A SHORT HISTORY OF THE CHURCH'S MISSION

Stephen Bevans, SVD

Introduction

The church, says Vatican II's Decree on Missionary Activity, is "missionary by its very nature," because it participates in the very life of the triune God, whose very identity is self-diffusive love.[1] From the first nanosecond of creation God has been present in creation through the Spirit, and became concretely present in history through the Incarnation of the Divine Word. When we speak of the history of the church's mission, therefore, we are speaking of the history of the church. It used to be standard practice in historical studies of the church to speak about "church history" as distinct from "mission history," but more and more this is becoming a distinction that is less and less valid. Works such as Dale Irvin and Scott Sunquist's *History of the World Christian Movement*, Frederick A. Norris's *Christianity: A Short Global History*, and a one-volume work currently being written by Roger Schroeder are all contributing to a reversal of perspective in the understanding of Church history.[2]

Mission is not something tangential to church history. It is rather one that is at the heart of the church's life. Our story will be of the church's missionary activity, and so we will not dwell that much on such things as Councils and popes and treaties between church and state. But the events, the movements and the persons we will meet in the following pages will be just as important in the overall history of the church. While some of the central events and characters will be the same as in standard church history, many will not be. We will certainly speak of Gregory the Great, Charlemagne, Luther, Francis, Clare, Nicea, Trent, Ignatius of Loyola and Rose of Lima, but we will also include great missionaries like Alopen, Augustine of Canterbury, Cosmas and Damien, Ramon Lull, Matteo Ricci and Marie of the Incarnation. Viewing the history of the church from a missionary perspective will also help us understand that our church has always been a world church, and that the Christian movement has always been a world Christian movement. The mission of the East Syrian Church on the Silk Road and into China is as important as the mission of Patrick to Ireland and Boniface to Germany. The conversion of Nubia is as integral to the church's history as the conversion of Constantine.

"The church exists by mission," twentieth century Protestant theologian Emil Brunner wrote, "like a fire exists by burning".[3] I hope that these pages, although in a sketchy way, will show just that.

---

[1] See Vatican II, Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, *Ad Gentes* (AG), 2.

[2] Dale Irvin and Scott Sunquist's *History of the World Christian Movement* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001 / 2010), Frederick A. Norris's *Christianity: A Short Global History* (Oxford: OneWorld Publications, 2002). Schroeder's work is in progress and will be published by Orbis books within the next several years.

[3] Emil Brunner, *The Word in the World* (London: SCM Press, 1931), 11.

The Mission of Jesus Creates the Church

Jesus was a missionary, sent by God to preach, serve and witness to the Reign of God. His was a message of the incredible love of God, forgiving sinners, including those usually excluded by polite religious society, healing the sick and driving out demons, challenging women and men to live in reconciliation with their neighbors, and even with their enemies. His was a vision of a new society, and his was a call to repentance, but not, as the Canadian novelist Rudy Wiebe paraphrases him, by feeling bad, but by "thinking different."[4] Everything he said in engaging parables and sayings, everything he did in works of healing and exorcism, and his very behavior of including everyone and even defying the Law for the sake of human beings helped explain his basic message: "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1:15).

Jesus' challenge to reimagine the world, to think different about God and religion and community, but it was still a challenge *within* Judaism–to imagine a new kind of Judaism, "to be Jewish in a new way," as U. S. Anglo theologian Kenan Osborne expresses it.[5] Even though he gathered a group of disciples around him and gave that group a basic structure with Peter and the Twelve, he probably had no idea (at least in the beginning of his ministry) that he was laying the foundations for what would later emerge as a "church," a community different from Judaism that would continue his mission after he was taken out of this world.

Nevertheless, Jesus was executed as a blasphemer and criminal as a direct result of the vision he lived and proclaimed. His challenge to reimagine was misunderstood by Judaism's insecure leaders as a betrayal of the Jewish tradition, and as a vision that could subvert the colonial power of Rome. But the bonds of death could not bind him, and he was experienced by his timid followers as still alive. And so the community that he had formed in the time of his ministry continued to gather together in his name, to break bread in his memory as he had told them to do, and to listen to the wisdom of Peter and the Twelve. Even then, however, and even after the experience of the Spirit at Pentecost, the community still saw itself as basically Jewish. Yes, they realized, they had been called to continue Jesus' mission of preaching, serving and witnessing to the Reign of God to the Jewish People. God had given the Jews a new chance after Jesus' resurrection, and the Jews were urged to proclaim Jesus as Messiah and repent before he would come again and re-establish the Kingdom of Israel. But they hardly understood themselves as a "church," a distinct reality from their Jewish identity and tradition.

Gradually, however, the community realized that God in the Spirit had other plans for this little flock. As Acts of the Apostles tells the story (one that is highly theological, but basically accurate nonetheless), after Stephen was executed for proclaiming Jesus' messiahship and calling into question the ultimate significance of Judaism, members of the Jesus Movement spread out throughout the surrounding countryside. One of the community, Philip, preached

---

[4]Rudy Wiebe, *The Blue Hills of China* (Toronto, Canada: McClelland & Stewart, New Canadian Library Edition, 1995), 258.

