

Who Are the Missioners?

We need to rouse people and inspire them to realize their mission in life

By Richard Hart, O.F.M. Cap.

The concept most people have of mission is men and women sent to far away countries. The current idea of mission, however, has undergone a Christian paradigm. A transformation has taken place. In recent times, few terms have changed so radically as "Christian mission." All of us are called to be Christian missioners, not just those sent to far away countries.

In the new concept there is no geographical center or boundaries. Think of St. Thérèse of Lisieux who said her vocation was love, and became the patroness of missionaries without going to a mission country. We have to help our assembly think in new

ways about mission, especially in the context of our baptism.

Mission is what God does for a living, God's job description. God is the mission statement. The Trinity is the divine agent, or as St. Bonaventure wrote, the Trinity is goodness diffused of itself. The analogy often used is a

breathing in and out of God's love and goodness which becomes an abundant blizzard. Or, to use another analogy, like a Niagara Falls, an awe inspiring scene of God's constant love and goodness.

Mission comes from the Latin word for "sent." We are sent by a loving God to walk a path opened to us. Isaiah tells



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IN BRIEF

- *Mission not a program*
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- *Encouragement to go beyond good intentions*
- *Mission means risk*

A true disciple of Jesus says yes, not just when it is convenient, but always, fighting against injustices, hunger, poverty, racism, sexism, human indignities.

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to love we must encounter
others, not love in the abstract;
to grow we must suffer....**

us of God, "I, the Lord your God, teach you what is for your good, and lead you on the way you should go" (48:17). Or,

the Psalmist says, "You will show me the path to life, abounding joy in your presence, the delights at your hand forever" (16:11).

No one walks the same path, but we do not walk alone. Jesus is our companion who transcends all spatial and earthly limitations. He asks us to share his mission with others.

God sends Jesus in the incarnation who is God's activity or mission brought down to earth. Jesus is the Good News who accomplished His mission of going up to Jerusalem to suffer, die, rise. Then He sent us His Spirit. He calls us to discipleship, a mission, which is a call to adventure. But we want stability.

Discipleship is to hear the word and internalize it. Mary heard the word, internalized it, and her immediate mission was to help Elizabeth. Discipleship also means our openness or willingness to be changed by what we hear, especially to become more human. Jesus was most human and extends to us that invitation. He told His disciples at the Last Supper, "I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends" (Jn 15:15).

In the Eucharist we are not just gathered but scattered, living in the tension of the already and the not yet. We live in the beyond because we have no lasting city here. That is our mission or realized eschatology.

Mission Not a Program

Mission is not a program but a call to be the Good News. We need to nail our colors to the mast as we make our radical and passionate commitment to Jesus. We probably can never say "Mission Accomplished." Too many of us are sprinters rather than marathon runners. In cooking we probably prefer the microwave to the Crock-pot.

Viktor Frankl believed that to live we must choose life; to love we must encounter others, not love in the

abstract; to grow we must suffer which can be redemptive. The Church does not have a mission, but mission has the Church. Parishes do not have a mission, but mission has parishes. We do not have a mission, but the mission has us.

Mission is not what we do out of obligation, fear and selfishness, but out of freedom, hope and selflessness. We become agents of God's reconciling love. Can we think of a more noble and worthy cause? We respond with our time, talents, treasure and sweat.

Untapped Potential

Experts point out to us that if we are using 20 percent of our potential, that is extraordinary. Anthropologists claim that if we are using 10 percent of our brain power, that is unusual. If that is true, there is much untapped potential within each one of us.

We need to point this out to our congregations. Jesus certainly used His potential well, but He also found a balance between His preaching, healing, caring, and His prayer life. Jesus can also show us how to find that balance in our lives.

Our friends often tell or remind us of our giftedness. Do we listen to them as God speaks to us? So we pray with the psalmist, "Show me the path I should walk, for to you I entrust my life" (143:8). God has multiple purposes for our various talents. But we often object and come up with all kinds of excuses especially that we are unworthy.


Angels do not make any mistakes but, being human, we do. God, however, can use faulty people just like Jesus used with his bumbling Apostles. When Jesus invited them to "follow me," they did.

How open are we to Jesus' invitation and to the possibilities that lie ahead? How do we use our time, a most precious commodity, for the good of others? Even our past sins can't block

the great love God has for us — a love that splits open our future. The good thief is a powerful example of someone

who acknowledged that he deserved his penalty.

