

NOVATE
VOBIS
NOVALE

FURROW

The

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Michael A. Conway

Distance and Desire: From Mission to New Evangelization

February 2020

Distance and Desire: From Mission to New Evangelization

Michael A. Conway

I'm wondering if you've seen Brian Friel's play *Dancing at Lughnasa* (or if not the play, at least, the film)?¹ In it, we meet the missionary priest, Fr. Jack, home from Uganda, where he had worked in a leper colony for twenty-five years, and only having a break for about six months during World War I, when he served as chaplain to the British Army in East Africa. Now he returns to Ireland after all this time, as it turns out to die (he is ill with malaria). But it becomes very clear, very quickly, that Fr. Jack has been profoundly changed by his experience of living, and working, and ministering, in Africa. Even his faith had taken on dimensions that were now very strange to his family in Bailebeg in Donegal. When we meet Fr. Jack early in the play, he asks Kate, his niece: 'Do you think perhaps Mother didn't believe in the ancestral spirits?'² To which he got a response from Kate with all the clarity and precision of the schoolteacher that she was in 1930's Ireland: 'Ancestral –! What are you blathering about, Jack? Mother was a saintly woman who knew she was going straight to heaven. And don't you forget to take your medicine again this evening. You're supposed to take it three times a day'; that was her response, but Jack goes on speaking about killing roosters and goats to please the spirits, and, significantly, having great difficulty in remembering the word 'ceremony.'³ When he says 'we' he means Africa, not Ireland. Fr. Jack is neither here, nor there. In Friel's play, he is the signifier for the completely other: culture, understanding, religion, and even human dynamics. His experience on mission *ad gentes* (to nations) had changed him radically: his thinking, his actions,

1 Brian Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1993). A version of this paper was presented at the conference, *Crossing the Other: The Changing Face of World Mission*, St. Patrick's Campus, Thurles, 12 October 2019.

2 *Ibid.*, 49.

3 *ibid.*, 50.

Michael A. Conway is a priest of the Diocese of Galway. He is Professor of Faith and Culture at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, Co. Kildare.

his health, his sense of belonging, his sense of family, his mental wellbeing, and even his faith. I imagine that many, who have been on mission abroad for a significant period of life, might appreciate Fr. Jack's predicament.

FROM THE MISSIONS TO THE MISSIONAL

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, mission was conceived predominantly as mission *ad gentes*, as bringing the good news of the gospel to those, who had not yet heard of it, inevitably, in a foreign place. This 'going on the missions' was understood, for the most part, as a one-way journey from here to there; and, yet, the actual experience was nowhere near that simple, as Fr. Jack and many of you, I believe, might attest. The complexity of the encounter with the other, and, indeed, the mistakes made, would, in time, lead to new theologies of mission that have reflected a growing and deepening understanding, where it has gone from been a particular phenomenon associated with a number of mission societies to now *being a central aspect of our very identity as baptised Christians*. This means that we now recognize that every Christian is called to be *missional*. If I may quote Pope Francis:

[The] missionary mandate touches us personally: I am a mission, always; you are a mission, always; every baptised man and woman is a mission. People in love never stand still: they are drawn out of themselves; they are attracted and attract others in turn; they give themselves to others and build relationships that are life-giving.⁴

The learning from mission for the entire Church has been extraordinary, and it continues to bear fruit. I would like to reflect, however briefly, on something of that learning for today, paying attention, from my side, to the question of new evangelization in Ireland. I am doing this out of the conviction that what has been learned on mission *ad gentes* might now be appropriated in new evangelization *ad proximos* (to neighbours). I say this because one of the crucial dynamics in our contemporary European culture is the growing appreciation of otherness and difference in all its variants. As Church, particularly here in Ireland, we have been slow, not only in understanding this achievement of our culture (and it is an achievement), but also in responding appropriately

4 Pope Francis, 'Baptised and Sent: The Church of Christ on Mission in the World,' Message of Pope Francis for World Mission Sunday 2019, available at <https://www.catholicbishops.ie/2019/06/11/pope-francis-message-for-world-mission-day-2019/>, accessed 2 October 2019.

THE FURROW

in terms of our theologies, our pastoral practice, and our ecclesial structures. It is precisely this meeting of the other and of difference that missionaries have been grappling with for over at least two centuries, now, in their practice and in their thinking; and oftentimes the practice has been miles ahead of the theology.

