

BEYOND THE NEW EVANGELIZATION: TOWARDS A MISSIONARY ECCLESIOLOGY
FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Stephen Bevans, SVD

Introduction: A Church for Real Time

Tom O'Meara's theological autobiography, *A Theologian's Journey*, bristles with references to time. "I have written down these memories," he writes, "to be a witness to a time, to recall that I once stood on the edge of a change in history that still continues."¹ Roman Catholicism before Vatican II, the period in which he grew up and was formed as a Dominican, O'Meara describes as one of "bland timelessness."² Summers in the seminary were "summers without days." The timelessness of Dominican life was "the only world." "Little radio, rare newspapers, and no magazines entered this isolated world."³ "In monastic life, and in Eisenhower's America, I expected all days to be the same."⁴

But when Tom traveled to Europe to begin doctoral studies at the Ludwig-Maximilian University in Munich in 1962, "experience and history, my new mentors, stepped forth to meet me, ready to show me Europe and ages past, but also worlds

¹ Thomas F. O'Meara, OP, *A Theologian's Journey* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2002), 314.

² O'Meara, *A Theologian's Journey*, 29.

³ O'Meara, *A Theologian's Journey*, 33.

⁴ O'Meara, *A Theologian's Journey*, 38. See also 105.

being born, worlds yet to come.”⁵ He had walked into history; he had walked into the modern world;⁶ he had encountered Time, and with Time, culture. It was this encounter that set the mark on his career as a theologian, and a teacher and mentor to so many, many of whom will gather to honor him on September 5-7, 2014.

Tom O’Meara’s life is thus emblematic of a fundamental change in the last fifty years in the theology of the church. In the years before Vatican II, “the church too often was the schoolteacher of blind obedience and subservience to an ignorant, authoritarian will.”⁷ But now Time was “was setting us free from the prisons of the 1940s and 1950s, from the ruthless and mindless scholasticisms of Rome, Moscow, and Washington.”⁸ A century before, the church of Pius IX had refused to have anything to do with the “modern world” or “progress”; now the Council had issued a Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, expressing its solidarity with “the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the women and men of this age”⁹ A century before the church spoke of its essence as institutional, hierarchical, and monarchical; the Council did not reject that identity, but emphasized the identity of the church as Mystery, as God’s Pilgrim People.¹⁰ A century before, laity

⁵ O’Meara, *A Theologian’s Journey*, 67.

⁶ See O’Meara, *A Theologian’s Journey*, 71 and the title of Chapter Four, 105-43.

⁷ O’Meara, *A Theologian’s Journey*, 29.

⁸ O’Meara, *A Theologian’s Journey*, 212.

⁹ Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), 1.

http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html. Here and elsewhere for Vatican documents I have substituted more inclusive language.

¹⁰ See Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (LG), Chapters I and II.

http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

were encouraged to be little more than “to be led and to follow its pastors as a docile flock”¹¹; the Council spoke of a fundamental equality shared by all Christians because of Baptism, and idea that exploded, as O’Meara has described it, into a wide variety of lay ministries.¹² Thanks to the Council, the church was fashioning a self-image of itself for Real Time; Time was leading the church into the Modern World, and so into experience, history, and culture.

The Second Vatican Council was fundamentally a “missionary council.”¹³ This is not always seen clearly, but as one “revisits” the Council after fifty years and in the light of present developments, it’s missionary spirit and style emerge quite sharply.¹⁴ As John XXIII’s articulation of his goals for the Council gained precision in the years between 1959 and 1962, a vision emerged that the Council “would mark a transition between two eras, that is, that would bring the Church out of the post-tridentine period and ... into a new phase of witness and proclamation.”¹⁵ John XXIII called for *aggiornamento* in the church, but not for its own sake. Any renewal the Council would bring was for the sake of a more intelligible and effective preaching of

¹¹ Pius X, *Vehementer Nos*, Letter to the Bishops of France, February 11, 1906, quoted in Michael A. Fahey, “Church,” in ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John Galvin, *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, Volume II, 32 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press).

¹² LG 32; see Thomas F. O’Meara, *Theology of Ministry*, Completely Revised Version (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999), 6-12.

¹³ Johannes Schütte, “Ce que la mission attendait du Concile,” in ed. Johannes Schütte, *Vatican II: L’Activité Missionnaire de l’église* (Paris: Cerf, 1967), 120.

¹⁴ See Stephen Bevans, “Revisiting Mission at Vatican II: Theology and Practice for Today’s Missionary Church,” *Theological Studies* 74, 2 (June, 2013): 261-83.

¹⁵ Giuseppe Alberigo, “The Announcement of the Council: From the Security of the Fortress to the Lure of the Quest,” in ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, Volume I, *Announcing and Preparing Vatican Council II* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 42).

the gospel.¹⁶ The church, the Council proclaimed, was “missionary by its very nature.”¹⁷ Vatican II’s missionary church was a church for Real Time.

