My Pilgrimage in Mission

Louis J. Luzbetak, S.V.D.

Despite a number of major surprises along the way, my pilgrimage in mission, as I am now able to see it, has been actually in a more or less single direction. God does indeed work in marvelous ways.

My pilgrimage began in a deeply Christian home and family. My parents were of hardworking Central European peasant stock. They came to the United States in the early 1900s from Slovakia, while still teenagers. Although simple in their piety, they were religiously well informed and quite tolerant toward other Christian traditions. However, they did have very little use for two types of individuals—those that never went to church, whether they were Catholic or not, and those that were overzealous proselytizers, invading our neighborhood at more or less regular intervals and pressuring my parents to abandon their “misguided” faith and to “save” themselves and their offspring from almost certain hellfire while there was still time.

Joliet, Illinois, where I was born on September 19, 1918, was a small industrial city thirty-five miles southwest of Chicago, known especially for its steelworks and railroad yards, a city now twice its former size and different in many ways. But perhaps to most non-Jolietans the city was known simply as the site of a famous state prison.

My immediate neighborhood was remarkable for its cultural and religious diversity—a cultural diversity that has been largely responsible for my appreciation of ethnic diversity wherever I would later find it, and a religious diversity that has been at least partly responsible for my later ecumenical interests and commitment. Adjoining our small yard and modest, but comfortable, home were the homes of a Scottish family of the John Knox persuasion on our left and that of a strict Orthodox Jewish family, which for some time was also the home of the local rabbi, on our right. The other homes on the block were mostly those of Polish, Slovak, Ukrainian, Russian, Lithuanian, Norwegian, Hungarian, Syrian, and Irish families. To my parents, as to most immigrants from Slovakia, the parish church and school were in importance second only to their faith and family. Although my elementary school companions were therefore mainly Slovak and Catholic, my relationships outside of school hours reflected the heterogeneity described.

From my earliest years I could not but be deeply impressed by the life of dedication of my teachers, a community of Benedictine nuns, mostly of Slovak ancestry, not a few of whom were from the home parish itself, all totally committed to the ideals my parents valued and so profoundly cared about. I can still hear my first-grade teacher reminding me over and over again: “Just do your best and God will do the rest.” This truth was so much a part of my teacher that it also became a part of me. The sisters believed in the value of their religious life and teaching ministry, leaving no doubt, even in the youngest minds, that a church vocation was indeed the greatest of all vocations. The fact is that I cannot now recall ever having seriously thought about any career for myself other than a commitment to the mission of Christ. Not clear to me, however, and actually not of special concern, right into my college days, was the specific nature of the church vocation to which I felt I was called.

With the blessing and encouragement of my parents and my mission-minded pastor, I entered the Divine Word Mission Seminary at Techny as a high school freshman. I soon realized that the Society of the Divine Word, a modern missionary organization founded in Holland by a German and ethnically diversified even more than my neighborhood, could offer me an even wider scope of opportunities in mission than I had imagined possible. I had no doubt that this society would eventually find the slot for which I would be most suited. The Divine Word Missionaries became my second family, no less important in my pilgrimage than the first. In fact, all my general and theological education and spiritual formation from high school to ordination (almost fourteen years in all) was provided by this missionary society, which is named after, and totally dedicated to, the Incarnate Word and his Good News.

From my early college days I felt particularly proud of the role that the Divine Word Missionaries played in the development of an indigenous clergy around the world. In fact, I secretly hoped that I might someday be associated with this particular apostolate. I felt that this way in which it was possible for me actually to multiply myself as missionary a hundred times over. In fact, unexpectedly, my very first assignment was clearly in the direction of seminary teaching. Several months before assignments were normally given to the newly ordained, I was appointed for further theological studies at the Gregorian University in Rome. The first milestone on my pilgrimage was reached; I was heading for seminary work.

