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After September 11, 2001: Whither Mission?

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The cataclysm of September 11, 2001, has left nothing untouched, nothing in our thinking and acting, without a deep wound. But it has also given us even more motivation to revitalize our engagement in mission that is also action-based dialogue. In the face of a radical fundamentalism that preaches hatred and bloodshed, we must confess and proclaim our own vision for a hoped-for messianic kingdom of peace and justice, albeit realized only beyond the veil of history.

Religious fanaticism of any stripe brooks no argument, and *a fortiori* has no tolerance for dialogue; when it resorts to such unspeakable violence as we have recently seen, it creates an arena of conflict that only secular government can deal with, and our role as Christians becomes that of discerning and counseling how they might combat terrorism with true justice.

However, as many civil and religious leaders have advised, we cannot let terrorists obliterate our resolve to build a just spiritual and secular order. This means that we must continue to focus on our Christian calling to announce the Gospel and to carry on positive conversations with authentic believers of other traditions. We renew our intention to teach the ethic inspired by the Gospel, even as we keep learning how other traditions would strive for peace. This leaves us with the challenge to re-examine the content of our message and renew our methods for presenting it.

What, Then, Is Mission?

In November of 2000, I wrote an article for *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, entitled “Pilgrimage Re-Envisioned,” in which I emphasized the missionary nature of the Church and thus the mission vocation of the Society of Jesus as instrument of the Church. With the help of the late David Bosch, an ecumenical Protestant missiologist, I saw the Society as a witness to what Bosch called God’s “yes” and God’s “no” to the world—that is, God’s affirmation of culture as well as God’s evangelical challenge to all cultures.¹ Our work of gospel inculturation should always affirm as well as critique cultures, but I offer some brief consideration for discussion here.

The fact is that no Christian can legitimately argue against

the idea of mission to the nations, since the Church itself grew out of the tiny missionary community gathered and sent by Jesus himself. The Church is *essentially* missionary,² with its roots in the Trinitarian origin of Jesus’ mission, so that we are well advised to say that the Church *is* mission rather than that the Church merely *has* a mission.³

That is the first and most fundamental characteristic of mission—its *theological* nature and foundation. From this starting-point, I would propose three derived notions of what mission is:

- 1) Foreign mission “to the nations,” including those within the boundaries of our own North America;
- 2) Mission among the indigenous non-European cultures; and
- 3) Mission as outreach from already established ministries.

All three views of mission draw us into the tensions between faith and justice, and between dialogue and proclamation of the gospel. As we grapple with these seemingly insoluble tensions, we consider a modern dynamic process of moral discourse, which is firmly grounded in social ethics.

The Ethics of Discourse: Communicative Action

Most of the disagreement about the relationship between faith and justice a few years ago was grounded in the seemingly conflicting claims of spiritual ministry and socio-political activism. While I have no intention of releasing us from our calling in *both* of these dimensions of the apostolate, I suggest here another direction indicated to me by my own involvements between 1970 and 2000, in which there was no dichotomy between these two dimensions. While I do not intend to superimpose my own history onto the world problems of today, I find a memory of my own experience among Native peoples as I examine our world mission calling, which always stimulates



Aboriginal Dancers near Turkey Creek, Western Australia

a tensive interaction of interfaith dialogue and mutual faith witness—a tension that characterizes our pilgrim condition.

To wit, it was in respectful conversation between church and Amerindian leaders that interfaith dialogue was engaged even as we sustained our mission of witness to the Gospel. Even more dramatic were the testimonies of many of those native leaders that for the first time they were being listened to as representatives of an authentic religious tradition. Some even resumed their allegiance to the Church, apparently with these conversations as a starting-point.

What was happening in such dialogue was a form of moral discourse that became in itself a *praxis* of justice in its recognition of the equal rights of all persons to be heard. Social philosopher Thomas McCarthy succinctly points out the ethical value of dialogue: [P]ractical discourse does not feature rational egoists prudently contracting behind a veil of ignorance a procedure that can itself be carried out monologically but moral agents trying to put themselves in each others' shoes."⁴ The shift here described transposes social ethics from *monologue*, which we may extrapolate to include one-sided religious proclamation, to *dialogue*—an interactive sharing of faith witness. This shift transforms the very practice of discourse into a process of mutual exchange between equals; more, since no one abandons his or her honest beliefs, it is a form of proclamation as well. Such an approach to discourse thus readily applies to any honest and respectful sharing of faith: “By entering into a process of moral argumentation,” writes Habermas, “the participants continue their communicative action in a reflective attitude with the aim of restoring a consensus that has been disrupted.”⁵

What more dramatic and tragic example of disruption of everything—dialogue *and* proclamation—can there be than the setback dealt to conversation among the religions by the terrorist action of September 11th? And yet, ironically, the terrible pervasion of Islamic teaching has led to widespread initiatives in dialogue with Muslims by other Americans, as well as to Christians, Muslims, and persons of all faiths examining the quality of their witness. But, to return to the Jesuit vocation of both proclaiming the Gospel and listening respectfully to other viewpoints, I would remind readers of some of our greatest predecessors in mission.

