

Mission Today

Andreas Müller OFM

The new concept of “mission,” introduced by Vatican II, began a process of study that has not yet been concluded. It has changed our understanding of “mission” as well as changing the tasks and methods of “mission”, strongly characterized by the local Church. If in fact, the whole Church is missionary, nevertheless the principal responsibility of “mission” passes from missionary Institutes to the individual local Churches.

In the German-speaking world, Franciscans have tried to face this challenge with the Franciscan Foundation “Mission-zentrale”. They were convinced that an Order with such a long and varied missionary tradition could not passively accept this change, but rather it had to take it on with courage and actively collaborate in bringing it about.

I. From the Western Church to the Universal Church

The center of gravity for the Church and for mission has shifted from Europe across the Atlantic (Latin America, Africa, Asia), where a good two thirds of Catholics live. Shortly, mission will no longer be a one-way journey from Europe towards overseas countries. Mission is everywhere, in all six Continents. We have become a Missionary Country.

We must convince ourselves that the secularized and dechristianized atmosphere of the so-called countries of origin must be evangelized anew by missionaries.

In addition we must become aware that we are no longer those who only give. We are receiving more and more inspiration from the Churches of the Southern Continents. For example, the commitment of the laity in the Church’s life, or the energy of the Base Communities, gives us an understanding of our faith that relates to daily life. Thus mission is returning to us. Churches, which were dependent on Europe, are becoming adult and self-responsible. White missionaries, great pioneers and leading figures who wrote the history of mission, have to withdraw into second place: accustomed, as they were, to being listened to, now they must learn to listen anew. The exclusivity of the salvation offered by Christianity now has to face the salvific values in the non-Christian religions; the Church established and organized in a Western way, has to face indigenous theology and the local Church with its own particular organizational needs.

From the theological point of view, Vatican II made this evolution possible. If Vatican I placed the emphasis on the universal Church and central authority, the Second Vatican Council brought this ecclesiological vision to completion with its doctrine on the bishops and local Churches. In this new vision dioceses and parishes are included. They are the Church. “The Church of Christ – says the

Council – is truly present in all legitimate local assemblies of the faithful, which, adhering to their pastors, are also called Churches in the New Testament.” (Lumen Gentium, 26) These too have the right to a relative independence, to their own structures, liturgy and theology. Unity of the Church, yes, but in pluralism, in which each local Church can instill all the richness of its own cultural and religious tradition.

II. From Proclamation Alone to Dialogue

Church documents until Pius XII spoke of “infidels, who serve pagan gods”, of those who “do not know God”. Missionaries were therefore obliged to unmask indigenous religions as demoniacal superstitions. Now, they will have to address these same religions with frankness, understanding and patience, to discover how God is acting in them. And this will only be possible with a spirit of sincere dialogue, which is more than just a new method. It presupposes a new understanding of our faith in relation to other religions: being Christian does not mean following a new religion that replaces other religions. Rather it means accepting that which brings all religions to fulfillment.

This means bringing a new religious dimension to religions, the spirit of hope, of love, and of responsibility for the world. It will be the task of Christianity to communicate the power of transformation and of decisive dedication to the

world. In fact, if the world wants to survive, it must resolve the grave problems of hunger, of imbalance, of ethnic and religious conflict, and of the destruction of the environment. This will only be possible with the contribution of all religions and the Christian religion has a particular responsibility in this.

This new task is described well by Jürgen Moltmann: “Mission, on the qualitative level, takes place in dialogue. In dialogue the various religions undergo changes, Christianity too, just as in interpersonal dialogue the faces, opinions, and hopes of the participants also change. Dialogue among world religions is a process that can begin in the measure in which we are malleable and are transformed by it. Just as we do not lose our own identity in dialogue with a partner but we gain a new face, so also through dialogue with world religions we will gain a new profile. As hope for Christians we can say that they will be profiles that bear the mark of suffering man and of his future in life and in peace” (J. Moltmann, *Kirche in der Kraft des Geistes*, Monaco 1975, p. 174 – “Church in the Power of the Spirit”).