From Theology to Anthropology

The thought that I might someday be a professional anthropologist, however, had not as much as crossed my mind. At the close of my second year of postordination studies at the Gregorian University, I was one day called to the office of the superior general. (My residence during my studies in Rome was at the international headquarters of the society.) He suggested that I give up my theological studies at the Gregorian University, transfer to the University of Fribourg, and prepare myself to join Father Wilhelm Schmidt’s team of anthropologists. This “preposterous” idea, it seems, originated with Father Schmidt himself, one of the most respected and influential intellectuals and church leaders of his time. While on an official business visit to the Vatican in July 1947, Schmidt approached my superiors personally to convince them that postwar conditions demanded the presence of an American in his institute. Somehow it became clear that I was the “logical” and, in fact, “available” person.

The superior general must have read my mind, stumped as I

Louis J. Luzbetak is a Roman Catholic anthropologist, a member of the missionary Society of the Divine Word, and now in semiretirement. He serves as consultant at the society’s headquarters at Techny, Illinois, where he is continuing his mission-related study, research, planning, strategy development, and writing. He has formerly served as professor of missions, executive director of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), editor of the international journal Anthropos, and as staff member of Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Culture. His best-known works are his handbooks The Church and Cultures: An Applied Anthropology for the Religious Worker (1963) and The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology (1988).
was the thought of changing from theology and church law to the profane science of anthropology. As I stood motionless and silent, I asked myself: "Would not these two important years at the Gregorian University be wasted by making such a transfer?"

In anticipation of this objection, the superior general's reply and reasoning was simple enough: "A bit of extra exposure to theology has never hurt anyone." As I now reflect on my pilgrimage, I must admit that he was very much on the mark. My extra exposure to theology was not enough to make me into a great theologian or canonist, but it was an essential part of my pilgrimage and helped me develop a great interest in the theological and canonical dimensions of my future work as anthropologist.

Wilhelm Schmidt, whom I had always admired, was now my mentor and constant inspiration in my attempt to serve faith through science. It was my privilege to live for several years during my anthropological training with this great man in a community of about a dozen of his collaborators and students. In fact, as it turned out, I was the last student to receive a doctorate under his tutelage before he gave up his university post. It was by knowing this great scholar and seeing him serve his God, the church, and his missionary society that the specifics of my own vocation became clear to me. Somehow I felt that Wilhelm Schmidt was asking and personally challenging me over and over again: "If we are to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength, and our neighbor as ourselves, must we who live in the Age of Science not also love God and neighbor correspondingly with all the scientific strength with which our age is thus blessed?"

From Anthropology to Applied Mission Anthropology

The third critical point in my pilgrimage in mission was as totally unexpected as had been the first two. But first I must explain how it came about. It was Schmidt's practice to assign a specific geographic area to each member of the Anthropos Institute so that eventually the specializations would cover the whole globe. I was assigned an area I hardly knew existed, the southwest corner of the Soviet Union, the Caucasus region. As I soon learned, this was culturally and linguistically a very complex and extremely important area worthy of serious study. Many ancient ethnic groups, each with its own history, culture, and language, lived there almost unknown to the outside world. They had been tucked away in this high mountain passageway between Asia, Europe, and the Middle East since the great migrations of peoples many hundreds of years ago.

Ethnological literature in the major European languages about such groups was almost nonexistent. My first task, therefore, was to acquire a reading knowledge of Russian as I pursued my studies in general ethnology and my two minor fields, linguistics and comparative religion. I also spent two semesters at the University of Vienna, where there were a number of outstanding authorities in Soviet archaeology and linguistics, in the Caucasus in particular. Since my anthropological training took place during the height of the cold war, there was no hope, especially for an American, to do any ethnological fieldwork in the Soviet Union. It was in London that I found most of the Russian literature that I needed for my doctoral dissertation.

