

# Periodic Paper #3

## Fall 2005

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### THE KINGDOM OF GOD: THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

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The following is a synopsis of his keynote address at Mission Symposium 2004.

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#### INTRODUCTION

Every day we take part in so many different types of conversations. Some are informal and spontaneous, while others are quite focused and structured; some deal with superficial topics, while others touch the core of who we are; some are with people with whom we share many interests, while others are with those whom we consider quite different from ourselves; some are moments for sharing information and trivia, while others are moments for sharing values/opinions and for making an important decision.

In this paper, we are bringing together two sets of conversations into a third conversation. On the one hand, we have a rich collection of thirty narratives by local people and missionaries in a variety of contexts who describe and reflect upon how they experience globalization and how mission may best be done in light of this globalized situation. On the other hand, we have another equally rich collection of current missiological reflections by the teachers and writers of mission studies who are in dialogue with one another. They also draw upon experiences and reflections from a variety of different contexts around the world. The primary focus of these two sets of conversations represents human experience and Christian tradition, respectively. In this short paper of theological reflection, we are bringing together these two collections of voices—experience and tradition, practice and theory—into conversation with each other. The goal of this process is to mutually affirm, challenge and enrich both sets of partners. First of all it provides missionaries with theology and reflections for the future practice of mission in their situations and secondly it provides missiologists with experiences and reflections for future teaching and writing. Moreover, this conversation is a resource for the reflections, deliberations and actions of the Mission Congress 2005.

We begin with the recent missiological image of *prophetic dialogue* which serves as a framework for our theological

reflection. Secondly, we reflect theologically on globalization which is the primary context for the conversations of the local people and the missionaries. In the third section of this paper, we describe the theology and spirituality of mission which emerges commonly in both the stories and missiological writings. Fourthly, we focus on the agents of mission. And finally we conclude with challenges for the next step.

#### PROPHETIC DIALOGUE

In the final chapter of *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder use the term “prophetic dialogue” as an overarching “umbrella” for a mission theology and spirituality today. Mission must first of all be an exercise of *dialogue*—a dialogue with God’s movement in human experience (personal and communal), culture, history, religion and events in the world (“signs of the times”). “And just as the triune God’s missionary presence in creation is never about imposition but always about persuasion and freedom-respecting love, mission can no longer proceed in ways that neglect the freedom and dignity of human beings” (Bevans and Schroeder, 348). This theology and attitude of dialogue is very prevalent throughout the thirty mission/globalization stories. For example, in the words of Maryknoll Sister Janet Hockmann from her years in the Marshall Islands: “...to tend to wounds inflicted by and associated with my own heritage [as a U.S. citizen]” in the current context of globalization, there is the need and hope for “inclusive dialogues.” Writing from Nepal, Sr. Rosita Kavilpurayidathil, SCN, advises those entering the work of mission today to “be prepared to listen to the people regarding their needs before enforcing any activities.” After the Second Vatican Council, the call for dialogue in mission initially came most strongly out of the pervasive multi-religious context of Asia, and later this call was expanded by the Federation of Asian Bishop’s Conferences (FABC) to a three-fold dialogue: with the

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poor, with culture and with other religions (cf. Rosales and Arévalo, 11-25). Soon, dialogue with the “seeds of the Word of God” (cf. AG 11, 22; EN 53) in its variety of forms was recognized by the church in every part of the world as

not only as an essential element of post-Vatican II mission theology and strategy, but furthermore, an essential element of mission and basic Christian spirituality and church life in general.

At the same time, mission needs to be *prophetic*, presenting the constant call of the gospel to conversion from sin, individual and communal. Together with the above mentioned three-fold dialogue within the Asian reality, mission involves speaking out against what continues to cause poverty and injustice. It critiques human cultures and guards against globalization’s tendency to degrade cultural distinctiveness. It also maintains in respectful inter-religious exchange the conviction that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life (Jn 14:6). This prophetic aspect of mission theology and spirituality was likewise consistently present throughout the missionary narratives and reflections. Sr. Pashal Maria Fernicola, SCN, writes that the most difficult aspect of her ministry with Latino migrants in Kentucky is dealing with “the dehumanization of peoples—placing money, gains and greed before human needs, compassion and the well-being of ‘those left behind.’” Another SCN, Sr. Joel, working in India, describes the future of mission passionately as “raising our voices of dissent” and the absolute necessity to “stand for truth no matter the opposite current [of globalization].” This prophetic element of mission was most strongly represented in the early post-Vatican years through the voices of the Latin American Church, beginning with the 1968 Medellín Conference, and, like dialogue, it is now clearly a non-negotiable for all local, national and regional churches.

