

# Ambition Versus Folly : The Existential Tension in Mission

Peter said, 'I have neither silver nor gold, but I will give you what I have : in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene...' (Ac. 3:6).

As ambition in life so achievement of life! To exercise one's potential to the full and to become fully what one is existentially and constitutively like a seed sprouting and growing into a fruit-bearing tree - that is ambition and has everything to recommend for it! Ambition therefore, as Kahlil Gibran has expressed somewhere, is a sort of work, indeed life-work! But it can be vitiated as all basic urges of life can be. How rightly Laotzu had remarked long ago : "Ambition wanders blind!" So then, as there is innate, existential, and therefore ideal ambition which is the very principle of life and growth there is also the devious kind of ambition that consists in merely making a name for oneself and often enough making for one's ruin!

## The problem of ambition

To tell the difference between the one and the other is no easy task, and therein lurks the temptation for missionaries as for others. Did not Christ himself face such a temptation right at the threshold of his unique mission of *being* the Son of God (Mt 4:3, 6)? Besides this problem of discernment regarding ambition there is the fundamental, existential problem. If ambition, even of the right kind, has to do with one's own self how does it square with the missionary existence which is an experience of "standing down" to be at the disposition of the sender<sup>1</sup>, and even of

1. See E. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus, An Experiment in Christology*, (London, 1983), p. 488.

making way for another existing in oneself and so in a way despoiling one's own self?

Given this vital problem, one can wager that a true missionary is a rare find and the false one is the usual kind met with anywhere! Here is an unselfconscious self-description of the former :

It is my mission as a pilgrim to act as a messenger expressing spiritual truths. It is a task which I accept joyfully, and I desire nothing in return, neither praise or glory, nor the glitter of silver and gold. I simply rejoice to be able to follow the whisperings of a Higher Will...

There was a time...when I died, utterly to myself. I have since renounced my previous identity. I can see no reason to dwell upon my past, it is dead and should not be resurrected. Don't inquire of me - ask about my message. It's not important to remember the messenger, just remember the message<sup>2</sup>.

Contrast this with the chain description of the false missionary :

He (or she) is a traitor who uses the Gospel as a threat to extract money... a hypocrite who uses the cross as a sword... a wolf disguised in a lamb's skin... a glutton who adores the tables more than the altars... a gold-hungry creature who runs after the rolling coin

2. Anonymous, *Peace Pilgrim* (Santa Fe, 1994), p. 126. An example of just the opposite case is John of Vicenza, O. P., one of the leading figures in the Italian revival of 1233, who fell into such madness that he believed he could work miracles on his own independent of God. See S. Tugwell, *The Way of the Preacher* (London, 1979), p. 37.

to the farthest land .. a cheat who pilfers from widows and orphans<sup>3</sup>,

in sum, if we may add, a Judas whose ambition runs counter to Christ's. Missioners who fit this inglorious description surely make their mark hitting the headlines but no less surely miss the mark woefully, because they serve themselves in their mission and attain their purposes by hook or crook nourished necessarily by "ambition that should be made of sterner stuff"<sup>4</sup>, reminiscent in recent history of some fundamentalists or extremists with marked megalomania buttressed by violence.

Missioners of the right and worthy kind, on the contrary, who are alive to their existence as people sent on a mission have no personal interests, parallel or even subsidiary, like Gideon or Saul. All their ambition is to live their missionary existence to the full letting their message spread abroad and so make a name for their sender. Thus they go about their life—canvassing<sup>5</sup> not for themselves (which is so despicable that no one will admit it openly) but for the person behind their life of mission. That is the way they make their way in life, in mission life apart from which they know or have no life of their own. Surely they can speak in their own name thus :

...as God had entrusted his Gospel to us as to faithful ministers, we were anxious to please God...rather than men. We never pleased you with flattery...nor did we try to earn money... We did not try to make a name for ourselves among people, either with you or

3. Kahlil Gibran, *Spiritual Sayings of Kahlil Gibran*, tr. and ed. A. R. Ferris (New York, 1970), p. 60.

4. W. Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act III, Scene II.

5. The word "ambition" comes from the Latin *ambitio*, meaning canvassing.

anybody else, although we were messengers of Christ and could have made our weight felt (1 Th 2:4-7, Christian Community Bible).

Having quoted with approval Paul's missionary interest in the commissioning God alone rising above any selfish considerations, one may still have qualms about his concluding remark claiming his missionary prestige (which however he did not choose to use!) and so going back on his confession of pure, disinterested divine mission. However this quarrel with Paul may be viewed, does this not bring to focus the inherent danger of ambition in mission broached earlier?

### **AMBITION RIVETED ON GOD**

#### **By mission of faith**

The first person in biblical history entrusted with a divine mission, namely Abraham, was, fortunately a person who did not cherish any personal ambition. The experience of egoistic ambition is alien to faith and it was faith that characterized Abraham. By means of his faith his righteous ambition was riveted on God. By faith it was that he, together with his wife, sought to carry out the mission of blessing given them by God: the mission of begetting a great nation and becoming a source of blessing for all nations (Gn 18:18-19). His readiness to sacrifice his only son Isaac through whom his name was to be carried on was a proof that in his original, inaugural mission of faith he set his mind not on himself but on God and God's word and God's power. Thus by faith he sought to establish, not himself but his God, letting God be God, surprising and promising, faithful and powerful, inscrutably testing but effectively intervening in blessing; and thus worked out his mission. While glad to be part of the mission show of God he was not one to steal the display from God and make it his personal show!

