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situation. For these three reasons, Newbigin's assessment is as pertinent now as when he made it nearly a half century ago:

Everything about such a missionary situation conspires to make Christian disunity an intolerable anomaly. ...

... When the Church faces out towards the world it knows that it only exists as the first-fruits and the instrument of that reconciling work of Christ and that division within its own life is a violent contradiction of its own fundamental nature. His reconciling work is one, and we cannot be His ambassadors reconciling the world to God, if we have not ourselves been willing to be reconciled to one another. It is the result of this deep connection at the heart of the Gospel itself that Churches which—within Christendom—had accepted their disunity as a matter of course, found that when they were placed in a missionary situation their disunity was an intolerable scandal.<sup>69</sup>

Within the missionary dynamic of the one church, we face the all too human breach, relying on the divine *Pontifex Maximus*.

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## The Mission of the Church

### *Post-Vatican II Developments in 'Official' RC Theology*

Thomas F. Stransky

**Keywords:** Vatican II, Mission, Evangelism, Church, Salvation, Trinity, Contextualization, Proselytism

#### VATICAN COUNCIL II (1962–1965)

Pope John XXIII (1958–63) intended the Second Vatican Council of over 2,400 bishops from six continents to be the hope of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) for 'a new Pentecost', 'a means of spiritual and apostolic renewal', 'an updating (*aggiornamento*) of the church on the edge of a new era'.

After four annual two-month sessions (1962–65), Vatican II promulgated sixteen documents with over 100,000 Latin words. The **Church** became the fulcrum or vital center for all *aggiornamento* themes in the two longest documents: on the church (*Lumen gentium* [LG], from its opening Latin words), and on the church in the modern world (*Gaudium et spes* [GS]). In their theological light bask the other fourteen statements, such as the decree on the church's missionary activity (*Ad gentes* [AG]).

Vatican II covered every major biblical / theological / ecclesiological issue, every major dimension of personal and communal renewal, of liturgical worship, of institutional life (laity, priests, and bishops), of relationships to 'Others' (whether other Christians, or

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<sup>69</sup> 69. *Household*, 17–18.

those of other world faiths, or of no explicit religious commitment), and of missionary and service (diakonia) outreach. The council directly faced marriage and the family; the development of culture; economic and social life; the political community; war and peace in the family of nations.

Only by taking account of *all* the Vatican II debates, resolutions and later interpretations can one understand the modern RCC—and in particular for our RCC/WEF conversations, its present consensus and dissents about understandings, motivations and practices of mission, including organization, recruitment and distribution of personnel and financial resources.

## POST-VATICAN II DEVELOPMENTS

The RCC as a whole, and each obediential member, were suddenly called to interiorize and carry out Vatican II's demands of fidelity. They were to do this in response to conflicting analyses of an elusively changing world and varied predictions about their consequences on human communities. In hindsight, too much came too soon for too many—a discontinuity in the presumed confidences of Catholic identity in a church which prides itself on its faithful continuity with the past.

This future shock had much to do with post-Vatican II confusion and hesitations about the missionary nature and function of the church. If most of the changes can be called 'developmental continuities' (e.g. liturgical reforms), three major themes were 'sudden discontinuities' in the tradition, which directly implicate mission understanding and practice: the decrees on religious freedom (*Dignitatis humanae [DH]*), on ecumenism (*Unitatis redintegratio [UR]*), and on the relation of the church to non-Christian religions (*Nostra aetate [NA]*). The daze of future shock brought with it contrasting mission practices, and identity crises within western missionaries' own lives, within their sending organizations and supporters, and within the local churches which received these resources.

On the positive side, the incarnated fidelities to Vatican II challenges, including the risk of making mistakes, are causing holy tensions, as can be seen from the following examples:

1) experiences of the decolonization process in the newly labelled 'third world' which is struggling through the first generations of new nationhoods blessed with new freedoms and cursed with new dependency syndromes; and the local churches, more than ever indigenous in their lay and clerical leadership, are discovering their roles in nation-building, including their missionary responsibilities, at home and beyond their borders. The local churches are no longer objects but subjects of their own destinies;

2) movements of liberation theologies, initiated in Latin America, and a restructuring of local congregational life (ecclesial basic communities), so that the politically, socially and economically oppressed and powerless have a voice in the very doing of theology in a faith that *does* justice;

3) experiences of collaboration in common witness with those of like mind and spirit among the mainline and more liberal Protestant (and Eastern Orthodox) churches, at the very time when most of these are being sidelined by the fast-growing conservative Evangelicals and Pentecostals who are, for the most part, outside of present 'ecumenical' structures, and who embrace subgroups called fundamentalists;

4) experiences of living dialogue with peoples of other world faiths, especially in regions of Christian minorities (Middle East, Asia);

5) experiences of cooperation with 'all people of good will' in building up a sane family of nations and societies, peace with justice;

6) recognition of soulless economic and technical developments, especially in the West, which is stimulating the search for truth about God, about the meaning of the human, of life itself.

Nevertheless, already in the early 1960s the Vatican II bishops were uncomfortably aware of a *Zeitgeist*, a mood that was challenging the right of the church to be missionary. The articulators of this mood varied. Philosophers advocated a syncretistic union of all world religions. Internationalists judged Christian mission to be an obstacle to peaceful coexistence between nations. Neonationalists saw indigenous religion as an essential part of cultural heritage and identity which should be defended against 'outside' Christian disrupters. A growing minority of Christians in a pluralistic one-world society questioned their right and responsibility to proclaim the explicit gospel to those of other world faiths. Are missionaries but zealots who impose a disturbing religious message among peoples who want to be left alone, and should be?

