

THE CHURCH AS MISSION*

As Father Karl Rahner points out in the Foreword, "The thoughts offered for consideration in this book are of great importance." The conclusions arrived at can stand on their own merits. The fact that the author is an experienced and active missionary authenticates them still more. It is not a large book. It is rather small, but rich in content, and the contribution it makes to a theology of the Missions is significant.

Father Hillman places the problem of the Missions in its proper context, namely, in the sphere of theology. He shows clearly that the Missions not only have problems, but that they are themselves a problem — not one principally of finances, nor more personnel, nor new methods, but rather theological. To clarify the right theological foundation of the Church's mission is of supreme importance for the Church's existence and its work of service.

Developing a theology of the Church as "the universal sacrament of salvation," he shows convincingly that there is a very real difference between the missionary activity of the Church among non-Christian peoples and the pastoral care of Christian peoples (even though these may be very much de-christianized). He defines the purpose of the Church's specific missionary activity — to become, in an historical and tangible way the efficacious sign of redeemed humanity among and for the peoples and nations where the Church has not been established. In carrying out this mission in this final period of salvation history the Church proclaims the Kingdom of God and hastens the day when all the nations will be gathered together to "form one People of God... joined in one Body of Christ, ... built up together in one Temple of the Holy Spirit." This is the author's main thesis. It draws from

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and is supported by the decree of Vatican II on the Church's missionary activity. (*Ad Gentes*).

This thesis is proposed in contrast to the concept of mission advocated particularly by some French writers... He points to the great deal of confusion which has arisen in recent years over the notion of "mission," and to the harm which has resulted from this confusion. In some countries, there is growing up a tendency to pay less and less attention to the other tribes and tongues and peoples outside of western Christianity. This tendency has been the fruit of an intense and almost total pre-occupation with the parish, together with a lack of distinction between the de-christianized peoples and the pagan masses of the world. Theoretically, the concept of mission has been broadened to include every individual whether in so-called christian countries or in pagan lands. In practice, however, the scope has been narrowed drastically. Catholics, exhorted to be missionaries in their own milieu, are failing to advert to their obligation to participate in the universal mission of the Church. The priority of the home apostolate is almost exclusive. To substantiate this charge, Father Hillman draws attention to the serious disproportion between the pastoral and missionary activity of various nations. Nearly 400,000 priests serve 1/3 of the world's people (i.e. the Christian and de-christianized peoples.) Only 30,000 are vainly trying to cope with the other 2/3 of the world's population, and of these about 1000 priests are directly concerned with bringing the gospel to the non-evangelized. If these figures are accurate, or even if they are only a very rough approximation, the result is obvious. The image that the Church presents is that it is an affair of Europe and the Americas. Even in Africa and Asia, the tendency is to absorb personnel exclusively into areas where the Church already has been established. This new concept of mission advocated by some European authors calls for more and more missionaries to be sent to those communities without priests at the expense of the non-evangelized.

The concept of mission outlined above differs considerably from the traditional concept. The custom has been to reserve the term "missionary activity" to the foreign missions, especially to the apostolate to the non-evangelized. Missionary activity ought to be distinguished from pastoral activity. The work of raising up the sign of salvation among

a people who have not believed in Christ differs from the work of maintaining the clarity of this sign once it has been set up so that it will become meaningful and salutary for all those who live in the nation. Missionary activity and pastoral activity are two functions of the one mission of the Church. They are equally essential to the life of the Church everywhere. Where one of these functions is being neglected in practice, the mission of the Church is not being served there.

Although these two functions are distinct, they are also complementary. Missionary activity establishes an indigenous Church. This Church, in its need to expand, will send out missionaries and so on. This is a vital process, a process that does not wait to begin only when its own area is thoroughly evangelized. If it waits for this then there is a fair chance that it will never begin to send out missionaries. Pope Pius XII said, "Their own growth in holiness will be in proportion to their active interest in the holy missions."

