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Comments on the New Age of Mission

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COMMENTS ON THE NEW AGE OF MISSION

I would like to comment first on the expression, "new age of mission", which I find highly significant, although in my experience people use it lightly and ignore its implications. The expression presupposes the notion, accepted by modern thinkers like Paulo Freire, that human history can be divided (loosely of course) into eras. In each era, society is marked by certain dynamics, some of which foster human development while others are obstacles to it. Great leaders in each era understand critically the dynamics of their society and help their contemporaries to understand them too; in this way they facilitate the emergence of a new era, as people adopt new ways of relating which are more consistent with the human vocation.

Similarly in the Church, a new era arises when creative Christians develop ways of being Church which allow gospel values to emerge which for various reasons had lain dormant in the previous era. These new ways of being Church gradually become dominant and a new era has begun. All this of course happens under the guidance of the Spirit of Jesus (who himself inaugurated a definitive new era) and normally in our Catholic tradition through people who have founded or renewed religious orders.

If then we accept that we have entered into a new age of mission and want to understand it, we must answer two important questions: What was the previous age, which has now ended? How does the new age differ from it?

* * *

I think that the key to answering both these questions can be found in the statement of Karl Rahner that for the first time since the earliest years of its existence the Church in our day has the opportunity to become a world Church.

The previous age, then, even allowing for a certain exaggeration on Rahner's part, spanned several centuries, perhaps even a millennium. The implications are clear. It means that if we want to pose the question of mission adequately today we must have a sense of history, not merely the history of the Church's history. Now this poses a great challenge for the whole Church, but especially for congregations like ours which were founded during the last century or two. There is no way that we can find within our own history the memories that will enable us to understand the new age of mission. We have to go further back. In particular we have to make the mental leap necessary to free ourselves of the attitudes of the colonial era, which was, let us remember, at its height precisely at the time that our Congregation was in full flower. We have to remember mission as understood by Cyril and Methodius, by St. Patrick and the English and Irish monks of the pre-medieval era.

This is going to be a slow and painful process. I make this point because, for many, the turbulence that marked the sixties and seventies is now over — "mercifully", as I remember one of the preparatory documents for the chapter of 1980 putting it, and "things are now settling down again". There is, for example, the notion often stressed at Carcavelos that in 1984 we can fix parts of our constitutions which will remain unchanged from now on. This is quite naive. The change of attitude required of the Church and of the Congregation could not possibly have happened in such a short time. A new age, like every new-born, emerges laboriously and in great pain. There must be signs in the sun and moon and stars, men must die of fear as they await what menaces the world, and the powers of heaven must be shaken. Only then is liberation near at hand.

Of course we need stability and rules. From this point of view we have progressed over recent years. I remember that at the chapter of 1968 anyone who tried to make rules was quickly told, "*il ne faut pas fermer les portes*". Even in a time of rapid change, rules are necessary to safeguard us from the tyranny of fantasizers or to enable us to survive times of crisis. But no rules can save us from the pain and uncertainty involved in the birth of the new age of mission.

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All this becomes clearer when we examine Rahner's answer to our second question on the nature of the new age of mission, the Church becoming a world Church. Rahner, like all great thinkers, understood the dynamics of his era. The besetting sin of our age is fragmentation, fragmentation at every level, between cultures and between individuals, between the different layers of our selves, between humanity and nature, between humanity and God. It is precisely because modern people live fragmented lives that the Church today is called to be a world Church, a symbol of that communion to which God calls us, a communion that should exist not merely between all peoples — Rahner's point — but at all those same levels where fragmentation now dominates.

Now if we study religious life over the centuries, and in all the forms it has taken, we will find as a common thread that it has always helped people achieve harmony. We can conclude that religious life today must have as its main aim to overcome fragmentation in all its forms and foster harmony and communion instead.

Just to take one example. There is the harmony between traditional culture and faith in Jesus. We all know of the gradual blending of culture and faith which took place in the first centuries of Christianity; it is the story of the Catholic Church in Europe of East and West, in England and Ireland. It is a wonderful story, a triumph of human wisdom as well as of God's grace, and much of it took place within the framework of religious life. For various reasons the process stopped at a certain point. It was not allowed to happen during the great missionary thrusts of recent centuries. The result was fragmentation, Christians not allowed to integrate their cultural traditions and their faith. Today, however, the integrating is happening again, one of the marks of the new age of mission. Indians and Africans are becoming fully people of their culture and fully catholic, just as, centuries ago, Bede and Augustine, Catherine of Siena and Bernard, were fully both. Once more, also, religious are in the forefront of this process.

It is essential that our Congregation play its part here, especially in areas where it is attracting large numbers. This

poses a human problem which is really a sociological problem. The traditional Spiritan, especially in third world countries (there have always been exceptions), is a man of action, a pioneer, "*homme de brousse*" (I remember a great missionary who had returned to teach in a college at home and was delighted when the boys nicknamed him "bushman".), impatient with academics, more interested in putting up school buildings than in a philosophy of education. These men have given birth to religious communities that are called to be centres of culture and learning, of philosophy, poetry and dance. There will necessarily be clashes of personality.

