

# James H. Kroeger, MM

## The Gift of Mission

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An Easter Letter to the Maryknoll Society and the American Church

PRECIS: Easter week 2000 saw Maryknoll's five missiologists gathered for an extended conversation on mission. They focused their reflections on current realities attaining in North America; however, their proffered insights will likely find resonance in other local churches and countries.

Employing the optic of "mission as gift", the Maryknollers explored several neglected aspects of mission; their overseas experience coupled with sacred scripture and church teaching enabled them to reflectively assess mission awareness and commitment among American Catholics today. The paschal nature of Christian mission became a central focus of the week-long exchange. Paradoxically, for. Christian missionaries, loss, emptiness, despair, and apparent failure contain the seeds of a renewed appreciation of the gift of mission. The Easter octave conversations once again affirmed that mission always has a paschal shape; the Easter gospel consistently moves from emptiness to the ends of the earth [James H. Kroeger].

**Dear Friends in the Risen Lord,**

We are five Maryknoll missionaries and missiologists engaged in research on the church's evangelizing service in the world's many cultures. Local churches in Asia, Africa, and Latin America have welcomed us as participants in their witness to Jesus Christ. During the Jubilee's Easter octave, we met to discuss mission in general and the contribution of our institute, the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America, to that endeavor. In the course of our conversations, we decided to compose and send you the following reflection on mission.

As late as the beginning of the last century, the Holy See considered the United States a "mission territory" directly dependent on its missionary offices. In 1908, however, Pope St Pius X recognized the maturity of the church in the US and ended that designation. Out of gratitude for the missionary service the American Catholic community had received, our bishops decided to establish an American institute dedicated to the church's evangelizing service among the nations. In 1911, this initiative gave rise to Maryknoll, the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America.

As we gathered on the evening of Easter Sunday, the story of the disciples and Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35) reminded us that much has changed in the church and the world it serves since 1911. The disciples gloried in Jesus' ministry, but his cross had crushed their hopes. When we entered Maryknoll, we rejoiced proudly in the history and spirit of the missionaries who have gone before us. Indeed, we could have taken the words the disciples used to describe Jesus and applied them to our own missionary forebears of the early twentieth century. Like Jesus, they had been "powerful in word and deed" (Lk 24:19). We yearned to be like them: imaginative evangelizers, a strong influence for good in the world. Falling short of our goal, a confusing emptiness has overtaken us. Many of our fellow American Catholics, and indeed many of our sister and brother missionaries, seem indifferent to mission. An essential virtue for any evangelizing community, love for the church as a frail human institution, has been replaced by an easy cynicism about creed, authority, and tradition. As missionary vocations plummet, anxiety about mission's crisis soars among missionaries. Powerless to change this course of events, many missionaries seek comfort by keeping busy until the inevitable closing of their institutes. Truly, an unspoken grief grips the missionary communities of our US church. An emptiness has suddenly come upon us and, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we move away from it.

Just as the Emmaus story spoke to us about the present situation of mission, the story of Jesus encountering the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4:4-42) captured many of the themes that emerged in our discussions. "If only you recognized God's gift, and who it is that is asking you for a drink, you would have asked him instead, and he would have given you living water" (Jn 4:10). If *only* we

recognized God's gift in mission. Perhaps the very emptiness that has unexpectedly seized us holds the promise of revealing God's gift.

### **Recognizing the Gift**

During our exchange, several *neglected aspects* of mission claimed our attention. In offering these essentials for your consideration, we do not exhaust the grandeur and gratuity of mission.

**Trinitarian Birth of Mission.** What is mission about if not the entire breadth and length and height and depth of trinitarian love embracing the world? The eternal self-giving of Father, Son and Spirit takes flesh in every human being's graced need to yield entirely to love. How marvelous it is that human need and divine gift reflect each other! What is true of individuals proves wonderfully true of whole societies as well. Throughout human history, we find at the heart of every culture such grace-filled patterns of reciprocity as community, marriage, parenthood, and friendship. Each of these social relationships repeats the human need for mutual giving. The church's mission as well expresses this defining human need to be for another.

