

The Spirituality of Apostolic Missionary Societies

Written by

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After having lived as a Missionary in many different contexts and exercised leadership roles in the Missionaries of Africa and now shepherding God's people in the Diocese of Wa (Ghana), some things that have inspired and nourished me spiritually as a Missionary of Africa are becoming clearer every day. They are some of the elements that I see as essential for a Missionary spirituality. In the Extraordinary Missionary Month that the Pope has decreed, a return to some of the sources of missionary spirituality can nourish us in God's mission.

I. Today's Complex Missionary situation

Many international Missionary Institutes are witnessing the decrease of vocations in Europe and the Americas and the increase in Africa and some coming from Asia, especially India. In this context, it is necessary to raise the awareness that the mission the Church has given to our Missionary Society should be owned and lived by all the members of the Society wherever they are. Thus, there is the need for collaboration between younger Provinces / Sections with younger confreres and older Provinces with experienced/aged and sick confreres. We have sought to promote what we might call an organic ecclesial solidarity.

Faced with the diminishing number of vocations it is tempting to be inward looking and seek ways of survival. Pope Francis, on the World Day of Consecrated Life (February 2, 2017) challenged us and asked us to reach out constantly as missionaries rather than planning our end and determining who will be the last one to switch off the lights. It is not enough to plan, in the light of a *theology of accomplishment*, how to transmit the charism to another group.

In the light of our success stories, we need to recognize how God has been active in and through us. We can still seek out ways of remaining faithful to how our Founders lived the Gospel and make it relevant for the world of today. As Apostolic Missionary Societies, our spirituality can only be rooted and nourished by the experience of being sent out by Jesus. According to Mark (3:14-15) there is a double purpose of the call / institution of the Twelve Apostles:

- that they should be with him; grow in discipleship in relation to a master;
- that they be sent out by him to preach in his name and drive out demons.

There is a time of being with the Master, sitting at his feet, learning from him. That is an essential part of discipleship and that precedes being sent out (Apostles). See the placing of sending out of the Twelve in Mark (6:6b-13.30-33).

Jesus' call of his disciples cuts across the conventional barriers and scandalizes some people¹. Think of Levi (Mk 2:14) and Peter (Lk 5:1-11). That is why and how we all got here, not by our own merit but by God's grace. We are not worthy but God's call makes us worthy of being disciples.

Jesus Sends out 72 Missionaries (Lk 10:1-12)

The sending of the 72 lay missionaries by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke does offer some elements of a missionary spirituality. This passage is unique in Luke. He situates it rather early on in the section on the journey to Jerusalem (Lk 9:51-19:48). This is an opportunity for Jesus to teach his disciples. The opening section of the Jerusalem Travel Narrative (Lk 9:51-10:42), for example, deals with discipleship from the perspectives of hearing and doing the Word! This word will be welcomed by some but refused by others. Although some suggestions are given as to the better answer, as reader we have to deal with some "narrative gaps". How do the potential disciples (Lk 9:57-62) who open the section respond to Jesus when he outlines the conditions of discipleship? How does the Jewish lawyer respond at the end of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37)? Do they accept the conditions and follow and act accordingly or do they walk away? By not indicating the answer, we as readers are invited to make our own answer to Jesus' invitation.

Before the Travel Narrative, Luke narrated the sending out of the Twelve Apostles in **Luke 9:1-6** which has parallels in Matthew (10:5-15) and Mark (6:6b-13). However, the instructions there (in the Lucan version) serve as the background for the instructions to the 72. When we look at what Jesus expects of them and we read the sending out of the 70/72², we notice that actually the instructions to the 72 are taken/inspired from those to the 12 and other teachings of Jesus on other occasions. For example, the giving of

¹ Francis J. Moloney, *Disciples and Prophets. A Biblical Model for Religious Life*, Mumbay, Saint Paul Publications, 1991, p. 137.

² The ancient MSS support 70 (MT) and 70 (LXX). From the text critical point of view, scholars like Kurt Aland Metzger, think that it is more like that because 70 was the commonly used number in the biblical tradition, it was easier to drop the "2" than to add it. So 72 must have been the original number in the text!

authority over unclean spirits is given to the Apostles (Lk 9:1) but not mentioned for the 72. However, when they make their report, we learn that they also exorcised in the name of Jesus (cf. Lk 10:17-20). Thus, they would have also been given this authority. The instructions given earlier on to the Twelve Apostles, therefore, are understood as applying to the 72 also.

