From the Editor: Enabling the Word to become flesh

Patrick Fitzpatrick
Our faith tradition says the Word became flesh. God came among us in Jesus of Nazareth, a first century Jew, who spoke Aramaic, grew up in a small village, left home and proclaimed the kingdom of God mainly along the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. He went to Jerusalem a few times on pilgrimage. There he was eventually arrested by his own religious leaders, found guilty of blasphemy, brought before the Roman overlord of that region who sentenced him to death. They crucified him and then buried him in a friend’s tomb.

The ruling class breathed a sigh of relief — one less disturber of the peace to deal with.

If he was to be born in East Africa — what language would he speak? How would he celebrate Eucharist? What symbols would he use? What elements of the culture would he esteem because in them he found hints of God? What elements of that same culture would he challenge because they contradicted God’s way?

How would that Word become flesh among the many peoples and tribes of Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda? What sort of “incarnation” would take place there? How different would he be from his own people? Would he, in fact, be any different from them? If not, how would they recognize him? Would he stand out from his own Chagga or Maasai people or blend in with them? Would his “church” become an East African church in its liturgy, its way of life, its aims and aspirations?

Shortly after they arrived from Europe and/or North America with their “luggage” — Europe’s ideas, Europe’s way of being church, North America’s values, North America’s priorities — many missionaries faced a big question: do they adapt to the ways of the people or do they insist that the people adopt their ways?

United States Spiritan, Vincent Donovan, wrestled with such thoughts during his time in Maasai land. Others who worked alongside him accommodated somewhat both the foreign Roman Catholic ways and local ritual and symbols. All in their own way were trying to enable the Word to become flesh in East Africa.

But the Roman and the local clashed from time to time:

“If you should succeed in ‘converting’ an individual apart from his community, what you have succeeded in doing is separating him from his community, making him forever an outcast, an outsider to the structure of the tribal community. And this thing that made him an outsider — Christianity — will be abhorrent to the community. You have probably cut off forever the possibility of bringing Christianity to that community.

“As for him, poor man (or imagine if he is a child), he has two bleak choices: either to struggle and fight against the structure of the tribal community as an outcast, or to give up the Christianity in which he might well even believe. Historically, he has most often chosen the latter course.” — Missionary Letters of Vincent Donovan, edited by John Bowen

Reading about the clash between the Roman and the local, one is reminded of the residential schools in Canada. The efforts to make Roman Catholics out of First Nations people led to a sorry chapter in the history of the Canadian Church. Have we forgotten that Jesus was not a Roman Catholic?

This Summer, Spiritans hold a General Chapter — delegates from across the world will come together for three weeks to discuss and decide what course of action is called for at this time in their history. For the first time in Spiritan history this General Chapter is taking place in Africa. If location influences thinking, Bagamoyo in particular, along with Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda will surely influence the discussions and decisions of the delegates.

Twelve years ago, Spiritan Bishop Augustine Shao of Zanzibar spoke with Spiritan: “Today the missionary must sink into the culture of the people ... The missionary must be patient enough to sit down and learn why the people do what they do ... The missionary must be willing to be a student every now and then.”

Jesus of Nazareth spent thirty years sinking into the culture of his people.