Introduction

The perception of “the divorce between professed faith and daily life” (GS 43,1) and of the incapacity in assuming modernity, with its laicity, as an authentic “evangelical preparation” led Vatican II, with a certain internal logic, to the areas of reform and mission. Missiology, which up to then had been an optional appendix to the pastoral field, became a fundamental theology and a central nucleus of the theology of Vatican II. Mission is the guiding star in the constellation of the 16 Documents of the Council, which emerged from practical pastoral demands. Liturgical practices, biblical readings, ecumenical living, necessities of a new presence in the world of the working classes, pointed to the necessity of a doctrinal realignment of the relationship between the Church, the modern world, specific cultures and humanity.

Similar to the “linguistic about-turn”, which in the last century shook the human sciences, the turning to the people, the “popular about-turn” of Vatican II, the effort to define the people, adult and autonomous, as the subject of the Church, shook the institution and the ministry of the Catholic Church. A Church that in its liturgy looked to the wall, in its theology to the Roman Catechism, and in its ministry to the elites, in the Council made an about turn versus populum (towards the people). After the Council the largest sector of the Catholic Church sought to deepen the biblical, patristic, historical, theological, liturgical and pastoral foundations of this “popular about-turn”, while a minority braked this process which demanded of it a transition from a pre-modern world to a critical taking on of modernity, a prophetic voice and a “letting go”.

50 years have passed since the beginning of that “popular about-turn” which had as its objective “to continue the work of Christ himself who came to the world to give witness to the truth (cf. Jn 18,17), to save and not to condemn, to serve and not be served” (cf. Jn 3,17; Mt 20,28; Mk 10,45). In this linking of “witness” “salvation-liberation” and “service”, the Church fulfills its mission of announcing the Kingdom of Christ and of God” (LG 5,2).

Recently, the Conference of Aparecida (2007) recognized the necessity of the Church “rethinking profoundly and re-launching with fidelity and daring its mission in the new circumstances of Latin-America and the world” (DAp 11). Rethinking mission in the context of the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) signifies deepening our understanding of the origin and reach of the “missionary nature” (cf. AG 2) of all the baptized. It falls to us to follow the trail of the “missionary nature” in post-conciliar times. “Fidelity”, in this reconstruction, only makes sense if there exists “audacity” in the reception, the continuous aggiornamentos and in the projection of Vatican II.

From the beginning of the Council, three voices were raised with respect to it. For some, the council was unnecessary, for others it had the function of sewing on new patches on old cloth, while others still were convinced of the necessity of a true ecclesial reform. Step by step, a majority of the Council Fathers became convinced of the necessity of a “popular about-turn” as an ecclesial conversion.

1. Articulation: The Central Thread of the Documents

Before looking at the theological axis and the historical reception of Vatican II, we will try to weave the central thread which unites and situates hierarchically the 16 documents of the Council.
1.1. Basic Idea

1) The One and Triune God, being Love, is the centre, the origin and the goal of the Church’s mission.

2) God reveals Himself to peoples (DV; AG) from whom the Church People of God is constituted, to be “a light to the nations” (LG).

3) “The people of God have a public, historical and prophetic mission, at the service of the poor, one which is, at the same time, an eschatological mission. This service is made up of serving the unity of Christians (UR), religious liberty (DH), and the cultivating of relations with non-Christian religions (NA).

4) The Church is, firstly, rather than a hierarchic structure, the People of God. As such, all the faithful participate in the common priesthood (cf. LG 10) and the infallibility “in the act of faith”. “The whole faithful, anointed by the unction of the Holy One (cf. 1 Jn 2,20 and 27), cannot err in the act of faith” (LG 12). There exists a collegial responsibility among all baptized who have an active role in the articulation, the concrete carrying out and the propagation of the faith (cf. LG 17). Mission is for people who are adults in faith and free in the Spirit.

5) The People of God have as their natural condition “the dignity and freedom of the sons of God”, as their “law” the new commandment and their “goal” the Kingdom of God (LG 9b). The People of God is built up from the humble, the poor and the excluded. In the logic of the Kingdom, the others (translator’s note: the author continually uses the expression “os outros = the others” without further qualification, and is simply translated as such throughout) the poor and those who live in the shadowy areas of the world are the way of truth and the gate to Life.

6) The Church, People of God, celebrates its faith (SC). Its liturgy is missionary because it shows the ultimate goal of mission: that God be praised in everything and in all people. “The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy”, through discussions on the use of the vernacular (SC 54) and the integration of cultural elements of the various peoples in the liturgy (SC 65), opened paths to further discussions about the paradigm of inculturation.

7) God is in the world and sends us to the world. The Council translated this presence of God by the term “aggiornamento” as a task: becoming present. Becoming present in the contemporary world, declared Vatican II, is an eminently pastoral and ecclesial task, and, therefore, missionary (GS).

8) This presence of God found its expression in the texts that spoke of insertion, inculturation, the taking on of humanity and its culturally diverse world (AG 3b, Puebla 400), and also the option for the poor (GS 88, AA 8c.d, CD 13a, DM XIV 3,9, DAp 391). Also, the methodology of “see, judge, act” has a trinitarian connotation of aggiornamento: see with the eyes of God, judge according to the discernment of the Spirit and act according to the example of Jesus.

9) The “Church, People of God” lives out the trinitarian mission in the following of Jesus, announcing the Kingdom as an historically relevant and eschatologically significant goal. The new People of God convokes all of humanity for the definitive meeting with God.
10) Starting from the concept of universality, evangelization takes on multiple forms, never isolated or individualistic (cf. GS 32, PO 7). Within the “Church – People of God” there will always be, in the pastoral unity of the Spirit, a certain communion and a certain diversity of values, gifts and goals.

11) Because of its intimate link with the Cross and the Eucharist, the people of God is simple in its way and inviting in its announcing: “The Church grows, not by proselytizing but by attraction: as Christ attracts everything to himself by the force of his love” (Document Aparecida 159).

12. Vatican II defends the possibility of the salvation of followers of other religions (LG 16; AG 7a). In this openness, dialogue makes sense. It is a premiss of mission and a transcendent category of freedom and liberation (DAp 239).

1.2. Articulation and the “Hierarchy” of the documents

1) LISTENING to the Word of God directed to all people.
Constitution Dei Verbum: God reveals himself to humanity in Jesus.

- Decree Ad Gentes (AG): God directs his Word, who became flesh, to all peoples (mission of announcing the cause of the Kingdom of Christ to all nations).

2a) DISCERNING and ILLUMINATING every creature through the light of Christ.
Constitution Lumen Gentium: The Church, Mystery and People of God, illuminates all people with the light of Christ.

- Decree Christus Dominus (CD): bishops
- Decree Presbyterorum Ordinis (PO): presbyters
- Decree Optatam Totius (OT): presbyters
- Decree Apostolicam Actuositatem (AA): laity (common priesthood)
- Decree Perfectae Caritatis (PC): religious
- Decree Unitatis Redintegratio (UR): ecumenism
- Decree Ad Gentes (AG): missionary character
- Declaration Dignitatis Humanae (DH): religious freedom
- Declaration Nostra Aetate (NA): dialogue with non-Christian religions

2b) SEEING/DISCERNING/ACTING in solidarity with all humanity
Constitution Gaudium et spes: The Church is situated in, and directed to, today’s world.

= sacrament and service through sensitive presence (macro and micro cultural: autonomy/aggiornamento and insertion) in humanity and the world, attentive to the signs of God in the times, with the aim of building a new humanity.

= The mission of the Church manifests itself as religious, and for this reason, human in the highest degree.

