

THE CHURCH'S MISSION: FIVE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

"Through the Council, the Church has better understood its missionary nature. But how, given the demands placed upon it by the era in which we live, will it accomplish the mission which is its 'raison d'etre.'

As Father Chenu so admirably pointed out in the first issue of this magazine, the structural reform proposed in the Council and carefully discussed in the first two sessions should profoundly affect the churches of the Third World.(referring to the nations now in the process of development).

But such a reform must ultimately influence the entire Church. ~~In particular,~~ ^{particularly important} It ought to have ^{consequences of great} ~~importance~~ for the mission of the Church. Vatican II has succeeded in creating a more vital consciousness of the necessity for a missionary renewal ^{both} among the assembled bishops and Christians in general. As the discussion continued it became increasingly apparent that ~~the~~ ^{today's} fundamental question ~~appearing today~~ is the relationship of the Church with the world in which it ~~lives~~ ^{acts.} When it became aware of this fact, the Council planned a schema on the problem and added it to the sixteen projected texts. At the present time we might say that the crucial issue of Vatican II is found in schema XVII.

Following we would like to offer some reflections on the necessary conditions for a missionary Church, in light of the basic tendencies manifested during the first two sessions and the first information available on schema XVII. We

believe that the effectiveness of the declarations of the Council depends on the openness and the preparation of Christians. Not even the finest text will result in action if Christians are not prepared to understand it. Therefore, each one of us, from our distinct vantage points, must try to discover the demands of the Church's mission today.

The Church in Continual Reform:

It is necessary and sufficient that the Church be the Church, speaking in the ecumenical language common today. However, this point must be clarified so that it is employed in a Catholic sense without risk of error. The word 'Church' means, in one sense, the concrete community of those who recognize Christ as Lord and Saviour, who carry his sacramental mark, and live in organic and fraternal unity with each other. This concrete community is recognized by Catholics as the historical manifestation of the Body of Christ. It is also called the 'Church' to emphasize the fundamental bond which can be expressed in terms of relative identification. The Catholic Church is the Body of Christ realized historically. But if this is true, it is also true that this identification does not allow us to apply to the Church in its historical fulfillment what is not absolutely true of the Body of Christ, for that is what the Church is in its ultimate and 'mystical' (or better mysterious, i.e. in the realm of mystery) form. The Body of Christ, as Cardinal Lienart stated in the first session of the Council, transcends the limits of the Church

proper; those on the boundaries live the life of Christ without being part of the Catholic Church in the same sense as are those communities which are visibly united to the Roman Catholic Church.

To this real discrepancy must be added still another: the concrete Catholic community of any given era (our own, for example) does not make full or perfect use of all the means of grace which are at its disposal in the ecclesiastical institution. In other words, the present historical form of the institution is necessarily imperfect and, to a certain extent, partial. As an example, the concrete form which the pontifical primacy has assumed today--extreme centralization--is only one of many possible forms. It certainly has its advantages, but it also has disadvantages. It is not the only possible form, nor necessarily the best, even at a given moment. Here too we see the discrepancy between the Church as an ideal institution and its historical fulfilment in various forms. This discrepancy is, undoubtedly, inevitable; it springs from the very nature of things. It imposes on the Church a permanent state of reform from both an ethical point of view (which is, of course, important) and a structural point of view (although the latter is much more difficult to recognize).

It seems to us that this is the first condition for missionary vitality within the Church: that it unceasingly attempt to reduce the discrepancy which exists between the ideal institution and the present historical form of this institution as it is in fact. This effort should take place according to the bases of the

institution: Unity, Sanctity, Catholicity, Apostolicity.

The Church: No Identification with a Political Society

The principle of the Church being the Church must also be understood in another sense. This brings us to the second condition for an authentically missionary Church. We wish to speak here of the fidelity of today's Catholics and of the concrete institution through which the Church expresses itself to the original and unique nature of the community, which is the Body of Christ.

Historically, the Church has been affected by its experience in the Middle Ages, when it found itself at the head of Christian civilization. The political, earthly role of the Church as a social institution is a thing of the past. But this era is not definitively behind us as of yet, at least in the sense that many of us look back nostalgically to the past when the distinction (always maintained legally) between the temporal city and the ecclesiastical city, for all practical purposes, had been eliminated in favor of the latter. The Church has been an important factor in civilization and culture. It was able to bring its original message to a world which was familiar to it and in which its language was perfectly comprehensible. If the consequences of this situation were, on one hand, fortunate, they did not prevent the Church from facing certain dangers which it still faces. To those who stand outside it (and perhaps even some of its members), the Church appears to be a cultural organization like many others, but unlike the others it contains a certain civilization. It is a civilization, but without transcendence. It is true

that in Asia and Africa the preaching of the Gospel has often been accompanied by civilizing contributions. This is why secular states, such as France, have so openly favored missionary activity. In the eyes of the government, it was a matter of the projection of French culture. No matter what importance we wish to give to this fact, it cannot be denied and the importance of its consequences must be recognized.

