

Christianity in north-east Thailand (15 July 1966)

Everyone here, including the bishop, is a jack-of-all-trades. The pastoral workload is defined rather locally, in response to local needs: there are the Christians in the area to be served, the school if there is one, catechumens to be catechised, material assistance, building work, healing, and so on. Our flock is generally divided among Christian villages. (Those who have left the mainstream and departed from the Christian villages usually abandon Christianity, unless a small group of them gathers in the same situation and the same place, and they are 'pursued' by a zealous priest). Of course the ambition of our leaders is that we should have 'everything that is needed' as soon as possible (especially now that we have real bishops and archbishops instead of mere apostolic vicars), like the dioceses of Christendom whose organisation can be admired during visits to the West. Our bishops, who periodically go on long trips (to raise funds) to America are inevitably struck by the organisational structure, the impressive machinery with multiple moving parts of a large diocese with all its activities, its branches, its differentiated, specialised tasks, and so on. Whereas here, we are still living a life of day-to-day solidarity with communities whose size is still very human and natural (with whom one can share rice and fish) – of the kind that many modern Western apostles miss and try to regain. For us, believing as we still do that all that is good comes from the West (obviously, otherwise we would have been made neither parish priests nor Christians), it is the large 'machinery' that impresses. The proof of this is that if it were not so, we would be looking for other more evangelical ways, more in keeping with our people's religious instincts. But the wind of change has affected our people's instincts.

Under the auspices of the Ministry of Education there is a team with its own journal that is working for the renewal of both Thai culture and the Buddhist religion, and this definitely reflects the aspirations of a cultivated élite that is anxious to safeguard the Thai cultural heritage. But at the level of the 'simple folk' (and this can be regarded as including all those who scramble to attend the so-called middle schools, in order to obtain a study diploma which, they hope, will open the gates of the Paradise for people who no longer need to do manual work), everything seems to converge on a hunger for all manner of fruits of the 'progress' brought by the West. As for the desire to build such progress, this is left to an élite of educators, coordinators, those 'working' for an open-minded outlook at university level. And the edifice is supported by those who build it indirectly by taking care of their own affairs, and, when it comes down to it, by the anonymous masses who must work to earn their living... just like anywhere else, in fact.

But what of the native Church?

There are doubtless Christians in all categories. In the team that is preparing for the future, the team that has directed and planned the planting of the 'tree' and is directing and planning its development, there may be some (probably not very many) Christians in the capital. Our Christian community in the north-east of Thailand is descended from ransomed slaves, sheltered fugitives and poor folk who were rescued (between 1880 and 1900). A number of these (the sons of poor people) created businesses. They were creatures of the mission: the missionaries gave them a minimum of instruction, and as they were intelligent, lent them some money to get started: trading, shady dealings, all kinds of racket. Money quickly snowballs when you know what you are doing. They are no longer there: they built houses in durable materials around the church (which became a procathedral) of the mission's mother village, to bear witness to their success, but they themselves left for the capital, where they have multiplied their money further. Their children and grandchildren have their path mapped out for them: junior seminary (free of charge) in their home village, then off to the paradise of the capital, where they can pursue their studies or settle down in the offices of some administration or some commercial or financial company. They start by eating away at Dad's capital, but go on to create another snowball with what's left. So much for the smarter ones; as for

the rest, they have swarmed from the mother village, which is too small, to unoccupied land, and created new villages. These people grow rice, as everybody does, and their children, like their parents, continue to slave away at the foot of the 'tree' in order to earn their living, hoping that some fruit will fall within their reach. At the age of 16 or 17, they leave to taste the joys of the city (there are always ways of finding some work – enough to live on and afford a pair of trousers and a shirt). After a year or two, they return to the village to get back into rice-growing, enough to feed a wife, then children. Then again, they may be luckier: lucky enough to be sent to junior seminary (everyone in the mother village where the junior seminary is located applies for a place, and those who are rejected still have the resources to go to the mission's middle school, which is also there; it is not free, but it is not expensive for non-boarders).

Once they have entered junior seminary, they follow the pattern of the sons of the 'rich' that we have already seen (unless of course some of them become parish priests). If they misbehave, the result is disastrous: they are expelled from the seminary. But does that mean returning to their home, to the village, to the paddy-field? Dad would really have to lack love for his son to refuse to cough up the money for him to attend middle school and deprive himself of the pleasure of seeing his liberated offspring return in the holidays to strut around the village, dressed too smartly to step into the mud of the paddy-field (in fact he is now wearing shoes).

What then of the clergy in the local Church?

