

Passing Over and Coming Back: A New Approach to Mission

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MISSION IN RETROSPECT

Although the nineteenth century was called a high point of mission, it simply marked one era and one approach. There have been many.

The word “mission” itself is not found in the New Testament. There was no need for a special word: to be Christian implied living the “missionary” dimension of the faith. Exemplified in Jesus, the faith is outreaching, boundary breaking: missionary. A Christian should not be “endocentric” but “exocentric” – not introverted but turned outward. The earliest Christians obeyed the imperative to “love thy neighbor as thyself,” but they knew that the neighbor was not merely “someone nearby” or “someone like me,” but also “people out there” and “people not like me.” They remembered the warning of Jesus, that “as long as you did it (or did not do it) to the least of these, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40, 45).

After a thousand years, when Christianity had become respectable, cheap and relatively easy, its missionary dimension had been all but forgotten. The monastic orders tended the flame, but the rank and file forgot (or were not taught) the essential missionary dimension of their faith.

One “era” of missionary activity began with the voyages of Discovery that opened up the New World in the sixteenth century, and was followed by another after the Reformation. It was then (mid-sixteenth century) that the word “missionary” – applied specifically to those who went overseas to “win souls for Christ” – was coined. But far from galvanizing Christians in general, the “missionary” became, and was allowed to become, a member of an elite corps, permanent and full-time, and almost exclusively a member of a religious order.

By the twentieth century, Roman Catholics knew that they themselves could become missionaries – provided they “signed up” for life, which typically meant becoming a priest or a nun. Some did, of course. But many did not. Still, if one did not actually become a “missionary,” one could at least support missionaries or (foreign) missions, typically by saving and sending money. But the

polarization, or opposition, between missionaries and the rest of the faithful was clear and fixed. The church had come a long way from its beginnings, and the missionary dimension of baptism had atrophied or disappeared from the lives of many.

MISSION IN PROSPECT

Vatican II revived the teaching of the priesthood of all believers and reminded the church that, just as we are baptized with the very Spirit that animated Jesus, so we are sent, as he was: “The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, and has *sent* me to bring good news to the poor” (Lk 4:18). But Jesus did not cross oceans or leave his native land permanently, so those cannot be the only criteria for mission. Since the 1960s, we have (re) discovered both a new dimension of mission and a new way of committing ourselves to mission in the Spirit of Jesus. Sometimes characterized as “boundary-breaking”, it implies a willingness to go beyond our own “comfort-zone” – our neighborhood or social class, language or culture – and move to encounter others *as Jesus did*.

If mission is a required outcome of baptism, then every Christian is called to mission, and mission simply cannot be defined as a commitment to some overseas posting until we die. The vast majority of people cannot go overseas, at least indefinitely. We need to visualize mission in new ways. Theologian John Dunne offers an image of “passing over” and “coming back,” that can help us fashion a new understanding. Paraphrasing, we can say, “the passing over and the coming back are the greatest religious adventure of our time.” Can we construct a theology of mission on this framework?

“Passing over” and “coming back” are two phases of a single journey, a cycle that, repeated, lasts as long as life: each passing over is likely to be followed by a coming back, and every coming back is a prelude to another passing over. And every time we come back we have been changed, so that every subsequent passing over involves a somewhat different self – evolving, transformed and in a continuous process of conversion.

“Passing over” evokes three images. First, the Passover: the night when God protected God’s people who were marked with the blood of the lamb (Ex 12); our life is a kind of Passover in this sense. But we also “pass over” in another sense: from the known to the unknown, and from life to death to new life; dying and rising are intrinsic to mission. These deeply biblical themes can assist our meditation – unless we choose to “pass over” them in another sense: to “pass over” something can mean to avoid it, not to speak of it, or to change the subject.

“Coming back” evokes the notion of a return to familiar places and faces. But, as Heraclitus said, you cannot step into the same river twice: when we return, things are always a little different: we have changed, others have changed to a greater or lesser degree, and often to the surprise of each.

Dunne describes this as adventure: in fact, as “the greatest religious adventure of our lives.” “Religious” has something to do with a sense of awe or mystery. Passing over from what is familiar leads to an encounter with what is not – and what is unfamiliar can be, literally, awesome or breathtaking. We know the instinctive reaction that makes us say “O my God!” This bespeaks a kind of religious experience. But more intimate exposure to the unfamiliar – Kilimanjaro or Lake Titicaca, people from Pakistan or Patagonia – may also make us aware that we are looking upon a facet, a face, of God.

What *is* adventure? Think of all the words that describe an activity that has something to do with movement: a walk, a stroll, a journey or a voyage, or words like holiday, vacation or “timeout.” All of them conjure images of *bounded* activity. Anyone on *vacation* knows quite well when it is half over or nearly at an end. If someone goes for a *walk* or a *stroll*, family and friends should worry if they are not back by nightfall; not so, however, if they are on a *voyage* or *journey*. In every case, the word itself suggests certain limits. But an *adventure* is quite a different matter. It is impossible to say of a true adventure that it is half over: we simply cannot know the outcome. A person may take a walk or a vacation, but one *is taken on* an adventure; a very different experience. The missionary passing over and coming back is an *adventure*: .It will take us to places unknown and encounters unforeseen. It may have an identifiable beginning, but once it is underway its contours cannot be known with any precision. That’s what mission entails.

THREE LANDS

We can think about the passing over and the coming back in terms of three phases - or “lands” - that we need to encounter and negotiate: the Homeland, the Wonderland and the Newfoundland.

The *Homeland* is the motherland, the familiar environment, the land of our birth and nurture. This is where we are first rooted and first grow. In the homeland, we learn our culture, including our language, values, faith. We become familiar with the homeland and with ourselves in relation to it. It is critically important that we forge a strong and enduring identity in the homeland, and that we come to know who we are, with our strengths and weaknesses. Then we may be ready to pass over and to be changed.

The “passing over” takes us into the *Wonderland*, perhaps worlds away, perhaps relatively near. But it really is another, and unfamiliar, world. The rules of the Homeland do not always, or quite, apply in the Wonderland, where people behave rather differently. They may speak a different language, practice a different religion, hold different values and inhabit a very different environment. We may discover the Wonderland in a hospital, among terminally sick patients, or among homeless people who subsist on the streets, as easily as across the ocean. But always it is we ourselves who are the outsiders, the strangers. We, therefore, must learn how to live in the Wonderland, which is, after all, someone else’s Homeland.

We may stay in the Wonderland for many years. But one feature of the twenty-first century is that we are quite likely to move out of the Wonderland and back to where we started, whether for a shorter or longer period. But, ironically, we do not return to the Homeland we left, for we, and it, are changed, subtly or radically. We return to what is, in some respects, a newly found land: the *Newfoundland*.

“Coming back” then, is not simply a return to the old and familiar, because change has constantly been at work. Expectations of coming back “home” will never quite be met for the person with a missionary spirit. Coming home can be more painful than leaving home: we leave, full of excitement and ready for anything; we return, expecting the familiar and rather unprepared for what we find. Home seems much smaller now, people seem to lack passion, some things that should change have not, while some things that need changing are the same as always. It can be quite an anti-climax.

Finally: there is no end to the cycle; every coming back is a pause before, or a prelude to another passing over. We cannot remain static and we cannot resist change. To paraphrase Paul Clasper “If

you don't want to be changed, then don't pass over." But we must. That is the requirement of every missionary disciple; that is the only way to live, the only way to life.

A fuller treatment of this theme can be found in my *Ministry at the Margins: Strategy and Spirituality for Mission*. Orbis, 2002: 1-8; 161-166.

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