What we say about the past seems to us to be equally true for the present. Everyone agrees that today the Church is not directing culture and civilization. But many of us feel that the Church, and only the Church, can contribute essential and effective elements for the construction of the temporal city. As we face the problems presented by the modern world (social justice, international understanding, cooperation, etc.,) we frequently give the impression that we are the only ones who know the answers, even when we haven't bothered to carefully study the exact nature of said problems.

In doing so, we risk identifying the Church with something other than what it is or what it ought to be. It is evident that the Church is not a physics or chemistry laboratory of superior quality. It is less frequently remembered and emphasized that neither is it a kind of 'society of nations,' a welfare organism, or a super-syndicate. This is especially evident when we recall the purpose for which Our Lord Jesus Christ instituted His Church. The Church is erected on Faith, Hope and Charity. Through these elements it expresses the

relationship of humanity with God in Jesus Christ. It is established in history by the workings of the sacramental structure in which its entire raison d'etre is found in the original relationship between humanity and God, and God and humanity. Consequently it has a totally different nature than that of institutions of this world. Its mission is of a different order. The more the community of Catholics manifests this transcendence today in signs as expressive as possible, the more it will be the Church, the more it will be really missionary.

The Church as the Humble Conscience of the World

Will the Church then be pure transcendence? Some might be tempted to think so. In the commonly accepted distinction between the spiritual and the temporal we seem to introduce a clear separation between the domain of the Church, the spiritual, and the realm of the profane, the temporal.

Thus, we could easily draw the conclusion that the Church completely avoids the terrestrial, the profane, the political--that it plays no part in these things. It seems to us however, that the third condition for a missionary Church is that it be present, really present, in the world of men. The Church is not yet the kingdom. It is paradise realized only in a partial and incomplete form. It exists on this earth and its members all belong to the world of human beings who cannot, even if they wish, ^{to do so} escape their human condition. Even the most mystical of hermits remained tied to the temporal conditions of human existence. All bishops are equally committed

to the human adventure. Their function of another order does not remove them from the world. Nor is it possible to explain the distinction between the clergy and the layman through the sole distinction existing between the Church and the world.

Both clergy and laymen are members of the ecclesiastical city and of the temporal city although not in an absolutely identical manner. The presence of the Church in the world is best expressed by the idea of 'service.' Its mission is that of serving Man, not only in an abstract and distant manner by indicating theoretically what Man ought to believe and do to be saved in the future, but by making its own contribution toward Man's fulfillment. It does this negatively by opposing through official statements and through the daily conduct of its members, everything in our modern world which is a force of dehumanization. It does this in a positive manner through its members' participation in the progressive humanization of the world. In this way, without imposing its own convictions, the Church undertakes to demonstrate the ultimate meaning of the effort toward greater humanization. This meaning is none other than Man Realized--Jesus Christ himself. The Church thus becomes the 'conscience' of the world, provided that we eliminate from that term everything which would imply pride or self-satisfaction. But this meaning can be achieved only insofar as the Church carries on the struggle for humanization impartially, without seeking the triumph of its own cause.

As Monsignor Blomjous recently pointed out in an article in Informations Catholiques Internationales, it is essential to emphasize the change of perspective from the concept of the mission of the Church as conquest to a purer concept. The mission of the Church, a little flock among nations (and increasingly a minority in the world) is to manifest the ultimate ^{meaning} ~~significance~~ of that world by embodying it.

Laymen in the Church: Christ Saves Real Men

This function cannot be carried out if the layman does not occupy his rightful place in the life of the ecclesiastical community (and this is the fourth condition for the existence of a missionary Church). It is necessary that in the Church there are Christians whose essential duty is to manifest its transcendence. They do so by reminding the world through their ~~merymission~~ that grace come from Jesus Christ, from what we sometimes call 'on high.' They are responsible for showing that salvation is due to the free initiative of God who calls men and invites them to participate in his own Life. These Christians are the bishops and the priests, the group of ministers who are the service of the revealing and sanctifying authority of Christ. But there are also Christians whose mission within the Church is to manifest the object of the divine initiative. These men, within their very humanity and not outside it (through some sort of negation of Man) are called to live the divine life, just as Christ lived it in His humanity. The universality and humanity of salvation (that is, of its ultimate fulfilment) reveals itself through the laymen in the Church. This is indispensable if the reality of salvation is not to remain foreign to men.

The entire Church, by vocation, is missionary. Missionary action cannot be reserved only for men especially gifted for a difficult life or for dangerous missions, nor exclusively for bishops. The distinction between the priesthood and the laity is not anterior to the mission of the Church. All the people of God, by the very fact of their participation in the priesthood of Jesus Christ, are sent into the world to make real His priestly presence and action. Within that common mission, it is necessary to distinguish two essential functions: that of the priest (or bishop) who reminds us that Jesus Christ descended from heaven, sent by His Father from above; and that of the layman, who remembers that the goal of this descent of the Son had as its goal humanity itself. This same humanity must one day enter into the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In other words, the Church as the Conscience of the world is missionary. Within its structure the clergy ~~###/###/###/###/###~~ manifests the fact that the ultimate meaning of humanity comes from God Himself in a transcendent manner. The laity demonstrates the fact that men themselves are called, and that humanity itself receives this transcendent destiny and meaning from God.

