

Have We Lost Our Nerve? Changing Theologies of Christian Mission¹

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Abstract: *It may be argued that the Church has lost its nerve in relation to proclaiming the Gospel; and there are some who would situate this trend with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. Such a judgment is devoid of an historical sense of the Church's relation to culture; and it fails to see how Vatican II has inspired a much richer sense of Christian life and mission for the post-colonial world. The emerging theological paradigm for mission emphasises that proclamation of the Gospel must be carried out in respectful dialogue—hence the metaphor, “prophetic dialogue.” While remaining a prominent aspect of Christian life, evangelisation today needs to be undertaken with fresh eyes on the reign of God, inculturation, struggle for human liberation, reconciliation, option for the poor, the power of the Holy Spirit and interfaith dialogue.*

Key Words: church – mission; Christian mission – history; Vatican II; post-colonialism; prophetic dialogue; inculturation; kingdom of God; divine mission

The twentieth century witnessed a seismic shift in Christian missionary thinking and practice. In 1910, the Edinburgh World Mission Conference was bold enough to predict “the evangelization of the world in this generation.”² Such high-minded optimism was associated with the advance of science, technology and European colonialism. As we know, within a few short decades, these dreams of western cultural superiority were to be shattered by two world wars, economic depression, the rise of communist and fascist ideologies, post-colonial independence movements, effects of the population explosion and the emergence of multiple, alternative visions for the planet and its peoples. By the end of the century, some people were asking if Christianity would survive!

The effects of twentieth century social change and ideological challenge on Catholic missionary approaches were not immediate. In Australia, missionary vocations continued to rise in the period after World War II until the 1970s. But something new was beginning to stir. Not only did the churches face ideological opposition in so-called “missionary lands,” they were beginning to question their own identities as Christian churches at home. Catholics reasonably locate this shift with the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) in which clear ideas on the Church’s mission of “saving souls” are replaced by emerging concepts arising from cultural studies and the human sciences. There is new emphasis on

¹ A form of this paper was originally presented as the third Jubilee Lecture for the Aquinas Academy, Sydney, 11th May 2005; subsequently published in *Issues for Church and Society in Australia*, ed. Michael Whelan (Strathfield: St Pauls, 2006), 47-65.

² Cited by Peter Phan, “Proclamation of the Reign of God as Mission of the Church”, *Theology@McAuley* Issue 2 (August 2002): <http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/Issue2/issue2.htm>; accessed 10 September 2005.

personal conscience and religious freedom, and a more respectful and open attitude to the secular world and other religious traditions. The Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity specifically encourages missionaries to be dialogical, respect social and cultural traditions of the people among whom they live, and recognize authentic "seeds of the Word" waiting to be uncovered. From a theological perspective, the relationship between Gospel and culture is not one-way; it needs to be dialogical and interactive. The question of how mission is to be done raises deeper questions about why mission at all.

Vatican II is a symbolic watershed representing the movement from a self-referential, ghetto Church—with a clear if narrow understanding of its mission to "convert the world"—to a Church which perceives its mission in "dialogue with the world." Rather than seeing mission in terms of a "sending Church" (Europe, North America and Australasia) and a "receiving Church" (Africa, South America, Oceania and Asia), we are now to see that the whole Church as missionary.³ The Church goes from "having missions" to "being missionary." Agents of mission are no longer confined to missionary priests, brothers and sisters, but all the baptized. Receivers of mission are no longer just the "pagans" in "foreign lands" but the "entire world" including emerging secular, post-Christian societies. In effect, this represents the "democratization of mission" in which all Christians, clerical and lay, north and south, carry equal responsibility for spreading the Gospel in a world more complex than could have been imagined at the start of the twentieth century.

