

MISSIONS

The term 'missionaries' appears at the start of the 17th century, meaning religious (members of a religious order or congregation) engaged in the conversion of pagans or in further christianising people in Europe who were already baptised. In the Middle Ages, the missionary apostolate had been associated with monks and with friars (Dominicans and the various kinds of Franciscans). In the sixteenth century it became the subject of theoretical reflection on the part of the Jesuits and in the seventeenth century it became part of the identity of a number of new congregations (Missionary congregation of St Vincent de Paul, the secular priests of the 'Missions Etrangères of Paris). The golden age was between 1800 and 1950, a period which saw the foundation of many congregations dedicated to foreign missions. The period gave birth to the image, which became very popular, of an itinerant missionary risking his life and health to bring the gospel to distant regions.

Spain, Portugal and Italy were on the crest of the first great wave of missionary activity. Aside from the Franciscan Ramon Lull and Francis of Assisi, then the Dominicans who evangelised Spanish America, the person who most perfectly embodies the missionary ideal of the early modern age is the Spanish Jesuit Francis Xavier, the 'apostle of Asia', canonised in 1622 with Ignatius Loyola. Another great model, from the early seventeenth century, is the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci, whose methods gave rise to lively controversies: he acquired a deep knowledge of Chinese culture and wanted to make it a basis for his evangelisation. From the seventeenth century on, France became increasingly important. It was the French Jesuits who came up with the idea of making available every year, to a wide public, missionary narratives under the title of *Relations*. After a brief intermission they started appearing again from 1702, under the title of 'Edifying and curious letters'. The new missionary orders which appeared in the seventeenth century, especially the Missions Etrangères and the Lazarists, imitated the Jesuit example.

These narratives gave form to the features that would characterise the missionary vocation, its spirituality, its methods of evangelisation and forms of religious action, and the ways in which all this was represented. Idealised by a prolific literary production, the missionary was presented as the principal agent around whom the entire mission was organised. Totally devoted to the 'salvation of souls', setting pagans on the path to life with God after death, he embodied the virtues that Catholicism celebrates: self-denial and the gift of self even to the point of martyrdom.

After the decline noticeable in the eighteenth century and the crisis following on the French Revolution, there was, paradoxically, a revival of missionary activity, in a paradoxical manner, took place in the 1830s. A new generation of Catholics, on whom the ordeals of the Revolution had left their mark, was imbued with the conviction that the salvation of souls was an urgent priority and that true universality was to be found only in Christianity. In a world whose frontiers had been widened by the progress of navigation and the circulation of travel narratives, the foreign mission became a privileged locus of Christian commitment. It carried an image of populations living in a state of material and spiritual deprivation (slaves, 'savages') and was closely bound up with preaching and caritative works. In three generations, French Catholic missionaries invaded every continent. According to an estimate made in 1901, France had at that time 38 missionary congregations totalling 7,400 members of religious orders, priests, or brothers, to which were added some 8,500 female religious. More women than men, a gap that would continue to widen in the 20th century.

The process of internationalisation of the recruitment of missionaries took off in the last third of the nineteenth century, and accelerated after the World War 1. It took the form of a diversification of recruitment within congregations of French origin, and of the foundation of new missionary societies in Europe and North America. In the 1930s, France still supplied a quarter of all missionaries, but Italy, Germany, the Low Countries, Belgium, Ireland, Spain and Switzerland made a contribution sometimes greater in proportion to the Catholic population of the countries in question. Each Catholic country produced its own national missionary personalities who were a focus of common emotion and of pride, for example, Père Libermann and Cardinal Lavigerie in France, Monsignor Comboni and Cardinal Massaja in Italy, Père Damian the apostle of lepers in Belgium, etc.

Though the missionary priest was indeed the person at the centre of the decision to send a mission, of its organisation, and of its representation in narratives, he was far from being an isolated figure. Alongside him worked, also, brothers who were not priests. Some belonged to large congregations devoted to missionary work, and took care of the material and economic side of the missions. Others, specialising in teaching, belonged to congregations composed of brothers only: the Brothers of the Christian Schools, the Marists, the Ploermel brothers, etc.

For a long time the foreign missions continued to be men's work, despite the initiative taken by Marie of the Incarnation, who in 1639 left for Quebec and set out to convert the original peoples through education. The importance of women grew

spectacularly in the nineteenth century thanks to the rise of female congregations. Certain women who founded orders, endowed with strong personalities (such as Marie de Javouhey, who founded the sisters of Saint-Joseph de Cluny in 1806, and Marie de la Passion, who founded the Franciscan sisters of Mary in 1877) were not afraid to show their independence of mind, refusing to take a passively subordinate role when collaborating with men or slavishly to obey ecclesiastical authorities. Sisters were entrusted with mission to women - thanks to their familiarity with domestic science - and with teaching, the running of dispensaries, and with home visits. They developed their own networks of periodicals and of financial support for their missions and promoted the missionary ideal through their schools in Europe and North America. They presented an image of unlimited devotion (leper houses, hospitals) and won the sympathy of public opinion. Their role was for a long time presented in writings about the missions as complementary but secondary, as being dependant of the work of male missionaries. Today the place of women is the theme of research which is completely revising our idea of female missionary activity.

