

The Kenosis of the Missionary Some Thoughts on Religious Vows and Mission

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The experience of weakness, of powerlessness and of the cross is inherent to mission. Depending on time and circumstance it will present itself in varying degrees of intensity. Should not "kenosis unto the cross" be characteristic of missionary praxis?¹

Religious Life and Mission

As a radical option and an alternative way of life pointing to the Kingdom, religious life has a prophetic dimension.² The religious are called to be at the peripheries of human reality, to be counter-cultural and creatively prospective.³ In this context, the religious vows are to be understood and lived primarily as a style of commitment in imitation of Jesus and as signs of hope in an increasingly difficult and complex world.

What the world needs now, respects now, demands now, understands now is not poverty, chastity and obedience. It is generous justice, reckless love and limitless listening ... a religious life that vows to be what the world needs most: a reckless lover, a voice for the poor, a pursuer of truth. For only such things as this, for this kind of poverty, chastity and obedience only, does the present battered, exploited and poverty-stricken world wait and grieve and crave.⁴

This approach to religious life and particularly to the vows does not, of course, exhaust their meaning, but may help us to value and live them better in connection with the missionary charism.

Over the years of renewal there have been many redefinitions of the vows, and innumerable attempts to explain what they are and what they are not. A new approach to the vows is needed, one that will go beyond re-defining words. It is too soon to say

what the new vows will be, but already there are some hints of areas where they may emerge. The vows, to be life-giving, **must capture the essence of what committed life is and the mission it is working toward.**⁵

If this is true, then religious missionary institutes should dare to have a closer look at how religious life and the evangelical counsels could inspire their missionary commitment, and how missionary reality should enrich their religious commitment. While the religious are supposed to be the cutting edge of the Church's mission to the world, religious missionaries could render a particular service to religious life. Being the first ones who are called to keep the fire of missionary dynamism kindled in the Church, they should — from the challenges of the field, and from their commitment at the frontiers of faith and society — remind consecrated people of what is at stake in mission today.⁶

One of the points of contact between religious life and mission is **prophecy**. As was said before, prophecy is at the heart of religious life. Likewise, modern theology of mission underlines that mission is at heart prophecy: it reminds people of God's saving will and faithfulness, calls them to conversion, and summons them to a new way of being and relating with God and neighbors.⁷

Since both religious life and mission have to be rooted in the prophetic vision and praxis of Jesus, let us have a closer look at the wellspring and inspiration of what Jesus was, said and did.

The Kenosis of Jesus

A key notion that helps us to read the Gospels well and to understand the spirituality and ministry of Jesus is *kenosis*, a word forged by theologians from the Greek verb 'kenoun' ('to empty') in Philippians 2.

Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but he emptied himself taking the form of a servant, appearing in human likeness. (Phil. 2:6-7)

The adjective *kenos* refers to something that is vain⁸, sterile⁹, without meaning or purpose¹⁰, or hollow.¹¹ The verb *kenoō* [*kenoun*] indicates the act of emptying, making meaningless or hollow.¹² The form of the verb in v.7 – *ekenōsen* – is variously translated “emptied himself”, “made himself nothing,” or “gave up all he had.”¹³

The meaning of the expression depends:

- First, on the interpretation given to the next word in the text, *morphè(n)* ('form'). Does the “form” [of a slave] refer to Jesus’ “nature”, or only to his “appearance”?
- Second, on the interpretation of the subject of the sentence: who is “he”? Is the one who emptied himself the eternal Logos or the historical Christ? If he is the Logos, the text would mean that he divested himself of his divine nature. The consensus of scholars is that the text refers to Christ. It does not speak of an abandonment of the divine nature by the Logos, but only describes the stages of Jesus’ self-emptying during his life.

According to E. Mathews the *kenosis* of Christ included:

- the suspension of the exercise of his divine prerogatives;
- the need to study and learn as other mortals;
- the refusal to rely on human strength to accomplish his mission;
- the willingness to risk failure in winning disci-

ples by self-effacing love;

- the necessity to maintain a relationship with his Father through prayer and obedience.

