

FROM CONQUEST TO HUMANITARIANISM

After the Second World War, the missions continued to develop. This worldwide conflict was followed by wars of independence in Africa and Southeast Asia, which made the association between missionary activity and colonialism appear in a more ambiguous light.

Many missionary projects were gradually converted to humanitarian activities. The oppositions between "civilization" and "savagery", or between Christians and pagans, that had given colonial and missionary projects their justification, made way for a view of the world that opposed "developed" and "underdeveloped" countries, the latter sometimes also being called the "Third World".

During the same period, starting in the 1950s, missionary activity in the Valais was to become increasingly organized. Many events were held, associations were created, fund-raising campaigns conducted, lectures given and articles regularly printed in the press. This effervescence around the missions attests to the effectiveness of the propaganda aimed at recruiting new missionary candidates throughout the canton. Appeals were also made to young laypersons to engage themselves in parallel activities developed in the missions, such as education, health, construction or cattle farming.

On 25 October 1949 a Journée des Missions was held in Saint-Maurice, the agenda of which was devoted in large part to the evangelisation of Africa. Subsequently, other "Journées" or "Semaines" of Missions were organized elsewhere in the canton. At the beginning of the 1950s, a "Missionary Centre" was created in Sion under the direction of the physician Pierre Galpini.

From 11 to 18 October 1955 an Exposition missionnaire catholique suisse (also called MESSIS) was held for an entire week in Sion. This was a travelling exhibition that had already been held in other cities in the country. Also during this period there were similar missionary exhibitions organized in Protestant cities by the Maison des missions in Basel. The Catholic event was held on the Place de la Planta, where big tents were set up. The ecclesiastic and political authorities of the Valais were well represented and constituted for the occasion an honours committee presided by Bishop Nestor Adam. In a letter printed on the front page of the Valaisan paper *Le Nouvelliste*, this bishop placed this event under the motto of the "propagation of the faith" and called for a "peaceful and holy conquering mobilization". The issue of the persecution of Christians throughout the world was also a focus of the event, and there was a stand especially devoted to the "persecuted Church". In addition to information about the various missionary activities, there were exhibitions of African art and film showings. The press reported that the exhibition received 16,000 visitors in eight days.

This event belonged to the tradition launched by the Exposition missionnaire universelle at the Vatican in 1925. In both cases, the purpose was to celebrate the greatness of the Catholic Church, but the geographic displacement made it necessary to modify the emphasis of the celebration. The vast amount of means devoted to the organization of this MESSIS shows that it was not just a matter of the Church, but also and possibly above all of the Valais itself. By the choice of site, the solemnity of the speeches, as well as the impressive media coverage, the Valais presented itself in a "conquering" pose vis à vis of a world in need of salvation. The Valaisan religious emigration therefore seems to have had another function that was internal to the canton, and the issue of identity was to be reinforced in the decades to come.

"Missionary centres" were created in many parishes in the Valais, first in the cities, then, starting in the 1960s, in the villages of the plain and mountains. Their common meetings were held under the high patronage of the bishop. The increase in the number of these centres led to the creation of the Fédération des Centres missionnaires of the Valais, which organized charitable activities on behalf of the missions. The best-known was the Noël du missionnaire valaisan that took place from 1956 to 1995. The fund-raising appeals were largely taken up by the local press, which devoted

more and more articles to the missionary activities of the Valaisans.

On the occasion of the Christmas event of 1976, the press reported that 212 Valaisans had left on missions throughout the world. Whether priests, nuns, monks or laypersons they were presented as "ambassadors" of the Valais; through their work they put all Valaisans "in contact with other countries, other races, other peoples". An explicit comparison was made with sportsmen and sportswomen who represented their country when they participate in international competitions. The identity stakes for the Valais inherent in the Catholic missions were reinforced by the pride of having relatives among the missionaries who left for underprivileged countries. This feeling of pride, whether it appealed to patriotic or familial honour, was carefully nurtured over several decades and constituted an integral part of the phenomenon of religious emigration.

During the 1990s, departures of missionaries from the Valais became increasingly rare. At the same time, the crisis in vocations resulted in the Valais in a lack of new priests and increased work loads, especially for those who had to serve several parishes. One of the ways in which this imbalance was compensated was by having priests from the four corners of the world come to officiate in the parishes of the Valais. Should these men from other parts of the world come to preach in a country in which Catholicism is losing ground be called "missionaries" to the same degree as those who came across the Grimsel Pass in 1607? This does not seem to be how the situation is being perceived. Not without some condescension, the term of "adoption" is sometimes used to qualify this new form of religious immigration.

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