

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH MISSIONARIES IN NEW WORLDS 1500-1850AD

In this Article, we will look at the Church's efforts to bring the Gospel to every continent.

In Jesus' Great Commission to his disciples before he ascends to heaven, he says: "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19). As explorers discover the new worlds, Catholic missionaries follow them to carry out Christ's Great Commission to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. In his introduction to this chapter in Church history, Protestant historian Bruce Shelley writes:

On Thursday, October 11, 1492, a new world opened for the Christian faith. On that day Christopher Columbus, "Admiral of the Ocean Sea, Viceroy and Governor of whatever territory he might discover," sighted sandpipers, green reeds, and finally land in what we call "the West Indies."

Next morning Columbus stepped on the island's shore, named it San Salvador (Holy Savior), and took possession of it in the name of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain. He offered to the curious natives "red caps and glass beads to put round their necks." This gave them such obvious pleasure that Columbus surmised that they could easily be "converted to our holy faith by love" rather than by force.

Historians speak of the next 150 years as the age of discovery because during these decades Europeans planted colonies in the Americas and found new trade routes to the riches of the Far East. In the history of Christianity we might call these years "the age of global expansion" since between 1500 and 1650 Roman Catholic monks and friars carried the gospel to Spanish colonies throughout Latin America and Portuguese ports along the coasts of Africa and Asia.

Through all these exhilarating years Columbus's original alternative troubled Christian missionaries. Should the natives be won to the "holy faith" by love or by force? At times it was some courageous and selfless Franciscan or Jesuit winning by persevering love. At others, it was some troop of ruthless Christian conquerors forcing baptism upon natives at the point of the sword.

The problem arose because missionaries must always decide what heathenism is. Is it mankind stumbling in uncertain quest of the true God? Or is it humanity organized in hardened resistance to the gospel? Should the Christian ambassador seek the good in heathen religions and use this as a foundation for building a Christian community? Or should he suppress—destroy if necessary—all forms of heathen religion in order to plant the true faith? We can call one the policy of adaptation and the other the policy of conquest. (Church History in Plain Language, pp 280-281)

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Portugal and Spain are the two nations that dominate the seas. To justify not only exploration but conquest of new lands, these two countries declare that they will plant the faith wherever they land. Pope Alexander VI tries to eliminate conflict between Portugal and Spain by dividing the globe in half, granting all lands on one side to Spain and all those on the other side to Portugal. That dividing line explains why Brazil is a Portuguese-speaking country today and the rest of Latin America is Spanish. The pope's hope is, of course, for the Europeans to evangelize other lands, that is, to bring the inhabitants of the new lands to Christ and the Catholic faith. For this reason, he allows the crown heads of Portugal and Spain to appoint bishops and priests in their spheres of influence. But this arrangement all too often makes the Church an agent of the state, whose role becomes focused more on controlling the citizens rather than spreading the Gospel.

Missionaries embarking on their voyage to new lands see themselves as following in the footsteps of the Apostles, risking their lives and security to bring souls to Christ. They crowd into ships knowing little or nothing about their destination and the language, customs, or way of life of the inhabitants. They are committed to bringing Jesus' message to these lost souls. We will now look at the efforts of the Church to proclaim the Gospel to "the ends of the earth."

Latin America

When the Spanish land in the new world that today includes South and Central America and Mexico, they encounter at least three well developed cultures,

the *Mayas* of Mexico and Guatemala, the *Aztecs* of Mexico and the *Incas* of Peru. The Spanish soldiers are called “*conquistadors*” (conquerors)—and conquer they did.

The Spaniards put to death large portions of the native population, either by the sword or by the many diseases the explorers carried with them. By the end of the 1500’s, only 100 years after Columbus’ arrival, the native population of Mexico and Central America has been reduced to 10 percent of what it was before Columbus came.

Missionaries who travel with the conquistadors feel powerless to stop the exploitation of the native people. After all, they depend on the army for all their basic needs. Initially, some clergy serve as government functionaries for the Spanish Colonial Administration. In some cases, religious communities and parish priests amass sizable wealth causing them often to lose sight of their mission to serve God and not themselves. Also, for almost 300 years, the king of Spain has forbidden the ordination of Indians to the priesthood lest they be a threat to colonial rule.

Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474-1566) – champion of the oppressed. While all too many clergy fail to stand up to their Spanish masters, some frequently try to be defenders of the Indians. Two such champions of the oppressed are Bartolomé de Las Casas and Friar Montesino. In his early life, Las Casas was a landowner in Santo Domingo where he inherits slaves. After a conversion, he gives up his holdings and becomes a Dominican priest working among the Indians whom he loves very much. He writes that the only way to draw all people to a living faith is by way of neighborly love and peace. Las Casas joins with many other friars and Jesuits in helping to win respect for the native people. In one of his many books, he relates how on one Sunday morning in 1511 in the Cathedral in Santo Domingo, Friar Montesino spoke truth to power when he said:

Montesino began to speak of the sterile desert of the consciences of the Spaniards on this isle, and of the blindness in which they lived....

You are in mortal sin, and live and die therein by reason of the cruelty and tyranny that you practice on these innocent people. Tell me, by what right or

justice do you hold these Indians in such cruel and horrible slavery?

Are they not men? Do they not have rational souls? Are you not bound to love them as you love yourselves? ...Be sure that in your present state you can no more be saved than the Moors or Turks.

According to Las Casas, none of the listeners were turned against slavery. In fact, Spanish and Portuguese settlers continued to enslave the Indians for decades to come. Friar Montesino had named the crux of the evil: most of the colonizers did not believe, or did not care to believe, that the natives were human beings. (Quoted in A Popular History of the Catholic Church, p.195)

Montesino and Las Casas, both Dominican priests, are sometimes called the first modern civil rights leaders because of their defense of the Indians.

St. Peter Claver (1580-1654) was born and raised in Spain. After his ordination, Fr. Peter travels in 1610 to Cartagena in Columbia, the principal slave market of the New World. Thousands of slaves are brought there from Africa each month. Peter Claver ministers

to the slaves for forty years, binding up their wounds, treating them with dignity. He is said to have baptized about 300,000 slaves.

Indians declared human in 1537. When the colonizers meet the native people for the first time in the newly discovered world, questions almost immediately arise: Are these “savages” human or not? Could they be enslaved? Could they be

baptized? In 1537, Pope Paul III declares that “Indians” in Mexico are indeed humans, can be baptized and taught Catholicism, and should not be taken as slaves even if they do not become Catholic.

A sign of the period’s confusion in response to rapid developments is Pope Paul III’s reversal of the decision of two fifteenth century popes (Nicholas V and Alexander VI) that allowed non-Christians to be enslaved, whilst supporting the declaration made by two other popes (Eugene IV and Pius II) that opposed slavery.

Communal living for the Indians. In many ways, the most remarkable chapter in the history of the Latin American missions, and one of the most remarkable anywhere at any time, is the *reducciones*

The missionaries who accompanied the colonizers frequently protested against the conquistador’s treatment of the native peoples. Rather than a quest for gold and riches, the missionaries were on a quest to save souls.

(Settlements) established by the Jesuits in Paraguay and Brazil in the seventeenth century. By 1700, these communities have embraced 100,000 Indians, perhaps the most successful social experiment ever attempted.

Each *reducción* is entirely self-sustaining, with the Indians being taught agriculture, herding, and basic crafts. White men, especially merchants, are barred, and the Indians are even permitted by the Spanish crown to form armies for their own protection. The Indian settlements are so successful that the Jesuits have made enemies among the greedy colonizers.

Eventually, those greedy enemies will force the Jesuits out and destroy the communal life of the Indians in a most brutal way. This tragic story is portrayed in the successful 1987 film, *The Mission*.

Apparition of the Virgin Mary brings 8 million into the Church. In 1531, an important evangelization event happens in Mexico, about ten years after the Spanish defeated the Aztecs. The Virgin Mary, dressed in an Aztec costume, appears to a peasant man named Juan Diego. The Aztecs see in Mary's picture a heavenly person that they can totally identify with. In a space of seven years, it is estimated that about eight million Aztecs have converted to Christianity.

North America and Canada

The first Catholic missionaries to what is now the United States are Franciscan friars who accompanied explorers on their quest into the Southwest during the 1560's. These missionaries arrive in St. Augustine, Florida, in 1565. By 1772, there will be mission stations in San Diego, Carmel and Los Angeles. By 1630, thousands of Native Americans have been baptized in Santa Fe, New Mexico. In 1790, John Carroll is consecrated the first bishop of Baltimore, the first member of the hierarchy in America. (His cousin, Charles Carroll, is the only Catholic signer of the Declaration of Independence.) For 30 years, Bishop Carroll does much to set the direction for the Church in a new country. He asks Rome for permission to use the vernacular in the liturgy, but is denied.

