

The Legacy of Joseph Schmidlin

Karl Müller, S.V.D.

When Professor Joseph Schmidlin celebrated the silver jubilee of his priesthood, his former student, Anton Freitag, S.V.D., wrote of him:

The merits of this German missiologist are not to be found only in the scientific field; rather, through his very deepening of the idea of mission by means of missiological studies, he has made an impact on the entire Catholic world mission. The immense progress at home in work for the missions and the missionary drive itself, now undertaken with far more vision and understanding, are due to a very large extent to Schmidlin's pioneer work.¹

Freitag wrote this appreciation while Schmidlin was still at the peak of his creativity, ten years before he began his tragic decline. The last ten years of his life were to be extremely bitter. Eventually he found himself incarcerated in a concentration camp. On the occasion of his brutal death, the Basel deanery newspaper wrote of him as follows:

A few days ago, the parish priest of Hagenthal asked me to meet him at the border at Schönenbuch. There he told me how his unfortunate brother, Prof. Dr. J. Schmidlin, had been tortured to death in Schirmbeck concentration camp and had died like a martyr. How often had this thoroughly good, pious and learned priest visited the parish at Allschwiler. A deeply emotional man, he could never keep silent in the face of injustice. Zeal for God drove him on and he had to pay dearly for it. His dead body was burnt by his torturers and his ashes used as fertilizer.²

1. Chronology

Joseph Schmidlin was born on May 29, 1876, in Klein-Landau in Sundgau, Alsace. His father was a teacher in an elementary school, educated in the French tradition, but German at heart. Joseph describes him as a "genuinely good man, if at times a bit rough and vehement." His mother was a more intelligent person and was deeply religious; "she lived in a supernatural world, and we were never pious enough for her liking."³ Of her five surviving children, three became priests. Schmidlin considers himself typical of the Alsace Sundgau people when he writes: "Whoever knows Sundgau and the sort of people who live there can use this knowledge to excuse many things which appear uncouth or temperamental in my character and even in my scientific and literary works: I have never been able to belie my Alsace and Sundgau origins, neither outwardly nor in my thoughts and feelings."⁴

Joseph was immensely talented and had an enormous capacity for work. When he finished his elementary schooling, he attended the minor seminary in Zillesheim for his high school studies.

He graduated from St. Stephen's College, Strassburg, with the highest possible honors. Then he opted for theological studies. These he had to interrupt for some time because of pulmonary catarrh. The fruit of this break in his studies was a comprehensive history of Blotzheim and Sundgau (720 pages); a railway guide; a history of the pilgrimage center, Our Lady of the Oak; and a biography of the parish priest, Juif of Blotzheim. He was ordained priest at the age of twenty-three. In 1901 he became a doctor of philosophy, two years later, of theology, both degrees from the University of Freiburg in Breisgau. He was invited to Rome by Louis Pastor, whom he helped with his monumental *History of the Popes*. Over and above this work and the many articles he wrote, he published the following books during those years: *Papst Pius X., sein Vorleben und seine Erhebung* (1903), *Ein Kampf um das Deutschtum im Klosterleben Italiens, Farfa und Subiaco im 16. Jahrhundert* (1903), *Die Geschichte der deutschen Nationalkirche Santa Maria dell' Anima* (1906), *Die geschichtsphilosophische und kirchenpolitische Weltanschauung Ottos von Freising* (1906), *Die Restaurationstätigkeit der Breslauer Fürstbischöfe* (1907), *Die kirchlichen Zustände in Deutschland vor dem 30 jährigen Krieg nach den bischöflichen Diözesanberichten an den Heiligen Stuhl* (1908-10). In 1906 he became the first private lecturer in the newly founded Catholic theological faculty in Strassburg.

