My Pilgrimage in Mission

William R. Burrows

I
ever it could be said that the foundations of faith were laid in childhood, it can be said of me. I was imprinted with an Irish-American Catholic gestalt in its small-town, Midwestern, American variety from my birth in Belle Plaine, Iowa, on November 29, 1942, till I left home on September 3, 1958, to attend the high school seminary of the Divine Word Missionaries (SVD) in East Troy, Wisconsin. From childhood until the revolutions of the 1960s, that gestalt was so enthralling, satisfying, and all-encompassing that I mostly just absorbed the magic of it.

The turmoil of the 1960s began for me in the spring of 1963 in the break between the first and second sessions of the Second Vatican Council. On a rainy fall day, Frank Budenholzer, a seminarian in the class below me at Miramar, the Divine Word College Seminary in Duxbury, Massachusetts, that we were attending, showed me a copy of Hans Küng’s The Council, Reform, and Reunion (1961). I read it quickly. Küng painted a picture of a church that needed updating and reform more radical than I had imagined either necessary or possible. I divide my life into before and after that reading.

In its wake, I first became an enthusiastic advocate of aggiornamento. Much later I grew ambivalent about the way aggiornamento was interpreted in the United States to entail modernizing the church in Western cultural terms, as if modernization were itself the goal. As the years went on, I became an advocate of change in the church, but my sense of what was possible and desirable to change was rooted in my Irish Catholic grandparents’ sense of Catholicism as organic and needing to honor the soil it sprang from. As close as my urban-born SVD friends would be in later life, I became convinced that good ideas and scholarship are insufficient to guide reform and renewal in matters religious.

Personal Formation

Where did my pilgrimage in mission start? My father’s family was Protestant and, at least according to legend, may have been in the United States since before the Revolutionary War. By the time Dad (Richard) was born in 1915, his family was no longer a follower of Great-Awakening, frontier Protestantism so much as socially conservative, generic, respectable small-town Protestant Christianity. They were certainly influenced by Masonry’s emphasis on civic virtue more than by denominational loyalty. Dad, I was told by his older brother, Bob, attended no church from early adolescence till he met my mother. Dad’s indifference was no match for Gertrude Kearney’s fierce Irish Catholicism. Thus Dad became Catholic, and they were married by Mom’s uncle, Fr. James Hamill, in 1940.

From Dad’s family, I inherited a relaxed attitude toward dogma. They were good people, who believed they were destined for heaven—if it existed—in good measure because they were from English Protestant, Daughters of the American Revolution stock. But Catholic liturgy stirred up in me a sense that God spoke in ways other than the many words of Protestant worship. I felt sorry for anyone who worshiped in a church where incense, an abundance of candles, and genuflection before the Eucharist were not found.

As far back as I can remember, I wanted to be a priest, and the example of our pastor, Fr. Edward Flynn, clinched the decision. Ordained in Rome in 1916, he always had a sense of the church’s universality and of mission as integral to its life. He was a student at Propaganda Fide’s Urbaniana University in Rome during the reign of Benedict XV, the first pope to write a mission encyclical (Maximum illud, 1919). And when $500 was a lot of money, Father Flynn sent that amount from his personal bank account every year to the SVD, which had a seminary in the Archdiocese of Dubuque training men to be missionaries.

My parents were not overjoyed to have me leave home at fifteen for the minor (high school) seminary, but they loved Frs. Ken Reed and Leo Hotze, vocation directors for the SVD, who visited our home. I remember my always practical Dad saying, “At a minimum, you’ll get a good education, and you can leave whenever you want to.” They dropped me off at the school, and I immediately felt at home. We had a Solemn High Mass of the Holy Spirit to open the school year. I had never before seen a Solemn High Mass, nor had I imagined the power of 160 men and boys (counting the brothers and priests) singing Gregorian Mass VIII with Credo III. My love affair with Gregorian chant began that day and has not diminished in the succeeding decades.