- Decree Inter Mirifica (IM): Means of Social Communication (communication and translation)
- Declaration Gravissimum Educationis (GE): Christian education (GS 61s)
- Decree Unitatis Redintegratio (UR): ecumenism
- Decree Ad Gentes (AG): missionary character
- Declaration Dignitatis Humanae (DH): religious freedom (GS 17, 92)
- Declaration Nostra Aetate (NA): dialogue (GS 92)

3) CELEBRATING
Constitution Sacrosanctum Concilium (SC): The Liturgy
= the presence of Christ in the liturgy
= vernacular language

1.3. The Significance of the Conciliar Event according to Paul VI

In his final speech at the last session of the Council (7.12.1965), Pope Paul VI offered a key for a theological-pastoral reading of Vatican II. Here follow the most important topics of this speech:

- There still resound, in this Basilica of St. Peter, the words pronounced in the inaugural address of the same Council, by John XXIII: «The most important element of the Ecumenical Council is the following: that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine be safeguarded and taught in a more efficient manner.. The Lord said: «Seek first the Kingdom of God and its justice». The word «first» expresses, above all, in which direction our thoughts and forces should move (AAS 54 (1962), p. 790). The event corresponded exactly with that idea.
- The Council was celebrated for the glory of God, in the name of Christ, with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who «scrutinizes all» and who continues to be the soul of the Church, «so that we may know the gifts of God»,
It may be said that the Council occupied itself more with the Church, its nature, structure, ecumenical vocation, missionary and apostolic activity, than with divine truths [...] The Church [...] did this so as to find in itself the Word of Christ, alive and working in the Holy Spirit, and to sound more deeply the mystery, that is, the design and the presence of God outside of, and inside, itself, and to revive in itself the force of faith, which is the secret of its security and wisdom, and revive the force of love. The conciliar documents [...] permit us to see directly this primordial religious intention.

- It would not be licit to omit something that is of the greatest importance when we examine the religious significance of the Council [...] The Church felt the need to know, approach, judge correctly, penetrate, serve and transmit the gospel message to, and so to speak, touch, the human society which surrounds it, accompanying it in its rapid and continuous change. This attitude, born from the fact that the Church, in the past and especially in this century, had been absent and distant from profane civilization, is always inspired by the essential salvific mission of the Church, and was efficaciously and continually present in the Council.

- It is because of this that some suspected that in the men and acts of the Council, the doctrine of relativism which is found in the outside world, in passing things, in contingent needs, in the thoughts of others, had dominated more than it should have and with too much tolerance; and this at the price of the fidelity due to traditional doctrine and with prejudice to the religious orientation which is necessarily proper to a Council.

- We wish to note firstly that the religion of our Council was, before all, charity; With this declared intention, the Council cannot be accused by anyone of lack of religiosity, of infidelity to the Gospel, if we remember that Christ Himself taught us that all will recognize us as His disciples if we love each other (cf. Jo 13,35): «religion that is pure and immaculate before God the Father is this: visit orphans and widows in their tribulations, and preserve oneself immaculate in this world (Tg 1,27); and also: «He who does not love his brother, whom he sees, how can he love someone he does not see?» (1Jo 4,20)

- Lay and profane Humanism appeared, finally, with all its terrible stature, and, so to speak, challenged the Council to a struggle. A religion, which is the cult of God who wished to be man, and a religion – because such it is – which is the cult of man wishing to be God, met together.

- What happened? Combat, struggle, anathema? All this could have taken place, but in fact, did not happen. The old story of the Good Samaritan was the example and norm which guided our Council [...] The discovery of, and renewed consideration of human necessities absorbed the attention of this Council.

- The Council wished to consider profoundly its double physiognomy: the misery and the greatness of mankind. We should recognize that this Council stressed more the positive rather than the negative aspects of mankind. In this sense it had a clearly optimistic viewpoint [...] So there emerged suggestions full of hope rather than depressing diagnoses; this so that the Council could speak to the present day world, not with morbid forecasts, but with messages of hope and words of confidence.

- We should however, note one thing: the magisterium of the Church, although it did not wish to make any pronouncements about any doctrinal matter with extraordinary dogmatic sentences, did propose its authorized teaching about many questions that today concern human activity and conscience.

- The Church [...] adopted an accessible and friendly manner of speaking, which is proper to pastoral charity. It wished to be heard and understood by people. Thus, it was not only concerned with speaking to people's intelligence, but expressed itself in a way used today in normal conversation, in which recourse to life experiences and the use of cordial sentiments have a greater force to attract and convince. That is so say, the Church spoke to the people of today, as they are.

- Another point is worthy of consideration: all this doctrinal richness is directed only to the following: to serve humanity, in all life circumstances, in all its weaknesses, in all its needs. The Church declared itself to be almost the slave of humanity [...] the idea of service occupied the central place.

- Has all this, and everything else that we may say about the Council, by any chance diverted the Church in Council to modern culture which is completely anthropocentric? Diverted, no; returned, yes.

- Whoever honestly observes this prevalent interest of the Council in human and temporal values, cannot deny that this interest is due to the pastoral character which the Council chose as its programme, and must recognize that this same interest is never separated from the most authentic religious interest, due to charity, which is its only inspiration (and where there exists charity, God is there), or the union of human and temporal values with those which are specifically spiritual, religious and eternal.

- If we must discover the face of the Father in the face of Christ, according to the phrase: «who sees me, sees the Father also» (Jo 14,9), our humanism becomes christianity, and our christianity becomes theocentric, so that we may affirm: in order to know God, it is necessary to know the human person.

- In summary, will it not be this Council that will bring a simple, new and solemn way of teaching mankind to love God? [...] For this reason, this whole Council can be summed up in its religious significance, which is nothing if not a vehement and friendly invitation to humanity to meet, through the means of fraternal love, that God «from whom distancing oneself is to fall, and coming close to is to rise up, in whom, to continue is to be firm, to whom to return to is to be born again, in whom to dwell is to live» (S. Agostinho, Sol. 1, 1,3: PL 32, 870).
2. Proposal: Transversal themes

The flag of aggiornamento, hoisted by John XXIII, revealed, as well as the distance between the Church and the modern world, other distances: the distance between people and the Church, between the Church and the poor; between the manner of living and celebrating life not only in “the modern world”, but also in the traditional world; and between theology and popular imagination. A macrocultural aggiornamento to modernity, was translated by the Council into microstructure as inculturation, as the construction of a Church versus populum, as a popular turnaround of pastoral, liturgical, institutional and theological practices. The Church which is light (1.1), turns towards the people (1.2) by means of incarnation and aggiornamento (1.3).

2.1. Let the Light of Christ Shine

Vatican II ruptured the ecclesial introspection which, after Vatican I, determined a large part of the reflection, documentation and ministry of the official Church. The first words of the two Constitutions on the Church, Lumen gentium (“light of the nations”) and Gaudium et spes (“joy and hope”), pointed towards the programme of a turnabout.

To be a light to the nations, as Christ is the light of the world (cf. Jo 8,12; 9,5), is the origin, identity and goal of disciples. When Paul, in Damascus heard the voice of the Master, persecuted by him, Jesus gave him the reasons for a new life: he was called to come from the darkness to the light and made “servant and witness” (Acts 26,16). “Come from darkness to light” signifies a conversion, a refocusing of life, leaving alienation, discerning, and establishing priorities so that God may shine out in the faces of witnesses and in the hands of the servants he sends.

In the ancient Church, especially among Orthodox Christians, the Feast of the Epiphany was celebrated as the “Feast of lights”, memory of the baptism of Jesus, feast of illumination and of those illuminated by baptism, manifestation of the Most Holy Trinity. In order to be a light to the world and the nations (Lumen gentium), Jesus submitted himself to the waters of the Jordan; Stripped of everything, he received the baptism of John. In this “stripping”, as in those of the manger and the Cross, the trinitarian love of God and the mission of Jesus are revealed. The Epiphany as a Theophany, a revelation of the love that illuminates and sends out. The beloved Son is the Son that is illuminated and sent. There is a coincidence between love, illumination and sending.

