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

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

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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 fulfillment 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 *missio* 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 naiveté 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.