When I look back at my three years in the SVD high school at East Troy and then two years of junior college in Duxbury, Massachusetts, I remember most of all being surrounded by really good guys in a system where students (thanks to the structures put in place by our prefect [dean], Fr. Edward “Spike” Dudink) enforced the rules, kept the house and grounds clean, and were encouraged to take initiatives in areas such as sports (which were at least as important as chapel exercises), hobbies, band, and drama.

Missionary Formation in the SVD

SVD formation was missionary through and through, but the word “missionology” was never uttered. Reflecting much later on this, I realize that the tradition of Catholic orders was to form you in their missionary charisms by immersion, not theoretically. The real missionological program consisted in deans, teachers, and novice masters helping you understand your personality’s strengths and weaknesses, leading you to commitment to intimacy with Christ as he was imitated in the SVD. You were taught to ask “his mother, Mary, mother of the first missionary, to mold you in his likeness.” Yes, you needed a modicum of intelligence, and study was important. Character, however, was rated much more highly than brains. The reality of missionary life in the SVD was conveyed by stories our teachers told about their classmates and letters from those classmates in places like Ghana, India, Chile, Taiwan, the American South, and New Guinea. Excerpts from their letters were read in the dining room. When a missionary on furlough visited the seminary, he presented a slide lecture.

To be an SVD missionary, it was stressed, you needed to
cultivate your talents, grow in the spiritual life, and foster a willingness to go where your superiors sent you. That would be a place where the church was not yet planted or, if planted, was not yet able to stand on its own. Why mission? Because the church and its sacraments were the channels of Christ’s saving grace, and without explicit faith in Christ, most non-Christians would not be saved.

At a practical level, superiors listened to what they were told by you and about you by your classmates, teachers, and formation directors. Ideally, higher superiors would take into account your wishes, strengths, and weaknesses before they sent you anywhere. On the whole it worked. The Society, you were constantly told, needed all types of people, and those who were assigned to stay in their home countries in teaching, fund-raising, recruitment, and maintenance were considered missionaries as much as those working in the heat of Africa and New Guinea.

Growing Self-Awareness

My class started novitiate on September 8, 1963, at St. Michael’s Divine Word Seminary in Conesus, New York, fifty kilometers south of Rochester, just a few weeks before the second session of Vatican Council II began. In novitiate, while Vatican Council II was still going on, my classmates and I were told by Fr. John Musinsky, our novice master (who later, 1967–77, would serve as SVD superior general), that we were to be “apostolic religious missionaries, not monks.” Nevertheless, we lived a seminastic life in which conversation was allowed only three hours a day. It was a life, Musinsky said, that promoted self-knowledge and habits of prayer that we would need later. Formation and life in the apostolate, in other words, were still quite distinct.

Equally important in my pilgrimage, the summer before entering novitiate, I spent two months in Mexico with twenty of my college friends on a “mission.” Reflection on that experience was a constant during my novitiate. After an introductory program in Mexico City, we split into teams of three and four. LeRoy Schweiterman, Bill Pappas, and I went to Las Animas, six kilometers northeast of Tepotzotlán, where we each lived with a different family. My home was with la familia Ramírez, complete with a stern paterfamilias, a self-effacing and generous materfamilias, a beautiful daughter named María, about my own age, and her older brother Enrique.

All twenty of us had studied Spanish together at Miramar, and we had a basic language course led by a young woman from Buffalo, New York, when we arrived in Mexico. Those preparatory sessions were completely inadequate, sola familia Ramírez, especially Enrique and, more delightfully, María, spent many hours helping me learn by asking questions like, “What is the difference between raising corn and pigs here and in Iowa?” And, “Do you really think you can live the rest of your life [I was twenty] without a wife and family?”

El proyecto on which Bill, LeRoy, and I worked with the men of Las Animas had been decided upon by the parish council. We were to help the village men tear down their old adobe church with a decrepit roof, dig foundations for a new brick church, and start pouring a concrete foundation for a new cement block church. We got the roof off and tore down the walls during our two months in Las Animas.

