

## **Mission Constitutes the Church Community...or Does it? Reflections post the Plenary Council.**

In recent days several excellent reflective summaries of the work of the recent Plenary Council of the Australian Catholic Church have been circulated. This small reflection is not an attempt to add to that impressive corpus, but to focus on one aspect of the Plenary Council's work, viz the missional nature and work of the Church.

### **Historical Perspective**

During the first 300 or so years of Christianity, mission was demonstrably mother of the Church and of the theology in which the Church engaged.<sup>1</sup> The development of the New Testament particularly the Gospels is but one, and the clearest, illustration of mission driving the work of the Church.

As the hand of the empire tightened its grip on a successful Church, it drew the community into the life and modus operandi of the empire itself. The mission of Jesus that had brought the Church into life began to fade from the Church's collective consciousness. Theology became an exercise of reflection on the doctrines and life of the Church rather than on the challenges of a missional context, as had been the case. Of course, the Holy Spirit continued to shape the life of the community across the years as it encountered many demanding contexts. The rise of monasticism, effectively a powerful missionary movement, is a case in point. In due time, came the great apostolic religious congregations, and more recently, many lay movements have begun to find their place in the Church's life and mission.

Church and state were to be separated in the West in the early modern period and it has thereby become easier to return to the initial way of theologising (faith seeking understanding.) In a secular age we must start with experience and so we have experience that seeks faith and then, in the process, finds understanding). The Holy Spirit continues to throw up leaders who help us deal with whatever the experience of context demands. She prompts, warms, strengthens, insists, that we be attuned to the possibilities of God's mission, and generous people respond despite the difficulties they face within and beyond the Church community.

### **Mission and the Plenary Council**

During the Plenary Council there was in evidence a fundamental issue about how members construed mission. In the original agenda for deliberations, mission was listed as an important area of activity for the Church. **It was not portrayed as constitutive of the Church.**

Two excellent short inputs by periti (experts) - Richard Lennan and Patrick McInerney - provided a significant challenge reminding members that the mission of the Church must be understood as God's mission, which first calls the faith community into life for mission, and then charges it with partnership in God's mission. **It is mission that constitutes the Church.**

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<sup>1</sup> See the article by renowned missiologist Stephen Bevans 'Wisdom from the Margins: Systematic Theology and the Missiological Imagination' CTSA Proceedings 56, 2001,21-42. He is acknowledging the work of Kahler in this point.

### Post-Vatican II Theologies of Mission

Post-Vatican II three major strands of mission theology have made the running in the deliberations, and consequent actions, of the wider Church and of official bodies charged with the Council's implementation.

- The first, as we have noted, is that mission is essentially God's work and prerogative as Richard and Patrick argued so cogently. Mission flows from the very life of the Trinity.
- The second relates to how Jesus understood God's mission and his own part within it. He spoke of the presence of God's kingdom and taught people to work and pray for it to come on earth as in heaven. His understanding of kingdom was diametrically opposed to that of the rulers of his world. It was to be a kingdom of love and inclusion in which all could find an honoured place.

The rediscovery, after a very long period, of the theology of the kingdom or reign of God, a period in which it had been assumed that the kingdom of God and the Church were one and the same, was among the most important contributions of the Biblical renewal in terms of impact on mission understanding and theology. For a clear and authoritative discussion of the theology of the kingdom of God see Pope John Paul II *Redemptoris Missio* Chapter Two, 1990).

As a larger reality for which the Church labours in a range of ways – working for justice, peace, and reconciliation, engaging in inter-religious dialogue, re-contextualising the Gospel in a change of era, caring for creation etc – the kingdom of God invites all the baptised to expand kingdom spaces in Church and society wherever they have the gifts to do so. They are also called to *create* kingdom spaces within and beyond the Church when such are lacking. This strand of mission theology was very much underdone in the theology articulated, or rather not articulated, during the recent Plenary Council.

- The third rich strand in post-Vatican II mission theology is that of Jesus as universal saviour of all humankind. (c.f. *Dominus Jesus* 2000). What can this mean and how can it be understood when so many are demonstrably not Christian and it seems likely never will be? ...And when the Church has clearly recognised that people of other religions and those who live in good faith according to various ideologies can be saved if they are sincere truth seekers? (c.f. *Nostra Aetate*). What is mission to be in this situation? How is Jesus to be understood as universal saviour?

There are various ways in which this deep truth can be understood, and rich veins of theology are developing in regard to this.<sup>2</sup> In the meantime the faith community proceeds with its engagement with the various dialogues of life, faith, theology and religious experience (c.f. *Redemptoris Missio* n 57) in order that all parties may be

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<sup>2</sup> A helpful article is that by Anh Q Tran SJ 'Experiences Seeking Faith: From Theology of Religions to Interreligious Theology' in Dale T. Irvin and Peter C. Phan eds *Christian Mission, Contextual Theology, Prophetic Dialogue*, Orbis: Maryknoll, New York, 2018, 209-228.

enriched through the processes, and together can co-create a better world and a healthier planet.

The Asian bishops have since 1975 pledged themselves to dialogues with faiths, cultures, and the poor.<sup>3</sup>

Particularly in the Western world including countries like Australia, we would add a fourth category, that of the ideologies and the worldviews of those with no particular faith or who adhere to secular ideologies.

At the same time we treasure the joy of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord, (Philippians 3:7) and hope and pray that that joy may be available to others. This complex third stream of mission theology engages theologians across the world and certainly in Australia. We are encouraged especially to pray and support the emerging mission theologies of category three.

### **The Plenary Council – Implementation**

The agendas of the Plenary Council's implementation program require us to embrace all three streams of mission theology and practice, and to explore the connections between them. Together they constitute ways of understanding God's mission which frame the projects of missionary disciples today. We consciously locate ourselves within the life-stream of God's mission as we see and learn to engage according to the example of Jesus who carried out God's mission even unto death.

### **The Alternative**

Without embracing mission in this deep and rich way, we may find ourselves approaching mission as simply the various activities carried out in the name of the Church, a 'laundry list' of things to be done. These may tend to be pursued as simply 'good works' with no deliberate connection to God's mission.

It must be remembered, however, that mission is first and foremost that which **constitutes the Church**, keeping us honest in our plans and activities, while securing our identity unequivocally. It militates against an inward self-serving mentality such as was the heritage of the Church's integration into the Roman empire. This worldview tends to forget that every person who is baptised is invited into mission, and most certainly is not called into the self-aggrandisement of any faith community, nor of creating a comfortable Church that exists for its own sake.

Like Jesus, we missionary disciples are called to be, first and foremost, people for others. With the help of the Holy Spirit this can be the leitmotif of the missional activities in which the Church's members engage post the Plenary Council.

In the light of the challenges before us, it is time to ponder the mission education, animation and formation needed for our own local faith communities. It is clear that there is much work

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<sup>3</sup> See G.B/ Rosales and C.G. Arevalo *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970-1991* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992).

to be done to enable mission to continue to be, in the full generative sense, the mother of the Church and of our theologising. In this scenario we are co-creators of the Church in every era.

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**25 July, 2022.**