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The Love that is Mission

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Springing from Love

Mission springs from *the mystery of God who is love* (1 Jn 4:16), from his overflowing and boundless love for the whole of humanity and creation. In the “fullness of time”, this love sent Jesus among us (*cf.* Jn 3:16). Jesus is the One who is “sent” by the Father. Mission belongs to Jesus’ identity. There is but one mission: *God’s mission*, God’s love reaching out to the whole of humanity and creation. It follows that mission is what God is doing, what God accomplishes in his love. In many ways, God precedes the Church and her missionaries in loving people. God is in mission since creation.

We used to think that religious traditions other than Judaism and Christianity are human ways, efforts, or striving to reach God. But, perhaps, we are closer to the truth when we see that those traditions are God’s ways and means, in his ineffable love, of reaching out to peoples. Mission means to discover the mystery and beauty of God’s love for a people, other than what we are familiar with in our own Christian tradition. In a sense, “mission is to point out to people that the love of God exists already in their own lives”.¹

Seeking Out the Other in Love

To follow Jesus is to share both in his life and in his mission. Those whom Jesus calls, he chooses in order to send them out to others that they may preach the Gospel (*cf.* Mk 1:18; 3:14).

Christian discipleship is a discipleship in mission. All Christians participate in God’s mission. This is made possible by the love of God that comes to us and unites us with Christ and sends us out to others that we may bear fruit (Jn 15:7). It is this love that impels us to step out of our narrow selves, our selfish worlds, of our lives of safety and security, of our homes—to encounter others. Thus, mission is *seeking out the other in love, a going forth to the other in love*.

To be sent out in love to others by Jesus belongs to the very identity of his disciples. With or without, a geographical movement from one place to another or moving out from one’s culture to another, it is this identity and consciousness of being sent out to others that makes one a missionary. It is in this sense that every Christian, every religious is a missionary, regardless of

the place where he or she enters the service of the Gospel. The same holds true even for cloistered monks or nuns. In spite of being hemmed in inside the cloister, they live a life of love for others, for the Church and the world.

Every religious, in fact, has deepened his or her missionary identity by virtue of his religious consecration. By profession, one consecrates oneself to Christ and to his mission of proclaiming God's Reign to others. It is not sufficient to count mission as one value among other elements of religious life.

Rather, it has to be seen as the primary value, that is, as the organizing element around which all other elements of religious life are oriented. "The task of *devoting themselves wholly to 'mission'* is therefore included in their call; indeed, by the action of the Holy Spirit who is at the origin of every vocation and charism, consecrated life itself is a mission, as was the whole of Jesus' life".²

The way of being that religious need to recover today is a life of being sent to others, a spirit and mentality of living our lives for others in love.

Loving the Other in his Otherness

There are many challenges of mission today that oblige us to re-visit and re-orient ourselves to mission. I would like to single out one which seems to me of the greatest import to mission today. The biggest challenge of mission today is *how we love the other*. "When we say other, we mean persons considered in how they are different from ourselves. In this sense, each one, even our closest neighbour, is irreducibly other. The same goes for societies, cultures, religions that aren't our own."³ As in the case of love, in mission the other precedes us. Mission like love is defined by the quality of one's relationship with the other.

More than in times past, we are confronted today by *the stark difference*, by *the utter "otherness" of the other*. This is not only true in numerical but also in the qualitative sense. "Have we ever been so starkly confronted by the realities of difference? Are we conscious of how forcefully difference is resisted, of our inability to live with difference? Ours is a world of falling back on primary identities, of hatred of the other, of the cult of the same".⁴

It seems that resistance to forms of differences is on the rise today, with its ugly heads of ruthless imposition on the one hand and of violent terrorism on the other, an indication of the contemporary world's inability to deal with differences in a healthy way.

Asia is one area of the world largely marked by great differences. Our region is home to the world's major religions and smaller traditional religious traditions existing alongside each other. It hosts a wide range of unique and rich cultures, big and small, ancient and modern. Wide social, political and economic divides separate countries from one another and peoples in one and the same nation. The rich and the poor, the weak and the powerful, adherents of divergent ideological and political views inhabit our region.

In the past, and to some extent even today, mission comes about from a position of superiority, arrogance, denial, or violence in the presence of otherness or difference. But, if missions means love, how we relate to or encounter the other is the primary question of mission in our time. In the face of differences, we have to resist the temptation of reducing the other to ourselves or to create them according to our own image. Love beckons us to love the other for what the other is, as different and unique from us. Hence, the bottom line challenge of mission today is *how to love the other in his otherness*.

Implications for Preparation of Missionaries

What are the implications of the above considerations to the preparation of missionaries? If missions pertains primarily to God and to what He does in his love for the world, then the first spiritual resource of missionaries is their own personal experience of the *love of God*.

They must have experienced how God in his own mysterious ways has reached out personally to them, embraced them in his love and has made them his chosen ones. Without this foundational God-experience it could be difficult for them to reach out to others in love. Moreover, it might be hard for them to see that God's love is alive and working in the lives of others too.

As God occupies the first place in mission, it is necessary that missionaries be men and women of God, *persons of prayer*.

