

THE URGENCY OF A DECOLONIAL MODEL OF MISSION

A MISSION STYLE FOR OUR TIME

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ABSTRACT: The text addresses the coloniality of mission, outlining some avenues for missionary work from a decolonial perspective. Modern mission is intrinsically colonial, as an inspiring part of the colonial process of the Christian West. Coloniality is the profound structure of colonisation that survives to this day in relationships between peoples, races, and cultures. Some theological, pastoral, and spiritual elements can help us discern decolonial paths for thinking about mission in continuity with its own original, non-colonial, Jesuit/apostolic charisma.

We call "*coloniality*" the *structural* dimension of the colonial process that survives historical colonialism. It is a paradigm that has spread globally since the 16th century, as something natural, superior, universal, hegemonic, and messianic. While colonialism shaped the process of global conquest—military, political, and economic—*coloniality* is instead inscribed in the cultural, cognitive, ontological, and spiritual order, that is, in the imposition of a cosmovision, a cognitive structure, and an ethnocentric understanding of human beings and society. This *coloniality*, along with other complex historical-cultural interactions, inaugurates the emergence of the modern world-system.

As a totalitarian cosmovision of power, knowledge, and being, *coloniality* represents the "dark side" of emancipatory modernity (MIGNOLO, 2017). There is no modernity without *coloniality*, without the domination of souls, without the imposition of an imaginary, without the seduction of minds, without the eradication of cultural identities, without racial hierarchy, without the denial of otherness.

From these considerations, *decoloniality* represents the patient process of recovering the denied stories of survivors, stories marked by colonial violence and masked by miscegenation. It seeks to reclaim frontier thinking as an alternative and subversive thought, bringing those oppressed identities to the surface and aiming for a pluriversal utopian horizon. If we truly want to build a better world for all, this will only be possible if many different worlds can coexist.

CRITIQUE OF MISSIONARY REASON

The *modern Christian mission*, which has shaped the missionary imagination to this day, only emerged in the 16th century as a spiritual arm of historical colonialism, closely linked to the European movement of invasion, appropriation, and plunder of the New World territories and

their peoples. The frantic search for gold was accompanied by the tireless work of converting the indigenous people.

The modern mission was considered, as the exporter of a totalitarian ideology, the backbone of coloniality, the origin of the Christian, messianic, salvific, universal imperialist spirit. This character was later reaffirmed by the secularisation of philosophy and science, when they became the "theology" of the second modernity (19th and 20th centuries). Indeed, when religion was replaced by secular culture, faith by reason, the church by the state, providence by progress, mystery by science, etc., only the content of the discourse changed, not the rules of the game. Indeed, the West's asymmetrical and hegemonic supremacy over other peoples has strengthened, with the absolute conviction that the civilisation forged by modernity represented the end of history and the path to the definitive fulfilment of the life plans of all peoples.

In this way, we can understand that colonisation was not only made up of crimes and plunder, but also had its terrible humanitarian face: a colonisation of love, goodness, self-giving, and truth, always in a relationship of submission between the superior white-European-master-Christian-civilized individual and the inferior Indian/Black-pagan-servant-savage individual.

If a fundamental critique of modern missionary reasoning must be made today—not so much as a historical retrospective, but as a contribution to the present and a plan for the future of mission—it should not primarily concern the methods, projects, results, training, testimony, and sanctity of its protagonists, but rather the theological presuppositions that supported its statute.

Is it possible today to envision a Christian mission from a decolonial perspective, radically detached from European colonialism and ethnocentrism?

The theoretical answer might even be affirmative, but it still needs to spark a significant pragmatic and paradigmatic shift, given the long missionary tradition tied to the Christian regime. Here, we might outline some theological, pastoral, and spiritual elements for a reconfiguration, seeking to question the power relations that still condition us.

