My Pilgrimage in Mission

Adrian Hastings

For a Roman Catholic fifty years ago, the word "mission" referred principally to a week of sermons inflicted upon a parish by a visiting preacher, probably a Redemptorist or Passionist, to reinvigorate its fervor and bring its more lapsed members back to the sacraments. But a "missionary" was something else—a priest, brother, or nun whose vocation was to go abroad, to convert the pagan or otherwise minister in some remote non-Western country in conditions of particular difficulty. It was a "special vocation." Ever since the age of six I had felt myself inexorably called by God to be a priest. I have no recollection—nor, so far as I know, has anyone else—how this sense of calling came to me, but it had become a matter-of-fact certainty well before I went to boarding school at eight.

In 1946 I entered the University of Oxford to study history, mostly English history, medieval and modern. At the same time I had to settle the question of what sort of priesthood I should seek after leaving the university. The choice appeared to lie between the secular clergy of my home diocese of Birmingham and the Dominicans, whom I had come to know and admire in Oxford. Then in the summer of 1947 I spent six quiet weeks in the Cistercian (Trappist) priory on Caldey Island, reading books of history and working in the monastery garden. In that contemplative atmosphere it dawned on me that I should perhaps offer to do something very much more demanding, even more unpleasant, than I had hitherto thought of. Even the Trappist life appeared far—as it seemed to me—from the possibility of academic pursuits of any kind, had absolutely none. That, then, was what I should do. I struggled with this actually quite frightening idea for the next eighteen months, but I could not banish it.

Finally, in my third and final year at Oxford, I had to come to a decision and appealed for help to my old headmaster, Dom Ignatius Rice, at Douai Abbey. In consequence I spent Epiphany at Douai in January 1949, unaware, I suspect, that Epiphany has always been seen as the greatest of missionary feasts. Dom Ignatius listened to my problems, and despite his initial and natural preference for the "English" option, his mind changed during the festal High Mass. The African and missionary alternative seemed so unusual that he felt it should be followed. I accepted his advice as final, was miserable about it for quite some time, but knew I could not withdraw.

Throughout this experience "missionary" and "Africa" had gone together. I never considered Asia or anywhere else. The only African missionaries I knew anything about, and that was not much, were the White Fathers, to whom I consequently wrote and whose seminary of philosophy near Dorking in Surrey I entered in the autumn of that year. A few months later I wrote an article entitled "The Missionary Vocation" which may be found on pages 3–6 of White Fathers, the small English magazine of the society, in the issue of June 1950, though not under my name. For our theme it is a significant article because it is the first thing I ever wrote on the subject. Moreover that month, June 1950, I also celebrated my twenty-first birthday, so it may be taken as representing some sort of vocational coming of age. My mother and sisters came down to Dorking to celebrate my birthday with a picnic, bringing a flask of mead and a wonderful cake iced by my mother and shaped like a great African cathedral (the model was Tabora) with a line of little black altar boys in their red cassetons approaching the west door. I have, in a way, been en-

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deavoring to find, construct, or reconstruct that visionary cathedral in all the decades since.

That early article of mine, from which the following is quoted, shows how my mind was moving:

The sacrifice of the missionary was, and remains, a spiritual thing, an emptying of self and the taking on of the outlook and traditions of a strange primitive people. He must follow the missionary example of St. Paul... empty himself as far as is humanly possible of the effects of his own milieu in order to carry Christianity into a land where it can achieve a new “incarnation.” If Christianity in Africa were to remain a European thing it might gain enthusiasm converts for one or two generations, but it would not permanently hold the hearts of the people... we must adapt and not destroy African ideas.

Doubtless such thoughts were current even in 1950, though rather little attempt was made to implement them, at least within the Catholic Church. But for my own life I became determined to implement them as ruthlessly as possible. Hardly in fact had I arrived in the seminary of the White Fathers than I perceived how very European such a society remained. On the Feast of

A white priest within a local African church? I was told that it was impossible, unreasonable, undesirable.

