

Religious and Their Language of Mission: Wisdom from the Experience of the Church

It does not take too long in any conversation about the religious life among US religious these days before the word *mission* comes up. The word seems to focalize a whole fabric of concerns about the religious life today.

- With regard to formation, the use of the word almost always points to a concern that models of formation of the recent past may have been too reductively therapeutic, consuming energy on *straightening out* aspects of the self in order to prepare candidates for life in community and ministry, often losing focus on how formation relates to what the wider community perceives to be its purpose, role, place, work, ministry, context in the contemporary world. (We have coined the phrase *formation for mission* for this.)
- When used in conversations about leadership, the word *mission* focuses on concerns that leadership in the recent past may have been too concerned with personnel matters, administration, the dynamics of dealing with decline in numbers and resources, legal cases, keeping the community reasonably happy and united in their journey through difficult times; and now there is a need to return to clarifying and effectively living out charism and founding purpose in a contemporary world that seems to need religious communities more than it ever has. (Coined phrase: *leadership for mission*.)
- When used in the context of the role and place of religious life in the contemporary Church, the use of the word *mission* arises in contexts of concern about whether the strongly prophetic role of the religious life in recent years may not have weakened the foundational reality that religious emerge in and for and about the mission of the Church and that there may be a serious need to revivify the ecclesial dimensions of religious life. (Coined phrase: *religious life in the mission of the Church* or the *ecclesial dimension* of religious life)
- When the word *mission* emerges in the context of the dynamic role that religious have played in justice and peace concerns, and the living out of the preferential option for the poor, it usually points to the *why* of those involvements, of the *how* religious differ from good secular non-governmental organizations and charitable services, questioning whether religious may need to deepen the contemplative, theological, Gospel base of how and why they are involved in these movements. (Coined phrase: *mission for justice*)
- When used in the context of role of the religious life in US culture and society, the word *mission* evokes and provokes deep concerns about the acculturation of US religious life into middle class life and culture, seeking to challenge US religious on living out in authentic and concrete ways their articulated *mission* to the margins--of society, culture, Church, the Western world, post-modern consciousness, etc., suggesting that our documents may be calling us to situate ourselves differently from where we now perceive ourselves to be, struggling with insertion among the poor and what an institutional and

structural preferential option for the poor might mean for how we organize, run, lead, inspire our myriad institutions in the US. (Coined phrases: *mission to the poor* or *the institutional preferential option for the poor*)

- When used in the context of the religious priesthood and Church pastoral roles, the word *mission* echoes the concerns of the *Nygren-Ukeritis Report*¹ of six years ago, suggesting that US religious in their move from their own institutions into ministry throughout the Church had become highly parochialized, engaging in the maintenance of the central structures of the Church in the US without regard to the essentially missionary role of the religious life to the edges of the Church, where it has not yet been established, formed, developed. For religious priests, this focal point of concern questions their still widespread involvement in established parishes that dioceses can and should be maintaining, often remaining there from decades ago when these parishes truly were missionary outposts. (Coined phrases: *the missionary dimension of the religious life* or *the retrieval of the missionary priesthood*)
- When communities whose founding purpose was specific, e.g., teaching, hospital work, social work, work with the homeless poor struggle with the word *mission*, it is often in the context of how the institutions of these groups have now separated them from *hands on* involvement with the poor on a daily basis, and placed the communities behind the walls of institutionalized forms of their founding purpose, often ministering to those who can afford their services--the lower and middle-middle classes. While they struggle to retrieve founding purpose in the context of the contemporary world and its human needs (as their founders had done in their own times), the communities instinctively know that they cannot and should not reduce *mission* to the concrete work of their ministry or they open themselves to US pragmatism and work-centeredness. They know that *mission* is a richer context than their daily work in ministry and try to put the two into dialogue by various approaches to spirituality and contemplation. (Coined phrases: *mission and charism* or *retrieval of founding purpose*)
- In the context of the decades-long efforts of US religious communities to renew their sense of mission by making use of the extensive vocabulary and conceptual tools of US organizational philosophy in writing *mission* statements and in find structures and operational styles that seek to implement that *mission*, prophetic members and mission theologians have consistently cautioned that this US philosophy can often be reductively pragmatic and function-oriented, missing the richness of the traditional Catholic theology of *mission*, rooted not in pragmatism but in the all-embracing mystery of the Trinity and the Incarnation, of God's mysterious *mission* in history that is never truly ours but that we are privileged and gifted to enter and engage and become one with the more we move toward transformation in the Spirit. (Coined phrase: *mission clarification* often by using *organizational consultants* and *organizational development techniques*)