Respect for Freedom of Choice

The real presence of the Church in the world thus implies the complementary natures of the priesthood and the laity (or better, the episcopate and the laity) in the accomplishment of the Church's mission. This requirement is obviously not the only one. Many others could be indicated here, but we will limit ourselves to pointing out two which are of vital importance in today's world. This world, in which the Church ought to be present through its missionary vocation, is on its way toward unification. There is no reason to dwell on so evident a fact.

This unification, based on the development of science and technology, is expressed in the creation of a certain type of culture or civilization. However, this powerful process of unification is paradoxically accompanied by a great emphasis on its diversities.

Our world is also characterized by the recognition of the value of these differences. Access to political and economic independence by numerous peoples also means recognition of cultural independence. This independence is sometime affirmed by violence and hostility toward those who have destroyed local traditions in order to impose their own civilization.

The Church is in a position to understand these points of view, since it calls itself 'Catholic.' It considers itself as the conveyor of a message which encompasses all human values, rather than destroying or diminishing them. This respect for diversity seems to us to be another essential condition for a missionary Church.

The more difficult its fulfilment, the more important it becomes to insist on this condition. Throughout its history the Church has progressively adapted itself to the civilizations which have followed one another since the time of the Apostles. The Church achieved integration with the Greek and Latin worlds to such a degree that its dogmatic, cultural, and disciplinary expression was formed from the elements offered by the Greco-Latin civilization. Greek concepts were used by the Church to express the dogmas of the Trinity and Christology. The same thing happened in the field of liturgy and in the concrete organization of the institution. Peter's successors, for example, took the

titles formerly used by the Roman emperors (Pontifex Maximum, etc.). It is impossible to erase historical fact. ~~It is also impossible today~~ Today it is also impossible, without casting doubt on the action of the Spirit in the history of the Church, to return to some sort of original departure point by means of scientific or other methods. Therefore, it is absolutely essential to the mission of the Church that the mystery of Christ be expressed in terms which are comprehensible to Hindus, Chinese and Africans--those who are the farthest from the Greco-Latin mentality. Likewise it is of the utmost importance that the message of Jesus be expressed in cultural terms and according to forms which are accessible to modern man, whose technical mentality is ever more alienated from the classical cultures and the ancient Western tradition. If the solution proposed by Protestant theologians such as Bultmann (in the form of demythologizing) seems ultimately irreconcilable with the Catholic faith because of the undeniable contribution of historical development, it is nevertheless true that it constitutes a real problem. A recent expression of this opinion is the Anglican bishop's book, Honest to God.

To solve this missionary problem, it is necessary to recall that the Holy Spirit is always present among us carrying out his work in the hearts of men. Thus we arrive at the final condition for a missionary church.

The presence of the Church in the diversity of the present-day world cannot be realized through decisions made at the top of the center of the Church. They are too distant from the reality of this diversity. Let us speak clearly. It is not the 'Roman'

or European theologians who can express the mystery of Jesus in a truly Hindu or Chinese theology. The Hindu and Chinese Christians themselves will gradually be able to express it in their own language and through their own cultural materials. In the same way, the African and Japanese Christians will have to find forms for the liturgical expression of the mystery of Christ which best fit their religious sensitivity. This presupposes that we are determined not to be content with hasty and superficial reforms in the field of liturgy, as in discipline or dogma (each of these fields presents different problems). It also presupposes ^{that we have an} infinite respect for the action of the Spirit ~~on all parts of the Church,~~ thus supporting ~~the~~ the liberty of Christians in the realization of their commitment to Christ.

In other words, it is necessary to bring into the light one of the characteristics of the Church of Jesus Christ--~~F~~Freedom. Freedom is not caprice or chaos, but rather the action of the Spirit which ~~uses~~ uses attempts, intents and trials to show the infinite richness of the mystery of Christ, never totally expressed in our Christian behavior or dogma. Today the Church can only be missionary in a real, and not merely a theoretical, ~~sense~~ sense if she accepts as a gift of the Lord the free search for a human and diversified response to divine revelation.

Having reviewed all that seems to be demanded of us twentieth-century Christians, and knowing full-well our limitations and deficiencies, we might be tempted to be pessimistic. It is more important to appeal to God's grace. Recognition of the demands of the Gospel is ~~always~~ always accompanied by a gift of the Lord,

He gives to His own the very thing he asks of ~~them~~ them. Thus, it is better to rejoice that we have been called to such a task under these new conditions. We are privileged to be the witnesses to an unusual wave of renewal ~~within the Church~~ which is taking place both in the Catholic Church and in the non-Catholic Christian churches. We are privileged to have been called upon to work in this renewal."

(Translation of an article published in Terre Entière, Paris, No. 6, July-August, 1964, pp. 23-36).

This translation has been prepared by the Rev. James Barry, a resident scholar at the Urban Training Center in collaboration with the Rev. James P. Mahoney. It is a part of Mr. Barry's project within the Research and Development Program of the Urban Training Center in the field of Church Renewal.