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The Future of Mission and Church

My sincere thanks to Rev. Dr. Jooseep Keum and the Mission and Evangelism Team of the World Council of Churches for inviting me to offer an address during this public seminar on the “Relationship between Church and Mission” on the occasion of the CWME Commission Meeting and the 50th Anniversary of Integration between IMC and WCC (22-27 November 2011).

As a Member of a Catholic Missionary Society, both terms – Mission and Church – are loaded with meaning for me. I am grateful that the title of my intervention is the “Future of Mission and Church” and not the other way round. It might seem a minor detail, but it reflects an emerging understanding of Mission and of the Church. I will approach the subject from the perspectives of our Missionary Society founded in 1868 in Algeria by Cardinal Charles Lavigerie. According to our *Constitution and Laws* (2006):

[Our] aim is to proclaim the Gospel to the peoples of the African world. Because of its origins [our] Society has always had a particular interest in Muslims (Art. 1).

Working in areas where we can proclaim Christ for the first time is important. So also is the dialogue with our Muslim sisters and brothers. However, we are aware that we are not alone to do this. Other disciples of Christ commit themselves to the same mission. From this stems the importance of working together for a united witness of all disciples of Christ through different ecumenical endeavours like this one.

“The Mission has a Church”

When I read these words of Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder (SVD),¹ they confirmed my thinking about and practice of Mission and how I see the Church, the community of believers in Jesus. I acknowledge my indebtedness to them for some of the reflections that I want to share with you now. I felt that the Spirit of Jesus is blowing and influencing us in similar ways, although we carry out our mission in different contexts and in different ways. The notion of Mission today has gone beyond the ‘territorial imperative’. The missionary movement is no more from North to South but is going in all directions!

We are all familiar with the affirmation that the Mission of the Church stems from the Trinity. God the Father sent his Son Jesus, who in turn sent his disciples to continue his message aided by the Spirit. God, by nature, has, right from the beginning, been reaching out to humanity out of love through the Spirit.

“From the first nanosecond of time, God has been there, in the fullness of God’s Mystery, through the presence of the Holy spirit. The Spirit, as it were, is God’s ‘inside out’ in the

¹ Cf. their book, *Prophetic Dialogue. Reflections on Christian Mission Today*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2011, pp. 9.13.

world. She is God's complete presence, palpable, able to be experienced, and yet elusive, like the wind"².

The Spirit of God, the *ruach Adonay*, in Hebrew, imparts God's life to "earth creature" (*ha adam*) (Gen 1), gives life even in the most desperate circumstances (Ez 37: the dry bones; Ez 47: the living water from the Temple) inspires the Prophets (Is 61) and inspired Jesus (Lk 4,18-19) and later the Apostles (Ac 2,1-4) .

God reaches out in love and this is made manifest in the life and ministry of Jesus. In order to know who God is, we need to look at Jesus, to listen to him. Thus, the saying of Juan Luis Segundo, "God is like Jesus"³. It is through looking at Jesus, listening to him, that we know who the invisible God is. Jesus makes God visible.

He was led by the Spirit (Mk 1, 12; Mt 4, 1; Lk 4, 1). His message is what we now call the Good News of the Kingdom of God. Even in the midst of suffering, God is there, vulnerable, not disregarding our wickedness. On the contrary, he suffers because of our wickedness. All this is part and parcel of the message of the Kingdom. It underlines the fact that love is not something that can be hidden. It has to be shared, if it is true. In spite of the opposition to Jesus, his message continued. God's message of love that crosses boundaries is the mission itself.

What is the Future of the Mission and the Church?

To be honest with you, I do not know what the future of the Mission and the Church looks like, but I believe there is a future for the Mission because it is not about the Church, but about God.

I think all of us here are aware that the time is over when different representatives from Christian Churches set out on "mission" to a given territory with the sole aim of saving souls from hell! They often did it without collaborating with other Christian Churches. Traditional beliefs were looked often upon as evil and had to be abandoned to become a Christian. The contexts did not seem to matter too much, as there was one message to proclaim. Mission was a North → South and West → East Movement. Now we have moved on from this and have experienced different forms of mission⁴.