GOING OUT TO THE OTHER

The one who is called to mission – and we are all called – goes out to the other (in every sense); the expectation is not that the other comes into my domain and dwells in my space; if that were the case, there would be no mission, no being sent, and no movement of the self. That is really worth thinking about: the life of faith is not about here; it is always about there. The essential place in the life of faith is not where I am; it is, rather, in the place of the other. There is always a journey to be made, a terrain to be crossed, someone to be welcomed, and something to be shared. This is so basic it can be easily missed. *In mission you go out the other*: there really is a journey of faith, of place, of lifestyle, of language, of understanding, and of hope. In mission the essential encounter takes place in the space of the other; and not in the space of the self. The location of the other is already recognized to be that place, where God's majesty can be met through the other. This translates as the fundamental recognition that the ordinary meeting with the other is the initial and, perhaps, most important gesture of evangelization; and the reciprocal connection that ensues can only be one that is founded on an absolute respect for the other. The place of the other is always, already a sacred space. The eyes of faith see more, not less.

Why do we go out to the other? It is a deep desire – metaphysical in Levinas's language – coupled with the joy of knowing the gospel. This draws the Christian deeper into the adventure of faith and the journey toward the other. It is, you could say, a dance between desire and distance. God is always *the* other, and as such recognised best through the other, to whom we journey in the hope of assuaging, finally, our heart's desire. To overcome distance, and to seek God, as we must, and to draw ever closer to God-self through the other is at the core of the journey of faith. The entire energy of mission is invested in this dynamic, in what I'm calling this dance of distance and desire. Love is not measured by what it has accomplished, by what it possesses, or by what it already knows; rather, it goes out to the other, it seeks the very future that it creates. That is why it is so powerful, so creative, and so fulfilling for the human spirit.

THE MISSIONAL EXCHANGE

In the missional exchange distance is deepened; it is not cancelled out. There is a real crossing of paths; the interlocutors, those who meet, seek to understand each other; to express their hopes and joys; and to recount their respective journeys. And the first gesture is an ordinary one: to meet the other in simple friendship. There is a primordial, mutual understanding that is achieved through persons connecting, expressing something of their selves, and sharing something of their own reality. In the missional encounter, which is the heart of new evangelization, there is a desire to live the gift of faith that one has received and contribute to the opening of its possibility for the other. Yet, it is important to realize that one does not bring or give faith to others; the most that one can do is witness to the possibility of faith. The encounter with the other is a crossing of paths. This is not a giving from one side to the other; rather, if anything, it is a mutual giving, with both sides being enriched. It begins simply as a personal exchange that may, indeed, also, be an intercultural exchange. And this level of encounter is extremely important; it is the foundation of evangelization. Grace builds on this foundation, and there really cannot be a sharing of faith without it.

There can be no journey of faith without this crossing of paths, without this meeting of the other, who enables and realizes the presence of God among us through the encounter with the other. This is an extraordinary realization. No language, no doctrine, no theology, no institution, can achieve this so spontaneously, so naturally, and so simply! The other in their otherness inevitably brings us closer to our God; this insight is what we have inherited in our Judeo-Christian tradition.

It seems to me that this first gesture of mission is followed by a second vital step; namely, the recognition of the mystery that is the other. Without this recognition there is a real danger of falling back into a totality of the same that does not respect the other in their otherness. This mystery of the other is manifested in a multiplicity of ways: in lifestyle, in worldview, in language, in forms of relationship, in a symbolic order, in religion, and so on, all of which must, needs be, remain to a significant degree beyond our reach and comprehension. The distance cannot be overcome; and the difference must be respected. The person who seeks to be missional in action is not an invader, a usurper, a coloniser, or a conqueror. The desire to communicate the life of faith is not to be elided with the desire for power over the other – the *libido dominandi* (lust of domination) of St Augustine – no matter how

THE FURROW

subtle the expression might be. Faith and any such desire do not ever complement each other. This was, at least in part, confused in practice in earlier understandings of *missio ad gentes* (mission to the nations), and here we have made a significant discovery, and there has been a great learning. It is, I hope, clear that this recognition of the sacred mystery that is the other, ultimately, sets out of play any colonising desire of the self, that strives to possess, manipulate, and dominate the other. If you cannot see and recognize this mystery, then, you can no longer speak or act in the name of faith, however well-intentioned your motivations might be.

