

Spring 1993

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Recommended Citation

Dosen, Anthony J. C.M. (1993) "New Evangelization, New Communities—1930s Style," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 10.

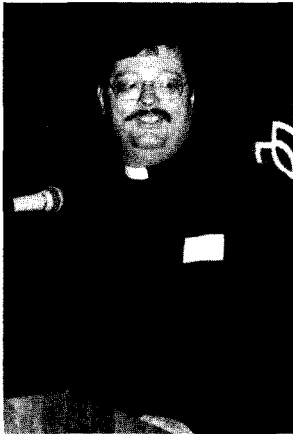
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New Evangelization, New Communities— 1930s Style

BY

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The story of the Motor Missions has its roots in the presidential campaigns of 1924 and 1928. These campaigns formed the vehicle that expressed the underlying anti-Catholic bigotry and prejudice of nativist Americans, as well as the misinformation that many non-Catholics held about Catholicism. The Motor Missions were founded to provide accurate information about Catholicism and to transform bigotry into understanding.

In 1924, Al Smith sought the nomination of his party for the presidency of the United States. Smith, the governor of New York, had one major stumbling block to overcome. He was the descendent of Irish and German immigrants and a Catholic. This combination proved fatal to Smith's chance for nomination. After seventeen days of deadlock at the convention, Smith lost the nomination to William Gibbs MacAdoo.

After his loss during the Convention of 1924, Smith attempted a second run for the White House in 1928. He won the nomination of his party and began his campaign against the Republican candidate, Herbert Hoover. The major issues of the presidential campaign of 1928 were religion, social class, and Prohibition. Smith and Hoover represented different worlds. Hoover represented the American establishment. He was of old American stock, a Protestant, and a proponent of Prohibition. Smith, by contrast, was a Catholic, a product of the urban streets, and an opponent of Prohibition. Smith, with his rough voice and awkward usage of the English language, became an easy target for American

snobbishness.¹ Herbert Hoover's victory at the polls was not surprising. According to Richard Hofstadter, the margin of victory "had a great deal to do with the personal snobbery and religious bigotry invoked against Smith."² The bigotry of this campaign fundamentally attacked the patriotism of Catholics.

The American Catholic Church was caught in a double bind. The Roman Curia was suspicious of democracy as a form of government, as well as what it perceived as the laxity of the American Church. The late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Curia was quick to condemn the heresy of Americanism.³ Nativist Americans feared what the Roman Catholic Church, which wielded such condemnatory power, could do to their individual liberties. They were especially fearful of what would happen to their freedom if one of the Catholic Church's members was elected president. As a result of this, the American hierarchy went to great lengths to prove both their patriotism and their loyalty to the Church. Beyond the intellectual conflict, many recent immigrants came from predominantly Catholic countries which were viewed by naturalized Americans as strange and backward. In the end, Catholics were viewed by Protestant Nativist Americans with both suspicion and disdain.⁴

The bigotry and anti-Catholic bias which were characteristic of Al Smith's political campaigns did not go unnoticed at Saint Mary of the Barrens Seminary in Perryville. Reports of anti-Catholic sentiment were presented to the students and discussed among them. Anti-Catholic literature from southern Missouri made its way into the hands of some of the seminarians. Joseph McIntyre, Joseph Phoenix, and Lester Fallon—three Vincentian seminarians at the Barrens—were especially concerned about the anti-Catholic prejudice throughout southern Missouri.

At the same time, McIntyre, Phoenix and Fallon came in contact with some materials about the street preaching that a young priest was conducting in Indiana. Written accounts of the street preaching and pictures of the touring car turned pulpit moved these three seminarians to consider the possibility of counteracting the bigotry about which they had read and discussed. The simple procedure and the fair

¹Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: 1955), 282-301.

²*Ibid.*, 300.

³James Hennesey, S.J., *American Catholics* (Oxford: 1981), 198-202, 250-53.

