

Missiological Reflections on the Maryknoll Centenary



Maryknoll Missiologists' Colloquium
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This year Maryknoll celebrates its founding as the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America. In the early 1900s, the idea of founding a mission seminary in the United States circulated among the members of the Catholic Missionary Union. Archbishop John Farley of New York had suggested the establishment of such a seminary, and also tried to entice the Paris Foreign Mission Society to open an American branch. Finally, two diocesan priests, Fathers James Anthony Walsh and Thomas Frederick Price, having gained a mandate to create a mission seminary from the archbishops of the United States, travelled to Rome and received Pope Pius X's permission to do so. The date was June 29, 1911, the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul. In the years since, well over a thousand Maryknoll priests and Brothers have gone on mission to dozens of countries throughout the world. Many died young in difficult missions, and not a few have shed their blood for Christ. This is a time to celebrate the glory given by Christ to His relatively young Society.

The main purpose of this event, though, is not to glory in our past. We celebrate principally to fulfill the burning desire of our founders, in words enshrined over the main entrance of the Seminary building, *Euntes Docete Omnes Gentes*, "Go and teach all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Nearly twenty centuries after Christ gave this command, the Church, during the Second Vatican Council, again defined this as the fundamental purpose of mission, being "sent out by the Church and going forth into the whole world, to carry out the task of preaching

the Gospel and planting the Church among peoples or groups who do not yet believe in Christ” (*Ad Gentes*, 6).

In our Maryknoll century of mission, the Church grew further in its understanding of its evangelical work. In 1965, the Council declared that the Church is missionary “by her very nature” (AG, 2). Mission is not just one characteristic of the Church, it forms its fundamental identity. Nor is it something relegated to professional, lifetime missionaries; it is the responsibility of every member of the Church.

In retrospect, the Council proclaimed this at a time when the Church in the United States had reached a pinnacle in its missionary efforts; a great multitude of its sons and daughters were on lifetime mission in foreign lands. In 1965, Maryknoll had passed its fiftieth anniversary, and its membership was at a peak from which it would decline to where it is today, a little over a third of what it was then.

Thus, we Maryknollers are not as numerous as before. In fact, there are only ten permanent members under the age of fifty. While we are still nearly two hundred active members “in the field,” that number will decline steeply over the next two decades. In twenty years, depending on new vocations, we may have less than fifty active members on mission. We cannot deny this reality and act and live as if we were still hundreds more. We need to ask, “Where will we focus our missionary activity, and what will we let go of?” We have to help younger members among us plan for a more practical missionary future.

But we have hope in this smaller Society of the future. We were relatively few when we first went into China and pioneered some new mission strategies. The same holds true for many of the new missions we worked in and developed throughout the world.

In order to plan well for the future, it would be good to recognize some important developments in mission and the Church which have shaped our Maryknoll work over the past 100 years. Maryknoll has never been an island set apart, but a Missionary Society of Apostolic Life integrated with the greater world Church. At this critical juncture, in this year when we celebrate our foundation, we propose four foundational elements to reflect upon. They are: 1)

Maryknoll's unique history, 2) the local Church, 3) proclamation and dialogue, and 4) mission and the Paschal Mystery.

1. Maryknoll's Unique History and Role in Mission

Inspired by the Paris Foreign Mission Society, our founders sought, together with the bishops, to create something new within the U.S. Church: a vehicle for training and sending priests (and soon after, Brothers) to missionary fields abroad. Distinct from a religious order or congregation, they envisioned that diocesan priests, seminarians, and Brothers would come from their dioceses, through Maryknoll, and go forth to the missions. This required a special relationship with the U.S. bishops, which both co-founders fostered and nurtured. But Bishop James A. Walsh also wished Maryknollers to be humble about this unique status, often mentioning that there were other missionaries from the United States who had been on mission longer than those of the young Society. Bishop Walsh is remembered as a man who always approached both high and low within the U.S. Church with gratitude and humility, ever anxious to maintain and grow Maryknoll's connection to it.

We were eventually obliged to take on a firmer canonical structure, and, in some ways, we began to simply resemble the religious orders and congregations around us. Yet, this special history of ours, as a Missionary Society of Apostolic Life formed by the U.S. bishops, is a gift that may enable us to be of greater service in the promotion of mission within the U.S. Church.

