

TOWARDS A MISSION SPIRITUALITY

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Introduction: The Notion of Spirituality

This paper will focus on the development of a “mission spirituality.” As I begin, however, I must acknowledge that to define “spirituality” today is a risky business. There are in fact many definitions of spirituality, and while all have a lot in common they differ among themselves—sometimes very much. I’m sure not everyone will agree with the definition or description of spirituality out of which I will work here. Nevertheless, one has to start somewhere.

As I understand spirituality, therefore, I would conceive of it as (1) a kind of “framework” or “set” of values, symbols, doctrines, attitudes and practices which (2) persons or a community attempt to make their own (3) in order to be able to cope with a particular situation, to grow in the love of God and self transcendence, and/or to accomplish a particular task in life or in the world. A spirituality, in other words, is like a reservoir from which a person or a community can draw to motivate action, to keep on track, to bolster commitment, to avoid discouragement when times get rough. It is a way, in still other words, of tapping into the infinite, life-giving, refreshing and empowering presence of God’s Spirit, so that people’s or a community’s life can be lived in grace, gratitude and growth.

On the one hand, everyone has a spirituality—Christian or not, believer or not, pious or not. A spirituality—implicit or explicit, cultivated or neglected—is simply the way persons cope with life. This is true at least as one regards human existence from a religious perspective. Spiritualities are very personal, and everyone develops one in some form or another. On the other hand, while allowing for individual differences, preferences and need, there are some spiritualities that are *systems*—particular, tried-and-true or freshly innovative ways of thinking, praying, imagining and acting that are developed to help women and men in particular circumstances find the stability then need, the challenge they require, the growth that they seek. Thus we can speak about lay spirituality, Precious Blood spirituality, SVD spirituality, Australian spirituality, presbyteral spirituality, etc.

Mission Spirituality

It will be to develop a spirituality of this latter type that this essay will attempt to sketch a framework of *mission* spirituality. This will be a spirituality for women and men who want to grow and thrive in their identity as people who consciously participate in the mission of the triune God, particularly insofar as such participation involves moving beyond their own zones of security in terms of culture, social status, language and location.

Having said this, however, I do not believe that there is a particular, “one-size-fits-all” mission spirituality. Mission spirituality, like mission itself, is always and everywhere a *contextual* spirituality. It will depend on *where* a person engages in mission (in affluent North America? in poor Latin America?), *when* she or he engages in mission (as a newcomer in a

situation learning the language? as one begins to withdraw from one's ministry situation in retirement?), one's experience (failure? struggle? identifying with the people in a particular culture?), one's theological perspective (Rahnerian? Process? focused on papal and magisterial teaching?). Because of this contextual reality, therefore, what I will sketch here will be more of a template or check list *towards* a particular spirituality of mission. It will include topics and questions that I believe every mission spirituality must address, but how they will be articulated will depend on a variety of contextual factors. One might say that I am presenting here a number of *constants* of spirituality that will vary with every context. Readers may also recognize that there are issues and questions which are not addressed here. They are certainly free to add these to the template.

Our template will have six sections corresponding to six questions: (1) What Scripture passage(s) anchor(s) one's mission spirituality? (2) Who are (is) one's hero(es)/heroine(s) as one engages in mission? (3) What are the assets and liabilities of one's own culture as one crosses over to another culture or context? (4) What is one's basic theological perspective as one ministers in a missionary situation? (5) What is one's experience as a missionary? And (6) what are some practices in which one might engage to deepen and develop one's life in mission? The meaning of each one of these questions will be explained, followed by a number of possible ways they might be answered. Again, the point is not to offer a complete mission spirituality here, but to engage the reader in constructing or articulating her or his own.¹

I. Scriptural Foundations

Every spirituality needs to be rooted in Scripture, and mission spirituality is no exception. One needs to ask the question, therefore, what passage(s), books, or themes of Scripture are those that ground one's missionary life.

