A Missionary Correspondence

by Eugene Hillman and Adrian Hastings

The following letters written during the course of last year are not presented as offering some sort of definite judgment upon the missionary work and needs of the Church today, but very simply as a genuine exchange of ideas between two men deeply concerned with the problems involved, both theological and practical. Clearly, if writing a systematic study, they might wish to qualify their remarks in a way one does not always do in the limits and more personal context of a letter. The letters were written as a private discussion but when meeting in September, towards the close of the correspondence, the writers agreed there might be a point in publishing them. They are printed as written, apart from a few minor changes and omissions [on the part of the editor as well as of the authors].

Father Hillman is a Holy Ghost Father and has been working in Tanzania since 1951, mostly among the still hardly evangelized Masai people. He is the author of *The Church as Mission* (Sheed & Ward, Stag book, 1966). His latest book entitled *The Wider Ecumenism* is now with the publisher.

Father Hastings is a secular priest working in East Africa since 1958. He is the author of *The World Mission of the Church* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964), and of *Church and Mission in Modern Africa* (Burns & Oates, 1967).

Catholic Mission, Monduli,
Tanzania.
6 June 1966.

Dear Father Hastings,

Almost every time I pick up a current Catholic periodical these days, I find something in it by you. I thought that your article in the Clergy Review,[1] on the universality of salvation, was particularly outstanding for its force and clarity. While I agree with all you said about making Christianity explicit, I feel that much more must still be said about the necessity of the Church and the motive for missionary activity; and I think that the full answer will be found in terms of

[1]March 1966. The subject of the article was God's offer of saving grace and salvation in Christ to all men whether or not they are in the visible Church. The reason for missionary work was seen as lying in the explicitation of God's universal love whereby individual men, being brought within the history and conscious community of salvation, can respond more fully and deliberately. Father Hillman himself tackled some similar questions in *Ecumenism and Grace*, AFER (African Ecclesiastical Review), January 1966.

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sacramentality: the progressive self-realization of the Church as universal sacrament.

Now I am most anxious to see how you will answer the very complex question you stated so well in the April issue of AFER on the ministry in Africa.[1] There seemed to be a very slight hint in this article that you might be tempted to the view that new mission fields ought not to be opened up until the numerical problems of the existing missions are well in hand. Perhaps I mis-read you on this point. I hope so; because I think that would be a dangerous solution. But I think the practice of starting new parishes every three or four miles from existing parishes should be questioned. The real question on which all the rest hinges is, it seems to me, what exactly are we missionaries trying to achieve? For most, I am afraid it is simply a matter of increasing the numbers of Christians wherever parishes exist already, with the aim of converting every single individual in one place; or so that all Christians may easily get to church and 'get more grace' from the sacraments for their own salvation.

Is it possible, do you think, for us to just drop this 'salvation of souls' hypothesis in connection with missionary motivation?

Sincerely,

EUGENE HILLMAN, C.S.SP.

Kipalapala, Tanzania.
7 July 1966

Dear Father Hillman,

As you say, the real question is, what exactly are we trying to achieve? I don't think that I have thought it all through adequately myself, and there are so many related questions. But I am sure that a lot has been objectively wrong both at the level of missionary motivation and at that of our methods.

No, I don't think that as a general rule we could possibly accept the idea of not opening up new mission fields until existing pastoral problems are settled. But I don't think that it is responsible to start a mission unless one can, in a reasonable way, guarantee sufficient follow-through; it seems to me that that is what our methods make so difficult. I am not sure that I quite agree with you about not starting new parishes every three or four miles from an existing one. The point is, we want to establish the *Church*, as the sacrament of God and salvation, in a place. But what is the Church, that we can establish her? Is it a great big building, some schools put up with foreign money, a foreign priest, and a mass of *receiving* Christians? Or is it a religiously self-supporting community, if I may so put it, a community of Christians, standing on their own feet, ministering to themselves, actively sharing in the universal communion? If this is

[1]The subject of this article was a statistical examination of the steadily growing, and already acutely serious, shortage of priests in Africa relative to the existing number of Christians. It discussed the reasons for this, together with some proposed solutions.