**By mission of friendship**

The first person in Christian history entrusted with a divine mission was John the Baptist as witnessed by the earliest and latest Gospels (Mk 1:1-4; Jn 1:6). If ever there was any one missionary who had the utter consciousness of having been sent and so lived as such to the core it was none else but he! Jesus' own testimony to him was a prophet and more, indeed *the* messenger sent by God, and thus arguably, despite the hesitation of some<sup>6</sup>, the greatest human being (Mt 11:9-10). So John the evangelist could not introduce him better than saying in words suggestive of the identity of his being with his mission :

A man came, sent by God.

His name was John (Jn 1:6).

Whenever people marvelled at the new unheard-of mission exercised by the Baptist he disabused them of their enthusiasm over him and maintained his characteristic place of being no more than the forerunner to the greater one to come. In living up to his mission which was indeed subsidiary it was the most natural thing for him to grow less (Jn 3:30), knowing his own place relative to Jesus and so yielding place to Jesus. The humility that people would recognize in his ready admission that he was not fit to undo the strap of the sandals of Jesus (Jn 1:27), was for him real dignity that just suited his sense of mission! Further it was indeed the basic reality of his very existence! Thus fulfilling the ambition of his life and mission, he had the full happiness in his life as well as mission both constituting one reality. His sentiments therefore he could express in terms of the bridegroom's friend filled with joy at the bridegroom's voice (Jn 3:29). His ambition therefore was

6. See the commentary on Mt 11:7-10 in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. R. E. Brown *et alii* (Bangalore, 1990), n. 42 : 73, p. 653.

not that he should be independently great—greater than the great one he himself announced—but that he should know the great joy of his life fulfilled precisely by the lesser mission of precursor according to the mind of the one above who had sent him as announced earlier (Is 40:3 Mt 3:1). Such is his missionary identity for all its lime-light, characterizing him as true and glorious in his life mission.

To the surprise of many a missionary the artist Jyoti Sahi has captured it all in his puzzling picture of John by presenting Jesus in the foreground and portraying John himself as a small figure in a corner pointing directly to Jesus!

### **By mission of Sonship**

In the original gospel mission which Jesus initiated at the behest of his Father he sought no glory of his own (Jn 8:50), setting it at naught at every opportunity. After all he knew as no one else did that real glory is of the divine sphere (Is 42:8), and so even being *the* Son of God, he would not, in his human mission, assume or arrogate it to himself for whatever reason (Mt 4:1-11), unlike Adam, the lesser son of God (Lk 3:38). Rather he would acknowledge his derived glory at once of his being and mission :

I have my being from him  
and it was he who sent me (Jn 7:29).

As for human glory his stand was anything but conventionally human as instanced by his flight from being crowned king (Jn 6:1-15)! So he could, in the face of innuendoes against him, declare with calm aplomb : "Human glory means nothing to me" (Jn 5:41). In this he was like the ideal Cynics, as against the Sophists of antiquity; but unlike them known for high philosophy he spoke simple theology : namely, the word of God and the word about God and the word from God. Such was his conviction about his divine mission that he could insist :

**My teaching is not from myself;  
it comes from the one who sent me (Jn 7:16).**

Equally he had his express aim in his mission: knowing that any mission such as his was primarily God's, and so never doing anything of his own accord (Jn 8:28), he could make his self-assured claim:

**When someone speaks on his own account,  
he is seeking honour for himself;  
but when he is seeking the honour of the person who  
sent him, then he is true  
and altogether without dishonesty (Jn 7:18).**

Further he could even charge his opponents that because of their penchant for mutual praise they were in no mood to recognize the true messenger of God in his person with his characteristic interest and rootedness in the glory of God (Jn 5:43-44).

But did he not at times speak of his own glory? Surely, and when he did so he was contemplating nothing but how God used him gloriously for his mission, or better still, made him part of his glorious mission. Simply put, his mission from God was itself his glory. In other words his glory that he had in mind was simply glory in his mission: i. e., the perfect realization of his mission assigned to him by his very God. Perhaps the best related instance is the paradoxical opening of his prayer at the Last Supper. Away from the suspicious crowd closeted together with his disciples who were going to inherit his mission, he had no fear of even praying, "Father, glorify your Son" because his ultimate prayer was: "so that your Son may glorify you" (Jn 17:1)! In other words, to the extent he was true to the identity of his being, i. e. truly ambitious in the best sense of the word, he would be true to his mission.

Such ontologically based mission necessarily succeeds redounding of course to God's glory and no less to God's missioner! Here we light upon something of what may be called missiological ontology that will emerge hopefully more clearly in what follows.

