My Pilgrimage in Mission

Willi Henkel, O.M.I.

I was born on January 17, 1930, in Wittges, a German village seventeen kilometers east of Fulda, as the third of four sons. My father, Karl, was a worker repairing streets. He died in 1961, and my mother, Mary, died in 1953. I received my primary school training at Elters (1936–43). When I was a boy about twelve years of age, a Benedictine father of the abbey at St. Otilien tried to recruit me for their junior seminary. Since I was so young, however, my parents failed to give their agreement. Thus I received my secondary school training in Fulda at the Winfriedschule (Realgymnasiale Aufbauschule, 1943–51).

During my secondary school I became familiar with St. Boniface, the apostle of Germany, often witnessing pilgrimages to his tomb in the cathedral of Fulda, especially during the first week of June. In my heart the wish arose to become a missionary. Near Fulda, in Hünfeld, was Bonifatiuskloster, a house of studies of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, where oblates studied philosophy and theology to be sent as missionaries in many parts of the world. Also in Hünfeld is the tomb of Robert Streit, O.M.I., the well-known founder of Bibliotheca Missionum, who died in 1930.

In April 1951 I entered the novitiate of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate at Maria Engelpfort, near Treis-Karden, where I received my first oblate training. In April 1952 I was sent to study at Hünfeld.

Student in Rome and Münster

After being at Hünfeld for only a few weeks, I was greatly surprised when, in 1952, my superiors sent me to Rome to continue the study of philosophy and theology. In Rome I lived in a community of one hundred students who came from all the parts of the world. It was only seven years after the end of World War II, but I experienced a great fraternal spirit in that community. Missionaries from all over were used to speak to us about their missions. We students had the great opportunity of speaking and practicing several modern languages, especially Italian, French, English, and Spanish. My first task then, however, was to study philosophy at the Gregorian University. The lectures were given in Latin, and it took me a while before I could follow them well. In June 1955 I received the licentiate in philosophy. I continued the study of theology, again with the courses in Latin, and took a greater interest in these two disciplines. Four years later, in June 1959, I earned the licentiate in theology. I had already received priestly ordination on July 13, 1958.

Having completed my studies, I opted for the Oblate mission in South Africa. However, I was asked to return to my German province of origin. In 1960 I became a member of the Oblate periodical Der Weinberg. Soon its director, Bernhard Willenbrink, O.M.I., asked me to study missiology at the University of Münster (1961–64). For my doctoral dissertation, Thomas Ohm, O.S.B., my major professor, proposed that I study the idea of conversion in John Henry Newman. I completed the dissertation under the direction of his successor, Joseph Glazik, M.S.C., and received the doctorate in February 1968.

To my great surprise, I was asked in early 1966 to join the three-man team of editors of Bibliotheca Missionum and Bibliografia Missionaria in Rome: Johannes Rommerskirchen, O.M.I., Joseph Metzler, O.M.I., and Nikolaus Kowalsky, O.M.I., who died in June 1966 at the early age of fifty-five.

Assistant at the Pontifical Missionary Library

Returning to Rome, I became a staff member of the Oblate international house of studies and also an assistant (1966–72) to Rommerskirchen, who was the head of the Pontifical Missionary Library. At the time the library was housed in the palace of Propaganda Fide, next door to the archives of Propaganda Fide (now called the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples). During my first year I enrolled in the School of Library Science of the Vatican Library. In July 1967 I obtained the diploma in library science. I also learned practical work in a library.

When I arrived in Rome, Rommerskirchen was working on volumes 25–30 of Bibliotheca Missionum (1916–74). I helped him and Metzler in the preparation of the indexes. At the same time I assisted him in collecting the material and preparing the indexes of the yearly Bibliografia Missionaria. I still remember quite well visiting major Roman libraries each year with Rommerskirchen and Metzler for the preparation of Bibliografia Missionaria, which made it possible to see firsthand the new publications. I became acquainted with special bibliographies, including the bibliography in the quarterly journal International Review of Mission. I also took into consideration the book references that appeared in the International Bulletin of Missionary Research. Many missiological journals carried book reviews, which were very useful. The ideal would have been to control every single reference, which later on was easier to do with computers.

