



INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED JESUIT STUDIES
BOSTON COLLEGE

JESUIT SOURCES

International Symposia on Jesuit Studies

ISSN: 2766-0664

Michel de Certeau (1926–86) and His Travels to Latin America:
The Reconfiguration of the Notion of Mission

Author: Carlos Alvarez, S.J., Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile –
Centro Manuel Larraín / ITER-Universidad Alberto Hurtado

Source: *Circa Misiones: Jesuit Understandings of Mission through the Centuries*
(Proceedings of the Symposium held at Lisbon, Portugal, June 12–14, 2023)

Edited by: Alessandro Corsi, Claudio Ferlan, and Francisco Malta Romeiras

ISBN: 978–1–947617–35–3

Published by: Institute of Jesuit Sources

Originally Published: October 30, 2025

<https://doi.org/10.51238/ISJS.2023.15>

Provided in Open Access by the Institute for Advanced Jesuit Studies at Boston College.

The Institute of Jesuit Sources, specializes in preserving, maintaining, and expanding for scholars around the world important texts and studies in Jesuit history, spirituality, and pedagogy.

© Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2025

Visit our website at <https://jesuitsources.bc.edu>

Michel de Certeau (1926–86) and His Travels to Latin America: The Reconfiguration of the Notion of Mission

CARLOS ALVAREZ, S.J.¹

Introduction

This essay seeks to explore the displacement of the notion of mission established by Michel de Certeau (1926–86) through his own itinerary, especially linked to his travels to Latin America. His first journey to the continent dates to the European autumn of 1966, when he was sent by the journal *Études* to Brazil to observe the Congress of the Latin American Confederation of Religious. He made a second visit in early 1967, staying in Venezuela, Chile, Brazil, and Argentina. In 1968, de Certeau went so far as to ask his provincials for a joint mission between Brazil and France that would allow him to collaborate in the intellectual development that was taking place in Latin America in the post-Vatican II (1962–65) period. The church's involvement in that continent's political and social life made it a highly promising laboratory for elaborating a new political theology or at least for elucidating the complex relationship between revolution and tradition.

After a period in the seminary, de Certeau joined the Society of Jesus in 1950, encouraged by the model of the “intellectuel engagé” (engaged intellectual) represented at that time by Henri de Lubac and the Jesuits of the Jesuit Faculty of Fourvière in Lyon. De Certeau entered the Society of Jesus with a desire to go on mission to China. For political reasons, this desire was never realized. However, in 1968 the missionary impulse was reawakened, this time with Brazil being the chosen place but without the joint mission that de Certeau had been hoping for.

Although the theme of mission is referred to explicitly in de Certeau's articles “La conversion du missionnaire” (The conversion of the missionary) and “L'universalisme ignatien: Mystique et mission” (Ignatian universalism: Mysticism and mission), there are other works where it appears in a more or less tangential way, as for example in chapter 5 of his *The Writing of History*, entitled “Ethnography: Speech, or the Space of the Other; Jean de Léry.”² Here, de Certeau analyzes the figure of Jean de Léry, a sixteenth-century Calvinist missionary who in 1578 wrote *History of a Journey Made in the Land of Brazil*, a work considered one of the founding texts of ethnology.

1. Carlos Alvarez has a PhD in theology (Centre Sèvres—Jesuit Faculties of Paris) and a PhD in history (the Institute of History of the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile—PUC). He is currently professor of theology at PUC, member of Centro Teológico Manuel Larraín and researcher at ITER—Universidad Alberto Hurtado. His research interests are the cultural history of theology in the twentieth century, particularly in France, via the thought of Henri de Lubac and Michel de Certeau. He currently directs a project on the intellectual history of the Society in Chile in the twentieth century focusing on mysticism, theology, and Ignatian spirituality.

2. Michel de Certeau, *La escritura de la historia* (México: Universidad Iberoamericana, Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, 2006), 203–33.

Or in his dense and complex article “Histoire et anthropologie en Lafitau” (History and anthropology in Lafitau)—on the French Jesuit missionary Joseph-François Lafitau (1681–1746)³—who was based in North America and is also remembered as one of the pioneers of ethnology due to his famous book *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Times*.

In this way, de Certeau, close to these figures, liked to define himself as a simple “traveler”⁴ in the lands of the Other, capable of recounting and narrating the particularity of diverse itineraries, collected in his reading of distant countries, past and present. Within these countries, the Americas have a fundamental place, to such an extent that Certeau spent most of his travels in the Americas.