In 1608, the French establish a new trading post in Quebec. This is the beginning of a New France which the Indians call *Canada*, meaning "village" or "community."

French missionaries in the mid-1600 are the first to bring Christianity to Canada. (See Articles 16, 17 and 18 for the history of Catholicism in the United States.)

India

When the Portuguese arrive in India, they bring with them missionaries, the most famous being the Jesuit priest Francis Xavier (1506-1552). He arrives in India in 1542. Friar Xavier's loving and gentle way attracts large numbers to Christianity. He would ring a bell in the villages, and young and old would gather for instruction. He would teach the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the Ten Commandments and the Rosary. When the natives have learned these beliefs, Xavier would baptize them by the hundreds, organize a church, and then move on to other places, such as Malaysia and Ceylon, known today as Sri Lanka.

After Xavier's departure, the next important missionary figure in India is Robert de Nobili, another Jesuit. De Nobili knows about acculturation long before the term was invented. He adopts the manners and way of dressing of the local holy men. De Nobili believes that if he conducts his way of life as closely as possible to that of a proper Indian, it would add to the credibility of his message.

China

Beginning with Italian Jesuit ***Matteo Ricci (1552-1610)***, missionaries seek to adapt Christianity to the highly developed culture they find in China. Ricci speaks fluent Chinese and dresses like the Chinese. He respects Chinese civilization and tradition and tries to show how Christianity complements those traditions. By 1660, the Jesuits in China are saying Mass in Chinese and not in Latin.

When other Catholic missionaries—Franciscans and Dominicans—arrive in China, they are shocked and outraged by the way the Jesuits have adapted Christianity to the Chinese culture. They complain to Rome. Questions arise: How much can missionaries adapt and assimilate without violating the core of the Christian message? Where is the line between culture and faith? One pope agrees with the adaptation but others disagree. Finally, in 1704, Rome sides with the Spanish friars, banning the Chinese-language Mass and affirming that native people in missionary lands should adopt Western customs along with the Christian faith. Commenting on Rome's decision, Carl Koch writes:

That decision had far-reaching effects, but the immediate effect was that the emperor outlawed all Christian missionary work and threw most of the missionaries out of China. Understandably, the emperor found the pope's decision to be an insult to Chinese culture. For generations the Chinese had suspected that the missionaries wanted to subject China to the West. The pope's decision seemed to confirm their suspicions. Chinese Catholics felt abandoned by the church; they were persecuted by the Chinese government, and some who did not renounce their Christian faith were executed as traitors. (ibid, p.204)

In the mid-1800's, China opens up again to Catholic missionaries, including women's religious orders. By the early twentieth century, nearly a half million Chinese people will have been baptized in the Church.

When Chairman Mao establishes the People's Republic of China in 1949, all religious activity, other than government-led, is banned. So today in China, two forms of Catholicism exist: (1) state-sponsored church under the authority of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA), that has no contact with Rome, and (2) secret underground church that remains loyal to Rome. It is estimated that there are about eight million Catholics in the underground church.

Japan

In 1549, Francis Xavier leaves Indonesia for Japan. After taking time to learn enough Japanese to communicate, he starts once again to teach the core beliefs of Christianity to the natives and sets up churches for those who will come after him. Francis dreams of going to China but dies at the age of forty-six on a lonely island before reaching the Chinese mainland.

Miracle of Nagasaki. The Jesuits have remarkable success in planting Christianity in Japan. During their time there, they establish a new town and call it Nagasaki. The town produces thousands of converts.

In 1614, the Japanese ruler becomes very concerned that Christianity would divide his subject's loyalty and overthrow his government. To prevent this from happening, he bans the foreign religion and expels all missionaries. In a period of about 20 years, more than 40,000 Japanese Christians are martyred including

many missionaries. For the next two centuries, Japan's doors will be shut to the outside world. Remarkably, when missionaries are allowed back into Japan in the mid 1800's, they are amazed to find thousands of Christians living in Nagasaki. Over the course of two centuries, the Christian faith, led by the elders, is passed on from one generation to the next.

Philippines

The Spanish conquerors bring missionaries to the Philippines in the 1500's. In 1581, a Spanish Dominican is named the first bishop of the Philippines. As in Latin America, the military's sole purpose in setting foot in the Philippines is to explore and colonize, but the missionaries have a totally different aim, that of sharing the Gospel of Jesus. Some of the brave missionaries push back against the military's policy of enslavement. Because the Spanish king forbids the training of natives for the priesthood, the Filipinos see the Church as a foreign institution in which they are treated as second-class citizens.