These are obviously sophisticated... in terms of their living conditions, their lifestyle, their standard of living, their non-manual work, their security, their disposable income. The break comes when they enter junior seminary. Last year, I had a 16-year-old seminarian in a village. He entrusted a letter to me to pass on to his fellow-seminarian in another village (here, as is the custom, letters are open and not secret). He said in the letter that after a few days of holiday he was completely disgusted, and that he was looking forward to getting back. Last week, I was working on my own, clearing a patch of land over the road, just in front of his house. For the first few days, he was there, well-dressed, clearly bored, hands in his pockets, coming and going. In the following days, he could only be seen when I wasn't working, but disappeared when I was at my task. At the junior seminary, the youngsters are transplanted to a different world: a building made of durable materials at fabulous expense, comparatively speaking. In the villages, an ordinary wooden house (a good floor, wooden walls, shingle roof) costs 200 to 250 francs. A straw hut costs a good deal less. The accommodation for 100 seminarians costs as much as the housing for 2,000 peasant families (or 10,000 straw huts), and there are all forms of convenience: rice, meals that can be counted on and are served ready at the table, electricity, furniture, machines at work on your behalf. The contrast is too pronounced with life in the pupils' villages. 'So does that mean that the seminarians ought to go hunting for frogs every morning for their breakfast, as they used to do in their village, that they should each have their own little oil lamp when night falls, etc.?' No, there is no obvious solution apart from inventing a new form of initiation into the priesthood. It is inconceivable that the clergy should not become 'sophisticated', people who have escaped the servitude and insecurity of the lives of the poor from whom they originated.

What about the Buddhist monks? Haven't they also escaped from the servitude of their peers? True enough, the Buddhist monks do not work for their living. Yet where poverty is concerned (at least with regard to the village monasteries), I believe that there is quite a contrast between them and us.

The native Church, particularly in the north-east of the country, has gone through a painful, dark period, following the Franco-Thai War over the borders of French Indochina, which was looking for any excuse to nibble away at Thai territory on the pretext of recovering former Laotian or Cambodian territory (when all Thai schoolchildren learn in class that Laos and Cambodia are in fact ancient possessions of the Thai kingdom).

The Christians of Siam (the majority of whom are non-Thai, incidentally: Chinese and Vietnamese),

having been educated by the French missionaries, became suspect, especially near the Indochinese frontier. The Bangkok government believed that it would be fairly easy for it to get the Christians in the north-east to revert to the national religion that they had left only recently (two generations ago at most) and for pragmatic reasons. Once the foreign missionaries had been expelled, various hassles and administrative harassment would have got the better of any inclination to resist on the part of most of the flock (despite the courage of some individuals), if the armistice in 1945, victory (Thailand very fortunately finding itself in the allied camp) and a return to democratic freedoms had not enabled the expelled missionaries to return and work to gather together the dispersed flock again.

Most of the Christians trusted officialdom to be favourably disposed towards them, and most of the Christian villages resumed their previous Christian character. During the period of upheaval, ordinary Christians had come through unscathed through submission, at least on the outside, to the necessities of the moment. The priests, however, who were firm in their faith, faced the storm without any compromise: prison, insults, condemnation, mistreatment. When freedom was restored and proclaimed, their faithfulness shone out: they had not betrayed the faith and were no longer called traitors to the Fatherland. Being anxious to purify themselves of any remaining suspicion of lack of loyalty to the Fatherland in the eyes of the officials who had bullied them only yesterday (but who now treated them with deference in accordance with the instructions received since the wind had changed), there was nothing the priests sought more eagerly than to seize every opportunity to give free rein to their patriotism. Attending official ceremonies, and receiving the greetings and congratulations of officials was indeed a balm for old scars. Traumas and complexes melted away. Relations and opportunities to meet with officials increased in connection with the schools, which were first authorised, then approved, then subsidised. The native Church trusts officialdom to be favourably disposed towards it. The way of the Buddha is the official, national religion, inseparable from the national culture, and education in it forms part of all school curricula and examinations (including confessional schools and seminaries), but [recognises – ed.] the absolute freedom to practise and spread other religions.

The delegates of all religions present in Thailand are called to periodic meetings by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The atmosphere at the Ministry is euphoric, and, providing new proof of its loyalty to the nation, the Church has entered fully into the anti-Communist policies of official propaganda (not without reason, as for our anti-Communist leaders, the fact that Communism was born and has the majority of its supporters in the Christian countries is not unproblematic). I believe that they can relax where the Catholic Church of Thailand is concerned: they would not have too much trouble in getting us to put on golden chains if some *duce* or *caudillo* of sufficient intelligence and skill got involved.