Catholic approaches to mission in the twentieth century have been categorised according to four periods representing diverse attitudes of certainty (1919-1962), ferment (1962-1965), crisis (1965-1975) and rebirth (1975-).⁴ However, questions about the how and why of mission today need to be placed in context of wider historical discussion of the kinds of missionary theology and strategies employed throughout the past two millennia. Consequently, we overview some of the diverse missionary paradigms that operated throughout Christian history (mainly in the West), evaluate the classical missionary paradigm that has been so influential in recent centuries, and explore the significance of an emerging missionary paradigm as we head into the third millennium. We can then directly address the question of whether or not the Church has lost its missionary nerve.

DIVERSE MISSIONARY PARADIGMS

Historians use different frameworks, models or paradigms to describe Christian mission in various historical epochs.⁵ The choice of the word "paradigm" is not without problems especially if used in its scientific sense of completely overturning a prior theory or understanding of reality.⁶ As used here, paradigm means a fundamental worldview or

³ *Ad Gentes*, n. 2.

⁴ Robert Schreier, "Changes in Roman Catholic Attitudes toward Proselytism and Mission" in J. Scherer & S. Bevans, eds., *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization 2* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1994), 113-125.

⁵ David Bosch identifies Primitive Christian, Eastern Church, Medieval Roman Catholic, Protestant Reformation, Enlightenment and Ecumenical "paradigms" in his *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1991); Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder identify Biblical, Early Church, Monastic Movement, Mendicant Movement, Age of Discovery, Age of Progress and Contemporary "models" in their *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2004); Raimon Panikkar identifies "Five Epochs of Christian History" as Witness, Conversion, Crusade, Mission and Dialogue in his *A Dwelling Place for Wisdom* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 109-122.

⁶ See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970). The application of "paradigm" to theological discourse is developed in Hans Küng and David Tracy, eds., *Paradigm Change in Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1991). Also see Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 181-190.

interpretative framework that influences how we perceive reality. According to Fritz Capra, a new paradigm emerges in a culture every three to five hundred years. In this context, a new paradigm does not completely obliterate the old. In theology, for example, earlier ways of thinking about God, world, Church and mission continue to inform latter paradigms or ways of thought. Nor is there an implication that latter modes of Christian thought and action are more faithful to the Gospel than former approaches. Given that Christian faith is based on the unique historical revelation of God in Jesus Christ, we have good reason to privilege biblical and patristic perspectives over later expressions. Still, we appreciate the need to inculturate the Gospel in times and places quite distinct from the worlds of first century Jerusalem, second century Athens or fourth century Constantinople.

After Pentecost

To be a Christian after Pentecost means to witness to the good news of salvation that has come to us through Jesus Christ and the power of God's Spirit. Specifically, it means experiencing and testifying to the truth of the resurrection of Jesus. The first Christians do not consider themselves members of a new religion as such; they are faithful Jews who identify Jesus as the promised Messiah. Their experience of Jesus as *Christos* (Christ) and *Kyrios* (Lord) is interpreted entirely within Jewish categories of thought. They also believe themselves called to a new form of community testifying to the ultimate disclosure of the divine mystery at work everywhere. The intensity of their religious experience compels them to share this earth-shattering news with others.

Even so, the first Christians do not immediately move to share their new life in Christ and the Spirit with non-Jewish people. This took time to emerge. The Council of Jerusalem in 50 CE follows Paul's advice in overturning the opinion of Peter: Gentiles may indeed be members of the new community of Jesus' disciples without adopting circumcision and other Jewish customs. By then, Paul and the other apostles are convinced that God is calling them to spread this "good news" of salvation to people throughout the entire known world. This experience of being missionary and overstepping cultural boundaries is what defines the early Church and distinguishes it from its Jewish origins. To be a Christian is to belong to this new community, the body of Christ and temple of the Spirit, in which there is to be no division on gender, racial or ethnic lines: "neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female" since "all are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). We note, for example, the prominent position played by women as leaders and deacons in early biblical communities (Rom 16).

