

MISSIO AD GENTES AND HUMANITY'S PASCHAL IDENTITY

- Topic: Human Suffering Opens Mission Paths
 Convener: James H. Kroeger, M.M., Loyola School of Theology, Manila
 Presenters: Larry Lewis, M.M., Maryknoll Society Coordinator
 of Formation Program for China Church Personnel
 Lance P. Nadeau, M.M., Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya

This session was a direct response to the 2001 CTSA Convention theme: Theology and the Church's *Missio Ad Gentes*. The convener and presenters are Maryknoll members with extensive overseas mission experience joined to their professional, doctoral degrees. The presentations were unique, designed to integrate field mission experience and theological reflection on the particular theme of human suffering (a constant, experiential reality of missionaries) and to explore how this reality provides avenues for proclamation of the Gospel. Both presenters drew on their individual mission experience as well as on the collective mission wisdom of Maryknoll, since it was founded ninety years ago (1911–2001) by the Catholic Bishops of the United States to be the "Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America."

Lewis began his presentation by narrating some of his experiences as a China missionary. He focused on the 1989 student democracy movement in China and the subsequent disillusionment and despair that the Tiananmen Square incident brought. This shattering experience enabled Chinese students and the foreign missionary to form deep bonds of solidarity. Both realized they are in society as "social-cultural misfits." Both experienced the shattering of their "definition of life" (cf. L. Lewis, *The Misfit: Haunting the Human, Unveiling the Divine* [Orbis Books, 1997]). The journey through suffering, despair and eventual hope becomes a paradigm that invites the missionary to witness to the paschal mystery by honestly facing in his or her own life the hunger to trust in God's fidelity.

Based on his China experience, Lewis elaborated his view of "the faith formation of the missionary." Because the missionary faces suffering, "the brothers and sisters of death," more intensely and more frequently than most people, he/she also has "the opportunity to face the ultimate faith questions of life," to experience vulnerability, and to rejoice in "God's fidelity to the promise of life through death." Mission is always a profoundly paschal experience. The missionary's inner journey—in solidarity with people served—is at the heart of any outer, geographical or cultural journey undertaken.

Nadeau spoke of his African mission experience, focusing on the evolution of lay ecclesial ministries in Kenya's small Christian communities. Their vibrancy suggests that *missio ad gentes* has been a success. Nadeau described one lay effort, the Church's health ministry in "Nairobi East." It offers a key evangelizing service during the current crisis of pandemic HIV infection. Yet, in

face of the tremendous pastoral challenges facing the health ministers, one must question whether successful East African *missio ad gentes* genuinely prepared the local church for evangelization during a profound social and cultural upheaval.

Nadeau asserted that "flawed soteriologies and culturally sanctioned death denial shaped East African mission and gave birth to a Church ill-equipped to make its paschal way in the world." In addition, "missionaries passed on their inherited and unsound theological and anthropological presuppositions about evangelization." "They relied exclusively on soteriologies that neglected the paschal and participatory dimensions of Christian initiation and vocation." In a word, "the Church's avoidance of the paschal mystery . . . left [the health-care] ministers unprepared for pandemic HIV."

A common, consistent theme that emerged from Lewis' China encounters and Nadeau's African experience affirms that the Church today will only be able to evangelize and fulfill her *missio ad gentes* if she actively retrieves her fundamental paschal orientation (cf. J. Kroeger, "Mission, Conversion, and the Paschal Mystery," *African Ecclesial Review* 37 [1995]: 71-92).

The ensuing group discussion brought comments from persons involved in the formation of missionaries, several long-term overseas missionaries, and university professors who guide foreign students. The lively exchange was a mixture of theological reflection, sharing of mission experience, and a reaffirmation of the intimate links between contemporary *missio ad gentes* and the paschal shape ("through death to life") of human life and Christian faith. Participants were of a common mind that "paschal mission" is at the heart of evangelization today, particularly *ad gentes* mission.

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