[5]Kenan Osborne, *A Theology of the Church for the Third Millennium: A Franciscan Approach* (Leiden: Brill, 2009) forthcoming).

the message to the Samaritans–half breed Jews–and they accepted it with joy. Philip also was called to preach to an Ethiopian eunuch, traveling from Jerusalem, a person who because of his physical condition could never become a bonified Jew. As a result, the eunuch came to faith in Jesus, and while he was ineligible for Judaism he was accepted as a follower of Jesus. Peter found himself preaching to the Gentile Cornelius and his household, and admitted him into the community as well. Finally, as Acts of the Apostles tells us, some of those who fled from Jerusalem after Stephen's execution preached to the Gentiles in the large, Gentile city of Antioch, and these people also accepted Jesus, were admitted into the community, and received the name "Christian" from their neighbors. It was at Antioch that the Jesus community began to realize the full extent of its destiny and began to appropriate its identity. Listening to the boundary-breaking whispers of the Spirit, it recognized that it was the beginning of a new way of being religious. It saw itself now as "church."

It was, in other words, in the practice of mission–moving beyond the boundaries of Judaism and embracing in its community people of other nationalities and cultures–that this erstwhile Jewish sect began to recognize themselves as more than Jews. The Spirit had pushed them beyond Judaism to help them see that their faith in Jesus and their mission in his name gave them their new identity.

The Jesus community moved beyond Judaism and so became church. In the same way today, the repetition of this missionary dynamic continues to create the church. The church is missionary by its very nature.

Paul and the New Testament Church

Although a kind of Jewish Christianity would continue to be a vital form of Christianity until the fourth or fifth century, especially in the area east of Palestine and in the Persian Empire, a Christianity that consisted of mostly Gentiles began to flourish in the Roman Empire, especially in Asia Minor, or what is now Turkey. One of the great missionaries of these early years of Christianity was the former Jew Paul, whose missionary journeys throughout Turkey and Greece were extensive, and whose writings were so influential that some scholars have argued that it is Paul who is the real founder of the religion called Christianity. In Paul's letters we see that Paul was assisted in his missionary work by a rather large number of co-workers, both women and men. It seems that these early Christian missionaries made use of the vast network of Roman roads to preach the gospel in many of the major cities of the Empire, and we know from one of Paul's letters that the church was already rather firmly established in Rome itself. In the letter to the Romans, Chapter 16, Paul mentions many of these women and men by name: the deacon Phoebe, the husband and wife team Prisca and Aquila, Epaenetus, Mary, Andronicus and Junia (whom he numbers among the apostles), Aristobulus, Persis, Hermes, and so on.

Paul's letters also give us a glimpse of some of the ministries that the early community in the Roman Empire engaged in. There were deacons, apostles, co-workers, healers, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers (see Rom 16, 1Cor 12, Eph 4). Other New Testament witnesses

speak of presbyters or elders, often identified as overseers or bishops (e.g. 1Tim 3, Titus 1, James 5:14). Some of these ministries are certainly for the internal care of the community, but the constant growth of the Christian community bears witness to the fact that there must have been intentional missionary activity, even in the face of suspicion and persecution. The first letter of Peter urges people to give an account of the hope that they have within them (1Pet 3:15).

Gossiping the Gospel

Other early documents of the church reveal that there existed wandering apostles and prophets who, like Paul, went from town to town and city to city as they preached the Gospel. These appear in one of the oldest Christian documents on record, perhaps a document older than some of our canonical texts: the Didache or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, dating from the beginning of the second century, most likely in Syria. However, as Michael Green argues, perhaps the best missionaries of the early church were ordinary women and men who preached by the integrity of their lives and shared their enthusiasm with neighbors and relatives: people who "gossiped the gospel"[6] in the marketplace, while doing laundry, buying food at local shops. This informal missionary work is also attested to by sociologist of religion Rodney Stark who writes about how most probably Christianity spread through personal and family networks, with wives convincing husbands, mothers sharing with daughters and sons, friends sharing with friends.[7]

It was a natural thing to do. The gospel was for sharing. But perhaps even more effective in terms of communicating the gospel was the witness of Christians. It is a commonplace that non-Christians at the time remarked at how Christians loved one another. Rodney Stark gives that statement credibility when he relates how people were impressed by the way Christians nursed one another during the inevitable plagues that broke out in crowded, unsanitary cities. But, he says, Christians even went beyond that. They also cared for people who were not members of their community, and many joined the church because of such witness. Ordinarily, once someone got the plague, they were put out in the streets to die. Christians took care of other Christians and non-Christians alike. Perhaps this new religion was worth joining. In the same way, people–especially women–were attracted by the seriousness with which Christians took marriage. Divorce was forbidden. In the same way, the killing of girl babies was forbidden, as well as abortion. The fact that being a Christian was a high cost religion–it could cost one her or his life–was also a kind of witness. The fact that people were willing to die for their beliefs and hoped for even a fuller life after death was attractive to people as well. Christianity grew because of the authentic lives of ordinary people, people who lived mission in their daily lives.

Christianity spread throughout what is modern day Turkey and Greece, and spread as well over the north coast of Africa. Christianity also spread from Antioch into the far eastern

[6]Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 173.

[7]Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publications, 1996).

reaches of the Roman Empire. It spread through the buffer states between Rome and its great rival, the Persian Empire as well. In 301 the king of Armenia, converted by the Cappadocian Gregory the Illuminator, declared his kingdom a Christian one.

Although Ethiopia in Africa traces its roots to evangelization by the anonymous Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8, the first historical evidence of Christianity there goes back to Frumentius, a young Syrian, in the fourth century. Frumentius had been sold as a slave to the king of Axum in Ethiopia and preached the gospel and converted the king. The king sent him to Alexandria in Egypt to ask for missionaries to come to the country, but instead Frumentius himself was consecrated bishop and sent back to Ethiopia in the name of the Patriarch of Alexandria.

