A MARIAN MISSIONARY SPIRITUALITY OF PROPHETIC DIALOGUE

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Dedication:

In dedicating this work to Professor Anthony Kelly CSsR, I wish to acknowledge the dynamic way in which his theology grapples with the emerging issues confronting our Church and world. Steeped in the classical Christian tradition, both Church Fathers and medieval scholars, Professor Kelly is equally knowledgeable of the
transcendental and political theologians of our time as well as the hermeneutical, postmodern and phenomenological philosophers. His love for art and literature influences the way he does theology, providing us with a rich tapestry of ideas through which he communicates the Christian mysteries with remarkable freshness. He knows we stand on the brink of a new era in human history for which a new consciousness in our way of relating with the ‘other’ is required. This is evident in the increasing attention he gives to intercultural, interreligious and global challenges confronting our world. His own phrase, ‘inter-hope dialogue’,¹ along with his insistence that ‘dialogue’ in this context is a ‘verb’ rather than a ‘noun’,² captures his dynamic approach.

For Professor Kelly, theology too is more a verb than a noun; it is also much more an existential than a cerebral activity. In his book, The Resurrection Effect, he calls for “the resurrection of theology”.³ As he stresses throughout this work, the Resurrection is not just an idea, but a world-changing event. If Christian theology does not arise from an experience of the risen Christ it is, arguably, a dry concoction of intellectual concepts with little practical import for the Church or the world. In this sense, Professor Kelly retrieves the connection between theology and spirituality: all good theology is rooted in spiritual experience, as the ancients always knew. This is also why theology has a missionary mandate: to draw attention to the hidden power of God’s Spirit who “discloses a new world of relationships and a new way of being in the world.”⁴ This kind of theology sees its role as a continuation of the Marian task of giving flesh to the Word in the world of our time with its new-found sensitivity to the experience of violence and victimhood, on the one hand, and openness to the mystery of transcendence in the cosmos and creation, on the other.

¹ See, for example, Anthony Kelly, Eschatology and Hope (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 15-17.
⁴ The Resurrection Effect, 156.
In any case, I express my indebtedness to Professor Kelly whose way of doing theology, in the spirit of Mary’s Magnificat, celebrates the tender-loving mercy of our God in this world without justifying the, at times, overwhelming expressions of injustice and evil. Such theology must engage with the world (dialogue) as it brings to the world the message of true liberation and salvation (prophecy). Theology, then, at least in the Redemptorist tradition of Professor Kelly, is always challenged to derive from and express anew a Marian missionary spirituality of prophetic dialogue.5

Christian Mission: Text and Context

We might say that the Church’s mission is one and the same in every age: to proclaim the Gospel to all peoples and nations. Yet, the Church’s evangelising mission never occurs in an historical or cultural vacuum. The ‘text’ (proclaiming Christ to the world) must always take account of the ‘context’ (reading the ‘signs of the times’). At the start of the third millennium, the context is one of complex social change marked by post-colonial independence and liberation movements, technological and communication revolutions, advances of (and reactions against) globalisation and secularization, cultural (e.g. Aboriginal, African, Asian) and religious (e.g. Islam, Hindu, Buddhist) resurgence, the greatest migration of people in world history, and much more. After many centuries, it also appears we are at the end of European hegemony.

If the context for mission has changed, so has our way of understanding the text. Vatican II signals a theological shift by insisting that: the source and origin of mission is not the Church but the Holy Trinity;6 the goal of mission is not

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6 “It is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that (the Church) draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father.” Ad Gentes, 2.
membership of the Church but openness to the reign of God.\textsuperscript{7} There is new emphasis on personal freedom and conscience as well as a more positive attitude to other religions.\textsuperscript{8} Missionary activity is now described in terms of witness, solidarity, mutual encounter and enrichment as well as proclamation.\textsuperscript{9} The former conquest model of mission is replaced by a model of reciprocity in which we dialogue with others and learn from them of “the riches which a generous God has distributed among the nations.”\textsuperscript{10} In other conciliar language, if we are to announce the Gospel in ways the modern world will understand, we need first listen to the “hopes, joys, griefs and anxieties” of all people.\textsuperscript{11}

**Mission as Evangelisation**

Subsequently, Paul VI and John Paul II presented the Church with an extended charter for mission with emphasis on evangelisation—or bringing “the Good News into all the strata of humanity.”\textsuperscript{12} Such evangelisation must begin at home—with the Church “being evangelised herself.”\textsuperscript{13} It is not the Church or its missionaries but “the Holy Spirit (who) is the principal agent of evangelisation.”\textsuperscript{14} Evangelisation specifically includes the work for justice, peace, human development, liberation of peoples and rights of minorities (such as Indigenous, the urban poor, youth, immigrants, refugees, women and children).\textsuperscript{15} Ecumenism and interreligious dialogue are integral to the Church’s evangelizing mission.\textsuperscript{16} New expressions of evangelisation focusing on communications, scientific research and international relations are also required.\textsuperscript{17} The notion of mission as dialogue with peoples, cultures and traditions is

