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The Challenge of Continuing Jesus' Own Mission*

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INTRODUCTION

Christian life is a life of witness. It bears witness to the love of God that has no bounds. Jesus' command to his followers was to be the witnesses of his message: "Go into the whole world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mk 16:15). The good news, which is meant for all, cannot be limited to any particular country or culture. Any true religion must be applicable to all places and times, peoples and cultures.

The Church's approach to evangelization should be made in the perspective of universality. The good news must reach out to all humans. The aim of evangelization is to transform the world and to change its structure. It is rather a call to mission, a call to be witnesses, in word and deed. Let us try to see what 'mission' means, what its significance is and what approaches it must adopt in civil society.

I. GENERAL CONCEPT OF MISSION

In the scriptures 'mission' signifies the sending by God of a person for the purpose of communicating his will to other persons. In a generic sense, 'mission' connotes a sending of persons with authority to preach in accordance with the text: "And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?" (Rom 10:15)ⁱ.

The Christian concept of mission resembles the other great missionary religions, Buddhism and Islam, which are also alike in looking back to a single historic founder: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19)ⁱⁱ. In the restricted sense, 'mission' has more frequently been limited to apostolic action in regions dominated by other faith traditions, where either the hierarchy is not yet established, or if it is, the Church is still in its initial stagesⁱⁱⁱ.

1. *Jesus Christ and His Mission*

In Luke's gospel Jesus applied to himself the words of Isaiah: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lords favour" (Lk 4:18-19). The mission of Jesus is the proclamation and the immediate inauguration of salvation, seen as a divine gift of liberation both spiritual and corporeal^{iv}.

Jesus' mission is to fulfill the old order of salvation (the Law) and not to destroy it (Mt 5:17). As Jesus himself emphasizes in his meeting with the Syro-phoenician woman, his coming benefits sinners (1 Tim 1:15), not the just alone (Mt 9:13 and parallels). The son of man has come to seek out the lost and to rescue them (Lk 19:10) as is exemplified in the parable of the prodigal son in Lk 15^v.

Jesus' mission from the Father is the basis of all his work. All the sayings converge upon the assertion that he who is sent is one with the Father who sent him (Jn 10:30). Christ knows his Father because he is one with him (Jn 7:29). Christ himself emphasizes that his coming is based on his mission from the Father (Jn 8:42)^{vi}.

Jesus now has emissaries of his own whom he sends into the world. His chosen missionaries are 'the twelve' (Mt 10:5) whom he sends out in two's (Mk 6:7) without material means of support (Lk 22:35), as sheep in the midst of wolves (Mt 10:16), to proclaim the good news (Mk 3:14). All this shows that their mission was intended as a 're-presentation', a making present again of the mission of Christ in all its aspects. Jesus tells them indirectly that they are to share in the fate of prophets, that is, lose their lives (Mt 23:34)^{vii}.

2. *Different Aspects of Jesus' Mission*

Jesus describes himself as 'envoy'^{viii}, as one who has been sent. He tells that he has come to do certain things or that the Father has sent him to do something specific. He does not provide his friends or disciples

with much information concerning his inner-life, his character, or other things that we commonly associate with an individual's personality. His personality is described in terms of his mission, which is not just a function or a task or a profession; it envelopes and occupies his whole being and life^{ix}. Let us see some of the aspects of his mission.

A. Prophetic and Social Consciousness

Jesus presented himself as a prophet. He spoke with the authority of the prophet. His mission, as he himself understood it, was primarily that of teaching (Mk 1:38-39). He interpreted the failure and lack of acceptance in his home territory in prophetic terms: "A prophet is not without honour, except in his country, and among his own kind, and his own house" (Mk 6:4; Mt 13:57; Lk4:24)^x.

