Doulos Christou Press has just released a free e-book version of Ivan Illich's out-of-print book *The Church, Change and Community Development*.   **http://douloschristou.com/illich**

Reprinted here from that volume is the essay "Missionary Poverty."

Missionary Poverty
By Ivan Illich

[I challenge churches that understand themselves as missional to listen carefully to Illich here and to imagine how his words might apply to missional church communities, instead of just individual missionaries/ missioners. – Editor]
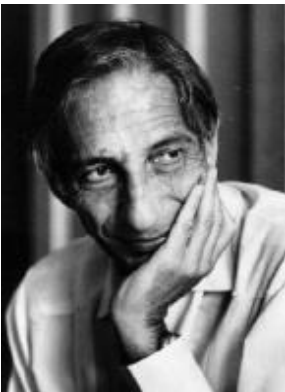
An intensified search for methods of missionary education now parallels the heavy demand for missionaries. However, before one can attempt to decide what should be the nature of a missionary training program one must determine what are the specific qualities which distinguish the missionary.

The simplest way of exploring these qualities is to study what the missionary has in common with the non-missionary, and to decide what is proper to him alone. It seems absurd to search for a specific difference in depth of generosity or competence or sanctity between the priest or the sister or the doctor or the layman who considers himself a missioner, and the person who does not. Evidently the missioner is intended to be a fully dedicated human being, but is not complete dedication equally characteristic of any man or woman totally given to God in any circumstances?

The difference between the missioner and the non-missioner is, therefore, not one of degrees. Neither is it, as we shall see, a difference in the field of action chosen. For to distinguish the missionary by his field of action is at best misleading. To say, for example, that the missioner is he who preaches the gospel to the infidel or the heathen would exclude the MaryKnoller in Peru and the Jesuit in the Philippines from that vocation. And to say that a missioner is a person who leaves his country would imply that the home missioner in the South of the United States or the priests of the Mission de France have no right to be included in the missionary category.

Our search for the common denominator of every missionary vocation (specifically if for this article we exclude "missioners" who conduct parish revivals) does not lead us toward a common field of action or geographic location; a missioner and a non-missioner can work side by side in a parish doing the same job. On the contrary, the one common denominator of all missioners is that they are men who have left their own milieu to preach the Gospel in an area not their own from birth. The difference is one of the relation between the man and the field, not one in the man himself or the field.

Since this is so, the formation of a missioner will be centered on the development of a capacity to leave his home at least spiritually and to talk to strangers. It is this he has to learn in a course aimed at missionary formation. Our purpose here will be to analyze the way in which all spiritual, intellectual and practical training of the missioner has to be organized around the development of the beatitude which makes the transition from a familiar to a foreign way of life easy and practical: spiritual poverty in imitation of a specific aspect of the Incarnation.

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God: the perfect communication of God eternally consubstantial with Himself. To communicate Himself perfectly to man God had to assume a nature which was not His, without ceasing to be what He was. Under this light the Incarnation is the infinite prototype of missionary activity, the communication of the gospel to those who are "other," through Him who entered a World by nature not His own. The closer the pattern of a human life approximates this aspect of the "Kenosis" of the Word the more can that vocation be called a missionary one. It does not matter if the missioner is the Irishman among the Zulus or the bourgeois among the totally different culture of the French proletariat, or the urban northerner in the rural South, or the New York "boy" in a Puerto Rican neighborhood. Just as the Word without ceasing to be what He is became man, Jew, Roman subject, member of a culture at a given moment in history, so any one of these missionaries, without ever ceasing to be what he is, enters and becomes part of a "foreign" culture at the present moment in a given place.

The missioner is he who leaves his own to bring the Gospel of those who are not his own, thus becoming one of them while continuing to remain what he is. Only great love can motivate a man to do this, a deep knowledge is required which love wishes to communicate.

To make intercultural communication of the faith possible, the missionary must acquire special skills and special attitudes through specific missionary training. The urgency of the need for missionaries, the limited supply of willing persons, and the rapidly changing pattern of culture make it ever more necessary to attempt a planned and intelligent formation in those skills and attitudes which the missionary requires for his apostolate. An intensive training program can accelerate the process of cultural adaptation which previously was often left to casual osmosis in the mission field itself. Intensive formation can mean an economy in manpower by shortening the time to make a man fully effective.

Very often the missioner has to learn a new language; always a new lingo. Modern linguistics have greatly shortened the time this takes. The missioner must also learn to understand hitherto unknown social, economic and geo-physical forces. This is often easy on the surface but it is difficult for the missionary to accept the consequences these forces will have on his own life: the weather might frustrate him with tiredness; his social position put him into a goldfish bowl, and poverty force him to unaccustomed discomfort.