\textsuperscript{7} “The Church has but one sole purpose—that the Kingdom of God may come and the salvation of the human race may be accomplished” *Gaudium et Spes*, 45.
\textsuperscript{8} See *Dignitatis Humanae* and *Nostra Aetate*.
\textsuperscript{9} *Ad Gentes*, 26.
\textsuperscript{10} *Ad Gentes*, 11.
\textsuperscript{11} *Gaudium et Spes*, 1.
\textsuperscript{12} *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 18.
\textsuperscript{13} *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 15.
\textsuperscript{14} *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 75.
\textsuperscript{15} See, for example, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and *Redemptoris Missio*, passim.
\textsuperscript{16} This is explicitly recognised in such documents as *Dialogue and Proclamation* and *Redemptoris Missio*.
\textsuperscript{17} See *Redemptoris Missio*, 37, where John Paul II speaks of cultural sectors as modern equivalents of the Areopagus.
explored in multiple documents, including those which emanate from the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples.\textsuperscript{18}

This new emphasis on dialogue and inculturation highlights the reality that evangelisation is not—or should not be—a one-way communication process. Rather, it recognises that the Spirit of God is already present among those who know little or nothing of Jesus Christ or his Church. The importance of dialogue is specifically developed in the Asian context where Christianity is a small and comparatively insignificant presence. Here the Christian missionary is inspired to be sensitive and listening rather than announce him or herself in any kind of dominating fashion. As developed by The Federation of Asian Catholic Bishops’ Conferences, Christian mission requires what they call a “triple dialogue” with the poor, local cultures and other religions.\textsuperscript{19} It is also made very clear that such dialogue is a two-way process of mutual encounter. Consequently, while the term ‘evangelisation’ (bringing the “Good News”) may appear to give priority to ‘prophecy’, as developed in Catholic Church teaching and praxis, authentic evangelization is also genuinely ‘dialogical’.

**Prophetic Dialogue and Missionary Approaches**

The Church needs to acknowledge that its approach to mission has not always respected the dialogical imperative. At times, for example, the Church so identified with a particular culture (e.g. context of European colonisation) that it either seemed incapable of dialogue or simply used dialogue as a tool for conversion. What is missing here is the insight of John Paul II who stresses that “dialogue is an indispensable step along the path toward human self-realisation . . . of each individual and of every human community.” \textsuperscript{20} In this view, it is not adequate to perceive dialogue as a missionary strategy; rather, it flows

\textsuperscript{18} Also see John Paul II’s “Address to the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders,” Alice Springs, Australia (November 1986) which demonstrates a profound understanding of the importance of dialogue with the rich spiritualities of these Indigenous traditions. \textit{The Australasian Catholic Record} 83/3 (2006): 259-263.

\textsuperscript{19} See \textit{For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences. Documents from 1997 to 2002} (Quezon City, Manila: Claretian Publications, 2002).

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ut Unum Sint}, 28. Many thanks to Tom Ryan SM who reminded me of John Paul II’s theological anthropology and what could be called his philosophy of dialogue.
from the relational reality of who we are as human persons. It follows that to live, speak and act authentically we must engage with others in an attitude of respect and even friendship, an attitude that can be called “the spirit of dialogue.”21 This implies an openness and willingness to learn from others in all our human encounters, including our missionary engagements.

However, it is equally true that dialogue does not preclude prophecy. To the contrary, authenticity in dialogue requires that one live, speak and act in fidelity to truth as one perceives it. In this regard, the words of the philosopher of dialogue, Raimon Panikkar, spring to mind: “Truth is not something that we possess, but something that possesses us, or besets us, something in which we find our being.”22 From a Christian perspective, there is only one absolute truth, namely God. It is this self-giving, self-communicating God who calls us into a living relationship with Godself and God’s creation. This prophetic call is ongoing and, for Christians, first and foremost addressed to them. Further, when Christians encounter others, they are also encountering the prophetic Word mediated to them through the lives, words and actions of others. In turn, they hope to be prophets of the Word and mediators of Gospel truth to all they encounter. Prophecy, like dialogue, is a two-way process.

All this has implications for Christian missionary praxis which I will attempt to develop under the rubric of “prophetic dialogue” and in fidelity to the Catholic Church’s renewed call to mission. Missiologists propose different models which imply diverse assumptions about what Christian mission involves.23 The crusader model, for example, does not reflect the Church’s contemporary theology of mission. In our terms, it does not engage others in a spirit of dialogue; nor is it open to the prophetic challenge mediated by other cultures and traditions. However, rather than focus on missionary models, I suggest a

21 See Dialogue and Proclamation (9) where various understandings of dialogue are proposed including this “attitude of respect and friendship which permeates, or should permeate, all those activities constituting the evangelising mission of the Church.” This is the understanding of dialogue that is the focus of Bevans and Shroeder in Prophetic Dialogue; see 21.


more discursive approach drawing from three scripturally-based, missionary images—“sending out,” “gathering in,” “walking with”—in order to illuminate a missionary spirituality of prophetic dialogue.24

The first image gives priority to the explicit announcement of the Gospel: the “sending out” of the disciples two-by-two to the far corners of the earth. Based on the Scriptural injunction, “as the Father sent me, so I send you” (Jn. 20:21), the image also captures the missionary vitality of multiple religious orders in the life of the Church. The second image highlights witness and worship at the heart of Christian community: the “gathering in” model of the first Jerusalem community (Acts 2:42-5:11). This model inspired the monastic movement which initially Christianised Europe, later missionary movements,25 and the newer charismatic-type communities. The third image is one of solidarity or “walking with” people, especially those on the margins of society, something at the heart of Jesus’ own life and ministry. Today, 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.26 Each image has something to contribute to our understanding and re-imagining of mission today, especially when viewed through the prism of prophetic dialogue.