In baptism, the illumination becomes the re-creation of the world, as is shown by the episode of the cure of the man born blind by He who declared himself “light of the world” (Jn 9,5). Putting mud on the eyes of the blind man, Jesus reproduces symbolically the creation of a new world, the end of darkness and of blindness in him who is born again of water and the Holy Spirit. The man anointed with the mud is sent to wash himself in the pool of Siloé, outside the walls of Jerusalem. Siloé means, according to the explanation of the Evangelist, “sent” and to be sent means to be aware, to be illuminated and freed in order to encounter a new path. To give sight to the blind is a sign of the definitive salvation announced by the prophets: “On that day, the deaf will hear what is read, and the eyes of the blind, free of darkness, will see again.” (Is 29,18ss; cf. 35,5.10). The Messiah will come as a covenant of the people, as a light to the nations, in order to open the eyes of the blind, free the prisoners from jail, and from prison those who dwell in darkness (Is 49,6.9). The man born blind, cured on a sabbath, was also a beggar (cf. Jn 9.8). He represents the Church and humanity. He who recovers his sight gains mobility and autonomy to “illuminate all people with the light of Christ” (LG 1) through proclamation and witness to the “Gospel of the Kingdom of life” (DAp 143). The proposal of Vatican II was and is auspicious.

Regarding people with compassion, the Church sought to relearn its mission in the world. Vatican II sowed the seeds of a Church that does not have as the centre of its mission itself, or territories to be administered, amplified and defended, but its identity as a follower of Jesus and servant of the Kingdom. A Church People of God, sacrament and communion, whose missionary nature, because it is at the service of the Kingdom of God, is at the service of the creation of a new world, in the joys, hopes and suffering of the people.

---

1 Paulo VI, in his Encyclical Ecclesiam suam (1964), reminds us of “aggiornamento” as “the programmatic orientation” of the Council (ES 27).
2 In the Epiphany there survives the Jewish “Feast of Lights”, Chanucá (“dedication”, “inauguration”), commemoration of the victory of the Jews over Antiochus (164 a.C.), of the purification of the Temple and the liberation of Jerusalem (cf. 1Mc 1-9).
2.2. Ecclesiological Revision: Lumen gentium and Gaudium et spes

In two ecclesiological Constitutions (LG, GS) - Lumen gentium, Dogmatic Constitution treating of the Church ad intra, and Gaudium et spes, Pastoral Constitution, looking ad extra, “at the Church in today’s world” - the Council sought to redefine itself and clarify the question of mission, its place in the world and its relevance to and responsibility for it.

2.2.1. The Subject of mission: The People of God (LG, AA)

The densest theological text of Vatican II as regards mission is to be found in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, which is a mystery (LG, ch. I), “visible assembly” and “spiritual community”. Both dimensions, the visible and the spiritual, “form one complex reality in which the divine and the human elements fuse together as one” (LG 8.1). To explain this complex reality, Lumen gentium establishes a “not mediocre analogy” with the mystery of the Incarnate Word. As the nature assumed by the Incarnate Word serves the Divine Word, so “the social organism of the Church serves the Spirit of Christ” (LG 8.1). The model of this “not mediocre analogy” is the following of Him who the Father sent. “As Christ fulfilled the work of redemption in poverty and persecution, so the Church is called to follow the same path, in order to communicate to mankind the fruits of salvation” (LG 8.3). As Christians and baptized, we are “inserted into the mysteries of His life, configured to Him, die with Him and with Him are resurrected” (LG 7.5). The analogy of the configuration is present in the paradigms “aggiornamento”, “assumption”, “insertion”, “inculturation” and action that is “in solidarity with the human race and its history (GS 1 and cf. 32).

Before structuring itself in different ministries and services, and before examining the Church-Institution with a hierarchical structure, and in contrast to the emphasis which Vatican I gave to the definition of papal infallibility, the Council invoked by the word “mystery” its divine reality, with no mystification of the papacy as a replica of a type of divine monarchy. The concept “people of God” points to a sociological composition of the Church. The “Church, People of God” (LG, cap. II) is a “community of faith, hope and charity”. Also the concepts of “mystery” and “people of God” are in harmony with the ecclesiological “popular about-turn”.

The understanding of the Church as people of God opens the way for a Church of adults and equals. Even though in this “Church people of God” there be different services, “there reigns, however, a true equality among all as regards the dignity and action common to all the faithful in the edification of the Body of Christ” (LG 32.3). In the interior of the Church-People of God, “all participate in the common priesthood of the faithful (LG 10.2), in the “prophetic munus of Christ” (LG 12.1) or, according to the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (AA), all participate “in the priestly, prophetic and kingly munus of Christ, and share the mission of the whole People of God in the Church and the world” (AA 2.2). The twofold mission of the Church – to bring to mankind the message of Christ and his grace (“explicit evangelization”), and to “penetrate with the spirit of the Gospel temporal realities and perfect them” (“implicit evangelization”), in principle falls to the whole People of God, without special prominence of “professional specialists” in various areas (AA 5). In pastoral reality, however, there belong to the laity the so-called “Works of charity”, which must make sure that “in the first place the demands of justice are fulfilled, so that there not be given as charity what is due in justice” (AA 8.5). Often the terms “apostolate”, “mission” and “evangelization” are used synonymously.

All that is said in regard to the “Church, People of God”, due to the fundamental equality which determines this people, is valid for laity, clergy and religious (LG 30). In Vatican II, the place of the laity and its relevance for the mission of the Church is found in Lumen gentium, chapters 2 and 4, and in the Decree Apostolicam actuositatem on the lay apostolate (AA). In virtue of their baptism and confirmation, all who have been “incorporated into Christ” (LG 31.1), constitute the People of God and are called to the apostolate: “The apostolate of the laity is a participation in the salvific mission of the Church” (LG 33.2). “They exercise their multiple apostolate both in the Church and the world (AA 9). Every layperson “is at the same time a witness to and living instrument of the mission of the Church itself” (LG 33.2). The lay person, in his/her apostolate in the Church and the world, is not subordinated to the ordained ministers. The diversity of services in the Church, People of God, does not signify the inferiority of some and the superiority of others.

Mission has its place in the interior of the Church-People of God, which is the Body of the Lord and the Temple of the Holy Spirit (LG 17). This People of God, called from all peoples, is a messianic, priestly and universal people. In the diversity and unity of the Holy Spirit, “everyone is called to belong to the new People of God” (LG 13). The universality (catholicity) of this people, who “must extend itself to the whole world and for all time” (ibid.), is the reason for its permanent mission. This people represents an invitation for all humanity to become the new People of God and citizen of the Kingdom.

The Church, People of God, is made up of subjects, not of flocks. And from this collective subject – the Church, People of God – there emerges the responsibility of all the faithful regarding faith, its internal truth and the divulging of this truth because of the “common priesthood of the faithful” (LG 10), which has its foundation in baptism “The community of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One (cf. 1 Jn 2.20 and 27), cannot err
in the act of faith” (LG 12). Through the “supernatural sense of the faith, of the whole people, which exists, according to Augustine, “from the Bishops down to the least of the lay faithful”, there is built up “a universal consensus about questions of faith and morals. By this sense of the faith, sustained by the Spirit of truth, the People of God (...) not only already receives the words of men, but truly the Word of God (1Tess 2,13)” (LG 12).

The infallibility of the People of God in the act of faith (in credendo) is part of Catholic doctrine. Because of this, the validity of any dogma depends on the participation of the People of God in its formulation, as well as its reception by the community of the faithful. If this is true for the most intimate part of the Church, for doctrinal formulation, it is even more true for the administration of the Church as an institution. This has serious consequences, for example, regarding the nomination of bishops, for the practice of subsidiarity in the administration of the Church and for the participation of the local Church in the decisions of the Roman Church, whose universality is strictly linked to its articulation with the local Churches.