### **The last lesson in mission**

If Abraham and John are age-old paradigms of rightly ordered ambition in mission Jesus is altogether of a class apart! He was the very paragon of the right interplay of high ambition and pure mission!

His successors in mission came nowhere near him in his life-time. They were too much full of themselves and of their world. Not only did they entertain thoughts of special privilege for themselves as a group (Mt 19:27; Lk 9:54) but even within the group did they nourish feelings of precedence, superiority, and consequent rivalry in their hearts in relation to one another which at times erupted into the open (Mk 10:35-41; Lk 9:46; 22:24). If there was one thing in which they needed a last lesson from Jesus before his departure from them it was in the matter of their ambition in the context of their one common mission. And so Jesus washed the feet of his disciples to teach that lesson, *the final lesson not in humility as such but in mission*, a lesson that climaxed the first lesson warning them, when flushed with success, of the danger of falling like Satan (Lk 10:18).

To grasp this one must read the account of the washing in the light of its introductory verse: "Jesus, knowing that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father, having loved those who were in the world, loved them to the end" (Jn 13:1). This is a summary of the mission of Jesus: if the Father had handed over all to the Son-agent it was for the purpose that by his life and death he might save all in love, in particular his disciples destined to be

partners in his own mission<sup>7</sup>. It was *with this consciousness of his mission and so free from all thought of self* that in an act of finality he chose prophetically and dramatically to wash the feet of his disciples and so to carry out his mission and at the same time to imprint in their hearts the one way of mission that he had himself inherited from his Father : the urge or outpouring within his self which was expressive of the love of the Father exercising the mission of sharing the fullness of life with others.

### HISTORICAL BETRAYAL OF MISSION

But it is a sad commentary on the apostles that they were not to imbibe until much later his spirit of mission ambition inspired by none else than the living source of the mission, namely the sender and the sender's own mission and vision! Fortunately after the resurrection both the Apostles and their collaborators appear in a far more favourable light in the way they go about their ministry. All their ambition is now centered on Jesus, their sender, as Jesus' was on his Father! Jarring their new experience of their mission a man like Simon, the converted magician, appears on the scene wanting to buy a share in their mission, and become an astounding missionary in his own right, without any proper appreciation of mission as such with its source in the divine sender, accounting ultimately for everything else in the mission (Ac 8:18-21)!

Though such an event is far from being the usual happening in the apostolic period of witness, still the period of the first missions is not without its own incidents of mixed ambitions surrounding missionary activity. Paul himself is not completely above blame in this respect. Does he not quarrel with Barnabas regarding Mark as a companion for their second mission in 50 A. D. (Ac 15:36-39)? Perhaps

7. See *idem.* n. 61:172, p. 973; also the *The New Jerusalem Bible*, note Jn 13b, p. 1775.

learning from his own mistake he cautions, Corinthians and Romans, later around 57, in general terms, about the ego-centric jealousy and competitiveness in the exercise of their charismatic mission (1 Co 12:1-11; Rm 12:3-13). Roughly about the same time he shares with Philippians, more concretely about right and wrong ambitions that can take hold of people involved in mission :

Some in their preaching of Christ are actuated by envy and strife; some by goodwill. The one preach from love... the other proclaim Christ for their own partisan purposes, not with pure motives. What then? The only result is that in every way, whether as a cloak for other purposes, or whether in truth, Christ is proclaimed. And in this I rejoice (Ph 1:15-18, Barclay).

So even as Paul rejoices in the progress of mission because Christ comes to be proclaimed by some somehow or other there are others who engage in mission because of envy and strife (*eris*), which are clear symptoms of dishonest ambition (*eritheia*), pure and simple! It is with such low motives of promoting their name and fame that those who are not friendly to him, work harder at their mission when he is forced in his confinement to abandon his usual vigorous mission.

As in the initial age of mission, so in every succeeding one up to the present the Church has known the tension of mission ambition in its purity as well as depravity.

In the second and third centuries Jonah seemed to have caught the fancy of Christians in their mission outreach to others, as can be inferred from his representations in the catacombs<sup>8</sup>; and surely the symbol of Jonah, for all

8. See J. Saldanha, *Patterns of Evangelization in Mission History* (Bombay, 1988), p. 18.

his wayward mission, stood paradoxically for the real, pure mission practised by Jesus (Mt 12:38-41)! Whatever might have motivated the new entrants into the Church, the Fathers of the Church in general had their mission perspective right as may be illustrated by the remark of Cyril of Jerusalem in the fourth century: "You become Christians, one to win a friend and another to marry a rich wife. However, by all means come, for it is Jesus who casts the bait"<sup>9</sup>.

