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## From 'Missio ad gentes' to 'Missio inter gentes'. I.

### *Shaping a New Paradigm for Doing Christian Mission in Asia*

Jonathan Y. TAN

Assistant Professor of Minorities' Studies and World Religions at Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio, Malaysia-born Professor Tan serves as a consultant and facilitator for the Asian-Pacific Pastoral Initiative of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Office for the Pastoral Care of Migrants & Refugees. Jonathan's research interests include missiology and Asian theologies, and is presently working on his first book, *Introducing Asian-American Theologies*, to be published by Orbis Books. In this essay, to be completed next month, he studies the evolution of the mission theology in the last century.

The greatest challenge to the task of doing Christian mission in Asia is the question of the diversity and plurality of the Asian milieu and its peoples, with their myriad religions, cultures, and philosophies. While Asia is home to some two-thirds of the world's population, nevertheless it remains the continent with the smallest Christian population, notwithstanding almost two millennia of Christian missionary activity, beginning with the Assyrian Christian missionaries who ventured to India and China in the first Christian millennium. At the beginning of the third Christian millennium, Christians account for only approximately 4% of the total population of Asia, and the only Asian countries with a significant Christian percentage of their total populations are the Philippines, South Korea and East Timor.

Such diversity and plurality is not limited to the Asian continent. In the course of its 2,000-year old history, the Church has encountered a diversity of peoples, cultures and religions, beginning with the Jewish and Graeco-Roman cultures, before moving into Roman, Germanic, Celtic, Gallic and other European cultures from the 4th century onwards. In Europe and the Americas, the quandary was resolved by Christianity becoming the dominant religion and culture. Backed by the full might of the imperial power within a church-state alliance, the Church in Europe overcame pagan religions and institutions to christianise the Late Antiquity, leading to the emergence of Christendom. David Bosch succinctly described this development and its missiological implications as follows:

Emperor Theodosius' decrees of 380 (which demanded that all citizens of the Roman Empire be Christians) and 391 (which proscribed all non-Christian cults), inexorably paved the way for Pope Boniface's bull, *Unam Sanctam* (1302), which proclaimed that the Catholic Church was the only institution guaranteeing salvation; for the Council of Florence (1442), which assigned to the everlasting fire of hell everyone not attached to the Catholic Church....<sup>1</sup>

Bosch further contended that the "unshaken, massive, and collective certitude of the Middle Ages, which existed until the eighteenth century," perceived the task of Christian mission as that of "conquest and displacement," viz., "Christianity was understood to be unique, exclusive, superior, definitive, normative and absolute; the only religion which had the divine right to exist and extend itself."<sup>2</sup> For him, with the collapse of Western colonialism, Christianity "lost its hegemony" everywhere and "today has to compete for allegiance on the open market of religions and ideologies" such that "there are no longer oceans separating Christians from other religionists."<sup>3</sup> On this basis, he concluded, "we have reached the point where there can be little doubt that the two largest unsolved problems for the Christian church are its relationship (1) to world views which offer this-worldly salvation, and (2) to other faiths."<sup>4</sup>

More specifically, Bosch's careful observations and comments are especially relevant to the difficult task of doing Christian mission in the diverse and pluralistic Asian world. The Vietnamese-American theologian Peter C. Phan hits the nail squarely on the head when he states that "it is in Asia that the question of religious pluralism is literally a matter of life and death," and more importantly, "the future of Asian Christianity hangs in balance depending on how religious pluralism is understood and lived out."<sup>5</sup> The issue is deceptively simple but a solution is exceedingly elusive: how should the Church in general, and missionaries in particular, react to the diversity and plurality of religions and cultures in Asia?

In this paper, I would like to proceed on the basis that the Asian milieu, with its rich diversity and plurality of religions, cultures and philosophical worldviews, requires a distinctively Asian approach to a

<sup>1</sup>David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991, 474.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 475.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 476-7.

<sup>5</sup>PHAN made these remarks in his review of Paul Knitter's *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, see *Horizons* 30 (2003) 117.

proclamation of the Gospel that is sensitive to such diversity and plurality. On this basis, I would like to propose a new missiological paradigm, *missio inter gentes* (mission among the nations) for meeting the challenges of the task of carrying out the Christian mission in the diverse and pluralistic Asian *Sitzen-im-Leben*. First, I shall explore the emergence of the classical Catholic mission paradigm, "*missio ad gentes*," and discuss how this missiological paradigm was understood and carried out during different historical epochs and circumstances before Vatican II. Second, I shall survey the paradigm shift in Catholic mission theology in the documents of Vatican II, evaluating the repercussions of this paradigm shift in a post-Vatican II Church. Third, I shall introduce a new paradigm, "*missio inter gentes*," as a new way of doing Christian mission in Asia in the third Christian millennium, exploring the rationale for this new paradigm, explicating its constitutive elements, and discussing its implications. Finally, I shall conclude by proposing that the *missio inter gentes* paradigm is best exemplified by the mission theology of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC).

#### I. What is "*Missio ad gentes*?"

In the introduction to his magnum opus, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, David J. Bosch made the following observations:

Until the sixteenth century, the term *mission* was "used exclusively with reference to the doctrine of the Trinity, that is, of the sending of the Son by the Father and of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son." The Jesuits were the first to use it in terms of the spread of the Christian faith among people (including Protestants) who were not members of the Catholic Church.<sup>6</sup>

Bosch went on to explain that the term "*mission*" in the above sense: was intimately associated with the colonial expansion of the Western world into what has more recently become known as the Third World (or, sometimes, the Two-Thirds World). The term "*mission*" presupposes a sender, a person or persons sent by the sender, those to whom one is sent, and an assignment. The entire terminology thus presumes that the one who sends has the *authority* to do so. Often it was argued that the real sender was God who had indisputable authority to decree that people be sent to execute his will. In practice, however, the authority was understood to be vested in the church, or in a mission society.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 1, citing in turn, Thomas OHM, *Mächer zu Jüngern alle Völker: Theorie der Mission*. Freiburg: Erich Wever Verlag (1962), 37-9.

<sup>7</sup>Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 1.

What Bosch described above is often referred by the official Roman magisterium, as well as Roman Catholic missiologists and theologians as "*missio ad gentes*" (literally, mission "to the nations"). The Latin term: *gentes* ("nations"), of which the nominative singular is "*gens*," translates the Greek *ethnē*, which according to Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich and Danker,<sup>8</sup> is used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew term, *goyim*. According to Lewis and Short,<sup>9</sup> in its original context, "*gens*" referred to a clan, stock or race; in post-Augustinian Latin, it referred to a nation or a people; while in late Latin, it was used to designate a foreign nation or foreigners (i.e., non-Romans). In the Latin Vulgate, "*gentes*" is the term used to translate the Hebrew word *goyim*, which is used in the Jewish Scriptures to refer to the non-Jewish "nations" or "gentiles," of whom the Jews were expected to avoid (see, e.g., Lev 18:24 and Josh 23:7).

In Christian usage, "*gentes*" has been variously translated as nations, gentiles, heathens, pagans, unbelievers and non-Christians. Therefore, "*missio ad gentes*" refers to the obligation on the part of Christians to proclaim the Gospel to the non-Christians. Such is the case with the Matthean "Great Commission," in which Jesus was portrayed as giving the final instruction to his followers to evangelise the "*gentes*": "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19). The Gospel of Luke uses similar words: "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations..." (Lk 24:47). The Acts of the Apostles reinterprets Is 49:6b to provide a foundation for the *missio ad gentes* of Paul and Barnabas:

It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, 'I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth' (Acts 13:46-47).