The mission of the People of God is preceded by, and founded on, the mission of God, which is synonymous with trinitarian love. John’s Gospel helps us understand the essence of the mission of Christ (Jo 20,21). He is sent by the Father. His being is that of being sent. This sending is not his nor for him. In this abnegation and self-emptying, the Son, sent by the Father, sent the Apostles: “Go, therefore and make disciples of all peoples” (Mt 28,18). The “missionary nature” (AG 2) of the new People of God and its pilgrim character which invites and witnesses, are based on the trinitarian mission of God. In the universal people of the New Covenant, “the legitimate varieties” (LG 13,3) of peoples and individuals are protected as gifts at the service of all, in the building of universal peace.

In favour of this peace are “the faithful Catholics, other believers in Christ, and finally all mankind, called to salvation by the Grace of God” (LG 13,4). From the starting point of the universal horizon of peace, synonymous with salvation, which anticipates unity, although still in a process of historical construction by various segments of humanity, the People of God of the New Covenant has lost its exclusivity. All of humanity, baptized faithful and authentic followers of other religions and world-views, “can achieve eternal salvation”. For no one is salvation a right or a privilege – it is always a grace of God. All of humanity is on the path of “evangelical preparation” (LG 16) at the service of the unity that has to be built historically. What distinguishes the baptized from the unbaptized is not that they “possess salvation”, but the imperative of mission. The missionary nature of the Church, People of God, which emerges from the trinitarian sending out, from the missio Dei, of the apostles is the imperative: “it makes incumbent on every disciple of Christ the duty of disseminating the faith” (LG 17). “Woe to me if I do not evangelize!” (1 Cor 9,16; LG 17).

2.2.2. The Place of Mission: The Contemporary World (GS, DH, NA)

We find the central text about the missionary activity of the Church in the Constitution Gaudium et spes. The Church exists because of the relevancy and responsibility of its pastoral mission: relevance to the world in transformation and to social responsibility for humanity, especially for the poor and those who suffer. The ministry and mission of the Church are not the secular arms of a Church that is in itself spiritual. Whatever is truly religious is always profoundly human and concrete. The People of God and humanity, in which it is inserted, serve each other mutually. The frontiers between the two are not formed by walls, but by bushes which permit transit and communication (cf. GS 11,3): “Eschatological hope does not diminish the importance of earthly tasks, but rather supports them, with new motives” (GS 21,3).

The Pastoral Constitution (GS), more than other documents of Vatican II, uses an inductive discourse, starting with the concrete life of humanity, its joys and hopes, sadness and anguish, “especially of the poor and all who suffer” (GS 1). Humanity and the world are more ample than the “Church – People of God”. Thus, the reading of the signs of the times and the interpretation of the messages that God sends from the secular world to His Church, are so important. They are universal messages to all peoples and creeds. The Church welcomes these messages in the light of the Gospel, as additions. God’s revelation in the world continues: “the Church itself is not unaware of how much it has received from the history and evolution of humanity” (GS 44,1).

The “About Turn”, in Gaudium et spes, is shown as approximation to peoples, responsibility for humanity and being questioned by concrete challenges: “Peoples oppressed by hunger question richer peoples. Women demand […] parity of rights […]. Workers and farmers do not want only to earn enough for food, but also by their work to cultivate their personality […]. Now, for the first time in human history, people are convinced that the benefits of culture really can and should be extended to all” (GS 9,2); “it should be recognized therefore, more and more, that here exists a fundamental equality among all” (GS 29,1).

Peoples and individual who up to now have been under the tutelage of others, discover that they can only progress materially and spiritually, by conquering their autonomy: “In the entire world there grows constantly the sense of autonomy, and, at the same time, of responsibility, which is of the maximum importance for the spiritual and moral maturing of the human race” (GS 55). “Recognizing as legitimate the autonomy” (GS 56,6) of science and culture is a presupposition of human existence and creativity. The “autonomy of terrestrial realities"
(GS 36,2), understood as laws and values proper to different societies, is a demand of different cultures and a presupposition of mission.

Equality and the recognition of diversity, liberty and the recognition of autonomy with responsibility, are the great conquests of modernity. “Faith, precisely because it is a free act, also demands the taking on of social responsibility for that in which one believes” (Porta Fidei, 10). From faith as act of liberty, which is not limited to “any particular human culture (GS 42,4) emerges the recognition of the autonomy of earthly reality as a presupposition of missionary dialogue. This dialogue in all its dimensions – intercultural, interreligious, ecumenical, and with atheism – depends “not only on an adequate doctrinal exposition, but also on the purity of life of the Church” (GS 21,5), on the “witness of a formed adult and living faith” (ibd.). For the good of humanity, the Pastoral Constitution solicits an ample interreligious collaboration: “all mankind, believers and unbelievers, should collaborate in the adequate construction of this world” (GS 21,6), which requires “sincere and prudent dialogue” (ibd.). Gaudium et spes already includes the essential intentions of the Declaration “Dignitatis humanae” on religious freedom (DH) and of the Declaration Nostra aetate on relations between the Church and non-Christian religions (NA).

Religious liberty, in the elaboration of Vatican II, was a disputed question, which required six different drafts of the final document. The declaration defines liberty as a human right and not as an act of tolerance of the modern State or of the religious community itself: “In the spreading of religious faith, however, and in the introduction of moral behaviour, any type of action which tastes of coercion or dishonest persuasion must be avoided [...]. Such a manner of acting must be considered as an abuse of one’s rights and a wounding of the others rights” (DH 4,4). In order to avoid the impression of a relaxing of the missionary question, the text affirms “that only true religion is found in the Catholic and Apostolic Church” (DH 1,2). Religious freedom does not dispense mission, but as such, is a condition sine qua non of missionary proclamation and witness. It was the bishops of the old “missionary regions” who most defended this Declaration, because it gave them arguments against the religion of the State in some countries. The Declaration is a dimension of a transition from Christendom to a situation of religious pluralism. Not all the Council Fathers were disposed to take this step and let go of the universal exclusivity of their religion. Also the recognition of religions as a sincere searching for God is a human right and a Christian duty: “The Church, therefore reproves any and all types of discrimination or pressure against anyone because of race or colour, class or religion, as being incompatible with the spirit of Christ” (NA 5).

Just as Lumen gentium, also Gaudium et spes points to discipleship and the incarnation as an indispensable missionary method: “Through His Incarnation, the Son of God united Himself in some way with all mankind. He worked with human hands, thought with human intelligence [...], became truly one of us, equal to us in all things, except sin” (GS 22,2). He suffered for love of us and “gave us an example so that we follow his steps, and more, opened a new path” (LG 22,3). Following in his steps, we will always have to open new paths. In this path we will announce the Paschal Mystery which is the central message of the missionary kerygma: Life has a meaning, death has been vanquished. Christ died and rose again for all, and so, “the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of associating themselves, in a way known to God, to this Paschal Mystery” (GS 22,5).

The approximation of incarnation as the following of Jesus and the new ways that in this manner open up in order to discover and announce the Good News, oblige the Church “to express the message of Christ through the concepts and the language of the various peoples” in order to “adapt the Gospel, when possible, to the capacity of all” (GS 44,2). In all cultures, peoples already realize the plan of God and complete creation (cf. GS 57,2) before entering into contact with the Gospel. “Before becoming incarnate in order to save and recreate in Himself all things, the “true light which illuminates all mankind” was already in the world (GS 57,4). In this context, Lumen gentium tells us that the different cultures can be interpreted as a “preparation for the Gospel” (LG 16) and that “the Church works in such a way that all which has been sown” among peoples, especially in their cultures, can be cured and taken up (LG 17). Missionary work protects the most fragile cultures against the hegemonic culture, so that cultural exchanges “do not destroy the wisdom of the forebears and do not place in danger the particular character of each people” (GS 56,2).

