

Crossing the Threshold: Liminality in Missions

Missionaries are liminal beings. They are neither total outsiders, nor insiders; they live in between two worlds. As noted by Victor Turner and Arnold Van Gennep before him, anyone who passes through a temporary liminal stage emerges as a new being. The transformative nature of such rites of passage, in which one crosses over from one defined structure to another, that transfiguration that occurs at the disjuncture between two worlds, is evidenced in the lives of missionaries in their effort to evangelize. The transformation of such missionary figures as St. Paul, St. Boniface, and Ramon Llull, and the impact that their changing perception of who God was in their lives, parallels the theological development that affected the transfiguration of Agnes DeWitt in Louise Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. Each of these figures was transformed by their encounter with God, an encounter that profoundly shaped the further transformative encounters they were to have with those to whom they brought the Gospel.

Agnes DeWitt, an innocent Swabian girl, enters the convent as Sister Cecilia in 1910. A mere two years later, after experiencing events beyond what she could have ever imagined, the same woman finds herself saved from a flood on the banks of the swollen Red River and takes up the guise of Father Damien Modeste and assumes his mission to the Ojibwe. While Sister Cecilia was living in the convent she understood God to be a devoted lover, but Cecilia did not parallel this devotion. "In her music Sister Cecilia explored profound emotions. Her phrasing described her faith and doubt, her passion as the bride of Christ, her loneliness, shame, ultimate redemption."¹ She understood herself as a person having made an unconditional promise to God to live a life of music, teaching, and prayer. Her doubt was as strong as her faith and she experienced loneliness more profoundly than any loving embrace of Christ. "She was one who believed without seeing, felt spiritual emotion without experience of its source, kept an orderly faith and hap-hazard observance without the deepest marks of conviction."² Leaving the convent, Agnes felt ashamed at having betrayed God, unaware that Christ would redeem her

¹ Erdrich, pg. 14.

² Erdrich, pg. 42.

from the flood. Agnes later writes, “Through my years my love and wonder have steadily increased. Having met Him just that once, having known Him in a man’s body, how could I not love Him until death? How could I not follow Him?” The salvation she experienced left Agnes transformed. She was no longer a bride of Christ because her religious superior told her as much; Agnes was now the bride of Christ because Christ had saved her and she loved him for that. In the flood Agnes had lost everything – her house, her piano, the remnants of her life that remained after the shooting. She lived the rest of her days in steadfast and convicted love and devotion; she knew the warm embrace of a Christ who pulled her from despair to new life.

A similar radical conversion took place in the life of Saul of Tarsus. Saul’s conversion likewise effected a change in name and conviction so great that Paul was to become the prototypical Christian missionary. The Acts of the Apostles records that “Saul, meanwhile, was trying to destroy the church; entering house after house and dragging out men and women, he handed them over for imprisonment.”³ After his experience on the road to Damascus, during which Christ appeared to him, Saul radically reversed his ways and prepared himself to do the work of the Church. From the moment that he came to know Christ, he was “compelled by the Spirit.”⁴ The sense of compulsion that drove Paul to bring Christ to the Gentiles was profoundly influenced by his conversion and the transformation it affected within him. Paul’s understanding of God changed from that of a God concerned with the proper adherence to laws and obedience to the Temple authorities, to a God whose love and salvation extended beyond the children of Abraham to all those on earth. Paul’s mission seemed to him the only available path given his conversion at Damascus. Similarly, Agnes’ conviction derived from her single-minded response to Christ’s saving action.

The respective conversion experiences of Agnes and Saul, in which each of them crossed over from an understanding of God in legal or intellectual terms to a God who saves and personally drives one forward in faith, had repercussions for the manner in which they each conducted their missions. Father Damien went to the Ojibwe and was determined to bring Christ to them, but in a personal manner. Father Damien went to visit those people in his charge and engaged in very personal and friendly relations with even those such as Nanapush who did not embrace Christianity. In this encounter with the Ojibwe, Father Damien came to a much fuller

³ *New American Bible*, Acts 8:3.