But once Constantine favoured Christianity paving the way for it to become the state religion Christian mission was in danger of being tainted with power, politics and power politics. This would be the lamentable state of affairs more or less from the fifth century right up to the present. For instance in the period 500 to 1500 when kingdom after kingdom became Christian in Northern and Eastern Europe the Christian rulers fostered the missionary enterprise, using Christianity as a tool for their own domination, employing at times such military religious orders as what were popularly called the Brothers of the Sword! This *missions politik* so contrary to the nature of mission as a divine, and not regal, assignment continued, though not so crudely but more subtly, in the colonial period stretching from the middle of this millenium to the middle of this century. A clear instance of it was Portugal's royal patronage by which the country claimed national responsibility for missions overriding the charge of the Church universal even, leading at times to the exclusion of Spaniards from the Jesuit mission in India. Though a mission innovator like A. Valignano, coming in the years after Francis Xavier, took his stand against the national trend in missions<sup>10</sup>, and much later the Propaganda officially instructed the missionaries to be not

9. See J. Schmidlin, *Catholic Mission History* as in J. Saldanha, *Patterns*, p. 29 (emphasis added).

10. See J. F. Schutte, *Valignano's Mission Principles for Japan*, Vol. 1 (Anand, 1980), pp. 88-89.

national but Christian wholly<sup>11</sup>, the mission of Christianity in general came to be synonymous with denationalization in the minds of the colonized, whether in Japan or Philippines or India or Americas. Robert de Nobili (1577-1656), a contemporary of Valignano, had reason to lament: "The Portuguese wanted to make those whom they brought to the faith, not only Christians but also Portuguese"<sup>12</sup>. Even two centuries later the mission situation had not much changed for the better. Gandhi was not being untrue when he sized up Christianity in India "as synonymous with materialistic civilization and imperialistic exploitation by the stronger white races on the weaker races of the world"<sup>13</sup>. So mission for all practical purposes transpired to be part of a power structure of greedy and aggrandizing nations full of national ambition and glory.

Like the different nations competing for their glory so also have the different Churches carried on "divine beauty contests", to use an expression of the Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama. So W. Buhlmann could say with his usual trenchancy at a symposium in India:

Instead of giving non-Christians the choice of saying Yes or No to Jesus Christ, we have degraded this option into a choice between many rival Churches

11. The old, bold instruction reads thus: "Do not in any wise make any attempt to persuade those people to change their rites, customs and ways, provided they are not very manifestly contrary to religion and morals. For, what is more absurd than to introduce France, Spain or Italy, or any other part of Europe into China? It is not these things, but the faith that you must bring in..." See J. Saldanha, *Patterns*, p. 68.
12. See P. Dahmen, *R. de Nobili, L'Apotre de Brahmes*, as in J. Saldanha, *Patterns*, p. 68.
13. *Young India*, March 21, 1929 as in M. K. Gandhi, *The Message of Jesus Christ* (Bombay, 1971), pp. 57-58.

often equivalent to a choice between the English, French, Belgian or American power<sup>14</sup>.

To cite an example from North East India with its sizeable Christian population, a Baptist minister was once heard during a Church festival, for which he had borrowed a microphone from the neighbouring Catholic parish, exhorting his people to stand firm in their new-found faith and warning them, if ever they should leave their faith, not to join the Catholic Church<sup>15</sup>! That the Catholic Church itself in its long history has not been above such antagonism or rivalry, can be inferred from the warning given in a Decree of Vatican II<sup>16</sup>. So the description of mission as religious egoism has had validity in relation to its disloyalties in all Churches<sup>17</sup>.

Even within the same Church the missionaries did not always keep themselves uninfluenced by considerations extraneous to the purity and truth of their mission. A case in point was the way in which the eighteenth century controversy regarding Chinese rites was kept raging by those who were not particularly friendly to the Jesuit Order. Even the then pope, Clement XI, who brought to an end the controversy by the prohibition of the Chinese rites, agreed with

14. As in *Mission in India Today*, ed. K. Pathil (Bangalore, 1988) p. 320.

15. For more such information see Lal Dena, *Christian Missions and Colonialism*, (Shillong, 1988), pp. 66-70, and J. Puthenpurakal, *Baptist Missions in Nagaland* (Shillong, 1984), pp. 1, 87-89, 126-127.

16. See Vatican II, *Ad gentes*, n. 15, para 5.

17. See K. Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* (New York, 1964), p. 182; also D. J. Bosch, "The Invulnerability of Mission," *Vidyajyoti Journal*, 1992, p. 593: "Even our beautiful and moving stories about "Christian Martyrs" contain elements that have little to do with dying for the sake of the Gospel."

the Jesuit veteran of the Chinese mission, Kaspar Kastner, that the antagonists of the rites were less concerned about the purity of Christian worship in China than the disgrace of the Jesuits. One of the initiators of scientific missiology Robert Streit, O. M. I., himself would point to the unscrupulousness and partisanship that marked the whole controversy, as also many other contemporary writers on missions<sup>18</sup>.

