THE CHURCH'S MISSION TOWARDS MINORITIES

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Theological reflection on the mission of the Church towards minorities is the aim of this presentation; I choose a more "theoretical" in comparison to "existential" approach. While it is true that no serious reflection is done apart from people's life experiences and situations, it is equally true that no experience occurs divorced from a horizon of understanding and interpretation. My first goal in this article is to serve theological reflection by articulating a framework within which the Church's mission towards minorities can be more adequately understood. A second goal is to help direct or redirect the actual performance of mission towards minorities.

In the first part of the article, the situation of being minority or belonging to the minority will be dwelt upon. In the second part, it will be shown how the Church's appropriation of the situation of the minority can reinterpret the understanding of its mission. The type of Church that emerges from mission recast according to the optic of the minority will be considered.

It will be obvious, as the argumentation of the article unfolds, that mission will not be interpreted exclusively as work or task performed for minorities. Rather it will be approached as a moment of mutuality between the Church and the world of the minorities. Consequently, mission will be considered as generative of the ekklesia, of the Church's being, identity and rebirthing rather than simply a pragmatic "spelling out" of an a priori ecclesial essence.
DESCRIBING THE MINORITY REALITY

We begin by reflecting on the situations of people who are part of a minority. Talk about minorities usually focuses first of all on people who as a group are numerically fewer than other groups who make up the wider society. This quantitative notion of the minority status is easily verifiable in the case of migrants, foreigners, cultural, religious and ethnic groups who form small pools or pockets within a much larger population. It is in this numerical sense that Christians are considered a minority in most countries in Asia. This signification also lies behind the observation that within the Church the Caucasians, who were eighty per cent of the whole Christian population in 1900, will be a minority by the year 2020 when they will comprise a mere twenty per cent of the total number (Schreiter, 7). On this level of understanding, to belong to the minority means “to be one of the few” living in the midst of the “others” who en masse constitute “the more, the majority” of society. The statistical approach to the minority situation, however, does not capture the full reality of belonging to the minority.

When the discussion moves to the level of quality of life, the minority condition acquires a new configuration. The focus shifts from numbers to actual people who experience being regarded as lesser in rank or importance within a societal hierarchy. In some cases it comes in the form of being considered as not having come of age or as not possessing the normative “maturity” supposedly already achieved by other sectors of society. This qualitative dimension of the minority situation deserves greater attention because of the neglected, and therefore powerful truth it forces upon our consciousness. The numerical minority does not automatically become the qualitatively “least” in a given society, as evidenced in the cultural superiority of a small elite. Conversely, the statistical majority may in fact be living in a minority state of existence. When the Church is called to conversion to the cause of minorities, it is primarily in the qualitative sense that “minorities” is taken. Let us turn to three examples of people whose living experiences illustrate minority situations.

The first big group of minorities, who incidentally make up
the larger part of humanity, is the so-called "Third World," the reality of which exists even within countries of the so-called "First World." These are people who suffer subjugation at the hands of holders of power. Deprived of real opportunities to attain a decent human life, and often of their cultures and identities, they are subjected to different forms of crucifixion, meriting for them the name "crucified peoples," victims who remind us of the presence of executioners (Sobrino, 120-21). From the eyes of the "Third World," belonging to the minority is perceived as poverty imposed on the weak by dominant powers.

A second group is composed of the migrants. Now present globally, they are living narratives of life as minority. Whether refugees, skilled or unskilled laborers, they remind the world of ethnic conflicts, political persecutions, religious or tribal wars, famine and imbalances in international political, economic and cultural relations that have forced them into geographical and cultural displacement (Tomasi, 3-4). The presence of migrants often generates xenophobic and discriminatory reactions from the dominant racial or cultural group, thereby making the migrants the easy scapegoat of national ills and restrictive laws. Though they contribute also to the economic and social life of the receiving countries, the positive side of their cultures is not appreciated. Defensiveness and self-centered restrictions are the responses they usually get (Ibid.). Effectively excluded from what is significant in society, they are debased mainly on the basis of their ethnic background or race that is judged to be inferior to that of the dominant sector (Schotsmans, 87-89).

Finally, we will consider women. According to feminist scholars, the minority status of women is due to sexism, a pattern of attitudes and structures analogous to ethnocentrism and racism. Sexism considers women essentially less than men and flawed in humanity, on the basis of physical and psychological traits. Women stand on the margins of society, being part of the whole yet outside the main body. "Being there [on the margins] signifies being less, being overlooked, not having as much importance" (Johnson, 22).

The faces of the less in rank or importance that we have pre-
sented are just a few of the many that could be encountered. But they give us sufficient insight into the world of the minorities, a world generated by the “lack of ease” in dealing with “the others” or with other-ness. The experiences of minorities indicate that very often difference is understood in terms of exclusive definition or mutual exclusion. In this sense, a person or group acquires a unique identity by defining oneself or itself over and against “the others.” Other-ness is not a function of relatedness but of segregation.