⁴ *New American Bible*, Acts 20:22.

appreciation of his own nature. This reaches a climax at what may be seen as Damien's conversion to the Ojibwe spiritual way, inaugurated by his joining Nanapush and others in the sweat lodge. "The way Damien understood it, he was to help, assist, comfort and aid, spiritually sustain, and advise the Anishinaabeg. Not the other way around."⁵ From the Ojibwe Damien learned to be able to accept himself, to feel a sense of ease with himself and his surroundings. "Father Damien loved not only the people but also the very thingness of the world."⁶ This ability of Father Damien to add the Ojibwe spiritual methods to his repertoire of ways to relate to God is directly linked to the saving act Agnes had experienced many years before. Christ had pulled her out of the river, reaffirmed his marriage of faith to her, and set her on a mission. This mission did not include a renunciation of her previous life; her mission was rather a fulfillment of what remained of Agnes' former life. Thus, as Father Damien, Agnes was predisposed to add to her religious experiences, rather than replace them.

Paul's conversion and his subsequent evangelization took a different turn due to the different transformation that accompanied his conversion experience. Paul's dedication to Christ was likewise unwavering, unwavering to the point that he was willing to accept death for the message of Christ. However, unlike Agnes' salvation from the flood, Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus involved a renunciation of his previous way of life. Thus for Paul, Christ was one who came to save him from error and correct previous wrongs. Despite this renunciation and the ferocity with which Paul preaches to the Jews to accept Jesus as the Messiah, Paul does not fail to learn the ways of those to whom he is evangelizing. When Paul comes to Athens and preaches at the Areopagus, he makes use of the philosophic and poetic statements of the Greek society. In the words of Epimenides of Knossos, Paul states that it is in Christ that "we live and move and have our being."⁷ In so doing Paul accepts that these people have experienced some aspect of the Word of God, despite never before having been evangelized. Through his own conversion experience Paul implicitly understands that God uses the situations in which people find themselves in order to convey the Gospel. Just as God came to Saul in his position as a retainer of the Jewish Jerusalem elite, so to does Paul come to the Greeks in their position as intellectual and abstract thinkers. Just as Jesus commanded Paul to renounce his persecution of

⁵ Erdrich, pg. 214.

⁶ Erdrich, pg. 215.

⁷ *New American Bible*, Acts 18:28.

the Church, Paul admonishes the people of Corinth and others to renounce their immorality in order to follow Christ.

If both Saul and Agnes experienced conversions which are recorded, the conversion of the third missionary figure to be examined, St. Boniface, is more less documented. Nevertheless, Boniface' understanding of God profoundly impacted the way in which he crossed over the Rhine in his mission to the Germans. While Father Damien and Paul had a relationship with God that was not overtly intellectual, but rather experiential, it is clear from the preserved letters of Boniface that his relationship was profoundly influenced by intellectual models. Born in Wessex in the late seventh century to a noble family, Winfrid went to the monastery of Adescanastre under the direction of Abbot Wolfhard and later to the Abbey of Nutshalling under Abbot Winbert. With years of schooling and training in the Benedictine way of life, Winfrid set off for Germany and in 722 was consecrated bishop of Thuringia and Hestia, taking the name Boniface. Thus two aspects of Boniface's theological understanding were present that figure prominently in his letters and evangelization: authority and correct teaching.

As Boniface crossed the Rhine and entered the territory of the Germans these two aspects of his theological understanding became all the more important. In a letter from Bishop Daniel, Daniel recommends that Boniface challenge the people to whom he has been sent with intellectual inquiries, meant to show the intellectual superiority of Christianity. For example, questions about the origin of their gods "should be put to them, not in an offensive and irritating way but calmly and with great moderation."⁸ Boniface himself is interested in disputation and intellectual affairs. Aware of the scholarship of the monk Bede of Wearmouth, Boniface writes to Abbot Huetbert, "We earnestly beseech you, kind brother, to assist us with your holy prayers in our labours among the rude and savage people of Germany...to be so kind as to copy and send to me the treatises of the monk Bede, that profound student of the Scriptures."⁹ Boniface is interested in having the correct scholarship at his fingertips in order to teach correctly. The correct teachings are those teachings that are backed by authority, the authority of Rome specifically. Boniface concerns himself greatly with preserving "the Catholic faith and the unity of the Church of Rome,"¹⁰ and declares that "my decisions here and your decisions in Rome

⁸ Boniface, pg. 77.

