

"The Changing Nature of Mission"
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Let me begin with these four statements:

- 1) The era of the foreign missionary movement as we have known it has definitely ended.
- 2) It would be advantageous to the Church if it voluntarily did away with its present missionary organization and structure, in order that the whole Church might become missionary.
- 3) The role of clerical and religious foreign missionaries is diminishing rapidly; and
- 4) The laity must assume an ever-increasing role in carrying out God's mission in this world.

These statements are some of the conclusions to which I have come after a decade of teaching Missiology at The Catholic University of America and wrestling with the concept of mission, its goals and objectives. They are merely conclusions; it would take a semester or two in the classroom to go into all the reasons for them, which I have been doing these past few years. I firmly

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believe that missionaries and missiologists have finally worked themselves out of a job. But we have yet to recognize and act upon this fact.

In making these statements I am not trying to be either melodramatic or sensational, only honest and sincere. I am convinced that it is no longer possible even to think along past lines, let alone act in accordance with most of our past conception of mission. Ours is a revolutionary era, so it should be no surprise that our outlook upon mission must take a revolutionary turn.

Let me elaborate briefly on these four statements. The era of the foreign missionary movement is definitely over, because the goals and objectives of that movement are no longer valid and justifiable. Although they were valid and justifiable in the light of past thinking, they are no longer. The mission of God in this modern world must be seen in a radically different manner.

The Christian Church once revolutionized and shaped the Western world. It was also the Christian missionary movement which was once the principal agent in bringing about change and progress in the non-Western world. But this evolutionary process is being carried forward no longer by the Church or the missionary movement but by science and technology. We have entered upon a new stage of human history in which God's redemptive activity in this world is closely related to the process of secularization, a process that has its roots in the biblical revelation. I suggest both that we realize this and that we formally recognize the end

of the foreign missionary movement. I believe that a candid announcement that we are giving up the goals and objectives of that historical movement would be advantageous in making the Church more acceptable in the modern world, a world at once both secular and pluralistic.

Secondly, I suggest that the Church voluntarily do away with its present separate missionary organization and structure, since they are designed for goals which are now outdated. I say this not in any spirit of iconoclasm. Rather, I am convinced that only when the Church does away with its separate missionary organization and structure can the whole Church become truly missionary, as it ought to be. A demonstration of this would be too lengthy, and I can only point out here that Christ gave to His Church a sufficiently missionary organization, that the early Church was eminently missionary, and that the later missionary organization and structure came about as a result of accidental, historical circumstances and for reasons which no longer obtain. It is not only no longer needed; it is positively an obstacle to the new type of mission demanded.

This separate structure was added on principally because of a faulty conception of mission. And the reason for this was due basically to a lack of a theology of mission. Perhaps only a missiologist can appreciate just how faulty has been our past conception of mission. Let me point out that our past outlook upon mission has reflected the empirical situation, not what the mission ought to have been according to the teaching of the Bible.

This is a fundamental defect vitiating much of our thinking about mission, and although it ought to be recognized, it has not yet.

Our traditional statements of mission, for example, have centered around these goals: to propagate the faith, to convert pagans, to save souls, to bring the benefits of Christian civilization and culture to non-Christians, to establish the Church. The first thing to note about these formulations is that they are not the language of the Bible but man's interpretation of what the mission should be. Second, it should be noted that most of these past goals have either been quietly discarded, or else should be.

For instance, no one seriously contends that the purpose of mission is to bring to other peoples the benefits of Christian civilization and culture. Although the notion of conversion and salvation of souls has been a principal motive in past centuries, this too has become superseded. For hundreds of years there has been a widespread assumption that the Church through its missionary activity was destined to convert the entire human race to Christianity. This was a mere assumption, one based on political and social factors, not on the teaching of the Bible. Yet we based much of our labors on this goal alone. Today it must be rejected as a valid goal, and principally because it has no biblical foundation.

More recently, as we all know, the notion of the "establishment of the Church" has become the accepted Catholic formulation of

the purpose of missionary activity. In fact, it is the operative principle in the Missionary Decree of Vatican II, around which everything else missionary revolves. Yet it is inadequate and far too narrow, for it limits our thinking of mission to Church planting. This has placed the focus of mission on the Church and its establishment as an institution. We must free ourselves from preoccupation with establishing an institution, with its growth and well-being, and only indirectly and as a kind of afterthought giving consideration to the idea of the People of God serving the world of mankind at large. This attitude now needs to be reversed, especially since the Vatican Council placed so much emphasis upon the Church serving the world.

We must place the focus of mission not on the Church but upon the world; for God's love and concern is not merely for the Church, but for the entire world, which He so loved that He sent His only begotten Son into it to redeem it. It is erroneous to think in terms of a "mission of the Church," as we have done, for this can be misleading. The mission is God's, not the Church's. This deserves emphasis, for the Church does not so much perform mission but rather participates in God's mission.

The notion of the "establishment of the Church" narrows dangerously the very notion of mission. It makes us think in terms of a mission of the Church which results merely in founding more institutional churches. If we think in terms of establishing and maintaining an institutional Church, as we have done, we tend to make our plans, devise our programs, rather than leave ourselves open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit to direct us in His mission

as he wants us to act -- within or without the institutional Church.

