

# MISSION

## *Mother of the Church and of Theology*

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I HAVE BEEN surprised that as yet none of my colleagues challenged me about the ‘pretentious’ title of my talk this evening, *Mission: Mother of the Church and of Theology*. I guess all subject area heads believe that their subject area is important and even critical but I don’t imagine many would claim that theirs is the mother or purpose of the Church and of theology. It is an extraordinary claim, and if it is true then it has serious implications for the church and theology.

But that is precisely what the Fathers of Vatican II claimed in their missionary document, *Ad Gentes* when they asserted, ‘The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature. For it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she takes her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father.’ (*AG* par.2).

About thirty-five years ago Karl Rahner made the telling observation that ‘should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged’. Today that is no longer true about the Trinity and the church and theology is much richer for that. Tonight I would like to claim that mission has also been too long marginalized and isolated from theological education to the loss of mission, theology and the church. In some ways it is no coincidence that both the Trinity and mission have been ignored, for modern missiology is fundamentally Trinitarian. (Bevans 2004, 13f)

### *Why Is Mission Still So Marginal?*

Forty years after *Ad Gentes*’ strong call to mission it seems to have fallen on deaf ears. For

most, mission is not essential but an optional extra. It is something the church leaves to missionaries or does only when it has attended to its more traditional activities of celebrating the liturgy, running schools and hospitals, teaching, catechising, baptising and building up Church structures. And my guess is that missiology is regarded by most theology students as a subject to be studied only by those preparing to go overseas.

Others in the Church have a strong commitment to evangelisation but their emphasis is on the growth of the church through individual conversions. This of course is a worthy and important goal but not the fullness of mission embodied in *Ad Gentes* or the more recent missionary documents, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and *Redemptoris Missio*.

Why is mission so marginal? I think it has a lot to do with the word, ‘mission’. Very few words are innocent. Most come packed with history and ‘mission’ is certainly one of those words. Today many people see missionaries as well meaning but narrow minded fanatics who have destroyed the beautiful cultures and cherished beliefs of Third World peoples. Others see us as people who work overseas and whom they support with prayer and money and hope to see every few years when we are on a home visit. In general, mission is the church’s department of foreign affairs, dealing with the exotic and peripheral. I remember when I was leaving for Korea in 1970, I visited a number of families before leaving. They would often ask me ‘Where in the Islands are you going, Father?’ And when I answered Korea they would ask me ‘Where in the Islands is Korea, Father?’ And despite my detailed geographical explanations as I was leaving they would say, ‘Have

a good time in the Islands, Father'. For many Catholics of that time, mission was clearly something that happened 'in the Islands'.

### ***Mission According To Ad Gentes.***

As with many of the documents of Vatican II, the original schema prepared for the Fathers was largely canonical with minor practical applications. However, after the heady debates on the church in the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)* and the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)* and the ground-breaking insights of the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)* the Fathers knew they had to be consistent and rethink mission as well. So the original schema was rejected and late in 1964 a new committee including Yves Congar and Joseph Ratzinger plus some missionary theologians and Superior Generals was asked to rewrite the document.

### ***God's Mission.***

They went back to the Trinity to ground mission. Up till then the Church was seen as the major agent of mission. It was the Church who had the mission and was responsible for and sent people on mission. But for the Council, mission was God's mission. The Father so loves the world he sends the Son and the Spirit into the world to bring about the reign of God. God has a mission, a liberating plan for the cosmos.

Jesus was consumed with a sense of mission. He was keenly conscious of the power of evil but convinced that a new age had come and he spent his life preaching that the reign of God was at hand.

At Pentecost Jesus sends the Spirit who is the principal agent of mission. The Spirit has been active in the world since creation and is sent again with new focus and purpose. In this new age the three persons of the Trinity are constantly creating, healing, reconciling, transforming and uniting the world.

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### ***The Church And Mission.***

It is in this context that the church is born. God so loves the world that for its sake he calls the church to be the sacrament and servant of the reign of God in the world.

Mission is our participation in God's existence in the world. The Church exists to be a sacrament of, to be involved in and to promote God's plan for the world. So in a real sense the church does not have a mission. Mission is the reason for its existence. It is 'the 'business' that calls the church forth'. (Bevans 2005, 49) Mission is the Mother of the Church.