The State of the Discussion of Mission in the 1940s

In 1941, Henri de Lubac published a remarkable article entitled “Le fundament théologique des missions” (The theological foundation of the missions), the fruit of two lectures he gave in January 1941 at the Chair of Missions at the Catholic University of Lyon.

A brief review of de Lubac’s paradigm will help immerse us in the specificity of de Certeau’s approach to missions. In the lectures that gave rise to “Le fundament théologique des missions,” de Lubac tried to break the impasse produced by two approaches to the question “why missions?,” which was in vogue in Europe at the beginning of the 1940s. The first approach, the so-called rigorist solution, was based on Cyprian’s adage *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the church, there is no salvation); the second, called laxist, claimed that the purpose of the mission was solely to facilitate salvation for the unbeliever. In his paradigm of mission, de Lubac links the model of the Münster School, founded by the German Jesuit Joseph Schmidlin (1876–1944),⁵ which understood mission as the need to proclaim the Gospel for the “conversion” and/or “salvation of souls,” as fullness (“The glory of God is that man should live”), with the

3. De Certeau presented this lecture in Berkeley in early 1979. Tom Conley was in charge of presenting the conference devoted to Lafitau in front of about twenty people “delighted by the intensity and precision of his remarks. He was about to foreshadow what cultural studies and postcolonial studies, as well as travel literature, were to become.” Conley interview, in Francos Dosse, *Le marcheur blessé* (Paris: La Découverte, 2002), 416.

4. Michel de Certeau, “L’expérience spirituelle,” *Christus* 17, no. 68 (October 1970): 488–98, here 488.

5. Its founder was the Jesuit Joseph Schmidlin, who in 1917 published an “Introduction to the Science of Missions.” Influenced by Protestant currents, he restricted the concept of mission to the apostolate among non-Christians, leaving aside heretics, Protestants, and schismatics. The mission would then be the Christianization of the pagans. The missionary purpose would be twofold: individual by conversion and baptism, and social by the organization of the local church. According to Ángel Santos, his argument can be summarized as follows: “The mission of Christ to his church must be understood according to the very terms of the sending. Now, these terms contain nothing more than the preaching of the Gospel to all nations, and baptism [...]. He insists on the essential point of saving souls. The pagans are in great danger and in great spiritual misery; their salvation is compromised, or at least, it is very doubtful.” Ángel Santos, “Contribución de la Compañía de Jesús a la misionología en el siglo XX,” *Cuadernos de cultura misional* (Burgos: Editorial Instituto Español de Misiones Extranjeras, 1958), 5:1–23.

School of Louvain, whose main exponent, the Belgian Jesuit Pierre Charles,⁶ upheld the notion of mission understood as *Plantatio ecclesiae* (the founding of the church).⁷ De Lubac escapes the rigorism–laxism dilemma through the notion of “fullness,” linked to the adage of Irenaeus of Lyon: “The glory of God is man fully alive.” In turn, he insists on the principle of “divine charity,” which cannot but seek its expansion. Although de Lubac is still linked to the scheme of the “implantation of the church,”⁸ his approach seems to be less hierarchical, recognizing that the church is missionary in all its members who are in solidarity with the common growth of the church.

The Mission: Between Secularization and Decolonization

A year after the lectures that led to de Lubac’s “Le fondement théologique des missions,” a significant book was published by the priests Henri Godin and Yvan Daniel from “La mission de Paris,” with the extremely provocative title *France pays de mission?* (Is France a country of missions?). Its publication marked the beginning of an awareness of the profound link between secularization and the reconfiguration of the notion of mission.⁹ This book, the result of research based on the sociology of religious practice,¹⁰ landed on the desk of the cardinal of Paris, Emmanuel Suhard, on Easter Monday, 1942: “I am shocked,” he confessed the next day to his secretary. “I knew something about this, but I had no idea of its extent.” The book’s thesis is simple: in 1942, a census of religious belief in France showed two regions, Bretagne (Brittany) and the North, which were still Christian in terms of culture and mentality, and other areas that were already de-Christianized, especially on the peripheries of the cities, where the working class predominated, as well as in some rural areas.¹¹ The authors note the church’s abandonment of the working class, which was therefore fertile ground for the advance of communism in France. The authors call for a mission dedicated to this population. In this way, the notion of mission gradually began to expand its semantic field, ceasing to be associated only with establishing the church in traditionally non-Christian countries.

