



myers

# The Mission: Season of Light And Spring of Hope

J. Albert Doshner, O.P.

## The Truth of the Matter

In the Autumn of 1962, a Paris headline provoked fiery responses from various quarters. It read: *Un pietre refuse de batiser*. Baptism upon request was refused by a priest. Although he believed in the grace-efficacy of the sacraments by the sacrament-act itself, nevertheless in this case he foresaw the moral impossibility of the sacrament-commitment to be made later by the child in the years of maturity.

What might lie deep down in the particulars of this case by way of social embarrassment for the family, scandal to the public, and the moral judgment of the minister is not my concern here. What is important, though, in the deep layers of the Christian consciousness is the fact that in the lives of many people, religion is considered all too often a social-set affair, and the sacraments of religion are conjured as quickly effective catholicons which are poured into the human organism for "fast relief."

This is not a new phenomenon. The seven ages of mankind have borne historical witness to personal and tribal codes of magic ritual; every era of the human animal has seen the molding of idols: the grand public stone and metal figures embellishing social progress and the private wood-carved mannequins providing personal inspiration. Described in this way, fetish-ritualism is not an old phenomenon either.

## The Mission of the Son

Yet this fact in no way discounts something else throbbing in the Christian consciousness; in fact, cosmic heathenism, whether primitive or sophisticate, whether publicly avowed or privately cherished, whether conscious or unconscious, is discounted by cosmic redemption, for ". . . God [i.e., the Father] so loved the world that he *gave* his only-begotten *Son* so that those who believe in him may not perish, but have eternal life"

(John 3: 16). Saint John tells us this same truth with a different accent in his Genesis-Prologue: "The *Word* was made flesh and *pitched his tent among us*" (John 1:14). Here we see the primordial stirrings of redemption. The Son of God who is the Word of God who is God himself was *given* to mankind as a life-saving gift, was *sent* to mankind as a love-inspiring messenger.

Yet, even before the Incarnation of redeeming love, the Word of the Father was already spoken in the world, because ". . . it was through him [the Word] that all things came into being" (John 1:3). The Word possessed the exemplary shape according to which the Father would make all things. We read in the Book of Genesis: "God said, 'Let there be light' . . . 'let a solid vault arise' . . . 'let the waters below collect' . . . 'let the earth yield' . . . 'let there be luminaries' . . . 'let us make man' . . ." (Genesis 1). The word spoken is a command; existence is conferred, names are given to the created world—all things are already named and worded in the Word himself.

Still, before any of these things were, before anything was made, ". . . in the beginning was the Word [i.e., at the beginning of time the Word already was]" (John 1:1). Before time began, God eternally knew himself lovingly and perfectly, and his eternal self-reflection conceived a Word who, because he perfectly expressed God, was God. Since this Word was not a dead letter but a living person, he is also a Son. The point I'm trying to make is this: before anyone can talk about the Incarnation-redemption act of Jesus Christ, he must start with his eternal generation. It is only in view of the fact that the divine incarnate person, Jesus Christ, is the natural Son of God that we can ever dare to imagine ourselves as genuinely adoptive sons of God; it is only because Jesus Christ is the eternally spoken Word of God that we can fully and whole-heartedly accept the testimony of his message. When the Word was made flesh, when the perfect image of the Father was imprinted upon the human species, when the perfect light of God shone forth in a human being, God now dwelled in the world in a new way. He had been there already, but now he is present in a marvelously new manner: God became man in Jesus Christ. The incarnate Word who is spoken to us in this new way is the precise definitive personal plan by which man can encounter God.<sup>1</sup> Yet, because the Word is also the Son-Ambassador of the Father, we not only *see* God

---

<sup>1</sup> For an elaboration of this theme read Edward Schillebeeckx' *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (reviewed in this issue).

present in the world in a new way, but we also *possess him*. The identification of *Word* and *Son* in the person of Jesus, as he is spoken and sent, as he lives with us and is possessed by us, is the personal meaning of *Mission*—for he is sent to us and given to us by the Father. John writes: "The *Word* was made flesh and came to dwell among us: and we had sight of his glory, glory such as belongs to the Father's only-begotten *Son*, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