The relationship between Professor Albert Ehrhard, the inflexible professor of ecclesiastical history in Strassburg, and the equally obdurate Schmidlin was from the very start stormy. Thus it was that Schmidlin applied for a transfer to Münster. He was accepted, not without qualms, by the theological faculty in Münster, since "he had shown himself in the course of his studies to be an exceptionally talented man." Dean Hüls sent him a fatherly warning:

After making conscientious enquiries we could not fail to recognize that the development of the Strassburg situation into what it actually became was due by and large to a certain imprudence in your own remarks and, even more, to the indiscreet way in which your friends backed your cause in public. You should, therefore, regard it as a sign of genuine goodwill if we express the wish that you do your very best to prevent your appointment as a lecturer here from being blazoned abroad in the press (especially in Strassburg), for should that happen, you could once more become the victim of the importunity of your own good friends.⁵

In Münster things went more smoothly and developed along normal lines. On April 27, 1907, he was appointed lecturer for church history of the Middle Ages and of modern times. In 1910 he took on the post of extraordinary lecturer for the history of dogma and for patrology. At the same time he was asked to teach scientific missionography, which in 1914 developed into a chair of missiology. From then on he devoted himself chiefly to missiology, although he continued to lecture in church history. One result of the latter activity was his four-volume history of the popes of modern times (1933-37).

His own publications in the field of missiology are legion: Besides his basic works—*Einführung in die Missionswissenschaft* (2nd ed., 1925), *Katholische Missionslehre im Grundriss* (2nd ed.,

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1923),⁶ *Katholische Missionsgeschichte* (1925),⁷—he also published innumerable articles in *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft*; *Historisch-politische Blätter*; *Philosophisch-Historisches Jahrbuch*; *Akademische Missionsblätter*; *Priester und Mission*; *Wissenschaftliche Beilage zur Germania*; *Allgemeine Rundschau*; *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie*; *Schönere Zukunft*; etc. In the first twenty-five years of *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft*, there are no fewer than 165 lengthy contributions from Schmidlin's pen. In volumes 22 and 23 of *Bibliotheca Missionum*, 146 entries are his.

Schmidlin was nothing if not professional; his heart and soul lay in imparting his knowledge through teaching. One of his students in the early 1920s, Father John Thaurén, S.V.D., speaks of his thorough preparation for his lectures in which he communicated a plethora of material; he traced the main themes and didn't clutter up his presentation with a superfluity of details. His love for his subject and still more for the church and its mission came through all the time. In his seminars he presupposed a lot and demanded a great deal. Even in private conversation he spoke almost entirely about mission, scarcely ever about himself. He seldom went out but, rather, seemed wedded to his desk-work. Thaurén also recognized the tough streak in Schmidlin's character and called him "a fighter for the fight's sake." But he adds: "Yet every fight affected him deeply. Those who knew him well know how much he suffered within himself: 'my greatest cross is myself.'" He himself was aware of how much of what he had built up with great effort and success he himself destroyed in the heat of battle.⁸

Schmidlin was not the kind of man to throw in his lot with the antidemocratic National Socialism. Because of his "opposition which brooked no bounds"⁹ he very soon ran up against reprimands and vexations; he even had to forfeit his passport. In a sharp letter to the minister of education on March 22, 1934, he broached the subject of an early retirement. It was immediately granted him. Since a return to his native Alsace had been officially forbidden because of his involvement in the Alsace Autonomy Process in 1928, he settled down in Neu-Breisach. Here he edited the *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* and continued his scientific work. In 1937 he was obliged to resign from the journal. Eventually he was condemned to seven months' imprisonment in Freiburg in Breisgau because of speeches he had made against the government. He was then put under house arrest in Rottenmünster Infirmary near Rottweil (Württemberg). As he did not observe this, he found himself again in prison, first in Offenburg and then in Struthof concentration camp near Schirmbeck (Breuschtal). But even here he couldn't hold his tongue. He was punished by being put into the "casemate," a small concrete dungeon in which it was impossible either to sit or to lie down—one could only stand. After some time here, he was beaten to death with rubber truncheons.¹⁰ According to the official prison report, he died on January 10, 1944, as a result of "a stroke." Professor John Beckmann, S.M.B. wrote in his obituary: "Although both his personality and his written work are marred here and there by imperfections and mistakes, they are more than compensated for the total dedication of his life to the great business of world mission and by the successes that were his in this field."¹¹

2. Schmidlin and the Chair of Missiology in Münster

Long before there was any move in Catholic circles to approach the work of world mission scientifically, Protestant scholars were already attempting to lift it "out of the twilight of sentimental piety into the bright noon of science enlightened by faith."¹² When Schmidlin in the winter semester 1909–10 commenced his lectures on the Catholic missions in the German protectorates,

sixteen Protestant professors in twelve different German universities were giving one or more lectures on mission themes.¹³ They also had to their credit Gustav Warneck's three-volume standard work, *Evangelische Missionslehre* (Gotha, 1892–1903); nothing comparable existed in Catholic circles. Schmidlin's first series of lectures in the 1909–10 winter semester were attended by 120 registered students.

