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Salvation and  
the Irish  
Missionary  
Experience

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# Salvation and the Irish Missionary Experience

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There are some concepts so significant that when they begin to lose their meaning, individuals and groups can feel their own identity and value slipping away. Their remaining energy is either directed towards internal concerns or seeks alternative goals to restore a sense of relevance.

The Catholic Church has an example, and warning, of this in what has happened to the Irish missionary movement. Like the birds that miners brought underground with them to alert them of lethal gases, missionary enthusiasm is the first to suffer from a sudden deterioration in the religious atmosphere.

Just forty years ago Irish missionary colleges were still full of eager candidates, today the seminaries are empty. Depending on your starting point a number of explanations can be given but the most crucial was the change in understanding the concept of 'salvation.'

## VIEWS OF 'SALVATION'

The bond between 'salvation' and Church are close. Even today our prayers and liturgies regularly echo an ancient cry for salvation and from the time of Augustine the necessity of baptism for salvation was widely accepted. Up to the late 1960s the urgency in foreign missions was seen in terms of giving non-Christians the opportunity to seek salvation within the Church. Outside the Church there was little possibility of escape from eternal darkness.

However, by the 1960s missionaries were bringing back positive reports from the non-Christian world. The religions they encountered there had much in common with Christianity and inspired many to lead admirable and moral lives. Theological thinking was also facing up to the problem that a compassionate God is not likely to condemn millions of people to lasting unhappiness though they had no real opportunity to become Christians.

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## SALVATION AND THE IRISH MISSIONARY EXPERIENCE

Vatican II brought these misgivings into the open by suggesting that salvation was possible outside the Church and it presented a positive, if carefully nuanced, view of other religions. A practical implication was quickly drawn: was the Church only optional? Within twenty years missionary seminaries in Europe were emptying and a considerable number of missionaries in the field left. Those who remained began a series of assemblies and renewal courses as they grappled with the consequences.

### RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

So what is 'salvation', and the role of the Church, today? There are two opinions.

One began with a positive regard for other religions and not wanting to be seen as challenging them. In an age when respect and equality are important, it is unacceptable to insinuate that one person, or religion, is better than another. Personal conscience and differences must be honoured. Religious dialogue is to be encouraged as a means of learning about, and from, others. The Churches' place should now be that of offering material, psychological and moral assistance to people as a sign of the presence of God's Kingdom and gospel compassion.

This attitude gathered strength from the '*missio dei*' concept developed in Protestant circles after 1952. That was the time that Mao's China was expelling all missionaries and seemed to be drawing a curtain on all mission activity for the foreseeable future. While this did not dampen mission enthusiasm in Ireland (the Columban Fathers – the Maynooth Mission to China—just moved their personnel to Japan, Korea and other countries), it posed a question for Protestant groups who saw the conversion of all nations as a necessary step towards the Second Coming of Christ.

They began to view the building of churches in order to baptise and save people as short-sighted. The Church does not have a mission of its own. Rather the primary emphasis is on what God is doing for the redemption of the world. The Church's task is to participate in God's mission (*missio dei*).

This meant moving from a Church-centred approach to a Christ-centred message, accepting that God is active outside the Church, in other religions and movements. The Church, as a 'light among nations,' may never have majority or universal status.

From this standpoint, some moved on to a 'cosmic-centred' view: God's activity in the cosmos is so pervasive that the Church and all religions fade into insignificance. The *missio dei* is active in the secular world over and beyond the Church, so 'the world provides the agenda.' The Kingdom of God is realised in terms

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of social and ethical transformation. While Protestant Churches remain divided between the Christocentric and Cosmocentric viewpoints, many Catholic scholars waver between the two and much of this confusion has trickled down to the grass roots.

### THE ALTERNATIVE

The contrary approach comes from missionaries who have lengthy experience of other cultures and religions. They warn of a 'far away hills are green' attitude. In countries such as China and Korea millions of people are showing a keen interest in Christianity and find themselves as much at home in churches as do, or did, people in the West. This search for help, felt by ordinary people and witnessed by missionaries, cannot be ignored.

