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978-0-521-56201-0 - The Religion of the Poor: Rural Missions in Europe and the Formation of Modern Catholicism, c. 1500–c. 1800

Louis Châtellier

Excerpt

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Part 1

The extent of the missions in Europe

In a famous book which influenced an entire generation, *La France, pays de mission?*, Henri Godin and Yves Daniel contrasted ‘the lands of Christendom with the missionary lands’.¹ The former are those where the Gospel has already been fully preached and whose inhabitants have been instructed therein, even if they have subsequently forgotten it. The latter, in the authors’ words, are those ‘where there has so far been nothing’.² Such were most of the countries of Europe at the beginning of the Middle Ages, when Boniface and Columbanus undertook their great journeys. The situation was similar at the end of the nineteenth century in the new towns created by the Industrial Revolution, in which uprooted and huddled masses had forgotten their Christian traditions. Between these two phases Europe could be seen as being, on the whole, a Christian continent. However, this Christianity was for a long time in a fragile condition. Held in a pincer-grip, from the west and the south, and especially from the east, by conquering Islam, it felt, until the seventeenth century at least, that it was under threat. Torn apart within by the rival churches, their mutual excommunications and the wars they waged against each other, Christian Europe was never able, after the thirteenth century, to recover its lost unity. In the sixteenth century this division was intensified by the Reformation and the Council of Trent. Protestants and Catholics were thenceforth absolutely separate and very often in conflict. The situation was all the worse because, in those days, it was hard to distinguish between temporal and spiritual matters. Rulers looked on those of their subjects who did not practise the same religion as they did as being potential rebels. In many countries the rule laid down, or tacitly recognised, was: *cuius regio eius religio* (the religion of a country shall be that of its ruler). These principles also led rulers to intervene constantly in the management of their church. On their part, the spiritual authorities sought the rulers’ support and themselves in some cases exercised actual power over

¹ Godin, Henri and Daniel, Yves, *La France, pays de mission?*, Lyons, L’Abeille, 1943.

² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

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populations and over entire territories. The Pope was the head of a state, bishops were princes, and it could happen that a mere preacher, such as Savonarola in late-fifteenth-century Florence, became the master of a whole country.³

Consequently, there was always scope for missions in Europe. Their function was no longer to implant Christianity but to renew it in spirit and effects, to re-awaken Christians by recalling to their minds the teachings of Christ and his commandments. Only priests who were completely free (preferably, members of religious orders) and who were convinced of the need to resume unceasingly this work of evangelisation in town and country, without feeling bound to any parish or diocese, could be in a position to take upon themselves this apostolic activity.

³ Antonetti, Pierre, *Savonarole, le prophète désarmé*, Paris, Perrin, 1990, p. 127.

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I From the Middle Ages to modern times

Itinerant preachers had long been traversing Europe in the task of reviving the faith of the inhabitants and reminding them of the penitence they needed. In the thirteenth century the Mendicant Orders had been founded with this as their main purpose, and in subsequent centuries they had undergone considerable development.¹ In France alone 800 friaries subject to the rule of St Francis of Assisi or of St Dominic had been established between 1250 and 1550.² Only at the end of the Middle Ages, however, did the type of great missionary able to gather crowds gain recognition in the Church, and only at the beginning of modern times was a precise method established for this form of apostleship.

The first great missionaries of modern Europe

As with the various reform movements that the Church had experienced, since the early Middle Ages, the initiative again came from the South. Italy and Spain provided the example. In Tuscany at the beginning of the fourteenth century the Franciscans had systematically established centres in the small towns from which they sent forth friars into the villages.³ Later they were to install themselves in Southern Italy and proceed in the same way.⁴ Much more spectacular, though, were the missions of Thomas Cornette, Vincent Ferrer or Bernardin of Siena.⁵

¹ Rapp, Francis, *L'Eglise et la vie religieuse en Occident à la fin du Moyen Age*, Paris, PUF (coll. 'Nouvelle Clio'), 1971, p. 126.

² Martin, Hervé, *Le Métier de prédicateur en France septentrionale à la fin du Moyen Age (1350–1520)*, Paris, Cerf, 1988, p. 146.

³ La Roncière, Charles M. de, 'L'influence des Franciscains dans la campagne de Florence au XIVe siècle (1280–1360)', in *Mélanges de l'Ecole française de Rome, Moyen Age, Temps modernes*, 87, 1975/1, pp. 27–103.

