

Chapter 13 – The Missionary Church

“The Missions and the Roman Pontiff,” a statement presented by the patriarch at the March-April 1962 meeting of the Central Commission.

In approving as a whole the schemas that are proposed to us by the Commission on Missions, I believe that I must make the following comments:

1. There is found in these schemas, perhaps more than in the others, a certain tendency to flatter the supreme pontiffs, and this flattery at times inspires inappropriate or excessive expressions.

Thus, in the preamble of the schema *“De regimine missionum”* (On the administration of the missions), historical perspectives are distorted by placing the Roman pontiffs at the head of those who received the missionary torch from the hands of the Apostles. Indeed, one knows that during the first centuries of Christianity not only was the evangelization of unbelieving lands not reserved to the Roman pontiffs, but also that the Roman Church did not always come at the head of the missionary Churches. What should not be forgotten is the missionary work displayed by the great apostolic sees of Antioch, Alexandria, and Constantinople, which brought the faith to Asia, to Africa, and to the Slavic peoples. It is unfair to these apostolic Churches to mention exclusively, in the history of evangelization, the missionary activity of the Roman pontiffs. At the present time there is prevalent in certain Catholic circles a trend toward conscious or unconscious adulation of the Roman pontiffs that distorts all ecclesiastical perspectives.

This tendency to adulation sometimes inspires expressions that may be pleasing to certain circles, but that have a definite result of inflexibility and exaggeration of the dogma of Roman primacy, thus contributing to the needless widening of the gulf that separates us from our Orthodox or Protestant brethren. For instance, in the above-mentioned schema *“De regimine missionum,”* it is probably not very catholic to say that, “all the faithful have the Pope of Rome as their own bishop,” and to add that he can “rule the faithful either by himself or through other bishops who possess vicarial power.” If the Pope of Rome is their own bishop for the faithful of Constantinople, then the Bishop of Constantinople is only his *locum tenens*, his proxy, a “prelate possessing a vicarial power,” and hence his vicar? And what happens to apostolic succession?

The dogma defined at the First Vatican Council declares that the pope has authority, even immediate authority, over all pastors and faithful. But it does not follow from this that the pope is the immediate bishop of all dioceses and that the bishops of the world are his vicars. Such exaggerations should indeed be condemned by the council, as being contrary to Catholic dogma.

2. In a general way, the schemas of the Commission on Missions do not seem to have anything else in view than to assert to a surfeit the rights of the Roman pontiffs.

Now, when the *patria potestas* (fatherly power) of the father of a family or of a king is recognized, loved, and respected by his children, what need is there to recall it and affirm it all the time? It would seem that there is a constant fear of seeing it contested, as if his children owed him love, respect, and obedience solely because of his *potestas*! The constant reminder of this *potestas* has two disadvantages:

a. With respect to the faithful children of this father-king, they can grow tired of always hearing this reminder, as if their loving fidelity were in doubt.

b. With respect to those of his children who are still separated, this constant reminder of *potestas* embitters them, and above all frightens them and drives them away. The frequent repetition of the assertion of *potestas* seems to them to be a constant threat that they could some day easily become victims of possible abuses of this power.

3. It should also be noted that the suggested reforms and recommendations are good not because the supreme pontiffs made them. On the contrary, the supreme pontiffs made them because they were good in themselves. In prescribing them, the council must not rely on the already published acts of the popes, but on the innate goodness of these reforms or recommendations.

These remarks do not affect the essence of the reforms, but only the form in which these reforms must be expressed. The fundamentals are excellent.

For an East That Is Again Missionary

The Eastern Church today, confronted by all sorts of difficulties, has as it were withdrawn within itself as though renouncing as a whole the work of the distant missions. Only the Syro-Malabar Church of India, in the light of its large numbers, seems to be able to devote itself effectively to the missions. Yet it has been prevented from doing so until now by a series of discriminatory measures. In its "Observations on the Schemas of the Council" [1963], the Holy Synod claimed for the East a place in the missionary work of the Church.

Considering the injustice of which the Malabar Church of India is the victim, whose numerous clergy can spread the Gospel outside Malabar only by embracing the Latin rite, we wish to proclaim here the right of our Eastern Churches to cooperate in the work of evangelizing the world without ceasing to be themselves, and to create Christian communities of the Eastern rite. On this subject of evangelization, we wish to call to mind the role played by the Patriarch of Constantinople in the Christianization of the Slavs, or that of the Patriarch of Antioch in the conversion of Asia. We wish to be living, organizing, and dynamic Churches in the great Church of Christ, and not archeological relics, or variations to be maintained because they are interesting and picturesque. Nevertheless, the exercise of this right must be regulated by agreement with the central authority, in conformity with the rules of Christian prudence.

Mission in Eastern Theology

When at the third session of the council the assembly discussed the schema "De activitate missionali Ecclesiae," Archbishop Elias Zoghby, Patriarchal Vicar in Egypt and the Sudan, made a valuable contribution to the debate on November 9, 1964, by stressing the Orthodox concept of mission.

You are perhaps wondering what an Eastern bishop can say about the missions, when the Eastern Churches, because of certain historical vicissitudes, have been obliged to suspend their missionary activity. However, over the centuries the Eastern Churches have themselves also been eminently missionary, and they possess a rich and fruitful mystical life of mission, which our schema seems in great part to disregard.

While giving homage to the intense and admirable missionary activity of the Latin Church, I dare hope that the Eastern Churches will some day be able to resume their missionary drive.