The preparation of his lectures gave Schmidlin an insight into the deficiencies on the Catholic side and into the importance of a Catholic missiology. Very soon he was exerting himself to have a chair of missiology set up in Münster. The lectureship in missionography given him in 1910 partly met his request. He did not limit himself to missionography in the narrow sense, but took in at once the whole field of missiology. He himself lectured to 157 students in the winter semester of 1910–11 on the introduction to missiology. These lectures appeared in book form in 1917: *Einführung in die Missionswissenschaft*. He also held seminars on the bibliography and sources of mission history. Moreover, he succeeded in getting Professor Meinertz to lecture one semester on mission texts in Scripture. It was in response to his proposal that a chair for comparative religion was set up in 1912 to complement the lectures on missiology. From 1913 on, Professor Ebers in the faculty of law lectured on church law as obtaining in the missions, while Schmidlin himself spoke on normative and practical mission theory. A chair of missiology was formally established in 1914.

His aim, as explained in a memo to the faculty in 1911, was the setting up of a missiological institute at university level, which would comprehend the whole range of related missiological subjects: missionography and mission history, mission theory and mission methodology, comparative religion, ethnology, and linguistics. But such a university institute never materialized.

Already in the fall of 1909, Schmidlin was approached about the publication of a missiological journal by Father Friedrich Schwager, S.V.D., who had pursued this idea for many years and now believed that in Schmidlin he had found a suitable editor. Even Schmidlin hesitated: "What put me off was, on the one hand, the size and the difficulty of the proposed task, and, on the other, its novelty, which would impose on me the necessity of leaving the areas of church history well known to me and venturing into an almost unknown terrain whose extent couldn't be perceived."¹⁴ But in the end he agreed to become editor in chief of the new journal, *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft*. A team of colleagues was to help him in the work; for the first year this comprised seven university professors, Monsignor Baumgartner, and seven representatives of missionary congregations. Schmidlin's aim was a "harmonious wedding of mission and science, a synthesis on which the theorists and practitioners, the representatives of theology in the home countries and in the missions could easily agree."¹⁵ Father Schwager moved to Münster to give him a hand. Cardinal Fischer of Cologne contributed the foreword to the first issue. The journal became in time a mine of missiological research and information. Besides book reviews and bibliographical reports, many of its essays were of lasting interest. Schmidlin himself provided sixty-two pages of text in the first year: his two articles, "Die katholische Missionswissenschaft" (pp. 10–21), and "System und Zweige der Missionswissenschaft" (pp. 106–22), were already very basic. His choice of themes and writers shows his openness and breadth of vision, and also the great response his efforts found from the very start. In order to support these missiological undertakings financially, especially the publications, the *Internationale Institut für missionswissenschaftliche Forschungen* was founded on August 10, 1911, as an autonomous institute, situated first in Münster, and later transferred to Aachen. Schmidlin became the director

of the scientific commission of this institute. But the planned internationalization never really came about. The institute supported the publication of the *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* and the publication of the *Biblioteca Missionum*. It was the publisher of the two series of *Missionswissenschaftliche Abhandlungen und Texte* (14 tracts appeared before World War II); and of *Missionswissenschaftliche Studien* (9 tracts in all; discontinued after World War II). The series *Missionsstudienwochen* was begun after World War II and likewise published by the institute. It is remarkable how quick the response of missionary congregations was and how many of their members decided to make a special study of missiology. Already on July 19, 1915, Father Anton Freitag, S.V.D., and Father Maurus Galm, O.S.B., obtained their doctorates in theology with dissertations on missiology. A year later, Father Laurence Kilger, O.S.B., did likewise. There were fourteen such doctorates awarded in Münster in Schmidlin's time and twenty-three in the first fifty years after the chair in missiology was established. All the recipients, with the exception of Jean Pierre Belche, who was a parish priest and national director of the pontifical mission works in Luxemburg, were members of religious congregations: five Divine Word missionaries, three Benedictines, three Capuchins, two Pallotines, two Oblates, two Sacred Heart missionaries, and one each from the Dominicans, Bethlehemites, Holy Spirit Fathers (Spiritans), Franciscans, and Marianhill missionaries.

