MISSION FROM BELOW

This presidential lecture is billed as a public event. So it is a fitting context to thank publicly our local hosts - the local planning committee and the Dean and Chapter of St. Andrew’s Cathedral - for both welcoming us and all the hard work that has gone into making our congress a success this far.

It is also my pleasure to pay tribute to my predecessors in the Presidency of the I.A.M.S. - Professor Hans-Werner Gensichen of Heidelberg, whose successor Professor Theo Sundermeier is with us; Prof Arnuld Camps of Nijmegen, Holland, who is the only president who had two terms and who is with us in this room; Prof Johannes Aagaard of Aarhus, Denmark; Dr Gerald Anderson of New Haven, Connecticut, who is with us in this room; my immediate pre-decessor Prof Joan Chatfield M.M. of Hawaii. The tribute will be incomplete unless I mention three founding fathers Prof Olav Myklebust who lives in retirement in Norway; Paul Rowntree Clifford of the United Kingdom who was our treasurer until Rome Congress; and Andrew F. Walls of Edinburgh, Scotland. This catalogue of I.A.M.S. “saints” is a reminder that the work of our forbears has brought us to where we are today. “Others have labored and we share their glory; our’s to do exploits and add to their gain. Those who come after us will take up our story.” May it be worthy to be retold.

Let me begin with what may sound apologetic for the theme of my presidential address and I will do so with three snapshots. Let me begin with a young girl in her early twenties, Dori Brown who has been helping us in the conference office. She has been ministering to us. Every time I encounter her, I get a vivid picture of a young girl in the midst of established professors of mission studies. I cannot help but ask: What impact are we making on her as missiologists? She is but a youth, and are we conscious of her and of youth like hers in our mission studies or do we ignore the youth? Is our mission not relevant youth to all? Yet again - every time I encounter Dori Brown, I recall some powerful words of our Lord: “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will” (Mt 11:25-26). I guess I am asking us to reflect
on her mission to us. How may we missiologically interpret her ministry to us? Every encounter like that with youth is a missionary opportunity and of relevance and such is God's gracious will. This is one snapshot of mission from below - a youth, who by normal standards is seen and not heard and is often considered the church of the future, has a missionary significance. Do we know that missionary significance?

The second snapshot is of our immediate past President, Joan Chatfield. We included her on our executive at our Maryknoll Congress and later made history by making her Vice-President and later still President. She is the first and only woman President in our twenty or so years of existence. One hardly needs to mention that women have been marginalized in spite of their numbers and solid contributions to the life of church and society. In her presidential address in Rome she reminded us: "If voices of women are missing, cultural gaps occur which cannot be bridged retrospectively. They must be deliberately included, searched for, captured for the truth of full humanity."

The third snapshot is of myself. Since 1988 you have had an African, the first ever person from the South, as President of I.A.M.S. I dare not address by what ummin and thummim I was chosen. But it can be said that for the first time a member of that group who have often been treated as objects of mission, was chosen to occupy a leadership role. These contrast sharply with the Peter Pan syndrome which has not infrequently been a characteristic of missions.

Certainly the election of a woman as President of I.A.M.S. and the election of an African as President of I.A.M.S. are significant steps, the full implications of which we need to grapple with. It is this concern I try to signal with the phrase "Mission From Below." By it I seek to remind us that official history is only one version of the past. We cannot undo history but we can make it possible for the underside of history to tell its story. It is the duty of all, particularly those from the underside of life - youth, women, minorities, peoples of the South - to contribute to the traditions of the people of God. To remain silent is to deprive the living tradition of the perspective and experience of those from the underside. That heritage must be added to the history of the church. The unwritten heritage is as important as the written heritage.