⁴ Cestaro, Antonio, 'Le structure ecclesiastiche del Mezzogiorno dal cinquecento all'eta contemporanea', in *Società et religione in Basilicata, Atti del convegno di Potenza-Matera (1975)*, 2 vols., *Collana di studi storici*, s.l., D'Elia Editori spa., 1977, vol. I, pp. 179–219. See p. 200.

⁵ On Thomas Cornette in northern France, see Martin, *Le Métier de prédicateur*, pp. 54–7 and 173–4.

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In less than 20 years (1399–1419) the Dominican Vincent Ferrer travelled through Castile, Aragon and Catalonia, southern and central France and the eastern borderlands of that realm, from Lorraine to the southern Alps, northern Italy from Genoa to Bologna, western France from Caen to Angers, and Brittany, where he died. In this long apostolic march across Europe there is something reminiscent of the immense enterprises of men like Columbanus and Boniface at the beginning of the Middle Ages, though with more feverish haste, since everywhere he went the missionary stayed for only one or two weeks in the more important places, and usually for only a few days. He presented himself, moreover, in the guise of a mere pilgrim travelling on foot, with capacious cloak over his shoulders and staff in his hand. But he was not looking for holy relics. It was the faithful who came to meet him and who obtained miracles from him. Like Christ he preached as he walked, or settled cases of conscience that were put to him. As he drew near a village a long procession of flagellants took form, crying ‘Mercy!’ as they thrashed themselves with whips that they flung over their shoulders as hard as they could.⁶ ‘Since the outpouring of Our Saviour’s blood’, it was said of the flagellants in Tournai in 1349, ‘there has been no such notable shedding of blood as they produced’.⁷ The villagers, impelled to leave their houses, first saw a cloud of dust, then heard the cries and weeping, saw the cross that headed the procession, and trembled at the dull and rhythmic sound of the scourges as they beat the bloody backs. Soon the first groups were entering the village. The master followed, making his way to the church. When the crowd was too great it was led to a field where a platform had been hastily erected so that the missionary could be seen and heard by all.⁸ The mournful procession was naturally followed by a sermon on the last things and the need for penitence.

The words of Vincent Ferrer, however, were more terrible still. What he proclaimed was nothing less than the end of time and the imminent arrival of the Antichrist who ‘will come soon, very soon, quite soon’.⁹ In Murcia his prophecy was still more precise: God’s wrath was such, he declared, that within ‘forty-five days’ we shall all perish in fire from heaven.¹⁰ It is easy to imagine the wave of panic that swept over the

⁶ Gorce, Matthieu-Maxime, *Saint Vincent Ferrer (1350–1419)*, Paris, Plon, 1923, pp. 81–117 and 183–6.

⁷ Martin, *Le Métier de prédicateur*, pp. 32–3. ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁹ Gorce, *Saint Vincent Ferrer*, p. 142. On preaching about the end of the world in the Christian West during the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period, see the classical work of Jean Delumeau, *Le Pêché et la peur: la culpabilisation en Occident XIIIe–XVIIIe siècle*, Paris, Fayard, 1983.

¹⁰ Gorce, *Saint Vincent Ferrer*, p. 144.

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town – especially as this preacher who had come as a pilgrim from a faraway land often seemed, when out of his native region, Valencia, like a stranger unknown to anyone. Was this not the Angel of the Apocalypse come to announce, as was said in Scripture, the imminent end of the world? ‘And so now’, he added, ‘you have only to reconcile yourselves and cleanse your consciences so as to receive at Easter the body of Our Lord.’¹¹ Imminent punishment and necessary penitence were the two parts of a sermon that aimed at immediate conversion of sinners. Once the shock effect had been produced, the penitent needed to be guided in examining, one by one, his various sins. Lust and quarrelling were the first to be nailed to the pillory. ‘Make faggots for me of these weeds and cast them into the fire – one faggot for each of the seven deadly sins. Oh! Oh! With all these fine faggots, what a bonfire for the eternal brazier. There! Plop! Into the pan.’¹² Then, since, eventually, the goodwill shown by the population might well restrain the vengeful arm of the Almighty and the ‘forty-five days’ might turn into forty-five years, or even more, it was necessary to teach the people to live as Christians. On Sunday, he went on, do not be like those men sitting at table in the tavern who wait for the bell to ring for the elevation before hurrying to the church, ‘like a mob of pigs in a sty’.¹³ Be present, rather, throughout Mass, ‘and when hearing it do not be idle, but have faith in God, saying to yourselves: my God whom we are now adoring, thou art the one God in three persons who has created all things’.¹⁴ One should also say one’s prayers every day. This is what a man from Limoges remembered from Brother Vincent’s teaching: kneel when you get out of bed and say the *Pater*, the *Ave* and the *Credo*, cross yourself in the proper manner, and hear Mass, from beginning to end.¹⁵ There could be added: flee from sin, from shameful distractions, from disguises ‘in which human nature is distorted’, from intemperance and from exaggerated fashions in women’s dress.¹⁶ Above all, in order to be saved, one must banish from one’s mind all superstitions, one of the commonest of which consisted in deifying the stars, especially the sun, and worshipping them. In one of his sermons the preacher imagined the ascent of the elect into Paradise and made them converse with God. ‘“What, Lord, is this the moon, then? How foolish were they who worshipped it, saying: moon, moon, my protectress . . .” Then they will rise into the other heavens, wondering at their beauty. And when they reach the fourth heaven, which is the sun, they will say: “What, Lord, hasn’t the sun eyes? It’s nothing but a stone that shines: how crazy were