THEOLOGY AND MISSION

In 1908, Martin Kahler defined mission as the "mother of theology" (BOSCH, p. 34), because, since apostolic times, Christians had to answer the questions others posed to them, and therefore were obliged to think. At a certain point, however, the roles reversed: mission no longer forced theology to think, but rather theology forced mission to apply its purposes: the colonial principle lies here, in this unidirectional deductive relationship.

When the relationship between theology and mission returns to what it was before, theology becomes the second act. Mission is called today to regain its theological relevance, bringing to the debate every possible provocation and contribution of frontier thought, unmasking colonial and ethnocentric worldviews, developing tools that help create decolonial pastoral attitudes, and placing itself at the service of the liberating causes of subaltern peoples.

In an era when the theology of mission was understood only in operational terms of *salus animarum* and *plantatio ecclesiae*, it essentially had to answer the question of how to carry out

a certain type of activity most effectively. But as soon as we begin to treat mission no longer as a practical application, but as a divine nature that has its origin in the Father's source of love (AG 2), we begin to speak of a missionary God in his action (economy) and in his intrinsic essence and relational structure (immanence).

Mission, therefore, is not only a mandate from the Lord (Mt 28:19), but is the pure divine gratuitousness that freely overflows as the permanent presence of God-Love in the world, calling everyone to participate in renewed, reconciled, and reconciling human/divine relationships. This eminently theological approach represents a decisive step toward a dialogical, disarmed, inculturated, and intercultural ecclesial practice, because it indicates a relational disposition that appeals to all that is most human and humanising.

Historically, the Church was born from this mission and for this mission. Indeed, starting from a careful reading of the Acts of the Apostles, the Church is born and structured as something distinct from Judaism only when it understands and assumes the mission of proclaiming the Gospel beyond its own sociocultural milieu. The Gospel is essentially an inclusive form of communication, open to all. The Church is born by going forth (FRANCIS, 2014), reborn and rediscovered every time it is willing to welcome *others* and be welcomed by new peoples, new histories, and new cultures.

EVANGELISATION AND MISSION

Beginning with the recognition of *others* as interlocutors, in creative reciprocity, the Christian mission is called to weave intersubjective dynamics in which none of the actors involved must be objectified: neither God as doctrinal truth, nor the missionary as a simple instrument in God's hands, nor the interlocutor as a passive recipient of the proclamation of the Good News. The role of each individual in missionary dialogue passes through the circularity of communication, participation, discernment, testimony, and praise, in which all subjects are involved.

First, we are sent on mission as disciples of the Lord, called to learn *to become poor* (Mt 5:3) as *He became poor* (2 Cor 8:9), *to become servants* by lowering ourselves, to enrich and serve others; Furthermore, we are called to learn *to be neighbours* like the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:36), in an exodus from ourselves, breaking down those sacred and untouchable barriers that exist between us—priests and Levites—and others.

Second, we are sent to the ends of the earth and of humanity (Acts 1:8): mission has its geopolitics and is always called to inhabit frontiers. These can be identified with the margins of a context (territorial, environmental, existential *peripheries*), with the dividing line between one territory and another (*borders* between worlds and cultures), or with unexplored paths of presence and cooperation (*horizons* of new emerging challenges). Each type of frontier can correspond to a type of missionary presence. The evangelical metaphors of the shepherd, the sower, and the fisherman (GIRARD, 2000) can inspire different ways of caring for people, proclaiming the Kingdom, and serving humanity. It is a matter of identifying these mission situations in different global realities.

Mission conceived from a decolonial perspective fosters the goal of denouncing and combating all exclusion (power), all exclusivity (knowledge), and exclusivity (being), in the construction

of new relationships of participation, learning, and recognition, starting from the colonial wound as an intercultural, ethical, and political proposal.

On the one hand, mission as a project from a decolonial perspective evokes a participatory process based on context and the protagonism of its interlocutors (QAm 40); on the other, it must be connected to the major decolonial causes, to the protection of Mother Earth, to solidarity with other peoples, and to integration with the different dimensions of life. In this sense, mission always seeks an insertion into the local in communion with the universal (FT 142), and an interconnection between the personal, relational, social, and cosmic dimensions (LS 91, 117, 138, 240).