The mood persists. Some observers claim to hear the death gasps of traditional missionary activities, especially direct evangelism. Some question the very validity of the biblical missionary mandate, or at least ask for more convincing reasons for it.

In the history of the church the missionary drive has always been a sign of vitality. Is its lessening today ultimately a sign of a crisis of faith? of faith in the church? of faith in Jesus Christ? of faith in God?

## OFFICIAL RC RESPONSES

By 'official' I mean those teachings, directives and guidelines which come from 'the centre'—the Holy See/ Vatican, either directly from the pope or from departments of his Roman Curia. Such varied, and not always consistent, statements intentionally bear different degrees of authority or finality—a fact too often missing in their interpretations. The two major post-Vatican II mission encyclicals, Paul VI's *Evangelii nuntiandi* (EN 1975) and John Paul II's *Redemptoris missio* (RM 1990), are formally addressed to the universal RCC, and bear more magisterial weight than, say, the pope's speech at public audiences in Rome.<sup>1</sup>

*Redemptoris missio* is entitled, 'on the permanent validity of the church's missionary mandate'. RM reflects official RC responses to an array of post-Vatican II positive and negative developments in the theology and practice of mission which during twenty-five years have been swirling within a world church of over 600 million adherents.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1. Mission encyclicals enjoy a tradition, beginning with Benedict XV's *Maximud illud* (1919), then Pius XI's *Rerum ecclesiae* (1926), Pius XII's *Evangelii praecones* (1951) and *Fidei donum* (1957), and John XXIII's *Princeps pastorum* (1959). One should evaluate each papal encyclical by what is proposed and why, in the context of the teachings of Vatican II and prior general councils (e.g. Vatican Council I, 1869–70), of previous pronouncements from popes and the Roman Curia, and of writings by biblicists and theologians.

<sup>2</sup> 2. John Paul II's first encyclical on the Redeemer of humankind (*Redemptor hominis*, 1979) sets forth 'the central commitment of my new ecclesial service—the relationship between the mystery of redemption in Jesus Christ and the dignity of man', 'the church's fundamental function of every age, and particularly ours, is to direct man's gaze, to point the awareness and experience of the whole of humanity towards the mystery of Christ'. Sections of RM refer to the pope's seven prior encyclicals, in particular, on the mercy of God (*Dives in misericordia*, 1980), on the re-evangelization of Greater Europe (*Slavorum Apostoli*, 1985), on the universal action of the Holy Spirit (*Dominum et vivificantem*, 1985), and on social justice (*Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 1988).

By 1990, over 65% of Catholics were living in the southern hemisphere. The Roman Synods<sup>3</sup> for the first time had only a minority of bishops from the northern Atlantic region, and here Catholics were decreasing by cradle or commitment. International missionary communities were fast depleting in numbers of priests, brothers and nuns from North America and Western Europe, but these institutes were being replenished by an increase of personnel in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Oceania. More and more of this latter fulltime personnel are foreign missionaries from other third-world countries, e.g., Mexicans and Koreans in Africa, Nigerians in other African countries, Indians in Thailand, Filipinos in Palestine. Lay catechists become necessary leaders in parishes; in 1996, over 300,000 in Africa.

Pope John Paul sees a 'new springtime of christianity' but also 'the waning of missionary activity specifically directed "to the nations (*ad gentes*)" ' at the very time when 'God is opening before the church the horizons of a humanity more fully prepared for the sowing of the gospel'. He wants 'to clear up doubts and ambiguities' in order to 'commit all the church's energies to a new evangelization and to the mission *ad gentes*'. He sees the urgency of this commitment: since Vatican II 'the number of those who do not know Christ and do not know the church . . . has almost doubled' in the world of 5.4 billion people (RM 1-3).

In this teaching task of both affirmation and correction, RM and other elated mission statements continue to face an almost no-win total reception. On the one hand, they try to analyse church/world situations (often with overgeneralizations), and under the complex mission umbrella to synthesize a massive RC theological heritage with selected emphases and nuances. On the other hand, RM, in particular, raises realistic issues that leave room for biblicists, theologians and practitioners to debate and develop. But critics would prefer other emphases, or more detailed magisterial assertions on certain issues, or more space for open debate on the same.

Pope John Paul II's very reading of 'the signs of the times' leads him to *exclude* those assertions which go beyond the parameters of 'common' or 'ordinary' RC teaching, and, in the pope's judgement, corrode 'the permanent validity of the missionary mandate'; 1) in *theology*; 2) in *christology*; 3) in *ecclesiology*; 4) in *soteriology* (God's salvific ways); and consequently, 5) in *missiology*.<sup>4</sup>

## CENTRAL TEACHINGS

1. *Excluded are **theologies** which deny the classic credal understandings of the mystery of the Trinity.*

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<sup>3</sup> 3. The Roman Synod brings together for one-month meetings, every 2-3 years, chosen bishops who represent the national or regional episcopal conferences on a specific theme; for example, justice in the world (1972), evangelization (1974), catechesis (1977), the laity (1987), and North and South Americas (1997).

<sup>4</sup> 4. The most detailed articulations of these major themes are the documents of the International Theological Commission, esp. *Faith and Inculturation* (1989), *God the Redeemer: Selected Questions* (GR 1994), and *Christianity and World Religions* (CWR 1996). Departments of the Roman Curia issue, usually 'with the approval of the pope', lengthy statements which expand and nuance missionary themes; in particular, statements from the congregations for the Doctrine of the Faith (e.g. liberation theologies); for the Eastern Churches; for the Evangelization of Peoples; the pontifical councils for Justice and Peace; for Interreligious Relations (e.g. 1991 *Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*); for the Laity; for Culture; for Christian Unity (e.g., 1993 *Ecumenical Directory*). The most comprehensive official source of current teaching is the 1992 *Universal Catechism for the Catholic Church*.

