

February 1998

Spiritana

SMEN
MISSIONARY

A conversation
with Basil
Johnston

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A close-up portrait of Basil Johnston, an elderly man with grey hair and glasses, wearing a blue shirt. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a thoughtful expression. The background is a soft-focus outdoor setting with green foliage.

Company
of Strangers

Crossing Borders

An issue of *Spiritan Missionary News* that will take readers to Catholic-Orthodox cooperation in Ethiopia, to life with refugees in Tanzania, to a prison in Ontario, to the First Nations people of Canada, to the gay and lesbian communities of Manhattan, to conflict resolution and peacemaking — such an issue requires some words of introduction, some foreword.

In a laudable attempt to emphasize that every local church should be missionary-minded, contemporary language tends to downplay the “foreign” missionary. Yet a missionary will always be foreign, leaving one country to live and work in another or leaving the prevailing mentality of society to go out and about among those who do not belong to that society or whose mentality is very different. To be foreign is to be a stranger, to be “from away.” Missionaries are strangers in the company of strangers.

Missionaries cross boundaries — geographical, political, linguistic, religious and cultural. Sometimes they go in trepidation, unsure of their welcome. They wonder if they will ever speak the language well enough to really get in touch with the strangers that await them. It takes some time to feel at home. Being a foreigner makes it difficult to blend in. The temptation is to bring to their new-found land all they relied on before.

But the God whom they declare is not confined to one land, one church, one theology. The God of Jesus is a mobile God, a pilgrim God, a migrant God. This God travels with his people, pitches his tent among them, pulls up the pegs, folds up the canvas and moves on with them stage by stage.

Jesus the missionary

Jesus walked along the borders of Samaria and Galilee, where two religions met and two peoples lived in uneasy relationship. Samaritans were, in Jewish eyes, a “half-breed” people, of mixed ancestry and religion. An orthodox believer, on pilgrimage to Jerusalem from Galilee, would cross and recross the Jordan rather than put foot in Samaria. Yet Jesus’ best known story is about a good Samaritan. The leper who turned back and thanked him was a Samaritan. He needed the Samaritan woman at the well to do something for him: “Give me a drink.”

Jesus was not mainline — not a Scribe or a Pharisee, not a Sadducee or a Levite, not even a qualified rabbi. To many of the religious people of his time he was a “marginal Jew” who spent far too much time with borderline cases: Samaritans, women, sinners, lepers, the poor, the sick, the blind, the lame, the mute.

Neither mainline or establishment, Jesus was uninterested in honour, privilege or prestige. He washed feet and took young and old by the hand to raise them up. He gladly accepted the attentions of a woman who was a sinner. He ate with Pharisees and freely went to Roman centurions’ homes. He was an in-between man: God-with-us who delighted in crossing over to the other side.

He was found among the displaced; they became his family. Today there are so many dwelling on the threshold, occupying the crowded margins of contemporary life. Some are overseas, some as near as our downtown. Spiritans have crossed the border to live and work among them.

When they do, a strange thing happens: the outsiders give back as much as they receive. Spiritan Anthony Gittins has written: “Missionaries are evangelized by those they were supposed to evangelize, masters become disciples, speakers become hearers, givers become receivers.”

Patrick Fitzpatrick cssp

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Mary Magdalene and the Gardener

Deirdre McLoughlin, Lay Spiritan

(John 20:11-18)

Grief stricken and bewildered, Mary Magdalene stood crying outside the empty tomb. (John 20:11). Where had Jesus gone? Who would help her find him? The gardener asks why she is crying and for whom she is looking and Mary, through her tears, begs him to help her in her search. He says her name, "Mary", and she recognizes Jesus in the person of this gardener.

Catherine de Hueck Doherty, founder of the Combermere Apostolate, told the story of a day in Toronto when she was on her way to see the Bishop. A street person called to her and she became engaged in a conversation with him. Her companion pointed out that she would be late for her appointment. Catherine would not be hurried, she had found the stranger-Christ; she had recognized the gardener.

Why have the recent deaths of two women from different parts of the world and from such divergent backgrounds affected millions of people around the world? Could it be that both Mother Teresa and Princess Diana had the gift of gazing into the faces of those most in need of love, and recognizing in them the face of the gardener?