The history of the Church and of theology shows that it is easier to discuss the meaning of *kenosis* than to practice it. However, “the self-emptying of Christ is meant to be a model for imitation rather than a proposition for theological debate... The phrase “to empty himself” is ... a metaphor that holds up a compelling example ... From the manger to the cross the life of Jesus was consistently a life of service”¹⁴ and of surrender to the will of the Father. His birth, life and death are all evidence of self-emptying. The *kenosis* of Jesus is not limited to a couple of New Testament texts. “It is a thread that runs throughout the fabric of his life.”¹⁵ Self-emptying, therefore, is the essence of the incarnation and, in a way, indicates the true nature of Jesus.

When Paul, or an ancient hymn quoted by him, summarized the mystery of Christ Jesus by the Greek verb ‘*ekenōsen*’ – literally: ‘he emptied himself,’ he had in mind the cross that showed this attitude of Jesus brought to its height: “even to death, death on a cross.” But the cross only revealed the ultimate reality of the mystery of Christ and the *kenosis* of the cross can be found **at the heart of all that Jesus was, did and said...** A reflection on *kenosis* and mission should take into account this *kenosis* which is **constitutive of Jesus’ mission** and can be found in all forms of his activity.¹⁶

The Kenosis of the Missionary-Religious

Religious life, as a special way of discipleship (*sequela Christi*) “for the sake of the Kingdom” (Mt 19:12) and *mission* as the continuation of the prophetic mission of Jesus, are the two compo-

nents of the charism of missionary congregations. The way we live this charism and our religious vows should reflect as much as possible the commitment of Jesus the missionary. At the same time it should be nurtured by a spirituality that is modelled on that of Jesus “the faithful witness” (Apoc 1:5).

Jesus sends out his disciples with the same mission: “As the Father has sent me, so do I send you” (Jn 20:21; 17:18). The Father’s sending of the Son serves both as the model and reason for the sending of the disciples.

What we need today is not so much the hellenized “high” Christology of patristic times that explain what Jesus *is*, but rather a Christology that explains what Jesus *said* and *did*, the “low” Christology of the gospels. To be “witness” is not so much a question of accepting truths and proclaiming one’s faith, but foremost a question of following Jesus. The Kingdom became visible in what Jesus said and did. The Kingdom is realized when his disciples follow his life-style, words and deeds. “This is your calling: remember Christ who suffered for you, leaving you an example so that you may follow in his steps” (1 Pe 2:21).

If Jesus is the model of the missionary, and if *kenosis* is constitutive of Jesus’ life and mission, our lives should follow, to the extent possible, this *kenosis*. This has profound implications for the life, ministry, spirituality and basic attitude of the missionary. It will transform the aims, the priorities, the structures, and the methods for doing mission.

In the past, missionaries have generally attached little importance to their role as servants. They did not adopt “the form of slaves or servants”, but rather that of masters and patrons. Missionaries often went as supervisors, not as partners.

If the idea of *kenosis* would have guided missionary activity throughout history, we would not be facing today the consequences and difficulties of an exclusively western and often unattractive type of Christianity that has been exported

and imposed all over the world, in connivance with imperial conquests and colonial interests.

A Triple Kenosis

When we look at Jesus’ life and ministry, we can distinguish three moments or dimensions of his *kenosis*: the *kenosis* of incarnation (identification and solidarity with human reality), the *kenosis* of the road (being on the move, reaching out to all people, especially the most abandoned), and the *kenosis* of the cross (faithfulness in assuming the ultimate consequences of his mission). In the life of Jesus’ disciples these three dimensions are not to be considered chronologically but simultaneously, aspects of one and the same lifelong process. As such, they may also help us in our understanding of the religious vows.

The Kenosis of Incarnation – the call to love

It is the *kenosis* of entering human reality **deeply**, of going to the very depths of human existence, of becoming and being totally and truly human (Phil 2:6-7; Lk 2:1-20; Jn 1:14a) through participation in what is weak, oppressed and poor. This *kenosis* brings us closer to people, and especially to sharing the life of those for whom Jesus opted (Lk 4:18; Mt 5:3-12). It calls us to solidarity and ‘insertion’ into the reality of people in need of light and liberation.