For the Christian, there can be no separation between theological reflection on the one God and on the triune God. This blunt insistence responds to claims that only a 'theocentric' or non-trinitarian approach is amenable understandable to those who are not Christian, yet wish to find a common ground 'in the one divine reality, by whatever name it is called' (RM 17). The God to be proclaimed is the triune God, the missionary God of salvation.

The ultimate ground for mission does not rest in the human desire for one's own or for others' salvation, or in our love for God and people, but in the trinitarian mystery of the Sending God, centred in Christ the Sent-One (Heb. 3.1) and in the Spirit, 'the principal agent of mission'[30] who carry out the Father's saving plan: to build up the kingdom or reign of God.

Both the Bible and church tradition use different words and metaphors to describe and interpret God's mission of kingdom-building: re-capitulation, salvation, conversion, liberation, shalom-ing, reconciliation, transfiguration, etc. None of them should be 'reductive' of mission (RM 17). (Reductive examples: *salvation* applies only to 'souls', assumptions or only to those who are explicitly committed in faith and discipline to Jesus Christ as the Lord and Saviour; *reconciliation*, only to human or only to God relationships; *liberation*, only to political, social or economic conditions, or only to personal sinfulness; *transfiguration*, only to persons, and not to all cultures, humanity itself, indeed the whole of creation.) 'The kingdom of God is the manifestation and the realization of God's plan of salvation *in all its fullness*' (RM 15). It is not for us and our words to separate what the Father and the Spirit already hold together in the Word.

2. Excluded are **christologies** that deny Jesus Christ to be the fundamental, indispensable mediator between God and humankind, the sole mediator of salvation, redemption, justification, sanctification, and final reconciliation.

Jesus of Nazareth is the incarnate Word. To separate the Word from Jesus Christ, or Jesus from the Christ (a 'Jesus of Nazareth' who is other than the 'Christ of faith') is 'contrary to the Christian faith. ... Jesus of Nazareth is the incarnate Word—a single and indivisible person'. In him 'the reign of God became present and was fulfilled'. In him God wills all things to be united, in heaven and on earth [cf. Eph. 1.10]. Therefore, only in Jesus Christ is salvation, only through him comes salvation (RM 18, 6). Excluded are denials by 'the myth of God incarnate' that Jesus has no universal role but is only one among several agents in God's plan of salvation.

This is the Good News—*holistic* salvation, best articulated by Paul VI: 'As kernel and center of the Good News, Christ proclaims *salvation*, this great gift of God which is *liberation* from *everything* that oppresses man but which is, *above all*, liberation from sin and the evil one, in the joy of knowing God and being known by God, of seeing God, and of being turned over to God' (EN 9, my italics; RM 44).

3. Excluded are **ecclesiologies** that sever the relationship between the reign of God, the Christ, and his visible, structured community of disciples—the church; or that co-extends the church with the reign of God.

Vatican II corrected the sharp RC tendency (since Augustine) of identifying the church with the reign of God. As Paul VI stated in 1975: 'Only the Kingdom is absolute, and it makes everything else relative' (EN 27), even Christ's church. God rules, the kingdom happens whenever and wherever God's redemptive will is fulfilled over creation and over

human history, within or outside the visible borders of the church. This relativization of the church could be *the key shift* in post-Vatican II ecclesiology.<sup>5</sup>

The church, as 'sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among all persons' (LG 1), is that part of humankind whom the triune God has called explicitly, in trusting, loving faith, to live out the divine mission of building up, in word and deed, 'the reign of Christ and of God among all peoples'. 'The reign of God cannot be detached from Christ or from the church' (RM 18), for the church is 'on earth the initial budding forth of God's reign' (LG 5), 'the sign and instrument of this reign which is and is to come' (EN 59).

This movement of being divinely sent for kingdom-building extends to the whole length and depth of ecclesial life in space and time. It transcends any and all of the church's specific tasks (e.g., initial evangelization, catechizing, teaching and preaching, worship, and selfless service), and of specific vocations within the church (e.g., the laity, the religious, and the ordained). 'The whole church is missionary by its very nature' (RM 62). The gift of mission is a calling to mission.

The mystery of the church of Christ forms 'one complex reality which comes together from a human and a divine element' (LG 8). Primarily and at its deepest level, the church is an *internal communion* (koinonia) in faith, hope and charity of those who live out their fellowship with one another and with the triune God; and secondarily, a *visible institution of means* through which this communion is brought about. Through them the internal communion is expressed and perfected in the confession of one faith, in the common celebration of divine worship, and in fraternal harmony of ministries—the Sacrament of God's love in the world.

In so far as the church does not become what it is because of sin and imperfections (including the sins against unity), 'the growth of God's reign is retarded' (UR 4), and the witness of the church to God's reign is wounded. Vatican II's *aggiornamento* translates into: 'Christ summons the church, as she goes her pilgrim way, to that *continual reformation* (reformatio perennis) of which she *always* has need, insofar as she is an human and earthly institution' (UR 6). This need is more than 'interior conversion' (UR 7), 'change of heart and holiness of life' (UR 8); it is also a 'renewal of the church (renovatio ecclesiae)' as such, 'in increased fidelity to its calling': ecclesiastical discipline, formulation of teachings, the biblical and liturgical life, the preaching of the word of God and catechetics, spirituality of married life, the church's social and teaching and activities (UR 6). The Lutheran 'ecclesia est sancta simul et semper purificanda' (LG 8) enters into the core of RC ecclesiology, which marries mission-and-unity with personal *and* communal and institutional 'purifications'.