This understanding of *missio ad gentes* is reiterated in the opening sentence of Vatican II's Missionary Decree, *Ad gentes*:

The Church has been divinely sent to all nations that she might be 'the universal sacrament of salvation.' Acting out of the innermost

<sup>8</sup>Walter BAUER, William F. ARNDT, F. Wilbur Gingrich & Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

<sup>9</sup>*A Latin Dictionary*. Founded on Andrews' edition of Freund's Latin Dictionary. Revised, enlarged, and in great part rewritten by Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879, reprinted 1955.

requirements of her own catholicity and in obedience to her Founder's mandate (cf. Mk 16:16), she strives to proclaim the gospel to all... (AG 1).<sup>9</sup>

In the same vein, in the encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, Pope John Paul II defines *missio ad gentes* as mission "directed to people or groups who do not yet believe in Christ, who are far from Christ, in whom the Church has not yet taken root... and whose culture has not yet been influenced by the Gospel" (RM 34). According to the Pope, "*missio ad gentes*" is "addressed to groups and settings which are non-Christians because the preaching of the Gospel and the presence of the Church are either absent or insufficient" (RM 34).<sup>10</sup>

The foregoing references, albeit cursory, highlight a significant dimension of apostolic Christianity, i.e., it was thoroughly missionary in its *Weltschmerz* from its inception. The urgency and necessity of preaching the Gospel is clear in the New Testament. What was not clear at first was to whom should the Gospel be preached. At first, the preaching of the Gospel was limited to Palestinian Jews, before being extended to the Hellenistic Jews, and finally, to the Gentiles. This was not surprising. The writers of the four gospels presented Jesus as someone who had little encounter with other religions, as a Messiah who did not preach directly to the Gentiles, and as someone who was somewhat reticent concerning the need to preach his message beyond a Jewish audience (see Mt 8:15-13; Mk 7:24-30; 15:34). At the same time, one cannot deny that Jesus unequivocally rejected the narrow Jewish nationalism of his time. In addition, there are snippets of Jesus' sympathetic treatment of individual gentiles in the canonical gospels (e.g., the Syro-Phoenician woman in Mk 7:24-30).<sup>11</sup>

Within the Roman Catholic missiological tradition, the term *missio ad gentes* acquired a variety of meanings in different historical periods and contexts. In his book *Mission in Today's World* (Orbis 2000), the Irish missionary Donal Dorr surveys, among other things, how the notion of *missio ad gentes* was articulated in the past in the Catholic Church. As he explains:

At one end of the spectrum is what may be called the medieval Catholic notion of mission. This presupposes that there is a clearly defined geographical reality called Christendom, surrounded by 'the heathen

<sup>9</sup>The English translation taken from Walter M. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: America Press, 1966), 584.

<sup>10</sup>The English text of RM 34 is taken from *Origins* 20 (1997): 551.

world.' Mission is then a one-way going out from Christian lands to 'save souls' and to extend the boundaries of Christendom. A less extreme version of this outlook was common during the heyday of Catholic mission from 1860 to 1960. During that period, 'the West' was still thought of as 'Christendom', which implies that it was seen as already evangelized (more or less). Most other parts of the world were seen as 'missionary territory.' This means that at that time Catholics still defined mission almost exclusively in geographical terms. It was during this period that most Catholic missionary congregations and societies were founded. Their task was at first seen as 'saving the souls' of 'pagan' people. From early in the twentieth century the priority began to be changed to 'planting the church.' But the location was still 'foreign lands'. So it is not surprising that the idea of mission as expressed in the constitutions of these organisations was mainly geographical.<sup>12</sup>

Dorr further notes that in the wake of Vatican II, "Catholic missionary agencies have either abandoned or carefully nuanced the geographical definition of 'mission to the nations'. In general they have moved cautiously from geography to *ethnicity* or *culture* as the main criterion for defining their specific role."<sup>13</sup>

A review of the annual reports on the missions submitted by bishops and vicars apostolic from the 17th to the 20th centuries reveal a concern for statistics as evidence of numerical growth. In turn, these statistics of baptisms, marriages and deaths, churches and chapels, schools and orphanages, Catholic population and missionary personnel, were compiled by *Propaganda Fide* and trumpeted with great pride, especially in the competition vis-à-vis emerging Protestant missionary societies that were making inroads in various Asian countries. The goals of the *missio ad gentes* could be summarized as preaching, instructing, baptizing the local populace, and erecting new missions as the Catholic population increased.

Historically, during this period, Catholic missiological understandings of the theological rationale behind *missio ad gentes* took one of two possible schools of thought. On the one hand, theologians who belonged to the first school of thought, commonly known as the Münster School, asserted that the goal of *missio ad gentes* was the "saving of souls." The basis for such an understanding appeared to be the popular understanding that the unbaptized were destined for the fires of hell. Hence, the goal of *missio ad gentes* was the earnest drive to baptize as

<sup>12</sup>Donal Dorr, *Mission in Today's World* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000), 204. <sup>13</sup>Ibid., 205.

many souls as possible. Commenting on this approach, Michael Amaladoss notes that a "certain anxiety gripped mission. To this anxiety was added a certain aggressiveness when other religions were seen as the works of the devil and erroneous and had to be fought against and suppressed."<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, theologians from the second school, the Louvain School, adopted an institutional understanding of *missio ad gentes*, arguing that *plantatio ecclesiae* or church planting was its ultimate goal. They equated the preaching of the Gospel with the establishment of the Church. For them, missionaries were called to travel to places where the Church was not yet established. Michael Amaladoss comments that, in practice, *plantatio ecclesiae* "entailed establishing a 'mission compound' - build a church building, convert a group of people, establish a community of religious men and women, start schools and hospitals, engage in works of mercy, etc. Structurally, and culturally, the planting of the Church was more a transplanting of structures with which one was familiar back home."<sup>15</sup> Amaladoss further explains that mission was understood as "the preaching of the Christian Gospel; the stress was on verbal expressions of the truth. Faith was an intellectual assent to a body of truths. Hence, mission was identified as proclamation. Salvation was "thus linked to knowledge."<sup>16</sup> In this understanding, social works such as schools, hospitals, orphanages, etc., were pre-evangelisation activities that were geared to making people more sympathetic to the preaching of the Christian missionaries.<sup>17</sup>

Although the missiological approaches of both schools were different, they both agreed on a bipolar and dialectical vision of the world as that of the *baptized* who are saved on the one hand, and the *unbaptized*, viz., the *massa damnata* in need of the Gospel, on the other. *Missio ad gentes* entailed missionaries leaving their Christian homelands to foreign nations, where they would convert the pagans and bring them salvation.<sup>18</sup> Whether the approach is "saving pagan souls" or "church-planting," numerical and territorial expansion became an important, at

<sup>14</sup>Michael AMALADOSS, "The Challenges of Mission Today," in *Trends in Mission: Toward the Third Millennium*, eds. William Jenkinson and Helene O'Sullivan, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991, 360.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 361.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 360.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 361.

times overriding, objective of the missionary task. In the pursuit of this expansion, the missionaries were often protected militarily, politically and legally by the European colonial powers that controlled the territories, and in return, these missionaries were often co-opted by the European colonial powers to keep the restive natives in check. M. Thomas Thangaraj reminds us that European missionaries and colonizers often collaborated with each other. As he explains, "missionaries saw the West's colonial expansion as God's own providential way of opening the doors for preaching the gospel in the uttermost parts of the earth," while "colonizers saw missionary work as a way of subduing people in the colonies."<sup>19</sup> In addition, missionaries also benefited from extra-territorial privileges that colonial powers negotiated with local rulers.

Such ostensibly favourable conditions led many missionaries to believe optimistically that the Christianization of Asia was an attainable goal within the 20th century. Among the Protestant circles, such optimistic expectations reached its peak at the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference, with its triumphalistic slogan "The Evangelization of the World in this Generation."<sup>20</sup> Catholics brought a similar optimistic understanding to Vatican II:

On November 6, 1964, in the 116 General Congregation of Vatican II, after Paul VI had presented the "Schema" *On the Missions*, Card. Agagianian, Prefect of *Propaganda Fide* drew a bright view of the situation: in times of Vatican I, he said, the Church had 275 mission territories; today, we have 770. In 1870, there was not one autonomous bishop, today we see here 41 archbishops, 126 bishops and 4 cardinals. ... The popes had assumed the effective protagonism which they intended with the erection of the *Propaganda* in 1622 by Gregory XV. The 20th century had seen the great encyclicals *Maximum illud* (1919), *Rerum Ecclesiae* (1928), *Evangelii praecones* (1951), *Fidei donum* (1957), which channelled the missionary zeal of the secular clergy into Africa, and in the eve of the council, *Princeps pastorum* (1959).<sup>21</sup>

Nobody paid much attention to the underlying tensions arising from nationalistic fervours that were spreading throughout Asia, and that would eventually influence many Asians to identify and equate the Church's

<sup>19</sup>M. Thomas THANGARAJ, *The Common Task: A Theology of Christian Mission*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1999, 19.

<sup>20</sup>For an excellent synopsis and review of the 1910 Edinburgh Conference, see Stephen NEILL, *A History of Christian Missions*, 2nd ed. rev. by Owen Chadwick, Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1990, 331-4, and THANGARAJ, *The Common Task*, 11-20.