Director of the Pontifical Missionary Library

On June 1, 1972, I was appointed director of the Pontifical Missionary Library of the Congregation de Propaganda Fide, a position I held until 2000. Since its founding in 1622, Propaganda Fide possessed a library which from the outset included a good number of books on the missions. In addition, the missionary pope Pius XI (1922–39) wished to give a new impulse to the missions by planning a missionary exhibition in the Vatican during the 1925 Holy Year. He asked for a special book section on missions, and Streit was put in charge of its organization. Pius XI asked that “the greatest possible number of publications concerning the missionary apostolate and the Catholic Missions, those of the past and those of the present, as well as those books which had any connection with the subject,” be gathered together. His appeal received a generous response, as close to 30,000 volumes, written in many languages, arrived at the exhibit. The Vatican Library and the Pontifical Urban College, as well as many religious orders, sent rare and valuable books. “Never in the history of the Church and the Missions had such a treasure of missionary literature been assembled.”

At the close of the missionary exposition, Pius XI decided that the literary section should remain in Rome as a center for missionary research housed in the palace of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide. (The section of missionary art was transferred.

Willi Henkel, O.M.I., is the former director of the Pontifical Missionary Library.
from the Vatican to the Lateran, which led to the founding of the Missionary Museum, now part of the Vatican Museum.) The necessary rooms for the library were provided by transferring the Urban College to the Janiculum Hill.

Librarians Robert Streit, O.M.I. (1875–1930), Johannes Dindinger, O.M.I. (1881–1958), and Johannes Rommerskirchen, O.M.I. (1889–1978), maintained a handwritten catalog (which still exists) of authors, subjects, and periodicals; they also offered a special catalog of books in 540 non-European languages. This rich patrimony needed a continuing updating, which I considered to be my first task.

After fifty years in the palace of Propaganda Fide, the rooms of the Missionary Library urgently needed renovation. At the same time Urban University needed more space for its library to satisfy the increasing needs of its four faculties: theology, philosophy, canon law, and missiology. (From 1973 to 2000, I taught Latin American mission history at the university.) In light of these needs, Cardinal A. Rossi, prefect of the congregation and also chancellor of Urban University, proposed that the Pontifical Missionary Library be united with the library of Urban University and that a new building be constructed on the campus of the university that would house both libraries.1

The construction was finished in June 1979, and at the end of September the libraries were moved into their new premises. I was appointed director of both libraries. The official opening on October 1, 1980, was presided over by Cardinal Joseph Höfner, archbishop of Cologne, with the participation of a great number of bishops who had come to Rome for the synod of bishops held that year. Höfner interpreted the new library as a symbol of sciences, of peoples and cultures, and of salvation.2 The two libraries are housed on different floors and continue to maintain their respective functions.

My overall goal was that the Missionary Library be an efficient instrument of missionary research. This goal should be apparent even in the reading room, which contains a large selection of bibliographies and dictionaries. An important item is the Dictionary Catalog of the Missionary Research Library, a collection which is now located in the Union Theological Seminary in New York.

A special grant made it possible to acquire 50,000 microfiches. This acquisition includes much invaluable information from the Council for World Mission Archives, 1775–1940; the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (London); the IMC/CBMS Archives; the Primitive Methodist Society, London; and the Catholic Church in Indonesia: Archives of the Archbishops of Batavia/Jakarta, 1807–1949.

**Bibliographia Missionaria**

With my appointment as director of the Missionary Library, I became the person on the team who took over the major responsibility for *Bibliographia Missionaria* (BM; in 1986 we changed the title from Italian to Latin: now *Bibliographia Missionaria*). Previ-ously, the indexes had been prepared in Italian every four years. In 1986 I decided that the time had come for yearly indexes and for preparing the technical apparatus of the volumes in English, not Italian.

Since these were the first years after the Second Vatican Council, it was also a time of change in the concept of mission, which now seemed to require an ecumenical outlook. The changes in mission are reflected in the new categories and subcategories that we began using at BM, as well as in the new subjects covered in the index. Categories added included the following:

- canon law and human rights
- ecumenical dialogue and mission, with a subdivision on dialogue with the Jews
- history of mission, which entered a new era
- mission and atheism
- mission and cultures (anthropology, sociology)
- mission and development
- mission and dialogue, with subdivisions on religions in general: Buddhism, Chinese religions, Hinduism, Islam; later, “African Religions” was added
- the missionary
- missionary cooperation
- missionary societies
- missionary spirituality
- pastoral topics: methods, evangelization, catechesis, liturgy
- theology of mission, which corresponds to the former “fundamental missionary doctrine”
- *also* various new topics, such as art, linguistics, mass media, medicine, and schools

Additional categories deal with the continents and the mission countries, including the many new nations. The index of subjects soon included new themes, especially under theology: Third World theology, plus African, Asian, Latin American, and other local theologies. “Inculturation” first appeared in the mid-1970s, replacing “accommodation” and “adaptation.” In the 1980s liberation and the theology of liberation received worldwide attention. Missiologists now focus their attention on local churches. Ecumenical initiatives in mission appear at the international level.3 Church growth and statistics of mission receive increased attention.4 Spiritual values of non-Christian religions appeared as a discovery of Vatican Council II.

