

MISSIONS IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

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MISSIONS are the Church in a state of growth. They are not merely an outside activity by which external additions are made to the Church, nor are they just the geographical expansion of the Church as it is. They involve a real growth and development of the whole Church, of doctrines, practices and life, and of every individual who shares in that life. For missions are the development of the catholicity of the Church.

Catholicity is of the very nature of the Church. It is the property by which it is able to adapt itself to every human group and incorporates all genuine human values, while remaining one and transcendent. Being of the nature of the Church, it tends to realize itself as fully as possible, until the whole of humanity has been gathered up.

Until the Church has in fact incorporated every human group, and established itself in every nation, its catholicity is undeveloped, though complete as a power. Its riches are not yet brought out, and the Church has not yet reached the fulness of its actual universalism. Its doctrine and life are still only developed in and by a portion of the human race and its cultures, and consequently each individual member of the Church shares in and lives an as yet immature catholicism. The growth of the Church by missionary activity will therefore mean the growth of the whole, and bring to the whole and to every member new riches out of the deposit of faith and the life of grace.

In order to grasp this fully, the manner in which the Church expands must be considered. As instituted by Christ the Church consists structurally of the pope and bishops and their flocks, and consequently it is a *body of churches*, as well as one universal Church. The particular churches are images and realizations of the one Church which has as the principle of its unity and universality the pope, but as the principle of its diversity and adaptation to human groups the bishops. The local Church is constituted in and through its bishop, through whom it receives the universal values of catholicism and the life of grace. It is normally a territorial unit, grouping together all those who live in one area,

and developing itself in smaller territorial groups, parishes. In this way the Church is adapted to the normal development of human life, which takes place in cultural groups on a territorial basis, for individuals naturally develop a culture and seek a fulness of human life in a multiplicity of relationships with those closest to them in space. And in this way the Church is able to make the grace of God and the universal values of catholicism penetrate into human life in its deepest and most individual recesses, and at the same time to incorporate all human values in Christ.

The Church has the task of incarnating the supernatural and transcendent in human cultural values, taking what it needs and assimilating them and elevating them for its supernatural life. A visible society, working through visible sacraments and worship, teaching through human concepts and words, and through human ministers, the universal and supernatural must always be humanized and particularized. Christ himself was an individual Jewish man, of a particular time and place: but he came to incorporate all humanity. The Church took on much of the outward forms of Jewish, Greek and Roman cultures. Later it adopted many of the forms of the western and Byzantine cultures that sprang from these, and made partial adaptations to near eastern cultures and the Celtic. But in fact the Church as it is today is largely bound up with western European culture, and most of the other adaptations have become separated from it, except for small groups which remain to witness to the Church's real universality. In the eastern rites we can see other ways of expressing the doctrine and life of the Church than the one most Catholics know, and they are a kind of pattern of the adaptation that missionary work calls for. Eastern theology, liturgy, devotional life, law, customs, all express the universal riches of catholicism in a different way from western, and often bring out different aspects and new riches. And these represent only a small minority of all human groups and cultures: the main development of catholicism has yet to come, and the Church is still in its infancy. So far it has spread mainly in a geographical fashion only, wedded to western European culture and migrants, establishing western European catholicism in distant places without any real change. The vast and densely populated cultures of Asia have hardly been touched, and the Church, such as it exists there, is still a

foreign and European church in most of its outward forms.

The supernatural life of the Church, and the universal human values in which it is incarnate, can never exist solely as such and in the abstract. They must always become concrete and individualized. For example, filial reverence is a universal human value. Each culture has its own ways of regarding the respect due from children to parents, its own ways of expressing it. It gives it a different place in the culture as a whole, more central or less central. The whole family structure hence differs; and the attitude to authority; and the attitude to the fatherhood of God as Father of the Son and as Father of men. New aspects will be brought out, new depths penetrated, new expressions of doctrine and behaviour formulated. Only then will the Catholic doctrine of the fatherhood of God and all its consequences become really assimilable to the new group. And at the same time the whole Church will experience a development of its doctrine and life in which all its members will share to some extent.