However, missionaries and local churches sometimes have considered the dialogical and prophetic dimensions of mission as contradictory, as an “either/or” arrangement. The late South African missiologist, David Bosch, described the complementarity of these two elements as “*bold humility*” (Bosch, 489)—a humility to listen for God’s stirrings in humanity and the world, Jesus Christ. The phrase “prophetic dialogue” builds and elaborates upon Bosch’s image underlying mission theology and

spirituality. With their stories, a number of missionaries explicitly reflect this “both/and” perspective. For example, the MM lay missionary Joanne Blaney in Brazil on the one hand urges the church to “embrace a spirituality of truth, justice and solidarity when there is so much injustice and exclusion,” and at the same time, her vision for the future of mission “would flow from faith in God as revealed in the gospel, human history, and the natural world and would include experiences of grassroots groups, particularly the oppressed....” We will be using the theology and spirituality of “prophetic dialogue” as the backdrop and overall perspective for our theological reflection.

### GLOBALIZATION

The thirty narratives of mission were intentionally focused on the context of globalization. Megeen White-Testa and Sr. Mary Ann Smith, MM, have already done a splendid job of drawing out threads and compiling insights from these stories. Building upon their work, what further reflection can we make regarding globalization?

In describing the challenges facing mission after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 (which many historians consider the end of the twentieth century), Robert Schreiter would support USCMA in choosing globalization as the focus for these mission reflections. “Globalization appears to be the best frame by which we can interpret and engage the world in response to our call to participate in the bringing about of the Reign of God in our world” (“Globalization and Reconciliation,” 122). Globalization, on the one hand, promotes *connectedness*, as witnessed by the immediate worldwide and inter-religious response to the tsunami disaster, but on the other hand, globalization also promotes *exclusion* to the point that the position of approximately 80 percent of the world population has worsened because of globalization (Schreiter, 125). While pointing out some of the positive benefits of globalization, the stories relayed from the local communities certainly testify much more strongly to the negative consequences.

**“GOD IS THE  
FOUNTAIN OF  
SENDING LOVE”**

Schreiter describes four dimensions of human life which are being affected by globalization:

ommunications, economics, politics and the sociocultural sphere (127-132). Put simply in the words of Joseph

Callahan in El Salvador, “The challenge is to put a human face on this phenomenon of globalization,” and that’s what our set of mission stories accomplishes. The narratives illustrate many tragic consequences of globalization, which include breakdown in family and village community life, suicide among farmers, urbanization, massive migration, growing poverty, local ethnic violence in places like Rwanda, Burundi and Sierra Leone, and the trafficking of women and children for sexual purposes.

Let us now turn to the particular theology and spirituality of mission which emerges in response to globalization today.

### INCARNATION, ACCOMPANIMENT, SOLIDARITY

A major missiological breakthrough of Vatican Council II was the recognition that all mission is of God. Maryknoll Sister Claudette LaVerdiere, working in Kenya, reminds us, “As faith-filled people we know that God is there with us and that mission is God’s work.” The work formerly cited by David Bosch lifts up for our reflection the reminder that all mission is God’s mission, the *missio dei*, and we are invited, called, to participate in God’s mission. Mission has its beginning “in the heart of God.” God’s love for creation not only gives meaning and purpose to human existence, it also establishes how we are to relate to each other and to all of creation. God’s love for creation defines what it means to be truly human. “God is the fountain of sending love” (Bosch, 392).

In the same article mentioned earlier, Schreiter says our response to globalization should build on the missiological developments after Vatican Council II (134). “[W]ords that capture the theology and spirituality of Catholic missionaries since the Second Vatican Council, ...[are] incarnation, accompaniment, and solidarity” (136). These words, concepts and spiritualities echo repeatedly in the stories from missionaries and the communities they represent. Roselyn Karakattu, SCN, writes from Nepal about her work with women rescued from the sex trade, most of whom became HIV or AIDS positive. “As I look back into those days of accompanying these girls in their time of loss and grief, I know that it was the God in me who prompted me to the incarnational spirituality of walking a risky path with them....In their pain I have witnessed the suffering face of Jesus and in their joy, His resurrection.”

### TO WALK WITH JESUS IS TO WALK WITH THE PERSONS IN THE WRONG PLACES.

Jesus, the *incarnate* Word, God’s love poured out for us, teaches us how to *accompany* others and be in *solidarity* with them. Donald Pelletier, M.S., who has worked in Madagascar since 1958, writes, “My mission was to witness to Christ. The only reason I came on mission was Christ....Any missionary must insert in his or her time schedule mission to the poorest, prisoners, mentally retarded, sick, marginalized, loving presence to the poor.” Elizabeth Johnson, in her celebrated book, *She Who Is*, writes how Jesus, God’s love incarnate, reveals through his words and actions the preferred object of God’s love:

By becoming one with humanity in incarnation and suffering, Sophia [Jesus], whose paths are justice and peace, shows that the passion of God is clearly directed

toward the lifting of oppression and the establishing of right relations. The table is set for those who will come, the bread and wine ready to nourish the struggle. What is needed is to listen to the loud cries of Jesus-Sophia resounding in the cries of the poor, violated, and desperate, and to ally our lives as the wisdom community to the divine creative, redeeming work in the world (166).

