

A Reflection at the Crossroads of Mission

Sr. Josephine Scanlon

I remind you of the story about the little boy and the sculptor. The lad, inquisitive by nature, was endlessly fascinated by the sights and sounds of the whole new world opening up before him. His questions and obvious delight pleased his father, who himself took a deep interest in the artisan section of the city. Rounding a bend, they came face to face with a sculptor chipping away, shaping a block of marble into the image of a lion. "What's he making, daddy?" asked the little fellow. "A lion," said his father. The boy looked in wonderment at the sculptor for a long while and then whispered, "How did he know the lion was in there?"

I believe that because of our call from God to our particular Institute of Missionary Franciscan Sisters, there's a missionary inside each one of us! I know she's there because it is our spirit and our charism to be sent forth to others as witnesses to Jesus and His Gospel; to be evangelizers on-the-road as Francis was; and to be insecure and on-the-move as Elizabeth Hayes was. The sculptor chips away until the lion emerges. The Divine Sculptor surrounds us with many tools that shape us into who we are as missionaries and guides us in determining what we are able to offer the Church in ministry. These tools are: our Franciscan roots, our community life, our missionary heritage from Elizabeth Hayes, our history past and present, the new shape of church and its mission, the world in which we live.

When I commenced writing these reflections, I attempted to write under the above headings, but I discovered I could not separate the concepts *Franciscan*, *community life*, and *missionary*. One seemed to flow into the other, back and forth. Perhaps this is because they are me, a Missionary Franciscan Sister, and I cannot be divided into parts. They are the elements that make me who I am, or rather who I am trying to be. What I want to share with you has been with me over my years as a missionary in Papua New Guinea, and much of what I think was confirmed and clarified for me in the time I spent in June and July of 1993 at Clacton-on-Sea and Abbotswick during a very enriching program with seventeen of my Sisters on our Charism Renewal Course.

Because I am a Franciscan, I pray and work in Community in a certain way. During our charism program in England, each of us told a story which was for us a significant missionary experience. Words and phrases which surfaced, read for me a little like the story Celano tells of Francis when he was asked to describe a Friar Minor. My paraphrase reads: As peaceful as Bernie.... as gentle and respectful as Marguerite ... as truthful as Jeanne Marie ... as prayerful as Annette ... as courageous and just as Liz ... as discerning as Margretta ... as open as Pauline ... as compassionate as Isabelle ... and the list could go on and on describing us, and what we bring to each missionary situation. It really struck me that it was only when we put the word collage together that we saw the whole picture. No one of us had all that makes us particularly Franciscan, but together our corporate witness was powerful. We were witnessing to who we are as missionaries: simple, humble, caring; close to the people; seeking the lost one, the down-and-out; fearful, yet trusting in God; respectfully listening....

The situations we described covered a wide range of missionary activities and again, when grouped together, gave a good picture of what we do. Even though we often work out of frameworks such as diocesan offices, education and social centres, health departments, mission stations, yet the contributions that we shared, as being significant to us as missionary experiences, showed that the reality of what we do is often in hidden things: the small acts of love; one-on-one listening that facilitates healing; solidarity with our people through a loving, attentive presence of helplessness and trust. We were touched by the telling of these stories, touched deeply because we recognized the power of such small acts.

Small can be beautiful and very real and very Franciscan: *minority*. We reach out to others but discover we have to change ourselves: *conversion*. We pray, we listen, we love, we wait, we trust: *contemplation*. We suffer with people, for people, feeling our powerlessness and theirs: *penance and poverty*. When we shared these experiences in our Clacton Community and when we listened to each other in respect and acceptance, we found our relationships deepened. We were bonded together in a special way: *community*. We were working out of our Franciscan values, and this placed us in a category of mission and a manner of working and serving different from other groups. Our unique and special offering is described beautifully and inspiringly in our Rule, Chapter V.