'Distinct from Christ and the kingdom, but indissolubly united to both' (RM 19), the church is 'not an end in itself, but fervently concerned to be completely of Christ, in Christ and for Christ, as well as completely of men and women, among them and for them' (EN 34, RM 19), so that the church can 'open up for all men and women a free and sure path to full participation in the mystery of Christ' (AG 5). To say 'yes' to Christ is to say 'yes' to God's reign and to the Body of Christ, head and members—the church, the ikon of the presence of God and of the divine kingdom in the world. The church is *of* the gospel, not only its agent.

The Catholic believes that the church of Christ 'subsists' in RCC (cf. LG 8, UR 4), as a visible, structured family of local ('particular') churches, united in faith and sacraments,

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<sup>5</sup> 5. The reign of God is a very minor theme in Vatican II documents. But pregnant passages are LG 5: 'the church is on earth the initial budding forth of the reign of God'; and GS 39: the already/not yet 'reality of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love and peace'. In the doctrinal principles for missionary activity, *Ad gentes* uses 'reign of God' but twice, and vaguely (1, 9).

and in governance through their overseers or bishops, with and under the bishop of Rome—the pastor of the universal church who must ensure the communion of all the particular or local churches in their diversities (Code of Canon Law 331, 375). Together in the ‘college of bishops’ they bear missionary solicitude and direct responsibility for the whole church (RM 63), ‘the responsibility of proclaiming the gospel throughout the whole world’ (AG 29); each bishop ‘should be, above all, a proclaimer of the faith who brings new disciples to Christ’ (AG 20, LG 25).

Through this family of local churches, each particular church achieves growth in harmony through ‘authentic reciprocity’ (RM 64). Each should be generous and open to the needs of the others and share its spiritual and material goods. A local church is defective if it only receives or only gives, or worse, if it neither receives nor gives. ‘The evangelizing activity of the christian community, first in its own locality, and then elsewhere as part of the church’s universal mission, is the clearest sign of a mature faith’. Thus, mission is not just *from* some countries, groups, races or cultures *to* others, but *in* and *to* all. *Mission realizes the church as a communion of churches* (RM 48–49, 62–64).

## INCULTURATIONS

Official statements often speak of ‘the gospel’, or ‘the church’ as if they exist in culturally disembodied forms, to which the cultures of peoples need to be ‘adapted’ by being ‘purified’, ‘elevated’, ‘transformed’, ‘perfected’, or, John Paul II’s favourite word, ‘redeemed’. But *Ad Gentes* imaged a particular church as the local incarnation of whatever in ‘the customs, traditions, wisdom, teaching, arts and sciences of the people could be used to praise the glory of the Creator, manifest the grace of the Savior, or contribute to the right ordering of christian life’ (AG 22).

To be faithful to this image of earthing the church of the gospel is to effect a profound *inculturation* in every sphere of ecclesial life: theology, ethics, primary evangelization, catechetics and preaching, liturgical worship, religious life, formation of laity and clergy, congregational life, ecumenical and interreligious relations, and canonical legislation (AG 19–22). Following the 1994 Synod of Bishops for Africa, JP II’s *Ecclesia in Africa* calls inculturation ‘one of the greatest challenges for the church on the eve of the millennium’ (59).

Inculturation works dialectically in a ‘marvelous exchange’: the transformation of a culture by the gospel, and the re-expression of the gospel in terms of that culture. ‘A faith which has not become inculturated is a faith which has not been fully received, completely thought through, faithfully lived’ (JP II, cf. CWR 26). The church is to be completely at home among each people in the same authentic way that Jesus was at home in Nazareth. This is genuine catholicity.

RM stresses the first part of the process—the transformation of a culture by the gospel, and even uses *christianity*, the already heavily cultured word which communicates more than gospel: ‘the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in christianity and the insertion of christianity in the various human cultures’ (52). In fact, is it not an illusion to name an existing ideal culture Christianity, which is certainly not European or North American? More in practice than in theory, Rome still hesitates to confront that second necessary part of the process—the re-expression of the gospel: not only Africa to be gosselled but also the gospel to be Africanized.

The two guiding principles are ‘compatibility with the gospel and communion with the universal church’ (RM 59), but in practice since Vatican II, Rome seems to display too much fear of possible overdomesticated gospels, and too much anxiety about a potential diversified, culturally polycentric church unable to be held together in communion. Thus,



this 'particularly urgent' missionary objective of inculturation is for the pope a 'gradual, slow journey' (52), 'a difficult and delicate task' (E. in Africa 62).

*Inculturation*—the word first used in a papal document, *Catechesi tradendi*, 1979—is certainly 'difficult' once one goes beyond the generalities to careful analyses and critical understanding.<sup>6</sup> Into what culture? Cultures, and civilizations, are not unchanging essences. All cultures, whether modern or traditional, are in rapid transition to unpredictable, moving targets. And everywhere many cultures intertwine and remain mostly unintegrated; e.g., ethnic cultures, technological versus traditional, urban versus rural mind-sets, youth values versus that of the older generations. More critical is the omnipresent, global culture of 'consumerism' which plays a conspicuous role in developing certain values, patterns of behaviour, perceptions of happiness, success and fulfillment, and attitudes towards sex and love. This assault of a global culture creates 'cultures of helplessness' (Sherif Hetata).

Are not certain gospel values in themselves always, everywhere 'counter-culture'? One is never liberated from the cross; the resurrection did not *de-crucify* Christ.

So the questions remain: how do the *gentes* of the world become the *populus Dei*? how much and what of their being *gentes* do they have to be freed *from* in order to be free *for* being mature member-communities of the one yet diverse *populus Dei*?

