

Unraveling a "Complex Reality": Six Elements of Mission

Stephen B. Bevans, S.V.D.

Mission," writes Pope John Paul II in *Redemptoris missio*, "is a single but complex reality, and it develops in a variety of ways" (RM 41).¹ There is only one mission, the mission of God as such, in which the church shares (e.g., Gal. 2:20; Phil. 1:21; 1 Cor. 10:16–17; Matt. 10:40; John 20:21) and which it continues (Matt. 28:18–20; Mark 16:15–16; Luke 24:44–47; Acts 1:8) by preaching, serving, and witnessing to Jesus' lordship and vision of the reign of God (Acts 28:31). The church does so in four "fields": in its pastoral work, in its commitment to the "new evangelization," in its efforts to transform society and culture, and in its movement to all peoples in the mission *ad gentes* (RM 34). At every level as well, there are six operative elements: (1) witness and proclamation; (2) liturgy, prayer, and contemplation; (3) justice, peace, and the integrity of creation; (4) dialogue with women and men of other faiths and ideologies; (5) inculturation; and (6) reconciliation. Both the singleness and complexity of mission can be seen in the accompanying diagram.

But why *six* elements? Opinions certainly vary. In 1981 the Catholic organization SEDOS (Service of Documentation and Studies, sponsored by missionary orders headquartered in Rome) spoke of *four* elements of mission, adding dialogue, inculturation, and liberation to the traditional element of proclamation.² In 1984 a document entitled "Dialogue and Mission" was issued by what was then known as the Secretariat for Non-Christians at the Vatican, and it named *five* elements: presence and witness; development and liberation; liturgical life, prayer, and contemplation; interreligious dialogue; and proclamation and catechesis (DM 13).³ In 1991 David Bosch's *Transforming Mission* spoke of *thirteen* "elements of an emerging ecumenical paradigm" of mission; in 1999 Andrew Kirk outlined *seven* elements, as did Donal Dorr in 2000.⁴

In an effort to synthesize these various namings of elements, my colleague Eleanor Doidge and I wrote an essay in 2000 in which we named the six elements of mission surveyed here.⁵ For us, witness and proclamation were bound together; Andrew Kirk's important insistence on ecological concerns as integral to mission should be paired with the equally important elements of justice and peace; and Robert Schreiter's insistence on reconciliation as a new model of mission needed to be fully acknowledged.⁶ In addition, unlike the document "Dialogue and Mission," we were convinced that inculturation is an essential part of every missionary task. And so our synthesis was of six elements. Here I offer brief reflections on each of these six.

Witness and Proclamation

The interconnectedness of Christian witness and explicit proclamation of the Gospel is perhaps expressed most clearly in the charge attributed to Francis of Assisi: "Preach always; if necessary, use words." As Pope Paul VI wrote in *Evangelii nuntiandi*, "The first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life" (EN 41); and the document "Dialogue and

Proclamation" insists that proclamation "is the foundation, center, and summit of evangelization" (DP 10). Witness and proclamation go together. As David Bosch noted, "The deed without the word is dumb; the word without the deed is empty."⁷

The church's missionary witness is of at least four kinds. At a first level, there is the witness of individual Christians. Some of these may be quite public and acclaimed, like the witness of an Albert Schweitzer or a Mother Teresa. But most Christian witness is given by Christians in their ordinary lives—in the patience of parents, the honesty of Christians in business, the dedication of teachers, the choices made about where to live, where to shop, how one is entertained. Second, there is the witness of the Christian community—the "hermeneutic of the gospel," as Lesslie Newbigin famously put it.⁸ Third, we can speak of the church's institutional witness in its schools, hospitals, orphanages, and social service agencies. Finally, there is the "common witness" of Christians of various traditions committed to common prayer, common educational ventures, common work for justice, and the like. As the Manila Manifesto so aptly puts it, "If the task of world evangelization is ever to be accomplished, we must engage in it together."⁹

John Paul II has spoken of proclamation—explicitly of the lordship of Jesus and of his vision of the reign of God—as "the permanent priority of mission" (RM 44). The task of evangelization would be empty, said Paul VI, without proclaiming "the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God" (EN 22). Nevertheless, proclamation needs always to be done dialogically, taking account of the situation of those to whom the Good News is