These otherwise uninteresting details form the background for what I regard as the third, and perhaps the most critical, point in my pilgrimage. To provide the necessary field experience that every anthropology student needed, and to broaden my anthropological vision (and, with the Caucasus being out of the question), I received permission to accompany my confere and friend, Father Martin Gusinde, on a field trip to Angola. When this plan was foiled by serious flooding, I was assigned to New Guinea instead. This alternative I at first opposed, but I ended up spending almost four fruitful and enjoyable years in New Guinea (1952 to 1956), doing field research and guiding missionaries in ethnographic and linguistic work.

It was especially in New Guinea that I began to feel more and more the inadequacy of the traditional accommodational approach to missionary action, despite its many positive aspects. Such thoughts and frustrations as the following repeatedly ran through my mind: the Gospel message not only must be preached but must touch the very heart and soul of the people. But does it? The Christian faith, whether in the Third World or in one's own home parish, must be expressed in terms of nothing less than one's innermost self, one's innermost premises, basic attitudes, and fundamental drives, otherwise Christianity is not authentic. But is it actually being expressed in this manner? Evangelization and religious education everywhere in the world must deal not only with the whole mission of the church (including its teaching mission and its sacramental, social, institutional, and all other roles) but also with the whole culture and with culture as a whole, actually integrating the Gospel message with real life here and now. The evangelizer and the religious educator must deal with culture not as with a heap of unrelated odds and ends but as a living organic system. But how does one best analyze such an organism and how does one deal with it? Such and many other thoughts and problems, theological as well as anthropological, occupied my mind. The more I thought of such problems, the more I became convinced that the place to look for light would be in my own field, in the modern science of culture.

In fact, I became so convinced of the importance of cultural anthropology for the mission of the church, and so frustrated was I by the fact that so little attention was being given to the relation between faith and culture, that I was determined to do everything in my power not to return to my original specialization but rather to devote all my energy in the future to the application of anthropology to mission. This, I felt deeply, was my true and personal calling. What I really had to do now was exactly what I learned in the first grade of parochial school: Do your best and God will do the rest.

My mind was made up: I would now work with other like-minded Christian anthropologists and missiologists, whatever their tradition, in a common effort toward the development of an applied anthropology specifically for mission. I would study, research, teach, and write anthropology, but it would be an anthropology at the service of missiology. I would go to missiology to identify the issues but to cultural anthropology to study and research such issues; I would lecture, teach, and write about missiological issues, viewing them through the eyes of an anthropologist. This was not an easy decision, because many an-
thopologists, even some of those closest to me, believed, and still believe, that my two fields are irreconcilable and that they should have nothing to do with one another. Others regarded, and still regard, any application of anthropology to mission or to anything else as totally unbecoming of a true scientist. I realized also that some of my colleagues would never be able to understand the Christian meaning of mission and would make it synonymous with proselytization in the sense of pressure, force, and manipulation, which I have always rejected, condemned, and avoided. The decision, as difficult as it may have been, was made a trifle easier for me when the sad news of Father Wilhelm Schmidt’s death reached me in New Guinea in February 1954; my hero might not have given his blessing to my abandoning the Caucasus, a specialization he personally had chosen for me and believed in most intensely.

A New Beginning

My mind was definitely made up. In season and out of season, I would “preach” anthropology to mission agencies, church administrators, missionaries in the field and those in preparation, and colleagues in anthropology, missiology, and other disciplines—not because I considered anthropology to be a panacea or because I felt that I had ready answers; rather, I was hoping that as disciples of Christ living in the Age of Science we together—practitioners and theoreticians, bishops, pastors, and their people, mission societies and boards—might look for the full and true relationship between the church and cultures.