I remind the confreres from Europe that the harmony of culture and faith is in their blood; it is part of their tribal memory, as the sociologists say. It is before their eyes in the Book of Kells, Chartres, the Rock of Cashel. We in the third world have to start from scratch, and they can help us by teaching us their history. When I was a student in Ireland in the fifties it was fashionable to decry the Irish scholastics who specialized in Celtic studies; they were said to have no interest in missions. From my present observation post, I could not think of a better course to prepare someone for being a missionary today. Celtic spirituality was not only the source of some of the greatest missionaries in the history of the Church, it was a blend of faith and culture that can be a model for the young Churches today. At the risk of coming under suspicion, I would call it the spirituality of a popular Church. For those looking for an alternative to Celtic studies I would recommend a study of Jean Leclerc's classic, "*The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*".

Then there is the harmony between prayer and apostolate, which is but one aspect of the harmony between active and passive elements in human living. This is a major problem in many traditional cultures today. All traditional cultures have an inbuilt harmony of activity and leisure. We who spent time in Africa were always struck by the importance people there give to "conversing"; it is a moment that must not be hurried. The modern world with its overemphasis on activity has swept away this harmony with enormous damage to people's psyche. Religious life has always been a harmonious blend of the two, a living testimony of good human living. Religious life can be, as it has been over the centuries, in the forefront of what Paul VI in *Populorum Progressio* called "the

search for a new humanism which will enable modern man to find himself anew by embracing the higher values of love and friendship, of prayer and contemplation". The pope added that this search required "the deep thought and reflection of wise men". The lesson of history is that religious life produces that kind of wisdom.

I noticed at Carcavelos a tendency to go back to the false way (the way of the previous age) of posing this problem, namely, to ask which elements in our life-style are subordinate to others. Eventually the commission accepted that our life has four elements, apostolate, community, the counsels and prayer, and each is absolute. This is harmony, not fragmentation, the ancient understanding of religious life.

I have just given two examples. Both point to another fragmentation that we must overcome in the new age of mission, the false opposition between different forms of religious life. I am concerned by all the focussing on identity ("what precisely is our charism?") in religious congregations today. I see it as a symptom of that unhealthy desire to know who we are that is a mark of our culture of fragmentation, whereas Jesus taught that it is only in losing ourselves that we can find ourselves. We are called to be ourselves rather than to know ourselves, and we should be content to say of our religious orders what St. Francis said about each person: "what we are before God, that we are and nothing more".

My main point here, however, is that in searching for our identity we are always locking ourselves into a problematic that belongs to the previous age. There is, for example, the so-called opposition between monastic and missionary life. I often hear European confreres insisting that the two things are opposed, and I wonder what do they make of their own history. All I have said shows that, far from distancing ourselves from the monastic tradition, we need urgently to open ourselves to the great lessons it can teach us.

I have similar reservations about the notion of "specifically missionary orders". This notion was born in the nineteenth century, made sense within it, but very little in the new age of mission. Our Trinidad province has suffered greatly under the burden of having to conform to this model. There was a time when the province was told by high authorities in the Congregation that they were not "real Spiritans" because they were not sending large numbers to "mission

countries". It is quite clear to me that the province was developing according to its own inner dynamic, with all the elements of religious life, and, as it continues to do so, its own distinctive missionary spirit is emerging as it has always done.

In general I find that people project on our founders a concern for identity that historically was not theirs at all. I imagine the founders, like some wonderful old Spiritans I have known, secure in their own identity and achievements, would put their hand on the shoulder of younger confreres as a gesture of continuity, but also encourage them to follow new paths.

This brings me to my final point, which is that our Congregation will enter into the new age of mission, not primarily by the decisions of chapters or the texts of constitutions, nor even by the study of history, important as this may be, but by the spontaneous decisions of the confreres, the conclusion being that nothing is more important or constructive in the Congregation today than to put our hands on one another's shoulders.

One of the features of modern civilization is that we like to plan for our institutions. There are, however, institutions where planning has very limited value. Parents cannot plan how their children will turn out, a school of art cannot plan what its students will create, a research laboratory cannot plan what will be discovered in its experiments. Religious life is that kind of institution. All religious orders came into being because deeply spiritual people spontaneously felt the urge to try something that the rest of the Church was neglecting and, whatever we might think, they are kept alive by the same dynamic. I am very struck by this within my own province. We are moving in certain directions because some of our confreres started doing things which they did not understand very clearly themselves, although as time went on they understood them. I have heard confreres in the Congregation decried as "outside the mainstream of the Congregation" when in fact they had fallen on work that was totally in tune with our traditions. Of course not every spontaneous movement is authentic; we must do our work of discernment, do our critical reflection in the light of history, as I have explained, but without undue concern, remembering the principle of Gamaliel in the Acts:

If this enterprise, this movement, is of human origin, it will break up of its own accord, but if it does in fact come from God you will not only be unable to destroy them but you might find yourselves fighting against God (Acts 5.39).

It is the Spirit that is leading us into the new age of mission and we must learn to re-read the teaching of spiritual masters like Fr. Libermann on docility to the Spirit, so that it applies equally to individual persons and to institutions like our Congregation or the whole Church. That too is a task for the new age of mission.

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