Schmidlin is commonly regarded as the founder of a "school" of missiology—the Münster school. Is this really correct? Certainly he cannot be associated with the classic plantation theory of Pierre Charles, S.J. (Louvain). It seems to me, however, that one cannot identify Schmidlin with any school. Chronologically he was before them, and his ideas were of such general validity that they cannot be enclosed within the narrow confines of this or that school.

In his *Einführung in die Missionswissenschaft* (1917), Schmidlin deduces the mission of the church from the biblical text "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you," and so distinguishes a twofold task for the church: "1. to proclaim and spread the Christian faith and the Christian gospel and so, of necessity, propagate itself, and 2. to preserve and strengthen this faith and this church."¹⁶ He distinguishes between "mission in the subjective sense" (missionary activity), and "mission in the objective sense" (missionary works). The first he defines as "that ecclesiastical activity whose aim it is to plant and spread the Christian religion and church,"¹⁷ and then to preserve it; the second is "the totality of all ecclesiastical organizations which serve the spread of the faith."¹⁸ He feels that there is also some sense in regarding Catholics as the "object" of mission, "especially those, who outwardly count as church members, but who, because of lack of faith or sin, are dead or estranged members who stand in need of conversion anew."¹⁹ For practical and historical reasons, however, he defines mission as "the spreading of the faith among non-Christians." While Warneck accepts three stages in the aim of mission—developing the mature Christian, the independent community, and the organized church—Schmidlin considers the "confession of Christian teaching" (with simultaneous reception of baptism) and the "grafting into the church" to be two aspects of the one mission, a "twofold function found inseparable in the aim of Catholic mission."²⁰ Later, in his *Missionslehre*, he distinguishes more clearly between the individual and social aims of mission, but he still holds firmly that "for the mission of the Catholic church the question doesn't arise in this absolute form, and the solution can only be individual conversion and the christianisation of a people. Mission must strive for both and unite both, if not at the same time then in successive development; on the one hand, it should seek to convert the in-

dividual, or rather individuals, and on the other, to join these individuals together in community, that through it the whole people may be renewed in Christ."²¹

Schmidlin was hardly fifty-eight years old when he fell foul of the National Socialist system, which was to crush him mercilessly. He himself describes the end of his academic career in simple but moving words:

The growth of the missiological faculty and seminar in Münster, which had given so much promise, was suddenly cut off, chiefly by my retirement in the summer semester 1934, at first at my own suggestion, but in the end by force. After I had begun a fifth series of lectures in that semester on ancient Christian and medieval mission history, I changed it into a seminar in which we treated the Indian missions of the past two years. Then, in the ensuing winter semester, I was forbidden by the rector to enter the university and a successor in the person of Prof. Lortz was appointed for the summer semester 1935.²²

3. Schmidlin and Home Support for the Missions

Schmidlin, at his deepest level always a priest, pursued not only missiological but also practical missionary objectives. Already in March 1909 he urged his students in Münster to found an academic missionary association. His appeal fell on receptive ears, and on June 10, 1910, the first constituent meeting of the Akademischer Missionsverein was held with 100 students of Münster university and 175 from the Borromäum (seminary) taking part. After the solemn opening Mass, 600 students joined the association.²³ It turned out to be extraordinarily active, sending out invitations far and wide to the very best speakers.

Other colleges soon followed the example of Münster: the clerical seminary in Passau on February 26, 1911; Tübingen University (with 230 association members) on December 1, 1911; the seminary in Freising on February 6, 1912; St. Peter's Seminary in Baden on March 5, 1913; and soon afterward the house of studies for priests in Bonn, and many others. The Catholic Academic Association formed an Akademischer Missionsbund (missionary union) in 1920. From 1913 on, the academic missionary associations had their own paper, *Akademische Missionsblätter*.²⁴

On January 22, 1912, Schmidlin, in the course of a lecture for the clergy of the city of Münster, called for a rise in contributions to the missions and for a discussion on the need for the clergy in the homeland to organize themselves into a "mission conference." Once more his proposal was readily accepted, and on May 7, the Missionsvereinigung des Münsterischen Diözesanklerus was inaugurated. There were 300 participants at the first meeting. The dioceses of Treves, Cologne, Paderborn, Strassburg, and others soon followed suit. All these diocesan units later merged in the Unio Cleri pro Missionibus founded in Italy in 1916 after the pattern begun in Münster.