Should history repeat itself even today in such failures to keep to the sacredness of the origin of our mission and so to warp our ambition in mission? In the Catholic Church in India the posture of Syro-Malabar hierarchy (so different from their laity's) in relation to the Latin rite in the present Indian situation does not *seem* to be all inspired by the Spirit that came down on the apostles, including Thomas of course. For all their professed zeal for mission all that they are engaged in *may* be quite coloured by persuasive propaganda, at times bordering on the aggressive. After all there is only the thin difference between mission and propaganda, of which the latter is nothing more than the expansion of their own ecclesiastical trademark<sup>19</sup> whereas the former is governed by its divine limitation! To spell out this limitation:

All the activity of the disciples is subject to the clear precept of their Lord. They are not left free to choose their own methods or adopt their own conception of their task. Their task is to be Christ-work, and therefore they are absolutely dependent on the will of Jesus. Happy are they whose duty is fixed by such a precept, and who are therefore *free from the tyranny of their own ideas and calculations...* The choice of field for their

18. W. V. Bangert, *A History of the Society of Jesus* (St. Louis, 1986), pp. 279-284, esp., 280-281.

19. See David J. Bosch, *Witness to the World* (London, 1980), p. 138.

labours does not depend upon their own impulses or inclinations, but on where they are sent... But does not the very love of Christ constrain us to set no limit to its proclamation? The love of Jesus is something very different from our own zeal and enthusiasms because it adheres to its mission... If Christ will not let us preach the Gospel in any particular place, we must give up the attempt and abide by his will and word<sup>20</sup>.

In the light of this sobering reflection of Bonhoeffer the demand of Syro-Malabar ecclesiastics to their unfettered rights to exercise *their* mission in the way they want protesting against the peculiar mission compulsions involved in the Indian sphere, what with its illiteracy, poverty, divisiveness, etc., while adapting themselves quietly to political constraints, would *seem* to some observers at least, among whom are included not a few of their members too, that their motivation for mission is not solely the God or Christ of mission; and may even draw some comparison to the goings-on of certain evangelizers at Corinth or Philippi (1 Co 1:11-12; Ph 1:15-17) causing serious differences in the Churches. One may wonder really whatever their ambitions could be when one hears now and then how they can harass the members of their fold going to work in areas outside their rule, while boasting at the same time about the number of their religious personnel working outside their rite. There is much wisdom in the warning of Taoism that it is when the Way (*Tao*) fades away that virtues of all sorts rise up, ending up with ritual and rite which are but the crust of loyalty and good faith<sup>21</sup>.

20. D. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (Bombay, 1974), pp. 184-185 (emphasis added).

21. See R. Panikkar, *Worship and Secular Man* (London, 1973), p. ix.

## MISSION ROOTED IN AMBITION

Whatever might have been the past, the future can and should be different heralding the change for the better, especially because the spirit of Christian mission was originally and continues to be perennially: "New wine into fresh skins" (Mk 2:22). And the way that suggests itself here is that missionaries set their ambition right and bright.

### Ambition of loyalty

The word "ambition" deriving from the Latin *ambire* can connote the experience of going round. Missionaries who have necessarily to make their rounds—the Jesuit Constitutions almost characterize the Jesuits as men who have to travel to various parts of the world by their very vocation—must be carried away on their rounds by only one thing: their loyalty to the last gasp to their master who has commissioned them with their particular "ambition!" They "must not force any issue," as Bonhoeffer insists, "contrary to or beyond the word of Christ. Their commission is not a heroic struggle, a fanatical pursuit of a grand idea, or a good cause. That is why they stay only where the Word stays"<sup>22</sup>. In other words they do not allow themselves to be carried away by any sort of supposed zeal of mission but are persuaded that they can do nothing apart from their master who has commissioned to them *his* own work. So their loyalty to Christ becomes their passion; and loyalty to the least wish is, as Christ himself indicated, the hallmark of the best of servants in relation to their master assigning them their portion of work (Mt 25:21, 23; Lk 12:42-48). So Paul could boast:

People should think of us as Christ's servants, stewards entrusted with the mysteries of God. In such a

22. D. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 189.

matter, what is expected of stewards is that each one should be found trustworthy (1 Co 4:1-2).

Such an experience however seems to be not particularly conspicuous in some of the acclaimed theologians. They are not the ones who have taken seriously the warning of Christ against the infringement of even the least of the commandments and teaching others the same (Mt 5:19). They may be even to blame for the way of dealing with *the* talent of the kingdom bestowed on them (Mt 25:14-30): to say the least, they may not be all that eager to hand it on<sup>23</sup> to others in all its richness, evacuating thus their theology of much of divine inspiration. It can be asked of them whom they serve! It *may* appear that for such people Christ would not mean even as much as Mohammed to a fervent Muslim or Marx to an activist nominally Christian! Perhaps they have not answered for themselves Christ's probing question of loyalty demanded of professed followers: "But you, who do you say I am?" (Mk 8:29).

On the contrary true missionaries who are so very sure of Christ and therefore serve surely as ambassadors of Christ, know of no other ambition than knowing Christ in himself so truly that in them others can know Christ for themselves and all the blessings stored in him. They can also spell out their ambition in some detail:

It is not ourselves that we are proclaiming, but Christ Jesus as the Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. It is God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' that has shone into our hearts to enlighten them with the knowledge of God's glory, the glory on the face of Christ (2 Co 4:5-6).

23. See *The New Jerusalem Biblical Commentary*, n. 42:144, p. 668 for the idea of tradition involved in Mt 25:14, 20, 22.