Africa

Christianity takes root in African soil in the early centuries of the Church. Many of the great theologians and saints of the early Church come from Egypt in northeastern Africa. Monks, like Antony of Egypt, inhabit the wild places, communing with God. Augustine comes from North Africa. However, as Islam sweeps across North Africa in the seventh and eighth centuries, it replaces Christianity as the major religion there. Natives in the South of the Sahara Desert do not encounter Christian preachers until the 1600's.

Between 1645 and 1700, Franciscan missionaries baptize an estimated 600,000 Africans in an area that is now Angola. Later, whenever a leader of a tribe rejects Christianity, members of the tribe follow. Mozambique, on the Eastern Coast of Africa, is also an area of significant activity in the 1600's.

The rest of Africa does not hear about the Gospel until the 1800's. In this century, both Protestant and Catholic missionaries come to spread the Gospel.

Slavery. Regarding this immoral activity, Carl Koch writes:

The missionaries faced many difficulties in Africa. One of the most persistent problems was slavery. From about 1600 to the mid-1800s, millions of

Africans were sold into slavery by European and American slave traders. Slave ships sailed from the coast of Africa to the New World and to Islamic countries in the Middle East. By 1800, ten to fifteen million blacks had been transported to the Americas; millions more had died on the way. Even up to the year 1900, Arab slave traders raided mission stations, killing missionaries and anyone else who opposed their taking Africans into slavery. The colonial governments forbade slavery in 1850, but they were unable to stop it for decades.

The Catholic missionaries fought slavery as well as they could. They sometimes bought people out of slavery, instructed them, and then gathered them into Christian settlements. Also, missionaries sheltered children who were left behind when their parents were captured into slavery. When the children grew old enough, a group of them, under the supervision of a catechist, would be sent to a village. There they would raise their own food, take care of other abandoned children, and teach local people new agricultural methods. (ibid, p.206)

Another big problem that missionaries face come from within their own ranks. French Nationalism rears its ugly head in faraway Africa when missionaries from different countries do not get along. Added to this are conflicts between Protestant and Catholic missionaries.

Despite times of persecution, inter-religious fighting, natural dangers, and colonial interference, the Church grows steadily throughout sub-Saharan Africa. As in Latin America and Asia, religious orders only slowly open to recruiting natives into religious life. Phenomenal gains are made in the twentieth century that today more Catholics live in Africa than in North America. Africa is now the fastest growing region of the worldwide Church.

Australia

In 1788, the first Christians come to Australia. They are a group of Irish and British convicts brought there by the British. Among the convicts are a few Irish priests, one of whom celebrates the first Mass in Australia in 1803. Writing about the development of the Church in Australia, Carl Koch writes:

In 1819, a French ship docked at Australia. For the weeks it stayed in port, its Catholic chaplain stayed constantly busy baptizing, performing marriages, saying Mass, and hearing confessions. Finally, in

1820, the first permanent Catholic chaplain arrived in Australia. Others soon followed, although the number of priests would remain insufficient for years to come.

By the 1840's, the majority of Australians were free immigrants who had come to escape the slums or the landlessness of England or Ireland. The immigration of free settlers and their children spurred Catholics and Protestants to establish their own schools. In a few years, a steady stream of sisters, brothers, and priests arrived to serve the Catholics. The Irish Sisters of Charity ministered to the female convicts who worked at forced labor in government factories. In later years, religious orders set up an extensive network of schools, clinics, orphanages, and parishes. All of these institutions were needed as the population swelled with a gold rush in the 1850's. People called "diggers" poured in from Europe, China, and the Americas.

When the gold rush subsided, former diggers supplied the labor force that built the country. The need for convict labor subsided. Partly due to testimony from the Catholic bishop, the British government moved toward abolishing the transportation of convicts to Australia. The last convict ship unloaded sixty Irish political prisoners in 1868. By 1900, a large percentage of Australians were Catholic. (ibid, p. 208)

By the late 1800's, Jesus' command to preach his message around the world has been achieved in a geographical sense: Catholic missionaries have reached every continent.

Reflection questions

1. What spoke to you most in this Article?
2. What surprised you most about this period in church history?
3. Have we today lost the missionary spirit of earlier centuries?
4. Do you have any questions about this period?