We can also deepen our understanding of prophetic dialogue with reference to the Trinity in which the missions of Son and Spirit flow from their eternal communion with the Father and overflow into the world drawing all creation to share in the divine mystery, our origin, source and goal.27 Or we can look to Jesus who continues the prophetic tradition by calling people to faith and repentance while also speaking words of hope and

24 For other reflection on these images with reference to Marist Mission see Gerard Hall, “Marist Approaches to Mission: ‘Then and Now’” in Alois Greiler, ed., Catholic Beginnings in Oceania: Marist Missionary Perspectives (Hindmarsh, SA: ATF Press, 2009), 201-214, esp. 209. There I referred to these images as ‘metaphors’.
25 Alois Greiler argues, for example, this ‘intensive’ (versus ‘extensive’) missionary model was the major (if sometimes disputed) inspiration for Marist evangelisation in Oceania. Catholic Beginnings in Oceania, 10-12.
26 See also, Gerard Hall, “Marist Approaches to Mission,” 209.
27 Among his many, often profound, reflections on the Trinity as the dynamic source of Christian mission, see Anthony Kelly, The Trinity of Love: A Theology of the Christian God (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1989). Also, see Bevans & Schroeder, “Mission as Participation in the Mission of the Triune God (Missio Dei)” in Constants in Context, ch. 9, 286-304.
redemption. Specifically, we remember Jesus fearlessly proclaiming the reign of God while also sharing meals with outcasts and sinners, signifying how God’s reign and communion are offered to all.28 In our Catholic tradition we have saints and martyrs, founders and foundresses, who in diverse ways manifest both prophetic and dialogical qualities. Examples such as Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, Alphonsus Liguori, Charles de Foucauld, Peter Chanel, Marcellin Champagnat, Francis Xavier, Edmund Rice, Mary Ward, Mother Teresa, Therese of Lisieux, Catherine McAuley and Mary McKillop spring to mind. As we shall also see, Mary, mother of the Lord, is a model of missionary praxis as prophetic dialogue.

**Mission as Dialogue** 29

“We were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her children......

*We are determined to share with you not only the Gospel of God

but also our own selves because you have become very dear to us*” (1 Thess. 2:5-18)

Mission implies a task to be accomplished; dialogue suggests that task be undertaken in spirit of respect, openness and willingness to learn. To speak of a missionary spirituality of dialogue implies the ability to communicate with a listening heart. It gives priority to establishing relationships, first and foremost with God and, secondly, with those to whom we are sent on mission. The approach is one that underscores the importance of mission being done in a spirit of vulnerability and humility as well as patience and courage. One must also be open to being evangelised by those whom we seek to evangelise—recalling that God’s gifts and the seeds of the Word are already present in the lives of others. In this way, mission is mutual encounter among persons. Paul VI long ago described

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29 See especially “‘We were Gentle among You’: Christian Mission as Dialogue” in *Prophetic Dialogue*, 19-39.

the ideal relationship between the Church and the world as one of dialogue.\textsuperscript{30} We could also learn much from the Asian Churches for whom the Church is the “sacrament and community of dialogue.”\textsuperscript{31}

A missionary spirituality of dialogue includes the spirit of repentance and reconciliation. John Paul II’s initiatives in this regard are significant in seeking forgiveness for the Catholic Church’s “sins” against Jews, Muslims, women, Indigenous peoples and other religions.\textsuperscript{32} Such “betrayal of the Gospel” includes misplaced attempts to evangelise via “methods of violence and intolerance” and “acts of persecution.”\textsuperscript{33} These recent papal admissions of guilt on behalf of the Church and individual Christians display a remarkable humility, reliance on God’s mercy, and confidence in the Holy Spirit to achieve authentic reconciliation with aggrieved parties. In the current climate, the Church is finding itself needing to ask forgiveness for sins of sexual abuse especially against children. These and other examples are issues of serious moral failure. Even more poignant has been the failure of contrition and a tendency to cover-up for such grave misdeeds in the mistaken belief of protecting the Church’s image. This demonstrates in a profound way the Church’s need for self-evangelisation and repentance which, in turn, demand a commitment to heartfelt dialogue with the Lord and those who have suffered at the hands of the Church, especially her priests and ministers.