MUTUAL ENRICHMENT

In the missional encounter the other, for its part, does not meet an alien ‘religion’ or ‘faith’ that is a complete enigma or some sort of problem to be resolved. Rather, the encounter awakens for the other a dimension of life that was unsuspected, hidden, voiceless, and, thereby, unknown and unrealized. This means that the significant gift that the other receives in the encounter of mission is not some-thing from the outside, not an alien or foreign product, but, rather, *the gift of one’s own person*.⁵ This gift emerges in a more consolidated way through the missional encounter. It is the discovery, for example, of being part of a family that heretofore had remained hidden and unknown, and that Christianity announces in the language of communion. Being part of God’s family in Christ is a shocking discovery; and, naturally, it can take time to realize and to even accept this – not because it is alien or difficult or incidental or vague; but the opposite, because it is so simple, so overwhelming, and so final. It secures your entire belonging not only in regard to your neighbour, but also in regard to your God and your very destiny. You discover that you are a son, a daughter, who belongs uniquely to a God, who loves you; A God, who through his own son, your brother, assures you absolutely that you have nothing to fear and that you belong in a family that is characterised only by love. The God whom the other discovers in mission is proclaimed over and over again in Christianity to be the God of Love. It is in the name of that God and through his Son that we witness in mission.

5 It is worth noting that social and historical objectifications of faith are akin to ‘relics’ to use Rahner’s words. See Karl Rahner, ‘Strukturwandel der Kirche als Aufgabe und Chance,’ in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 24/2, *Das Konzil in der Ortskirche*, ed. Albert Raffelt and Ulrich Ruh (Freiburg im Br.: Herder, 2011), 490-579, at 543.

On the other side of the equation, so to speak, the missional encounter is enriching, too, for the one who goes out on mission, for the one, who is sent. You receive a hundred times over, according to the Gospel promise (Mk 10:30). If you have been on mission abroad, then, I hope that that has been your experience and that you might share, appropriately, some of that experience with those of us for whom such an encounter has not been part of our own journey. Recognizing this principle of receiving *from the other* is particularly important for new evangelization. It maintains and protects the dignity of the encounter. We go out in the sure knowledge that we will receive. This knowing, then, has a major impact on the missional encounter itself. We do not go out just as givers; we go out also as beggars, as mendicants. If we are not aware of this primordial poverty in our mission, it is not possible for us to give witness to faith; we would only flaunt ourselves – our achievements, our possessions, or our own faith as power. Nothing of our achievement matters, really, when it comes to witnessing to the life of faith. It is, for example, for this reason that listening and learning are intrinsic to mission action; they are postures of poverty. In being prepared to listen and to learn from the other, you admit your own poverty and place yourself in need of the other. It is vital at least to acknowledge and recognize the grace that this poverty in mission harbours. Ultimately, we go out to the other in poverty, and not in power.

An authentic missional encounter interrupts the life of the one, who is sent; and this interruption is not, primarily, the physical displacement of mission (which can, indeed, in the case of mission *ad gentes*, be a great disturbance, particularly when you have to travel great distances in difficult circumstances); what interrupts us is the advent of the otherness of the other into our lives, into the space of the self. This is a necessity to the movement of mission. In the look, the voice, and the meeting of the other, the self discovers something about himself or herself that was equally unknown, unsuspected, and waiting to be unveiled. Something of the Gospel that had remained hidden and closed to this point can now emerge in the missional encounter for the one, who was sent. You discover that you are called not just to evangelize, but also to be evangelised, to be transformed, and to receive, through the encounter with the other. In giving, you are, indeed, gifted. In the meeting with the other in their otherness, you experience the Gospel in a new light, marked by creativity, by novelty, and by difference. It is in this way that faith moves, and develops, and grows along the axis of mission and new evangelization; in this way it can claim, legitimately, to be real, to be life giving, and to

THE FURROW

be authentic. In the missional encounter we re-discover our own faith anew, literally, and we understand more comprehensively the presence of the One who calls us, equally, to live life to the full. We should always remember that the journey that we each make on mission is above all a mystic one, as opposed to being mere ecclesial growth and expansion. And that is not to deny the relative importance of ecclesial structures for Christian life and community.

