“Mission and Religious Life in the 21st Century”
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Introduction


- Three approaches to mission in last 50 years
  - Participation in *Missio Dei*
    - The church (religious congregation) doesn’t have a mission, but the mission (of God) has a church (religious congregation).
  - Liberating service of the Reign of God
  - Proclamation of Jesus Christ as universal savior
- Each one valid
- Any adequate understanding of mission today—a synthesis (creative tension)

- “Prophetic Dialogue”
  - Not really a new term
  - Steve and I took it from the SVD 15th General Chapter
    - Asians—more dialogue
    - Latin Americans—more prophecy
  - Since 2004, Steve and I have unpacked the term even more than in *Constants in Context*
  - Many of our confreres don’t like it—recent review!
  - And yet, others do
Outline of Presentation

- Mission and Religious Life: “Prophetic Dialogue”
  - “We Were Gentle Among You”: Mission as Dialogue
  - “I Am Not Ashamed of the Gospel”: Mission as Prophecy
  - Dialogue and Prophecy Together
  - Process and Harvesting: Implications for Religious Life in the Future

I. Mission as Dialogue: “We Were Gentle Among You”

Major shift from pre-Vatican II
- “There is a two-way exchange of gifts, between missionaries and the people among whom they work…. Mission is not just a matter of doing things for people. It is first of all a matter of being with people, of listening and sharing with them” (Dorr in Prophetic Dialogue, 20).
- Paul wrote: “… we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own 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 Thes. 2:7-8).

Dialogue as Spirituality
- Dialogue as a spirit and underlying spirituality of mission/ministry
- Mission “always implies a certain sensitivity to the social, cultural, religious, and political aspects of the situation, as also attentiveness to the ‘signs of the times’ through which the spirit of God is speaking, teaching, and guiding. Such sensitivity and attentiveness are developed through a spirituality of dialogue” (Dialogue and Proclamation 1991, 78).
- U.S. context as well
- Pope Paul VI: “it seems to Us that the sort of relationship for the Church to establish with the world should be more in the nature of a dialogue.” (Ecclesiam Suam 1964, 78)
- Further shifts in Vatican II
- Spirit of dialogue “is the norm and necessary manner of every form of Christian mission, as well as every aspect of it ….” (“Dialogue and Mission” document, quoted in Prophetic Dialogue, 22).
Trinitarian Foundations of Dialogue

- Just as God is dialogical in Godself and present in the world . . .
  - So the church needs to learn from the world, its cultures, its religions—and so learn more about God’s unfathomable riches

- Just as God “humbled” Godself in the incarnation
  - So the church needs to do mission not out of superiority, but in humility and vulnerability

- Just as God’s missionary presence is never about imposition but about persuasion and freedom . . .
  - So must the church never neglect the freedom and dignity of human beings

- “Each member of the faithful and all Christian Communities are called to practice dialogue” (RM 57)

“Taking off one’s shoes …..

Characteristics of Dialogue

- Respect, openness, willingness to learn, listening, attentiveness, vulnerability, hospitality, humility, and frankness

- Repentance

- “Mission in Reverse

- Orthopraxis or “principle of graduality” (cf. Chia, quoted in Prophetic Dialogue, 30)

- Paul VI in Ecclesiam Suam
  - Clarity, meekness, confidence, and discernment

Images of Mission as Dialogue

- Treasure Hunter
  - Treasure already present
  - All are enriched
- Guest
  - Aware of hospitality
  - When to offer a helping hand
- Stranger
  - An outsider
  - Opportunity for relationship

II. Mission as Prophecy: “I Am Not Ashamed of the Gospel”

- “...mission is and must be prophetic because God’s inner nature is also prophetic” 
  (*Prophetic Dialogue*, 40).
- The Spirit anoints prophets “to speak God’s Word faithfully, to bring good news to the 
  oppressed, healing to those who are discouraged, liberty to captives, release to prisoners, 
  comfort to those who mourn, but condemnation to those who have betrayed the covenant 
  (see Isa. 61: 1-4)” (ibid., 41).
- Jesus as “the eschatological prophet, who preached, demonstrated, and embodied the Reign 
  of God” (ibid.).
- Paul
  - “Drew courage through our God to speak the truth to you the gospel of God” (1 
    Thes. 2:2).
  - “Not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for the salvation of everyone 
    who believes” (Romans 1:16)