Such an ambition can take shape only when they bare themselves like mirrors reflecting the glory of the Lord and so are transformed into the image that they reflect in ever brighter glory (2 Co 3:18). They must in other words be conformed to their Lord resulting in what the Orthodox identify as internal witness<sup>24</sup>. Ruled by such an ambition of being penetrated and possessed by him they, like Paul, "bring every thought into captivity and obedience to Christ" (2 Co 10:5) counting every asset, every advantage, every thing indeed that has no reference to Christ, as a sheer loss; and make a boast only of Christ Jesus, aiming at nothing but knowing him and the power of his resurrection in their very being and doing (Ph 3:3-10). In other words their ambition turns out paradoxically to be primarily, not missionaries, but disciples<sup>25</sup>, in the singular tradition of the mysterious prophet announced in Isaiah (Is 50:4).

### **Ambition of folly**

An ambition of this sort cannot be without some touch of madness. Were not the twelve apostles seized by such a spirit of madness and ambition in their following of the earthly Christ and much more so of the risen Christ, even daring the powers that be to order them about (Ac 2:12-13)? An artist perhaps has grasped this truth more than most

24. See *Martyria/Mission.*, ed. Ion Bria (Geneva, 1980), p. 213, in Vandana, "The Yoga of Witness," *Vidyajyoti Journal*, 1993, p. 611. Compare here Christ's own way of witnessing (Jn 8:17-18; 10:37-38).
25. It compares well with a Hindu Swami's perception that one reason for the rarity of real gurus is that everyone wants to be a guru without being a disciple first. His story of the man who begged a guru to make him also one because he had asked him the question, "Which is better, to be a guru or a disciple?" and heard him answer, "A guru surely," is as tragic as funny! See Vandana, *Gurus, Ashrams and Christians* (Bombay/Delhi, 1978), p. 31.

theologians. The story is told of how before painting his famous pictures of the apostles, El Greco went to the local lunatic asylum and chose twelve of the inmates as his models. Telling this story on the authority of a guide at the museum at Toledo, Smyth confides:

After hearing this story, I found myself looking at the Apostles, specifically at their eyes, with a new understanding. Call it vision in their eyes or call it some hint of madness, there was more there than the light of common day<sup>26</sup>.

For a modern version of such madness I can think of no one better than Muggeridge! After remarking how all the best of the last two thousand years derives inescapably from the birth of Jesus he continues:

I have to add, too, that over and above this, the revelation Jesus provided in his teaching, and in the drama of his life, death and Resurrection, of the true purpose and destination of our earthly existence, seems to me, even by comparison with other such revelations, to be of unique value and everlasting validity.

And what is more:

The fact I happen to have come into the world myself at a time when the revelation's impetus in history gives every sign of being almost spent, and when Western Man is increasingly inclined to reject and despise the inheritance it has brought him, only serves to make me the more appreciative of and awed by it<sup>27</sup>.

26. B. T. Smyth, *Paul: Mystic and Missionary* (Maryknoll, 1980) p. 43.

27. M. Muggeridge, *Jesus the Man who Lives* (London, 1976), p. 11.

How admirable a folly worthy of authentic missionaries who have no doubts about the one who has sent them, unlike many theoretical theologians innocent of any mission praxis!

Knowing Jesus so to the limit of folly, is the veritable ambition of the missionaries who take up their mission of Jesus. What is at work in this experience is certainly, *though not entirely*, despite what some moderns opine, the psychology of love. Lovers are necessarily ambitious about their love and demonstrate it by extremes of folly, hoping all the while to become united in life and work with their beloved. Missioners are certainly ambitious lovers of Christ Jesus seeking oneness with him in his mission as he himself did with his Father in his mission (Jn 10:30); but their folly of love in its experience, identification and proclamation works theologically more than psychologically as in Jesus in relation to God. In other words if there is a method in madness (to use an expression from Shakespeare) of love then there is a theology in missionary madness for Jesus and his mission. Did not the first apostles act it out spontaneously when in their mission they exposed themselves temptingly but fearlessly (Ac 5:41)? Paul explicitated the similar experience of his own, boasting in fact in so many words:

Here we are, fools for Christ's sake, while you are the clever ones in Christ; we are weak, while you are strong; you are honoured, while we are disgraced. To this day, we go short of food and drink and clothes, we are beaten up and we have no homes; we earn our living by labouring with our own hands; when we are cursed, we answer with a blessing; when we are hounded, we endure it passively; when we are insulted, we give a courteous answer. We are treated even now as the dregs of the world, the very lowest scum (1 Co 4:10-13).

### **Theology of folly**

Perhaps folly is incidental to any sort of mission (mercenary or military, fascist or fundamentalist, nationalist or political), but folly in Christian mission, unlike in other kinds, is not so much incidental as intrinsic to it. The obvious reason is to be found in the source of Christian mission proper, namely Christ.