6. Pierre Charles, Belgian Jesuit, founder of Association universitaire catholique pour l’aide aux missions, and great animator of missiology weeks in Belgium. His publications include: *Les dossiers de l’action missionnaire: Manuel de missiologie*, 2nd ed. (Louvain: Editions de l’Aucam, 1939); *Études missiologiques* (Paris: Desclee de Brouwer, 1956). He maintained that “missionary dogmatics is nothing more and nothing less than the theology of the expansion of the visible church.” The figure of Charles, who developed a very influential missiological thought in France and Belgium from the 1920s until the Second Vatican Council, must be underlined. For him, unlike Schindlin, mission is not only addressed to the pagans but to all groups in which the church is not yet visibly established.

7. Cf. Henri de Lubac, *Le fondement théologique des missions* (Paris: Les Éditions du Seuil, 1946), 46–47.

8. “Le propre de missions, c’est d’apporter aux hommes qui ne les ont pas encore à leur disposition les moyens essentiels du salut. Or, ces moyens se résument en un seul: la présence visible de l’Église au milieu des hommes. Concluons que l’objet propre des missions est d’apporter aux hommes cette présence visible, c’est-à-dire de fonder ou, comme s’exprime la liturgie, de planter l’Église dans tous les pays où elle n’est pas encore établie: plantaverunt ecclesiam, est-il dit des premiers apôtres.” De Lubac, *Le fondement théologique des missions*, 46.

9. I use the complex concept of secularization in a restricted way, referring only to processes of de-Christianization.

10. Cf. Denis Pelletier, *Les catholiques en France de 1789 à nos jours* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2019), 226–30.

11. Cf. Christoph Theobald, *Urgences pastorales du moment présent* (Paris: Bayard Éditions, 2017), 101–3.

In addition to this process, from 1950, the colonial problem began to agitate Catholic consciences. Although the encyclical *Summi pontificatus* (October 20, 1939) of Pius XII (r.1939–58) affirmed that “the objective of missionaries of all times has been to facilitate intimate comprehension” and to “give fruitful spiritual values for a living and life-giving preaching of the Gospel of Christ,”¹² in the civilizations where the church was established, little by little, the shameful sin of the mission and its close links with oppressive social structures began to be denounced. For example, in the preface to the December 1953 issue of the journal *Recherches et débats* (Research and debates), we can see the crisis of conscience that the mission–colonization link was beginning to generate among French Christians: “Today, the colonial conquests are the subject of less unanimous judgment, and their permanence raises anguishing questions in the conscience of the people. For his part, the French Catholic feels deeply involved in this drama, and he knows that almost personal responsibilities weigh on him at present.”¹³

The Conversion of the Missionary through the Figure of the Missionary-Ethnographer

The first important milestone in the reconfiguration of the notion of mission dates to 1963, in connection with the article “The Conversion of the Missionary,”¹⁴ written for the review *Christus*¹⁵ and published prior to de Certeau’s encounter with Latin America. His contribution was included in a special issue devoted to mission, entitled “Le devoir missionnaire” (Missionary duty). *Christus* was thus responding to the effervescence that accompanied the preparation of the Second Vatican Council on missiology.

Although the article corresponds to de Certeau’s earlier work on the great texts of Ignatian spirituality in *Christus*, it also shows an interest in an interdisciplinary approach to the religious question, which makes this article an excellent mirror of the necessary dialogue between theology and the human sciences as a condition of possibility for understanding mission. In the article, de Certeau explores the necessary conversion of the missionary, a stage prior to the conversion of the pagans. This conversion implies the death of a whole linguistic and cultural baggage, where the missionary’s understanding of the faith, the Gospel, and the church is framed. “Going out of one world to enter another” is the project and the initial definition of mission. De Certeau draws on Émile Poulat’s work on the “birth of the worker-priests,” showing how the “going out–coming in” poles organize the mission abroad. The conversion of the missionary comes after a time of “disillusionment and anguish.”¹⁶ Like his master de Lubac, de Certeau quotes Abbé Monchanin on the need to review mental habits

12. Collectif: Colonisation et Conscience chrétienne, *Recherches et débats* (Paris: Fayard, 1953), 9.

13. *Recherches et débats* (December 1953): 7. “Aujourd’hui les conquêtes coloniales son l’objet d’un jugement moins unanime, et leur permanence pose d’angoissantes questions à la conscience des peuples. Pour sa part, le catholique français se sent très engagé dans ce drame et il sait que des responsabilités quasi personnelles pèsent sur lui dans le présent.”