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the Church, a genuine local church, then a group of fairly close parishes is needed. They create a human Church community in an area, which the single big parish seldom does. I feel the erection of the sacrament of the Church in an area in other terms is really a sort of pseudo-missionary work. I don't think that would be a fair description of much work in Africa in recent years, but that we are somewhere between the two.

As regards the ministry, it is indeed difficult to formulate an answer satisfactorily. Basically I think that our major seminaries are in some ways going ever further in a wrong direction. They are not really adapted to producing priests able to deal very effectively with the educated five per cent in the new societies or with urban groups; at the same time they are hopelessly unadapted for ministry to the other ninety-five per cent of the population—socially, economically, psychologically, unadapted. Most of our priests ought to be ministering afterwards among the very poor; to prepare them for that they are given twenty years of formal education and conditioned to expect a high European type of standard of living which most cannot possibly have afterwards unless permanently subsidized from abroad.

My real answer would be to cut off *all* money from abroad, relax all the prescriptions of canon law, and then let the Church here by force of necessity work out structures suited to itself. A church has to have its structural shape, but at present we are creating structures out here which are dependent on a constant stream of money and personnel from abroad, and which consequently prevent it from developing its own active side at all.

Give our foreign money in future to the government, limit the intake of missionaries, relax canon law, and then wait and see! ! ! That is my answer. . . . Of course, neither the Church in Europe and America, nor the Church in Africa, neither missionaries, nor African priests, would begin to agree. People talk about 'adaptation' incessantly, but they talk about the frills of Church life most of the time, not about adaptation to a total social situation.

How to say all this, and how to do something to move in that direction? Married, not too professional, deacons could indeed be a first step, but I don't detect much interest out here even in that. So there we are.

Yours very sincerely,

ADRIAN HASTINGS

14 July 1966.

Dear Father Hastings,

It is the work of missionaries to establish parishes among each people, but not necessarily every three or four miles among one particular people, while nothing is done for neighbouring peoples. This, I think, is what I wanted to say. Otherwise, all missionaries

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will be bound to pastoral work among one people. Surely a reasonable number of parishes must be established among each people, but it should be left to the local clergy to gradually fill in the gaps every three or four miles between the parishes established first by the missionaries, who need not remain among one people until every individual there has been converted. The danger I have in mind is the 'choke-law'.

I think I agree with your very radical solution which alone would lead to the full kind of adaptation of the Church to the 'total social situation'. You only hint at your ideas about the clergy, deacons, etc.; but I suspect from this that we are thinking in exactly the same way. I feel that we should use our junior seminary to prepare deacons with the understanding that they may marry or not, as they wish; then, from them, we will recruit priests later, married or not. This is a long story which I cannot explain in a letter, but I have some plans along these lines.

Sincerely,

GENE

15 August 1966.

Dear Father Hillman,

Thanks very much for your letter of 14 July. I quite agree that it is not the job of missionaries to convert every individual; and I agree too about the danger of your 'choke-law'. But I feel that our trouble does not lie in having too few missionaries, nor in concentrating for a time on a particular area (I don't see why there is some absolute compulsion on the Church now, in the mid 1960's, to be effectively missionary everywhere in the world; it has never been so in the past—God will be patient!). The best way forward, it seems to me, is to make at least some missionary work really effective—that does not of course mean being content with a situation where more and more missionaries are sucked into the pastoral work of a quantitatively expanding Church and just remain there. Our trouble seems to me to lie in this, that our missionary mechanism is really one for making conversions, not one for establishing self-supporting churches. I would not mind how many parishes missionaries opened close to one another, if this was a way of getting the Church really going there in a relatively short time, so that they could then disengage themselves and so that (even more important) the new local church could itself become missionary. The thing is that with the system we are working we can proceed at the Church membership level in third or fourth gear, but at the ministry level only in first gear. Our type of ministry is adapted to a developed society and a church which is growing only slowly. The ministry must be adapted to the Church. Ours is not. Hence the Church grows quantitatively at a great rate, but its structures do not do so. The result is the 'choke-

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law'—the more successful initial missionary work is, the more it is bogged down afterwards throwing in missionaries from outside to do the pastoral jobs which the local clergy ought to be doing.

