



MISSIONARIES TO SECULARITY

The General Council's Ongoing Formation Committee

One of the themes that emerged from the General Chapter of 1998 was the idea that perhaps the most important and difficult mission field in the world today is not, as in former times, the mission in the developing world, but the Western world where secularity is, too much, greying and emptying our churches and making it ever more difficult for us to pass the faith on to a new generation. At the end of Chapter, the new General Administration was explicitly challenged “*to do something*” in terms of missiology for those parts of the Congregation where the Oblates work in a culture of secularity.

With this in mind, the General Council organized two symposia entitled “*Missionaries to Secularity*”. The first was hosted by **St. Paul University, Ottawa**, and took place **June 20-22, 2002**, and second was hosted by **Oblate School of Theology and the Oblate Renewal Centre, San Antonio, Texas**, and took place **October 3-5, 2002**.

Each event, despite being invitational, attracted more than 150 persons. About half of the participants were Oblate and about half were laypersons or other religious and priests. Both were events of communal prayer, communal search, high energy, intellectual stimulation, and Oblate fraternity. Both events too were international in character, drawing people from every continent, albeit, given the locale, the majority of participants were from North America.

THE OTTAWA SYMPOSIUM

At the Ottawa event, our key resource persons were **John Shea**, a theologian-writer, story-teller, from Chicago, now working in health ministry, who spoke on, “**The New Dialogue with Secularity: Multidimensional Spiritual Living**”; **Richard Rohr**, a Franciscan priest from the *Center for Action and Contemplation* in Albuquerque, New Mexico, perhaps the most popular Catholic speaker in America, who spoke to us about “**Singing Songs of Sion in a Foreign Land**”; **Gilles Routhier**, a professor of Theology from Laval University in Quebec City, whose voice is much respected vis-à-vis the question of how the Church might respond to secularity and whose presentation was entitled, “**Risquer plonger en eau profonde: non plus seulement réaménager, mais retrouver les gestes des bâtisseurs**”; **Michael Downey**, a theologian and writer who works full-time for the Cardinal’s office in Los Angeles who spoke to us about “**Theology’s Prime Commandment: Understanding God’s Kenosis**”; and **Vivian Labrie**, who works full-time with and for the poor in Quebec City and who reminded us of the place of the poor within missiology in her presentation, “**Jeter les bases des sociétés sans pauvreté: Comment?**”

We had also invited a number of persons to lead focus sessions, namely, *Maxime Chaigne, Edward Beck, Sandy Prather, Denis Paquin, JoAnne Chafe, Bishop Jim Weisgerber, Normand Provencher, Chief Harry Lafond, Robert Michel, and Bishop Gerald Wiesner.*

We didn’t write up any manifestos at the end, but, based on our conversations and the insights of our resource persons, we did write up a series of “*missiological principles*” which can, we feel, point us in the right direction. What are these principles? We list here *ten* of them:

- 1) We are at a new place today in terms of the faith. Adaptation of what has worked in the past may not be enough. We need to re-inflate the romantic imagination within Christianity.
- 2) Secularity is not the enemy; it’s our own child, sprung from Judeo-Christian roots. Like any adolescent child, suffering from an understandable youthful grandiosity, it’s not bad, just unfinished. Our relationship to it shouldn’t be adversarial but one of solicitude. The “soil” of secularity is defined by Jesus in the parable of the Sower – some ground is good, some hostile, some indifferent – but the fact that some ground is hostile or indifferent does not absolve us from the mandate to keep on sowing.
- 3) Spirituality is peoples’ birthright. The secular culture hungers for spirituality, but is largely spiritually illiterate. People go where they get fed.
- 4) Recovering the tradition is a great labour. We must seek to rediscover the core, heart, of our tradition, beyond its encrusted accretions, and then put our own passion to that heart. We must work at finding our own faith-voice and then speak in an invitational way. Part of this must be a profound asceticism of listening.
- 5) A potentially fertile image of Christ for our time might well be *Christ as the kenosis of God*. This perhaps can be the place of contact with the secular world. Christ, in his self-emptying, expresses a love which gives itself and seeks nothing in return, incarnates God’s presence without

pretence, reveals a God of total non-violence and vulnerability, a God of pure invitation, and a God who accepts the provisionality of everything. Jesus' essential message is a universal message of vulnerability that all people need to hear.

- 6) Given this self-emptying God, we might remind ourselves that sharing in the mission of Christ does not always mean using words about Jesus. God can give us permission, when necessary, to take a holiday from religious language.
- 7) As a faith community we are in exile – from the power, possessiveness, and prestige of the past – but we should remember that all transformation happens in exile because that is the only time God can get at us. We need to stay with the pain, the exile, the kenosis, and hold the tension long enough until it changes us.
- 8) There are four aspects of the Church that people still do accept: the Church as an agency to serve the poor, the Church as delivering the rites of passage, the Church as a voice within ethical discourse, and the Church as a “beautiful heritage”; but we must be careful to not let ourselves be identified with only these. Perhaps too we are asking our parishes to carry too many things, asking them to do some things they can no longer do. Parish and mission are not co-terminus. We need to ask ourselves: Do we need new structures, beyond and outside the parish, new “missiological” structures to supplement what parishes can do? Can we dream of new “ecclesial houses”?
- 9) The gospel is ultimately about God rescuing the poor. Part of evangelization is the movement to eliminate poverty. The Church is a big international body and it could do a lot, internationally, as regards poverty. But, if we want to work for the poor, we must free ourselves from too much reliance on dogma and rely more upon human solidarity.
- 10) There are human foundations, solid ones, for moral progress within our culture and we need to accept this and widen the pool of sincere people with whom we form one body to work for a better world. Excessive stress on denominational identification can narrow the body. Interreligious dialogue must lead us back to a common humanity. We need to commit ourselves not just to the baptized, but to all people of sincerity and good-will.