God’s love is also incarnate in the stories of missionaries and their communities. Julie Driscoll, SCN, served as Executive Director of the House of Ruth in Louisville, KY caring for families and individuals affected by HIV and AIDS. She offers the advice to “develop a loving relationship with Jesus in order to learn deep compassion and servant leadership....As missionaries we will keep our hearts focused on the vision of Jesus to ‘bring good news to the poor, freedom to prisoners and to set the downtrodden free’.” Medical Mission Sister, Gemma Mendes, writes from India in response to globalization’s impact, “We need to globalize hope.” She is expressing a lived faith in the power of humans to be signs of God’s loving presence in the world. “Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (I Peter 3:15).

Jesus lived God’s mission in his total immersion into the lives of the poor, alienated and oppressed and in his commitment to justice, peace and the sacredness/integrity of creation. He did this by becoming one *with* those among whom he lived and exercised his ministry. “As the humanity of Jesus is not abstract, neither is his relationality. The relationships which define Jesus are themselves mediated and defined physically: as

accompaniment, as “being with” or “walking with” (Goizueta, 68). To be in mission is to be with people. IHM Sister Joan Mumaw working in Johannesburg, South Africa, imagines the future of mission to involve reconciliation and healing, bridge-building between cultures and religions and “walking with those who are marginalized and offering compassion and support.”

According to Goizueta, the fact that Jesus accompanied the poor and the outcasts meant that he put himself in the “wrong” place. To walk with Jesus is to walk with the wrong persons in the wrong places (203). Teresa Madassery, SCN, writes from Nepal that her approach to mission has been affected by globalization. “For the suffering people of Asia, Nepal - Jesus is the suffering servant. [This calls us to a ] readiness to face the challenges of pain and suffering that make us credible witnesses to justice and peace.” As Eleanor Doidge has written, “Anyone who has been invited into relationship with the victim of physical or sexual abuse, the prostitute, the mentally ill, the chemically addicted, refugees and displaced persons, people haunted by past traumas, soon loses the romantic idea of ‘helping the poor’. A spirituality of accompaniment asks us to “walk with” rather than to “do for.” It asks us to “care about” and “care for” the other in a way that honors their dignity and humanity. It asks that we be transformed by love, compassion and mercy as we walk with the other” (169). Dennis Leder, SJ writing from Guatemala names this very clearly. “This calls for a careful balance between accompanying and empowering the communities and being a protagonist, with skills in areas like education, communications and the arts, architecture and urban planning, health, economy, the sciences, psychology.” Accompaniment asks us not to walk in front, not to lead. It asks that we support the voices and actions of individuals and communities we are living and working among. Accompanying and walking with challenges our desire to initiate and take charge, or to make decisions for individuals and/or communities. Leder suggests that the missionary accompany and empower local communities while at the same time having professional skills that make one’s voice heard in public policy that might affect social transformation on a national level.

**“I DON’T EVER WANT TO BE COMFORTABLE IN THE FACE OF INJUSTICE...”**

**CHRISTIAN WOMEN AND MEN BY VIRTUE OF THEIR BAPTISM ARE CALLED TO PARTICIPATE IN GOD’S MISSION...**

“Heartfelt solidarity” is not just a desire to alleviate other’s needs, pain and suffering, rather it is a genuine compassion for those whose lives are threatened (Aquino, 105). “This “heartfelt solidarity” is a deeply felt relationship with the one in danger. It gives life and energy to the struggle for justice, peace, freedom and the humanization of all relationships. Solidarity in mission asks us to go to the foot of the cross with the one suffering” (Doidge, 166). As Claudette LaVerdiere says, “bear the heat of the day with them.” It is not always possible to save them or to take the cross away. Solidarity asks that we stay with them, doing what we can to make the cross lighter. Maryknoll Father Joseph Healey tells the story of Little Sister Davita who works as a nurse in Central Prison, Kigali Rwanda. She visits the prison three times a week and the prisoners asked her to come everyday. When she asked why, they answered, “Just to be here with us.” It reminded her of the words of their foundress, Little Sister Magdeleine, “To be with them,” and of Brother Charles de Foucauld, “Be a brother to each one, a sister to each one.” For Little Sister Davita it is obvious on the one hand that she cannot change the prison sentences, she cannot take from the prisoners their crime or suffering. They asked only that she be present with them.