Dialogue highlights both presence and witness. The mission of presence and witness is what distinguishes the Church in its foundations. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, believers came to experience the risen Christ in their midst empowering them to live in communion with one another and the living God. To be Christian is to witness to this experience as the very foundation for mission. This experience of the divine presence overflows into the mission of loving service, liberating action and the

\textsuperscript{30} Paul VI, \textit{Ecclesiam Suam} (1964).
\textsuperscript{31} See, for example, Edmund Chia and Jonathan Tan, cited in \textit{Prophetic Dialogue}, 27. The theme is also explored in many works by Peter Plan, such as, “Crossing the Borders: A Spirituality for Mission in Our Times” in \textit{In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation} (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 139-150.
\textsuperscript{32} John Paul II’s most extensive apology occurred at St Peter’s Basilica, Vatican City, 12\textsuperscript{th} October 2000.
\textsuperscript{33} See International Theological Commission, \textit{Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past} (December, 1999).
dialogue of life. To speak of witness, service and dialogue as ways of being present to people demands that one be self-effacing in imitation of Christ who humbled himself and became as we are, offering his life that others may live. It is this self-emptying, self-giving love that establishes and transforms life-giving relationships; it is also signified in Pope Francis’ recent calls for the Church to truly become the church of and for the poor.34

**Mission as Prophecy** 35

“And this Gospel of the Kingdom must be preached to the whole world as testimony to all nations; and then the end will come” (Mtt. 24:14)

While “dialogue is . . . the norm and necessary manner of every form of Christian mission,”36 the evangelist or missionary is also called to prophetic action. Israel’s prophets, including Jesus himself, not only share their own selves in dialogue with others; they also live, speak and breathe a radical message that is not their own, but God’s message, God’s truth, God’s Word. The prophet’s role is to nurture, nourish and evoke an alternative consciousness and way of life that stands in contrast to the dominant culture of the times.37 Consequently, Christian prophetic mission involves the two-fold task of criticising dehumanising, un-Gospel values and energising a new vision based on the reign of God. Jesus, the “eschatological prophet,” models these realities in both word and deed. He is no stranger to denouncing immoral and unethical behaviour whether among the Pharisees or his own disciples. We have also noted Jesus’ counter-cultural actions in forming relationships with those who are most denigrated by the society of his time. It is this counter-cultural, prophetic activity that eventually turns people against him, resulting in his crucifixion and death.

However, prophetic mission is not only, or even mainly, about social and ethical critique. While prophets speak out against

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34 For example, Pope Francis, Address to Journalists, Vatican City, 16th March 2013.
corrupt and evil practices, they are called to both energise and embody a new way of being. In the Christian context, the prophetic missionary announces the good news that God is with us through Jesus of Nazareth and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Words fail if this good news is not evident in the witness of Christian lives and community. This is what is implied in the saying attributed to Francis of Assisi: “Always preach the Gospel; if necessary, use words.” The prophetic mission of the Church is to be a sacrament—sign and instrument—of the liberating reign of Christ and the kingdom already present in the world (like a seed) and yet to be fully revealed only in the future: “and then the end will come.” Jesus’ own way of announcing the kingdom through parables, stories and healings is effective on account of its basis in dialogue with the Father (whom he knows intimately) and with the people of his time (awareness of culture). He awakens people’s curiosity, leads them imaginatively and then surprises them with his wisdom.

What should now be evident is that Christian mission and ministry require both dialogue and prophecy. This becomes even more evident in relation to the third missionary image which stresses evangelisation in solidarity with marginal and oppressed minorities. The missionary is called to “let go” negative or patronising attitudes that may stem from over-identification with particular cultures, educational levels and other classes or races of people. The prophetic call to work for justice, peace and reconciliation is first and foremost a call to self-evangelisation in which the missionary’s ingrained prejudices and attitudes are confronted and overturned through engagement with others.

Obviously, though, self-critique and dialogue are insufficient. As Jesus’ own ministry demonstrated, one is also called to speak and act out against prejudice, discrimination and violence wherever they are encountered. This protest which the Gospel itself proclaims will sometimes be against society's policies and laws; at other times, as noted, against the actual state of the Church’s life.38 However, in all this, we must not lose sight of the fact that the prophetic challenge is as much God’s challenge to ourselves as it is our challenge to society,

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38 See, for example, J. B. Metz, *Emergent Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 1-16.
church or others. Or in the words of David Bosch, the missionary is called to live and act with “bold humility.” The lives of saints and martyrs—including Oscar Romero—model what it means to be an authentic prophet of the Gospel.

Mary’s Magnificat: A Song of Prophetic Dialogue

Speaking of prophets and martyrs, German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was killed by the Nazis, draws our attention to the ‘revolutionary’ words which Scripture places on the lips of Mary in what we know as the Magnificat (Luke: 1: 46-55). This is what he says:

It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings: this is the passionate, surrendered, proud, enthusiastic Mary who speaks out here. This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic or even playful tone of some Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind. These are the tones of the women prophets of the Old Testament that now come to life in Mary’s mouth.