Perhaps, in the light of what has been said already, we may have reason for a little soul-searching. If our growth in holiness is in proportion to our active interest in the missions, surely we have cause for a little apprehension. If the missionary and pastoral functions of the Church are equally essential, why have we concentrated our resources, our efforts and our personnel almost exclusively to pastoral activity? Are de-christianized areas so much worse off than the non-evangelized areas? Finally, what did Christ really mean when He gave the command to preach the gospel to every creature? All these questions demand answers and those answers, in turn, demand appropriate action.

Referring to Our Lord's apostolic mandate, Father Hilman delineates further the terms of the problem. Does "every creature" refer to each individual quantitatively or to the whole of creation in its totality? In other words, what is the aim of the Church, solely to build up the number of the faithful, or to establish itself as a sacramental and symbolic sign among the nations, a symbol that does not depend on numbers nor on historical perseverance among any one people?

With compelling quotations from the Acts of the Apostles and from the encyclicals and allocutions of some of the modern Popes, he declares that the missionary work of the Church is not concerned directly and primarily with saving souls. Rather, it consists in bringing

to the sight and hearing of all men the one salutary work already accomplished historically for all men by Christ. To illustrate the point, he draws our attention to St. Paul. St. Paul regarded his missionary work as complete once he had established the Church amongst a people. We do not find him engaged in the work of bringing every individual in the neighbourhood into the Church. His aim was to set up the Church as soon as possible. Then he moved on elsewhere. In this way he hoped to hasten Christ's return. His missionary work had an eschatological motive. The motive of the Church's missionary work remains eschatological.

At this point, it might be well to introduce a concept which is very important for a full understanding of Fr. Hillman's thesis — the concept of ethnic-culture units and their relationship to the missionary work of the Church, which is to establish an indigenous Church among "every tribe, tongue, people and nation." The custom has been to interpret this phrase according to geographical or political groupings. Others have attempted to break away from this pattern. Fr. Schillebeeckx suggests "pagan cultures." Fr. Rahner thinks it means "everywhere." Both suggestions are somewhat vague and inadequate. Any alternative must express the notion of the solidarity of mankind and its implications in terms of Christian life and corporate salvation. To speak of the solidarity of mankind is not to deny the obvious differences and divisions that exist among men. These differences and divisions are natural. They are the result of the isolation of groups and the need to adapt to varying conditions. The sum total of all these differences (physical, psychological, linguistic, political, etc.,) developed by countless generations is the historical reality by which mankind is divided into distinctive units of people. Each unit reflects, in a unique way, the One Goodness, Truth and Beauty. We call these units of men "ethnic-culture units." To its members, the ethnic-culture unit is "the people." It is the symbolic body of mankind, signifying to its members the solidarity of mankind. In such a group, (as in the Trinity), an individual never stands alone. He stands always and only with an essential relationship to his community. — i.e. to the ethnic-culture unit. Since no man goes to God alone, salvation will come to establish herself within each of these groups and to recapitulate with the groups into one visible symbol which is herself.

The Parousia will not come until the Church has made Christ sacramentally present in every land, to every "people;" until there has been a corporate confrontation between Christ and the peoples who constitute mankind. Admittedly, the Church has spread to every continent, but her mission is far from accomplished. It has yet to spread to every ethnic-culture unit of men, doing sacramentally among one people after another what Christ already has done historically once for all, and what he does eternally in the souls of the saved.

A brief summary of the points treated so far will give some idea of the significance of this book. The Church's missionary activity is prior in both time and urgency to its pastoral activity. The Church's primary mission is not directed indiscriminately towards an increase of numbers, but, rather, to establishing the Church among each of the natural divisions of peoples, and it is to such groups that Christ's mandate refers.

