

THE MISSION HAS A CHURCH:

An Invitation to the Dance

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Abstract: In his recent sojourn as Visiting Professor to Melbourne's *Yarra Theological Union*, Stephen Bevans also gave talks throughout Australia on the theme of the Church's mission today. The textual basis of those talks follows. It begins not with the church or mission, but with God whose very nature is mission. This means that the starting point for missiological reflection is not the church, but God's engagement with the world and the church through the communicating Word and empowering Spirit. These rich reflections, by one of today's foremost missiologists, lead us to think church and mission less in terms of onerous duty than divine invitation to join in the dance. (Editor)

God Is a Verb

A few years ago I began to realize that our God—the God revealed to us by Jesus of Nazareth through the power of the Holy Spirit—might be best described as a *verb*, not a noun. What I mean by this is that the God we know from revelation might be best imagined not as a static kind of “person”—sort of like us but wiser and more powerful—who is “up there” or “out there.” Rather, in a way that is much more exciting and worthy of our adoration and love, God is a Movement—more personal than we can ever imagine—who is always and everywhere present in God's creation, present in the warp and woof of it, working for creation's wholeness and healing, calling creation to its fullness, and calling women and men on a small planet in a minor galaxy in this vast universe—billions of years old, billions of light years in extension—into partnership in God's work. These women

and men, Genesis tells us (1:26-27), God created in the divine “image and likeness.” They are to be, as Nigerian Old Testament scholar James Okoye tells us, stewards, caretakers, “greeners,” viceroys of God on earth.¹ We do not know, although it is surely possible, that other creatures—perhaps in a far-off galaxy and perhaps many times more intelligent than we—have been entrusted by God with the same task. What we do know from revelation is that *we* have been.

Nothing about our God is static. One of our greatest theologians, Thomas Aquinas, spoke of God as pure act.² And the equally great theologian Bonaventure speaks of God as self-diffusive goodness and love.³ In the great Western Medieval tradition, Mechtilde of Magdeburg spoke of the “restless Godhead,” an “overflow . . . which never stands still and always flows effortlessly and without ceasing”⁴

God is not even static within Godself as such. God in God’s deepest identity is a relationship, a communion. “In the remotest beginning,” Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff writes of the Trinity, “communion prevails.”⁵ This life in communion spills out into creation, healing and sanctifying, calling all of creation, according to its capacity, into that communion, and once in that communion, sending that creation forth to gather still more of it into communion. It is though God as such is a dance—a great conga line, I like to imagine—moving through the

¹James Chukwuma Okoye, *Israel and the Nations: A Mission Theology of the Old Testament* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 33.

²See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Part I, Question 3, article 1.

³Bonaventure, *De Trinitate*, 3.16. See Ilija Delio, “Bonaventure’s Metaphysics of the Good,” *Theological Studies*, 60, 2 (1999): 232.

⁴Mechtilde of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, Book VII, Chapter 55, in *Classics of Western Spirituality*, Vol. 92, Frank Tobin, trans. (New York: Paulist Press, 1998). See Oliver Davies, “Late Medieval Theology,” in G. R. Evans, ed., *The Medieval Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Medieval Period* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 228.

⁵Leonardo Boff, “Trinity,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 389.

world, inviting the world—material creation, human beings—to join in the dance. And the more that join the more attractive joining becomes.⁶

This self-diffusive, gathering, and sending nature of God hints at what the true nature of reality is. What is real is not what is concerned with itself or turned in on itself (this latter is Luther’s definition of sin!). What is real is going beyond oneself, being in relation, calling others to relation. The British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead suggested that God, rather than being the *exception* to the laws of the universe, is really their greatest exemplar. And so God is perfectly related to the world—in fact God is relation itself. God is perfectly involved in the world, and rather than unable to change and suffer with the world, God is infinite in God’s ability to be affected by the world and is, in Whitehead’s famous words, the “fellow sufferer who understands.”⁷ Benedict XVI describes God in a way far from Platonic and Aristotelian thinking: God is “a lover with all the passion of true love.”⁸

God is Mission

Another way of saying all this is that God is Mission. Not that God *has* a Mission, but that God *is* Mission. This is what God is in God’s deepest self: self-diffusive love, freely creating, redeeming, healing, challenging that creation. God, as my colleague Anthony Gittins once said in a lecture, is “love hitting the cosmic

⁶This idea comes from a play on the word *perichoresis*, from the Greek *perichoreo*, meaning “cyclical movement or recurrence.” “To dance around” or “dance in a ring” comes from the Greek *perichoreuo*. See Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 220-221.

⁷Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 521, 532.