As inspiration for prophetic dialogue, we need go no further than Mary’s Magnificat. The prophetic element is clear in the verses that sing of “collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world,” about God protecting the weak, raising the lowly and scattering the proud-of-heart. Mary, speaking in the long tradition of Israel’s women prophets (Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Judith), proclaims God’s liberation for oppressed peoples everywhere. There are political overtones: God’s justice includes a new social order in which the poor are empowered, the lowly uplifted, the hungry fed. Equally, its spirituality is clear: God is Saviour; God is faithful; God is merciful. In particular, God’s bountiful mercy is extended “from generation

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to generation, upon those who fear him.” In a world where cruelty and violence all too often reign, the Magnificat proclaims that God’s mercy and justice will be finally victorious. The Magnificat is Mary’s version of Jesus’ Sermon of the Mount (Mtt. 5:1-12).

The Magnificat is not only a song of prophecy; it is also a song of dialogue. The first half of the Magnificat is clearly a song of praise and thanksgiving resulting from Mary’s intimate experience of relationship with the living God. There is ecstasy in her voice as she proclaims her soul ‘glorifying’ the Lord, meaning to celebrate the Lord’s greatness with all her body, mind and heart. The song is also dialogical in a structural sense: it is Mary’s response to Elizabeth who initiates the conversation by praising Mary and sharing in her joy. In another sense, it is Mary who initiates the dialogue by responding to her cousin’s situation and heading out in dangerous territory to visit her. The image is one of two poor, pregnant women responding to each other in need—and placing God at the centre of their lives. Through prophecy and dialogue, Mary and Elizabeth minister to each other in a situation of personal confusion, social exclusion and political oppression. Here, in this lowly place, they sing of God’s transforming power coming to life in the birth of the Messiah.

Whatever the precise origins of the Magnificat, it is clearly associated with the early Church in Jerusalem. By placing the hymn on Mary’s lips, Luke acknowledges her as representative of the Jewish anawim (lowly servant; one of the poor) now participating in the post-resurrection community of disciples. For Luke, Mary’s faith in the impossible ways of God models the path of true discipleship. Yet, according to some scholars, the prayer may also represent the wider struggle for political survival. The conflict imagery, especially in the verbs describing God’s actions—*show strength, scatter, pull down, lift up, fill with, send away*—resonates with the first century milieu of Palestinian resistance against Roman oppression. Pointedly, though, it is God alone, not a political movement, which brings liberation.41 Whereas Mary’s passionate dialogue with God is

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41 The question of the historical origins of the Magnificat, whether in the religious life of the Jerusalem community or in the political struggle of the Palestinians against their Roman oppressors, is unresolved.

evident in the first part of the Magnificat, her prophetic call for God’s liberating action is unmistakable in the second.

Equally instructive is the manner in which the Magnificat has been interpreted throughout Christian history.\(^{42}\) St Ambrose speaks of Mary’s hurried visit through the hill country of Judea as symbol of the Church’s stride across the centuries. This vision places emphasis on the proclamation of the Gospel so evident in the image of missionaries being “sent out.” However, the vision also gives due importance to the Church’s task of inculturating the Gospel (e.g. Hellenistic world) requiring deep dialogue with peoples and cultures. For St Irenaeus, the Magnificat expresses the heart of the Church’s liturgy, especially through its opening refrain: “my soul glorifies the Lord.” For almost two millennia, the Magnificat has been and continues to be sung as evensong in Christian monasteries throughout the world. This reminds us that liturgy, prayer and contemplation are central elements of the Church’s evangelising mission. Here the second missionary image comes to the fore.

In our own day, the Magnificat is also properly interpreted in relation to the Church’s “option for the poor.” Emphasis on solidarity with the world’s most marginal and oppressed peoples is highlighted in the third missionary image with its focus on works of justice, peace and liberation. Linked to this is the Church’s mission to care for the earth—or preaching, serving and witnessing to “ecological justice.”\(^{43}\) Yet another aspect of the Church’s missionary task given prominence today is the ministry of reconciliation—at personal, cultural, political and religious levels.\(^{44}\) Clearly, these approaches to Christian mission demand a prophetic response to the call of the Gospel as well as commitment to dialogue, accompaniment and solidarity. Mary’s Magnificat, as a song of prophetic dialogue,

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Raymond Brown argues for the first, Richard Horsley for the second. Elizabeth Johnson suggests both may be at play. See Truly Your Sister, 267f. In whichever case, the prayer makes it clear that Mary’s hope-for-liberation is entirely focused on God rather than on political movements. I am indebted to Alois Greiler SM for highlighting any possible misinterpretation.

\(^{42}\) For discussion of St Ambrose and St Irenaeus on the Magnificat, see Truly Your Sister, 259.


\(^{44}\) See, for example, Robert Schreiter, Ministry and Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998).
continues to be a “dangerous memory” calling Christians to ever more authentic Christian life and missionary praxis.