## ECUMENISM

The one and only church of Christ bears historical divisions which contradict the will of Christ, scandalize the world, and damage the good news of reconciliation (cf. UR 1). In order that the world may believe in the Sending God, the church in the Spirit makes Christians sharers in communion with the Son, and in him, sharers in his communion with the Father. The Triune God has always blessed the church with divine gifts to be the *koinonia* (communion) of God. But because of Christian divisions, this communion is imperfect, and thus its witness is imperfect. Nevertheless, there is a true and real *koinonia* even if imperfect, existing between Christians, between the RCC and other churches and ecclesial communities.

This God-given reality of *koinonia* is the common ground or basis for the *oneness* of the ecumenical movement (also real but imperfect), and for all interchurch relations and activities.<sup>7</sup> 'Real but imperfect communion' is ontologically prior to any bilateral or multilateral interchurch or ecumenical structure.<sup>8</sup> And the holy objective—the

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<sup>6</sup> 6. The same applies to contextualization, a term also from the early 1970s, used more often in evangelical circles. Cf. Darrell L. Whiteman, 'Contextualization. The Theory, the Gap, the Challenge', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Jan. 1997, 2–7.

<sup>7</sup> 7. At the founding conference of the Evangelical Alliance in 1846 (London), the 800 delegates resolved that the EA is 'a voluntary union of individual Christians of different churches'. And the basis: 'essential unity is the invisible bond existing eternally between all(continued) believers ... whereas visible unity was that which these believers had to create among themselves as a testimony to the world'. Although in another resolution, the EA did not assume to itself 'the right authoritatively to define the limits of Christian brotherhood', the definite posture was strong opposition to Roman Catholicism. Cf. David Howard, *The Dream That Would Not Die. WEF, 1846–1986* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1986), p. 10. Catholics were objects of evangelical missions.

<sup>8</sup> 8. Ecumenical structures, such as local, national and regional councils of churches and the World Council of Churches, are necessary but transient. They can easily become sectarian by including only a sampling of actual Christian diversity, and in fact reach a practical ceiling far short of their professed intent and vision. Their tents are too small. Needed is an acceptable 'forum for regular interchange, on a full and equal basis, between Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Orthodox, evangelical, ecumenical Protestant, independent and

reconciliation of all Christians in the one and only church of Christ—transcends our human powers and gifts (UR 24), our finite plans and limited visions. ‘Hoping for what we cannot see means awaiting it with patient endurance’ ([Rom. 8:25](#)).

What does God call disciples of Christ and the churches to be and to do in the *one* reality of ‘real but imperfect communion’? Does not the Lord of history use even our sinful and finite imperfections in his service? ‘The Spirit helps us in our weaknesses’ ([Rom. 8:26](#)). Ecumenical and missionary activities are an inseparable duet: unity in mission, mission in unity. Even while the churches are divided, together they are called already to common witness by manifesting, especially through joint efforts, whatever divine gifts of truth and life they *already* share and experience together.<sup>9</sup>

4. Excluded are **soteriologies** that claim that because God’s universal will is that every man and woman should be rescued from sin, death and judgement, every person is saved from the beginning to the end of God’s salvation process, whether that person is explicitly Christian or not.

Also excluded are soteriologies that restrict God’s free initiative of salvation through undeserved grace, either by placing those divine initiatives only within the explicit Christian arena (e.g., explicit faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, and explicit membership in the church), or by binding them to human intentions and efforts (even evangelism campaigns can easily be ‘works over faith’).

The old question of ‘the salvation of the unbeliever’ and *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the church no salvation) finds a more developed answer in Vatican II,<sup>10</sup> and a more focused response in John Paul II’s Christian anthropology (the reality of grace in the human). How can people be saved who never arrive at explicit faith in Jesus Christ, indeed for so many, even explicit faith in God, since Catholic dogma teaches that no one can be justified without faith (Council of Trent, 1548, Decree on Justification, 7)?

Already in his first encyclical (1979) pope John Paul states: ‘The human person—every person, without exception—has been redeemed by Christ; because Christ is in a way united to every human person—every person, without exception even if the individual may not realize this fact. Christ, who died and was raised up for all—for every human being and for all—can through his Spirit offer man the light and the strength to measure up to his or her supreme destiny’ (RH 14).<sup>11</sup> And in 1985: ‘Since Christ died for all, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every person the possibility

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indigenous Christian churches’. S. Mark Helm, ‘The Next Ecumenical Movement,’ *Christian Century*, (Aug. 14–21, 1996), 781.

<sup>9</sup> 9. Cf. the 1970 study document of the RCC/WCC Joint Working Group, *Common Witness and Proselytism*, in *Mission Trends* N. 2, eds. G. Anderson/T. Stransky (NY/ Grand Rapids: Paulist/Eerdmans, 1975). T. Stransky, ‘Common Witness,’ in *The Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, eds. N. Lossky, J.M. Bonino, J. Pobee, T. Stransky, G. Wainwright, Pauline Webb, (Geneva/Grand Rapids: WCC/Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 197–200.

<sup>10</sup> 10. On tracing the long history of the RC debates and responses, cf. Francis A. Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?* (NY: Paulist, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> 11. Missiologist Gerald Anderson (evangelical Methodist) regards this papal sentence as, ‘the single most significant doctrinal statement of the Catholic church for mission theology since Vatican Council II’. *Christ’s Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, eds. G. Anderson/ T. Stransky (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1981), p. 111.

of being associated with this paschal mystery [of salvation]' (*Dominum et vivificantem* 53. cf. GS 22).<sup>12</sup>

'The Spirit offers everyone the possibility of salvation through human cooperation, and works in everyone through "seeds of the Word" found in human initiatives—including religious ones—and in human efforts to attain truth, goodness, and God himself' (RM 26, citing Vatican II texts). Thus, a twofold respect informs our relationship with other persons, whether Christian, religious or not: 'respect for the person in his/her quest for the deepest questions of one's life, and respect for the action of the Spirit in him/her' (29). 'Salvation, always a gift of the Spirit, requires man's cooperation, both to save oneself and to save others' (9). But the human person is free, and one can choose to respond with a rebellious fundamental 'No'.