There may, of course, be some passages that figure large at certain times of one's missionary service. One may take strength and inspiration, for example, from some of the great vocation passages like Is 6:1-8, Jer 1:4-10, Mt 4:18-22 (the call of Peter and Andrew, James and John), or Jesus' invitation to Andrew and Peter to "come and see" in Jn 1:35-39. One may also be buoyed up in difficulty by Jeremiah's sufferings in Jer 38, by Jesus' passion as a consequence of his own faithful missionary witness to the Reign of God, or by Paul's being suspect by fellow Christians (Acts 9:23-30) or those whom he had tried to evangelize (e.g. Acts 9:19b-25 or 13:50-52).

There may also be passages, however, that can provide basic guidance, inspiration and direction to one's work of crossing a culture, struggling with a language, being accepted by a people, bonding with the people among whom one works. Paul's passionate statement that he had become a slave to all so that he could win more of them to Christ—indeed, that he had become "all things to all people," so that he might "by all means save some" (see 1Cor 9:19-23) might serve as the anchor and beacon for missionaries in a very different culture from their

¹I am highly indebted to my friend and confrere Larry Nemer, SVD for the development of this paper. It was in conversation with him that the ideas in it have taken shape, even though, of course, I am responsible for its concrete development. Larry referred to the groundbreaking work on mission spirituality by Michael C. Reilly entitled *Spirituality for Mission: Historical, Theological and Cultural Factors for a Present-Day Missionary Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978).

own. One of my own inspiring passages is that of Jn 10:10—the reason for my ministry, the reason for witnessing to and proclaiming Christ, is to bring, like Jesus, abundant life to the world. One missionary in a course on missionary spirituality, my colleague Larry Nemer relates, chose as a foundational passage the story of the wedding at Cana in the second chapter of John’s gospel: the missionary, this person explained, is like water, but at the word of Jesus and in his hands he or she can be transformed into rich, joy-giving wine. The movement of the Acts of the Apostles has always struck me as a marvelous story of missionary spirituality. It is the Spirit (the primary agent of mission as Paul VI and John Paul II have characterized her [see EN 75 and RM 30]) that challenges, calls, pushes the church beyond the boundaries of their understanding of the gospel to include all peoples and all cultures in the plan of salvation. It is precisely this move of the Spirit that calls the Jesus Community to be church.

There is no “normative” passage of Scripture for a mission spirituality. One reason for this, as I’ve said, is the changing context of one’s missionary service. Another reason is that the *entire* body of Scripture—Old and New Testaments, but especially the New—is the result of Israel’s and the church’s reflection on the mission in which they have been called to engage. The reader might pause here and reflect on the scriptural foundations for her or his own missionary spirituality.

II. Missionary Heroes/Heroines

Particularly in the last decade or so, I have become more and more convinced of the importance of the example of the saints for my own spiritual life. Back in 1997 I was given an autographed copy of Robert Ellsberg’s marvelous *All Saints*, in which he sketches the life of a “saint” (canonized or otherwise, Christian or otherwise) for every day.² For the next ten years I read one of Ellsberg’s sketches every day; I have not done so for a few years, moving on to something else for my daily reading. But I know soon I will go back to it again. There is something powerful about being in touch with that great “cloud of witnesses” (Heb 12:1) of our faith, and I have been greatly nourished in my faith and ministry by women and men like John Main, Cardinal Newman, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mary Mackillop, Mary Ward, Mahatma Gandhi and Pandita Ramabai.

A second element of a mission spirituality, I believe, is a rootedness in those women and men who have gone before us, set amazing examples, set standards, have helped us see our own humanness as we struggle and celebrate our participation in God’s mission. Perhaps our heroes / heroines are the founders of our own missionary congregation: Gaspar del Bufalo, in your case as Missionaries of the Precious Blood; Arnold Janssen in my own as a Divine Word Missionary. Perhaps the great missionaries of the past might offer us guidance and inspiration: Charles de Foucauld, for example, or Alopen of East Syria, or Matteo Ricci, or Mary Magdelene the Apostle to the Apostles. Perhaps it could be missionaries who are also heroes and heroines from our own culture: an Oscar Romero from Latin America, an Alessandro Valignano from

²Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time* (New York: Crossroad, 1997).

