Challenges to Mission

In the past, the purpose of Christian mission was clear: to ‘save souls’ by converting people to Christ. In the theology of the day, conversion implied baptism and membership of the visible Church as the (only) means of salvation. Christian missionary strategy was equally clear: ‘implant the Church’ wherever it did not exist and ‘extend the Church’ (especially
through schools, hospitals and development agencies) where it did exist. The model of Church being reproduced was predominantly European and worked well where Christian mission was aligned with Western colonization. All this changed with events in the twentieth century which challenged assumed European cultural supremacy. Witness the rise of post-colonial independence movements, the resurgence of local and Indigenous cultures, and the awakening of non-Christian religions such as Hinduism and Islam. To this we could add the impact of secularization and the decline of Christian belief and practice in the West.

This gave rise to theological challenges encapsulated in the title of a book: *The Gospel is not Western*. Demographically speaking, Christianity has already become a non-Western religion; yet, most churches remain European in their structures, laws, liturgical rites and theologies. With the emergence of local theologies—such as Asian-African theologies of inculturation and Latin American theologies of liberation—further questions were raised regarding the purpose of Christian mission. Other challenges were more fundamental still: does one need to be converted to Christianity to be saved? If not, some asked, does the Church even have a mission?

**Vatican II Theology of Mission**

The Catholic Church takes up these challenges at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The Council affirms the missionary character of the Church locating it in the mystery of the Trinity: ‘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’ (*Ad Gentes* 2). Since the Trinity is the source, origin and goal of Christian mission, what then is the role of the Church? In the Council’s view, the Church is called to be universal sacrament of God’s saving presence in the world. The goal of mission then is not the Church itself, but God’s reign in the
world, a reign which cannot be restricted to membership of the Church.\textsuperscript{1} We are reminded it is Christ, not the Church, who is ‘light of the world’ (\textit{Lumen Gentium} 1). The Church’s mission is to be sign and instrument of Christ’s illuminating presence—both within and beyond the visible Church.

The Council also enriches the Church’s theology of mission by acknowledging the importance of local churches, diverse cultures, interreligious dialogue, liturgical inculturation and integral human development.\textsuperscript{2} There is new emphasis on people’s freedom in view of the Church’s aim to bring Christ’s freedom and peace to people. Missionary activity is now described in terms of witness, solidarity, mutual encounter and enrichment (AG 26). The conquest model of mission is replaced by the model of reciprocity in which we ‘learn of the riches which a generous God has distributed among the nations’ (AG 11). This also means the Church’s missionary agenda is set by listening to the ‘hopes, joys, griefs and anxieties’ of all people (\textit{Gaudium et Spes} 1). Through dialogue, we learn to speak the Gospel in ways the modern world will understand.\textsuperscript{3}

**Mission as Evangelization**

Post-conciliar thinking about mission is concerned with the complex interaction between Gospel, Church and culture. This discussion is spearheaded by Paul VI (\textit{Evangelii Nuntiandi}, 1975). Mission is now described in terms of ‘evangelization’ which aims to bring ‘the Good News into all the strata of humanity’ (EN 18) through direct proclamation, authentic witness and profound dialogue with culture. The Church begins the process of evangelization by ‘being evangelized herself’ (EN 15) especially by being formed into the community of Jesus’ disciples through the Word of God and celebration of the sacraments. The ‘evangelization of cultures’ (EN 20) includes the work of justice, peace and liberation. The document also gives prominence to the roles of local churches and popular piety in the Church’s
evangelizing mission. Finally, we are reminded that ‘the Holy Spirit is the principle agent of evangelization’ (EN 75).