Mission and Monasticism

By the beginning of the fourth century, Christians comprised some ten percent of the Roman Empire. According to Stark, for this to happen the rate of growth would have to have been forty per cent per decade, and at that rate by 350 Christians would number almost one half of the Empire's population.[8] At the end of the third century Emperor Diocletian recognized this growth as a threat to Roman traditional religion and directed an empire-wide persecution against Christians and any other religious body that did not submit to Roman religious practice. But the persecution failed to stem the tide of Christian growth. In the famous words of the Latin theologian Tertullian, the blood of martyrs was like seed, and Christian conversions continued. A new emperor, Constantine, realized that Christians were a group that could not be stopped, and so he allied himself with them. He had become sole emperor after the Battle of the Milvan Bridge outside of Rome, when he had ordered his soldiers to paint the cross on their shields. By 313 he had issued an Edict of Toleration which at last legalized Christianity in the empire, and began to give this new religion a favored status in the Empire. By 381 Emperor Theodosius had declared Christianity the official religion of the Empire.

While this development was very beneficial to Christianity, and was greeted enthusiastically by writers like Eusebius of Caesarea (who even spoke of Constantine as the thirteenth apostle!), there was a price to pay for such prosperity. Christianity had been a costly religion to join. Now it was advantageous to profess it. There began to be mass conversions to the faith, and with that there began to creep in a certain mediocrity of faith and practice.

It was in this context that a new movement began to develop in the church, that of monasticism. A number of men and women realized that a "red martyrdom" was no longer possible for Christians, but they began to seek a "white martyrdom" of an ascetical life. One of the earliest of these "white martyrs" was Antony the Hermit, who lived in the desert of Egypt, but he was one of countless hermits who fled the good life of the cities for the hard life of the desert. These monks were men and women who fled the world, but in many ways they could not succeed in doing just that. They became sought-after figures, to whom many people flocked

[8]Ibid., 3-27.

for spiritual guidance and inspiration, and so their solitary and ascetical life was a new kind of witness in the world. As indicated above, monasticism was not limited to men, there were many women as well, the most famous are women like Synlectica.

Some monks like Pachomius and John Cassian began as hermits in North Africa , but as a community of monks formed around them they became heads of communities of monks, and wrote famous rules that are still read today for their wisdom. Both Pachomius and Cassian journeyed to Europe and established communities in what is now France. It is said that some Egyptian monks traveled to Ireland and were perhaps the founders of a rich Irish monasticism that flourished after Patrick converted the island in the fifth century. Irish monasticism developed its own missionary method. As a kind of penance, individual Irish monks would set forth from Ireland to what is now England and Scotland as "pilgrims for Christ" (peregrini pro Christo). They would preach the gospel as they traveled, and once they settled they would attract a number of men to a monastic community, from which others would go on their own *peregrinatio*. The important monastery on the Scottish island of Iona is the foundation of the Irish monk Columba, and another monk, Columbanus, wandered as far as Italy, where he set up a monastery. Irish monasticism is famous as well for its "double monasteries"–monks and nuns living in separate quarters and yet worshiping and working together. Famous among such monasteries was that headed by Abbess Bridget of Kildare, and the great double monastery presided over by Hilda at Whitby in northern England.

The monastic movement also flourished in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) and Greece. In Cappadocia in Asia Minor, men like Basil, his brother Gregory of Nyssa and his best friend Gregory of Nanzianzen, and women like Basil's and Gregory's sister Macrina lived at least part of their lives in monastic community, although all three men were tapped to become bishops–a common phenomenon at the time, despite their own personal opposition. (John Cassian wrote in a work on monasticism that a monk must by all means "flee from women and bishops."[9]

Like many of the monks in the East and African desert, Benedict began his monastic life at the beginning of the sixth century as a hermit. Before long, however, his hermitage at Subiaco near Rome was surrounded by men who wanted to have his guidance. He soon wrote his famous rule, moved south to Monte Cassino and was joined by his twin sister Scholastica in a nearby monastery. Benedict's version of monasticism was less ascetical than that of the desert monks. He balanced work and prayer and encouraged his monks to eat and drink properly. His version of monasticism soon became the most popular form of monasticism in Europe, and before long there were thousands of monasteries all over the continent. At a time when Europe was reeling from invasions from tribes from the north, and Roman Empire in the West was tottering on the brink of ruin, Benedictine monks were witnesses to regularity and civilization. Their monasteries, as did the Irish monasteries before them, preserved the treasures of Western secular and religious culture. They preserved traditions of agriculture and pharmacy, and educated young men in monastery schools. Their monasteries were outposts of evangelization, as evidenced by the work of Boniface and Leoba in what is now Germany, and

[9]John Cassian, *De Institutis Coenobiorum et de Octo Pincipalium Vitiorum Remediis*, XI, 18 (in J.-C. Guy, ed., SC 108.444). The original text reads ". . . omnimodis monachum fugere debere mulieres et episcopos."

Augustine of Canterbury in England. Boniface was perhaps too dismissive of local Saxon culture, but ironically his monastery was the place where the great Saxon gospel, the Heliand, was written in the ninth century.