Christ the King, in late November 1949, I was suddenly gripped by a new vocation—to substitute for membership of a missionary society membership of the African diocesan clergy, to serve in obedience to an African bishop instead of a European superior general. At that time there was but one black bishop of the Latin rite in the whole of Africa, Joseph Kiwanuka of Masaka, Uganda. It was said that white priests could not serve under a black bishop, and so there could not be more of the latter until in anyone place there were enough black priests to staff an entire diocese. Let me show, I thought, that I was willing to do so, abandoning any connection with a missionary society and becoming instead a priest incardinated within a local African church. I was told that it was impossible, unreasonable, undesirable.

Again for a time I hesitated. It seemed a huge and frightening leap. Would Bishop Kiwanuka or his African clergy even want me? I was assured that they would not and that my health would never stand the life anyway. I delayed a decision until early 1953, when I had begun the study of theology in the White Fathers’ house at s’Heerenberg in Holland. There I received rather more closely in Propaganda, and only later did I perceive how very little, beneath the surface, remained Rome’s willingness to modify its traditional insistence upon uniformity.

I finally arrived in Uganda in October 1958, the one white priest in a black clergy, still very anxious to submerge myself in the local milieu as a matter of principle. I was now a doctor of the African church but, inevitably, a far more developed person than the young man who had wrestled with the issue of missionary vocation five to ten years earlier. I was now a doctor of theology with several other degrees and two published books. Moreover I soon came to realize that, far from being encouraged to develop a new African identity, I would be employed above all to improve the educational standards in Western terms (Cambridge School and Higher Certificate, that is to say) of the clergy. I had long believed—having learned this at least from the missionary encyclicals of several popes—that the establishment of the church depended principally upon the development of an adequately numerous and well-prepared local clergy, so it was not too strange to find myself for quite a number of years working almost obsessively at this particularly task.

Little by little, however, I came to question whether we were really on the right track and found it necessary to try to rethink theologically the nature and appropriate shape of the ordained
ministry. The whole concept of a minor seminary was something
I found uncongenial; unlike all the African priests and most of
the missionaries, I had never studied in one myself. Quite inevi-
tably the clergy of Masaka were a great deal more conservative
theologically than I was and very little in touch with ideas which
were by then elsewhere sweeping through the world church. My
very concern to take seriously the job I had been given drew me
increasingly into a collision course with those I had come to serve
and to obey. By 1964 I was advocating, as in a little book The
World Mission of the Church published that year, “the wide-
spread ordination of trained and tested married men.” To me
this was becoming a keystone in any policy of genuinely Afri-
canizing as opposed to unmitigated Westernizing. For many of
my fellow African priests, who had themselves faithfully adopted
the Roman model, brought to them by an older generation of
missionaries, it was betrayal. It was not that I wanted a peasant
church, but a varied and adaptable one, appropriate to the needs
_of both the village and the university. It was to university
graduates that I appealed at the end of that book to recognize
that “the Church’s mission in and out of Europe will be more and
more personal, more and more a confrontation of minds.” How
often have the words that Francis Xavier wrote in India in his
1544 appeal to Europe drummed in my ears: “I have often felt
strongly moved to descend on the universities of Europe and to
cry aloud like a madman.” I reflected:

“In today’s missionary confrontation with the great reli-
gions, the great ideologies, and in the mental searching and in-
tellectual struggle which such work must involve, it is the example
of a Clement of Alexandria, a Raymond Lull, a Matthew Ricci, a
Teilhard de Chardin, that we should have before us. Only with
such as these can the gates of the modern world be opened” (pp.
55-56).

Yet through these years, the years of the Second Vatican
Council, I was myself doing little else than teaching A levels in
a minor seminary. When the council was over, I was suddenly
and unexpectedly called to move to Tanzania and interpret the
conciliar documents for all the dioceses of the five countries of
eastern Africa. The next two years proved a profoundly mission-
ary experience. The commentaries I produced (subsequently re-
printed in Britain in two volumes entitled A Concise Guide to the
Documents of the Second Vatican Council) and the seminars I led
in each country constituted for me personally a new theological,
pastoral, and ecumenical education, and I moved quite quickly
from being a preconciliar liberal to being a postconciliar radical.