<sup>21</sup>Felipe GÓMEZ, "The Missionary Activity Twenty Years After Vatican II," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 23 (1986) 29.

territorial expansion with European colonialism's territorial expansion. Rightly or wrongly, in the eyes of many Asians, the missionaries and the Christian Gospel were tainted by their association and collaboration with, and support of the European colonial powers.

## II. Vatican II and the Paradigm Shift in Catholic Mission Theology

On 25 January 1959, Pope John XXIII announced his intention to call an ecumenical council of more than 2,000 bishops from six continents, stating its objectives to be a new Pentecost, a means of spiritual and apostolic renewal, an *aggiornamento* of the Church on the edge of a new era. After four sessions, which produced sixteen documents, Vatican II can be said to have covered every facet of renewal, including the renewal of the Church's theology and practice of mission to the nations. In the course of the four sessions, the traditional model of Catholic ecclesiology underwent a significant transformation, and with the adoption of a more positive understanding of the world and other religious traditions, the classical model of Catholic missiology was carefully nuanced. This renewal was first introduced in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (21 November 1964), and further explicated in the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra aetate* (28 October 1965), the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes* (7 December 1965), and the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, *Ad gentes* (7 December 1965).

### (a) *Lumen Gentium*

The theological foundation of Vatican II's theology of mission is rooted in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*. The missiological dimensions of ecclesiology permeate the opening sentence of *Lumen gentium*, which comprises the explicit proclamation that "Christ is the light of all nations. Hence, this most sacred Synod, which has been gathered in the Holy Spirit, eagerly desires to shed on all peoples that radiance of His which brightens the countenance of the Church. This it will do by proclaiming the gospel to every creature" (LG 1).<sup>22</sup> On the one hand, *Lumen Gentium* adopts the classical understanding of the central role of the Church, insisting on an ecclesio-centric grounding of *missio ad gentes*: the Church is necessary for salvation (*Ecclesiam necessariam esse ad salutem*, LG 14). It explains that the Church is "the

<sup>22</sup> Abbott, *Documents of Vatican II*, 14-15.

universal sacrament of salvation" (*universale salutaris sacramentum*), because the risen Christ is leading all peoples to the Church (*ut homines ad Ecclesiam perducatur*) and "through her joining them more closely to himself" (LG 48).<sup>23</sup> It also applies the classical Thomistic axiom *gratia non tollit naturam, sed perficit* (grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it) to the Church's missionary enterprise, when it insists that "the Church or People of God takes nothing away from the temporal welfare of any people," but rather, "she fosters and takes to herself, insofar as they are good, the ability, resources, and customs of each people," (LG 13)<sup>24</sup> and, "whatever good is in the minds and hearts of men, whatever good lies latent in the religious practices and cultures of diverse peoples, is not only saved from destruction but is also healed, ennobled, and perfected unto the glory of God" (LG 17).<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, *Lumen Gentium* also presents the possibility of an extra-ecclesial way of salvation, when it suggests that non-Christians "also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or his Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do God's will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience" (LG 16).<sup>26</sup> However, three strict conditions are laid down: (i) through no fault of their own (*sine culpa*), non-Christians do not know the Gospel of Christ or the Church; (ii) they must, with a sincere and open heart, seek God, the Creator whose existence they may know by reason, but whom they do not yet know as the God revealed in Christ; and (iii) they must try to do God's will as they know it through conscience, i.e., on the basis of natural law, striving to lead a good life and moved by grace (*sub gratiae influxu*).<sup>27</sup> On that basis, "divine Providence" will not deny them the assistance necessary for salvation, although the mode by which this grace operates (*modus gratiae*) is left open.

By being cautious and refusing to speculate on the mysterious workings of God's grace outside the Church, the Council Fathers left room for future dogmatic development of this principle. Even as they accepted the possibility that salvation can be mediated extra-ecclesially, nonetheless they took pains to argue against any lessening of the urgency

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 79.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 36. LG 17 is also reaffirmed in AG 2.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 35.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

of mission when they held that by "promot[ing] the glory of God and procur[ing] the salvation of all such men, and mind[ing] of the command of the Lord, 'Preach the gospel to every creature' (Mk 16:16), the Church painstakingly fosters her missionary work" (LG 16).<sup>28</sup>

(b) *Nostra aetate*

The Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra aetate*, marks a paradigm shift in the Church's understanding of other religions. It is the first official Church statement which recognizes other religions as entities that the Church should respect and enter into dialogue with, rather than suppress as evil and false. Eschewing the traditional terminology such as "pagan" (*paganus*), "idolatry" (*idolatria*) and "false religion" (*religio falsa*), the Council Fathers introduced a new atmosphere of recognition, respect and dialogue, recognizing the plurality and diversity of religions. The most radical aspect of this declaration is its presumption that other religions contain at least some elements of truth, although this presumption does not lessen the dominical mandate to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all people. Indeed, she proclaims and must ever proclaim Christ, "the way, the truth, and the life" ... (NA 2).<sup>29</sup>

The Council Fathers were also somewhat ambivalent as to the truth found in other religions. While NA 2 unequivocally accepts that the manner of life and conduct, and precepts and doctrines, often contain gems of truth, it nevertheless insists that the "fullness of religious life" (*plenitudinem vitae religiosae*) is to be found solely in Christ. On a more positive note, the Declaration lays out the foundations for interreligious dialogue when it urges Catholics to "prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among [them], as well as the values in their society and culture" (NA 2).<sup>30</sup>

(c) *Gaudium et spes*

In the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 662.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 662-3.

*Gaudium et spes*, Vatican II officially acknowledged the diversity of cultures and the fact that the Christian Gospel is not a communication of timeless truths, but rather God's intervention in human history:

There are many links between the message of salvation and human culture. For God, revealing Himself to His people to the extent of a full manifestation of Himself in His Incarnate Son, has spoken according to the culture proper to different ages. Living in various circumstances during the course of time, the Church, too, has used in her preaching the discoveries of different cultures to spread and explain the message of Christ to all nations, to probe it and more deeply understand it ... (GS 58).<sup>31</sup>

This new understanding of culture has profound implications for Christianity, because the Church has accepted that much of what was perceived as essential formulations of the Christian faith is simply the Eurocentric cultural expressions of the Gospel. The Council Fathers categorically asserted that there is no one culturally normative way to be Christian:

The Church, sent to all peoples of every time and space, is not bound exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation, nor to any particular way of life, or to any customary pattern of living, ancient or recent. Faithful to her own tradition and at the same time conscious of her universal mission, she can enter into communion with various cultural modes, to her own enrichment and theirs too. ... By riches coming from above, it makes fruitful, as it were from within, the spiritual qualities and gifts of every people and of every age. It strengthens, perfects, and restores them to Christ. Thus by the very fulfilment of her own mission the Church stimulates and advances human and civic culture (GS 58).<sup>32</sup>

More significantly, the Pastoral Constitution insists that since Christ died for all, the Holy Spirit offers to all peoples, in a mysterious way known only to God, the possibility of being associated with the paschal mystery (GS 22).<sup>33</sup>

(d) *Ad gentes*

The Missionary Decree *Ad gentes* initiated a profound change in its fundamental understanding of the Church's task of mission when it grounded the necessity of mission within the Trinitarian *missioes* of the Son and the Spirit, and insists that the whole Church is missionary

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 264.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 264-5.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 221-2.

by its very nature (AG 2).<sup>34</sup> In one sweep, two major paradigm shifts were effected. Firstly, as Michael Amaladoss explains, if the Church's mission of evangelisation is rooted in the *missio Dei*, then it follows that while the Church "continues the mission of the Incarnate Word - Jesus," it "does not monopolize or exhaust the continuing action of the Word and the Spirit in the world," because the "mission of the Church is at the service of the mission of God."<sup>35</sup> Secondly, the task of mission is not merely the province of professional missionaries sent to foreign lands, but rather of the whole Church, laity included. On the one hand, the Missionary Decree reiterated the *placetis ecclesiae* approach to the task of Christian mission, asserting that "the specific purpose of this missionary activity is evangelization and the planting of the Church among those people and groups where she has not yet taken root" (AG 6).<sup>36</sup> In explaining the purpose of the Church's *missio ad gentes*, the Decree opts for a fulfilment approach to the Christian mission (AG 3) and rooted the source of this fulfilment in Jesus Christ (AG 8). The Decree also insists on the necessity of preaching the Gospel, notwithstanding the possibility that salvation may be available by other channels (AG 7). On the other hand, the Council held that the Church was not a huge and uniformly Eurocentric monolithic entity, but a communion of local churches, each of which seeks to give life to the universal Church in accordance with the native genius and traditions of its members:

Thus, in imitation of the plan of the Incarnation, the young churches, rooted in Christ and built up on the foundation of the Apostles, take to themselves in a wonderful exchange all the riches of the nations which were given to Christ as an inheritance. From the customs and traditions of their people, from their wisdom and their learning, from their arts and sciences, these churches borrow all those things that can contribute to the glory of their Creator, the revelation of the Saviour's grace, or the proper arrangement of Christian life. ... As a result, avenues will be opened for a more profound adaptation in the whole area of Christian life. ... Particular traditions, together with the individual patrimony of each family of nations, can be illumined by the light of the gospel, and then be taken up into Catholic unity. Finally, the individual young churches, adorned with their own traditions, will have their own place in the ecclesiastical communion, without prejudice to the primacy of Peter's See, which presides over the entire assembly of charity (AG 22).<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 585.