My New Guinea experience offered me unparalleled opportunities to make both anthropological and missiological observations. The experience also provided me with rich linguistic opportunities not only to learn but, in some small way at least, also to contribute. In partnership with a government linguist, I was directly involved in standardizing the spelling of Neo-Melanesian, more popularly known as New Guinea Pidgin, or “business” English. This interesting trade language is a true language, very expressive, easily learned by the indigenous population, and useful for the economic, social, and religious development of this second largest island in the world. New Guinea was nothing less than a veritable Babel of no less than 600 languages. Since the local languages nevertheless have to this day remained important, I tried to do in some small way what the Wycliffe Bible Translators are doing today: besides doing a very modest amount of translating, I analyzed and described in simple terms the grammar of one of the languages and worked on several other languages with fellow missionaries. Since most of the New Guinea highland languages were either still without an alphabet or the existing alphabets left much to be desired, I sought to develop orthographies for several of the indigenous languages, basing the spelling on a strictly phonemic analysis, with one distinct symbol for one meaningful sound, in the hope of facilitating literacy programs and other work of missionaries in areas where the use of Pidgin English was greatly limited. In any case, I have always felt that the language preferred both by the Creator and most human creatures is not any foreign tongue or way of life but the language and the culture that reflect the soul of a people—their own spoken and unspoken forms of communication.

I realized that the best way to achieve my goals was to try to do so through teaching, researching, and writing, sharing with others what I so strongly believed in. Over the years I have taught cultural anthropology, linguistics, and missiology: in Washington, D.C. (at the Catholic University of America and Georgetown University); at Techny, Illinois, to theology students at my alma mater; at Epworth, Iowa, as president of the Divine Word Seminary College; and again in Washington, D.C., as director of postordination pastoral and academic programs. For a number of years I also had the privilege of giving orientation courses in anthropology to large groups of missionaries in Cuernavaca, Mexico, and at the Catholic University of Puerto Rico. Even years before ecumenical cooperation was understood and encouraged, I gave a course to a Lutheran missionary group in Chicago (Maywood); lectures to evangelicals at Fuller Theological Seminary as church growth lecturer (the first Roman Catholic to be so honored) and to a very friendly, dedicated, but definitely motley group at Stony Point, New York; and to many other Catholic and non-Catholic groups in the United States and elsewhere.

The division among Christians has always pained me deeply. The old slogan “There is much more that unites us than divides us” has been more than a mere slogan to me. As a Roman Catholic, I have always welcomed the inspiration and friendly relationship with such organizations as the United Bible Societies, World Vision, the Summer Institute of Linguistics, the Overseas Ministries Study Center, and many others. Perhaps more than anything else I have appreciated the genuine ecumenical spirit of such professional associations as the International Association for Mission Studies and the American Society of Missiology. I felt greatly honored by having been chosen the second president of the ASM. It was also a privilege to be personally invited as a Roman Catholic observer to the International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne, Switzerland, in July 1974 and some years later to its follow-up consultation on Gospel and Culture at Willowbank, Bermuda, and to serve on committees and attend a number of important assemblies of the World and National councils of churches. I strongly feel that the hopes for mission that I have always expressed and the dreams I have today will be impossible without such close ecumenical cooperation and mutual enrichment.

Church-related Research

A very important part of my pilgrimage has been my role in church-related research, planning, and strategy development. I was the director of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) during its first decade of existence. This U.S. Roman Catholic organization was founded in Washington, D.C., by the superiors of men and women religious, leading lay organizations, and a number of far-seeing bishops. CARA’s concerns were precisely where my own hopes were placed: in the total mission of the church especially as envisioned by Vatican II and by the many developments after the council. CARA’s staff included as many as thirty highly dedicated lay men and women, religious, and clergy, all working together researching, planning, and coordinating dozens of theological, psychological, sociological, anthropological, and other projects (often interdis-
NEW VIEWS ON CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

Conflict Mediation Across Cultures
Pathways and Patterns
David W. Augsburger
Believing that conflict is inevitable, essential and potentially constructive, the author provides, "...a book that, as the Book of Common Prayer puts it, must be 'read, marked, and inwardly digested.'... It is a fresh, vitalizing force." —Wayne E. Oates
Hard $24.95

