

MISSION AND DEVELOPMENT

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Searching for meaning in the midst of war

Living as a volunteer in a simple home without electricity in the midst of the civil war in the South of Sudan in the late 1980's brought unexpected insights and new perspectives on life. I was working with a non-denominational humanitarian organisation engaged in vital life saving interventions providing food and medical support to a suffering and completely abandoned people. I loved my work and it represented a complete liberation from my desk job in Ireland. I was making a difference and though challenged by the brutality of war and the suffering of a beautiful people, I was quietly satisfied that I had found a role in life, a job with a purpose and a mission with credibility. At night often with the sound of gunfire and subversive noises dominating the natural voices of the darkness of the bush, a team of volunteers played cards, talked and debated, and perhaps for the first time in our lives, we did philosophy. We were sometimes visited by missionary priests who to our amazement were able to lay their hands on half-decent whiskey. We loved their visits, the banter, the sharing of stories and lively conversation and good debate. We respected these men but we were not in awe of them. We felt that our contribution was just as good and in our own minds we felt that through our development work we were having greater impact than our religious missionary friends.

Word and Witness

Two interesting things happened that turned my newly founded confidence upside down. The first was entirely unexpected. A female volunteer flung a copy of the New Testament across the room at me one night when I complained of having nothing to read. I struggled at first to read the pages of this famous book but my questions about suffering prompted by the harshness of what I witnessed each day kept niggling me, and as a result I found myself returning with frequency to the *Word*. The second event was sudden and if not unexpected it was certainly convincing. The war escalated and as the people of Sudan faced even more danger, the international community began with great speed to flee. The development workers on the biggest salaries were the quickest to exit. As volunteers we were slower to leave. Our organisation at headquarters level were not fully aware of the dangers of the imploding situation. Our headquarters moved swiftly when they began to understand the real threat and dangers. The only members of the international community to stay were our missionary friends who refused to abandon the people at the time of their greatest need. In the days and months and indeed years that have followed, the witness of these men in the midst of real danger has inspired me and influenced me.

Primacy of Service

Saint Paul writes that: "I fed you with milk and not solid food, for you were not yet able to take it" (1. Cor 3:2). In the midst of extensive hunger and famine, I began to read by myself the scriptures for the first time. The people we served were not able to take solid food. During the day, I was a part of team that served appropriate liquids to a starving people. At night time, I read the famous book. So much of it was about food. I found more than four dozen accounts of Jesus in the gospels, either eating or talking about food. Years later as a finally professed Redemptorist, I smiled in quite recognition when I read Paul Bernier's comment that in the gospels "there is almost

more about food than about miracles”¹. The gospel of Luke, in particular, places great emphasis on meals. It can be argued that this gospel is centred around thirteen subversive meals, and that most of the time Jesus is either going to or coming from the table. Luke establishes a very strong correlation between eucharist and service by pronouncing the primacy of service in his account of the institution of the Last Supper (Luke 22:24-27). Then there is John’s powerful connection where Jesus washing the disciples feet (13:1-15) engages in action reserved for the lowliest in any household. This account is regarded as “John’s vivid way of showing the connection between eucharist and service, it is a symbolic expression of what eucharist is all about”².

Millennium Development Goals

Development workers immersed in a humanitarian and secular narrative also have their *Word*. Younger than the scriptures, but like the *Word*, very well disseminated. Revealed in September, 2000, and inspired by 189 nations gathering together, this word affirms a set of international development goals in the United Nations Millennium Declaration. Popularly known as the Millennium Development Goals, it is the template and bible of the development sector. Like the gospels, it gives prominence to food. The first of the eight goals is committed to eliminating extreme poverty and hunger. The remaining goals aim: to achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and finally develop a global partnership for development.

Redemptorists responding in service

The Spirit of God is upon me to bring Good News to the poor and to heal the broken hearted (Luke 4:18). As a young volunteer in my mid-twenties far away from home in a war torn land, these words awakened within me a sense of fascination and energy. Wondering what these words might mean spiralled me into a journey that continues to this day. Along this journey I have continuously asked for directions so as to discover a credible way of doing justice to the imperative and inspiration presented so powerfully to us by Luke. I am convinced that the Redemptorist charism demands that we both proclaim the gospel in speech and action while also committing to projects that express solidarity and that deliver both meaningful dignity and hope as well as strategies and solutions that lift the poorest and most vulnerable from poverty. The extraordinary leadership and courage displayed by Saint Alphonsus as Bishop in selling assets so as to feed the poor both inspires and challenges. Blessed Gennaro Maria Sarnelli’s willingness to get his hands dirty in the service of the poor is a legacy that makes me proud. We can add Saint Gerard’s commitment to the craftsmen and peasants of southern Italy or Saint Clement’s caring for orphans in Poland and Austria, and Saint John Neumann’s initiatives to help the lot of immigrants to America. Great witness was also given by Blessed Peter Donders among the lepers and slaves of colonial Dutch Guyana.

¹ Bernier, *Bread Broken and Shared*, 27.

² Seasoltz, *Justice and Eucharist*, in *Living Bread Saving Cup*, 319.