This already alerts us to the fact that Missionary Apostolic Spirituality is not just for the “official missionaries” but really for all the baptized. Like the number of descendants of Noah (cf. Gn 10:2-31), representing the 72 nations of the world, this figure is meant to stress the fact that the message of the Gospel is meant for all. No people is to be excluded. The number 70/72 is actually symbolic. The boundaries of discipleship are pushed beyond Israel to involve all the peoples of the world. Our role as missionary societies would therefore be to keep alive the missionary flame in our local churches (those we come from or those to whom we are sent) so that we all better respond to this missionary vocation.

The sending of the 72 encapsulates what should be part of the spirituality of an apostle of Jesus or a Missionary Apostolic spirituality. This can be summarized with three S’s: simplicity, service and solidarity.

a) Solidarity (vv. 1-3)

One of the first things that is striking in this passage is that Jesus sends out his disciples as vulnerable people, *lambs among wolves* (v. 3) who will meet violence and rejection (Ac 14:19) but in the face of this opposition their message is to be one of reconciliation and peace. Isaiah 11:6 had foreseen a time when the lamb would lie with the wolf. This is the messianic time that has arrived, but that will have its hardships in spite of everything.

They go forth in pairs of twos ahead of him (cf. Mal 3:1) to places where he himself was to go. The fact that they are in pairs is often seen as a fact that their witness will be credible. The witness of two people is more credible than of just one person. However, we know that 2 people can agree to lie and it takes some sharp minds to discover where and how they are lying! The story of the elders and Susana is a classical one.

After reminding us of the double commandment – love of God and love of the neighbor – as the reason why they are sent out in twos, St Gregory the Great has the following commentary on the sending of the disciples:

The Lord sends his disciples out to preach in twos in order to teach us silently that whoever fails in charity towards his neighbor should by no means take upon himself the office of preaching³ ...

The fact that they are sent out in pairs is also so that they might support each other. They will be obliged to live what they preach by living it among themselves first of all. Thus, even before they open their mouths to speak, their personal life witness is a teaching for them. St Francis of Assisi is sometimes quoted as having said to his brothers: *preach always and if necessary use words.*

It is worth noting that Jesus sends them out as his precursors. They precede him but do not replace him. The disciple remains that, a disciple and not a new master.

b) Simplicity (vv.4-5a)

When Jesus sends out his disciples he instructs them not to take a bag, sandals, purse, etc. It is possible that these instructions are given because they are sent out to the neighbouring villages of Galilee and actually do not need much for this mission. However, given other emphasis in the Gospels and the call to trust in God, we can hear in this a call to trust God and to trust the people to whom we are sent. It is rare to hear that a priest who has gone out on mission to serve the people has died of hunger!

These instructions of Jesus, calling for simplicity in the manner in which we live our mission, is a reminder that we are not masters of the Mission but servants. That is, in fact the opening reminder. There is a master of the harvest and we are sent out as servants (v. 2.). The *harvest*, in Biblical terms is the time of judgement (cf. Is 17:9; Jer 13:24)⁴. If we are servants, arriving in power could obstruct the central focus about the mission. It might make people think that being a disciple of Jesus is about being dependent on rich and powerful missionaries. What happens when the missionaries are poor and do not have access to funds from elsewhere?

³ Cf. "Second Reading" of the Office of Reading for 18th October, Feast of St Luke.

⁴ Cf. Matteo Crimella, *Luca. Introduzione, traduzione e comment*, Torino, Edizione San Paolo, 2015, p. 193.

c) Service (vv. 5b-10)

Jesus gives a message to the disciples who are sent: they are to announce peace, heal and announce the nearness of the Kingdom of God. It is so urgent to announce it that even the Oriental habit of greeting comes second!