The presence of God in creation, in the continuity of this creation in cultures and history through the “signs of the times” demands that missionary work have a multidirectional openness, be plurilingual, with a capacity to speak various languages, and be in permanent discernment. That which, in the microstructure of cultures signifies insertion (cf. GS 44), assumption (cf. GS 22) and inculturation, in the macrostructure of modernity, signifies perception of the “facticity” and actuality of the voice of God through His signs, in each epoch. These should be interpreted in the light of the Gospel, “adapting in each generation, the eternal interrogations about the meaning of life (GS 4). The “signs of the times” can be identified in the principle characteristics of the modern world. We are questioned by a “mixture of hope and anguish, about the present evolution of the world” (GS 4,5).
The open questions, which Vatican II took up in an aggiornamento with modernity in fidelity to the tradition of the Church, should be thought about in a trinitarian dimension: The Father sends in mission; the Son, who is the Incarnate Word, is salvific dialogue with all humanity, and the Holy Spirit, who is God in the gesture of gift, is that grace which transcends the salvific modalities which are at the disposition of the Church.

2.3. Ways of presence: Incarnation and Aggiornamento

The “about turn to the people” demanded that the Church extend its arms in direction of the macrostructure of modernity and the microstructures of the life contexts of peoples. In these life contexts, it met those who were victims of elements of modernity: the poor and their struggle for the redistribution of goods; and others in search of recognition of their identity. Macrostructural aggiornamento in the modern world does not distance the Church from the microstructural contexts of the poor and the others. On the contrary, modernity places at our disposal instruments in defense of the poor and others: autonomy and self determination, the universality of the causes and subjectivity of people, the organization of social struggles and democratic participation, tolerance and the recognition of “being other”.

How can the heritage of faith be inserted into the historical dynamics of contemporary culture and of traditional cultures? In defining itself as a pastoral council Vatican II sought to answer this question. It sought – through an inductive methodology– to start with the concrete reality of people. In the light of the faith, it looked to establish, with this reality, communication in contemporary language, “because the deposit of faith is one thing [...] and the way of proclaiming it is another” (GS 62,2).

The language of faith is an analogical language, forged in life contexts of the past. In the origin of its language and expressions are humanity’s life experiences of God, not dogmatic concepts. In contrast with scientific concepts the expressions and language of faith do not describe, nor denote, cultural or scientific facts, but point to another level of reality, which is spiritual. Denotation without connotation, dogmatic concepts without faith experience, are a dead letter.

Faith proclamations approach reality by way of historical analogies, constructed culturally. The representations of God and the formulations of faith are indicators of the truth, which must not be confused with the truth itself. The formulations of faith which seek to freeze faith experiences, distance themselves from the reality of other contexts and generations.

Vatican II sought to establish a new communication with humanity in its contemporary condition and warned against the fragility of dogmatic definition without religious experience or frozen in the cultural contexts of the past.

The proximity to the world, and to the real problems of the world, and the recognition of the autonomy of earthly reality and of the person, are a historical learning process; they are permanent searches in order to escape alienating conformism and superficial adaptation to the world, and from a distancing from the world in niches of spiritual well-being.

The Council gave this search names like “aggiornamento” and “adaptation” (SC 37s; GS 514), “the autonomy of terrestrial reality” (GS 36; 56) and of culture, “signs of the times” (GS 4; 11), “dialogue” (CD 13; UR 4), “incarnation” and “solidarity” (GS 32). Later, especially in Latin America, these terms were translated as “option for the poor”, “liberation” (Medellin, 1968), “participation”, “assumption = taking on” and “base communities” (Puebla, 1979), “insertion” and “inculturation” (Santo Domingo, 1992), “mission”, “witness” e “service” as a samaritan Church and advocate of justice for the poor (Aparecida, 2007). None of these terms describes the totality of the pastoral project of Vatican II.

The Council distinguished between, and unified pastorally, the two levels and dimensions of reality: the natural and supernatural, incarnation in microreality and autonomy in the reality of the modern world. Both realities have a particular dignity, having been created by God, “without separation” and “without confusion” (Chalcedon: indivise, inconfuse). Terms such as “incarnation”, “insertion” and “inculturation” in the microreality of the poor are coupled to macroreality, and both dimensions of reality are supported by autonomy and subjectivity which have their deep roots in the mystery of creation, in the “founding reality”3 of God. This “founding reality” cannot be separated from, nor confused with, terrestrial reality (cf. GS 36).

Autonomy signifies rejection of any form of tutelage, submission or colonization. The proximity of the pastor signifies protection for the “sheep”, option for the poor and for others, not the suspension of their liberty. The fundamental task of mission is to favour a process which will help them be adults without abandoning them to the liberty of market forces and without suspending solidarity, in a society marked by structural inequality and lack of solidarity. The proximity and solidarity of a Church that is advocate of justice and the poor does not signify tutelage or the coercion of their liberty.

3 Inaugural Speech of Benedict XVI, in Aparecida, nn. 3, 5.
Pastoral Aggionamento seeks the taking up of multiple socio-cultural contexts with adult responsibility. Proximity illuminated by the Gospel does not suffocate, and autonomy does not leave people abandoned before stronger forces, nor lead to individual abuse of liberty. Dialogue with people who live the double reality of their particular culture and of a global civilization is the constant tune sung by the Council Documents. Starting with this inductive and bifocal viewpoint, Vatican II constructed its theological discourse.

3. The Journey: From colonial mission to decolonization

3.1. Retrospective of the Latin-American journey

The documented missionary essence of the latin-american Church is in the Conclusions of Medellín (1968), Puebla (1979), Santo Domingo (1992) and Aparecida (2007), but also in innumerable documents and regional pastoral plans.

Medellín, with the theme “The Church in the present transformation of Latin America in the light of the Council”, made a re-reading of Vatican II based on the axis of justice, integral development, dialogue and liberation. In an introductory exposition to the Medellin Conference on August 28th, 1968, Marcos McGrath, bishop of Santiago de Veraguas, Panama, and second vice-president of Celam, auxiliary bishop of La Plata, Argentina, and General Secretary of Celam and of the Second General Conference of the Latin-American Episcopate, spoke to the delegates on “the signs of the times in Latin America today”. McGrath examined the “signs of the times” in continuity with Vatican II (GS 4 e 11; DH 15; AG 15; AA 14: PO 9), above all as the principle of the interpretation of reality. Pironio, in his text, affirmed: "Since the Incarnation of Christ, every historical moment is a moment of salvation" (SECOND CONFERENCE, p. 103). The paradigm "signs of the times" points to the reality of the world and the continuity of revelation, which accompanies historical evolution. The "Incarnational principle" of Medellín and the “option for the poor”, which have their matrix in Vatican II and which became the latin-american expression of the “popular about-turn”, accompanied the majority of the pronouncements of the latin-american magisterium.

Puebla (1979), whose theme was “Evangelization in the present and the future of Latin America”, deepened Medellin. It made a re-reading of Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii nuntiandi (1975), of Paul VI, with the axis "taking in reality" (DP 201, 400, 469) and "communion and participation" (DP 563-1127), in the context of dictatorships and the Ideology of National Security. To evangelize in this context signifies proclaiming human dignity starting with the image of the divine image of human beings. Puebla reaffirmed the option for the poor of Medellin and supported Basic Ecclesial Communities (CEBs) as missionary cells of the people of God.

The Conference of Santo Domingo coincided with the commemoration of the 500 years of the conquest of America. The theme of the Conference was “New Evangelization, human promotion and Christian culture”. The delegates to Santo Domingo were divided with respect to the character of the celebration of the 500 years. Should the conquest be celebrated in a penitential way, or in a eucharistic manner, thanking God for the success of evangelization in our continent? In spite of exogenous interventions regarding methodology, Santo Domingo succeeded in securing the advances of the preceding conferences and gave its own version of the “popular about-turn” as the “imperative of inculturation” (DSD 13, 243). It also understood that it was not its task to opt for the creation of a “Christian culture”, but for an “inculturated evangelization” in the cultural context of city and countryside, of indigenous peoples and afro-americans, of education and the means of communication.