**Excursus: A Marist Missionary Spirituality of Prophetic Dialogue**

It was Paul VI who, in his reflection on Mary’s pivotal role in the story of salvation, named her the “Star of Evangelization.” John Paul II and Benedict XVI further specified Mary as “Star of the New Evangelization.” The importance of Mary’s role in the evangelising mission of the Church is also evident in the founding vision of most, if not all, religious orders, including more recent ecclesial movements. My aim here is simply to demonstrate how that Marian approach to evangelisation is articulated by one little-known religious founder, Jean-Claude Colin. My choice is related to my being a member of the Marist Society he founded; and, more precisely, because he places special importance on Mary’s role in the Church of the beginnings and now at the end-of-time. As well, I believe Colin’s Marist vision is particularly suitable for interpretation as a Marian missionary spirituality of prophetic dialogue.

For Marists, it is Mary herself who inspires their particular approach to evangelisation by calling them to be a Marian presence in the Church and world of our time. Indeed, Colin insists that Marists “must think as Mary, judge as Mary, feel and act as Mary in all things.” How better to do this than by breathing in and breathing out Mary’s spirit of prophetic dialogue expressed in the Magnificat? Colin articulated the Marist vocation in relation to Mary’s presence at Nazareth, in

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46 Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, #82.
48 Jean Claude Colin (1790-1875) is founder of the Society of Mary (Marist Fathers and Brothers) and (with Jean-Marie Chavoin) the Marist Sisters (SM). Other Marist branches are: Marist Brothers (FMS), founded by Marcellin Champagnat; and mostly-lay Marist groups initially founded by Colin as the Third Order of Mary from which emerged the Marist Missionary Sisters (SMSM). For Jean-Claude Colin, see Donal Kerr, *Jean-Claude Colin Marist* (Dublin: Columba, 2000). Note also the website: http://www.jeanclaudecolin.org/
49 Cit. *Constitutions of the Society of Mary* (Rome, 1988), #228; hereafter, SM Constitutions.


the early Church of Pentecost and, now, “at the end of time.” Even if his documented references to the Magnificat are modest, these three pivotal symbols of Mary’s historical (Nazareth), ecclesial (Pentecost/new-born Church) and eschatological (end of time) roles are intimately connected to the Magnificat prayer.

First, Mary’s initial call to mission—to give birth to Christ—occurs in Nazareth, what Colin called “the cradle of the Church.” It is from Nazareth Mary makes her first missionary journey to visit Elizabeth, her cousin-in-need. In other words, the Magnificat arises from and profoundly expresses Mary’s Nazareth experience—just as Marists are called to live the Nazareth virtues as the foundation for their own mission of bringing Christ to the world. Second, as noted, the Magnificat is also a Pentecost hymn of the first Jerusalem community. It is here the disciples gather to sing Mary’s song of praise and thanksgiving in the face of all kinds of opposition. In this singing of the Magnificat the missionary “Church is born,” symbolizing the Marist vocation of “beginning a new Church.”

Third, by envisaging a final age where God’s justice and mercy flourish, the Magnificat is also linked to Mary’s role as “mother of mercy”—and the ensuing missionary vocation of Marists to be “instruments of divine mercy.”

These three Colinian symbols of Marist mission can be further explored in their own right as expressions of prophetic dialogue. The prophetic dimension arises from Colin’s cosmic or eschatological vision of the “whole world Marist” so that

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50 Gaston Lessard warns against exaggerating Pentecost as a key Colinian symbol, noting that it is Mary’s presence in ‘the new-born Church’ and ‘at the end of time’ which is prominent. Even Colin’s major source, Mary of Agreda, focuses her attention on Mary’s presence amidst the apostles rather than at Pentecost. Nonetheless, the argument is made that Pentecost is a foundational Marist symbol, especially in the manner that Mary and the Holy Spirit are so intricately linked in Colin’s thought. See “Marists and Pentecost,” Forum Novum 5:1 (2000): 52-68. As used in this chapter, “Mary at Pentecost” and “Mary in the new-born Church” are used interchangeably: Pentecost functions as a symbol of the new-born Church. For further reflection on “Mary in the New-born Church and at the End of Time,” see Jean Coste’s article by this title in Forum Novum 3:3 (1996): 245-263.


53 This is often expressed by Colin in phrases similar to this, for example, A Founder Speaks, #120.1.


55 Also see Michael Fitzgerald, “A Marian Consciousness: Marist Spirituality as Prophetic,” Maristica 5 (Rome, 1991), especially for the manner in which the prophetic aspect of a Marist missionary spirituality is developed.
“there would be at the end of time what there had been at the beginning: cor unum et anima una.”\textsuperscript{56} This founding Marist vision of Mary’s presence in the early Church and the end of time is unquestionably utopian in the manner it evokes an idealised past to critique current negativities and provoke a forward-looking imagination directed towards a transformed future. Marists are privileged to participate in this mission or “work of Mary”\textsuperscript{57} for the radical transformation of Church and society “in these last times.”\textsuperscript{58}

This cosmic perspective requires Marists to see the world and Church through the eyes of Mary—and, I would add, through the spirit of her Magnificat—naming the forces of resistance while embodying an alternative ecclesial consciousness focusing on divine mercy. We are now aware that Colin’s utopian Marian perspective was foundational to his understanding of Marist evangelisation arising from his time in Cerdon and his Bugey missionary experience.\textsuperscript{59} Here, the mystical vision of Mary’s presence at “the end of time” is concretely expressed in a missionary approach we could call dialogical: to do whatever is necessary to touch the hearts and souls of all people with “the merciful love of a mother.”\textsuperscript{60}

