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# HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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# A Mission to Intimacy

**George J. Auger, C.S. V., M.A.**

*As a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself, but must remain part of the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, and I in them, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me, you can do nothing. (John 15:5)*

John's gospel is certainly one of intimacy. "Make your home in me, as I make mine in you .... As the Father loves me, so do I love you. Remain in my love .... I call you not servants, but friends .... You did not choose me, I chose you" (John 15). Jesus is the vine; we are the branches. Our fruitfulness depends on our union with the vine. In him we can do everything, without him nothing lasting. In other words, our ministry and mission as Christian disciples are rooted in, with, and through Jesus. The title of this article is quite simply a reminder that in the end, our first and most telling mission lies in intimacy with the Lord. It is more a matter of *being* in him than *doing* for him. Indeed, in John's gospel the latter flows naturally from the former; otherwise, "doing for him" risks becoming "doing for self" in subtle and unperceived ways.

## MISSION AS DOING

The church has an ecclesial mission, and the people who make up the church are instrumental in

carrying that mission out. Basically, the mission is to bring good news to the poor, liberty to captives, sight to the blind, and freedom to the downtrodden (Isa. 42:6-7; Luke 4:18). The vineyard is in need of laborers (Matt. 9:38). As Christians, our call is to labor in the Lord's vineyard. Many religious and laypersons do this with utter dedication, sometimes to the point of exhaustion and even burnout, and our hearts go out to them.

When mission is seen as geared almost exclusively toward active ministry, it can be rather easily articulated, schematized, and presented in exciting and appealing ways, ways aglow with the enthusiasm of building up the Reign of God. Psychosociological studies, surveys, and successful models drawn from the world of business are important points of reference that permit us to see where we are, where we want to go, and the necessary means to get there. As a religious, I have seen and studied such documents in many recent publications on the future of religious life. Such documents seek, above all, to be evangelical, practical, and effective, yet inherent in some of them is what I consider a certain shortsightedness. By this I mean that mission is seen almost exclusively in terms of doing, and men and women are viewed primarily as doers of ministry. This shortsightedness seems rooted in the view that what really counts in ministry is efficiency, effectiveness, and measurable positive results. Surely prayer, witness, and the hiddenness of

their effectiveness?

Intellectually, we divide mission into two separate arenas: the apostolic (exterior) and the contemplative (interior). It is far easier to articulate the for-

mer. We are more comfortably competent at dealing with active ministry as something apart from and exterior to the person accomplishing his or her mission. As someone once noted, Westerners are far more aptly described as "human doings" than as "human beings."

We are Aristotelian to the core, and very much at home with Descartes. We analyze and divide to understand better. It almost seems that once we have intellectually grasped a subject, we can in some way possess, master, and even control it. We Westerners conquer Mount Everest, whereas Easterners make friends with Mount Everest. It is far easier to conceive of mission as something external to us, something we do, something we can discuss objectively and intelligently.

Mission and one's life in Christ are correlative. To separate them is to create a false dichotomy; it does justice to neither. The two are facets of the same reality. One has but to think of the vitally important mission of the aged or the sick-those incapable, by the design of a loving God, of exercising an active ministry. Is it not perhaps the living prayer of their life in Christ that is holding this crazy world of ours together? Their deepest mission is their mission in Christ. To work more effectively in hiddenness seems to be God's mysterious and unfathomable way (Rom. 11:33-36). One might even say that the most effective ministry will always go unseen.

