

***The "Whys" of Twinning:  
Rooted in the Gospel...manifested through and in social justice***

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I'm (writing) not so much as an expert with great wisdom to share, but as a fellow seeker of wisdom; one who shares the need to know more about the meaning of being missionary; and about how to promote in the US Church a sense of global solidarity; and how to promote a living out of faith that is truly "catholic".

What I have to share with you is my reflections on those questions and issues and the work of my community. The Missionaries of the Precious Blood are a small Society of Apostolic Life- we are a mission sending community with about 500 priest and brothers working in 17 countries. My province-the Cincinnati province has an international membership with about 20% of the members working in Guatemala, Chile and Peru, the majority of whom are non-North Americans. That international flavor has informed our understanding of mission, ministry and Church.

Along with some other duties, I am the Mission Coordinator for our province. Traditionally, that job has been to do fundraising for our foreign missions; and that remains an important piece of the work. But recently we have placed an emphasis on promoting a sense of global solidarity through the fostering of North-South relationships- through twinning. For us, our parish twinning program is as much about how we want to approach the parochial apostolate in this country, as it is about how we want to support our foreign missionary efforts. We are a missionary community and we want our parishes to be missionary. Our province has members working in about 35 parishes in the US, and about a dozen of those are now in some sort of ongoing relationship with a parish, a faith community or a ministry in our missions. Some of those relationships are based in the more traditional model of "doing charity" and is primarily a financial commitment; others better reflect my community's vision of a twinning program.

My (goal) is to set up (a basis for) dialogue and group work, by suggesting a theological framework for parish twinning. That framework will include a simple ecclesiology and model of missionary activity. What I'm sharing with you is basically the presentation that I make when speaking with pastors and parish council about twinning. I'll end by describing my community's parish twinning program; not as the definitive model for this activity, but as a jumping off point for our dialogue.

**The Heroic Model**

When I speak with our parishes (pastors/parish councils/mission committees) about parish twinning- I usually begin by asking them: "What does it mean to be missionary?" While a variety of answers will be offered, by and large, the image of a missionary that emerges is of the man or woman that makes the huge personal sacrifice and goes to the far off place to preach the Gospel to the pagans. Missionaries are those who live among "others", among "strangers" in a foreign culture and language. Missionaries are those who choose to suffer the hardship of living with and like the poor. People describe the missionary in heroic terms and we can call this the heroic missionary model.

For many centuries this has been a very accurate description of the missionary activity of the Church. Part of the myths of my own community is we tell the story of the initial group of missionaries that came to the US in 1843. We tell with pride their stories of personal hardship- of the hard physical labor of clearing land and building churches and convents, their pioneer spirit. These were good men and women of faith who answered the call to help build the Church in the Ohio valley.

After they have described the missionary and his/her work- I then ask them: So, what is the role of the people in the pew; how do they participate? Their answer is always the same: We pay for it! Their job is to pay the

freight. They see their call as giving charity in support of the work of the Church. Catholics are great at this- this is a lesson that we have drummed into the average guy in the pew. Catholics give generously in support of missionary work. Probably everyone here remembers giving pennies to save pagan babies. Or more recently, Operation Rice Bowl. We are great at taking up second collections and every year an incredible amount of financial support reaches the missions because of the Mission Cooperation Plan and other collections. Catholics have been and continue to be very charity motivated in support of the missionary work of the Church.

So historically, the heroic missionary model has been the dominant approach to this ministry and the traditional role of the laity has been to support it financially. Without meaning to denigrate the historical approach or to suggest that it has completely changed, a new model of missionary activity seems to be emerging that is based on a post-Vatican II understanding of Church.

### **The Humble Model**

I believe that there are two characteristics of a Post-Vatican II ecclesiology that are relevant for (this presentation). First, in Vatican II ecclesiology we find two prevalent images of Church: the Church as the People of God and the Church as the Body of Christ. And secondly, we no longer think of the Church as *having* a mission; rather, we must think of the Church as *being* a mission.

Let's look only briefly at these images of Church, because for us they are very familiar, but the implications are important for understanding the missionary endeavor.

The foundational scripture for the image of the Church as the Body of Christ is found in Paul's first letter to the Corinthian. There, in chapter 12, Paul instructs the Church that we are like a body. Though a body has many parts, there is a unity in being one body. Though we have many different gifts and calls, we are united by the one Spirit that is given to all. Regardless of our role in the Church, Paul tells us that we are all members of the one body of Christ.

Another scripture passage that expressed that notion of the "oneness" of the Church can be found in Paul's plea for unity in Ephesians:

"Make every effort to preserve the unity which has the Spirit as its origin and peace as its binding force. There is just one body and one Spirit, just as there is but one hope given all of you by your call, There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and father of all, who is over all, and works through all, and is in all." (4:3-6)

There is just one body of Christ- there is just one people of God. That is the universal nature of the Church and the implication of that is the call to global solidarity.