⁴Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind* (New Haven: 1950), 189-95.

reception which the street preaching priest had received in the more bigoted parts of Indiana further inspired these students. These discussions led the three to draft a simple contract which stated that at the first opportunity after ordination, they would go to the towns of southern Missouri and request the privilege of talking to the public. On a wintry, Perryville afternoon in 1927, Joseph McIntyre, Lester Fallon, and Joseph Phoenix signed this personal pact.⁵

Ordination and graduate studies separated the three seminarians. Fallon was sent to Rome for studies and was later ordained at the Maison-mère on 30 July 1928. Joseph McIntyre was ordained at the Barrens on 7 June 1929 and sent to Rome for further studies. Joseph Phoenix was ordained later in 1932 (12 June) and sent to Catholic University for his graduate studies. There was no formal planning in preparation for undertaking the work of the Motor Missions after the signing of the contract. Their talks about the missions during these years were infrequent and informal.⁶

While teaching at Kenrick during the 1933-1934 academic year, Father Fallon met a deacon from Oklahoma. This young man spoke of the work of Father Stephen Leven, an Oklahoma priest who was presenting weekly talks on the Church in various small towns in Oklahoma. Father, later Bishop, Leven in speaking of his experience as a street preacher was quoted as saying, "I am the pastor of all the souls in my parish. I consider myself responsible for all of these people. Even the Protestant ministers within my parish boundaries are my people."⁷ Father Fallon inquired into the possibility of working with Father Leven during the following summer. Approvals given, Father Fallon spent the summer in Oklahoma learning about the missions by preaching the missions.

Fallon returned from the summer experience in Oklahoma with a renewed enthusiasm for living out the contract. He contacted both McIntyre and Phoenix, reminded them of the contract from their student days, and recommended that they get to work as quickly as possible. By the summer of 1935, these seminary professors turned street preachers were ready to begin their new apostolate.

⁵Recorded interview with Joseph E. McIntyre, C.M., conducted by John Rybolt, C.M., 10 May 1981. Herein referred to as "McIntyre/Rybolt Interview." The tape is located in the DeAndreis-Rosati Memorial Archives (DRMA): Oral history section.

⁶"McIntyre/Rybolt Interview."

⁷Conleth Overman, C.P., "The American Street-Preaching Movement," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* 46, No. 6 (March 1946):432.

The earliest missions took place in the small towns surrounding Cape Girardeau, Missouri. Saint Vincent's College in Cape Girardeau, the community's minor seminary, provided a good base of operations for the missionaries. It provided friendly, adequate housing and resources, yet was close to those bootheel towns which were noted for their bigotry.

In the early part of June, Fathers Fallon, McIntyre, and Phoenix drove to Lutesville to see if the mayor would allow them to speak in town. Lutesville was a town of approximately 350 inhabitants. The religious makeup of Lutesville was predominantly Baptist and Seventh Day Adventist.⁸ The town had one Catholic family in residence. Upon arriving in Lutesville, the priests learned that there was no mayor, but there was a resident sheriff, so they sought out the sheriff at the power station—which he also ran. Despite being surprised at the visit from three clerically collared men and a little uncertain about how to deal with his visitors, the sheriff did allow the missionaries to preach in the town park, on the condition that they would not attack any other religion. The three assured him that it was not their intention to attack any other religion, only to explain the truths of the Catholic faith.

Prior to the first night of the mission, literature, programs, and handbills were printed and distributed throughout Lutesville. The headline on the cardboard programs read:

“Catholic Motor Missions:
if it's anything Catholic, ask the Catholic.”

On the night of 21 June, the first Vincentian Motor Mission began. At 8:00 p.m. the public address system broadcast a Sousa march, followed by several other musical numbers. Father Fallon approached the microphone and began, “Ladies and Gentlemen: I guess you are wondering why we are here.”⁹ He proceeded to tell the gathering of the purpose of the lectures and to give a sampling of the issues to be raised in the lectures throughout the week. Fallon also informed the audience that there would be a question box in front of the Kroger store and invited people to place their questions in the box. He promised that they

⁸“Catholic Motor Mission Report” & “Questions Asked During the Catholic Motor Missions” [DRMA Motor Missions Box 2]

⁹“McIntyre/Rybolt Interview.”

would answer any questions placed in the box. It did not take long for the question box to be used.

The missionaries in Lutesville were faced with a variety of questions which showed the level of ignorance and misunderstanding among the population about Catholicism. The questions provided an opportunity for the listeners to learn a little more about priests and sisters. On occasion the question box also provided a forum for the local Protestant clergy to challenge the teachings of the Catholic Church. These questions were always the easiest to pick out because of their polished rhetorical style and extended scriptural quotations. The questions quoted below provide us with a sampling of the mindset of the individuals listening to the Motor mission talks.