Mission—by the numbers

- 1 Mission**
the mission of God
- 2 Dimensions of church involvement**
sharing in the mission of God
continuing the mission of God
- 3 Ways to promote Jesus' lordship**
preaching
serving
witnessing
- 4 Fields of work**
pastoral work
"new evangelization"
sociocultural transformation
movement to all peoples (*ad gentes*)
- 6 Elements**
witness and proclamation
liturgy, prayer, and contemplation
justice, peace, and the integrity of creation
dialogue with women and men of other faiths and ideologies
inculturation
reconciliation

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addressed. It can never be done apart from witness, for "no matter how eloquent our verbal testimony, people will always believe their eyes first."¹⁰ Moreover, proclamation is always to be given as an invitation, respecting the freedom of the hearers; it is never done in a manipulative way. "The church proposes," insists John Paul II, "she imposes nothing" (RM 39). Finally, authentic proclamation is the answer to a question about "the reason for our hope" (see 1 Pet. 3:15). The first task of evangelization, mused Francis Cardinal George on a visit to the school where I teach, is to listen. To proclaim out of context, without listening to how the Gospel answers people's deepest yearnings and hopes, is to proclaim in a way that is unworthy of the Gospel's power.

Liturgy, Prayer, and Contemplation

According to Lutheran liturgist Robert Hawkins, the church "lives from the center with its eyes on the borders."¹¹ Liturgy is a dead end if it is its own end. My colleague Richard Fragomeni said once that the goal of liturgy is *worship*—and worship is not what takes place in a church but in the world. Liturgy needs to be celebrated "inside out," as an anticipation of the "liturgy after the Liturgy," as the Orthodox say.¹² Celebration of the liturgy is an evangelizing act on several levels. It is always the evangelization of the Christian faithful, who day after day, week after week make up the liturgical assembly, forming them more perfectly into Christ's body in the world and calling each individually to more authentic Christian life. But since there are always visitors in the congregation who may be nonbelievers or unchurched, the worthy and vital celebration of the liturgy in Eucharist, baptism, marriages, or funerals can be moments when the Gospel proclaimed and celebrated may find particular resonance in those who are seeking more depth in life, or may even be able to break through indifference or resistance.

In 1927 Pope Pius XI declared Francis Xavier and Thérèse of Lisieux as patrons of the church's missionary activity. The Jesuit Francis Xavier was no surprise; his exploits on behalf of the Gospel in India and Japan make him one of the greatest missionaries of all times. But naming Thérèse was a bit unusual. After all, she was a strictly cloistered Carmelite nun and never left her convent in France. Nevertheless, her autobiography, published a few years after her death, revealed her to be a woman on fire for the Gospel, whose heart was always beyond her convent walls, calling all humanity to faith in Christ. Her life of prayer was so intense, so universal, so missionary, that she could very justly be named patroness of the missions. The pope's action in 1927 points to the truth that commitment to the spread of the Gospel is not simply a matter of heroic work in cross-cultural situations; it is a matter of allowing the missionary task to shape Christian spirituality. Prayer and contemplation are seeing and feeling with the missionary God, aligning one's needs and wants with the saving activity of God's missionary presence in the world. The British *Doctor Who* series provides a striking example of how prayer and contemplation can be missionary. Doctor Who would enter a certain telephone booth, the inside of which contained the whole world. The cloister, the parish church, or one's room is like that telephone booth.

Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation

"Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel"; "if you want peace, work for

justice"; "we discern two types of injustice: socio-economic-political injustice . . . and environmental injustice"; "the responsibility of the church towards the earth is a crucial part of the church's mission."¹³ Commitment to justice, peace, and the integrity of creation is a seamless garment. All are constitutive of the church's missionary task.

Commitment to the poor and marginalized of the world takes shape in the first place as the church acts as a voice for the victims of injustice on the one hand and a goad to the consciences of the rich on the other. People like Oscar Romero and Desmond Tutu, and documents like the U.S. Bishops' peace and economics pastorals and the Kairos Document in South Africa are shining examples of this justice ministry. Second, the church needs to work to help those who suffer injustice find their *own* voice. If the church did only the first, it would ultimately only be patronizing. The goal of justice ministry is helping the poor and marginalized find their own subjectivity and hope. Third, the commitment to justice inevitably means committing oneself to a life practice that is in solidarity with the victims of this world, through a simple

Every time and every culture needs to reflect on faith on its own terms, using its own lens to interpret Scripture.

lifestyle, through political stances, and through a constant siding with the poor and oppressed and their causes. Finally, as the 1971 Synod puts it, a church committed to justice must be just itself: "everyone who ventures to speak about justice must first be just in their eyes."¹⁴