As the term implies, an eschatological vision focuses on the end times. Subsequently, especially in his years as Superior General, Colin gives increasing importance to the time of the beginnings: Mary’s presence in the midst of the apostles supporting the new-born Church. In fact, this is to be the Society of Mary’s “only model.”\textsuperscript{61} Its mission of beginning a new Church means that “we must recreate the faith of the first


\textsuperscript{57} The “work of Mary” is used by all three Marist founders: Jean-Claude Colin, Marcellin Champagnat & Jean-Marie Chavoin.

\textsuperscript{58} For interpretations of how the Colinian eschatological vision may be interpreted for and by Marists today, see Jan Snijders, “The End of Time: The Present Age,” 20-41; and Michael Fitzgerald, “The Colinian Eschatological Vision,” 94-111; chapters in authors’ respective above-mentioned works. See also, Gerard Hall, “The Political Dimension of Colinian Eschatology and Praxis” in Forum Novum 1:2 (April, 2009): 213-240.

\textsuperscript{59} Cerdon was Colin’s first appointment after his priestly ordination in 1816 and where the beginnings of the Society of Mary (priests, sisters and laity) take shape. The Bugey region in south-east France was the place the Marists (still diocesan priests) provided parish missions 1825-1829.

\textsuperscript{60} See, for example, an early sermon of Colin on the “motherly heart” of Mary which extends “to all nations and all peoples, comforts all miseries, meets all needs, grants all prayers.” APM #241.42. Translation cited in Gerard Hall, Community of Memory and Hope (Sydney, 1985), 25.

\textsuperscript{61} Colin: “Our model, our only model, must be and is the early Church.” Origines Maristes, #631.
believers.” Here the prophetic element which contrasts an idealised past with the present reality of the Church is certainly evident. However, the call to Marist mission is not so much focused on critique of ecclesial practices as it requires Marists themselves to effectively image the first Jerusalem community through their lives and missionary activity. This requires conversion of heart, an alternative Marian consciousness, for Marists to be effective catalysts for the Church’s rebirth. This role also involves ‘supporting’ the Church in the manner of Mary who reconciles diverse groups or parties which threaten the Church’s unity.

Moreover, Colin’s intuition is clear: Marist missionary effectiveness depends on their being like Mary, “hidden and unknown,” disappearing into the life of the Church so that the Gospel may be proclaimed through a revitalised Church. This is not a missionary strategy, but a missionary spirituality whereby the mystery of Mary’s hidden presence in the new-born Church becomes the central and most evocative symbol for Marist missionary evangelisation. Why? “Today there’s no other way of doing good. *Ignoti et Occulti.* The times demand it.” Arguably, our post-modern, post-secular age is even more demanding of the hidden and unknown Marist way. Such an approach gives priority to witness, service, dialogue and solidarity with others in the manner of Christ’s own kenosis.

Clearly, for Marists, there is also an intimate connection between “hidden and unknown” and “the home of Nazareth,”

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62 *A Founder Speaks,* #117.3.
63 These ideas are developed by Michael Fitzgerald, “A Prophetic Spirituality” in “A Marian Consciousness,” 112-121.
64 Justin Taylor suggests that Mary (in Luke and Acts) plays a mediating role between the two groups: the blood group (“Jesus’ brothers”) who belong to Jesus’ natural family; and the new faith community of disciples and believing women. “Marist Retreat” (Rome 2005), 22-25. Private manuscript.
65 Colin stated that “(Mary) did more than the apostles for the new-born Church, but she did it without any stir” (*A Founder Speaks,* #190.2). Nonetheless, it is important to note that it is not “Mary in the new-born Church,” but “the new-born Church, as such, which includes Mary and the apostles” which is the model for the Society. See Coste, “Mary in the New-born Church,” 251.
66 *A Founder Speaks,* #102.33.
67 See Patrick Bearsley, “From Ascesis to Kenosis: The Evolution of the Marist Understanding of the ‘Hidden and Unknown,’” *Forum Novum,* 5/1 (2000): esp. 86-94; and Jan Snijders, “Hidden and Unknown” in “The Age of Mary,” 72-96. Both see the ‘hidden and unknown’ way as especially relevant for mission in the contemporary age. SM Constitutions (#24) indicate a similar sensibility: “In this spirit [of ‘hidden and unknown’] they are able to hear the longings of the people of God and discern the signs of hope in today’s world.”
68 See Bearsley, 83-86.
even if this was not an original connection in Colin’s thought.\textsuperscript{69} Insofar as Nazareth stands for the interior virtues—“humility, self-denial, intimate union with God, most ardent love of neighbour, poverty, modesty and simplicity of heart”—these are directly related to apostolic activity and “works of zeal.”\textsuperscript{70} In relation to Marists’ and Mary’s role at the end-of-time, Colin had already articulated his famous “three No’s” to greed, pride and power which inevitably obstruct “Mary’s work.”\textsuperscript{71} Clearly, too, the Nazareth virtues are profoundly evident in the manner of the apostles’ and Mary’s presence in the early Church.\textsuperscript{72} Furthermore, Colin himself often links contemplation and action, dialogue and prophecy, discernment and mission with reference to Mary at Nazareth \textit{and} in the early Church: “Let us imitate her life at Nazareth. She did more than the Apostles for the new-born Church.”\textsuperscript{73} Nazareth is a place from where we see more clearly our missionary role: “I place myself at Nazareth; \textit{from} there I see all I have to do.”\textsuperscript{74}

