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The Challenge of Roman Catholic Missions

BY STEPHEN NEILL

PROTESTANTS are accustomed to refer to, and to be awed by, the majestic and rock-like unity of the Roman Catholic Church. A study of Roman Catholic missionary history suggests that that unity is not quite so automatic and unbroken as Protestant fears and anxieties sometimes suggest.

One divisive factor, the effects of which were felt for more than four centuries, was the *Padroado*, the right given by a succession of Popes in the fifteenth century to the kings of Portugal to control all Christian operations in the vast areas of the eastern and western worlds assigned by those Popes to the dominion of Portugal. This worked fairly well, as long as Portugal was strong and rich. Francis Xavier went to Asia as a royal missionary, supported by the wealth and prestige of Portugal. Matters changed when the Portuguese power began to diminish. The Popes felt it right to send in new Orders, and Vicars Apostolic who were not Portuguese or in any way dependent on Portuguese power. This led to some curious situations. At one period in China the non-Portuguese missionaries in China were very much between the devil and the deep blue sea. If they did not accept the authority of the Vicars Apostolic sent out by the Pope, they were debarred from exercising any ecclesiastical function. If they accepted that authority, they were cut off from the financial support of the Portuguese authorities and reduced to desperate poverty.

Many volumes have been filled with the story of the controversies between the Jesuits and other orders, From the time of Matteo Ricci in China in the sixteenth century, and of Robert de Nobili in India in the first part of the seventeenth, the Jesuits have tended towards a more accommodating attitude towards the customs and even the religion of those whom they wished to convert than most missionaries have felt to be compatible with Christian faith. Hence the bitter controversies in China over the "rites", and in particular over the correct Chinese term for the translation of the word "God", and in India the famous "accommodation controversy", over the allegedly pagan practices which de Nobili had allowed to his converts. The controversy broke out about 1620; it was not finally settled until 1744.

There are signs in some parts of the world that Rome is not displeased at having a number of orders at work in the same country, and is unwilling that any one should grow too powerful. In Uganda, in the early days the only Roman Catholic mission was that of the White Fathers, who were almost all French. It is unlikely that the White Fathers viewed with enthusiasm the arrival of the Mill Hill Fathers, who are mainly Dutch and British. It is odd to look out over the city of Kampala, and to see one Roman Catholic Cathedral on Rubagu Hill,

and another Roman Catholic Cathedral about three miles away on the opposite side of the city.

It is no uncommon experience to find that the Roman Catholic missionary orders, like the Protestant missions, resemble the spokes of a wheel; they all run in to centres of direction in Rome, or in some western country. They do not necessarily have very close connections in the area in which they work.

This is particularly noticeable in areas in which the regular hierarchy has not yet been established. In Kenya, for instance, the Protestant missions have been able to agree on the appointment of a single educational adviser to the missions, to whom the government department turns when any matters of common interest arise. As yet the Roman Catholics have no single officer who can speak on educational topics for all their missions in that region.

We may note three further characteristics of Roman Catholic missions, which time is gradually correcting but which are also painfully familiar in the Protestant world.

Roman Catholic countries are very unequally engaged in the work of overseas missions. For a century the influence of the French was predominant, to such an extent that even the political relationships of the Roman Catholic Church in certain areas were deeply influenced by French policy and the French point of view.

It is still true, though much less so than a century ago, that overseas missions are the concern of a minority of the faithful in almost every Roman Catholic country.

Many great missionary enterprises of the Roman Church go back not to any official policy but to the vision and devotion of an individual. One of the most noteworthy cases in recent years is that of Cardinal Lavigerie, Archbishop of Algiers (1825-1892), who almost single-handed brought into existence the White Fathers for the evangelization of Africa.

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Yet, when we have allowed for all these details, the unity of the Roman Catholic Church, and therefore of its missionary effort, is a tremendous and impressive reality.

It goes back to a fundamental theological conviction, which was expressed by Boniface VIII in the Bull *Unam Sanctam* in 1302, that it is absolutely necessary to the salvation of every human being that he be subject to the authority of the Bishop of Rome, the Vicar of Christ. Canonists have discussed in detail the extent to which the Pope can exercise this sovereignty over those who are not Christians and in non-Christian lands. Of the fact itself no Roman Catholic is in doubt. All authority in heaven and earth has been given by the Father to Jesus Christ; on earth the Pope is the Vicar of Christ, and into his hands have been given all the authority and power exercised by Peter in the name and as the representative of his divine Lord. We have to reckon very seriously with the sense of universal mission which is implicit in the Roman Catholic outlook on the world.

