance. This does not mean that there are no assertions for which the reviewer would have liked to see a stricter formulation. Is it really true to say, for instance, that the local church may decide, e.g., on humanization as its goal? Would that not be a betrayal of the core of the Gospel? Must the Christian missionary not make use of every opportunity to speak about Christ, except where such talk would be rejected outright? Actually, Reilly would seem to agree with these observations in principle since he demands the constant intention of bringing men to faith in Christ. But he does not insist in the same way on the practical consequences of such an intention. These questions are not meant to detract from the great value of the book. Although focusing on missionary spirituality it will also be of great help for priests, religious and laymen working within the regular parochial context of established Christianity.

A few typographical errors have still found their way into the book. Above all the name of the anthropologist from whom Father Reilly took the definition of culture should be corrected: he is Edward P. Tylor (not Taylor, p. 36). On p. 155 read “attitude” instead of “altitude;” p. 203: read “conceptually” instead of “conceptuality;” p. 220: read “preserved” instead of “pressed;” p. 235: read “notions” instead of “nations.”

Herbert Scholz