This isolationist perspective, when influential in viewing “the others,” often operates on both cognitive and emotional levels, shaping not only ideas but charging them with strong affective reactions (Schotsmans, 91). Because “the others” in fact show us who “we” really are, we tend to ignore, cover up or distort “the others” in order to eliminate the threat that they pose to our identity (Sobrino, 120). To appreciate ourselves, we engage in depreciating “the others.” To preserve society harmony, the plurality that “the others” bring is not tolerated. Uniformity is imposed by the logic of domination, not recognition, the logic of assimilation, not respect (Metz, 116).

If the Church is to serve minorities, it needs to enter the world created by this ill-at-easeness with other-ness. From the Spirit of communion and the Word of love, it hears the question, “for you, Church, do they also count as ‘the others’”? The mission of the Church takes shape in the very event that it helps create a world and a Church where other-ness is not the stumbling block that it is made to appear.

THE CHURCH IN RELATION TO MINORITIES

The story of Babel tells of how other-ness, symbolized by different languages, led to confusion, scattering and abandonment of the city being constructed (Gen. 11:1-9). Babel speaks of other-ness as a curse. The day of Pentecost reversed Babel. Mysteriously, the Spirit did not eliminate the diversity of languages but enabled people to understand one another, to gather and to construct a new community (Acts 2:5-12). Pentecost assumes other-ness as a blessing in the
unifying power of the Holy Spirit. The Church's mission towards minorities takes on the Pentecostal thrust of overturning Babel.

Within this general perspective, we can identify some priorities that must characterize the Church's mission to minorities.

Solidarity-Communion

One mark of the Church's service to minorities is facilitating the creation of a new hermeneutical culture both within and without the Church, where the recognition of others in their other-ness happens within the horizon of a covenant relationship (Metz, 117). This entails breaking the prevailing hermeneutic of defining ourselves by withdrawing from "the others" or in the words of Metz, defining "ourselves exclusively with our backs to such faces," (Ibid., 114). Among the manifestations of this prevailing hermeneutic are the tendencies toward mental isolationism, tactical provincialism, existential distance, privatization of lives and the voyeuristic approach of onlookers—all contributory to the suffering of many in the world. A covenant resting on common humanity needs to be forged again with renewed vigor.

For this to happen, the Church must spearhead the movement towards constructive tolerance (Schotsmans, 93), not a grudging accommodation of differences but a calm and joyful recognition and integration of other systems of meanings or cultures, allowing them to build up the whole. Inter-culturality therefore becomes an indispensable element of the Church's life and mission. Even outside the explicit question of serving minorities, the Church needs to grow in this area, especially concerning the concrete communion of local Churches within the Universal Church. The Church after Vatican II continues to search for adequate theological and structural responses to the demands of the concrete catholicity of the one Church existing in and out of local Churches (Lumen Gentium 23).

Respect for human dignity is central to solidarity. In the world of minorities, the Church has a privileged opportunity to witness to the gratuitous love of God that looks to humans as they are and not
to lovable qualities they have to offer or from which one could profit. This agape is the soul of mission (Congar, 494-95). The power of this love impels the Church to be of universal service to people as people, to really exist for people even outside its fold, to be universal sacrament for the world (Fuchs, 47). The mission of solidarity requires an “empathetic mysticism of opened eyes” (Metz, 119) which sees a neighbor in “the other,” in a wounded “foreigner,” in the “Samaritan” (Lk. 10:25-37).

Solidarity with minorities becomes solidarity with all peoples, especially the suffering and victims. Solidarity, however, becomes truly dynamic and militant only in the practice of radical charity that breaks down barriers that stand in the way of peace (Betto, 57). It is commonplace to think of serving minorities in terms of kind acts that are necessary and laudable. But if the world of the minorities becomes an interpretative key to understanding mission, we cannot allow the Church to treat the minorities simply as beneficiaries of the Church’s benevolence. Neither is it sufficient for the Church to respond to their needs occasionally, or only in times of emergency. “Solidarity instead of support” is necessary (Steinkamp, 70).

In the face of minorities, the Church cannot fall back on the inadequate responses of institutionalized diakonia performed by social action centers and diocesan offices that somehow absolves Christians from effective koinonia with the real men and women who inhabit the minority world (Steinkamp, 70; cf. Fuchs, 45). Solidarity implies the conversion of the world and of the Church to partnership with the minorities who are clamoring for change in the world order. The Church, therefore, is critically questioned by the minorities themselves regarding its role in the perpetuation of barriers, of ethnocentrism, of the curse of Babel (Lesch, 118-19). Solidarity demands of the Church vulnerability and sensitivity to the transforming influence of the world of the minorities.