Since Vatican II there is growing appreciation of a Trinitarian approach, that the Spirit is and has been active in all of history and all cultures. In line with this belief, Christ is seen as sent by the Father to enlighten and the 'mission of God' is the task of the Church. The command, 'Go ye therefore and teach' is still considered to be timeless.

The two sides have debated these questions to exhaustion. The *avant-garde* influence remains strong and poses a practical problem, not just for missionaries, but for the wider Church. Why bother to be a committed Christian if it is sufficient, in this world and the next, to be recognised by society as a 'good person'? Should the Church not be re-directing its energy to address other needs? What justification has it to offer its message in a decisive manner?

Rather than prolonging this debate, a solution could be found by shifting the focus, and topic of discussion, from 'salvation' to something less divisive, more inspirational and more in tune with modern thinking. The Church's spiritual tradition has something to offer here. In the present anti-institutional atmosphere, interest in forms of spirituality, ranging from mindfulness to contemplative life, has grown. But keeping in touch with modern trends is not the main reason for turning to the Church's experience in the spiritual field. Over the years clarifications have been made as spirituality sought to define its unique place in religion and society. Such distinctions can now help guide us through much of the confusion surrounding the essential role of the Church, and Mission.

### PROBLEM WITH DISTINCTIONS

Making distinctions is generally frowned upon today because there is suspicion that they can lead to unfavourable comparisons and elitism. So from the beginning it is necessary to affirm that every human is born with an urge to understand themselves better, discover a space for themselves in the world and seek happiness.

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How far they go in responding to this challenge depends on when and where they were born and how much help they receive from their family and background. As Christians, and in accordance with a Trinitarian perspective, we see the Spirit active within them and their culture.

While responses will differ from age to age and person to person, we can distinguish three situations in one of which people can find themselves at any moment of time. These categories are generalisations, and are not to be applied too strictly, but they should reflect reality sufficiently for us to see a way forward.

### AN 'INTERIOR LIFE'

When a person moves beyond appearances, achievements and status to look inwards for what is most important and who they really are, they can be said to be embarking on an 'interior life.' Millions experience this urge in every generation though poets, artists, philosophers and psychologists are the most celebrated. Their 'interior life' can bring a sense of calm and peace, deeper awareness and, often, a desire to reach out to others. For some, this leads to recognition of an external power or deity and seeking affiliation with a religion. However, others go no further and are content to use their own inner resources to experience nature and their inner-self intensely, without the help of any deity or formal religion. For them, the 'interior' life is not just a beginning, it is where their search finds completion.

### A 'RELIGIOUS LIFE'

Not all of those considered to have a 'religious life' have necessarily passed through such an 'interior' phase. Some, due to their upbringing, from an early age have an awareness of a deity to be served through conformity and obedience. The deity they know or depend on is remote but important because he or she is the source of blessings and misfortune. Their 'religious life' is bound up in those expectations and is likely to remain formalistic and external though religious celebrations and practices can help keep their sense of the sacred alive.

Every religion has a large number of such followers. Many of them are serving God to the best of their knowledge and it may lead them to a more personal spiritual relationship. However, here the intention is just to identify a particular moment when God is seen as severe and demanding and to be kept at a distance.

### A 'SPIRITUAL LIFE'

Those said to have a 'spiritual life' in the Catholic sense are those seeking a closer personal relationship with God. They do

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this through a process of reflection, meditation and prayer, guided by Scripture and Church teachings. They draw strength from community celebrations and the sacraments. They feel that God has not just spoken to them in the past but continues to call them to a closer unity.

While this might lead some to a contemplative life, for many their growing awareness of God's presence in creation, and God's plan unfolding there, leads them to a greater concern for both people and nature, and their growing spiritual energy is channelled into social action. Christian involvement in justice and environmental issues draws its inspiration and energy from this deepening consciousness.

