

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

Ecclesiology, II: Differing Responses to Mission

A PREVIOUS ARTICLE considered two theological trends which are influencing contemporary ecclesiology: the development of New Testament scholarship as a resource for theological reflection on church and the emergence of the local church and the eucharistic community as the starting point for ecclesiology. The article focused on how these trends are shaping contemporary understandings of the nature of the church, particularly the church as a communion of communities, wherein the differing gifts of the one Spirit are manifested in a variety of ways.¹ The present article will consider the mission of the church also drawing on the insights of New Testament studies and the experience of local churches. Our understanding of mission shapes our understanding of church, just as our understanding of church influences our view of mission.² It has been argued that

the theme of mission, at one time considered a particular heading, seems to have shown itself not as one among several topics in ecclesiology but rather as *the* area in which to pose the fundamental question concerning the nature of the Church.³

The influence of New Testament studies

Vatican II encouraged a return to the sources, particularly the New Testament, as foundation of Christian faith. Studies of the New Testament throw light on the person and mission of Jesus as well as on the praxis of the early communities of disciples which in turn influence how the contemporary church understands its mission. In the past it was assumed that Jesus's mission was 'to save souls', and that he founded the church to continue this task. Critical historical studies of the origin of the Jesus movement and of the early church demand a rethinking of both Jesus's mission and the mission of the church.

New Testament scholarship has emphasized that Jesus's mission was the announcement and actual breaking in of the reign of God. His person as well as his preaching and actions proclaimed that God is among us. Jesus's deliberate choice of those on the margins of society, women, tax collectors, the poor and the sick, indicated that the reign of God was inclusive. The early communities that welcomed persons from different social classes pointed to the table fellowships of Jesus as the sign of the kingdom or reign of God. The earliest followers of Jesus expected the

return of their Lord and the definitive establishment of God's reign very soon and only gradually came to see that in Jesus's life, and particularly in his death and glorification, God's reign had already begun. This good news had to be proclaimed.

The followers of Jesus who formed the churches of the New Testament continued the mission of Jesus by proclaiming the coming reign of God, while professing their faith in Jesus as God's anointed one in whom the reign of God is already present. These churches did not exist for themselves but in order to carry out their mission. Jesus's own mission had been addressed primarily to the people of Israel, but his followers recognized that the good news which he had brought was for all peoples.

New Testament studies reveal the diversity in theology and practice which characterized the communities for whom and from whom the canonical writings originated. One's experience of church and its mission would have been quite different depending on whether one belonged to a housechurch in Corinth, to the Matthean Church, to the Johannine community, or to one of the churches addressed by Timothy. Scholars point to this diversity within the New Testament itself as normative for the continuing church which from its origin has responded to the memories of Jesus in a variety of ways.

The Church and God's reign

Vatican II distinguished between the church and the reign of God. However, Dulles suggests that the Council left open the questions whether the kingdom (reign of God) is present on earth beyond the borders of the church and whether the final reign will be anything other than the church in its glorious condition.⁴ He refers to the Report of the International Theological Commission, *The one Church of Christ*, which argues that the perfected church and the perfected kingdom are identical, and that to belong to the kingdom is to belong, at least implicitly, to the church.

Some ecclesiologists see the church as 'one of many agencies intended to make the world a place of freedom, peace, justice and prosperity', conditions which are seen as embodiments of the reign of God. For others, the church alone is the embodiment on earth of God's reign.⁵ These two perspectives perceive the mission of the church in very different ways. The first stresses qualities of co-operation with all who seek the good of humankind. The second focuses more on the church itself.

The position of this paper is that the mission of the church is to be a sacrament of the reign of God, a sign of what that reign is like, and a means of working toward that reign. Such a view seeks to avoid the relativism of the first position by holding that the church has been chosen by God as a special means to bring about God's reign, while acknowledging that the church is often not faithful to its mission, and

that God can and does use other means. At the same time it avoids the absolutism of the ecclesiocentric position.