The New Evangelization

Vatican II’s document on Mission outlined three areas or fields where the church carries out its missionary mandate. The major emphasis of Mission is “missionary activity among the nations,” but “closely connected with the missionary zeal of the church” is “pastoral activity exercised among the faithful” and “undertakings aimed at restoring unity among Christians.”¹⁸ As the years progressed after Vatican II, however, there seemed to be less emphasis on the ecumenical aspect of Mission (although this did not completely disappear).¹⁹ What began to emerge in official church documents in place of this third area of mission activity was a greater emphasis on the need to evangelize within the context of growing secularity and indifference to the church among those peoples who made up

¹⁶ This is certainly the spirit of Pope John’s opening speech. See the speech in *The Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbot, ed. (New York: Herder and Herder / Association Press, 1966), 710-19.

¹⁷ Vatican Council II, Decree on the Missionary Nature of the Church, *Ad Gentes* (AG), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html, 2.

¹⁸ AG 6.

¹⁹ Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html, 54 and 64; John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* (RM), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio_en.html, 23 and 49.

traditionally Christian nations. This emerging emphasis was eventually named the “New Evangelization.”²⁰

Ronald Witherup suggests that the roots of the New Evangelization go back “at least” to Paul VI’s 1975 Apostolic Exhortation when he speaks of the need for evangelization in the modern world.²¹ It was John Paul II, however, who began to use the term in his speeches and documents, possibly influenced, as missiologist John Gorski suggests, by the document issued by the Latin American Bishops at Puebla in January, 1979.²² John Paul’s first use of the term was during his historic visit to Poland in 1979, although, as the *Lineamenta* for the 2012 Synod on the New Evangelization point out, the Pope used it without any particular sense that this would be one of the hallmarks of his future teaching.²³ He used it again in a much more deliberate way in 1983 addressing the bishops of Latin America and the

²⁰ For a much more detailed history of the New Evangelization than appears here, see Stephen Bevans, “New Evangelization or Missionary Church? *Evangelii Gaudium* and the Call for Missionary Discipleship,” *Verbum SVD*, November, 2014 (forthcoming).

²¹ Ronald D. Witherup, *Saint Paul and the New Evangelization* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2013), Kindle edition, Location 241-250. Witherup does not give a reference to the Apostolic Exhortation, but the pope speaks of evangelization within the context of secularism in EN 54 and 56.

²² See John F. Gorski, “From ‘Mission’ to ‘New Evangelization’: The Origin of a Concept that Challenges Our Institutes,”

http://www.sedosmission.org/sedosarticles/documents/jgorski_2013_en.pdf, 5.

²³ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20110202_lineamenta-xiii-assembly_en.html, 5. See John Paul II, Homily at the Sanctuary of the Holy Cross, Mogila, Poland, June 9, 1979), 1; *L'Osservatore Romano: Weekly Edition in English*, July 16, 1979, 11: AAS 71 (1979) 865. “Where the Cross is raised, there is raised the sign that that place has now been reached by the Good News of Man's salvation through Love. ... The new wooden Cross was raised not far from here at the very time we were celebrating the Millennium. With it we were given a *sign* that on the threshold of the new millennium, in these new times, these new conditions of life, the Gospel is again being proclaimed. *A new evangelization* has begun, as if it were a new proclamation, even if in reality it is the same as ever.”

Caribbean assembled in Haiti, and again in his opening address at Santo Domingo in 1992, explaining that it what was needed in Latin America today was ,an evangelization “new in its ardour, methods and expression.”²⁴ Subsequently the Latin American bishops picked up the term in their 1992 General Assembly in Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic, recognizing it as the “all encompassing element” or “central idea” of the Conference.²⁵

In 2005 Joseph Ratzinger was elected Pope, and quite deliberately chose the name Benedict, the choice of which he explained in his first general audience. The name was to recall Benedict XV (1914-1922) who had worked to prevent World War I and worked afterwards to promote reconciliation. Probably more significantly, however, Benedict’s name referred to Benedict of Norcia, “one of the patron saints of Europe who—according to the pope—had exercised an enormous influence on Europe’s Christian heritage,”²⁶ and saved Europe from the ravages of the non-Christian or Arian migrating tribes of his time. As a cardinal, Ratzinger had repeatedly expressed his concern for Europe in the twentieth and twenty-first century. Especially since 1989, he had argued that “Europe has been deeply affected by the master narratives of progress and emancipation,” and has embraced a

²⁴John Paul II, Discourse to the XIX Assembly of CELAM (March 9, 1983), 3: L'Osservatore Romano: Weekly Edition in English, April 18, 1983, 9: AAS 75 (1983) 778. See also “Conclusions: New Evangelization, Human Development, Christian Culture,” in ed. Alfred T. Hennelly, *Santo Domingo and Beyond*, 80 (paragraph 22) (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

²⁵ “Conclusions: New Evangelization, Human Development, Christian Culture,” 80 (paragraph 22).

²⁶ Lieven Boeve, “Europe in Crisis: A Question of Belief or Unbelief? Perspectives from the Vatican,” *Modern Theology* 23, 2 (April, 2007): 209.

relativism what has actually betrayed genuine truth and freedom. Because of this, the church has to stand to the witness to Truth which is not the result of subjective experience, but given in Revelation. The church has to be a “minority that is often opposed to ‘the spirit of the world.’”²⁷ As Pope, Ratzinger would commit himself to saving Europe from the ravages of post-modernism and unbelief. In some ways Benedict, it could be said, was trying to move the church back into its timeless, pre-Vatican II existence through a number of policies that missiologist John Sivalon characterizes as “romantic conservatism.”²⁸

It is in this context that Pope Benedict created the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization in September of 2010. In the Apostolic Letter “Ubique et Semper” that established the new Council, Benedict acknowledged that “to speak of a ‘new evangelization’ does not in fact mean that a single formula should be developed that would hold the same for all circumstances.” Nevertheless, he says that churches in “traditionally Christian territories” require a “renewed missionary impulse.”²⁹ Shortly afterwards the Pope announced that the theme of the upcoming Synod of Bishops in 2012 would be “The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Faith,”³⁰ the *Lineamenta* for which speak of the New

²⁷ Boeve, “Europe in Crisis,” 208.