Jesus assured him, "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk 23:43). No matter how we misused our past life, Jesus will remember us too — provided we are willing to




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One of our goals as preachers might be to bring the people in the pews out into the world and bring others into our pews.

move ahead carrying on His mission. Hope energizes us to move forward as St. Paul wrote to the Romans, "So that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (15:13).

The Nicene Creed we recite every week is an example of God's mission. It is a continuity of the work and purpose of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God has been on a life-giving mission and purpose for all eternity.

We reflect this mission and purpose in our lives despite the fact that we are sinners. We carry on God's work despite the times we stumble and fall. We pick ourselves up and continue to share our faith. For some the cost of this kind of discipleship will be challenging, but not as challenging as Jesus' life. We proclaim His life and resurrection from the dead until the end of the world — until He comes again.

Living the Now

Even discouragement can awaken us to our mission. However, we have to live the present moment and the tomorrows that lie ahead. One of the problems of living in the past, outside of guilt, is that we will not have time for the now or future. Clutching the past will not leave our arms open to the present. Who is rich enough to buy back one's past?

Living in the past is like watering last year's crops. The past can act as a guide but not a hitching post. Living in the past we can easily become paralyzed as Lot's wife was. The doors to the past are closed that we long to open, instead of looking for the open doors in the present moment. We live too much in the past while rehearsing the future. We can even ask our congregation what is the best time in their lives. How many of them would answer NOW?

Did you ever notice how children enjoy the present moment? We can easily be crucified between two thieves, the past and the future. Living today fully prepares us to live tomorrow. The future often causes us anxiety, worry and even depression.

A baby has too much to discover to

live in the future. Albert Einstein maintained that he never thought of the future because it came too soon. The future is often an opaque mirror, so why look into it? The future comes one day at a time, not sooner. As St. Paul wrote, "At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face" (1 Cor 13:12).

Mission is an activity carried out in many ways, from proclamation of the Gospel to improving material life. Jesus told His disciples before He ascended into heaven, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Mt 28:19-20).

Mission is continued in the hearts of Jesus' followers by the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. While being transformed we manifest God's love, forgiveness and justice exemplified so well in Christ's life. Conversion now takes on a biblical turning away from sin and embracing God's mystery. We share our precious gift of faith with others. St. Francis advised his friars, "Preach always. And if necessary, use words." And everyone can accomplish that advice.

Mission Among Others

Our mission is not so much *to* others but *among* others. We share our faith as neighbors engaged in daily living and reaching out to others. Mother Teresa of Calcutta did this well. She did not get caught up in the religious marketing messages, but was more concerned about authentic witness.

Another example is J.B. Dill, a 19-year-old from Mequon, Wis., who made many trips with his folks to Ethiopia, Costa Rica, and New Guinea. These trips had a deep and profound effect on him: he decided to do something about the devastation caused by

waterborne diseases. That was his mission.

Using cloth and charcoal, he developed a simple, inexpensive water fil-

tration method that allowed people in rural Africa to turn stagnant and disease-filled water into clean drinking water. He was named one of five national winners of Net Aid's Global Action Awards. This award is presented to high school students who have taken outstanding actions to fight global poverty.

Our mission might be to challenge those living in a culture of the satisfied, our consumer-oriented culture, by living in solidarity with the poor — those who live on \$2 or less a day, or those who want to live a dignified life. Our mission might be to embrace a simpler life style. We must never lose sight of our mission by focusing on ourselves and our need. The *me* has to become *we*.

Beyond Good Intentions

One of our goals as preachers might be to bring the people in the pews out into the world while bringing others into our pews. We need to encourage our assemblies to go beyond good intentions, donating money and prayer. These are certainly laudatory, but our listeners have to become good stewards of all creation and hear the cry of the poor. We have to encourage them to live the great commandment, love of God, others and self, which entails speaking out against local, national and global injustices.

A true disciple of Jesus says "Yes," not just when it is convenient, but always fighting against racism, sexism, human indignities, hunger, poverty, and upholding the right to employment, health care, fair wages, proper education, and conserving our environment, just to mention a few.

Part of the problem is that some congregations are interested more in orthodoxy, maintenance, or financial stability. The urgency of money prevents them from the Gospel imperative of mission which is more challenging but which opens the doors of evange-

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lism.

