

A Mission to Discover

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In January 2016, the bishops of Quebec published a facilitation tool entitled *The Missionary Shift of Christian Communities*. Inspired by Pope Francis's Apostolic Exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel*, this text invites the Christian communities to undergo an "evangelical review of life in order to implement concretely the missionary shift."¹

At a pastoral formation meeting to which I was invited, a participant alluded to this famous missionary shift [*tournant*" in French] with a sense of humour that conveyed what I took to be a good measure of exasperation. "This is not the first *tournant* [shift] we've had to make. In the end, we risk going around in circles. Instead of missionary *tournant*, we should talk about the missionary torment!" This satirical comment was followed by applause, which was quite an introduction to my intervention on the subject!

What Mission?

Without using this particular expression, Pope Francis evokes the missionary shift by hoping the communities will devote the necessary effort to "advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are. ... Pastoral ministry in a missionary context seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: 'We have always done it this way.' I invite everyone to be bold and creative."²

No doubt, it is necessary to be bold and creative for an ecclesial renewal in service of the Gospel, including the life of religious communities. But what must appear? What must continue? What could disappear? Multiplying initiatives while further dividing dwindling resources—now that would be a real pastoral torment!

What mission? A certain image of the mission remains firmly anchored in the ecclesial imagination: mission as recruitment, propaganda or the admirable heroism of a few. While it may be necessary to abandon the comfortable criterion of the status quo, it is not a question of returning to an outdated missionary criterion. To move from a stance of a pastoral maintenance to a stance of pastoral mission requires a profound transformation of the whole life of the Church.

Putting Down Deeper Roots and Turning-Away from the Centre

This great disruption involves the Church "putting down deeper roots into its very foundations" and a "radical turning-away from the centre." For the Church, it is a matter of "going out from its own world (its programs, its organization, its rules, its language) and from its self-referential system, to living less centered on itself in order to find its true center, which lies in what God does, as well as in the humanity to whom the Church is sent."³

¹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium, The Joy of the Gospel; An Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father Francis*, Vatican Press, 2013; Council on Communities and Ministries, Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Quebec (AECQ), *The Missionary Shift of Christian Communities*, 2016, p. 30.

² *The Joy of the Gospel*, 25 and 33.

³ *The Missionary Shift of Christian Communities*, p. 10 to 12.

In that respect, the true missionary turning point is the one made by the Second Vatican Council in labouing “to decipher authentic signs of God’s presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires ... of our age.”⁴ In the light of the Gospel and in dialogue with the world of its time, the Church discovers the love of God already working at the heart of the human endeavour. God visits his people (see Lk 1:68).

At the same time, the Church is discovering its own identity as a believing community. In the words of the former Archbishop of Algiers commenting on the Vatican II decree on the missionary activity of the Church: “The heart of the mission is located in this spiritual place in which, professing the love of God manifested in Jesus Christ, the Church commits herself and commits others to live their true human vocation by entering into the order of love.”⁵

An Experience of the Joy of the Gospel

In the perspective of this commitment of the Church at the heart of a mission that precedes and exceeds it, the missionary shift does not consist of asking ourselves what we must do. Rather, it is to seek what God is doing today and how He invites us—we and so many others of good will—to collaborate in His work in the world. The missionary “outreach” required by this attentive love for the events and requests of our time is a challenge for our consecrated life.

What is the contribution of consecrated life to the pastoral and missionary conversion of the Church? Should not this contribution be the testimony about an experience of the joy of the Gospel, which, by facilitating the missionary shift, avoids becoming a torment?

Here are three aspects to explore along those lines:

1. The Movement of the Mission

The movement of the mission in which the Church finds her identity is not primarily geographical or organizational, but of the order of free love. “You received without charge, give without charge” (Mt 10:8). The manifestation of the Spirit of Pentecost mobilizes the Church for a mission that “goes on and in the course of history unfolds the mission of Christ Himself, who was sent to preach the Gospel to the poor.”⁶

In this movement of the mission, consecrated life is not a particular function among others, but a gift from the Spirit to the whole Church. It is the gift of seeing, judging and acting in the footsteps of Christ according to one aspect of the Gospel, which belongs to the entire community of the baptized and inspires a radical commitment of a few.

At the heart of the many decisions demanded by the missionary shift, consecrated life is called upon to testify about this experience of the free gift of God. This source of freedom and joy must always be present in places of evangelical discernment.

“If monastic life, religious life, consecrated life are given to the Church, it is to constitute an instance of discernment in the service of the people of God. Their reason for being is not to be seen or imitated but rather, through their ways of life, to show and tell about the

⁴ Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 11.1.

⁵ Tessier, Henri, *La mission de l'Église*, Desclée de Brouwer éditions, 1985, p. 215.

⁶ Vatican II, Decree *Ad Gentes* on the Mission Activity of the Church, no. 5.

ever-renewed freshness of the Gospel. Received by the Spirit, (this vocation) can only be but unpredictable, unhinged by conventionalism, always innovative.”⁷

2. The Sign of the Mission

The sign, which is at issue here, is the one that indicates the presence of God, that is to say, his mission at work in the world. That sign is the Christ Jesus, risen in the power of his Spirit. The privileged places where this sign is being recognized and announced by the Church are the multiple faces of human poverty where the hope of the Beatitudes is being lived.

In the diversity of its gospel-inspired commitments, consecrated life displays a prophetic sensitivity for identifying current places where the sign of the mission can be found. Such sensitivity is essential for steering an authentic missionary shift. Among those current places of revelation are immigration, exclusion for ethnic or religious reasons, disregard for human rights, especially for children, the sick, and the elderly.

In a world where there will be more and more fragile people, living with illnesses, handicaps and mental weaknesses, Jean Vanier sees a new sign for Christians and asks: “How can we guide Christian men and women towards the weak of our time, not only to heal and evangelize them, but to meet them and be evangelized by them, to receive from them the Gospel that we need today? ... Do we not need new types of monasteries, monasteries of love where the weak are welcomed and reveal a new presence of Jesus?”⁸

This sensitivity to the presence of Jesus showing the human face of God joins two pastoral categories, which according to Pope Francis, have their roots in the newness of the Gospel: “*closeness and encounter*, two ways through which God himself is revealed in history culminating in the Incarnation.”⁹

3. The Style of the Mission

In a pluralistic society, closeness and encounter in a spirit of service make possible a hospitality that dispels fear. That is the style of the mission, a third avenue to explore in order to appreciate the gift of consecrated life to the missionary Church. By creating spaces for reciprocal listening and testimony, hospitality offered and received is the environment conducive to dialogue.

As mission style, dialogue is all the more necessary because the missionary shift involves “outreach” to people from other cultures, beliefs and convictions. In that respect, the international and intercultural experience of religious communities can offer a precious gift to the Church at a time when it is welcoming the surprises of God. Who is this Visitor who comes to visit his people and who is waiting at the turning point, at the shift?

⁷ Lécivain, Philippe « Une histoire ouverte. Moines, religieux et consacrés », dans *Christus*, n° 210, avril 2006, p. 169.

⁸ Vanier, Jean, *Les signes des temps à la lumière de Vatican II*, Albin Michel, 2012, p. 134-135.

⁹ See Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Consecrated Life, Circular Letter *Rejoice!*, 2014, no. 10.