In the last ten years, the fact of the loss of 1% of Catholics each year in Brazil, and the growing distance between the number of clergy and, especially, women religious, and the ever increasing population of our region (DAp 100a), has disturbed the Catholic Church in Latin America.

Under pressure from the reduced number of Catholics, Aparecida took place with a missionary focus: “Disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ, so that our peoples may have life”. The missionary proposal of Aparecida sought to situate the term “mission” in the context of a liberating journey of the poor. The welcoming of this path, which is a process without end, is translated in a Samaritan “coming close” and in prophetic presence in communities, in their struggle for justice and recognition, and in the construction of a world that is for all. Innumerable times the DAp invites the missionary disciples to really become what they are, since baptism; missionaries of Jesus Christ who live the Christian vocation not only in multiple tasks, but “in a state of mission” (DAp 213) at the service of the Kingdom of God. Mission is at the service of the Kingdom (DAp 33, 190, 223), and the Kingdom is at the service of the poor.
Looking at the utopia of the Kingdom, the DAp indicates the necessary multiple transformations. Almost everything is in a process of transformation and must be transformed: reality (DAp 210), the world (DAp 290), society (DAp 283, 330, 336) and ecclesial and pastoral structures (DAp 365). This concern with the transformation which is happening in today’s world and with the transformation which the Gospel should produce is present since Medellin in the pastoral agenda of the Latin-American Church (cf. DAp 511). Many of the proposals of Aparecida come close to the dream of a post-neoliberal world in the interior of capitalism which will not offer solutions to the poor nor to the others. Misery is not an error of the modernity formed by capitalism. Social irresponsibility is not an accident of post-modernity. They are an integral part of the civilizing process of our time.

Overall, the post-conciliar documents show a significant historical advance in ecclesial consciousness, indicating the transition from a lunar to a solar Church, with its own light. The Church of Vatican II, symbolically defined itself as *versus populum* when it removed the altars from the walls and permitted celebrations of the Eucharist face to face with the people; and in Latin America sought to define itself in its documents as a Church looking to the poor, the most fragile and others.
3.2. Decisive missiological steps and impulses

Vatican II created profound theological impulses and took important pastoral steps that signalled the possibility of a new ecclesial presence in the world.

3.2.1. From mission territories to a missionary nature

Vatican II began ecclesiological and pastoral processes which freed the mission of the Church from a fixation with geographical territories. The Church declared itself the People of God which is “by its very nature” (Ad gentes 2 e 6) missionary. Since their baptism, Christians participate in this missionary nature as “belongers to the Way” (At 9,2) and followers of Jesus Christ. He is the first missionary, sent by God Father-Mother to the world (cf. Jn 5,36s). He is the Way. This Way is choice and school. Starting with this missionary nature, the Church, People of God, sought to rebuild its identity, its pastoral services and its theology. It sought to slowly take on the shift in position from a Church with territorial missions under the responsibility of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Propaganda Fide) or of Religious Orders, missions in favour of which collections were made and prayers asked for, to a Church in which being missionary represents the fundamental orientation of all its activities and its very being, on the local (in the communities), regional (in dioceses and Episcopal Conferences) and Universal (Roman Curia) levels. In the relations between the various ecclesial instances what should prevail is the principle of subsidiarity, consecrated in the Social Doctrine.

3.2.2. From the monopoly of salvation to inter-religious dialogue

We are part of a journey of God with us (salvation). We neither need to start from zero nor re-invent the wheel. The reality of the other does not represent a tabula rasa, but a reality to be taken on with continuity, and at the same time with ruptures. Wherever the Church and its missionaries arrive, God is already there. He precedes us in all peoples. Missionaries must listen to how God worked in other peoples, hear their cries and perceive in them the signs of resurrection. This clamour is part of their “salvation history”. We need to take up and re-contextualize this history and complete it with the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. The aggiornamento of John XXIII demanded the passing over from a pre-modern and fundamentalist world to a critical taking on of modernity and the passing over from a salvific monologue to dialogue with other religions, creeds and world-views.

Exemplary missionaries such as the three Jesuits Francis Xavier (1506-1552), in Asia, and José de Anchieta (1534-1597) and Antônio Vieira (1608-1697), in Brazil, taught the official doctrine of the Christendom-Church. With European thought as their reference, these missionaries knew, through their manuals and catechisms, that the world of “the other”, of the non-catholic, is a world without grace. To the question of the Japanese about the fate of their ancestors, Francis Xavier, in the year of his death, 1552, answered with the pain of the messenger who has no influence over his incontestable divine message: all their ancestors are in hell, and there is no spiritual means of saving them.

The hermeneutical principles of this missionary activity are known:

a) Christianity, in its Catholic version, is the only religion that saves.
b) Other religions are idolatrous because they are not based on the revelation of the true God.
c) Involvement for the salvation if souls is an urgent duty of the Church.
d) Inter-religious dialogue serves only to convince the other of his errors and convert him/her to Christianity.
e) Salvation is an eternal value and belongs to Christianity so that to belong to Christianity in any condition is preferable to a passing liberty outside it.

In order to understand these affirmations, we should remember the Bull Cantate Domino, of the Concilium Florentinum, 1442, which defined: “no one who exists outside the Catholic Church, neither pagans or Jews, heretics or schismatics, will participate in eternal life, but will go to eternal fire, which has been prepared for the devil and his angels (Mt 25,41).” This was official doctrine – not only of the Catholic Church, but also of the majority of Christian denominations – until the first half of the XXth century.

Vatican II brought substantial changes which are summarized here:

a) “The Saviour wishes all men to be saved” (LG 16; cf. 1Tim 2,4). In the plan of salvation, eternal life is for all.
b) “Those who have not yet received the Gospel are ordered in various ways to the People of God” (LG 16).
c) “The plan of salvation also includes those who recognize the Creator” (LG 16), very often in non-Christian religions which “reflect flashes of that Truth which illuminates all men” (NA 2b). God is not far from anyone who seeks “the unknown God in shadows and images” (LG 16a). “This affirmation signifies a salvific recognition of non Christian religions.

DENZINGER-SCHÖNMETZLER, n. 1351: Firmiter credit, profitetur et praedicat, nullos extra catholicam Ecclesiam existentes, non solum paganos, sed nec Judaebos aut haereticos atque schismaticos, aeternae vitae fieri posse participes, sed in ignem aeternum ituros, ‘qui paratus est diablo et Angelis eius [Mt 25,41]
d) Christians, says *Gaudium et spes*, and non Christians can be associated with the Pachal mystery and the hope of the resurrection: “We must admit that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of associating themselves, in a way know to God, to this paschal mystery” (GS 22).

e) All “who, without blame, do not know the Gospel of Christ and his Church, but seek God with a sincere heart, and try, by the influx of grace, to fulfill by works His will, known by the dictates of conscience, can reach eternal salvation” (LG 16). “God can, through ways known to Himself, bring to faith those who without blame do not know the Gospel” (AG 7a).

f) Religious liberty is a right of the human person and a presupposition of mission. “In religious matters, no one may be obliged to act against his conscience, nor impeded in acting according to it.” (DH 2a).

All these affirmations lightened the missionary task, but also demanded profound theological and pastoral reforms.

3.2.3. From mission ad gentes to mission inter gentes and with those who are victims

Missio “ad gentes”, in its traditional sense, is today, in fact, “mission inter gentes”, mission between peoples and continents, between local Churches and communities. The paradigm of “mission inter gentes” arose in the context of religious pluralism in Asia, where more than 60% of humanity live. It is a context of dialogue with religions, cultures and the poor. The mission theology of the “Federation of Episcopal Conferences of Asia/FABC” can be summed up as a theology of mission *inter gentes*. And we, Church-People of Latin America and the Caribbean, still with some deformations of Christendom, can learn much from Asia.

