

Marie-Helene Robert, OLA (NDA)

Mission in Europe

Introduction

Has mission in Europe a special aspect? Europe in the 21st century, especially Western Europe, is welcoming more and more people from all the continents, from diverse cultures and religions. In this context, the points of reference sometimes become blurred, but each experience enriches the other. The Church in Europe plays an active role in this transnational movement, with which she has always been familiar. In the Church's eyes political frontiers are bound to change: the Church proclaims the Kingdom, the gathering of nations.

But in reality, those receiving and those received do not always have the key to understand and support the other in unprecedented situations. Perhaps what both need most is to overcome the illusion that faith is lived for itself, apart from culture. Faith transcends culture/s but cannot be lived without them!

In Europe today culture is deeply marked by secularization, in the sense that religion is no longer a recognized common social, cultural denominator. Faith is lived more intimately, or in private as in some families, movements and parishes. It is also losing impact as regards the number of baptized and those involved in the life and mission of the Church.

However, the scene remains typically Christian: the topography, the large number of religious buildings, the Stations of the Cross, the statues placed at intervals.

So, missionaries arriving in Europe have difficulty in finding their bearings! Is Europe, which courageously carried the Gospel to all the continents, now in the process of denying its roots, its prowess, its soul? What is a missionary permitted, prohibited, to do in terms of proclaiming his/her faith?

The missionary should look for some helpful clues in order to serve better:

First clue: which Europe are we dealing with?

Europe is a complex reality. It is a continent with many contrasts, nuances. To start with, on the religious level, the countries with a Catholic tradition (Spain, Italy, Malta, Poland, Belgium, Ireland) border on predominantly Orthodox countries (Greece, most of Eastern Europe) or those marked by Protestantism (England, Germany, Scandinavia, Norway, Denmark, most of the countries in northern Europe). Judaism has linked much of its history to Europe, for better or for worse; Islam and Buddhism are spreading in many European countries. The mission cannot be exercised in the same way in contexts marked by this or that confession and religion. Indeed, religion purifies cultures, social models, even history. **CHECK**

It is important to clarify how we refer to Europe when we speak of it: by its Christian roots, geographic borders, history, politics, economics, Græco-Latin culture, ideologies? It is even more pertinent to discern whether or not we have any prejudice against Europe, based on our own experience, dreams, fears, the media, etc.

There is a great difference between Europe's image and reality. For example, Europe has a long-standing tradition of welcome as well as of treacherous changes of policy; Science has disenchanting the world, while new forms of spirituality hatch that may serve as a footbridge/link between

contemporary people; Ministries of ecology and activists of integral ecology *versus* unscrupulous waste. There is a drop in the birth rate, even a rejection of procreation, an aging population, a withdrawal into self and a very strong commitment to welcome migrants of various religions, great generosity in adopting children, unprecedented initiatives of solidarity. The list could be much longer.

Europe is also the platform for dialogue and co-operation in a context of de-Christianization and secularism. In 2006, an IAMS Europe Meeting questioned *l'Europe après les Lumières. Oser la mission dans une Europe qui se construit*¹/Europe after the Enlightenment. Daring to practice mission in a Europe still trying to construct itself. The meeting showed what the Enlightenment made possible: universality, freedom, change in social relations, the call to happiness, dignity and human rights, solidarity, open public space, a culture of dialogue (religious, social dialogue, between men and women), a critical approach to religion, which led to the recent investigation and redress of sexual abuse and influence.

However, the notion of progress at any cost has also caused much social injustice; contempt for religion has been traumatic for the Churches (public executions, annihilation of entire communities, exile, confiscation of property); it is difficult to understand the legal complexity. One may well feel helpless in the face of the abuse of power by the "secularists" who want to de-Christianize both mind and space; the reign of subjectivity and unbridled freedom has reached unprecedented limits.

Everyone should try to appraise the differences that worry them. Perhaps the missionary is called to stand where these differences intersect to help Europe rediscover its vital force, its hope, hospitality, the fraternity for which it was renowned for centuries.

Second clue: what mission?

Mission in Europe is active and multifaceted. It goes from the new evangelization to social action in very diverse areas (reception of migrants, service to the sick, education of young people, street people, and so many other situations). It is a matter of combining the service of the faith (parish, movements, Evangelisation) and the service carried out in the name of the faith (André-Leon).

In a secularized Europe, the social environment is not marked by religious life, even though religious traditions remain (holidays, rest on Sundays); it is governed by labour and civil laws. So, how should the nebulous mission be tackled in the world of work? Talking about one's faith is quickly rejected as proselytism, at least in France in the name of secularism, although the freedom to believe, express and speak about one's faith is a right in France as in many countries of Europe. Secularism/*laïcité* means respect for all beliefs, not their abolition! The question of religious symbols varies from one country to another, and it is important to be well informed.

Relativism and pluralism are the rule in social life. The missionary proclamation cannot be carried out without reference to past and present scandals or without respect for the convictions of non-believers or those of believers of other religions.

Third clue: How can one co-ordinate and enhance the respective cultural wealth?

The International Missionary Institutes can further the mission in Europe. Seek to improve and integrate the respective cultures and forms of reception, relations, perseverance. In exchange, how can we offer our wealth of experience in the fields of training, pastoral care, learning about the various mixed areas Europe has to offer (social diversity, ecumenical and inter-religious research, combination of cultures, styles...)?

To be continued...

FOOTNOTES:

¹ The Acts are published in English in the *International Review of Mission*, and in French in *Perspectives missionnaires* and *Spiritus*.