Padre Kino's Missionary Teaching
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In working on the history of the Society of Jesus and especially its early missions, I have learned that its missionaries were not preoccupied with questions of orthodoxy and refinements of the Magisterium. They were much more radical; they were really doing what Christ asked us to do - that is, to teach the Way, to teach Christian living. They were not worried about making certain that their neophytes were doctrinally precise. As a matter of fact most converts had no clue about what they were being taught-at least in the beginning.

These observations compel one to become critical about what the mission of a missionary is, what the mission of the Church is, what the mission that Christ has given is - to those who were to follow Him and teach as He did. When I look at the life of Padre Kino and the other missionaries with him, this is precisely what I see. This may be a misreading, a misinterpretation, but I do not think so. When Christ said, "Go and teach all nations," we were thrust on a course of contacting peoples that would seek in some way to transform them. But the question is, what do you transform? Are people to be transformed according to what they think? Or how they act? Or perhaps both? What is the interaction to be expected? We can even more basically ask: what is the goal of mission? What is the final causality? Sometimes a nominalistic answer is offered: "Well, one converts them from being pagan to being Christian, to being believers in Christ, obviously." But how do you know there has been conversion? Here we find ourselves confronted with the same question that Saint John asked: how do you know they are Christians? And he answered better than anyone, ever-better than Bishops, councils, congregations, or encyclicals. "You shall know them by their love." For Saint John, it was not a question of what they thought; it was a question of what they did. It was a question of interpersonal conduct. It was a question of outreach in a sense of giving, in a sense of community, in a sense of sharing. In fact, in the earliest days of the Church, its members were not known as "Christians," but as "Followers of the Way." They were doers, although we can presume they were not exactly inept at theology either.

If this is historically accurate, then a mission really attempts to reach out to others and asks for "metanoia," a change of life; this clearly becomes the goal and option of our contact. Our educational efforts, then, focus on bringing this change about, and we naturally attempt to shore our efforts up with rational argument and example. Put yourselves in the shoes, boots perhaps, of a man like Padre Kino, who was young, vital, and a dreamer of almost impossible dreams, somewhat like Don Quixote-well, not exactly, because Kino came from the Italian Tyrol and not La Mancha. Imagine |232| yourself, like Kino, being sent to the New World to contact people whose language you do not speak. He was contacting people who did not understand his language either. How do you educate? How do you communicate? What can you do under these circumstances to change their lives? How can you preach or teach "metanoia"? This is not an easy task, but this is what the foreign missionary faced. He came without tools to communicate and was expected to construct those very tools. Arriving in a totally foreign culture, bereft of the means of communication, he was expected to transform native peoples from being pagans to being Christians. He was to build Christian community among peoples whose concept of God bore little resemblance to the Hellenic biases of Christian dogma. This was no mean feat. But this is exactly what a man like Padre Kino set out to accomplish. So when we look at the problematic situation that faced Jesuit missions world-wide, we can only be amazed at their foolhardy faith-and even more at God's gracious generosity.

In my own historical work I have seldom concentrated on the Jesuit missions of the Orient; I have spent my time studying missions in the New World - the Western hemisphere - particularly North America. One of the elements that has caught my attention is the enormous discrepancy between the cultural 'presuppositions of Western culture and those of the Americas. One sees that the Western mind has considered itself far advanced over these "primitive, savage, backward, unenlightened, and dull peoples." But when one pays honest attention to Indian cultures, none of these judgments rings true. Perhaps the cultures of the Americas did not display the kinds of scientific sophistication with which we credit ourselves, but the Indians' knowledge and integration of nature with their way of life, with their sense of morality, were remarkable. As a matter of fact, it is only today that the West is coming to understand the immense sacredness of nature that cries for respect, a respect that long since characterized Indian cultures in the New World - which many Christians deigned to call paganism. …..

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What is it that the missionary must teach? What are the basics? Are they the rudiments of doctrine? Are they the ABCs of the Magisterium? Are these the propositions of the Faith? Is this a question of knowledge or something more? I suggest the issue is a holistic one and that the task of the missionary was not, and is not, that of communicating knowledge alone. The missionary's task is one of sharing knowledge, the basic appraisal of nature, and the fundamental appreciation of peoples, their interaction, and their relationships. After all, I must recognize, no matter who I am, what culture I represent, what skin color I have, what bone structure I have, that that "other" out there is a person like me. If that is not seen or accepted, we are locked into a racism of the most destructive kind. The missionary was someone who reached out to the Indian peoples as persons; he tried to move them to discover a better vision of themselves. Often the missionary learned as much from the Indian with whom he worked as he taught them. There is a beauty and wisdom that exists among communities of people that has to be respected. Sometimes we, as communities of people, no matter what may be our origins, can concoct systems that are unjust and unwise. It is then that we must sit down among ourselves to interact and reconcile our aberrations so that we can devise something more beneficial to all. To impose law, morality, and authority on another community solely from the outside is pious folly. Such a process does not create, invite, or engender "metanoia" in anyone. "Metanoia" is an interchange, a complete transformation of the person. When we look at the teachings of the Church, when we review the paradigms of doctrine, they are only valid as metaphors that reinforce, that communicate some richer, higher notion to people who are on a quest for truth, understanding, and ultimately love. …..

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That is the faith we find in Padre Kino. This is why I titled this essay, "Kino: On People and Places." I could have recounted his expeditions, his mapmaking, his church-building, with an impressive array of historical statistics. One might then have misunderstood in thinking he came to do these things. No, Kino came to all these places and recorded them because of people. And in finding people in the places he visited and explored and in doing the brave things he did, he found God. He found God in the people he served, and together they joined in the quest of the recreation of the world, which we like to call salvation. We are engaged in something more than just saving our souls; we are engaged in making a newer world, a better world. And we are just barely set out on that path, even though Kino rode those trails more than three centuries ago.

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"Kino: On People and Places"

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