Ten years ago, I was told by a Siamese bishop that when he was at junior seminary and the French missionaries still had extra-territorial status, during boat trips on the canals they would deliberately shoot birds in the pagodas' sacred groves as they went past, and deliberately camp in order to say Mass in the travellers' shelters built by pious Buddhists at the pagodas. Before the war, one day, a young priest fresh out of seminary went to visit his relations in a village that was still pagan, and explained to them that in order to be saved and go to heaven, there was only one way: to leave behind Buddhist 'superstition' and become Christians. 'What about our Buddha, where do you think he is now, then?' 'In hell, of course!' This provoked fury and indignation on the part of the villagers: such a truth should not be told in this way, the bishop commented! Since then, we have started to doubt whether it is even true!

Since the time of John XXIII, we have started to see the yellow robes of the monks at certain official Christian ceremonies, at important occasions... firstly in order to impress them, and then increasingly as a neighbourly gesture.

How does the native Church see its mission? Naturally in the same terms as it sees the goal of 'religion' and of life in this world: the whole problem is seen in terms of 'souls to be saved': one's own soul and those of others, from hell (a serious matter). In other places, people speak of the clergy's loss of confidence: priests who are unable to define, easily and clearly, their meaning, place, role and mission, and the forms of behaviour that are possible and desirable for them in today's world. (Perhaps such priests could be offered the opportunity to come and visit us for a detoxification cure?) Some time after the end of the war, at the seminary of X in France, we attended a retreat at which the preacher was a missionary and the director of a seminary in Asia, who had returned after many years, his leave having been delayed by the war. Preaching at retreats in diocesan seminaries in his home country, he had made it his mission, seeing the disorientation and confusion that the war had produced among us, to help us get back on the right path – for, he said, those who had spent the terrible war years in fairly remote parts had undergone less contamination and upheavals in their thinking, and had the advantage of seeing very clearly where we were going astray in the fog. For those seminarians who had experienced prisoner-of-war camps, forced labour and concentration camps, this kind of talk was hard to tolerate: they were convinced that during those hard years they had discovered things about mission work that he had not discovered while he was actually on mission work. Yes, here at the mission, we (still) see the goal and the way very clearly: we are working for the salvation of souls, just as Jesus Christ did and commanded the apostles to do.

'With your ideas, I can't see what you plan to do in mission work!' This was the conclusion of my parish priest (who had sent me as a choirboy to junior seminary) one day at a meeting of the deanery when, as a young vicar, the chairman told me to explain why I wanted to leave the diocese and go on mission. I can't have expressed it with as much subtlety as would have been desirable... and I didn't have a very clear grasp of the problem while I was at seminary, as there was not much literature on the subject. The possibility of salvation for all men – yes! But was it necessary to know God the creator, remunerator, saviour? And if so, must it be explicitly, or implicitly? At that time, nobody was bold enough to come up with the idea of a salvific faith that was implicit in righteousness, devotion to an ideal, goodwill... The traditional solution was the 'special lights' that God was bound to grant, before the instant of death, where common sense (which God also has) rejected the idea that a person should be damned – if there had been a limbo, as for children, the solution would have been simpler! Unclear though this position was in terms of its ideas and expression, it seemed to me that Christ's work on earth, and hence the goal of mission work, could not be summed up purely in terms of 'saving the infidels', although it did of course include it, but my parish priest did not agree!

Even recently not everyone agreed! (cf. *Christ au monde* one or two years ago: 'What a false perspective it is that totally excludes salvation from the goal of mission work. How right on the contrary is that which makes it the exclusive goal'). Father Quéguiner has good reason to weigh his words (cf. *Revue des M.E.P.*, No 145, p. 20).

So what is the right perspective? Vatican II opted for the perspective of God's plan as his Word itself reveals it to us, by opening our eyes to the gradual process by which the Father has been realising that plan since the earliest times through to the present day and so on until the end. Its realisation has taken the form of a mission, or rather of successive missions. There are the missions of Adam, Abraham and Moses, the servants of God and of his Word, and the promises and covenants that moulded the people. There is Yahweh's first-born son, and his mission – the new Adam and the new Moses, the true servant. And there is the mission of his Spirit, transmitted to his Church and directing its mission, guaranteeing it, ensuring that it is the same. 'Father, thy Kingdom come': this is the work (of the Father, the Son, the Spirit, the Church); this is the 'consummation', the Accomplishment of all things. Thy Kingdom (Basilica) come! It is near, announces Jesus, the

Kingdom (Basilia) of God – of ‘heaven’, says Matthew; and he had his reasons. ‘Heaven’ = God; the heavens or the sky = Paradise, a common religious notion: a blessed place where disembodied spirits reside, human and divine, nothing less biblical. *Cieux* (‘heaven’) or *ciel* (‘the heavens, the sky’): in French we make a distinction that our recent Fathers in the Faith, in Thailand, have neglected to make (no doubt because in their minds and that of their sons, in faith, the ‘kingdom of God’ was equivalent to the heavens or paradise) in the translation of the four gospels (made from Buzy’s French text of the NT) and in the Sunday missal (the translation that is now official for the renewed liturgy).