Yours ever,

ADRIAN

20 August 1966.

Dear Adrian,

Thanks for your letter of 15 August. The compulsion on the Church to become effectively missionary everywhere, now in the mid-1960's, arises from our present awareness of the essentially missionary nature of the Church—an awareness which was perhaps not so acute in the past. If the Church exists primarily in order to become in historical tangibility the symbolic 'lumen gentium', then the Church will cease to exist to the extent that it is not striving to become what it is. In this view then, missionaries today are certainly too few—aside from the fact that they are badly distributed, trapped in archaic structures, enmeshed by dubious methods, etc. Wherever the Church is turned, not outward to the non-evangelized 'gentes', but inward upon the Christian community, it must die—to the extent that it is not doing what it was given life to do. Perhaps this is why the Church has become so irrelevant to the Christians of Europe and the Americas. At any rate, it seems to me that the missionary failure in all of its aspects must have very much to do with the death of Christianity in so many places where only the buildings remain in the service of the culture-religion which fills the religious gap in Europe and the Americas, if not here also.

Yours sincerely,

GENE

26 August 1966.

Dear Gene,

Thanks for your letter. Of course I quite agree about the Church being the 'lumen gentium' and essentially missionary. But I do think that 'become' is an important word here. She is on the road to being fully herself, both from this point of view and from others too. But she has not reached the fullness, and in fact at the moment she simply *can't* be effectively missionary everywhere, hence here and now God cannot want it of her. There is Tibet and Mongolia and Uzbekistan and Saudi Arabia, and lots of other important places, which are totally out of our reach. In fact most of Asia is passing out of the missionary sphere, at least according to the conventional idea of 'missionary'.

So it seems to me that even more important than trying to cover all the ground at this very moment is to get our approach right, so to

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shape the existent Church and her structures that she may go forward to fulfil her mission when circumstances are more opportune.

Are missionaries too few? If by missionaries we mean European and North American professionals, organized in societies, and financed at a present rate of, I believe, some £5 million a year from Propaganda Fide, then I wonder. If, however, we mean mission-minded members of the Church which is indeed the 'lumen gentium' in her whole life, then I quite agree. The extraordinary thing is that we have a Church of 28 million Catholics in Africa, formed and instructed by professional missionaries, and yet this Church is not itself missionary-minded. Where are the Chagga missionaries who should be preaching to the Masai, etc.? If the Church could get her missionary structure right (and that would indeed include some full-time professional missionaries, but much better trained than the present ones), then indeed she might really be able to evangelize the world in a way that at present is quite unthinkable.

As it is, in spite of having a vast full-time missionary army and terrific financial backing, we are crying out for more missionaries and more money, we are creating a situation which may well be really disastrous in about twenty years time, and yet we are making the very slightest of impressions upon the non-Christian world. It is all rather awful, especially as we are so blind to it. So there we are!

Every best wish,

ADRIAN

9 October 1966.

Dear Adrian,

The fact that the Church cannot now be 'effectively missionary everywhere'—because at present the doors of many lands happen to be closed to Christianity—does not excuse her from *trying* to be effectively missionary wherever this may be possible. Many countries are still opened to Christianity; but missionaries simply are not available for such places, since the present missionary commitment of the Church represents something less than five per cent of her total endeavour in the world. This task of establishing the Christian community indigenously among the nations who have 'not yet' been evangelized even once is, as a matter of empirical fact, rather low on the Church's list of practical priorities.

Whatever weaknesses or failures may be justly attributed to the present missionary effort, the fundamental weakness is surely due to the fact that the Church as a whole is not serious about working for the evangelization of the peoples of the non-western world. The several sloppy schemas produced by the Council's commission on the missions, and the curious ambiguities of the final document, show how little thought our best theologians have given to what they themselves finally called 'the highest and most holy function of the

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Church . . . the fundamental duty of the people of God'. But who accepts the implications of this? Who? Missionary societies are still being pressured to send missionaries to fill the pastoral gaps in Latin America, while missionaries are not available for so many peoples elsewhere for whom the Church has never been present even imperfectly. And what is being done to modify the present rigid missionary structures of the Church so that a significant lay missionary movement can become a reality through which the missionary duty of the people of God can be realized in a proportion related to the size of the task?

