

FOREWORD

When I joined the team at the SVD Missiological Institute (Steyleyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut) in Sankt Augustin (Germany), Ennio Mantovani's book on *The Dema and the Christ*¹ was about to be published. At that time, "Mantovani" was for me the enigmatic name of an elder, a seasoned and probably famous missionary and missiologist from Papua New Guinea. Reading the proofs of his *Dema* book offered a chance to get a closer look at him and his concerns in theology and faith, in sticking to his convictions and in processing the challenge to trust his observations of the others. Now, several years of collaboration—as Ennio Mantovani has been a member of the Missiological Institute since the early 1970s, at least—and of articles in our journal *Verbum SVD* later, I am honored to draw a sort of road map to his reflections and to highlight some of the implications of his journey. A couple of years ago we met in Melbourne, where Fr. Mantovani lives now, in the context of a missiological symposium organized by the Australian SVD Province and the Yarra Theological Union,² and Ennio told me how fond he was of listening to me—not so much for what I said but for the melody of it: My Austrian presentation took him back to the pleasant memories of his study years at St. Gabriel's in Austria at a time when I barely walked or rather crawled this world.

Sent to Baptize or What?

In 1962, Ennio Mantovani set out to take up his mission in New Guinea (today Papua New Guinea, PNG for short).³ He held a missiological doctorate from the Gregorian University in Rome to face this commitment, so he was well prepared for the task before him. He knew

¹ In the series *Studia Instituti Missiologici SVD* of our Institute, 2014. – Full references of his books and articles are given in the selected bibliography at the end of this volume.

² See: Jacob Kavunkal, SVD/Christian Tauchner, SVD (eds.) *Mission beyond Ad Gentes. A Symposium* (Studia Instituti Missiologici SVD 104), Siegburg: Franz Schmitt Verlag 2016.

³ The name of the country has changed over the years. Papua New Guinea is the country's present-day name (since 1975), though PNG is also often used to refer to the SVD administrative unit in this country ("province") which also had different names in the course of its history. See Mantovani's introduction to the country and its peoples in *The Dema and the Christ*, Part I (pp. 21-42).

his tradition, but somehow he must also have been aware of the new winds that started to sweep into the dusty structures of a church getting into labor for a new self-understanding and practice, through the Second Vatican Council. These are the two reference points in Mantovani's life: *tradition*—as in Paul's letter to the Romans stating that there is darkness among those who do not know Christ (see Rom 1:21)—and an open *approach* to the people in PNG with their cultures and religions. In hindsight, he finds that this confrontation with reality made him reflect: As he tried to explain the Christian faith, "I began asking questions of myself. [...] I began to question my cultural—Northern Italian, Roman Catholic—version of the Christian tradition and began seeing the so-called 'pagan' differently. I began listening with a new ability to hear and I began learning from a perspective I had previously been unable to imagine. Front and center for me was the basic problem of resolving the tension between proclamation and dialogue. Not everyone agreed, and in a meeting of the Catholic Bishops' Conference I was told bluntly, 'You are in PNG to convert people, not to study their cultures.'"⁴

As far as I understand Ennio Mantovani, this is his basic question of being "sent to baptize or what":⁵ The fidelity towards his commission to evangelize and spread the good news, and the same fidelity to discover God's uncharted grace and presence in the people he encountered and whose culture he tried to understand.

Culture, Religion and Gospel

From his studies at St. Gabriel's and the encounter with the SVD anthropologists there he had acquired a sharpened awareness of culture. The studies in Rome confirmed these insights. "I understand 'culture' as a system of meanings expressed through symbols which one learns and shares with one's group and through which one sees the world and interacts with it," he states.⁶ This "Anthropos tradition" as it is called⁷ helped him to take cultural aspects in the lives of the others

⁴ *The Dema and the Christ*, 135.

⁵ See his book under the same title, 2011, which is a smaller and probably more readable version of his extensive chronicle *Mission: Collision or Dialogical Encounter?* The Italian version is more explicit on this point of commission: "Mandati a battezzare."