Italy, a Lorenzo Ruiz from the Philippines, a Samuel Ajayi Crowther from Nigeria. Or perhaps our models for mission are senior members of our congregation with whom we have worked. I think of a German SVD by the name of Fritz Scharpf from whom I learned so much as a young missionary in the Philippines, or my former teacher and then colleague Bernhard Raas from Switzerland.

Once again, it might be good for the reader to pause here and think about the great women and men who have influenced him or her in their lives, who have lent them inspiration or perhaps a sympathetic, listening ear. These are the agents of the Spirit who shape our missionary spirituality.

III. Cultural Assets and Liabilities

We are all unique individuals, with individual strengths and weaknesses, and the development and cultivation of a mission spirituality is to bolster and harness those strengths and, if possible, blunt those weaknesses. But we are more than individuals. We are people of a particular time and generation. We are shaped by our families and by our social class and education. And we are formed and deformed by the culture in which we find our identity.

Culture is more than practices and cuisine. It is even more than values and attitudes. Culture shapes the way that we view—or, even better, *construct*—our world and our very selves. Westerners *really do* see themselves first as individuals and only subsequently related to others—even family. Latin Americans, Africans and Asians (if I can venture to say it) *really do not* see themselves first as individuals, but as vitally connected to family, community, tribe. What is the “truth” here? Is the best form of organization of society hierarchical? Or is it democratic? There is no objective answer to this.

Culture is not something that we can just take off or put on. While we can *acculturate* ourselves to various new circumstances, from the first moment of our lives we have been *enculturated* within our own culture by our family, our friends, our language, the media which surrounds us. While there are some people who are truly bi-cultural, and some people who do manage to acculturate to a remarkable degree, most of us—the vast majority of us—never really move out of our original culture.

This is why knowing who we are as cultural beings—as Italians, as Germans, as Polish, as U. S. Americans, as Chileans, as Indians—is so important. Each of us brings a good amount of cultural baggage to mission, and we need to be aware of how that baggage can sustain us or how, as Latin names baggage, it is *impedimenta*, or a real liability in our cross-cultural ministry. It is important to understand and believe that *every* culture is both good and bad in itself, and that every culture offers opportunities and impediments for growth in another culture or situation. No culture is all good. No culture is all bad.

As a U. S. American, for example, I bring a confidence to my ministry that is supported by a Yankee “can do” attitude. I bring a sense of equality of all peoples that can help me build a strong sense of participation among the people where I work. I can easily work for a strong, well-educated laity. As a member of an affluent, powerful nation I have a confidence in myself and in my worldview, and a confidence in the capacities of others. But such confidence and surety can border on the arrogant. My sense of equality and participation might trample on people’s sensitivities about distinct, important and even sacred roles in a particular society. My

affluence can allow me to live in a way that actually separates me from the people among whom I minister. I speak with a frankness that my countrymen admire, but which often can be insulting to the men and women who are my hosts.

So part of my spirituality is to recognize who I am as a cultural being and make sure that my identity does not get in the way of God's work. I can never slough off that identity, but I can temper it quite a bit, and use its positive aspects for good. Working with my identity surely needs to find itself into my prayer life; it certainly points to ways that I can practice real "self denial" for the sake of my ministry. Once again, readers might want to pause here to take their own "cultural inventory."

IV. Theological Perspectives

Every Christian is a theologian. We may not recognize that fact. We may deny that we think theologically—that we operate pastorally rather than theologically. But that very denial is already a kind of theology in itself. Our theology may be highly developed and articulated, or it may not be, but when we understand that the basic dynamic of theologizing is simply part of faith, we see how inescapable it is. The mark of a good pastor, as spiritual writer Henri Nouwen suggests, is how conscious she or he is of that dynamic in her or his life.³

Our theology shapes our world, and provides the framework for our spirituality. Depending on our understanding of God (judge, father, friend, Mystery), of Jesus (emphasis on his human nature, emphasis on his divine nature), of Mary (model disciple, the way to a basically angry God), the church (missionary community, hierarchical community) we get energy for ministry, make time for prayer, feel challenged, intimidated or discouraged.