I loved the rhythm of the Spanish of the campesinos with whom we worked. More important, I caught a vision of a way of life where I could be happy living in another culture, if I could master the language and immerse myself in the people’s way of life. But I also realized that it would not be easy for me to do so, because I shied away from situations where I would be a child because I had not yet learned a language. I also became aware of an unyielding introvert component in my personality. My more outgoing companions, LeRoy and Bill, did better than I.

The experience in Las Animas also revealed, unflatteringly, my need to be someone who counted. Forty years later, when I heard Andrew Walls say, “A missionary is someone who lives on terms set by others for the sake of Christ and the Gospel,” I realized that my summer in Las Animas before I entered the novitiate had put exactly the right question front and center. Learning to live humbly on terms set by others, I realized and prayed about, without putting it quite as succinctly as Andrew had, was going to be my biggest challenge.

That summer also presented another challenge. The boy who left home for East Troy at fifteen was beginning to really notice girls at twenty. In Mexico that summer, I noticed María, and she noticed me; and I liked being noticed by her. The same thing had happened with our attractive language teacher from Buffalo. And later, when I shared a bus seat from Mexico City to Tulsa, Oklahoma, with a very attractive woman my age from Milwaukee, it happened again. But during novitiate, I revealed none of this to my novice master and felt myself drawn to say “Yes” to following Christ as an SVD missionary during the electio of our thirty-day Ignatian Spiritual Exercises.

Clarifying the Vision

During the period between taking my first vows in 1966 and going to Rome to study theology in 1969, I was juggling two visions of my future. The first had me heading to Latin America, encouraged by my Chilean philosophy professor, Luis Manuel Rodriguez, SVD. Under the guidance of Luis, I was reading Spanish translations of Teilhard de Chardin’s The Divine Milieu (“El Medio Divino”) and The Human Phenomenon (“El Fenómeno Humano”), with a view to learning Spanish for studies and eventual work in Latin America. The second vision of my future had me reading St. Thomas Aquinas in Latin and Jacques Maritain in English and French, also with Father Rodriguez, as I sought to understand Aquinas and Maritain on “contemplation as the end of human life” (my senior philosophy B.A. paper). The latter vision drew me to the thought of being a theology teacher who would attempt to build bridges between the vética of tradition and the nova of thinkers like Alfred North Whitehead, Teilhard de Chardin, and Bernard Lonergan.

After graduation from college in 1966 and before starting theological studies at St. Mary’s Divine Word Seminary in Techny, Illinois, I spent a year teaching high-school–age SVD brother candidates in Conesus. At night I was making my way through one of the most important books I have ever read, Bernard Lonergan’s Insight: A Study of Human Understanding. Lonergan helped me understand the gulf that separated classical, ahistorical Catholic Christian culture from the world of scientific discoveries in evolution, on the one side, and, on the other side, the historical and subjective consciousness that arose in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Grappling with Lonergan led to the decision that, wherever I went in mission, I would go as a theology teacher.

I began theological studies at Techny in 1967. The summer before I arrived, however, a much-loved dean of seminarians was suddenly removed by a provincial superior who thought he was too permissive. The seminarians vigorously disagreed. Two years after the Council closed, Techny was in turmoil. Continuity with the past was lost. Indeed, not a single faculty member who taught there when the Council began in October 1962 was
still active when I started theology in September of 1967. Techny had joined German and Dutch seminaries in being thought out of control by most SVDs around the world.

In an attempt to find a way through the turmoil, the SVD engaged a clinical psychologist. The confused state of affairs at Techny, however, was such that—in retrospect—it is clear that the problem in the seminary was simply not one that a psychologist and group therapy could solve. In this, Techny and the SVD as a whole were but a large microcosm within a huge, dysfunctional, global, ecclesial macrocosm.