⁶ *The Dema and the Christ*, 26.

⁷ See Mantovani, Anthropos Tradition in the SVD. – The influence of Anthropos, both the journal and the Institute, is considered important for the manner in which the SVD missionaries have related—and must relate—to

seriously. It brought him to take a careful and cautious approach to the people in New Guinea with high respect for their lifestyles: “First of all, I was convinced that the people I would meet would be as intelligent and as honest as myself. If I encountered customs that seemed illogical or morally wrong, most probably it would be a sign of *my ignorance*; a sign that I was missing something important in their culture; that I needed to do more research.”⁸ By the way: Over the last decade it has become fashionable to do away with the concept of a “mission *ad gentes*,” since this *ad gentes* is seen as culturally insensitive and patriarchally colonialist with no respect for the others etc. and therefore it should be more appropriate to do mission *inter gentes* and intercultural-ly.⁹ Mantovani’s quote referring to an *ad gentes* position in the mid-1960s tells a different story of approaching others in their culture.

If culture is taken seriously, there arises the question of its relation to religion. Mantovani goes on, “Secondly, I was convinced that culture and religion belong together and that if the former changes the latter needs to change as well. If I discovered changes in the religion, I needed to study the changes in the culture that caused them. It could well be that it was not sin that caused them, as St. Paul had stated, but a sign of deep, living religiosity from which I might learn.”¹⁰

This trust in culture also had a theological underpinning from his studies in Rome, before setting out to PNG. He had seen with Joseph Masson SJ that the gospel must relate to the local cultures. This discussion had gone on for long decades—and indeed centuries, if one wants to return to the rites controversy. An important step in the direction of overcoming an imperialist attitude in mission was Benedict XV’s encyclical *Maximum Illud* (1919) with its condemnation of a nationalistic perspective in the missionary enterprise: “Remember that your duty is not the extension of a human realm, but of Christ’s; and remember too that your goal is the acquisition of citizens for a heavenly fatherland,

cultures and the local context in their evangelization. The “Anthropos tradition” has merited quite some missiological reflection over the years, not only by SVDs.

⁸ Mission: from Bringing to Discovering the Light, 435 (my emphasis).

⁹ The discussion of *ad* vs. *inter* was set off by another former PNG missionary: Bill Burrows, in a conversation at the Catholic Theological Society of America in 2001, suggested this change of emphasis. See William R. Burrows, Jesus and Christology: Mission and the Paradox of God’s Reign: *IBMR* 39:4 (2015) 232-235; expanded in Jonathan Y. Tan, *Christian Mission among the Peoples of Asia* (American Society of Missiology Series 50), Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 2014.

¹⁰ Mission: from Bringing to Discovering the Light, 435.

and not for an earthly one. [...] It would be tragic indeed if any of our missionaries forgot the dignity of their office so completely as to busy themselves with the interests of their terrestrial homeland instead of with those of their homeland in heaven. It would be a tragedy indeed if an apostolic man were to spend himself in attempts to increase and exalt the prestige of the native land he once left behind him. Such behavior would infect his apostolate like a plague.”¹¹ The relationship between gospel and local culture was named differently in the decades before and after World War II as accommodation, adaptation or acculturation—and each of the concepts underwent significant changes in definition, comprehension, and appreciation over the years and by different authors. Already *Maximum Illud* and again Joseph Masson’s reflections consider the “indigenization” of the clergy as highly important for the church.¹² Masson already centered mission christologically: Once Christ is installed everywhere, he cannot remain on the surface, he must take root profoundly and penetrate all activities. Thus, everything becomes divine-human.¹³

Joseph Masson also reflected on the value of the cultures for the church. In the early stages of Vatican II he characterized the world through its cultural plurality as one of six characteristic features:¹⁴ The church has related to the Mediterranean cultures but “today, the demand is more pressing for an *inculturated* Catholicism in polymorphous ways.”¹⁵ For Masson, this openness for other cultures is an “evident

¹¹ Benedict XV, *Maximum Illud*, in the section “To the Missionaries”: “Now We turn to you, beloved sons [sic!], the working-men of the Lord’s vineyard.” – In the context of the special missionary month of October 2019 proclaimed by Pope Francis, this encyclical is receiving renewed attention.