In 1997 the USCC released this document- *Called to Global Solidarity: International Challenges for U.S. Parishes*. (I'm sure that many of you are familiar with the document and in this talk when I reference the bishops, I'm citing this document.) In it we read: "We are members of a universal Church that transcends national boundaries and calls us to live in solidarity and justice with the peoples of the world. We are also citizens of a powerful democracy with enormous influence beyond our borders. As Catholics and Americans we are uniquely called to global solidarity." (pg. 1)

The bishops acknowledge that the call to global solidarity is a great challenge to our parishes. They recognize that "parishes often act as islands of local religious activity rather than as parts of the mystical body of Christ." (pg. 1) And the challenge is that at the parish level, where the Church lives, we need to integrate more fully the reality of being a universal Church. That it has to go beyond just adding another program to the parish activities; rather the universal nature of the Church has to be integrated into the way the parish prays, educates, serves and acts.

The bishops say : "A parish reaching beyond its own members and beyond national boundaries is truly a 'catholic' parish." (pg. 1) When I speak with parishes I tell them: they don't need to do parish twinning to be faithful. But unless they have some significant focus outside meeting the needs of their parish members; unless there is some significant ministerial activity and commitment to a mission beyond caring for itself and its parish members, it is not a "catholic" parish. As the bishops put it: "A parish's "catholicity" is illustrated in its willingness to go beyond its own boundaries to extend the Gospel, serve those in need, and work for global justice and peace." (pg.5) That's the measure of their "catholicity". It is not- how spirited is their Sunday worship is or how exactly they follow the rubrics? It is not- How strong is the sense of family? It is not measured by the number of participants in parish groups or activities. The measure of parishes' "catholicity" is their commitment and involvement in mission. When I speak with parishes I like to echo the challenge: "Parishes need to be more Catholic and less parochial." (pg.5)

I think that in the document, [*Called to Global Solidarity: International challenge to U. S. Parishes,*] the bishops reflect an understanding of Church that goes beyond seeing the Church as **having** a mission, to a belief that the Church **is** a mission. There is no purpose for the Church beyond the carrying on the mission of Jesus. That is our identity as a people of God; as the body of Christ; a Church of disciples. Every aspect of what we do as a Church has to reflect that understanding, that self-identity. That is a great challenge to most parishes.

When I speak with our parishes I often remind them that the pre-Ascension command of Jesus, where he entrusted his mission to the disciples, was:

"All power has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them ... and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age." (Mt 26-18-20)

The command was not: Go and form small faith communities; hold hands and pray together and support one another. Of course, it is OK to do that-but that is not the mission that is the Church.

For most parishes, for many pastors whose ministry is dominated by parochial administrative concerns, embracing global solidarity requires a huge paradigm shift. We find in the book of Isaiah an image that can help them to make that shift. "Enlarge the site of your tent and let the curtains of your home be stretched out; do not take back; lengthen your ropes and strengthen your stakes." (Is 54:2) A truly catholic parish is one that is willing to pitch a bigger tent; to stretch out the fabric of their concern to make room for brothers and sisters that live outside their old boundaries. It doesn't mean that they discard the many other elements of the parish life that people find spiritually enriching. Rather, for most parishes, a commitment to mission is to expand their self-identity as a parish; to create a little more room in their hearts and consciousness.

If our images of the universal Church are: being the people of God; being the body of Christ; and being a mission- what does that say about the missionary work of the Church?

Along with the emergence of a new Vatican II ecclesiology, there has been a shift in missiology- a new model in the Church's approach to living out the missionary command of Jesus. I'd like to suggest three important shifts in understanding that results in what can be called the humble model of missionary activity.

The first important shift brought about by a changing ecclesiology has been that the missionary call is shared by the whole Church and is not just a call given to only a few, usually members of the religious congregations. The missionary task is no longer restricted to men and women religious. Others also find a missionary element to the baptismal call and work as lay missionaries. While not unheard of in previous years, the growth in lay involvement in this ministry is a more recent phenomenon.

While still relatively few may experience the personal vocation of being a foreign missionary, this shift in understanding underlines the need for all the baptized to be a participant in the mission that is the Church and the importance of all Church institutions, like parishes, to be involved in the mission. As the bishops write:

"This is not a work for a few agencies or one parish committee, but for every believer and every community of faith." (pg. 5)

That is the first shift- missionary activity is the responsibility of the whole Church.

A second shift that forms a new missiology is the shift away from believing that the missionary "has God and takes God to the pagans"; to recognizing that Christ is already present in the mission Church and recognizing and supporting the inculturation of Christianity in a particular local Church. This is important when we talk about parish twinning, which is between established faith communities and not the work of initial evangelization. For my community- our twinning relationships are in Chile which is 89% Catholic, Peru is 80% and Guatemala about 50% Catholic. Today, the missionary activity is not just about evangelizing, but it also about being willing to be evangelized. A missionary is challenged not just to 'be Christ to others', but to have a heart that is able to recognize the presence of Christ in those to whom he or she was sent and to be willing to allow those that they encounter to be Christ to them.

