Reflections on the Mission Ad Gentes in North America

Where are we? *Ad gentes, ad extra, ad vitam. Mission and Culture*

1) My appreciation of the *mission ad gentes* in my life, and how I share that with confreres in the congregation deepens and evolves through the many experiences I have being the "stranger", the "foreigner", the one who is religiously and spiritually "other." These identifiers capture for me one way of understanding the missionary of the twenty-first century. It positions us in relation to others whom we are sent and underlines the deep and rich *pluralism* that characterizes our lives and the many cultures, faiths, and spiritualities we find ourselves. Sharing Christ across cultural and religious boundaries means navigating through the gift of pluralism, and in doing so, creating bridges of "encounter and dialogue".

Missionary as Stranger

2) The experience as "stranger" where human pluralism abounds, carries rich scriptural undertones. The tradition of strangers bearing divine gifts is expressed in the Persian magi and their appearance in Bethlehem. Once they deliver their gifts to the child Jesus, they go back where they came from presumably to resume their roles as Zoroastrian priests. Melchizedek, a Canaanite king, and priest comes out of nowhere to offer bread and wine to Abram after a great battle in the fourteenth chapter of Genesis. There, Melchizedek blesses Abram in the name of their same God. In return, Abram offers him a tenth of everything and becomes "Abraham", father of the nations. Like Melchizedek, the missionary enters the lives of others, is blessed by them, and blesses them, and then without much ceremony, departs.[1]

The Context of Pluralism in North America

3) Pope John Paul II, in the last major encyclical on mission, *Redemptoris Missio*, speaks about the *missio ad gentes* among the established churches where entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel". These latter are churches where the gospel has been established for a long time—like the churches of Europe or North and South America.[2]

4) In North America, one way that pluralism can be understood is in how people shape their identities both through traditional religious institutions, and/or outside of them. These identities were often understood as people who adhere to traditional religious communities, particularly Christianity, but also Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Judaism,

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[1] Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others*. (New York: HarperCollins Books, 2019), p. 109.

[2] Bevans SVD, Steven. CHURCH TEACHING ON MISSION: Ad Gentes, Evangelii Nuntiandi, Redemptoris Missio and Dialogue and Proclamation. (Paper) Microsoft Word - Church Teaching on Mission-Bevans.doc (cppsmissionaries.org).

Buddhism, and others.[3] Within these traditions there lies many layers of differences in the way people understand and practice these faiths as well as find a sense of belonging. At the same time, studies show the "mass exodus" from these religious traditions of younger and no so young generations that have occurred for more than 60 years and more. Many who leave religious practice behind, do not necessarily leave belief in God behind as well. Why they leave traditional faith, where they go, and what of their former faith they carry with them are crucial questions in understanding the evolving dynamic of religious/secular pluralism. Thus, there are amorphous and fluid boundaries where dialogue between religiosity, non-traditional spirituality, and the culture of unbelief may take place.

5) In light of the dynamics of North American pluralism, something needs to be said about the growing phenomena of *deconversion*. It is no longer possible to ignore the fact that a growing number of people choose to convert more than once in their lifetime; multiple conversions are unavoidable in cultures in which religion is no longer a single tradition in a mono-religious environment but plural in a pluralistic environment. Multiple conversions, however, involve deconversion(s) as well as conversions.[4] Both are extraordinary changes in the lives and identities of individuals with deep theological meaning, and both conversion and deconversion are two ways people seek the Lord and a deep sense of authenticity, in and out of the institutional religion.

6) Although in our Christian vision of the Kingdom of God we understand our religious and cultural pluralism of the human community, sociologically, and psychologically as gift, pluralism is also a source of anxiety as it tends to relativize many certainties. When living side by side with those who have very different worldviews, belief systems and values that may even contradict your own, what is one to do? One response is fundamentalism, which is an effort to restore certainty by insulating oneself and battling against the realities of pluralism. Nationalism in politics, and fundamentalism in religion are two examples how this plays out. Relativism is another way by underplaying the importance of differences.[5] The Catholic tradition of dialogue finds itself in between the extreme expressions of fundamentalism and relativism, thereby maintaining a certain tension between the proclamation of Christ and the necessity of interreligious dialogue.

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[3] The practice of traditional faiths in North America is understood and expressed differently in liberal democracies than in other cultures such as Saudi Arabia. Since these faith traditions are minorities and because of a certain openness to pluralism, there are many opportunities for dialogue and collaboration.