An important trait in any prophet is his social consciousness. One clear fact about Jesus is that he related to and was concerned about the social outcasts of his time. C.H. Dodd, a famous theologian, says: "All of them (Gospel passages) in their different ways exhibit Jesus as an historical personality distinguished from other religious personalities of his time by his friendly attitude to the outcasts of society"^{xi}. Jesus was a prophet particularly concerned about his society. In other words, Jesus was a 'preacher' and 'healer' at the same time. 'Being of God' and 'For the people' were two sides of the same person.

B. Friend of Sinners

To whom was Jesus' mission directed? We see Jesus' friendly contacts with tax collectors and sinners as a recurrent theme in the Gospels^{xii}. Introducing the parables of mercy Luke writes: "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to him and the Pharisees and the Scribes murmured saying, this man receives sinners and eats with them" (Lk 15:1-2). This verse really summarizes Jesus' habitual way of dealing with the outcasts of Jewish society. He not only received sinners but also went out to them. He visited the tax office of Levi to call him to discipleship (Mk 2:13-14). He invited himself to the house of Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector of Jericho (Lk 19:1-10). He used to enjoy meals with tax collectors and sinners (Mk 2:15; Lk 15:2).

The unusual relationship of Jesus with sinners was well known that he was derisively nick named 'a friend of tax collectors and sinners' (Lk 7:34; Mt 11:19). His name 'Jesus' means indeed saviour of sinners: "She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins"(Mt 1:21). Even the death of Jesus was for sinners. We see 'Christ died for our sins' (ICor 15:3; Rom 4:25). The same idea is conveyed by St. Paul in Eph 1:7 where he identifies redemption through Christ's death with forgiveness of sins; "in him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses"^{xiii}.

C. Mercy to the Afflicted

The Gospels present Jesus as the compassionate saviour of the afflicted crowd in Galilee. Matthew says that people afflicted with all sorts of pain came to him and received healing (4:24). The evangelists often remark that Jesus' activity was motivated by compassion^{xiv}. The healing of the leper (Mk 1:40-45) was the result of Jesus' mercy, moved with pity. After liberating the demoniac of Gerasenes from a legion of powerful demons, Jesus sent him back to his people with the words; "go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you" (Mk 5:19).

Through his care for the sick Jesus manifested not only his saving power but also his messianic compassion for those who suffer. Luke gives us a moving description of Jesus' mercy to the widow of Nain, who was following, with a large crowd, the dead body of her only son to the grave (Lk 7:11-17). When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said, 'do not weep' and he touched the bier, raised the young man to life with the word of power and gave him back to his mother. The sorrow of the poor widow, indeed, touched Jesus profoundly, but more than mere human sentiment, it was a movement of his messianic mission. It is thus clear that the Gospels present Jesus' ministry in Galilee as a practical manifestation of his messianic mercy towards the afflicted and the oppressed^{xv}.

D. Option for the Poor

Jesus was sent to preach the Gospel to the poor^{xvi}. He did most of his ministry amidst the poor people who lived in the villages of the provincial countryside in Galilee. The sick, the possessed, the publicans and sinners, the poor and miserable approached Jesus with great confidence. Treating them all with gentle affection, he announced to them the good news of God's unconditional love.

Matthew states emphatically that Jesus felt overwhelming compassion for the sorry plight of the poor people whom he met in his journeys through the villages of Galilee: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Mt 9:36). It was a people who were bearing heavy burdens and labouring hard for bare subsistence (Mt 11:28). They suffered oppression and exploitation by the Roman colonial power, which snatched away a large part of the meager income of the poor peasants and labourers through heavy taxes^{xvii}.

These are the main aspects of Jesus' mission. Jesus fulfilled his mission through his whole ministry in word and deed and his passion, death and resurrection. We have to make use of these aspects of Jesus' mission as our own, and have mercy towards the poor, the afflicted, sinners, to the lost, to the last, and insignificant people as manifested in Jesus' compassionate conduct. We should remember that "God wants not sacrifice but mercy".

