

Church and Mission

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The theme of our talks during this Lebanese meeting will be the Church in its missionary aspect. We will meditate together on the theological basis of mission, its aim, its spirit and method.

The problem of mission springs out of the dogmatic notion of the people of God. Yahweh establishes his covenant with Israel. Israel is the chosen people of God not because of its ethnical or cultural character nor because of its ethnical superiority or any other quality recognised by the Scripture, but simply and exclusively because of the promises given to the Fathers by God and the gratuity of the divine Love.

Israel is chosen in order to carry out Yahweh's design for the world in order to be Yahweh's servant in the messianic action of saving the world through suffering and expiation.

A popular understanding of this truth has led Israel to the religious nationalism which was and remains to the present day its greatest temptation. Against this religious exclusivism arose the religion of Prophets.

Jeremiah condemned this attitude with great violence and pronounced words of Justice against the people. According to him the Justice of God is going to strike not only the nations, but Israel too; for its election by God does not confer on it any special rights, since it is pure grace.

The people can be punished by the way God uses the nations. After the dispersion a messianic remnant will be gathered again in Jerusalem and the nations themselves will come together in Zion to worship-the Eternal. We have here already the beginning of a universalism which will become truly explicit only with the second book of Isaiah, by the end of the exile. After speaking about the radical separation of the Jews from the Gentiles, the uncircumcised, the Bible goes on to proclaim God the God of all, the God of every people and Nation. This fact does not abolish by any means the doctrine of election. The particular and real character of Israel must not be necessarily denied in favour of universalism. The biblical universalism is neither anonymous nor levelling. It is a vertical dimension, a gathering of actual people. Israel will therefore be the instrument for the salvation of nations and the renewal of the entire creation.

The reconciliation of the nations had been contemplated in the book of Ruth and above all in that of Jonah who went to the nations and converted them. After the return after the end of the exile Jewish universalism affirms itself at the same time as the particularism. The psalms include the idea of the gathering of nations before the Lord (Ps 86, 9-102,-22) the king of all. But the last prophets announce that this gathering will take place in Jerusalem in the context of Jewish worship and the observance of the Law.

If the true nature of universalism is not yet clear, we are however presented with this extraordinary affirmation that the salvation of nations will be accomplished by their integration in Israel.

When the new Israel is revealed in the person of Jesus, it is greeted by Simeon as the salvation of nations and the glory of Israel. It is in His name - that is in His very being - that salvation is given. "All nations of the earth shall be blessed in thee" (Gal. 3:9,14; Rom. 4:16,25). In His Name, repentance from sins which is the definition of salvation, is preached among the nations (Luke 24:47). Jesus is the place of the saving action of God. The Gospel that presents Him is "the power of God into salvation to everyone that believeth". Thus salvation is really and truly accomplished in the very being of the believer, if he accepts in faith the Gospel preached to him. It is true that man is completely saved only in the Kingdom, after the final consummation; salvation is the crowning in man, in the universal man, of our redemption. Salvation is the deification of man, his participation in the Glory of God! At that moment, Israel and all nations will be saved. But if salvation is a work inaugurated in the blood of the Lamb and accomplished in His wedding with the Bride, then it is true that Christ is the only instrument for the salvation of the nations - the Christ experienced and communicated in and through the Twelve.

Jesus who died and has risen for us and for our salvation, has outburst the boundaries of Israel. It is by Him, in His Body and no more in Jerusalem or on Mount Garizim that the meeting of humanity with the Father will be realised "in spirit and truth." The wall of partition between Jesus and Gentiles is abolished (Eph. 2:11-22; 3:4-6; Rom.3:28). This new nation, this holy nation will be the witness of Jesus in the world, the new people of God. The integration to the covenant having been made in the Body and the Blood of the Son. The proclamation of the new covenant, its new economy, its perpetuation, its fertility will be insured by the coming of the Spirit poured out upon all flesh. Once they are filled by Him, the Apostles could realize the Master's command: "go ye therefore and teach all..." The Gospel should henceforth be preached to all creatures in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and in Samaria, and to the uttermost part of the earth. The Lord should come again in glory. Though this coming should certainly be hastened through prayers it should also be done through evangelisation of the nations. Glory, the true goal of the created universe, the end of all evils in the cosmical deliverance is conditioned by the propagation of the Gospel.