God and his affairs take centre stage and if they are to place their lives at the service of God's actions in the world they cannot but strive to grow in their intimate relationship with God, attune their hearts and minds to God's will and seek to fulfill its demands. They are challenged to be sensitive to God's presence and workings in the lives of people and in the world, to become *spiritual persons*. Otherwise, they might think that mission primarily consists in what they do rather than in what God does.

That means to say we need missionaries who are steeped in *contemplation*. Contemplation roots us in God and gives us the vision to see God's loving activity, regarding people and the world. Furthermore, it motivates us to participate in God's activity, in a beautiful phrase from Yves Congar, "so that I can be there where God awaits me, the link between this action of God and the world".⁵

This must be the reason why today there is so much emphasis on the role of contemplation in mission. As Pope John Paul II put it: "A missionary who has no deep experience of God in prayer and contemplation will have little influence or missionary success. This is an insight drawn from my own priestly ministry and, as I have written elsewhere, my contact with representatives of the non-Christian spiritual traditions, particularly those of Asia, has confirmed me in the view that the future of mission depends to a greater extent on contemplation".⁶

Since we participate in God's mission by becoming a link of his loving activity in the world, then the most essential virtue for missionaries is the *virtue of love*. There is only one virtue of charity: the love of God and the love of neighbor constituting one whole single movement of divine love.

A missionary is called to be a loving person. Only a loving person can effectively share the love of God with others. The virtue of charity is God's gift, as St. Paul says, "poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given us" (Rom 5:5). But, for this gift to be operative in our lives, we need to have a corresponding human capacity to love, the so-called love of friendship, a mature love for the sake of the other. St. Thomas Aquinas explains that our relationship with God has the nature of a love of friendship. Charity is God's love of friendship with us and a person's love of friendship for God.⁷

Jesus calls and loves us as his "friends" and asks us "to love one another" ("as he has loved us") as friends (Jn 15:14-17). Thus, "befriending" others, according to Chrys McVey, is "the heart of mission".⁸ Missionaries, by their *love of friendship*, more than anything else, draw hearts to Christ! If mission today means loving the other in his otherness, we need missionaries schooled in *dialogue*, a value so necessary in our time to pay homage to the otherness of the other. The shift from imposition or confrontation to dialogue is a most crucial challenge of mission. This is particularly true in Asia. We are challenged to enter into dialogue with cultures, religious traditions and with the socio-economic realities of the people, especially of the poor.

Dialogue demands, above all, an *openness to learn from another*. I was recently in Japan to visit the Brothers. I asked a Brother who has been a missionary for 49 years, what would be his best advice to anyone going on mission. He answered me straight to the point: "One should go to mission not wanting to teach but to learn". That seems to me the primary requisite of dialogue, a whole mentality or spirit of seeking to learn from the other: the other's language, culture, religious tradition, history, philosophy, and socio-economic realities. This is a tough challenge, an excruciating experience of learning again from scratch, of being a beggar of the truth of the other. But, this is the only way to enter into the "world", the mystery of the other, if one has to love the other in his otherness.

Dialogue also requires missionaries to seek to know the societal context of the people they serve. It is better if they have the habit and commitment to know and understand the *context and needs of people*. Otherwise, one is bound to do what one simply thinks or wants to (which is a far easier thing to do) but fails to respond to the real needs of the people.

Dialogue does not prevent a missionary from sharing his/her cherished beliefs and values. It is not meant in any way to forget or hide one's own unique identity as Jesus' disciple. But, like the Master, he or she can do it best by a life of witness, especially in our region, "where people are more persuaded by holiness of life than by intellectual argument".⁹ "A fire can only be lit by something that is itself on fire".¹⁰ The most effective way for us Christians to share our faith while respecting the freedom of others is simply by being true to who we are. Missionaries are challenged to become *authentic witness* of God's love. The best testimony they can offer is the quality of their loving actions and loving relationships towards all those they encounter. In all this loving of the other in his otherness, Jesus himself is our model. When the divine Son was sent to us for love of the world (he was in mission) (Jn 3:16), and paid immense homage to our otherness. He "became flesh" and "pitched his tent among us" (Jn 1:14). He "emptied himself" and "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped" (Phil 2:6-7); he came "to serve" (Mk 10:45) and laid down "his life for his friends" (Jn 15:13). Indeed, he has gone a long way in welcoming our otherness. In life and in death, as if, in order to give himself fully to us, humans,

he “emptied” himself fully of his divinity. By his *loving embrace of our otherness*, it was possible for him to save us, to bring life to the world.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Philip Pan Yongda, from his talk given at the meeting of Regents of Studies of Asia Pacific at the University of Santo Tomas, Manila, 1999.

² *Vita Consecrata*, n. 72.

³ Report of the Commission *De Missio Ordinis* of Friars Preachers, 1998, nos. 21.

⁴ *Ibid*, no. 1, 1, 3.

⁵ As quoted by Paul Murray. *Preachers at Prayer*. Dublin: Dominican Publications, 2003, p.17.

⁶ *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 23.

⁷ Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 23, art. 1.

⁸ Chrys McVey, OP, “Befriending: The Heart of Mission”, in *SEDOS*, Vol. 35, No. ½, 2003, pp. 3-7.

⁹ *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 42.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, no. 23.