Just today, the seventh Sunday after Pentecost, the text of the Gospel that I will proclaim in Thai will have me say, if I am faithful to it, ‘Not everyone who says “Lord, Lord” shall enter the kingdom of Paradise, but he who does the will of the Father who is in Paradise (in the sky); he shall enter Paradise (shall go to the sky).’

What did Jesus come for other than to save souls, and what mission did he give to the Apostles, other than to save souls? Our mission is to go to heaven and ensure that as many others can go there as possible! There is just one choice: heaven or the unquenchable fire.

It is very easy to read and preach the gospel purely from the viewpoint of the soul’s salvation, from death and from ‘particular’ judgement. In Matthew, we can take chapter 3 on John the Baptist: the axe at the foot of the tree, the winnowing fork in hand to clear the threshing floor, the wheat in the barn, the chaff thrown to the fire. In chapter 5, we have the Beatitudes: sound advice on how to be surer of going to heaven and ensuring oneself a good place there. The lamp, the salt: this is about responsibility for leading others to heaven. Then there is the narrow gate (chapter 7), and the parables (chapter 13). The sower: merits to be acquired before the harvest; the tares (thrown into the fire): inevitable judgement; the treasure and the pearl: the soul to be saved; the rest is irrelevant. The same meaning can be found in chapter 18 (the things that cause people to stumble). The lost sheep: final perseverance (conversion in time).

This is the formula for our ‘de catechizandis rudibus’, ‘mission’ style: because we must not seek things that are too complicated; we must use easily accessible language to talk to simple people.

And sure enough, our ‘religion’ is not inaccessible. At its basis are beliefs which are fairly widely accepted and common to many religions: God, the soul, death, heaven and hell: God must be worshipped, the soul must be saved, death must be prepared for, heaven must be gained, hell must be avoided. Death is the moment when all is settled. Everything depends on being in order at that moment, so that the soul is saved.

In practical terms, avoid mortal sin. It is terribly dangerous: one may die without having time to get oneself back in line, to confess. If one has the misfortune to stumble into a mortal sin, one must confess very quickly. If one cannot confess, one must perform an act of contrition in the meantime (but nothing is as good as confession).

The Christian religion says what you have to do to get to heaven: you have to get baptised in order to wipe away original sin (and there’s something one needs to know about: that business with Adam and Eve); one must go to Mass on Sunday and attend at Easter because that is obligatory. Doing that, avoiding serious sins and confessing, you will be saved. What you have to do to confess and take communion is learnt in the catechism, with prayers. In order to do well, you should also say your prayers in the morning and evening. When you get married, to be in order, you mustn’t arrange everything just with the relatives. You must go and find the priest who will tell you what you need to do, and do what is necessary before you can get together.

When you are seriously ill, you should send for the priest so that he can give you the ‘sacraments’. If this is not possible, you should perform acts of contrition.

Waiting for the final moments to ‘convert’ is terribly risky. You can’t be sure that you will have time. Finally, if you have reached that point, don’t forget the last element of salvation: performing an act of

contrition and praying to the Virgin.

Finally, to increase one's chances of salvation (and take out extra insurance) and increase your merits and the reward you will receive in heaven, it is strongly recommended that as well as the obligatory things you should do other things that are not recommended: attend Mass, go to confession, take communion often, say other prayers (especially the rosary), and most especially do what the Sacred Heart and Our Lady of Fatima requested for the first Saturday and for which they have made promises.

Such is the Christian's vade mecum: 'Do this and you will go to heaven'.

And Jesus Christ? No mention of him yet! Of course, it is also important to know (but one learns this in the catechism) that he was born at midnight on 25 December in a stable, and then that he died on a cross 'to wipe away the sins of the world'. (That's the way it is. You need to know. It's necessary.)

When you want to become a Christian, there is no need to worry. It's not complicated: you study religion for a while, you learn the prayers. You are told what you need to know. You are shown what you have to do and, when you are ready, you are baptised, you go to confession and take communion, and you've done it: you are a Christian.