In the East, monks from Antioch and East Syria traveled with traders on the Silk Road through the Persian Empire and on towards China. After Constantine's legitimation of Christianity in the Roman Empire, the Persian Empire began a dreadful persecution that cost the lives of tens of thousands of Christians. And after the appearance of Islam in the seventh century Christians survived but not always very well under Muslim rule. But monks and nuns continued to exist, and they set up places of hospitality along the Silk Road. By the eighth century, a monument discovered in China in the sixteenth century tells us, East Syrian monks, led by a monk named Alopen, had come to China, set up a monastery in Chang'an then the largest city in the world), and translated Christian texts into Chinese. Relatively recently a collection of "Jesus Sutras," marvelous inculturations of Christian texts, were discovered. A century or so later, a bishop named Adam lived in the capital city and worked with Buddhist monks in translating both Christian and Buddhist scriptures. Unfortunately the first great Christian period came to an end at the beginning of the tenth century, when the T'ang Dynasty fell and Christianity fell out of favor. East Syrian monks also traveled to India very early on and may even have traveled as far as Sri Lanka and even Indonesia. They set up monasteries in these places, served Christian traders and merchants, and no doubt evangelized the indigenous population as well. Years later, when the Portuguese came to India, they discovered a Christian community there that had connections with the Patriarchs of Antioch and used Syriac in their liturgies.

In the tenth century the monks Cyril and Methodius, two blood brothers, were sent from the Byzantine Church in the east to evangelize the Slavs in what is now north-central Europe. In many ways we can understand them as pioneers of what we call today inculturation, since they insisted that the gospel be preached and the scriptures translated in the local slavic language. In order to do this they devised an alphabet for that language, the alphabet that, even though it has changed over the years, is still called by the name Cyrilic. Their efforts of adaptation, however, were fiercely opposed by missionaries from the Latin church, and the brothers had to journey to Rome to see the pope, who justified their efforts. Around 1000 Russia was evangelized by monks from Byzantium. The story is that when Russian representatives traveled to Byzantium and experienced the splendor of the monastic liturgy they were instantly converted and requested missionaries to Russia, who converted the Czar and the Russian people.

Mission and the Mendicant Movement

Monasticism continued to be a powerful force of evangelization after the first millennium, and still is so today. In about the thirteenth century, however, another movement began to emerge that would be the way the gospel was effectively preached from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries. This was the mendicant movement, especially the

developments of the Order of Friars Minor under Francis of Assisi and the Order of Preachers led by Dominic Guzman of Caleruega.

The Franciscans and Dominicans, however, were only two examples of movements that spread especially throughout western Christianity at the time. In the west, the church leadership had become powerful and, inevitably, corrupt, and so there were many calls to return to the purity and simplicity of the gospel, and to live the "vita apostolica" or the apostolic life. Movements such as that of Peter Waldo in France were such movements–strongly lay in character–that called for hierarchical reform and more pastoral care of Christians. Unfortunately, Waldo's movement got on the wrong side of the church's leadership and was condemned, as were several other groups as well (such as the probably orthodox Humiliati and the certainly unorthodox Cathars). Francis's and Dominic's genius was to work for reform and renewal in the church while still staying faithful to the institution.

From the start, Francis's was a lay movement. We all know the story of Francis's conversion and his embrace of poverty. He would go throughout Umbria preaching the gospel wherever he could, and he soon attracted followers. At one point Francis journeyed East with one of the crusading armies and crossed the battle lines to preach to the sultan near Damietta. He stayed three days with the sultan, and instead of being put to death as Francis had hoped–to die a martyr's death for the faith–he preached to the sultan, who was very impressed with Francis's message and surely more with his person. Francis, in turn, was impressed by Muslim prayerfulness, and the conversation with the sultan affected a later writing of the Franciscan rule. In that rule, Francis talked about two kinds of preaching of the gospel–direct preaching, and also the preaching of witness. It may have been from these instructions that the dictum attributed from Francis has come: "preach always. If necessary, use words."

Almost from the beginning Francis was joined by women. The first and closest to him was Clare of Assisi, who lived in a cloister with several other women in the town center, but whose ministry of prayer was not to pray for themselves but for the work that Francis and his brothers were doing. Rather than *exclusivae*, or shutting out the world, they were *inclusivae*, embracing the world despite being enclosed as women had to be in those days. Clare sent many of her sisters to Muslim lands to witness to the gospel, even though most were martyred a short time after they arrived.

Two other important Franciscans need to be mentioned in this short history. Ramón Lull was a Third Order Franciscan lay brother who is one of the most remarkable figures in the history of the church and its mission. His conviction was that Muslims could be converted if the gospel was presented to them in their own language and in ways that they could understand, and so he spent his life learning Arabic, writing hundreds of volumes, and teaching in various places in Europe. He went on three missionary journeys to north Africa from Spain. On two of them he was almost immediately deported; on the third and last he was martyred. The other important Fransciscan of this time was John of Montecorvino, Franciscan bishop who was sent to the court of China in the 1200s. For a while, once again, Christianity flourished there. Pictures of John show him in episcopal attire, but with very strong Chinese accents in his dress.

Dominic Guzman of Caleruega in Spain was a Canon Regular of Osma and traveled with

his prior Diego, now a bishop, on two diplomatic missions that would have a great impact on his later life. On one of these missions, in Toulouse in France, he encountered a Cathar and stayed up the whole night with him in conversation, trying to convince him of the church's truth and his own error. In the end the Cathar repented and came back to the church. When Dominic later encountered a group of inquisitors traveling in grand style, he suggested to them that they might do better to live more simply–perhaps their example would help change the heretics they wanted to root out. When Diego died and Dominic was on his own he gathered some followers to follow his own convictions of the simple life linked with piety and learning. This was the beginning of the Order of Preachers, and order that took the twelfth century by storm. These were men of high learning, expert preachers and simplicity of life who traveled the whole of Europe preaching and teaching reform. They also sent representatives to China. And, like Francis, women were involved in the Dominican apostolates from the Order's beginnings. The most famous of these women was Catherine of Siena, who was noted in her home town for her charitable deeds, and who even traveled to Avignon to persuade the pope to return to Rome and get out from under the influence of the French king.