14. Michel de Certeau, “La conversion du missionnaire,” *Christus* 40 (1963): 514–33.

15. Michel de Certeau was subeditor of *Christus* from 1960 until 1967. See Carlos Alvarez, Henri de Lubac, and Michel de Certeau, *Le débat entre théologie et sciences humaines au regard de la mystique et de l’histoire* (Paris: Cerf Éditions, 2024), 105–66.

16. De Certeau, “La conversion du missionnaire,” 515

and methods. In this way, deep questioning is not an accessory but the “inner law of the mission.”¹⁷

“The Conversion of the Missionary” is evidence of what we might call the “ethnological turn” of the Catholic mission in the 1950s–1960s.¹⁸ De Certeau compares the missionary to an ethnographer, invited to enter and study the culture of the pagans in order to discover their common humanity. The allusion to the human sciences in the article is explicit. To purify his prejudices, the missionary must use “the methods of ethnographic research or sociological analysis.”¹⁹ By painstakingly revealing the linguistic signs, the symbolisms, the topography, the missionaries begin to discover this “terra incognita.” This process of research leads him to discover an unspoken unity of cultural meaning that escapes him everywhere. “Like the ethnographer, the missionary becomes aware of different depths; like the ethnographer, he is confronted with the problematic fact that contrasts with his simplifying postulates: the plurality of mental universes.”²⁰ At this point in the argument, de Certeau quotes Claude Lévi-Strauss on the death of the ethnographer to the societal imaginary from which he came.²¹ Like Lazarus, the ethnographer is a dead person who returns from another world and who cannot rely on cultural certainties, which therefore remain necessary.

The missionary is moved, shaken, because he discovers that his church is linked to a determined culture. In other words, the missionary, situated between two worlds, discovers that the Catholic essence of the church is situated and localized only in certain regions, captured by certain cultures. However, unlike the ethnographer, the missionary cannot stop at the objective knowledge of his research. The divergence reveals an open and even unknown possibility for the emergence of Catholicism. The apostle witnesses and participates “in his flesh and in his spirit in the painful engendering of Catholicism.”²² This still open or unknown dimension allows the missionary to resist the temptation to clarify and identify his brothers and sisters with the categories he knows from his past.

De Certeau places his understanding of the necessary conversion of the missionary in a paradigm of a coalition of cultures. Referring to Levi-Strauss, he states that “all cultural progress is a function of a coalition between cultures,” and “this coalition is more fruitful when it establishes between the most differentiated cultures,”²³ and the missionary’s intervention must promote a much deeper renewal of Christianity.

17. De Certeau, “La conversion du missionnaire,” 515

18. See Agustina Altman, “Echar raíces: El impacto del ‘giro antropológico’ de las misiones menonitas en el caso argentino (1940–1960),” *Nuevo Mundo/Mundos Nuevos*, Cuestiones del tiempo presente, Puesto en línea December 10, 2018, <http://journals.openedition.org/nuevomundo/74262> (accessed September 10, 2025).

19. De Certeau, “La conversion du missionnaire,” 519.

20. De Certeau, “La conversion du missionnaire,” 520.

21. Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Diogène couché,” *Les temps modernes* 10 (1955): 1186–1220, here 1217.

22. De Certeau, “La conversion du missionnaire,” 521.

23. De Certeau, “La conversion du missionnaire,” 530.

Reconfiguration from the Paradigm of Proclamation: *Plantatio ecclesia* to the Dialogical Paradigm

Is a new missiological paradigm beginning to be born in the church? De Certeau cites three remarkable testimonies that appeared at the beginning of the 1960s and marked a generation of missionaries: Henri Gravand, C.S.Sp., *Visage africain de l'église: Une expérience au Sénégal* (African face of the church: An experience in Senegal [1961]); Placide Tempels, O.F.M., *Notre rencontre* (Our encounter); and of particular spiritual and theological penetration, Jacques Dournes, M.E.P., *Dieu aime les païens: Une mission de l'église sur les plateaux du Vietnam* (God loves the pagans: A mission of the church on the plateaus of Vietnam [1963]).

De Certeau's reflection on the missionary experience suggests a paradigm shift in mission, based on a theory of communication founded on a new understanding of the Christian message. "In order for the Word to reach its addressees, he must grope to find, in it and in them, how to encourage this encounter."²⁴ This theory of communication would be the condition of possibility for the establishment of a true encounter for those who are aware of the mutual strangeness experienced by the missionary in the mission lands and by the new brothers and sisters of these lands.