Like Jesus, the church is called to proclaim and to embody the reign of God. All are called to the reign of God but not all are called to be members of the church. Bishop Remi De Roo refers to God's reign as

an explosion in our midst, challenging and changing individuals and structures, summoning and encouraging not only those who have identified themselves with the Christian community but all people of goodwill, whatever their religious convictions.⁶

God's reign extends beyond the boundaries of the Christian church to include all humankind.

New understanding of mission

In the teaching of Jesus and of his followers there was no split between a supernatural and a natural mission. The reign of God, while transcending the world, included the transformation of this world. Some theologians have referred to a 'continuous eschatology', emphasizing the continuity between what we do in this world and what will be permanently in the end-time. What is accomplished by our human efforts 'is as it were the raw material for God's power of transformation'.⁷ As Knitter states:

The primary mission of the church, therefore, is not the 'salvation business' (making persons Christian so they can be saved), but the task of serving and promoting the kingdom of justice and love, by being sign and servant, wherever that kingdom may be forming.⁸

Not only our planet but the entire cosmos becomes the focus of the church's mission as we became aware of our interrelationship with all human beings and with the natural world and all its creatures.⁹ Many who are not Christian share as subjects in this expanded view of the mission of the church.

Such an understanding of mission is very different from the understanding and practice of mission that began in the sixteenth century and continued into the twentieth century. Bernard Cooke described these worldwide missionary endeavours:

. . . despite the heroic efforts of some prophetic figures who saw the need to honour the deeper catholicity of the gospel, missionary evangelization was basically a transplanting of Latin Christianity that accompanied European colonization.¹⁰

It was also an activity undertaken by some members of the church, supported by the prayers and financial resources of the rest of the church. Mission was largely church-centred, tending to equate the reign of God with the expansion of the church.¹¹

At Vatican II the church came to the realization that the whole church had a mission, and that this mission was not to perpetuate itself, but to proclaim the reign of God and to work for the transformation of the world in the light of the gospel. This transformation always takes place in a particular historical and cultural context. The local church provides the context for mission and the New Testament is its source.

Transformation of the world

The documents of Vatican II support this approach to the mission of the church, especially the great pastoral constitution on the *Church in the modern world* with its strong opening statement:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of our age, especially of those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the followers of Christ (n.1).

Already there was expressed a 'preferential option for the poor'. Post-Vatican II church documents further develop this thrust.

One of the clearest statements linking the mission of the church and the transformation of the world is *Justice in the world*, issued by the Third International Synod of Bishops in 1971.

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation (Introduction n.6).¹²

The transformation of the world is not added onto the mission of the church but is at the heart of the mission. The survival of our world and the very possibility of faith in the God of love and justice depend upon this mission.

The wider ecumenism

Given this understanding of the mission of the church, what is the relationship between the church and the non-church—whether members of other world religions or secular humanist? In the years following Vatican II, Roman Catholic Christians joined in ecumenical dialogue and collaboration with Christians from other traditions. Through these

experiences Christians moved from ecclesiocentrism to christocentrism. Common faith in Jesus Christ was seen as more important than ecclesiological differences. However, an even more dramatic shift is occurring as Christians enter into a wider ecumenism which embraces other religions. They discover that their christology can be an obstacle to authentic dialogue. It becomes necessary to move from christocentrism to theocentrism, so that God, rather than the church or Christ, becomes the centre.¹³ For those who do not believe in a personal God, salvation or the welfare of humanity can be the centre.¹⁴ The experience of dialogue with religious pluralism is shaping a new understanding of mission. This view considers that the church should be present among the other religions, witnessing to God's saving action in Christ and learning how God is present among other religions and world views. 'Because the world has become smaller, the vision of God has become bigger.'¹⁵

Local church as starting point

The emergence of the local church and even of the eucharistic community as starting point for our understanding of church influences how we perceive the mission of the church. We are becoming more aware of the importance of context in our reflection on the mission of the church which is always carried out in history and has social, political and economic implications. Christians in Latin America will experience the mission of the church in a way that is different from Christians in Canada, Britain or South Africa. Christians who live as a minority in the midst of one of the other world religions will have a different understanding of mission from those who live in a Christian or a post-Christian milieu.