The missionary strategy of the Christian movement consists in the establishment of "house churches" where the Eucharist is celebrated and a variety of charisms and ministries develops among the members. Communities also develop various styles and leadership structures under the guidance of deacons, presbyters and bishops. In the early centuries, Christians often found themselves persecuted, even martyred, for their faith. This led to the growth of the underground Church associated with the famous catacombs of Rome. Christians were generally seen as undermining the authority of the Emperor so that persecutions were common for the first three hundred years. Tertullian makes the link between martyrdom and mission when he states: "The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church." The conversion of the masses to Christianity in the early centuries is due in no small manner to this ultimate testimony and witness to Jesus Christ.

Many early Christians were Greek-speaking so that Greek soon became the major language of liturgy and catechesis. The celebration of the Eucharist, in which Jesus' death

and resurrection are re-enacted, becomes the centre-point of Christian life: to be a witnessing community is to be a community in worship. The influence of Greek thought is also linked to the increased importance given to the intellectual articulation of Christian faith. In particular, the conversion of the educated classes is attributed to the work of apologists and teachers of the faith such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Origen and Clement of Alexandria. Together they provide a reasoned basis for continuity between Christian faith and Greek philosophy. In historical terms, it is difficult to think of Christianity becoming such a major intellectual and cultural movement in the past two millennia without this profound adaptation to Hellenistic thought.

In summary, after the era of initial expansion under the guidance of the apostles and first believers, the Church continued to be missionary through a variety of means including evangelists, bishops, presbyters, deacons, apologists, teachers and martyrs. However, the primary model of mission was witness and word among existing networks and “households”—including slaves, free persons, hired workers, tenants, trading partners, fellow craftsmen. Christianity became a predominantly urban mass movement in the early centuries providing people with order, meaning and community in a failing Greco-Roman empire. In the simplest terms, being a missionary was not a specialist role; to be baptized was to be called to witness to the power of Jesus Christ. Mission is witness.

After Constantine

When Constantine, emperor of Rome, became Christian in 312 CE, the very understanding of what it was to be Christian changed profoundly. No longer are Christians the persecuted minority; they are now a significant social and political force. Entire populations convert to Christianity as the legally and publicly established religion. The spread of Christianity from Constantine in the fourth century through the Medieval period displays all the characteristics of the close liaison of church and state. Different kinds of missionary strategy are associated with this period including the expansion of Christian “creeds” and “rules.” Now, to be a Christian means to be a good citizen of the empire as well as the Church. The ideal is no longer the simple promotion of personal faith and individual spirituality; to be a Christian means to be a member of a separate religion called Christianity and, eventually, a member of an established Christendom, an entire civilization epitomized by Medieval Europe.⁷

The Christian monastery becomes the key Christianizing agent; the monk, symbol of Christian conversion.⁸ It is through the Irish, Benedictine and Byzantine monasteries, centres of intellectual and cultural life as well as Christian faith, that European civilization is converted from diverse pagan practices and mystery cults to a relatively homogenous culture based on Christian values and principles. In time, the success of monasticism brought its own problems with the monasteries becoming centres of wealth and privilege. This led to the emergence of the mendicant movement, such as the Franciscans and Dominicans, who renounced ownership of property, begged for their sustenance, and preached the Gospel by walking from town to town. These “wandering friars” shared life more closely with the ordinary people and were significant agents of Church reform and catalysts for more sensitive missionary strategies. The Franciscan movement promoted lay preaching and identification with the poor and outcast; the Dominican movement emphasized clerical preaching and the importance of scholarship.

⁷ Panikkar, *Dwelling Place*, 115-116.

⁸ See Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 214-238; Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 99-170.