¹² See Joseph Masson SJ, *Vers l’Église indigène. Catholicisme ou nationalisme?*, Bruxelles: Éditions Universitaires 1944.

¹³ « Le Christ, une fois installé partout, ne peut rester à la surface de son nouveau domaine; il lui faut s’y implanter profondément, en pénétrer toutes les activités. A côté de la réalisation en quantité, il y a l’implantation en qualité. Car si rien de l’étendue ne peut échapper à celui qui est l’Immense, rien non plus de la diversité ne peut se soustraire à celui qui est le Parfait total. Dans le corps physique du Christ, le Verbe de Dieu inondait et transfigurait par sa divinité à la fois le corps et l’âme, l’intelligence, le vouloir et l’action : tout cela devenait divino-humain. » Masson, *ibid.*, 42.

¹⁴ Joseph Masson SJ, L’Église ouverte sur le monde. Aux dimensions du Concile: *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 84 (1962) 1032-1043.

¹⁵ « Déjà aux temps anciens, l’Église latinisée a éprouvé des difficultés à garder le contact des peuples hellénisés ou des groupes germaniques. [...] aujourd’hui, alors que, tout justement, l’exigence se fait plus urgente d’un catholicisme inculturé d’une façon polymorphe. Jamais sans doute autant que de nos jours, les grands groupes culturels de l’humanité n’ont senti, apprécié et

demand” and consequence of the church’s catholicity.¹⁶ These reflections must have circulated already at the Gregorian University when Mantovani was there: “The lecturers at the Gregorian University were outstanding in their field and forward looking. Once the Second Vatican Council had started, most of them became involved as advisers. Their teaching shaped my understanding of mission, prepared me for the changes the Council would bring, and helped me in facing the challenges of a new beginning in Yobai,” his first mission post in PNG; “One of my lecturers, Fr. Joseph Masson SJ, introduced the term ‘inculturation’ into the vocabulary of the church just before Vatican II, in 1962.”¹⁷

Mission: Collision or Dialogical Encounter?

In this attitude and openness Mantovani went to New Guinea and was assigned to a place called Dirima, in the Simbu mountains and in today’s Kundiawa diocese. Divine Word missionaries had worked in that area since 1948. He planned his commitment along several principles:¹⁸

- I saw my role in the light of St. Paul’s method. My task was to preach the good news of the kingdom to those who wanted to listen, and to make sure that they understood the message in terms of their culture so that they could take a free decision to follow or not to follow Christ.
- My plan was to form a fully self-supporting Christian community, a community conscious of its missionary responsibility and capable of carrying it out.¹⁹
- The community had to be self-sufficient not only economically but also in terms of ministries.

voulu défendre leur originalité culturelle, leur sol avec ses caractères propres, leur langue, leur art, leur symbolique, leur étiquette, leur vue générale de la vie... »: *ibid.*, 1038 (my emphasis).

¹⁶ « L’ouverture de l’Église à la multiplicité des cultures est un postulat évident de sa catholicité »: *ibid.*

¹⁷ *Mission: Collision or Dialogical Encounter*, 16. – On inculturation as a basic asset of contextual theologies, see recently Judith Gruber, *Intercultural Theology. Exploring World Christianity after the Cultural Turn* (Research in Contemporary Religion 25), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2018, 30-36.

¹⁸ See *Mission: Collision or Dialogical Encounter*, 20-24.

¹⁹ In missiological terms that corresponds to the program of “church planting” of the Jesuit “Louvain school.”

