

## A THEOLOGY OF MISSION FOR THE LOCAL AND UNIVERSAL CHURCH (2)

### Christ and religious pluralism

There are many religions. From the Catholic church's point of view, it has been customary to group them as "non-Catholic" and "non-Christian". The church's dialogue with these two groups has had a different scope. The church's dialogue with the other Christian churches is directed towards reunion and fuller communion in Christ. The length of this paper does not allow space for a discussion of recent developments within the ecumenical dialogue. It is sufficient to point out that the dialogue between the Catholic church and the other Christians seems to be moving in the very same direction as the dialogue with the world religions, i.e., towards a theology of religious pluralism.

Since the relationship of the church to the world religions is more complex and also more significant than the dialogue with the other Christian churches for an understanding of the theology of mission, it is this relationship which will be outlined here.

In recent times the church has moved through two paradigms to a third in its understanding of itself in relation to the world religions. These changes, pivot around Vatican II and are usually labeled as preconciliar, conciliar and postconciliar.

Roman Catholic missiology has moved to a new plateau because deeper consideration has been given to some of the most basic concepts involved in the ministry of evangelization. It will be possible to understand the present missiology after examining the changes that have taken place in our understanding of four interrelated areas:

1. salvation
2. mediatorship of Christ;
3. conversion;
4. true and false religion.

### 1. Salvation

All men and women have found themselves in a state of alienation from self, from others, and from God. Salvation consists in being delivered from alienation to integration, human community, and divine love and life. Christians declare that Jesus of

Nazareth has brought salvation through his life, death and resurrection. Jesus' salvific life is found in his church.

The preconciliar understanding of salvation was that members of the Catholic church had available to them all the means of salvation. Membership in the visible church was the ordinary way to be saved. The duty and responsibility of the church were to preach her message of salvation to all peoples so that they could be converted and saved. If followers of a world religion remained in their religion, they could be saved if they practiced their religion sincerely and honestly. However, their salvation did require the extraordinary intervention of God in their lives.

At Vatican II the church moved away from this ecclesiocentric view and acknowledged the salvific value of the world religions. It declared that God and his Spirit have been working through these religions and not in spite of them. The world religions were legitimate and had a proper place in God's salvific plan (1 Tim 2: 4-6).

The conciliar view of salvation maintained that the world religions were the normal and ordinary way of salvation and that Christians, being so overwhelmingly outnumbered during the four million years humans had been on earth, had been given the extraordinary grace of knowing Christ. Christians should be a sign that all peoples are saved in Christ.

The postconciliar understanding of salvation for those not Christian is much more radical than the conciliar view. For one thing, there was a certain uneasiness and even dissatisfaction with the theology of the "anonymous Christian". When Christian theologians and missionaries started using this term in their dialogue with the other religions, the Jews and Muslims found it offensive and the Hindus and Buddhists found it incomprehensible. It would be like whites in the U.S. trying to express their esteem for Martin Luther King, Jr. by saying that he was anonymously a white man (or for men to say that women are virtually as good as men). Furthermore, it seems that to read Christian ideas into the world religions does not do justice to the distinctiveness of these faiths. What we encounter in each religion is a different faith and, therefore, different patterns of behavior; different standards and ideals of ultimacy, happiness, and salvation; and different claims to present the truth about God, the universe, and the nature of our humanness.

The act of faith is the basic foundation of each religion. Each religion has its own identity and autonomy because of the specific epistemological nature of faith, i.e, because of the "absolute" certitude that faith confers upon the believer concerning the content of his faith. When the Muslim, for example, makes an act of faith, he stands in a relationship to Allah, to the Absolute, which is in no way less immediate than that of the Christian to the Trinity.

The postconciliar theology of salvation states that the gospel of Jesus Christ is only one way of salvation. The preconciliar understanding of salvation was ecclesiocentric: salvation in the Catholic church alone. The conciliar understanding was christocentric: salvation in Christ alone. The postconciliar understanding is theocentric: salvation in God who works in the heart and history of each person.