With the increasing spread of Islam into southern Europe, another face of Christendom emerged in the crusader.⁹ Church language sometimes promoted this form of Christianity: to be a Christian is to be a 'soldier' for Christ; the Church is the Church 'militant'; one's sacred duty is to 'conquer' the whole world for Christ. Now, Christianity defines itself not only as a religion, or even the best religion, but as the 'only true' religion. There emerges a belief that all other religions, including Islam and Judaism, are pagan and false. Of course, there are notable exceptions to this view including such scholars and mystics as Hildegard, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa, Francis of Assisi and Raimon Lull who are consciously open to the power and presence of God's Spirit in other religious traditions. Another notable exception is the history of Christian-Jewish-Muslim relations in Medieval Spain which testifies to a culture of harmony and tolerance among the three Abrahamic traditions—prior to the time of the Crusades.¹⁰

What we note in this period of the Church's life is that being a missionary becomes a specialist role for the monk, nun, preacher, friar or crusader as well as religious founders, scholars and mystics. In fact, this represents a successful missionary strategy given that Christianity spreads in all directions well beyond the Mediterranean world to Western and Eastern Europe, China and Persia, as well as expansions in India and Africa. The monasteries are major catalysts for Christian mission as well as being important intellectual and cultural centres. Mendicants emerge as a counter-cultural force emphasizing the need for evangelical conversion; they also count among their numbers beacons of religious tolerance. We have also noted that missionary outreach is expressed in military terms of the soldier and crusader. In many ways, the Church becomes more like an army with everyone having a particular rank, status and role. Mission is no longer a task for the baptized but becomes a specialist role for religious professionals.

After Columbus

The missionary expansion of the Christian Churches of the West is inspired by Columbus' arrival in the Americas in 1492. The discovery and colonization of the "new world" in the sixteenth century coincides with Protestant and Catholic Reformations which release new evangelizing energy.¹¹ The "new world" also became a haven for religious minority groups, both Catholic and Protestant, escaping post-Reformation persecutions in Europe. Inevitably, European colonizing powers promote Christian evangelization as a way of securing territorial gain. There is no doubt that "Bible and sword were too often hand in hand" and that Christian mission is tightly related to the transportation of European culture, worship and theology.

This colonizing approach saw Christian missionaries supporting and working within an official "state-church mission." For example, the Spanish and Portuguese military conquests throughout the Americas were usually followed by European settlement, economic if not literal enslavement of Indigenous peoples, and an evangelizing approach—known as *tabula rasa*—that simply replaced indigenous religious-cultural beliefs and practices with Christian/European ones. There were nonetheless prophetic voices among the early missionaries, such as the Dominican Las Casas, who spoke out

⁹ Panikkar, *Dwelling Place*, 116-117.

¹⁰ See Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament Of The World: How Muslims, Christians, and Jews Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (Boston, New York, London: Little, Brown & Co., 2002).

¹¹ See "Mission in the Age of Discovery" in *Constants in Context*, 171-205; "The Medieval Roman Catholic Missionary Paradigm" and "The Missionary Paradigm of the Protestant Reformation" in Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 214-261.

against violence and insisted on the necessity of peaceful proclamation, persuasion and dialogue based on the fundamental dignity of Indigenous people.

Likewise, the Catholic Church's missionary work throughout China, Japan and other parts of Asia sometimes took a radically different approach to the more dominant conquest model. Jesuits Francis Xavier, Matteo Ricci, Robert de Nobili and Alexander de Rhodes signify a "Catholic inculturation paradigm" which involved, in varying degrees, commitment to learning local languages, dressing according to local customs, dialoguing with scholars on Confucian, Hindu, Buddhist and other religious and philosophical systems, and adapting certain religious and cultural rites for Christian liturgy.¹² This also proved a successful approach until Rome's condemnation of the accommodation model and, through a complex series of events, the expulsion of foreign missionaries from both China and Japan.¹³ Similarly, among Protestant missionaries, the majority followed the colonizing approach while there were notable exceptions such as Anabaptists, Pietists and Quakers who distanced themselves from the colonizers.¹⁴