3. The Mission of the Apostles

After the summary of Jesus' own ministry of preaching, healing, and teaching (9:35; 4:23) the evangelist Matthew goes on to note Jesus' compassion for the crowds and the need of labourers to reap the plentiful harvest (9:36-38). The compassion of Jesus and his exhortation to pray for labourers to be sent out into the harvest (9:38) form the sending of the disciples in Matthew 10:1: "Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness".

The section that follows includes the whole chapter (10:1- 42), closing with Matthew's typical transitional formula in 11:1: "now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities."^{xviii} After the departure of Jesus, the disciples went on preaching the good news. After some years the twelve apostles seem to fade from view, their essential work done. Then the mission was entrusted to the second generation as ministers of the word. Later this post-apostolic generation is entrusted with the work of carrying God's message of salvation 'to the ends of the earth'^{xix}.

4. The Community and Its Mission

Jesus wanted a group of people to continue his work in the world. He was probably convinced that the whole of Israel is not going to follow their Messiah. But he wanted a group of disciples who would be faithful prophets. They would be travelling as light as possible, living wherever they are welcomed, proclaiming the Kingdom of God in civil societies, challenging them to change and make them experience God's nearness through their mission activities such as preaching and healing. He did not expect them to have a settled pleasant life. They would be persecuted (Mt 10; Lk 9:1-6).

Through the Second Vatican Council, Church indicates the duty of such community^{xx}. "Since the Church is missionary and the work of evangelization is a basic duty of the people of God, this sacred synod invites all to a deep interior renewal; so that, having a vivid awareness of their own responsibility for spreading the Gospel, they may do their share in missionary work among nations"^{xxi}. According to the Council fathers the missionary co-operation demands a profound interior renewal because being precedes and generates action. Thus formation and animation are necessary in order to arouse a commitment for missionary activity.

Now let us consider this missionary activity of a community in a civil society. What does *civil society* mean? "Civil Society is the space where people meet, interact, debate, form opinion, etc."^{xxii}. Through the mission and activity of the Church the sacred reaches out progressively to bring the secular sphere under its control. The word of God became human in Jesus and proclaimed the Reign of God. The Reign of God is a new human community of freedom and fellowship, of justice and love that lives integrated with the cosmos and with God.

What is the goal of mission in *Civil Society*? It is the creation of a new human community. This mission can be concentrated in *civil society*, for, mission itself is understood as communicating a message—the good news, through which civil society is able to establish a feeling of self worth, identity and solidarity^{xxiii}. An individual can have a mission; a country can speak of its mission; a military adventure can be seen as a mission. The Christian mission gives expression to the dynamic relationship between God and the world; particularly as this was portrayed, first, in the story of the covenant people of Israel and then, supremely in the birth, life, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus of Nazareth^{xxiv}.

Christian Mission is the proclamation of the good news of salvation and wholeness in Jesus Christ to the whole world. Since it is intended for the whole world, it is the task of the Church to offer it to every individual, every tribe and every people's groups in a civil society. This mission comes from God based on Jesus Christ and Apostles as we see in the scripture. The Christian mission should not destroy the culture of any civil society, but only enhance it. The distinctive role of a missionary in a civil society however, remains that of an authoritative link between God and community^{xxv}.

II. SIGNIFICANCE OF MISSION IN CIVIL SOCIETY

The community of Jesus' disciples is called together by Jesus' own word and animated by his Spirit to continue his mission and carry it out in all the nations and among all the peoples of the world. The Church's mission is nothing less than that of Jesus Christ himself. He went about doing good and proclaiming the good news that God is powerfully present and is transforming this world, gifting his 'rule' to all and in particular to the poor and the oppressed, the weak, the marginalized and the outcasts. We have already seen that civil society as a human community should be rooted in God and characterized by love, freedom, equality, justice and peace, 'through the power of Spirit' (Acts 1:8). Therefore we understand that, mission in civil society is very important. Let us see some of the aspects of the mission in civil society^{xxvi}.