Questions about the life of priests and sisters asked during the Lutesville mission were: (1) Why don't priests marry? (2) Why do Catholics call the priest Father? (3) Will a Catholic priest take money to pray a Protestant out of hell? (4) Does the priest sleep with the housekeeper? (5) Is it true that priests show the newlywed brides the ways of life before they are wed? (6) Do you think that a priest who indulges in strong drink and on intimate terms with the fair sex and engages in gambling with his fellow church members and with people who belong to neither the Catholic nor any other Church, is a true Father to his flock, and is he in a position to forgive his fellow sinners of their sins? (7) Why do nuns wear big hats and long robes?¹⁰

Then there were the questions about Catholic beliefs and practices. (1) Do Catholics believe that it is a sin to eat meat on Friday, or is it just a matter of form? (2) Why do Catholics confess? (3) Why don't Catholics lead Christian lives? (4) Do Catholics believe in the Bible? (5) Why do Catholics burn candles over the dead and also when a storm comes up? (6) If a member of the Catholic church confesses a crime, such as murder, does the priest conceal it from the authorities? If so, is it right for him to do this? (7) Have you ever known or heard of a Catholic priest or any of the church devotees praising God through Jesus Christ for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit? Not written to offend. (8) When Christ transferred his power to Peter as head of the Church, where is there record that Christ commanded Peter to transfer this power to another person making this person his successor? What is the bible answer for

¹⁰"Questions Asked During the Catholic Motor Missions," 1935. Unpublished manuscript published by the Stephen Vincent Ryan Mission Unit, Catholic Student Mission Crusade, Saint Mary's Seminary, Perryville, MO. [DRMA Motor Missions box 2].

the power of the priest to forgive sins?¹¹

Questions about temperance and Church-state relationships were also standard. (1) Why do Catholics drink beer? (2) Why do you drink beer? God never drank beer and you lie if you say he did. (3) Do you think it is wrong to drink such drinks as whiskey? (4) If, as you said the other night, the Catholic Church and the state are separate and there is not the intention of mixing Church and state, how do you explain the fact that Father [Charles] Coughlin preaches politics and appears on the stage with politicians of his own choosing? (5) Isn't it a fact that the pope wrote an encyclical within the last three years condemning the public school system? Why does the Catholic Church oppose a federal department of education? (6) If a disagreement occurs between any of the members of the Catholic Church relative to civil affairs are they settled satisfactorily by the priest or by the civil authorities? (7) When a boy is born in a parish is a rifle put in the basement of the church in event of a war with Protestants?¹²

The questions asked in Lutesville were representative of the types of questions asked in other towns during those early years of the Motor Missions. The talks show not only the level of misinformation that the people of the bootheel had about Catholicism, but also their interest in learning more about Catholicism. One can see in questions such as the one regarding the role of Peter and his successors in the Church, an honest searching for the connections between Catholic teaching and the questioner's understanding of the scriptures. The integrity of the individuals who made up the audience is best demonstrated by the fact that the question box had never been vandalized during the course of a mission.

Many years later, Father McIntyre recalled that not one pencil was taken from the question box. He described, with fondness, the gentleness and kindness of the people with whom he and his companions came in contact during the course of their work. According to Father McIntyre, "The bigotry didn't show much at the start, but soon there came questions that were quite bigoted. Not infrequently, when they were asked there would be a little note: 'I don't mean to offend, but this is what I heard. . . .' Often the question was modified to show the good will."¹³

¹¹"Questions Asked During the Catholic Motor Missions" [DRMA Motor Missions Box 2].

¹²"Questions Asked During the Catholic Motor Missions." [DARMA Motor Missions Box 2].

¹³McIntyre/Rybolt Interview."

The success of the first year's program became the impetus for the program's continuation and expansion each succeeding summer until 1964, when the apostolate was disbanded.

One of the interesting characteristics of the Vincentian Motor Missions was the use of seminarians as team members. Subdeacons from both Saint Mary's and Kenrick Seminaries were invited to participate in the summer program with the Vincentian priests. Units of two seminarians and one or two priests were sent to preach the missions in a rural region of one of the Missouri dioceses. The use of seminarians in the Motor Mission Apostolate served a twofold purpose. First, it provided the extra personnel which was required with increasing requests for the missions. Secondly, it provided the seminarians with practical experience in preaching and dealing with a public which was not always congenial.

