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BOOK REVIEW

John Bowen, ed. *The Missionary Letters of Vincent Donovan: 1957–1973*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011. 225 pp. ISBN 1608991172.

Fads fade, trends come and go, and in some cases what is old is new again. In the case of Father Vincent Donovan's work the latter is true. Donovan was a Catholic priest and member of the Spiritan order, who spent a significant part of his career doing missionary work in Tanzania and Kenya. John Bowen, Associate Professor of evangelism at Wycliffe College (University of Toronto), has done a great service to the contemporary church by bringing together in one volume some of Donovan's personal letters from his years of service in some of the remotest areas of the world. These letters, while written in a previous generation and vastly different context, have important ideas in them that are dynamically relevant for the ministry of the church in the West today. As Brian McLaren notes in the Foreword, there has been a steady interest in Donovan's book *Christianity Rediscovered*, which emanates out of Donovan's reflection on his ministry in Africa, and, in recent years, this interest has spread to people like McLaren, who are involved in Christian mission in the changing cultural context of North America and Western Europe.

The letters themselves are a collection of personal letters that Donovan sent home, mostly to family and supporters throughout his sixteen-year missionary career. The letters have been carefully preserved and Bowen has not only done the work of compiling them chronologically, but has also added helpful notes based on further research that he undertook. As well as the aforementioned Foreword by McLaren, the volume includes a brief introduction and concluding chapter with reflections by

Bowen. At first glance, a book that is based on letters from a missionary to Africa may not seem like the most compelling read for anyone beyond a select audience interested in African church history. However, to conclude this would be a mistake. This volume has much to offer anyone who is interested in Christian mission, including contemporary practitioners in the West.

Six areas of Donovan's experience clearly connect with the realities of ministry in the post-Christian West. The first one is Donovan's obvious commitment to reflective practice. Donovan was a combination missionary practitioner and theologian, who read widely and did his theology in the trenches of missionary engagement, always keeping an eye on Scripture as an essential conversation partner in his reflections. His theology of mission and how that theology should be applied was born through the work of reflection on practice through the lens of Scripture, tradition, culture, reason, and experience. This dynamic, evolving conversation helped Donovan forge a ministry that was pragmatic and effective as well as biblical and faithful to Catholic tradition (mostly). Reading Donovan's letters leaves the unmistakable impression that Donovan's intentional theological reflection on his work was what caused it to grow in its effectiveness and helpfulness to others. It also demonstrates an on-going development in his thinking about the Christian faith and his methodology for proclaiming it. This kind of reflective practice is a needed discipline in Christian ministry and Donovan is a model *par excellence*.

Second, building on the first point, Donovan's methods grew out of practice not out of untested theory. Throughout the letters, Donovan relates stories of how the work of mission is happening that clearly shape his theology and philosophy of mission. As an example, over the course of two letters written to supporters, Donovan relates how he tells the story of Jesus to the Masai people with whom he is working. His telling of the story is certainly in keeping with the biblical narrative but it is also thoroughly in keeping with Masai language and traditions. The integration of Scripture with culture in order to proclaim the gospel effectively is masterfully achieved and clearly comes out of much trial and error on Donovan's part. He had a clear

commitment to pragmatism (i.e., how to effectively reach the people with the gospel message), which drove his ministry, but his commitment to Scripture and orthodoxy meant that he was also committed to forming his practice of ministry around the Scriptures and (more or less) Catholic tradition. However, while holding these two in tension, Donovan was ultimately interested in finding methods that worked in practice. There is nothing wrong with this kind of orientation when it comes to doing the work of mission, and Donovan's ministry offers guiding evidence to us all on this point.

Third, Donovan's ministry demonstrates the potency of incarnation in the work of Christian mission. Early in his ministry, one can see Donovan's increasing identification with Africa and the African people among whom he is living. By 1960, three years into his ministry, he identifies Tanzanians as his "fellow countrymen." This deep identification with the place and the people was part of what made Donovan such an effective missionary. He made Tanzania his home and its people his friends; this kind of commitment is informative to any missional enterprise. It may also explain some of his effectiveness as a support raiser; people believed in him, in his work and in his love for the people with whom he worked.