Mission as total interdependence

Vatican II has helped grow an awareness of the need to address the structural causes of poverty and injustice in addition to alleviating its symptoms. Carl Braaten offers the following vision for mission in today's world

“Something more than saving souls and planting churches; it will mean something more than emergency relief and charitable works. Mission will assume the role of advocacy, tracking down causes of global injustice and violence...If faith is radical dependence on God, mission is total interdependence among people, overcoming all idolatry in the one case, and all systems of domination, oppression, and exploitation of the many by the few on the other”³

The eighth Millennium Development Goal aims to develop a global partnership for development. Matthew's call in 5.42 to “**Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you**” should act as a catalyst to religious communities to link with the global civil society campaign against poverty. The Millennium Development Goals offer an important opportunity to work with members from diverse faith traditions on issues of common humanity and or responsibility to care for one another. Religious communities working in partnership with secular institutions can transform our world. While faith/secular or mission/development inspirations and traditions are different, and though our narratives are moulded through different experiences both models often aim for very similar outcomes. While religious speak of option for the poor, the development sector speaks of pro-poor outcomes. The development sector emphasises strategic plans based on the culture of efficiency, targets, excellence and quality while mission models operate in a culture premised on church and extended family that emphasises love, concern and harmony as a way of life. Inevitably there will be clashes and misunderstandings when you try to combine both. Even though the development sector adopts an engineering approach while the religious approach is more inclined towards a relationship-living being approach. It is true that many non-governmental organisations chase money and often run their programmes from briefcases and often engage in what is known as sector nomadism. Religious may not like a culture that is dominated by big cheque syndrome where consultants flourish, while secular stakeholders complain about issues of accountability in the approach of missionary groups to money and budgeting. Despite these differences, there are merging ambitions. For example, consider the vision for mission articulated by Braaten above with its emphasis on advocacy and interdependence and compare this with the established characteristics of the trends in development accurately summarised as a move from:

1. Needs to rights
2. Projects to programmes
3. Service delivery to advocacy

³ Braaten, *The Flaming Centre*, p.89

Sarnelli's development approach

Each of the above mentioned modalities, aim to help the poorest of the poor, and contemporary best practice implements these programme through standardised management procedures. It is interesting to evaluate Blessed Sarnelli's approach to helping poor people. Sarnellis stressed the importance of inspiration, liberation and personal responsibility. While caring for others was seen as an activity leading to personal holiness, there was little emphasis on changing the causes of people's misery or tackling social class or structure. What set Sarnelli apart was his incredible sensitivity to those who were marginalised. Sarnelli was an advocate for education believing that it was the basis of all formative development of the human person, and of formation as a Christian. Sarnelli's approach was characterised by feverish and disorganised activity with little or no common denominator in the diverse activities to which he gave himself tirelessly. Sarnelli and his peers didn't have a strategic plan or programme approach other than to convert women ambushed by evil and to guide people into personal holiness.

A new model for Redemptorist development work

The central and compelling force in every one of Sarnelli's initiatives was his obsession with the plight of the abandoned. Like, the missionary priests in the South of Sudan, he lived what he preached and he witnessed to what he believed in. In the midst of a feverish approach he delivered remarkable care to the weakest and poorest. Redemptorists today are still called to tackle the awfulness of poverty. As advances in theology have changed our approach to salvation and justice, so too advances in development practice, call us to new ways of more effectively helping the poorest of the poor. A good missionary programme in 2009 will have a range of strategies working towards defined outcomes. A programme will include a collection of inter-related projects and activities. It will be a mixture of development, relief, advocacy, networking, capacity building and holistic development, components and commitments emanating from the Gospel values of solidarity, trust and compassion. Pro-poor, it will be sufficiently flexible to accommodate changes that may occur to the participatory and reflective nature of the process. The characteristics of a missionary programme include the following:

- Be faith-based and inclusive of people of other religions and cultures
- Based on the charism of the individual missionary congregation
- Have shared ownership
- Be people-centred
- Context driven
- Have a long-term geographical commitment
- Multi-dimensional and holistic
- Have a prophetic voice
- Involve capacity building for succession
- Demonstrate accountability
- Demonstrate resourcefulness and flexibility

The truth of the eucharist

For the Jesuit theologian and ethicist, Jose Aldunate: ' Truth is not in the clouds nor in absolute universal principles but in the different circumstance of reality itself'⁴.

⁴ Jose Aldunate in conversation with Parissi, quoted in *Visions of Development*, p138

The Hindu mystic Ramakrishna (1836-86) in response to the shortcomings of religion remarked that ‘Religion is like a cow. It kicks, but it also gives milk’. Faith based initiatives successfully deliver real results for poor communities. Redemptorists in Zimbabwe feed the poor, in the Phillipines they offer skills training to street children, in Mozambique they provide life-saving water resources, in Brazil they fight for land reform, in Colombia they succeed in getting young people to trade bullets for books and in Niger and Burkino Fasso they deliver agricultural programmes to people from diverse faith backgrounds. We have a unique role to play in sharing our talents and resources in liberating people from poverty. We have also lots to learn. New models of development can help us to bring even better news to the poor. The person who celebrates eucharist according to Jesus’ understanding must be willing to become a servant to others, to be body broken and blood poured out for the sake of all.”⁵. Finding practical solutions to the problem of poverty is part of our Redemptorist vocation. It is our truth that we are a Eucharistic movement, called as servants to other, asked to pour out our lives in listening to the cry of the poor. We can have every confidence that our witness, our traditional approach influenced and improved by new development approaches is as comprehensive to the concept of human flourishing as any other model.

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⁵ Hines, *Eucharist and Justice*, 216

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