Since the Church exists in history, in the consecutive terms of different times and places, the aim of missionary work is not to make the Church present *simultaneously* everywhere. *Consecutive* presence among the nations should be quite enough for the progressive realization of the Church's tangible universality (as 'lumen gentium') in history. Why not?

Did the Apostles wait until the 'circumstances' were 'more opportune' before moving outward to the non-evangelized peoples of the world they knew? The fact that they could not go everywhere did not prevent them from going where they could. If the whole Church exists in order to become the 'lumen gentium', then we are called here and now to work (through whatever inadequate structures we now have) towards this goal. It should be a matter of our prior concern to do what we can where we can, without waiting until some vaguely future time when 'circumstances' will be 'more opportune'. The Christian community anywhere in the world, in season and out, will be healthy and true to itself only to the extent that it is trying to do the job for which it exists. If we had our priorities right, we would see that the time for evangelizing the nations is always 'opportune'.

At the same time, I agree that we must reconsider exactly what is meant by evangelizing the nations and establishing the Church among them. But the Church can re-think this only in the course of trying to do it, only when her orientation begins to be 'ad gentes', and when her theologizing becomes eschatological. The way Bonhoeffer put it: 'The Church is her true self only when she exists for humanity.' Really now I do not believe that the Church today, with all the talk of being 'missionary', is even trying to exist for humanity outside of Europe and the Americas and the few young churches which reflect so well the glories of christendom: 'spiritual colonies of Europe's tribal religion', someone called them. The temptation facing the Church today, and always, is that which undid Israel in the first place: the failure to recognize and to obey, with all of its risks, the messianic mission to the nations who have not yet seen the sign of their salvation.

Yours sincerely,

GENE

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26 February 1967.

Dear Gene,

I have delayed and delayed replying to your letter, partly because I have been on safari a very great deal in the intervening months. I have only been back here a week.

I quite agree with almost all you say. Clearly all times and places are and must be opportune for mission in the deepest sense. Nevertheless some seem more opportune than others—today, for instance, Tanzania vastly more than Morocco—and there are occasions when true loyalty to mission may suggest sitting back and thinking a little rather than continually being missionary 'in act'. The more active we are the less time we have to examine the structures we are acting through. Certainly missionary enthusiasm and activity, if linked with mistaken preconceptions and unsuitable structures and methods, may actually put the Church's mission back rather than forward, and that can be true even when conversions are actually taking place. Such prejudices may be generated among non-Christians as will block future work for generations.

Now what I cannot help thinking is that today the professional missionary structures we have inherited from the late nineteenth century may be in fact impeding rather than assisting the whole Church, that is the people of God, to be effectively missionary.

If the African Church is so little missionary today it is not that the urge was not there but that being a missionary has become identified (except for emergency cases such as the Sudan) with belonging to a European missionary society. It does not seem to be for them.

When you say the Church's missionary commitment represents 'something less than five per cent of her total endeavour in this world', you are of course talking of the clergy as such. At this level I see absolutely no solution. If the fate of the Church's missionary work and of the young churches of Africa and Asia is to depend upon a full-time professional clergy, then indeed I see no hope as things stand today for a continued missionary drive and little for many of the young churches. Only if this essential side of the Church's existence can be effectively declericalized, and her ministry greatly and quickly diversified, has she—it seems to me—any hope of being 'lumen gentium' across a world whose population is vastly exploding, from which the professional western missionary is being more and more excluded, and in which anyway that sort of vocation seems to be on the wane.

As an immediate remedy the establishment of a genuinely African missionary society to missionarise Africans could indeed—if its structure was worked out with imagination and flexibility—be highly valuable, but of itself it is still within the system. The only full answer is to break out of the system. Let the Church be the missionary 'lumen gentium' not chiefly across professional societies but through her whole membership everywhere. Some professional stiffening will

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surely still be required, but the whole balance of the thing must be different from today. This indeed would require a revolution in comparison with which Vatican II might look like a mere ripple on the pond, but without it I fear that in the next decades the Church will appear less and less of a world-wide light of the nations.

I am sure that ours will be the generation either of missionary transformation or of missionary collapse.

Yours ever,

ADRIAN

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