²⁸ See John Sivalon, *Mission in Postmodernity: The Gift of Uncertainty* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), esp. ---.

²⁹ Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter *Ubique et Semper*, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20100921_ubicumque-et-semper_en.html. The document has no paragraph numbering.

³⁰ Benedict XVI, Homily at the Conclusion for the Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops, *L'Osservatore Romano: Weekly Edition in English* 27 (October 2010): 4.

Evangelization as “primarily addressed to those who have drifted from the Church in traditionally Christian countries.”³¹

Pope John Paul II had spoken several times of three aspects of the New Evangelization: its newness in ardor, methods, and expression. Although all three of these are mentioned occasionally in the pre-Synodal documents, and in the talks of Pope Benedict, the impression is given nevertheless that the first aspect receives the most emphasis.³² One of the key words in the *Lineamenta* is “boldness,” recurring thirteen times in the document, seven times in the text, and six times in the questions that follow. In the *Instrumentum Laboris* we read that “our institutions need to adopt a bold and even ‘apologetic’ approach and seeks ways of publically affirming their faith, fearlessly and with a clear sense of pastoral urgency.”³³ The *Instrumentum Laboris* quotes Pope Benedict’s phrase that there is in the church an “educational emergency” due to the individualism and secularism of the age.³⁴

The 2012 Synod: Shifts in the Center of Gravity

³¹ *Lineamenta* for the XIII Synod of Bishops, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20110202_lineamenta-xiii-assembly_en.html, Preface.

³² See, for example, *Lineamenta* 5; see the *Instrumentum Laboris*, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20120619_instrumentum-xiii_en.html#Transmitting_the_Faith_Educating_the_Person, Preface, 23, 45, 62

³³ See the *Lineamenta*, 2-11. See the *Instrumentum Laboris*, 138.

³⁴ *Instrumentum Laboris*, 152.

While an emphasis on a new ardor or boldness in the church's evangelizing efforts was also expressed in the Synod itself,³⁵ some of the more striking interventions of the bishops focused more on a new attitude of humility, gentleness, and listening that needed to be espoused by the church as it renews its efforts of evangelization in the world. Bishop Bernard Longley of Birmingham, England, for example, emphasized that the prerequisite for evangelization today is "profound listening." "There can be no effective proclamation of the faith, Longley said, 'without an attempt to understand how the message is likely to be heard, how it sounds to others.'"³⁶ Archbishop (now Cardinal) Luis Antonio Tagle of Manila also called for the church to listen first before speaking. "The Church must discover the power of silence," he said. "Confronted with the sorrows, doubts and uncertainties of people she cannot pretend to give easy solutions. In Jesus, silence becomes the way of attentive listening, compassion and prayer."³⁷ Another bishop from the Philippines, Socrates Villegas from Lingayen-Dagupan, emphasized the fact that "the new evangelization calls for new humility. ... This humility will make us more credible new evangelizers. Our mission is to propose humbly, not to impose

³⁵ For example, the Intervention of Cardinal Peter Erdő of Hungary, Archbishop John Dew of Wellington, New Zealand, and Cardinal Sodano. See http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino_25_xiii-ordinaria-2012/xx_plurilingue/b05_xx.html.

³⁶ Intervention of Archbishop Bernard Longley, quoted in Noel Connolly, "New Evangelisation in Australia," *Sedos Bulletin*. <http://www.sedosmission.org/sedosarticles/documents/nconnolly-2013-newev-en.pdf>, 137.

³⁷ Intervention of Luis Antonio Tagle, http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino_25_xiii-ordinaria-2012/xx_plurilingue/b07_xx.html.

proudly.”³⁸ To give one more example, Adolfo Nicolás, Jesuit Superior General and long time Asian missionary, spoke of how humility, simplicity, generosity and joy are the tried and true ways of best communicating the gospel.³⁹ Although these interventions were still a minority voice at the Synod, they did go beyond the impression often given that the New Evangelization is simply evangelization “revved up,”⁴⁰ or as I have put it, saying the same old thing but saying more loudly. If some voices were advocating a move back to the time of the church before the Council, these voices at the Synod were advocating a real-time dialogue of the church with today’s world. Only a listening church could offer the conditions of the possibility of an evangelization adequate to the present day.

Ronald Witherup offers a reflection on the fact that the Synod pointed away from the New Evangelization’s rather exclusive emphasis on the secular West. Writing about the list of Final Propositions from the Synod, he takes note of a “slight change in direction”⁴¹ that took place as the Synod progressed. As we have seen, the original intention of the Synod was to address issues arising particularly from the secularized West. Such a perspective was also seen in many of the interventions as well, and also in the Final Propositions. However, Witherup says, “a renewed emphasis on the mission *ad gentes* or *ad extra*, that is, an outreach to those who

³⁸ Intervention of Socrates B. Villegas, http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino_25_xiii-ordinaria-2012/xx_plurilingue/b07_xx.html.