¹David J. Nygren, CM, and Miriam Ukeritis, CSJ, *The Future of Religious Orders in the United States: Transformation and Commitment* (Westport, Conn: Preager, 1993).

In the earliest days of this dialogue over *mission* in CMSM, Howard Gray, SJ, delivered his famous *The Challenge to Religious Leadership: Maintenance or Mission?* address to the gathered Assembly in 1985, provoking a debate that has lasted into the present about whether *maintenance* has too often been the prevailing model of leadership in our communities as institutions, seeking in normal ways to maintain their *status quo* in an era when the *status quo* is lumbering to inevitable decline and death for most religious institutes; when all around us is fast-paced, ever accelerating change in the context of globalization, all impinging on the very core of religious life and its identity in all of its aspects. Howard Gray's challenge was not only a watershed address. It has become a continuous point of reference for conversation about *mission* in CMSM ever since and a phrase that needs only to be repeated to evoke and provoke whole levels of meaning for leadership. (Coined phrase: *mission or maintenance*)

It should be evident by now that the word *mission* is some type of evocative pointer in contemporary religious life rhetoric that is nearly impossible to define in any orderly way. In the drafting group of Washington missionary organizations that articulated their perceptions of the social and world context of *mission* since the end of the Cold War (included in this issue of *Forum*), it became necessary to bracket the use of the word *mission* and precisely not attempt a working definition. Efforts to do so engaged the whole history of the Catholic tradition of mission, and surfaced all of the contemporary views of the role of the Church in the contemporary world with a spread of ideological differences across a spectrum of Catholic voices today about *mission*. A similar experience occurred when the CMSM Mission Committee (then the Mission Focus Group) began working together with the Board of the United States Catholic Mission Association to plan a Jubilee Mission Congress for the year 2000. Everyone seemed to know what *mission* was not; how to distinguish *mission* from good secular NGO and social service work today; how *mission* practicably integrates proclamation of the Gospel with *hands-on* service to humanity; and even how Catholic approaches to *mission* differ from many protestant models of proclamation and evangelization. But the groups had to put a working definition of *mission* on hold until clarity across a spectrum of urgent concerns could be dealt with.²

Lest you be misled, this short paper will not attempt that working definition either. We will have to wait until the Spirit *who breathes where She wills* settles down somewhere in history for a rest long enough for us to schematize, conceptualize, and fix once and for all what She has been about since Her breathing over the *chaos* at the beginning of Genesis; until the dynamics of the Trinitarian life of God pouring over our history finally reveal themselves; until the mystery of why and how God would so completely enter our world, our experience, our flesh, and our sufferings in Jesus Christ can settle into a working definition. We are at the heart of mystery when we talk about *mission* in the Catholic tradition. *He who speaks does not understand, and*

²Note, however, that the drafting group while celebrating the richness of this diversity in understandings and approaches to mission, also pointed out how this same diversity can be paralyzing and debilitating when it lapses into polarization and ideology.

he who understands does not speak. So it is no wonder then that *mission* can only be grappled with in contemplation and wonder over our journey into and with God. And yet, we do not throw up our hands as if *mission* is a hopeless word that should be banned from our speech because of its *tensiveness* and *polyvalence* and *polysemy* to use terms from Paul Ricoeur³. It is precisely this ambiguity that carries so much energy for us and directs us to constant and ongoing renewal and conversion for *mission*. It may well be a face of the Spirit reminding us always that *mission* was originally *missio* in the full Trinitarian sense and that we must give it up as our own possession to find it again as the gift of God inviting us into the drama of salvation history. We are a sacramental community, after all.

