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A JOURNAL FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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## Reflections on Mission Today

May 2018

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A Mission Colloquium was held recently in Dalgan Park to mark the Centenary of the Missionary Society of St Columban. It brought together nine leaders of international missionary institutes and thirty-five other actively involved missionaries – a good cross-section of the missionary Church. The purpose was to air missionary questions today and search together for possible answers. The process involved a lot of listening, which in itself was a reminder that listening and searching together are essential in mission today. In this reflection, I focus on topics that particularly captured my attention, with some indication of questions I'm left to ponder and some suggestions for further exploration of the issues.

## INTERCULTURALITY

We are cross-cultural missionaries, called to witness to the Gospel in cultures not our own. We have come to realise, sometimes through our mistakes, that we have a lot to learn and receive in crossing into the cultural world of the other. Our vocation implies ongoing conversion to the God who is present and active in the lives of people belonging to the new cultures we encounter. All this calls for a listening, contemplative and discerning attitude in mission, as we try to tune into what God is doing and co-operate with that. As was said repeatedly during the Colloquium, our mission is a participation in the Mission of God who is continually reaching out in love and compassion to peoples of all cultures. Mission is God's project and we are not the main actors.

What is now calling for more attention in our crossing of cultural boundaries is the challenge of interculturality, i.e., learning to relate in a mutually enriching way within our own multicultural institutes. Perhaps this is becoming more pressing, because non-Western members are moving more and more into positions of leadership in missionary congregations and societies, which were predominantly Western, and are confidently raising questions from the standpoint of their own cultural identity.

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We need a deep conviction that genuine intercultural living among ourselves is a *sine qua non* for mission today. Intercultural living is not just a preparation or support structure for mission; it is an essential way of doing mission in a conflictual and divisive world. This point was well made during the Colloquium. I was led to think again of what the Columban General Assembly 2012 said about our call to be instruments and signs of the communion which is God's dream for our world. To participate in the Mission of God is to commit oneself to work for this communion. In the Colloquium the pain of genuine intercultural living was honestly acknowledged. We should not forget that inter-cultural living is a way of entering into the paschal mystery at the heart of the Christian life, which involves the pain of dying to self in order to have a fuller experience of life. Entering into each other's cultural world, though at times painful, leads us to see new aspects of Christ's face and gives us a fuller experience of what it is to be human. This is a lifelong conversion process. We can never say we have arrived!

Interculturality is not just about peaceful co-existence, putting in place arrangements for living together with the minimum of hassle. The challenge is to move beyond multiculturalism to genuine interculturality. We need professional help to guide us through the process of intercultural living. The training and renewal of missionaries should address this challenge in an experiential way. Perhaps this is one area where missionary institutes could co-operate more fully - for instance, by sharing resources in organising joint workshops on interculturality.

### EMPOWERING LAITY AND ESPECIALLY WOMEN

The missionary vocation is rooted in baptism. As Pope Francis says, we are all missionary disciples. So it was good to hear people speak of the important and indispensable role of the laity in mission. The rich contribution of the lay participants at the Colloquium reinforced this.

The cry of women for greater participation in Church life and mission, particularly in decision making, was a constant theme at the Colloquium. It was good for a male missionary like me to hear that cry once again and to listen to women talking about experiences of exclusion. To what extent are we men convinced that the Church's mission is poorer and even impossible without the prominent and genuinely meaningful role of women? I'm reminded how the discipleship and mission of women are highlighted in the Gospels of Luke and John.

We often say that partnership in mission is the way forward, a partnership of women and men, lay, religious and ordained, in which there is real equality and complementarity. This too is

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a sign of the communion which is central to God's mission. We would do well to remember what St Paul said about different gifts given to different people, all working together harmoniously for the good of the Christian community. We have to explore and put in place structures for real partnership. It was interesting to hear the Rector General of the Pallotine Missionaries speak of their founding charism, which envisaged a community of women and men, ordained and religious – all working together in the Christian apostolate. I think it would be good to explore any models of this type of partnership in Christian mission today and to make the findings known to missionary institutes which are trying to put better structures of partnership in place.

### JUSTICE, PEACE AND THE INTEGRITY OF CREATION

The vital importance of work for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation [JPIC] in mission today was rightly highlighted in the Colloquium. If Christian mission is to be faithful to the mission of Jesus, who was sent to bring good news to the poor, then it has to be an outreach to the marginalised, excluded and vulnerable people of our world. 'Being with the lost, the least and the last' became a mantra at the Colloquium. In listening to the various contributions, one could see that in missionary institutes there is an increasing awareness that the exploited earth must be included in our care for the vulnerable. God's dream of universal communion calls us to live in communion, not only with other people, but also with all creation. I found it thought-provoking to hear how the exclusion of the earth was linked to the exclusion of women and how women can be more sensitive to the cry of the exploited earth.

Almost every missionary institute has some involvement in JPIC issues. I think there is need for greater cross-congregational networking and cooperation in this important ministry. No one congregation can take on every JPIC issue. To be more effective and realistic, each congregation needs to focus on selected issues and, through a system of networking, be a support to others who are involved in different issues. And, as cross-cultural missionaries involved in local issues, we should help people to be aware of the wider global dimensions of these issues.

