

Be, Beget, Be Gone¹

The Challenge of Inculturation

One of the greatest challenges to religious life today is inculturation. Every religious institute is comprised of persons of every race, culture, class and nation in the world. Many of these institutes in the first world send missionaries to so-called third world countries. Work of these pastoral agents may be summed up in three stages: Be, Beget and Be Gone. Let's take a look at each of them.

Stage One: Be

Religious doing missionary work must be present to and among the receiving people as witnesses of the Good News. First they must listen to the people they are evangelizing for only they will know how to verbalize the message so that it is intelligible to those who are to receive it. Put differently, missionaries must learn the ways of the people and their language before attempting to teach them. All of this is a slow process that cannot be rushed.

Stage Two: Beget

Evangelical agents must beget, that is, assist in the formation of small groups or base communities with whom they will share the Gospel. These communities seek to discover the riches of the Good News in their own culture as well as elements which differ from their culture and are challenged by the Good News. Recipients interpret it in the light of their own experience of faith. Scripture then becomes their own book, illuminating their life-long journey to God as they struggle in concrete practical ways to liberate themselves from oppression. Then God is discovered as One with them in their struggle. Here the local church has its beginnings and Christ is born again into the culture of the small community.

Stage Three: Be Gone

Missionaries, like all Christians, are called to bring the Good News of salvation to peoples of other cultures. When they have done this and the local church has been firmly established and leadership is in the hands of the indigenous peoples, it is then time for the first bearers of the Good News to depart. Thus the new local church is able to develop on its own, relating with other churches as part of the universal church. This departure is probably the most difficult step. It means missionaries return to their place of origin and perhaps to another situation.

Be Back Home

There are biblical precedents for this step.² Consider the journeys of Moses and Elijah. Both men were sent back to return to the place of origin which they had fled from for fear of their lives.

Moses fled Egypt and went to Midian after killing an Egyptian. In Midian Moses experienced God in the burning bush. God sent Moses back to Egypt to lead his own

¹ Peter Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), p. 27.

² Anthony J. Gittins, *Called to Be Sent: Co-Missioned as Disciples Today*, Liguori, Missouri: Liguori Publications, 2008, p. 5.

people out from oppression and injustice under Pharaoh and his minions. (See Exodus 3-4.)

Elijah had fled the wrath of Queen Jezabel for forty days as he journeyed to Mount Horeb. Here he experienced God not in thunder, lightning or earthquake but in the gentle breeze. Elijah was also sent back to **re**-establish the covenant and **re**store Israel to its true faith as well as to anoint Hazael as king of Aram, Jehu as king of Israel and Elisha as prophet to succeed him. (See: 1 Kings 19; 2 Kings 2:1-18)

Before terminating the “be back home” section, let us look at a few final notions employing the letters “re”. **R**eturning missionaries bring back and share the newness they have found, becoming **r**everse missionaries.

Rev. Dr. Miguez Bonino in The J. Lovell Murray Lecture at the University of Toronto in 1978 addressed many of the complex issues facing missionaries. Are they needed short-term or life-long? Are they specialists in technology needed for a short period of time to help in a particular situation? According to Dr. Bonino, God calls us to be available for new forms of liberation and he demands of us availability and obedience.

Not only are religious communities called to evangelize but also to look at their own cultures which are living, changing entities; these cultures require constant **re**-enculturation as do the religious institutes which originated in them. The task which currently challenges us is monumental. Are we ready to embrace it whole-heartedly?

Questions for Reflection:

1. Has your community engaged the services of competent cultural anthropologists and/or sociologists as well as missionaries who have had similar experiences to assist in the preparation of its future missionaries?
2. Are the scriptures one of your principal tools in the formation of base communities? How might oppressed people use a different hermeneutic in interpreting scripture and applying it than a dominant group?
3. How are returning missionaries treated in your community? What can they contribute now?

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