What are we to do then? If the word *mission* is essentially a *provocateur*, disconnecting us from our own plans, schemes, and strategies, and indicating another path by way of the force of metaphor and symbol that is more God-centered, more contemplative, more grace-centered, how can we make use of the word in practical ways as religious institutes struggling with renewal. Only the contemplative journey of our communities can adequately struggle with this mystery because the fullness of the light is not in our own schemes and analyses but in the heart of God's action in and for history. That being said, one of the most fascinating developments in the articulated self-understanding of the Church since Vatican II has been its (still) developing theology of mission, reflecting a ferment of mission theology that spanned the late nineteenth century to the eve of Vatican II profoundly influencing even its theology, and continuing unabated since.⁴

From the beginning of John XXIII's statements of his hopes for Vatican II, it was evident that the Council was going to attempt to better situate the Church in the contemporary world, preparing it for a new world that was yet being born. It was to be a pastoral Council that would unfold the Church's traditional self-understanding of its place in the world in the context of a world that had undergone a host of social, cultural, economic, structural shifts that pointed the Church to the *signs of the times* for more clarity about its role in the world.

³The words are almost impossible to translate into ordinary speech but they refer respectively to the energy with which the shimmering ambivalence of metaphors and symbols draw our consciousness to themselves; the multiple layers of values and meaning that symbols and metaphors bear; and the multiple interpretations that they can have in their richness of meaning making them often transcend cultures and epoches in their journey through history. (See Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multidisciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975)

⁴A cursory review of the key salient magisterial documents for this discussion, not at all intending to be complete, would be the following: *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* of Vatican II; *Lumen Gentium, The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* of Vatican II; *Ad Gentes Divinitus, Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity* of Vatican II; *Justice in the World* of the 1971 Synod of Bishops; *Evangelii Nuntiandi, Evangelization in the Modern World* of Paul VI (1975); *The Church and Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission* of the Secretariat for non-Christians (June 10, 1984); *To the Ends of the Earth: A Pastoral Statement on World Mission by the Catholic Bishops of the United States* (1986) that was supposed to be read in a trilogy with the *Economics Pastoral* (1986) and the *Peace Pastoral* (1983) of the US Bishops; *Missio Redemptoris, On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate* of John Paul II (1990); and *Dialogue and Proclamation* of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (1991).

While these observations about Vatican II may be a rehearsal of the obvious by now, the consequences precisely for the developing theology of the mission of the Church has not been so widely understood in the post-Vatican II Church and its consecrated life. Our functioning models of mission, our unarticulated working assumptions about mission, our ability to integrate the fairly massive shifts in understanding about mission in a useful way into the work of renewal of our institutes is far from a rehearsal of the obvious. This is especially true in the US where our notions of mission are so acculturated to US business and military thinking that we find it difficult to move beyond the notion of *function* to the rich mystery of the Catholic theology of *mission*. Our very thought styles as Americans enmesh us in pragmatics and only what can be operationalized in organizational performance, eschewing the supposedly more ethereal and arcane ways of thinking that could integrate mystery and faith into *mission* conversations.⁵

Mathematics, for example, uses *limit* concepts to deal with infinite regressions that it cannot and does not care to solve. In the face of an infinite regression, it can work with limit concepts just on this side of the infinite regression in ways that it can build on the known even in the face of the mathematically endless unknown. The wisdom of the Church at its best also tends to be pastoral and for the benefit of Christians trying to find their way in a muddled world in the midst of mystery. Thus, the Church has not yet arrived at a comprehensive or homogeneously closed and final theology of mission for the post-Vatican II Church that eliminates the profound mystery. Any creative theologian of mission from almost any spectrum of theology today can find support somewhere in Church teaching for his or her position as long as its integrity and coherence is faithfully preserved.. With regard to the work of integrating in a holistic way the particular insights and self-understanding of the Church since Vatican II into approaches to mission, the collective and collaborative work of theologians, Council, Vatican Congregations, and Bishops around the world have articulated some clear limit concepts for authentic post-Vatican II understandings of mission. In other words, “Go beyond these limits, fail to integrate these elements, and you have either left the Catholic tradition or are failing to understand the full consequences of Vatican II for what it means to be Church today.”