THE MISSIONARY PARADOX

We have here what I would like to call the *missionary paradox*. In going out as a person of faith to the other (ostensibly to bring the life of faith), what you discover is that you receive something of your own faith through the other (who ostensibly does not have faith). The giver becomes the gifted, the one, who now receives; and the gifted is recognized to be a giver, the one who gives in return. We think too much of faith as if it were a commodity to be possessed, organised, structured, and transmitted; it is, rather, a life that is being gifted to us through the other at every moment, whether we acknowledge this or not.

And it is *your* life that you receive; it is not the mere repetition of someone else's words and actions. It is your person, the singularity that is you, the irreplaceable, beautiful, empowering person of faith that you are, who encounters the other and enables in the generosity of an exchange the very life of faith. The paradox is essential to mission and to new evangelization; it is the most powerful affirmation, albeit indirect, of the One who is with us, who calls us, who sends us, who gathers us together, and who acts through us. If he were not present and with us, then, we would know nothing of the experience of being gifted through the other in our giving, which would entirely escape us.

It is along these lines that Christian community-life might grow, be enriched, and flourish in our contemporary culture. In being part of the growth of Christian community, the missionary is, in turn, converted more deeply to his or her own faith journey, which now shares in the journey of the other, with its richness, its novelty, and its energy. There is, inevitably, an element of risk; it is not possible to freeze the life of faith into a definitive form that might abide forever. That is an illusion. Indeed, if we attempt to freeze the form of faith to any particular historical or cultural expression, we betray the very life that we propose to others in our witness. Karl Rahner remarks:

This freezing (Erstarrung) of the form in which the truth of the Gospel is expressed is in fact a dangerous symptom of indifference, whether conscious or not, to the truth, the symptom of a lack of power to assimilate it existentially and express it in new terms.⁶

Faith never reaches a definitive state that subsequent generations would only have to examine, understand, and replicate in an immutable way. Faith life is not a reproduction of the same; it requires the on-going encounter with the other.⁷

It is not conserved through taxidermy; rather, through the encounter with the other, new expressions in thought and practice are created in order to maintain the possibility of the life of faith. It is vital not to confuse the expression with the reality that grounds that expression. We cannot know the future shape of the life of faith. For the missionary, there is always the temptation to identify the life of faith with his or her originating experience, with what he or she knows more or less. This explains why it is so alarming and even destabilizing when you return to your place of origin and find that it, too, has radically changed in your absence. But the originality of Christian life is never in the past; it only ever takes shape and is lived in the present. It is always being deconstructed in one place, or time, in order to be recreated and lived in a new situation.⁸ No matter what competence you bring as a missionary or person of faith, it is never a matter of giving to others the simple results of whatever constitutes your competency as if you were giving the solution to a problem. The task is, rather, that of enabling others to realise the life of faith by drawing on their own interior resources in the present; and in this way, finding their own resolutions to the challenges that they face in living out faith. The more that you understand this, then the more that you realize that you do not have the answer to another's existential predicament. This is so since the predicament itself – like a question – is always sacred as it is the very means through which the Spirit leads the other on the path of life and faith. Your responding must be an enabling one, not a closing, or arresting, or domineering one.

6 Karl Rahner, 'Gefahren im Heutigen Katholizismus,' in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 10, *Kirche in den Herausforderungen der Zeit*, ed. Josef Heislbeitz and Albert Raffelt (Herder: Freiburg im Br., 2003), 99-142, at 141; See also Karl Rahner, 'Natur und Gnade,' *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 5/1, *De Gratia Christi* (Herder: Freiburg im Br., 2015), 111-32.

7 The dynamic is less a definitive arrival in the Platonic realm of ideas and much more the Judeo-Christian struggle of Jacob and the Angel (which results in a blessing).

8 See Karl Rahner, 'Im Heute Glauben,' in *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. 14, *Christliches Leben*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (Freiburg in Br.; Herder, 2006), 3-6.