Another of his great wishes was to found a missionary society of German diocesan priests. In 1937 he composed a memo on this theme and published it in the *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft*.²⁵ In 1913–14 he made many a journey to the Far East. His intentions in doing so were concrete and specific, "not just a grandiose program of setting up mission universities and printing presses, but also the recommending of an international association to gather financial support, and a mission training society to prepare the necessary personnel."²⁶ Neither the missionary society of German diocesan priests nor the international association ever got off the ground. But they illustrate the breadth and vitality of Schmidlin's interest and imagination.

Schmidlin was also the organizer and animator of courses in missiology for the most diverse audiences: in 1916 there was a course for the clergy of Cologne, in 1917 for teachers in Münster, in 1919 for missionaries in Düsseldorf, in 1919–20 for missionaries home on leave in Münster, in 1925 for diocesan and religious priests in Steyl, in 1925 for academics in Siegburg, in 1926 and 1930 in St. Ottilien and Münster. He also played a decisive role in other congresses not organized by himself, for example, in 1924 at Mödling, Vienna, 1925 at Budapest, 1926 at Leitmeritz, 1927 at Posen, 1928 at Würzburg, 1929 once more at Mödling, 1930 at Leibach, and 1932 at Freiburg, Switzerland.

It must be added that the idea of having the theme of mission handled at the university level also caught on elsewhere. Thus in Munich missiological questions were treated by Königer in 1911 and by Aufhauser in 1912, in Bamberg by Königer in 1912, in Breslau by Seppelt in 1911, in Strassburg by Bastgen in 1912, in Hamburg by Schmidlin, Schwager, and Streit from 1911 to 1913, in Würzburg by Weber and Zahn in 1915. A lectureship in mission history and comparative religion (Professor Aufhauser) was set up in Munich in 1919. After World War I, the missiological movement passed on to other places too, especially to Rome, where the Urban College set up an institute and the Gregorian University established a chair for missiology. Professor Ohm, O.S.B., Schmidlin's successor in missiology on the faculty at Münster, was not exaggerating when he said, "It is impossible to think of missiology and mission history without Schmidlin. For a long time he was mistrusted or even rejected in many missiological circles. But he won through all the same. Catholic

missiology gained a secure place in the curriculum of universities and developed into an independent, well-defined, clear-sighted and true science. It has, thanks to Schmidlin's exertions, reached a position that commands attention."²⁷

Posterity has not really been fair to Schmidlin. His early forced retirement and, above all, his wild reactions to everything and everyone, be he pope or king or subject, were largely responsible for his being judged unfavorably. He said what he thought and was no respecter of persons. But, for all that, he deserves an honorable place in history. Not without reason has he been called the father of Catholic missiology. So much can be traced back to his inspiration and untiring zeal, so much is of permanent value. He maintained his own position clearly as distinct from the views of Protestant missiologists, notably Gustav Warneck. On the other hand, however, he is a great deal closer to them than is the "Louvain school." This, in these ecumenical days, is something positive. In Vatican Council II some central ideas of the "Louvain school" doubtless made an impact. But the "Münster school" was also represented and made its presence felt. Both were good and necessary.

If in some places today the idea of mission has been relegated to the background, one could only wish for another Schmidlin, one who would perhaps be calmer and more balanced, but who would add his weight to the missionary cause with the same clear-sightedness, energy, and love that were peculiarly his. Schmidlin was indeed a pioneer, whose legacy has left its imprint on Catholic missiology.