The diverse situations in which the Church is called to live out its evangelizing mission are enunciated by John Paul II (Redemptoris Missio, 1990). He distinguishes three distinct types of mission: ‘mission ad gentes’, for those who have not heard the Gospel; ‘pastoral care’, for established communities of faith who always require ongoing evangelization; and ‘re-evangelization’, for those who have lost contact with their Christian roots (RM 33). More specifically, he calls for new methods and expressions of evangelization. This ‘new evangelization’ is directed to particular groups—the urban poor, youth, immigrants, refugees, women and children—as well as to cultural sectors—communications, peace, development, rights of minorities, safeguard of the environment, liberation of peoples, scientific research and international relations. Ecumenism and interreligious dialogue are integral to the Church’s evangelizing mission. Base Christian communities can also be a force for evangelization, especially in the younger churches.

**Missionary Metaphors**

There are three metaphors which help us draw together these various threads for contemporary mission. The first is the ‘sending out’ image of mission highlighted by classical missionary approaches. It is based on solid biblical foundations: ‘As the Father sent me, so I send you’ (Jn. 20:21). This gives priority to evangelization through direct proclamation of the Gospel. The second is the ‘gathering in’ image epitomized in the life of the first Jerusalem community and later monastic communities. The emphasis is on evangelization through witness, worship and fellowship. The third image is ‘solidarity’ with people, especially those on the margins of society—something at the heart of Jesus’ own life and mission. Solidarity manifests
itself in dialogue with cultures and religions, option for the poor, work for peace and reconciliation, respect for creation and care for the earth. Ideally, these three missionary images should co-exist in every local Church.

Other insightful images for mission are instructive. The missionary is a treasure hunter who not only brings the message of the Gospel to cultures but invites people to unearth the treasures already buried in their own history, cultures and traditions. As educator, the missionary seeks to capture the imagination of others, to invite them to reflection and action arising from their own life experiences. Jesus’ own teaching, appealing to the whole person—mind, heart and spirit—provides the clearest example of the visionary educator. In the tradition of Israel’s prophets, Jesus presents another side of the missionary vocation by denouncing oppressive structures and attitudes as well as calling for personal, social and even cosmic transformation. The missionary also comes as a guest, especially when working in other cultures. The attitude of the guest is epitomized in the manner of Jesus’ acceptance of hospitality and table-fellowship in his own Jewish culture where he nourishes respect and friendship. Other images of the missionary as stranger, partner and migrant worker present themselves. Finally is the image of the missionary as a friendly ghost who appears and then disappears leaving the local people to take full responsibility for their own way of responding to the invitation of the Gospel.

Missionary Strategies

If the goal of mission is now understood in terms of the broader concept of evangelization, this does not eradicate the importance of conversion and Church planting as specific missionary strategies. This is affirmed by Vatican II and subsequent Church documents. However, there are important caveats. People’s freedom of conscience as well as their cultural and religious identities is always to be fully
respected. There is no place for intrusive proselytizing or forced conversions: proclamation of the Gospel is an action of invitation rather than imposition. Nor is there any place for ‘transplanting’ a foreign church into another culture. According to Vatican II, ‘seeds of the Word’ are already present in peoples and cultures prior to the arrival of the missionary. If the Church is to take root there, this will be through the action of the Holy Spirit enabling the message of Christ to be freely received and genuinely enculturated in local soil. It is a work to be done on the basis of authentic witness, true dialogue and genuine solidarity with the people. In this way, inviting people to convert to Christianity, and implanting the Church where it does not yet exist, retain their validity in context of the wider agenda of evangelization.