The missionary Jesus embodies the human thirst for self-abandonment to God our Father. In his Passover, the Father's Word bears witness that self-emptying love makes us finally human. In his cross, God's gift holds out the compassion that makes culture truly humane. Mission, then, is the gift, divinely born of self-emptying love for the other.

**Paschal Drive of Mission.** With indomitable persistence, Jesus carries out his mission of planting the seeds of life through his dying. This is his paschal drive, his paschal mystery, his paschal personality creatively responding to the demands of every situation. Thus, the Gospel remains forever a story of the Lord's — indeed, every human being's — steadily intensifying paschal experience.

Throughout his earthly crossing, Christ steadfastly moves more deeply into his own human poverty and weakness. The Spirit sends Jesus into the desert, the realm of death, where a frail human being can count on God alone. Exposed to the dangers of the wilderness, Jesus suffers the Liar's distractions. Satan tempts the hungry and thirsty Lord, not with transparent evil, but apparent good. It is only after having endured the desert that Jesus returns in the Spirit's power, enters Nazareth's synagogue, and begins his liberating mission (Lk 4:1-19). Long after John baptizes him in the Jordan, Jesus announces that he still has "baptism to receive" (Lk 12:50). But Christ's journey to Jerusalem offers no pursuit of suffering for suffering's sake, no blessing of victimization. On the contrary, it is on the cross that Jesus' humanizing love for the Father and the neighbor perfectly unfolds. Stripped of power in word and deed, the consummately missionary Christ evangelizes by placing his faith in God alone. Through the self-emptying cross, Jesus so entrusts himself to God that the grave cannot hold him.

Yesterday, today, and forever, the face of the paschal mystery is the face of "that Morning Star, who came back from the dead, and shed his peaceful light on all humankind" (*Exsultet*). The Father fills his empty Christ with the Spirit and sends his risen missionary to the fearful disciples (Jn 20:19-21). Only the one who has returned from the dead can offer the gift of trans-cultural mission. His paschal disposition alone can breathe life into the church's missionary activity today. The gift of mission has a face. Christ and no other. The gift of mission has a name. Jesus and no other.

**Church, Fruit of God's Mission.** In the church, God meets every human being's need to be for another, to be for God and neighbor. In the church, God supplies the reciprocity that is every culture's daily bread. No wonder then that the missionary Christ, the true and faithful witness to what is human and humane, "loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:25). Today, in and through the easily tempted church for which Christ died, God shows forth the divine life of self-giving and draws all creation to share in that life.

Jesus the missionary dies out of love to gain and enable the church, which is "the seed and the beginning" of God's kingdom (*Lumen Gentium* 5). Like Christ, the church exists to serve God and the human family. Like the Samaritan woman, the church calls individuals and cultures to meet Christ, to participate in humanity's paschal destiny, and thus to share in divine life. By undergoing sacramental initiation into the Lord's death and resurrection, women and men give themselves to kingdom service

with the Lord. They take on the gift of his liberating mission to other human beings and, indeed, to a cosmos eagerly waiting to share in the glorious freedom of God's children.

**Explicit Proclamation of the Gospel.** In the service of clearly announcing God's good news to those who do not know Jesus and those who hardly know him, Christians join Christ on his paschal way. Once again, we draw from the riches of John's gospel. Aware and thankful for the gift he has received from the Father, Jesus offers himself as Messiah and Savior to the woman of Samaria. Through proclamation, Jesus the missionary awakens the woman to her true self (4:17-18). He frees her from cultural and religious habits that divide the human family (4:21). He invites her to worship in Spirit and truth (4:23-24).

Just as in the meeting between the missionary Jesus and the Samaritan woman, the gift of proclamation affords the primary means for awakening women and men to their deepest thirst, their need to be for another in a paschal way. Through proclamation, the baptized enable others to encounter Jesus, to know God's saving plan in Christ, and to give themselves to the Risen Lord and his church. To be sure, proclamation is not exclusively unilateral action. The meeting of Jesus and the Samaritan woman unfolds in a spirited exchange. Proclamation proves to be similarly reciprocal. As the Holy Father reminds us in his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (2): "Faith is strengthened when it is given to others!"

