

MISSION AD GENTES – LOOKING AT THE FUTURE

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The Search for a New Vision

It has often been said that what we are witnessing in the Church today is a paradigm shift in the understanding of mission. The vision of mission which inspired the great modern missionary movement, of which the SMA and with many other missionary congregations and societies were a part, was centred on the Church rather than the Kingdom or Reign of God. Mission meant that particular task of the Church whereby it brought its deposit of revealed truth and means of salvation to new peoples and places. The chief purpose of this activity was to save souls for the glory of God. The agents of this activity were known as missionaries. They were mostly groups of priests and religious, commissioned to go to places where the Church had not yet been established. They saw themselves as an elite corps within the Church – the recipients of an extraordinary vocation which set them apart from the vast majority of the Church's members. They were the Church's frontier troops, carrying out a task that was essential, demanding and dangerous.

The methods employed by the missionaries to carry out their task were clear and precise. They were the preaching of the Gospel; the conversion of individuals to Christ and their baptism into the Church; finally, the building up of the structures of the Church (as these had developed in their home countries) and the administration of the sacraments.

The modern missionary movement can be brought into sharper focus by noting its salient features and dominant values. It was an approach marked by unshakable certainties and unilateral claims, as, for example that the Church was the sole proprietor of revelation and the indispensable means of salvation for all peoples. Furthermore, this approach divided the world into "Christian lands" and "mission territories" and promoted an attitude of spiritual and moral superiority by the inhabitants of the former towards the inhabitants of the latter. True enough, missionaries left their countries and went to the "pagan" lands in a spirit of generosity and self-sacrificing love. However, they saw themselves as engaged in a one-way traffic (cf. Justin Ukpong, "Contemporary Theological Models of Mission: Analysis and Critique," AFER June 1983). It was they who had the truth, and the pagans had to receive it; it was they who had to convert, and the pagans were the ones who had to be converted.

In the judgement of David Bosch, the modern missionary movement was "child of the Enlightenment." (Transforming Mission, Orbis Books, 1992, p. 274) The Enlightenment had stimulated and nurtured a new self-confidence that permeated the Christian Churches and led them to embark on new conquests for the sake of Christ. Furthermore, the spirit of Enlightenment found expression in three characteristic features of the modern missionary enterprise: the assumed superiority of Western culture; optimism about the combined progress of Christianity and Western civilisation; and certain alliance with colonialism. The question may be asked to what extent was the entire enterprise vitiated by the ethos it ingested? Did not the assumption of Western cultural superiority distort the essential missionary ideal? For the norm of mission is Christ and his Gospel, not Christianity or the existing form of the Church in a particular culture. The modern missionary movement's identification of the Gospel with Western culture meant a) that it was blind to the pagan elements in Western culture and b) dismissive of the religious and cultural traditions of the peoples it sought to evangelise. In this respect, it can be contrasted with the missionary outlook of the early Church, and with the approach of the missionary monks in the medieval Church.

Furthermore, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the modern missionary movement was infected with an unhealthy dose of Pelagianism and activism. The human agents of mission saw themselves as taking over God's work and doing it for him, rather than participating in the action of God's Spirit in the world. And yet, as Bosch points out (op. cit. p.344), for all their blind spots and arrogance, the missionaries brought the Christian Faith to peoples of other cultures and religious beliefs in the only way it could have done, given the historical and cultural context from which it emerged. For all its faults, the modern missionary movement was a remarkable phenomenon which endured well past the middle of the last century. However, it is now well and truly over, and the vision which inspired it requires radical revision.

Within the past forty years, there has been a highly significant shift in the global axis of Christianity. The number of Christians in the Southern hemisphere has expanded to the point where they now outstrip the Christian populations of Europe and North America combined. This shift in of axis has brought with it a shift in the style of commitments and relationships between the Churches of the North and the Churches of the South. The era of northern paternalism is well and truly over, and even the brief period of mutual exchange between older and younger Churches is also coming to a close. The Churches of the South and the East now see themselves as taking over the missionary baton. Pope John Paul II noted and affirmed this development on several occasions. The home base of mission is no longer to be located in the Northern Hemisphere. It is the Churches of Africa, Asia and Latin America that are producing the missionaries of our time.

Furthermore the agents of mission are no longer just priests and religious. Lay men and women are increasingly becoming actively involved in the missionary enterprise. The era of male clerical dominance is clearly on the wane and the era of lay participation is on the ascendancy.

The agenda of mission has also changed. The concept of mission as institutional expansion is on the wane. In the past 40 years, the most successful forms of Christian mission have been directed to aims other than Church extension. According to Avery Dulles the two most conspicuous movements have the struggle to promote justice peace and the integrity of creation in the wider world and the commitment to interreligious dialogue.

The new era of Mission emerging in the aftermath of Vatican II calls for a new vision of mission. Grounded in the fresh theological perspectives of Vatican II, this new vision will respond creatively to the changes which have been, and still are, affecting the world and Christianity. The phenomenon of the modern missionary movement, when a unique constellation of factors converged to effect a remarkable drive to conquer the world for Christ, is simply not recoverable. Nor should it be. The religious character of our world has changed decisively since then. Nostalgia for a past 'golden age' of missions is no justification for avoiding the challenges of our time. Nor is it sufficient to tag on new ideas to a basically nineteenth century framework. This, I fear, is a big temptation for Missionary Institutes like our own, born in the nineteenth century. But, as Christ himself has told us, you cannot put new wine into old wineskins or sew a new piece of cloth onto an old garment (cf. Mt 9:16-17). Eventually the new has to take over from the old and the permanently valid elements of the older version have to be re-situated and re-thought in terms of the new framework. But the move from the new to the old is never easy. It requires a kind of conversion. The scales have to fall from our eyes and we have to be led to a new way of seeing things.