## MISSION AS BEING

*... What I do is me: for that I came.  
I say more: the just man justices;  
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;  
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is-  
Christ-for Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of men's faces.  
(From "As Kingfishers Catch Fire,"  
Gerard Manley Hopkins)*

If instead of separating my life in Christ from mission, I unite them, then I become mission and my spiritual life becomes, at its deepest core, mission. Here one goes far beyond, and deeper than, sheer (no matter how well planned) mission activity. We are in fact dealing with "Mission Before Mission," as

A. Dominic notes in *Review for Religious* (Jan.-Feb. 1993)-an existential and holistic view of mission and the spiritual life. On a practical level, this means that any discussion of mission will, by its very nature, speak of conversion, both personal and corporate; prayer, the evangelical root of mission; the scriptural grounds for being "sent"; and true brotherhood/sisterhood and all those traits marking the advent of God's Reign in our world today. Our gospel witness is a witness to the living presence of our Risen Lord-a presence that frees, heals, and is Good News, and this in whatever mission activity. The fundamental questions will always be, "Am I Jesus for those to whom I minister? Do I have the heart and mind of the Lord?" I am reminded of a short prayer written by Cardinal Newman, which I paraphrase here from memory:

Lord Jesus, may I be the radiance of your presence every-

where. Flood my whole being with your Life and your Spirit. Penetrate and possess me so utterly that all that I am and all that I do may be but a reflection of you. Shine through me and be so in me that all those with whom I come into contact may see not me but only Jesus.

I was recently invited to attend a meeting of a group seeking to recreate a faltering commission on social ministries. Instead of actually forming a commission, the group decided to gather together with someone who would lead the group in a few days of shared scriptural reflection and prayer within the context of ministry to the poor and marginalized. One young man, rightly or wrongly, insisted that this facilitating person be one who was somehow implicated in this ministry and not, as he said, "an expert in scripture." He wanted to be guided by a person who somehow lived scripture within the context of social ministry. What the group wanted, I believe, was to be guided into a deeper relationship with Jesus and his mission. Having previously faltered on an ideological or theoretical level, the group did not want to organize before having met together in Christ. In the end, it is not what one does that matters most, but rather how, and with and in whom, one does it.

## JESUS IS MISSION

To quote an expression used by Richard Rohr, "Jesus really did nothing. He let the Father do it." In Jesus' person, God is sent. Jesus is himself mission: he is liberty to captives, sight to the blind, freedom to

the downtrodden. In his person, he is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Jesus is, in a word, our deepest mission. To state that redemption is in Christ Jesus is

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During the three years of his public ministry, Jesus never seemed to hurry to get things done. Certainly, organization was not his forte. His teachings were achieved through the authority of his person, unlike the teaching of the Scribes and Pharisees. The calling of the apostles seems rooted far more in fascination than in marvelous deeds, the antecedent of which was always faith. Jesus' gentle compassion, truthful confrontation, and intimacy with the Father, as well as the quiet understanding and loving forgiveness that enfolded his person, drew others to him. The Word of God was love incarnate, and when Jesus touched others at their deepest core, they responded with abandonment. The human person, made to love and be loved, finds fulfillment in him (Col. 2:9). The disciple who does not follow God's call to intimacy and does not allow grace to act in his or her life will never come to know the deepest meaning of life or let

that life come to its proper fulfillment. As Christians our mission is to fulfill life abundantly, and the breath of that life is prayer. This, I might add, is essentially the message of John of the Cross. In the

truer than stating that Jesus accomplished the work of redemption.

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longest commentary of his *Canticles* (29:3) he writes:

Let those who are singularly active, who think they can win the world with their preaching and exterior works, observe here that they would profit the Church and please God much more, not to mention the good example they would give, were they to spend at least half this

time with God in prayer .... Without prayer they would do a great deal of hammering but accomplish little, and sometimes nothing, and even at times cause harm.

God forbid that the salt should begin to lose its savor

(Matt. 5:13), for however much they may appear to achieve externally, they will in substance be accomplishing nothing.

As Christians ministering in the Lord's vineyard, we too have been fascinated by the Word who is Love:

Something which has existed since the beginning, that we have heard, and we have seen with our own eyes; that we have watched and touched with our hands: the Word, who is life-this is our subject. (1 John 1:1)

It is the deepest root-source of our vocation, perhaps not fully recognized in early years but grasped ever more fully with time, prayer, trials, stumblings, conversions, and ministry.

