

A THEOLOGY OF MISSION FOR THE LOCAL AND UNIVERSAL CHURCH (1)

Early in 1974, I wrote an essay on the theology of mission entitled, "The Theology of the Overseas Apostolate (Missions), Yesterday and Today". Now, more than ten years later, I have been asked to revise that essay. I welcome the opportunity because the topic is so essential to our lives as they effect our students, associates, and the Institute. Furthermore, this is a perennial topic for the universal church, e.g., the synod of bishops planned for 1987 will have as its theme "The Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World".

As I review the 1974 essay, I find that the basic thrust of its theology is still valid. However, there are three glaring (even embarrassing) faults. First, the language is blatantly sexist. Second, I refer to the other Christians as "non-Catholic" and to the adherents of the world religions (i.e., the Buddhists, Hindus, Jews and Muslims) as "non-Christian". In view of our more sensitive ecumenical attitude, these negative terms are obviously pejorative. Third, there is a total disregard of the Holy Spirit! Never once do I refer to the Spirit, the one who distributes charisma; who assists the church's office-holders; who, as the Paraclete, not only defends the cause of Jesus Christ against the world but also teaches every believing Christian; and who directs the church's mission.

The brothers and mission

Everything that concerns the mission of the Brothers as Christian educators was reaffirmed at the 40th general chapter in 1976. In "The Acts of the 40th General Chapter", the Brothers are reminded that they "must integrate personally, as well in their communities as in their institutions, the components of Christian education, the ministry of the word, the service of the poor, and action on behalf of justice in the world" (p. 74). Furthermore, Community and district planning must create adequate guidelines for assuring the fulfillment of our mission of imparting Christian education by association. Only in this way can the Brothers consider themselves, at one and the same time, "personally called and communally sent" (p. 42). Finally, the Brothers were seriously urged to "share their Lasallian spirituality and leadership of their works with all the members of the educational community" (p. 76). This last injunction, a firm reiteration of the 1967 *Declaration* (section 46), signaled a striking shift from the concept of "a Brothers' school" to "a Lasallian school". The reasons for the change of emphasis were obvious: As a group we are rapidly declining in numbers and our colleagues are increasingly aware not only of the apostolic dimension of their calling as teachers but also of the wisdom of our Lasallian spirituality.

In Circular 419 (April 30, 1984), the announcement of the preparations for the 41st general chapter in 1986, it

says (p. 32): "The question of most interest to the Brothers is the future of their mission". I must leave to the general chapter the elaboration of the specifics of our Lasallian mission and how we can best integrate it into the local and universal mission of the church. The purpose of this essay is to outline a theology of mission that can serve as a basis upon which to build those specifics.

Developments in theology

But before getting to the revisions of the 1974 essay, it is necessary to outline four significant developments since then within society and/or theology that now nuance the mission of the local and universal church.

1. The growth of atheism: in 1900, a mere 0.2 percent of the world was atheistic. Today, some 21 percent of the world is atheistic. About 33 percent of the world's people are Christian, a percentage not likely to change by the year 2000. This indicates that the opportunity and challenge of mission have probably never been greater in the church's long history.

2. The development of political theology: the political, social, familial and economic issues of our day (e.g., abortion, world hunger, nuclear war, women's rights and dignity, the ever-widening gap between the rich and poor peoples and nations) have forced the church to listen to the victims of society, to analyze the structures of society that produce this victimhood, and to examine the extent to which Christian tradition, institutions, and language participate in these structures of sin. Bishops through their episcopal conferences have published social messages on such topics as the preferential option for the poor, nuclear arms and peace, and the economy which have evoked considerable debate within and outside the church. Furthermore, Paul VI and John Paul II have reiterated often the church's commitment to justice and mercy.

3. The emergence of the world church: in 1971, Walbert Buhlmann published *The Coming of the Third Church*, a book that is a phenomenological study of the notion that Vatican II marked the emergence of the church as a world church. However, in 1979 Karl Rahner (1904-1984), the eminent Jesuit theologian, produced a brief essay which has become the locus classicus for the discussion of this question and its far-reaching consequences. Rahner divided church history into three periods: 1) the short period of Jewish Christianity (30-49 C.E.) when Christianity was proclaimed in Israel and to it; 2) the period of the church in a distinct cultural region, namely European (and North American) culture and civilization (49-1962 C.E.); 3) the present period in which the sphere of the church's life is in fact the entire world. Rahner was fully aware that the church has always been a world church in principle because its mission has always been universal. But at Vatican II, due to the influence of the Spirit, the church appeared for the first time as a world church in a fully official way. This means that the church now recognizes and accepts the essential differences among cultures and is attempting to find ways not only to formulate the gospel within each cultural setting but also to learn about the risen Christ from the various cultures. In other words, every country is now mission territory. Finally, Rahner warned that if the church does not become de-Europeanized and de-Romanized, she will remain a Western church and so in the final analysis betray the meaning of Vatican II.