A paradigm shift⁵ has taken place and today Mission is seen from a more complex and holistic perspective. The Church, born from the Mission of God, exists in order to continue sharing this mission with all humanity. The mission precedes the Church! That is why we can rightly affirm, "*The church does not have a mission, but the mission has a church*"⁶. The Church does not exist for itself but for the Kingdom/Reign of God.

² S.B. Bevans & R.P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, p. 11.

³ S.B. Bevans & R.P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, p. 12.

⁴ Cf. Francis Anekwe Oborji, *Concepts of Mission. The Evaluation of Contemporary Missiology*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2006, presents among other things, the concepts of mission as conversion, mission as Church planting and Church growth, mission as adaptation and inculturation, mission as dialogue with religions, mission as *Missio Dei* and service of God's reign. As a new perspective, he speaks of mission as Ecumenical Dialogue.

⁵ The master piece on the question is undoubtedly David Bosch, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1991. To facilitate the reading, see, Stan Nussbaum, *A Reader's Guide to Transforming Mission. A concise, accessible companion to David Bosch's classic book*, Maryknoll, 2009.

⁶ S.B. Bevans & R.P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, p. 16.

Unlike in the old models of Church, our being Church is expressed not so much in the building, in the statistics, etc., no matter how important these are. Our being Church is about being witnesses to God's love in our nation, in our schools, in our homes, in our caring for the environment, etc.

Being disciples and apostles of Jesus is more than saving souls. While the connectedness to God will always remain the foundation of Mission and the Church, Mission takes into consideration a whole range of other perspectives that might not always have been considered as being part of the missionary endeavour. These perspectives include:

- **Ecumenical dialogue** and the Unity of Christians. There is more that unite us than that divides us!
- **Dialogue** with other religions, especially Islam, other Traditional Religions, in a spirit of great respect and a sincere desire to learn from each other and to be spiritually enriched in the process! (cf. Later on in this paper for the different forms of dialogue).
- **Reconciliation** of the entire human race in today's interconnected and globalised world (human beings, nature)⁷ ;
- **Justice**: making sure that those people whom society discards or are placed at its margins also have their rights respected. In many parts of the world, issues like the just wage, the fight against Human trafficking and against other modern forms of slavery⁸;
- **Peace**: the "*shalom*" concept of the Hebrew Scriptures; the well-being of the whole person in his / her society and the well-being of society at large.

These are some of the challenges of Mission today that our missionary family has to face and respond to. The realization that the **Mission is from God** brings home the point that **we are co-workers of God**, signs of his healing love, reconciliation and the life he brings to humanity. Consequently, there is no cause for alarm even if we are not able to achieve everything and the numbers of churchgoers is diminishing in some parts of the world! I would add that even the Unity of Christians that we pray for and work for does not depend on us. It is God's work and as the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican put it: "*the Holy Spirit, in a way known only to God, offers all peoples ways of participating in the Paschal Mystery*"⁹.

Our participation in God's mission comes through our personal and community witness as disciples and apostles of Jesus. As a community of believers, **we have probably not yet fully taken on board the implications of the growing awareness that Mission precedes the Church**. Moreover, we should strive more and more to live in such a way that our common Baptism and not our "Church-given titles" should really become what binds us together and makes us all active members of the community.

The credibility of the Good News of Jesus that we announce depends on the quality of our **witness**¹⁰. This was very forcefully brought home to us as Missionaries of Africa during our 2010 General Chapter. In keeping with the charism of our Founder, we commit ourselves to announcing Jesus where he is not known (primary evangelisation), encountering and dialoguing with Muslims and believers of African Traditional Religion, working with other Christians for Unity (Ecumenism), promoting the values of the Kingdom of

⁷ From the Catholic perspectives, Pope Benedict XVI offers a road map for the Church in Africa (and elsewhere) for the years ahead of us through his *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Africae Munus*, Vatican City, Libreria Vaticana, 2011.

⁸ Cf. Article 4 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Promulgated on 10.12.1948).

⁹ S.B. Bevans & R.P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, p. 17 [*Gaudium et Spes*, n° 22].

