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MISSION: FROM EXPANSION TO ENCOUNTER

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To question whether or not mission is fitting in certain contexts would be to return to the incongruous conception that limits Christianity to a geographical area. It exists in suspense between its insertion in a real, specific and therefore limited culture and above it, in an ideal sphere in that it seeks to be a multi-racial, pluri-ethnic gathering in continual expansion. Oddly enough, it is precisely now that the Christian Churches are present on all the continents that they are becoming aware of the inadequate definition of mission (or missions) in purely geographical terms. As regards the Catholic Church, we can go back to the Second Vatican Council to see how the emergence of a new context has led us to perceive mission no longer in terms of geographic expansion. The hypothesis put forward here is that we are gradually going from a spatial conception of mission to a symbolic one. This presents two aspects: the encounter with others and the interaction between the present time and the Kingdom of God to come. We shall try to suggest some lines of action in the framework of a secularized Europe.

A DIFFERENT WORLD

The Second Vatican Council coincided with a new global awareness of the planet. If the word *globalisation* only serves to qualify a general condition of exchanges, the Second Vatican Council coincided with a prodigious change in mankind's overall view of the planet. For the first time since humanity began, it was possible to see our planet at a single glance. The Earth then began to be photographed from outer space by Russian and American astronauts. We became aware that we are all aboard the same space ship. And the representation of the Earth on a map that extends to infinity clearly shows our planet to be a limited and finite sphere. All peoples began to feel an objective interdependence on the one hand and of human beings with their environment on the other. The Second Vatican Council perceived this as a positive and promising new factor. In the introduction to *Lumen Gentium* in addition to the Church's universal mission, one reads that, "the condition of the modern world lends greater urgency to this duty of the Church; for, while men of the present day are drawn ever more closely together by social, technical and cultural bonds, it still remains for them to achieve full unity in Christ" (n. 1). In this perspective, the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* seeks to sum up the different aspects of man's role in the universe and reflects on "the meaning of individual and collective endeavour" (n. 3). Therefore it was its awareness of the global aspects of cultural, ethnic, religious and economic exchanges that made the Second Vatican Council begin to reflect on an ecclesiastical

identity that must take into account both its special status and its closeness to those who were once remote but have come near.

Since then the globalisation process has continued to accelerate and to shape new relationships between peoples and individuals. This process is marked by opposite trends. The homogenisation of cultures due to the pressure of the economic imperative and the free movement of people, goods, symbols, fundamental convictions, sometimes at the price of their relativisation and syncretism, is countered by each community's defence of, and return to, its local identity. The aim is to find a balance between the local and the global, between universality and single differences, between techno-scientific rationalism and the affirmation of cultural subjectivity, between the overall and the near.

ALTERNATIVE VISION OF THE CHURCH

The perception of universal solidarity is flanked by a new degree of self-awareness the Catholic Church has of its position in the world. There are two aspects to this. The first is the Church's passage from Westernization to universality: Catholicism can no longer be defined as uniquely Mediterranean and European. Actually the Church of the West must join the Churches of the other cultural spheres. With the Second Vatican Council, as K. Rahner explains, the Church began to act magisterially as the Universal Church. However this universality does not make a uniform *début*: less and less it is possible to speak of "one" Christian culture because the Church is entering an age of cultural polycentrism. Terms such as "Sister Churches", "Local Churches", "Church of Churches" in the theological vocabulary are proof of this.

The second aspect of the Catholic Church's new degree of self-awareness is the reverse of its universal dimension: the specificity of the Christian religion which can be noticed at different levels. First, on a global scale Christianity turns out to be localized and limited. The Church experiences its relativity and hence falls short of universality. Moreover, as regards each society it does not enjoy, or no longer enjoys, a spiritual monopoly, so it cannot seek to impose its scale of values, its morals or its methods on everyone. It is part of the competitive system as it can be compared to other forms of conviction, other types of humanism or other religions, of which some have a universal scope. Thus, once again, the question arises of how to combine the particularism of the Church with the mission to

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proclaim, and to witness to all, the Good News of salvation of Jesus?

The Second Vatican Council began to see that the Catholic Church was entering an age of irreversible pluralism.

However to admit pluralism implied leaving behind a well-established perspective that may be qualified as monarchical in that it postulates Christianity, in the name of salvation through Christ's unique mediation, as the bearer of a superior truth that excludes others, and that it is by virtue of this that every man and woman must belong to the Church in order to be saved. Such an outlook would far prefer unity to religious plurality. Here is a possible opening for "the great Christian event" which embraces everybody, every age, and all cultures in the mystery of God's salvation. Of course this incorporation could be a positive sign of God's love which excludes no one, but it could become negative by making the Christian religion the only legitimate path to reach God. A religion which becomes an end in itself loses one of its just criteria, namely to be a "vehicle" or a way to reach transcendence or Truth that surpasses it.