Fulfilling this goal depends upon our relationship with the bishops and the faithful. While we still have good relations with much of the hierarchy, clergy, religious, and laity within the U.S. Church, there is a growing ignorance about Maryknoll, especially among the younger clergy, religious, and laity. In addition, most of the numerous foreign clergy and religious working in the United States do not know us.

Also, we must admit that there are others in the U.S. Church who have a less than positive opinion of us. A centennial presents us with an opportunity in this regard. The ancient Israelites would have “jubilee” years, when debts were forgiven and things were made right. Our present Superior General, Father Edward Dougherty, has said that the Centennial should be a jubilee, that along with the rejoicing, it should initiate a process of asking forgiveness for our past mistakes, and for having alienated portions of the U.S. Church. This is the time to mend fences and rebuild bridges that were broken by our own arrogance.

These are foundational characteristics of our history: that we have a unique relationship to the U.S. Church; that we are not “religious” but “secular” (diocesan) priests and Brothers; that our founders wished us to promote vocations coming straight from the dioceses; that we exist totally for world mission and only for world mission. These are all elements we should rely upon as we revitalize ourselves for the future.

2. Developments in Ecclesiology: The Mission Identity of the Local Church.

Because of the Vatican Council, we have come to a new awareness of what is most essential about the Church, since she has her origin “from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit ... in accordance with the decree of God the Father” (AG, 2). We believe that the Church is born from the mission of the Holy Trinity, and that the Church lives to proclaim Christ. This missionary nature of the Church should be part of the faith that all Catholics live: “[Since] the People of God lives in communities, especially in dioceses and parishes, and becomes somehow visible in them, it is also up to these to witness Christ before the nations” (AG 37). Years earlier, Father

Price himself observed, “The matter of mission lies at the very essence of Catholicity.”

It is up to each local Church to participate in mission, with the bishop as the leader in this effort. “All bishops, as members of the body of bishops succeeding to the College of Apostles, are consecrated not just for some one diocese, but for the salvation of the entire world. The mandate of Christ to preach the Gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15) primarily and immediately concerns them, with Peter and under Peter.” Each bishop is called upon to make “the mission spirit and zeal of the People of God present and as it were visible, so that the whole diocese becomes missionary” (AG, 38).

In practical ways, this growing sense of all local Churches being missionary has affected our Maryknoll work. At the time of our founding, the Church organized its foreign mission work by a set of principles set up in the 1600s known as the *jus commissionis*, i.e., certain mission territories would be entrusted to particular religious groups. To this end, James Anthony Walsh went to the Far East to search for territories that could be entrusted to Maryknoll so that we might become missionaries. The Church largely abandoned this system in 1969, making the local Church, and not missionary orders, responsible for evangelization. Thus, we can say from that time onward, Maryknoll began to think of itself less as developing a certain mission territory, and more as working in service to local Churches throughout the world.

This change, that all local Churches must be missionary, has become an important part of our identity as *ad gentes, ad vitam* (“to the nations, for life”) missionaries. We are able to speak with authority from our own experience about mission to both the local Church from which we originate, and to the local Churches to which we are sent. In fact, this could be one description of our “new” specific mission after the Council: enabling local Churches to assume and live their missionary identity. “In order that this missionary zeal may flourish among those in their own homeland, it is very fitting that the young churches should participate as soon as possible in the universal missionary work of the Church...” (AG, 20).

This development is seen in local Churches that are young and growing. For example, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences reflected this thinking when it said: "The renewal of our sense of mission will mean ... that the acting subject of mission is the local church living and acting in communion with the universal Church" (*FABC V*, 3.3.1). The fact that all local Churches are by nature *missionary* makes us ask the question: How can local Churches today find newer ways to structure their response to the vast needs for worldwide evangelization?

3. The Proclamation of Jesus Christ, Interreligious Dialogue, and Authentic Human Development.

The Council opened the windows of the Church to see other faiths in a more positive light. While missionaries had been taught to accept local customs that do not directly conflict with faith and morals, the Holy Spirit inspired the Council to move even further toward an appreciation of other faiths and cultures.

Developing positive relations with other religions, or "interreligious dialogue," has become a significant part of our overall work and outlook. Blessed John Paul II explained that this dialogue should proceed not from tactical concerns or self-interest, but from a "deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he wills" (*Redemptoris Missio*, 56). In dialogue, the "seeds of the Word" are encountered within the faiths of others. John Paul II was aware that dialogue is not the work of dreamy idealists, that it has its challenges: "Other religions constitute a positive challenge for the Church: they stimulate her both to discover and acknowledge the signs of Christ's presence and of the working of the Spirit, as well as to examine more deeply her own identity and to bear witness to the fullness of Revelation which she has received for the good of all" (*RM*, 56).