God's mission in this world goes far beyond the frontiers of the Church, far beyond the plans and programs of religious men and women. He reaches out to, and works through, every creature in this universe, Christian and non-Christian, believer and unbeliever. A notion of mission which starts from Church and ends with Church results in a vicious circle, so narrow that it excludes many realities of this world which God has redeemed. It is a false basis on which to place our thinking; yet it is the basis of the Missionary Decree.

In the past we have tried to fit all mankind into the Christian Church rather than attempting to see how the Church and Christianity fit into mankind at large. I suggest that we reverse the process and look at the present world and at God's action in this world through all men, and then ask just what Christianity has to contribute to the human race in its evolutionary development. In so doing, let us avoid the cliches of the past.

Finally, it should be noted that the purpose of mission as stated in the Missionary Decree disregards the fact that the Church is established to a large extent in nearly every part of the world. It also disregards the fact that the institutional form of the Church which is established throughout the world is being seen more and more as inadequate and irrelevant to the challenges facing the human race in any part of the world, and

that further attempts to extend that institution are futile and useless.

The task of Christians is no longer to propagate a Western formulation of the Christian faith, no longer that of converting and saving souls, no longer that of establishing a Western form of institutional Church -- all of which have been the goals and objectives of the missionary organization and structure. Some may think that it is possible to renew and reform this organization and structure, that it is possible to change the attitudes and thinking of those working within it, that centuries-old procedures can be redirected. I do not share such sanguine hopes, especially since the end of the mission, its agents, and the methods in the future must be so completely different from those of the past. Just as a Colonial Office is nothing more than a relic of a past era, so too the Propaganda Congregation should be. The parallel is apropos; for, without suggesting any causal relation between the two, the foreign missionary movement and its goals is as defunct as is colonialism.

My third point is that the role of clerical and religious missionaries is coming to an end rapidly, for non-Christians no longer want (indeed, probably never did want) Christian missionaries trying to convert them. Moreover, missionaries have accomplished their assigned task, namely, the establishment of the Church -- only to find that the imported Western form of the institutional Church is largely irrelevant to the problems and challenges facing the People of God in the new independent

nations of Africa and Asia. (In fact, the weakness and irrelevancy of the present institutional form of the Church is becoming more and more apparent even in the Western world.)

Still, Christianity can play an important role in the upbuilding of the new world order, even as it did in the upbuilding of Western civilization, but with this difference: the unity of man to be sought in a secular, pluralistic world cannot be a religious unity within the framework of the Christian Church. The missionary task is not to try to convert the world to Christianity. The problems and challenges with which God is facing us today are more secular than religious.

The great challenge facing the whole human race today is development in all its forms -- political, social, economic, cultural, spiritual, especially the latter. In one sense, development can be considered as synonymous with evolution, and it is useful to so consider it, for then it will be easier to understand that development is not merely material or economic but must embrace the totality of the human phenomenon.

Evolution is not merely a theory but a fact. It is a process that has been going on within mankind, even within the history of salvation. This evolutionary process is, of course, the doing of God Himself. Consequently, it is our responsibility to try to understand mission in the light of the total process of the evolution of man.

Evolution in the past has been principally in the material

order. In the future, however, according to Teilhard de Chardin, evolution will very likely be principally in the spiritual order. The present stage of human evolution on which we have already embarked indicates not only that future development must be principally within the spirit of man but also must be in accordance with the nature of the modern world in which man is evolving, and that world is secular and pluralistic.

Future development will require a conscious and determined effort on the part of all men to increase the unity of the human family, to work for peace and brotherhood, for the collaboration of all men -- in a word, "to promote the universal good of the entire human family," as Pope John wrote in Pacem in Terris. Obviously, these are secular, not religious goals. In the language of Teilhard, we must work for the increase of love, the greatest of cosmic energies and the very lifeblood of this spiritual evolution. It is a challenge being given to all men, Christians and non-Christians, believers and unbelievers, and it demands that we see Christian involvement in a pluralistic world in a totally different light. Unlike their position in Christendom, Christians have no privileges in a pluralistic world order.

It means then that the future mission must lie principally with the laity, for God's redemptive activity in this world is taking place more and more in the secular sphere. It is, I believe, absolutely essential for a better understanding of the mission to see the relationship and meaning to the Christian Church of the process of secularization. It is necessary to distinguish between

secularism and secularization. Secularism refers to that total worldview which tries to explain this world, man and society without any reference to God or religion. Secularization is a word that points to the world of time where God is at work and where man is called to be free to join Him wherever the action is. Used in this sense, the term stresses the positive fact that for Christians the world of time is important. This is the world God created and redeemed, and which He is now elevating to a higher order along with the cooperation of men of all religions and cultures. Again, let us stress it: the future world which is evolving is a secular, pluralistic world and Christians will have no privileged position in it. This fact will largely determine the future mission.