³⁹ Intervention of Adolfo Nicolás Pachón, http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino_25_xiii-ordinaria-2012/xx_plurilingue/b09_xx.html.

⁴⁰ See Witherup, *St. Paul and the New Evangelization*, Chapter 5, “The Church’s Mission: Evangelization and the Transmission of the Faith,” Location 894.

⁴¹ Witherup, *St. Paul and the New Evangelization*, Chapter 2, “What Is the New Evangelization?” Location 338.

have not received the Gospel message, is now also prominent. It reinforces the notion that the church is always on mission, always outwardly oriented to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ.”⁴²

Pope Francis and *Evangelii Gaudium*: Beyond the New Evangelization

The calls at the Synod for a more open, listening church; the shifts toward spirituality, structural reform, and dialogue; and the insistence on a renewed form of evangelization for the entire church, not just the West, are all features of the remarkable Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of the newly-elected Pope Francis in late November of 2013, *Evangelii Gaudium*. Since his election in March of the same year, Francis had astounded the world by one dramatic gesture after another—asking the crowds to pray for him when he first appeared on the balcony after his election, embracing a quadriplegic man at his inauguration, washing the feet of Muslim women on Holy Thursday, uttering his famous “who am I to judge?” when asked about gay priests, the release of a wide-ranging and frank interview. Such gestures seemed to signal an entirely new, astonishingly fresh approach not only to the Petrine Ministry but also to the witnessing to the gospel. The first Pope ordained to the priesthood after the Second Vatican Council was signalling the validity of all the Council stood for. In his commentary on the document, Italian theologian

⁴² Witherup, *St. Paul and the New Evangelization*, Location 338.

Christian Albini expressed his conviction that it “signals a new stage in the trajectory opened by Vatican II.”⁴³

Although *Evangelii Gaudium* is the expected Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, it seems to lead the church beyond the Synod’s theme of New Evangelization toward a vision of the church as going forth as a “community of missionary disciples.”⁴⁴ It is perhaps significant that the term “new evangelization” appears only twelve times in this very long document of 288 paragraphs (Pope John Paul II’s mission encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* has, in comparison, 92 paragraphs).⁴⁵ Perhaps significant as well are phrases like new *chapter* of evangelization,⁴⁶ new *paths*,⁴⁷ a new *phase*,⁴⁸ new *processes*⁴⁹ of evangelization. The Pope likewise speaks of a “new missionary going forth,”⁵⁰ a new evangelical fervor,⁵¹ and new challenges to evangelization.⁵² The strong impression that the Pope gives is that he is leading the church beyond the new evangelization towards an understanding of the church

⁴³ Christian Albini, *Guida alla Lettura della Evangelii Gaudium*, Kindle edition, no publisher indicated, Location 72. This connection with the Council has been noted as well by Richard R. Gaillardetz, “Francis: Pope of the Council,” <http://elephantsinthelivingroom.com/>.

⁴⁴ EG 24. See also Albini, *Guida alla Lettura della Evangelii Gaudium*, Location 18.

⁴⁵ EG 14 (3x), 73, 120, 126, 198, 239, 260, 284, 287, 288. A word count on the Vatican Website yields a count of fourteen times, but two of these are in the introductory outline of the document, not in the document itself.

⁴⁶ EG 1, 161.

⁴⁷ EG 1, 11, 31, 288.

⁴⁸ EG 17, 287.

⁴⁹ EG 69.

⁵⁰ EG 20.

⁵¹ EG 29.

⁵² EG 20. I think it quite significant that the title given to the October, 2014 Synod of Bishops is “The Pastoral Challenge of the Family in the Context of Evangelization”—not the *New Evangelization*.

that is, in the words of Vatican II, “missionary by its very nature.”⁵³ As he introduces his Apostolic Exhortation he notes that the topics he reflects on in the document “help give shape to a definite style of evangelization which I ask you to adopt *in every activity you undertake*.”⁵⁴

“I dream of a ‘missionary option,’” he writes, “that is a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her preservation.”⁵⁵ Here in one sentence is Francis’s vision for the church, one adequate for this time. The passage goes on to speak of a “pastoral conversion” that demands renewed structures, that will make “ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open,” that will call pastoral workers to go forth to preach and witness to the gospel. As Martin Tuelan, National Director of Australia’s Catholic Mission office, observes, “rather than stressing new evangelization or overseas mission, Pope Francis sees that the whole Church needs to be ‘permanently in a state of mission.’”⁵⁶ Francis echoed the 2012 Synod’s move to speak of new evangelization not only in terms of the secularized West, but as taking place in ordinary pastoral work, among people “whose lives do not reflect the demands of Baptism,” and in primary evangelization situations.⁵⁷ Thus, like the Synod itself, he offers a wider understanding of the new

⁵³ AG 2.

⁵⁴ EG 18. Italics are Francis’s.

⁵⁵ EG 27.

