

Contemplation and Mission: Exploring the Relationship

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Introduction

When I began my studies in missiology under the tutelage of the late Professor David Bosch some members of the Department of Missiology at the University of South Africa (UNISA) defined mission in terms of activism. As someone whose spiritual director had introduced her to contemplative prayer early on, I often questioned this definition of mission. David Bosch's thinking complemented the activist perspective. He wrote:

Our mission does not have a life of its own: only in the hands of the sending God can it truly be called mission. Not least since the missionary initiative comes from God alone (1991:390).

Fortunately, Professor Bosch¹ and later Professor Kritzing² were both open to the approach I was taking in my research. When I was invited to teach at Unisa I was able to give expression to my perspective of mission in the study texts I was asked to write. In each of the three, I included sections on the relationship of spirituality and mission. So for years I have been pondering the relationship between what I call the inner and outer dimensions of mission.

With this academic and personal background in mind I developed the thesis of this presentation in the following statement: if we are going to participate in Christ's mission in the world we must know the Lord intimately, become more and more like him and allow ourselves to be filled with Christ's love for the world. The questions before us then are: How do we open ourselves to the mystery of communion with the Risen Lord? And, what is in essence the relationship between contemplation and mission? Let's try to explore these queries.

¹ David Bosch was killed in a car accident in April 1992. He bled to death because the ambulance that answered the call for help was from an ill-equipped medical facility in a Black area of the then segregated South Africa. He died as a result of the inequitable distribution of medical services as so many Black people who suffered under apartheid. He was truly one with his Black brothers and sisters both in life and in death.

² Professor JNJ Kritzing (known as Klippias) was the director of my doctoral thesis. He was respectful of my own thought in regard to mission and opened up new areas of study that immensely enriched my missiological studies.

Contemplation and Mission

I have developed what I call the contemplative mission spiral as a tool for grappling with these questions. The spiral begins to take shape at the bottom in the realm of human experience through relationships with other people and impacted by the Word of God and participation in the liturgy.

Biogeneticists have found that our capacity for appreciating the meta-narratives of our faith tradition and the symbols that give expression to our beliefs resides in the limbic system of the brain. Our openness to these expressions of the mysteries of faith and the rhythms of ritual that flow through the liturgy can

be enhanced or diminished through our participation in the liturgy or our lack of participation (Karecki 1997:171). This is precisely why it is important for children to have experiences of ritual so they learn to open themselves to the mystery of God.

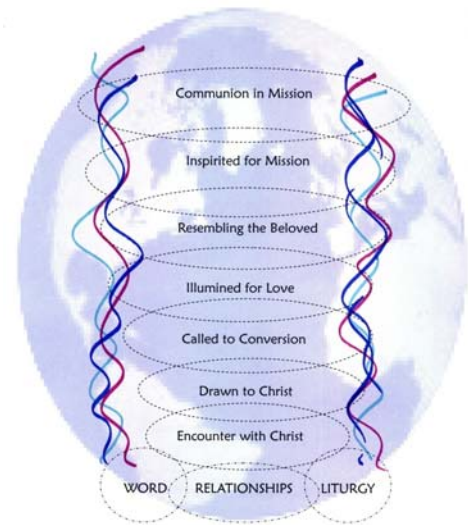
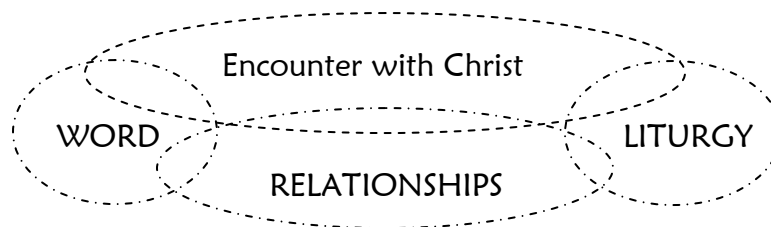


Figure 1 Contemplative-Mission Spiral



Cultivating good human relationships, the expansion of our capacity to hear and understand the Word of God and participation in the liturgy are avenues for opening up possibilities for encountering Christ. They are possibilities because they require a response on our part. If we respond in faith and trust then we experience a sense of being drawn to Christ.

The spiritual classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, teaches that we are being drawn to Christ, by what the author

Drawn to Christ

calls "stirrings." These stirrings are invitations to pray and they are invitations to which we need to respond. If they go unheeded we can miss opportunities in which the Spirit extends opportunities to us to grow close to Christ. As in all things, God takes the

initiative in drawing us to himself in ways quite “independent of our conscious willing” of them ; (Casey 1995:49). We are drawn to Christ through the working of the Holy Spirit. The encounter creates open space within us where God’s presence can flourish.