Notes

1. *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* (ZM) 14 (1924):247. The chief sources of information on Schmidlin's life and work are the following articles: Schmidlin's own autobiography, found in E. Stange's *Die Religionswissenschaft der Gegenwart in Selbstdarstellungen* (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1927). L. Kilger, O.S.B., "Ein Lustrum katholischer Missionswissenschaft in Deutschland," in ZM 6 (1916): 1–15. J. Schmidlin, "Was wir wollen," in *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* (ZM) 1 (1911): 5–10; "Wie unsere Missionswissenschaft entstand," in *Zeitschrift für Missions- und Religionswissenschaft* (ZMR) 21 (1931): 1–18; "Lehrstuhl und Seminar für Missionswissenschaft," in ZMR 25 (1935): 226–34. Joh. Beckmann, S.M.B., in *Bethlehem* 49 (1944): 442–45, and Th. Ohm, O.S.B., in MR 32 (1947): 3–11 (obituaries). K. Müller, S.V.D., "Joseph Schmidlin, Leben und Werk," in J. Glazik, M.S.C., *50 Jahre katholischer Missionswissenschaft in Münster* (Münster: Verlag Aschendorff, 1961), pp. 22–33. E. Hegel, "Der Lehrstuhl für Missionswissenschaft und die missionswissenschaftlichen Studienrichtungen in der kath.-theolog. Fakultät Münster," in Glazik, pp. 3–21.
2. Dr. K. Gschwind, parish priest, Allschwil, in Basel deanery newspaper, 1944, p. 503.
3. Autobiography, *Josef Schmidlin*, p. 168.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 168f.
5. Thus E. Hegel, according to Schmidlin's personal file in the Cath. theol. faculty, Münster, op. cit., p. 5.
6. The mission bibliographer R. Streit, O.M.I., calls the *Missionslehre* "epoch-making in German mission literature" (*Die katholische deutsche Missionsliteratur*, Aachen: Xavierverlagsbuchhandlung, 1925, p. 127). Bishop Hennemann, P.S.M., called it "a literary event" and stressed its clear definitions, exact arrangement, all-round elucidation, brilliant mastery of the apposite literature, and splendid review of history (ZM 9, 1919, p. 204). It has been translated into English: *Catholic Mission Theory* (Techny, Ill.: Mission Press, 1931, xi, 544 pp.).
7. The *Missionsgeschichte* has been translated into Italian by G. Tragella,

- P.I.M.E. (Milan: Pontificio Istituto Missioni Estere, 1927–29; 3 vols.), and into English by M. Braun, S.V.D. (Techny, Ill.: Mission Press, 1933, 862 pp.).
8. Notes for a conference on Schmidlin. To round off the picture of Schmidlin it must be added that before he took his degree he worked zealously as assistant priest in Gebweiler. As a young private lecturer, he also worked as a priest in the Antoniusstift, and later as chaplain to Count Hatzfeld in Dyckburg. During World War I, he organized the rescue of missions in the East endangered by the Turks. He also took spiritual care of those in a prisoner-of-war camp and gathered its French theology students together there into a wartime seminary. He worked a good deal for the poor (see K. Müller, op. cit., pp. 23f.).
9. E. Hegel, op. cit., p. 16.
10. According to information received from Dr. Clauss, archiepiscopal archivist in Freiburg i.B. According to Th. Ohm he was starved to death and his corpse left lying in the prison for days: MR 32 (1947):10.
11. Swiss church paper 112 (1944): 236.
12. Thus Karl Graul in his famous trial lecture at Erlangen, 1864. Cf. O. Myklebust, *The Study of Missions in Theological Education* 1 (Oslo: Egede Instituttet, 1955): 94f.
13. From a conference of R. Streit at the Berlin Conference of the Mission Commission of the Katholikentag. Cf. ZMR 21 (1931): 8f.
14. ZM 1 (1911):5.
15. *Ibid.* p. 7. In 1938 the journal was renamed *Missions- und Religionswissenschaft* (MR), and in 1950 it was changed to *Zeitschrift für Missions und Religionswissenschaft* (ZMR).
16. *Einführung in die Missionswissenschaft*, 1st ed. (Münster: Verlag Aschendorff, 1917), pp. 46f. It is interesting that *Ad gentes* (AG)—Vatican II's document on the missions—speaks in its first five chapters of the "mission of the church" in general, and only in chap. 6 defines the specific term "missionary activity." Schmidlin had done likewise.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 48. Cf. AG 6.