The whole Church is essentially missionary. Our schema should therefore be inspired not only by the Latin tradition, but also by the Eastern traditions, in order to promote the missions in the entire Church. Now, this schema seems more concerned with organizing the already existing Western missionary activities than with deepening the sense of mission and opening up new ways better adapted to the needs of the present-day world. The missionary theology of the Eastern Fathers could perhaps help us to work out a more complete schema. Here is how the Eastern Fathers conceived the mission of Christ and of the Church:

1. Since the first centuries, the Eastern Fathers have considered the mission of Christ in the world to be an epiphany, i.e., a flood of divine light on the work of creation. The mission of the Church consists in perpetuating this Epiphany of the Lord and thus preparing, over the centuries, for the coming of the Kingdom.
2. Another idea dear to the Eastern Fathers is the following: the redemptive mission of Christ and of the Church is carried out for a humanity that has already been made fruitful by the divine sowing, the "seeds of the Word," according to the expression of Saint Justin, of Clement of Alexandria, and of Origen. The Gospel message, when it has reached a land that has not yet been evangelized, does not cast the seed of God's Word into souls that are totally ignorant of the Word of God, but rather into souls that have been prepared over a long period of time by the Holy Spirit, since they received at their creation the creative "seed of the Word," the divine seed that awaits the dew of the new dawn in order to grow and bear fruit.

This progressive preparation of the world for the coming of the Savior was conceived by the Fathers as a "divine pedagogy" in which Saint Irenaeus and Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, among others, saw and admired God's plan from the beginning to save mankind. This traditional concept of Mission has two advantages: a. The first advantage is that it does not isolate the Redeemer-Word from the Creator-Word, or redeemed

humanity from created humanity. Mission-epiphany is simply the flooding in the world of the divine light communicated to all men with their life on the day of their creation. As Saint John the Evangelist tells us: “In the beginning was the Word... In Him was life, and the life was the light of men...” (John 1:1,3). Just as the Word, by communicating life, had deposited in every human being the “seed of the Word,” so too the Word incarnate, in redeeming humankind, communicated to it the fullness of life. So there was light at the beginning, and the flooding of light at the Incarnation; the seed of the Word at creation, and the fullness of the Word through redemption: “From His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (John 1:16).

The mission of the Church, after the example of the mission of John the Baptizer, is to bear witness to “the light that enlightens everyone who comes into the world.” But the mission of the Church does not stop there. It transmits to all human beings the fullness of life; and “the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he (John the Baptizer)” (Matthew 11:11).

In thus linking the mission of the Word Incarnate with the mission of the Creator-Word, the Fathers affirmed by that very fact the universal character of the Church’s mission.

b. The second advantage of this patristic concept of mission lies in the fact that it invites the missionary Church to respect this “seed of the Word” deposited in every human creature, and this direct action of God in humankind that the Eastern Fathers called the “divine pedagogy.”

The Church must begin by discovering in the peoples it evangelizes the divine seed and the natural riches that are the fruit of that Seed. The evangelized peoples must not only receive the Gospel message from the Church: they themselves must also enrich the Church by contributing their own human values, the fruit of this Seed of the Word received from God in the beginning and cultivated by them over the centuries, thanks to the action of the Holy Spirit, the divine Teacher of humankind.

Since the Redeemer-Word is also the Creator-Word of all humankind, He belongs to all men and to all peoples. He must be at home everywhere: everywhere among his own. The missionary Church must therefore not impose on the peoples it evangelizes a ready-made Christ, the Christ of one particular people or one particular civilization. The peoples who receive Jesus Christ must be able to express Him, to reincarnate Him in their image and likeness, so that He may be all things to all. The Church is catholic, that is to say, universal, to the extent that it is capable of recognizing the stripped Christ in the transformed Christ it receives from them.

In our own time, when the young nations are justifiably proud of bringing their own cultural and spiritual patrimony to humanity and to the Church, it is important that our schema develop this traditional theology of missionary activity.

3. Mission is not the only epiphany of the Lord and germination of the Word. There is another aspect of missionary activity that is very dear to the Eastern Fathers: mission is a

pasch, a paschal outpouring. The sacramental sign of this outpouring that will be perpetuated until the coming of the Lord is the Eucharist.

Speaking to His Apostles, Jesus said, “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you” (Luke 22:20). And so it is around the Eucharist that the Church must ratify the new covenant between God and men. It is through the Eucharist that the Church takes root in a land. Besides, the stages through which unbelievers are introduced into the Church are those of their participation in the Eucharistic office: the liturgy of the catechumens prepares them for baptism, and baptism introduces them into the liturgy of the faithful.

In speaking about the Kingdom of God, did not our Lord more than once evoke the parable of the feast to which the Master of the house invites not only his friends and fellow-citizens—who do not come—but also all who wish to enter?

The Church’s mission, wherever it exists, consists first of all in setting the table of the Eucharistic sacrifice, in preparing men to participate in it, in convoking them to assemble around the Lamb. The altar thus becomes the gathering place of the people of God and firmly plants the Church in the new soil.

Furthermore, the Eucharistic presence of the Word incarnate is the first gift that the Church gives to the people it comes to evangelize. The community of charity that unites all those who participate in the Eucharistic meal with one another and with the risen Christ is the beginning and the completion of the mission of the Church until the coming of the Lord. The paschal outpouring is perpetuated in the Church by the Eucharist. And so in the East the celebration of the Eucharist is accompanied every Sunday by the office of the Resurrection. The life of the Church, therefore, is a perpetual Easter, and its presence in the world is a liturgy in which the New Covenant between God and men is sealed by the blood of the Savior.

As we express the wish for a new working out of this schema, we Eastern Christians hope to find in it the Eastern missionary mystical life that will help us to collaborate with our Western brothers in the great work of the missions.