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 144. ¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 162–8. ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 154.¹⁴ Martin, *Le Métier de prédicateur*, p. 357. ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 607–8.¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 379; Gorce, *Saint Vincent Ferrier*, p. 154.

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they who worshipped it.”¹⁷ Being well-informed as to the weakness of human nature, Vincent Ferrer cherished no illusions concerning the lasting conversion of his listeners after they had heard a few sermons. Accordingly he encouraged the creation, in the larger towns at least, of confraternities of flagellants who would maintain the spirit of penitence, if only among a few.¹⁸

Vincent Ferrer was not the only one to think about the consequences of his apostolic activity. One of his fellows in the Dominican order, Alain de La Roche, inspired a form of devotion that was destined to enjoy a great future in Christian Europe: telling, in honour of the fifteen joyful, sorrowful and glorious mysteries of the life of the Virgin, the same number of decades of one’s beads. The rosary, as it was called, would become a fresh link between fervent souls who themselves were not slow to form themselves into confraternities.¹⁹

The fame of the missions of Vincent Ferrer, who left so great a memory, and who in many ways was the inspirer of a number of similar undertakings in the Baroque age, should not cause us to overlook the work of many religious who were his contemporaries or immediate successors. The Franciscan Bernardin of Siena (1380–1444) seems to have enjoyed in Italy a prestige comparable to that of Brother Vincent. While also arousing immense popular fervour, he nevertheless did not preach in the apocalyptic style that was often characteristic of the famous Dominican missionary. In the steps of Francis of Assisi, he was concerned to establish the reign of Christ here below, in an Italy torn apart by struggles between rival factions. The partisan ‘dead with weapons in his hands must not expect any mercy in the after-life’, he declared.²⁰ In order to prepare the future by changing men’s hearts he caused the name of Jesus to be inscribed everywhere (and particularly wherever Guelph or Ghibelline symbols were to be seen) in the form of a monogram destined for great success: IHS, surrounded with golden rays.²¹ In this way there developed another great devotion of modern times, that of the Holy Name of Jesus. His disciples were to carry on in the same direction and to emphasise still further some features of his teaching. A certain Brother Didier, in Picardy, urged his hearers, during

¹⁷ Gorce, *Saint Vincent Ferrer*, pp. 130 and 181.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 184–6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*; Martin, *Le Métier de prédicateur*, pp. 606–7; *Dict. spir.*, vol. XIII, cols. 937–80 (art. ‘Rosaire’); on the functioning of the confraternity, Jean-Claude Schmitt, ‘Apostolat mendiant et société. Une confrérie dominicaine à la veille de la Réforme’, *Annales ESC*, 1971/2, pp. 83–104.

²⁰ Thureau-Dangin, Paul, *Un Prédicateur populaire dans l’Italie de la Renaissance: Saint Bernardin de Sienna 1380–1444*, Paris, Plon, 1897, p. 213.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 79; *Dict. spir.*, vol. VIII, cols. 1109–26.

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Lent in 1455, to forgive each other's trespasses and become publicly reconciled.²² Devotion to the Virgin was vigorously encouraged by Brother Bernardin. It was promoted no less at the end of the fifteenth century, by the Franciscans and Observants, who developed, in Spain, Italy and France, a new devotion: that of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin.²³

Matteo da Bascio and Ignatius Loyola: two conceptions of mission at the dawn of the sixteenth century