Those Christians who are not Roman Catholics belong to the Church or *Koinonia* of Christ. They are of communions which are ecclesial means by which Christ mediates salvation, because in these churches and ecclesial communities his one, holy church is really, if imperfectly, present and operative.

But so many non-Christians live in communities of other faiths/ religions. Are they saved *despite* that community or somehow *through* it? Can they mediate salvation to their faithful adherents?

In different degrees other world faiths contain 'gaps, insufficiencies and errors'. Nevertheless, the presence of the Spirit of Christ and the action of the Saving God is in these faith-community through their 'saving elements' (RM 55–56). The religions can be carriers of saving truth only in so far as they raise man and women to the true love of God and neighbour (CWR 87). In referring to the Day of Prayer for Peace (Assisi, 1986), in which representatives of the major Christian communions and of non-Christian religions took part, pope John Paul maintained that 'every authentic prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person' (to Roman Curia, Dec. 22, '86).

This universal action of the Spirit cannot be separated from or confused with the specific, peculiar action that develops in the body of Christ, his church (RM 28–29, CWR 81–86).

'Other religious traditions' are 'participated forms of mediation of differing kinds and degrees', but 'they acquire meaning and value *only* from Christ's own mediation, and they cannot be understood as parallel or complementary to His' (RM 8). At the same time, the current RC position would exclude the theological judgement that all other religions are fundamentally wrong ways of approaching God because they are religions of 'self-redemption, self-justification and self-sanctification' (Henrick Kraemer, following Karl Barth).

Dialogue with those of 'other religions' is not opposed to mission but is one of its expressions (RM 55). Nor does dialogue 'originate from tactical concerns or self interest' but is based on respect for the person and for the Spirit who blows where the Spirit pleases ([In. 3:8](#)). 'Other religions constitute a positive challenge for the church. They stimulate both to discover and acknowledge the signs of Christ's presence and the working of the Spirit, as well as to examine more deeply the church's own identity and to bear witness to the fullness of revelation which she has received for the good of all' (RM 56).

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<sup>12</sup> 12. This Vatican II single reference (GS 22) to the universal presence of the Holy Spirit offering grace to every person the possibility of being associated with the paschal mystery of Christ becomes foundational, the principal theme in every context in which JP II speaks or writes about the 'non-Christian world'.

## THE JEWISH PEOPLE

The relationship of the church to the Jewish people is unique. The Jews, then, today and always, remain a chosen people. Their election stills stands. God has never revoked the people of God of the old covenant (NA 4). Catholics should respect the continuing integrity and spiritual fecundity of the Jewish people. Thus, excluded would be supersessionism, whereby the church of the new covenant displaces or replaces the Jews of the old. Nevertheless, the church, in which alone 'the fullness of the means of salvation can be found, must of its very nature proclaim Jesus Christ to the world, for through Him we go to the Father ... The church and Judaism cannot be seen as two *parallel* ways of salvation and the church must witness to Christ as the Redeemer of all'<sup>13</sup>.

Questions remain. What is the eschatological destiny or fulfillment of the Jewish people in relation to their permanent election, and to the incomplete, wounded catholicity of the church as long as the 'proto- schism' is not healed? What is the continuing mission of the church to the synagogue, of the synagogue to the church, and their common mission as two peoples 'elected' to humanity?<sup>14</sup>

In short, everyone *can* be saved, but one *is* saved when 'good faith', 'sincere heart' and conscience-dictated deeds are present. God's undeserved, free initiating grace is always necessary, as *somehow* necessary is Christ's mediation, and *somehow* 'a mysterious relationship' to the church (RM 10)—not *extra* (outside) but *sine* (without) *ecclesia nullus salus*. The *somehows* of 'the ways of God', the saving yes's and the damning no's to ever present saving grace in decisions by free persons, are left to theologians, as are the far less developed *somehows* on the relation of the reign of God, of the Christ and of his church to other communities of religious faith.

If the above be true in Catholic faith, then 'why the church'? 'why be a Christian'? Paul VI spoke of 'insidious excuses' which justify the relinquishing of evangelization: 'Why proclaim the gospel when the whole world is saved by uprightness of heart? We know that the world and history are filled with "seeds of the word"; is there not therefore an illusion to claim to bring the gospel where it already exists in the seeds the Lord himself has sown?' (EN 80). In short, what is the content of the missionary mandate that has permanent validity? To summarize that mandate, as now 'officially' understood:

1. The nature of the church, as the social, incarnational presence of the grace of Christ in the world, demands its striving to become visibly present in every culture, in every historical context.<sup>15</sup>
2. In 'the one mystery of salvation' (RM 9), 'all people are searching, albeit at times in a confused way' (11), and need 'the communion of life, love and truth' which is the church—the *totus Christus*, Christ the head and the members (Augustine), 'the

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<sup>13</sup> 13. The Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Notes on the correct way to present Jews and Judaism in preaching and catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church* (1985), I, 7.

<sup>14</sup> 14. For these and other questions still on the table, cf. T. Stransky, in *Unanswered Questions: Theological Views of Jewish-Catholic Relations*, ed. Roger Brooks, (Notre Dame IN: U. of Notre Dame Press, 1988), pp. 63–69.