Nevertheless, in a series of weekend sessions of confrontation and disclosure therapy, each involving ten to twelve men, we attempted to transpose our personal problems and those of a dysfunctional church into the level of problems of emotional self-awareness and honesty. Guiding this process was the judgment that we needed to abandon the notion that we could sublimate our psychosocial and sexual needs for intimacy into a celibate life of priestly service and prayer. Yes, we would take the vows, but we learned that emotional intimacy, especially with our SVD confreres, was the sine qua non of fruitful missionary religious life. Truth be told, celibacy did work for countless thousands of priests and religious, and it helped produce men and women of deep love of God and their fellow human beings. To this day, I find most criticisms of celibacy shallow. I have seen it work too often in too many men and women not to believe that God calls many to that way of life and blesses them in it.

What our confrontation-disclosure marathons revealed was that many of us were emotionally stunted and needed to break out of psychological prisons in which we loathed ourselves and repressed our sexual needs and identities. Masturbation, for instance, was considered a mortal sin, and those who engaged in it felt intense shame, all of which was hidden from others. In years not so long gone by, confessors were told to advise masturbators to leave before taking final vows if they could not master the temptation. Same-sex attraction was absolutely forbidden and had to be hidden, since its revelation was cause for dismissal. The marathon encounter sessions lifted the veil covering such realities, and that was all for the good. Because every sexual fantasy or improper sexual action was considered a mortal sin, most of us had never before confided our problems in that area to anyone.

At another level, the seminary was opening the doors to the American cultural Zeitgeist, wherein openness, sincerity, and self-expression trumped values like loyalty, commitment, and tradition. Religion was redefined as righteous action, and the civil rights and antiwar movements had moved into high gear; few of us failed to join either or both movements.

Study in Rome

To place all this in the context of “my pilgrimage in mission,” during our second year at Techny, the decision was made to close the school of theology there and to send half the student body to Theological Union in Washington, D.C., and half to Catholic Theological Union in Chicago to determine which school held out the most promise. On September 9, 1969, however, my best friend, Steve Bevans, and I went to neither school. Instead we boarded an Aer Lingus flight from Chicago to Ireland on our way to Rome. I was a zealous advocate of the new psychological freedom, without much sense that, although free from many demons, I had too little grasp of the way in which to be a Christian is to be free for service to a Kingdom far more paradoxical than can be realized by promoting good causes, being theologically au courant, or removing barnacles from the hull of Peter’s bark.

My three years as a student at the Gregorian University and as a member of the Collegio del Verbo Divino community in Rome were deeply enriching. The Collegio was also the seat of the SVD’s worldwide administration, which was now led by Steve’s and my former novice master, John Musinsky. Of the 106 SVDs in the community, only 11 were Americans. Steve, Mike Blume (now an archbishop and papal nuncio in Uganda), and I—the three American seminarians—were getting an experience of being a minority.

Living and studying in Rome was a great gift. First, I gained insight into how deeply multicultural the Society of the Divine Word was, which allowed me to experience both the enrichment and the difficulty of multicultural living. Second, although I found myself reacting against the rigidity of Roman theology, I gained an appreciation for the balance, depth, and importance of the magisterium that our Jesuit professors interpreted and defended. Over the years my respect for that magisterium has only grown, although I remain troubled by the way traditions are often passed off as Tradition by the hierarchy. Third, living abroad and getting news about both the Vietnam War and the American civil rights movement from European sources gave me a much deeper appreciation both of the capacity of the United States for self-delusion and of the messiness of efforts to correct its mistakes and live up to its ideals.

Steve and I were ordained on September 5, 1971. We had been assigned, respectively, to the Philippines and Papua New Guinea before ordination. Having finished my degree at the Gregorian in June 1972, I returned home to concelebrate a solemn Mass in Belle Plaine, Iowa, at my home parish with the people who had nurtured my faith, although my family had moved from there five years earlier.

Papua New Guinea

Arriving in Papua New Guinea in September 1972, I entered upon the most challenging and rewarding step in my pilgrimage in mission. Given the limits of this article, I will mention few names but will group insights into two interlocking fields. The first is missiological; the second, personal.

