



International Confederation of Christian Family Movements



THE MISSION OF LOVE AND SERVICE IN AN INTERFAITH COMMUNITY **By Nop and Elma Muangkroot, ICCFM Presidents, with Rev. Fr. Donnon Murray** **Thailand**

The main areas of the Catholic missionary work throughout the world are well-known: education, care of the sick, managing orphanages, homes for the handicapped, the aged and the dying, and many other forms of fraternal service. However, there are other manifestations of Christian love and service unique to countries where various faiths exist side by side, particularly when Christianity is a minority religion. Possibly no other countries could better exemplify the Christian mission of love and service in an interfaith community than Japan and Thailand, countries which have the world's lowest percentage of Christians, 1/2 of 1%. The issues that come to mind when considering this topic are the following:

- How do Christians render love and service in an interfaith community?
- Is the function the same for every interfaith community in every culture?
- What should the priority of this mission be: social action or spiritual conversion?

A great majority of people in non-Christian countries of the Third World live in dire poverty. For example, there are street people, the garbage pickers and the debt-ridden farmers in many Asian countries. As non-Christians, these people are also deprived of hearing the Good News that Jesus has proclaimed. A great manifestation of Christian love and service would be to offer them the opportunity to experience God's love and help them develop a deep relationship with the Lord. However, the reality is that they can think of nothing beyond the fact that they are hungry, have no clothing to wear and no roof over their heads. Therefore, common sense requires that, in our mission of Christian love and service, we do what we can to alleviate their suffering before even thinking about meeting their spiritual needs.

In the parched northeastern part of Thailand, a Filipino missionary Rev. Fr. Phil Mahusay lives among a community of impoverished Lao-speaking Thais. When asked about how he is evangelizing the people, he answers that he helps them have a better life. He solicited funding from abroad, and the donations he received were put into agricultural improvement. At an enormous cost, he dug a deep lake for irrigation and fishing. Despite the people's discouraging predictions that nothing would grow on the land, he planted cashew trees, which grew well with irrigation, and then he distributed cashew saplings to the families. Before long the people had their own fruitful cashew orchards. Now Father Mahusay has a thriving community with pigs, ducks, and chickens running around. When asked about how many people he has converted, he just smiles and says, "Not many, but I have many families who are now self-sufficient and living much better than before, and they see God's love manifested in my care for them. The conversions will come later." To Father Mahusay in Thailand, social action is the essence of evangelization.

In an interfaith community where the biggest issue is spiritual emptiness, the greatest form of love and service is to witness that the Gospel is, indeed, "Good News," thus offering non-Christians the means to experience a loving God they will then desire to know. Fr. Donnon writes: In Japan destitution is almost a chosen way of life, and certainly not the general norm. Therefore, what is outstanding here is spiritual poverty. I think that for the Christian here, the "Mission of Love and Service in an Interfaith Community" must lie, first of all, in a discernment of whether my own Faith is viable - something that I make every attempt to live out, and not just a head trip whereby I merely give intellectual assent to what



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I am supposed to believe. If it is only a head trip, all the altruism in the world is not going to have any real effect on society. In countries where CFM exists, if I am a member of CFM, am I more interested in parties and social activities under the auspices of this so-called Catholic gathering, than in a real sharing of lives in order to help one another deepen in the Faith so as to be better witnesses of the Gospel? Are people disposed to join precisely because they experience in this environment a living and joyful Faith? This, to me, is a real "Mission of Love and Service."

Father Donnon concludes that, because of an intellectual rather than an affective approach towards evangelization among the bearers of the "Good News," conversions in Japan have been slow. Despite the obstacles, Christians throughout the world have not given up on their mission of love and service to non-Christians. The Japanese Bishops many years ago gave permission to non-Christians to celebrate weddings in the Catholic Church, considering the occasion as an opportunity to present the Christian ideals on marriage not only to the couples but also to the 100 or more wedding guests. These are people who, otherwise, would not be reached in any way. The requirement is that the couple attend the parish's marriage preparation course, such as the Engaged Encounter, an experience the couples have found joyful and beneficial. In both Japan and Thailand, the weekend Marriage Encounter or Marriage Seminar is open to all couples, and about half the participants are non-Christians. Many conversions have resulted in both countries, and the Marriage Weekend has become one of the best ways to introduce the Lord to non-believers.

In many countries, the Christian mission of love and service is demonstrated in unique ways. For example, many Sri Lankan Buddhists are greatly devoted to St. Anthony, and the pastors of St. Anthony's Church in Colombo open its doors with a warm welcome to non-Christian believers, who light candles and seek petitions from the great Saint of Padua. In parts of Malaysia where Chinese, South Asians and Malays live in harmony, Christmas is a time of great celebration for Christians and for their non-Christian friends, who feel the same kind of ownership in the celebration of the Savior's birth as the Christians themselves. We are sure that there are many other special ways in which the mission of love and service is conducted in your countries, and we would like you to share them with us.

In conclusion, our Christian mission of love and service in an interfaith community is rendered in diverse ways, according to the needs of the people we serve. Whether our priority is social action or spiritual conversion is determined by the privations, whether material or spiritual, of the non-Christian brothers we love and serve. Like St. Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles, we hope to proclaim as we perform our mission: "So I become all things to all men, that I may save some of them by whatever means possible. All this I do for the Gospel's sake, in order to share in its blessing."