In the past, much of the missionary apostolate was thought of as a rich Church handing down charity to a poor Church. Consequently, the relationship between the mission sending Church and the recipient Church was viewed as a relationship between superior and an inferior and missionary work would be characterized as being paternalistic or maternalistic. But when missionary work arises out of a Vatican II ecclesiology, then the desired relationship is one where there can be a mutual sharing of gifts within the body of Christ. We seek to recognize, embrace and nurture a relationship with the mission Church as a relationship between equals. That is the second shift.

The final shift that forms a new missiology arises out of global economic awareness. Today, missionary work takes place in a world that has been drawn together by the globalization of markets, communications and transportation. An effect of that globalization is that our economic interdependence has been laid bare and there is a growing realization that often the "haves" of the world, have at the expense of the "have-nots". As the bishops put it: "Global economic forces empower some and impoverish many." (pg. 2)

We, in the U.S., are among those who benefit from that economic system. This is not an accusation of personal guilt, but a recognition that the economic system is stacked in our favor. Let me give an example. This past January I was in Guatemala and visited a coffee finca/plantation that had a processing plant. There in the gift shop, I could buy a pound of their export quality coffee at the inflated tourist price of about three dollars. As I was flying out, in the gift shop at the airport I found the same coffee on sale for about four dollars. I haven't found it here in the US-but I'd guess that at Starbucks I would probably have to pay, maybe six dollars, for that pound of coffee. Now the peasant who picked the coffee beans gets paid three or four cents a pound. By working hard all day, he will earn three to four dollars, which even the government recognizes as being below what is necessary for subsistence. Now, wouldn't we all gladly pay an extra four cents for a pound of coffee to double that Guatemalan family's standard of living? Of course we would. But of course, he wouldn't receive the extra four cents. That's the economic system, and while we would not choose to exploit that peasant worker in Guatemala, we have to realize that we benefit from the injustice done to him by the economic system.

With that understanding, giving money to the missions isn't viewed as giving charity. Rather, I think we have to view it as act of solidarity to correct an economic imbalance; to address an injustice. That is an important shift in our understanding of our mission activity and is sometime difficult for people to accept. We usually feel good about ourselves when we give charity to others; it shows that we are good people. It can be uncomfortable to realize that we have benefited from an injustice and have to make it right.

### **Being in Solidarity**

In my talks with parish groups, I sometimes ask those who are parents if they think that they are giving charity when they buy clothes for their children. Of course, they don't think of that as charity. They'll say that they are just using their family resources to meet the needs of the family. Well, when we recognize the mission Church as part of "us", then our sharing of resources is not going to be viewed as charity, but simply the using of our resources for our needs. Being in solidarity means that we re-define our understanding of "us" so that it better reflects our theology of the Church as the body of Christ.

These three shifts in our understanding of mission,

1. That the whole Church has to be missionary
2. That missionary activity must be relationships between equals, where the presence of God is recognized and the inculturalization of Christianity is encouraged
3. And, that the financial component of missionary activity is about justice, not charity

brings about a shift in missiology from the heroic model to the humble model. That is not to say that sacrifice is not required of the missionary- we all can tell contemporary stories of the heroic faith and commitment of missionaries. But it requires humbleness to be in mutual relationship. It requires the humility to recognize and accept the gifts that the mission Church has to give the mission sending Church.

A great gift that the mission Church offers us is their powerful witness of faith. I saw this articulated best in an interview with Bishop Macram Max Gassis, in *America* magazine. Bishop Gassis was speaking about the reality of the Church in Sudan, where an estimate 2 million people have been killed since 1983. He said:

"We are called a 'recipient church', and we are. And the Church in the U.S. says that it is a 'donor church'. And it is. But aren't we also a donor church? What about our blood-the blood of our martyrs? What about the suffering of our children? We donate these realities to the universal Church. So I think that we are giving more than we are receiving-because we are giving our lives."  
(*America*, Jan 15-22, 2000)

Perhaps one of the greatest gifts that the mission Church can give us, is that in its witness of faith, they hold up to us a mirror that allows us to examine our own lives of faith. As we come to know brothers and sisters of faith from a culture other than our own, we learn of new ways of understanding the Scriptures; we see new models of being a parish community; we encounter experiences of God's interaction with God's people that are different from our own. And in the relationship with the mission Church we can see how our own experiences of faith and Church are bound by our own culture and fail to fully express the richness of the relationship between God and God's people. If we approach the missionary activity as a mutual sharing within the body of Christ, then in our desire to evangelize, we receive the gift of being evangelized; of having our faith renewed.

That is probably the greatest benefit that a US parish receives through twinning- it renews the parish. But the motivation for entering the twinning relationship has to come from a desire to faithfully represent a Vatican II understanding of Church and a willingness to accept their responsibility for participating in the missionary activity of the Church. Parish twinning reflects a Vatican II ecclesiology and this understanding of the missionary activity of the Church. For a U.S. parish to enter into an ongoing relationship with a faith community in the missions is to choose to embrace a new way of being parish. It is a choice that can renew the parish.

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