

## THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF A MISSION

NICHOLAS HUMPHREYS, O.P.

**T**HIS article is concerned with the spiritual life of a *mission*, and not with the spiritual life of a missionary. That is a different matter. A man may be a saint but yet unsuited to missionary work, as a good concert singer may be unsuited to opera. If the missionary can be both saint and missionary, well and good, but the essential thing is that he be a good missionary, understanding the technique of the work.

What is the root purpose of missionary work? The answer is simple: it is not merely to convert a number of people, to build a school, to teach the children to sing hymns—and wear European clothes?—but to plant the Church. The spiritual life of a mission means the spiritual life of the mystical body, lived by the people there. It means the Church as she is in herself, as the popes have written about her in encyclicals, as the great ages of the Church have known her, and as history has revealed her. All this shows her as virile, creative, and *new* wherever she takes hold, the universal friend and teacher, and always *new* though she never changes her nature. It does not mean a simple transplantation of what the missionary knew at home.

The Church must be planted truly. This means she must not be thought of narrowly, as in some other context, for her texture is not summarized by any local application of her principles. She is founded in Truth itself, and out of this Truth her 'wise householder', the Holy Spirit, produces continually 'treasures old and new'. Just as human life cannot be standardized to one set of circumstances but will express itself fittingly wherever it happens to be, so the Church must not be thought of simply as reflected in the set of circumstances of a man's home town. An attempt merely to reproduce a well-known scene is a vast mistake which leads to revolts, to pagan revivals, to unsatisfactory vocations, and to the hostility of governments—though this last is a possibility in any case, and seems to be a continually recurring feature in the history of the Church.

The truth is that the Church comes with her own doctrine and her own method of worship and she builds these things into

whatever is true in man, according as the missionary finds him in any place. If the Church is not built on man as he is *there*, then she will later either adapt herself painfully, or die. It was certainly with facts like this in mind that St Gregory told St Augustine of England—to the great scandal later of Mr Coulton—to adopt whatever he found good in English culture. Similarly, if the missionary is to plant the Church so that he opens the way to her vigour, he must start from the beginning with this outlook: If he is going to plant the Church as she is in herself, in such a way that she can teach her worship and her doctrine freely and be most easily understood, then he must use and incorporate and sanctify whatever is good in the local culture.

With these points in view, what will be his immediate aim? This is clear; it is the conversion of families. He is not going to be satisfied with capturing individuals only—one more name in the catechumen register, one more baptism recorded. He will be looking further than that. Catholic life is lived most healthily and perfectly in *families*, and hardly at all in single individuals. Catholic life requires the interchanges of family life, its organization and discipline, because that is the natural setting of man, and because the Church herself is a family, and not a conglomeration of individuals. If she tried to live in individuals only she would not be true to human nature, and grace would find hardly any foothold for its work.

Accordingly the missionary must start with the standpoint that the Church is a family; a family with ways of her own, a discipline of her own, a life and unity of her own that are all under the direct guidance and inspiration of almighty God, and perfectly suited to man everywhere. The reason for this is that this life, together with the doctrine which informs it is true in itself, *catholic*, that is it is fitted to the nature of man as he really is, no matter how local circumstances have 'conditioned' his way of life. Accordingly the life and ways of the Church must be brought in squarely from the beginning. It does not matter that it may be only in miniature, so long as it is a miniature of the Church, and not just an imitation of what she is in some particular foreign country. The great mountaineer Whymper, who made the first ascent of the Matterhorn, said in his book, *Scrambles in the Alps*, that he always brought back a stone from every climb he made to remind him of that mountain, because the stones of any mountain

always resembled the main lines of the whole mass. So the missionary goes to work on the principle that his mission must be born of the Church directly, and not at second hand *via* his home town, so that it will be a microcosm of the Church. He must be sensitive to what is admirable in the characteristics and culture of the local people, for it will be the work of the Church to sanctify and build her family life on that good product.

Let it be emphasized that a missionary must plant the Church in this fashion from the beginning. If he starts weakly he will have unending trouble later, trying to convert his people to better ways. They will be puzzled, they will feel they have been misled. They have been trying painfully to adapt their lives to a foreign form and to make themselves at home in it, and now the changes necessary to the true life of the Church disturb their confidence.

