

43. MISSION, SENDING

Summary:

1. The fundamental idea in mission is that of being sent for a specific purpose. The Hebrew and Christian scriptures speak of certain persons being sent by God to accomplish his designs for the world. The Christian mystery centers around the mission of Jesus Christ, sent by God to announce the kingdom of God bringing salvation to the world. The visible mission of Christ is complemented by the invisible mission of the Spirit and entrusted to the Church to continue until the end of time. – 2. The missionary vision of the Church was widened by the discoveries of new cultures by the 16th and 17th century explorers. The missionary spirit was very evident in the Church of 17th century France. – 3. In his writings, De La Salle often refers to the fact that God has sent his Son and his Spirit into the world, that God sends trials as well as blessings, that the Brothers themselves have been sent by God to bring the good news of salvation to the children of the poor. – 4. The Institute of the Brothers has retained a strong sense of its continuing mission to bring the Gospel to the educational world in institutions concerned with the needs of the poor and the promotion of peace and social justice.

1. THE MEANING OF THE WORD

1.1. The fundamental idea in mission is that of being sent. Persons and things are sent for a specific purpose to certain places or to certain other persons. In political life, official representatives sent to act for their superior officers are called envoys, derived from the French *envoyer*.

1.2. The term mission as used in Christian literature has a rich meaning rooted in the mission of the apostles, sent by Jesus Christ in the same way he had been sent from his Father (Jn 20,21), to baptize and preach the good news of salvation. The Church's mission derives from that of the apostles. Those who exercise this mission, especially those who are sent for this purpose to foreign lands, are called missionaries. Sometimes communities of clerics formed to catechize and to preach the Gospel in foreign lands refer to themselves simply as The Mission, notably the Congregation of

the Mission, otherwise known as the Lazarists or the Vincentians, founded by Saint Vincent de Paul. In Canon Law the term mission is applied to an official act whereby an ecclesiastical superior orders or empowers a specific person to perform ecclesiastical actions, such as preaching or teaching, in the name of the Church.

1.2.1. Already in the Old Testament, there is discernment that certain persons have been sent by God, notably the prophets who were seen as the bearers of God's message to the kings and to the people. When the Davidic line of the messiah-kings came to an end with the Babylonian captivity, beginning in 605 BC, there arose an increasing expectation that God would send a new king-messiah to restore the fortunes of Israel.

1.2.2. In the New Testament, the Gospels describe the way in which Jesus became increasingly aware that he had been sent by the Father for a

messianic mission, limited at first to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark conclude with the commissioning words of Jesus to the apostles to carry on his mission. The Gospel of John contains the promise of Jesus to send the Holy Spirit to be the advocate, the comforter, to teach them all the truth, in a word to be the internal and invisible force to carry the mission of Jesus forward until the end of time. Saint Luke and Saint Paul emphasize the universalization of the mission that is now seen as extending to all the nations through the constitution of the Church as the new Israel. This is the mystery of salvation, hidden in the designs of God up until now. Mission in this sense is the primordial task of the whole Church before it is a task assigned to any individual or group of individuals to be carried out in a particular way.

1.2.3. Out of the early Trinitarian and Christological controversies and the credal statements that followed, there developed a theology of missions in relation to the life of the Triune God. In this theology, rooted in scriptural language, the internal activity of the Trinity is spoken of in terms of the processions: the Father proceeding from no one, the Son from the Father, and the Spirit from them both. Corresponding to the processions there are the missions, the external activity flowing over from the divine vitality into the work of creation and redemption. Thus the Father is sent by no one, the Son is sent by the Father, and the Spirit is sent by them both. The theological meaning of the mission of the Church can thus be expressed as an extension in time of the mission of the Son and Holy Spirit.

2. MISSION IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

2.1. Once the known civilized world had become evangelized and the center of Christianity was established in Rome, the concept of mission and the missionary spirit receded into the background. During the middle ages, for example there is very little evidence of a missionary attitude, nor is there any significant papal initiative for the conversion of non-Christians, Jews or Moslems who

were considered as enemies of the Christian faith to be avoided or overcome.