**Conversion: Embracing Trinitarian Love in the Church.** Jesus respectfully calls others to give of self as he did. His way is a grisly cross-shaped Passover through death to world-transforming life. God has created each one of us for conversion leading to baptism in the Lord's death and resurrection. Why? Because incorporation into the body of Christ answers fully the human being's inherent paschal quest for meaning. Christian initiation gives definitive expression to every person's thirst to offer self to God and neighbor. Consequently, Christ's paschal surrender remains forever the gospel's appeal and the church's true attraction. Humanity's religious history offers us many candidates as saviors. However, who among them has addressed our search for meaning and hope more deeply than Christ-crucified who gave himself over to the mystery of God and rose from despair to speak of peace and fearlessness? It is precisely in the gift of conversion and Christian initiation that Jesus gives us a share in his own self-gift to the Father.

In attending to the five *neglected aspects* of mission that we have just mentioned, we do not mean to slight other fundamental elements of evangelization. Rather, we believe that if we fix on what has been overlooked, we may recognize more clearly the whole gift of mission with its indispensable and interconnected parts. If there can be no gift without Trinity, paschal mystery, church, proclamation and conversion, so can there be no gift without witness in the affairs of daily life, worship, a commitment to the global common good, and attentive dialogue with sisters and brothers of other faiths. If only we recognized God's gift in all its wonderful complexity!

To summarize, mission incomparably shows us that everything is gift. Truly, mission names the entire sweep of divine love. It identifies the course, the drive, and the constancy of God's presence throughout the breadth of our groaning, agonized creation. By his paschal gift of self in Galilee and Jerusalem, Jesus wins his church, a communion vulnerable to pessimism and institutionalism. In its service of evangelizing those who do not know Christ and those who know of him only through a proclamation that falls short of the Gospel's richness, the church struggles to keep faith with the Lord. Proclamation thus endures as union with the Word from whose wounded side flows true worship in Spirit and truth. By offering all the gift of conversion sealed in Christian initiation, the church carries out the work of redemption until the Lord's return. From baptism comes streams of living water, an abundance of prayer, witness, solidarity with the poor and oppressed, inculturation, and the dialogical search for "seeds of the Word".

### **Receiving the Gift**

In their conversation, Jesus draws the woman of Samaria out of herself. She receives this gift in a fitting manner. How does she respond? She goes off to town and invites others to come and see the gift. Like the woman of Samaria, American Catholics have come to know Jesus Christ and have offered him to others. Generations of American Catholics have received the gift of mission in a way that fits this divine work. Millions, many of them poor and newly arrived in this land, have generously reached out to neighbors on other continents. Thousands have given themselves overseas as

missionary religious and clergy. In recent times, increasing numbers of lay men and women have taken on the ecclesial ministry of missionary. Mission education and promotion have flourished in parishes throughout our country. Many Americans have given heroic missionary witness. As Maryknollers, we recall with satisfaction the paschal service of Francis X. Ford and Patrick Byrne. Like Christ, they loved the church and gave themselves for her. The faith of American Catholics has brought millions throughout the world to the knowledge and love of God in Jesus Christ.

Just as there is a fitting manner in which to receive a gift, so is there an inappropriate reception of the Lord's favour. In his encyclical letter on mission, *Redemptoris Missio* (2), John Paul II comments on a common response to mission that is incompatible with this gift:

[Today] there is an undeniable negative tendency.... Missionary activity specifically directed 'to the nations'... appears to be waning.... Difficulties both internal and external have weakened the Church's missionary thrust toward non-Christians, a fact which must arouse concern among all who believe in Christ. For in the Church's history, missionary drive has always *been* a sign of vitality; just as its lessening is a sign of a crisis in faith.