Here we have the Mission of Jesus: "In order to discharge the debt of our condition, the inviolable nature is united to the passible, and God and Man are combined in our one Lord—so that, as the appropriate remedy for our ills, one and the same Mediator between God and men might from the one element be able to die and from the other to rise again" (Leo the Great—his first homily for Christmas). The Incarnation is because of redemption; God is humanized that man may be divinized through redemption. Mankind understands this *Word* translated into human terms; mankind accepts this *Son* born to Magi and Shepherds (i.e., to every human being), only when it is saved from sin, rescued from the evil powers, and given a share in that fulness of grace and truth which belong to Jesus by right. Jesus, then, was sent (i.e., he had a Mission) to be mankind's redeemer, saviour, rescuer; Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one, the messiah. In his humanity he is the servant of God (Ebed Jahweh); in his divinity he is the Son of God. This Mission was accomplished through the Incarnation from the initial birth-movements in the womb of Mary to the encyclic climax of the exaltation at the right hand of the Father. The mystery of the Incarnation-Mission holds within its redeeming grip the whole of Christ's human life: from the emptying of himself unto the point of servitude to his glorification as the Lord.

Up to this point, the Son is seen as coming from the Father into the world (yet never experiencing the breaking asunder of their oneness) to be the life-giving light of the world, to gather into his green pastures those who hear his voice. Jesus witnesses to his Mission and gives to his followers the true (i.e., the real) water, bread, and life. This giving, this Mission is culminated in Jesus' eagerly awaited and thirsted reunion with the Father and the rebirth of mankind through his death, resurrection, and exaltation. When the beloved Son of the Father entered his final contest with the powers of darkness (this one not a dialogue with the blind men, but a fight to the finish with the prince of the world of unbelief) he offered himself up as a sacrifice-lamb. If Abraham could rejoice to see the birth of Isaac, he rejoiced all the more to see the coming of Jesus. Jesus'

sacrifice on the wood of the cross completed the interrupted sacrifice of Isaac on the wood of the pyre. Jesus was lifted up on the cross (he was crucified); he was lifted up from the chains of death (he was raised from the dead); he was lifted up to the right hand of the Father (he was exalted).

"It was the God of our fathers who *raised up* Jesus, the man you *hung* on a gibbet to die. It is God who *raised him up* to his own right hand, as the prince and saviour who is to bring Israel repentance and remission of sin" (Acts 5:31).

Jesus Christ now in his Kingdom sends the *Spirit*, and this is the *second divine Mission*. The Holy Spirit is now sent and given. "And *now, exalted* at God's right hand, he [Jesus] has claimed from his Father his promise *to bestow the Holy Spirit: and he poured out that Spirit* (Acts 2:33).

### **The Mission of the Spirit**

Between the exaltation of Jesus and his second coming (the Parousia) the Spirit of truth and of love is sent, both as the climax of Jesus' terrestrial Mission and the continuation of that Mission by way of his own Mission. The Spirit is sent and given to mankind just as the Son is sent and given. Just as the Son was sent by the Father to salvage the wreckage of humanity through a redeeming love so the Spirit was sent by the Father and the Son to realize that love-redemption in the lives of mankind, to bring to consumption the harvest sowed and reaped by Jesus. All this is a grand mystery, but we know that Jesus had to return to the Father before all the good things he came to do could actually be completed in us. He says in his literally lovely discourse with his followers in the days before his final triumph:

I can say truly that it is better for you I should go away; he who is to befriend you will not come to you unless I do go, but if only I make my way there, *I will send him* [the Spirit] to you. . . . I have still much to say to you, but it is beyond your reach as yet. It will be for him, *the truth-giving Spirit*, when he *comes*, to guide you into all truth. He will not utter a message of his own; he will utter the message that has been given to him (John 16: 7, 12, 13).

Like the Son, the Spirit had also been in the world before the Pasch-Pentecost event. In the beginning when God formed all things, "The

Spirit of God was stirring above the waters" (Gen. 1:2). In the creation story we witness the Father commanding things to come into existence and receive their nature-names through the powerful Word and in the brooding Spirit.

The Spirit of Jahweh is associated with the messianic king in the Isaian account of the burgeoning scion of Jesse: "One shall be born, on whom the Spirit of the Lord will rest. [Then] the knowledge of the Lord shall fill the earth" (Isaiah 11: 1, 2, 9).

The Spirit of Jahweh is associated with the last days in the prophecy of Joel: "I will pour out my Spirit upon all mankind and your [Israel's] sons and daughters will be prophets. Your old men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions" (Joel 2:28).

Intimately involved with the Mission of the messiah, an angel tells Joseph that "... it is by the power of the Holy Spirit that she [Mary] has conceived this child" (Matthew 1:20). The Spirit, in the Marcan account, "... drives Jesus into the wilderness" (Mark 1:12). When "Jesus returned with the power of the Spirit upon him into Galilee" (Luke 4:14), he announces to the congregation at Nazareth that the prophecy of Isaiah has been fulfilled: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and sight to the blind, to set at liberty the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's pardon, the day when he, our God, will give us redress" (Isaiah 61: 1, 2).