This sense of mission has often displayed itself in what to us are highly unpleasant ways. The ceaseless attempts of the Roman Church over

four centuries to undermine and destroy the Church of England are more logically necessary to them than pleasant to us. The Orthodox Churches look back over a lamentable history in which the West, having first ruined Constantinople in the Fourth Crusade in 1204, and then allowed it to be captured by the Turks in 1453, has spent the years since then in taking every advantage of the political and intellectual weaknesses of the Eastern and separate Churches to wean the members of those Churches away from their allegiance to the Eastern patriarchs, and to win them to what for them is an unnatural allegiance to the Patriarch of the West. The records of Spanish and Portuguese conquest in East and West include horrible examples of the use of force, fraud, and fear to bring whole populations into the Roman Church. One might have thought that the small community on Tristan Da Cunha might have been allowed to maintain its unity. But no; it was found some years ago that some of the inhabitants of that remotest of islands were descendants of shipwrecked Roman Catholic sailors; so in due course a priest is landed, a number of the inhabitants are "baptized", and told that they must separate themselves from the rest of this previously close-knit and united community.

Yet there is something to be said on the other side. When the new continents were discovered, one of the first thoughts in the minds of the discoverers was that these were new lands to be added to the kingdom of Christ. The personal habits of the *conquistadores* left much to be desired; yet the idea of conversion to the Christian faith was never far from their minds. This cannot be doubted by anyone who has looked into the records of the strange and perplexing relations between stout Cortes and Montezuma. And, when we have shuddered at the brutalities committed, we do well to recall the humanity of the regulations put out by the court of Spain for the government of its western dominions, and to remember that in Bartholomew de Las Casas (1474-1566) the western world produced one of the most humane and effective defenders of the rights of the coloured man against the white that the world has yet seen.

Secondly, this basic idea of the Roman mission leaves its traces in the kind of instruction given to the convert. To put the matter in its extreme form, the Protestant missionary tries to introduce the non-Christian individual to a Christ through whom in course of time he may be led to make the acquaintance of the Church; the Roman Catholic tries to introduce the potential convert into a Church through which in course of time he will be brought to acquaintance with Christ its Lord. The advantage of the Roman Catholic method is obvious. Almost from the first day the convert becomes aware of the world-wide unity of the Church. He has seen a picture of the Pope, and has been told what he signifies in the life of the Church. He realizes that his missionary, of whatever race and order, is simply a servant of this one universal Church. We, by contrast, introduce our convert first to a strange and meaningless set of western initials, behind which by some process of divination he is supposed to discern the reality of the Church. Even thirty years ago the majority of Christians in Tinnevely, called themselves, and regarded themselves as, C.M.S. Christians or S.P.G. Christians. The Church of India, let alone the world-wide reality of the

Church, was something of which they had hardly the faintest conception.

The Pope being what he is in the Roman Catholic world, it follows naturally that he can, if he wishes, take action in missionary affairs no less than in any other of the affairs of that Church. The development of the indigenous episcopate in the Roman Church in modern times is due almost wholly to the initiative of three successive Popes. Benedict XV (d. 1922) put forth the Encyclical *Maximum illud* on the subject. This was followed up by the *Rerum Ecclesiarum* of Pius XI (d. 1939). Of course the Popes did not act without consultation. The hero of the new measures in Rome was Cardinal van Rossum. The hero in the field was Mgr. (later Cardinal) Costantini, who arrived in China as Apostolic Delegate in 1922. If Protestant missions have been slow to recognize the potentialities of leadership in the younger Churches, it is perhaps consoling to discover that the Roman Catholic missionaries were, if anything, slightly worse. The missionaries had little that was good to say of their flocks. When told to produce candidates for the episcopate, they produced exactly the same objections as were being made by Anglican missionaries of the same period. But in the end the Pope can always have his way. The first Indian bishop of the Latin rite in modern times, Mgr. Tiburtius Roche of Tuticorin, was consecrated in 1923, eleven years after the Anglican Bishop Azariah. In 1926 Pope Pius XI showed that he was not going to stand any nonsense by himself consecrating the first six Chinese bishops in Rome. At the present time the Roman Catholic Church has rather more than a hundred bishops of non-Caucasian origin, as against about fifty in the Anglican Communion.