The Cistercian, Michael Casey (:48), has pointed out that those who urge people to pray often speak of it as a “useful human activity.” He argues that prayer is not something we do for personal enrichment or because it is a beneficial human project. Rather, he contends, “prayer is first and foremost a giving of myself, empowered by grace” and letting God draw me to himself (:49).

The medieval mystic, Clare of Assisi, would concur with Casey. In her *Fourth Letter to Agnes of Prague*, we find evidence of her spiritual wisdom in the advice she offers her correspondent to cry out using the words of the *Song of Songs* and allow the Spirit’s action to work within her. She wrote:

Draw me after you! We will run in the fragrance of your perfumes, O heavenly Spouse! I will run and not tire, until you bring me into the wine cellar, until your left hand is under my head and your right hand will embrace me happily and you will kiss me with the happiest kiss of your mouth (Song of Songs 1:3, 2:4, 2:6; 4LAg 30-32; Armstrong 2006:57).

We notice here the change from the singular to the plural form: “draw me” to “we will run.” This seems strange, but a commentator on this text explains that when one is drawn to the Lord in contemplative union one’s heart is enlarged to gather with him/her all people to the Lord (Arminjon 1988:77). The contemplative, and we are all called to contemplation, according to the teaching of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2709, 2724), embodies the concern of Christ for the world and wants all people to experience the “unfathomable riches of Christ” (Eph 3:8).

The intimacy reflected in the text from Clare demonstrates how one called to contemplative union tastes the “hidden sweetness” of Christ’s presence. What we taste is Christ’s alluring presence and as we are drawn closer to the Lord there is the temptation to pull away because we realize our own sinfulness. As we continue to respond to the Spirit’s invitations we begin to see how the Spirit is working in

Called to Conversion

imperceptible ways in our lives through people and events that call us to change. Michael Casey offers this insightful comment:

The experience of the Holy Spirit praying within us is inseparable from a sense of our own weakness and incapacity. By the action of the Holy Spirit what is worst in us can give rise to what is best. This is an alchemy we do not comprehend and can never anticipate, no matter how often it happens. God transforms human limitation into something beautiful, taking what is of least value and ennobling it from within (1995:7).

Authentic, Christ-centered contemplation always leads to our transformation: affective, intellectual, moral, socio-political and religious conversion (Gelpi 1998:42). We begin to see the dark side of ourselves and situations in the world. Conversion happens gradually. As we respond to the grace of conversion we become convinced that we are called to work for the transformation of the world so that it more clearly reflects the presence of God. Our sense of mission grows. Bosch believed that:

Mission remains an indispensable dimension of the Christian faith and that at its most profound level, its purpose is to transform reality around it. Mission, in this perspective, is that dimension of our faith that refuses to accept reality as it is and aims at changing it (1991:519).

Illumined for Love

Those who have experienced the transforming grace of Christ begin to see the world as Christ sees it with the light of his love illuminating their minds and hearts. Spiritual writers throughout the centuries have observed that those who have been changed by friendship with Christ are people filled with zeal who are ready to participate in the God's mission in the world.

As we grow in intimacy with Christ we do whatever is necessary to make this relationship the primary one of our lives. Slowly, we find that we are able to make choices that better reflect God's love for the world. Contemplation is not an escape from reality. In the contemplative experience of union with Christ one is called out of one's self in progressive stages of growth in love. In the Lord's embrace we become empowered for love, a love that we are taught by the One who is love. True contemplation does not lead us away from people. On the contrary, it leads us to be more loving and generous toward all people, but especially those who are in most need of the liberating love and mercy of Christ.

In the post-resurrection appearances Christ reveals himself to the women and to the apostles as one transformed by the resurrection, but still bearing the wounds of his crucifixion. The one who has experienced intimacy with Christ is not estranged or somehow exempted from the pain of human suffering; on the contrary genuine mystical union plunges one into the very depths of the world and opens one's heart to the mystery of the other, all others.

Resembling the Beloved

In the Contemplative-Mission Spiral the next stage reflects the effects of growth in intimacy with Christ: we become like the one we love. We are transfused by a new sense that the mission is not our own, but the Beloved's. We realize that mission consists essentially in offering people an opportunity not to "have more" but to "be more" in Christ who is the real source of life and meaning (RM 58). We do this best when we resemble the Beloved.