Still, it is only after the glorification of Jesus has swung full circle that the Mission of the Holy Spirit is seen in its proper light. What was done once and for all by Jesus is brought to fruition in us through the sending of the Spirit. With the sending of the Spirit, the fulness of the Christ-life stirs in us. It was through Jesus Christ that we have found our way by faith to a loving relationship with the Father, but now our hopes of sonship are realized. "Nor does this hope delude us; the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom we have received. . . . The Spirit himself thus assures our spirit that we are children of God; and if we are his children, then we are his heirs too; heirs of God, sharing the inheritance of Christ; only we must share his sufferings, if we are to share his glory" (Romans 5:5; 8: 16, 17).

Our imitation of Christ is actualized; now we are by gift what Jesus is by right: God's son. Human beings now living in the world, from the moments of Jesus' departure from the earth and the Spirit's descent to the second coming of Jesus in the Parousia, are children of God, not separated

from each other from age to age or even in one age—we are all joined to the Lord here and now *in the Church*—the Mystical Body of the Lord Jesus, the mighty work of God during this time of Advent. It is through the Church that Jesus lovingly attracts all people to himself. The Holy Spirit, who is the very weight of love between the Father and the Son, is sent to communicate the new grace-life in the Church to men. The Spirit comes at Pentecost to present to the world the Church, born from the side of Christ on Calvary. The Spirit lives in the Church, among the people of God in a holy alliance with them. The Church is not his; she is Christ's. However, the Spirit is sent to bring the harvest to a magnificent vintage year. He is sent to keep the building impregnable; he is sent to bring the Bride's children to maturity in their Father's house.

### The Mission of the Church

This brings us to the third Mission—the Church-Mission, which is nothing more or less than the building up of Christ's Body by Christ himself in his Spirit by means of his apostles. The resurrected Lord appeared to his followers “. . . and they were glad. Once more Jesus said to them, ‘Peace be upon you. As the Father has sent me, I also send you.’ With that, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit; when you forgive men's sins, they are forgiven; when you hold them bound, they are held bound’ ” (John 20: 21-23). In Luke's account Jesus is presented as the new Elias. Elias had said to his disciple, Eliseus, “*Stay on here awhile; the Lord has an errand for me.*” Eliseus would not leave Elias' side, for he knew his master would be carried off by the Lord. At the Jordan bank “. . . a flaming chariot appeared, drawn by farming horses, and Elias went up in a whirlwind into heaven. . . .” Eliseus could see Elias no longer. *He then took up Elias' cloak*, which had fallen, and continued in his master's place (2 Kings 2: 2, 11). Jesus, the new Elias, tells his disciples, “‘I am sending down upon you the Gift which was promised by my Father; you must wait in the city until you are *clothed* with the power from on high’ . . . and even as he blessed them he parted from them and *was carried up into heaven*” (Luke 24: 49, 51).

In Matthew's account Jesus is portrayed as the new Moses. Moses from the mountain heights gave his final blessings to the tribes of Israel and presented them with their inheritance: the land of Chanaan (Deut. 34). Jesus, the new Moses, met his disciples on a mountain, and there he spoke to them: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me; you, therefore, must go out, making disciples of all nations and bap-

tizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all the commandments which I have given you. And behold I am with you all through the days that are coming until the consummation of the World" (Matthew 28; 18-20).

I am now ready to discuss the third Mission—the Mission of Christ's envoys. First of all, let us hear from Luke:

The first book which I wrote, *Theophilus* [which might just as well be addressed to us as *beloved of God*], was concerned with all that Jesus set out to do and teach, until the day came when he was taken up into heaven. He then laid a charge, by the power of the Holy Spirit, on the apostles whom he had chosen. . . . Now he gave them orders, as he shared a meal with them, not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the fulfillment of the Father's Promise (Acts 1: 1, 2, 4).