<sup>15</sup> 15. Complement this by the summary of Waldron Scott, former WEF general secretary: '... contemporary evangelical concern focuses on evangelization as the proclamation of the gospel in every nation rather than the conquest of religions per se, or the total conversion of religiously based cultures. If as a result of proclaiming the gospel a particular people—tribe, caste, or other—turns to Christ in toto, well and good. If it does not, the mandate to preach the gospel to every culture and make disciples in all nations remains. The Great Commission has never been rescinded' ' "No Other Name"—an Evangelical Concern', in *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, op. cit., 63.

instrument of salvation for all' (9). 'The church is the ordinary means of salvation, and she alone possesses the fullness of means of salvation' (55). Thus, 'the universal call to salvation includes the call of all men [and women] to the catholic unity of the people of God' (CWR 69, cf. LG 13).

3. A true lived-out conversion to the historical Jesus the Christ is a qualitatively radical decision, 'not simply providing a way of interpreting transcendence, but its greatest realization' (CWR 24). *Spirit* means movement toward, the direction. The Spirit guides the disciples of Christ toward the whole truth ([Jn. 16:12-13](#)). 'The Spirit guides along the way that Jesus is, the way that leads to the Father' (CWR 59, cf. 53). 'Only in the church, which is in historical continuity with Jesus, can his mystery be fully lived out. Hence the inescapable necessity for the church of announcing Christ' (CWR 49).
4. Being a member of the church, 'the privileged sphere of the Spirit's action' (CWR 61), does not guarantee a person's salvation, but 'not from one's own merits but from the grace of Christ' (LG 14), it does provide the opportunity in faith and trust to realize and experience a greater fullness of life in Christ than would be available to non-Christians.
5. The reign of God is built up primarily by prayerful acts of adoration, contrition, thanksgiving and petition before the Father, in the name of Jesus and in the Spirit. The liturgy is 'the summit (culmen) toward which all the activity of the church is directed, and at the same time the fount (fons) from which all her power flows' (Vat. II SC 10). And in the celebration of the paschal mystery, the church fulfils her mission service in representing all humankind and in being efficacious for all men and women (cf. CWR 77). Is not the culmination of mission the gatherings of all peoples in the eucharistic sharing of the bread and the cup, with and in Christ the priest?

5. *Excluded are **missiologies** that so restrict the church's missionary purposes and activities that the church need not try to offer all men and women, everywhere, their God-given right: a valid opportunity to be directly challenged by the explicit gospel of explicit faith in Jesus Christ and in his church.*

'The church cannot fail to proclaim that Jesus came to reveal the face of God, ... that true liberation consists in opening oneself to the love of Christ, "our peace" ([Eph. 2:14](#)), and to his church' (RM 11).

Excluded would be dichotomies between the proclamation of this good news and, for example, concern for justice in the world as peripheral consequence. 'Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of society is a *constitutive dimension of the mission of the church and the proclamation of the gospel*; or in other words, of the church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation' (1971 Roman Synod statement, *Justice in the World*). Here one moves away from assertions that the church has no proper mission in the political, economic or social order. The move, above all, is based on the human person's dignity of being already in Christ. The person is redeemed in Christ, shares in the life of God's love, and in his sonship—mysteriously and inchoatively, but nonetheless really. To tell the human person this (evangelization) is to do whatever can remind one of his/her true dignity. To deny one his/her rights or to tolerate their deprivation by economic, social and political conditions

and structures is *counter*—proclamation (counter = told of one's real lack of worth and dignity.<sup>16</sup>)

Thus, in the explicit gospel proclamation, two dimensions are integrated: everyone, everywhere, should have the opportunity to be challenged by the explicit gospel of explicit faith in Jesus Christ, the one Lord and Saviour of all; and in that one commitment to be a disciple of Christ is the responsibility to carry out God's works of justice and compassion by service to individuals, groups and societal structures in temporal need, especially in the promotion of human dignity and in the defence and fostering of human rights.

## RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, WITNESS AND PROSELYTISM

Irreplaceable, initial proclamation is a permanent *priority* in the complex reality of mission among human communities (RM 44). In proclamation the church should respect and foster the right of the person and of communities to social and civil freedom; that is, freedom from any coercion to act against conscience and prevention from expressing belief in teaching, worship, or social service (DH 4). But more than that, proclamation should respect the gospel pedagogy of Christian witness and avoid whatever does not conform to the ways God draws free persons to respond to divine calls to serve God in spirit and in truth. Otherwise Christian witness is corrupted, becomes counter-proclamation or proselytism.

Since Vatican II, Roman Catholic and wider ecumenical circles have become much more sensitive to the distinction between authentic witness and proselytism in proclamation and other missionary activities, e.g. diaconal assistance to the needy. They are rightly afraid of committing acts of spiritual violence (use Jesus as a club with which to herd people into salvation camps called churches); or of being arrogantly disrespectful of non-Christians ('You are nothing in God's eyes and heart unless you explicitly believe in Jesus as Lord and Saviour'); or of repeating past imperialisms (the presumed rights of God-squads prevail over 'mere' human freedoms, including the right to be free from the manipulative hardsell).

More recently, ecumenical Christians are placing the interchurch problems of civic religious freedom and proselytism in the context of 'real although imperfect koinonia' (respect the ecclesial reality of other churches) and common witness (not the counter-witness of competitive ways and means which contradict the spirit of 'doing the truth in charity' ([Eph. 4:15](#))).

Acceptable though the witness/ proselytism distinction is, there are occurring increased allegations of proselytism and antagonistic competition in mission. Well-intentioned, and often well-financed, evangelistic activities may often ignore the Christian reality of other churches and their pastoral practice, or be insensitive towards their more vulnerable members (e.g. new immigrants or refugees from different religious cultures—Hispanic peoples in the USA, or firmly rooted Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholics in the Middle East). Or mission strategies may aim to re-evangelize baptized but 'non-practising' members of other churches, but there are different interpretations and criteria of who is 'unchurched', 'dechurched', 'nominal', or not a 'true' believer. Or in the situations of new civic religious freedoms, e.g., Eastern Europe and former USSR, some churches judge that others, usually Western European/North American missionaries, are unduly pressuring their members to change church allegiance.