Although this has all been enriching, it has not been the easiest shift for missionaries. We wonder: Is dialogue a substitute for proclamation? Is proclamation itself still valid? Is evangelization in the hopes of conversion a worthy activity? In answer to questions such as these, the Church has issued further clarifications. John Paul himself quotes Paul VI, who said that “salvation comes from Christ and that dialogue does not dispense from evangelization” (*RM*, 55). In addition, the Pontifical Council on Interreligious Dialogue explained that “Proclamation and dialogue are ... both viewed, each in its own place, as component elements and authentic forms of the one evangelizing mission of the Church. They are both oriented towards the communication of salvific truth” (*Dialogue and Proclamation*, 2).

In practical ways, these clarifications on dialogue could just as easily be addressed to Maryknollers involved in the social apostolate: all missionaries, whatever their everyday work, cannot avoid the fact that they are called to proclaim Christ. We work to better the lives of people in places where there is a need for action for integral development and liberation from all forms of oppression. In this, our work of evangelization and development does not begin and end on a strictly human level. The Gospel of Christ always sees human persons in both their finite and infinite ends. John Paul challenges missionaries to always attend to both:

Through the gospel message, the Church offers a force for liberation which promotes development precisely because it leads to conversion of heart and of ways of thinking, fosters the recognition of each person’s dignity, encourages solidarity, commitment and service of one’s neighbor, and gives everyone a place in God’s plan, which is the building of his kingdom of peace and justice, beginning already in this life. Human development derives from God and must lead back to God. That is why there is a close connection between the proclamation of the Gospel and human promotion (*RM*, 58-59).

Wherever we work, we Maryknollers need to continue to ask ourselves, according to varying circumstances, how are we participating in the work of proclaiming Christ, and how are we fostering a missionary Church.

4. Mission and Participation in the Paschal Mystery

Why do we go on mission? Sometimes asking the simplest question brings the most fruit. One of John Paul II's answers to this question has a deep, spiritual appeal: "The ultimate purpose of mission is to enable people to share in the communion which exists between the Father and the Son" (*RM*, 23).

God made human in Christ unites God with humanity. Christ, in the Paschal Mystery, took upon Himself our sin and through the Cross redeemed us, making it possible for us to be one with God. *Gaudium et Spes* states how this grace of redemption is communicated to us Christians by the Holy Spirit. But, surprisingly, it adds: "All this holds true not only for Christians, but for all persons of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. For, since Christ died for all, and since the ultimate vocation of humanity is in fact one and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known to God offers to every person the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22).

We might define mission, then, as promoting a full, conscious participation in this Paschal Mystery that the Holy Spirit has already begun in cultures not yet touched by the Gospel. People "of good will" will find the explicit and full understanding of what God has begun in them by their hearing of the Gospel. Beyond just the *understanding* of this mystery, they will come to participate more fully in it. "Evangelization is everything [the Church] does to promote the people's *participation* in the mystery of Christ" (from the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the 1974 Synod of Bishops; emphasis ours).

Mission promotes people's participation in the Paschal Mystery in many ways. There are the normal human encounters of the missionary with the unevangelized, or of the newly baptized with the larger culture. There are shared projects among religious and secular groups for the development of peoples. But the pinnacle of our efforts to promote people's participation in the Paschal Mystery is found in the Sacred Liturgy. In the Mass, we encounter the Christ who has died for our sins, and "the victory and triumph of his death are again made present" (*Sancrosanctum Concilium*, 6). The Church desires that the people participate in "the sacred action conscious of what they are doing, with devotion and full collaboration.... They should give thanks to God; by offering the Immaculate Victim, not only through the hands of the priest, but also with him, they should learn also to offer themselves; through Christ the Mediator, they should be drawn day by day into ever more perfect union with God and with each other, so that finally God may be all in all" (SC, 48).

The Council later expanded on the missionary nature of this liturgical participation, stating: "The Most Blessed Eucharist contains the entire spiritual boon of the Church, that is, Christ himself, our Pasch and Living Bread, by the action of the Holy Spirit through his very flesh vital and vitalizing, giving life to all who are thus invited and encouraged to offer themselves, their labors and all created things, together with him. In this light, *the Eucharist shows itself as the source and the apex of the whole work of preaching the Gospel*" (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 5, emphasis ours).