In the Low Countries especially there emerged a movement of men and women who are known by the name of Beguines (the men are called Beghards). These were groups of lay people who lived together in communities (called Beguinages), but these were not monastic enclosures. These men and women lived active lives of charity in the world. Especially noted among them were Mary of Oignes, Mechtild of Magdeburg, and Mechtild of Hackenborn. Because of their active lifestyle, however, they were always under suspicion by the church, and some of them were executed as heretics as well. But they represent women's constant efforts to live dedicated and active Christian lives in the midst of the world–efforts that would not be fully successful until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Toward the end of this era, in 1453, the great city of Byzantium finally succumbed to Muslim invaders and the Byzantine Empire, which had lasted for some one thousand years beset on all sides by Muslim threats, was finally conquered. There had been sporadic missionary activity in the East even under the Muslim threat, but now mission became an impossibility.

Mission in the Sixteenth Century and the Rise of the Jesuits

The next major development in the history of the church's mission occurred in the sixteenth century, the century when the West's horizon was indelibly altered by its "discovery" of or encounter with the peoples of the Americas and by greater contact with the peoples of Asia. It was also a century when Christendom was torn apart by the schisms led by Luther, Calvin and several other Reformers.

At the end of the fifteenth century, Christopher Columbus "discovered" or "encountered" or "invaded" (depending on one's perspective) a world that had been hitherto unknown by Europe. He and subsequent European explorers found a vast land teeming with people who had never heard of Christ or the gospel. While much of Spain's–and eventually

Portugal's–motivation was that of greed, their Kings and Queens were also interested in converting the indigenous people of these (for Europeans) newly-discovered lands, and so missionaries–Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians– accompanied the various explorers on their voyages of conquest and further discovery. This was the famous policy of the cross and the sword.

Converts were made, but there was much exploitation of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. In Hispaniola (the island where the Dominican Republic and Haiti are today), Dominican missionaries early on came to the defense of the indigenous peoples. Right before Christmas in 1501, the Dominican Antonio Montesinos preached a sermon in which he condemned the encomenderos' abuse of the local people: "You are all in mortal sin," he exclaimed, and have as much chance of being saved as those who have not been baptized.[10]

In the congregation, it is speculated, was a young encomendero by the name of Bartolomé de las Casas. Las Casas eventually returned to Spain, became a priest and then a Dominican, and for the rest of his life took up the cause of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. He made many trips back and forth across the Atlantic, defending the indigenous peoples before the king of Spain and church officials, and wrote voluminously. He is called–rightly–the Defender of the Indians. Even though at one point he advocated the use of African slaves to take the place of the slightly built indigenous people, once he realized the inconsistency he repented of that opinion. He is one of the great–and not a few–"voices of compassion" of missionaries to Latin America in this era.[11]

On the other side of the world, in the 1530s, Spain began to colonize the Philippines and, as in Latin America, Dominicans, Augustinians and Franciscans were sent to evangelize the country. At first the missionaries were quite open to the local culture. They learned the language and even translated a catechism written in Mexico into Tagalog. Soon, however, the missionaries allied themselves much more with the Spanish government, owned huge tracts of land, and were rather oppressive of the local people. Some of the beautiful Spanish churches that still exist today were built with virtual slave labor overseen by the Spanish missionaries. In the late nineteenth century Filipino novelist and nationalist José Rizal wrote scathingly against the friars. The Philippines nevertheless are the fourth largest Catholic country in the world today and are known for their loyalty to the Catholic Church.

While de las Casas was desperately trying to persuade Spaniards and the pope to respect the humanity of the Latin American peoples, first Luther and then Calvin were beginning their momentous careers as the architects of Protestantism. They fought head on some of the abuses of the medieval church–corruption of the clergy, lack of pastoral care, forgetfulness of the Word of God, superstitious practices around the sacraments, the selling of indulgences–and when Rome would not listen they formed their own churches. Europe was split between Catholics and Protestants and not only was there religious turmoil but political

[10]Original text in Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 29.

[11]See Justo L. González, "Voices of Compassion," *Missiology: An International Review*, 20, 4 (1992): 163-173.

turmoil as well. The next two hundred years at least would be years of senseless wars and persecution: Catholics of Protestants and Protestants of Catholics. In this context was born the Society of Jesus, founded by Ignatius of Loyola, a former soldier who experienced conversion while recovering from a battle wound and who modeled his Society or Company of Jesus on a military brigade. Highly disciplined, highly educated, highly motivated and highly mobile, the Jesuits as they were called embodied a completely different kind of religious life: they were *active* religious, not monks, not mendicants. They took a fourth vow to be at the pope's direct disposal, and they spread rapidly throughout Europe, their learning and skill at preaching strong tools to bring those who had gone over to Protestantism back to the Catholic Church.