2.2. The discoveries, explorations, and conquests of entire new worlds that began with the Portuguese and Spanish explorers in the fifteenth century gave a fresh impetus for the Church to rethink in wider terms its commission to spread the Gospel to all nations. The initiative for this missionary expansion came at first from the mendicant orders, the Franciscans and Dominicans, many of whom accompanied the conquerors to the lands they were claiming for their sovereigns. New ways to express missionary zeal both at home and abroad were developed by the Jesuits, founded in the 16th century by Saint Ignatius Loyola, especially with the innovative vow of obedience to the pope with a view to disponibility for mission. The Jesuit Francis Xavier became the prototype of the new style missionary in his evangelization of the peoples of the Far East. Toward the end of the 16th Century, Francis de Sales initiated a new attitude toward the Protestants, replacing policies of legal and military opposition with a spirit of mission for their conversion through the spiritual means of prayer, alms, fasting, and charitable works. In 1622 the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith was established in Rome for the purpose of preserving the Catholic faith in the faithful and spreading it among the infidels. Through this newly created office, the church leadership was able to direct and support a concentrated and well organized worldwide missionary effort.

2.3. France in the 17th century was alive with a missionary spirit. French-speaking Canada afforded missionary opportunities for the Sulpicians sent by Father Olier, and for diocesan priests as well. The French Jesuits worked among the Indians throughout much of North America, an effort that cost many of them their lives. The reports of their encounters with the American natives, and the accounts of the trials and martyrdom that many of them endured, helped to keep alive the missionary spirit in their countrymen. In continental France itself, under the direction of Propaganda Fide, new efforts were directed at converting or at least containing the influence of the Hu-

guenots and Jansenists as well as the Jews, Moslems, and the idolatrous sects in the remote regions of the country. Important contributions to the missionary effort to combat widespread ignorance and religious indifference in certain regions of France were made by the Capuchins, the Congregation of the Mission, founded by Saint Vincent de Paul, and the Company of the Blessed Sacrament, founded by the Duke of Ventadour in 1630. In 1663-1664 there was established in Paris a seminary to train priests for the foreign missions. In these various efforts, lay people often participated along with the clergy in the missionary enterprise.

3. MISSION IN THE WRITINGS OF DE LA SALLE

3.1. The instances where De La Salle uses the abstract word mission are rare. In the *Duties of a Christian* he refers in general to the vocation and mission of the apostles" (Da 31 A) and their mission to found and establish the Church (Dc 93 C). He mentions that God gave great success to the preaching and mission of Saint Barnabas (Dc 272 C). The meditation for the feast of Saint Yon, for whom the motherhouse property outside Rouen was named, refers twice to the ministry of that saint as his mission (MF 269 C, 270 A). Otherwise, De La Salle uses the word mission only in referring to the title of the Congregation of the Mission in his letters to Brother Gabriel Drolin in Rome.

3.2. Rather than the abstract word mission, De La Salle characteristically employs the verb send in all of its human and religious meanings. In his letters to various Brothers, he speaks of sending letters, books, documents and other objects to the Brothers. More significantly, he speaks of sending the Brothers themselves to a certain place or to fulfill a certain function. In the *Conduct of Schools* he refers to parents who send (or who fail to send) their children to school.

3.3. De La Salle's catechetical writings abound in references to the New Testament descriptions of the divine missions in the plan of salvation. Thus

God sends his Son, Jesus Christ to earth (Da 1 E, 24 D; Db 8 D, 34 C; Dc 68 C, 71 C). Jesus returns to the One who sent him (MD 35.1), but when he goes he sends the Spirit as the comforter (MD 35.3) to his disciples and apostles (Da 61 A) and to the whole Church (Dc 175 D). More accurately, it is the Father and the Son who send the Spirit (Db 51 B, Dc 181 A, GA 335 A). During his earthly life Jesus send twelve disciples, whom he called apostles because the word apostle means one who is sent (Da 31 B), sending them two by two from city to city (Dc 32 B, C). Then Jesus sends his apostles to preach the Kingdom (MR 199.2). Saint Peter in his turn sent many bishops to preach over the whole world (Dc 238 E, 244 A).

3.4. At other times, De La Salle employs the verb send to express various manifestations of God's providence in dealing with his creatures. He often urges his readers to accept pains and humiliations as being sent from God. This theme occurs in the catechetical works intended for the children (e.g. Da 56 D, 364 C; Db 198 D, 286 D; I 168 A), as well as in the letters and meditations intended for the Brothers (MF 95.3, L 12.8). The Founder reminds his readers that these trials are to be expected (MF 124.3) and can serve as a punishment for pride (Da 170 C). On the other hand, God sends us holy inspirations (MF 141.1), and the children are encouraged to ask God to send his Spirit to give them life (E 21 E). The Brothers should consider their spiritual reading as a letter sent by Jesus Christ himself (R. 144.12). After death, God sends to purgatory for a time the souls that need still to be purified (Dc 218 A).

