

## THE LANE AND THE CHAPEL

Leaves, like mingling waters, kiss above the lane,  
While I, an Israelite, pass by dry-shod;  
But for the son of Egypt fast behind  
Their union will turn to tempest strain.

Cow parsley all along the verge reminds  
The Israelite of manna in the wadi,  
Rock-born, sand-blown, a sweet viaticum;  
But weed is what the false Egyptian finds.

Around the bend a dyke collects the rain,  
As if the tarmac flowed like Horeb's rock  
Before the patriarch's prophetic wand;  
The stranger only sees a drain.

This little gradient's my Sinai;  
I live in clouds and thunder haunts my ears.  
Here, where the tables of the Law were broken,  
Daily in stone and bread and wine in token  
A Surrey hill becomes new Sion.

HUGH FARNASH



## CATHOLICISM AND ADAPTATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

FINBAR SYNNOTT, O.P.

**I**N every mission periodical you open now you will find articles on adaptation, on developing Catholic life according to local custom, on 'making the word flesh'. But it is not so easy to find many detailed suggestions of what to do here and now. Not long ago I heard of a special lecturer being called in, at a Catholic college, to lecture on this subject. When asked to

name one practical point on which to get started he said: 'The solidarity of African family life'. The hungry disciples felt somewhat let down. This does not seem so very specifically African. Later I read, with very mixed feelings, an article in which the writer attempted to point the matter more definitely. He referred, somewhat sharply, to the small father-mother-child group we call the family in western culture, and said we should build on the African extended family, which shares out full family duty, and authority, on a lessening scale, to uncles, aunts and cousins. Yet the average sociologist would point out that this clan system could only operate where there was stabilization, community of domicile and occupation. Just as the Macdonalds are now spread all over the world, so one Mlangeni is in Durban, one in Johannesburg and one in Bloemfontein. For an increasing number the clan is forever broken. Also the missionary would see this awkwardness in it, that on the death of a Christian man his heathen brother might demand the right to take the wife into his harem and send the children to the tribal initiations. So a long debate could begin.

There is hardly one custom, or element of culture, the adaptation of which could not cause similar disagreement. One student speaks of the value of African musical rhythms; another claims they were essentially connected with war and sex excitement. Someone mentions the African contemplative spirit; another says that the slow measured movements of Africa, and the hours of sitting in silence, were only the self-protection of bodies short of vitamins and of minds short of things to discuss. You ask African artists or architects to develop their own forms; you find that what was engineering in mud and thatch becomes only affectation in brick and iron; that choice of colours was not only preference, but due to the shortage of natural dyes. One missionary says we should encourage liturgical variety and indigenation, just as we are now learning from the Greek liturgies. Another points out that the unification of rite was an immense advantage while the European Latin custom occupied the world.

As the debate goes on more fundamental difficulties appear. There is a central truth and life in the faith, redemption and the union of the soul with God, which 'has no colours but only light'. It belongs to no one people, is equally expressible in all languages. But it is only reached in the form of pure light in

interior graces and visions, and cannot be so expressed in words. Nor was it meant to be propagated in this form. The incarnation and the gospel were given at one time and place, in one particular culture, so that to the end of time everyone who hears must in part hear through the Hebrew idiom, even through the thought forms of the Roman-Greek culture in which the apostolic creeds and customs were formed. This should not be seen as a burden. It roots the faith into human things. Also there was a fulness of time and place in the incarnation, the place where continents meet, the growth of cultures which were to provide the basic useful knowledge of the world. But of its nature this historical connection puts a limit to adaptation.