The fundamental work of the Church is to teach her doctrine and her mode of worship. These, as has been noted, are true in themselves, *catholic* that is, suited to every man everywhere at all times.

In many parts, under the stress of penal times and the secrecy they involved, there has grown up a habit where the congregation sits silent during mass or, beginning to come out from under cover, now sings hymns, or lets a choir do the singing for them. Is this to be copied in a mission? Is it the mind of the Church? Will it fit into the culture of the people whom the mission is to serve? Certainly it is not the mind of the Church but a poor makeshift, and definitely not to be copied but avoided. Will it fit into the culture of the people themselves? Far from it, for it is the custom of simple people to make their acclamation of chiefs and notables a community act. Accordingly the missionary will build on to that, and catholicize it, not weakly but strongly.

This means that from the beginning he will help his people to join in with the mass itself, and not to sit silent or sing hymns. He will set himself to provide means, perhaps by booklets made by himself, by getting someone to lead prayers in the vernacular, or by any means he can find, so that he secures that active co-operation of the congregation in the mass itself which is according to the whole spirit of Catholic worship. The scriptures must be read aloud during mass because his people will almost certainly have little background knowledge of them. A three-minute instruction can be given daily to help further to build up that

background. As quickly as possible he must get his congregation, no matter how small, to sing the Sunday mass in chant, since the Church's music is perfect for worship, and as 'universal' as her doctrine. Indeed, he will find this easier than he expects if their taste has not been spoiled by sentimental hymns. Moreover, since this is part of the life and spirit of the Church herself, he will thereby be forming their souls to right worship. If on the other hand he has got them into the habit of sitting silent at mass they will hate to change the habit, and if they have the habit of singing hymns they will almost certainly have developed more interest in the tunes and in the sound of their own voices than in the worship of God. He will find them sorry to leave their hymn tunes with their almost sensuous melodies, and will see that they are not too willing to co-operate with the changes he wishes to make. The chant may even seem distasteful. He has given them a wrong notion of the Church and built up in them something inferior that now does not want to fit with what is better. The Church they were beginning to know is becoming unfamiliar. It need not have been distasteful, but a happy revelation of beauty if he had started right.

The family principle must apply also with his catechism classes. To try to build up a congregation by converting the children and hoping they will bring in the parents is the slowest and most unsatisfactory way of going to work. It occasionally happens that the parents follow the children, but more often, particularly in African townships, the children simply drop the faith when they leave school, if they have not the support of at least one Catholic parent. In such cases, non-Catholic parents take no trouble to keep the children up to their duties. They reckon they gave the missionary his chance to win the child and he has not succeeded; that is all. It is too optimistic to hope to pass from the child to the parents. The plan that builds the Church is to keep the family together and not break it up. Delay the child's baptism till at least one parent is ready to be baptized too, and then the natural order is preserved and grace can build more strongly. Parental authority and guidance in religious life has been provided for the budding Christian life as it has been for the budding human life, and the Christian life is planted in its proper setting, the life of the family.

In her book, *Desert Calling*, published in 1950, Anne Freemantle describes a conversation between the great missionary Mgr Guérin

and Fr Charles de Foucauld. Mgr Guérin told him it was 'fatal' to be too ready to bestow baptism, especially on children. 'Nothing retards the christianization of a country as surely as apostasy and apostates.' She goes on to remark, 'To this day the White Fathers never, under any circumstances, baptize anyone remaining in his Mohammedan family or surroundings: they know the pressure will be too great. And the only infants they consent to baptize are those whose parents are already Christian, who are orphans, or who are *in articulo mortis*.' This seems to apply equally well to an African township.

Instruction and worship—these are the root functions of the Church, and if they are carried on in this fashion, the Church is being planted in a setting in which she can function most easily.