1. Service to the Poor

In the Church's mission, the problem regarding the poor becomes more and more evident. We speak of Church for the poor, option for the poor, preferential choice for the poor, learning from the poor, etc. However, the service to the poor is not something that is absolutely new of today's mission. Church should work for the poor. Without neglecting the material and social problems, the Church's specific and original contribution is, however, of a spiritual nature^{xxvii}.

Human life does not have only a material and social aspect, but it also a moral and spiritual dimension and on these levels. Consequently, the poor need good technicians, economists, politicians, etc., but also they want good 'specialist' in matters of God. Therefore the significance of Christians in a civil society is 'to be specialists' in matters pertaining to God^{xxviii}.

2. Promotion of Human Rights

According to Christian faith, every human person created in the image of God is endowed with inviolable dignity and inalienable rights. It is the sacred duty of every Christians to uphold the dignity of every man, woman and child and to defend their human rights. They are obliged to do so, not simply because they are Christian believers but it is their duty as citizens of the country^{xxix}.

For Indian Christians one practical way of effectively promoting human rights is by joining hands with all peoples, movements and associations working for the defense of human rights and civil liberties.

3. Christian Witness

There is no doubt that evangelization is of primary importance: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (ICor 9:16) and that proclamation is the permanent priority of mission. This witness consists of respect and love, of understanding and acceptance, of solidarity with the efforts for whatever is noble and good. So such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the good news, and very powerful and effective one. The witness of life and exercise of charity are particular forms of mission work: the word may remain silent but charity will speak^{xxx}. According to the theologian Joseph Comblin, "witness is grounded on the belief that it is possible to change and that only human beings can change structures and forces the powers of oppression into submission"^{xxxi}. There are many forms and degrees of witness. As Vatican II states, "They (faithful) should cooperate in a brotherly spirit with other Christians, with non-Christians, and with members of international organizations" (*Ad Gentes* 41).

4. Inter-Religious Dialogue

Inter-religious dialogue is a kind of communication between the followers of different religions at the religious level. "It means not only discussion, but also includes all positive and constructive inter-religious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment"^{xxxii}.

The goal of such a dialogue is meant for mutual understanding, where each religion feels challenged to grow in an atmosphere of mutual acceptance and respect. Religious freedom is a human right and our Constitution gives the right to follow and propagate any religion. Theologically too, inter-religious dialogue is not opposed to welcoming people who like to become disciples of Jesus Christ^{xxxiii}.

Here it is not the religious systems that encounter each other, but religious persons, and what brings them together is love and as such it is a mutually enriching experience. It helps the people to grow in their own faiths.

To have a well-founded inter-religious dialogue, the Christian should be well founded in faith, with a clear knowledge and deep esteem for the truths it teaches. And his knowledge should go beyond a mere intellectual understanding, passing into daily life and becoming a joyful experience. His life should be a real witness to the truth he professes.

We also need the knowledge of the other. There can be no true dialogue without an objective knowledge of the other religion, its scriptures, its history, its cultural background. The study of the other religion must be undertaken with openness and sympathy, ready to acknowledge and appreciate all that is good and noble in them^{xxxiv}.

The mission of God makes our mission in civil society dialogical. There is no dialogue without witness. We have to consider the pluralist multi-religious context of India. Inter-religious dialogue in this multi-religious context demands deep faith, strong love, much patience, good knowledge about other religions and unflinching trust in the providence of God.

5. Significance of Inculturation

Inculturation has been a concern of Catholic thinkers on mission, whereas Protestants seem to prefer the term 'contextualization'^{xxxv}. Mission is not something which people in the Church do, but what the Church itself is. People encounter the Gospel within their culture. Culture, which is dynamic, shapes and is shaped by humans. "Evangelization and inculturation are naturally and intimately related to each other" (E.A. 21). The Church renews the cultures but accepts what is positive in them.