After a downturn in missionary activity throughout the eighteenth century, Catholic and Protestant missionary societies flourished in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁵ In part, this represented an intensification of the colonial paradigm following the rise of the European nation-state and the partitioning of lands throughout expanding colonies in Africa, Asia and Oceania. There were other forces at work such as Enlightenment faith in reason, science, technology and the possibilities of human achievement. Sometimes, colonization took on a more benign face associated with the desire to bring civilization and culture to the "natives" of non-European lands. But the increase in missionary activity in the nineteenth century should not be seen entirely in imperialistic or nationalistic terms. There was also a burst of religious awakening, especially among Protestantism, that empowered laypeople in youth, student and worker movements to be directly involved in the spreading of the missionary Gospel "at home and abroad" according to Enlightenment ideals. The energy for Catholic missionary practice came predominantly from the massive increase in religious congregations founded exclusively for missionary work.¹⁶

The time since Columbus and the Reformation is in many ways the missionary period *par excellence*. The model of the true Christian is the evangelizer. Although the missionaries often saw their role in consort with promoting European values and civilization, they were even more committed to the building up the spiritual Christian empire by dispelling ignorance, baptizing infidels, and thus saving the world for Christ. There are also examples of individual missionaries and movements who take the challenge of promoting justice, inculturation and interfaith dialogue seriously. Moreover,

¹² See Bevens and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 183-191; Jonathan Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984); Peter Phan, *Mission and Catechesis: Alexander de Rhodes and Inculturation in Seventeenth Century Vietnam* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998). The phrase "Catholic inculturation paradigm" is attributed to William Burrows in Bevens and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 195.

¹³ For an overview of the infamous Chinese Rites Controversy and its relationship to the decline in the Church's missionary activity, see *Constants in Context*, 192ff. The judgment of Philip Jenkins on the outcome of this controversy is: "The Catholic missions in China can be regarded as one of the greatest might-have-beens in world history." See his *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 63.

¹⁴ Bevens and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 195-197; Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 252ff.

¹⁵ See "Mission in the Age of Progress" in Bevens and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 206-238; "Mission in the Wake of the Enlightenment" in Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 262-345.

¹⁶ According to Bevens and Schroeder, in 1800 Catholic missionaries worldwide numbered three hundred which jumped in 1920 to seventy-five hundred! *Constants in Context*, 226.

we can say there was much success—if, by success, one is counting numbers of baptized, churches built, communities founded. Today, Christianity counts for more than one in three human beings on the planet. However, it also true that success came at the price of the marginalization of Indigenous cultures and an often superficial acceptance of Christian values among the impressive number of converts to Christian faith.

CHALLENGES TO CLASSICAL MISSIONARY PARADIGMS

The dominant missionary paradigms that operated throughout most of Christian history since Constantine were based on the dual goals of “saving souls” and “implanting the Church.”¹⁷ These goals were linked to the narrow interpretation of St Cyprian's dictum: “outside the church there is no salvation” (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*). Salvation is interpreted in terms of one's individual and eternal destiny; Church is interpreted in European cultural forms. This missionary approach typically placed more emphasis on overcoming sin and evil than in witnessing to the power of Christ and the divine life of grace. Other aspects of mission such as engagement with culture, dialogue with religions, inculturation and liberation of the poor are considered secondary. The primary tool of mission is proclamation. All this is challenged by events in the twentieth century which, for Catholics, were experienced most keenly in the periods of ferment and crisis surrounding the Second Vatican Council.

We have seen that missionary enthusiasm was at an all-time high at the beginning of the twentieth century prior to two world wars, the advances of communism and fascism, the rise of post-colonial independence movements and the ongoing effects of science, technology and secularization. Above all, the experience of the holocaust made Europeans question their right to claim superiority over other cultures. In contrast to predictions at the turn of the century, there was also an unexpected religious awakening within Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism. As well, Indigenous peoples, whose traditions were often devastated by colonialism, began to assert their right to exist on equal terms with other traditions. Christianity found itself in a situation of profound shock for which it was ill-prepared.

