My Pilgrimage in Mission

John P. Martin

I was born in New York City on December 28, 1939, as the son of an Irish Catholic immigrant family and became an altar boy server in the sixth grade at Ascension Parish School in Manhattan in 1950. In 1952, while in the eighth grade, I went through a three-step process that became my “vocation story” and led me to become a member of Maryknoll. First, with the total innocence of a twelve-year-old, I rejected the path of the Catholic diocesan priesthood because of a personal quirk I once noticed in the priest coordinator of the altar boys. (It represented no ill will or bad behavior on his part.) Second, soon afterward, presuming to already know all about doing Masses, funerals, weddings, and baptisms, I decided to await “another challenge.” (Years later I recovered the memory of these exact words.) And, third, an unlikely classmate introduced me to two priests doing vocation promotion for the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers in New York City, and I discovered the challenge of my life. I got hooked on becoming a missionary and discovered that I had to enter the seminary, which I did in 1955 in order to become one. This did not seem at all out of place, as I had been contemplating the priesthood as normal within my tradition.

Thus was set up a lifelong dichotomy and tension between my inner fundamental calling to be a missionary, that is, to establish the church overseas, which was my dream, and the ministerial role that I was expected to fulfill as a priest. Because of the overwhelming signification that the Roman Catholic Church gave to the priesthood for any male believer with a “vocation,” during my eleven years of formation there seemed to be little or no room for further development of my initial inspiration to become a missionary.

In the summer of 1964 I studied linguistics with the Wycliffe Bible Translators, mostly Southern Baptists, at their Summer Institute of Linguistics. The linguistic skills that I learned were invaluable tools for my missionary adaptation, helping me first of all to learn quickly to speak Spanish well.

Mexico

I was assigned to Mexico in the spring of 1966, and soon a dream came to the surface: as a true missionary, I would be dropped into an area to live with a people who did not know anything about Jesus Christ, so I would begin by just giving testimony to my Christian faith and living with them to assimilate their culture, and then we would together work out some kind of reciprocal sharing. It seemed that this vision was another, but rather screeching our ways apart, inch by stressful inch. In the view of the old-timers, I and others like me could not seem to do anything right. This tension became the harbinger of the breakdown of my dream that I would spend the rest of my life with the Mexican people. The prospect of separation from the extended family into which I had been adopted kept me from this unthinkable thought, until the separation became inevitable.

Bangladesh

It turned out that our central leadership foresaw the need to offer me and many others new challenges for doing mission in other situations and with newer styles of living. At the end of 1974 I grasped onto that offer to be part of an “ecclesial team” of priests, sisters, and lay missionaries among the Muslim people of Bangladesh, then considered the neediest country in the world. This would be a dream come true, since to that point I had not had any community or work experience except with Maryknoll priests.

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in Mexico. Here again my naïveté popped up, as I dreamed of being a missionary among our Muslim sisters and brothers with no involvement with a local church or hierarchy. I was implicitly trying to keep a distance from the priestly ministry as the main way in which to carry out one’s missionary calling.

By December of 1975, a not very ecclesial team of five of us priests landed in Dacca, the capital. Another disappointment! We all had previous mission experience only in Christian countries (Bolivia, Philippines, and Mexico), yet we came together on a vision of ourselves living as brothers and friends among the Muslim population with a strong commitment to our communal lifestyle. Our vision and our community living were new and unique values in the Maryknoll world at the time. We had to deal with the expectations of the local Bengali bishops and priests that we each be assigned to a separate “mission” to do pastoral ministry for the Catholics. Because of the untimely but fortuitous death in 1977 of our archbishop, who had wanted to give us an opening for our mission vision, his temporary replacement was not willing to prevent the archbishop’s wish from being implemented. Thus we were able to start out on this venture of fools for Christ to do mission in a way that none of us had ever done before, with people of a religious tradition that we knew nothing about either. In mid-1977 we rented a small, hot, noisy, uncomfortable house in the town of Tangail in the north-central part of the country.