The essential organ of this growth of the Church is the new local church, consisting of bishop, clergy, religious and laity drawn from the local people, sharing to the full in their whole cultural heritage, and so able to adapt and express catholicism in new forms. Missionary activity consists precisely in the establishment of such new local churches. Missionaries go out from the established churches to places where a church does not yet exist. In them the universal Church begins to exist there. From the beginning they are constituted as a new local church, however rudimentary, passing commonly through the stages of a new local mission, more or less dependent, or prefecture apostolic, through vicariate apostolic to residential diocese. These legal stages express the degree of dependence of the new local church on the Church universal. It is at first wholly foreign, and wholly dependent on the universal Church. As it makes converts adaptation begins, usually at first in the realm of language. The teaching, pastoral care and all the outward life of the Church are still in foreign form. Then, as priests and religious and an educated laity begin to be formed, the means of teaching and of grace begin to take on the mentality of the local people. When the bishop and most of his clergy are of the country, this adaptation of the persons who mediate the life of the universal Church is complete, unless by their training they have been made foreign to

their people. At this point the mission is really at its end, and the life of the new local church comes into being as a partner among equals with the older local churches. It is subject only to the universal control of the pope, and no longer dependent for much of its life on some other local church or churches. Now the full adaptation to the new people can begin properly.

But the whole of this process of foundation, development, and complete establishment of the new local church, together with its whole future life and development after it has reached adulthood, depend all the time on the life of the universal Church. The initial missionary impulse is due to forces rising within the existing Church: prayer, alms, zeal, interest in missions, readiness to go abroad and readiness of the whole Church to expand and adapt itself. There are periods when this missionary movement of the existing Church is strong, and periods when it is weak. The prayer and zeal and readiness of the universal Church to expand by missionary enterprise is also the normal means by which abundant grace is mediated to the peoples outside the Church. Missionary zeal in the Church is the condition, both of abundant missions going outwards to new peoples, and of abundant graces turning new peoples towards the Church. Missions are thus a work of the universal Church in which every member has some part to play. And as the new local churches grow, they still depend on the universal Church and its life. They constantly receive more and more of the riches developed in the older churches, and their ability to adapt them to the new people also depends on the readiness of the universal Church to allow them to do so. For they must grow, not as schismatic churches, but as integral parts of the one universal Church. Their development and adaptation must not conflict with the good of the whole, for in so doing they would destroy or damage both themselves and it. So their development and adaptation are limited and conditioned by the ability of the whole Church at the moment to suffer and absorb such adaptation and development.

The interchange of life and thought between the older and the newer churches is thus of vital importance, especially to the new churches. They depend on the older churches, in a diminishing degree as they mature, for the already developed life of the Church. But their adaptation to their own people will depend, at a later stage, on the knowledge and understanding that the older

churches have of their contributions to the fulness of catholicism, and their readiness to adapt the Church universal so that it can absorb the new.

Missions are therefore an integral part of Catholic life for every part of the Church and for every individual, until the Church shall have reached its full growth and incarnated itself in every nation. The present age of the Church has been one of unprecedented missionary development, aided by a world-wide diffusion of western civilization, and the foundations of the past are rapidly growing into independent local churches. The most critical stage of missions begins: that of adaptation, when stress and strain between the older churches and their traditions and the newer ones may well be felt. If it is not to result in schism as in the past, the greatest understanding and flexibility on the part of the older churches will be required. Recent considerations of the question of the reunion of eastern dissidents usually stress that the greatest obstacle is the distance which east and west have drifted apart in their attitude to and practice of the same religion, and the necessity of mutual understanding and readiness to adapt and tolerate unessential differences. In the same way missionary zeal and knowledge will be required on the part of every Catholic, with a readiness to help the younger churches and to aid them in every possible way to absorb the fulness of Catholic life. At the same time there must also be a great readiness to hand over this treasure to their control and initiative, and to accept the new things that they will develop. Only so will the Church reach the fulness of its catholicism and its maturity, and every Catholic share fully in all the riches that are implicit in catholicism.