As we are transformed by grace to resemble Jesus more and more we engage in the primary way to be on mission. Pope John Paul II wrote eloquently and strongly about the importance of witness as the most basic form of mission.

The witness of a Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission: Christ, whose mission we continue, is the "witness" *par excellence* and the model of all Christian witness (RM 42).

The witness that is highlighted by John Paul II in this section of *Redemptoris Missio* is meant to reflect the concern that Jesus showed toward people in need in the Gospel. The most travelled pope expected that our witness would be patterned after Jesus's own. It should be marked by humility and forgiveness (RM 43). History has proven over and over that only a truly evangelical witness of those who have conformed their lives to Christ, followed in the footsteps of the kenotic Christ and lived in union with the Risen Christ can speak to people in every sphere of life.

In the past mission was too often explained in terms of projects and plans. If we are to take seriously John Paul II's words about witness

Inspired for Mission

we have to look for a deeper motivation for mission. It is my contention that contemplative prayer opens us to the deeper motivation that is only given by the Spirit for the sake of the world.

Casey, whom I have quoted earlier, observed that people often turn to prayer most easily in times of difficulty and yet, in the ordinary circumstances of life, we must make time each day to pray, and do what he calls “rewriting the script for the day” so that prayer becomes a priority, not an optional extra (1995:49). This is a challenge we all face as people living in an activist culture in which productivity is valued above emphasis on the transcendent dimension of life. Developing a capacity for contemplative prayer is only possible when we spend time being attentive to the Lord. When this happens our desire to share Christ with others grows, supports and directs our sense of mission.

Pope Benedict XVI, linked mission and discipleship in his opening address to the Conference of Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAM) gathered at Aparecida, Brazil. He said:

Discipleship and mission are like the two sides of a single coin: when the disciples are in love with Christ, s/he cannot stop proclaiming to the world that only in him do we find salvation. In effect, the disciple knows that without Christ there is no light, no hope, no love, no future (in AD 46).

The bishops gathered at Aparecida echoed the conviction of Pope Benedict in the final document that was issued after their deliberations in the statement:

Mission is not limited to a program or project, but it is sharing the experience of the event of the encounter with Christ, witnessing to it and announcing it from person to person, from community to community, and from the Church to the ends of the earth (AD 145).

The conviction of the bishops is borne out in the formation process they outlined in the Aparecida Document. They defined the spiritual dimension of the process as that element that “grounds Christian existence in the experience of God made manifest in Jesus, and leads it by the Spirit over the paths of a deep maturation” (AD 280b).

The CELAM bishops envision this maturation as an essential aspect of an experience of communion that gives rise to mission and a way to be on mission that invites people to be in communion (AD 163).

Communion in Mission

In mission history stories abound of individual missionaries emulating a “lone ranger” method of engaging in mission in isolated areas of the world. Now, with a vision of the church as a communion in almost every ecclesial document our understanding of mission has been enriched and begs for implementation in ways in which people can experience life in Christ at the level of communion.

In baptism we are invited into the community of the Trinity to share in their communion. It is our baptism that makes contemplative union possible. The Jesuit theologian, the late Karl Rahner was of the opinion that every serious-minded Christian needs to be very intentional about developing a strong contemplative relationship with Christ. He wrote: “The devout Christian of the future will either be a ‘mystic,’ one who has ‘experienced something’ [which is God’s grace and love] or he (sic) will cease to be anything at all” (Rahner 1973:15). Rahner recognized the need for every follower of Christ to be transformed by the love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5) to be an authentic witness of this love in the world. God desires to embrace us and fill us with love so that we can be epiphanies of that love to all people and invite them to share this love in communion with the Body of Christ.

Communion is the process of “decentering the ego where the self no longer obstructs us and where we can enter into other people’s concerns with genuine interest and concern” (Hart and Holton 1993:248). In communion with others we learn to love as Christ loves. The capacity for love is shaped and expanded by God in the measure we desire to be a participant in God’s life.

Communion is the goal of mission and this goal is expressed best when the whole church takes seriously the fact that “The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father” (AG 2).

Mission as presented in this text from *Ad Gentes* is not connected to a work, but to the very identity of who we are as church. We cannot not be missionary because our Catholic identity as church is rooted in the very life of the Trinity. Mission is the way the persons of the Trinity manifest themselves in the world. Our part is to be in union with the persons of the Trinity as privileged participants in the *missio Dei*, *the mission of God*. There are not multiple missions, there is only one, God's mission; to claim another is to betray our very identity.