Fourth, Donovan reflects deeply on the relationship between "social work" (i.e., doing acts of compassion and social development) and preaching the content of the gospel for the purpose of spiritual transformation. This is a rising tension in many contemporary evangelical circles and has been an ongoing struggle in mainline denominations for many years. Donovan's conclusion on this debate is clear. Having witnessed and participated in Catholic projects in Africa like the building of hospitals and schools, Donovan observed how many Africans who attended the schools or benefited from the health care would express Christian faith for as long as they were participating in the institution, but would return to their former religion soon after leaving. Donovan wrote, "I began to wonder if it would be possible to leave aside schools and education, leave aside hospitals and medicine, leave aside all social works and go directly to the Masai and preach the gospel directly to them" (p. 108). In all of

the “good” that the Catholic social work was doing, Donovan saw a deficiency in the kind of faith that it engendered. As his ministry progressed, he became committed to the work of evangelism exclusive of social programs, believing that spiritual transformation was what really mattered for the people of Africa. While some may disagree with his conclusions, his effective practice of mission invites reflection on the relationship between social justice and proclamation in a contemporary Western context, and it may act as a counter-balance to the trend toward social justice exclusive of proclamation.

Fifth, like many Christians in the West today, Donovan wrestled with the institutionalization of the church. After several years of work in Africa, he was disillusioned with the way that Catholic Christianity was taking shape there. He writes in one of his letters dated April 1967, “We have let the African people think of us as a land-grabbing, child-centered, school-running institution—instead of what we are supposed to be. We have brought an institutional Christianity to Africa” (p. 106). Later, as he develops a more direct, evangelistic approach in his ministry that is devoid of direct social programs, he refers to it as “the non-institutional approach—an attempt to bring nothing but Christianity to people” (p. 125). This is the impetus that led to the writing of *Christianity Rediscovered* and also makes his thought and approach appealing to all of those who have felt similarly about how Christian faith can easily become institutional as opposed to the organic, living faith that we believe it is meant to be. Donovan became a genuine resister of institutionalized Christianity through his practice of mission. Yet he did this without dismissing or leaving the church as a real and necessary concept. While his practices and outcomes may not have been perfect, they reflect a genuine attempt at propagating an authentic Christian faith.

Finally, in keeping with point five, Donovan’s life, as reflected in these letters, is a compelling example of the potential for Christian mission in places that are resistant to, or even untouched by, the gospel message. Donovan’s view on the importance of mission is summed up in a letter dated May 1970, “It is only in the teaching of an outward turned Christianity that we

have any hope of achieving a Christianity” (p. 164) Later in the same letter, he asserts his view that a Christian community is always in existence for others not itself. This is a book for today because it recognizes that Jesus is at work in places long before the missionary ever shows up. Further to that, Donovan even anticipates how his work among the Sonjo people, who he notes have been referred to as a “narcissistic” people by anthropologists, may help inform mission among a generation of American youth who are thoroughly in-turned. Reading such reflections reminds one that the principles of good missionary methodology can often be transferable from one context to another if we are willing to read, reflect on, and discern principles in the work of others even in vastly different contexts.

This book offers a wonderful opportunity for this kind of reflection on the work of mission in every context, including the Western one in these post-Christian, postmodern days. In so many ways, Donovan’s struggles are our struggles. He speaks for many today when he writes in April, 1967 about his sense of the church in Africa, “What would you do if you were a missionary who suddenly realized just how badly it was that we had lost our sense of direction?” (p. 107). Many readers will resonate with that question in their own context, and Donovan’s missionary journey, as traced through his letters, will give readers much input on how to wrestle with that question as it is posed anywhere in the world today.

Bowan’s work in compiling these letters is a great service to the contemporary church. It not only offers a highly compelling introduction to a great missionary and missional thinker, but also invites reflection upon how Donovan’s practical theology and methodological philosophy has helpful insights for the practice of mission today. This book, coupled with Donovan’s *Christianity Rediscovered* would be of great use and inspiration to all of us who are seeking to lead the church in mission today no matter what the context.

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