Nature of Prophecy

- Prophet is rooted in dialogue
  - Listens to God’s Word
  - Discerns the “signs of the times”
  - Attentive to people and context
- “Speaks forth” = annunciation
  - Message (words and deeds)
  - Future: 
    Not “fortune telling,” but what God plans (Ezechiel’s vision of the “dry bones”
• “Speaks against” = denunciation
  – Vs. injustice and narrow understanding of religion
  – Future
    • Consequences of unfaithfulness (out of sorrow and love; Jesus wept for Jerusalem)

1. “Speaking forth” without words: witness

• “First means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life” (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 41)

• Mother Teresa—not successful, but faithful

• Francis of Assisi: “Preach always, and if necessary use words.”

• Individuals and communities (religious communities)

  Paul VI—Evangelii Nuntiandi
  “Take a Christian or a handful of Christians [religious community] who, in the midst of their own community, show their capacity for understanding and acceptance, their sharing of life and destiny with other people, their solidarity with the efforts of all for whatever is noble and good. Let us suppose that, in addition, they radiate in an altogether simple and unaffected way their faith in values that go beyond current values, and their hope in something that is not seen and that one would not dare to imagine. Through this wordless witness these Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst? Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good news and a very powerful and effective one” (21).

2. “Speaking forth” with words: proclamation

• Christians/religious prophesy the future—what the world will be like…

• Full flourishing! Peace, justice, freedom, harmony of all creation

• That future is possible now—at least a taste!

• Tell the world about Jesus—“God is like Jesus!”—creation-centric—God’s cause is the cause of human and cosmic flourishing!

• Good news! Not judge, tyrant, but respecting human freedom, humble, joy in midst of suffering, calls women and men to work together for flourishing of creation

3. “Speaking against” without words: being a “contrast community”

• Christian life/ religious life goes against the grain
• Not “anti-cultural,” but “counter-cultural”
• Different “drift” than the natural current of society
• Simple life, standing for justice, forgiveness, living convinced that “unless the grain of wheat dies…”
• Not success, self-interest, having power over others
• Religious vows
• In U.S. Context?

4. “Speaking against” in words: speaking truth to power
• Christians/religious speak out against any form of injustice, or of the “culture of death”
• Individually in the workplace, neighborhoods, editorials, demonstrations
• Teaching Office: Papal and Vatican Catholic Social Teaching; U.S. Bishops pastoral letters, Bishops of Appalachia, Cardinal George on Racism
• CMSM document on priestly formation

“Every ‘garden’ needs weeding”

Images of Mission as Prophecy
• Teacher
  ﹣ Something to teach
  ﹣ Community of learners
  ﹣ “Speaking forth”
• Storyteller
  ﹣ Identity, challenge and deep meaning
  ﹣ Story of Jesus and Church
  ﹣ Story as universal and contextual
• Trail Guide
  ﹣ Reading “maps” and “signs”
  ﹣ Guidance, encouragement, and challenge
  ﹣ Christians follow the “Way”
III. Mission as Prophetic Dialogue

• Asian Bishops:
  – Speak out vs. what keeps the poor that way
  – Critique human culture
  – Maintain conviction that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life (Jn 14:6)
  – “It is … a bold humility—or a humble boldness. We know only in part, but we do know” (David Bosch)

An Image of Prophetic Dialogue: Movie “Of Gods and Men”

Conclusion:

Mission in 21st Century—for church, religious life
  • is dialogue
  • is prophecy
  • The two go together—distinguish, but not separate
    • Mission is prophetic dialogue
    • Mission is dialogical prophecy
  • Not one or the other—but when one or other is emphasized
    • Like life itself, mission is an art
  • Need to be in touch with the Source of creativity—the Spirit

Questions for Discussion:
  What are some examples of times when dialogue is most necessary to carry out your congregation’s mission?
  When might a more prophetic stance in mission be necessary?


“Popular edition” (undergraduate level) of Constants in Context for parish, diocesan, novitiates, and religious communities