In terms of new evangelization and responding to our present situation here in our European culture, it would be naive to think that one can escape the law of cultural exchange and the progress that accompanies the movements of culture. You could say that culture now has a deeper impact on Church, than Church does on culture. It is almost as if an historical imbalance is being re-addressed in our own times. This is happening quietly, silently, but very definitely. This re-dress can only be welcomed as beneficial to the life of faith. In terms of meeting the change that is inevitably afoot, one cannot respond by hoping to find some kind of easy integration of elements taken from our contemporary culture, on the one hand, and, on the other, from the ecclesial tradition as though one could extend the past of faith into the present through a simple addition. Nor can it be a matter of putting a veneer of contemporary ideas and practices onto an ecclesial reality, that would fundamentally remain intact and unaffected by this surface application; a sort of postmodern, cultural facelift.⁹ Nor would it be adequate to see the response as a mere pastoral programme that would be concerned with meeting a new culture in changed circumstances, but that would still be no more than the application of some classical teaching. Something much more profound is required. We cannot escape, avoid, or neglect the very cultural context itself as a creative moment for the life of faith. We must not forget what we have learned from our missionary experience to date. This means that the only option open to us is taking the culture seriously, dialoguing and discerning with and within it (and not against it), learning from it, and, finally, achieving that *new creation* that honours both Christian life as that which has been handed on (*tradere*) and the very place and circumstances within which it now takes root anew. Most recently, Pope Francis addressed a group of indigenous people participating in the Synod for the Pan-amazon Region and underlined the importance of the inculturation of the Gospel. He points out – in an enlightening development of a classical metaphor – that the Gospel is like a seed, which falls onto the soil it finds, *and grows with the characteristics of that soil*.¹⁰

9 For this same reality, taken from the opposite perspective (putting a religious veneer on culture), see *Evangelii nuntiandi*, no 20, http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html, accessed 2 October 2019.

10 See <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-10/synod-for-the-amazon-pope-meets-with-group-of-indigenous-people.html>, accessed 18 October 2019, emphasis added.

Whoever closes the door to the present culture in all its complexity, vulnerability, precariousness, and, indeed, grandeur, does so through a limited interpretation of the life of faith and against its integrity. Perceptively, the French Jesuit, Michel de Certeau observes that ‘the intelligence of tradition is always in proportion to charity.’¹¹ Fidelity is not reflected in security, rigidity, superiority, or knowing better, or, indeed, in knowing at all, but in meeting, engaging, supporting, listening, learning, enlightening, and accompanying. This is what mission, I believe, has already taught us.

You may by now realize that there is no hierarchy at play here in the sense of power over the other, no one-way system of giving and receiving, no structures of dominance, of indebtedness, of presumption, or of superiority. All these manifestations of socio-cultural inequality are radically deconstructed so as to facilitate the life of faith, in all its richness, in all its integrity, and in all its splendour. New evangelization will be genuinely ‘new’ in terms of ecclesio-cultural dynamics. The continuity of faith bespeaks a life-giving diversity that marks a real transformation of faith in our own time. The past will not be repeating itself; and the future is already on the horizon.

CONCLUSION

Near the end of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, and as his last, great gesture in the play, Fr. Jack puts on his old uniform from the time he was chaplain in the British army in order to re-enact a ceremony of exchange from his days in Africa. He is swapping his ceremonial tricorne hat for his friend Gerry’s straw hat. And he explains that they must first face each other; leave the two hats on the ground; step back; then turn round once to signify the letting go of what they once owned; then each must cross over to where the other person was standing; and it was only at that point that the exchange was formally and irrevocably complete.¹²

Here there are two movements and there are two gifts: both move from where they were to the place of the other; and both receive and are enriched. Mission *ad gentes* and new evangelization need to appreciate this double dynamic to missional action, which, alone, enables the spiritual dimension of life to emerge and play out more wholesomely among us.

11 Michel de Certeau, *L’Étranger ou l’union dans la différence* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1991), 93.

12 See Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, 81.

THE FURROW

In the earlier quotation from Pope Francis on the missional character of all baptised Christians, he spoke about mission and about love. With that, now, in mind, I'd like to finish this reflection with a poem from Maya Angelou (as we gather here in the Mission Month of October).

Late October Maya Angelou

Carefully
the leaves of autumn
sprinkle down the tinny
sound of little dyings
and skies sated
of ruddy sunsets
of roseate dawns
roil ceaselessly in
cobweb greys and turn
to black
for comfort.

Only lovers
see the fall
a signal end to endings
a gruffish gesture alerting
those who will not be alarmed
that we begin to stop
in order simply
to begin
again.¹³

13 Maya Angelou, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diie* (New York: Random House, 1971), 7.