The paradigm of “mission inter gentes” corresponds to the spirit of Vatican II. It:
- takes into account the situation of religious pluralism and the growing diaspora of the Church in today’s world;
- stresses the responsibility of the local Church for mission
- breaks the monopoly of a Church that sends missionaries to a Church that only receives them.
- admits reciprocity and mutual conversion between the agents and the recipients of mission and of the Church in six continents and values intercultural and inter-religious dialogue;
- underlines mission not as an activity between individuals but between communities. *(cum gentes)*.

It is important that the former Christendom of Latin America prepare itself for the new religious situation which is arising, concomitant with the popular religiosity that is inherited and the diaspora of the little flock.

Who are the “gentes” of today?

In the beginnings of Christianity there were three recipients of the Good News: Jews, Christians and pagans. “Pagan” became synonymous with “gente” (non-Christian and non-Jew). Vatican II contemplated the missionary nature and activity of the Church in the Decree “Ad gentes”, dialogue and relations between Catholics and non-Catholic Christians in the Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis redintegratio*), and dialogue and relations with non-Christians in the Declaration “Nostra aetate”.

The expression “mission ad gentes” can point in two directions: in that of the ancient pagans, considered as being without true religion and who today would be those who declare themselves atheists, therefore, without religion, or in the direction of the peoples of other continents or countries where there are Christians in the midst of other religions, and social groups or individuals who declare themselves without religion, such as in Latin America.

But for Latin America and the Caribbean, which experienced a profound biblical reading and the renovation of Medellin, Puebla and Santo Domingo, mission “ad gentes” signifies the following of Jesus, convoking his preferential destinataries, the poor, and the sending them as protagonists of his Kingdom. In his keynote discourses in the synagogue of Nazareth (Lc 4), the Beatitudes (Mt 5) and the Last Judgement (Mt 25), Jesus of Nazareth is more than clear. The protagonists of his project, which is the Kingdom, are the victims (the poor, captive, blind, hungry, oppressed, strangers, sick). The recognition of the “other-poor” in his dignity and otherness signifies inclusion and participation.

Puebla dedicated one of the five parts of its Conclusions to “communion and participation” (*Puebla* 563-891). The promoting of significant practices of participation of the People of God is a consistent expression of the missionary nature of the Church. The fraternal sharing of services and power dynamizes the option for the poor through an option with the poor, who are the gateway to Life. They are the protagonists and destinataries of the missionary project, but are also the representatives of God in the world. As missionaries of the universal mission *inter gentes* they point the way to another world which is necessary, possible and real.

3.2.4. From ecclesiocentrality to the centrality of the Kingdom

The Church turned towards the people, defined itself as mystery and People of God, as an instrument and sacrament at the service of the Kingdom. The missionary community lives in the interior of the Church – People

---

of God, a community made up of communities who live out their mission in the struggle for life, inspired by their faith. This mission is not just one among many activities of the Church. It flows from its “nature”, which has its found in the sending of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit, according to the design of God the Father (AG 2). To speak of the Church is to speak of mission. The structure of this “Church-mission” is Trinitarian. It is the “People of God” “Body of the Lord” and “Temple of the Holy Spirit” (LG 17).

Being essentially missionary, the Church does not live for itself. It is not, nor does it place itself in, the centre. It lives at the service of the Kingdom. This Kingdom is central for all its activity and reflection. The goal of the Church is the Kingdom of God (cf. LG 9). It is servant and witness to the Kingdom. In the Holy Spirit, it is sent to articulate universally all peoples in a great “network” (cf. Jo 21,11) of solidarity. From this sending out, paschal communities are born, which try to contextualize the utopia of the first day of a new creation. From the communities, the sending out is born. Mission, with its two movements, the diastolis of sending out to the periphery of the world and the systolis which convokes, from the periphery, for liberation from the centre, is the heart of the Church. Under the sign of the Kingdom, it proposes a world without periphery or centre.

Conversion to the Kingdom is the daily task of this Church-People of God. Its historical concretizations need permanently the “emptying” “purifying” “inspiration” and “animation” of the Holy Spirit, who is the Father of the poor. Thus the poor are the signs which mark its trajectory: the emptiness, openness, sharing, rupture, journey, cross and sacred host. The manger and the tomb are empty; the door of the Cenacle is open; the genealogy truth. It is servant, pilgrim guest, instrument, sign. But it has a direction. Whoever is born and reborn at the foot of the Cross, in the flight and in pilgrimage, is wary of the false jewels of the winners.

The mission of the Church is carried out with eschatological urgency. The proclamation of the Kingdom, through the living of the “new commandment” is an urgent question, one of life and death. Mission cannot await tomorrow because life cannot wait. “The charity of Christ urges us” (2Cor 5,14) to destroy the structures of death, to interrupt the logic of systems and to question the slowness of bureaucracies. Life is always for today. The signs of justice are for here and now. The announcement of hope is for this moment. This hope cannot be interrupted by the Spirit. This Church does not have a homeland, nor a culture, and is not the owner of the cross and sacred host. The manger and the tomb are empty; the door of the Cenacle is open; the genealogy interrupted by the Spirit. This Church does not have a homeland, nor a culture, and is not the owner of the truth. It is servant, pilgrim guest, instrument, sign. But it has a direction. Whoever is born and reborn at the foot of the Cross, in the flight and in pilgrimage, is wary of the false jewels of the winners.

The mission of the Church is carried out with eschatological urgency. The proclamation of the Kingdom, through the living of the “new commandment” is an urgent question, one of life and death. Mission cannot await tomorrow because life cannot wait. “The charity of Christ urges us” (2Cor 5,14) to destroy the structures of death, to interrupt the logic of systems and to question the slowness of bureaucracies. Life is always for today. The signs of justice are for here and now. The announcement of hope is for this moment. This hope cannot be imagined as a quantitative process, in a society of classes. On the horizon of justice and hope is a society which overcomes the division of social classes. The proclamation of the Kingdom is historically relevant beyond history, in other words, is eschatological.

4. Vatican II produced many fruits. The challenges in taking up again the proposal of a Church versus populum are not insuperable. What is needed is a collective commitment with certain basic priorities, such as: the Church is the sacrament of salvation for all humanity and humanity is not at the service of the Church; the walls of the Church are to protect life and it is not life that should protect the walls; the salvation of “souls”, today translatable as “the integral defense of life”, is the supreme law, and ecclesiastical laws must not, according to the Church’s own rules, impede this “salvation”. The order of the Lord is clear: “it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I did not come to call the Just to conversion, but sinners” (Lc 5,31s). The Church itself is obliged to admit that the God of mercy also can save, and in fact saves, those to whom she denies the signs of salvation and the possibility of ecclesial reconciliation. “Making present the Father as love and mercy, in the consciousness of Christ himself, is the touchstone of his mission as Messiah” (DM 3,4) and that of his followers. God hears the two cries of his people: the cry for justice, of the poor, and the cry for mercy, of sinners. “Conversion to God consists always in the discovery of His mercy” (DM 13,6). Mercy benefits the life of the Church itself. It is in giving that one receives. The love-mercy that the Church today, as always, needs to receive, passes through three elements: the option for and with the poor as subjects, for and with the laity as People of God and for inculturation and aggiornamento, which are prerequisites of dialogue and communication.

4. Horizons: Challenges and Commitments

4.1. The Poor and “the others”: subjects and mediators

The “option for the poor” and “for the others”, which became the backbone of the theological reflection of Latin America, needs today to be transfigured into an “option with the poor/others” and and “option of the poor/others” of a Church – Poor People of God. Aparecida recognizes that the poor “are the subjects of evangelization and of integral human promotion […] and give life to the pilgrimage of the Church (DAP 398). “How often the poor and those who suffer […] really evangelize” (DAP 257) the Church! All these phrases of benevolence towards the poor in the documents of the Church still reflect a certain paternalism and a sociological divorce between the poor and the Church. When Aparecida affirms that “the Church is […] the house of the poor” (DAP 8), it still seems that the poor and the others inhabit the small room of the servant or are tenants and not proprietors.
Also the “samaritan Church” (DAp 26) is still a benefactor of the poor and does not express their subjectivity in the Church. Its “samaritan charity” (DAp 491) is for those who fell into the hands of robbers. It is not the Church itself, fallen by the wayside, that pleads for help.

