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Mission memories

Two young mission volunteers recall the experiences of a week spent amid the people and culture of Apalachia. Page 8.

Mission encyclical speaks to the times

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Released Jan. 22, Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* ("Mission of the Redeemer") already has acquired a nickname: "the Stealth encyclical," in honor of the U.S. fighter plane that evades radar.

"It kind of came out of nowhere," Father Donald Doherty said of Pope John Paul II's recent encyclical on missionary work. "And there was no radar out there to pick it up," quipped the priest, director of media relations and productions for the Maryknoll Society.

Speaking by telephone to the *Catholic Courier* from his office in Maryknoll, N.Y., Father Doherty pointed out that he had not anticipated the issuance of a papal document on missions. He speculated that the pope issued the lengthy encyclical to be pondered by the Catholic theological community, not necessarily the missionary community.

Indeed, the document's subtitle — *On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate* alludes to a concern the Holy Father expresses in Section 4 of the encyclical:

"(As) a result of the changes which have taken place in modern times, and the spread of new theological ideas, some people wonder: Is missionary work among non-Christians still relevant?," the pope wrote, adding the following questions:

"Is not human development an adequate goal of the church's mission? Does not respect for conscience and for freedom exclude all efforts at conversion? Is it not possible to attain salvation in any religion? Why then should there be missionary activity?"

The Holy Father devoted the rest of the encyclical to answering those questions and to affirming the value of spreading the Good News in foreign lands amid modern-day trends that seemingly invalidate or render missionary work obsolete.

Father Kevin E. McKenna, interim director of the Diocese of Rochester's Missions Office, praised the encyclical for calling Catholics to recognize "that the church is missionary by its very nature."

Father McKenna's statement echoed the Holy Father's contention in the encyclical that since Jesus Christ is the definitive and fullest revelation of God in history "(this) is the fundamental reason why the church is missionary by her very nature. She cannot do other than proclaim the Gospel, that is, the fullness of the truth which God has enabled us to know about himself."

Yet two dangers, in particular, present themselves to the church's missionary role, the pope noted in *Redemptoris Missio*. One is the danger that the Good News of Christ will be exchanged for the good news of secular salvation — a salvation concerned primarily with man's social, economic, political and cultural well-being.

"In the modern world, there is a tendency to reduce man to his horizontal dimension alone," the pope wrote. Such a reduction of the Gospel robs men of their "openness to the Absolute," without which — as history shows — society descends into godless barbarism, he argued.



The pope illustrated his point by alluding to various "ideologies" and "political regimes" that have "sought to build a 'new humanity' without God."

The second danger modern times present to the church's missionary role is religious "relativism," the pontiff observed. In the encyclical's opening paragraphs he lamented a wane in missionary activity toward non-Christian nations, and later in the document, he wrote:

"But one of the most serious reasons for the lack of interest in the missionary task is a widespread indifference ... based on incorrect theological perspectives and (that) is characterized by a religious relativism which leads to the belief that 'one religion is as good as another.'"

These two concerns — "reductionism" and "relativism" — are at the heart of the pope's message in the encyclical, noted New York Auxiliary Bishop William J. McCormack, who wears two mission-related hats — chairman of the U.S. bishops' committee on missions, and national director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith.

Bishop McCormack observed, for example, that the pope's critique of "reductionism" may be addressed to some theologians who have interpreted liberation theology in an unbalanced manner, emphasizing its earthly benefits to the exclusion of spiritual rewards.

In part, liberation theology views history through the eyes of the oppressed, arguing that since the Bible frequently portrays God as siding with the oppressed, the church must side with the oppressed poor of the world against the structures that imprison them.

The pope was not attacking liberation theology as

a whole, Bishop McCormack emphasized, but merely pointing out that Christian liberation means "liberation from all forms of oppression," including spiritual ones.

Some mission observers have noted that at times, Catholic missionaries and their native colleagues must struggle to discern what path to take in attempting to establish the kingdom of God among the principalities of mankind.

Sister Janet Korn, RSM, of Rochester, recalled that during her missionary stay in Santiago, Chile, from 1965-81, she at times wrestled to decide how to best assist the people with whom she was working.

Sister Korn noted that she assisted families of the "disappeared" — kidnapped and murdered political opponents of the brutal right-wing regime that dominated Chile throughout most of the 1970s and '80s. During this period, some opposition political parties went underground, and she remembered debating whether to join them.

"I came to the realization that that wasn't my route to the bringing about of justice," she said.

"Some of the political parties were discussing the use of violence as a means of achieving their end," Sister Korn explained, noting that violence was a tool she chose not to use.

The Mercy sister pointed out that she saw Jesus as the model for her missionary work. He worked with people "in a holistic fashion," caring for people on their physical and spiritual levels. Despite some criticisms of the encyclical's "sexist" language, and lack of supportive endnotes from new sources on mission work, Sister Korn said that she shared the pope's concern about tendencies to reduce the Gospel to mere social improvement.

"I think that's a danger for any life," she said. "We can lose our center, lose the reason for what we are doing."

The answer to reconciling the tension between ministering to the "horizontal" or earthly dimensions of humanity and the "vertical" dimensions of people lies in the proclamation of the cross, according to Father Paul J. Ryan, pastor of the Cayuga Team Ministry Center in Aurora.

"You take the vertical and the horizontal, and you've got the cross," asserted Father Ryan, who previously coordinated missionary work in Rochester's sister diocese of Tabasco, Mexico. On the one hand, "you can never minimize people to cogs in the machine," he said, arguing for a transcendental emphasis in missionary work. Yet on the other hand, "we would certainly not want to say to the poor that, 'You put up with all of this and you'll go to heaven.'"

If and when the subjects of missionaries' concern enter heaven, will it have mattered that they were given a chance to believe in Jesus Christ? This question preoccupies the pope's encyclical, which some observers have criticized for injecting a negative note into the growing chorus of interfaith dialogue since Vatican II.

The encyclical clearly embodies a respect for other faiths, but the document's paramount message is the uniqueness of the Christian message and its necessity for the salvation of man. In Section 55 of the docu-

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