

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

Therese D'Orsa

In the days following the close of the proceedings of the Australian Catholic Church's Plenary Council (PC), completed in July 2022, several excellent summaries of its work were circulated. This short piece is not an attempt to add to that impressive corpus, but to focus reflection on one aspect of the Council's work, viz the missional nature of the Church, a divine reality that is so foundational as to constitute (call into being) the community we know as Church. This focus is vital to the PC's implementation.

Why is this reflection important? It is important because this community, in our time and place, is being invited once again to be a people who intentionally lives and acts in such a way that the dynamic of Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection, and the subsequent sending of the Holy Spirit, are enabled to continue through them in the here and now. The invitation to the community comes now, as always, via the forward movement of history, and of human experience of that movement.

The PC's members have sensed the invitation to strive to respond to human need as **co-creators** and **co-redeemers**, just as Jesus did. In the immediate future Australian Catholic faith communities must decide how best to carry out the agendas the PC members have discerned through the Council processes – agendas around caring for the earth our common home, attending to the human needs and aspirations of First Nations peoples, placing the poor and marginalised at the centre of their life, and engaging in the ongoing formation of church members. These are among the **forms of contemporary mission** recorded in the PC's documentation, which will be officially 'signed off' in the time ahead.

Directions discerned and decisions taken will shape the agendas of each local church (diocese) which must prioritise them in a deeply honest way. So too, must the communities within these local churches. For them, it is a matter of engagement with these agendas, reflection on that involvement, followed by a reshaped engagement. Such a *modus operandi* carried out in the light of a shared faith journey is likely to be creative and at times sufficiently inspiring as to be worth recording as the journey proceeds. Missional engagement has the potential to be the mother of a renewed theological tradition.

There is much at stake. Should we seriously lose sight of our missional nature, we will cease to be church, reverting to life as some kind of comfortable spiritual club, hollowed out, lacking attractiveness except to those who are searching for a safe haven in a confusing world.

Historical Perspective

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

¹ 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.

The communities, however, lived in the context of the Roman empire, and as it tightened its grip on a successful Church, the empire inevitably drew those communities 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 communities as history unfolded, and their members encountered many other demanding contexts.

The rise of monasticism, effectively a powerful missionary movement, is a case in point, new forms of community life coming into being so that the mission of Jesus could continue in new contexts. In due time would come 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 way of theologising that characterised early Christianity. In a secular age we again start with experience, experience seeking faith (relationship), and then in the process, finding understanding. The Holy Spirit continues to throw up leaders who help us deal with whatever human experience within our context demands. She prompts, warms, strengthens, insists, that we be attuned to the possibilities of God's mission. Generous people continue to respond despite the difficulties they face within and beyond the Church community.

Mission and the Plenary Council

During the Plenary Council there was clearly a fundamental issue about how members construed mission. Members were not at all clear, and many had not had an opportunity to become acquainted with the post-Vatican II magisterium (official teaching) on mission, nor where, why, and how such teaching had developed. In the original Plenary Council documentation, mission was listed as an important area of **activity** for the Church. **It was not portrayed as constitutive of the Church.** In that sense, the mission theology on which the Council proceeded was less than adequate.

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

Theologies of Mission Post Vatican II

Post Vatican II three major strands of mission theology have made the running in the deliberations of the wider Church.

The first we have already noted. It is that mission is essentially God's work and God's 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 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 of the kingdom or reign of God was among the most important contributions of the Biblical renewal in terms of mission understanding and theology.² Francis Moloney, an eminent Australian scripture scholar, and peritus at the Plenary Council, reminds us that the phrase 'kingdom

² For a clear and authoritative discussion of the theology of the kingdom of God see Pope John Paul II *Redemptoris Missio* Chapter Two, 1990).

of God' does not do justice in the English translation to the reality that Jesus was presenting in his teaching on God's kingdom. The difficulty is that the current phraseology is more evocative of static geographical boundaries than the dynamism of the original Aramaic.³ A challenge for missionary disciples is to be attuned to that original dynamism.

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, **recontextualising** 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 but simply taken for granted, during the Plenary Council's deliberations.

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 many ways in which these deep questions are being pursued theologically, and rich veins are developing in regard to them.⁴ At the same time, 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 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 the faiths, cultures, and the poor of their countries.⁵ Particularly in the Western world including countries like Australia, we would add a fourth dialogue partner, viz the ideologies and the worldviews of those with no particular faith or who adhere to secular ideologies.

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 in our pluralist contexts.

As history unfolds, we Christians never cease to treasure the joy of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord, (Philippians 3:7) and hope and pray that our joy may become available to others through our humble efforts and the grace of the Holy Spirit.

³ Francis Moloney SDB uses 'the reigning presence of God' rather than 'kingdom of God', arguing that in the passage of the term from the original Aramaic, into Greek, and then into English, the dynamism of Jesus' usage has been eliminated and what we are left with is more of a static territorial image emphasising the authority of the king. Such limitations do not do justice to either Jesus' proclamation or to that of the Christian tradition that has grown from it. See Francis Moloney *Mark: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist*. Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 2004, 126.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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.

The Alternative

Without embracing mission in the deep and rich ways described above, we may find ourselves approaching mission as simply the various activities carried out in the name of the Church, a kind of 'laundry list' of things to be done. These may tend to be pursued simply as 'good works' with no deliberate connection to God's mission, and with inadequate sense of who we are and who we are called to be.

It must always be remembered that mission is first and foremost that which **constitutes the Church**, providing our deepest identity, and keeping us honest in our plans and activities.

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 to enable mission to continue to be, in the full generative sense, the mother of the community we call church, and of all our theologising.

Therese D'Orsa

Professor Emeritus Mission and Culture

The Australian Institute of Theological Education

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