Luke records Peter's definition of an apostle: "There are men who have walked in our company all through the time when the Lord Jesus came and went among us, from the time when John used to baptize to the day when he, Jesus, was taken from us. One of these [brethren] ought to be added to our number as a *witness of his resurrection*" (Acts 1: 21, 22). The Twelve, then, are the apostles, the envoys of the Lord, the bearers of his message. Still, the men sent out by the Twelve are also denominated "apostles." For example, Paul and Barnabas are sent off to do the Lord's work. In Iconium ". . . they stayed a long time . . . speaking boldly in the Lord's name, while he attested the preaching of his grace by allowing signs and wonders to be performed by their means; the common folk of the city were divided in opinion, some taking part with the Jews, and some with the *apostles*" [i.e., with Paul and Barnabas]. And of course Paul loudly proclaims in his letters his divine designation as *Apostle of Jesus Christ*. This forces my hand to stress the fact that the sending of apostles, although carried on by the Christian communities at Jerusalem or Ephesus, nevertheless, properly belongs to the Lord himself. It is not the individual community-creation, but the work of the Lord acting through his Church. The Church accomplishes in the Lord's name, in his very person, the work of sending men out to preach the good news of salvation. These men are the Lord's ambassadors; it is through them that God makes his appeal. The Body of Christ is then built up age upon age, generation after generation. The mission is the work of the Head and Members of the Mystical Body: Christ operates and the members cooperate. The cooperation finds its

primal energies in the college of bishops, for it is they who are the successors of the apostles; it is they who communicate power to the priests; it is they who ask for the service of the deacons; it is they who motivate the activity of the laity. Yet this ordered functioning does not lessen the truth that the Mission belongs to the whole Church: Christ sends, through his



bishops, priests, deacons, and lay people to work in the vineyard, to cultivate the entire earth with divine seed.

### **Dynamics**

"Let us thank God that He makes us live among the present problems. It is no longer permitted to anyone to be mediocre. Everyone has the imperative duty to remember that he has a mission to fulfill, that of doing the impossible, each within the limits of his activity, to bring the world back to Christ" (Pius XI).

How much more true is this today? It is becoming increasingly difficult for people to live in an unhealthy but safe mediocrity. The once fortified hideaways find themselves suddenly visible to the rest of society as the sun's stripping light shatters the darkness; the people secure in self-made isolation are now being forced to the wall. There will always be more or less indifference, but the times are demanding commitment of one sort or another. The commitment to Christ, the share in his loving way, his saving truth, his everlasting life is the missionary's in a special way. The missionary is the apostle of the Lord today; he is called by Christ and anointed by the Spirit and sent into the world by the hierarchical successors of the first apostles to spread the kingdom.

What does the Mission-commitment consist in? To answer this ques-

tion and see its relevance today we can really do no better than to hear what Matthew has to say. The second discourse in his Gospel account is the Mission-Discourse (9:35-11:1, in effect: chapter 10). You recall the great Sermon on the Mount (cc. 5-7), which is the first discourse on the nature of the Kingdom of the heavens.<sup>2</sup> The Mission-Discourse translates all of the new Kingdom legislation of the first discourse into a way of life for Jesus' envoys. The Mission-discourse opens with Jesus' being moved by the sight of the multitudes of harried people who are like sheep without a shepherd. Then he says to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful enough, but the laborers are few" (9: 37). Then he calls the Twelve to him and gives them power [exousia] over the demons and disease. The Twelve, who will be active apostles later on, are now disciples, i.e., learners in the school for ambassadors. They have been called from the fishing boats and customs houses to give witness to God's envoy *par excellence* and to learn the way of apostolic asceticism. Jesus tells them (for the time being) to confine their efforts to the house of Israel and announce their presence with: *the Kingdom of heaven is at hand*. They are to heal and cleanse—in short, to give the gift they have received, without payment. He tells them not to worry about copper pieces lining their clothing, about spare shoes and the like. Further, Jesus indicates the literal extent of their witness: martyrdom. They are sheep among wolves; they must have a practical sense as well as innocence; they will be moved by the Spirit in the time of trial. Above all, they must expect to be accepted no better than he himself is: they will be taunted with, "*Beelzebub!*" They must give up all things to follow him without fear. "He is not worthy of me who does not take up his cross and follow me. . . . It is the man who loses his life for my sake that will secure it" (10: 38, 39). The missionary must give up his self-centered way; *his* messianic plans for world-improvement must be put aside; his pride is nailed to the cross and his life in Christ is born, a life which will transform the world. If there is anything at all which will firmly set the glamor and romance on rough ground, it is the fact of self-sacrifice and persecution.<sup>3</sup>

Hippolytus of Rome proclaims: "The wood of the cross is mine for my eternal salvation. I am nourished by it; I am strengthened in its roots; I lie under its branches; I fill my nostrils with its savor as with a sweet

---

<sup>2</sup> For a short treatment of this, see *the Wonder-Worker of Saint Matthew's Gospel*, DOMINICANA, Fall, 1963.

