NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

A missiology to make our own

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | Jul. 12, 2014 Spiritual Reflections

In today's first reading and Gospel, the sacred authors give us a glimpse into the missiology God has used to bring about the redemption and salvation of sinful humankind. Deutero-Isaiah describes the missionary efforts of God's powerful and creative word, spoken into time and space to accomplish the end for which God sent it: to gather in all the peoples of the earth. In today's Gospel, the Matthean evangelist describes the salvific seed of God's good news, sown freely and indiscriminately so that anyone with ears to hear and a heart willing to understand might listen and learn the ways of God.

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 55:10-11
Psalm 65
Romans 8:18-23
Matthew 13:1-23

As the Matthean community of the 80s explains the parable of the sower, we are each invited to evaluate how receptive we have been to God's missionary efforts. Did we initially welcome the word, but then turn away from its truth when times got tough? Have worry and anxiety and the lure of riches caused us to turn a deaf ear to the word's challenges? Or do we listen and allow ourselves to become disciples of the word in good times and in bad? And then, with the grace and strength offered to us through the Spirit (Romans, second reading), do we continue to bear good fruits of faith and service?

Part of the service we are privileged to render is active participation in the missions begun by God and Jesus. In Jesus, God spoke the ultimate word of salvation and grace. For his part, Jesus continued God's mission by embodying in himself -- in his words and in his works -- the good news of salvation. We who profess to believe in and belong to Jesus are to continue his mission by realizing our role as evangelizers.

As evangelizers, we are to be eager witnesses to the good news of salvation, not only in what we say but also in what we do, how we live, how we choose a job, how we vote, how we choose our friends, how we tend to the earth's resources, how we give voice to the needs of the poor and the voiceless and the marginalized of society.

In an encyclical written about 40 years ago, Pope Paul VI described evangelization as "the process of bringing good news into all the strata of humankind and, through its influence, transforming it from within and making it new." The purpose of evangelization is the "interior change ... of the personal and collective consciousness of people, the activities in which they engage and the lives and concrete milieux which are theirs" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 18).

In order to be authentic, evangelization is to be both theocentric and christocentric, announcing God's desire for the universal salvation of humankind through the redemptive hand of Jesus. "Through Jesus, salvation is offered freely, to all, as a gift of God's grace and mercy" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 26-27).

This salvation necessarily includes both historical and transcendent elements. Salvation involves human advancement, development and liberation here and now, as well as the hope for full participation in the reign of God. Therefore, salvation is both existential (pertaining to this world) and eschatological (pertaining to eternity). For that reason, evangelizers and their missiologies cannot ignore the injustices or needs of this world in the hope that eternity will bring relief. On the contrary, our efforts as followers of Jesus must be concerned with bettering the lives of others now so that they may taste of the joys of the kingdom here, while preparing to enjoy it fully and forever in the future.

Authentic evangelization precludes keeping a safe distance from the ugliness of this world or from those who struggle to make their way, despite the difficulties. When trying to advise would-be evangelizers to stand with and not apart from those they serve, Cardinal M.A. Lavigerie, founder of the Missionaries of Africa, advised, "We must assume as much as possible the manner of the natives, we must speak their language, wear their garments, eat their food, in conformity to the example of the apostles: 'Become all things to all people that we may save all' " (1 Corinthians 9:22).

In a similar vein of thought, the current Pope Francis, who leads by word and example, has said, "I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and clinging to its own security." Francis also advised pastors, "Be shepherds with the smell of your sheep, in the midst of your people, like Jesus, the Good Shepherd."

These are words that teach; words that challenge; words that cannot remain unheeded.

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Source URL (retrieved on *10/26/2016 - 18:53*): https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/spiritual-reflections/missiology-make-our-own