Joanne Blaney writes, “As I walk through the center of São Paulo, I am constantly confronted by homeless people and street children. It causes me to continually question myself about my lifestyle. I don’t want to ever be comfortable in the face of injustice, whether it be economic poverty or the violence against women which I witness at the domestic violence center...I am trying to be on the side of those who are oppressed and marginalized, accompany them in solidarity, and work to enable them to become advocates in the process of their own formation.”

There were many other examples in the missionary narratives that give evidence that these women and men live a theology and spirituality of incarnation, accompaniment and solidarity in their day-to-day presence with the people among whom they live. We now turn to name the different actors, or agents, of mission revealed in the narratives.

## AGENTS OF MISSION

Following the breakthroughs of Vatican II, we have no doubt that Christian women and men by virtue of their baptism are called to participate in God's mission, and that this is to be done in collaboration with movements and peoples who represent the "signs of the times", that is God's goodness and justice in the world and outside the Catholic Church. Within this context, let us now address the question of the "who" of mission.

The feedback from the narratives provides us with a litany from local people who are responding to the challenges of globalization in their own particular situations. Indian women "who were afraid to speak in public, are able to come together...to change society by constructive works like digging roads to the villages, constructing wells, halls for them to gather together and to educate their children" (Kavilprayidathil). In El Salvador, basic Christian communities within a parish offer "a venue for prayer, scripture reflection, catechesis, fellowship and community action" (Callahan). "The victims of globalization have realized the need for asserting themselves....[The World Forum of Fisher People] is involved in a campaign to establish the rights of fishing communities to own water bodies, fishing implements and distribution of fish" (Carol Huss, MMS, in India).

A second agent of mission is the missionary, who, as we have already noted in sufficient detail above, sees herself or himself more and more today as one who incarnates oneself, and who accompanies and lives in solidarity with the people of the local communities. Sr. Mary Paul Asoegwu, DDL, reminds us in her narrative that this mission theology and spirituality applies equally for those from the South coming as missionaries to North America. A third agent of mission is the local church itself, with which the missionaries are interacting and which of course includes the local people, but it is much broader. As one concrete example, in response to the situation of migrants in the United States, a parish needs to be "a caring Community of Faith that reaches out to the newcomers and assimilates them into the life of the parish" (Fericola).

The fourth set of agents of mission includes those "in the world," that is the members of other Christian churches, followers of other world religions and secular authorities

and agencies. Joanne Blaney has found inter-church competition very destructive and hopes "to see more ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue." Furthermore, she celebrates joint efforts by Brazilian Bishops and certain NGOs as hopeful "instances of collaboration and mobilization." In her involvement with HIV/AIDS ministry, Julie Driscoll, SCN, notes the importance of establishing "community relationships with local, state and federal officials as well as other organizations...." It is surprising that these two final groups of agents of mission are not more strongly represented throughout the stories.

## CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: CHALLENGES FOR THE NEXT STEP

**SUCH A CONVERSATION  
CHALLENGES ALL OF US  
WHO ARE CALLED TO BE  
WITNESSES AND  
SERVANTS OF GOD'S  
MISSION OF PROPHETIC  
DIALOGUE.**

In reflecting on the voices and experiences of the thirty narratives, we have proposed that the most appropriate mission response to globalization today is a mission theology and spirituality of *incarnation, accompaniment and solidarity*. Such a mission theology finds its beginning and end in the *missio Dei* and it needs to be *prophetic dialogue*. On the one hand, we need to

recognize and be in dialogue with God's stirring presence in human experience, history, faith and creation. At the same time, we as church need to be a prophetic voice of the gospel calling all peoples, including ourselves, closer to the fullness of God's reign through a process of conversion and transformation. Finally, mission is a collaborative effort between local people, missionaries, the local church and the broader human family of fellow Christians, followers of other faiths and secular agencies.

Several days ago, one of us (Roger Schroeder) was describing this theological reflection process at a missiology seminar of doctoral students. One of the students, a Native American from South Dakota, stated that this process would be more complete if the theological reflection was also done by an African, an Asian, an Hispanic and/or an African-American, etc. This is a challenge not only for the two of us as U.S. born Anglos, but also for all missiologists, USCMA and the participants and supporting mission agencies of the Mission Congress. On the grassroots level of mission, the parallel task for missionaries is to engage/facilitate their local communities and fellow missionaries in the ongoing process of

collaborative theological reflection, based on the thoughts of this paper and other missiological resources, the experiences and wisdom drawn from the mission narratives, and the entire process and event of the U.S. Catholic Mission Congress.

At the beginning of this paper, we described this theological reflection as bringing together two sets of conversations—narratives by missionaries and their local communities, and insights from the teachers and writers of missiology. This endeavor was intended not only as a mutual enrichment of both parties, but also as a resource for Mission Congress 2005. Such a conversation challenges all of us who are called to be witnesses and servants of God's mission of prophetic dialogue.

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