These limit concepts are critically important to religious seeking to retrieve founding purpose and charism for their mission in the contemporary world. In our return to origins as religious, we have all struggled to avoid an *historicist fundamentalism* that would seek to retrieve the epoch of our founders and merely replicate wholesale what they had done then into these latter years of the twentieth century. We have always known that beyond the minds, and hopes, and dreams, and passions of our foundations, we need to be people of our own times, conversant with the *signs of the times*. We want to avoid burying the *talents* of our foundations for fear of

⁵A forgotten book of the 1970's, William Barret's *Illusion of Technique: A Search for Meaning in a Technological Civilization* (New York: Doubleday, 1979) summarized and brilliantly applied a continuing critique of Western thought since Nietzsche that it had collapsed into and been reduced to the technical manipulation of mental tools and had lost its capacity for higher thought, e.g., contemplation and meditation. Heidegger's last work had also warned the West of this tragedy, setting out the dangerous consequences for maintaining a fully human world (Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966). Religious like all Westerners are tempted to this by their normal acculturation processes.

taking risks and want to invest them in rich complexity of the present as they would have done were our founders here now. We can only do that if we are astute and informed observers of our age, conversant with culture, society, the “joy and hope, the grief and anguish” of the people of our own time.

Combing through the documents of the Church, the Council, the subsequent Synods, and the concrete experience of the Church since Vatican II, five elements of an integral, holistic, authentic vision of *mission* have been articulated. Some documents of the past have emphasized some of the elements more than others because the experience of the Church is that some moments of *mission* in particular times, places, and circumstances require emphasizing one or another of the elements. But all of the elements must be present in some way for an integral, authentic vision of *mission* after Vatican II. One document so clearly articulated the essential elements that I would like to simply quote from it at the point where it summarizes the body of magisterial teaching on mission since Vatican II:⁶

“Mission is thus presented in the consciousness of the Church as a single but complex and articulated reality. Its principle elements can be mentioned.

“Mission is already constituted by the simple presence and living witness of the Christian life, although it must be recognized that “we bear this treasure in earthen vessels.” Thus the difference between the way the Christian existentially appears and that which he or she declares himself or herself to be is never fully overcome.

“There is also the concrete commitment to the service of humankind and all forms of activity for social development and for the struggle against poverty and the structures which produce it.

“Also, there is liturgical life and that of prayer and contemplation, eloquent testimonies to a living and liberating relationship with the active and true God who calls us to His kingdom and to His glory.

“There is as well the dialogue in which Christians meet the followers of other religious traditions in order to walk together toward truth and to work together in projects of common concern.

“Finally, there is announcement and catechesis in which the good news of the Gospel is proclaimed and its consequences for life and culture are analyzed.

“The totality of Christian mission embraces all these elements. Every local church is responsible for the totality of mission. Moreover, every Christian, by virtue of his or her

⁶While formulations and developing clarifications about these elements can be found throughout the magisterial documents referred to above, they seemed to emerge most clearly in one of the classic documents of the post-Vatican II Church, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of Paul VI in 1975 after the Synod on Justice in the World of 1970 and the Synod on Evangelization of 1974. John Paul II’s encyclicals presume the great synthesis on mission worked out in the 1970’s and goes on to build a comprehensive and coherent body of magisterial teaching on the role of the Church in the contemporary world that many thinkers see as a generation or two ahead of where local practice is at the present time. The best and clearest articulation of these elements is in the quoted document from the Secretariat for non-Christians called *The Church and Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission* (June 10, 1984). I would like to acknowledge Bill Frazier, MM, as the source of this document at a CMSM Mission Committee meeting.

faith and baptism, is called to carry out to some degree the whole mission of the Church. The needs of the situation, the particular position of the People of God, and an individual's personal charism dispose the Christian to direct his or her efforts principally to one or another aspect of mission. The life of Jesus contains all the elements of mission."