We are sharers in that mission by reason of our baptism. We are guided in our growth in mission through communion with the Trinity through prayer, especially contemplative prayer and the liturgy. We are sent on mission by Christ through the Church to give witness by our lives and through a myriad of ministries, but always it is God's mission for which we spend ourselves.

I want to use this icon of the Trinity by Rublev as a visual segue into the last section of this presentation. In the icon the figures representing the members of the Holy Trinity sit in a circle around a table. They radiate a sense of harmony. The figure on the left symbolizes the Father. Behind this figure is a house with open windows and doors as a symbol of the Father who is always longing for us to come to him. The figure on the right represents the Holy Spirit. A mountain is the symbol behind this figure because so many of the biblical theophanies took place on mountaintops. Like deserts, mountain peaks symbolize the challenges one may face in seeking union with God. The central figure is Christ. Behind him is the figure of a tree representing the cross as the tree of life. Together the Father, Son and Holy Spirit live in a communion of love. Communion and serenity emanate from them. The Son and the Spirit are attentive to the Father to discern his will and plan for salvation. They act only "to do the will of the Father" (Jn 4:34). The Spirit is almost bowed, inclined towards the Son, waiting to be sent to hover over the world to manifest the wisdom and love of the Father and the Son for all humanity and the whole of creation. Christ reveals both divinity and humanity in the heavy robes in which Rublev has clothed him. His humanity no longer is localized in time and space (Casey 1995: 162); his presence now continues without restriction as the risen and glorious Christ.

In the foreground of the icon there is an open space at the table. It is here that that one beholding the icon can enter into communion with the Trinity. The table is a table of sacrifice with an offering at the center of the table so we must be ready to surrender in love to the mystery of this communion. Christ sits across from the empty space so that he can lead those who desire to enter into this communion on the way of selfless love because without self-giving there is no communion.

The Trinity also is a sending community. The Father sends the Son who from all eternity was meant to be the full and unique revelation of the Father's love for all humanity. The Son in turn sends the Spirit to create out of all humanity a communion that will continue to extend this communion to people throughout the ages.

In his encyclical letter, *Caritas in Veritate* 34, Pope Benedict XVI noted the enrichment of persons who respond to the call to union with the Trinity.

God desires to incorporate us into this reality of communion (the life of the Trinity) as well: "that they may be one even as we are one" (Jn 17:22)...Relationships between human beings throughout history cannot but be enriched by reference to this divine model. In particular, in the light of the revealed mystery of the Trinity, we understand that true openness does not mean loss of individual identity but profound interpenetration (34).

Benedict XVI's text lends credibility to my thesis that all encounters can be profoundly enriched through the transformative grace inherent in contemplative encounters with the One who is the source of communion between persons.

Conclusion

Contemplation is not about passivity or escapism in the face of the tremendous challenges that we face in our world. War, poverty, injustice, racism, immigration, economics, the ecological crisis, unemployment all cry out for our creative engagement from a faith perspective. Those serious about participation in God's mission need to know God intimately so that they can spend themselves giving witness to God who is both transcendent and present to us through the mystery of the Incarnation (Gallagher 2003:110). Only those who know the transforming embrace of God's love can respond to the complex challenges of the world with God's love made visible through creative initiatives.

Shared mission calls for the creativity and energy born of common commitment to a just ordering of human societies so that they reflect the in-breaking of God's reign. William Johnston (2000:113) maintains that what is needed to engage in such mission is the "mysticism of interpersonal relationships." Mission emanates from communion with God and others. Furthermore, the mission we are called to share in is wide, expansive and inclusive. We are truly to be one family in mission.

Pope John Paul II urged people to remember that: "the Kingdom of God is not a concept, a doctrine or a program...but before all else a *person* with the face and name of Jesus of Nazareth, the image of the invisible God" (RM 18). Christ as the definitive self-revelation of God is the fundamental reason why the Church is missionary by her very nature and for this reason the Church cannot do other than proclaim the Gospel (RM 5).

Whatever shape or form mission takes one thing remains a constant: we must reveal Jesus's name and face, a face of compassion and love to all people. If we live in communion with the Trinity every missionary encounter can be an epiphany of God's presence and we will be able to give a ready answer to those who ask the reason for the hope we have in our hearts (1 Peter 3:15) and with Easter faith say again and again "we have seen the Lord, he is truly risen."

References

Church Documents

AD	<i>Aparecida Document</i>
AG	<i>Ad gentes</i>
CCC	<i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i>
CV	<i>Caritas in Veritate</i>
RM	<i>Redemptoris Missio</i>

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Scripture texts are from the *New American Bible*.