Recent emphasis on ‘new evangelization’, especially in the increasingly post-Christian environment of the Western world, also calls for new imagination. At base is the call to bring the Gospel into active and sensitive dialogue with the forces of secularization, pluralism and postmodern thought—both to challenge and be challenged by them. Three steps are required. The first is to accept the challenge of Christian self-renewal: evangelization begins at home with Jesus’ own disciples providing new zeal for the Gospel. Second, new methods are required to establish contact, let alone create vital relationships for dialogue, with emergent alienated groups and cultural sectors of contemporary societies. The Church’s apostolates in education, health and development work remain important to the extent they become agents for dialogue and cultural transformation. The third step grows out of increased commitment to Christ and the Gospel (step one) as well as meaningful encounter with secular cultures (step two). It produces new expressions of evangelization capable of engaging the political, moral, social, economic and scientific questions of our time.
At this point, it may be helpful to reflect on the distinction between mission and ministry. The mission of evangelizing belongs to the whole Church and is the responsibility of all Christians. Ministries, on the other hand, belong to individuals in particular churches. Yet they also exist for, and are expressions of, the Church’s universal mission. If there are now more vibrant theologies of lay-ministries and local churches, current structures—not to mention mentalities—must also change. The relationship between the universal Church and local churches resembles the relationship between mission and ministry: one cannot exist without the other. For the work of evangelization to be effective at the local level, there needs to be diverse and extensive local ministries—with appropriate specialist formation in media, culture studies, ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, to name a few.

As well, members of church communities with expertise in such fields as science, economics, politics or the environment should be encouraged to see their work in the secular field as expressions of Christian mission. These could also be validated as forms of Christian ministry. In biblical language, some are ‘called’ to be prophets, teachers, pastors, evangelists; others specialize in ministries of healing, works of mercy, prayer or community leadership. Not everyone, nor even every local Church, can do everything. Yet, through prayerful discernment, each local Church is challenged to develop appropriate evangelizing strategies and ministries in accordance with the particular needs of local situations. This also requires the establishment of missionary priorities.

**Priorities for Mission**

Here I suggest seven missionary priorities. Others will perceive equally pressing, perhaps more urgent, priorities in response to their situations. While the task of discernment belongs to each local Church, it should be done through
reflection on the Word of God, openness to the vision and voices of those speaking for the universal Church, and attentiveness to the demands of the situation in which the Church is called to live out its evangelizing mission. This discernment of priorities is integral to each local Church’s process of self-evangelization.

**Role of Women**

Jesus’ own ministry is significant in establishing relationships with women in a manner quite contrary to the culture of his day. Women stand in solidarity with Jesus at Calvary; they are the first to witness and proclaim the resurrection of Jesus. Women are also prominent in leadership roles in the first Christian communities. Today the Church is challenged to authorize women’s experience, roles in ministry and essential place in the Church’s evangelizing mission. We recall that if the Church is to be an agent of evangelization, it must first of all be evangelized itself. This entails transformation from overemphasis on hierarchy and institution to renewed emphasis on Church as the inclusive community of Jesus’ disciples.⁹

Otherwise stated, the Church is called upon to develop an ecclesial feminine sensibility which is hardly achievable without women’s leadership in creating communities of welcome, hospitality and openness. There is also the all-important challenge to evangelize through expressions of solidarity and dialogue where women’s often more finely-tuned skills in communicating ‘matters of the heart’ are a particular asset. While all of this is quite independent of the issue of priestly ordination, the establishment of ministries in which women are ‘called forth’ to exercise leadership responsibilities must be encouraged. For many churches, this requires significant re-thinking in regard to the role of women in mission, ministry and Church life.
**Interreligious Dialogue**

Dialogue with Jews and Muslims, fellow-followers of Abraham, is important religiously and politically: we are all descendants of Abraham and the revealed Word of God to Israel; we also make up half the world’s population. In the increasingly globalized world we also acknowledge the importance of dialogue with the mystical traditions of the East such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism. Yet, as Australians, our most urgent need is to enter into dialogue with the Indigenous peoples of our land—a dialogue already lived by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who embrace the Christian faith. Yet, they will be the first to tell us this dialogue cannot be exercised outside of the acknowledgement of their suffering at the hands of colonization. This may also have a political dimension of which Church involvement in defending Indigenous Land Rights is one expression. If local dialogues are often more humble, the importance of establishing life-giving relationships with people of other religious and ethnic traditions is integral to the Church’s mission.

The Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference in association with other Church bodies has recently taken a lead in regard to these first two priorities through the establishment of the ‘Young Catholic Women’s Interfaith Fellowship’. Over a three-year period, full scholarships are provided to some thirty young, Catholic women to study for the Graduate Certificate in Interfaith Relations with the aim of encouraging their appreciation of other traditions and promoting their participation in the Church’s life and mission with a specific focus on interreligious dialogue. There are of course many other worthwhile initiatives such as the Columban Mission Institute’s Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations which gives particular emphasis to religious dialogue among women. These are but two examples of how specific strategies for mission and ministry are responding to the Church’s changing missionary priorities.
Struggle for Human Liberation

Since ‘all liberation is an anticipation of the complete redemption of Christ’, work for justice is at the heart of the Church’s evangelizing mission. In his own ministry, Jesus sides with the poor and opposes the unjust powers of his day. Consequently, Christians have a double responsibility: to walk in solidarity with those at the margins of society; and to challenge the forces of injustice which lay heavy burdens on the weak. Inspired by Christ and empowered by the Spirit, Christians are called to work selflessly for the coming of God’s reign of peace and justice on earth. They are also called to practical collaboration—or ‘dialogue of action’—with people of other traditions. This occurs when churches join with other community groups or agencies in providing hospitality, education, pastoral care and legal advice to migrants or by challenging government policy toward refugees. This can also be a work in which the Church is evangelized by learning from ‘the stranger’ the spiritual riches of other cultures and religious traditions.

We should also recognize the need for liberation within the Church as part of its call to constant renewal. Churches can find themselves in collusion with oppressive regimes. They may be dictatorial in suppressing voices of legitimate dissent. We might also consider the treatment of gay and lesbian people or the divorced and remarried. As we know, homosexuality and divorce are contentious issues. However, what is not contentious is that the Church’s evangelizing mission involves the task of reaching out to all people, regardless of sexuality or marital status, with the Gospel message of divine mercy. The Church is not, or should not be, God’s policeman. It is perhaps easier to side with innocent victims of injustice than to stand in solidarity with those whose genetic make-up or life-circumstances lead them to decisions the Church considers ‘too sinful’ to be invited to full communion. While there are no easy solutions,
there is the challenge to rethink how the Church may best express its evangelizing message of human liberation to those at the edges of the Church as well as at the margins of society.

**Reconciliation**

The Church is called to make its message of hope and reconciliation a priority for our time. We know we live in a world where violence and oppression know no bounds, where war is often the first rather than the last resort, where five year olds are forced to become boy-soldiers and girl-prostitutes, where sexual abuse and exploitation are rife, where suicide bombers and terrorists kill innocent people at will, and where market forces require billions of people to be cheap fodder for global capitalism. It is a divided world in economic, ethnic, political and religious terms. The Church acknowledges it is no innocent bystander through its historical association with colonial powers. By apologizing to Jewish and Indigenous peoples, John Paul II demonstrates that reconciliation must begin with our own acknowledgement of sin and guilt. More recently, the Church has apologized for sexual abuse scandals. So the work of reconciliation is a task the Church cannot avoid. It is nonetheless a task in which the message of the Gospel offers victims and perpetrators alike the possibility of healing and salvation. This is an urgent need and most relevant expression of the Church’s contemporary mission of evangelization.

**Ecumenism**

Healing divisions among the Christian churches is an important and urgent expression of the work of reconciliation. First, the tragedy of division among Christians contradicts Christ’s own injunction that ‘they may all be one’ (Jn. 17:21). Second, the division is blight on the one mission we all share as members of the one Body of Christ. Healing
these divisions therefore belongs to the very essence of Christian faith. If the Church is to bring the message of Christ’s offer of peace to the world— particularly by applying the Gospel to situations of human conflict— , that message falls short of full credibility in view of Christian disunity. Therefore, Christians are called not only to work collaboratively for God’s reign of peace and justice in the world. They must also acknowledge their wounds of division and seek reconciliation among themselves as a Gospel priority. While significant steps have been made, the major work of ecumenism remains profoundly challenging. Taking practical ecumenical steps among local churches—in shared worship and pastoral activity—is an important missionary strategy.