18. Ibid. Schmidlin is thinking here of the house or group in which or from which mission proceeds, or again of a mission limited by place or specific personnel, such as the mission in Honduras or the Franciscan missions. AG stands by the geographical idea of mission. *Evangelii nuntiandi* (EN)—the apostolic exhortation of Paul VI on evangelization in the modern world, 1975—speaks of the missionary and of missionary activity, but steers clear of the word “mission” as a geographical determination.
19. Ibid., p. 51. AG 6 is also aware of conditions which “demand a new onset of missionary activity.” EN 56 speaks very fully of the “evangelization” of the nonpracticing, but doesn’t specifically make them the object of mission.
20. Ibid., p. 56.
21. *Katholische Missionslehre im Grundriss*, 2nd ed. (Münster: Verlag Aschendorff, 1923), pp. 243f. For Schmidlin the word “conversion” means the profession of Christian teaching on the one hand, and baptism in the name of the Trinity, on the other (*Einführung*, p. 55).
22. ZMR 25 (1935): 232.
23. At the opening meeting speeches were made by Auxiliary Bishop Illigens, Prince Löwenstein, Abbot Weber, O.S.B., and Professors Mausbach and Schmidlin. Ulms, the general secretary, reported: “Within the next few days the young association could count about 1,000 members from all faculties and student groups. However skeptical the anticipations of some may have been as to how things would develop, this surprising outcome proved all doubts unfounded; it surpassed the greatest expectations” (ZMR 25 [1935]:237).
24. See Ulms, *Fünf Lustren akademischer Missionsbewegung in Deutschland*, in ZMR 25 (1935): 234–42.
25. *Denkschrift für eine deutsche Weltpriestermission*, in ZMR 26 (1936): 25–29.
26. Autobiography, p. 180.
27. MR 32 (1947): 7.

Base Ecclesial Communities: A Study of Reevangelization and Growth in the Brazilian Catholic Church

A. William Cook, Jr.

Possibly the most exciting item of missiological news to come out of Latin America these days cannot be found in the journals of most Protestant mission organizations. It has to do with the *comunidades eclesiais de base*¹ or Base Ecclesial Communities, the fastest-growing movement within the Roman Catholic Church. *Time* magazine (May 7, 1979, p. 88) called it the most influential Catholic movement in Latin America, where there may be as many as 150,000 *comunidades*—80,000 of them in Brazil. A prominent sociologist, in a Smithsonian Institution symposium, states that these “grass-roots congregations” promise to change the face of Brazilian Catholicism into the nation’s first truly working-class association. He goes on to liken this phenomenon to eighteenth-century Wesleyanism (IDOC 1978:78–84).

What is the nature of this movement? What are its social and historical roots and its fundamental characteristics? And what is its significance for both Catholic and Protestant mission today? I have approached these issues with several concerns: (1) as a Christian who is deeply concerned about total human liberation; (2) as a Protestant who has been engaged in mission in Latin America for over a quarter century; (3) as an evangelical missiologist who is committed to holistic evangelization and church growth; and (4) as an inquisitive student of social and religious phenomena.

1. Definition

The Base Ecclesial Communities constitute a dynamic movement that defies easy definition. The 1968 Medellín Episcopal Con-

ference of Latin America (CELAM II) called them “the first and fundamental ecclesiastical nucleus . . . the initial cell of the ecclesiastical structures and the focus of evangelization . . . the most important source of human advancement and development” (CELAM II:201). The 1979 Puebla Conference (CELAM III) called the *comunidades* “an expression of the church’s preferential love for the poor . . . the focal point of evangelization, the motor of liberation.”

CELAM III defined “community” as “intimate personal relationship in the faith.” “Ecclesial” suggests the church-relatedness of these communities through the celebration of the Word and of the sacraments. But, above all, it is the church “putting into practice the Word of God” and making “present and active the church’s mission.” Finally, the *comunidades* are “of the base” because they are germinal cells in the wider parish community.²

What sets the Brazilian Base Ecclesial Communities apart from other superficially similar movements are their origins. They have not been imported from abroad. Nor are they communities that have been created by ecclesiastical fiat as part of some predetermined strategy for church renewal and reevangelization. They are grassroots communities, spontaneously in response to the Latin American reality, and of which the church was virtually forced to take cognizance.

The church gradually became aware of the existence of “natural communities (neighborhood associations, youth clubs, workers’ cells, etc.) . . . local and environmental, which correspond to the reality of a homogeneous group and whose size allows for personal fraternal contact amongst its members.” Having discovered these “homogeneous units,” the church determined to orient its pastoral efforts “toward the transformation of these communities into ‘a family of God.’” It tried to do this by making itself present among them “as leaven” by means of a small nucleus. The *comunidade* “creates a community of faith, hope and charity which takes seriously and at the same time challenges the ‘homogeneous units’ which are at the base of society” (CELAM II: 201).

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