CHANGING FROM A GEOGRAPHIC TO A SYMBOLIC DIMENSION

To reconcile the singularity of the Church with its universal message, we shall gradually cease to understand the Church in terms of territorial, spatial or numerical expansion. Once it was usual to speak in terms of territory to be conquered, or occupied, and in terms of peoples or individuals to be converted and baptized. The non-Christian was seen as alien, on the periphery of the Church, who it was necessary to bring from the exterior to the interior of our religion. Obsessed with frontiers, mission was perceived as pastoral work in pagan territory where the Church had yet to be established! The ideal was to achieve a simultaneous extension of the Church and of society to reproduce elsewhere a Christian situation where individual and collective life would be framed by a ritual vision of a world shaped by Christianity.

MEETING AND APPRECIATING THE DIGNITY OF THE OTHER

The alternative to this spatial and numerical concept of the Church's mission is a symbolic conception. I shall qualify this: the symbol is at one and the same time a link and a difference. The symbolic concept has two forms. The first highlights reciprocal respect for any differences. The stranger does not only represent otherness to us, but each of us is a stranger to the other. The foreigner is no longer first and foremost the non-Christian who lives far away: but we are all equally foreign to each other. Thus each person is to be discovered in his/her individuality. This outlook leads one to recognise that Christianity represents one religious experience among many others in the world and in history: it is one of the forms that has

taken up the human question about God. It also leads one to recognise the legitimacy and originality of the spiritual journey of the other person. Moreover, it leads one to discern God's deep commitment in our human differences. Such a vision is based on the Christian belief that God has given his grace and his Spirit to all flesh. He is present in the heart of each human being and of each people. The grace is that there is good and truth in each one, including in each religious tradition: "for such people salvation in Christ is accessible by virtue of a grace which ... enlightens" and gives them life (*Redemptoris Missio*, n. 10). Therefore, mission work consists in "purifying", "raising" and "perfecting" "whatever good is found sown in the minds and hearts of men or in rites and customs of peoples" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 17).

In this perspective, mission no longer seeks to integrate everything but to relate whatever is best in a single or collective life to God. It is the explanation, the celebration, the recognition that God has drawn close in whatever in life is good, true, beautiful or positive among men. It is the Kingdom of God that is outlined and approaches. It is also the work of promoting and developing human values lived in a given context. To achieve this it might be feasible to enter into partnership with other bodies that seek to emancipate people and societies. Mission would then become a form of alliance or pact, possibly temporary, with other groups of people, of other beliefs, other world views, to work out solutions to the problems that exist for everyone. In this perspective methods such as dialogue will prove useful to discern both what kind of relationships to build up, with mutual recognition of the characteristics to be respected, to bring about the humanisation of society to be carried out in an ever more refined and widespread way. The power and credibility of mission would always come partly from its ability to take the cause of mankind seriously. If God's last word be man (K. Barth) just missionary action is a humanism which carries out the work of salvation. It is often thanks to its practical charity that the Church has seen men and women come forward to help build it up. The Church starts equally from the strength of the Gospel lived in a given situation as from Baptism. It

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appears in social and cultural contacts: it is less a question of bringing, of proposing our Christianity to others, as of letting the faith trace its own route in a population that as come into contact with Christ.

In view of this, can one outline the basis for a type of mission working towards an encounter and partnership with others in our secularized Europe? I shall mention two. First, there is the individual. We could serve the quest of self which torments Westerners today: by sharing our conception of the person; by facilitating inter-personal meetings through our institutions; by encouraging the development of individual talents. We could

also defend human rights against the temptation of collective institutions to absorb or to instrumentalise the individual. Then there is urban concentration which brings new lifestyles and new methods of communication, but which also presents brutal and violent aspects. In this context mission would consist in

the Church ... is the vehicle through which the Kingdom takes shape

serving as a link between various types of life and outlook, in providing areas/reference points for populations on the move, in providing meeting places conducive to retaining and cultivating one's identity as an immigrant, in founding associations to prepare people to enter high power circles in a responsible manner, to present the Church as a crossroads of communication between different sensitivities and institutions. This kind of mission promotes Christianity through communication by favouring encounter and bringing people together.

SIGNS OF THE OTHER APPROACHING

The second symbolic conception of mission passes from a spatial representation to a temporal one. So, mission consists in relating the present to the future: it is in the order of an eschatological sign. This is the new point of departure of the Second Vatican Council which understood the Church as a "prefiguration" of the People of God to come. The reference is to St John's Revelation: "Here is the dwelling of God among men: He will pitch his tent among them and they will be his people. God will be with them" (Rv 21:2-3). The future unity of mankind is plural, conceived in terms of an eschatological sign. The Church presents itself as journeying or on pilgrimage towards everyone's common goal: humanity pacified is considerate to the Other, leaves rooms for others. Thus, the present, visible Church does not represent the final destination. It is travelling with humanity towards the City to come. That is to say that the present Church is unfulfilled "the pilgrim Church, in its sacraments and institution, which belong to this present age, carries the mark of this world which will pass, and she herself takes her place among the creatures" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 48). The Church is a sign in the present of a perspective or of a hope everyone can share: humanity gathered in peace. This reconciled humanity will be the People of God. The advantage of this type of approach is that it enables one to recognize and think of the Church's limited, indeed minority, situation while assuming the boundless extension of the People of God: "Hence that messianic people, although it does not actually include all men, and at times may appear as a small flock, is, however, a most sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 9). The Second Vatican Council uses the expression, "instrument for the salvation of all" to explain the bounds of the geographical expansion of the Church and the interest for all of

the utopia that it bears. It realizes in history a common human hope: reciprocal acknowledgement.