Christ-mission is, often without one's realizing it, the richest source of one's scriptural prayer life. As we read, ponder, and pray over scriptures, we are far more drawn to the person of Jesus than we are to his works. His ministry always draws us back to his person, which in turn leads us to the Father and the gift of the Holy Spirit abiding in our "hidden self" (Eph. 3:17, Rev. 2:17). This is the loving trinitarian presence. The Christ-mission, God's presence within us, is a constant theme in Saint Paul's letters (Gal. 1:15-16, 2:20; Phil. 1:21; Col. 3:3-4; Rom. 8:10-11).

## LIVES OF INTIMACY

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they ministered. Is not this the lived message of the Acts of the Apostles?

Documents and mission statements may well be prophetic-many strive to be so-but in themselves, they are not life-giving, and although they may quote scripture (and it is hoped that they do), they are not the Word of God. The granite ground of all such doc-

uments has to be Christ-mission or they will remain shortsighted and superficial. They will be superficial as long as they aim solely to revamp ministry in terms of activity, neglecting or forgetting the ultimate Christ-mission of the Christian who has, by his or her calling, a prophetic mission. If the renewal of ministerial structures does not encompass a renewal of one's (or a group's) spiritual life, it means little in concrete existential reality. One could go so far as to say that such "renewal" may well prove to be the silken shroud of a dying endeavor.

A prophet is, as was Jesus, a living parable pointing beyond self. It is the person of the prophet who touches most significantly. The prophet's message is given life in his or her person.

The primary mission of most prophets of our day has been the mission of their lives, the mission of their being. We remember Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Teilhard de Chardin, Pedro Arrupe, and many others for the living truth of their lives. Surely, their accomplishments were many and tremendously significant, but they were always authenticated by lives of intimacy with the Lord. Their mission was rooted in prayer; their accomplishments were not theirs but God's. Perhaps that is why their lives are marked with simplicity and humble truthfulness; perhaps that is why there is usually a touch of humor whenever they speak of their accomplishments. It is through the wonder of empty hands that God's most marvelous deeds are done. This is a constant theme in the Old Testament -in Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea, and of course in the lovely story of Gideon's reduced army (Judg. 7).

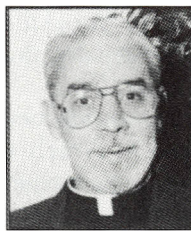
Like many who have labored long and hard in the Lord's vineyard, prayerfully pondering their lives and

ministry, the prophets came to an awareness that it was not their work that meant most, but rather their persons-their life in Christ, shared and nourished in the brotherhood and sisterhood of those to whom

## FOCUS IS IMPORTANT

In this brief article, I have attempted to bring into sharper focus the Christocentric and trinitarian ground of mission. I have viewed mission primarily in terms of being rather than doing because I believe that such a focus is important today. Documentation on the topic of ministry must not neglect this element

or put it aside for later consideration. At times mission documents are logically clear and competently articulated, yet the light of Christ does not shine through. One sometimes gets the impression that those drawing up such statements feel they must include such items as prayer and conversion. At times, however, the contrary is all too evident, and one can point out instances in which effectiveness takes



precedence over the spiritual life of the minister. Such, certainly, is the case when the spiritual life of those who minister becomes subservient to a set of complex structures-and this, unfortunately, happens in the name of the ecclesial mission of the church.

Bearing fruit aplenty means being one with the vine and receiving from that vine the life and nourish-

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ment we hope to share with others. "Whoever remains in me, and I in them, bears fruit in plenty" (John 15:5).

#### **RECOMMENDED READING**

Aschenbrenner, G. "Active and Monastic: Two Apostolic Lifestyles." *Review for Religious* (Sept.-Oct. 1986): 653-68.

Dominic, A. "Mission Before Mission: God's Mission Within Us." *Review for Religious* (Jan.-Feb. 1993): 119-130.

Kavanaugh, K. *Teresa of Avila: The Interior Cast/e*. New York, New York: Paulist Press, 1979.

Nygren, D, and M. Ukeritis. "The Future of Religious Orders in the United States." *Origins* 22, no. 15 (24 September 1992).

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