The word used to describe the Franciscan approach to spirituality and mission is *evangelical*. It has been my theory over the years that if we are genuinely trying to live our Franciscan community life, the Spirit will shape us and mold us into who we are called to be---evangelical people. I believe that it is within community that we are renewed and formed: praying, sharing, loving, forgiving, struggling together.

I would like to share with you how we came, as a community, to claim this evangelical approach. In the late seventies and early eighties, the big in-word among religious groups in Australia and in P N.G. was *apostolic* spirituality. Everyone was trying to describe it and fit into it! Although we, as a group, were as actively apostolic as others, still I could never feel comfortable or at home with that description of our spirituality or mission. Then, in preparation for a chapter, we read together an article, written by a Franciscan friar, describing our spirituality and life as *evangelical*. We are not monastic, although we show elements of it; we are not apostolic, although we are active missionaries. Our manner of life and work is different. The emphasis is to observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ. We carry Jesus, the Word, in our own hearts and communities, experiencing Him there first. Then we go out, carrying the Word and our experience of Him to others. "That's it," we said. "That's us, that is what we are trying to do." My point is that we found the term to describe us last! We did not find it and try to fit it! Somehow, because we were trying to live our Franciscan lives, centered around the Eucharist and the Gospel, in prayerfulness, and simplicity, and close to the people, we were living the evangelical life without knowing it! This manner of working out of our Franciscan community life is the gift we bring to the Church wherever we are. It is different from other groups but complements their charisms in building up the whole Body of Christ. In thanksgiving to Jesus for his mercy to us, we move into works of mercy to others, imitating Jesus in His public life, walking close to the people, instructing, healing, loving, and seeking to do this at all times in a peaceful manner. To be His human presence in each situation we are in, is a tremendous missionary challenge and the core of evangelization.

The approach of Elizabeth Hayes to mission is another challenge that is part of us. That she was called to be a missionary was her unswerving belief. It seems to me that she made sure of following this call to the end by her fourth vow: ". . . and further to devote myself to foreign missions and never by any act of my own will to seek to be removed from them." We know that she perseveringly pursued this search for mission for ten years after leaving Jamaica, and

finally reached Belle Prairie and established herself there. Yet this was only the beginning. The next twenty years, until her death in 1894, describe for us a struggle that places beyond doubt her passion for being missionary: trials, setbacks, sickness, frustrations, disappointments, and always new beginnings. Some, who do not share this missionary call, interpret her searching and urgency as a restlessness, as being unable to settle. I believe it was zeal, courage, foresight. The world was her mission, and we are discovering more and more today the richness of our internationality which has resulted from her perpetually moving out. Not many foundresses of her day had this foresight. Brian de Breffny comments that she saw the North American convents only as two outposts in a vast expanding missionary network, with Rome as its centre. Some did not share this broad missionary vision. How about us? At her death, the Institute she established for us could count only the Generalate, the convalescent home in Naples, and the little place in Assisi near St. Mary of the Angels as active communities. What is more important for us, and we must claim it today, is that she left a spirit of courage, determination, and her unswerving faith in the missionary call. When we read Chapter XI of *Unless the Seed Die*, we realize that those first Superiors General certainly inherited her spirit. They too did not settle! The expansion of the Institute into missionary lands, during the years after her death, reflected the same passion for mission that we see in her: "An incessant longing for the poor was in my heart and was the subject of my prayers. Some difficulties arose and I was asked to give up this longing. I said *No I would rather be trampled upon.*"

It is important to learn from our history. We need to reflect on our past in order to shape the future. When we recall the way God works in our personal lives and how He has worked in our Institute, over the past one hundred years, we enter into an area of mystery. We were on this holy ground at Clacton. Each group shared some reflections on the missionary thrust of their own particular area. We acknowledged our achievements, successes, and strengths and also our diminishments, painful memories, wrong decisions, mistakes, failures. There were periods when we searched out the un-evangelized, the marginalized, the poor, and the powerless. There were times when we got bogged down and our expanding numbers allowed us to settle, so that it was hard to get going again. Too much baggage! There were times when we seemed to forget our original thrust of working for the poor and being poor ourselves.