⁵⁶ Martin Tuelan, “Called To Be Missionary Disciples,” in ed. Danielle Achikian, Peter Gates, and Lana Turvey, *The Francis Effect: Living the Joy of the Gospel* (Sydney: Catholic Mission and Catholic Religious Australia, 2013), 44, citing EG 25.

⁵⁷ EG 14, citing Benedict XVI’s opening homily of the Synod.

evangelization than the Synod's preparatory documents, and moved that understanding toward a consistent vision of a missionary church.⁵⁸

This move from an emphasis on new evangelization to a more comprehensive missionary church is a highly significant one, both ecclesologically and missiologically. The new evangelization emerged out of the concern of two European popes in the context of a radically secularized Europe on the one hand and a church that, to their minds, had lost the clarity of commitment to the content of the faith in the wake of Vatican II on the other. Pope Francis's call for a truly missionary church comes out of a totally different context, and reflects not a European interest but that of the majority world. Perhaps much of the missionary emphasis of the Aparecida Document—a major source of *Evangelii Gaudium*, and the source of the term “missionary discipleship”—was occasioned by a need to respond to the growing exodus of Catholics to Evangelical and Pentecostal groups, and so very rooted in the Latin American context.⁵⁹ The tone of the Apostolic Exhortation, however, transcends that context, and is motivated much more by a more universal missionary vision. It does not deny the vision of the new evangelization, but takes it further—“sublates” (*aufhebt*) it, as it were—to make it more comprehensive, and more relevant for the entire church.

⁵⁸ For fuller reflections on EG, see Stephen Bevens, “New Evangelization or Missionary Church”; Richard R. Gaillardetz, “Francis: Pope of the Council,” elephantsinthelivingroom.com; and Gaillardetz' Presidential Address to the Catholic Theological Society of America, June 8, 2014, on the CTSA Website.

⁵⁹ Conference of Latin American Bishops, Final Document of the Aparecida Conference (2007), <http://www.aecrc.org/documents/Aparecida-Concluding%20Document.pdf>, 225-26.

Moving Forward: Towards A Missionary Ecclesiology

Pope Francis's call for the church to understand itself as a "community of missionary disciples" beyond the new evangelization seems to require a thorough rethinking of ecclesiology in the light of missiology. The perspective favored by John Paul II and Benedict XVI was to reflect on and explain the church in terms of "communion," an understanding also favored by the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops of 1985.⁶⁰ Francis's preferred way of speaking about the church taps into another major emphasis in Vatican II, evident in documents like the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World and the Decree on Mission Activity. Paragraph 2 of this latter document speaks forcefully of the church, rooted in the missions of the Trinity, as "missionary by its very nature." It is this phrase, I suggest, that should be the starting point for a contemporary ecclesiological reflection that is adequate for our time. In Richard Gaillardetz' apt phrase describing Francis's ecclesiological agenda, "a missionary council has inspired a missionary pope to create a missionary church."⁶¹

Gaillardetz himself, of course, has gone a long way in developing such a missionary ecclesiology in his *Ecclesiology for a Global Church*, especially in terms of dialogue with cultures beyond the West. In the last months Neil Ormerod's *Re-Visioning the Church* has been published, a work that stresses the "operator" of

⁶⁰ Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, 1985, <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/12/08/world/text-of-final-report-adopted-by-synod-of-bishops-in-rome.html?pagewanted=4>, Section C.

⁶¹ Gaillardetz, "Francis: Pope of the Council," 3.

mission as shaping the “integrator” of communal identity.⁶² While more specifically missiological, Roger Schroeder’s and my books *Constants in Context* and *Prophetic Dialogue* have been rooted in an implicit missionary ecclesiology.⁶³

What I would like to sketch out in this final section of this paper, however, is the outline of a project for a full missionary ecclesiology, based on courses of ecclesiology that I have taught and developed over the past forty years, and on a plan for a book on ecclesiology that I intend to write in the near future. I believe that this sketch contains the main issues and questions that demand more scholarly attention from ecclesiologists today. It contains as well the most fruitful paths from moving ecclesiology forward in this time of the need for a missionary church. It is basically a theology of the church that unpacks the lapidary phrase in Vatican II’s Decree on Mission Activity regarding the church’s essential missionary nature. It might also be described as the unpacking of Pope Francis’s call for a “community of missionary disciples.”⁶⁴

This sketch of a missionary ecclesiology is divided into three parts, emphasizing vary aspects of the image of the church as “community of missionary disciples.” A first part reflects on “The Essence of the Church: A Community of *Missionary Disciples.*” A second part probes “The Mystery of the Church: A

⁶² Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008); Neil Ormerod, *Re-Visioning the Church: A Systematic Historical Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MN: Eerdmans, 2014).

⁶³ Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004); Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).

⁶⁴ EG 24.