In the Footsteps of De Nobili and Ricci

Authentic moral discourse is anything but a mere polite exchange of opinions that remains innocuously on the surface of the search for truth. While it assumes a fundamental equality among all conversation partners, and thus contains a dialogical quality, moral discourse by definition involves

clear moral arguments that, as scholars suggest, are “embedded in context of communicative action.”⁶ I suggest that this kind of exchange, when conducted in matters of religion, is essentially missionary and evangelical. Such evangelical or missionary discourse follows the best tradition of the Society of Jesus, as can be read in the dialogues carried on by Matteo Ricci, Roberto De Nobili, and the Jesuit missionaries among the Amerindians, to mention only the better known figures.

Although they may have adopted the more adversarial tone of their times, as opposed to the more polite exchanges of our own era, these pioneers did not indulge in monologues, but implicitly accepted the human dignity of their conversation partners by entering into a civil competition of ideas and beliefs. In sum, evangelical mission took the form of interactive dialogue even then, and there was no veiling of intention about it. All those involved expressed their own strong convictions.

The Mission Mandate in Troubled Times

I submit that this is where we are as Christians, as Catholics, and as Ignatian companions in mission. At the present moment in history, perhaps even more momentous than any other has been, our calling is to work for a consensus on the meaning of justice in the world. However, we must do this as a dimension of Christian mission. The present moment challenges us to recognize the radical gospel element in our witness; that is, we cannot conduct our mission without announcing the evangelical message of the incarnate love of God in Christ. How might this find practical realization?

Certainly, whenever anyone directs, preaches or undergoes any version of the Spiritual Exercises this message is central, but the context of the Exercises nearly always presupposes the Christian faith of all participants. Are there ways to extend this message out into the “marketplace” of religions and competing ideologies? Where does this leave our fundamental mission mandate—“the Great Commandment” to proclaim the Gospel to every creature? Should our proclamation occur through direct preaching or through more complex methods? Is the celebrated street preaching of Hyde Park still a valid medium?

Although I have not been there in years, I suspect that it is, and that it is ultimately far more genuine than the slick methods of contemporary televangelism. But be that as it may, I believe this question must have been in the mind of Pedro Arrupe when he mandated the field of communications as a major focus during his generalate.⁷ Our communication experts have their work cut out for them, in theory and especially in their praxis.

Danger Zone: The Crusade/Jihad Mentality

I believe that it was a true inspiration when GC34 employed the word *pilgrimage* so extensively to describe the mission and ministry of the Society today. The word is a venerable one in mission history, beginning with the Irish monks in the seventh century. It symbolizes an important element in Jesuit spirituality: that of mobility. It also signifies the “anti-structure” character of Ignatian mission, a term which I borrow from the great anthropologist Victor Turner (1920 - 1983), who first used it to describe the condition of persons passing through “rites of passage” in African tribal society.⁸

Anti-structure signifies a reality over-against structure, and does not mean hostility to structure. It is far more “radical” than that, in that it functions at the “roots” of ordinary structured society, where so many socially and religiously transforming events occur. Thus, Jesuit missions are anti-structural, since they share the lot of countless marginalized persons and communities, and in so doing seek to renew structures from below. Our missionary vocation also sends us on pilgrimage, since, it has all the qualities of a rite of passage which situates pilgrims on the margins of society and places them in a process of transition and often of insecurity.⁹ Pilgrimage has often incurred the enmity of secular governments, and even at times the misunderstanding of those responsible for supporting the structures of the Church.

Nonetheless, GC 34 has called us to conduct our Jesuit mission with “a new spirit of pilgrimage” that integrates faith and justice, as well as evangelization and interfaith dialogue. The balance of faith/justice and dialogue/evangelization has always been a high-wire act, but in today’s complex and increasingly dangerous world, it is even more challenging.

