

### 13. MISSION

Fr. Chevalier chose for his Congregation the title of Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. The choice was made in accordance with his vision of the Christ of the Gospels and with his view of the spirit and aims of the society he was founding.

« At all times, in all his actions, Our Lord is taken up with the mission which he has come to carry out on earth » (1). The compassionate Christ is concerned for mankind; the Good Shepherd goes in search of the lost sheep; He invites all men to come to him in order to find rest for their souls.

There is no need, here, to stress the importance of apostolic zeal, nor the special place of the mission « ad gentes ». The whole history of our Society bears eloquent witness to these realities. Other aspects of « mission » in our Society are not so immediately suggested by the terms « mission » or « missionary » in their popular understanding. For this reason there is need to insist that these aspects, too, are an es-

(1) Quoted by H. Vermin, « Le Père Julez Chevalier », Rome, 1957, p. 368.

secular and vital part of our MSC vision and spirituality.

Firstly, « Missionaries of the Sacred Heart are given the wonderful mission of *glorifying the Heart of Jesus* and of making known the treasures of grace which fill it... » (2) It is rather well known that, after Vatican II, the first efforts at renewal in religious congregations gave their greatest attention to involvement in the world. This was a necessary phase and a good one. Fortunately « there are many indications that the Spirit is leading congregations to a courageous reassessment not just of their relationship with the world but of their relationship with God. We are discovering that, just as a spiritual quest which dried up all apostolic desire would be suspect in the eyes of the Gospel, so too a *missionary* commitment which would not be open to the free gift of self in worship *before God* would be evangelically unhealthy and unconnected to the 'following of Christ'... For more and more religious, generous commitment to the service of human causes, in the name of the Gospel, has no real meaning or worth unless it is lived within the *before God* of their call. This *before God* becomes all important to them. Without questioning their commitment to their mission, or refusing to take part in the movements of human liberation which are stirring wherever they are at work, they try to give to their relationship with God all the importance which it holds in any life spent 'in the following of Christ' » (3).

(2) Formula Institut, n. 6  
(3) J. Tillard, O. P. in *Keywords Address to the Third Interannual Meeting of Religions*, 1977.

In this quotation Fr. Tillard makes an application of the thesis which he develops in his book « *Devant Dieu et Pour le Monde* ». As the title indicates he sets out to stress that religious life is lived « before God and for the world ». Fortunately for us, these two elements are united in the concept of mission if it is rightly understood in the light of the Gospel. It is by examining the biblical concept and the spirituality of mission that we see how we are called to live *before God* — constantly and consciously — if we are to say truly that we have a mission to the world.

A mission is *to* someone (to all who labour and are burdened): it is also, and essentially, *from* someone. If the « from » dimension of mission is not lived faithfully, we are hardly entitled to claim that we are carrying out a mission, that we are 'missionaries'. Ours is a sharing in the mission of Christ or it is no mission at all. Reflection on the way that Christ lived his mission is essential if we are to live our MSC vocation. Central to such reflection are the points contained in the following passages from Fr. A. Feuillet:

« The world must be brought to know that I love the Father and that I am doing exactly what Father told me. » (Jo. 14,31).

' I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love ' (Jo. 15,10).

In these two passages the love of Jesus for his Father is synonymous with his unconditional attachment to the will of the Father, an attachment which will lead him to Calvary for the salvation of men. In view

of this synonym, even if explicit declarations are rare, Jesus constantly proclaims, implicitly, his love for the Father since he constantly proclaims his unflinching attachment to the will of the Father.

In the fourth Gospel Jesus is as if obsessed with the desire to carry out the mission which the Father has entrusted to him. This explains why he speaks so often of the Father who has sent him. » (4)

« We need to begin with what is implied by the ordinary concept of an envoy (one who is sent). The envoy of a sovereign represents him... the importance of the role that he plays comes from the one who speaks and acts through him. Furthermore the authentic envoy who fulfills his mission as he should is not content to express thoughts which he does not share. He puts himself entirely at the service of his sovereign. He forgets himself in order to make his own the thoughts and desires of him who sent him...