Peace, as we know, from the Hebrew *Shalom* - salvation, communal well-being, is a gift of God (cf. Numbers 6:26; Is 26:12; Lk 2:14) ; it involves the whole person from the material, economic, political and spiritual point of view. God desires that we have life and have it to the full (Jn 10:10). The Missionary, in Jesus' name, engages in whatever will promote peace and justice for the good of the people to whom he / she is sent. God offers his peace through his messengers that he sends and who work to promote harmony between people. Pope Paul VI said *if you want peace, work for justice!* This is still very real today. God's peace is offered concretely to houses /families before being **offered** to the whole city. Our contact is to be with real people and not a top-bottom proclamation.

In 1971, there was a Synod of Bishops on *Justice in the World*⁵. Taking place shortly after the Second Vatican Council, this Synod was the occasion for the Church to:

"to read the "signs of the times" by observing, analyzing and evaluating reality as they present themselves in a given context so as to respond effectively to the situation. It calls us to listen to "the cry of those who suffer violence and are oppressed by unjust systems and structures" (Justicia in Mundo [JM], n° 5).

A passage from this Synod that has been important for practically all Missionary Congregations and Societies and faith-based movements is that:

"action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation." (JM, n° 6).

This action for justice must address the *personal dimension of sin, the systemic dimensions and the structures of oppression*. In this light:

"those who reach out to developing countries in their development efforts to do so in justice and as cooperators so as to enable those they help become principal architects of their own economic and social development in accordance with their own culture" (JM, n° 71).

In carrying out the mission of God of promoting justice and peace wherever we are, of denouncing injustice, we unavoidably at times find ourselves in the *arena of conflict and*

⁵ Cf. <https://www1.villanova.edu/content/dam/villanova/mission/JusticeIntheWorld1971.pdf>

*eschatological engagement with diabolic forces*⁶. This invites us to be prudent and yet firm and to examine ourselves and ask for the grace of on-going conversion in order not to be undermining our own message. The healing brings the proclamation of the Kingdom all the more closer to the people. It is not an abstract proclamation but something that has a face.

d) The Response to the Proclamation (vv. 10-12)

From his own experience, Jesus is aware that not all will accept the message. Some will refuse it. This is part of the freedom that God gives to each person. Rather than trying by all means to impose themselves, the Apostles are to move on. That is what we see in the section on Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum (vv. 13-15). In spite of the miracles worked in their midst they do not believe. However, by failing to listen to those sent, they are refusing to listen to Jesus and to the one who sent him (v. 16).

Not all is lost. When the disciples return and announce what they have done, their success is a source of great joy for Jesus who declares them blessed (vv. 17-24). In a way they also come to know something of Jesus that the close circle of Peter, James and John had had during the Transfiguration experience. Through the humble works of Jesus and his disciples God manifests himself to his people. Even today!

III. Pope Francis' Apostolic Missionary Spirituality

Gleaning from a few of the writings of Pope Francis, we can get some orientation as to what a Missionary Apostolic Spirituality could look like. Right from his first *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Evangelii Gaudium [EG]*⁷, Pope Francis has reminded us that by virtue of our baptism we are missionaries and that the Church is missionary by nature.

*In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become **missionary disciples** (cf. Mt 28:19). All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized ... **Every Christian is a missionary** to the extent that he or she has*

⁶ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997, p. 411.

⁷ Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, Nairobi, Pauline Publications Africa, 2013.

encountered the love of God in Christ: we no longer say we are 'disciples' and 'missionaries', but rather that we are always 'missionary disciples (EG n° 120).

*The Church which 'goes forth' is a **community of missionary disciples** who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice. An evangelizing community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, he has loved us first (cf. 1 Jn 4:19), and therefore we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away stand at cross roads and welcome the outcast. Such a community has an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the Father's infinite mercy (EG n° 24).*

The Church is in permanent state of Mission (EG, n° 25) to share the joy of Good News. Our reform, restructuring should promote that.

*Today, as the Church seeks to experience a profound **missionary renewal**, there is a kind of preaching which falls to each of us as a daily responsibility ... Being a **disciple** means being constantly ready to bring the love of Jesus to others, and this can happen unexpectedly in any place: on the street, in a city square, during work, on a journey. (EG n° 127).*

During the year of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis invited Consecrated people to look that past with gratitude, live the present with passion and look the future with hope. This will be possible, he noted, if we listen to what the Spirit is saying to us and what the world is demanding of us as ministry. This is what discernment is about. It has to be ongoing for a disciple who is on a journey throughout his / her life.