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The Roman Church has not, and has never had, one single strategy of missionary work. Yet one can see over the centuries a steady development in the direction of such a strategy. The first great step was taken with the formation of the Propaganda (*Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*) in 1622 (reconstituted in 1844). The Propaganda has perhaps suffered a little from having too many things to attend to—the Roman Church has never clearly distinguished between missions in pagan countries and those in nominally Christian lands. But it has been a centre of information, training, and study more effective than anything possessed by any other Church in the world.

One can see traces of forward-looking strategy in, for example, the creation not merely of bishops but of complete hierarchical systems in a number of countries. Thus China was organized on a regular hierarchical basis in 1946, Ghana and Nigeria in 1950, South Africa in 1951. Such arrangements minister to national and local pride; but they also help to prepare for the time, if it comes, in which these areas are cut off from all contact with their centre and have to manage all their ecclesiastical affairs themselves.

Again, a sense of strategy is evident in the contemporary concentration of the Roman Church in tropical Africa. It is clearly the Roman Catholic aim that the Belgian Congo, in the very heart of tropical Africa, should be a wholly Roman Catholic country. Already a quarter of the population of that country of twelve million people is

at least nominally Christian, with the Roman Catholics outnumbering the Protestants by two to one. The Protestants have nothing to compare with the Roman Catholic University, the Lovanianum, which has recently come into existence.

Strategic action is made possible by that discipline of the Roman Catholic Church, which Protestants profess to regard as mechanical and sub-Christian, yet which at times they are fain to envy. The Roman Catholic goes where he is sent. The missionary force is mobile, and to an extent unknown in the Protestant world can be deployed in relation to changing situations and needs. There may be criticism of the quality of some of the Roman Catholic missionaries; as with the Protestants, missionaries in their isolation tend to fall behind the times and to become fixed in methods that are no longer appropriate. But it is just the fact that in certain areas Roman Catholic missionaries outnumber all the Protestants together by ten to one. The old Protestant advantage in the rapid creation of an indigenous ministry is being done away, as the Roman missions increase the number of their indigenous priests and sisters.

It is an odd fact that the Roman Church, in some ways the most international body in the world, has not managed for 436 years to elect a non-Italian Pope. Some thought that in 1958 this long-standing tradition would be changed, but the cardinals voted true to form and chose Cardinal Roncalli. Yet in other directions the Church has moved steadily in the direction of a genuine internationalism. Pius XII for the first time gave the College of Cardinals a non-Italian majority, which continues. The College includes a Chinese and an Indian—the expectation that Mgr. Kiwanuka of Uganda might be the first African Cardinal was not fulfilled in the first set of appointments made by the present Pope. The dominance of France in Roman Catholic missions is a thing of the past. The most notable development of recent years has been the entry of America into the field. Every year the great centre at Maryknoll is sending out into the field a number of intelligent, passionately devoted young men, trained in the most modern methods of evangelistic work and Roman Catholic controversy. The wealth of the American Roman Catholics is considerable; years may pass before we see an American Pope; but certainly a new and great force has entered into the missionary scene.

Roman Catholics are taught to be loyal citizens of their own country; this makes their situation, like that of the Jews, peculiarly agonizing in time of international war. But there have been examples in recent years of a central Christian loyalty transcending the purely national, when the two seem to come into conflict. Under Communist pressure there was a real danger of schism in China. It is known that two or three bishops have been consecrated without the consent or approval of the Vatican. The surprising thing is not that this has happened, but that apparently the schism is so small. As an international body, the Roman Church in China has been specially exposed to the venom and malice of the Communists: there have been many martyrdoms; yet it seems certain that the vast majority of Chinese Roman Catholics have remained faithful to their Church.

What are non-Roman Catholic Christians to make of all this ?

In the first place, they had better look at the situation quite realistically, and consider what lessons are to be learned from it.