This Trinitarian understanding of mission turns ecclesiology on its head. It makes mission prior to and constitutive of the church. Theology has tended to think of mission as an activity that takes place only after the church is constituted, as 'one among several functions of the church.' A contemporary theology of mission, however, rooted in the mission of the Trinitarian God, points to the fact the church does not so much have a mission as the mission has a church. (Bevans 2004, 18)

Mission, then, is not primarily about the extension of the church in time and space. Its focus is not on institutional development, expansion or numerical increase. Its focus is fundamentally theological, namely the realisation of the fullness of the knowledge and love of God which is boundless and all-embracing. (McCabe 1997, 2)

The church's role is to help in the realisation of God's love and plan for the world. The church is the sacrament of salvation and sign of the reign of God. Sacraments and signs model but they do not encompass everything they signify. They point to realities greater than themselves. Or as Paul VI reminds us in *Evangelium*

*geli Nuntiandi*, 'Only the kingdom therefore is absolute, and it makes everything else relative'. (*EN* par.8.)

This doesn't mean we ignore Church growth, because to be an effective sign the church must be present as widely as possible. We must build Christian communities everywhere to reflect God's coming reign. We are also compelled to proclaim Jesus and his Gospel which has brought us life. However, Church growth is not primarily a question of expanding Church membership, but of becoming a more authentic sign of God's hopes for the world.

The Church exists, not for its own sake, but for the sake of God's reign which is breaking into our world in many ways and many places, far beyond the boundaries of the institutional Church. Our task is to proclaim, seek, uncover, encourage, celebrate and build on the Spirit's presence and activity in the world. God is especially active wherever people strive for justice, peace, freedom and reconciliation between peoples, religions and with the environment.

The church does not have to do or claim all the good done in the world. Presumably most of it will be done by people outside the Church. We need to be spiritual and discerning enough to recognise good wherever we meet it and humble enough to rejoice in it as much as if we had done it ourselves. We are most missionary when we stretch ourselves and focus not on our own internal concerns but on moving outward, exploring and discovering what God is doing in the world.

### *A Spirituality For Mission*

Another challenge facing us Christians is to become less active and more contemplative, for that is the only way we will recognise the Spirit's presence. Mission is an encounter with mystery in unexpected places and in unsuspected ways. We need to contemplate, discern, listen and learn if we are to respond, celebrate and collaborate. Only in prayer can we learn to respect God's freedom to save in ways we might never have dreamed of and to avoid the risk of becoming 'propagators of a Gospel that

is not of Christ and builders of a Kingdom that has nothing to do with the Reign of God'. (McCabe 1997, 17)

We are not the bearers of an exclusive salvation to people devoid of any saving relationship with God. We can be confident that the Spirit has been there long before us. After all the Spirit is the principal agent of mission and more committed to the salvation of the world than we are.

### *Missionaries Free Of Messiah Complexes.*

Finally, the fact that mission is God's responsibility frees us from the intolerable burden of having to save the world. We Christians do not have to save the world. Not even the Church has to save the world. God will save the world and our role is to play our part, along with every man and woman of good will throughout the centuries. We just have to try to stay relevant and involved and maintain our faith and sense of humour. Taking too much responsibility is unconvincing and reveals a lack of faith. We should give witness to the need to live without messiahs.

## **MISSION: MOTHER OF THEOLOGY**

Missiology has traditionally been seen as part of pastoral theology or as training for those 'brave souls' preparing to work overseas. It was a peripheral activity that did not provoke any serious theoretical questions like the more scientific parts of theology, biblical studies, church history and systematic theology.

As you will have gathered by now, modern missiologists will not agree to such marginalisation. If our Trinitarian God is essentially missionary and if the Church is missionary by nature then there can be no more important task for theology than to discern what God is doing in the world and articulate the contemporary challenges for our faith and for the Church.

### *The Early Church*

Mission was not always marginal to theology.

In the first few centuries of the Church it was mission and missionary questions such as the place of Gentiles that provoked the most creative theological thinking. The New Testament writers were forced to theologise because of their missionary encounter with the wider Greek and Roman world. 'Thus, by a profound and transforming dialogue with Greek culture and philosophy the Church was led to discover the universal significance of the Gospel of Christ which had brought it into being.' (McCabe 1997, 2) Gradually and painfully the Spirit urged the community to include even the Gentiles and moved it out of Jerusalem to Antioch, Asia Minor, Rome and the ends of the earth. As the community became more conscious of its mission, it became more and more conscious of its identity as Church.