We did have a vision of friendship and brotherhood, but we were too ignorant to have anything like a plan. So each of us tried our hand at relating to whomever we could, however that might develop. Within our first week there, I took a ride by bicycle rickshaw out of town to visit a nearby “Muslim university” founded by a renowned freedom fighter and religious leader, Moulana Bhashani. I put “university” in quotes, for it was short on whatever one might expect to find there, being only a cluster of small schools around a mosque and madrasa for teaching children to memorize the Quran. Despite the warnings of the Bengali priests and the veteran missionaries that you can never make friends with a Muslim, on my first visit, Masud Khan, the director, and I became friends with our first eyeing of one another. Our visits often saw him reading the Quran and explaining it to me in his enviable combination of intense fervor and a social conscience. After a year of occasional visits, he floated the idea of my going to live there as a Christian in residence. We did have a vision of friendship and brotherhood, but we were too ignorant to have anything like a plan. So each of us tried our hand at relating to whomever we could, however that might develop. Within our first week there, I took a ride by bicycle rickshaw out of town to visit a nearby “Muslim university” founded by a renowned freedom fighter and religious leader, Moulana Bhashani. I put “university” in quotes, for it was short on whatever one might expect to find there, being only a cluster of small schools around a mosque and madrasa for teaching children to memorize the Quran. Despite the warnings of the Bengali priests and the veteran missionaries that you can never make friends with a Muslim, on my first visit, Masud Khan, the director, and I became friends with our first eyeing of one another. Our visits often saw him reading the Quran and explaining it to me in his enviable combination of intense fervor and a social conscience. After a year of occasional visits, he floated the idea of my going to live there with them as a Christian in residence. It seemed like a marvelous idea, but internal problems with the staff over other matters sabotaged it.

When I found myself spending more time at home than my companions, I continued a trend from my Mexican period of openness to building family ties, this time with the family from whom we rented our house. Their boys were in and out of our presence among the people, first in Bangladesh and even later back in Mexico doing pastoral work. Doing things for others, which I did plentifully, became a more integral response on my part out of my basic missionary motivation.

Upon our arrival in early December 1975, I had had the most traumatic experience of culture shock of my life, in part because of my vuanted vulnerability as my basic attitude toward people in a new cultural situation. For several years I suffered through bouts of physical sickness and psychic depression.

Visits to India

Four years later I found myself traveling to a most unusual place in India, given my focus on a presence among Muslims: the Christian-Hindu Ashram of Father Bede Griffiths outside of Trichy in the state of Tamil Nadu. I had assimilated something of the repugnance of the Muslims for traits of the Hindu tradition, such as making images of their deities. Father Bede had left his monastery in England for India as a Benedictine monk in 1955 to follow the dream of an indigenous type of Christian contemplative life. His ashram became a center of attraction for many pilgrims, young and not so young people, disenchanted Christians and Jews, in those decades of the 1960s and beyond, who were searching for spiritual values in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sufi Islam. He also did a grand service to the Christian churches of India by challenging them to open up new approaches, besides total isolation, to the sincere believers all around them.

In December 1979 Father Bede was the midwife for two wonderful revelations for me. First, he gave me a way to understand the deep psychic and spiritual dimensions of my culture-shock experience as a shift from living on the masculine side of my personality to the feminine, thus challenging me to greater balance and equilibrium in my life. (My heterosexual orientation was not affected.) And the expansive spiritual environment of the ashram sowed a new seed in my heart: to be a brother not just to Muslims, but to all peoples.

In the succeeding years I made pilgrimages to several holy places in India belonging to the Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist, and Sikh traditions, just to hang out and be still, to listen and to meditate, to read their Scriptures, and to join their rites. In December 1981, upon finishing my commitment of six years in Bangladesh, I made monthlong pilgrimages to half a dozen places for the same purposes.

United States

I did not know it until months later back in the United States when the aura had dissipated, but I began ever so slowly to emerge from that special time and space that the Spirit had created around me and in me during that long pilgrimage. Some people’s responses to my story were “Wow!” as they helped me to grasp its meaning. Then came the challenge of getting used to living in this country again, a place where I had never worked in my life, but now as an adult at age forty-four I engaged in reverse mission, sharing the fruits of my sixteen years in Mexico, Bangladesh, and India with folks in this country. It took me a year and a half of trans-
tion time and a series of retreats and other experiences before I was ready to accept an assignment to our house in Los Angeles. Knowing that my culture shock in Bangladesh was due in part to a shoddy transition out of Mexico, I learned once and for all to be aware of these transitional times.

All told, I worked for seven years with much satisfaction, creativity, and personal growth at the task of being a “mission promoter” for Maryknoll in Los Angeles, Chicago, and Jacksonville, Florida, in a wide variety of situations, conferences, church collections, vocational promotion, and so forth, for I was highly motivated to share the fruits of my overseas living with people here at home. I had been uniquely enriched beyond measure by those years and those peoples of several cultures and religious traditions. The missionary dimension of my life, the challenge I accepted at twelve years of age, was alive and very well in my heart and spirit and could not be contained, as it was not mine to cling to, but rather to give away.

There are some Pharaohs that are not Egyptian, and my run-in with one of my department heads left me in a black hole in our community organization. Looking for a way to get back to India, in 1989 I took some courses in world religions at Harvard Divinity School. This experience challenged me to get a master’s degree with a focus on Hinduism and Islam. It made me conscious of how little I really knew about either one. But it helped in the long run to get a multiple entry visa for India, where I was permitted by my Maryknoll leadership to remain from 1991 through 1994.