We have to recognize that in many areas relations between Roman Catholic and non-Roman missions are about as bad as they could be. For this there are a great many reasons ; but, whatever the reasons may be, it is not an edifying spectacle for the non-Christian world. It is true that Roman Catholics, entering a territory where other Churches have long been established, tend to speak with the utmost contempt of the existing Churches. But it is also true that some of the extremest Protestant missions, entering Roman Catholic territory, have started by engaging their hearers in debate on the perpetual virginity of the blessed Virgin, as though this had anything to do with the doctrine of salvation, and as though the best way to gain a hearing was deeply to offend the sensibilities of the hearers. The best elements on both sides genuinely desire a better relationship. It may not be easy to establish ; but we might do well to remember our common danger. In Egypt the pressure of the government in matters of education led to the formation of the committee on co-operation, of which the chairman was a Roman Catholic bishop, and to which almost every Church and mission in the country adhered.

We do well to take note of the fact that on the whole the Roman Catholic missions are at every point defeating the Protestant. At the moment they are showing quite extraordinary success in entering in precisely at the points at which the Protestants had regarded themselves as safe and strong. For instance, the work of the Rhenish Mission in Nias, an Indonesian Island, was extremely strong ; rather more than half the population was Christian, and no other mission was at work. Now the Roman Catholics are strongly established ; it is not to be supposed that they will limit their activities to converting the small remaining pagan population. Basutoland had been for a century the sphere of the Paris Mission, which had worked heroically, contending always against shortage of staff and limited financial resources. Now Basutoland, a High Commission territory in South Africa, has been very heavily staffed with French Canadians—who speak French like the French missionaries, but have the advantage of belonging to the Commonwealth. It is reported that the Roman Catholics plan to make Basutoland the centre for the Roman Catholic University of South Africa.

For a century, Protestants had been well ahead in education. The Roman Catholics had done much less in this field, and had concentrated mainly on the education of the priesthood. In consequence the majority of the prominent Christians in Asian and African lands were non-Romans. Now all that is changed. In many Indian cities the great Roman Colleges tower over their non-Roman rivals. Premier Diem, the Prime Minister of Vietnam, is likely to be the first of a great series of Roman Catholic statesmen in the newer nations of the world.

Rivalry with another Church is never a good ground for any kind of Christian action. But on the whole the non-Roman missions seem to be entirely unaware of the situation, or, if aware of it, to limit their activity to petulant complaints of the advantages enjoyed by the Roman

missions. Unless they wish just to hand over the whole of the non-Christian world to the Roman Catholic Church, it seems that they would do well to wake up, and to take some of the measures that commonsense would appear to dictate as essential, if they wish to survive.

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In the first place, the Church must come back as a central part of Christian teaching, and at a very early stage of Christian instruction. This is in line with the best of modern theology, in which a renewed attention to the doctrine of the Church plays so important a part. Practically it is essential. In the stress of the modern world divided Churches simply cannot stand. Even very simple people in out of the way parts of the world have heard of the United Nations. They are aware of the unity of all mankind. They must be taught from the start not to regard themselves as Finnish Pentecostalists or Norwegian Baptists, but to know that they form part of one great world-wide fellowship of the people of Christ. To those who have been brought up in the wrong way the Roman Catholic argument about the one unchanging Church with its visible centre in Rome is tremendously appealing; at present what we have to offer is very thin and poor by comparison.

We may well learn from our Roman brethren the absolute necessity of a strategy; and strategy demands study and a full possession of the facts. When I was a boy there was a great deal of talk in missionary circles about the Muslim menace in Africa. With the tremendous growth of the African Churches the missionary forces had perhaps so much to do inside the Churches that they had not much time to spare to look outside. Now once again the cry of Islamic penetration has been raised. Tribes which twenty years ago were completely open to the preaching of the Gospel have now been so thoroughly, though perhaps superficially, Islamized that the entry of the Gospel has been made immensely more difficult than it would have been a generation ago. There are hundreds of tribes still untouched by either the Christian or the Islamic faith. They ought to be reached at once by effective missionary work, carried on by African missionaries if possible, if not, by western forces preparing the way for the coming of the Africans. But where are these tribes? There was a good deal of general talk at the All-Africa Church Conference held at Ibadan in 1958. But it was clear that the non-Roman Churches had never made an accurate study of the situation, did not know where open doors were likely to close in the next few years, and had not even the rudiments of a strategy for meeting the situation. An expert has at last been appointed, forty years too late, to look into the matter.