<sup>35</sup>AMALADOSS, "The Challenges of Mission Today," 364.

<sup>36</sup>ABBOTT, *Documents of Vatican II*, 591.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 612-3.

The foregoing extract from AG 22 is also groundbreaking for its missiological paradigm of adaptation (*aptatio*), which is based on the principle of *oeconomia incarnationis*. Indeed, AG 22 speaks of a more profound adaptation (*aptatio profundior*) in "imitation of the plan of the Incarnation" (*ad instar oeconomiae incarnationis*). Commenting on this phrase, Anscar Chupungco explains:

The phrase *ad instar oeconomiae incarnationis* indicates that the conciliar decree sets Christ's incarnation as an exemplar to be copied faithfully. In imitation of Christ, who by virtue of the incarnation made himself one with the Jewish nation, the local Church should strive to identify itself with the people among whom it dwells. As Christ became a Jew in all things *save* sin, so the Church should become not merely a Church *in* but the Church *of* a particular locality.<sup>38</sup>

In addition, the Council also gives an expanded role to the Holy Spirit - "Doubtless, the Holy Spirit was already at work in the world before Christ was glorified" (AG 4).<sup>39</sup> In an application of Justin Martyr's notion of *logoi spermatikoi*, the Decree suggests that the Holy Spirit "calls all men to Christ by the seeds of the word and by the preaching of the gospel" (AG 15).<sup>40</sup> It explains that these "seeds of the Word" (*semina Verbi*) lie hidden in the national and religious traditions of peoples (AG 11).<sup>41</sup>

#### (e) Aftermath of Vatican II

In the aftermath of Vatican II, the Catholic Church's mission underwent radical changes as it grappled with a rapidly changing world. While it is true that *Ad gentes* resulted in a renewed interest and enthusiasm in mission, the realities of new socio-political developments in former "mission lands" soon crept in. Although missiologists and missionaries soon produced a flood of books, essays and workshops that sought to build on the momentum which *Ad gentes* generated, the results were less than encouraging for several reasons.

First of all, the process of decolonization in the Third World in the aftermath of World War II gave rise to many unforeseen challenges. On the one hand, the two World Wars and the Jewish Holocaust or *Shoah* undermined the positive confidence of Christian leaders, theologians,

<sup>38</sup>Anscar J. CHUPUNGO, *Liturgical Inculturation: Sacraments, Religiosity, and Catechesis*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 17-18.

<sup>39</sup>ABBOTT, *Documents of Vatican II*, 587.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 601.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 557-8.



and missionaries, who had expected that missionary endeavours, Church growth, scientific progress and the dominance of European colonial powers would go on unchallenged. The Indian theologian M. Thomas Thangaraj sums it up well when he states that these two wars not only "demonstrated that humans, while making progress in science, technology, and other fields, are nonetheless very capable of engaging in extreme forms of violence and cruelty," but also deflated the optimistic naïveté that "[h]uman progress, though seen as a great ally to the missionary movement at the beginning of the century, was no longer a trusted ally in the task of evangelizing the whole world."<sup>42</sup> But on the other hand, in the eyes of millions of Asians, the two World Wars and the *Shoah* punctured the picture of superior might and invincibility that was carefully crafted by the European colonial authorities. No longer would these Asian masses acquiesce passively to the hegemony of European colonisation of their lands.

As a result, while the alliance of Christian churches with European colonialism helped these churches somewhat in their growth in Asia during the heyday of colonial expansionism, this alliance became a liability for Christian churches struggling to adapt to the rapidly changing socio-political situations throughout Asia. As Felipe Gómez puts it: "Vatican II has been accused of blindness to history, for having missed the import of decolonization, not having offered a critique of colonialism, etc. In fact, by 1965 the ancient colonies were practically all independent, only the Portuguese empire ended in 1975."<sup>43</sup> In a somewhat measured tone, Michael Amaladoss explains the dilemma clearly:

In the former colonies, Church extension is associated in the popular mind with colonialism. They certainly coincided historically and at that time the new Churches were not really built up as authentic local Churches. A certain assertion of autonomy on the part of the local Churches is not without connection to this past. Hence anything foreign is suspected and resented not only by non-Christians, but even by some Christians.<sup>44</sup>

Secondly, many mission societies and individual missionaries underwent much gut-wrenching soul searching. There was much confusion and hesitation about the future of *missio ad gentes* in the

<sup>42</sup>THANGARAJ, *The Common Task*, 17.

<sup>43</sup>GÓMEZ, "The Missionary Activity Twenty Years After Vatican II," 53.

<sup>44</sup>MICHAEL AMALADOSS, "Foreign Missions Today," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 25 (1988): 13.

Catholic Church. Some questioned the validity of the Church's missionary mandate, perceiving that *missio ad gentes* was in its death throes. The termination of the *ius commissionis* in 1966 and the resulting "loss" of territorial exclusivity called into question the *raison d'être* of many foreign mission societies, which had previously operated on a territorial or geographical concept of *missio ad gentes*.

Thirdly, for many of these newly independent nations, independence led to a discovery of national pride, and with it, a massive revival of traditional Asian world religions. Recall that it was not too long ago that all the delegates to the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference, which had boldly and optimistically predicted "the Evangelization of the World in this Generation," were in agreement that "as the lordship of Christ came to be recognized, these other religions would disappear in their present form – the time would come when Shiva and Vishnu would have no more worshippers than Zeus and Apollo would have today."<sup>45</sup> Today, many missionaries often cringe at such a simplistic and triumphalistic perspective of the complete extinction of world religions, as though the "Great Commission" of Jesus Christ would automatically lead to the "Great Monopoly" of Christianity. World religions such as Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism have been rejuvenated and are now asserting themselves, to the point of sending missionaries to Europe and North America and gaining new believers worldwide.

As a result, since the 1960s, Buddhism also assumed greater militancy in Sri Lanka, while new Buddhist sects were emerging in Japan and China.<sup>46</sup> Hinduism became emboldened, rejecting its secular tolerance and wielding the sword of religious nationalism against what its fundamentalist adherents believe to be other religious contenders in the Indian subcontinent. As the Indian theologian T.K. John explains:

The [Hindu] critics see Christianity as an alien and complex power structure that threatens to eventually undermine India's culture, national integrity and its religions. They feel that a religion that is disappearing from its former stronghold is being dumped, like so many unwanted drugs, on the Third World where it has to be nourished, supported and propagated by foreign money, control and power, instead of drawing its strength from the soil. They conclude that even current efforts at inculturation (which meet with so much inside opposition) are subterfuge

<sup>45</sup>NEILL, *A History of Christian Missions*, 418.

