



Pentecost – Passion for Global Mission

The Freshness of the Spirit

A trademark of God's Holy Spirit is that she makes all things new. Where the Spirit is, there is fresh life, movement and unexpected change. After all, the Good News is NEWS, and an apostle is a messenger with something fresh and important to communicate. Nothing is as old as yesterday's newspaper. And so, missionaries are by nature communicators of what people need to hear TODAY; not yesterday.

No wonder then that mission and missionary activity must constantly change and evolve to keep the message fresh and new. Our Congregation was founded in the era of the great missionary revival in Europe. Saint Arnold tuned in to the new missionary spirit that swept through the church in Europe. Remarkably, it was driven by the initiative and enthusiasm of lay people such as Pauline Jaricot, Auguste Sartorius and Heinrich Hahn who founded associations to support missionaries in China and elsewhere through financial contributions and prayer. Arnold Janssen, too, was part of this movement and actively promoted it. In some countries, mission seminaries were established for the training of priests who were willing to serve "in the missions" as it was called then. Soon, missionary congregations were founded, wholly dedicated to mission work overseas. That was a new type of religious life. And it was astonishing for several reasons. Firstly, the Catholic Church was under severe pressure from nationalist governments. Convents were forced to close down and only congregations with schools and

hospitals were allowed to continue their work. Secondly, there was the huge poverty problem in the wake of industrialisation. With such massive problems on hand at home – why would anyone worry about mission overseas? New was also the participation of women in mission work, an area formerly reserved to male religious and clergy. The idea of female missionaries was so novel that Helena Stollenwerk had trouble finding a place where she could hope to be sent to China.

From "ad gentes" to "inter gentes" to where?

Naturally, the period context of our foundation has informed our understanding of mission. First and foremost, it is *missio ad gentes* – *gentes* meaning those who do not yet know Christ in "other" parts of the world. (We will come back to the "other" further on.) In some ways, this has tied our idea of mission to geography: being a missionary means being sent to somewhere else. We speak of the Sisters of our Province working elsewhere as "our missionaries". We give mission appointments and have mission sending ceremonies for those headed to serve in another country. We are proud of being present in many countries around the world.

However, this pre-Vatican II mission understanding of special missionary personnel working in so-called mission countries, has crumbled away. In the decades after Vatican II, there was renewed enthusiasm. We woke up to the reality that mission is not a one-way-road from Europe and North America to elsewhere, but that mission is *inter gentes*. This mission concept too, however, is still somehow tied to

geography. And geography, in a globalized digital world, doesn't count much anymore. It is no longer geography that defines us, but rather social mobility, migration, and participation in digital communities.

So, when we speak now of "Global Mission", what does it mean? Around the globe, meaning geographical totality? Our 14th General Chapter (2014) was a breakthrough in the sense that we let go of the geographical matrix and opened up to a more contextual understanding of mission. By a previous Chapter Africa had been declared the priority continent to which financial resources and personnel were to be channelled. The Capitulars felt that this was certainly well-meant but did not do justice to the multifaceted realities of the African continent; it unintentionally blanketed all of Africa under the stereotype of "poor and needy". The Chapter moved on to a fresh understanding of mission as situational: mission is wherever God's Spirit invites our presence to witness to Her healing and reconciling power. The Chapter coined the expression of our being "accomplices of the Spirit" endowed with a new globalised, planetary consciousness.

If mission is everything, what then is mission?

The sweeping Vatican II statement that the church is missionary by its very nature, brought renewed enthusiasm for evangelisation. Our Congregation moved with vigour into new ministries such as pastoral work in parishes and Christian communities; in a variety of social work, we joined hands with people in order to shake off the oppression of poverty and injustice. We were liberated and empowered by a new theological understanding of ourselves. Our first Constitutions had still stated that we, like the women who supported Jesus and the Apostles, were the female helpers and supporters of the "real" missionaries, i.e. the clergy. Now we understood ourselves as missionaries in the full sense.

New theologies of mission have flourished. Mission was liberated from its ecclesiological confinement and became *missio Dei*, participation in God's own mission to bring about the Reign of God. Mission was no longer preaching, teaching and baptizing, but came to include the dimensions of human development, liberation, justice, reconciliation, and recently the stewardship of creation.

