



CATHOLIC COURIER

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Missionary work often evokes romantic imagery.

These images depict the missionary — usually a priest, woman religious or brother — venturing boldly into unexplored regions to convert “pagans” to the “one true faith.”

Along the way, the missionary may confront fierce animals, hazardous jungles, raging rivers — and hostility from those the missionary hopes to baptize.

Yet the reality of contemporary mission work differs greatly from such romantic depictions.

Priests and religious do constitute the bulk of approximately 5,600 U.S. missionaries currently serving in foreign lands. But lay men and women — even families with children — now make up about one-tenth of that total.

Today, none of the world remains uncharted, and the Catholic Church has established native dioceses in most regions. Missionaries now enter such dioceses only with the permission of local bishops and the nations in which the missions are located.

And the countries served by missionaries actually may be more heavily Catholic than are the nations from which the missionaries hail.

Modern missionaries continue to evangelize and seek converts, but they are more often involved with education, medical work, training native Catholic ministers for existing par-



This scene from *The Mission* typifies romantic images of missionary work.

Modern workers evangelize by meeting the needs of people

By Lee Strong, Staff Writer

ishes, or simply providing support and encouragement to people.

Missionaries still meet with persecution and restrictions in some lands. But they are more likely to face torture and death for advocating social change than for preaching the Word of God. And in many instances, their persecutors are fellow Catholics.

Although the circumstances of missionary activity have changed during the past few centuries, mission work remains at the heart of the church. That fact was clearly stated at

Vatican II.

In *The Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church*, council fathers declared, “The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

Pope John Paul II echoed that point in his 1990 encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*, writing, “The missionary thrust therefore belongs to the very nature of the Christian life.”

But while Vatican II reaffirmed the essential nature of mission activity, it also modified the focus of missionary’s work, according to Father William Frazier, MM, a professor of theology at the Maryknoll Training Center in Maryknoll, N.Y.

Father Frazier said one of the council’s major legacies is that the church no longer considers Catholi-

cism the only path to salvation.

Vatican II declared that Protestants, non-Christians and even those who do not believe in God can find salvation by following the Holy Spirit’s urgings within their hearts, the priest pointed out during a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*.

Father Frazier explained that this is not a new teaching, but noted that the council articulated the principle far more clearly than the church previously had done. In directly

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