THE SAN ANTONIO SYMPOSIUM

At the San Antonio symposium our key resource persons were **John Shea**, who had also been with us in Ottawa and spoke of “**Gospel Stories: Resources for Contemporary Spiritual Living**”; **John O’Donohue**, a colourful theologian-philosopher-writer from the West coast of Ireland whose writings in spirituality are both very respected and very popular and whose presentation was entitled, “**Poetics of Presencing: An Exploration of a Spiritual Landscape When the Old Wells Run Dry**”; **Robert Schreiter**, from Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, who is one of the most respected writers in missiology in the English-speaking world and who clarified the landscape of secularity for us with his presentation, “**Pathways to a New Evangelization in the First World**”; **Robert Barron**, a young diocesan priest who teaches systematic theology at Our Lady of the Lake Seminary in Chicago whom we affectionately dubbed “the young Father Barron” and who brought the voice of a younger generation of Catholic thinkers with his presentation, “**A Missiology of Aesthetics: The Icon of Jesus as a Paradigm**”; and **Mary Jo Leddy**, who teaches theology and spirituality at Regis College in Toronto and is the founder of Romero House and spoke to us about “**Naming the Present Moment: Culture, Spirituality and Missiology**”.

Our focus sessions leaders were: *Marion Gil, Sandy Prather, Joanne Chafe, Wayne Holzt, Stuart Bate, Paul Fachel, and Ron Rolheiser.*

Again, as in Ottawa, no formal proceedings were written up, though a book on both symposia will eventually be published. We did however again synthesize the insights into “50 missiological principles”. Here are *ten* of those principles:

- 1) Secularity is both a restriction of consciousness and a widening and freeing of it. It is spiritually interested, but largely spiritually illiterate, not so much bad as asleep. Evangelization is very much about waking someone to another reality. Liberals and conservatives are asleep in different ways, liberal ideology is too privatized and conservative ideology too re-entrenched in authority and rules, even as our culture had replaced the ideal of a good life by the vision of having more.
- 2) How does one become spiritual without leaving behind the physical, the emotional, the sexual, and the bodily? To move beyond churches that are weary, grey, and tired, we must move beyond clericalism, fear of the feminine, excessive unease with Eros, false reliance on authority, and reclaim our mystical and our intellectual traditions.
- 3) Jesus offers a model: He tries to wake us from both our distractions and from the ways we habitually fall asleep “out of sorrow”. We need to begin our proclamation with what lies at the centre of our faith: Christ has died and has risen. We kill God, but God returns in a forgiving love and this is what opens up a new world. What’s unique to Christianity is that God gives himself as friendship, love, forgiveness, non-violence, empathy, compassion.
- 4) We must listen to our contemplatives: our poets, artists, mystics, and returning missionaries. They will help tell us what’s best and worst in secularity and help us form an alternative imagination, an alternative to the “myth-of-progress”.

- 5) There are three levels to evangelization: *i) The renewal of the evangelizers themselves; ii) a calling back of those who have heard the gospel, but it has not taken hold or been lost in some way; and iii) a calling of those have not yet heard the gospel.* Our own children mostly fall into the second category.
- 6) Today's secularity has a particular set of characteristics: *i) It is an uneven terrain. ii) You cannot measure it simply by declining church attendance because there is still, in secularity, a strong, diffusive, belief in the supernatural, a believing without belonging. iii) There is a resurgence of religious sensibility, carried by, among other things, our immigrant communities and the rise of religious movements.*
- 7) Religious decline in secularity may be the exception rather than the way the future is going. There are three different images of secularity that suggest this: *i) Secularity as receding and eroding; ii) as a veneer, you poke deeply into it and see a teeming religiosity underneath, and iii) as an island within a sea of religiosity (in a world perspective).* Inside of our churches we, too, are not homogeneous. We are not one generation but are two-and-half generations within a single generation. As well, we should observe how various counter-cultural groups are engaging secularity: fundamentalists, enthusiasm movements, social justice groups, and the new conservatives. All these groups, both the right and the left, have three things in common: *i) They foster and feed-off a sense of community. ii) They try to give clear form to life. iii) They call for a clear set of actions.*
- 8) We may not continue to keep our faith private. Evangelization must show itself publicly, like the medieval pilgrimages and processions and today's papal youth days. Faith must be expressed publicly, in colourful, romantic ways. We must stop building "beige churches" and build churches that express public faith. We are drowning in individuality.
- 9) Unless we can regain our own inner vision and define ourselves more by what we are for than what we are against we will continue to divide from each other. The Christian tradition offers that inner vision and throws light on a history and upon realities beyond the here and now and, most importantly, calls us to world citizenship, beyond our own backgrounds.
- 10) Finally, a few sound-bytes for reflection:
"When the sun shines right even the meanest trees sparkle." (Flannery O'Connor)
"The cock will crow at the breaking of your own ego. There are lots of ways to wake up!" (John Shea)
"We are better than we know and worse than we think." (Mary Jo Leddy)
"We must gamble everything for love." (Rumi)