- I tried to follow the social structure of the people, making sure it would be able to cope with the dangers both of clanism and of abuse by individual “big men.” I took the local social unit—a subdivision of the clan—as the basic unit of the parish.
- I recognized a man and a woman as leaders of that basic unit. I recognized their roles in society and allowed them to use their traditional power in their traditional way.
- I recognized the authority of church leaders in the daily life of the community. What they decided—and luckily they were wise people—was law. The community learned very soon that I would not change the decisions of their local leaders.
- When I started the parish at Yobai [established as a separate unit from Dirima] I wanted to make sure the people understood that my main concern and purpose was the word of God. The word of God had top priority, hence catechumenates were first on my agenda. I could, and would, delegate other responsibilities, but the word of God always took first place.
- I knew that people wanted to become Christian to obtain material success. Their religion, as I had learned, was a search for a better life.
- I am convinced that people learn and are moved by what they see and experience. I had to do more than simply preach the priority of the word of God: people had to see it.

These principles are somehow summaries in retrospect. Mantovani compiled them in the first section of his diary from his service at Yobai parish. Now, this diary is something interesting to note—an important road mark when mapping his reflections and contribution: He made extensive field notes (not necessarily in the technical sense). The publication includes a fair amount of letters written to his family, but the major part of it consists of the parish diary, published in 2011.²⁰ It covers fifteen years from 1962 to 1977. Almost every day he wrote down a couple of lines, often fairly unconnected, like:

Tuesday 19th [December, 1967]. At Aulabol I repeated what we have covered so far. After so much work there still was a clean slate. The Christian doctrine is not something that enters their daily life but something exterior that does not touch them. It is knowledge, not life. It is a Sunday shirt, not their skin. Back at Baminwera, I continued with the

²⁰ *Mission: Collision or Dialogical Encounter*. The letters to the family included there are also published as *Sent to Baptize or What?*

roof. Working up there gives me time to think about my catechetical troubles. [...]

Thursday 21st. The repetition continues at Aulabol. Here at Baminwera, I made the door for the store but did not have enough time to mount it. We installed the new generator.²¹

Mission seems to be: “repetition” of catechism lessons, teaching the catechumens and “testing” them—often a frustrating job—, long hours of hearing confession, building houses, trying to get to another place on the motorbike and having endless trouble with it because of landslides, bad roads, and mechanical failures.

However, I consider it quite important to have these notes and reflections over a long time. They are made up of small and *per se* probably quite insignificant observations, but each of them is a little stone that contributes to and blends into a mosaic picture of mission and evangelization at that time and that place. It is not a structured report or a hero’s account, and thus allows the reader to get more deeply into the everyday experience of that community. Interesting also that there is hardly any mention of “concelebration” as a major liturgical innovation after Vatican II, or of similar post-conciliar developments.

Skin, not Sunday Shirt

Mantovani’s interest focused on a *community of disciples* who had taken on this new way of life in fullness. Therefore, he remained reserved to suggestions of *rausim satan* ceremonies²² leading to quick baptisms. The church is not a matter of quantity but of quality, he repeats in many of his reflections. Being a Christian engages the identity, the entire life. It is meant to be an affair of skin, not shirt. This is the question of *inculturation*.

Culture means the bigger and wider reality and religion receives its expression and language from culture. So religious content is expressed in a cultural language. On the other hand, religion means the soul of

²¹ *Mission: Collision or Dialogical Encounter*, 157.

²² “One important moment in the process of ‘conversion’ of the community was the official renunciation of the so-called ‘old ways.’ The community would formally promise to give up the old rituals and would tear down the small huts where they kept the sacred objects of the past, such as sacred stones. In our area they called that ceremony *Rausim Satan*, to get rid of Satan. After communal renunciation, the road was open for the formal preparation for baptism of those who applied to do so”: *Mission: Collision or Dialogical Encounter*, 19.

culture. When different cultures come together they engage in some form of interaction. Such processes go beyond the human will towards it. The cultures meet at first at their external ranges. This engagement might be called *interculturation* and it sets off a transformation process within a particular culture. The consequences of the interaction within culture lead to new expressions and there inculturation would take place.²³

It is important to be careful with each of the elements and the entire process: There is no such thing as a culture-less religion (nor is there a gospel outside of culture and its corresponding religious setting). Religious meaning is available only in the cloak of a particular culture. New religious content and meaning are expressed within the culturally available language.