IV. The Implications for Initial and Ongoing Formation

Tomorrow's missionaries are formed today in our houses of formation and in our seminaries. That is where we need to look at if we want the right type of spirituality to take shape. Through our formation programmes we try to pass on a type of spirit that we need as Missionary Apostles. The *New Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* gives us some directions on how to programme our initial and ongoing formation programme. It explicitly states the **four dimensions** that must be in formation: **human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral**. In a meeting with Superiors General in November 2013, Pope Francis insisted on creating the right type of atmosphere of trust between formators and candidates in the houses of formation so as not form "little monsters" for the Church.

Though the focus of the new *Ratio Fundamentalis* is the formation of the diocesan clergy, the document says things that are very important and that we can relate to. It clearly affirms that:

This Ratio is normative as regards the 'General Plan of Studies' also for those countries under the competence of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples. Moreover, the Rationes of the following entities must be conformed to the Ratio Fundamentalis, with the necessary adaptations: Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, dependent on the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples...⁸

Just as the Episcopal Conferences are expected to form their *Ratio Nationalis*, Societies of Apostolic Life are also expected to form theirs based on the *Ratio* of the Congregation for the Clergy, with the necessary adaptations.

A close look at the document shows that it amply takes inspiration from Pope Francis' missionary orientation. Just a few examples:

With regard to the **subject of formation**, the seminarian/candidate, the document says that:

[He] is called to 'go out of himself' to make his way, in Christ, towards the Father and towards others, embracing the call to priesthood, dedicating himself to work with the Holy Spirit, to achieve a serene and creative interior synthesis between strength and weakness (n° 20).

We can hear Pope Francis' call to reach out.

Since the entire people of God participates in the saving work of Christ, the candidate/seminarian is reminded that:

The unity and dignity of the baptismal vocation precede any differentiation in ministry (n° 31).

At the **end of his formation**, the following is expected of the **priest**:

*As member of the holy people of God, the priest is called to cultivate his **missionary zeal**, exercising his pastoral responsibility with humility as an authoritative leader, teacher of the Word and minister of the sacraments, practising his spiritual fatherhood fruitfully.*

⁸ Congregation for Clergy, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation. New Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (Nairobi, Paulines, 2017), p. 13.

*Consequently, future priests should be educated so that they do **not become prey to 'clericalism'** no yield to the temptation of modelling their lives on the search for popular consensus ... (n° 33).*

Priestly ordination requires, in the one who receives it, a complete giving of himself for the service of the People of God, as an image of Christ the Spouse.

*The priest is therefore called to **form himself so that his heart and his life are conformed to the Lord Jesus**, in this way becoming a sign of the love of God for each person (n° 40).*

*Priestly formation is a **journey of transformation** that renews the heart and mind of the person, so that he can 'discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect (cf. Rom 12:2).*

Personal accompaniment is important so that the

*seminarian should know himself and be known, relating to the formators with sincerity and transparency. Personal accompaniment which has **docibilitas** to the Holy Spirit as its goal, is an indispensable means of formation (n° 45).*

*Formation [- initial and ongoing is] one unbroken **missionary journey of discipleship** (n° 54).*

One is always a 'disciple' throughout the whole of life, constantly aspiring to configure oneself to Christ.

Community life is encouraged in the years of formation and afterwards (n° 51) since *the priest is a 'man of communion'* (n° 52).

By way of conclusion

These words of Pope Francis sum up what is taking shape more and more as a conviction. They say what our spirituality should be about:

***A true missionary, who never ceases to be a disciple**, knows that Jesus walks with him, speaks to him, breathes with him, works with him. He senses Jesus alive with him in the midst of the missionary enterprise. Unless we see him present at the heart of the missionary commitment, our enthusiasm soon wanes and we are no longer sure of what it is that we are handing on; we lack vigour and passion. A person who is not convinced, enthusiastic, certain and in love, will convince nobody (n° 266).*

Beyond all our own preferences and interests, our knowledge and motivations, we evangelize for the greater glory of Father who loves us (n° 267).

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