<sup>46</sup>BOSCH, *Transforming Mission*, 476.

measures to win over hesitant or unwilling recruits to the Christian fold. They accuse the Christian missionaries of taking undue advantage of the poverty, the illiteracy and ignorance of the vast majority of the people, and for the proof of this they point to the fact that they have altogether withdrawn their 'forces' from the more difficult areas like the caste Hindus, the educated and the economically well-off.<sup>47</sup>

Islam has been in the upsurge, especially in Asia and Africa. Felipe Gómez does not mince his words when he paints the following picture:

If the revival of the religions poses an embarrassing theological question, their missionary awakening is bewildering. Hinduism, for example, is not only self-assertive at home, but its sects proselytise with success in the West; in India, Christians number a mere 2.60% (Catholics, 1.71%), with conversions coming from racial minorities, hardly any from caste Hindus. Buddhist monasteries dot Europe and North America; many Christians are attracted by Buddhist meditation and philosophical tenets; in its strongholds, anti-Christian reactions are felt in Burma, Sri Lanka, Thailand. The greatest source of worries is Islam. Its revival has been spectacular. Now it is on the missionary path, especially in Africa, and is the fast growing religion in the world. ... Where Islam holds political power, it uses it for proselytist goals, ... intolerant fundamentalism is on the rise in the whole Islamic world.<sup>48</sup>

Clearly, unforeseen socio-political developments, e.g., decolonization, renewed nationalistic fervour, and the increasingly assertiveness of major world religions in many Third World countries in the wake of the Second Vatican Council altered the landscape of many so-called mission territories. As a result, missiologists and theologians began to question the *raison d'être* of *missio ad gentes*, leading to a prolonged period of questioning and self-doubt on the efficacy of the traditional approaches to mission. The inability of the 1974 Synod of Bishops to arrive at a consensus on the Church's *missio ad gentes* is symptomatic of this development.

(to be concluded)

<sup>47</sup>T. K. JOHN, "The Pope's 'Pastoral Visit' to India: A Further Reflection," *VTR* 5: (1987), 59.

<sup>48</sup>GÓMEZ, "The Missionary Activity Twenty Years After Vatican II," 44.

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From 'Missio ad gentes' to  
'Missio inter Gentes', II

Shaping a New Paradigm for Doing  
Christian Mission in Asia

Jonathan Y. TAN

The last part of the study on Mission: theology in the last century started in the September 2004 issue.

III. *Missio inter gentes*: A New Missiological Paradigm

The term "*missio inter gentes*" (mission among the nations) was first proposed by William R. Burrows in his response to Michael Amalados' presentation, "Pluralism of Religions and the Proclamation of Jesus Christ in the Context of Asia," which he delivered at the 56th Annual Convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America (Milwaukee, 2001).<sup>2</sup> According to Burrows, "Christian mission in Asia is already primarily in the hands of Asians, and is better termed *missio inter gentes* than *missio ad gentes*."<sup>3</sup> To support this paradigm shift, he puts forward the following five propositions.<sup>4</sup>

- (i) Asian Catholics are in a process that can be imaged best as one of translating the Gospel or incarnating Christ in Asia in the gentle, loving, persuasive power of the Spirit.
- (ii) Most Asian Christians, including Catholics from the right, left, and centre, understand the religious traditions of Asia not as demonic or evil but as vehicles of God's salvific encounter with their followers.
- (iii) Countering the perception that Christianity is imported from Europe and North America, and is not properly "Asian," remains the single most critical thing on the Christian agenda in Asia. If the accusation of "foreign import" cannot be overcome, Christianity has a doubtful future in Asia.

<sup>1</sup>Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America 56 (2001) 1-14.

<sup>2</sup>William R. Burrows, "A Response to Michael Amalados," Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America 56 (2001) 15-20.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>4</sup>For an in-depth discussion of these propositions, see *ibid.*, 15-20.

(iv) The *missio inter gentes* paradigm recognises the task of the Christian mission in a plural religious context to be one of proclaiming and making the world ready for God's Kingdom. It views the ultimate reconciliation of the world's contradictions as *eschatological*, one that will bring about a unity among *religions* but a unity among *believing persons*. In the context of the religious diversity and plurality of Asia, this paradigm acknowledges that the religious unity of humankind will be an *eschatological* accomplishment — one in which the Spirit is active in other religious Ways.

(v) The *missio inter gentes* paradigm proposes a new kind of missionary activity which sees other world religions not as Christianity's rivals or enemies that have to be overcome, but as potential allies, *collaborating* and *working together* against the real, *mutual* enemies of all forms of evil, attachment to wealth and power, selfishness, exploitation, as well as the social, cultural, and political structures which support them.

Taking Barrows' profound insights one step further, I would like to submit that the *missio inter gentes* paradigm in Asia may be understood in two senses. Firstly, this paradigm *redefines* the relationship between the traditional churches of Europe and North America on the one hand, and the emerging churches in Asia, Africa, and Latin America on the other. Instead of the unequal, hierarchical, and institutional framework between the traditional and the emerging churches which the classical *missio ad gentes* paradigm articulated, this new paradigm redefines their relationship as one of *koinonia*, interdependence, solidarity, and collaboration as equal partners. This is what Aylward Shorter calls a "new mission paradigm" in his trailblazing work, *Evangelization and Culture*.<sup>8</sup> No longer are Europe and North America seen as "Christian lands," sending forth missionaries to Asia, Africa and Latin America, the "mission lands" in need of evangelisation. Although Shorter did not use the term "*missio inter gentes*," I would like to suggest that his vision of a "new mission paradigm" is a fitting description to this first sense of "*missio inter gentes*." Shorter's profound insights deserve to be cited at length:

The new mission paradigm offers the model of a *koinonia* Church, in which local Churches are responsible for mission-sending and reaching out to help one another in a variety of needs. Some of these needs involve the practice of pastoral care, and others involve the primary evangelization

<sup>8</sup>Aylward Shorter, *Evangelization and Culture*. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994.

of non-Christians, as well as the Christian penetration of specialized 'worlds' or levels of human activity. *Missionary vocations are recognized wherever they occur, without reference to any standard of ecclesial maturity.* In the new paradigm there are no geographically, or even demographically, defined mission territories. *Mission takes place wherever a Christian crosses a human frontier to supply a felt need, in accordance with the priorities of the local Church, and this includes Europe and North America.* ... In the new paradigm, missionary activity is multidirectional and there is a *growing interdependence or partnership among local Churches.* ... The paradigm envisages an egalitarian world communion of mutually respected local Churches, serving and enriching one another. ... Already it is reflected in the pattern of missionary recruitment and in the identification of mission contexts. The recently founded local Churches of the non-Western world are already sending missionaries and founding missionary societies. Non-Western Christians already outnumber those of the West.<sup>9</sup>

Drawing upon Shorter's insights, one could say that the *missio inter gentes* paradigm is able to overcome the unwillingness of the traditional *missio ad gentes* paradigm "to recognize mission contexts in the secularized West, because the Church had already been implanted there."<sup>7</sup> No longer does one accept uncritically the paternalism<sup>8</sup> of the traditional hierarchical missionary structure, which sees the "mature" churches of Europe and North America as offering missionary leadership and sending foreign missionaries to the exotic mission lands of Asia, Africa, and Latin America as recipients of such missionary endeavours, thereby promoting a sense of dependency of Asian, African and Latin American Christians on these foreign missionaries.<sup>9</sup> One is reminded of Stephen Neill's devastating critique of the traditional missionary approach:

And the student is again and again amazed at the Westernness of the missions. Almost everywhere it seems to be taken for granted that the missionary period will go on for ever; the duty of the convert is clear — to trust in the superior wisdom of the white man and so to be conveyed without too much trouble in the safe bark of Holy Church to the everlasting kingdom in heaven.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 59-70 (emphasis added).

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 69

<sup>8</sup>See Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 2nd ed. rev. by Owen Chadwick. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin 1990, 362.

<sup>9</sup>See, in particular, the extensive discussion *ibid.*, 380-448.  
<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 369.

Shorter makes the same point in the following hard-hitting remarks about the old Eurocentric model of mission, in which the Western Church is credited with stability and maturity, and with the right to send missionaries to the 'pagan' nations of the non-Western world. Such new Churches are to remain indefinitely under the tutelage of the Christian West. In this paradigm, missionaries are sent by centralized organizations on behalf of the universal Church.<sup>11</sup>

In short, instead of patriarchy, hierarchy and dependence, the *missio inter gentes* paradigm recognises and fosters mutuality, interdependence, solidarity, and collaboration between all the churches without regard as to geographical locations or supposed maturity levels. It eschews the artificial dichotomy or division of labour between "mission sending" nations and "mission receiving" nations, suggesting instead that a new mission theology for today's global, interconnected world is rooted in interdependence and solidarity, whereby all nations are both senders and recipients at the same time, engaging in mutual collaboration to promote the liberative and life-giving Good News of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, and more importantly, the *missio inter gentes* paradigm proposes a new understanding of religious diversity and plurality in the Asian milieu, and in doing so redefines the relationship between the Christian Gospel and the other world religions within the Asian context. In particular, the *missio inter gentes* paradigm views religious diversity and plurality not as something that has to be confronted and overcome, but as something that defines the Asian landscape. That being the case, this paradigm seeks a non-confrontational way of relating to the immense religious diversity and plurality of Asia, with an emphasis on harmony, mutuality, solidarity and collaboration with the Asian *gentes*, viz., the Asian peoples, with their diverse religions, cultures, worldviews and ways of life. While it does not neglect the importance of proclamation, it also values friendship and trust, relationality and relationship-building, dialogue and consensus, as well as solidarity and harmony as constitutive elements of the task of Christian mission in Asia. One could thus speak of a "*missio inter gentes*," viz., mission among the Asian peoples, because of the emphasis on the "immersion" of the Christian Gospel and local churches in the Asian realities, with its commitment and service to life in solidarity with the Asian peoples.