Incarnation means that we should ‘become flesh at the underside of history,’ and opt for the places where people are suffering or hurt in their dignity. For missionaries it also implies a respectful entering into the riches of other cultures and into the mysterious depth of different God-experiences. This is further expressed in an ongoing readiness and capacity to listen to people’s voices, questions, answers and mysteries. This will demand of the missionary a willingness to give up preconceived ideas, privileges, pretensions and hidden agendas. For a religious missionary this *kenosis* requires the sacrifice of certain forms of human love and of building a family, so as to have greater freedom for the specific demands of mission. But the call to mis-

sonary incarnation is above all the call to **encompassing life-giving love** of others without necessarily being loved in return (cf. Jn 13:34; 15:12-13).

Could not *the kenosis of incarnation* be the missionary way to understand and live **the vow of chastity**?

The Kenosis of the Road – the call to justice and solidarity

It is the *kenosis* of **mobility**, availability and provisionality, the *kenosis* of walking with people, of setting out with people, and of a common search for truth, light and hope. This *kenosis* will lead us to **solidarity** with people's movements and struggles, and with people who are lost or on the run. It will enable us to reach out to all, especially to those to whom the Lord urges us to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom. It is the *kenosis* of missionary restlessness and daring, the *kenosis* of the ongoing search of the "lost sheep" and of the unconditional option for the poor. It is the *kenosis* of **going "very far,"** to the outer boundaries of faith and hope. This necessarily demands a simple life style and the sacrifice of all impediments to this commitment. Like Jesus, a missionary has to give up all ambitions, plans and securities, and rid him/herself of any feeling of superiority. This is the *kenosis* of not-having, of renouncing extra luggage, powerful means and even one's family (cf. Mt 10:9-10; 19:27.29), and of refusing to settle down, to look back or to compromise (cf. Lk 9:23-25. 59-62; 14:26-27). It is the *kenosis* of non-installation (cf. Mt 8:20), be it in works, occupations, commodities or ideas.

Since we do not know where the Lord will lead us or how long the road is, this *kenosis* requires trust, patience and the acceptance of weakness and vulnerability. It is also the *kenosis* of our willingness to share what we have and what we are (time, talents, skills, energy), and of our constant readiness to 'move', to respond to greater pressure, to more difficult or challenging calls. In other words, to follow the Lord to Galilee (cf. Mt 28:7.10.16), to the periphery. Only through this self-emptying will missionaries acquire the inner freedom and the prophetic

frankness they need for their task, especially in demanding situations (cf. Mt 10:17-20; Lk 21:12-19).

Could not *the kenosis of the road* be the missionary way to understand and live **the vow of poverty**?

The Kenosis of the Cross – the call to risky choices

It is the *kenosis* of **faithfulness** to God and to people till the end, the *kenosis* of radicalism in going all the way like Jesus did (Phil 2:8; Mt 16:24; Mk 8:34), refusing to escape threats, conflicts or difficulties. It is the *kenosis* of **going "too far,"** the *kenosis* of solidarity with the crucified people of today, shown in our commitment to help carry the crosses of the wretched of the earth, and in our protest against the crucifixion and massacres of the innocent. It is also the *kenosis* of giving up our freedom in order to set others free.

For missionaries, the *kenosis* of the cross is very often the *kenosis* of not seeing the fruits of their efforts (cf. the missionary parable of the Sower), the *kenosis* of having to endure the hardships of mission, even persecution. For some it may be the *kenosis* of failure, loneliness, bitterness, or doubt. For many others, like for Jesus, the *kenosis* of the cross implies the experience of fear (Mt 26:37-38 // Mk 14:33-34; Jn 12:27), solitude and abandonment (Mk 15:34). Jesus showed us how to assume it all in total obedience to the will of the Father (Mt 26:39 // Mk 14:36 // Lk 22:42). His final commitment culminated in a *kenosis* of total surrender in naked poverty as a sign of his love without limits (Lk 23:46).

The *kenosis* of the cross is that of the sacrifice of our life: we are called to give up our life so that others may live. Yet we know that the cross, suffering and death are not God's last words: *kenosis* is the way to the resurrection, to the fullness of life (Phil 2:9).

Could not *the kenosis of the cross* be the missionary way to understand and live **the vow of obedience**?