All this applies to any envoy whoever he be; it applies in the most perfect possible way to Christ sent by the Father, as described by St. John. Constantly in the Fourth Gospel Jesus declares that his words are not his own, but those of the Father (3,34; 7,16; 8,26,38,40; 14, 10,24; 17,8), that the works he does are not his own but those of the Father (4,34; 5, 17, 19, 20, 30, 36; 8,28; 14,10) that he does not carry out his own will, but the will of the Father (4, 34; 5,30; 6,38; 10, 25,37). He is only the voice and the hand of the Father — and this is his claim to

(4) « *Le mystère de l'Amour Divin dans la Théologie Johannique* », Paris, Gabalda, 1972, p. 69.

honour from men: « so that all may honour the Son as they honour the Father. Whoever refuses honour to the Son refuses honour to the Father who sent him (5, 23; cf. 7,18; 8, 50, 54).

There is this difference from human missions that, at no moment is he who is sent really separated from the one who sends him: the Father who has sent his Son into the world does not leave him alone (8, 29; 16,32); Jesus and his Father are always one (10,30); always 'the Father is in me and I am in the Father' (10,38; cf. 14, 11; 17,21). Consequently when Jesus loves men and gives his life for them, it is the love of the Father that reaches out to them through him: 'To have seen me is to have seen the Father' (14,9). » (5)

A good deal of « living before God » is necessary if we are to share the « mission » of Christ. Yet without this sharing we can not claim to be sent on a mission to men, no matter how deep our concern for men, no matter what our involvement in the world.

Here, too, our Founder provides us with example and inspiration.

« Chevallier », wrote Belleville, « was the man of an idea and a work... The idea 'is a mystic idea... Having taken his place so to speak in the Heart of Christ, he will never leave it, come what may'. In these words l'Abbé Belleville rather beautifully describes what he considers the mystic quality of Fr. Chevallier's spirituality... The term mystical is often used to indi-

(5) *ib.* p. 26.

cate the conscious living of the spiritual life as God's gift experienced, rather than our own effort at asceticism or the practice of virtue... He seemed to live the mystery of Christ living-in-him and acting and loving through him. Conscious as he was of Christ before his eyes in meditation, and Christ in his heart in his prayer and exercise of charity, he seemed to live a conscious union with Christ 'in his hands' — Christ working with him his apostolic efforts. He was as conscious of the presence and action of Christ in his activity as he was in his prayer. And he would write in his Rules:

'The Missionaries will have a tender devotion to the adorable Heart of Jesus; they will not forget that it is the source of all grace, a hearth of light and of love, an abyss of mercy; they will have recourse to it often in their trials, their temptations, their redium, their difficulties.'

Furthermore he would find Christ in the people for whom he worked, seeing them always as 'the souls *mystique of mission*, conscious of sharing in the mission of Christ, High-Priest and Apostle, conscious of the love of God given to every man whom he met. This did not mean that he thought one could find God in others and not make efforts to meet him regularly in prayer and especially in the eucharist. In his own busy life, his assiduous practice of the religious exercises of his religious community is stressed by those who knew him. » (6).

(6) E. J. Cuskelly, « *Jules Chevalier* », 1975, pp. 300-301.

A second aspect of mission is the constant challenge to try to discover the signs of the times and what should be our response to them in the spirit of our vocation. In an earlier chapter we have seen the importance of this. Some of our Provinces have faced this issue squarely and give an example of what should be done in all parts of the Society. Questions such as these need to be asked: What are the appeals which are addressed to us today in the spirit of our mission? What are the real needs of the Church? Where are the real « poor » who need our help? Does the work in which we are engaged respond to our MSC mission today? Is it an obvious expression of our MSC vocation? Does it fulfil a real need in the local Church? Or are we doing this work simply because we began it some years ago? Can existing apostolates be re-vitalized and adapted so that they will, in fact, better respond to modern needs and be more vital expression of our own charism?

The different elements of a spirituality are lived with conviction in the measure that they are felt to be integral and constitutive parts of a unified spirituality. This unification exists when we see how the various components of our life flow from our central vision of Christ or are integrated into our response to that vision. The particular MSC vision has been considered in a previous Chapter. We have learned to believe in the love of God for all men — and this is the source of mission: « *carritas Christi urget nos* ».