The missionary might consider that his apostolic task consists in transmitting a message of faith that is identified with knowledge—which he possesses—and that he would have to impose in some way on the mission's beneficiaries. The risk of an intransigence too deeply rooted in the need to safeguard a few words of a certain orthodoxy of faith would not allow him to explain the "mystery enunciated in Christian language: the power of the Word that awakens the whole man to a new life."²⁵ The other risk would be adaptation. De Certeau thus shares, with his master de Lubac, a rather critical view of the notion of adaptation, which he viewed as a concept that ran the risk of suppressing differences.²⁶

According to de Certeau, the apostle's primary intention is not to transmit a doctrine aided by rhetoric. The primary intention must be to "seek to understand people, because he believes that God is already present in them."²⁷ The missionary is thus called to meet people where they live, in the land that God inhabits without their knowing it. This human reality resists the language of faith and therefore requires re-learning to read God because "God writes in characters as yet unknown to the missionary, speaking a language that is not punctuated by any Christian sign."²⁸ Undoubtedly, in de Certeau's thinking, this paradigm shift is sustained by an image of an unpredictable God,²⁹ being a "Deus Semper maior" (God is always greater). It seems that the

24. De Certeau, "La conversion du missionnaire," 515.

25. De Certeau, "La conversion du missionnaire," 516.

26. "L'adaptation peut même devenir un moyen d'éviter la confrontation: le désir de se faire accepter suppose toujours trop vite que les divergences sont superficielles et faciles à estomper avec d'habiles transpositions." De Certeau, "La conversion du missionnaire," 517.

27. De Certeau, "La conversion du missionnaire," 519.

28. De Certeau, "La conversion du missionnaire," 519.

29. "Le missionnaire est dans l'attente de la manifestation du Dieu qui vient, d'une façon, toujours imprevisible." De Certeau, "La conversion du missionnaire," 515.

intercultural experience, the encounter with difference and the Other, is defined in his thought as a spiritual experience.

De Certeau does not base the mission on the classical texts of the sending of Jesus on mission (Mt. 28:16; Mk. 16:15; Jn. 20:19–23) but finds its biblical inspiration in the Acts of the Apostles, especially in the passage where Peter is invited to share impure ritual food with the uncircumcised Cornelius. It is in this passage that Peter finally understands that Christ came for all men (*gentes*) and not only for the Jews. The mission thus leads to a double conversion: the pagan must discover God, and the missionary must deepen his knowledge of God through this experience of common humanity. We could say, then, that the missionary paradigm that imposes itself on de Certeau, founded on a communicational theory, is the paradigm of hospitality, which will be more in vogue in French theology in the 2000s.³⁰

His Passion for Latin America and the Scientific Mission

Many of these new ways of understanding the mission began to be put into practice in de Certeau's own itinerary as he became passionate about the situation in Latin America. His relationship with the continent is therefore fundamental to understanding his intellectual itinerary, and in particular how his understanding of mission continued to evolve. His first links date to 1966, the year in which he was sent by the journal *Études* as an observer to the assembly of the Confederation of Latin American Religious. The article published as a result of this trip was "La vie religieuse en Amérique Latine" (Religious life in Latin America).³¹ He returned to Latin America in 1967, visiting Venezuela, Chile, Argentina, and Brazil. The article that gives an account of this trip is: "Amérique Latine: Ancien ou Nouveau monde? Notes de voyage" (Latin America: Old or New World? Travel notes).

In 1968, de Certeau asked his provincial to be sent on a mission to Brazil. He proposed an "aller-retour" (round trip) between France and Brazil, which would allow him to participate in the bustling political-ecclesial "laboratory" that was Latin America at the time. In the note in which he asks his provincial to divide his mission into an "aller-retour" between Brazil and France, he sets out his intellectual project as a historian:³²

I have been and remain a historian. This specialization is twofold: (A) As an analysis of the relationships between socio-cultural structures and Christian experience, it questions the conditions under which a language of faith develops. It represents one of the ways in which the problem of theology is approached today. (B) As a human science (interfering with ethnology and psychology), it is a hermeneutics of the past according to a present situation. It is a question of knowing how one can, in the light of new problems, situate oneself in relation to one's own history, finding a rootedness in it on the basis of an

30. Christoph Theobald, *Le christianisme comme style*, vol. 1 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2007).