For all the vitality of the missionary movement between 1850 and 1950, the number of foreign missionaries was much too small effectively to evangelise the populations among which they established themselves: around 30,000 missionaries, according to a count made around 1930, spread over three continents and two billion people! Missionary sources give the impression that they were everywhere, but we should not be taken in. In fact their establishments were very localised, with a limited influence on society. Recent studies have drawn attention to the central importance of local intermediaries, who were often the true missionaries of their regions. Catechists, village chiefs, local teachers thus constituted an unsung third circle of missionaries of which the written sources say little, but whose decisive importance has been revealed by research using the methods of oral history. According to statistics established by the *Propaganda fide* around 1935, there were about 3,500 missionary priests in Africa (a thousand of them in central Africa), and 8,000 missionary nuns (1,150 in central Africa). But 45,000 lay catechists were listed and the largest number of conversions was in central Africa where there were 25,000 catechists.

Starting in the inter-war period, the layperson ceased to be someone who merely provided indispensable support on the home front. The idea took hold that a layperson too could go on the mission, without joining a religious order as had been the case for some of them in the previous century. Thus, in the 1920s a new kind of missionary appeared, a calling for laypeople in university milieux who began to

began to organise themselves in Belgium (AUCAM) and in France (the *Ad lucem* association). Initially they were in demand for their medical expertise and organised themselves in associations. After World War 2, in the context of decolonisation and thanks to the ecclesiology of Vatican II, the vocation of laypeople expanded to include teaching, management, collaborating with parish activities, and supporting *Action Catholique* movements (Decree *Ad gentes*, 41). This new type of commitment flourished in the 1960s, and, so far as France was concerned, sometimes benefitted from legal provisions that allowed the missions to employ overseas young volunteers who commuted military to civil service. Defined as specialists assigned to work in developing countries rather than as colleagues or collaborators, professionals with a speciality - by contrast with traditional missionaries who were supposed to be able to turn their hand to anything - and employed for a fixed period, these missionaries marked a break from the classic missionary model.

The ideal of the missionary focussed on the conversion of pagans through his zeal and his meritorious works found itself, furthermore, in competition with the new religious ideals. At the start of the 20th century Charles de Foucault, a missionary who stayed in one place, bore witness to his faith through voluntary poverty, without attempting to convert anyone or doing good works. His influence, at first limited to a small number of people, exercised a strong attraction in the aftermath of World War 2, thanks to the writings of Père René Voillaume, and gave birth to a new set of religious congregations of brothers and of nuns. The foundation by Père Lebbe in Belgium of the *Société des Auxiliaires des Missions* also broke with the tradition of assigning a territory to a congregation (according to the procedure known as 'commission'), and the members of the society put themselves at the disposition of the new Churches.

The most radical critiques, however, manifested themselves in the period of decolonisation, calling into question the very presence of missionaries. The latter were accused of seeking to impose an alien religion which was destroying native culture, and of complicity with colonialism. After independence, they were suspected of being agents of neo-colonialism and of exercising through their activities a power which was in competition with and a threat to the state. Certain states imposed limits on the circulation of missionaries. States that became communist began systematic campaigns of arrests and expulsions (China, then South-East Asia). They were not the only ones to show hostility, witness the cases of Haïti in 1959, and of certain African states which, after independence, linked the Africanisation of the Church with the expulsion of foreign missionaries (Guinée in

1967, Congo Kinshasa) or the more targeted measures taken by Latin American dictators.

The reality of the links between coloniser and missionary strike the historian as being more complex than this indictment made it seem. Many forms of collaboration with the coloniser were compatible with the defence of the colonised populations. The missionaries were social and cultural intermediaries and played a major role in the modernisation and development of the societies in which they were established. Faced with nationalist movements, missionaries were on the whole favourable to the direction of political change, above all if it permitted native Catholic elites, educated in missionary schools, to take on responsibilities in the new states. After the states became independent, the great majority of missionaries cooperated with the papal policy of transfer of power to the native clergy, and put themselves without reservation at the disposal of the young Churches and the people they served.

Oral history has shown that the ambivalence of the role played by missionaries in colonial history was grasped by local people. In their eyes, the missionary belonged, because of his origin, to a different world, and his dream of assimilation into the local population came up against barriers that he could not cross; but he was not lumped together with other colonial actors because he also devoted himself to activities judged to be beneficial, and could take their part against the administration. This is no doubt why the calls at the time when the new states were becoming independent for a general expulsion of missionaries met such a feeble response from the Christians of the young Churches.

For all that, the existing missionary congregations, both masculine and feminine, did not disappear. By reaffirming the specificity of mission 'to all peoples', defined as the evangelisation of peoples who had never been christianised, or by throwing their weight behind aide to local Churches, they found their legitimacy. And the most important ones seem set to solve the question of recruitment. If the old style recruitment in traditionally Catholic countries has clearly dried up, the young Churches of Africa, of Asia, and of Oceania produce a growing number of vocations, to the point where one can speak of a reversal of the direction of travel, now from the South to the North, not to mention the movement between different Churches in the Southern hemisphere. The outcome is a profound transformation of the old congregations of religious, whose members are now from Africa and Asia.

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