That is to say the time of the Church - which extends between the two events is the time of mission, and that the mission is the radiation itself of the nature of the church. There is no question of considering the mission as a church institution, because we have just seen that the mission is the Church itself in action. Thus we could not speak of Church and mission since everything in the Church: Theology, liturgy, pastoralia, Youth movements should be conceived in terms of universal love. Everything is truth propagated and apprehended. The social aspects of dogma have been masterfully shown. And everybody admits that worship has an external garment that makes it a didactic instrument. Nothing in our church life is foreign to communication, to contamination - a fact that makes it impossible for anyone to say that the church in any period of its life was exclusively turned to the contemplation of its inner existence.

The sending whose object is every man and every people aims to gather the Church from all the corners of the earth so that the scattered children of God might be united again into One. Thus they are integrated into the people of God. It is in this gathering that the salvation of people will be accomplished at the end of the world. This is the true meaning of the Catholicity of the Church. The whole world is called to become one in Christ. Nobody is left to his solitude. The partition of humanity in men, women, races, nations, social classes is overcome by the divine shape given to every man which creates him anew. He is henceforth member of a Body which is the Body of the Saviour. His dignity is beyond all measure. He is not sacrificed to an oppressive totality. "We have learned from Peter, said Origen, that the Church is the household of God built in living stones, a spiritual house in view of a holy priesthood. Each one of these living stones who are the Saint will have its place in the above temple according to the dignity which it has acquired in this earthly life. The whole world is called to the building up of this body. Everyone has to pay his tribute to the wealth of all. From this point of view the Church is not only our mother that convokes us, it is also convoked: it is the assembly resulting from the meeting of people. The miserable being that the World came to free from his prostitution, is now the Bride of the Lamb, the refuge of sinners and the mother of saints born from the open sides of Jesus. The church is this body where the world is mixed in, received, assumed through baptism and destined in faith and in the sacraments of faith, to the service and witness, in the unity of the spirit, to take glory of the kingdom to come. If the church is presented in the Scripture as the unique place of salvation to which we are called in Jesus Christ, we have all embarked on the great missionary adventure.

The obligation to bring the Gospel to all nations is confirmed by the traditional doctrine of Chrysostom who taught that grace is spread everywhere.

Origen wrote: "Christ has such a power that although invisible in His divinity yet He is present to every man and stretches to all the Universe". To him as to the blessed Jerome; and St. Cyril, nobody is born outside Christ. The grace of conversion to God is not lacking to anyone, not even to those who are outside the historical limits of the Church. But then, if it is possible for every man to save himself, why does the Church exist? Why do we try to convert pagans or monotheists to Christianity? It is naturally sufficient to reply that the church in the divine design is the only normal way to salvation. We do not have to know about the particular plan that God may have for one person or the other about the spiritual potentiality of the different religions. Outside Christ everything has a degree of error. And the best teaching of Hinduism and Buddhism lacks something to reach the summit of spiritual perfection. Everything is definitely lost if it is not part of a body of truths, and if it does not take place in the revelation of the organic truth. Clement of Alexandria said: "If the Greeks - on whom some sparks of the divine logos had fallen - have proclaimed a small part of the truth, they hereby attest that it contains a force which is impossible to compress. But at the same time they testify their own weakness, since they have missed the aim". If the truths that are scattered in the various religions are not organically tied up in Christ, who is the fullness, the pleroma, they can be divided against themselves and revolt against Christ. Every separated truth should pass through the paschal Mystery to become a living stone in the household of God. Then we can understand that salvation of one person or another is possible outside the visible church because it is a salvation operated by the invisible Christ in the Spirit

and that the church is the normal Way of salvation for every man who came into the world.