Envisioning the New City
A Reader on Urban Ministry
Eleanor Scott Meyers, Editor
Foreword by Harvey Cox
"A fascinating assortment of articles about urban ministry—some inspirational, some challenging, and some extremely practical."
—Kimberley Bobo
Paper $22.95

Divided We Fall
Moving from Suspicion to Solidarity
T. Richard Snyder
Foreword by Gayraud Wilmore
Encouraging people to overcome the divisions of race, sex and class, "Snyder provides a role model for others."
—Letty M. Russell
Paper $11.95

Six Billion and More
Human Population Regulation and Christian Ethics
Susan Power Bratton
"Bratton has pioneered in laying the theological groundwork for developing a Christian contraceptive ethos. Few other texts could be as pivotal at a time of profound sociopolitical and environmental concerns." —Carol Benson Holst
Paper $12.95

Social Ministry (Revised Edition)
Dieter T. Hessel
Providing new materials for his highly acclaimed earlier work, Hessel includes interviews with clergy and lay leaders, deriving fresh insight into what congregations are doing in society and the problems they are encountering.
Paper $13.95

At your bookstore, or
call toll free 1-800-227-2872
WESTMINSTER/JOHN KNOX PRESS
100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, KY 40202-1396
disciplinary in nature), seeking ways of making the U.S. Catholic Church more effective and relevant in the modern world, at home and abroad. CARA research included the dissemination, interpretation, and application of the results of research through workshops, consultations, and publications and dealt with problems affecting U.S. minorities; overseas missions; renewal of religious orders; diocesan planning; diocesan rebuilding after a natural disaster; selection, training, placement, distribution, and effectiveness of church personnel; and countless other challenges, all calling for attention in the spirit of Vatican II. To be so closely associated with the American Catholic Church as I now was (including the hierarchy, their committees and diocesan offices, the laity, as well as religious orders in their drive for renewal) and to be associated with practically all aspects of mission was indeed an invaluable learning experience for me: I was able to observe mission with my own eyes in its fullness, complexity, and actuality.

Since I realized that after almost a decade at the helm of CARA it was time for a change on the executive level, I accepted the invitation of the Board of Directors of the Divine Word Seminary College at Epworth, Iowa, to become the president of this mission training center. Here one of my chief concerns became to develop in collaboration with the faculty a new, meaningful college-level and distinctly mission oriented program. This challenge was clearly a continuation of my pilgrimage in mission, an interesting experience that lasted five years.

A Link in Wilhelm Schmidt’s Legacy

My college presidency came to an end when the superior general of my religious order on a visitation to the United States approached me in the name of the Anthropos Institute, now located in Germany, suggesting that I accept the post of editor for its publications, especially for its internationally acclaimed periodical Anthropos. Originally the journal (founded in 1906 by Father Wilhelm Schmidt) was intended as an “archive” in which the linguistic and ethnographical studies of missionaries might be published and preserved. The journal, however, developed into a strictly professional publication with only a relatively few contributions by untrained anthropologists. As editor and acting director of the Anthropos Institute, I made a deliberate effort to tie the institute and its publications organizationally and programmatically even more closely to missionary goals, without sacrificing the professional character of the institute. After my agreement with the Anthropos Institute expired in 1982 and as soon as I was able to propose a suitable successor, I returned to the United States to carry out an important earlier commitment: I was to update and rewrite my 1963 handbook in missionary anthropology, The Church and Cultures. The rewriting of this work, then almost twenty-five years old and often reprinted, had been generously and patiently subsidized by the Maryknollers, but my responsibilities at the Anthropos Institute had made the completion of this immense task impossible. Moreover, the developments in missiology and anthropology in the twenty-five years since my original Church and Cultures appeared were overwhelming. My return to the United States provided the necessary peace and time that such a gigantic rewrite demanded. I feel that somehow my whole journey in mission is reflected in this new work of almost 500 pages.