Community of Missionary Disciples.” A third and final part outlines “The Structure of the Church: A Community of Missionary *Disciples.*”⁶⁵

Part I: The Essence of the Church: A Community of *Missionary Disciples*

The first thing that needs to be recognized in the construction of a missionary ecclesiology is that the church is rooted in the overflowing life of the Trinity, which is itself a community-in-mission. God’s first act of mission is creation, and God has been present and active in creation from its first nanosecond. Such presence and activity is the work of the Spirit, who from the beginning persuades, encourages, cajoles, inspires—but never imposes on creation’s freedom.⁶⁶ And so came to be the gasses, the molecules, the stars, the galaxies, and our earth with its abundant life. As human beings emerged on our planet, the Spirit was there, and was present in humanity’s first groping toward understanding the depth and breadth of life’s meaning in local and then in the world’s great religions.⁶⁷ One of these religions was that of Israel, the God’s presence and activity was expressed often in the images of wind, fire, breath, water, oil, a soaring bird—all images that, while palpable, are nevertheless illusive and mysterious, images of God’s Mystery “inside

⁶⁵ Readers will no doubt notice that this three-fold structure is very much influenced by Hans Küng’s classic ecclesiology *The Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967). While in many ways now outdated after fifty years, it still remains, in my mind, an articulation of Catholic ecclesiology of the utmost importance.

⁶⁶ Both Denis Edwards and, most recently, Elizabeth Johnson have written elegantly in this regard. See Denis Edwards, *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption, and Special Divine Acts* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008) and Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

⁶⁷ This inspiration for this sentence is Denis Edwards, *Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 33, 171-72.

out” in creation and human history.⁶⁸ We read of God breathing life into “earth creature” (Gen 2:7), anointing prophets to proclaim healing and justice (Is 61:1-2), flowing like a river to bring freshness and life in the desert (Ez 47), blowing over dry bones to bring them together and back to life (Ez 37:1-14).

The history of the presence of the Holy Spirit in creation and in particular in Israel is a prelude to understanding the foundation of the church, which begins with the mission and ministry of Jesus. In the “fullness of time,” as Paul wrote (Gal 4:4) the ever-present saving activity of God took on flesh and a human face in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. As Elizabeth Johnson writes eloquently, “through [Jesus’] human history the Spirit who pervades the universe becomes concretely present in a small bit of it.”⁶⁹ Jesus’ mission was, in the words of Neil Ormerod, the advancement of the Reign of God⁷⁰—the continuation of God’s saving work from the beginning, but now imminent. “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:15). Jesus *witnessed to* this coming fulfillment by his own personal behavior of welcoming, inclusion, a personal freedom from the ritualistic and dehumanizing aspects of religious custom. He *served* his vision by his healings and exorcisms—signs of the wholeness of God’s salvation and of God’s liberating action in human life. And he *preached* God’s nearness especially in parables that spoke of God’s mercy, God’s commitment to justice, God’s inclusion, and God’s tenderness. Jesus is a person filled with the Holy

⁶⁸ See Stephen Bevans, “God Inside Out: Toward a Missionary Theology of the Holy Spirit,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 22: 3 (July, 1998): 102-5.

⁶⁹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 150.

⁷⁰ Ormerod, *Re-Visioning the Church*, 106-8.

Spirit, anointed by the Spirit at his baptism to proclaim the good news and bringing healing and hope to God's people (Lk 4:18-19).

Such behavior, however, got Jesus into trouble. What infuriated and scandalized the religious leaders of his day, says Latino theologian Virgilio Elizondo, was "his willingness and ability to have a good time with anyone and everyone" and his refusal "to be scandalized by anyone."⁷¹ And so they killed him. But, of course, three days later his disciples began to experience his living presence among them, and gradually, in the aftermath of Pentecost, they came to the amazing realization that the Spirit that had been lavished upon Jesus and been lavished upon them. In this growing realization that *their* mission was *Jesus'* mission, the church was born—born of crossing boundaries, born of mission. The church is indeed "missionary by its very nature" because it is missionary in its very origin.

The missionary nature of the church is further probed by a reflection on its complex relation to the Reign of God. As Jesus' mission and ministry was defined by the Reign of God, so is that of the church. The church exists as *subordinate to* and *servant of* The Reign of God, although God's Reign is not entirely a *separate reality* from it. Indeed, the church is a community of sinners, God's People imperfectly assembled, who when they are most church, nevertheless pray for the Reign's arrival as they "wait in joyful hope."⁷² It is to the Reign of God that all are called, not necessarily to the church, for Cyprian's dictum "outside the church there is no

⁷¹ Virgilio Elizondo, "The Miracle of Conversion," *Give Us This Day* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2012) (January, 2013): 205.

⁷² Roman Missal, Embolism after the Lord's Prayer in the Order of the Mass.

salvation” needs to be reinterpreted in terms of God’s all-inclusive salvific will.⁷³ Nevertheless, the church must never cease from inviting women and men to join its ranks, but not out of a motivation to join an exclusive group to which salvation is only available, but a life-giving community that finds the fullness of life in the joyful sharing in God’s saving work and service. Salvation is found in such kenotic free giving of self. As Roger Schroeder and I say at the beginning of *Constants in Context*, understanding the church’s relationship to the Reign of God reveals it as “not of ultimate importance.”⁷⁴ Although opinions vary here, a fair consensus among ecclesialogists is that the church as such will cease to exist when the Reign of God is finally established. This is the essence of the church: to give itself in service to God’s Reign, just as Jesus, anointed by the Spirit, did. The church, sign, foretaste, and witness to God’s Reign, continues Jesus’ mission in a Trinitarian practice of “Prophetic Dialogue,” boldly yet humbling witnessing to the gospel with which it is entrusted.⁷⁵

Part II: The Mystery of the Church: A *Community of Missionary Disciples*

Having established the missionary nature of the church, ecclesiology turns to the reality of the church as Mystery. The church is not simply a visible, fallible society. It is, in its deepest core, a society “imbued with the presence of God,” a

⁷³ See LG 16.