Undergirding this new paradigm of *missio inter gentes* is the acknowledgment that the Christian Gospel: (i) would never follow in

<sup>11</sup> Shorter, *Evangelization and Culture*, 155.

the footsteps of medieval Christendom in Europe to dominate Asia to the exclusion and extinction of other world religions, and (ii) for its survival and growth in Asia, it has to become truly immersed and rooted in the Asian milieu. As the Vietnamese-American theologian, Peter C. Phan sums it up, if Asian local churches are to "become truly of Asia and their association with colonialism be removed," the most important thing is that "Asian Catholics take their Asianness seriously as the context of their being Christian."<sup>12</sup> In his words:

In practice, this means that the first and last concern for the leaders of the Asian Churches must be not how a particular policy is conformable with canonical requirements and directives coming from Rome or elsewhere but rather how it will respond to the challenges of the Asian social, political, economic and religious contexts and whether and how it will effectively help Christians live their faith in fidelity to the Gospel and the living Christian tradition, here and now, in Asia.<sup>13</sup>

Phan goes on further to elucidate his position in the following terms:

To assume responsibilities in these areas, while remaining in full communion with the Church universal, demands courage, imagination, creativity, collaboration at all levels of the Church life, and above all trust in the Holy Spirit, and is much more challenging (and uncomfortable) than simply "applying" existing Church laws and traditions to different situations of Asia. But it is only in this way that the Churches in Asia become truly of Asia. As Christian Churches, they must of course proclaim and live the Christian faith, the same faith handed down the ages, but not in the theological categories and with the Church structures imported from without. Rather, they should do so in the modalities conceived and born from within the Asian contexts.<sup>14</sup>

He further argues that in Asia

Christianity must give up its ambition, so enthusiastically endorsed in many missionary quarters at the beginning of the twentieth century, to convert the majority of Asians to Christ. The report of the demise of Asian religions was premature and vastly exaggerated. In Asia, where Christians still form but a minuscule part of the population after four hundred years of mission, and where non-Christian religions have recently staged a vigorous revival, the prospect of a massive conversion of Asians to the Christian faith is utterly unlikely. Christians in Asia must come to terms with the fact that they are destined to remain for the

<sup>12</sup> Peter C. Phan, "Ecclesia in Asia: Challenges for Asian Christianity," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 37 (2000) 218.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

foreseeable future a "small remnant" who must journey with adherents of other religions toward the eschatological kingdom of God.<sup>15</sup>

He also suggests that

The objective of the Church's mission of "making disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19) in Asia cannot therefore be adding as many members to the Church as possible, even though baptism "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19) remains the desirable outcome of the Church's mission. Rather, the primary task of the Church is to become a credible "prophetic sign" of the coming reign of God. This new focus of the Church's mission must be the light guiding the ordering of its priorities and the choice of its policies which must not aim at serving the internal interests of the Church but the proclamation of the Gospel through the triple dialogue.<sup>16</sup>

More fundamentally, the call of the *missio inter gentes* paradigm to solidarity, interdependence and mutual collaboration between Asian Christians and the Asian *gentes* is grounded in Jesus' own solidarity with all of humanity. As Donal Dorr points out, the notion of solidarity best articulates the heart of Jesus' mission, as well as the Church's mission.<sup>17</sup> Specifically, Jesus "did not come with a 'message of revelation' in the sense of some abstract 'truth',<sup>18</sup> but rather, Jesus came to share in a fully human life.<sup>18</sup> In his words:

Using the image conjured up by the word 'solidarity,' we focus on the coming of Jesus to share the life of ordinary people, to experience their daily struggle for survival, to share their pain and their celebrations, to be in touch with their experience of God and of their own history as a people loved and saved by God. We then appreciate that it was out of his experience of solidarity with the common people, his own people, that Jesus came to have a sense of direction, of mission. This becomes an invitation to build our understanding of the mission of the church and of every Christian around the idea that it is a call: to follow Jesus in being in solidarity with people all over the world and in every human situation.<sup>19</sup>

Dorr unpacks the implications of his foregoing insight as follows:

Since solidarity was at the heart of the mission of Jesus, it must also be central to the mission of the church and of any Christian who engages

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 224 (emphasis added).

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 225.

<sup>17</sup>Donal Dorr, *Mission in Today's World*. Maryknoll: Orbis 2000, 191.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 190-1.

in missionary work of any kind. Like Jesus, we are called to share the life of the people among whom we feel called – and have chosen – to work. For each of us, mission cannot really begin until we are able, with some authenticity, to experience the people we live and work with as 'my people.' For us, as for Jesus, sharing in the life of a community is not just a preliminary to mission but is the very core of mission. For it is our solidarity with others which is the basis both for our openness to receive what they have to offer, and for our willingness and eagerness to share with them the gift of faith in Jesus and the other gifts we have been given.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, Dorr contends that the solidarity image does not conflict with the traditional "sending out" image, because "those who go forth without solidarity with those to whom they come, are not genuine missionaries but exploiters and colonisers."<sup>21</sup>

Accordingly, one can no longer speak of the Asian *gentes*, with their diversity and plurality of cultures, religions, and worldviews, as "objects of Christian mission." This is the point which the late Angelo Fernandes, Archbishop Emeritus of Delhi, insisted upon in his keynote address at BIRA IV/12 in February 1991,<sup>22</sup> when he asserted that Asians of other faiths were not to be regarded as "objects of Christian mission," but as "partners in the Asian community, where there must be mutual witness."<sup>23</sup> More fundamentally, the traditional image of mission as "sending out" may no longer be useful because, in the words of Donal Dorr, "it suggests that mission is a one-way activity, taking little or no account of the prior presence and activity of God in the world – in the great world religions, in the primal religions, and in the secular world."<sup>24</sup> Similar observations made by David Bosch in the section entitled "Mission as Witness to Peoples of Other Living Faiths" in his magisterial work *Transforming Mission* are helpful for understanding the implications of *missio inter gentes*:

We go expecting to meet the God who has preceded us and has been preparing people within the context of their own cultures and convictions (cf. Sharpe 1974:150). God has already removed the barriers; his Spirit is constantly at work in ways that pass human understanding (cf. ME

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 191-2.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 191.

<sup>22</sup>Angelo FERNANDES, "Dialogue in the Context of Asian Realities," *VITR* 55 (1991) 545-60.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 548.

<sup>24</sup>Dorr, *Mission in Today's World*, 189.

43). We do not have him in our pocket, so to speak, and do not just "take him" to the others; he accompanies us and also comes toward us. We are not the "haves," the *beati possidentes*, standing over against spiritual "have nots," the *missa damnata*. We are all recipients of the same mercy, sharing in the same mystery. We thus approach every other faith and its adherents reverently, taking off our shoes, as the place we are approaching is holy...<sup>25</sup>

How then, does the *missio inter gentes* paradigm differ from the traditional *missio ad gentes* paradigm? To begin with, the traditional *missio ad gentes* paradigm is uncomfortable with religious diversity and plurality, viewing it as a significant challenge to the distinctiveness of the Christian Gospel. This is because the *missio ad gentes* paradigm is rooted in a perspective of Christianity that is (or has for a long time been) dominant in the European milieu,<sup>26</sup> although it now faces stiff competition from secularism and postmodernism. In particular, the *missio ad gentes* paradigm presumes a classicist perspective with Europe (or Rome) as the centre of Truth, and sees the task of mission in terms of European missionaries belonging to mission societies or missionary religious orders radiating outwards from this centre towards those regions where ignorance of the Truth reigns. Thus, *missio ad gentes* gives primacy to verbal proclamation as the principal vehicle of Christian mission, especially the explicit, verbal proclamation of the unity and uniqueness of Christ for human salvation to ("ad") non-Christians as the primary task of mission. The goal of *missio ad gentes* is that ultimately religious diversity and plurality should eventually give way to the explicit acceptance of the Christian Gospel by non-Christians, because only Christianity can fulfil fully the deepest hopes and aspirations of non-Christians.

