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In the Footsteps of Vincent Donovan

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Not many books these days can look forward to being read twenty-five years from now. The book Christianity Rediscovered written by Vincent Donovan has been reprinted in a twenty-fifth anniversary edition. What is this book and why does it continue to be popular?

The book is a first person account of a Roman Catholic missionary working among the Maasai of Northern Tanzania in the 1960s. Donovan applies the then popular notion of enculturation — the idea that missionaries should listen as much as speak, be aware of God already at work among those they wish to evangelize, and translate the Gospel into terms of the local culture.

The strategy of Donovan was to visit Maasai villages and offer to teach them the Christian faith if they were interested. Then, after a year of instruction, he would invite them to be baptized if they wished. Most villages asked for baptism, though at least one refused. After baptism, Donovan felt it was time for him to move on: he had given them the gospel, but it was then their responsibility to work out what that would mean in terms of the structure, worship, and daily life of the new Christian communities. As a westerner, he could not do that for them.

What happened next?

I have used Christianity Rediscovered in several evangelism courses, because in many ways Donovan offers a thought-provoking, respectful model for evangelism in any culture, including our own. But from time to time the question has occurred to me: What happened next? The book ends with Donovan leaving Tanzania and flying back to the U.S., where he tried
(with limited success) to apply the same lessons to ministry in the West. But what happened to those fledgling Maasai churches? Did they survive? And, if so, in what form did the Donovan vision of authentically indigenous Maasai Christian communities bear long-term fruit?

In the summer of 2006 I was able to visit Catholic work in the part of Tanzania where Donovan had been stationed. What did I discover?

Since Donovan left

I was able to meet three Catholic missionaries, U.S. Spiritans Ned Marchessault and Joe Herzstein, who worked with Donovan since the time he began his work in 1966. A third, Pat Patten, came later in 1976. They have continued to implement Donovan’s vision for more then thirty years since he left in 1969. They still refer to him as the visionary leader who inspired them to spend their lives doing what they have done. To my mind, while Donovan may be the catalytic leader and the best-selling author, these are the real heroes of the story.

The ongoing story

The missionaries have continued their work of what they call primary evangelization. One of the goals of the Spiritan Order, to which they all belong, is to share the Gospel with those who have never heard it. So they have continued to visit far-flung Maasai villages to teach the gospel wherever there is interest. These days, Maasai catechists and evangelists, who have obvious advantages over white Americans, do more of the work.

The Donovan dream of independent Maasai churches, untouched by western
An important act, on my part, before I entered a village was to stoop down, scoop up a handful of grass, and present it to the first elders who greeted me. Since their cattle, and they themselves, lived off grass, it was a vital and holy sign to them, a sign of peace and happiness and well-being.

So, as the Mass began, I picked up a tuft of grass and passed it on to the first elder who met me, and greeted him with “The peace of Christ.” He accepted it and passed it on to his family, and they passed it on to neighbouring elders and their families. It had to pass all through the village...

The leaders did decide occasionally that, despite the prayers and readings and discussions, if the grass had stopped, if someone, or some group, in the village had refused to accept the grass as the sign of the peace of Christ, there would be no Eucharist at this time.

Vincent Donovan
Christianity Rediscovered

Please teach us how it should be done

Fr. Ned explained it this way, saying in effect: the people said to us, we are grateful. Maybe, in the eternal view of things, that is what really matters. Vincent Donovan is an Anglican priest and professor of Missiology at Wycliffe College, Toronto.

In every detail the way their forefathers did the rites and ceremonies. The ways of the ancestors must be followed most carefully so that the rites will have the desired result.

Asking a Maasai to construct a service made up of their signs and symbols to bring out the inner meaning of a ceremony is totally foreign and even repugnant to them. They want to know how a thing should be done so that it will work. The result has been that the Maasai churches practise traditional forms of Catholic worship, but informed by Maasai culture and customs.

Adapting Maasai symbols

We were able to attend a Mass in a distant village with Ned, and it was fascinating to share in it. He wore a simple black robe because for the Maasai black is the colour of the heaviest rain clouds, the colour of blessing and the goodness of God. He also wore a sheepskin stole embroidered with lines of cowry shells with which the women decorate their milk gourds, a sign of asking God for his rich blessings.

Although the whole service was in Maasai, we were able to follow the familiar shape of the liturgy. When the sick and troubled came forward to be blessed and prayed over, Ned sprinkled them with milk from a gourd decorated with cowry shells. For the Maasai milk is a symbol of life. The mouth of the gourd was stuffed with green grass, a symbol of reconciliation and healing.

One model fits all?

Times are changing in Tanzania, however, and the present Catholic hierarchy is no longer interested in this kind of enculturation. There is a sense that enculturation is unacceptable and that people need to be Catholic in the proper way, that is, the way of Europe and North America.

If this trend continues, what will happen to the indigenous Maasai Catholic churches when the present generation of white missionaries retires or dies? Ned and others believe that the church will attempt to force these acculturated congregations to conform to the one-model-fits-all way of the larger church and that Maasai signs and symbols will die out.

There are few Maasai priests and few clergy of other tribes willing to come and serve in such remote places. Certainly there are Maasai catechists who are passionate evangelists to their own people; but to what extent they can minister effectively without the infrastructure of the wider church is a real question.

Maasai faith and commitment

Was this then a short-lived experiment in a form of mission based on a mistaken methodology? Some would argue so. But our experience of the Maasai Christians and the service we attended spoke of a depth of faith and commitment which, humanly speaking, would not exist were it not for the sacrificial efforts of Vince Donovan and the missionaries that followed him.

The missionaries have loved these people, indeed laid down their lives for them, in the name of Christ and his Gospel. And they are greatly loved in return. Maybe, in the eternal view of things, that is what really matters.

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