When in 1525 a Friar Minor Observant, Matteo da Bascio, decided, being equipped with an authorisation from Pope Clement VII, to preach freely all over the Papal States, he was continuing a Franciscan tradition made famous in the previous century by Bernardin of Siena.²⁴ However, this reformer who was to launch the Capuchins linked with his vocation a concern to go back as faithfully as possible to what the founder, Francis of Assisi, had wanted. Hence the rules adopted at the first chapter-general in 1536, 'to the end that [our congregation] may, like the impregnable Tower of David, have ramparts by means of which we can defend ourselves against all foes of the life-giving spirit of Our Lord Jesus Christ and all laxities contrary to the most fervent and seraphic zeal of our Father St Francis'.²⁵ Now, the 'spirit' of St Francis, wrote the Capuchins of the Marais convent in Paris at the beginning of their Annals, 'was none other than the conversion of sinners and the salvation of souls, so that his life was simply a continual mission'.²⁶ Yet a mission as understood by Matteo da Bascio, following the sainted founder of the Franciscans, could not consist of a continual apostolic pilgrimage. It had to take its place in a life divided between preaching among the people and austere retreats in places remote from them. The first Capuchins wrote:

And so that they [the preachers], in preaching to others, may not themselves become reprobate, let them from time to time cease to frequent the people and return to solitude, ascending, after the most sweet Saviour, the mountain of sacred prayer and contemplation, and remaining there until, filled with God, they are driven by the impetuosity of the Spirit once more to spread its divine

²² Martin, *Le Métier de prédicateur*, pp. 78–9.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 607; Thureau-Dangin, *Un Prédicateur populaire*, p. 213; *DTC*, vol. VII, 1, cols. 845–1218.

²⁴ *Catho.*, vol. I, cols. 1278–79; *LTK*, vol. VII, col. 173.

²⁵ *La Règle et Constitutions des frères mineurs cappucins de S. François, reveües et de nouveau corrigées*, Arras, 1592, pp. 25–6.

²⁶ BN, Paris, MSS, Nouvelles acquisitions françaises 4135, fo. 61; *Recueil de ce qui s'est passé de plus notable en ce couvent du Marais, depuis son établissement en l'année 1622*.

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mercies about the world, striving to blaze like Seraphim of divine love, so that they, being so hot, may bring warmth to others. And so doing, sometimes serving in Martha's ministry and sometimes in Mary's silence, they will follow, in a varied life, the example of Jesus Christ, who, after praying on the mountain, came down to the Temple to preach, just as he came down from Heaven to Earth in order to save souls.²⁷

This passage shows how the work of mission was conceived, on the eve of the Council of Trent, by religious who were regarded as exemplary. Preaching to the people was doing the work of Martha – useful, indispensable, but by its nature inferior in value to listening to the Truth, the choice made by Mary.²⁸ According to the Capuchins' rule, the true missionary thus had to devote the greater part of his time to meditation, in silence, retreat and privation, and then, when impelled once more by the Spirit, to descend from 'the mountain' to address the people. His sermons would thus have meaning and would not risk betraying 'the naked and humble Crucified'.²⁹ It was to satisfy this requirement as much as out of fidelity to 'holy humility' that the rule ordered missionaries to take with them nothing but the Holy Scriptures, and especially the New Testament, 'because in Jesus Christ are all the treasures of divine wisdom and knowledge'.³⁰ The preacher thus inspired became truly an emissary of God, almost a prophet. Was it not natural to expect from him surprising revelations about the future and miraculous cures, as so many signs proving that he had been sent from God?

The life of Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus, was likewise a 'continual mission'. But it became so through a decision carefully thought-out, the stages of which were reproduced in that guide to the inner life and perfect conversion, the *Spiritual Exercises*. After a first week devoted to acquiring self-knowledge, awareness of his faults and confession of them, comes the moment when the retreatant is brought to make his choice. At the very heart of the *Exercises*, on the fourth day of the second week, we find the meditation on the two standards, that of Christ and that of Lucifer, when the Christian is called on 'to see how the Lord of the whole world Himself sends forth throughout the Earth the apostles He has chosen, His disciples and other ministers, so that they may spread among men of every kind, estate and condition His sacred and saving doctrine'.³¹ Carrying out a mission meant fulfilling the expressed will of Christ who, when he

²⁷ *La Reigle*, pp. 101–2. ²⁸ Luke, X, 38–42.

²⁹ *La Reigle*, p. 97. ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

³¹ Ignace de Loyola, *Ecrits*, translated and presented under the direction of Maurice Giuliani, SJ, by a group of Jesuit Fathers, with the collaboration of Pierre-Antoine Fabre and Luce Giard, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1991, p. 127, *Exercices spirituels*.

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appeared to the Apostles for the last time, in Galilee, repeated his wish: 'Go ye therefore and teach all nations . . .' (Matthew, XXVIII, 19). For a Society that was to bear the name of Jesus there could be no holier activity than fulfilling the last order given by Christ.