An interior life does not necessarily lead to a spiritual life, nor to a religious life. Nor does a religious life necessarily lead to a spiritual life. Why some people move from one to another is a question no theologian, or spiritual director, can fully answer. This, again, is a recognition that God is active in ways we cannot imagine but the gospels show that Jesus' intention was to call people to a closer relationship with the Father. That theme echoes in all he said and did, and he passed that undertaking on to his followers.

## A WAY FORWARD

Is an emphasis on issuing an invitation to a closer relationship with the Father the direction towards which the Church, and Mission, should be moving?

Instead of regarding other religions and ideologies as rivals, the starting point would be a recognition that none of us knows or understands God completely. Such wisdom, no matter how inspired, is beyond human ability. As fellow seekers of the truth we have all been enriched by our religious traditions and our own ability, gifts of the Spirit.

However, as Christians, we accept Jesus as 'The Way, the Truth and the Life' and we would be denying the gospel message to say otherwise. In a spirit of sharing what we consider most valuable we offer the Christian message and promise to others, to be accepted or declined by them. We do not judge or consider ourselves more perfect than them, we are all seekers and trying to cope with our limitations.

## SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Today the call for justice and equality is shared by both young and old. Yet, living out the implications has proved difficult even for Christians. Commitment calls for a consistency and singlemindedness that are hard to sustain in modern society with its contrary demands.

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For Christians, the Kingdom is the place where the Father's will is done; it opposes injustice and inequality. It denounces neglect of the environment, the homeless, emigrants and all others who suffer. But, in practice, the Church's response is often mixed and more said than done.

If I hear that someone in my locality had a serious accident or illness, I would wish them well and pray for them. But if that person is a near relative I will hurry to their side and see how I can be of practical help. What Christ did was expand that sense of relationship. The individual who is close to God should also feel a personal bond with all of creation, both in humans and in nature, and be the first to step forward when either are in distress. The Church's unique role in creating a better world would be seen as that of helping people deepen their relationship with their Creator and, thus, with one another, with nature and with the universe.

### CLARITY

Seeing interior, religious and spiritual lives as three distinctive responses to a universal call to self-discovery, provides Christians with a greater awareness of where they themselves, and others, are at this moment.

It provides a clearer idea of what the Church should be striving for, what sort of help it has to offer and how it should be preparing its personnel, clerical and lay, to play their part.

It give missionaries more decisive grounds on which to evaluate what they are doing and whether they should be adjusting their priorities.

It will take some time for the Church to adapt to this new image of its role, not just because group change comes slowly, but also because the distinctions between the three categories are not watertight. People will move from one to the other and back again. While the clearer markers will help people find their bearings and enable more tangible goals to be set, the re-thinking, re-planning and re-training called for will not happen overnight.

### RECOVERING IDENTITY

Some concepts are so central that if they lose meaning, individuals and groups can become disorientated.

'Salvation' was one such motivating force for Church and Mission and is so deeply embedded in Christian tradition and liturgy that it will not be easily displaced. However, viewing the Church's principal role as inviting people to spiritual growth and helping them on the journey through guidance and the sacraments, is more a new way of viewing salvation than an effort to supplant it.

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Salvation as liberation 'from' has connotations of looking back, constraint and tension but viewed as an invitation 'to' promises hope, possibilities and energy. The original message of Christ was an invitation, or call, to a new closer relationship with the Father. It had that effect on the lives of Peter, James, Mary and many other 'ordinary people'.

There was also a call to repentance and rejection of certain old attitudes and habits. Amid the assurances and compassion, there were warnings of a 'narrow gate.' But the possibility of finding one's real self and experiencing God's constant presence add up to a promise that can be attractive not only to truth-seekers in a non-Christian environment but also to those who have lost hope in Western religion or whose experience has turned them against all Churches. The appeal of this side of Christianity has been witnessed by those working outside the West. When news of this finally trickles back home, those at the coalface of the Church, like miners who see their 'early warning birds' revive, will begin to glimpse that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

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