SPIRITUALITY AND MISSION

The spiritual approach is perhaps closest to decolonial sensibilities and proposals, because to open subversive paths of decolonization it is necessary to resort to dialogue with other practices and knowledge, founded on symbolic and narrative languages, meta-rational knowledge, and holistic horizons of meaning, as *Laudato Si'* reminds us: "If we take into account the complexity of the ecological crisis and its many causes, we must recognize that solutions cannot come from a single way of interpreting and transforming reality. We also need to have recourse to the diverse cultural riches of peoples, to art and poetry, to their interior life and spirituality" (LS 63). Indeed, "if we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of dominators, consumers, or mere exploiters of natural resources, incapable of setting limits on their immediate interests" (LS 11).

The great Christian spiritual contribution is found in following Jesus on the Mount of the Beatitudes. It is a proposal/conversion of life for all humanity (Mt 28:19). It consists in growing in the practice of fraternity, respect and recognition of others, the search for truth, unarmed and nonviolent generosity, universality in love, mercy, tenderness, and forgiveness, which extends even to enemies (Mt 5:21-48). This journey is the content of the mission that makes us similar to the Father (Mt 5:48), participants in His divine nature (2 Pet 1:4).

The mission evokes a departure from oneself, from one's tribe, from one's land. It involves an exterior and interior journey of ourselves, a leaving of our own world for the unknown world of the other, a stripping away and detachment so that subversive otherness can challenge our identity. The journey calls for an attitude of detachment and intercultural proximity, which breaks down certainties and barriers and builds bridges.

Once we approach the wounded contexts of colonial frontiers, we face the challenge of encountering the poor and the other, of radically being guests in their home. As Placide Tempels (p. 32) said, "it is not possible to understand the Bantu without entering into spiritual contact with them." The pilgrim guest is called at a certain point to silence. In turn, the impulse of the Spirit gives rise to the irruption of the other's discourse, starting from their identity, their culture, and their surviving history. The Spirit of God blows in all directions: if for one interlocutor the asceticism required in the encounter most often involves detachment, for the other, "spirituality"

involves learning to be proud of their own culture and identity and to develop an authentic self-awareness.

John Paul II affirmed that human society today seeks "the spiritual dimension of life as an antidote to dehumanisation," and that the Church has in Christ "an immense spiritual patrimony to offer" (RMi 38). "The future of mission depends largely on contemplation" (RMi 91). Indeed, in a world marked by technocratic hegemony, capitalist necropower, and homogenising globalisation (FT 100), the Christian mission has as its primordial and subversive aim that of redeeming the sense of Mystery, in communion with the age-old wisdom of the humanity of the Native American, African, and Eastern peoples. If in the past, missionary activity was aimed at the salvation of souls, today we could say that it is centred on "saving God," thus announcing the possibility of a more humane world.

CONCLUSION

A mission from a decolonial perspective begins here with a reassessment of the Church's incapable missionary essence, a rethinking of its premises, and a new vision of the paths to follow and the horizons to strive for. Churches cannot deny their mission without denying themselves: the question remains whether and how this mission can be conceived in continuity with its original, non-colonial charism.

If colonialism was primarily determined by expansion and domination, decolonialism must indicate a new openness characterised by the attempt at an authentic encounter with the other. If exploitation has made the other an *object* of its own purposes, a mission from a decolonial perspective will instead strive to see the other as a *subject* in their most genuine otherness. If colonial expropriation generated conquest, from a decolonial perspective, one must place oneself in the role of the host. Finally, in the face of colonial extermination that continues to flaunt its massacres, the Christian mission must more than ever promote a profound and radical culture of life through a decolonial pedagogy, committing itself to unmasking every ideology and theology of domination, developing tools that help identify hegemonic positions, including its own, patiently proposing paths to decolonising subjectivities and relationships, and placing itself at the service of the liberation causes of subaltern peoples as a reliable ally.

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