The Jesuits were also new kinds of missionaries. They went to Latin America and started "Reductions" in Paraguay. These were settlements of indigenous people whom the Jesuits gathered together to protect from the exploiting Spanish and Portuguese. The film *The Mission* presented a stirring picture of the Jesuits' work in these reductions. Jesuits also went to Asia. Perhaps the most famous was Francis Xavier, an original companion of Ignatius and his good friend. Xavier went first to India, where his zeal for conversions is legendary. He then went to Japan, and was so impressed with the culture that he spoke highly of them in a report to Ignatius. They were the best people he had encountered on his travels, he said, with a high culture, honest, and when convinced of the truth, ready to act on it. Whereas in India he had employed more of a *tabula rasa* approach to mission which did not take the local culture into account, Xavier in Japan was much more culture conscious. He dressed like a Japanese, employed Japanese helpers, and tried to explain the gospel in ways that the Japanese could understand.

One of the most important Jesuit missionaries was the Italian Alessandro Valignano. Valignano was convinced that the missionaries had to get out from under the thumb of the Portuguese, the main European power in Asia at the time. For the Portuguese, becoming Christian meant leaving one's local culture behind and becoming European. Valignano, however, was convinced that Christianity was not tied to Europe, but could thrive in any culture. He tried to train the Jesuits under his guidance in this perspective and several stand out as models of his approach. The most famous of these was Matteo Ricci. Ricci worked in China, and became renowned for his mastery of the language, his mastery of the Confucian classics, and his knowledge of western science. His immense learning eventually got him in contact with the Emperor, and when he died he was buried with the highest Chinese honors. He managed to convert a small but important group of Chinese, among whom were even men ordained as priests.

In India, the Jesuit Robert de Nobili adapted to the culture in much the same way. He dressed as a Hindu guru or wise man, a sannyasi, and mastered the language of Sanskrit–the first European to do so. He was learned in Hindu philosophy and sacred texts, and spoke of Christianity in terms of the Indian worldview. Sadly, he had much opposition in his life, and, while he was vindicated, his adaptations of the gospel–like Ricci's–were condemned in what is called the Rites Controversy. This was a sad, complicated chapter in the history of mission that discouraged any real kind of taking the local culture seriously. The decisions of the Rites

Controversy were only reversed in the 1940s.

One other Jesuit missionary in Asia should be mentioned her, although he lived a bit later, in the seventeenth century. This was Alexandre de Rhodes, missionary to Viet Nam. De Rhodes developed the alphabet for writing Vietnamese that is still used today. He wrote a fascinating catechism that integrated Confucian principles into Christian doctrine and formed a number of catechists into men who were responsible for the wide evangelization of the country. He was expelled from Vietnam eventually and died as a missionary in Persia.

Jesuits also worked in North America among the Iroquois and Hurons in what is now Canada. Their work was also adapted to the local situation. They moved with the more nomadic First Nation peoples, and did their best to learn their languages and customs. They also were caught in the middle of tribal wars, however, and so often looked upon with suspicion by one tribe over against the other. A number were martyred, among them Isaac Jogues and John de Brebeuf, along with the lay man René Gupil. These were canonized as the North American Martyrs. Marie of the Incarnation was the first woman missionary to North America. She settled in Montreal in Canada and set up schools for both French and Native American girls. Other French women came to the French colony in Montreal as well. One Native American woman, Kateri Tekawitha, came to faith inspired by the French missionaries and has been declared "blessed" by the church.

Europe at this time was being devastated by Wars of Religion, the aftermath of which was a great suspicion of religion and a greater trust in human reason. In this Enlightened Age there began to be, for the first time in history, a confidence in human potential, a doubt about the existence of a transcendent dimension of life, and the beginning of a secularity that led to out and out atheism.[12] As a result of many factors, not least of which were the Rites Controversy and the Jansenist controversy as well, the Jesuits were suppressed in 1773 (although they were never suppressed in Russia). The emotional and religious bankruptcy of Europe, the suppression of the Jesuits, and the disaster of the French Revolution of 1789 all conspired to practically put an end to mission work throughout the world. It is said that in 1800 there were only a few hundred Catholic missionaries still working around the world. This bleak picture, however, would change dramatically within the next century.

The "Great Century" of Christian Mission and the Society Model of Mission

The year 1800 was pretty much the nadir point for Catholic missionary activity around the world, but it also marked the beginning of the great surge of Protestant missionary work that marked the nineteenth and at least the first half of the twentieth century. Luther and especially Calvin had believed that there was no need for more missionary activity, since those who were destined to be saved had already had the gospel preached to them. There was some missionary activity by the Lutheran Pietists led by Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf in the eighteenth century, but it was only after 1793, with the publication of William Carey's famous

[12]For a detailed history of this development, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

tract on the Christian obligation to convert the "heathen," that Protestant missionary work took off. And take off it did. Carey and his few companions went to India, and soon many others followed. Soon missionaries were going to China, and also to Africa. Mission became an important movement in the United States as well, and missionaries were also recruited for work in China, in Polynesia and Oceania. Missionary societies like the London Missionary Society the Baptist Missionary Society in England and the American Board of Commisioners for Foreign Missions in the United States were formed.

The explosion of missionary activity in the nineteenth century coincided with Europe's, and later the United States', interest in colonial expansion. Colonialism made it easy for British missionaries to work in newly-colonized lands like India, Kenya and Gold Coast (now Ghana). The colonizers were content that Christians could also be taught to be good British subjects, and mission schools educated young men and women in European languages and culture, helping to form a class of civil servants who would assist the colonizing powers in their rule. Missionaries, Catholic and Protestant, were not always the dupes of the ruling colonial powers, but they often were, consciously or unconsciously. A fine example of an indigenous missionary is Samuel Ajayi Crowther. He had been taken from his native Nigeria as a slave, but rescued by a British ship and place in Freetown in Sierra Leone. Crowther eventually went as a missionary to his native Yurubaland, where he eventually became a bishop. Unfortunately his successor was not African but British.