Mantovani often complains about difficulties relating to this articulation of religion, culture and gospel: “The most difficult part of the catechumenate is the oral communication of our faith—a basic problem of language. During the day we speak Pidgin, but during the catechumenate we use the local language, Golin. But this hurdle can and must be taken. In Golin there are no abstracts. It is not easy to express concepts like divine love, faith, hope, charity, or repentance; even harder to express the idea of creation, sacrifice, grace, sacrament, and redemption, all concepts which do not find true equivalents in the traditional culture. Our faith is expressed through terms borrowed from Greco-Roman culture, based on Western philosophy, using Western symbols. All of this is missing here, and so our faith must be expressed through indigenous language for an indigenous mentality by me, a son of Western culture!”²⁴

An important element in this process is to understand correctly the *agent* of change and of the new religious elaboration: It is the owners of the culture and not outsiders. There used to be a manner of speaking of “getting inculturated” (the missionary who adopts new cultural elements from the place of his service and “goes native”) or even to “inculturate” (the gospel, in the sense of bringing about new behavior in the converted community). This seems to be a misunderstanding of the inculturation process: The missionary may pass the good news on to the

²³ See the excellent presentation of Francis X. D’Sa, SJ, Können Kulturen evangelisiert werden? Ein Diskussions-Beitrag aus einer indisch-theologischen Perspektive, in: Mariano Delgado/Hans Waldenfels (Hg.), *Evangelium und Kultur. Begegnungen und Brüche*. Festschrift für Michael Sievernich SJ (Studien zur christlichen Religions- und Kulturgeschichte 12), Fribourg/Stuttgart: Academic Press Fribourg/W. Kohlhammer 2010, 34-46, here 35 and 43.

²⁴ In a letter of June, 1964: *Mission: Collision or Dialogical Encounter*, 47.

others and, as Mantovani describes his task, as a “son of Western culture” try to “express through indigenous language for an indigenous mentality” these new meanings. This is an important moment of agency, but it remains to some extent external. However, the inculturation process in reality relies on the new expression of the people in Benimwera, Yobai, etc. and in the changes in their lives. It is the local people, the owners of their culture, who are the agents in cultural change and in the process of this change *they* “inculturate” the gospel in their way of life. The “success” of inculturation which results in a different mindset and behavior (“metanoia”) can be determined only by the people themselves and demands faith in the Spirit; it cannot be judged by external parties.

Often, Mantovani wrote down his frustration about catechists who gambled, took second wives, misused community funds or engaged in tribal warfare.²⁵ However, the insight is correct: Only when the local communities themselves understand that Christian faith has to shape their way of living and they act accordingly, the gospel has arrived in their culture. Then, discipleship will have become skin, not only a Sunday shirt.

Against the Current

This road to discipleship structured along Papuan local terms is rather bumpy. It might have been easier to just set up a traditional parish, but Mantovani keeps insisting that “the future of the church in PNG does not rest on numbers, but on quality.”²⁶ He intended to put into practice his missiological insights and, in a wider sense, proposals derived from Vatican II. His pastoral work in Yobai remained vital for this process and at some stage he did not want to leave the parish and take up a position at the Melanesian Institute:²⁷ “My ideas are new, revolutionary if you want. I need to test their value in the field before they can be made known. Now you will understand that without Yobai I

²⁵ As an example of many: “Saturday 6th [May 1972]. Yesterday the headmaster of our school was caught with a girl by his wife: she was furious. Previously, the wife only suspected his infidelity, but now she had proof. This is the Christian model we present to the future generation!”: *Mission: Collision or Dialogical Encounter*, 269.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁷ The *Melanesian Institute* was set up in the early 1970s in order to study the local cultures and religions and to help missionaries to a better pastoral approach. Mantovani was among the founding group and after 1977 became its director. See *ibid.*, 177ff., 399ff.