"ALL MEN ARE CALLED TO THIS CATHOLIC UNITY WHICH PREFIGURES AND PROMOTES UNIVERSAL PEACE" (N. 13)

Then mission may unfold in two ways: one could have a critical relationship with the present in the name of the Kingdom to come; the other to give or create favourable conditions to provide a foretaste of what is to come. It is thus the anticipation in time and space of the promise of peace and harmonious unity. The difficulty is to define the Church's difference and its solidarity. In effect, as a sign of a finality as yet not fully accomplished, the Church claims to be different in history: it is the vehicle through which the Kingdom takes shape (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 13). Nevertheless, this does not alter the fact that it shares the same history as we do. The double affirmation of the Church's otherness and its solidarity with different cultures has often been repeated in the 20th century, mainly to avoid the danger of nationalism. In the 1955, for example, Pius XII declared that "the Church does not identify with any culture" and that it is "now ready for exchanges with all cultures". *Ad Gentes* highlights these two points: on the one hand one must identify with culture (n. 11) and on the other maintain the specificity of the Gospel (n. 15).

The insistence on its specificity leads to a type of mission that appears to be "exceptional" in the present order of things. By "extra" I mean something that surpasses, in the sense that it crosses over a frontier. This excess can assume three aspects. First, critical vigilance because no social order is the Kingdom of God. In this perspective the Church represents or safeguards its difference in regard to the City of today: although it has its place in history, "it transcends at once all times and all racial boundaries" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 9). It can represent a safe-haven/refuge, or even be a resistant counter-community against coercive powers, or again undertake a critical policy with non-political arguments to avoid the danger of all politics. Then social inventiveness: Christians are not reactionaries but take the side of present-day human renewal. The hope of redemption makes them reject fate and envisage a better future. The Church therefore represents regenerative yeast in society: "it is to be a leaven and, as it were, the soul of human society in its renewal

The future unity of mankind is plural

by Christ" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 40). This is one way in which the Church can perform its duty to the City. Criticism and innovation show the Church to be a sign of new growth in society. It is the special part of humanity which confesses God entered

history through his Son and exists for the Kingdom to Come. Note the intersection of two currents: the movement of God towards us, and of mankind towards God. According to this logic

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of exceptional growth, to evangelize could mean a transformation or even a qualitative overturning, which matches a compatible vision of mission. This is what Paul VI maintained in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* in 1975: "... for the Church it is a

question not only of preaching the Gospel in ever wider geographic areas or to ever greater numbers of people, but also of affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, mankind's criteria of judgement, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation" (n. 19).

One might also think that to be a sign of a different and fuller future consists in giving a foretaste of it in the present time. Because for a Christian the Kingdom of God is not indefinitely postponed to an expected tomorrow: it has drawn near. How can this be translated into the European way of life? One way could be to offer Christian time as exceptional moments able to give a heightened sense or a special experience, or again to situate one's life in the long human journey. More particularly liturgical time represents the culminating event that marks a person's, or a group's, conscience and heart. The second path consists in proposing to those who have a very busy work schedule and life to take some time off from their hectic time-table for: great festivals, a pilgrimage, a spiritual pause as a change from work. They judge the aesthetic

value of life from the utilitarian standpoint of a world fraught with worry. Human beings cannot be satisfied with the practical aspect alone: they need beauty and the sublime. This could mean celebrating a fine liturgy in a beautiful setting, or of studying the religious patrimony. Spending time in contemplating things, nature or creatures in silence and in peaceful moments of recollection is part of aesthetics. Isn't making time for such intervals an essential part of living the present time Christians started more fully? Setting time aside for reflection, meditation, silence creates space for a person to become available and neutral. In line with this, special attention will be paid to rest and free-time as an opportunity to affirm the primacy of man and God over the pressures of economic and professional life (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 67).

Our purpose has been to draw attention to the concepts of relationship and otherness to understand mission in a different way from geographical and quantitative terms. There is no doubt that mission no longer implies an outward movement to distant lands. Nevertheless it is still a journey of discovery to plumb the riches and depths of the other, an irrepressible desire to communicate, a prophetic art to make known that something more can be aspired to and awaits us, a creativity able to produce in daily life moments of such high quality as to give us a glimpse of eternity. This style of mission is without reservations.

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