**India**

I chose to live in Calcutta, since I already knew Bengali. I hoped to find an ashram community in West Bengal to enhance my contemplative lifestyle, and I looked forward to doing social outreach with the folks in nearby villages. It really was a great proposal that my superiors accepted willingly.

Nevertheless, I found it impossible to fulfill, except for speaking Bengali. I ended up living in Shantiniketan, 100 miles northwest of Calcutta, which is home of the world-famous Visva-Bharati University, founded by Rabindranath Tagore. I rented a flat from a Hindu Brahmin family, though I enhanced my contemplative lifestyle more as a hermit than in community. Once again I was invited to live as brother, friend, and neighbor to the people in town, with no proposed outreach on my part. My fluency in Bengali did help a lot to make it easy to get on with the people without much hesitation.

Then a funny thing happened on the way out of my hermitage, when I started getting bubbly inspirations to get back to Mexico, to my adopted family, and to priestly ministry. Well into my third year there I was strongly convinced that this would be my future path, somewhat surprised that these three years seemed to be all that the Spirit was giving me a rope for. They had sufficed for many encounters with foreign pilgrims at ashrams and travelers on the road, with Indians in many parts of the country, Christian, Hindu, and Muslim; for innumerable hours of writing my reflections; for good, simple social times with my neighbors; and for much reading about the historical riches of South Asia.

**Mexico Again**

Faithful to my awareness of the need for a transition, I spent two years active in mission promotion in the United States before, in January 1997, returning to live and work in Merida, Yucatan, Mexico; it felt as if I was going home again. I was given the pastoral care of a corner of a huge urban parish under our Maryknoll care. I was not prepared, though, for the dysfunctional dynamics of that highly margrained community. Much alcoholism, many broken families, low educational prospects, and high unemployment were signs that the “high” society’s concept of the neighborhood—that is, as a place where undesirable elements such as the cemetery, slaughter house, red light district, dirty garages, and bus station were concentrated—had been interiorized. I was able to frequent the home of my adopted family and visit many old friends, for I had maintained my communication with these folks over the intervening twenty-two years by letters and visits on vacation. The difference between then and now in my priestly ministry was enormous, for I had been subtly working on reconciling those two vocations to be *missionary and priest*. I had left behind the anxiety and inner tensions of yesteryear; the conflicts of those days with my companions were mostly gone. The inner spiritual resources from those years of purification and growth made themselves evident in the words and actions that I used in my pastoral care. I found it easier to spend my energy and my time in a more compassionate fashion with people. I was eminently available, and it did not bother me. My sermons were more biblical and applicable to their lives. The formation of the laypeople in community responsibility was my chief goal, and it worked.

During the eight years of this pastoral ministry, I committed myself to accompanying hundreds of couples in the Marriage Encounter movement through retreats that I qualified to give nationally. Counting on the friendships I started back in 1966, I offered to teach these old friends the rudiments of contemplative prayer through Father Thomas Keating’s “Contemplative Outreach,” eventually giving many retreats each year, forming several weekly prayer groups, and training many people to take over after me.

After leaving the pastoral ministry, I next worked on my longtime dream of leaving behind some specifically missionary work. *Pastoral* ministry left folks with many good memories of the priestly care of our missionaries but with scant focus on doing mission. The question often came to me of how much of the adulation was due just to our being American and how much to our being missionary. In 2006 I launched a community of Maryknoll Affiliates, a small local group of people interested in assimilating our missionary spirituality under four rubrics: community life, spirituality, global vision, and action in the community. At that time there were more than fifty active groups in the United States, but fewer than a dozen in other countries. It was impressive to see the enthusiasm of this group for being part of our worldwide missionary movement.

I have to admit that I was (indirectly) responsible for the closing of all missionary activity by Maryknollers after their sixty-nine years in Mexico. Because I had opted to ask for a year’s sabbatical during 2012, our leaders in Latin America decided that the three remaining older, retired priests had to move to our retirement facility in the Unites States. On the one hand, we could leave with a clear conscience because of the dedicated labor of the scores of our priests, brothers, sisters, and lay missionaries who had worked in a majority of the states of the country since 1943 in a wide variety of ministries. We were able to support the creation of a Mexican national missionary society, the Guadalupe Missioners, in 1949. On the other hand, I could leave to follow my dream of continuing to share the fruits of my many rich experiences of a cross-cultural and interreligious nature through writing my memoirs. This writing continues to the present.

Dreams really do come true, provided you do not expect to see them in Technicolor accompanied by Dolby sound tracks. They may look more like worn but cherished photos.
“I am excited to be a part of a global-minded community that both equips and learns from current and future mission leaders.”

Dr. Sue Russell
Associate Professor of Mission and Contextual Studies

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