Demographic challenges also challenge the classical missionary paradigm: at the start of the twentieth century, European and North American Christians number 80%; by the end of the century this was reduced to 40%. As Andrew Walls states: “Christianity began the twentieth century as a Western religion, and indeed *the* Western religion; it ended the century as a non-Western religion, on track to becoming progressively more so.”¹⁸ As we know, Christianity's twentieth century growth has been in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania; at the same time, Europe and the West have become increasingly secularized, even post-Christian. Certainly, Church demographics indicate the dethroning of European influence so that we can now claim to have a post-Christian West and a post-Western Christianity.¹⁹

Arguably, we are on the verge of the most significant transformation in Christianity since the time of Constantine in the fourth century. Raimon Panikkar speaks of three geo-

¹⁷ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 214-219. Bosch specifically argues that the Roman Catholic medieval model of mission from 600 to 1500 CE focused on this two-fold goal of saving souls and implanting the Church.

¹⁸ Andrew Walls, *The Cross Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 64.

¹⁹ Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 242.

political moments in Christian history.²⁰ The first is symbolized by the river Jordan, where Jesus was baptized by John. Should Christianity stay within the bounds of Israel or cross the Jordan to the other side of the known world? Under the influence of Paul, it chose to make such a journey in particular into the Hellenistic world. After the tenth century split between East and West, the major part of the Christian world turns west, symbolized by the river Tiber, symbol of western constructs, theologies and worldviews. As Panikkar states, “the Tiber, symbol of western imperialism and universalism, is showing signs of drying up.”²¹ For him, Christianity of the future must cross the Ganges in order to embrace—not colonize—the East, symbol of the religious other. The Ganges is symbol of this new attitude of Christianness—not Christianity as a superior religion or Christendom as a sort of human political ideal—but an attitude that returns to the early Christian emphasis on personal religious experience and witness.

Theology too plays its role in developing a more appropriate paradigm for Christian mission. The goal of mission is not the Church but the reign of God; mission is not primarily directed to actual or potential Church-members, but to the entire world; agents of mission are not priests, brothers and nuns, but the Holy Spirit in consort with the entire community of Christian believers as well as individuals, societies, peoples, cultures and religions well beyond the world of the Church. In the past half-century there has been a revolution in the theological approach to mission that is based in the recovery of biblical and patristic sources and in the realization that a new missionary paradigm is beckoning.

The Emerging Missionary Paradigm

The new paradigm for Christian mission focuses on the “kingdom” or “reign of God” which is at the centre of Jesus' own life and mission. The Church's mission is the continuation of Jesus' mission of proclaiming God's reign for our world. In his missionary encyclical, Pope John Paul II states that “the Church is effectively and concretely at the service of the kingdom.”²² Instead of being the goal of mission, the Church is its instrument. Consequently, mission should not be primarily about the expansion of the Church, but its authenticity as sign and instrument of God's reign in the world.

It is God's mission (*missio Dei*) not the Church's mission (*missio ecclesiae*) that is paramount. The Church only has a mission insofar as it participates in the mission of the Trinitarian God: “The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father.”²³ This is neatly summed up in the saying: “The Church doesn't have a mission; the mission (of God) has a Church”! In saying this, we obliterate any simplistic notion of a “sending Church” and a “receiving Church.” The whole Church is missionary—just as the whole Church is in need of evangelization.

By focusing on the reign of God and *missio Dei*, both the theology and praxis of missionary activity are transformed. Our concern is no longer some narrow view of implanting the Church and saving souls. The new emphasis is on: the person and ministry of Jesus; the active role of the Holy Spirit; openness of the kingdom to all, especially the poor and marginal; and human liberation as an integral dimension of salvation. Moreover,

²⁰ “The Jordan, the Tiber and the Ganges: Three Kairological Moments of Christic Self-Consciousness” in J. Hick & P. Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1988), 98-104.

²¹ See Panikkar's discussion of “Three Attitudes: Christendom, Christianity, Christianness” in *Dwelling Place*, 134-139.

²² John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, Encyclical Letter (1990), n. 20.

²³ *Ad Gentes*, n. 2.

we no longer perceive the Church in institutional terms; the Church is also servant, *communio*, herald, sacrament, change-agent, community of disciples.