would be without a 'laboratory' to test my theories; I would be a theoretician building castles in the air. My father gave me common sense, Rome the theory, and Yobai must give me the experience," he wrote to his brother in early November 1969.²⁸

Organizing a community of disciples led to any number of thorny issues to solve. An example is the "Simbu [Chimbu] case": For the people in the Simbu area (and not only there), marriage was supposed to be a service to the community in providing continuity to the family through children, preferably a baby boy. An infertile marriage was not regarded as a true marriage but a failure that had to be rectified through a new marriage. The catechumens and Catholics distinguished very clearly between sexual relations outside and within marriage. The former was condemned while the latter was regarded as proper. There was a point in the marital process when sexual intercourse became proper. As the child was an absolute condition for a valid marriage, sexual intercourse became necessary and proper. However, the church—and Canon Law—stipulated that sexual intercourse before sacramental marriage was sinful.²⁹ The community and some missionaries took the case and argued for understanding marriage as such a process in local cultural terms. Discussions were heated among the parish priests and the topic was eventually taken to the level of the bishops' conference. No clear directives emerged. Interestingly, Rome stated that Canon Law was binding, but nevertheless encouraged deeper study of the case. This case certainly shows that taking local cultural conditions seriously requires courage and the prophetic disposition to go against tradition and prescriptions. Innovation is required not only in practical pastoral issues but also in theological understanding. Another example of such an engagement is the theological proposal of understanding and interpreting Jesus Christ in terms of the *Dema*.³⁰

Enriched by Their Light

Looking back at a relatively short history of evangelization, Papua New Guinean Clement Papa is full of praise: "The last 80 years of evangelization in the PNG Highlands Church have been remarkable. We have seen great witness to the Gospel given through the pioneering missionaries as well as our own local pioneering catechists, and laity. The result today is a celebrated Church of flourishing Christian com-

²⁸ Ibid., 192

²⁹ See *ibid.*, 32f.; 266f.

³⁰ See *The Dema and the Christ*.

munities strongly rooted in the culture of PNG society. These Christian communities continue to flourish and mature given the challenges of the changing times. The involvement of our young people in Church activities is most noticeable. Our vibrant communities are products of numerous youth participation. Yet in my judgment, post-modernity has shaken up our PNG society, in some cases bringing into crisis the traditional catechism and religious connectedness we received from our first generation of Christians. I think there is a deeper challenge to pay attention to the currents in society. What is the Church's response to these developments in our society?"³¹

Ennio Mantovani made his contribution to this history and he was diligent enough to write down and keep track of the development and the stories. Just take a look at the annotated bibliography at the end of this book to get an impression of the topics he tackled and struggled with. It is something I admire in him: He set out as a fully armored knight and brave fighter for the Christian message, keen on extinguishing darkness and on spreading the Light. He would not let go of what he understood as central assets in revealed Christian faith. How great it would be to see younger colleagues with similar dedication to stand up for their concepts and convictions and to wage battle for new insights they might develop from their field observations.

I am a generation younger than Ennio Mantovani and many of the problems he struggles with are no longer of such a deep concern for me, due to theological development or post-modern floppiness. I might even take some of the enemies he fights time and time again for windmills, poor Sancho Panza that I am. But there he charges and struggles with all his might and pushes for new ways of staying faithful to God in changing contexts. For him, the sixty years of priestly ministry are a story and history of plenty and blessing. For me—and hopefully for many others—they are an encouragement and an example (if I may say so, Ennio).

In his words: "My journey as a missionary began by trying to bring the Light where I expected to find darkness, and ended by discovering and being enriched by the Light that was already present."³²

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³¹ Clement Papa, The Era of a "Fading Generation" and a New Emerging One of the Local Church in Papua New Guinea Highlands: *Verbum SVD* 58 (2017) 287-320, here 317f.

³² Mission: from Bringing to Discovering the Light, 444.