<sup>3</sup> The Missionary Meaning of the Cross is treated in *Advent* by J. Daniélou.

breeze. This tree, which stretches to the sky, goes from earth to heaven . . . it stands midway between heaven and earth, a strong prop for the universe . . . a cosmic interlacing which embraces the whole of humanity." The cross has never ceased to have meaning, because it is Christ's cross. The cross with its horizontal beam intersecting the vertical is the cosmic symbol of Jesus' words to his missionaries recorded both in the Mission-discourse in Matthew 10 and in the passage about the spirited send-off in Matthew 28. The arms of the cross are ever extending over the face of the earth (*You must go out, making disciples of all nations . . . until the consummation of the world*) while the vertical beam ever sinks deeper into the earth and lifts itself higher to the heavens (*Go to the sheep of the house of Israel*).

The Mission, then, has two existential counterparts: 1) the kingdom of God is established in new parts of the world down the years; the good news is preached in new places; and the Christian community in a particular place at one time, if destroyed, is open to the kerygma at another time. 2) when the Christian community has been established, i.e., when the pagan society has received the saving word and has been baptized, it is always open to greater and greater understanding of the word and a deeper and deeper living of the life.

This leads me to the final point: What is the mission-relevance today? Here we live two millennia from the day of the first Mission-journey, and Christ's tree of salvation has still to spread its branches over the world and sink its roots into the earth. The tree is still young and ever growing. Although in great part the realms of Stephen's Hungary, Henry's Germany, Peter's Russia have suffered ravaging barbarism and the work of Boniface, Augustine, Cyril has been exploited, for God a thousand years is a single day (2 Peter 3:8). Africa and Asia are the lands for the horizontal Mission-activity. "Truly we cannot look upon youth without a certain envy, especially the very young who still have a long future before them. We have seen many events; but they will see many beautiful things" (Pius XI).

However, the Mission-labor does not cease with an individual conversion, nor with a whole society's. The further growth of the vertical force is demanded. Reflect on the aims of the Second Vatican Council: "It [the Council] desires to impart an ever increasing vigor to the Christian life of the faithful; to adapt more suitably to the needs of our own times those institutions which are subject to change; to foster whatever can promote union among all who believe in Christ; to strengthen whatever can help to call the whole of mankind into the household of the Church" (*Constitution*

on the *Sacred Liturgy*, Introd., n. 1). The Mission-work for the Christian community as promoted by Vatican II must now revitalize the liturgical life, which revolves around sacrifice and sacraments, which in turn are the instruments of the Salvation-proclamation.

The Mission must enter the labor-circle, but with more than a theory on work; the Mission must bring Christ himself under the directives of his vicars Leo, the Piuses, John, and Paul. The Mission must have more than a passing acquaintance with its country's economy; credit unions and consumer cooperatives, for example, are its vital concern. The Mission must educate parents and children to activate their community's life. The Mission must have pastoral concern for the university and keep the students' vision clear and penetrating. In a word, the Mission is a service, a salient *diakonia*, which will carry the day because of its courage to stand committed to Christ and its openness to cooperate with all men in the cause of truth and social betterment.

The Mission is the last force in the world which should foster the Christian ghetto, which should allow its vision to grow myopic in a pluralistic and divided world. Hear Pope Paul: "Our voice trembles and our heart beats the faster both because of the inexpressible consolation and reasonable hope that their [representatives of separated Christian denominations] presence stirs up within us, as well as because of the deep sadness we feel at their prolonged separation. If we are in any way to blame for that separation, we humbly beg God's forgiveness. . . . For our part, we willingly forgive the injuries which the Catholic Church has suffered and forget the grief endured during the long series of dissensions and separations. . . ." Paul's magnanimous predecessor, John, said this: "It is necessary first of all that the Church should never depart from the sacred patrimony of truth received from the Fathers. But at the same time, she must never look to the present, to the new conditions and new forms of life introduced into the modern world which have opened new avenues to the Catholic apostolate. . . ." The Mission, ever vibrant, ever expanding and deepening, has the heritage of twenty centuries still to be the youngest and yet the strongest force for putting an end to disorder and making a beginning of peace. *Thy Kingdom come, O Lord.*

*All must come and see my glory revealed,  
and I will set a mark upon each of them.  
What of those who find deliverance?  
I have an errand for them:  
to be my messengers across the sea;  
to Africa and Lydia . . .  
and to islands far away.  
They shall go out where men  
never heard of my name,  
never saw my glory yet,  
to reveal that glory  
among the nations.*

Isaiah 66:19