However, in a subtle way, this plethora of new mission concepts is not only a sign of vitality but also of crisis. Ever new definitions and descriptions of mission are needed because none seems comprehensive enough to cover it all, and none really satisfies. For, if everything the church is and does is mission, what then, *is* mission? If every Christian is a missionary, who then *are* the missionaries?

Going Everywhere, or Going Nowhere?

Our founding generation had no doubt about it: leaving my family and my country to never see them again; eating forever strange food and living by foreign customs; facing an early death because of tropical diseases or violence; in short: offering my life in a real way – it's all worth it. Because if I do not go to the missions, the people there will remain unbaptised and consequently miss out on salvation. This was a powerful motivation indeed. For female missionaries especially, another strong motivational source was compassion and pity for those deprived of the achievements of European civilisation, that is education/schools and medical care.

Vatican II let go of the old adage *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (no salvation outside the church) and opened the gates of salvation for non-Christians also. Thus, one motivational source dried up, as it were. Missionaries turned from savers of souls into the yeast and agents of the Reign of God wherever it was nascent. The other, charitable and social part of the motivation for going "to the missions" continued in the missionary

development work and concern for justice and human development. As a Congregation, we have very much diversified our ministries. We no longer serve the people mainly through our schools and hospitals, but in a great variety of professions and activities that promote human spiritual and social development. Hopefully, we will more and more serve wounded Creation also.

Whereas these shifts have brought a lot of new life to our Congregation, they have also raised new questions. Mission is everywhere and everything; mission is at my doorstep, and in every person I meet. That makes it hard to prioritize our work. Yes, mission is everything, but we cannot do everything – so, what to choose? Mission is everywhere, and we do not need to move away from home to be a missionary. So, what about our mission mandates and appointments? Why should we let go of our home country, language and culture when this swallows a lot of our energy and financial resources, and when we could work more efficiently in our own cultural environment?

Building Blocks for Global Mission

As a Congregation, we need a conversation about our understanding of mission; or more precisely: about the understanding of *our* mission. An understanding that can nourish our passion for what we are doing. This involves making choices; because if the whole church is missionary, we, as single Congregation, cannot cover everything. Nor can “global mission” mean “all over the planet”. We do not have the numbers, and moreover, as we have seen, it is not desirable to regress to a geographical understanding of mission.

What could some building blocks be of a fresh view on our mission? In search of an answer, why not start with Jesus: How did Jesus go about his mission?

A. Mission as Hospitality

Jesus was a party guy, so much so that respectable religious people thumbed their noses at him (Mt 11:19). He went to weddings, did not insist on fasting practices (Mt 9:14), and accepted dinner invitations by pious Pharisees and public sinners alike. In his parables, Jesus drew on Old Testament Wisdom theology to liken the Reign of God to a wedding banquet to which all are invited, especially those regarded as unworthy and insignificant. Eating with the small and despised was a prophetic deed by Jesus. Table fellowship was a living tableau of what the Reign of God meant. Being a guest at someone’s table was Jesus’ powerful vehicle for evangelisation.

It is striking that, during his earthly ministry, Jesus preferred the role of the guest, not of the host. He let himself be invited and invited himself (Lk 19:5). (With the exception of the accounts of the multiplication of bread when Jesus feeds the crowds; these, however, are post-resurrection narratives with eucharistic overtones projected back into Jesus earthly life.) Only in the face of death does Jesus turn into the host at the Last Supper. This is, as it were, the turning point: after Easter, Jesus appears to his disciples in the role of host (at the shore of the lake; at Emmaus).

Jesus wanted his disciples to follow his “method”. When he sent them out on mission, he advised them to be guests and lodge with the people and accept their food (Lk 10:7-8). So, could this be a mission model for us too, and what would it imply?

First and foremost, it would imply a change of mindset and a role reversal. We appreciate ourselves in the role of host. For a good reason; hospitality is very much at the heart of religious life. The Letter to the Hebrews (13:2) urges: “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality

to angels without knowing it.” Saint Benedict prescribed that every guest must be received as Christ in person. In the Middle Ages, monks and nuns provided travelers and pilgrims with food, shelter and medical care. The words *hospital*, *hotel*, *hostel* are reminiscent of this traditional convent-hospitality. In our mission work, we often provide for people: for the poor, the ignorant, the vulnerable, for those with no or weak faith. We invite them to a share at our table of plenty. Certainly, this is a good and generous intention commanded by Christian charity. Sometimes, though, it can create problems when we are the exclusive providers and others merely welfare recipients. Or when it all ends with the material aspect and no one is interested in the faith we like to share. Or when we think that we are only relevant when I have something to give (be it money or answers to problems).