The Fathers have seen in the life of the holy men of paganism as in that of the justs of the old Testament, prefigurations of Christ. According to Clement of Alexandria: "In the same way that God has sent prophets to the Jews, He raised up in the heart of Greece the most virtuous of its children to make them prophets in the midst of their nation". That is the case today within certain groups formerly Christian and who gave birth, for instance, to saints without any religious belief. The Christian, should rejoice at these "crazy" truths and at this hidden holiness, in all human societies. He will fight self-sufficiency so much spread in the Christian milieu; Pharisaism, and Presumptuousness. He knows that he will be judged because he has not been attentive to the voice of the Spirit which blows where it wills, and because he has not recognised the traces of God in unfaithful lands. He knows that all the treasures of Egypt must be pillaged by Israel in its move towards the promised land and that Moses was learned "in all the wisdom of the Egyptians". St. Methodius of Olympus says: "The church is in travail until all people come into its womb".

From what we have just said, it follows that, on one hand mission is the radiance, the very energy of the Church and, on the other, that the Church grows through mission towards the point of attaining the full measure of Christ and His perfect knowledge.

Saying this, is not the same as affirming - as a large number of Protestant theologians actually do - that the Church and mission, are identical. We read the following by the pen of the Dutch theologian Hockendijk: "What else could the Church be than mission, and how could one interpret the famous ecumenical slogans, 'let the Church be the Church' except as meaning: 'Let the Church be the Mission'?" There is also the statement by Pierre Maury: "Mission, that is the Church" which is also affirmed by Mehl, by Emil Br nner and so many others. Because for them the Church is defined in relation to the world and a Church which would not speak to the world, according to them, would not be a Church at all. That is why - they maintain - the duality of Church and Mission did not exist in the New Testament. In the apostolic period the distinction between internal and external Mission was simply unknown.

The Church is apostolic because, like the Apostles, it is being "sent"; her essence is to witness. That is why Th o Preiss says: "the essence of the Church does not lie within her social structure, within her institutions, her traditions, within that which ensures her continuity as an association". It is not to be found except in the proclamation of the Gospel. This idea is most brilliantly developed by Hockendijk: "There is nothing which the Church could relate to herself, nothing which belongs to her as her own (not of course in ecclesiology); God has placed her in a living relation with the Kingdom and the Ecumene, she does not exist except 'in actu' in the fulfilment of her apostolate, that is in the communication of the Kingdom to the Ecumene. The Church is a function of the apostolate and the principle of her existence is to be found in the proclamation of the Kingdom to the Ecumene, she 'forms herself' through mission, she becomes herself under the direct touch of God upon the world. If the mission makes the Church, then the Church is merely a 'product' and the unity of the Church is the fruit of exercising the apostolate in common. Communion in all the services and in all witnessing will make the Church. This is the deep meaning, I

believe, of the integration of the International Missionary Council with the World Council of Churches”.

This identification of mission and Church, of function and essence, constitutes a most authentic application of Protestant ecclesiology.

For us the Church is defined not existentially but ontologically. She is the Body of Christ, not that she is a substance, as some would have us saying, not that she possesses a “being” of her own, but she participates in the being of the Incarnate Word. She lives in herself within the Spirit, the sacraments and the hierarchy. She dwells also in herself, not through the Word which she transmits at the time of preaching, but through a Word, which is always living, which has created the monuments of Tradition and sanctity of past generations. Tradition and sanctity represent concrete realities with us. They dwell in us as aspects of the Son of man. The Church is that new creation within the Spirit, which communicates to us the pledge of the Spirit and the foretaste of the Kingdom of Peace. As Newbigin has so well seen it: “This new reality, to feel the active presence of the Spirit among the people, is the first witness which comes before all specific activity of service and preaching. The activities are not related to each other through a logical link, but through the fact that they spring from the new unique reality”. It is because the Church is a given reality, that she can transmit herself and she can gather. “The Lord”, says the Book of Acts, “added everyday to the Church those who were saved” (Acts. 2:47) by the preaching of the twelve. Mission, in the light of this theology, is a radiation of Christ present in Church, through the Spirit. Mission could not be the action of a communion of Churches working together and discovering the “Una Sancta” in their missionary zeal.