*BM* indicates the context of radical social change. A new period of decolonization began in the 1950s, resulting in independent, single states. Pope Paul VI took up the theme of development in his encyclical *Populorum progressio* (1967). “Indeed, the political, economic and technical changes had social effects of inconceivable dimensions: misery and hunger, unemployment and housing shortages, flight from rural areas and urbanization, dissolution of traditional systems and values etc. not to mention new dependencies.”5

The 1974 Synod of Bishops in Rome discussed the theme “Justice in the World,” a topic of intense debate during the following years. It was presented in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1975) as well as in the plenary gatherings of the Latin American Bishops (CELAM) in Medellin (1968) and Puebla (1979). Many ecumenical conferences also dealt with justice and the demands it makes on missionaries. Bangkok 1972/73 was especially important (a conference on mission and evangelism of the World Council of Churches, as well as the WCC Assemblies at Nairobi (1975) and Vancouver (1983).

---

**My overall goal was that the Missionary Library be an efficient instrument of missionary research.**

---

April 2007
BM reflects a changing theology of mission worldwide. There is now intense interest in the Trinitarian aspects of mission as they are expressed in the missionary command of Christ (Matt. 28:19–20). Christology is now presented in a missionary context. One can find anthropological links between mission and the strivings of human nature; missionaries should impose nothing that does not correspond to their own deepest human reality. A new awareness of dialogue arose in mission, and thus missionaries propose the Christian message while respecting the free will of non-Christians. The role of missionaries is reconsidered in their service. Writers discuss local missionaries and their formation. These changes and many more, as well as a mood of crisis at the end of the 1960s and 1970s, were taken into consideration by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Redemptoris missio* (1991).

Through BM I was able to establish contacts with many missiological centers. Their publications opened my horizon and stimulated my work. I consider it a great privilege to have been able to meet many persons whom I first knew from their publications; some of them became close friends. In 1980 I hosted an important consultation of invited specialists at the Pontifical Missionary Library to discuss “the structural problem” in mission studies, which is “of major concern in the electronic age of the ‘new information superhighway.’” These and other concerns of “Documentation, Archives, and Bibliography” were studied and “sponsored by the International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS). This consultation was so successful that the entire IAMS came to Rome for a major conference in July 1988.” This support encouraged me to computerize the data of BM, which began in 1991.

**URBE: An Electronic Network**

In January 1993 the Library of the Urban University joined the Roman electronic network URBE (Unione Romana Bibliotiche Ecclesiastiche), which was officially inaugurated in May 1994. With some extra help, most of the data of the Pontifical Missionary Library were put on computer. Since the library offers material in many languages, a new catalog of topics was developed in order to facilitate research. In 2004 we made 100,000 records available. This number includes many articles that were published in multi-author works and in periodicals, whose authors sent them to the Missionary Library. As for the languages, the data of the Chinese catalog were the first ones to be made available on computer. It is hoped that other non-European languages will soon follow. This work was made possible with the intelligent help of generous collaborators, to whom I am deeply indebted. Their generosity helped the library to offer more user-friendly service.

In December 2000 Marek Rostkowski, O.M.I., was appointed as my successor, becoming director of the Pontifical Missionary Library and editor of BM. With him arrives a new generation that is more familiar with computers. I conclude with the wish that IAMS and the International Association of Catholic Missiologists may continue to give their benevolent attention and strong support to bibliographic work in the new electronic age.

**Notes**

11. I would like to mention that the entire bibliography of the *International Review of Mission*, from 1912, is now available online, which enables research by author, title, topic, or keywords from some 70,000 records. See Anderson, “The Role of Bibliographia Missionaria,” p. 436.
We are God’s instruments.  
We have a story to tell.  
And the world is listening.

With God’s grace, we’ll take His Story and tell it on the mountain, overseas, here at home, and across the world. Since 1908, Biola has been training students to take God’s story to the ends of the earth.

We offer M.A. programs in intercultural studies, TESOL, and applied linguistics, a doctorate in missiology, and a Ph.D. in intercultural education.

Contact Biola’s School of Intercultural Studies today.

www.biola.edu
1.800.652.4652
Errata

In Willi Henkel, O.M.I., “My Pilgrimage in Mission,” IBMR (April 2007), page 85, the year in which the Synod of Bishops considered the topic “Justice in the World” should have read 1971, not 1974. Also, page 86 should have shown 1990, not 1991, as the year in which John Paul II’s *Redemptoris missio* was promulgated. The editors regret the errors.