The evangelical counsels should be informed by that same vision, integrated into our response as missionaries of the Sacred Heart. This integration was not favoured by the older form of constitutions requested by the Holy See. That formula gave the impression

that some things were the expression of our MSC spirit while others, such as the vows, were required of us as religious. Often enough we looked to Canon Law and writings on religious life to see what the vows implied in our lives. This did not give us false knowledge; but it limited our view and detracted from the unified vision of a sound spirituality.

Fortunately we have begun again to look to our charism and mission to see what they tell us about the way we should live poverty, chastity and obedience in our Society. For instance, with regard to chastity, some Provincial Chapters in recent years have composed texts such as these:

« celibate chastity allows us to live more like Christ lived — compassionate, human, open to the needs of people with whom we associate, both those within the community and those outside ».

« religious chastity is a commitment to a creative, non-exclusive love — a love of Christ in faith, friendship and prayer; — a love of others in warmth, care and concern. »

The call to evangelical poverty, too, must be considered within the context of our mission. Some religious Orders such as the Franciscans have a special mystique of poverty inherited from St. Francis which we are not called to share. We are called to a mission of loving service, to witness to the compassionate love of Christ. The possession and use of material goods fits into this context and must be judged accordingly.

A case from one of our missions provides an instructive

128

example. A missionary was sent to a poor parish where there was no house for the priest. A well-to-do Catholic of the area offered the priest the use of one of his houses. However, the missionary realized that the house was so much better than the houses of the ordinary people that, should he accept it for himself, the people would not feel that he was there to serve them. He therefore lived in a poor house in the village. He thus gave clear witness that he was there in the service of the poor. After some months the people sent a representation to him to say that they would like to help him build a bigger and better house. They felt that the very poverty of his dwelling was a hindrance to his better service. In a bigger house, he would be better able to receive people and could take better care of his health. They saw that too much material poverty was an obstacle to the service he was sent to give.

There is far more, of course, to the living of evangelical poverty and consecrated chastity. Many good things are being written on these aspects of our religious life. However, the point I wish to make here is that we must not simply copy what others write; rather we need to think out the meaning of these spiritual realities in the light of our own vision and in the context of our mission. This is true, too, of obedience which will be treated in a later chapter.

In the same way we have to think things through with regard to community. Wherever we are, what is our mission as an MSC Community? Again, what kind of a community should we have as Missionaries of the Sacred Heart? Our mission requires that many of our dedicated members live alone. If one takes the Benedictine concept of 'community', these men

129

do not live in community. On the other hand, for the Jesuits, it is mission which constitutes community. We are neither Jesuits nor Benedictines. Yet we have not, as a Society, worked out a commonly accepted idea of what is the essence of an MSC Community. We need to do this.

The following quotations may help stimulate some creative thinking.

« In view of the incongruity between the academic praise of community and the hard facts of life, I shall make bold to wonder aloud if we could substitute our present emphasis on 'community' by the richer and more free New Testament term of *koïnoïnía* (fellowship). The charity, concern and devotedness which characterize a truly fraternal spirit can and should be present in a group of dedicated men even when the structures of community are minimal. Perhaps we have a great deal to learn from the missionary congregations who show an admirable esprit de corps and a truly evangelical bond of fraternity even when their apostolate precludes the close structural ties which seem to inhere in the word 'community' ... »

The example of the missionary congregations may serve to cut the Gordian knot tied around our necks by excessive 'community' emphasis. Though we may not be able to guarantee a close-knit community structure, our institute... must be able to guarantee a strong and helpful community spirit. It is this alone and not an abundance of 'community' structures that the Gospel requires ». (7).

(7) B. Ahern, C. P., address to S. C. Relig. and U. S. G., 1973.

« We see community life as a spirit of communion based on a firm commitment to Christ and the apostolate, manifesting itself in sharing on the spiritual, material and companionship levels, and in a deeper concern for one another. There are different ways of sharing for those who form a community which lives together and those who form a dispersed community. » (8).

(8) U.S.G., 1972.