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<sup>16</sup> 16. Cf. Richard A. and McCormick, S.J., 'Human Rights and the Mission of the Church,' in *Mission Trends*, No. 4, eds. G. Anderson and T. Stransky (New York and Grand Rapids: Paulist and Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 37–50.



In these very concrete situations, too often diatribe from-a-distance dominates over face-to-face dialogue, and defaces ‘the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’ ([Eph. 4:5](#)).<sup>17</sup>

## MISSION AD GENTES

RM develops *Ad Gentes*’ threefold division of human communities. First are ‘peoples, groups and socio-cultural contexts in which Christ and His gospel are unknown, or which lack local Christian communities sufficiently mature to be able to incarnate the faith in their own environment and proclaim it to other groups’. These arenas call for *mission ad gentes*, strictly speaking: primary or initial evangelization and founding or developing of local churches. A second group includes those communities in which the already established church functions normally: solid ecclesial structures, fervent faith in practice, ‘a sense of commitment to the universal mission’. These communities call for *pastoral care*. The third group consists of those communities in areas with ancient Christian roots in which the baptized have lapsed in their faith and practice, becoming either nominal church adherents or *de-churched*. These communities call for *re-evangelization* (RM 33).

Unlike Vatican II’s *Ad Gentes*, RM does not slight this third category. It perceptively recognizes that one cannot detail a world, even a region, by a map with different colours of clear boundaries between missionary and pastoral and re-evangelizing activities.

Furthermore, if an objective of mission *ad gentes* is ‘to found Christian communities and develop particular churches to their full maturity by functioning normally in its local setting’ (RM 48), it is not clear where such churches are, and when normal functioning begins.

Because of so many new multicultural situations created by migrants, refugees and immigrant faiths, especially in burgeoning urban centres in all continents, in the final analysis no local church is so totally ‘functioning normally’ that it can eschew home-mission *ad gentes*. No culture exists which is definitively permeated by gospel values. Mission *ad gentes* remains in and to six continents.

## CONCLUSION

The above are only my short-hand versions of some post-Vatican II developments in ‘official’ RC teachings on the mission of the church. They exemplify the more fundamental struggle of the RCC which tries not to be a self-centred, arrogant clan but to be a selfless, humble servant-community which enters into profound solidarity with the experiences of human society, takes humanity seriously in the unfolding of its history, and places *the mystery of the Triune God’s agape within the humanum*. For the most fundamental movement in God’s history with humankind is not that of Christians, say Roman Catholics and Evangelicals, towards one another, but of all people towards communion in the One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

As an ageing Catholic, I feel in the heart of the RCC those key creative tensions of expressing those divine gifts or properties of the church of Christ which ‘subsist’ in the RCC: one, holy, catholic and apostolic. These tensions are:

- a). between the necessary unity without uniformity of the RCC and legitimate, indeed necessary diversity without contradictions and divisions, during its transition, as one

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<sup>17</sup> 17. So the questions on the plate of dialogue: What kinds of Catholics do Evangelicals regard as objects of Christian mission? What kinds as partners in mission? Cf. T. Stransky, ‘A Catholic Looks at Evangelical Protestant’, *Priests and People* (Jan. 1998), p. 8.

family of varied local churches in six continents, from the northern Atlantic centre to a polycentric worldwide basis. And the tensions between the historical phenomenon of One Church and yet many churches—the RCC and other churches in their common calling to search together, ‘without prejudicing the future inspirations of the Holy Spirit’ (UR 24), for that full koinonia when all the churches will be able freely to recognize in each other the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church *in its fullness*. **['One']**

- b). between the fullness of Christian life and the perfection of love in adoring God in the moral community of ‘The Way’ ([Acts 9:2, 22](#)) of right living and conduct ‘in Christ’, and the embrace of a good yet sinful world, with choices, often ambiguous, of compassionate love of neighbour. **['Holy']**
- c). between the gospel message, ever old without being imprisoned by the past, to be proclaimed among all *gentes*, and, ever new without being ‘trendy’; its inculturations or integration of all that is authentically human. **['Catholic']**
- d). between the one mission of Ministry of teaching, worship and service inspired by the evangelical vision and teaching of the original apostles (Tradition), and the many traditions and ministries, always to be purified and renewed, in order that Ministry is faithfully effected. **['Apostolic']**

Furthermore, mission means sending. Surely as witnesses to ‘the Faithful and True Witness’ ([Rev. 3:14](#)), we Catholics and Evangelicals, who have been baptized into the one Body and are of the same healing, reconciling Spirit, have been sent neither to be enemies nor to be strangers to one another, but we are sent to be brothers and sisters in Christ on behalf of all peoples.

I am convinced that the ‘working paradigm’ in the present witness of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church is: **The unceasing search, in season and out of season, for mission in unity and unity in mission: the obligation to draw all Christians together, through the personal, communal and institutional renewal of our churches, into the One Church of Christ always in reformation; and the obligation of the whole church to proclaim by word and deed, the whole gospel of salvation to the whole world, as the servant both to that gospel and to that world.**

I bluntly ask the WEF: if historically so many evangelicals displayed a willingness to follow and witness Christ even into separation because of a commitment to *the truth of mission*, are Evangelicals now willing to be led into *the truth of unity* for the sake of the same mission? How essential is ecumenism, abstracted from its present institutional forms, to the continued renewal of a *true missionary church*?

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## **Missionary Dynamism in Search of Missiological Discernment**

*An Evangelical perspective on Mission*