⁹ Boniface, pg. 128.

¹⁰ Boniface, pg. 98.

ought to be in complete agreement.”¹¹ Clearly authority is important to Boniface and his mission. Little mention is made by Boniface of the actual people to whom he is evangelizing. Of them only the Wends are called by name and identified as “a most degraded and depraved race.”¹² The people whom Boniface encounters are an intellectual challenge for him not people whom he can learn from; Boniface must figure out how to establish in Germany a church in keeping with the correct intellectual teachings of the English-Roman Church and ruled by the order and authority of Rome. Boniface’s crossing over is more a matter of how he can translate his Christianity to the Germans and does not seem to offer any insights into the dialogue witnessed in both Father Damien and Paul’s accounts of their missions. One might even speculate that Boniface’s rigorous training, through which he increased his understanding of God by harmonizing new knowledge with old forms, predisposed him to not accept radical difference, but rather to assume it into preexisting categories.

If Boniface’s crossing over is merely a physical crossing over the Rhine, the case of Ramon Llull represents an intellectual mission encounter that is much more transformative. Living from 1243 to 1316 on the island kingdom of Majorca, Llull lived in between two worlds, both geographically and intellectually: he lives between Christian Europe and Muslim North Africa and writes between peaceful preaching and violent crusade. Living in a time when the crusader state of Antioch falls, Llull himself undertook many attempts to convert Muslims in North Africa and in Aragon with only limited success. He campaigns with similar disappointment to convince the temporal rulers of Europe to forgo military strikes against the Muslims in favor of preaching and conversion. Through these seemingly futile attempts and the political situation, Llull later comes to believe that preaching alone will not succeed in converting the Muslims and that a crusade is absolutely necessary. This transformation that occurs with Llull, a transformation conditioned by his position in the world, sees a parallel development in his theology.

In his early years Llull sees God as one and the same as the person Jesus and thus encourages Christians to follow the way of Jesus. In a novel, Llull “has an envoy of the Egyptian sultan appear at the papal court and read a letter in which the sultan expresses his amazement that the Christians attempt to conquer the Holy Land after the manner of the prophet Mafumet, who conquered by force of arms, and are not willing to follow *the manner of Jesus and the Apostles*,

¹¹ Boniface, pg. 100.

¹² Boniface, pg. 123.

who converted the world by preaching and martyrdom.”¹³ Clearly Lull has a Christology that understands Jesus as a loving human being, and Christ’s own personal example is important to him, thus Christians are to behave as the same loving human beings. At a much later point in his life Lull argues that the Church has two swords, and that the temporal rulers of the earth have a “duty to defend, sword in hand, the Roman Church against infidels and schismatics, against unjust Christians, ‘and against the infidels who hold the Holy Land.’”¹⁴ Lull’s understanding of Christ is that of the divine ruler, king of all, and thus it is the role of Christians to expand this kingdom both geographically and spiritually, with force if need be, in order to make the universal truth of Christ’s power known to all. Lull is a figure whose life experiences transformed his encounter and understanding of God, in a way that profoundly shaped his further transformative encounters he had with Muslims: arguing to convert them, dispute with them, or dominate them.

Each of these three figures – St. Paul, St. Boniface, and Ramon Lull – experienced a transformative encounter with those others to whom they were sent. The theological understandings each of these individuals harbored influenced the way in which they were to interpret and be transformed by these encounters. The experiences of Agnes DeWitt as Father Damien offer a unique way to consider the powerful effect such encounters, both with God and with others, can have on a person. These missionaries were all liminal beings, moving between two worlds, while at the same time transforming themselves and the two worlds into which they ventured.

¹³ Kedar, pg. 193. *Emphasis mine.*

¹⁴ Kedar, pg. 199.