¹⁰ Cf. Maurice Pivot consecrates the entire second part of his book (*Un nouveau souffle pour la mission*, Paris, Les Editions de l'Atelier, 2000, pp. 99-127) to witness as proclamation of the Gospel.

solidarity, reconciliation, justice and peace, etc. However, this is done through a community commitment. Thus, the following expression in our 2010 Capitular Acts:

*Community remains the prime location in which our mission finds its unity, fraternity and strength. (...) We strive to embody the Gospel-based testimony of men of all races and ages united by Christ's love. **We wish to live in witnessing communities as examples of unity, charity and reconciliation. We cultivate openness, availability, listening and brotherly concern. We practise dialogue, sharing, listening, welcoming and hospitality**¹¹.*

We believe that without trying to live these Gospel-values in the communities themselves, it will be difficult and even hypocritical to preach them to others. To do this, we realize that it is not just enough to live together. **We need to move from a life in common to a communion of life** in which we plan together, pray together, act together. We learn to communicate what we are doing and where we are, what we intend doing and what we feel deep down in what we are doing. We do at times experience conflict, but this too is an opportunity for self-questioning and further growth. There is a growing awareness that it is not enough to announce the Good news. The bearers of the Good news have to be evangelised themselves by the message that they bear¹². "Actions speak louder than words".

Some Missionary Attitudes Needed for the Church of Tomorrow

There are many attitudes, but I would like to mention two basic ones. The first is born of my personal conviction and the second inspired by how I have seen Missionaries of Africa and other missionaries in action in the field.

Missionaries as Disciples and Apostles

According to the account of the first Gospel to be written (65c. AD), when Jesus wanted to associate some people in continuing the mission with him and after him:

*He went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him.
¹⁴ And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, ¹⁵ and to have authority to cast out demons (Mark 3:13-15 [RSV]).*

They all spent time with the Master, listened to his teaching and observed him in action. They were first of all disciples. Then and only then did he send them out (as *apostoloi*) to the very places where he himself was to go with the message of proclaiming the Kingdom of God along with the peace and healing that accompany it (Mk 6:6-12). They are co-workers, co-creators of a new world with God!

In other words, they do not replace Jesus; rather, they continue his mission and prepare the way for him. Jesus empowered them only after this period of "being with him".

¹¹ Society of Missionaries of Africa, *Capitular Acts. XXVII General Chapter, Rome 10 May – 12 June 2010*, p. 44.

¹² Cf. John Paul II's post-synodal exhortation on Consecrated Life, n° 76; 81.

A similar point is made in the inaugural speech of Jesus at Nazareth (Lk 4:16-30). It defines who Jesus is, defines his mission in prophetic terms through quoting Is 61:1-2 (cf. Lk 4:18-19) and referring to Elijah and Elisha. What most commentators miss out in this passage is that through the Elijah (Master) – Elisha (Disciple) reference, Luke actually initiates the master-disciple relationship as the key to understanding the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles¹³. The reader (the implied disciple) is invited to adopt this attitude with regard to Jesus (the Prophet, Messiah and Master).

As Jesus reminds us:

⁴⁰ *A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher, (Luke 6:40 [RSV]).*

This dual vocation - being a disciple of Jesus and being sent out by him – has to be constantly combined in Missionaries as we move into the future.

The second missionary attitude that I mention below offers us a way of doing just this.

Missionaries as Prophets and Promoters of Dialogue

Over the years, there has been a growing awareness that Missionaries all over the world are not sent out to people who have no experience of God. Each nation, each people, already has its unique experience of God. The Spirit of God precedes us¹⁴.

This means that it is important that we become conscious of this and that we acknowledge it in the way we relate to people. As Missionaries, when we approach another culture, we do best to resemble children. Everything is new and we have to learn the language, the customs, etc. An essential attitude in this process is to let go of some presumptions and preconceived ideas about the other culture different from my own, in order to learn. Without this basic attitude, it is not possible to learn and be brought to life in the culture. This is commonly referred to as **dialogue**. It takes different forms¹⁵:

- **dialogue of life**: rubbing shoulders with each other, getting to know and appreciate one another better;
- **dialogue of social action**: our actions for a better world are more effective when carried out by and for all peoples. Knowledge of the social doctrines of the different religious traditions is helpful in this type of dialogue.
- **dialogue of theological exchange**: while experts of different beliefs study each others' doctrines and ways of living their faith, ordinary believers also learn from reading each other's sacred and inspirational texts.