This book is significant for another reason. Father Karl Rahner has been vigorously attacked by some writers for his theology of "anonymous Christianity" with its positive evaluation of the role of the non-Christian religions in the history of salvation. In recent years, this subject has been the focus of much controversy. Hans Kung and others who participated in the theological seminar of November, 1964, held in Bombay, were criticized for many of the expressions they used in reference to the value of non-Christian religions and to the aim of the missions. In "Christ to the World," No. 3., 1965, there is a summary of the papers delivered at the seminar and the conclusions arrived at, together with comments from people who disagreed with particular expressions and proposals. A criticism made against the theologians at Bombay has also been levelled against Rahner. It is claimed that the theology which Rahner and others present seriously undermines the work of the missions and missionary motivation. They claim that missionaries are asking themselves, "What is the use of the missions if non-Christians can be saved without Christianity?" Others just disregard such liberal theories and point out that they have been developed by armchair theologians in Europe who have little or no knowledge of the concrete situation in the mission field. Yet, here is a missionary, the

first priest sent to evangelize the nomadic Masai in Northern Tanzania, who, after years of missionary experience, accepts and develops Fr. Rahner's basic positions. Fr. Hillman shows that this theology, when it is rightly understood and when it is seen in relation to the Church as the dynamic and universal sacrament of salvation, in no way destroys the necessity nor the urgency of the Church's missionary activity.

At the risk of being superficial, I shall try to summarize Fr. Hillman's presentation of God's salvific action. It is not created grace, primarily, which constitutes salvation. Rather, it is the living presence of God in those whom He wishes to justify by created grace whereby creatures may respond to His presence in a personal communion of love. The One Word of God Who has redeemed mankind is present to all men in their inner being. He reveals himself to them in an experimental dialogue. Their knowledge of God need not be either explicit nor implicit. It may be unformulated, arising from conformity to a morally good impulse; i.e. to the voice of nature, which is the voice of God revealing Himself. Each act of man places him in dialogue with God, and, according to his moral decision in the situation, either accepts or rejects God's call. Therefore, many people who are living a life inwardly open to God in the events of their daily life, are Christians without their explicitly knowing it. For the Mercy of God, incarnate in Christ, transforms men into the likeness of Christ, even though they may have no historically explicit knowledge of Christ. As Fr. Schillebeeckx has said, "This is not an extra-ordinary way of grace." Through their communal religions, they signify their dependence on God and offer him homage. They have a moral code handed down through generations. For them, it is a guide to human behaviour with relation to God as they understand him. All this is not the result of natural reason alone. It is also the result of grace. Although such religions may be judged to be inadequate, they may be seen as a preparation, a prefiguring of what is to come historically in the visible Church. From this it is quite clear that such people are not saved because of their tribal religion. They are saved because they are already "unconscious" Christians.

An outline of salvation as given above ought not to discourage missionaries. The knowledge that God's grace usually precedes their

preaching should not lessen their motivation. Their task is to form among every people an active indigenous Church which, in turn, will send out its own missionaries. Their work is important. On it depends the realization of the Church's mission to gather all these peoples into one visible symbol of unity. The Parousia, Christ's return, is linked with the spreading of the "Good News" to every people. When it is completed, Christ will return. This was St. Paul's prime motivation. Surely, it is sufficient for the missionary of today.

I find it difficult to criticize a book with which I agree so wholeheartedly. My attitude towards this book is one of appreciation rather than criticism. Fr. Hillman is to be commended for his summing up, in a clear light and so concisely, matter which would require an otherwise extensive reading. Basing his study upon the Scriptures, magisterial pronouncements, especially the decrees of Vatican II, upon the best of modern theological thought concerning the Church and God's salvific acts, further authenticating his studies by years in the mission field, he expresses his thoughts with balance, restraint and conviction. His conviction and his sense of urgency are contagious.

If this book has any great defect, it is one of which the author is aware, himself. It does not present a complete theology of the missions. Probably, such a complete treatment is not possible at present. Nor does it suggest practical guidelines for a revised attitude towards the missions. However, following so closely on the decrees of the Council, it should serve as a powerful incentive for further reflection and discussion in this neglected field of theology.

Touching the very heart and core of the Church and its ecclesiology, this book presents two serious challenges which cannot be ignored — the urgency of developing a truly missionary theology which the Church in general and the missionaries in particular are crying out for — and the practical necessity of entering into closer dialogue with the two billion non-evangelized people of the world.

A fitting conclusion to this paper is the one which Karl Rahner uses in the Foreword, "The questions discussed and the conclusions reached in this book are very, very important."