We need to offer a vision of God's mission to our assemblies. If we as preachers have captured this vision, we can more readily excite them to partake of it. Workshops, lectures, programs and books help, but we preachers can inspire our people to a broader vision of Gospel change.

Our challenge is to make God's mission so inviting and attractive that people will respond, "Everything the Lord has said, we will do" (Ex 19:8). Or has this resolve ebbed and flowed away?

We have to ask them if they are fired up about the prospect of being Jesus' disciples, God's co-workers with a vision? We read in Proverbs, "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (29:18). But, with a vision of God's mission for us, we will flourish.

Being a disciple of Jesus, however, can be very demanding because of opposition or even persecution one might encounter. Superior qualities are needed. But, as Eugene Hensell, O.S.B., states, "Positive qualities such as meekness, mercy, purity of heart and peace-making will be rewarded by God in spite of the difficulties and opposition they may encounter in the here and now."

Mission Means Risk

Mission calls for risk. Steeplejacks, bungee jumpers, farmers and gamblers, are but a few who take risks. Are we willing to take risks? When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, He asked him to go to the Pharaoh and tell him, "Let my people go." Moses had to risk this daring adventure and mission even though initially he resisted.

James Dunn, in *Jesus' Call to Discipleship*, points out that "There is a disturbing quality about the urgency of Jesus' call, a shaking of the foundations which those who want a quiet life are bound to resent and resist."

Judith courageously averted the plan to eliminate her people. She worked for their welfare. This was her mission. In a grave crisis, Judith risked her life by beheading General

Holofernes who was about to attack Bethulia. She returned to Bethulia with his head, and the Jews defeated the enemy.

In the Broadway musical *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean — obviously a Christ-figure — assures the dying, poverty-stricken Fantine, that he will take care of Cosette by saying, "I swear this on my life." That became his commitment, his mission, and indeed a risk. We have to be willing to cast out into the deep waters and not hug the safe shore or wade in cozy shallow waters.

According to the latest United States census, one of three Americans is between the ages of 20 and 44. If that is true, we need to involve and excite them because they have the enthusiasm, the energy and the new eyes of faith to accept the challenge of being missionaries in a society driven by materialism and consumerism.

Someone once mentioned to a friend that he wanted to do some mission work in an unfamiliar culture, with strange music and a foreign language. The friend responded that all he had to do was go to any high school here in the United States and he would fulfill his wish, maybe even more. How many are willing to take up that risk or challenge?

Father Anthony Gittins, in *Called to Be Sent*, maintains that, "If more baptized Christians were more aware of the unrealized potential of their baptism and encouraged to activate it, the world would be a very different place." We need to energize our assemblies with their potential to be turned inside out, not turned inward which leads to selfishness.

Too many of our homilies do not assign or possess a call to mission, an inner call to conversion, or a challenge to help change the world and its injustices. A need exists to comfort the afflicted, but also to afflict or disturb the comfortable. We need to provoke

change in our hearers even if it is a deepening of something already present. A good question to ask them might be,

"What is the mission you are called to implement in your lives?" If the response at the end of the homily is, "So what?" the homily has indeed failed.

This advice, however, does not imply that every homily has to activate people. The mission might be as simple as a deeper call to prayer, a deeper commitment to a cause. James Kroeger, M.M., points out in his article "An 'Asian' Meditation on the Gift of Mission," that the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences describe mission as "gratitude to God," "grateful hearts," "spiritual blessing," "given to us," "love received as gift and mercy." Indeed, mission is viewed as a gift, graciously given, gratefully received and generously shared. Gratitude is a powerful motive for energetic evangelization.

And that will prompt us to put into action, "Go, and do likewise." "*Ita Missa est*" does not mean we can go home, but that we are missioned or co-missioned by Jesus, as Anthony Gittens suggests in his book *Called To Be Sent*, to bring the Good News to others. The hands, hearts, talents and personal contacts of lay people are needed to carry on the work of Jesus today.

A fruitful homily with a call to mission will not result in a "So what?" We need to rouse people from their safety zones, slumber or sleepwalking by exciting, energizing and inspiring them to realize their mission in life. St. Paul exhorted Timothy "to rekindle the gift of God that is within you" (2 Tm 1:6). St. Francis of Assisi exhorted his friars, "Do what you have to do, and do it well." Good advice for anyone with a mission. **P**

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