

REFLECTION

BY FR. ROY CIMAGALA

Some drastic updating of our understanding of what a missionary is, is now in order. We should not get stuck with the common, textbook idea that a missionary is usually a priest or nun who goes to a far-away place, and literally starts a settlement there.

While this concept of a missionary is still valid—it will always be—it now cries to be expanded to reflect its true character, especially given today's dynamic and more complicated world.

We have to understand that everyone, by virtue of his sheer humanity and much more, his Christianity, is called to be a missionary, and that he does not need to go to distant lands because his immediate environment already needs a more effective, down-to-earth evangelization.

Yes, even the ordinary guy in an office, the farmer, the businessman, the politician, the entertainers, artists and athletes, are called to be missionaries. That's simply because as persons with a prominently social dimension in our life, we have to be responsible for one another.

And the biggest responsibility we can have for the others would be their moral and spiritual welfare, much more than just their economic or social wellbeing. It is this responsibility that we have to learn how to be more serious about and more competent in fulfilling. This is the current situation and challenge to all of us. And so we have to reconcile ourselves with the reality that we actually have to be missionaries right where we are. In fact, I would say that to go to the deserts of Africa or the forests and rivers of Brazil could be far easier to do, since in these places we only have to contend more with physical and material difficulties.

The people in these isolated areas may exhibit primitive violent attitudes, but their minds and

hearts can easily be converted by simple and elemental gestures of goodness. This has always been the experience of missionaries who went to these places.

It's rather in the paved jungles of the big cities inhabited by very sophisticated people immersed in very worldly things where the more demanding kind of missionary work is needed.

In these places, the people tend to be so confined to their own world, already made beautiful and comfortable by the new technologies, such that any talk about spiritual and supernatural realities, especially about prayer, sacrifice and the need for the sacraments, could easily fall on deaf ears.

These urban dwellers may not openly profess atheism or agnosticism. They can even show many acts of piety, and can even show off some good work. And this is the more difficult part, precisely because with that condition they can think they are already ok insofar as religion is concerned.

But it is quite clear that their minds and hearts are not with God, nor with the others. When scrutinized, their behavior can indicate clear traces of pragmatism motivated not so much by love for God or for others as by self-love.

Thus, they find it hard to resist temptations and can easily fall into sin, though most of the time the sins are internal and hidden. But precisely that hidden condition can lend itself to more complications, developed in a gradual and steady way, since the need for correction would hardly be felt.

This can lead to a slow and imperceptible desensitizing of consciences. The signs of complacency, lukewarmness and mediocrity readily appear. The taste for prayer and sacrifice starts to disappear. And worse stages can come later, as in total loss of faith and open opposition to God.

We have to be wary of the gathering forces of earthly things, as typified by the accelerating inflow of new technologies, that can harden people's vulnerabilities, and lead them to find

rationalizations for this predicament.

As today's missionaries, we have to do battle in this kind of arena. In the words of Pope Paul VI, we have to "reach and as it were overturn with the force of the Gospel the standards of judgments, the interests, the thought-patterns, the sources of inspiration and lifestyles in contrast with the word of God and his plan for salvation."

As today's missionaries, we cannot remain with a shallow and partial understanding of our faith. Much less can we be left with an anemic spiritual life. We need to be vibrant and strong, knowledgeable not only with the faith, but with the practical ways of the men and the world today.

As so many saints have testified, as today's missionaries, we cannot be any other than another Christ, if not Christ himself!