We have seen that diversity existed even among the churches of the New Testament. As Congar points out, history provides numerous examples of diversity of customs and opinions which have been accepted in the unity of faith. John Paul II, addressing a Coptic delegation, refers to variety as a quality of unity itself:

It is fundamental for this dialogue to recognize that the richness of this unity in faith and spiritual life must be expressed in the diversity of forms. Unity—whether on the universal level or at the local level—does not signify uniformity or the absorption of one group by the other. It is rather at the service of all groups, to help each one to give better expression to the gifts which it has received from the Spirit of God.¹⁶

Unfortunately, history shows that such a respectful attitude toward diversity of forms has not always characterized the church's approach to mission. In our own day we are witnessing a greater appreciation for

diversity as churches respond in faith to the problems and challenges posed by different cultures and circumstances.¹⁷

Those churches which were the object of the former understanding of mission now point to the negative aspects of their 'christianization', which often destroyed their culture and made it difficult for them to be church in their own context. They remember the colonial past when mission stations accompanied trading posts and military posts. Churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America are challenging European and North American churches to listen to their experience and to learn from them as they uncover the Eurocentric bias of most Christian churches. They realize that it is only by becoming church in their own cultural context that they will contribute to the richness of the universal church. And yet, in spite of great changes brought about by decolonization and shifts in population patterns, it is difficult for these new voices to be heard. Gabriel Marc comments on the situation within the Catholic Church:

Western Catholicism remains normative, obsessed with the past, and cannot bring itself to give room to the vigour of the cuttings it has planted in other soils. The paradox is that the people with the faith and the imagination have no voice while those whose voices are heard shut themselves up in ghettos to avoid doubt and have no ideas. There seems little hope of being able to get to grips with mission in the world as it is without firm action to solve this paradox.¹⁸

In spite of difficulty, new voices are challenging our understanding of church and mission, if we have ears to hear.

In Latin America, where 43 per cent of all Catholics now live, small ecclesial communities have found in their reflection on the scriptures the strength to respond to their situation of oppression. The theology of liberation developed within this particular context of struggling base communities. The Latin American bishops, faced with the task of applying the principles of Vatican II in a situation of massive poverty, repression and injustice, recognizing also that the church has often been on the side of power and wealth, professed a preferential option for the poor at the Medellin Conference in 1968 and again in 1979 at Puebla.¹⁹ The Puebla document expressed solidarity with the victims of society and offered a defence of their dignity and human rights. 'Enunciating the basic rights of the human person, today and in the future, is an indispensable part of the Church's evangelizing mission.'²⁰ However, it is not only the statements of bishops, but the courageous witness unto death of Latin American Christians, inspired by the gospel to work for justice, that calls for the conversion of the whole church.

Christians in Latin America have discovered that it is in the local churches, and in the small base communities in very specific social

situations that the church can be 'the *effective* sign and seed of a new world'.²¹ The bishops at Puebla recognized that Latin American Christians

have something original and important to offer to all: their sense of salvation and liberation, the richness of their people's religiosity, the experience of their basic communities, their flourishing diversity of ministries, and their hope and joy rooted in the faith.²²

The theology of liberation is influencing other churches in their struggles to carry out the mission of the church in their own context.

Those of us who live in the First World have much to learn from our sisters and brothers in Latin America. Indeed many churches have received important lessons through their contact with the Latin American church. This is particularly true for the Canadian Catholic Church which since 1960 has had a national programme of pastoral action in Latin America. Thousands of Canadians have spent time in Latin America. On returning to Canada they see church and mission in a new light.²³ However, we cannot reproduce the Latin American experience. We need to be church and to carry out the mission of the church in our own context. But we also need to extend our context.