According to tradition, the seminarian who was youngest in vocation was the keeper of the diary for the mission unit. A sampling of one of the diaries gives the flavor of the mission experience of the seminarian and his companions. One such diary, presumably penned by the Reverend Mr. Bruce Vawter, C.M., of the Jefferson City Motor Mission Unit of 1946, provides a vivid example of the work, leisure, and daily living of these small communities on the road. Some excerpts of entries from the first of July follow:

July 1

This morning the Rev. Mr. [Robert] Brennan arrived somewhat unexpectedly, as we received a telephone notice of his coming from Fr. [Orliss] North almost contemporaneously with his actual arrival. The morning was spent in testing and otherwise checking the mission equipment and the afternoon was devoted to a few repair jobs and shopping for divers necessities. Mr. Brennan was delighted to find the town well supplied with ice cream parlours, and he now feels free to devote himself to the trivialities of lesser moment.

This afternoon we got our first look at the conveyance which has been supplied for us. We are very fortunate in having a vehicle with ample space for transporting our equipment. It is the school bus for Saint Peter's, and, because it is quite the worse for wear of schoolchildren, we search about for an appropriate name, and finally christen it The Ignominy, Iggy for short. . . .¹⁴

Fr. [Oscar] Miller introduced the unit and resumed the lectures given last year. Following, Mr. Vawter lectured on the Sacrament of Baptism and

¹⁴In the latter years of his life, Saint Vincent would reluctantly ride in a carriage which was provided for him. He called the carriage his "ignominy" or "disgrace." The name given the school bus is undoubtedly an allusion to Saint Vincent's carriage.

Mr. Brennan concluded with the Sacrament of Confirmation. An item of interest worth recording might be the succinct manner in which Mr. Brennan explained to the Hartsburg citizenry "the turbulency of the passions." Fr. Miller concluded the evening's programme with three questions "handed to him, you might say," which he asked of himself, the question box unfortunately not having been placed there until tonight. . . . We hope tomorrow for some good questions. The two subdeacons are immensely satisfied over their initial mission activity.

After our return, Fr. Miller enlivened the evening by locking himself in his room and being unable to unlock the door. The subdeacons searched all the doors of the house for suitable keys, all to no avail. and finally by brute force they battered in the door, which Fr. Miller had thoughtfully rendered hingeless.¹⁵

The challenge to the Motor Missionaries was not merely to present Catholic beliefs to the non-Catholic population of the bootheel, but to conquer bigotry and prejudice with kindness and understanding. Mission manuals, written and published by the Motor Missionaries, provide advice on the proper attitude of the street preacher. "Street preaching is based on the principle that every minor act, every word or deed of every person affects in some way the cosmos outside his own ego. A mere word or glance may be the beginning of faith for some soul; the effect of a good deed may be felt around the world."¹⁶

This challenge to missionaries—this new evangelization, as it were—is rooted in the tradition of Vincent de Paul's mission at Folleville. The new evangelization of the 1930s was based on a reflection of the realities of the Missouri bootheel and the spiritual heritage Frs. McIntyre, Fallon, and Phoenix received from Vincent de Paul.

Out of this new evangelization of the 1930s, new communities arose. These were cooperative communities of priests and seminarians, Vincentians and diocesan clergy; clergy and local Catholic laity. These communities were based on a shared mission and a shared life experience. They were communities in which the expertise of the teacher was shared with the student, and the enthusiasm of the student inspired the teacher.

The Vincentian Motor Missions, "New Evangelization, New Communities, 1930s Style," was the product of the zeal, innovative creativity, and courage of Fathers McIntyre, Fallon, Phoenix, and those who

¹⁵[Reverend Mr. Bruce Vawter, C.M.] "Diary of the Jefferson City Motor Mission Unit of 1946." [DRMA] Motor Missions Box 3. No author is cited in the diary. However, evidence points to the diary being the work of the Reverend Mr. Vawter.

¹⁶Motor Missionaries, "Manual for Street Preaching" 1941. [DRMA] Motor Missions Box 8.

worked with them over the years. Imbued with the mission of Saint Vincent de Paul, the Congregation of the Mission, and those who work in collaboration with the Congregation move forward to yet newer evangelization and newer communities. As we move forward, it must be with the zeal, creativity, and courage that created a dynamic apostolate out of the dream of three students.