Most important of all, the missioner has to face a new culture. He has to learn to distinguish between that which is morally good everywhere and this which is socially acceptable for a particular ethnic group. He will have to know which of his habits among "his new people" are socially unacceptable, though they may be morally good and he may be used to them, and he might have to become willing joyfully to accept the cultural taboos of his own home as everyday patterns in his new surroundings. This emotional and intellectual willingness to accept a new culture which does not come naturally can be greatly enhanced by a theoretical understanding of culture and a guided research of a local milieu.

However, the learning of a language, the acceptance in *toto* of a special "human climate", and especially the willingness to become part of a new culture present much more than purely intellectual problems for the missioner. For him language, techniques and culture are not academic ends but first of all means to a practical purpose; communication of the Gospel. The missioner becomes part of his new surroundings to become able to speak, not just to survive. He is the man who is willing to witness with his life to a foreign people the relativity of human convictions in front of the unique and absolute meaning of the Revelation. He often is the man through whom the Incarnation of the Word becomes real in cultures other than that of the ancient Jews. (Is it for that reason that we have missioners to all nations but He has reserved for Himself the mission to the Jews?)

Sometimes the "missioner" lives among people who to him are foreigners but who have received the Gospel before through priests form one culture and for a historical accident now that receive their priest coming from another. This is the case for instance in many parts of Latin America. In such situations the word "missioner" assumes a very special meaning. The priest from abroad remains "missioner" in the sense that he communicates the Gospel to those who are not of his own. The people among whom he lives might have received and absorbed the faith centuries before any of the missioner's ancestors entered the Church or the Church had any influence on the culture of the missioner's home. In such a situation the missioner's task is even more delicate than in a situation of first evangelization: many of the traits of the culture the missioner finds to be different from his own deserve respect not only because they are an intimate property of a people but also because they were developed in centuries under the influence of the Catholic Church.

The full realization of such cultural relativity, especially in matters which are intimately connected with the unchangeable structure of the Church, requires great detachment. We all love to give absolute value to the things we have learned to love. We must, because to love the immediate is human and therefore necessary. But we usually forget to ask ourselves if the values we treasure are absolute in relation only to ourselves or to everyone. The man who is willing to be "sent" away from his home as a "missioner" will have to subject his values to a careful scrutiny to determine their "catholicity." Just as he has to become indifferent (in the sense of Loyola) to possessions and physical comfort, just as he has to become indifferent to being or not being with his family and his people, so he has to become indifferent to the cultural values of his home. This means that he has to become very poor in a very deep sense.

For what else is spiritual poverty but indifference, willingness to be without what we like? As spiritual poverty implies not the absence of likes but freedom from them, so the attitude of the missioner carries with him not to the denial of his background but to communication with another, and this is a difficult goal to achieve. If it is difficult to become indifferent, detaches, from all exterior comforts, and if it is even more difficult to become indifferent to more intimate gifts such a physical integrity or the presence of those we love, or our reputation or our success, how much more difficult is it to become detached from convictions deeply rooted in us since childhood about what is and is not done.

Yet it is this last detachment which the missioner will have to achieve if he wants to be truly an instrument of the Incarnation rather than an agent of his own culture. No missioner has the right to insist, in the name of the gospel, on acceptance of his own human background, and thus to make Baptism or full Church membership dependent on a degree of spiritual poverty in the convert which he himself is not willing to practice.

The realization of the necessity of this deep poverty in him who stands at the frontier of the Church as incarnate in a culture and a culture which has not yet fully accepted the Church (or perhaps fallen away from Her) is equally important for the priest abroad as for the priest from the United States eastern seaboard who belongs to a Catholic subculture when presenting the Church to members of a traditionally Protestant group, or the French missioner to the proletariat. What else, in fact, is the purpose of Church history but a continuous meeting of the Church as it has already become a reality in a culture with a new world which now becomes Christian or now returns to Christ? The "new world" contributes to the body of the Church a new human richness and accepts for itself not only the faith but participation in purely human values of century-old tradition. This meeting is accomplished through the missioner. Through him not only will the faith be accepted, but the new convert will enter the mainstream of "Catholic culture" (a term which seems to imply a contradiction because "catholic" means "universal" and "culture" as we use it, says "the way of life of some"). The missioner's detachment, indifference, and spiritual poverty toward the values of his own particular culture, far from hindering him from transmitting his own background, will help him to give out of the treasures of his own history what is needed by the convert, and not just what he feels strongly about.