Upon completion of the new manuscript, my pilgrimage brought me to the Vatican; I was invited to serve on the Pontifical Council for Culture. Needless to say, to work at and with the most important office of the Roman Catholic Church specifically focused on the area of my deepest concerns was an enriching and in many ways an important milestone in my pilgrimage in mission. I had agreed to serve at the Vatican for a two-year term. Now, at the age of seventy-three, I am completely free for research, writing, and occasional lecturing—in a word, free as never before, to share my pilgrimage with others.

I feel strongly that my hopes for mission will be impossible without close ecumenical cooperation.

Notes

NEW SONG IN THE ANDES, By John Maust, 1992, 143 pages, paperback.
Darkness for centuries dominated the lives of the Quichuas living in the shadow of Mt. Chimborazo, in Ecuador. Missionary work went on among them for decades with little, if any, fruit. Then God, by his Holy Spirit, broke through and an incredible harvest began. You will be challenged and lifted by the narrative as you read this remarkable story of God's grace and the dedication of His people.
WCL219-0, RETAIL $9.95
Special postpaid discount - $7.00

MISSIONARY CARE: Counting the Cost for World Evangelization, Kelly O'Donnell, Editor, 1992, 420 pages, paperback.
One of the pressing issues facing the missions community today is the care of its people. Evangelizing the unreached is not without its costs. Missionaries thus need and deserve the best care possible to keep them resilient and effective. This book, a handbook for supporting and developing missionary personnel, is a collaborative effort of over 20 authors to address some of the cutting edges of missionary care.
Dr. O'Donnell was co-editor of Helping Missionaries Grow.
WCL233-6, Retail $17.95
Special postpaid discount - $14.00

A faithful, loving account of a unique organization, and a highly crucial movement within the larger cause of global missions, written by the man who gave it direction for over 30 years. It shows the God-given, God-guided, spiritual passion for the whole world in its classical role of a warm-hearted minority vision and cause, bursting out in fully legitimate structures before there ever were "denominational missions." It portrays that holy energy within the IFMA continuing to serve selflessly and impartially, in wholesome mutual inspiration and accountability.
WCL235-2, Retail $13.95
Special postpaid discount - $12.25

Theological Education by Extension (TEE) is often portrayed as a vision and a movement for the renewal of ministry in the church and in the world. The task of evaluation is to translate that vision into concepts and criteria that can be applied to the various components of TEE programs. This handbook is concerned primarily with self-evaluation in relation to planning, i.e. ways in which people who are engaged in TEE can clarify their goals and assess results in order to pursue those goals more effectively.
WCL229-8, Retail $7.95
Special postpaid discount - $6.75

What do churches around the world have in common? The selection and development of local church leaders! While the forms of leadership development vary, the need demands attention wherever the church is. The needs for vision, guidance, motivation, coordination, and encouragement exist whenever Christians gather. Dr. Elliston, associate professor of leadership and development at the Fuller School of World Missions, writes on understanding leadership, values for Christian leaders, and patterns of spiritual leadership development.
WCL236-0, Retail $8.95
Special postpaid discount - $7.00

A Bible-centered approach which first introduces the dynamics of conflict and the styles of conflict management and, with a solid Biblical background, identifies types of conflict and how to develop conflict management skills, applying them to cross-cultural situations.
WCL231-X, Retail $6.95
Special postpaid discount - $6.50

A marvelous collection of previously published articles dealing with topics such as the missionary's first years on the field, leadership training, opposition, persecution and competition, mission theory and practice, and others. Excellent for new missionaries and students in mission classes.
WCL234-4, Retail $12.95
Special postpaid discount - $12.00

TO ORDER...
Send check or money order to:
WILLIAM CAREY LIBRARY
P.O. Box 40129
Pasadena, California 91114

Add $1.00 for handling. California residents add 7.25% for tax, L.A. County add 8.25%. To place your order using MASTER CARD or VISA phone TOLL FREE 1-800-MISSION (647-7466)

PRICES ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE WITHOUT NOTICE