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 appears we are also 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; the goal of mission is not membership of the Church but openness to the reign of God. There is new emphasis on personal freedom and conscience as well as a more positive attitude to other religions. Missionary activity is now described in terms of witness, solidarity, mutual encounter and enrichment as well as proclamation. 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”. 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.

Subsequently, Paul VI and John Paul II presented the Church with an extended charter for mission with the aim of bringing “the Good News into all the strata of humanity”. For this, evangelisation must begin at home – with the Church “being evangelised herself”. It is not the Church or its missionaries but “the Holy Spirit (who) is the principal agent of evangelisation”. Evangelisation specifically includes the work for justice, peace, human development, liberation of peoples and rights of minorities (such as the urban poor, youth, immigrants, refugees, women and children). Ecumenism and interreligious dialogue are integral to the Church’s evangelizing mission. New expressions of evangelisation focusing on communications, scientific research and international relations are also required. The notion of mission as dialogue with peoples, cultures and traditions is explored in various Pontifical documents. John Paul II and Benedict XVI introduced the notion of “new evangelisation” with an emphasis on catechesis and prophecy; Pope Francis emphasises the universal call for all Christians to be “missionary disciples of Jesus” whose mission is to communicate divine mercy to the world. Meanwhile, the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences continues to specify mission in terms of “triple dialogue” with the poor, local cultures and other religions.

Mission Models and Prophetic Dialogue

Three models of mission suggest themselves as authentic expressions of how Christians are called to be missionary in today’s world. They each emphasise different aspects of the one mission of God in which we are privileged to participate. The first gives priority to the explicit announcement of the Gospel: the “sending out” of disciples two-by-two to the far corners of the earth. The second highlights witness and worship at the heart of Christian community: the “gathering in” model of the first Jerusalem community and later Christian monasteries. The third focuses on praxis and solidarity with those on the margins of society as well as dialogue with diverse cultures and traditions: “walking with” people on their life-journeys with particular focus on justice, peace, liberation and the integrity of creation. The models are complementary rather than oppositional. “Prophetic Dialogue” is a helpful expression for understanding the manner in which mission is carried out even if, for example, prophecy is more evident in the first model, and dialogue in the third.
We can 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. 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 redemption. Specifically, we remember Jesus fearlessly proclaiming the reign of God while also sharing meals with outcasts and sinners, signifying God’s reign and communion are offered to all. In our Catholic tradition we have saints and martyrs, founders and foundresses, who in diverse ways manifest both prophetic and dialogical qualities.

Mary’s Magnificat: A Song of Prophetic Dialogue

Here, we focus on Mary, especially in her Magnificat Song, as an inspiration for prophetic dialogue. The prophetic element is clear in the verses that sing of collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, about God protecting the weak and scattering the proud-of-heart. Mary speaks in the long tradition of Israel’s women prophets, proclaiming God’s liberation for the oppressed. There are political overtones: God’s justice includes a new social order in which the poor are empowered, the hungry fed. Equally, its spirituality is clear: God is Saviour; God is faithful; God is merciful.

The dialogical element of the song is evident in a number of ways. 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.

Marist Mission as Prophetic Dialogue

Mary’s Magnificat has particular import for Marist reflection on mission. Mary’s call to mission begins in Nazareth, the “cradle of the Church”; it is from here she makes her first missionary journey to visit Elizabeth. The Magnificat is also linked to Pentecost where the early Christian community gathers to sing Mary’s song of praise and thanksgiving; it is here the missionary Church is born. In envisaging a final age where the reign of God flourishes, the Magnificat is linked to Mary’s missionary presence at “the end of time”. Consequently, the Magnificat does more than provide a spirituality for Marist life; it also directly links that spirituality with our Marist missionary calling. If the goal is to “begin a new Church” in the image of Mary its true model, the Magnificat approach of prophetic dialogue should be central. “We must think, feel, judge and act as Mary in all things”.

This approach does not impose any particular missionary model. St Ambrose spoke of Mary’s hurried visit through the hill country of Judea as symbol of the Church’s stride across the centuries. This image resembles the first model’s emphasis on proclamation of the Gospel. However, it is equally an image that gives due importance to the task of inculturation requiring sensitivity to and dialogue with peoples and cultures. For St Irenaeus, “my soul glorifies the Lord” expresses the heart of the Church’s liturgy. And for two millennia the Magnificat is prayed as evensong in Christian monasteries throughout the world. Here the second missionary model, emphasising witness and worship, comes to the fore. In our own day, the Magnificat depicts the church’s option for the poor and marginal, and so gives prominence to the third model’s emphasis on works of justice and liberation. Here, both prophecy and dialogue are essential. Are we Marists sufficiently attentive to the Magnificat?

Discussion Question: Provide other Gospel examples where Jesus and Mary enhance our understanding of mission today as the call to “prophetic dialogue”.

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