Unlike in other parts of the world, the missionaries in India are confronted with the presence of profound religious traditions. History and other studies about religious activities show that, unless and until we take these religious traditions seriously and be enriched by them, we will fail to make an impact on the people of India.

The Church can undertake inculturation confidently precisely because the Spirit is "the prime agent of inculturation" (E.A. 21); the prime agent of the Church's dialogue with all peoples, cultures and religions" (E.A. 15)^{xxxvi}. The Spirit guides the process of inculturation, but the Church must prepare herself for this by a serious study of the riches of the culture she encounters because only when she knows and understands these various aspects of a culture, she can begin the dialogue of salvation (E.A. 21)^{xxxvii}.

6. Sign of Communion

The life and work of Jesus Christ exemplified a spiritual counter-culture. While the religious leaders of his time saw their religion and vocation in terms of differences and uniformity. Jesus advocated an approach based on 'unity in diversity'. He spoke about "other sheep that do not belong to this fold" (Jn 10:16) whom also he was to gather in. The good news is that 'the other', the 'outsider' can, and must, belong^{xxxviii}.

Lumen Gentium, while speaking about the mystery of the church, states: "The Church in Christ is in the nature of sacrament, a sign and instrument, that is of communion with God and of unity among all men" (L.G. 1).

The mission is to re-orient human nature and culture, spiritually, shifting the foundation from hate to love. To have unity in diversity we must learn to love our neighbours as ourselves, especially in the context of the widespread communal frenzy. Church is not only a sign of communion with God and unity of mankind but also an instrument for the realization of communion and unity among human beings.

The Church does not exist in this world for herself; she exists for others, for the glory of God and salvation of the people in the world. Her universal openness and missionary activity are not something added or secondary, but original and essential to her nature. So the more the Church reflects on herself, the more she discovers her missionary character. Mission means to have the courage to love without reserve. The Church and Christians must continually live this missionary dimension that urges them to be not far from anyone and particularly to owe truth, charity and solidarity to anyone professing truth and love^{xxxix}.

III. APPROACHES OF MISSION IN CIVIL SOCIETY

The missionary approach has as one of its basic presuppositions an unquestionable biblical fact: the universality of the salvation carried out by Jesus Christ. We have already seen the different aspects of Jesus'

mission. This means the missionary approach must be conceived and carried out also in relation to those who do not yet visibly belong to Christ and to his earthly body, which is the Church. The approach of church must be open with evangelical courage and with great trust in the Spirit to the complex reality of the world, with all its contradictions in order to perceive, to be attentive to the signs of the times, the anxieties, the explicit or implicit aspirations towards Christ. Let us see some of the important approaches of mission in civil society.

1. Commitment to the Poor

Jesus begins his mission by proclaiming the absolute priority of the Gospel for the poor (Lk 4:18f). The ministry of Jesus is differentiated from that of the leaders of the Old Testament by the fact that it is directed to the lost sheep of Israel (Lk 19:10). India is a country of plentiful resources and great civilizations, but where the poorest can be found, and where more than half the population suffers deprivation, poverty and exploitation.

One of the important characteristics of the mission in our civil society is to show a preferential love to the poor, the voiceless. The Gospel is the good news that proclaims that God loves all and that all are his children. This realization will arouse in our life powerful movements^{xi}. Our Christian life will receive a new force to be spent for the uplift of the poor. Our approach should be that of Jesus who was born in poverty, spent his life preaching the good news to the poor and offered his life for them.

2. Service in Civil Society

Jesus called his disciples not merely to embrace a new way of life in the kingdom of God but to work actively for its establishment. The twelve were chosen for a mission, "that they might be sent out" (Mk 3:14). These disciples were constituted for a constant and comprehensive relationship with society.

The disciples received authority for their mission from Jesus (Mt 10:1; Lk 9:1). He entrusted them with his own mission in different dimensions: preaching the good news of the Kingdom of God (Mt 10:7; Lk 9:2), exhorting to repentance (Mk 6:12), doing the works of the Kingdom, healing people and liberating them from the power of evil (Mk 3:15; Mt 10:8)^{xii}.