[4] Streib, Heinz. *Deconversion*. Chapter for: L. R. Rambo & C. E.Farhadian (eds). Oxford Handbook on Religious Conversion. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1-2.

[5] Berger, Peter. *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age*. (Boston: Walter de Gruyter, Inc., 2014), 2-6.

Encounter and Dialogue: A Third Way

7) Creating a *Culture of Encounter and Dialogue*, for Pope Francis, goes beyond dialogue to engaging difference with a stance of humility, generosity, and patience towards those who think and live differently, drawing on the fundamental human unity that lies behind our political, social, and religious divisions. "Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travelers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth, which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all." (FT, 8) In light of this, the imperative of interfaith dialogue in North America is deeply felt across the lines of faith everywhere. There is a proliferation of dialogue and collaboration opportunities throughout the continent. It is not difficult to join in a much larger dialogue movement that has a long history. *Interfaith America* is extraordinarily vibrant.

8) The notion of encounter and dialogue in our pluralistic and cosmopolitan world extends the *mission ad gentes* of St. Pope John Paul II which he entitles a "vast and changing" reality everywhere. In particular, he attributes the " the de-Christianization of countries with ancient Christian traditions" (32) as part of this dynamic. It is here where I would recast the idea that we share our faith with our *non-Christian* friends as further developed to also include our *non-ecclesial* friends. In this sense, there are those who have been shaped by Christianity, and specifically, Catholicism, and then left the practice of the sacramental life and church participation. They did not forsake belief in God and Christ generally, or the church's influence in their prayer and sense of justice. Instead, they left the *institutional church* for many different reasons.[6]

9) A few months after the promulgation of *Redemptoris Missio*, a follow up dicastral document was published entitled *Proclamation and Dialogue*, which highlighted the relationship between direct proclamation of the gospel and the imperative, as an integral part of the church's mission, of interreligious dialogue. The relationship between proclamation and dialogue is shaped in very specific ways by pluralism of North American culture. Traditionally, both proclamation of Christ and interreligious dialogue are considered separate experiences that are interrelated. But in my experience, dialogue among religious believers and nonreligious people brings together both proclamation and dialogue into a one *pre-evangelical* enterprise.[7] For those who are non-Christian and those who are non-ecclesial, mission becomes much more highly differentiated, not only between traditional faith lines, but also between non-traditional lines of spirituality , non-religiosity, and multi-belonging.

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[6] Chudy, Carl. Postsecular Catholicism*; A New Understanding and Pastoral Praxis in Catholic Families with Disaffiliated Children in the Archdiocese of Boston*. (Thesis) Hartford International University for Religion and Peace, Hartford, Connecticut. 2021. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.26787.58409.
[7] Ibid, 103-112.

10) Churches and other faith communities in the west not only are living in pluralistic cultural contexts, but as a result of this, are also bearing a greater internal pluralism. The *mission ad gentes* here is not only among those who reflect a division of *believers* and *nonbelievers,* but a division between *dwellers* (active parishioners) and *seekers* (spiritual but not religious).[8] In contrast to pastoral activity with active Catholics*, encounter and dialogue among seekers will connote a third path of the church with those who left religion behind, or those who were never part of religion*, with a greater detachment from existing institutional and doctrinal structures. The goal is not to bring *seekers* back to the already existing structures of the church but, through mutual dialogue, to enrich and to enlarge the existing structures so as to integrate the experiences in the treasure of faith. The greater understanding that occurs also enables the church to open wide its treasures of spirituality to those who seek and in ways that are most relevant to the spiritual needs of seekers' journeys.[9]

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[8] Halik, Msgr. Tomas. *The Afternoon of Christianity: Church and Theology for a Post-Secular Age*. A Templeton Colloquium a at the NDIAS (November 15-17, 2015) Introductory Essay for Participants and Discussion. (4-5) [The Afternoon of Christianity: Church and Theology for a Post-Secular Age a Templeton Colloquium at the NDIAS (November 15-17, 2015) by Msgr - DocsLib](#)

[9] Ibid, 5. The author goes on to clarify the complexity where mission occurs: "The distinction between dwellers and seekers is even more complex. Seekers among believers are those for whom faith is not a treasure of final truths, but rather a spiritual way while seekers among nonbelievers are "spiritual but not religious." And seekers occupying a middle ground between believers and nonbelievers are not fully identified with structured religion.