

## A THEOLOGY OF MISSION FOR THE LOCAL AND UNIVERSAL CHURCH (3)

### 3. Conversion

Conversion consist in changing from one way of living to another.

In preconiliar missionary theology, overt conversion from a world religion to Christianity was the goal. Missionaries went forth in the name of Christ and his church to baptize every individual in the Spirit and to make every nation Christian.

At Vatican II the Catholic church adopted a policy of "mergerism". Since the world religions prepared the way for Christianity and since they possessed elements that could be fulfilled in Christ, the dream was for a gradual convergence of all religions into one.

This theology was hardly acceptable, especially to those not Christian, because it meant a union by absorption. In postconciliar theology, there is greater respect for the autonomy of each religion. In view of the tenacious persistence and steady growth in numbers of the world religions, there is an increasing tendency to accept religious pluralism as part of the divine dispensation. The primary conversation that the missionary tries to effect is that each believer should be converted within the framework of the religion he/she already professes. The initial task of the missionary is to help the believer live his/her religions more integrally and honestly.

### 4. True and false religion

Religion pertains to the relationship of God with humans. Every religion declares that God has revealed himself through its sacred persons, signs and symbols. Every religious group thinks that it has received the true way. Each religious group often has little use for the other religions.

In preconiliar theology the Catholic church professed to be the home of the one, true religion. It could point to "the marks of the church" as the signs of its veracity. The other religions were considered to be natural, imperfect, and ultimately, erroneous. The missionary attempted to prove the superiority of Christianity over the other religions.

In conciliar theology, as the church moved from an ecclesiocentric to a christocentric position, it acknow-

ledged some truth in the other religions. This truth had its source in Christ who is the fulfilment of these religions. The missionary attempted to explain the developments required for each world religion as it evolved towards the Christian ideal.

In postconciliar theology the concept of true/false religion is approached not from a study of the quality of ecclesiastical doctrines, but from the conviction that true religion humanizes and reconciles persons whereas false religion dehumanizes and fragments the human community. This is a theocentric approach to religion. It begins with the fact that God incarnates himself in every human person, above every religious barrier.

Jesus taught a theocentric religion. He said that a person does not relate himself/herself to God in worship (a religious practice) and then, as a second step, seek the right relationship to his brother/sister (Matt 5:23-24). What is revealed in Jesus is that in people's relationship to the human community, people are related to the Father. The Father is love and anyone who does not love his brother/sister does not know God (Matt 25: 31-46). The ultimate test in the struggle between true and false religion, then is the reconciliation of persons in community. Anything in the church that hinders human community is false religion.

This understanding of true and false religion does not demand that the members of the world religions become Christian. When the missionary helps peoples overcome whatever fosters egotism, hatred, and injustice, he/she is evangelizing.

### Summary

The postconciliar missiology summarized in this paper is different from two other understandings of missionary activity and purpose. On the one hand, a liberal but secular approach maintains that there should be no Christian missionary activity because this is an age of religious pluralism. Jesus is *not* the way. On the other hand, very zealous evangelicals insist that there is to be missionary activity directed towards conversion to Christianity, because not only is Jesus *the* way, but also all the other religions are not legitimate for salvation. The liberal position rejects the universal mediatorship of Christ; the evangelical position rejects the salvific character of the world religions.

The missiology outlined here states that, from one point of view, Christian evangelization has three dimensions: human, religious, and Catholic Christian. The Catholic church evangelizes both Christians and others on any (or levels, depending on the circumstances and the needs of the people.

The Catholic church evangelizes on the human level by teaching Christ's call to all people to accept their humanity and to accept all persons as their brothers/sisters. "The church promotes the human by evangelizing, and the church evangelizes by promoting the human".

The Catholic church evangelizes on the religious

level by teaching that any religion is true to the extent that it contributes to humanization, liberation and reconciliation (James 1; 27), and any religion is false to the extent that it contributes to superstition, injustice and exploitation.

The Catholic church evangelizes on the Catholic Christian level by teaching that people can know Jesus Christ through a living tradition that is guarded by a community of disciples, and people can respond to Christ through this community of disciples.

### Conclusion

Christian Brothers are always missionaries "personally called and communally sent", whether they are active or retired, and whether they educate in their native country or abroad. They have the opportunity to teach the gospel, especially to their students and colleagues, on three levels: human, religious and Catholic Christian.

On the human level, the Brothers have the opportunity to deepen the humanization of society through education. To teach languages, arts, science, history, philosophy and religion is to help students develop as human beings. It should be remembered that the humanization of persons is itself a dimension of salvation and not simply a tactical prelude to teaching the gospel. In *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Dec. 8, 1975), the document that was a follow-up to the 1974 synod on evangelization, Paul VI taught that whatever helped people become more human was already evangelization "although in its initial and incomplete stage". Furthermore, in view of the developments in political theology, the Brothers must at times take a countercultural stance. They will have to educate their students about those sinful structures of society and church that foster racism, sexism, oppression and violence.

On the religious level, the Brothers have the opportunity to witness by word and deed to Christ's call to universal brotherhood and sisterhood by their own community life and the kind of community they foster in their schools. People should experience us as communities of disciples genuinely open to the power and presence of the Spirit. True religion reconciles people; false religion divides people, creates injustices, and destroys community. The Brothers should teach the differences between true and false religion.

On the Catholic Christian level, the Brothers have the opportunity to teach about Christ as interpreted in the long and rich tradition of the Catholic church. When serving in a foreign country, the Brothers will have to discern Christ as he is present in that culture. If the Brothers teach Christ so that he is simply a replica of the Christ they discovered in their own culture, their teaching would be a positive countersign: it would signify that the Catholic church, far from being a world church, is essentially bound to the civilization of the West. The heart of the Brothers' teachings about the risen Christ, then, should point to Jesus as brothers, friend, teacher, example and liberator. Jesus is

the principle of eternal life, the meaning of history, and the model of what it means to be human.

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