¹³ Cf. Richard K. Baawobr, "Opening a narrative Programme: Luke 4:16-30 and the Black *Bagr* Narrative", in *JSNT* 30 (2007) 29-53.

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, n° 57.

¹⁵ Cf. 1984 document of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation*° 42.; Michael L. Fitzgerald & John Borelli, *Interfaith Dialogue. A Catholic View*, London, SPCK, 2006, pp. 28-35; S.B. Bevans & R.P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, pp. 68-69.

- **dialogue of religious experience:** the experience of Assisi in 1986; 2002 and 2011, whereby leaders of different religions came together to pray each in his or her own way, is a good example.

From the very first moment that we set out on mission, we encounter and dialogue with people. It is not an option. It is a constitutive element of the process of sharing the Good News. Jesus encountered and sought dialogue with the people of his day and it is through this that he could communicate the news that another form of life is possible.

The result of dialogue and going with it is that with a better knowledge of the other religion, we can draw people closer together in spite of the divisions caused by religion, race and social condition. While we might go out to evangelise, we are in turn evangelised by the people to whom we are sent. Dialogue is thus not the privilege of some specialists, but of each one of us.

Alongside dialogue is the **prophetic attitude**¹⁶. We reach out to others because we have a message to share. This message is Good News, but it is sometimes in conflict with the cultural traditions and practices we might find in the places to which we are sent. Part of being a missionary of today and tomorrow is:

- to dare to **announce:** speak out in God's name with a message;
- to dare to **denounce:** point out the incoherencies or the counter-values to the Gospel¹⁷;
- to dare **commit oneself in God's name for a better future:** indicate a way forward¹⁸.

From an historic attitude of total rejection of the culture, sometimes we Missionaries fall so much in love with the culture that we fail to fulfil this prophetic attitude. However, to quote David Bosch, a "bold humility" is needed - *bold in preaching the Gospel but humble in its realization that it too needs the repentance to which the gospel calls humanity*¹⁹.

The Second Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa took as leitmotiv the saying of Jesus on the Sermon on the Mount: "You are salt of the earth and light of the world" (Mt 5:13.14). This role is possible if in dialogue with the culture we give it taste, like salt does to food, and if we dare let the light of the Gospel shine in the dark areas of our lives and challenge us.

Towards a Conclusion


It is my conviction that:

¹⁶ Cf. Abert Nolan (*Hope in an Age of Despair. And other Talks and Writings [edited and introduced by Stan Muyebe, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2009, pp. 88-98]*) refers to the prophets as speaking out (even accepting the risk of martyrdom), speaking before [calling for *metanoia* as a result of the way they see God's plan into the future: the judgement ↔ salvation / *metanoia* dialectic] and speaking for ([God] because they feel with God and share his attitudes, values, feelings and emotions).

¹⁷ The recent wave of the "*indignés*" across the globe following the publication of Stéphane Hessel's *Indignez-vous*, Octobre 2010, shows that at the wider level of society people are capable of identifying the structures of evil and of rising up against them.

¹⁸ The follow-up of Stéphane Hessel's *Indignez-vous* is precisely about the need to commit oneself in the fight against injustice (cf. *Engagez-vous. Entretiens avec Gilles Vanderpooten [Conversation pour l'avenir]; Editions de l'Aube, 2011.*

¹⁹ S.B. Bevans & R.P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, p. 145.

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- the future of the mission and the Church lies in the awareness that the Mission is God's and that we are his co-workers;
 - that all agents of Mission are called to be prophets filled with God's Spirit of dialogue;
 - and that it is possible to repair the divisions of the past and bear witness to the Good News together as sisters and brothers.
 - As Missionary disciples of Jesus, we are called to bring hope to different people wherever we are.

This, however, needs to be done in **poverty**, united with the **crucified** Master and with a **childlike** heart²⁰. It is when we recognise our own limitations that God can and does use us for his mission. The Mission is not about us, it is not about the Church. It is about God and the way to God is not an upward climb, but a descent, in which we recognise our need for God and for each other.

Thank you for your attention and for the dialogue that will follow, filling in points that I have perhaps dealt with too rapidly.

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²⁰ Cf. André Daigneault (*Le chemin de l'imperfection. La sainteté des pauvres, Québec, Anne Sigier, 2000, p. 150*) says this about the apostle of tomorrow.