The contemporary paradigm acknowledges the multi-faceted nature of Christian mission including: the reign of God; evangelization; inculturation; struggle for human liberation; reconciliation; option for the poor; the power of the Holy Spirit; and interfaith dialogue.²⁴ Rather than seeing itself as the “community of the saved,” the Church acknowledges that she, too, is a pilgrim people standing under the judgment and grace of God. Consequently, John Paul II distinguishes three distinct types of mission: mission *ad gentes*, for those who have not heard the Gospel; established communities of faith who always require ongoing evangelization; post-Christian people who have lost contact with their Christian roots.²⁵

Key to the newer paradigm is the recognition that the Church is not the kingdom. Nonetheless, the Church has a triple missionary responsibility: to proclaim in word and sacrament the definitive arrival of the kingdom in Jesus Christ; to offer herself as a sign that the kingdom of God is already operative in the world today; and to challenge society as a whole to transform itself according to the kingdom values of justice, love and peace.²⁶

This kingdom-centred approach to mission calls the Church to a more intimate engagement with the world. It is no longer adequate for Christians to transplant their own perspectives onto others without taking into account the way in which God's Spirit is already present in people and cultures. True evangelization is dialogical; witness is more important than words. In today's pluralistic world, the task of communicating the Gospel is complex. We can no longer be naïve in recognizing the manner in which faith and culture are intermingled. Above all, this challenges the Church to step outside its very European clothes in the interests of genuine inculturation. Pope John Paul II states that through inculturation the Church “comes to know and to express better the mystery of Christ.”²⁷

Struggle for justice, human rights, ecological sustainability and reconciliation among peoples are also dimensions of Christian mission because they relate to Jesus' mission of proclaiming God's reign in the world. Where the Church is involved in these activities, it becomes a servant after the model of Christ who “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:28). There is no dualistic opposition between divine salvation and human liberation since Christ embodies both divinity and humanity in his own person.

The disciples of Jesus have a particular sensitivity to the way in which God has a “preferential option of the poor.” In biblical terms, the poor and those on the margins of society (*anawim*) are the ones most likely to hear the Word of God and inherit the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5:3). In other words, there is something much more at stake here than the Church taking special care of the marginalized. Far from being the special 'objects' of the Church's mission, they are the 'subjects' who constantly call the Church to more radical Gospel truth and missionary fidelity.

²⁴ This schema for mission, outlined in Donal Dorr, *Mission in Today's World* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2000), reflects the rich theology of mission involving every form of human liberation and the transformation of cultures in the 1975 Apostolic Exhortation of Paul VI, “On Evangelization in the Modern World” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*).

²⁵ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 33.

²⁶ John Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God: The Message of Jesus Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 270.

²⁷ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 52.

Ultimately, it is the Holy Spirit who inspires and directs the *missio Dei* throughout the world as well as being “the principal agent of the whole of the Church's mission.”²⁸ Since the first Pentecost, the Holy Spirit continues to draw people to Christ and so has a special relationship with the Church and her members. Nonetheless, it is the same Holy Spirit who is present and active in individuals, society, history, cultures and religions, animating, purifying and reinforcing the noble aspirations of the entire human family.²⁹ The Holy Spirit, fount of love and wisdom, inspirer of peace and justice, and catalyst for truth and reconciliation, empowers the Church, enlightens all peoples and renews the face of the earth.

Mission as Prophetic Dialogue

The missionary Church is called to “prophetic dialogue.”³⁰ Its challenge is to announce the good news of God's reign in the world (prophetic) in partnership with other Christians, other religions, and all people of good will (dialogue). This new paradigm for mission stresses the Church's solidarity with the whole human family, engagement with contemporary culture and dialogue with people of diverse faiths. The language of solidarity, engagement and dialogue represents a significant shift in missionary rhetoric. Gone are the military metaphors and the language of exclusion. Instead, Christians are called to enter into relationship with others if they are to be faithful to their missionary calling. In this context of dialogue, Christians proclaim the saving mystery of Jesus Christ in “bold humility.”³¹