Missionary Praxis in the Manner of Jesus

Mission has its origin and foundation in the *Missio Dei*, in the salvific presence and action of God in history. Mission originates from God's boundless love for God's creation and for the human beings created in God's image. The goal of the *Missio Dei* is the Kingdom of God. *Kenosis* is the means by which one becomes part of the mission of God. The kingdom that Jesus announced and inaugurated is one that is founded on and maintained by a self-emptying love for all. No one is compelled to be part of it, but all are invited. Unlike in human societies, the first to be part of it are the poor, the victims, the marginalized, the vulnerable and the abandoned.

If *kenosis* is constitutive of Jesus' mission, it follows that missionary praxis always has to be carried out in the incarnational way of *kenosis*. In spite of difficulties and distortions in diverse historical circumstances, there has been a deep-rooted conviction throughout the history of Christianity that following the way of Jesus is an integral aspect of mission, proof of its authenticity, and *the test of missionary faithfulness*. Hence, an understanding of the self-emptying of Christ can lead to a fuller comprehension of his ministry and, consequently, of our own missionary commitments.

The criterion of the life, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ permits us to identify him today. This criterion leads us not only to discover who he is (the Lord and Savior of the oppressed), but where he is to be found today (among the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed), and what he is doing (healing their wounds, breaking their chains of oppression, demanding justice and peace, giving life, and imparting

hope).²¹

In the words of Anthony Gittins: Jesus "journeyed along the borders between countries and people, letting himself be sidetracked and put upon (Lk 17:11ff)... He engaged and encountered a variety of people, sinners and outcasts, and he entrusted himself to people whom he did not intentionally seek (Mk 7:24ff; Jn 12:1ff)." The many examples reflect a whole attitude and a whole way of being: Jesus' entire life was directed toward engagement with people and with negotiating and transcending their boundaries but also, gradually, his own.²²

And so it must be with each one of us. But we have to be committed to the call to mission, to the lure and the demands of the boundaries or margins. **Unless we seek the margins and the people who live there**, a dimension of our Christian lives will remain unexplored and a whole vista of mission will remain unseen, out of sight.²³

Since mission is the heart and nature of the Church, it is true what Lucien Richard wrote: we need a *kenotic*, self-emptying church, a counter-cultural and counter-societal church, an *apophatic* church (emphasizing the *via negativa*), not in the contemplative sense, but in the sense of a church which always offers an alternative vision; a church always – with the Lord – on the way to Jerusalem.²⁴

A biblical image that powerfully renders this idea is Heb 13:12-13: *Jesus suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured.*

To go "outside the camp" means that we have to go and encounter Christ where he is to be found: outside the visible civil and religious compound, outside the security and comfort of the redeemed community,²⁵ where he gave his life for our salvation. We have to look for him and find him among the crucified people of today, among the

destitute, the persecuted, the rejected and those who suffer. If the disciples want to encounter Jesus and follow him, they have to go and see where he lives, "outside the gate", in the wilderness, at the peripheries of society, amidst the outsiders and outcasts of the world. And once we have found the master there, we are summoned to commit ourselves to those with whom he suffered and for whom he gave his life: the excluded, the poor, the desperate, the voiceless.²⁶

This is the only way to "transform mission" and to discover the true meaning of *Missio Dei* in a time of crisis:

For this... indicates an action, which does not point indiscriminately to all kinds of happenings in the world, but only to one incomprehensible event, namely that God, the creator of all things, submerged himself in his own world as a stranger, as a displaced person, an outcast, in solidarity with other outcasts and strangers, who in this world pursues a very special, hidden road in order to liberate it.²⁷

This means that God is hidden in history and especially in Jesus Christ. And Jesus and the Spirit are "hidden" (present, active) in the Church, hence, in all disciples. The mission of the disciples, the mission of the Church, is to continue this mission of God by prolonging the logic of Jesus' mission in a creative, courageous and credible way.²⁸

Conclusion

Kenosis is not a strategy or a method, but an essential dimension of the mystery of Christ and his mission.

In Jesus' ministry it anticipated, and in the mission of his disciples it continues the mystery of a crucified Messiah, 'a scandal to the Jews and a foolishness to the nations, but to those who have been called, ... a Christ who is both the power of God and wisdom

of God. For God's folly is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength' (1 Cor 1:23-25). *Kenosis* is this foolishness and this weakness of God who draws all people to himself (Jn 12:32) by the power of a Love without limits.²⁹

Religious missionaries will benefit from the frequent meditation on the mystery of Christ's *kenosis* and its implications for missionary commitment and religious life. Following the way of *kenosis* is surely no easy task, but one that will be life-giving both for others and ourselves. It will call for a greater intimacy and identification with the Lord, which is the goal of all discipleship. *A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master* (Mt 10:24-25).