How are we now to continue our mission in the light of the September 11th horrific reminder of the breakdown of those values—a disaster caused by a demonic pervasion of religion itself? There is a dangerous tension even in pilgrimage itself, since it usually deepens and intensifies the pilgrim’s attachment to his or her religion. So failure in discernment can easily distort the pilgrimage into a crusade as a way of conquest rather than a “way of the cross”, or into a *jihad*, interpreted as “holy war,” rather than as spiritual struggle. This danger led the Turners to issue a warning: “In this [pilgrimage] again, they [pilgrims] follow the paradigm of the *via crucis*, in which Jesus Christ voluntarily submitted his will to the will of God and chose martyrdom rather than mastery over [man], death *for* the other, not death *of* the other.”¹⁰

An Urgent Moment in History

The tension between dialogue and proclamation figures somehow in all the major religions, in my opinion, so that it is not just Christianity that has to struggle with “pluralism,” “exclusivism,” and “inclusivism.” If in no other way, each religion, no matter how tolerant of pluralism, *includes* members of other faiths within its own “eschatology.” Thus Christians await the final manifestation of the Lordship of Christ; Muslims seek for all the ultimate submission to Allah through the mediation of his final prophet Mohammed; Hindus foresee salvation through the realization of the oneness of Brahman-Atman; Buddhists find it in Nirvana. Even the Jews, though perhaps the least mission-inclined of the religions, seek some form of ultimate justice as understood in the Torah.

So each faith has its “good news” that it proclaims as universally valid. Can there be any way of achieving a world community through honest exchange of these diverse “interests,” especially at this tragic moment, between Christians and Muslims? Or have we, as Christians, perhaps failed by backing away from evangelization at the very time when radically conservative sects are increasing their aggressive proselytism?

St. Paul, that tireless pilgrim, wrote, “I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God leading everyone who believes in it to salvation, the Jew first, then the Greek. For in the gospel is revealed the justice of God which begins and ends with faith, as Scripture says, ‘The just shall live by faith.’” (Rom. 1: 16-17) Paul was beyond doubt primarily a proclaimer of the Good News, in a pilgrimage leading to the ultimate marginality of martyrdom. But he too was drawn into a form of dialogue, such as his apologia to the Athenians in the Areopagus (Acts 17: 16-32), after which some “sneered” at him, but a few also joined him. I believe that the mission challenge of today features more complex situations than did Paul’s context, but we must follow Paul



Fr. Starkloff Celebrating Eucharist at Ringer’s Soak in Western Australia with the Kundat Djaru people

in both preaching and conversing. Certainly the formation of young Jesuits today demands that they be prepared to reflect on all the means of modern communication of the Gospel. The fact that our history is so filled with such complexity is part of the Jesuit pilgrimage that calls us to walk a narrow path between intellectualism and subjective emotionalism. This means that we have to focus carefully on “our way of proceeding” in all our ministries, especially on the development of communications in such diverse forms as liturgical preaching, preached retreats, directed retreats, interfaith events, work with lapsed Catholics, and social projects involving interfaith collaboration. As usual, this leaves us “between a rock and a hard place,” and there are no facile solutions. But in all of this, I conclude, is not our best witness the testimony of our lives, dedicated to patient discernment and to charitable and fair conversation,¹¹ as well as to courageous witnessing?

Some Questions for Reflection

1) It is often charged that mission as invitation to conversion is inevitably imperialistic, because it cannot avoid imposing a foreign culture. How do you respond to this?

2) Do you agree with the image of the “marginal pilgrim” as a paradigm for mission, or should we choose an image that points more to solidarity with culture and society? Is all this margin business too “alienating”?

3) Is the process of discourse described here too “wimpy” an approach to evangelization? If so, what stronger yet effective means can you suggest?

4) What do you see as the most effective means or media for mission today?

5) How does your apostolic situation enable you to reach out to those outside the margins of the Church?

Footnotes

1 Carl F. Starkloff, S.J., “Pilgrimage Re-Envisioned: Mission and Culture in the Last Five General Congregations,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 32/5 (November, 2000), p.6.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

3 An excellent development of this idea is the little book by Eugene Hillman, C.S.Sp., *The Church as Mission*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965).

4 Thomas McCarthy, *Introduction to Jurgen Habermas, Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholson, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), p. viii.

5 Habermas, Op. Cit., p. 67.

6 *Ibid.*, p.77.

7 For the strongest evidence of this, see Documents of the 31st and 32nd General Congregations of the Society of Jesus, (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1977), especially Decree V.

8 Turner’s best known work is probably *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, (New York: Aldine, 1995). I have explained his thought further in an article, “Church as Structure and Communitas: Victor Turner and Ecclesiology,” *Theological Studies*, 58 (December, 1997), pp. 643-668.

9 Victor Turner and Faith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

11 I would suggest frequent meditation on the Presupposition to the *Spiritual Exercises* (Ex. 22).



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