In 1981 John Paul II visited Hiroshima, the site of the first hostile use of the atomic bomb in 1945. "From now on," he said, "it is only through a conscious choice and through a deliberate policy that humanity can survive."¹⁵ The mission of the church involves making sure that governments and other groups keep making that "conscious choice" and follow that "deliberate policy" toward peace. In a similar way, the church's commitment to justice cannot but be concerned for personal and institutional witness of simplicity of life, and for support of legislation and movements that promote the integrity of creation and the care of the earth. According to Canadian novelist Rudy Wiebe, repentance is not feeling bad but "thinking different."¹⁶

The kingdom call to repent and believe takes on a whole new dimension in the light of today's consciousness of creation's fragility and humanity's vocation to stewardship.

Interreligious and Secular Dialogue

"Dialogue is . . . the norm and necessary manner of every form of Christian mission" (DM 29). This general norm for doing mission, however, has particular relevance as Christians encounter people of other faiths or people who have no faith at all. Mission is carried out "in Christ's way," reflective of the dialogic nature of God's Trinitarian self. Dialogue is based on the conviction that "the Spirit of God is constantly at work in ways that pass human understanding and in places that to us are least expected."¹⁷ Documents speak of four kinds of dialogue. There is, first, the *dialogue of life*, in which Christians live and rub shoulders with people of other faiths and ideologies. In this way people get to

know each other, respect each other, learn from each other, and reduce the tensions that exist among people who may have radically different worldviews.

Second, we speak of the *dialogue of social action*, by which women and men of differing faith commitments work together for common issues of justice. Working together for fairer immigration laws, for the abolition of the death penalty, for the sacredness of human life, and against racism and sexism are ways that committed people can learn to live with one another and be inspired by the social doctrines of the various religious and secular traditions.

Third, there is the *dialogue of theological exchange*. While this may be the area for experts, as they probe one another's doctrines and practices, challenging and inspiring one another, it can also take place among ordinary Christians as they read one another's sacred documents and cherished authors.

Finally, there is the *dialogue of religious experience*. While there always will remain differences of content and method, this is an area where many traditions seem to converge in major ways. While perhaps people of differing faiths may not be able to pray *together*, they can, as John Paul II has done at Assisi in 1986 and 2002, come together to pray in their own ways.

Inculturation

Throughout the history of the church, Christians have practiced in some way what we call today inculturation. Peter and Paul, Justin Martyr, Francis of Assisi, Clare, Raymond Lull, Matteo Ricci, Martin Luther, Mother Teresa, Roland Allen, and Charles de Foucauld are just a few names that may come to mind. Nevertheless, today there is an understanding that inculturation is not just something for a few women and men who live dangerously "on the edge." Rather, inculturation is acknowledged today as an integral part of communicating the Gospel, if the Gospel indeed is truly to be *communicated*. "You may, and you must, have an African Christianity," proclaimed Paul VI in 1969. "Contextualization . . . is not simply nice," writes evangelical missiologist David Hesselgrave; "it is a necessity."¹⁸

The central place of inculturation in today's understanding of mission is something that has emerged only as theology and spirituality began to recognize the essential role of experience in any kind of human living. Traditionally, theology was seen as reflection in faith on Scripture and tradition. There was one theology, always and everywhere valid. As theology began to acknowledge the anthropological turn that has so marked modern Western consciousness, the role of experience in theology increased and became more influential. It was not, however, that experience was just added to the traditional sources of Scripture and tradition; the anthropological turn revealed the fact that Scripture and tradition themselves were highly influenced by the experiences of women and men at particular times, places, and cultural contexts. And so experience has taken on a normative value that it did not have in times past. The theology of the West, we now recognize, was itself a limited, contextual product of a particular set of experiences. Every time and every culture has its validity and needs to reflect on faith on its own terms, using its own lens to interpret Scripture, past doctrinal formulations, ethical practices, and liturgical customs. Today the experience of the past (Scripture and tradition) and the experience of the present (context) may interact in various ways that are conditioned by particular circumstances or theological convictions, but that Christian faith needs to engage a context authentically is simply accepted as a missiological imperative.¹⁹

Reconciliation

In a world of increasing violence, tensions between religions, terrorist threats, globalization, and displacement of peoples, the church's witness to and proclamation of the possibility of reconciliation may constitute a new way of conceiving the content of the church's missionary task. Mission today recognizes that reconciliation needs to take place on a number of different levels. There is, first, the *personal* level of healing between spouses, between victims and their torturers or oppressors, as well as among victims of natural calamities such as earthquakes or tropical storms. Then there is *sociocultural* reconciliation between members of oppressed cultures (e.g., Australian Aboriginals, North American First Nations, and Latin American indigenous tribes) and those who have oppressed and marginalized them for centuries. A third level of reconciliation might be called *political*. One may think of the reconciliation called for after years of apartheid in South Africa, or by years of forced disappearances and massacres as in Argentina or Guatemala.