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¹See the introduction to *Spiritus* # 142, March 1996, p. 2 [my translation].

²Cf. D. O'Murchu, *Religious Life: A Prophetic Vision*. (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1991).

³M. Amaladoss, "Religious and Mission," *SEDOS Bulletin* 25 (1993) 8: 213.

⁴J. Chittister, *The Fire in These Ashes: A Spirituality of Contemporary Religious Life* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1995), pp. 102-103.

⁵Catherine M. Harmer, *Religious Life in the 21st Century: A Contemporary Journey into Canaan*

- (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1995), p. 82 [emphasis added].
- ⁶Cf. M. Azevedo, *The Consecrated Life: Crossroads and Directions* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), p. 23.
- ⁷Cf. M. Amaladoss, "The Challenges of Mission Today," in Jenkinson, W. and H. O'Sullivan, eds., *Trends in Mission: Toward the Third Millennium* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), pp. 359-397, esp. 390-396; "Mission as Prophecy," in Scherer, J.A. and S.B. Bevans, eds., *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization-2: Theological Foundations* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), pp. 64-72.
- ⁸Acts 4:25; 1 Cor 15:58; 2 Cor 6:1; Gal 2:2; Phil 2:16; 1 Thes 2:1; 3:5; Jm 4:5.
- ⁹1 Cor 15:10.
- ¹⁰1 Cor 15:14; Eph 5:6; Col 2:8.
- ¹¹1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 2:16; Jm 2:20.
- ¹²Rom 4:14; 1 Cor 1:17; 9:15; 2 Cor 9:3.
- ¹³E. Mathews, "Christ and Kenosis: A Model for Mission," *Journal for Applied Missiology* 2 (1991) 1: 2 (Article made available at <http://bible.acu.edu/missions/page.asp?ID=415>. Accessed October 3, 2005).
- ¹⁴E. Mathews, "Christ and Kenosis," p. 2.
- ¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 3.
- ¹⁶L. Legrand, "Rencontres kénétiques de Jésus," *Spiritus*, n° 142, March 1996, pp. 40-41 [my translation; emphasis added].
- ¹⁷Cf. also the reflections on the vows and *kenosis* by A. Paoli, *Buscando Libertad: Castidad – Obediencia – Pobreza* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1982), pp. 52-56, 74-78, 83-86.
- ¹⁸Cf. D.J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), pp. 389-393; A.J. Kirk, *What is Mission? Theological Explorations* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999), pp. 25-30.
- ¹⁹Cf. A.J. Kirk, *What is Mission?* pp. 39 and 69.
- ²⁰E. Mathews, "Christ and Kenosis," p. 4.
- ²¹O.E. Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1982), pp. 15-16.
- ²²A.J. Gittins, *Bread for the Journey: the Mission of Transformation and the Transformation of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), pp. 150-151.
- ²³*Ibid.*, p. 151 [emphasis added].
- ²⁴L. Richard, *Christ: The Self-Emptying God*. (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1997), p. 194.
- ²⁵O.E. Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate*, p. 190.
- ²⁶Cf. A.J. Gittins, *Bread for the Journey*, pp. 158-161; cf also A.J. Gittins, *A Presence that Disturbs: A Call to Radical Discipleship* (Liguori: Liguori/Triumph, 2002), pp. 107-118; A.J. Gittins, *Ministry at the Margins: Strategy and Spirituality for Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002).
- ²⁷H.H. Rosin, *Missio Dei': An Examination of the Origin, Context and Function of the Term in Protestant Missiological Discussion* (Leiden: 1972), p. 34 – quoted by J.A.B. Jongeneel and J.M. van Engelen, "Contemporary Currents in Missiology," in F.J. Verstraelen et alii, eds., *Missiology: An Ecumenical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 447-448.
- ²⁸Cf. D.J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 34.
- ²⁹L. Legrand, "Rencontres kénétiques de Jésus," p. 49 [my translation].

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