All this is to create a religion within reach of the ordinary people, a religion that people will be able to understand and practise (a religion with things you need to know and things you need to do = in order to go to heaven), a religion that people will like... perhaps! There's talk of going to heaven, poetry, the popular imagination, and there are processions, flowers, garlands made of coloured paper, like you get at festivals, singing, dancing, music. (Isn't it to imitate heaven that we have festivals? They are like a day of paradise on earth.) Yes, but one isn't always in the mood for celebration throughout one's life: there are bad days, days when everything goes wrong: your wife's ill, or the kids. The buffalo dies, the rain doesn't come or the paddy-field is flooded. The caterpillars devour the crop a month before harvest time. When one has all these problems on one's hands, and even when things aren't going so badly, but simply because times change, ideas change (that's life). The practices of such a religion, even simplified, become a nuisance: confession and communion for the annual festival (that's what Easter amounts to), it's no big deal. It's for the festival, once a year. We all go there together (to confession), but Sundays, the 52 Sundays that come round once a week, all year: we've got nothing against it, but we're neglectful. We confess in a very quiet voice. In Thailand, and especially among the Laotians in the north-east, an accommodating line is taken: when the priest seems to really insist that we do something in order to go to heaven, we are happy to go along with it, and we will even ask him ourselves. If we know that this is what he likes, we can't refuse. It's perhaps like a favour that we do him, an opportunity to notch up some merits for him for his own place in heaven (after all, why else would he have become a priest?) – just the way things were for our bonzes, before we were converted.

Remedies, various forms of emergency help: we will have plenty of opportunities to ask him for a something in return for the favour that we do him or the pleasure that we give him by attending Mass, confessing our sins and receiving the sacraments. (He must be really keen on all this: he talks of nothing else.)

It is very rare to encounter enthusiasts among us who burden the priest with their unpredictable and irrepressible desire for sacraments: 'It's up to Father, like Father wants and does'. How good the people are! All one has to do is deal with their forgetfulness. One simply sends legionaries (from the Legion of Mary) to remind this or that person that it has been a very long time since he has shown his face at Mass, at confession, or that the 'Easter period' will be over without him having done his duty. (When is that period, do they know? Our ways of counting are not the same as theirs.) He had forgotten. He will go on Sunday, of course! And next year, when the current legionaries have gone back into the rank and file (for example, the girls who have got married in the mean time) and forgotten their duty, fresh waves of legionaries will be sent to remind them and they will always be

received properly, with affability and even gratitude: 'It's very kind of you to come and remind us... we had forgotten!'

One day, a man passed through my village, holding a flask. He came to ask for a few drops of communion wine. He was a 'full' Christian (he had received all the sacraments, including marriage). He knew all the prayers and as he had been the Father's altar server for many years, he still knew 'everything that has to be done at Mass' (and to back up what he was saying, he recited the Prayers at the Foot of the Altar to me, in Latin of course: 'Dominus vobiscum. Et cum spiritu tuo', with the appropriate gestures. He had then left his wife and gone on a long journey, and the Father who, when he got married, had allocated his portion of paddy-field to him, had confiscated it (as had been agreed in the event of infidelity). He had travelled as far as Bombay with a merchant, as his domestic servant. And now, he was old. Of course, he had taken another wife in another place, and it was difficult to 'sort things out'. He begged for a little of the communion wine, which only the priest drinks and which has great properties. At his age, he felt that it would do him good. Was this superstition? My first instinct was to refuse. Then, thinking that this would be to confirm him in the idea that this was a jealously guarded 'talismán' (if his request were refused – ed.), I decided to comply, and he left with his flask virtually full and the customary wishes for strength, health and long life.

Such good people, the Laotians! Realism, simplicity, submission to the necessities and to the slow rhythm of nature, the seasons and the years. They know how to wait for what matures slowly. They demonstrate benevolence and the ability to soothe hastiness, impetuosity and anger, working against the natural inertia of things and people. I believe that I have been enriched by this realism and humour, although I am aware that the negative side of these qualities (apathy, nonchalance, lack of providence, inconstancy) could be luckily exchanged with the qualities of that negative side. My father, my mother, my brothers, my sisters, my nephews, my nieces, my cousins from the NE of Thailand, how ill at ease I feel in this religion in which we have dressed you: garb both foreign and strange, both too short and too long, like something that was not made for you, in which you are decked out rather than properly dressed. To dress someone properly is to bring out the beauty of the body, to transfigure it, to reveal its full radiance, its full 'glory' in the Biblical sense. It seems to me that the mission, instead of confining its ambitions to sending your souls, completely bare, one by one, to heaven by the surest and shortest route, should have passed on to you the Spirit of the Lord, the initiator and consummator of all things, so that he could properly dress, inform and steer towards their fulfilment the seeds sown and cultivated since prehistory by Wisdom who takes many forms, incognito, in their human seedbed, the diversifications and amalgamations of which have formed the physical, moral, spiritual and human heritage of the Thai people, so that in the end that precious, unique stone, like no other, should not be lacking which is indispensable to the fullness of the new and final people of God, the Church gathered from the four winds, from every tribe, language, people and nation.