As we reflect on our weaknesses today, personal and as an Institute, we think also of the physical weakness of so many of us who are growing old. Can the Lord use us? Elizabeth Hayes was considered, as were women of her day, past her prime at forty! But let's think of what she accomplished between her time in Jamaica and her death, a period between the ages of forty and seventy-one. Let's not fade out of the active missionary scene too soon. Most provinces have a majority of Sisters who are retired and sick and others who care for them. Old age and sickness are unavoidable, and internal administrative works of all kinds are very necessary. We must recognize them all as an integral part of the mission of the Institute. Behind each one who goes out, there are those at home who free her for the task. And a word of hope for our truly senior sisters: you have a new mission — that of encouraging others by your prayers and the memories of your own boldness.

Our history challenges us to recapture the original vision; to constantly evaluate the mission and ministry; to move on and find new beginnings. If we are continually evaluating our positions, we will not settle! We will find new situations and new ways.

All missionary movements have sprung from the understanding of the Church in the world and its people at a particular time in history. They were the Church's response to new challenges. In new situations we have to speak the truth in a different way. This is true evangelization and true missionary activity. Francis exemplified this in his novel approach as itinerant preacher, an approach that led to a new form of religious life. Elizabeth Hayes

understood this when she became part of the colonial expansion and missionary outreach of the nineteenth century. So the understanding of mission has always been a growing thing, a changing thing, and must be, because of our changing world.

What challenges us as missionaries today? The list is mind-boggling — secularism, materialism, consumerism, individualism. Many young people are alienated from the Church, which seems irrelevant to their lives. Millions of migrants and refugees suffer untold discriminations against their religions and cultures. Three-fourths of the world's population live in hopelessly overcrowded cities. We live in a world of satellites, computer systems, all new and instant ways of communication. Seventy per cent of the Christian population live in the southern hemisphere, and twenty-three percent of all peoples have never even come into contact with Christ, Christianity, or the Gospel. It's a world where I do not have to travel far to find a trans-cultural situation, a foreign mission. I can probably find one in my own town or area. The list could go on and on. Some situations touch us deeply. Some are not within our experience, yet as an institute of missionaries, all become our concern.

In this kind of world where boundaries are not fixed, where travel is limitless, my nieces talk to me about Australian people becoming Eurasian! In this kind of world, we do not talk about MISSION meaning the *place of or movement of missionaries*. The idea of mission has evolved greatly, and the emphases and challenges have become different. Mission is obviously not geographical any more, although it remains trans-cultural in the sense of going out from what is familiar and secure. It is, now, not simply geographical. A work in Ireland, a genuine solidarity with the travelers; or in Italy, an outreach to the refugees; or in Australia, helping re-evangelize alienated youth—these situations are arguably as missionary as some projects in a foreign mission situation. These may not be considered mission countries, but they are missionary situations. We are, all of us, wherever we are, in touch with missionary situations.

Now, as never before, because missionary situations are right on our doorsteps, our times offer special challenges and tremendous opportunities. I don't want to draw conclusions or make practical suggestions. I am happy that we are in the position we are in — standing at the crossroads. The Clacton experience has given me great hope in our future. One era of mission is finishing, another starting. We are all in the position to evaluate the present and make a new beginning. There is still the urgency, the basic task, the real need. We can still find new and practical ways to keep on moving out as missionaries. What does this new ordering mean for us as an Institute and for each of us personally? The responses may vary, but to be faithful each must still introduce herself as a Missionary Franciscan Sister.

There will be many questions and not too many immediate answers, but we must keep on holding and loving all the questions. If we do this, holding them as we hold the deep desires of our hearts, then maybe we will discover that we are gradually starting to live the answers! If we trust the Divine Sculptor, chipping away, the missionary in us will continue to emerge. She is there! This joy and optimism in our missionary thrust for the future gradually took hold of us at Clacton. We want to continue to listen to each other, knowing that together, our dreams to be truly missionary will be fulfilled.