The first major expression of this was my Church and Mission in
Modern Africa, published in Britain and the United States in 1967
and subsequently translated into German and Polish. It was easily
the most influential book I had yet written. Nevertheless, while
incorporating a good deal from the Vatican Council, it had mostly
been completed before leaving Masaka in May 1966 and thus
before the more radical development of my thinking that fol-
lowed. It appears in fact as a relatively conservative work both
_in its theology and its practical recommendations—perhaps that
was partly why it could prove so influential. It shared the enthusiasm
_of the immediate post conciliar age without being too disturbing.

Nevertheless I was increasingly coming to believe that effective
mission required a very much more radical approach to the church’s
institutional shape. I had by then learned a good deal from read-
ing Roland Allen, to whose books an Anglican friend in Uganda
had introduced me. Moreover, far more extensive ecumenical
contacts than I had formerly experienced were beginning to make
their mark on my underlying understanding of both church and
mission. Some of these more radical thoughts appear in letters

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exchanged with Eugene Hillman about this time and published
in New Blackfriars in August 1967 under the title “A Missionary
Correspondence.” Thus in one letter, dated as early as July 7,
1966, I wrote, “Give our foreign money in future to the gov-
ernment, limit the intake of missionaries, relax canon law,
and then wait and see!! That is my answer . . . . of course, neither the
Church in Europe and America, nor the Church in Africa, neither
missionaries, nor African priests, would begin to agree. People
talk about ‘adaptation’ incessantly, but they talk about the frills
of Church life most of the time, not about adaptation to a total
social situation.”

It was this “total social situation” with which I was more
and more concerned. In a major lecture at Navan in 1968 to the
Irish National Mission Week, I talked of “the three Ms”—min-
istry, marriage, and money. These three now seemed to me abso-
cutely crucial, marriage especially, but so did issues of politics
and economic development that appeared, for example, much
more in my 1971 Mission and Ministry than they had done in Church
and Mission of four years before, with its narrower ecclesiastical
and pastoral orientation. But marriage had become a central pre-
occupation, partly stimulated by Hillman’s harping on the
polygamy issue.

The Anglican archbishops of Africa picked up my interest in
this, and they also recognized the need for a larger rethinking in
the relationship between Christian and customary marriage, so
they asked me to do it for them, and it was wonderful to be able
to accept. Out of that came Christian Marriage in Africa, published
early in 1973 just before I became embroiled in a great battle to
expose Portuguese atrocities in Mozambique, which led to the
publication early the following year of Wiriyamu, the book in
which I came nearest to a theology of liberation. That was fol-

owed in 1975 by The Faces of God and in 1976 African Christianity.
It was a productive time, but it was also the period in which my
base had moved decisively back from Africa to Britain.

Several things were happening to me. One was a steady
reshaping in theological understanding involving both a mod-
ernization of approach and a diminution in doctrinal certainty.
In regard to mission this led to far less clericalist preoccupations
than I had had in the early and middle sixties and a new, more
profound model of what “mission” should really mean, in-
tegrally incorporating the dimension of diaconia, secular service.