The mission has circumscribed its ambitions: you have been offered some 'efficacious' recipes for getting to heaven.

These people are country folk, they exhibit atavistic country traits, the wisdom of country folk, steeped in realism and good sense. (They should not be taken for fools.) With our simplified 'potted religion' for simple folks, haven't we done just that? They say: 'Look! They like processions, flowers, garlands of coloured paper, music, dance, festivals, plays that tell interminable love stories against an unrealistic backdrop, like a dream, to which one can always add a new episode, rags, tawdry jewellery. It's pretty, it's entertaining. It's of interest for a moment, one pretends to be caught up in the game, as though one believed in it. But it's only a game, a representation, a festival. We're not stupid, we just play the game, that's all.'

So there it is, a religion, with a dreamlike heaven, rose-water-scented, as its goal, and, in order to

get there without fail, certain 'tricks', recipes, ceremonies and representations accompanied by a goodly number of rags and trimmings, where one cannot very easily see the connection between the two things – how a given obligatory observance can lead to a given result (e.g., go to Mass on Sunday, and eat fish on Friday, but not chicken! Necessary in order to go to heaven). Really, I do not think that country people's common sense, even if they do agree to go along with the game, is fooled by all this!

It seems to me that they believe in all these things a little, not too much – no more than is necessary.

Siamese Buddhism is Singhalese reformed Buddhism. While paying tribute on festival days to the taste for infantile and feminine religiosity with tawdry jewellery and cheap trash, it remains attached to an austere and ascetic line. Moreover, as a considerable number of monasteries belong to the reforms of last century which aimed at achieving still greater austerity, how does one explain that this austere form of Buddhism supplanted and drove out the Hindu worship that had preceded it (perhaps due to Khmer influence) among the Thais? Surely it was because Buddhism in its austerity seemed more serious and truer to them?

Four or five years ago, a vague desire to convert to Christianity appeared in a town. One of our priests, who is very zealous, went to visit them: some families decided to start studying the religion. To encourage them, the Father very quickly [endeavoured] to 'really show them how things are done in our religion'. In one of the houses, he got them to pile up some packages or boxes, which he covered with rags and decorated with rags of various colours, and he 'showed' them Mass. When Mass was over, they said: 'That was nice,' and the altar was left there so that he could 'do Mass' whenever he visited.

In Bangkok, we have 'done Mass' on several occasions in the presence of students from the faculty of Buddhist studies, who have come to 'see our religion'. Photos and reports have appeared in the Catholic periodicals. Inviting non-Christians to visit a church and trying to explain some of the symbols to them – fair enough. But performing a Mass, a real one, for them in order to show them how we do things? Even if they asked, there would probably be some way of making them understand that such a thing is not feasible. They could always go to a Church one Sunday and watch a Christian community taking part in its parish Mass. They wouldn't understand the rituals any better, but they would have seen the essential thing: the assembly of believers (who will protest and say that the essential thing is the Holy Sacrament!). Did Jesus institute the Church to do Masses, or the Eucharist to gather the Church in him?

So we find ourselves with this religion with its single preoccupation with the salvation of the soul, using the efficacious and obligatory means: giving the sacraments and extreme unction at the end, and in view of the absolute necessity of the sacraments and human weakness (a bruised reed, a smouldering wick), not demanding too much, especially of simple folk: this is pastoral charity.

Although the people take all that we tell them and get them to do with a good dose of humour, and do not believe in it all any more than is necessary, there is a category of 'Christians' which has entered completely into the religious mould that comes from the West: the priests from the local clergy. Taken and moulded from childhood, they are perfectly comfortable with all this (especially the middle-aged ones, who were 'well formed' by the Fathers, before new ideas burst in on the scene). The fact that they are priests is because they were docile: otherwise they would not have made it to the priesthood! The young clergy who attend seminary in Rome amid the questioning atmosphere of the Council years will doubtless be different. The older and wiser Fathers may have a rough ride.

For the middle-aged local clergy with whom we work, who set the general tone of the local mission, the key qualities are maturity, seriousness, zeal, realism, humility, pastoral charity, and a profound sense of mercy for simple people, the materially and spiritually poor. It really is a question of 'God

and souls', 'saving souls'. And all the works of mercy, education and development are for the sake of souls (as was Jesus' way). Their fundamental concern is to provide the souls entrusted to their care with every means of maintaining or recovering a state of grace, and above all the precious grace of final perseverance. Feeding the devotion of the faithful with parish life, instructing children with the catechism, seeing to the minimum of preparation that is impossible and acceptable in 'converts' with a view to marriage. Being attentive to issue periodic reminders to the negligent and the sinners about their obligations, either directly or through zealous Christians (the Legion of Mary), striving to bring back into line with the laws of the Church those who have gone astray.