Cuban American church historian Justo L. González speaks about three basic types of theology which can shape the way we look at the world and do ministry.⁴ González speaks first of "Type A" theology which has its source in the North African Roman lawyer Tertullian in the third century, and emphasizes order and, to a certain extent, law. God is the lawgiver; human sin is disobedience; Jesus came to bring the new law and to mend the gap between humanity and God by his obedience unto death. "Type B" theology goes back to Origen, the great scholar of Alexandria in Egypt. Steeped in Platonic philosophy, the focus of this type of theology is the mind's search for the truth, experimenting, even risking, using every rational and cultural means possible. In this type, God is the One, the contemplation of whom humanity failed to sustain and so needs to work its way back to; Jesus is the visible form of God, who helps us toward the goal of contemplation. "Type C" theology has its model in the Syrian bishop and pastor Irenaeus, exile and missionary to the frontiers of the Roman Empire in Lyons in Gaul (today's France). This is a pastoral theology, rooted in experience. For Irenaeus, God is the great Shepherd, who fondly cares for his sheep. God did not make the world perfect, as Tertullian conceived of creation; nor did human souls exist before creation in rapt contemplation of the

³See Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership in the Future* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

⁴Justo L. González, *Christian Thought Revisited: Three Types of Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).

Godhead, only to be distracted and fall into bodiliness. Rather, humanity was created imperfect but eminently perfectible, and Jesus shows us the way to achieve our full identity as made in God's image and likeness. Each type certainly implies a distinct spirituality: Type A might emphasize a spirituality of strict discipline; Type B might conceive spirituality as a journey in dialogue with the world's many cultures; Type C might conceive spirituality in terms of a relationship that needs to be cultivated. My own sense that Christians today still fall within one of these types, and this does indeed affect and form their spirituality—in this case, how they cope with cultural difference, with struggle and failure, with poverty or affluence.

As our theology becomes more and more conscious and explicit, it can become more and more consistent and self-critical. This is why the development of a mission spirituality is so closely connected with the articulation and critique of one's "operative theology." Is doctrine conceived more in the line of Type A, and so will breach no compromise as it is proclaimed cross-culturally? Is God a "fellow sufferer who understands," as Alfred North Whitehead once put it and which jibes with Irenaeus' image of a shepherd God? Is clarity on Jesus' divinity not all that important, as we struggle to understand the truth of Revelation in other religions? What kind of God will understand our failures in mission? What kind of church will encourage grassroots participation? These are theological positions we need to sort out to help us and guide us in our cross-cultural, missionary journey.

V. Mission Experiences

Once again, a spirituality is never developed in the abstract. Spirituality is always rooted in concrete circumstances, and concrete experiences. If a missionary is struggling with learning a language, for example, his struggle will precipitate a certain kind of prayer (abandonment, for patience), a certain kind of asceticism (study, humility in seeming like a child, risking sounding awkward, being corrected), the importance of certain Scripture passages (e.g. Mk 10:13-16, about becoming a little child; Jn 3:3 about being born again), the significance of certain missionaries from tradition (Cyril and Methodius and their important translation of the Bible, Matteo Ricci in China). If a missionary has been threatened with violence or death, or has experienced failure, or has after a long time been finally accepted by the people, all of these experiences will shape one's spiritual life.

It will be important for missionaries to share their experiences so as to be able to be aware of and articulate them better. Such effort doesn't need to stop when a missionary returns home. In fact, it is crucial that her or his experiences be told, and be appreciated. The search for such a support group and regular attendance at its meetings will be another way of cultivating a mission spirituality.