**Integrity of Creation**

With the advent of global warning, the Church must give priority to its mission of safeguarding the created world. Christian theologies of salvation have relegated theologies of creation to the realm of an afterthought. Yet, biblical eschatology speaks of a ‘new heaven and a new earth’ (Rev. 21:1) implying transformation of the entire creation. This is more than a mystical vision of the end of time; it is a prophetic call to incarnate God’s loving care for creation by the way we live and interact with nature. Christianity has been hijacked by the Enlightenment—seeing creation in purely material terms, something to be used and exploited at will. There are many resources in the Judeo-Christian tradition—ranging from the Book of Genesis to the cosmic mysticism of St. Paul, Francis of Assisi or Teilhard de Chardin—challenging Christians to develop a spiritual attitude to the earth. Christians will learn about their own repressed theology of creation through dialogue with Indigenous traditions where respect for the Creator Spirit and Mother Earth provide hope and the promise of healing.

**Dialogue with Secular Culture**
Dialogue between the Gospel and culture is an essential component of Christian mission. How then does the Church engage in religious dialogue with the secular world? This problem is compounded by two realities: many ‘left’ the Church on account of its perceived rejection of modernity and modern values; increasingly, secularized people have little knowledge of—and even less interest in—Christianity, the Church or its teachings. We can no longer begin this dialogue on the basis of shared religious language given that belief in God itself is now considered a dubious proposition. Nonetheless, as we enter the new phase of post-modernity, there is genuine awakening to the need for spirituality and spiritual experience. Here is an entrance point for dialogue—not in the traditional sphere of religion, but in the secular search for spiritual meaning and values.

In fact, secularity can be defined as a spirituality which focuses on the ultimate values of freedom and justice. This is often expressed through political and ethical commitment to human rights. Although the Church’s historical record may be tarnished, the underlying values of freedom, justice and liberation are essentially Judeo-Christian. Christians can certainly enter this dialogue with significant resources. However, political and moral issues can also be polarizing—for example, human sexuality, euthanasia, bio-ethics, abortion. Perhaps the place to engender more effective dialogue is spiritual experience. The focus is not on belief or doctrine, but on the spiritual needs we share in connecting to some greater cosmic power. Christians celebrate this connection through prayer, sense of sacred space, various rites of passage and use of symbols. Meditation is taken up by many people today who do not espouse a specific religious belief. If they turn to religious guidance in the practice, it is normally to the Eastern traditions. These are just some examples of where Christians need to recover spiritual connection to their own
tradition as a way of entering into dialogue with their secular contemporaries.

**Conclusion**

The Church’s missionary task is to be a sign and instrument of God’s reign in the world. This mission is carried out through ‘prophetic dialogue’\(^{15}\): announcing the Good News in ways that speak to our contemporaries; witnessing to Christ’s love among us; finding new points of contact between the Gospel and cultures; respectfully dialoguing with other religious traditions; and working for justice and liberation. Given the complex nature of evangelization, each local church needs to establish specific missionary goals and strategies. For all that, we do well to recall this is God’s work and that the Holy Spirit is the principle agent of evangelization. In the past, and no doubt today, there are instances where the Church actually impedes the divine mission. This is why we must approach the task of evangelization with ‘bold humility’\(^{16}\)—knowing the divine treasure is entrusted to earthen vessels.

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6. The expression is taken from St Justin Martyr in the Second Century CE; cited in *Ad Gentes* 11.
For example, St. Paul emphasizes ‘there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for all are one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal. 3:28).


Known as the principle of semper reformanda, the Church is ‘always in need of purification’. Vatican II, Lumen Gentium 8.


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