For proponents of *missio ad gentes*, although life-witness and dialogue are important dimensions of the task of mission in Asia, these cannot take precedence over verbal, explicit proclamation as the primary task of mission. Such an approach is essentially deductive, drawn from abstract, universal principles, and having no direct engagement with the diverse and pluralistic realities of Asia. Although the proponents of this

<sup>25</sup>David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll: Orbis 1991, 484.

<sup>26</sup>Interestingly, it is still a common perception among many contemporary Asians that Christianity is the "white man's religion." For example, many Muslim Malays in Malaysia continue to refer to Christianity as "agama orang putih" (literally, the "religion of the white people"). For an in-depth discussion of this issue, see also Lamin SANNEH, *Whose Religion is Christianity?* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003.

view are cognisant of the rich diversity and plurality of religions, cultures and peoples in Asia, they do not view this diversity as part of God's creative genius because of their deductive approach to theologising, which understands salvation history in linear, fulfilment, and supersessionist terms, as an evolution from pre-biblical to biblical faith, and culminating in Christ as the one and only saviour of the world.

By contrast, the *missio inter gentes* paradigm builds upon the experiences of Asian Christians who live and work with Asians who are adherents of other religions, and who are also their families, neighbours, friends and colleagues, sharing with them the joys and sufferings, blessings and misfortunes of daily living. While John Paul II speaks highly of the achievements of interfaith prayer and dialogue at Assisi, Asian Christians live in a permanent Assisi-type situation. While the Pope may invite representatives of other religions to Assisi for prayer and dialogue, Asian Christians live in the midst of the faithful of other religions, engaging in a permanent dialogue of life with these fellow Asian neighbours. Rather than proclaiming "to" (*ad*) the nations in the hopes of getting them to abandon their religions in favour of the Christian Gospel, the *missio inter gentes* paradigm advocates that Asian Christians immerse themselves in their diverse and pluralistic Asian *Sitzen-im-Leben*, collaborating, sharing and serving life in solidarity with the Asian peoples, just as Jesus had done in his earthly life.

**IV. Conclusion: *Missio inter gentes* and the FABC'S Mission Theology**

While the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)<sup>27</sup> has not used the phrase "*missio inter gentes*" to describe its mission strategy, I would like to submit that "*missio inter gentes*" best exemplifies what the FABC hopes to achieve in Asia. From its inception, the FABC has consistently sought to make the Christian Gospel and local churches be truly part of the Asian *Sitzen-im-Leben*. The FABC Bishops are very

<sup>27</sup>A.I of the important documents of the FABC have been collected and published in a convenient three-volume collection: *For All The Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents From 1979-1991*, eds. Gaudentio B. ROSALES and C. G. ARÉVALO. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992 (hereinafter referred to as *FAPA Vol. I*), *For All The Peoples of Asia Volume 2: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1992 to 1996*, ed. Franz-Josef EILERS. Quezon City: Claritan, 1997 (hereinafter referred to as *FAPA Vol. II*); and *For All The Peoples of Asia Volume 3: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1997-2001*, ed. Franz-Josef EILERS. Quezon City: Claritan, 2002 (hereinafter referred to as *FAPA Vol. III*). Unless otherwise indicated, all references in the documents of the FABC are taken from this three-volume collection.

much at home in the pluralistic Asian milieu, having been born into, and living amidst such rich diversity and plurality. They recognise that many Christians (laity, clergy and even bishops) come from a "mixed" religious background. They have non-Christian relatives, non-Christian friends, and non-Christian neighbours. Growing up immersed and steeped in such diversity and plurality, they also have firsthand experiences of communalists, nationalists, fanatics and fundamentalists who not only reject the diversity and plurality of religions, but also seek to eradicate such diversity and plurality and impose their vision as normative through coercion and violence. The forced conversions of Christians in past centuries, the simmering Christian-Muslim conflicts in many parts of Indonesia, and heavy restrictions placed on Christians and their freedom of association are imprinted in the consciousness of these Asian bishops. Ironically, without diversity and plurality, there is no room for the Christian Gospel in Asia, a continent dominated by the world's principal religions. At the same time, the FABC Bishops recognise cultural diversity and religious plurality lie at the heart of what it means to be Asian. To be truly Asian, and at home in the Asian milieu, the Asian local churches are called to embrace this cultural diversity and religious plurality. Indeed, as far as the FABC is concerned, diversity and plurality is not to be gotten rid of, but "rejoiced over and promoted."<sup>28</sup>

The consistent emphasis of the FABC on the need for solidarity, companionship and collaboration with the Asian peoples is truly a *missio inter gentes* in every aspect of the term. As the Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly explains,

Like Jesus, we 'have to pitch our tents' in the midst of all humanity building a better world, but especially among the suffering and the poor, the marginalized and the downtrodden of Asia. In profound 'solidarity with suffering humanity' and led by the Spirit of life, we need to immerse ourselves in Asia's cultures of poverty and deprivation, from whose depths the aspirations for love and life are most poignant and compelling. Serving life demands communion with every woman and man seeking and struggling for life, in the way of Jesus' solidarity with humanity (FABC VI, art. 14.2).<sup>29</sup>

A survey of some of the key pronouncements in its many Plenary Statements reveals this aspect of *missio inter gentes* clearly and succinctly. At its first Plenary Assembly in 1974, the Asian bishops spoke of the local church as one incarnate in a people. Concretely, they said,

<sup>28</sup>See *BIRA VIII*, art. 15, in *FAPA Vol. I*, 321.

<sup>29</sup>*FAPA Vol. II*, 8.

such an incarnation would place a local church "in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the great religions" of a particular area (FABC I, art. 12).<sup>30</sup> Speaking of the "dialogue of life," the Asian bishops insisted that it is not just a matter of working for people, but being with them, and learning from them "their real needs and aspirations ... and to strive for their fulfilment" (FABC I, art. 20).<sup>31</sup>

Hence, from the very beginning the Asian bishops have been interested, not just in a presence over and against the Asian peoples, but a presence that is relational and dialogical. Moreover, the FABC points out that Christian communities in Asia must not only "listen to the Spirit at work in the many communities of believers who live and experience their own faith, who share and celebrate it in their own social, cultural and religious history," but also "they (as communities of the Gospel) must accompany these others 'in a common pilgrimage toward the ultimate goal, in relentless quest for the Absolute'," and in doing so, becoming "sensitively attuned to the work of the Spirit in the resounding symphony of Asian communion" (FABC III, art. 8.2).<sup>32</sup> Clearly, the FABC's call to Asian local churches to walk in "a common pilgrimage" with, as well as discern the Spirit at work in, Asian peoples with their ancient diverse cultures and religions exemplifies its vision of *missio inter gentes* as the way forward.

Moving on to the landmark Final Statement of the Fifth FABC Plenary Assembly (Bandung, 1990), the FABC explains that the task of doing Christian mission in Asia is all about "being with the people, responding to their needs, with sensitiveness to the presence of God in cultures and other religious traditions, and witnessing to the values of God's Kingdom through presence, solidarity, sharing and word," and therefore, "[m]ission will mean a dialogue with Asian's poor, with its local cultures, and with other religious traditions" (FABC V, art. 3.1.2).<sup>33</sup> While the FABC affirms that "the proclamation of Jesus Christ is the centre and primary element of evangelization," nonetheless, it explains that this proclamation means,

first of all, the witness of Christians and of Christian communities to the values of the Kingdom of God, a proclamation through Christlike deeds.

<sup>30</sup>FAPA Vol. I, 14.

<sup>31</sup>FAPA Vol. I, 15.

<sup>32</sup>FAPA Vol. I, 57.

<sup>33</sup>FAPA Vol. I, 280.