To bring the Gospel is to transmit Orthodoxy. There is not a single Gospel which has not been handed through Tradition. Since the non-Christian joins already established Churches, the Gospel vs. Tradition question is in fact a non-existent problem. For us, it is dogmatically resolved because of the real identity which exists between Orthodox witness and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Given that Orthodoxy provides the only satisfactory answer to the expectation of people, the problem of mission should not be envisaged under the light of the activity of heterodox confessions. A plan of allocation of zones of activity or a plan of unification of the young Churches, for the sake of the witness, are ruled out a priori. We must, of course, admit the dramatic character of division in countries where Christianity is in minority and that the problem of a common witness towards non-Christians becomes really acute, but for us the problem of mission can only be posed, if one starts from Orthodoxy, owing to the Catholic profound and organic character of the truth of Church.

The message of the Gospel is sometimes rejected because it is presented according to a partial narrow tradition, entangled in a rigid interpretation proceeding from the decadent scholasticism, from the Protestant individualism or fundamentalism, from this suffocating and conceited Christianity of the West, which is incapable of inspiring the values of communion. We know that one of the factors which made Ghandi oppose Christianity, was his acquaintance with South-African Protestants for whom self purification was foreign to the essence of religion. And we

know how rudimentary is the doctrine of sanctification developed within Protestantism.

The essential pre-condition of Orthodox activity is the renewal of the Church. This renewal means essentially a return to the biblical and patristic sources. What is the value of biblical criticism? What is the place of biblical theology within the whole teaching of the Church? What is the place of the sanctoral in liturgical life, in the light of hagiography? What meaning should be given to facts which come from apocryphal sources? All these are questions which are hardly suspected in the Orthodox world and without the solution of which the ecumenical dialogue and the encounter with the modern spirit are simply impossible.

The return to patristic sources provides perhaps the best answer to the problems posed by the modern world and animates Orthodox action with a genuine spiritual life. Orthodoxy should benefit from all the thought of the Christian West, welcoming the living forces and the true holiness to be found in the Catholic world. But in the last resort, she will not be historically regenerated, except by actually using her spiritual theology in facing the problems which modern life poses for her. The restoration of a monasticism, internally faithful to the great tradition and at the same time sensitive to the uneasiness of the contemporary world, would make a direct contribution towards the solution of the problem of mission. A Romanian monk said: "To build the Church in the full meaning of the word and in all the directions of her fundamental unity, is to turn unceasingly a contemplating face towards the brethren and the world".

The attainment of Orthodox plenitude will also be brought about through a return to Syrian spirituality, which is indispensably complementary to Christian Hellenism. A sincere acceptance of the non-Byzantine tradition, whether Semitic or Western, will enhance the dimensions of actual tradition.

What holds true in thought, is also true in life. An Ecclesiastical revival is inconceivable without a return to the pre-Constantinian era, when the Church was effectively detached from the World, from the State, from social forms not falling in with the policies of any power, class or party, but being wholly bound to the way of poverty. Any earthly reality, even if this is the most rich culture, can be a burden to the people of God in pilgrimage. "We, the civilizations, know that we are mortal". To save the perishable, is hardly a duty that falls on the Church. To strip oneself of everything, to go out into the desert so that God speaks into our Heart, to regain the one thing necessary, while swimming within the freedom of the children of God, this is the necessary condition for a humble start towards the nations. This liberation is an absolute pre-condition, before real catholicity can be attained. Actual catholicity cannot be found except in real unity and unity cannot be achieved except through the renunciation of every political or cultural messianism, within the unique love of the Poor of Nazareth, Who baptised us in one single body by the sacrifice of Golgotha. The unity of dogma and of the sacraments does not cost us anything, as it does not come from us. The question is one of a community of life, of an exchange of life, of a self-evident manifestation of unity. It is this renewed life transfused from one Church to another, from one youth to another, that will create a missionary impetus free of any admixture. This Church revival will unavoidably turn to mission, because he who rediscovers God will also rediscover man, and, as St. Maxim the Confessor says: "He

who loves something human cannot love man". A composite Church which is attached to realities other than Christ, which suppresses the prophetic voices of her children, which is afraid of every enthusiasm, of every flame, of every novel expression of thought or in the apostolate; a Church which worships all absolutes except the one absolute of revelation, is incapable of meeting man in the midst of his misery and his thirst for the living God.