The term Christ was properly speaking the functional title of Jesus in his mission; and Jesus himself disabused his first mission companions of the grandiose ideas grown around the title and confronted them with the true picture of Christology which was with all its surprise details a *gestalt* of folly (Mk 8:31). He brooked no opposition whatever from his chosen companions to his characteristic mission of being the Christ of God and not the Christ of Satanic ambition so tempting to Peter. He even countered Peter and the rest with the counsel of mission ambition: "Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mk 8:35)! How he dinned into them the one and only way of mission, namely the way of folly unambiguously delineated by his way: for he himself came "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45). Because they had not learnt it to the last he gave them the last lesson on mission in his unforgettable sign of humble folly reversing the role of Master and assuming that of servant.

Once his mission was completed his followers in mission were quick to grasp his whole life and mission in the light of such topsy turvydom. Unlike Adam who with Eve had violated their unique mission of primogenitors by his vaulting ambition of becoming like God's own self Christ fulfilled his redemptive mission rooting for God (Heb 10:5-7) and proving himself the divine missionary not

by self-exaltation but self-diminution unto the last breath at death on the cross in obedience (Ph 2:6-8); and thus he scaled the heights of mission ambition (Ph 2:9-11). So nothing in mission succeeds not like success but like folly!

If the early Church had an instinct of all this as witnessed by the hymn found in Ph 2 referred to above, Paul had an insight into it all and thematized missiological folly:

After all, Christ sent me to preach the gospel ... not by means of wisdom of language, wise words which would make the cross of Christ pointless... As scripture says: I am going to destroy the wisdom of the wise and bring to nothing the understanding of any who understand. Where are the philosophers? Where are the experts? Where are the debaters of this age? ... Since in the wisdom of God the world was unable to recognise God through wisdom, it was God's own pleasure to save believers through the folly of the gospel. While the Jews demand miracles and the Greeks look for wisdom, we are preaching a crucified Christ: to the Jews an obstacle they cannot get over, to the gentiles foolishness, but to those who have been called, whether they are Jews or Greeks, a Christ who is both the power of God and the wisdom of God. God's folly is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength... (So) I was resolved that the only knowledge I would have while I was with you was knowledge of Jesus and of him as the crucified Christ (1 Co 1:17-25; 2:2).

Such a spirit of holy folly, in which every apostolically oriented saint sought to excel – think for instance of Ignatius' third degree of humility – must be the missionary forte in the midst of so much wisdom, not only ecclesiastical but also theological, let alone sociological or technological or financial or organizational, that surrounds us. Comblin has well remarked:

There seems to be no absence of wisdom, but what has happened to the folly? What are we really looking for is that seed of folly that will keep Christianity from becoming too wise, too well integrated, too much like any other religion or philosophy in the world<sup>28</sup>.

Interestingly in this context, we will be bowled over to learn that the word for "righteousness" in Hebrew is *tamim* which is a superlative of the Hebrew word for "foolish"<sup>29</sup>!

### Paradoxes of folly

Part of this ambition of following Christ in his folly as *the* servant on mission is the sense of boldness exercised in mission because mission in its purity is a matter of transcendence, deriving from the divine and experienced as a divine "ought." As Christ carried himself with striking boldness and even majesty in the face of threat to his mission and life (Lk 13:31-33; Jn 18:1-8, *et passim*), even so his apostles stood their ground in the face of persecution with surprising, but typical, boldness (*parrhesia*, [Ac 4:13, 29, 31]) and dared the persecutors stop their mission. Understood in this light the great commission as found in *Matthew* holds good as much today as ever; and calls for new commitment with new ingenuity and new courage on the part of modern missionaries facing altogether new onslaughts on the on-going mission!

If such an experience is not to be a matter of triumphalism the missionaries must aim at the high sense of humble responsibility that keeps them not anxious but awed in their

28. J. Comblin, *The Meaning of Mission* (Maryknoll, 1977), p. 51. For a slight corrective to the possible slur on other religions see the very end of the article.

mission of God, where, as Eckhart says, all works are equal, the smallest being as the highest and the highest being as the smallest<sup>30</sup>. It is the ambitious exercise of pure obedience, the very opposite of any complex of pride or dignity or jealous exclusivism or superiority that might have warped many a missionary endeavour and antagonized many a sincere seeker like Gandhi. It is not the attitude of those who zealously guard and hold to their religious titles, something expressly forbidden by Jesus (Mt 23:8-10). On the contrary it is the spirit of latter-day "prophets and wise men and scribes" (Mt 23:34) completely sensitive to having been sent by God and therefore intent only on the responsibility laid on them to labour day by day and, if the occasion demands it, to lay down their lives for their divine mission even as Christ said he would and indeed did, fulfilling supremely the unique role of the Isaian Servant of God, called and named by God appointed and anointed by God, entrusted with God's own mission and destined to suffer for it and so succeed in it (Is 42:1-4; 49.1-6; 53:11).