31. Michel de Certeau, "La vie religieuse en Amérique Latine," *Études* (January 1967): 107–13, here 108.

32. Michel de Certeau au Père Provincial, Note suite et précision de la conversation du 6 février 1968, Archives françaises de la Compagnie de Jésus (AFSI).

elucidated discontinuity. This reinterpretation of tradition today concerns both the church and society as a whole. A cultural problem must therefore give rise to theological reflection.³³

We could therefore say, without too much ambiguity, that this is how de Certeau understood his mission as a Jesuit in 1968. The crossing of different disciplinary perspectives appeared as a necessity in order to better grasp the plurality of reality, the contemporary situation of Christianity and culture as a theological place. As he himself explains in his article “Problèmes actuels du sacerdoce en Amérique Latine” (Current problems of the priesthood in Latin America), the church’s involvement in social and political affairs across the continent turned it into a laboratory for exploring the connections between theological innovation and the tensions between revolution and tradition.³⁴ Both subjects were difficult to approach and reflect upon, especially in France, probably because of the clear separation between church and state. In other words, de Certeau wanted to deepen the possibilities opened up by a cultural and intellectual transfer, capable of confronting his own reality with that of Latin America and vice versa. In this way, the mission is reconfigured as a necessary and explicit cultural transfer.

We know that this project would never materialize, but we are left with the imprint of the scriptural testimony of de Certeau’s political discernment and his commitment to the continent’s social situation. It is interesting to note that de Certeau became a keen observer of cultural and religious developments in Latin America. As the editor of the Chilean Jesuit magazine *Mensaje* (Message) wrote about de Certeau’s “Problems of the Priesthood in Latin America,” published in 1969: “[The article reveals] the lucidity of a man who knows how to grasp our differences, respecting them and glimpsing their potential” (86). De Certeau is conscious and lucid in the face of any francocentric temptation to look at phenomena from his own prisms or categories, without attention to cultural particularities.

Following the chronology proposed by Andrés Freijomil,³⁵ it is possible to distinguish three distinct moments in de Certeau’s relationship with Latin America. The first is as a chronicler of the religious world between 1966 and 1970, sent to investigate the socio-political situation of the priesthood and religious life in the context of the *coups d’état* and military dictatorships in Latin America. However, unlike Freijomil, it seems pertinent to extend this cycle to 1973, considering the article “Le Chili après coup” (Chile after the fact). The second stage would be marked by a greater interest in the politico-religious resistance of the native peoples and by research into the tensions between orality and writing in travel literature. The third stage, toward the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, was marked by his historiographical postulates in the light of the “otherness” imposed by the discovery of the Americas: the conquista-

33. Michel de Certeau au Père Provincial, Note suite et précision de la conversation du 6 février 1968, AFSI.

34. Michel de Certeau, “Problèmes actuels du sacerdoce en Amérique Latine,” *Recherches de science religieuse* 56 (1968): 591–601.

35. Andrés Freijomil, “El nuevo mundo como ‘página en blanco’: Elementos para una historia de las representaciones de América Latina en la obra de Michel de Certeau,” *Pelicano* 3 (2017): 31–38.

dor used the New World as a “blank page” where he wrote his history, altering the body of the Other and turning it into a field of expansion of a new system of production.

In de Certeau’s text on Lafitau, there is a sentence that, on first reading, could almost be applied literally to the article’s author:

Perhaps because of this shift from a theology toward an anthropology, he inscribes in the text his travel and his stay among the Iroquois. The distance that detached him from the universalist pretensions of his religious tradition would translate for him into an internal uprooting that alters his place and transforms “his” Christianity into scientific theory. Lafitau’s discourse would be the writing of his history, the index of a non-place between two ideological instances and two cultural worlds.³⁶

Speaking of Lafitau, de Certeau seems to speak of his own itinerary—of a shift from theology to the human sciences, from theology to history,³⁷ in order to avoid the universalist pretension of a theology unaware of its misery. And, like Lafitau, there is something in de Certeau that transforms his way of being Christian, of his own mission, into an urgent need to collaborate in a scientific construction.

The Paradigm of Spiritual Conversation at the Heart of Understanding Mission

In de Certeau’s 1969 text “Christians and the Dictatorship in Brazil,” the insistence on the need to incarnate a theology of the word is clear. Now, the question arises: What is this word? It seems that in de Certeau the word is certainly linked to a conversation, to the emergence of a speaking subject that is established in a conversation. If the *Implantatio ecclesiae* was the key to a certain notion of mission, in de Certeau it will clearly be conversation. Here, the change in his missionary understanding is at stake, which is clearly related to his own understanding of spiritual conversation in the Ignatian tradition.