If the Protestant missions are to become effective in the modern world, they will have to face the necessity of abandoning some of their dearly treasured autonomy and sovereignty. "Like a mighty army moves the Church of God", we sing cheerfully. But there is only one Church which moves like a mighty army; the rest advance with the dignity of a rabble of camp followers, and their effectiveness is about in proportion to their lack of discipline and planning. According to the latest figures, 357 foreign missionaries are crowded into the little territory of Liberia, which has perhaps a million inhabitants (one-and-a-

half million say the encyclopedias, but this is almost certainly an over-estimate ; no exact census has ever been held). Wonderful opportunities were lost in Indonesia after the war, as for instance in the island of Timor, where a great mass movement was taking place among simple people, and the small handful of indigenous pastors was allowed to carry on unaided by any missionaries whatever (a few have entered from Australia in the last few years). In some areas it is certainly right to hold on, though conversions are very few and God's time of blessing seems not yet to have come. But the missionary historian must needs weep, as he turns up the records of movements which never came to anything or mass movements which died away into stagnation, just for the lack of the few workers who would have made all the difference, if they had been there at the critical moment.

The tragic thing is that the non-Roman missions have at their disposal an even better instrument than the Roman, if only they would use it. The International Missionary Council has never been allowed to develop as an effective servant of the Churches. Yet in the almost forty years of its existence it has gathered an immense amount of reliable information. It publishes the best missionary review in the world, the *International Review of Missions*. It publishes every year in January the best survey of the world Christian situation produced anywhere. Its missionary bibliography over the years makes possible research on almost any missionary question. And there it ends ; the missions hardly ever make use of this admirable instrument for sensible or strategic planning of their work.

But the younger Churches themselves may make it impossible for this foolish incompetence to continue. The recent session of the East Asia Christian Conference, held at Kuala Lumpur in Malaya in 1959, made it plain that the East Asia Churches are now going to take things into their own hands ; the battle for freedom from the missions and equality with the older churches has been won ; they now feel themselves free to look around and to plan for the evangelization of their countries. Their thinking and planning may still be highly amateurish ; and yet they may drive the western missions to do what they ought to have done on their own initiative long since, and to agree to some reasonable measures of co-operation and common planning.

But of course such planning does not touch the heart of the evil. The only answer is in the organic union of Churches. We go on talking to our converts in these lands about the beautiful unity of the Church. They would like to see it. The more they know of the western divisions that have been thrust upon them the less they like them. This does not mean that all Christians in Asia or Africa are ready at once to unite with one another ; we have done our work far too well for that. They are as deeply Anglican or Presbyterian as we are. But in South India and elsewhere they have shown the way, and only plead that their friends in the older Churches will not stand in their way, as they move forward to fresh and perhaps perilous experiments.

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To the non-Roman churches of the west the immediate challenge is to a recovery of that world-sense which the Roman Catholic so amply

enjoys. The Student Christian Movement grew to greatness on the basis of the famous slogan, "The evangelization of the world in this generation". That may seem naïve and over-optimistic today; but it drove out thousands of the best students in the universities of the west to life-long missionary service. We seem to have fallen into a state of timidity and tameness. It is true that there is far more to be done in western lands than can be done by all the available Christian forces together. It is true that we all have a guilty conscience—this is the great success of the Communists; they have given us all a guilt-complex about colonialism and imperialism and all the rest of it, so much so that many of our younger people doubt whether the west has any values that are deserving of preservation. The moment is not favourable for a new and ringing missionary challenge.

And yet there is a certain aggressive element in the Gospel, without the affirmation of which it ceases to be the Gospel. If the words of Jesus Christ are true, nothing else can be true in anything like the same way. If our word is the word of God unto salvation, then we cannot deny to those who have never heard it the opportunity to hear, to be convinced, and to believe. Of all this our Roman Catholic friends are fully convinced. What the non-Roman Churches need above all else is a recovery of confidence and courage, a willingness to take seriously and to act on the things that they all say that they believe.