I am fundamentally an introvert, but I have an ensemble of extrovert traits that I employ sufficiently well that most people think of me as outgoing. In reality, however, I am constantly mulling over what I have experienced and in need of privacy to recharge my emotional batteries, and in Papua New Guinea (PNG) I found a great deal about which to brood. I spent my first two months teaching a half-semester course in eschatology at Holy Spirit Seminary in Bomana, near Port Moresby, before heading to Wewak, the diocesan headquarters of the SVD’s East Sepik mission. At Wewak on the north coast, Bishop Leo Arkfeld, SVD, assigned me to fill in for Fr. August Knorr, SVD, as parish priest at Sassoya, one of the largest parishes in the diocese. I objected that I was supposed to live and work with an experienced missionary. “Don’t worry,” he said, “that rule was made because some new missionaries have serious problems in their first year or two. I’ve known you for ten years. You’re solid, an lawn [as was he]. You’ll learn much more on your own.”

So I learned Pidgin (the common creole language on an island with over 800 languages), on the fly in village situations. And I nearly went around the bend. If it had not been for two Australian priests (Pat Gesch and Pat Rasmussen) in Negri, an hour away by jeep, and Australian Mercy Sisters in Yarapos and Yangoru, I would have gone round that bend. I finished my year...
When looking to save money on your international insurance:

There's no substitute for **experience**

**good neighbor insurance**
(866) 636.9100

[www.missionaryinsurance.info](http://www.missionaryinsurance.info)

We save groups & individuals money:

- By setting up self-funded plans to save on premium
- By offering superior advice from our years of experience
- By saving short-term workers money - Medical plans for about $1 a day

---

**SHORT-TERM TEAM INSURANCE**
- AND PLANS FOR FREQUENT TRAVELERS

**THE NEW ACA HEALTH LAW AND YOU. WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW**

★★★★★ (Five stars)

“The best insurance options for educators, missionaries and mission agencies.”
at Sassoya and returned to Bomana, convinced that there was deep, genuine faith among the Melanesian peoples, but also that it was far different than most of us “Europeans” understood. I brooded over that and resolved to try to understand the basic structures of that faith as I dialogued with my students. The next four years was an incredible journey.

Among the things I slowly came to realize was that, at Bomana, “we are [as Nick DeGroot, a Dutch-Australian SVD faculty colleague, said one day] spending 75 percent of our energy socializing the students into a celibate-clerical lifestyle; maybe 25 percent of it goes into something pastorally useful.” I brooded over that and began a serious study of the history of ministry in the early centuries. That study ended up in my being invited to give seminars on ordained ministry in several of the dioceses of PNG. Responding to questions, objections, and encouragement on the part of the missionaries of several different orders to keep thinking, I found myself formulating a basic missiological judgment: Since the beginning of the modern missionary movement in the sixteenth century, the Catholic Church has failed to establish a fully self-financing, self-ministering, self-directed local church. Instead, the new churches are in constant need of help from outside.

Departure from the SVD

In 1977, when I returned to the United States to begin doctoral studies at the University of Chicago Divinity School, I wrote several articles for an internal SVD newspaper, Word/LUSA. In them, I argued that the SVD was part of a large missionary enterprise that was insisting that local churches adopt structures that grew out of European history and culture rather than allowing them to evolve structures of church life and ministry that were both theologically sound and arising out of Melanesian ways of life. Archbishop Adolf Noser, SVD, read those articles and a book I published in 1980 (New Ministries: The Global Context). He demanded that I be fired. After a long tug-of-war, in which the SVD provincial, Arnold Steffen, and his council defended me in discussions with the bishops, it was finally agreed that if the bishops asked me to resign my teaching position, I would do so. That happened in 1982. I was invited that same year to join the Chicago Province of the SVD and to return to PNG as a theologian-member of the Melanesian Institute for Pastoral and Social Service.