⁷⁴ Bevens and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 7.

⁷⁵ See Bevens, “Missiology as Prophetic Dialogue”; Bevens and Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*; David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 489.

communion of “people made one with the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”⁷⁶

The first section of this part will sketch the missionary nature of three of the basic, scripturally based, *images* of the church: the People of God, the Body of Christ, and the Creation/Temple of the Holy Spirit. The image of the church as God’s special people, grafted onto the original olive tree of Israel (see Rom 11:17-24), chosen not for privilege but for service, in which all nations will find a blessing.⁷⁷ Most often Paul’s image of the Body of Christ is studied as it appears in 1 Corinthians and Romans (chapter 12), but a closer reading of Paul reveals that it is a missionary image. Baptism identifies us with Christ, whom we have put on as a garment, in whom we live no longer ourselves but in and through him, with whom we become one in our participation in the Eucharist (see Rom 6:1-11; Col 3:10-11; Gal 2:20; 1Cor 10:16-17). In this image, the church is the way that Christ continues to be present and active in the world. The third major image is that of the Creation/Temple of the Holy Spirit. Part I would have shown that it is the Spirit who creates the church as she pushes the early community towards and through the boundaries of Judaism and to the Gentiles, and continues to push the church to new and surprising realizations and practices.⁷⁸ The Temple is the place of God’s

⁷⁶ Paul VI, Opening Address of the Second Session of Vatican II, in *Enchiridion Vaticanum* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1968), 97; LG

⁷⁷ See Gen 12:3. See Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 190-264; See also Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids/Geneva: Eerdmans, 1989), 80-88.

⁷⁸ See TTL, 25. See also Stephen Bevans, “The Church as Creation of the Spirit: Unpacking a Missionary Image,” *Missiology: An International Review* XXXV, 1 (January, 2007): 5-21.

mysterious yet palpable presence in the world (1Kings 9:1-9; Ez 10:18-23; 1Cor 3:16). As God's Temple, the church is called to be a witness to God's saving presence in the world.

Section two of this second part of the book will sketch the "dimensions" or "marks" of the church as dynamic "distinctives," in evangelical theologian's Charles van Engen's words, of the church's mission.⁷⁹ Building on van Engen's powerful insight, the "apostolic" dimension will be treated first, since it roots the church in the apostolic commission of "teaching all nations" (Matt 28:19, witnessing to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8), giving a reason for its hope (1Pet 3:15). Each dimension of the church has a threefold identity. Thus the church *is* apostolic as a gift; it is *called* to be apostolic in fidelity; and it is to *act* apostolically in mission. Similarly, the church *is* catholic, but *called* to be catholic in its appreciation of local identity and diversity-in-unity, and commissioned to work for the catholicity of the world by protecting and fostering diversity (cultural, theological, gender, generational) in a constant dialogue for unity. Such unity is already a gift, and yet calls the church to work for unity among all Christians, and to work as well for unity among all religions and peoples. Finally, the church is holy as God's special people, but therefore called to be holy as a sign of God's presence in the world, and called as well to point out the holiness beyond its boundaries and invite people into the explicit relationship with God that it already enjoys.

⁷⁹ Charles van Engen, *God's Missionary People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 59-71.

What Part Two evidences, in sum, is that “communion and mission enrich each other,” or as Pope Francis has written “we no longer say we are ‘disciples’ and ‘missionaries,’ but rather than we are always ‘missionary disciples.’”⁸⁰

Part III: The Structure of the Church: A Community of Missionary *Disciples*

The structure of the church should serve the church’s mission. As Reformed theologian Craig van Gelder put it tersely, the church “*organizes what it does.*”⁸¹ Pope Francis writes that, in the light of the “missionary option” about which he dreams, everything in the church “can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented ...”⁸²

A first point that needs to be made is that, in the light of mission, the first structure of the church is no structure. Rather, first and foremost there is a “structure” of fundamental equality in virtue of Baptism. We are first of all *disciples*—missionary disciples.⁸³ As Hans Küng insists, distinction of any kind in the church “is of secondary if not tertiary importance.”⁸⁴ Missionary discipleship is lived out, as Kathleen Cahalan has described it, as followers of Jesus, as worshippers,

⁸⁰ Quotation from the 2001 Synod of Bishops on the Episcopate, quoted in Ormerod, *Re-Visioning the Church*, 119; EG 120.

⁸¹ Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000), 37.

⁸² EG 27.

⁸³ See LG 32; Kathleen Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2010), 24-47; EG 24.

⁸⁴ Hans Küng, *The Church*, 363.

witnesses, neighbors, forgivers, prophets, and stewards.⁸⁵ All participate in the mission of God, as God's People.

