22.

Being a Missioner without Leaving Home

The most enduring images of ministry I carry in my head are those of sisters and priests working in mission areas overseas. Whether tending sick children, chatting with women washing clothes under a bridge, conducting classes in adobe buildings, celebrating Mass in out-of-the-way chapels or on hillsides, caressing orphans or teaching poor farmers how to cultivate their land more productively—even today the images remain vivid and diverse—the missioners appeared immensely happy, dedicated, appreciated, and seasoned. They appeared to know something about life that the rest of us did not. I stared at such scenes in mission magazines, on calendars, and posters from the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. As I grew older, I devoured stories of heroic lives in distant lands and tried to imagine what it might be like, not just to live in strikingly different climates and cultures, but to leave home for good. Leaving your family, I believed, was the hardest sacrifice anybody could ever make. Adventure was one thing, but I was no more prepared to say goodbye to my family than to put a hot iron on my hand.

The fact is that many missioners did leave home for long periods of time. One La Salette missioner I met in Burma (now Myanmar) a number of years ago was unable to return to visit his family because, if he had left Burma, he would never have been permitted reentry. Just a few years ago I learned of a sister who had arrived in Bolivia from a town in Germany when she was in her early twenties, settled into a remote village where people spoke only Quechua, and after seventy years had neither learned Spanish nor ever gone back home to visit and rest. Most
missioners, of course, have taken regular home leaves, although a surprising number discovered that after a few weeks they felt increasingly out of place and could not wait to return to their adopted people. The northern culture of plenty and privilege seemed like an alien place after years of accompanying people who would eke out the most meager living as farmers, hired hands, or day laborers.

Mission builders were pioneers— independent, resourceful, fiercely hardworking, tireless. It was hard not to think of them as martyrs in slow motion. Some died from exhaustion, some from exotic diseases contracted in jungles or remote outposts, and others were actually killed when the missioners turned their attention to correcting social and economic abuses. As a group they typified the ideal of Christian ministry. If we want to go for broke and give absolutely everything to the Lord, the child in me reasoned, then the best way to do that would be to become a missionary. Whether this would involve direct, hands-on engagement with people in poor countries or leading a contemplative life, say, among Muslims in Algeria, an earnest young Christian would find no more satisfying way to live the Gospel and serve God’s people. The mission prospect would appeal to anyone blessed with a spirit of adventure, high ideals, and the desire to do ever greater things for God’s glory.

The changing face of mission

In the space of thirty or forty years, many things in the world and in the Church have clearly changed. While there have been fewer priests and religious to work as missionaries, many lay men and women have stepped forward to help, sometimes singly and sometimes as couples. These wonderful people have surrendered to the missionary impulse and become partners in mission, laboring for various lengths of time as associates
within veteran missionary groups. This welcome development follows the general trend since Vatican II of ordinary Christians living out their baptismal commitment more expressively and assuming greater responsibility for the Church’s life and mission.

A second development has been the Church’s growing sensitivity to the mystery of God as it touches people from within the other world religions. While a number of Protestant groups continue to make membership in their church a primary goal of their missionary aims, Catholics are increasingly circumspect when it comes to conversion. For one thing, in the past great harm was done to native cultures and traditions by a preaching of the faith that was frequently more imperialistic than evangelical. For another, Catholic imagination at its best has always been intrigued by the multiple presences of God beyond its own narratives, tradition, spirituality, and practices. The failure to acknowledge those showings ultimately impedes the preaching of the Gospel and its necessary inculturation.

Thirdly, as Paul VI pointed out in Populorum Progressio (1967) and Evangelii Nuntiandi (1975), evangelization always needs to take into account the integral development of the whole person and the humanizing of societies. Our relationship with God will not flourish unless we also grow in the virtue of solidarity, as John Paul II has said repeatedly, and this means that promoting faith cannot proceed without a passionate commitment to justice. Preaching the Gospel cannot be separated from cultivating peace, and there will be no lasting peace until systems and structures of injustice are dismantled. After all, we preach the word of God in the context of our times. This context includes huge disparities in the matter of access to the earth’s resources, and a serious tension between the forces
of globalization on the one hand and a fierce desire to preserve cultural identities on the other.

So long as the Church continues to read the Acts of the Apostles and to follow the life of Paul through his letters, the missionary imagination is going to remain alive and well among us. The idea that the word of God is on the move and that faith travels is deeply embedded in the Christian narrative. Yet the world is vastly different today from the world of antiquity—or from the world of Francis Xavier, for that matter. Xavier traversed more of the planet than Saint Paul did, but Xavier lived at a time when the Gospel frequently hitched rides on vessels of European commercialism. He also labored under the belief that without baptism countless souls would be lost. Today, of course, our perception of the world’s size, so tied up with our sense of time and distance, has made the prospect of leaving home less daunting. Even the most remote areas of the earth appear less inaccessible in an age of the internet and cellular phones. Moreover, few of us would be comfortable with the idea that the non-Christian world has to be “conquered” for Christ. Such language would sound perilously close to a new religious colonialism.