By 1815 peace had pretty much been restored in Europe after the final defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo. The same year saw the lifting of the order of supression of the Jesuits. Religious orders, sent out from France during the dark days of the Revolution were beginning to be restored. The papacy, which had reached its lowest point of power under Napoleon with the imprisonment of Popes Pius VII and VIII, was beginning to gain a new prestige in Europe. There had been a few missionary orders founded in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century–the Spiritans in 1703, what are today the Missionaries of the Precious Blood in 1815, and the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in 1816, the Marist Brothers in 1817. But after about 1830 there was a virtual explosion of them as Catholicism achieved a new vitality and colonial expansion need a religious dimension. The Marist Fathers were founded in 1836. In 1848, Francis Liebermann founded the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and was asked to merge, and take the name of, the Spiritans. The Missionaries of the Sacred Heart were founded around 1850 by Jean Jules Chevalier (1824-1907). In 1866 Mill Hill missionaries were founded, in 1868 the White Fathers, in 1875 Arnold Janssen founded the Society of the Divine Word. The 1840s saw the foundation of the Comboni Missionaries. Many of these male congregations had sister congregations as well: Marist Sisters, Sisters of the Precious Blood, Comboni Sisters, Missionary Sisters of the Holy Spirit, Sisters of the Holy Spirit of Perpetual Adoration. The United States saw the founding of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and the Sisters of the Holy Family, both of whom were dedicated to working among African Americans and the former, founded by St. Katherine Drexel, also worked among Native Americans.

In the nineteenth century, and into the twentieth, there were thousands of missionaries in the field. Sixty per cent of Protestant missionaries from the United States were women,

according to historian Dana Robert.[13] There were also many women serving as Catholic missionaries, although not as many as Protestants. The work of mission was varied: schools, universities, hospitals, clinics, charitable services and material aid. Most had a clear idea of the goal of mission work, the salvation of souls and the implantation of the church. Many missionaries thought (actually contrary to the teaching of the Catholic Church) that those who died without baptism were condemned to hell, or at least sent to Limbo. Local cultures and religions were seen as mostly evil, and cultural and religious practices of local peoples needed to be jettisoned if they were to become true Christians. This was the age of certainty,[14] the "great century" as historian Kenneth Latourette entitled three of the volumes of his multi-volume history of mission.[15] Missionaries worked in all parts of Africa, in South, Southeast and Northeast Asia, in the islands of the Pacific, in New Zealand and Australia.

In 1910 about twelve hundred delegates from all over the Protestant world met at Edinburgh for a great World Mission Conference. Its theme was the watchword of John R. Mott: "the evangelization of the world in this generation." Such confidence was soon to come to a crashing end.

Twentieth Century into the Twenty-First

Despite the devastation caused by the two great wars of the first half of the twentieth century, the "age of certainty" lingered for some time. But it was a certainty that was being steadily undermined by new understandings of theology, new understandings of culture, the beginning of the decolonization era, and the subsequent rise of nationalism and the renaissance of local religions. By the time of Vatican II (to focus now more on the Catholic perspective), change was in the air, ushering in what Robert J. Schreiter has called the "age of ferment" in mission.

Vatican II presented a different image of the church. Mission was part and parcel of the church's very identity and mission was not understood as much as a territorial reality as one that focused on particular people in particular circumstances. In some ways it echoed what a 1963 meeting sponsored by the World Council of Churches in Mexico that talked about mission today being carried out "on six continents."[16] This perspective, we have seen in the previous paper, was one of the major contributions of *Ad Gentes* (AG), the Council's document on mission. Culture too, as presented in AG and the document on the Church in the Modern World, (*Gaudium et Spes* [GS]*)* was looked upon positively as missionaries were urged to "learn by sincere and patient dialogue what treasures a generous God has distributed among the

[13]Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), 37.

[14]Robert J. Schreiter, "Changes in Roman Catholic Attitudes toward Proselytism and Mission," in James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, eds., *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization w: Theological Foundations* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 113-125.

[15]Kenneth Scott Latourette., *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937-1945), Volumes 4, 5 and 6 cover the "Great Century," which he speaks of as from 1800 to 1914.

[16]Conference on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME), Mexico City, 1963.

nations of the earth."[17] The Council also acknowledged in its Declaration on Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate* [NA]) that in these religions is found "a ray of that Truth which enlightens all peoples." The Council clearly taught the possibility of salvation outside explicit faith in Christ (see LG 16).

This age of ferment that ushered in very new ideas of mission soon brought the church's understanding of mission to a crisis–one that was being felt in the Protestant churches as well as in the Catholic Church. As Anglican bishop Stephen Neil put it famously, if everything is mission, then nothing is mission. If the entire church is missionary, in other words, there is no need for a special mission across cultures, nor a need for particular people to serve as cross cultural and foreign missionaries. If cultures are holy and good, why should Christians disturb them with a western religion? And, perhaps most distressing of all, if women and men can be saved without explicit knowledge of Christ and without the church, why should people leave their home and cultures to preach the gospel? In the wake of Vatican II, missionary vocations began to fall off and many missionaries left the mission field to work in their own countries. At the end of the 1960s and early 1970s there was a talk of a "moratorium" of missionary activity. All foreign missionaries were urged by some people in traditional mission lands to go home, and to offer the resources that supported foreign missionaries for the development of local churches.