There is a second attachment of the light to particular colours, less fixed but of great practical importance. Every missionary, and every diocese or province of a religious order that sends out a mission, is limited, human, localized. The missionary has to use, for his own soul, means he knows will protect him; and for his apostolic work some at least of particular local means he knows by experience will work. He is minister of something he must not allow to be falsified. He is struggling with those who often wish to accept the new truth while falling back for comfort on the old gods. He is usually overwhelmed by practical work. He must play safe up to a point, use latinized words in his catechisms, translations of European hymns only until his people can produce good ones. Being human, he can only administer all these things as he has seen them at home in England or Germany or Belgium. His missionary office requires that, practically, he impose upon his converts something of his own nationality, and a measure of custom that is not even neutral, much less indigenou, something deriving from European psychology, from the history of Rome, feudalism and modern Europe. This is very marked even in some of the best of missionaries. Hasty attempts at indigenation in language, in forms of organization and religious customs often compare unfavourably with the work of the missionary who seems to be unnecessarily and formally western and European.

These impediments to adaptation are classical in the Church, and can exist in the case of a missionary going to a country of equally developed culture; they will exist when Catholic priests can once more enter Russia. But there is also a special circumstance in the present 'mission field' of the Church: that the coming of the

Church is everywhere coinciding with a change from ancient to modern ways of living. This is not a matter of choice. It is a natural and inevitable social development, outside the missionary's choice. But it has helped the missionary greatly. For often the mission school has been the only instrument of the desired progress over vast areas, and so gained the Church a great social influence. The last fifty years, therefore, made the question of adaptation much less urgent. The converts often wanted to be europeanized.

This last condition is however changing rapidly. The mission school is more likely to be regarded as retrogressive by the founders of the community schools of the newly conscious peoples and nationalist movements. Africa is developing rapidly and deliberately as a third thing, neither eastern nor western; and nowhere is this shown more than in the immense number of African indigenous Christian sects, with garments, music and community customs very much their own. Adaptation is now becoming as important as it was unimportant, from the immediately practical point of view, in the period of voluntary europeanizing. The misunderstandings and reactions left over by the colonial period have redirected us to see the perpetual principle: that as long as there is a difference between an American and a Chinaman, or an African and a European, the labour will have to go on. It is not only to make the Church homely to each people, but to bring their gifts into the whole Church. The *Osservatore Romano*, comparing the coming of Africa into the Church to that of the Gothic tribes in the sixth century, struck this note.

In spite of the initial difficulty in each of the cases of adaptation mentioned above, it must be seen that there is something good and enduring that can be brought into the service of Christ. For instance, there was something in the clan loyalty system which was a golden mean between individualism and communism. Africa solved, in its rural living, the problem that has split the world in two. There must be some of that willingness to serve persons and not only leaders or systems, and to incur without calculation the economic risks of a brother, that can be carried forward into industrial relations. Again there is in African music something that seems to be geographical. I am speaking here from a limited knowledge of southern Africa south of the Limpopo. Bird song does not ring as it does in England. It cuts off short.

The frogs do not croak, they bark. You hear the voices of the insects of the bush drop into an insistent rhythm as they get into their stride after midnight, a thing I never noticed in English woods, but have noticed in a similar rhythmic quality in Bantu concerts and night vigils at Christmas and Easter in Church. An African priest recently wrote that the traditional African way of expressing mystery was by rhythm. It all seems to argue to African music in church also, within reasonable limits, having a character of its own. Then as regards the contemplative, unhurried attitude to life; it is already possible to visualize Africa being sufficiently set on its own personality to take over modern techniques without so much neurosis and activism; to hold on to the full entry into each experience which has been claimed to be characteristic of 'Negritude'. Africa might yet produce a common Christian life and monasticism of less active form and organization, but of an equal depth of influence, in contrast to modern European patterns. The experiment of the De Foucauld Brothers in a new form of contemplative life, combined with an apostolate of empathy in immediate community relationship to the people, although founded by non-Africans, comes from the African desert. Its inspirer was an adoptive African.

When you come to try and list the adaptations made by the Church to date they look disconnected, and often associated with primitive patterns of life which are passing, rather than with fruits of African genius that may prove a lesson to the whole world, or with essential psychological characteristics that are likely to survive in changes from the primitive to the modern way of living.