This is particularly clear in the article “L’universalisme ignatien: Mystique et mission” (Ignatian universalism: Mysticism and mission [1966]), where de Certeau remarks that the most characteristic aspect of the Jesuit’s missionary activity is conversation:

Conversation is a constant in the life of St. Ignatius. From Manresa onward, he sought out spiritual persons with whom to communicate. The Exercises are a spiritual dialogue between the director and the retreatant. But the “conversar” embraces also the apostolates of the Jesuit, whose individual ministries are often summed up by the trilogy: colloquies, confessions, Exercises.³⁸

36. Michel de Certeau, *El lieu de l'autre* (Paris: Hautes Études-Gallimard-Seuil, 2005), 104.

37. See Carlos Alvarez, *Le débat entre théologie et sciences humaines en regard de la mystique et de l'histoire* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 2024).

38. Michel de Certeau, “L’universalisme ignatien: Mystique et mission,” *Christus* 50, no. 13 (April 1966): 173–83, here 179.

What is proper to Ignatius's spirituality, as de Certeau understands it, is linked to "finding God in all things." And this would be done primarily through conversations: "The apostle who comes to the aid of others recognizes 'before himself,' through them, the Spirit who teaches them to discern in them. He finds in his interlocutors the God with whom he is in love. A continuous vocation consecrates him to be a man of conversation."³⁹ This conversation makes the apostle discover that the mystery of God and his action go beyond his own perspectives and plans. The apostolic activity of the Jesuit would then be "exchange among men and communication with God; it unifies the apostle more deeply and unites him to his neighbor by opening him to the Life they already carry."⁴⁰ Spiritual conversation thus seems to be one of the deep keys to de Certeau's itinerary, to his way of understanding his own mission and the mission of the Society of Jesus.

At the basis of de Certeau's scientific practice is the profound conviction of the need to reweave broken communication: between the human sciences and theology, between saying and doing, between the past, the present, and the future, between unity and difference. His "not without you" (*pas sans toi*) is the sign of an unwavering desire to "make place for the other" (*faire place à l'autre*), without whom we are not. This conviction is clearly rooted in his understanding of faith: "Faith is first and foremost communication in truth and the construction of languages that the group elaborates as it forms itself."⁴¹

This language, for de Certeau, in the context of Latin America, could only come from a true missionary practice, that is, from those who have chosen to dedicate their life

for the defense of the eliminated, [to] fight with them without leaving the risks of the operation to others, and [to] participate in the struggle which must also involve the beneficiaries of the work, the ex-communited, the country's supporters, the silenced, the victims of an experience or a truth necessary to all.⁴²

Thus it is the figure of the missionary that is capable of overcoming the "initial bipolarity" between here and there to engage in a circulatory exchange,⁴³ a "hermeneutics of the other."⁴⁴

Toward a Polycentric Christianity

In his article on Monsignor Ivan Illich, de Certeau states that he has founded his work on a missionary institution: "To evangelize implies that one begins by learning the language of the Other. But being both a university student and a priest, he has inserted this intuition in a place, in a pedagogy and in scientific researches by opening the

39. De Certeau, "L'universalisme ignatien," 179.

40. De Certeau, "L'universalisme ignatien," 180.

41. Michel de Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire* (Paris: Les éditions du Seuil, 1987), 157.

42. De Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire*, 161.

43. De Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire*, 262.

44. De Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire*, 262.

center of Cuernavaca.”⁴⁵ For de Certeau, the mission also implies learning to speak the language of the Other, their gestures, and oral traditions in order to sit down and talk. Far from any romanticizing understanding, de Certeau’s work allows us to move toward the polycentric dimension of the church, which springs first of all from the awareness of living in a particular place, situated in history (time and space). Only a dynamic of conversion can arise from this awareness: the rupture of Christendom has an ecclesiological corollary—the inevitable emergence of a polycentric church. A clear respect and apology for cultural differences (apology of the difference) characterizes the belief and missionary itinerary of de Certeau.