For Christians in Asia, to proclaim Christ means above all to live like him, in the midst of our neighbours of other faiths and persuasions, and to do his deeds by the power of his grace. Proclamation through dialogue and deeds – this is the first call to the Churches in Asia (*FABC V*, art. 4.1, italics in the original).<sup>34</sup>

As far as the FABC is concerned, this non-triumphalistic, non-confrontational *missio inter gentes* approach is necessary because Asia is a continent “marked by diversity and torn by conflicts,” and therefore, “the Church must in a special way be a sacrament – a visible sign and instrument of unity and harmony” (*FABC V*, art. 4.2).<sup>35</sup> As the FABC further explains in the same document, the Christian community “must live in *companionship*, as true *partners* with all Asians as they pray, work, struggle and suffer for a better human life, and as they search for the meaning of human life and progress.” Because “the human person created in Christ, redeemed by Christ and united by Christ to himself is the way for the Church, the Church must walk along with him/her in human solidarity” (*FABC V*, art. 6.2).<sup>36</sup>

Five years later, at the Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly (Manila, 1995), the FABC expands on the 1990 Bandung Statement by rooting it in the quintessentially Asian ideal of harmony amidst pluralistic diversity. Hence, the FABC speaks of “a vision of unity in diversity, a communion of life among diverse peoples” which characterizes the rich diversity of ancient Asian cultures and faiths to undergird its own “vision of holistic life, life that is achieved and entrusted to every person and every community of persons, regardless of gender, creed or culture, class or colour.” In this vein, the FABC envisages “a life with *integrity and dignity, a life of compassion* for the multitudes, especially for the poor and needy,” as well as “a life of *solidarity* with every form of life and of *sensitive care* for the earth.” As it explains it, this vision of life is rooted in “the Asian reverential sense of mystery and of the sacred, a spirituality that regards life as sacred and discovers the Transcendent in its gifts,” and thus, the “deep interiority draws people to experience *harmony* and inner peace and infuses ethics into all of creation” (*FABC VI*, art. 10, emphasis in the original).<sup>37</sup> Here, one finds yet another characteristic of *missio inter gentes* – a holistic approach to doing

<sup>34</sup>FAPA Vol. I, 281-2.

<sup>35</sup>FAPA Vol. I, 282.

<sup>36</sup>FAPA Vol. I, 283.

<sup>37</sup>FAPA Vol. II, 5.

Christian mission that recognizes, revalues and roots the Gospel message in the “Asian reverential sense of mystery and of the sacred.”

Perhaps the clearest articulation of a *missio inter gentes* view can be seen in the Final Statement of the Seventh FABC Plenary Assembly (Samphan, 2000). In this important document, the FABC reiterates what it stated five years earlier in its 1995 Manila Plenary Statement – it is committed to the “emergence of the Asianness of the Church in Asia” and asserting that “the Church has to be an embodiment of the Asian vision and values of life, especially interiority, harmony, a holistic and inclusive approach to every area of life.”<sup>38</sup> More significantly, the FABC is convinced that this Asianness of the Church is “a special gift the world is awaiting,” and explains that “the whole world is in need of a holistic paradigm for meeting the challenges of life,” and “together with all Asians, the Church, a tiny minority in this vast continent, has a singular contribution to make, and this contribution is the task of the whole Church in Asia.”<sup>39</sup> In addition, the FABC reiterates that the “most effective means of evangelization and service in the name of Christ has always been and continues to be the *witness of life*,”<sup>40</sup> and it is only through such witnessing that “Asian people will recognize the Gospel that we announce when they see in our life the transparency of the message of Jesus and the inspiring and healing figure of men and women immersed in God.”<sup>41</sup>

In short, the FABC’s mission theology does not begin from above or from the centre, but from below and from the periphery, moving towards the centre. For the FABC, mission and evangelisation is not a one way street, a uni-directional proclamation of abstract creedal principles and doctrinal truths. Hence, in articulating its *missio inter gentes* approach to the task of doing Christian mission, the FABC begins not with abstract and universalistic theological concepts and categories, but with the life experiences and other challenges arising from the ongoing encounter with contemporary Asian realities and specific Asian contexts. For the FABC, mission is more than planting a new local church in places where it does not yet exist. As far as the FABC is concerned, the Asian peoples are not objects of mission, to be converted and brought into the Church, although Christians do not hesitate to extend such an invitation. Rather, the focus of the Asian local church’s *missio inter gentes*

<sup>38</sup>FAPA Vol. III, 8.

<sup>39</sup>FAPA Vol. III, 9.

<sup>40</sup>FAPA Vol. III, 12.

<sup>41</sup>FAPA Vol. III, 12-13.

is identified with Jesus' own mission of bringing about the Kingdom of God among his people.

Following in the footsteps of Jesus, the FABC has also formulated its *missio inter gentes* in terms of building the Kingdom of God in the Asian milieu. For the FABC, Asian local churches are called to collaborate with God's ongoing mission of bringing about the Kingdom of God through their life witness and threefold dialogue with the Asian peoples and their cultures, religions and marginalizing life challenges. More specifically, the FABC's *missio inter gentes* entails a commitment to work in harmony with the life realities of the Asian *Sitzen-im-Leben*. At the same time, as far as the FABC is concerned, inculturation, dialogue and human liberation are integral dimensions of mission, and not merely pre-evangelisation.

Going a step further, the FABC also perceives the Church's mission as inspired by God's *prior* activity in the world, through the missions of the Father and the Spirit. As far as the FABC is concerned, the deep soteriological underpinnings of Asian religions and philosophies that have inspired multitudes of Asians are not evil, but from God. The FABC is unequivocal in asserting that the wisdom of Asian philosophies and the soteriological elements of Asian religions are inspired by the Spirit working outside the boundaries of the institutional Church.

The principal means of *missio inter gentes* is the quintessential Asian trait of *dialogue*, a two-way encounter of the Christian Gospel with the threefold realities of Asian cultures, religions and the poor. Not only may Asian socio-religious realities be enriched by Christianity, but also Christianity may be enriched by the Asian socio-religious realities. Undoubtedly, the FABC regards dialogue and harmony as necessary to redress the damage which has been perpetrated by centuries of colonial domination, resulting in many Asian ecclesial communities being very wary of any attempt at evangelisation which smacks of an approach of instrumentalisation. In particular, dialogue has the potential to bring about opportunities for two or more parties, with their different worldviews, to enter into each other's horizons so as to understand each other better and create harmonious relations between them.

Clearly, the FABC's preferred mode of mission as a threefold dialogue with Asian peoples in the fullness of their myriad cultures, religions and extreme poverty, and the promotion of the Kingdom of God as the principal goal of mission point to a mission strategy that is geared not to ("*an*") the Asian peoples, but rather, among ("*inter*") the

Asian peoples - in essence, a *missio inter gentes*. In particular, the FABC has often reiterated that the task of Christian mission, although clearly necessary, is to be done not for its own sake, or even for the sake of Church growth, but for the sake of the Kingdom of God. As far as the FABC is concerned, because the Church is at the service of the Kingdom of God, Asian Christians are called to contribute to Asian cultures, religions and socio-economic challenges, even if these cultures, religions and societies do not become institutionally Christian. For the FABC, missionaries are not called to conquer the Asian world in the name of a triumphant Christ, or build a triumphant Christendom on Asian soil, but to serve by giving of themselves and bringing the life and hope of God's Kingdom to a world beset with challenges and problems. As a result, while proponents of *missio ad gentes* place great importance on growth that can be measured in terms of numerical and territorial expansion, the FABC prefers a qualitative approach that seeks to transform and heal the brokenness in Asian cultures and realities. In other words, the FABC accepts that the Asian Church will always be a "little flock" in the sea of diverse religions and cultures in pluralistic Asia, while proponents of *missio ad gentes* dream of the Church growing by leaps and bounds to claim the allegiance of a significant majority of Asians, and in the process causing the extinction of other religions.

In the final analysis, the FABC views the salvation history of the Asian continent as embodied in the history, religions, cultures, challenges, and aspirations of its many peoples. Salvation history did not begin with the coming of Christianity to Asia. Rather, FABC recognises the Father's and Spirit's presence and saving activity in and through Asian religious traditions which preceded the coming of Christianity to Asia, and which also continue as an integral part of ongoing Asian religious history. Thus, the FABC rejects the presumption that Asia was a *tabula rasa* as far as salvation history was concerned, and also any attempt to relegate Asian religious traditions to the theological dustbin on account of any presumption of their inability to act as vehicles of God's self-revelation. On this basis, the FABC is able to speak of tapping into the movement throughout all of Asia "among peoples of various faiths to break down traditional barriers of division and hostility, and their initiative to reach out to neighbours of other faiths in a spirit of love, friendship, harmony and collaboration," and "discern[ing] the hand of God" in "all these aspirations, movements and initiatives" (BIRA IV/II, art. 5).<sup>42</sup>

<sup>42</sup>FAPA Vol. I, 318-9.