Going even further, Orthodox testimony, if it is to be complete, must integrate into itself the non-Chalcedonian traditions. From the missionary point of view the Coptic Church has an indisputable African vocation. She has penetrated in the past into the heart of the Black Continent and would be willing to resume such an advance. She is more spontaneous, more popularised, perhaps less crystallised intellectually than the Byzantine Church, but this creates a true affinity between her and the African spirit. In India the Syrian Church constitutes a presence which is, in fact, Orthodox: and the only one which is not affiliated to the West. It can not therefore be ignored by any Orthodox witness on the Indian Continent. Thus, from the simple point of view of missionary action, the unity of the non-Roman Eastern Churches constitutes a necessity. On the other hand, from the spiritual and doctrinal point of view, the unity of eastern Christianity is something which can be realized in the immediate future. The scholars and the heads of the Churches actually admit that the divergence between the supporters and the adversaries of the Fourth Ecumenical Council (that of Chalcedon) is a merely verbal one.

One of the obstacles, of which the missionary intention might stumble, is the belief: that the Church is not always in a state of maturity as far as mission is concerned. Indeed, a period of decadence might render us insensitive to the urgency of the work of Evangelisation. We must - we say to ourselves - attend to what is pressing, to reform the Church, strengthen her institutions, before we bring the Gospel to others. This attitude, however, is wrong, since a renewal is always in course of being accomplished and the people of God are always in need of reform. Spiritual senility is constantly threatening it. The regeneration of the Church is not only the cause of her extension, it is also its effect. Ever since the Incarnation, we are approaching the end of times and the Church has never been promised, in principle, an interval between Pentecost and the Second Coming.

Excessive prudence in the preparation of missionaries can be a kind of obstacle as well. It is sufficient to find a priest with a genuine spiritual life, receptive to the culture of the country where he is going to be sent, with some theological and spiritual training and you can then start a mission with a minimum of financial resources. For the spiritual man the financial problem does not arise at all.

Having said that, one has almost defined the spirit of the mission. In the middle of the XVIth century the Metropolitan of Moscow, Macarius, said to Archbishop Gouri of Kazan: "gain the confidence of the heart of the Tatars and do not lead them to baptism except through love and never because of any other reason". Relating the visit of a Governor to Father Kiriak, Leskov states, that the missionary refused to baptize the natives hastily and that, neglecting every view of the administration and above all statistics, he humbly served the population, whom he evangelised. "Let them therefore, he said, start by touching the hem of Christ's robe, let them feel His immense charity, and then the Lord Himself will enchant them".

Mission is nothing else but the evangelical life led in absolute poverty, the adoption of the standards of living of the population whom one calls to Christ. The Orthodox missionaries translated immediately the Scriptures and the liturgical books into the language of the people to whom they preached. Quite often they devised for them an alphabet and created a literary language. The apostle is but an ambassador of Christ, meek and humble at heart, and all cultural and sanitary efforts are surpassed, since they are often confused in Asia and in Africa with foreign tutelage. Schools and hospitals are no longer impressing anyone.

If the evangelist wishes to make disciples of Jesus Christ, he must realise that he has to learn quite a lot from non-Christians. It is with supreme humility that he should become a pupil to the school of traditions of the country where he works, if he is to be able to interpret the Gospel into the psychological language of the country.

A monastic Church, as the Orthodox Church essentially is, should be ideally suited to foreign mission. The vocation of poverty has already been given to monks. They have always struck the imagination of the Islam, and one of the special reasons which accounts for the respect that the Coran shows them is "the humility of their priests and monks". Similarly, India and the Buddhist civilisation are monastic. In history, it is the monks who brought the Gospel to Russia and to Orthodox missions. In certain parts of the Church, as in Syria, monasticism is especially open to the world. On the other hand, the testimony of liturgy is considerable.

It is the liturgy which has maintained the faith in the East, in face of the total absence of theological literature, because it speaks a dialect which is addressed to the entire human being, not to the intellect alone. It holds within it - for non-Christians as well - the experience of a higher world. The presence of prayer within it is a light that shines in the total darkness of the gentiles.

The apostolate of mission, seen as a communication of the Word, as a total presence to the world, appears to us as a divine claim, whose absence judges us. The Church is created during this eternal pilgrimage to the end of the World, to the end of times, within her nostalgia for the consummation of all in Christ. It is up to us to remain faithful and to launch world Orthodoxy into the great adventure of universal love.