This sociological divorce between the Church, the poor/others and the people has no theological reason for existing, as the documents themselves affirm. There corresponds to the subjectivity of the poor/others the objectivity of their status as mediators of grace: “The encounter with Jesus Christ by means of the poor is a constituent dimension of our faith” (DAp 257). In the poor/others we contemplate the suffering face of Christ (cf. ibd. and 393). A closer commitment with the poor (cf. DAp 396), with the intention of making them really subjects in the Church, which they are since their baptism, indicates not just an ecclesial conversion, but also points to a pastoral restructuring which has not occurred. The awareness of the necessity of this restructuring is not lacking: the preferential option for the poor “implies that it must be present in all our structures and pastoral priorities” (DAp 396). Be present and cause change. What are missing are concrete steps in this direction. The “Pact of the Catacombs” in which a group of participants, towards the end of the Council, committed themselves to leaving aside material goods and symbols that distanced them from the poor of their dioceses, is today practically forgotten.6

The victims of the logic of expropriation do not demand technical solutions from us, but participation in the living out of the missionary action of the Church, which could be a rehearsal for more widespread transformations. The People of God demand from the institutional Church a significant co-responsibility in the choice and formation of their pastors, without the democratic formalities of civil society, but with established rules of participation; alternative behaviour to that of civil society, as a sign of justice and reason for hope.

4.2. The Laity: priests, prophets and apostles

Speaking of the poor/others as subjects of the Church and mediators of salvation, obviously we are not speaking of the clergy nor of religious, but of the laymen and women of the Church-People of God. Up to the eve of Vatican II, the role of the layperson in the church was that of an auxiliary, subordinated to the clergy. The Council broke with this vision. The Church is, anterior to any division of functions, charism and ministries, the People of God, comunitio, which is to say, fraternal community with a constitutional equality (cf. LG 37). Everything that Lumen gentium says “regarding the People of God is valid for laity, religious and clergy” (LG 30). Even though some “are constituted teachers, dispensers of the mysteries and pastors in favour of the rest, there reigns, however, among all a true equality regarding the dignity and common action of all the faithful in the building up of the Body of Christ” (LG 32.3). Laypeople participate in the common priesthood of the faithful (LG 34) and participate with the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood “each in its own manner, in the one priesthood of Christ” (LG 10.2). They participate in the “prophetic munus of Christ” (LG 12; 35.1), constituted in “kingly liberty” and in serving Christ “lead their brothers to the King, to whom to serve is to reign” and participate in the apostolate: “The apostolate of the laity is a participation in the very salvific mission of the Church. All are destined for this apostolate by the Lord himself through baptism and confirmation [...] Thus every layperson, in virtue of the gifts which have been bestowed on them, is at the same time witness and living instrument of the very mission of the Church, “in the measure of the gift of Christ” (LG 33.2).

This vision of Vatican II cries out for a pastoral translation. Today, where there exist in the Church structures that are potentially participative (Parochial Councils, Synods), the clerical or curial prerogatives are maintained and the participative lay statute relegated to a consultative and not decision making role. The scarcity of ministers, which puts at risk the ordinary pastoral ministry, should be attributed to a “curial reserve” and does not count on, as it should, the participation of the People of God. Regarding the ministerial exclusion of women, neither they nor the People of God were consulted. With the invocation of an obstacle de fide, it was sought to close the question which, in truth, is one of culture, as are, generally all decisions inserted in human history. The laity question is a cause of the laity, a cause of the People of God, an evangelical cause of the equality of the sons and daughters of God. The entire People of God has more solutions for the present pastoral problems than a small clerical group. The Spirit blows where it wills. Defining the Church as “mystery” (LG cap. 1) and as “People of God”, Vatican II sought to overcome a vision of the Church that was centred on a patriarchal hierarchy. It did not succeed. There lacked a juridical definition of rights and fidelity to the spirit of Vatican II. The “popular turnaround” as “lay turnaround” has not yet occurred, and the task remains.

4.3. The autochthonous Church: from supervision to inculturation

In post-conciliar times, what is stressed are the dangers of aggiornamento to modernity and what is defended is the substitution of inculturation in microstructures by an abstract post-modern “interculturality”. Since the IV

---

General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Episcopate in Santo Domingo (1992), a theological reflection precedes an analysis of reality, in ecclesial documents, as a “help” to the sociological analysis. This “help” is justified by the affirmation that God is part of reality. Thus two distinct levels of analysis are confused – the theological and the sociological. One is a question of faith, the other of science.

A social analysis with a theological introduction gives to the facts of faith an almost scientific statute; abandons the original methodology of “see, judge, act”, which, since Medellin, is the registered trademark of Church Documents in Latin America and the Caribbean. John XXIII, in his Encyclical Mater et magistra (1961, cf. MM 235), had already accepted this method. In the peoples afflicted by the main conflicts in the world, and in their territories, we perceive the appeals of reality and commitment to it (cf. DAp 491) as a substratum if an incarnated faith. Being distant from this reality causes our analysis to be abstract, spiritualizing and confused.

Today, the Church needs to recover a critical and attentive analysis of reality, in which the signs of God once again furnish the starting point for all theological reflection and pastoral action, according to the Principle of St. Irineus; what is not taken on, is not redeemed (cf. Puebla 400). In the logic of the Kingdom, “the little ones,” those who live in the dark aspects of the world, the victims on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, are the paths of truth and the gate of life; they are the place of the epiphany of God in this reality.

With the poor and the others we work and live with what is available culturally. Missionary solidarity happens through concrete inculturation in real contexts. We are not supervisors of God’s project nor of the “social works” we inspire. Sophisticated means and places of command are a counter-witness for mission. “Supervision”, frequently distances us from the “ground” and the concrete faces of the poor. Missionary efficiency is not in the instruments used, nor in the leadership of our “social works”, but in the consistency between the message of the Kingdom and its contextualization, which occurs also through our lifestyle. In the restructuring of ministries, their amplification and decentralization should be taken into account so that in pastoral practice they may respond to the sociocultural diversity, geographical dispersion and spiritual necessities of the People of God. There never should be lacking the sharing that is symbolically celebrated in the Eucharist. In the sharing of the bread, the disciples of Emmaus recognized the Risen Jesus. Only shared bread will sate the hunger of the people.

Inculturation cries out for an autochtonous Church which breaks with all types of colonial tutelage and takes on its adult age. So that pastoral practice may correspond to the sociocultural diversity, geographical dispersion and spiritual needs of the people of God, it requires a certain autonomy for the amplification, decentralization and restructuring of ministries. Vatican II declared, in the Decree Ad gentes that “throughout the world arise local autochtonous Churches” (AG 6,3).

What supports the autochtonous Church are inculturated liturgies, ministries and theologies. Let us carry out what we promised and deepen these paths marked by grace and sin, with fidelity, without continism, with prophetic and militant audacity, without authoritarianism. We seek, in the spirituality of missionary militance, by alternative gestures, to brake the logic of the system: in face of exclusion we propose participation, of accumulation, sharing, and of exploitation, gratuity. In gratuity, our resistance against this logic, which substitutes “I think, therefore I exist” (Descartes) with “I pay, therefore I exist” (cost-benefit), becomes concrete. The Church People of God was born on the Feast of the Holy Spirit (Pentecost) which is God in the gesture of GIFT. Gratuity indicates the possibility of a world for all. In Pentecost, the missionary community was sent to a plural world – in the gratuity and plural unity of the Holy Spirit.

São Paulo, 30.9.2012
http://paulosuess.blogspot.com.br

Ref.: translation by Thomas Hughes, SVD (thughes@netpar.com.br)

---