If each of us could see in the faces of all whom we meet the face of Christ, would the world be changed? We are busy people in a hectic world. We don't have time to see. We have to keep important engagements with important people. Sometimes, however, we have cause to pause, take stock and realize that we have lost the way and we end up like Mary Magdalene weeping outside the empty tomb.

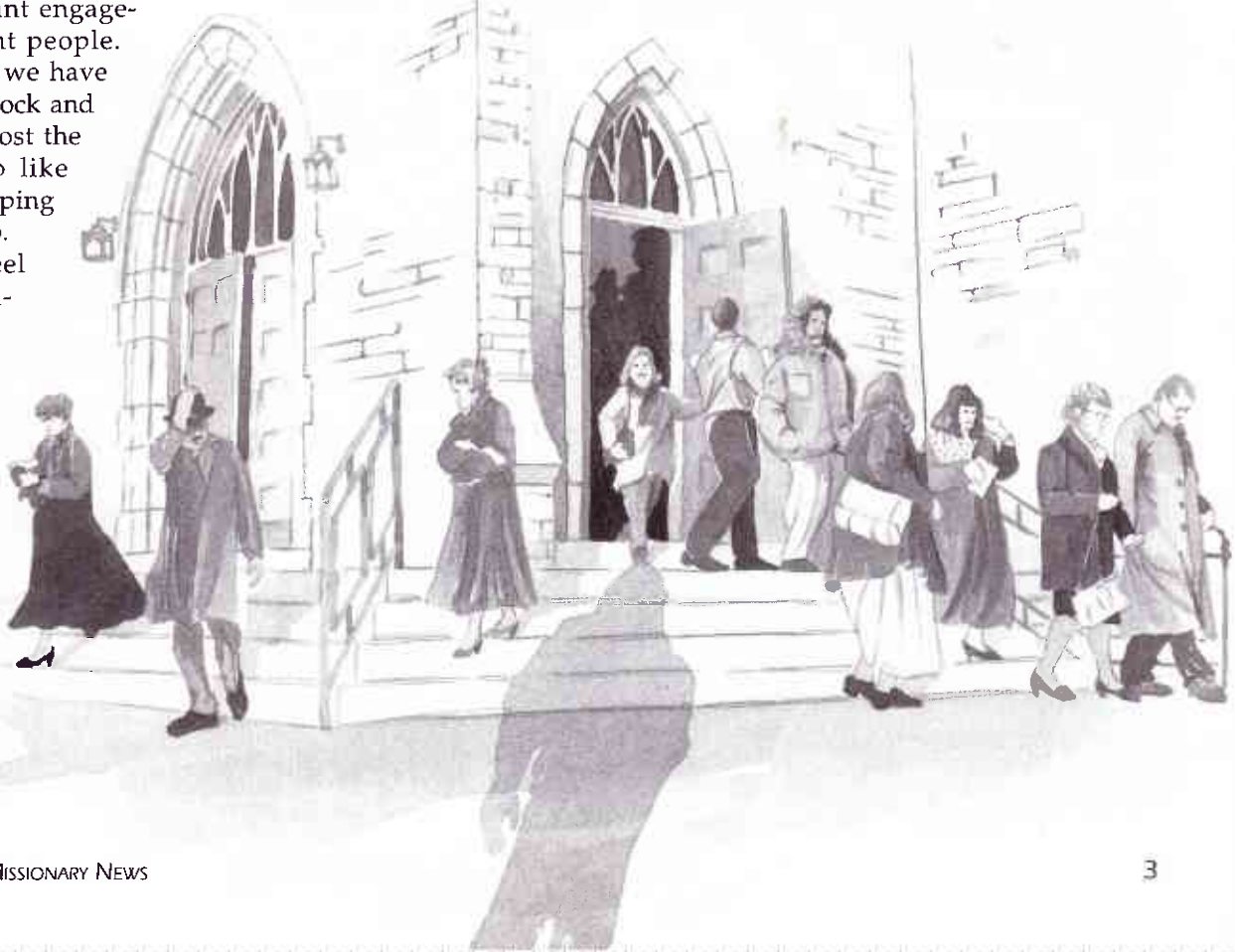
As we weep we feel confused and abandoned, wondering where has He gone? Why can't we find Him? The stone is rolled back and there is a hollow empty feeling in the centre of our being. We look around and cannot find Him outside either. Then in a gifted moment we are once again filled with the presence of the risen Christ

and we want to hold on forever to the feeling of being bathed in God's love. Jesus told Mary not to cling to him but to go on and tell the disciples what had happened. We also have to let go and move onwards. Being in a relationship with Jesus always leads us out of ourselves to action.