VI. Practices

Finally, although we have already spoken about them above, a mission spirituality is cultivated by commitment to certain basic practices. Contemporary theology has rediscovered

the importance of frequently repeated actions, actions which create habits.⁵ As we commit ourselves to particular times and forms of prayer, to ascetical practices, to regular forms of behavior, we are shaped by them in overt and quite subtle ways.

Any kind of spirituality involves the practice of regular prayer. That goes without saying. A mission spirituality, however, would make sure that the content of that prayer is one that reaches out to all the world. It might be one that uses the newspaper as a basic prayerbook. It is also a prayer that constantly calls to mind the people whom are served, with all their cultural richness. It will be a prayer of *kenosis* or self-emptying. It will be a prayer that, where appropriate, will use the forms and content of the other faiths among whom missionaries work.

A mission spirituality will practice a simplicity of life, in solidarity with the poor of the world. This may be a real challenge to those of us from more affluent countries, but it is essential.

The spirituality that we are reflecting on here might practice two kinds of asceticism. One would be a kind of “asceticism of risk.” By this I do not mean putting oneself in undue danger, courting violence or death for no good reason. This may be necessary, certainly (I think of missionaries like Dorothy Stang in Brazil), but this is not what I mean here. I mean rather a practice of choosing to be stretched in everyday matters—in terms of language, perhaps, or in terms of pastoral assignments, the kind of things one reads. My experience is that often in cross-cultural situations we opt to spend time with our own cultural or language groups, in our presbyteries and convents, eating familiar food. This “asceticism of risk” would be an option to move beyond our comfort zones—perhaps not all the time, but certainly some of the time.

A second kind of ascetical practice would be in the area of learning to listen rather than to talk. This is hard work. So often missionaries occupy a position of power and prestige. From this position, however, they often talk too much, and too soon. A common saying in the Philippines where I worked as a missionary years ago was that the new missionary should not say anything for at least six months to a year. Then he might venture a humble opinion once in a while. But the main thing is to listen, to observe. To learn to really hear what is being said—so often “between the lines”—to learn to really see what is going on in an unfamiliar context—this is a major exercise in self denial. But it will pay large dividends in the future.

Finally, although I am sure there are other practices that missionaries could engage in, it is important to have a mentor, a spiritual director, someone to talk to. Larry Nemer lays down the qualities of such a person. The mentor/director should first be one who can listen with an understanding heart: “someone who has time—someone who is willing to make [the missionary’s] experience the priority of the moment.” Second, the person needs to have wisdom and experience, and so able to advise the missionary on the “right way” to do something or other in a particular culture. Third, the director/mentor should be someone who is “serene, self-confident and not surprised by anything.”⁶ Our mission spirituality needs to be developed in dialogue, in real honest and openness.

⁵See, for example, Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002).

⁶Larry Nemer, “The Issues and Challenges of Cross-Cultural Mission in Promoting the Mission of the Church,” Unpublished presentation.

It might make sense at this point for the reader to reflect whether there might be any other practices that would promote a spirituality that will sustain and inspire the hard but amazing work of mission.

Conclusion

What I have tried to do in these reflections is to lay out a template within which men and women in various stages of missionary service—preparation, newly-arrived, veteran workers, those who have returned home or who are retired—can cultivate a spirituality that can sustain them, challenge them, console them, deepen them. Like spirituality in general, there is not one that works for everyone. And yet, any mission spirituality needs to be rooted in Scripture, in the Christian Tradition, and in human experience. As one works to discover how Scripture can inspire, how Tradition can challenge and anchor, and how human experience can continuously challenge, one will develop a mission spirituality suited for one's particular situation, and therefore conforming to the mind of Christ.

Discussion questions

Professor Bevans presented a template or framework for a missionary spirituality that includes:

- Scriptural foundation
- Missionary heroes and heroines
- Cultural assets and liabilities
- Theological perspective
- Mission experience
- Missionary practice

We will discuss just three:

- 1) Is there a scripture passage that defines or is foundational to your personal missionary spirituality?**
- 2) Who are your missionary heroes or heroines?**
- 3) Tell a story or give an example of your missionary practice.**