In addition to brute force to build the future world, there is needed an increase of that greatest of cosmic energies, love, the very lifeblood of this spiritual evolution of man. For this there will be needed a "conspiracy" of individuals who associate themselves to raise/a new stage of life the entire human family. They might be called "technicians of the spirit," persons who will be solely concerned with defining and propagating the concrete goals, ever more lofty, upon which the efforts of human activities should be concentrated. These "technicians of the spirit" will be the future missionaries.

Unlike the Christian missionaries of the past who worked for denominational interests, they will be secular laymen and women of every religious and cultural persuasion, each contributing the best of his religion and culture in the secular task of building

together the world of man. For example, they may be laymen working unselfishly within the framework of the international organizations, of national governments, and of other institutions serving man in his evolutionary development. In fact, they are already at work today. This type of "missionary" working in secular structures will be needed, not the type who works merely for the establishment of the Church and its growth.

In the task which lies ahead in building the earth, all men, all societies, all cultures, all religions, have something to offer. Everyone wants something finer and better for mankind; everyone wants to contribute from his national or cultural or religious background. All that is needed, writes Teilhard, is that the ray of divine light fall upon men who now differ and fight, that an appeal be sounded which responds to their internal needs, and across all denominations and religions and other existing barriers. Then we will see the living atoms of the universe seek each other out, find each other and organize themselves -- no longer the blind evolution of irrational atoms, but the purposeful evolution of spiritual creatures. All forces, the French paleontologist tells us, are leading towards convergence, towards God, the Alpha and Omega. We must believe, we must hope, we must work to make the theory of universal love a real fact. The universality of God's love for all men, which Christianity teaches, must be made a living thing and not a mere written doctrine.

Some might believe that the clergy and religious can also perform useful services as these "technicians of the spirit" in foreign lands. Perhaps for an interim period, but the logical outcome

is that they too will become secularized more and more in their thinking and in their conduct of life and activity. This should be seen as a good, not an evil, for secularization means precisely that God is freeing men from the temporal control of religious authorities so that they might take the responsibility for the direction of their world, under the rule of God but not under the rule of the Church. This process, which is surely a threat to institutional religion, need not be a threat to Christians if they are free and open to understand their own history, and the history of the impact of Christianity on the Western world, and try to foresee its impact on the rest of the world in the future. (Here I recommend for your reading and reflection the book of Arend Van Leeuwen, Christianity in World History.)

In conclusion, let me recapitulate. I have stated that the foreign missionary movement as we have known it up to now and as we still generally tend to think of it is definitely ended. Therefore, we must forcibly divest ourselves of outmoded patterns of thought and action regarding it, not just coast along trying to renew and reform what is no longer viable.

As a step towards this end, I suggest that the Church voluntarily dismantle our present missionary organization and structure. For an essentially missionary organism to require a separate missionary organization and structure over and above its basic constitution is somewhat like an advertising agency hiring a second agency to publicize the effectiveness of the first agency -- as if it were unable to advertise its own effectiveness. To

maintain that the Church needs this separate organization comes close to saying that Christ failed to give it a sufficiently missionary structure. Whatever usefulness that separate missionary organization served in the past, it simply cannot much longer. The laity need freedom to carry out the mission of the Holy Spirit, not a Congregation of the Roman Curia to hinder them from so doing.

Thirdly, I stated that the services of clerical and religious foreign missionaries are becoming less necessary or useful. I am not saying that they have not served well in the past. In fact, I am saying that they have served nobly and effectively. They have accomplished their goal -- the establishment of the Church throughout the world. It is now for the Church to carry out God's mission in the world. Precisely because missionaries have been successful, they are now out of a job. It should not be difficult to face the reality of success, which is all I am asking you to do really.

Finally, I have stated that, since the future mission must be concerned with the spiritual development of mankind but within the secular framework of building the earth, the mission rests principally with the laity. This should not be difficult to accept either, for the teaching of the Vatican Council emphasizes the role of the laity. It was the laity who were in the forefront of the mission in the early days of the Church, so we will merely be reviving the early tradition and at the same time making it possible for the whole Church to be missionary, as Vatican II said it must be.

Because we have only recently embarked on this new era of history, it is impossible to suggest new programs. Furthermore, I hope no man will do this. I hope instead that all of us will become more alert to the promptings of the Holy Spirit so that we may come better to know His mission and how to accomplish it in the future. In coming to this knowledge, we clerics will have much to learn from lay theologians and those laymen working at the task of building the earth.

Even though the future form of mission is not yet clear, it very likely is bound up with the process of secularization, with the evolution of mankind, with the development of the world, and with ecumenism in the broadest sense of the word, an ecumenism which includes non-Christians as well as Christians.

Meanwhile, let us not fear to acknowledge the end of the old mission era and to admit that its goals and objectives are no longer to be sought. Let us not fear to admit that the future mission lies in the hands of the laity rather than in those of the clergy and religious. Finally, let us not fear to put an end to an outdated missionary organization and structure, for only by so doing can we free ourselves for undertaking the form of mission dictated by the circumstances of a secular, pluralistic world, a world which Almighty God Himself has had a hand in the making.

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