We must resist idealizing the past just as we must strive against condemning the present. Impartial historians can point to many occasions when the church failed to receive the gift of mission. Today, objective observers find abundant examples of that gift faithfully and joyfully received. However, at the present time new forms of suspicion, misunderstanding, and indifference often obscure the gift of mission. Tragically, many within the general Catholic population and within missionary institutes associate mission with a violation of the other, a belittling of another's religion or culture, and the exaltation of a sinful institutional church whose doctrines, social structures, and traditions contradict the Gospel. On occasion, missionaries express fear about inviting others to enter the Catholic Church. The steady decline in the numbers of American Catholics choosing to serve as missionaries reflects a widespread weakening of faith in our community. Some argue that North Atlantic culture closes our hearts to the gift of mission. There are powerful habits of behavior and thinking in our society that block the path to mission: for example, addictive consumerism, the popular belief that personal good behavior defines religion, a pervasive and bland spirituality of individual growth and enrichment, and the dominant intellectual creed that all religions are equally useful or equally useless. Some American clergy and religious marginalize mission by reducing the church's ministry to care of the Catholic faithful. Finally, what is perhaps the most attractive and harmful misconception about mission has many advocates within the church itself. Many American missionaries, including Maryknoll missionaries, look on mission as almost entirely a matter of doing good things for poor and oppressed people overseas. Thus, temptations both inside and outside the church keep us from receiving the gift of mission.

Again, we return to the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman. In their conversation, Jesus discloses the woman's real situation for her. He says to her, "You are right in saying you have no husband" (Jn 4:17). Self-recognition brings the Samaritan woman to mission. She cares that others do not know the Christ. Therefore, she enters the town and invites others to "Come and see someone who told me everything that I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" (Jn 4:29). In searching for the truth about ourselves, we too may find our way on mission's path. Therefore, during our Easter week of conversations about mission, we used the following questions as a way of evaluating our own reception of God's gift in mission. Do I care that others do not know Jesus who gives meaning to our suffering? Am I disturbed that others cannot know him in the church, the community of his disciples? These questions are for us all.

### **Offering the Gift**

In the fourth chapter of his gospel, John recounts how Jesus brings forth an evangelizer and opens a way for evangelization. Personal identity proves to be the pivotal factor in both the birth of an evangelizer and the creation of a mission method. Through the proclamation of Jesus, the woman of Samaria moves from denying to acknowledging her emptiness. This conversion makes her an evangelizer.

When Jesus asks about the Samaritan's husband, she replies: "I have no husband". Jesus then builds on the woman's careful honesty and draws out her true identity: "You are right in saying you have no husband.... The fact is you have had five, and the man you are living with now is not your husband"

(Jn 4:17-18). The woman's life story tells of empty excess. Devoid of commitment, lacking in trust, without stability, any portrait of this future evangelizer would be no pretty picture. Surely, it would not be the expected self-portrait for an applicant to a missionary institute.

The conversation about identity continues. The Samaritan woman says to Jesus: "I know there is a Messiah coming.... When he comes, he will tell us everything". Jesus then proclaims: "I who speak to you am he" (Jn 4:25-26). After that, the woman goes off to town. There she proclaims the news about Jesus precisely by reminding everyone of exactly who she herself is by saying, "Come and see someone who told me everything I ever did!" (Jn 4:29). By offering the gift of a damaged self to others, the woman connects immediately with her audience and calls them out to meet Jesus. Marvelously, the "seeds of the Word" had been planted in the barrenness of her chaotic life. Could it be that others follow the woman out of the town to Jesus because she can speak so convincingly from her emptiness?

In this letter to you, we have referred to a vague mental and moral uneasiness about mission in the American Catholic Church and missionary institutes including our own. Often we ourselves feel captive to this indefinite feeling of disquiet. We sense this malaise, but are unable to identify its source with confidence. In our moments of apprehension, we pray for the honesty of Mary Magdalene. As she stood beside the tomb deeply distressed, angels asked her why she was weeping. Mary replied: "Because the Lord has been taken away, and I *do not know* where they have put him" (Jn 20:13). Faced with the emptiness of this time, may we have the courage, like Mary, to acknowledge that we *do not know* how and where to find exactly what we need to solve this crisis.