A world that starts at our doorstep

Last summer, while I was visiting a parish on the edge of the Bolivian altiplano, the Jesuit provincial directed my attention to the newly constructed road several hundred meters in front of us. There in a place on the tail end of the electric line, where a fifty-mile stretch of Andean peaks provides a magnificent backdrop for the waters of Lake Titicaca—a place where llamas graze and vicuña roam freely among fields of wheat and potatoes—a narrow strip of pavement originates beyond one end of the horizon and runs across this high-altitude
plain to the other. Far too modest to be called a highway, it’s just a road passing through the uncomplicated lives of people of the land. “Now there,” the provincial said, “lies the great hazard this culture faces.” He went on to explain that the children of the campesinos stare at that road, wondering where it originates and where ultimately it might take them. The presence of a road with its occasional trucks and tour buses awakens in them a youthful restlessness. They realize intuitively that the asphalt trail could connect them to people and experiences beyond their fields, the mountains, and the lake. All at once that road became for me a poignant symbol of the nearness and far-awayness of things.

I remembered a childhood experience, a morning many years past when I was sifting my fingers through the sand that had gathered at the roadside. As I studied the street, my eye followed its path to the corner, where it would turn sharply and take on a different name. Eventually it would connect, together with many other small streets, to a wider road; once on that wider road a person could drive to anywhere in North America he wished. The road could even take someone to the sea where a ship might set sail for another part of the world. For a brief moment the street in front of our house signified the connectedness of places and people. I would have been unable to formulate this thought then, but I can put it into words now. I ask myself, can a person be far away without leaving home, without actually stepping onto that fascinating web of roads which leads potentially everywhere? I think the answer should be yes, provided we understand that being in another place physically is not the same as being in another place inwardly.

The earth is full of interesting and beautiful places, but above all it is home to human beings. The more we open
ourselves to human existence in its depth and breadth, the more deeply shall we understand the connections between human beings, their cultures, histories, and societies. Travel enriches us, not just because we get to witness the beauty and wonders of nature, but because we encounter human beings whose difference from us socially, economically, culturally, and religiously makes us reflect on the intriguing oneness of the human family. As Vatican II noted, travel “refines human qualities and enriches men with mutual understanding.” Nevertheless, the point is not simply to sign up for a world tour, if one has the chance, but to have one’s consciousness of sharing a common humanity raised and stretched. The point, it seems to me, is to develop an awareness of how much we are connected with other human beings, both the men and women whom we interact with from day to day and above all with the countless others who share this world and its diminishing resources.

The at-home missionary

An at-home missioner is someone who possesses a global awareness, a person for whom the world starts at the threshold of the mind. He or she is going to be someone who necessarily lives and works in a particular place (as we all do) but whose interior life is joined to the lives of men and women everywhere. In terms of their loyalties and aspirations they identify with the deepest longings of people all over the world, particularly the multitudes who have been forced to live at the very bottom of the economic ladder. I doubt whether such awareness can develop apart from some exposure to segments of the underprivileged world; one needs actual contact to set the process of consciousness-raising in motion.
Given the times in which we live, today’s missioner can have a profound impact on people living in other areas of the globe without physically being there. I am referring to the fact that in an increasingly interdependent world we can assist impoverished people without actually living among them. Those who educate for justice, for example, are reaching toward those unseen others all the time. Young men and women whose consciousness has been raised can make significant contributions to the welfare of human beings in need; in short, they can become mission-minded. As they take their place in the world of business, finance, education, government, human service, medicine, international aid organizations, and so on, they bring to their work an awareness of the wider human community and of the necessity of creating a world that is ever more just and humane.

Needless to say, plenty of people live and work abroad simply because they are employed by multinational corporations. I would not label them missionaries on that basis alone, although even capitalism has its apostles. Those motivated by an overriding concern for faith and justice, however, will be selective about the firms they work for. The word of God, as we have noted, cannot prescind from the circumstances that either hinder or advance the integral development of people. Every genuine commitment to work for the economic and social improvement of disadvantaged peoples, from a Christian perspective, creates partners in mission.

The prospect of leaving one’s family and native land to work overseas for the sake of spreading the Gospel may be less compelling today. One reason for this, as I have explained, is that religious conversion often seems less urgent than the need
for economic and social transformation, that is, the moral conversion of the world’s privileged and the empowerment of those who pay the price of others’ success. Besides, dependence on foreign missioners eventually has to yield to the need for local churches to stand ministerially on their own. However attractive the classical missionary types were because of their zeal and energetic witness, the missioner’s role, like that of John the Baptist, is supposed to be to decrease. With gospel humility and apostolic pride in their accomplishments, in the end foreign missioners were (and are) paving the way for vibrant, self-sustaining, indigenous Christian communities.

While I do not envision a surge in missionary vocations of the classic type, the missionary spirit is not about to disappear. The proof is that Christians still want to bear witness, share in the proclamation of the Gospel, and reshape their world. They are as capable as ever of heroic love. Committed Christians might not feel as if they need to convert the world, but I think they do feel a holy longing to tell the Christian story. In sharing faith and relating their narrative about Jesus, Christians reenact the ancient impulse to announce the good news that we associate with Pentecost. But whereas the apostolic generation carried that word throughout the ancient world, we have to find ways to proclaim that word afresh to the growing numbers of unevangelized folks who live within our own shores. This too belongs to the vocation of missioners whom God has called to stay at home.

In recalling the mission of “the seventy-two others” Luke writes: “After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he was about to go” (Lk 10:1). Most of the time, Jesus walks ahead; a disciple is one who follows. In this case,
however, the order is reversed. But Jesus does not visit just “towns” and “places”; he visits homes. So the mission of the seventy-two takes them into the places where people live—and they should not be in a rush to leave. “And remain in the same house,” he instructs them (Lk 10:7). In the end, perhaps, all mission (like politics) is local, and even domestic. There’s a good reason why so many gospel scenes take place inside a home and why “house” became a metaphor not only for the church, but even for the human heart.

[2002]