Missioners imbued by this ideal responsibility of servanthood are people of assurance and certainty, as Jesus himself was (Lk 4:16-21; Heb 10:5-9). They do not drift along in their mission unsure of what they are to do. They are on the contrary in every way persuaded, like Barnabas and Paul, of what God had destined for them as the chosen portion of their mission (Ac 13:46-47). Paul who was deeply conscious of being less than the least of all God's people (Ep 3:8) held nonetheless a lofty vision of his particular task. In his ambitious articulation about his mission he could legitimately glory in his profound grasp of the mystery of Christ that had been given to him along with the special grace "of proclaiming to the gentiles the unfathomable treasure of Christ and of throwing light on the inner workings of the mystery kept hidden through all the ages in God"

30. See Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings* (London, 1964), p. 138.

(Ep 3:8-9). All missionaries who cannot give a similar testimony of their personal, bold and unwavering mission thrust inspired by the mystery of Christ beyond what is made of by sincere non-Christian admirers are not worth their salt!

All those who have been captured by Christ for his divine mission and so are in turn captivated by him in continuing it boldly, but humbly and responsibly, know to claim his promises on their behalf and to see them fulfilled to the full in every detail. The Synoptic tradition has treasured the promise of Jesus to his seriously believing disciples on the move that they would follow suit in his very works of teaching, curing, healing, and even miracles (Mk 16:17-18; Mt 10:1). Does such a promise over-awe us and disturb us to the point of disbelief so that we set our measures to our ambition in mission? But the word of Jesus does not become void or pointless for that reason (Mk 13:31). Indeed to confirm it he promised his apostles something more stunning: that they would perform not only the same works as he had done but even greater works, as witnessed by the Johannine tradition (Jn 14:12; see also Mt 21:21)! In the assurance of this tremendous promise with regard to mission works equal to and even superseding Christ's, what ambition can be too much for us to cherish in our mission yearnings and longings? Those who settle for anything less and dare not aspire to the ever greater achievements setting their sights higher do not know that ambition is made of sterner—if it can mean stronger—stuff! But the early experience of mission was altogether different, vibrating with the power of Christ's promise! At the least one can say this: once the early successors and initiates of Christ's mission took up his very mission without almost thinking about it, they could not but go beyond him and his work in space and time! It was a lay Christian who expressed this ambitious outreach first, in clear, concrete, and convincing terms! Was it not Luke who could interpret the very first stirring of the apostles from their fearful hiding as having its salvific

effect all over the earth far beyond the confines of Palestine indeed reaching the very ends of the world (Ac 2:1-11), and that in a short span! He knew certainly what glorious and global ambition could seize the hearts of caring and convinced missionaries commissioned by Christ!

One particular aspect, ancient as well as modern, of this universal ambition of the missionaries is the dynamism to renew the world even to the point of revolutionizing it. The early missionaries could not help being so dynamic wherever they went whether they knew it or not expressly. At Thessalonica for instance Paul and Silas came across to others as people who were turning the world upside down (Ac 17:6). Inspired by such glorious heritage the modern missionaries are rediscovering in their mission such challenging, stirring, prophetic spirit—call it revolutionary or whatever. So they would not merely rest on their oars but go beyond the relatively comfortable, social role of settled teachers or healers seeing only to the conservation of society; and aim at serving its re-construction and re-formation and trans-formation. Their activity then, if supremely authentic, is bound to take on creatively redemptive dimensions, going above and beyond a given society in order to change it, just as the Christian mission of the first few centuries brought about a religio-social revolution that almost created a third genus of humanity, different from but composed of, both the first genus of Romans and the second of barbarians<sup>31</sup>.

This is the way they make capital of the ambitious potential of Christianity: heralding the good news, giving birth to new structures, paving the new society, and signalling the new era, if necessary, by new martyrdom of the kind suffered by Bishop Romero.

31. J. Comblin, *The Meaning of Mission*, p. 50.

Martyrdom however is not the everyday experience of mission though its occurrence is growingly felt in our times specially in the third world and Church, two recent instances being Sister Rani Maria in India who got killed by landlords for conscientizing their farm-hands, and the ten year old Iqbāl Masih in Pakistan who was murdered when cycling home for Easter by those opposed to his involvement in the movement against child labour. What would characterize the normal atmosphere of mission is rather the typical Christian deportment of humour that knows and rejoices how, the missionaries, puny as they are, do fit into the gigantic divine mission! This makes for the height of folly that is wild ambition and for height of ambition that is happy folly, thanks to the experience of missionaries as nobodies in themselves and yet celebrities in God, so well portrayed in a person like Francis of Assisi who wanted to be a new kind of fool for God, reminiscent of the unusual Hindu sannyasi who unlike the superior or suspicious or even serious kind would play somersaulting and amusing the people, in particular, children, and thus show them how to play with God and find God and so build the world of God, all the while joining with God laughing at those who make their life without God (Ps 2:4; 37:13; 59:8).

The pope's own call to us to be ambitious in mission runs through the whole of his encyclical, striking us forcefully with his ideals regarding missionaries as universal neighbours or contemplatives in action or persons of beatitudes and climaxing with his concluding invitation to live more intensely the mystery of Christ by gratefully cooperating in the work of salvation at the threshold of the third millenium<sup>32</sup>.

A. Paul Dominic, S.J.

32. *Redemptoris missio*, n. 89, 90, 91.