One of the greatest importance that has been made up to date is the recognition of the pledge of cattle at the time of marriage. The Church has recognized this and synchronized the Christian marriage with it. Public penances have been used in the ancient manner, both as suiting more primitive people, and as necessary where there is corporate moral responsibility in most external delicts. The system of the 'Christian headman', the village catechist, has been used extensively; preparation for baptism and confirmation in remote areas done in the form of camp retreats. Sunday has been made a full day programme for those who can dispose of their own time during the week: mass, a social meal-time, a second exercise of instructions, reconciliations, benediction,

etc. All-night vigils have been used, since they come naturally to those whose village singing lasts till dawn. Suitable blessings have been substituted for 'passage rites', for 'doctoring the sky' and for sacrifices to 'lull to sleep the sleeping gods'. New forms of co-operatives and burial associations have been evolved. Where circumcision is the condition of manhood, some priests have advised their young men to have it done surgically, but without the associated manhood and fertility exercises and heathen ceremonies. One bishop is actually considering adding a public blessing after it. In that which is so large a part of African life, music, some tribes have wrestled our melodies into their own broken, swelling rhythms, and masses with drum and cymbal accompaniment are being composed. The Protestant Churches have gone much further than us in this, sometimes into excesses. Yet they have rhythmic litanies, and processions in the form of very restrained dances, which are often not unseemly, and from which we may yet learn.

The great adaptation has been to give Africa what it desired in order to be admitted to the brotherhood of nations: education and the teaching of social justice. The school has often been built before the Church. How much of the other adaptations will survive it is hard to say. But it is important that similar and newer experiments should continue all the time.

Is there any sort of general principle or formula that will cover the whole approach to this matter? The matter is so wide, and the debates rage so long, that I think there is only one: that bishops and religious superiors give not only freedom but encouragement and command to experiment. This entails certain very practical conditions:

1. The permission and word to act should be given not only by council and committee action, but also to suitable individuals, the authority satisfying himself about the man rather than the practicability of what he wants to do. If St Dominic or St Ignatius or Mary Ward or Canon Cardijn had been subjected to committee decisions they might have been sadly hampered.

2. That mission periodicals publish the maximum amount of factual matter and frank discussion about what is being done in this line, so that as much co-ordination as possible be achieved in what might otherwise become very confusing. Mission congresses are very difficult owing to the shortage of priests, and

the Catholic press could go far to overcome this difficulty.

3. That superiors and bishops be willing to apply the greatest liberty of spirit in interpreting canons, liturgical laws and religious rules where they are sure of their men; and then be willing to undertake the no mean labour of obtaining indults and dispensations when the matter is passing beyond the experimental stage and needs to be stabilized.

One sometimes hears it said that the matter need not be so directly approached, that when the African priesthood and hierarchies have been established they will see to it. This contains a very large part of the truth, but it is important also to remember the possible contribution of the laity, and the duty of encouraging them also to take responsibility for the matter. Also it is possible that the new African clergy will feel so strongly the bare responsibility of keeping intact the essentials they have been given, that they may not be the most free to experiment, or to permit lay-people to do so. The sense of long tradition and of links with overseas catholicism may make the European missionary more free, even should his understanding of African aspirations remain always less perfect. While it is true that Africa is becoming daily less willing to accept authoritative guidance from people from overseas, it is also true that it is learning a new appreciation of those who are prepared to work with Africans, in the African way, and subjecting themselves to Africa.



## THE ROAD TO PEKING

MICHAEL COOPER, S.J.

**T**HE name of St Francis Xavier is too well known to require any introduction in these pages, yet it is strange that Matteo Ricci, who took up the work interrupted by Xavier's premature death, remains comparatively unknown, even in Catholic circles. This may well be due to the cloud under which Ricci has been for so many years on account of his revolutionary approach to the evangelization of the east; his apostolic