It was through this process of outreach, dialogue and discovery that theology was born. Missionary historians like Andrew Walls give fascinating accounts of the vigour, creativity and pain of this time. It was at places like Antioch and Ephesus that the early Christians decided that they were to convert and not proselytise the early Hellenist Christians. They did not have to become Jews. They were allowed to stay Greek. This was not a soft Torah-less option. Instead they had to learn to live Christ-like lives in a Greek way. They had to develop a new valid way to be Christian with their peculiar questions and cultural tools and in their Greek environment. They were introduced to Jesus as *Kyrios* or Lord rather than Messiah. [We can only guess at the pain the early Jewish Christians must have felt at using this 'pagan' term of Jesus. It must have been similar to the pain they felt at sharing the Eucharistic table.] And the title 'Lord' brought new theological questions about how Jesus related to the Father and so to the Greek enrichment of Christianity through doctrines of the Trinity, incarnation, hypostatic union and so forth. Greek questions had expanded our understanding of Christ. It was in the Scriptures but it would never have been seen by Jewish minds. (Walls 2002, 78-80)

Unfortunately as Christianity became the established religion of Europe, theology was

gradually transformed from reflection on mission and the challenges of proclaiming God to the world to reflection on what faith was and how it should be properly expressed. It then 'progressed' to 'the knowledge of God and the things of God'. Missionaries like Bartolomeo de las Casas in Latin America, Matteo Ricci in China, Roberto de Nobili in India and Alexandre de Rhodes in Vietnam produced some revolutionary missionary theology. But they were missionaries working in Latin America and Asia so their ideas had little positive influence on European theology. Later, as the Church tried to cope with the Reformation and the Enlightenment, theology narrowed even further to concentrate on the practical skills necessary for priests and pastors. (Bevans 2004, 14)

This progressive separation of mission and theology has been tragic for mission, the Church and theology.

### *Some Major Questions Missiology Poses For Theology*

Obviously if you accept what I have said tonight then missiology poses some major questions for our understanding of God, Christ, the Holy Spirit and the Church.

Let me briefly mention a few other areas in which I think missiology generates significant questions for theology. Some of the major areas calling out for missionary and theological attention are: globalisation, poverty, the huge growth in refugees, the place of women, reconciliation, ecology, the need for religious dialogue and the salvific value of other religions. All of these themes will affect the way we understand and do theology. Some of them, for example the justice related questions, are more natural to us but even they bring tension and division. Others such as religious dialogue will provoke even more profound rethinking as we try to grapple with the salvific value of the world's religions and what exactly that means for our understanding of the centrality and uniqueness of Christ.

There is a final area which missiology opens up to us. Besides insisting on the Trinitarian

foundation of mission, *Ad Gentes* also taught that the practice of mission is the responsibility of the local church not of the universal church. Mission and theology are becoming increasingly local.

Earlier I mentioned the missionary historian, Andrew Walls, who pointed out how Greek questions had enriched Christianity in a way that was consistent with the Scriptures but would never have occurred to the early Jewish Christians. He called it 'the Ephesian moment'. Walls believes we are on the edge of another such 'Ephesian moment' as the Churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America grow in importance in the Church. Philip Jenkins in *The Next Christendom* points out that while Europe may be the most Christian continent nowadays, by 2025 it will have slipped to third place behind both Africa and Latin America. By 2050 there will be three billion Christians and only one fifth will be non-Hispanic Whites. (Jenkins 2002, 3) By 2025, Oceania will account for only 0.008% of the world's 1,362 million Catholics. (Jenkins 2002, 195) The most typical Catholic will be a poor black or coloured woman living in the shanty towns of Kinshasa, Buenos Aires or Manila. We middle class white 'European' Catholics will be the exception.

Surely this will pose major questions for theology. Surely it is only a matter of time before the major theological influences will be coming from the 'Southern Churches'. They not only have the numbers but they are now mature, having had to face crises Northern churches haven't e.g., persecution in China, AIDS in Africa and poverty throughout the Third World. (Walls 2002, 45-46) They come to Christ with new eyes and new questions. Perhaps we are in for an enrichment of Christianity and theology comparable to that of our

early Greek history.

### **Conclusion**

Probably, the Council Fathers did not foresee all this. But they did start a revolution when they insisted that the church was missionary by nature because it was founded in the life and mission of the Trinity. In theory, at least, they put an end to the long-standing isolation of mission and theology.

This is important because the relationship between mission and theology is indicative of the health of the Church, theology and mission. When mission sets the agenda for theology the church is truest to its fundamental calling. When theology is divorced from mission, the Church and theology become defensive, polemical, apologetic and to some extent irrelevant. Mission also suffers from this divorce. It becomes a matter of conquest rather than discovery, activist rather than contemplative and a human project rather than God's mission. (McCabe 1997, 2)

Forty years after Vatican II we must continue to bridge the gap between mission and the church and mission and theology. If we can, the church, theology and hopefully the world will be better off for we will have returned to our true calling. We will be most faithful to our Trinitarian missionary God and most relevant to the world which God loves and has great plans for.

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