Interfaith dialogue is not something Christians do in addition to evangelization. Rather, dialogue is one element of the Church's evangelizing mission.³² Other elements of mission include witness, social justice, human liberation, liturgy/worship, prayer/contemplation, proclamation, catechesis, reconciliation, care for the earth. Although proclamation of the Gospel remains the culmination of mission, the “totality of mission embraces all these elements.”³³ In particular, “all (Christians) are called to dialogue” not only to learn about the positive value of other traditions but as a way of overcoming prejudice, purifying cultures of dehumanizing elements, upholding traditional cultural values of Indigenous peoples and, indeed, purifying their own faith.³⁴ Clearly, dialogue complements proclamation since both are authentic elements of the Church's single evangelizing mission. “Prophetic Dialogue” captures the style, content and manner of Christian mission for contemporary times.

Prophetic dialogue does not shy away from the task of proclaiming belief in the universal Lordship of Jesus Christ. However, the manner of proclamation is equally important: it needs to take place in the context of respectful dialogue, solidarity and

²⁸ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 21.

²⁹ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 28.

³⁰ “Prophetic Dialogue... is the phrase that best summarizes a theology of mission for today, keeping the church constant in this context.” Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 395.

³¹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 489.

³² This is stated unequivocally by Vatican Commissions and in Papal Pronouncements: Secretariat for Non-Christians, *Dialogue and Mission* (1984), n. 13; John Paul II's Address to the Secretariat (1987) and *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), n. 55; Pontifical Commissions for Interreligious Dialogue and Evangelization, *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991), nn. 6, 55; Declaration by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus* (2000), n. 22.

³³ Secretariat for Non-Christians, *Dialogue and Mission*, n. 13.

³⁴ Pontifical Commissions for Interreligious Dialogue and Evangelization, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, nn. 43-49.

reconciliation. In a sense, witness has priority over proclamation because without authentic witness the true Gospel is not being preached. Neither will it be heard. Proclamation should be in the form of an invitation and as an answer to a question. It is genuinely dialogical. One proclaims with a listening heart, humbly and even from a position of weakness and vulnerability. Without reconciliation among estranged peoples, proclamation will be found wanting.

The Church continues to teach and proclaim that Jesus Christ is the fullness of God's revelation. However, it will also reflect on ways in which the Christian Gospel has been diversely interpreted and lived throughout two millennia. It will recognize in other religious traditions "elements which are true and good... precious things both religious and human, ... elements of truth and grace, ... seeds of the Word... (and) rays of that truth which illumines all humankind."³⁵ With Pope John Paul II, it will appreciate that there is but "one Spirit of truth" uniting all religions.³⁶ Beyond this, theologians will continue to explore an understanding of religious pluralism that affirms traditional Christian teaching while opening itself to a more inclusive appreciation of the wonders God has done in all the religions of the world.

HAS THE CHURCH LOST ITS NERVE?

In a situation of changing paradigms, there is always a period of confusion as former ideas and practices are critiqued and replaced by newer models of thinking and action. This should not be confused with a lack of nerve. To the contrary, the intercultural or prophetic dialogue model of mission, which includes inculturation, liberation and dialogue, is a much more challenging and complex task. Among other realities, it rejects the simple "replication model" which favoured a dominant cultural expression of Christian life. Moreover, it requires Christians in all cultures, contexts and situations to take responsibility for the Church's mission. It also challenges the Christian churches to overturn past rivalries and work together in common witness to the Gospel. In short, the Church's expanded missionary charter at the start of the third millennium is both visionary and courageous at the level of its theology. The task is to put this theology into action with the knowledge that the Church is servant, not the master, of God's reign in the world.

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³⁵ Vatican Council Documents, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 16; *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 2; *Ad Gentes*, nn. 9, 11, 15; *Nostra Aetate*, n. 2.

³⁶ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, Encyclical Letter (1979), n.6.