### AGENTS OF EXCHANGE BETWEEN LOCAL CHURCHES

It was good to hear the African Superior General of the Missionaries of Africa speak of his conviction that the time has come for the African church to share its experience with other churches. That reminds me of what the Columban General Assembly 1976 said about our call to be agents of exchange between different local churches. With the increasing realisation that the Church is a

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communion of local churches and every local church is missionary, cross-cultural missionaries can be important links between local churches in facilitating mutual exchange for the sake of the Gospel. In this too we can be instruments and signs of communion.

As a practical implication of all this, the question was raised about the contribution of returned missionaries in their churches of origin. It was pointed out that, while often a local church welcomes returned missionaries to fill gaps in a system under pressure because of personnel shortages, it shows little interest in creating opportunities for returned missionaries to share what they have learned on mission in other churches. However, we have to admit honestly that returned missionaries can be too happy to slip into these gaps, perhaps because they do not feel confident or energetic enough to step outside 'the way things are done around here.' How can missionary congregations and societies themselves be more proactive and supportive in encouraging and helping their returned missionaries to value their cross-cultural mission experience and engage in ministries which better enable them to share that experience? Many of the 'home local churches' have become much more multicultural in recent years. Surely returned missionaries, with their experience of living in another culture, have a lot to offer in helping to promote true interculturality in these multicultural churches.

### MISSION AND GEOGRAPHY

Quite a number of times during the Colloquium we heard that mission is not defined by geography. The Church's evangelising mission is to be carried out everywhere. Traditional Christian countries have become de-Christianised and should be regarded as 'mission territories.' While Pope John Paul II, in his mission encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), insisted on the continuing need for *ad gentes* mission, he also spoke of new worlds to be evangelised which are not defined primarily by geography - the world of the big cities, the world of youth, the world of migrants and refugees, situations of degrading poverty, the world and culture of modern communications, the world of scientific research, the world of international relations, etc.

I think cross-cultural missionary institutes have to look more closely at what they mean when they say their mission is everywhere. Is there anything specific about their missionary call in universal mission? I feel we must beware of de-emphasising our identity as cross-cultural missionaries. No matter where we engage in mission, we do it on the basis of our cross-cultural missionary experience. And I would say that there is a difference

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between cross-cultural missionary experience in another country and church and cross-cultural missionary experience in one's own country and church. The former is what best qualifies us to engage in the latter. And we should not forget what is said above about our role as links between local churches and the global dimension we can bring to local issues because of our overseas experience.

### CHANGING ROLE OF MISSIONARY INSTITUTES IN THE CHURCH

Near the end of the Colloquium the question of the future of missionary congregations and societies surfaced when one person asked, 'Have we come to completion?' Sometimes this question is prompted by a realistic and sober look at our rapidly decreasing membership. Sometimes it is said that our time is past because most missionary congregations and societies were founded at a time when mission was understood as a one-way movement from established mother churches to weak daughter churches and that is no longer the case. And sometimes we ask about the point of becoming a missionary religious or priest when one can be a cross-cultural missionary without choosing the option of religious profession or ordination. After all, the mission of all of us is rooted in baptism. One of the women religious missionaries at the Colloquium said we have to explore our identity as *religious* missionaries. The same could be said about the identity of ordained missionaries. It would be good to hear more about that. I recall a question that used to be asked in Columban circles: 'Are we missionary priests or priest missionaries?' Of course we are both and the challenge is to integrate these two aspects of our identity in a way that does not lead us to see the lay missionary call in a lesser light.

We understood ourselves as the missionary wing of the Church, the flying column to be supported by other members of the Church. That model is not completely dead. How often do we speak of *our* benefactors as people who support us in *our* mission? We have to think of the Church having, not a missionary wing, but a missionary heart. Missionary congregations and societies have a special role in helping to keep that heart beating by facilitating others to explore and respond to *their* baptismal call to be missionary disciples of Jesus Christ.

### GREATER NETWORKING AND CO-OPERATION BETWEEN MISSIONARY INSTITUTES

Throughout the Colloquium the need for greater co-operation between missionary institutes was mentioned many times and almost every leader thanked the Columbans for affording them the opportunity to share and search together. Mission today is about

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living in the ‘grey areas’ and we need to be fellow travellers in exploring together the path ahead. During a stint in a leadership role in the Catholic Missionary Union of England and Wales, I discovered that we missionary groups are not good at co-operating among ourselves. We are too busy ploughing our own individual furrows to give time to exploring together common issues and challenges. If the Colloquium succeeds in moving people to put in place opportunities for ongoing sharing and searching together, then it will have achieved a lot.

## CONCLUSION

The Colloquium opened up many important questions in mission today, without treating any question in great depth. That is to be expected. In a two-day Colloquium, one cannot get very far beyond naming the issues and coming to some agreement on that. As I said, many were calling for greater sharing and collaboration between missionary institutes. Could future colloquia, seminars or workshops be more focussed on one or two of these issues? Interculturality seemed to be the issue that many want to look at in greater depth. Could the different missionary groups think more in terms of partnership and working together ‘on the ground’ in responding to pressing missionary challenges which face all of us – for instance, outreach to migrants, care for the earth, and fostering interculturality in multicultural Christian communities?

**Future challenges.** The first and most crucial inadequacy in the social teaching of the Church consists in a failure to provide an adequate treatment of the issue of justice for women. I am not only or primarily concerned with the issue of justice for women in the Church and finding leadership roles for them but on the issue of justice for women in the world of work and politics.

- KENNETH R. HIMES, [Ed], *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*, (2nd Edition), Washington, DC, Georgetown University Press, 2018, p. 629.