4. The emergence of the church as a community of disciples: as a mystery, the church is irreducible to any single image or model. After Vatican II there was consi-

derable stress on models of the church, especially the five enumerated by Avery Dulles in his *Models of the Church*; namely, communion, herald, sacrament, servant and institution.

These five models are complementary and not exclusive. When they are interrelated, they denote that the institutional church is an interpersonal community as well as a missionary community with a threefold purpose: to teach the gospel, to witness the Kingdom of God, and to serve the needy and the oppressed. But something is lacking in this description; namely, the personal dimension. Is not the church also composed of individuals who personally respond to the God of Jesus in faith, hope and love? This dimension is important because at this level, although all women and men receive different gifts of the Spirit, all are equal in dignity and freedom. At this level, all women and men are followers and learners; all must embrace the cross; and all must appropriate the Spirit of Jesus and his mission. This model identifies the universal church as a worldwide community of disciples.

John Paul II stressed this model in 1979 in his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* (see no. 21) and Dulles wrote a perceptive essay about it in 1981. More than in previous generations, the discipleship model corresponds well to the situation and needs of the church in our own time. Because of the pervasive influence of atheism, secularism and anti-Christian values as well as the attractiveness to many of the world religions, Christians will only participate in the church and its mission to the extent that they have heard a personal call and respond in a free, self-conscious manner, allowing the risen Christ to be the focal point of their lives.

Missiology today

The church has always been missionary. It has gone forth at Christ's command and under the impulse of the Spirit to evangelize and baptize all nations. It has proclaimed to all men and women the gospel of Jesus and its belief that he is the principle of eternal life, the meaning of history, and the model of what it means to be human.

The theology of the mission has always changed to meet the needs of those being evangelized. In our day there has been an intensive study of missiology. A theme of contemporary missiology is that there were two major weaknesses in mission activity and theology before Vatican II. First, missionaries brought the Christ of their own culture to the peoples they were evangelizing without much adaptation to the new culture. We lacked an appreciation of cultural pluralism. We are not a world church in a fully official way. Secondly, missionaries strove to convert all nations and all religions to Christianity, based on the belief that Christianity was true and the world religions were false. We lacked a theology of religious pluralism.

Christ and cultural pluralism

Evangelization is the activity whereby the church proclaims the gospel in order to awaken living faith among those who do not know Christ and to deepen the faith among Christians.

There are two aspects of evangelization that have been questioned recently. One concerns the methodology of evangelization. In the past there may have been a rather widespread disregard for the autonomy of each culture. When a missionary went from the West to the East (or from the North to the South), it was understood that he brought the Western image of Christ and his church to the new culture. Before Vatican II, missionaries

did not permeate an autonomous culture which already existed with its own human values and traditions so much as create their own type of society artificially.

Today there is a greater appreciation of the fact that the gospel can and must be adapted to all cultures. Not only can a foreign culture be enriched by the discovery that its true values and traditions can be referred to Christ as their source, but the missionary's own relationship to Christ can be enhanced as he discovers Christ and his Spirit already present to the people and their culture. If, in the past, missionaries thought they had much to give and teach, they now acknowledge they have much to receive and learn.

It should be noted that this change in approach to mission countries is simply a manifestation of a greater change taking place throughout the world as a result of a rise in nationalism and a development in conscientization. For example, the countries of the Third World have challenged the success of the Western nations for placing themselves at the center of the earth, for controlling the greater share of the earth's resources, and for understanding human history along an axis that passes through their own immediate past.

The other aspect of missionary activity that has been questioned is an evangelization that has been strictly spiritual and religious. It is argued by some that evangelization cannot take place if the political, social and economic structures that are inhuman and oppressive are not denounced and changed.

It is in Latin America especially that various liberation theologies have developed.

Liberation theology does not seek to be another department of theology. It is a serious reflection on the perennial Christian themes, but from within the experience of participation in liberation struggles. What the various liberation theologies have in common is their desire to reappraise the Christian gospel from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed and those who have been banished historically from theological reflection. Another change is that, whereas the theology of Vatican II concentrated on intrachurch reform, liberation theology in its various forms is committed to fundamental challenges of the liberation process within society.

At the present time, those influenced by a liberation theology have some serious questions to answer. Many enterprising missionaries have involved themselves in the political, social and economic spheres of the country. This involvement has brought some of them into revolutionary activities that involved acts of violence. They now question how revolutionary and political they can be. They want to know if they should restrict their activities to those which are strictly pastoral. It does seem — as with Jesus — that living the gospel faithfully by imitating his threefold mission of teaching, witness and service of the needy is the most revolutionary stance one can take. Furthermore, this way of interpreting the life of Jesus is in accord with the latest scripture scholarship which is trying to refute recent attempts to portray Jesus as a political revolutionary. The gospel says his kingdom was not of this world, i.e., the world as distorted by the history of sin.

It is not clear where liberation theology will finally rest. Nevertheless, what liberation theology has made clear is that those who teach and preach the gospel must be very conscious of "the sin of the world": there is a sinful situation of oppression, domination, and exploitation that must be denounced and overcome if the Christian gospel of brotherhood/sisterhood, justice and peace would be established.