Thomas O'Meara writes that, in terms of the reality of grace, "ultimately, there are only two theological perspectives: the dividing line or the circle of circles."⁸⁶ The same is true of the church's structure. While some disciples are called to ministry within the church, ministry does not so much *divide* women or men from "ordinary disciples" as mark a particular presence of baptismal grace that all share equally. Rather than a sharp distinction between "laity" and "clergy," a missionary ecclesiology would focus on the various ways that Christian women and men share in the one mission of the church in its witness, service, and proclamation of the Reign of God.⁸⁷

That being said, there does exist in the church a certain order that is not so much hierarchical as ministerial. As Edward Hahnenberg points out, various kinds of ministries are shaped by various factors. First, there is the degree of commitment that a minister evidences—is it occasional? For a particular period of time? A lifetime commitment? Second, ministry is distinguished by the kind of ministry in which the minister is engaged—working under someone else's leadership? Assuming a distinct role of leadership in a particular area? Third, a particular ministry is distinguished by the type of recognition it is given in the church and by

⁸⁵ Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, 3-23.

⁸⁶ Thomas F. O'Meara, *A Theologian's Journey* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2002), 301.

⁸⁷ On this, see the very helpful reflections of Richard R. Gaillardetz in *The Church in the Making: Lumen Gentium, Christus Dominus, Orientalium Ecclesiarum* (Mahwah/New York: Paulist Press, 2006), 52-55; see also Edward P. Hahnenberg, *Theology for Ministry: An Introduction for Lay Ministers* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2014), 107-27.

the church's leadership.⁸⁸ Some ministries are public roles of service in the church, but are taken up occasionally and require a relative minimum of training and formation. Lectors, for example, or choir members certainly perform these important ministries. Others are responsible for a particular area of leadership in the church—for example, the director of religious education in a parish, or the director of music or liturgy or social justice ministries. For this task a particular expertise is required, a theological degree is necessary, and the person might be a salaried member of a parish or diocesan staff, and receive a special commission from a local bishop. Still others will be called to be more widely responsible for the general order of a community, coordinating, forming, leading the various ministries of a parish or diocesan faith community. Such a ministry ordinarily demands a lifetime commitment and a high level of theological and pastoral competence.

These various kinds of ministries are traditionally spoken of as lay ministry, the newly emerging reality of lay ecclesial ministry, and ordained ministry, presbyteral and episcopal. Richard Gaillardetz has proposed that we speak of commissioned ministries (e.g. lectors), installed ministries (e.g. directors of liturgy), and ordained ministries (bishops, presbyters/priests, deacons).⁸⁹ However we speak of them, their purpose is to serve and order the church's mission.

In the Roman Catholic Church we speak of the Petrine Ministry, or the ministry of the Pope. In the light of a missionary ecclesiology the Pope is the

⁸⁸ Hahnenberg, *Theology for Ministry*, 120.

⁸⁹ Richard R. Gaillardetz, "Does Vatican II Theology of the Laity Have a Future?" http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=5&ved=0CDgQFjAE&url=http%3A%2F%2Ffelephantsinthelivingroom.com%2Ffiles%2FRichard_Gaillardetz_text.doc&ei=RySaU_euBI6yyATK9oDYDg&usg=AFQjCNHWg7ZY1e9GH4oLwPv_sH7Gr7a7CA&bvm=bv.68911936,d.aWw, 11.

“servant of the servants of God,” the one who exercises the “care of all the churches,” and serves as a sign of unity and the possibility of dialogue for the entire “communion of local churches” that make up the universal, global church of today. While the Pope is indeed, in the preferred phrase of Pope Francis, the Bishop of Rome, nevertheless, in the light of the fact that the last three popes have not been Italian, the papacy has taken on a rather new role in the church as a global leader in a globalized church. In this role, the Pope is not a “super bishop,” but one whose primacy is to oversee the entire church as it engages in its mission of witness, service, and proclamation of the Reign of God.

The title of the important book by the late David Power is instructive. First there is *mission*, in which every Christian shares as a baptized disciple. Then there is *ministry*, which some Christians share in various levels of responsibility—although not levels of importance or dignity (as Pope Francis insists, our dignity “derives from Baptism, which is accessible to all.”⁹⁰ In the third place comes *order* “for the sake of the particular church and the sake of communion between churches.”⁹¹ The church is shaped to serve its participation in the Mission of God.

Conclusion

This paper has been a reflection on how today’s church, in the aftermath of the 2012 Synod of Bishops on the new evangelization and under the leadership of Pope Francis, is once more, as it did at Vatican II, discovering its time, and with time

⁹⁰ EG 104.

⁹¹ David Noel Power, *Mission, Ministry, Order: Reading the Tradition in the Present Context* (New York/London: Continuum, 2008), 2.

history and culture. Today's church is a missionary church. All four of the "fields" of mission described by *Ad Gentes* and Pope John Paul II in *Redemptoris Missio* are present in virtually every instantiation of the local church. In virtually every church there are people to whom the gospel needs freshly to be preached or re-presented, people whose Christian life needs to be nourished and equipped for service, and Christian communities need to be healed of the scars of 1054 and 1517. This is as true in suburban Boston as it is in inner city Chicago, the Kibera slum in Nairobi, the favelas of Rio, or the barrios of Ilocos Sur in the Philippines. The new ardor, methods, and expressions called for by Pope John Paul need to be operative in every field of mission, not just in situations of Western secularism. Our time calls forth a church that moves beyond what has been called the new evangelization to the formation of a community of missionary disciples, and ecclesiology for our time has to reflect that community's life and practice as it participates in the Mission of God.