'So what would you want of these good people and these saintly priests? Did St John Vianney do otherwise?'

The Lord forbid that I should judge anyone, or reproach any individual with anything at all, for at the individual level I can only admire. At the same time, though, at the general level of the mission, may one not express regret that we do not have a little more poverty of spirit: our status and general image have been a little like those of businessmen; our material and capital resources and our expenses have been rather excessive; our manifestations of power somewhat extravagant; we have invested substantial sums without particularly precise plans in enterprises that we have subsequently dropped or allowed to lapse; we have shown a certain lack of respect for the money that has been donated and for the donors, and rather too pronounced a habit of holding out our hand and receiving.

Above all, though, there is a need for a profound conversion in the deeper meaning of the mission, which has been left narrow and impoverished by the perspective of ensuring the individual salvation of souls. We have descended from the level of a Faith to the level of a religion with 'universal' beliefs and practices, valid at all times and in all places, indifferent to time and space. In this sense, such universality is a form of poverty, as it includes fixedness in time and uniformity in space (rather than the two dimensions – vertical and horizontal – of the cross, we have instead the point or the circle without any dimensions). Yet our Faith is Catholic, and this is the opposite of any atemporal or aspatial universality. Faith is wedded to the dimension of time: the work progresses, the story takes shape, punctuated with significant events, days which generate one another, laden with all the past and big with all of the future, on the way to the accomplishment of everything, which will be so abundantly the last that it will be the definitive first. So it is that in the final age this hidden mystery has been clearly announced and revealed to us: the total meaning of mankind's and indeed the entire Universe's progress, from remote preparations through to realisation (in the end that has been secured yet is still to come), in the Easter of the only Son. This revelation of the work is at the same time the Revelation of the Initiator, the Realiser and the Consummator. And by virtue of this announcement, everyone faces a personal challenge: 'Do you want to take your place today, the place that is already provided, marked out by the Master of the Work, in the mystery on its way towards consummation?' We have decided, and, in trust, putting ourselves completely in the hands of the Master of the Work, we have put all our hope of life, all our 'human project', into the construction of the Kingdom. 'He that shall "lose" his life for my sake', that is Faith.

Could it be because theology had a tendency in those days to be based on philosophical speculations rather than seeking to scrutinise God's design in the Scriptures? We have inherited a mission which has lost its fundamental dimensions.

The existence of God and the immortality of the soul – the conclusions of speculative reasoning – have become basic beliefs of religion, instead of Faith, a personal response to the Lord's call to enter into the work of the coming Kingdom, into the work that channels all things towards consummation, the mission that the only Son received from his Father, and which continues every day under the guidance of his Spirit, in the Church, God's new people.

Based on 'beliefs' in the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, what could the coming

Kingdom designate other than the salvation of the soul and happiness in heaven!

As for the spatial dimension which is enriched by all these scattered diversities and gives them their original, irreplaceable place in the overall unity, once it was misunderstood, diversity came to seem like a weakness, a source of peril, and under the pretext of unity we have rendered everything uniform. We regarded everything that was familiar to us from the West as authentically Christian, and the entire cultural heritage of the 'infidels' was therefore suspected of contamination with superstition.

How could a religion that has lost its sense of space and time not ipso facto become disembodied? A matter of individual rescues carried out at death, one by one, each in turn, each facing his fate, without any link to the fate of others. The salvation of the soul – that's the main thing! And once the soul is in heaven, all man's aspirations are deemed to be satisfied. The soul lives on, detached and separate. But it is the whole of man that wants to be saved, and the whole of humanity that needs to be saved, indeed the whole universe, including Sister Earth and Brother Sun. Modern man increasingly has a sense of the whole: the whole of man, body and soul, matter and spirit, man in association with the whole of the human community, and the human community in association with the whole of creation. The word 'save' makes him feel uncomfortable: saving souls, or some souls, from the immense shipwreck of all the rest?

And what of all man's work on earth, material progress, science, culture, the global society of peoples? It would merely exasperate him to quote to your brother man a phrase from the Gospels such as 'For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world...?', as he has every reason to believe that you are using this detached phrase in a sense other than that in which the Lord uttered it. Man cannot be convinced only by what can rest on clear proof and syllogisms. But there are also things of which he feels deeply with his nature, in communion with the whole of existence, that this cannot be true, and that cannot be false. There are aspirations that one senses springing up from somewhere too deep for them to be deceptive. This good sense is an instinct for what is true, which gives sound reactions to people whose powers of ratiocination have gone astray. Thus materialism itself may be a sound reaction if, in the presence of certain aberrations (alienations) of religiosity, it becomes clear 'that one cannot believe in these people's god'. Just as aberrant religiosity alienates, so Faith liberates. There are forms of devotion that are not a sign of good mental health, and rejecting them is thus a sign of balance and good sense.