**Mutuality-Complementarity**

True communion or solidarity, resting on the foundation of respect for our common human dignity, presupposes a sense of equal-
ity among peoples. Christians are a people of the conviction that in Christ all are one, Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female (Gal. 3:28). Equality in turn is manifested in the attitude of mutuality or reciprocity that allows and celebrates interdependence and exchange. The power of Pentecost that propels the Church’s mission creates a world of mutuality and a Church of diverse elements that complete each other and make the body whole (1 Cor. 12).

While solidarity affirms the blessing in other-ness, mutuality affirms as strongly that we are and become what we are, not in spite of, but because of “the others.” Other-ness is rooted in a deeper communion of equals from which differences or manifestations of otherness spring. This communion is not lessened or threatened by otherness because it is precisely other-ness that makes the whole what it is. Other-ness is assumed within a more fundamental unity by making that unity depend on the mutuality of those who are “other.” Mission towards minorities attempts to make mutuality a pillar on which human relationships in the world and in the Church should stand.

If mission is set within the perspective of promoting mutuality and complementarity, then the Church will become a community where so-called “helpers” and those “helped” assume both roles. The Church will be the first to learn that the suffering people do not only have a claim to the help of others. “They always have something important to say as well” (Fuchs, 46). Mission is concretely experienced in the birth of a “complementary community” described by Fuchs as mutual fellowship of helpers and those who need help, the healthy and the sick, the strong and the weak, where roles can be exchanged. “The others” are not looked upon in a patronizing manner but appreciated in their potential for enriching others as they are. Talking of this complementarity, the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines said, “In the Church, nobody is so poor as to have nothing to give, and nobody is so rich as to have nothing to receive” (PCP-II, 98).

When we consider the minorities in terms of their victimhood, mutuality demands that their “salvific role” in the history of the world and the Church be recognized. As we bring the crucified peoples down from their crosses, we receive from them the salvation that
they so eloquently bring to humanity: hope, great love, forgiveness, solidarity, and faith (Sobrino, 125-28). The minorities have an evangelizing and humanizing potential in their offer of community, cooperation, simplicity, and openness. They shed a light that unmasks the lies and pretensions of societies. Often the minorities evangelize through the disquieting yet salutary questions they put to the “helpers” who must recognize their own poverty and need for help. “The person who suffers always has an essentially critical, transforming and intensifying quality for all concerned” (Fuchs, 46).

Again, the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines states that the “Church of the Poor” is not only a Church that evangelizes the poor but where “the poor will themselves become the evangelizers. Pastors and leaders will learn to be with, work with, and learn from the poor. A ‘Church of the Poor’ will not only render preferential service to the poor but will practice preferential reliance on the poor in the work of evangelization” (PCP-II, 132). Thus a vision of a renewed community where everyone has an indispensable and active role in the building up of the whole is opened up. The minorities are no longer regarded as less in rank, importance, maturity or culture. They possess the dignity of evangelizers and helpers.

Prophetic Witness to Eschatological Hope

Very briefly we have to articulate how mission understood as solidarity and mutuality becomes the very prophetic witness to eschatological hope that the Church is meant to offer. Certainly the “Church is not primarily a moral institution, but the bearer of a hope. And its theology is not primarily an ethic but an eschatology” (Metz, 116). The hope that Christians bear is not a false optimism that denies the cries of sorrow and mourning arising from the bowels of history and the earth. Hope rather assumes the ambiguities of human situations, the pains of victims, the degradation of “the others” and from within them continues to believe in a future firmly held out to us. Hope asserts that the dehumanization of “the others” does not have the last word; rather the reconciled and redeemed humanity born on the cross of Jesus has won and will triumph.
This mission of hope is the only way for the Church to witness to the Christian God, the God of life. Other gods are kept alive by the sacrifice of human lives, especially of the poor. By struggling for a form of solidarity that respects mutuality, the Church does not only struggle for the liberation of minorities but at the same moment gives witness to the God of life (Betto, 61) and the God of love (Congar, 491-92).

CONCLUDING SYNTHESIS

Whether the Church in a particular human setting occupies a qualitatively majority or minority position becomes rather immaterial in the perspective of mission we have taken. Whether the Church is influential or not in its given human space, the calling to opt for the least, for the marginalized “others” is constant. By taking on the world created by alienating other-ness, the Church renews its mission and itself in a vision of blessed other-ness. Solidarity and communion, mutuality and complementarity and hope become the foci of its mission and its identity. In the “performance” of mission, the Church becomes, cannot help but become, the community where “the others” will find a home, a truly catholic Church, a credible universal sacrament of salvation, a prophetic bearer of hope. Then the Church truly becomes an icon of the one God it believes in: one God in three different persons whose other-ness springs from their relatedness and communion of life and mission.

REFERENCES