3.4.1. In the same vein, God sends his angels as instruments of his divine providence. Thus he sent an angel to comfort Christ at the agony in the garden (MD 21.1, Da 46 D). He sends us angels to be our guardians (Db 29 B, Dc 22 B, GA 321 D, I 253 B). God sends his angels as his messengers at the last judgment (Da 85 C).

3.4.2. God also sends his saints into the world. The students should thank God for sending John the Baptist (Dc 229 B). Saint Paul was sent by the Spirit (MF 134.3). To evangelize Armenia and the Indies, God sent "an unusual man" in the person

of Saint Bartholomew (MF 159.2). Concerning Saint Yon, the author of the meditation remarks that God gives grace and power to all those he sends to pagan lands (MF 269 E).

3.5. In his writings to and for the Brothers, especially the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, De La Salle reminds them that their mission and ministry derives from that of Jesus Christ himself and the apostles whom he sent to proclaim the kingdom of God (MR 199.2). The Brother is sent by Jesus Christ for the same reason that Jesus himself was sent, namely, “to announce the good news of the kingdom of God” (MR 199.2). De La Salle urges the Brothers to recognize “that it is God who has called you, who has chosen you for this ministry, and who has sent you to work in his vineyard” (MR 201.1).

3.5.1. The full scope of the Founder’s thought on the mission of the Brother cannot be fully appreciated without considering what he writes about the ministry of the Brother, namely, the religious instruction of the students as disciples of Jesus Christ, especially the poor. In relation to mission or being sent, it might be said that the Brothers are sent to a certain group within the Church, namely, the children of artisans and the poor “far from salvation”, to perform a certain service or ministry, namely, to bring them to salvation through the work of Christian education.

3.6. At critical stages in his life, De La Salle became progressively aware of his vocation to establish and to guide the Institute. At great cost to himself he accepted this mission as “the work of God”. The Brother, too, recognized that this mission had been entrusted to the Founder, most notably, in the letter of 1714 commanding him, in virtue of his vow to obey the Body of the Society, to resume the direction of the Institute that God had given into his care.

4. THE MISSION OF THE LASALLIAN INSTITUTE

4.1. In the *Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (R 1987), approved by church authority in

1987, Chapter II is entitled “The Mission of the Institute”. After consideration of some alternatives, the word mission was chosen to locate the apostolic consideration of some alternatives, the word mission was chosen to locate the apostolic works of the Institute within the framework of the divine missions described in the New Testament and the Founder’s vision of the Brother’s mission as derived from that of Jesus Christ and the apostles.

4.2. Just as the Founder “came to discern in faith what God wanted the mission of the Institute to be”, so today, the Institute, “concerned above all for the educational needs of the poor... establishes, renews and diversifies its works according to what the kingdom of God requires” (R 1987, 11). “As ‘ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ’, the Brothers participate in the Church’s mission by consecrating their lives to God in order to bring the Gospel to the educational world” (R 1987, 12). “By virtue of their mission, the Brothers establish schools and cooperate in creating educational communities...” (R 1987, 13). “The Brothers are entrusted with their mission by the Institute, a mission especially to the poor”, whereby they become “earnestly involved in the promotion of justice and human dignity through the educational service they provide” (R 1987, 14). The Brothers fulfill their mission “together and by association” (R 1987, 16).

4.3. Although the individual Brother participates in the mission of the Institute and receives his mission by being sent by the superiors to perform a specific ministry, the Brother’s role is not merely passive. In making the vow of obedience, the Brother promises “to go wherever I may be sent”. By these words he accepts beforehand whatever mission he may be given. The relationship between mission and being sent by the superior is implicit in the letters of De La Salle’s when he speaks of sending a Brother to a specific place, but he does not make the connection explicit.

4.4. A significant development that was not foreseen by the Founder is the recognition that the mission of the Institute is a shared mission. It is now recognized that “the spiritual gifts which the

Church has received in St. John Baptist de La Salle go far beyond the confines of the Institute which he founded" (R 1987, 146). For that reason, "the brothers gladly associate lay persons with

them in their educational mission" (R 1987, 17). The mission of the Brothers and the Institute has in this way become the mission of the entire Lasallian family.

Complementary themes:

Apostles; Disciples of Jesus Christ; Instruction; Ministry; Mystery; Obedience; Poor; Salvation; Vow.

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Bro. Luke SALM