Stripped of solutions, we nonetheless trust that perseverance will serve the Kingdom of God. We look to simple, basic, indispensable things: our need for one another, our need to respect one another, our need to forgive one another, our need to interpret the other's actions in the best light. With regard to basics, John Paul II teaches that "The witness of a Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission" (*Redemptoris Missio* 42). He then continues: "The evangelical witness which the world finds most appealing is that of concern for people, and of charity toward the poor, the weak and those who suffer" (42). He is right. Such a primary form of witness is unquestionably worthwhile, true to Christ, and attractive. It is absolutely necessary for any authentic effort in mission.

Such good work also promises that we missionaries will have our merited place on the moral high ground. The world routinely takes the evangelical witness it finds most appealing as a sensible confirmation of its own moralistic prejudices. Who would dare to question a kindly disposition to do good and promote the welfare of others? When the missionary Jesus began his liberating ministry in the synagogue, his announcement of jubilee justice offended no one. On the contrary, "They marveled at his appealing discourse" (Lk 4:22). But when Jesus stripped the Nazarenes of their self-righteousness and questioned their attitude of superiority, they drove him from the town (Lk 4:23-30). Whether in Nazareth or on the road to Emmaus, evangelization deals with treasured beliefs about what is unquestionably worthwhile and what unquestionably makes sense. Today when the gift of mission evokes more malaise than marvel, it may be that the witness we missionaries must offer will strip us of worldly respectability.

Truly, witness in a humane cause appeals powerfully to the world; witness in a foolish cause, an empty cause, does not. Whether in the church or world at large, the gift of mission often appears to be a waste of time when so many good things need to be done. When the world's needs are so pressing, why not neglect all that mysterious theological jargon of Trinitarian life, Christ's paschal drive, and an evangelizing church? Why not settle for the sensible essentials of mission? As the Holy Father makes clear, to offer so little will not satisfy humanity's thirst:

The temptation today is to reduce Christianity to... a pseudo-science of well-being... We know, however, that Jesus came to bring integral salvation, one that embraces the whole person and all mankind, and opens up the wondrous prospect of divine filiation. Why mission? Because to us, as to St. Paul, "this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph 3:8). Newness of life in him is the "Good News" for men and women of every age: all are called to it and destined for it. Indeed, all people are searching for it (*Redemptoris Missio* 11).

A world desperate for decency welcomes missionaries who fill up their own emptiness with appealing, sensible acts of benevolent witness. But in satisfying the demand for virtue, missionaries run the risk

of forgetting that the church and its gospel spread to the earth's ends from an empty tomb. It is emptiness and our embrace of it that can reach the ends of the earth and turn them to Christ.

### **A Final Word**

In John's Gospel, Jesus says to his disciples: "Open your eyes and see! The fields are shining for harvest" (Jn 4:35). As we return to the local churches overseas where we serve, we are thankful for the many signs of mission's new springtime. During our Easter week of conversation, one paradoxical truth became clear to us: What seems to weigh against mission — our loss, our emptiness — is the very yoke that can equip us, just as it did the Samaritan woman, for mission. Christians who venture to speak of the self-emptying Christ must embody in their own lives the message they proclaim. The steadfast servant of God's Kingdom personifies the paschal leader. Accordingly, Francis X. Ford reminds us of the Easter gift:

The hardest cross to bear in life is the thought that we are wasting our time, that we are useless, that the world is rushing along and we, apparently, have not yet found our feet.... God needs us where we are.... We are only too prone to look for sensible consolations in our mission work.... The remedy for this self-centered condition is contemplation and service of God. Contemplation takes us out of ourselves and focuses our attention on God; service of God instinctively issues from our contemplation ("*God Needs Us*", *Stone in the King's Highway*).

Contemplation of the God who offers the trinitarian-paschal-ecclesial gift of mission draws the promise of service from our emptiness. Truly, the Easter gospel always moves from emptiness to the ends of the earth.

Easter peace! Your brothers,

John Gorski  
Kevin Hanlon  
Jim Kroeger  
Bill LaRousse  
Lance Nadeau