As First World churches we must recognize our interdependence with persons in all parts of the world. Norbert Greinacher insists that Christian theology in the First World must first undertake a 'work of sorrow' as it reflects on its responsibility for the 'the four dangerous diseases which afflict world society today and which actually threaten its continued existence, namely, the East-West conflict, the North-South conflict, the ecological crisis and the man-woman conflict'.²⁴ First World theologians also need to recognize that our theology is not universal, and should not be imposed on other churches. Even within the First World there are many whose experience has been excluded from theological reflection. The experiences of women, of lay people, of the young and the elderly, of the poor and the handicapped, must be heard in order that Christian men and women may come to recognize and to fulfil their call to co-responsibility for the mission of the church, based on their baptism. At the same time, those who are office holders within the churches need to recognize the gifts and responsibility of the whole community.

In many situations throughout the world local churches are learning what it means to be church with a strong sense of mission.²⁵ Mission to justice draws local churches to act ecumenically. 'The vision of social justice brings Christians together in a common desire: to proclaim more effectively the good news of the kingdom of God.'²⁶ The unity of the church is seen in relationship to its mission to the human family.

Conversion to mission

A new understanding of the mission of the church calls for conversion on the part of the churches. As the Asian theologian, Tissa Balasuriya has pointed out:

The goals of the churches at the world level are still primarily based on ecclesiastical interests. There is more concern for building and safeguarding the institutions of the church than in presenting the gospel of Jesus Christ or serving humanity in its global search for survival.²⁷

Gregory Baum refers to the conflict between the logic of maintenance and the logic of mission. Persons whose primary concern is the maintenance of the institutions can easily lose sight of the reason for the institutions, and yet no church is really 'church' unless it is involved in mission.

As churches join with other religions and groups to work for the transformation of the world and for the human dignity of all persons, there is a need for self-emptying on the part of the churches. In the words of Vatican II: '. . . although the Church needs human resources to carry out her mission, she is not set up to seek earthly glory, but to proclaim humility and self-sacrifice, even by her own example' (*LG*, 8). This understanding of mission requires

a spirituality that integrates different dimensions in a wholistic vision. Proclamation, witness, dialogue with other faiths and ideologies, inculturation, struggles for societal justice and personal purification need to be correlated in one spiritual thrust within us.²⁸

Worship also needs to be integrated with mission. The church gathers as God's people to hear God's word, to celebrate God's saving presence in Jesus, and to allow God's power to transform our minds and hearts. Our gathering, in communion with other Christian churches and with all who work for the good of the human family, is a sign of the reign of God. Strengthened by 'the dangerous memory' of Jesus we go forth in mission to contribute to the fashioning of God's reign in our particular human situation.

Bishop De Roo refers to this task as a 'life project for each of us individually and all of us collectively as a pilgrim people, a mission of transformation in which everyone has a special gift and personal responsibility'.²⁹ Through our baptism we are invited to participate in this exciting task.

Ellen Leonard C.S.J.

NOTES

¹ 'Differing gifts: theological trends in ecclesiology', *The Way*, October 1988.

² Francis Schüssler Fiorenza in *Foundational theology: Jesus and the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1984) pp 195-245 devotes one section to 'The Mission of the Church'. He states that the church's mission has become an increasingly debated topic and argues that the underlying issue is the relationship between the church's religious identity and its understanding of mission (p 195).

³ Severino Dianich, 'The current state of ecclesiology', in *Where does the Church stand? Concilium* 146, ed G. Alberigo and G. Gutierrez (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1981), p 96.

⁴ Avery Dulles, 'Catholic ecclesiology since Vatican II', *Synod 1985—an evaluation, Concilium* 188, eds G. Alberigo and J. Provost (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1986), p 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 5.

⁶ Bishop Remi De Roo, *Cries of victims—voice of God* (Ottawa: Novalis, 1986), p 16. De Roo has been the Catholic bishop of Victoria since 1962.

⁷ Roger Haight, 'Salvation in liberation theology', *The Ecumenist* 26 (January-February 1988), p 20. Haight draws on the work of liberation theologians, especially Juan Luis Segundo.