It is worrying to see Faith give way to religiosity, and a more or less ill-assorted set of beliefs, practices, interdictions and rites pass itself off as Faith.

Religion: what an ambiguous thing it is! It may feed on sound instinctive feelings, or it may spring from fairly confused anxieties. Religion, like all that is human, needs to be redeemed, to be purified of its original ambiguity, to die like all that is in the human heart, in order to reach the Kingdom of God, for it is one of the works of man; whereas Faith is, more than man's response, a gift from God. The plan of making non-Christians better Buddhists and better Hindus (cf. Quéguiner, MEP) is denounced as a confusion and perversion of the nature and goal of mission work, on the grounds that 'conversion amounts to rupture rather than continuity'.

At present, the faithful of the non-Christian religions who wish to follow Christ are left with no alternative to a prior absolute break with their religion, without any possibility of the slightest continuity: the whole lot must be rejected. No possibility is considered (in fact it is positively excluded) of converting and elevating that religion itself to Faith, of bringing in that capital of human values and that spiritual heritage into the Kingdom of God.

When Buddhist monks ask to convert, the first thing that must be done is to defrock them, reduce them to lay status. Such a thing took place here not long ago. To mark the occasion, photos were taken, with the local priests, before and after. Before with the yellow robe, and after with a wretched borrowed pair of trunks and shirt. Why this degradation? Why could this monk, this religious, not

remain a religious when he came to Christ?

What is more, such a convert is required not just to renounce the entire spiritual heritage of the Buddha (which is cast into the outer darkness), but to lumber himself with an entire set of Western religious trappings – beliefs and practices that bear the name of Christian religion – and to stop there, without having really achieved Faith. Religion for religion – what is the benefit of this? The fine yellow robe is thrown away and replaced by European garb!

When will we see the way open for the non-Christian religions to enter the Kingdom with their spiritual heritage? When will we stop obliging them to 'Judaize'? Would not Faith suffice, if accompanied by a few essential signs, simplified as far as possible?

And now, what causes us less of a problem: do our Christians form communities that are capable of welcoming new brothers and offering a valid testimony, if they themselves have not undergone the conversion from religiosity-religion to Faith? If we lack a feel for the historic growth of the Kingdom of God on this earth from the time of preparation through to the consummation, we cannot really 'read' its message (we lack the key, we are not on the right wavelength). Our Father may be the deity of the philosophers, but not the 'Living God, God like no other, the true one, he who is', the 'Father of Jesus Christ'. Jesus ceases to be the alpha and omega. All that we remember of Jesus is his birth and his death, simple episodes: a chapter of catechism, some things that need to be known. In sentimental piety, which is overwhelmingly favoured, it is the 'Blessed Virgin' and then the Sacred Heart, and then St Joseph, and then the others. The Church's time has been misappropriated. The aim has become to die in a state of grace and go to heaven (and as there is purgatory, individual aid to the souls of the dead has laid claim to the Mass and the clergy's 'professional activity' for six days out of seven). Once the soul is in heaven, it is hard to see what could be expected of the Parousia! Man's task in this world and the need to ensure his eternal salvation are not integrated: they are separated, and each becomes the object of a separate time, compartmentalised.

Man's tasks in the world do not enter the kingdom; they are only related to salvation as an 'opportunity for penitence for sins and merits for heaven', a completely extrinsic connection. How can we live the liturgical year, the different times and celebrations of feasts, Sundays as a memorial of the events of salvation, made present today, on the way towards accomplishment? They have become birthdays (Christmas), moments of celebration of particular persons (the Sacred Heart, the saints) or even of a statue, or a festival of ideas, of the articles of the catechism (the Trinity), and of virtues (of the Blessed Virgin). What we learn the most easily by far is the moments at which particular prayers should be recited (the different 'months', the day of the dead, the novenas and those which are the most popular and the easiest to remember: the first Fridays, Saturdays and first Mondays, the last-born here).

How could the sacraments be anything other than 'things to be done in order to be saved', without reference to the events of salvation and to the Initiator and Consummator of our salvation (except in the sense that it is Jesus that has instituted them, as everyone knows)?

When a community has already acquired certain habits and non-Christians come along who wish to 'study' religion, as they say here, how can they avoid acquiring the habits of the new group into which they are transplanted?