The call is for more times of quiet, for prayer and contemplation. This will enable us to listen and recognize the face of the gardener, the face of the stranger, and then as Mary Magdalene did, respond to what he invites us to do.

An ancient Irish poem comes to mind:

*I saw a stranger yester e'en;
I put food in the eating place,
Drink in the drinking place,
Music in the listening place;
And in the blessed name of the Trinity
He blessed myself and my house,
My dear ones and my cattle.
And the lark sang in her song:
Often, often, often
Goes the Christ in stranger's guise.
Often, often, often
Goes the Christ in stranger's guise. ♣*



Strangers: God's revelation for us

Ron Rolheiser omi

There is a tradition within Christianity, strong in Scripture and in the early church but now sadly in danger of dying, of welcoming the stranger.

In the early church there was a custom of welcoming the strangers with the belief that they, being foreigners, were specially privileged in their capacity to bring new promise and fresh revelation from God. It was with this in mind that the author of the letter to the Hebrews wrote: "In welcoming strangers some of you have entertained angels without knowing it."

Thus, every family was encouraged to set aside a room in its house to serve as a guest room, a room within which strangers could be welcomed and hospitality shown to them.

In Scripture, God's promise, revelation, and new truth are most often brought not through what's familiar or through those whom we know and who are like us, but through a stranger or an angel (an angel being even more foreign than a stranger).

With the stranger lies surprise

Thus, for instance, we see: Sarah and Abraham receive the promise of a son not from a family member, a neighbour or the local doctor, but from

a stranger who has wandered into their camp at night and to whom they have shown hospitality. Jacob meets God by wrestling with a stranger. Christ is visited in the crib not by Jewish rulers but by the Magi, strange foreign kings.

With the stranger lies surprise, new possibility, contact with that part of God and reality that we have never experienced before.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the wounded man is helped not by his own kinsfolk and those who were of his own religion, but by a Samaritan, a stranger. With the stranger lies surprise, new possibility, contact with that part of God and reality that we have never experienced before.

Why is that? Would it not be more logical, and indeed in line with the principles of the incarnation, that

God should speak to us most deeply through that which is familiar to us?

The familiar is important. In the end, the real test of charity begins at home. However, precisely because it is home, it is not the place where we are often surprised. It is too familiar and because it is so familiar it is also not the place where we are likely to have our hearts stretched.

God is not familiar. God is other. Accordingly, those who are other to us, strangers, are in a privileged position to reveal God to us.

As Parker Palmer puts it:

"The role of the stranger in our lives is vital in the context of Christian faith, for the God of faith is one who continually speaks truth afresh, who continually makes all things new. God persistently challenges conventional truth and regularly upsets the world's way of looking at things.

"It is no accident that this God is so often represented by the stranger, for the truth that God speaks in our lives is very strange indeed. Where the world sees impossibility, God sees potential. Where the world sees comfort, God sees idolatry. Where the world sees insecurity, God sees occasions for faith. Where the world sees death, God proclaims life.

"God uses the stranger to shake us from our conventional points of view, to remove the scales of worldly assumptions from our eyes. God is a stranger to us, and it is at the risk of missing God's truth that we domesticate God, reduce God to the role of familiar friend."

(*The Company of Strangers*, p. 59)

The heart of the Spiritan pastoral tradition

It is not enough to leave behind one's country and culture and remain seated in an office or seeing the people through the windows of a car. We have literally to "go out" to meet the people, to be with them, to share their lives and their journey. You could call this "the mission of pilgrimage".

Nothing can replace meeting people in their own homes. We visit each house, whether the people are Catholic or not. We visit the sick and the bed-ridden, have a chat with some people, perhaps give advice on the building of a house... We often hear them say, "You came to our house, you drank some palm wine, you prayed with my daughter who was sick, we remember your words of comfort."

René Tabard CSSp., Congo