So much for the often virulent contemporary competitive version of the "I'm for Paul! I'm for Appollos!" debate of Corinthians 3: "I'm for justice! I'm for proclamation! I'm for dialogue! I'm for the integrity of quiet witness and presence! I'm for liturgy! I'm for prayer and spirituality! I'm for close adherence to the magisterium!" Each of these elements has his or her partisan supporter in contemporary Church debate, often dividing into camps with distinctly ideological castes to them. There is no authentically Catholic vision of mission in our times that does not integrally bring together all of the various elements, and that is precisely what the magisterium asks of us in our day. No one element or its proponents has final claim on the authentic mission of the Church in our time. Christ is our communion and Christ is the authentic source of our sense of mission because mission is ultimately the work of God in Christ in the power of the Spirit. On the other hand, none of these elements of mission can be safely dismissed without literally disintegrating the Church's contemporary self-articulation of its mission in the world.

If time or space would permit, it would be helpful to go back and broaden the perspective on each of the dialogues over *mission* in the first part of this paper. But the reader is more qualified than the author to do that for the reader's own situation. What this articulated wisdom of the Church in our time leaves as agenda for operationalizing in our contemporary debate and dialogue over *mission* in the US religious life is a set of ready-made criteria for testing the authenticity of mission in our institutes that can help us bring the wisdom of the Church into dialogue with our retrieval of founding purpose and charism. It goes without saying that Vatican II and its aftermath articulated a self-understanding of the Church in the contemporary world that is as authentic for our times as the Church's self-understanding was for their time in the days of our founders. They sought to be faithful servants of the Church even if that often brought them into conflict with the Church because of a vision for the Church's *mission* that was frequently more prophetic than their contemporaries could bear. That conflict was often a conservative one of calling the Church to what it had said it was in its self-articulation in that age and in previous ages. Our founders can hardly be charged with having "dreamed up" a different Church from the one in which they dwelt.

Thus, our *mission* as religious institutes cannot safely be collapsed into the ministry that we do, nor can it be reduced to what we can operationalize in good American mission statements and organizational charts. It is too rich for that. Mission is *process*, *content*, and *field* at the same time, a notion that is difficult for our functional, segmenting, compartmentalizing approach to organizational behavior in the US. We can't just use our heads and our practical intellects. We will not be able to be authentic to our rich tradition without using our hearts, our passion for God, our discernment of God's purposes in our times, our love for the charism of our institutes, our imaginations, our gifts for contemplation, our engagement in the life and world of the

present, our love for humanity in all of its concreteness. We will not have an integral vision for mission consistent with the Church in our times if we do not find a ways to integrate presence and witness; service to humanity and especially to the poor with concern for the structures that make them that way; prayer; liturgy; contemplation; genuine dialogue with those who follow other traditions; announcement, catechesis, proclamation of the reign of God and its consequences for life and culture; and a way of integrating these elements into a coherent way of life and ministry that projects them as the one presence of Christ, our communion, into our time and place. This *mission* comes from our Baptism; is deepened in every Eucharist; specified and fostered in our religious profession (and ordination for some religious) as much as it comes from our founding purpose and charism. When we are at our most authentic, they sing in harmony. The wisdom of the Church helps us to hear the melody in a way that can in which we can join in the chorus of the communion in Christ in the Spirit that is the Church for our time and place

So if the word *mission* is a *provocateur*, dashing our best hopes at creating good mission statements and organizational plans, at least it can also be an energy that always draws us to more authenticity, integrity, integration, holiness, cultural critique of our place in US culture--into communion in our own mission as institutes. The leadership role may be at its best when it can facilitate the processes of dialogue that get beyond present polarizations over the elements of mission in our groups and work toward a collaborative vision that harnesses the gifts of our diversity for *mission* in our time and place. John Paul II enthusiastically quotes Paul VI in his Jubilee call to the Church on the eve of the second millennium of Christianity: "Dialogue is the new name for love." Our deeply held *approaches to mission* do not need to polarize us. Their energy can be harnessed for the Kingdom, but only if we are integral (a new and fresh word placed into Church teaching on evangelization and mission by *Evangelii Nuntiandi* to reestablish the full richness of what it means to be human in our efforts at *mission*).

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