III. From the Care of Souls to the Promotion of the Whole Person

Eternal salvation and human well-being go together. It is heresy to divide the person into soul and body and place them in opposition to one another in their need for salvation. Nevertheless for a long time this was the reductive message given out through preaching. Leading

souls to heaven was considered the classic task of the “care of souls”. The “care of the body,” concern for earthly well being, was not listed among the tasks of the Church’s preaching. It is true that the Church was concerned with earthly well being through social institutions and by developing its social teaching. But this task was left to the laity, to societies and to politicians. Pastors of souls had to stay away from worldly and temporal worries.

Consequently a rigid distinction was made in mission between evangelization and human development. It is true, both are distinct, but the goal is the same: the liberation of the whole person. Thus a real evangelization is always also a contribution towards development, and the work of development well done, is a genuine and effective evangelization. “Only in this integral vision can the identity crisis of mission between missionaries and Christians at home be overcome. It is only above and beyond the thought patterns and distinctions heretofore in vogue, can the mission be understood as a new place of commitment: the new world situation of mission as an integral task of the Church. If the Church were not to permeate the world in this way, as the visible effect of God’s self-giving to the world, we should not be too surprised to find ourselves facing a Church without the world, and a world without the Church.” (W. Bühlmann, *Wo der Glaube lebt*, Herder 1974, p. 93 – Where Faith lives).

This inclusive vision found its most significant expression in Christianity in the liberation of Latin America. In the Sec-

ond General Assembly of the Bishops of Latin America in Medellin in 1968, 16 Documents were approved, which promoted a surprising renewal and revitalization of the Church. It is the beginning of a new theology and a new way to think in the Church. For the first time the theme and the word “liberation” finds its way into official Church language. Evangelization for liberation made people aware that the miserable conditions they inherited are not in conformity with God’s will. They are sin, and therefore must be modified. It made them aware that the salvation of people is indivisible; it includes a more human world, if God’s plan of salvation is to become a reality for us. It is true that 11 years later in Puebla this line was better enunciated because of some false interpretations; nevertheless it was confirmed and strengthened in its fundamentals. The Latin American Church has obliged itself to an “evangelization of liberation” from which people can attain a new hope.

IV. From the Individual Commitment to Group Work

The capacity and openness to collaboration will constitute a key point in verifying the sincerity of missionaries and missionary Orders. Lone explorers and personal projects should truly belong to the past, because even the most gifted person is no longer able to direct the tiring growth in the process of development, and above all, because such behavior easily becomes paternalistic and the people are not involved. Projects, with which the

people cannot identify, are doomed to failure.

It follows that we can only have a role of service. We cannot appropriate anything to ourselves, neither a position of power nor of helping monopoly. Collaboration demands a disinterested service in favor of all. This means respecting their dignity, their freedom, and their right to their own organization of life. Thus it may be more effective to support projects already underway, trying to bring them about as if they were our own. Likewise it may be more effective in a process of integral development, to limit ourselves to a collaborative role, rather than taking control of everything.

The question always remains: "What can best serve the people?" The employment of means and the choice of partners depend on this. The borders need to be very broad. Vatican II and the post-conciliar Encyclicals invite us to collaborate with all people of goodwill, when they "respect human values and sincerely seek

justice with honest means" (*De iustitia in mundo*, 63).

This requires sincerity and tolerance. We must never be afraid of pluriformity with the Church and society. And we should try to overcome our way of thinking in closed "blocks," which impedes any multiplicity and the prospering of different forms of expression. Ghettos are no use to anyone.

Finally, collaboration has an even deeper motivation for us. We are fighting for a more human world, because God has taken care of this world, because in Christ he has communicated to us the directives for a more just world, so that the values of the Kingdom might become visible in this world: justice, peace and love. We are members of the people that Christ wants to unite in one human family. We are members of the one People of God in which everyone is to be considered a brother and a sister. Thus, there is no alternative to convinced collaboration.