Theology has taken this theocentric position for two reasons: the church is relative to the kingdom of God, and the work of Jesus and his Spirit is relative to the work of the Father. In other words, our theology of salvation has shifted its focal point from the specifically Roman Catholic to the total Christian community — and, now, to the entire human family. The reason for this shift is the rediscovery of a basic fact about Christ: He calls all people to be totally open to their humanity so as to receive the grace of his Father. Christ says all people are of infinite worth to the Father.

Some question this theology of religious pluralism, fearing that it is really indifferentism and a denial of the primacy of Christ. This is not so. Christians still evangelize knowing that every religion affects the quality of a person's personal and communal life. Those in other religions need to hear how Christian life is distinctive from their religion.

How is Christianity different from other religions? Christianity does not add new truths to people's knowledge of God, but it does create a transformation of consciousness whereby a person acquires a new awareness of all history, self, others, the world and God. All history is lived from its eschatological dimension. Christians believe that their daily lives are filled with the glory of the risen Christ and his Spirit. Jesus Christ has transformed reality. He has brought about a new creation. The risen Christ is present transforming all space and time so that life, death, suffering, love, work, food, sexuality, etc., are understood and lived in the light of his resurrection. Christian life consists in sharing Christ's transforming love. Christian life consists in living with and for Christ as one lives with and for others.

So, while this theology of religious pluralism clearly rejects indifferentism, it does state that it is not necessary for others to join the Catholic church to be saved. A theology of religious pluralism argues that God's mission to transform people and make them whole can be carried forward through any and all faiths — although it is far from complete in any one of them.

The conclusion from a theology of religious pluralism is that the aim of the missionary's message is to free the adherents of other religions for a saving contact with the best of their own religious tradi-

tions. The missionary helps these people solve their own problems, humbly, genuinely, openly, with respect for their traditions and a willingness to learn about God from them.

## 2. The mediatorship of Christ

The church teaches that Jesus is the principle of eternal life, the meaning of history, and the model of what it means to be human. The function and mission of the church follow from the function and mission of Jesus.

In the preconciliar church, the missionary taught that Jesus founded the one true Catholic church and this is where he is present, mediating the Father and sending his Spirit. There was a radical discontinuity between Christianity and the world religions. Jesus was the world's exclusive savior (Acts 4:12).

At Vatican II there was a refocusing of the scriptures. As a result of this refocusing, it was seen that Jesus is the fulfilment of the world religions. The authentic seeds of the gospel are contained within them. Christianity is not discontinuous from the world religions, but the leaven which is interior to all of them. The relation of the church to the other religions of the world is not one of competition, or an effort at substitution. It is one of sublimation. The mission of the church is to take what is holy and true in the world religions and show its fulfilment in Christ. He is constitutive of these religions.

In postconciliar theology the universal mediatorship of Christ is still maintained, while respecting the pluralism of religions. This is no simple task since a theology of religious pluralism accepts a diversity of mediators and avatars whose relationship to Christ is more equal than had been thought possible before in the history of Christianity. Postconciliar theology retains Christ's universal mediatorship by pointing to the fact that the crucial decision regarding the divine is made by people in their relationship to the human community. The Gospels say that in people's relationship to the human community they are open to the Spirit, are addressed by the Spirit, and can commit themselves to it. When the missionary teaches people to love all peoples, especially enemies, he is actually evangelizing them.

In our postconciliar theology, Jesus is the normative mediator. This term is not without its difficulties. It can seem to be no more than another version of the "exclusive mediator" of the preconciliar theology. The best explanation I have seen is that of James Redington: Jesus is the one who illumines for the missionary as he encounters the other religions "other ways in which God has saved and is saving people". In other words, Jesus is the touchstone by which other religious experiences will be examined and related.