Without an understanding of this distinction between impossible and absorption of cultural patterns, neither the Catholic missions nor the concept of Catholic culture can be understood. Each people, just as every individual, has the right upon coming into the Church to absorb with the faith certain effects of the atmosphere in which the faith has grown for centuries, and thus to become in a fully human fashion part of a "Catholic world." On the other hand, certain human cultural traits, such as the law of Rome or the logic of medieval Paris, and the dress of the late Empire, have become the fashion in which the Incarnate Word appears to the convert and which he has to accept just as much as "kenosis" of the Word of God as he accepts Him as Jew. Unless the missioner is very detached from his own tiny world and reads absolute "Catholic" meaning into local and time-tied customs, he will not be able to think Catholic when asked for a divine faith and the development of a human tradition by his covert.

This growth in spiritual poverty must continue during the whole life of a missioner, but its first conscious development is of decisive importance and should be at the center of specialized missionary training.

The first learning of a language must be more than the attempt at the acquisition of a skill, even more than the capacity to communicate which we referred to above. It can easily become a symbol of a man's willingness to become profoundly poor, to relinquish his own world of thoughts and associations and expressions "as the best there is," as the standard measure of fully developed thought. The acceptance of a local history and climate and socio-economic structure can be more than the expression of a generosity which embraces physical discomfort for the sake of Christ. It is rather the expression of an eager willingness to become one with the missioner's new people. The acquiescence to foreign culture norms or behavior and taboos, besides being a necessary and utilitarian

accommodation and a mark of delicacy and charitable toleration, can become an imitation of the Incarnation in a unique and typically missionary way.

Such a course of action, which goes against the grain of everything that has become part of our personality from earliest childhood and which symbolizes for us all that is humanly precious and lovable, is not only difficult but extremely painful.

To study, for example, a language or a set of customs as a spiritual exercise rather than simply as a technical effort requires not only deep love but great insight. Since this insight is itself a painful experience, the human tendency is to obscure it, to keep it from view. One cannot make the effort at missionary poverty in order to avoid pain.

Many dangers threaten to hinder the missionary from seeking poverty at this intimate level. And most of them stem from the insecurity which breeds fear. If material things and friends and health are crutches against the threat of the unknown, how much more does the set of values and customs with which each one was brought up serve this protective purpose, and how much more, therefore, is each one anxious to defend his culture as inalienable, absolute and worthy of being imposed on others. If we don't want to let go of a thing we think we need we always find a reason for defending our right to keep it, and the more intimate the things is to us, the more unknowingly we protect ourselves from the suspicion that we might have to give it up. Since there is hardly anything more intimate to us than our culture, there will be nothing we will stick to more obstinately and against our best intentions than the ways we were taught "things have to be done". No wonder the young missioner will discover in himself every day new tricks his nature plays to avoid his detachment from his whole past. He will find himself constructing philosophical arguments pointing to "human nature" which is "the same everywhere" to justify the singing of "Silent Night" at Christmas in preference to traditional celebrations, or to defend the free choice of a mate as called for by the Gospel because he protests the choice by his mother of a wife for his brother in Boston. A more subtle trap in which the bright man might find himself is learning so much about his mission field as to become an anthropologist in order not to have to accept this one people as his by becoming a part of them. The difficulty of self-illusion will have to be taken carefully into account in a delicate process of integrated personality development as missionary formation should be.

Individual direction of the young missioner will be just as necessary as free-flowing group discussion to make rationalizations and subterfuges conscious and allow curricular training to become a channel of spiritual growth. Otherwise contact with the "foreign" becomes an opportunity for the development of detachment, and personal freedom could easily become either a force which throws a frightened man back upon himself anxiously grabbing for past symbols of security, or for the imprudent but enthusiastic, a temptation to deny the values of his own background, thus remaining suspended in a dangerous vacuum seemingly between cultures.

The development of a missionary spirit will have to start from an analysis of the concept of spiritual poverty, or Ignatian indifference or detachment. Man can become detached from visible things which he can use with his body and the integrity of his body itself. Man can go further and become detached from the respect, the affection and opportunities for self expression his fellow-men can give him. The missioner must go even further into an area of detachment from himself which we call "missionary poverty," an intimate mystical imitation of Christ on His Incarnation.

From its organization around the acquisition of this special aspect of the beatitude of poverty corresponding to the task of the missioner every attempt at missionary formation will receive unity and deep meaning. Intellectual formation in the social sciences and linguistic studies for the missioner must be seen as a means for the development of a specific form of spiritual detachment corresponding to his very personal vocation.

A curriculum of special courses given to the "missioner-to-be" thus can become a potent instrument for the realization of a deeply realized catholicity in imitation of the Word which by becoming son of a carpenter in Galilee, became MAN.