As indicated, these three key symbols of Marist life and mission—Nazareth, new-born Church/Pentecost and the end of time—call upon Marists to imitate Mary in their work of evangelisation which is expressed most profoundly in her song of prophetic dialogue, the Magnificat. This is, of course, a prayer for all Christians, a prayer which increasingly draws us to see in Mary the model of true Christian discipleship and ‘Star of evangelisation’. If Marists have a particular insight to share, it is surely the manner in which they expressly relate to Mary as a model of missionary praxis. Here the creative tension between prophetic proclamation and dialogic engagement is reflected in the various polarities that define Mary’s and Marist mission: hidden life and new Church; Nazareth and Pentecost; diocesan and universal; disappearance and creativity;

\textsuperscript{69} See Jean Coste, “Nazareth in the Thought of Fr. Colin,” \textit{Acta} 6 (1960-1962): 299-400. This important study indicates that Nazareth is not a key-symbol in Colin’s early years, but becomes important in his later years as General and in his contemplative years at La Neyliere. Nonetheless, a later exaggerated contemplative interpretation of Nazareth was not faithful to Colin’s more complex and dynamic understanding. See also Fitzgerald, 62-64; and Edwin Keel, “Jean-Claude Colin: Poet and Prophet” in \textit{The Study of Marist Spirituality} (Rome 1984), c. 158f.

\textsuperscript{70} See original SM Constitutions (1872), #49-50; repeated in SM Constitutions (1988), #228.

\textsuperscript{71} See Fitzerald’s chapter on “Prophetic Criticism” in “A Marian Consciousness” which discusses the significance of Colin’s ‘Three No’s’, 72-93.

\textsuperscript{72} Coste indicates how this connection develops in Colin’s thought only after 1850. See Fitzerald, 62.

\textsuperscript{73} \textit{A Founder Speaks}, #190.2.

\textsuperscript{74} \textit{Origines Maristes}, #839.38. [Emphasis added]
immersion and dynamism; self-effacement and forming a Marian people; ‘age of evil’ and ‘age of Mary’; all apostolates but preference for works that are hidden, unknown, neglected. Or in Colin’s cryptic expression: “Hidden and unknown: that is the way to take over everything.” This is a Marian missionary spirituality of prophetic dialogue.

**Conclusion**

Every Christian missionary spirituality must be focused on the experience and communication of divine mercy. John Paul II expressed this forcefully in his first encyclical: “Mercy constitutes the fundamental content of the messianic message of Christ and the constitutive power of his mission.” The encyclical stresses: God is “rich in mercy” (Eph. 2:4) and “father of mercies” (2 Cor. 1:3); the Pascal Mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection is both revelation and actualisation of divine mercy. Moreover, as mother of the crucified Lord, Mary experiences and responds to the divine mercy in an exceptional way to the point where she can be rightly called the “mother of mercy” and conduit for reaching those who most easily accept the merciful love of a mother. While God’s mercy and justice may appear antithetical, John Paul stresses their complementarity: “Mercy is the most perfect incarnation of equality and justice between people.” He explains this by saying that mercy confers on justice the ‘new content’ of tenderness, sensitivity, deepest respect for all that is human, as well as forgiveness. Moreover, the Church’s missionary task can be expressed in terms of professing and proclaiming divine mercy, and putting it into practice—by giving flesh to the words of Mary’s Magnificat which sings of God’s “mercy from generation to generation.”

As prophetic dialogue, Christian mission does not shy away from the prophetic demands of the Gospel. Equally, it stresses

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75 A Founder Speaks, #119.9.
77 Dives in Misericordia, #9.
78 Dives in Misericordia, #14.
79 Dives in Misericordia, #10-14. For further reflection on mercy, see Terry Veling, The Beatitude of Mercy: Love Watches over Justice (Mulgrave, Vic.: John Garratt, 2010).
the manner in which the Gospel needs to be communicated. This is why Mary’s Magnificat, with its two-fold emphasis on prophecy and dialogue, provides such a rich spirituality for evangelisation. Such a spirituality is genuinely missionary, authentically Marian, and deeply responsive to the new context in which mission is to be carried out today. Whether our primary image for mission is proclamation (“sending out”), witness (“gathering in”) or solidarity (“walking with”), our focus needs to be on the celebration of divine mercy as the source, inspiration and goal of evangelisation. As demonstrated, such an approach is also in profound continuity with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and subsequent magisterial reflections.

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