De Certeau claims that the deficit of the apostolate and of theology resides in the fact that they have not been capable, since the seventeenth or eighteenth century, of “renouncing a re-Christianization” or a “resacralization starting from the center (considered immutable).” According to him, theology did not see that the problem was already posed differently: “The reciprocity of cultures and peoples excludes the idea of a ‘center’ destined to represent the whole.”⁴⁶ The time of the Crusades and of Christianity is over. This is why his ecclesiological model is strongly marked by an awareness of a current cultural polycentrism. Evidently, his condition as a traveler in the two Americas and in even more distant mystical countries, together with his knowledge of structuralism,⁴⁷ has predisposed him to be more sensitive to otherness and to the lack of a referential center representing the whole. “This pluralism and the universalization of relativity are the principle of secularization,”⁴⁸ excluding from the experience of the encounter any totalizing center, any privileged reference. The mourning to which he invites us is therefore crucial: there is no longer an absolute cultural reference, no longer a single cultural language capable of expressing the absolute of faith.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council and during its celebration, the issue of decolonization was knocking loudly at the church’s door. The difficulty of the discussion of the *Ad gentes* (To the nations) document illustrates this development. And what was in crisis was nothing less than the credibility of a Christian vision of the world. The “geographical” conception of Catholicity, which was conceived during the second Latin millennium and especially after the Council of Trent (1545–63) as a homogeneous juridical space, at the same time centralized and divided into two zones, one Christianized and the other in the process of Christianization, became obsolete in the 1960s.⁴⁹

45. Michel de Certeau, “Cuernavaca: El centro cultural y Monseñor Illich,” *Mensaje* 18 (October 1969): 493–395, here 494.

46. Michel de Certeau, “Apologie de la différence,” *Études* 328 (January–March 1968): 81–106, here 104.

47. “Le point de départ privilégié structuraliste est de dire: il n’y a pas de référence privilégiée, pas de centre ni de sujet.” Michel de Certeau, “Structuralisme et histoire,” typed text. Archives communiquées par Étienne Fouilloux, La Bussière, 1967. Cited in François Dosse, “Théologie et sciences humaines,” in *Un nouvel âge de la théologie? 1965–1980*, ed. Dominique Avon and Michel Fourcade (Paris: Karthala, 2009), 219–38, here 224.

48. De Certeau, “Apologie de la différence,” 105.

49. Theobald, *Urgences pastorales du moment présent*, 105.

It is clear then that the church was confronted with giving the term mission a more fundamental and embracing meaning, including for example the evangelization of de-Christianized areas of historically Catholic countries (e.g. the working class)—“mission to the interior,” to use language familiar to historians. The council would consider this double need for mission. To be somewhat schematic, we could say that, on the one hand, *Lumen gentium* (November 21, 1964) and *Gaudium et spes* (December 7, 1965) deal with new theological tools capable of launching a new evangelization in peoples already marked by Christianity and, on the other hand, *Ad gentes* deals with mission in the classical sense, that is, with the foundation and development of the church in territories that are not yet marked by Christianity on a cultural level.

In this new context, the reconfiguration of the mission paradigm reflected by de Certeau's own itinerary expresses the attempt to establish communication between the modern world—with the pressing cultural transformations underway—and Christian language. I postulate that this communicative drive was inspired by the paradigm of spiritual conversation, the fruit of an original appropriation of the Ignatian spiritual tradition. In other words, to deepen de Certeau's understanding of mission, spiritual conversation is essential as an interpretative key to the dynamism that makes de Certeau audaciously cross different disciplines of the human sciences (history, psychoanalysis, cultural anthropology, semiotics, theology), all of them having as their central aim to try to be a hermeneutics of otherness, a “heterology.”

The “ethnological moment,”⁵⁰ to which de Certeau's own understanding of the missionary's task would belong, implies a profound appreciation of otherness and a dynamic of suspicion, or even deconstruction, around the “same” or one's own. Unlike his master de Lubac, who is interested in the theological foundation of mission, de Certeau draws a provocative parallel between the missionary's experience of cultural exile and the lived experience of the ethnologist. De Certeau is interested in the missionary in the singular. Transition from the universal to the particular. Or from the primacy of the definition to the awareness of the importance of the missionary's lived experience, which perhaps in itself reconfigures—even without knowing it—the notion of mission.

This ethnological moment of the mission must be read in relation to the fall of the colonial empires after the Second World War, which in turn generated a crisis in the Eurocentric vision of the world, marked by a linear and evolutionary conception of history through the idea of progress. From here, we can understand de Certeau's interest in the fathers of ethnology, de Lery and Lafitou, who perhaps help to reconceptualize in a different way the notion of mission in crisis in the 1970s.

50. François Dosse, *La sage des intellectuels français, (1944–1989)* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2018), 309.