Around the year 1975, however, after the Synod of Bishops on evangelization, with the publication of Paul VI's apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN), and with similar developments within Protestantism like the Nairobi meeting of the World Council of Churches and the Lausanne meeting of Evangelical Protestants in 1974, mission has undergone a "new birth." What EN did, as we have seen in the previous paper on church teaching, was to broaden the very idea of mission to include activities like inculturation and working for justice and liberation. Such broadening of mission continued in John Paul II's encyclical *Redemptoris Missio,* when he spoke of mission (echoing EN) as a "single but complex reality."[18] John Paul spoke of mission as including not only inculturation and work for justice, but also interreligious dialogue. In paragraph 37 of RM he also spoke of many other venues for mission: work in communications, urban ministry, youth, and science, for example.

In the years since RM there have been several developments in the church's understanding of mission. In the aftermath of the great Medellin Conference of 1968 there emerged a theology of liberation, developed not theoretically, but out of the practice of action/reflection of grassroots Christians committed to and working for political and social freedom, and from the personal and structural sinfulness in which institutional oppression resulted. Robert J. Schreiter has articulated the need to include an understanding of working for reconciliation as an integral part of mission in today's very violent world. Especially after the fall of regimes of oppression, as in South Africa, Argentina and Nicaragua, and after situations of racial slaughter, as in Rwanda and Burundi, reconciliation is no theoretical reality, and an urgent

[17]Vatican II, Decree on Missionary Activity, *Ad Gentes*, 11.
[18]John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* (RM), 41.

necessity. Schreiter claims that reconciliation is one of the major forms the Good News can take in the world today, and so is integral to missionary practice.

There have been cautions issued by the Vatican about a tendency in Asian churches to blur the significance of the centrality of Christ as universal savior. While the tone of these interventions has been unfortunate, the point is well taken. A true dialogue with other people of faith can only be possible if we have a firm sense of Christ's unique role in salvation history. More and more the issue of migration has come to the fore as central to the church's missionary activity. In many ways the "world of the missions" has come to the "home churches." In this way, there are no more churches that are simply "sending" and "receiving," but all are both.

This last reality is true in another sense in today's church. As missionary vocations have decreased in the West, more and more missionaries from the "Two Thirds World" are being sent to other traditionally mission countries, and they are also being sent to minister to migrants in Western countries as well. In my own congregation of the Society of the Divine Word, for example, almost one sixth of our membership is Indonesian, and our largest numbers of missionaries today are coming from Indonesia, India, and the Philippines. I am writing this paper from Australia, and what is interesting is that there are only Pacific Islanders, Indians and Vietnamese in the formation program here. Among Protestants, the largest number of missionaries come from Korea. Many Two Thirds World missionaries also see themselves as missionaries to Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand–sent to re-evangelize cultures that have become secularized and deaf to the gospel message. This, of course, has raised its own problems.

Mission today is also being carried out in large part by lay women and men, many of them on short term mission lasting from a week (doctors going to Haiti) to several years (the Maryknoll Society of the Faithful, who sign up for five year stints, renewable indefinitely). In some ways, today's most significant missionary work is being done by laity in these shorter terms–so much so that we could call today the era of Short Term Lay Missionaries.

Conclusion

What I have written in these few pages barely scratches the surface of the church's long history, much of which has been marked by missionary witness. What I hope readers will realize, however, is how central missionary activity is and has been to the church. Missiologists and other religious writers suggest that today we are living in the era of the "world church." But those who know the church's history–its entire history–know that we have *always* lived in such an age. Christianity was born in Asia, spread East in Persia and on to China, south into Ethiopia and Nubia, West across north Africa and north into what has become France, Germany, Ireland, England and Scotland. When Europe "discovered" new lands, the church went there as well. In doing so it needed to be in conversation with Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Roman Religion, Islam, and the various religions of northern Europe, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and the religions of Indonesian and Philippine local religions. Many missionaries, like Alopen, Cosmas

and Damien, and Alexandre de Rhodes, were in serious conversation with local cultures, and, like Francis of Assisi, Bartolomé de las Casas and Marie of the Incarnation, were always involved with the welfare of the people they served. There has also been a shadow side to mission. Missionaries like Boniface and the Spanish Friars in the Americas disparaged culture and preached a Christianity that destroyed it. Many demonized local religions. Many were collaborators with the colonial expansion of the nineteenth century.

In addition to the lights and shadows, however, is another factor. In EN, Paul VI emphasized the fact that "the Holy Spirit is the principal agent of evangelization."[19] It is the Spirit that created the church in the first place, continues to equip the church for the work of mission by lavishing gifts on every Christian, and constantly challenges the church to move beyond its "comfort zone" in order to do God's purposes in the world. In a real way, the history of mission is the history of the Holy Spirit, the history of God "inside out" in creation. Our great privilege and grace as church is to somehow be participants–sacraments, actually–of that history of love, healing and liberation.

Discussion questions

Professor Bevans painted in broad strokes a historical picture of the Church- a difficult task in such a short time and it is difficult to focus our discussion. We will only discuss two points.

1) In the early apostolic period of the Church, the growth of the Church was rooted in the evangelical work of the apostles but was encouraged by the "gossiping of the Gospel"—the ordinary witness of Christians in their daily life. **Tell your own stories; give examples of the 'gossiping of the gospel' that has impacted you.**

2) Throughout the missionary life of the Church there is a continuing theme of the relationship of the Church to the State. Discuss the relationship of the Church and State in your unit of the Congregation. How is this effecting the missionary work of the Church?

[19] EN 75.