⁸ Paul Knitter, *No other name? A critical survey of Christian attitudes toward the World Religions* (New York: Orbis, 1985), p 222.

⁹ See the work of the Asian theologian, Tissa Balasuriya, *Planetary theology* (London: SCM Press, 1984) and that of Thomas Berry, *Thomas Berry and the new cosmology*, eds Anne Loneragan and Caroline Richards (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1987).

¹⁰ Bernard Cooke, 'The Church: Catholic and ecumenical', *Theology Today* 36 (1979), p 354.

¹¹ Tissa Balasuriya, *Planetary theology*, p 4. The author points out that 'Christianity is only now beginning the process of purifying itself from being the religion of the Holy Roman Empire, Western culture, and Euro-American capitalism.' p 121.

¹² *The Pope speaks*, Washington, 1971, XVI, 377.

¹³ Paul Knitter, *No other name?* p 166.

¹⁴ Paul Knitter, 'Catholic theology of religions at a crossroads', in *Christianity among World Religions, Concilium* 183, eds Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1986), pp 99-107. Knitter refers to 'soteriocentrism'.

¹⁵ Emilio Castro, *Sent free: mission and unity in the perspective of the kingdom* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1985), p 71.

¹⁶ Yves Congar, *Diversity and communion*, published in French (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1982); trans John Bowden (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third, 1985; London: SCM Press, 1984). Quote from John Paul II, p 33; from message to Coptic delegation, 22 June, 1979, *Irenikon* 52, (1979), p 377.

¹⁷ See Giuseppe Alberigo, 'New balances in the Church since the Synod', in *Concilium* 188, pp 142-144. Alberigo goes so far as to suggest the end of ecclesiology which he considers 'incapable of rising to an effectively multicultural situation, such as has developed in post-conciliar Catholicism', p 144.

¹⁸ Gabriel Marc, 'Statistical data, projections and interpretations relating to the numerical composition of the Catholic Church', in *Concilium* 146, p 89.

¹⁹ Gregory Baum in 'Option for the powerless', *The Ecumenist* 26 (November-December 1987), pp 5-10, defines the preferential option for the poor as 'the double commitment, implicit in Christian discipleship, to look upon the social reality from the perspective of the marginalized and to give public witness of one's solidarity with their struggle for justice', p 5. This brief article provides a clarification and defence of the option for the poor showing its development through the ages.

²⁰ John Eagleson and Philip Scharper, *Puebla and beyond: documentation and commentary* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979), PD 1270.

²¹ Paulo Evaristo Arns, 'The communion of the Churches in society', in *Tensions between the Churches of the First World and the Third World, Concilium* 144, eds Virgil Elizondo and

Norbert Greinacher (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1981), p 72. Cardinal Arns is the Metropolitan Archbishop of São Paulo.

²² *Puebla. Evangelization at present and in the future of Latin America*, quoted by Jacques van Nieuwenhove in 'Implications of Puebla for the whole Church', *Concilium* 144, p 66.

²³ *Do justice! The social teaching of the Canadian Catholic Bishops (1945-1986)*, ed E. F. Sheridan (Toronto: Jesuit Centre for Social Faith and Justice, 1987), p 25.

²⁴ Norbert Greinacher, 'Liberation theology in the "First World"?' in *Option for the poor: challenge to the rich countries*, *Concilium* 187, eds Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1986), p 83.

²⁵ See for example 'The Report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas', *Faith in the city: a call for action by Church and Nation* (London: Church House Publishing, 1985) which calls upon the Church of England and others to respond to situations of injustice in the cities of Britain.

²⁶ Remi De Roo 'No longer going separate ways', in *Cries of victims—voice of God*, p 95. In this chapter De Roo provides information on the inter-church coalitions, a particularly Canadian form of ecumenism. The work of Anglican Bishop David Sheppard and Catholic Archbishop Derek Worlock, *Better together* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988) is a powerful witness to partnership in Christian mission in the city of Liverpool.

²⁷ Balasuriya, *Planetary theology*, p 128.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p 274.

²⁹ *Cries of victims*, p 17.