Reconciliation, insists Robert Schreiter, involves much more of a spirituality than a strategy.²⁰ In the first place, reconciliation is the work of God, a work of grace; it is offered first and foremost by the victims of injustice and violence to their oppressors. The church's task is not to develop strategies for reconciliation to take place but to witness in its life and proclaim in fearless hope that God's grace does heal and that, through the reconciling work of Jesus Christ, the barriers of hostility can be broken down, and those who are divided can be made one. For Christ "is our peace"

(Eph. 2:14). To facilitate the recognition of God's gracious working in the midst of so much violence and tragedy, the church needs to develop communities of honesty, compassion, and acceptance. Ministers of reconciliation need to hone their skills of contemplative attention and listening. Ways might be found to employ new approaches to celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation or to ritualizing God's reconciling action.

Conclusion

Mission today indeed needs to be understood as "a single but complex reality." While the explicit proclamation of the Gospel of and about Jesus has a certain "permanent priority" (RM 44),²¹ the words of proclamation must likewise be rooted in an authentic *being* of the church. The church is called equally to incarnate what it says in its community life and its engagement in the world. In a world where the Spirit is constantly manifest in social and political movements, in the riches of culture, and in the holiness of many religious ways, mission can serve that Spirit only through acts of justice, trust of human experience, and dialogue with religious difference. In a world that is torn apart by so many conflicts of religion, politics, and human tragedy, the church needs to recognize that Jesus' ministry of reconciliation and peace has been entrusted to us (2 Cor. 5:18–19). Mission ultimately is witness to the hope of a new heaven and a new earth, where every tear will be wiped away (Rev. 21:1–5), every tongue from every nation (Rev. 7:9) will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2:11), and God will be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28).

Notes

1. See *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading "Redemptoris missio" and "Dialogue and Proclamation,"* ed. William R. Burrows (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), pp. 3–55.
2. Robert J. Schreiter, ed., *Mission in the Third Millennium* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001), pp. 135–38; William Jenkinson and Helene O'Sullivan, eds., *Trends in Mission: Toward the Third Millennium* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), pp. 399–414.
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6. Schreiter, *Mission*, pp. 135–41.
7. Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1975); Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, "Dialogue and Proclamation," in *Redemption and Dialogue*, ed. Burrows, pp. 93–118; Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 420.
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9. James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, eds., *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization*, vol. 1, *Basic Statements* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992), p. 301.
10. Commission on World Mission and Evangelization, San Antonio, 1989, in *ibid.*, p. 78.
11. Robert D. Hawkins, "Occasional Services: Border Crossings," in *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission*, ed. Thomas H. Schattauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), p. 201.
12. See *Inside Out*, ed. Schattauer.
13. 1971 Synod, "Justice in the World," *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, ed. David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992), p. 289; Paul VI, "Message for World Day of Peace," *Origins* 1, no. 29 (January 6, 1972): 491; Leonardo Boff, "Social Ecology: Poverty and Misery," in *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, ed. David G. Hallman (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994), p. 243; Frederick R. Wilson, ed., *The San Antonio Report: Your Will Be Done, Mission in Christ's Way* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990).
14. 1971 Synod, "Justice," p. 295.
15. John Paul II, "Moral Choices of the Future," *Origins* 10, no. 39 (March 12, 1981): 621.
16. Rudy Wiebe, *The Blue Mountains of China* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1970; repr., 1995), p. 258.
17. World Council of Churches, "Ecumenical Affirmation: Mission and Evangelism" (1991), in *New Directions*, ed. Scherer and Bevans, p. 43.
18. Paul VI, "The African Church Today," *The Pope Speaks* 14, no. 3 (1969): 219; David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), p. 85.
19. See Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002), pp. 3–15.
20. Robert J. Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997).
21. See Mortimer Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God: Evangelization and the Subversive Memory of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

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