It is said that both of the cofounders of Maryknoll took great care in the offering of the Sacred Mysteries, and taught their spiritual sons to have the same devotion. They anticipated in their own way these later words of the Council, that the Eucharist is "the source and apex" of the work of evangelization. Bishop James Anthony Walsh expressed this thought in a similar way in a speech he gave to the Catholic Missionary Union before the formation of Maryknoll. He said:

The true priest lives his short life for the salvation of his fellow creatures. Every sincere Christian longs for the day when

the Kingdom of the Savior shall rule all men's hearts. What we priests and laymen can do by effort and prayer to win the world to Christ, this we should do, so that the altars may be more numerous on the earth than the stars in the heavens; that multitudes in every land may be nourished with the Bread of Life—the Body of Christ; that this earth may be deluged in the Precious Blood of the Lamb—a ruby earth glistening like a radiant jewel under the sunlight of the glorious Cross of Him who died on it, not for you or me alone, but for every child of man.

From its beginning, then, Maryknoll has had a deep Eucharistic, Paschal, and missionary foundation. We might ask ourselves in this time of Jubilee how we can best renew our sense and our practice of what James Anthony Walsh expressed above. We have been graced to see the growth of people's participation in the Paschal Mystery in dozens of countries over a number of generations. We can continue to ask ourselves how we find the Paschal Mystery already present in the cultures to which we are sent. Doing so, we become more able to proclaim Christ as the "Alpha and Omega" of this Mystery, especially in our missionary Eucharistic actions.

As a final note to this section, we must add that Maryknollers participate in the work of proclaiming the Gospel even when we are no longer able to go on mission. Many of our elder members, suffering with debilitating illnesses, are now united more intimately to the paschal sufferings of Christ. Their mission has become one of prayer and of bearing their own infirmities for the sake of Christ's mission and his Church. In the words of Saint Paul: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the Church" (Colossians 1:24). Like the Church, the members of Maryknoll form one body, where the efforts, prayers, and sufferings of all work together for our one mission. "We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

Conclusion

In our Centenary, while we think about our past, we also envision our future. We ask, “What do we hope the Society will become in the service of mission?”

In a recent encyclical centered on the meaning of hope, Benedict XVI states: “The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of new life” (*Spes Salvi*, 2). The Holy Father draws from Romans 8:24-25: “For in hope we were saved. Now hope that sees for itself is not hope. For who hopes for what one sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait with endurance.”

Given our present reality, what do we hope for? While we will be significantly more limited by numbers, we can also reflect upon the unique gifts we have to build upon. Two principal ones come to mind.

First, we are the only Society of permanent members created by the U.S. bishops for the purpose of *ad gentes* mission (“to the nations”) *ad extra* (“beyond our borders”) and *ad vitam* (“for life”). In discussions with the Bishops’ Advisory Board to Maryknoll over the past years, the bishops have been unanimous in encouraging us to retain this unique identity of being a U.S. Church response to World Mission needs: they recognize that we are “their” mission Society. We can draw more upon this unique relationship. We can also increase our own identification of being a part of the Church in the United States, and encourage all the bishops to fulfill their missionary duty in new ways. We can look to recruitment, formation, and support as areas for further collaboration (cf. AG, 38).

Second, we have vast mission experience to draw upon, both from the lives of the men who went before us, but also from the many of us who are still fully active in *ad gentes* mission. It would be hard to find a group more versed in the types and varieties of missions in which we have been involved. This experience should help us plan well for our future. Where do we realistically hope to work in the near future with our smaller numbers?

Keeping in mind the Holy Father's words above, we can approach these questions with hope. Although we may soon have to limit ourselves to a smaller number of missions, is it not possible that this will also create opportunities for us to become better evangelizers? Our situation may help us focus more deeply upon the foundations of mission mentioned above, and upon many other questions as well. We may find that while we still involve ourselves with basic mission work with those who do not know Christ, we may devote more effort to helping many other local Churches themselves become *ad gentes* missionaries.

Finally, we remember that our primary hope is not in ourselves, but rather in the Lord, in whom our co-founders and earliest members trusted so completely. With Bishop James Anthony Walsh and Father Thomas Frederick Price, we ask again that Our Lady, Queen of Apostles, whose name our Society bears, intercede for us with Her Son, that the Holy Spirit be sent upon us anew to shepherd our Society into a bright future.

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