Mission should be exercised as a service as the missionary is a servant of all. 'Servant of all' (Mk 9:3) means especially servant of the smallest and the most needy people. Our mission work in civil society must be like Jesus', 'not to be served, but to serve' (Mk 10:45). Since Jesus' service includes the giving of his own life for others, our service also should be selfless. Therefore mission in civil society is a mission for service to others.

3. Relation with the People of Other Faiths

Christians must have a positive approach to all that is in other religions. The Christian mission will have to be expressed in terms of not only doctrinal integrity, but as a capacity to relate to all.

In this sense, multi-religiosity means to be inter-religious. This does not mean that we make some sort of religious adjustment in our convictions or faith formulations, but it surely does mean that Christian faith will not stand as an obstacle to enter in to communication with people of other faiths. Our communication with people of other faiths may not always make them join our community but it will always build up the Kingdom of God. Thus, not only our way of fulfilling our mission, but our very way of being should be dialogical^{xiii}.

4. A Dialogical Approach

The Second Vatican Council has given a new vision and understanding of religions. The Christians are asked to "acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians" (*Nostra Aetate*. 2). The Church recognizes that there are seeds of the word, which lie hidden in these religions (*Ad Gentes* 11). In the fulfillment of the evangelizing approach to other religions, inter-religious dialogue is not a new tactic for mission work. The dialogical method in a civil society is more acceptable because the whole redemptive work began and continues as an act of dialogue. "It is an essential part of the church's mission because it has its origin in the fathers loving dialogue of salvation with humanity through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit" (E.A. 29).

Dialogue becomes the primary task and form of mission. Because the approach contrasts dialogue and proclamation, it gives priority to proclamation and sees dialogue as a step towards proclamation. The Church has the fullness of truth and salvation. Every one has to be brought to that fullness. Dialogue too is oriented

to that goal. Hence any type of compromise or falsity must be avoided because they do harm to the very cause of dialogue itself^{xliii}.

5. Witnessing in Civil Society

The disciples and their relationship with Jesus are the mirror through which Jesus is now made visible. The Christian message is communicated from person to person. To fulfill our function of witnessing, we should, like the apostles, encounter the risen Lord in a personal way, in the moments of prayer, in the communion of the believers, in hearing the word of the scripture and in committing ourselves to the values of the Kingdom of God. To be a real witnessing missionary we have to be empowered with the Spirit of God. Our approach as a witness in civil society is to continue the mission of Jesus Christ by converting love.

CONCLUSION

The Church in India in the third millennium needs fresh courage, a new resolve to continue the mission entrusted to her by Christ. It must continue to proclaim the good news of salvation without fear or favour. It must continue to affirm that conversion of hearts is the work of God, and no human force.

The Church has to continue its service to the poor. But at the same time it has a duty to counter the false notions and hate ideology propagated against Christianity and its members. People have the right to know the truth and we have a duty to proclaim it. A vast majority of people in the rural areas may be illiterate and ignorant about Christianity. They too have the right to know the truth.

The Church should evolve methods to reach the people in the villages with a clear message of what it stands for. People are fighting for the preservation of pluralism, secularism and the constitution of the country. We have to join hands with them and strengthen these forces. We need to meet believers of other faiths in a spirit of mutual respect, partnership and dialogue.

End Notes

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- ⁵ W. Beilner, "Mission", *Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology*, Vol. 2, Sydney, 1970, 589-590.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 590.
- ⁷ W. Beilner, "Mission", 593.
- ⁸ "Envoy" means a messenger or representative who is sent to do something.
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- ¹² Gundry, *Mark*, , 126.
- ¹³ G. Mangatt, *Jesus the Good News*, Kottayam, 1998, 128-136.
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- ¹⁵ Mangatt, *Jesus the Good News*, 108-112.
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