To explain why I did not commit to either invitation, I need to turn to what was going on in my internal, personal pilgrimage. I spoke above of my discovery in Mexico in 1963 that I enjoyed being noticed by and noticing women I encountered. In Rome, PNG, and back in the United States, where I helped out in parishes, the pattern kept repeating itself. I do not think it is right to write about these relations, other than to say that, in addition to the emotional and physical comfort these women friends offered, I was drifting away from the ideals of religious life, and I began to feel more deeply my lack of integrity. To this day, I feel profound guilt for hurting several of them. Although I kept up a busy life in the parishes and formation programs of the SVD and in my doctoral studies, at a certain point I realized that I was agitating for a world in which I would be comfortable, while living a shadow life that sinned against both my confreres and the people I was pledged to serve as a priest.

A few weeks after I met Linda Fyne in November of 1983, on the steps of St. Irenaeus Church in Park Forest, Illinois, I knew it was time to make a decision. After a bit more than a year we made it, and I left the SVD on February 8, 1985. We were married on March 30, 1985, at the University of Chicago’s Bond Chapel in the seventh year of Pope John Paul II’s papacy, by one of my Protestant students, a Baptist, whose name, improbably for an Oklahoma-born Baptist, was John Paul. On December 30, 1985, Linda and I became grandparents nine months to the day after our marriage.

Between learning to live every day with Linda, becoming a “householder” with domestic duties and a mortgage to pay (without the many perks that the Catholic laity accord their priests), and making a living, the next four years became an exercise in shaking off old habits. Linda’s love made that easy. I found, though, that, as Pope John Paul’s regimen took hold, Catholic universities were not interested in hiring former priests and that I was too “theological” for secular university departments of religion. Another former SVD, Jack Boberg, opened the door to a job at the American Medical Association. Three years there, working with wonderful colleagues, cleared my head of any lingering ideas that institutional Christianity was at the center of laypeople’s lives.

Conclusion

In the fall of 1988 I received a letter asking if I would be interested in applying for a job at Maryknoll’s Orbis Books. I was, and I did. I retired from the position of managing editor there in March 2009. The editors of this journal have asked me to write separately on the view of publications on Christian mission today as seen from behind an editor’s desk. I will therefore pass immediately to three observations that have as their background everything recorded here, as well as what I have learned through my years as an editor and my postretirement reflection and writing.

First, my pilgrimage in mission has brought me to a deep realization that the death of Jesus is the axis around which everything else in Christian life and the mission of the church revolves. Yes, crucifixion is the forerunner of resurrection, but any attempt to circumvent the paradox of the cross short-circuits our understanding of our plight as sinners wandering the earth in the dark unless we die to self to be born anew.

Second, the Spirit of the God and Father of Jesus is active universally. The mission of Christians revolves around making known Jesus as the Christ. That task is, as Pope John Paul II says, the permanent priority of mission. As the Christ, what he reveals is that God is the triune, loving force that saves the reality of universal process, including human beings. That panocosmic process is reality, and Christ names it. Christian life is complete only when it conforms to the pattern of the death and resurrection of Jesus, that is to say, when it is Christomorphic—in the shape of Christ’s life and death, embracing the Father’s promise of new life in the Spirit.

Third, the Gospel’s fundamental good news is the promise that God will treat those who embrace the way of Jesus as God treated Jesus and will transform both humans and creation in the Spirit. For humans, conversion entails abandonment of attempts to justify ourselves. We are born into a world of sin that is continually persisting. And sin is not simply breaking rules, though we break many in the course of a lifetime. We are, in the words of Lonergan, “incapable of sustained development.” The forgiveness of those sins is not merely having due punishment remitted by God. Much more deeply, it involves accepting God’s promise that the death and resurrection of Jesus reveal God’s transforming power at work in us and in the cosmos. And announcing that promise is the core of mission. Embodying trust in the promise is the most important trait a missionary must display.