The most succinct expression of my new synthesis is to be found
in the entry on “Mission” contributed to the English edition
of Karl Rahner’s one-volume Encyclopedia of Theology: A Concise
Sacramentum Mundi (1975). Another longstanding development
was the perplexed realization of the sheer complexity required
by a genuinely incarnationalist theology in such areas as culture,
migration, and politics. A third development was a slow personal
distancing from the actual functioning of the church’s organized
missionary life. I had gone too far on too many points to be reliable
in ecclesiastical eyes, and I had, upon my own side, slowly to
admit that I no longer felt even minimally at home in the rather
clericalist Catholic world to which I had belonged for over twenty
years. My very ecumenical involvements contributed to this, distan
ticing me from a more purely Catholic world but not quite
providing a congenial long-term replacement. I gave five weeks
of winter-school lectures on mission and church in South Africa
in 1971 at the invitation of Archbishop Hurley and four weeks of
similar lectures in Nigeria a couple of years later, and I lectured
for a month each year until 1972 at Gaba Pastoral Institute in
Uganda, but these were almost the last items in ten years of
intensive labor to bring about a missionary aggiornamento in Africa.
I would continue writing books, giving occasional lectures, pro-
viding ecumenical advice, but I had now to do such things from
an increasingly independent base back in Britain, in due course
a university base.

It was not only that my advice was too often not acceptable,
it was also that I was often no longer so sure as to what to advise.
Perhaps the writing of Christian Marriage in Africa, cautiously worded
as it was, could be taken as the point at which in my own mind
the issues were starting to get out of control and seem almost
incapable of sensible solution. Problems, I was beginning to re-
alize, do not necessarily have answers attainable within the real
world. Back in 1967, in Church and Mission, my most ecclesiasti-
cally influential book, I had been clear as to solutions, and they
were not, by and large, too unconservative ones. Ten years later,
as I became far more deeply affected by the modern theological
debate to which I had paid rather little attention during my four-
ten years in Africa, I found myself becoming ever less prescrip-
tive and more descriptive or historical. A History of African
Christianity, 1950-1975, published in 1979, marks the change
achieved. As I admitted in its introduction, it was “written by
one who now stands more apart from his subject than he had
once intended,” yet it was still “written in the belief that a
humane discernment of the tangled web of historic truth is the
kindest service a friend can provide.”

In regard to my African cathedral, the vision remains. I elected
when young, full of a rather simple faith and a hugely powerful
sense of purpose, to spend my life as a member of an African
diocese. I failed to do so. The fault was not entirely my own—I
simply could not “empty” myself to the necessary degree of
my own judgment and culture—and it led for a while to a highly
creative larger involvement in missionary debate and the wider
development of African Christianity. Africa had dominated my
thoughts, perhaps too greatly, between 1949 and 1953 and, again,
and then again, definitively, after 1973, while African issues re-
mained of special interest, they became merged within a larger
field, theological, ecumenical, spiritual. The very survival of
Christianity, of religious faith, of the meaningfulness of God, of
the relevance of Christ—such matters have now taken in my mind
an absolute priority. They are the themes, for instance, of The
Theology of a Protestant Catholic (1990), and they constitute the very
essence of what the central thrust of “Mission” has now to be
about. Specifically African and—in a narrow sense—“mission-
ary” issues seem, in comparison, provincial and derivative. Yet
I have not ceased to work upon an African cathedral. The volumes
of the Journal of Religion in Africa, edited by me since 1985, them-
selves constitute a kind of vast cathedral of their own. The Oxford
History of the Christian Church in Africa, upon which I have for
years been at work, may constitute another.

These are very different buildings from anything I envisaged
in my first, rather antiacademic, African and missionary fervor
of forty years ago. Acceptance of that calling and its unimagined
consequences has enriched me immeasurably. I have received a
hundredfold. But any mission I can have today is back in the
context of a British university, and it is one in which I can certainly
not “cry aloud like a madman.” In the world’s central debate
between meaning and unmeaning, God and the devil, goodness
and evil, the force of truth and a multitude of lies and deceptive
platitudes, that approach would not be helpful. Nor would I know
any more what to cry. As head, in Leeds, of a thriving nonde-
nominational department of theology and religious studies, I can
but try to uphold a space within which the Christian and religious
case may be reflected upon and restated critically and creatively,
within the context of a secular university, and in which I can offer
my own small contribution. It is often no more than the undog-
matic but gently warning note of a concerned historian. Thus it
has been, I may suggest to my African and missionary friends,
but how it should be or how it will be, I would seldom dare to
say.
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