Furthermore, there can be no greater mistake for a missionary than to endeavour to keep everything in his own hands. The whole Church is the mystical body of Christ, his life dwells in all parts of her. It is true that there are special functions which can only be carried out by special parts. As in the human body the eye must do the seeing and the legs the walking, so the bishops and priests have functions they alone can execute. But how many missionaries try to be, in themselves, every function of the body, as though the eyes of a man must carry on the whole of his life and movement! Grace comes to us from our Lord, who earned it for us, as the apostle of the Father (Heb. iii, 1); accordingly we receive it individually on the condition of using it apostolically.

If a missionary wishes to succeed in his work he must encourage this apostolic spirit to work in his congregation and to reap its reward. He himself will reap the fruits of his congregation's work. They will be glad to have a share in planting the Church further. They will make very few mistakes, for they will be among their own people, and will know what they can attempt and what they cannot; and they will be under the help of grace working in the area where it is most at home. Thus he should encourage the formation of apostolic societies, such as the legion of Mary and the St Vincent de Paul society. The members of such societies will be entirely happy to be helping the Church's work, and they will be extensions of the missionary's pastoral care for his flock. They will bring him news of families that need his special attention, they will carry help to people and places which it is difficult for him to reach. They will collect vital statistics, and

be helping to develop that sense of community which belongs to the Church as a mystical body, and will not remain simply a collection of people linked individually to the priest by the sacraments but not joined into a single whole by a common soul, and by a common desire to spread the faith.

If the missionary is fortunate enough to have a few sisters who can help him with his work he is indeed fortunate, but how many missionaries forbid the sisters to have anything to do with the people! But they too are part of the family of the Church, and have a corresponding relationship to the priest's congregation—to the Church in that area. They are the supernaturalized sisters of the people, and the people can set great store by their sisters if they are given a chance to get to know them. How much help and advice they can give in regard to the young people! What an example they set of steady and dedicated purpose! What an encouragement it is to the people to talk to them! After mass on Sunday they are chatting with those who are standing round the church. At other times they are visiting the aged and the sick and the parents of children in the school, and answering the questions of young people who are attracted to the idea of religious life and anxious to get a few words unostentatiously with them. There again it is the Church at work, and it is the missionary's work to plant the Church. He will guide and advise, but he must make his people co-planters with him. He is not running a glorified puppet-show where things only move when he pulls the strings!

Indeed the rule is: Start with a vision of what the Church has shown herself to be in her great ages, and be a microcosm of *that*. Liturgy carried out as well as possible, and if poorly now, better next year; a family spirit wherein the congregation feel they are co-workers with the priest, worship in which everyone is assisted to take part, singers trained not to stand together and sing as a choir but to split up among the congregation and help the others to sing. Start with what the Church *is* and develop *that*, and do not start with the makeshifts of penal times or with the methods of a particular locality as though they were universally suitable. Try to use *any* suggestion the people make, somehow, and then you will be planting truly and firmly what the Church *is* on the bed-rock of what *they are*, and they will feel at home. You will be building the Church, the sanctifier of creation, into this new context. You should not be trying to force foreign applications of

the Church's principles to fit a different people, more especially if what you have known was a straitened application cut to the measure of times of persecution, silent and self-effacing, and deeply imbued with 'inferiority complex'.

Finally, the Church is something bigger and deeper than the white collar of European civilization, its harmoniums and hymn-books and motor cars. There is always the danger that she may come to be looked upon as the way to a life that is more materially comfortable. Can the missionary make it clear that these things are not the trappings of Christianity, and that the Church is equally at home with the drums and ornamental beadwork which the human heart inspires? Can the missionary show there is a place for these things too in the worship of God, and that the Church will encourage and sanctify whatever may be the legitimate aspirations of human hearts?

Bishop Sweens of the White Fathers, now long dead, used to say continually, 'We must always have a great idea of God!' A missionary must have a great idea of the Church, and that may mean something different externally, and perhaps more picturesque than anything he knew in his homeland; something perhaps more supernatural than he expected, and at any rate something more closely in touch with his people, more part of their lives than he is himself, if he has not passed out of nationality into catholicity. This personal development must go on in him for as long as he is a missionary, for the sake of the Church he is building, so that the spiritual life of the Church may be built up in the culture where he works.