Ignatius consecrated himself very early to his mission. In 1535, at Azpeitia in Guipúzcoa, on returning to his native land after his studies in Paris, he refused to lodge with his brother and went to live in the poorhouse. There he led the life of the poor, begging alms around the country. He instructed the unfortunates who were with him and went out regularly to teach the catechism to the village children. On Sundays and feast-days he preached to audiences that rapidly increased to thousands of persons. He also attacked abuses and sought aid from the civil power in suppressing them – gambling and concubinage of girls with priests in particular. He caused measures to be taken to renew the religious life of the village, such as those relating to the maintenance of the poor or the ringing of church bells three times a day, in the morning, at noon and in the evening, so as to accustom the people to say the *Ave Maria*.³² In the years that followed, Ignatius, together with his first comrades Laynez, Favre and Jaÿ, undertook missions on a larger scale, in Italy. In Venice and Rome he preached and held catechism sessions. He began conducting the *Spiritual Exercises* with priests. In small towns and big villages he combined, as he had in Guipúzcoa, assistance to the poor with public reconciliations between hostile families, and endeavoured to bring as many persons as possible to confession.

Thus, the mission as Ignatius and his comrades understood it was, in contrast to the concept of the first Capuchins, the holy work *par excellence* to which the members of the Society of Jesus were to devote themselves exclusively. In order to be effective, however, it had to be conducted in accordance with precise rules.

How Ignatius Loyola thought missions should be carried out

One of the reasons for the power that the Society of Jesus acquired very soon was the capacity which its founder possessed, to a high degree, for translating ideas into instructions, instructions into rules, and rules into concerted actions upon people and institutions. This was what Ignatius called 'reforming the world'. The first stage was 'discovery' of the sacredness and primacy of missions. The second stage was reached with the *Spiritual Exercises*: what was a mission according to Christ? To this

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 1064–5, *Récit*, 8.

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he replied by grouping into three points the contents of chapter X of St Matthew's Gospel. First, Jesus conferred on his disciples the power to drive out devils and cure the sick, then he taught them prudence and patience ('Be ye therefore wise as serpents and harmless as doves'), and, finally, he told them how to go about their work: 'Provide neither gold nor silver . . . Freely ye have received, freely give . . .', and what they were to preach: 'And as ye go, preach, saying, "The Kingdom of heaven is at hand."' ³³

But how were they to proceed in practice? (Ignatius wrote *El modo de proceder*) The *Constitutiones circa missiones*, one of the first drafts, composed by Ignatius in 1544–5, of the future Constitutions, gave the necessary instructions. Pilgrims wandering as their inspiration might lead them were not to Ignatius' taste. The head of the Society alone was empowered to send forth missionaries, and it was for him to decide their destination. 'And because what is good is more divine the more universal it is', we read in the *Constitutions*, 'we must give preference to persons and places that, after having benefited from it themselves, will cause what is good to be extended to many others who are under their authority or take them as their model.'³⁴ Preference is therefore to be given to 'persons of high rank', such as princes or prelates, and, for the same reason, 'great nations' like India, or important towns, are to have priority.³⁵ An entire strategy was thus revealed, requiring of the missionary an apostleship conducted with discernment and political sense.³⁶ Moreover, these rules allowed of no exceptions and were applicable equally to Christian Europe and to the 'infidel' Indies. This is why Francis Xavier can be regarded as the first Jesuit who applied them on a large scale and whose reports sent to Rome served as instructions for all who went on mission.³⁷ Ignatius and his first comrades who remained in Italy conformed to them no less closely. After the Guipúzcoa episode it was substantial cities like Venice and Rome that benefited from the preaching of the Society's founder.³⁸ He chose with care the places and persons whither and to whom he sent his religious. The Viceroy of Naples and the Republic of Genoa were chosen because

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 198–201, *Exercices spirituels*, para. 218.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 548, *Constitutions*, 622.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 548–9.

³⁶ Durand, Dominique, *La Politique de Saint Ignace de Loyola*, Paris, Cerf, 1985.

³⁷ François Xavier, St, *Correspondance 1535–1552, lettres et documents*, translated and presented by Hugues Didier, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1987. See his 'Instruction pour les catéchistes de la Compagnie' (in the Indies), dated from Molucca, 10 November 1545, pp. 168–71.

³⁸ Ignace de Loyola, *Ecrits*, pp. 1067–73, *Récit*, 9 and 10; Ravier, André, SJ, *La Compagnie de Jésus sous le gouvernement d'Ignace de Loyola (1541–1556): d'après les chroniques de J. A. de Polanco*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1991, pp. 22 and 32.