Secondly, the missionary-as-guest would imply that we see ourselves as pilgrim people on the move. A guest, by definition, is not at home. A guest doesn't carry her whole household but only the bare necessities, and for the rest depends on the hospitality granted her. Even if told: “Feel at home”, the guest needs to respect and adjust to the customs observed in the home of the host. The guest might bring a gift, but first and foremost she receives whatever the host has to share.

On the other hand, the guest has something important to contribute. Imagine former times without newspaper, TV, let alone internet: people were dependent on travelers for any news from beyond their village fence. A guest can bring a lot of joy and excitement when she has some good news and interesting stories to tell. She can pull people out of the drudge and boredom of their routine. She can open a window to the wider world.

Timothy Radcliffe, OP, tells the story of his confrere Marie-Dominique Chenu, a celebrated theologian. Most evenings, he would go out to

visit artists, politicians, academics or anyone who invited him. On his return, when he met a young confrere having a snack before going to bed, he would ask him: “What have you learnt today? No, not at the university. At whose table have you sat?” The missionary is not necessarily the one doing all the interesting talking. A good missionary might find herself listening and learning. After all, that's the meaning of disciple = learner. We are presently rediscovering the listening dimension of discipleship in the synodal process.

Joseph Freinademetz' time as young seminarian in Brixen was probably a good preparation for his mission in China. He had to find a way to get his daily meals. The arrangement was that he would eat every day of the week as a guest in a different family. Imagine what it means to adjust to each of these families, take part in their conversations, show gratitude... In China he would be travelling around the villages, be the guest there; be guest in houses of other congregations, guest of Chinese administrators, Colonial personnel...

The missionary spirituality of being-a-guest takes expression in our intercultural living. We are not at home when we live and serve in another country. We are not even at home in our own communities where we have to let go of our preferences and own ways daily.

B. Mission as Moving Towards the Other

To recover the spirit of the itinerant preacher Jesus and of the Early Church (Barnabas and Paul, Prisca and Aquila, Junia and Apollos, and many others) implies mobility. Global mission is first and foremost a mindset. It means, not to become absorbed in local problems and affairs. Yes, these do need to be confronted; but some members of the local community should be freed for reaching out to Christian communities elsewhere, and to those who haven't heard of Christ yet (Acts 13:2-3). The outward movement

(going on mission to another place) becomes the physical expression of the inner movement: from the absorption with my and our local realities to the wider reality. The reality of the others; the reality of the “Other” – this is the direction the Spirit blows us (see Acts 16:6-10, Paul’s vision of the Macedonian).

God reveals Godself to us as the wholly Other. That is why God can be found in a privileged way in the encounter with the other. A deep encounter with another person, another reality, another culture will always be a God experience, painful though it may be.



Passion for global mission, in this sense, means the passion for searching God in the other, in the strange and unknown. For us as embodied beings, this experience will happen more easily when we physically and drastically change our familiar settings, i.e. go somewhere else. This “somewhere else” can also be just next door with people I normally do not mingle with; who have other interests, another outlook on life.

Changing place alone is not enough, though. Effortlessly, I can carry my familiar world with me to anywhere on the planet; the internet makes it easier than ever. The global mission mind, by contrast, will always look beyond the familiar towards the Stranger-God who reveals Godself to me in unexpected ways. Our struggles with adapting to another culture, and our painful experiences with intercultural living might not even be a bad sign after all. They simply mean that the Stranger-God is calling out to me, inviting me to step out of the circle I have drawn around myself calling it “home”.

For Reflection and Sharing:

Our founding generation was sustained by a clear vision and motivation. Their lives testify to their passion for mission. What nourishes and impels me to live my missionary life the way I do? What are open questions for me?

Where do we – as Congregation, as communities and individual Sisters – sit at the table of the other? What is my experience of being a guest in other people’s lives?

What is my personal experience with transfers and moving from one place to another? How has it impacted on me psychologically and spiritually?

Read Acts 16:6-10, Paul’s vision of the Macedonian man. Who could be the other, calling out to me/us to come over?