⁸Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, 10.

fan.” Or, to be a bit more prosaic, God is like an ever-flowing fountain of living water, poured out on earth through the Holy Spirit and actually made part of creation through the Word-become-flesh. As Vatican II’s document on Missionary Activity puts it, God “generously pours out, and never ceases to pour out, the divine goodness, so that the one who is creator of all things might at last become ‘all in all’ (1Cor 15:28), thus simultaneously assuring God’s own glory and our happiness.”⁹

God Inside Out

There has never been a moment when God has not been present to and in creation. From the first nanosecond of time, God has been there, in the fullness of God’s Mystery, through the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is, as it were, God “inside out” in the world. She is God’s complete presence, palpable, able to be experienced, and yet elusive, like the wind. Or, as she is described in a best-selling book today, *The Shack*, she is perhaps best seen from the corner of our eye rather than visible straight on.¹⁰

In our own tradition, with its roots in the Old Testament, the Spirit is described as breath or wind, *ruach* in Hebrew. She broods over the primeval chaos in the first lines of Genesis, like a mother bird brooding over her nest. She is the breath that God breathes into the “earth creature,” *ha adam*, that we call Adam. She is the spirit that stirs up prophecy, that brings the dry bones in Ezekiel chapter 37 to life. She is the water that pours out of the Temple in Ezekiel’s great vision in chapter 40, the water that gives life to healing plants and abundant fruits. She is the

⁹Vatican Council II, Decree on Missionary Activity, *Ad Gentes*, 2.

¹⁰William P. Young, *The Shack* (Newbury Park, CA: Windblown Media, 2007).

ointment in Isaiah chapter 61 that brings good news to the afflicted, to bind the wounds of the brokenhearted, that proclaims liberty to captives, that frees those in captivity. U. S. feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson beautifully sums up the Spirit's role in history: "Whether the Spirit be pictured as the warmth and light given by the sun, the life-giving water from the spring, or the flower filled with seeds from the root, what we are actually signifying is God drawing near and passing by in vivifying, sustaining, renewing, and liberating power in the midst of historical struggle."¹¹

God Is Like Jesus

"In the fullness of time" (Gal 4:4), the Word of God became flesh and gave the Spirit, God's complete yet elusive presence, a human face. Jesus continued the work of the Spirit, but now God is present in a visible, audible, and concrete way. Jesus was a man led by God's Spirit. All three synoptic gospels begin their narrative of Jesus' ministry with Jesus being led—or in Mark "driven" by the Spirit into the desert to prepare for his ministry (see Mt 4:1, Mk 1:12, and Lk 4:1). Luke describes Jesus' inaugural sermon at Nazareth, as he read from the scroll of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor, . . . to proclaim release to the captives and recovering sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Lk 4:18-19). The work of the Spirit in Isaiah is now the work of Jesus, and this is the program of his ministry.

In this ministry Jesus reveals the God who is a verb: God is a God who

¹¹Johnson, 127.

reigns, and God reigns by forgiving, healing, saving, reconciling, being in relation. “God is like Jesus,” Uruguayan liberation theologian Juan Luis Segundo writes.¹² Note that what Segundo says is *not* that Jesus is like God, as if we already know who God is; rather, it is Jesus who shows us what God is like. When we see the way Jesus taught and acted and suffered, we see the way God teaches and acts and suffers. Three hundred years later, when the church was embroiled in the controversy with Arius, this is what was at stake. If Jesus wasn’t truly God (*homoousios to patri*), then we don’t really know what God is like. The truth is, though, that we do.

Jesus taught, especially in parables. He taught about forgiveness in parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son in Luke 15. He taught about God’s generosity in the parable of the generous employer in Matthew chapter 20. He taught about how all are called to salvation in the parable of the wedding feast in Matthew 22, and about God’s persistent quest for justice as portrayed by a persistent widow in the face of an unjust judge in Luke 18.

Jesus’ was a message of joy. It’s too bad that Christian artists have for the most part portrayed Jesus as a serious, even somber character. How could he have attracted children if he didn’t smile? How could he have held the crowds if his parables were not humorous—even though ultimately deadly serious? Recently one of my students in Chicago put me on to a wonderful Internet exhibition on the “Laughing Jesus,” sponsored by the Major Issues and Theology Foundation based in Queensland, Australia. Jesus portrayed as a dancer, a comedian, a juggler and in abandoned conversation with the disciples at Emmaus (where he appears as a

¹²Juan Luis Segundo, *Christ in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 22-26.

woman) has helped me visualize and better imagine the God of joy that Jesus revealed.¹³

Jesus healed and drove out devils. His healings and exorcisms were parables in action. Making the lame walk, the blind see, the deaf hear, the dead return to life, those caught in the grip of evil experience liberation—these were all ways of saying that God’s salvation was not just something spiritual, but fully and completely involved with living in this world.

As Edward Schillebeeckx¹⁴ and others have suggested, Jesus himself was a parable. His own personal freedom in interpreting the Law, his fun-loving lifestyle (e.g. drinking wine), and his scandalous, inclusive behavior all pointed to the nature of a God who is a God of life, a God who cared for all, a God of freedom.

Of course, we know where all of this got Jesus. Although his message was deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition—particularly that of the prophets—it proved to be too much for the Jewish leaders of the time. They interpreted Jesus’ joy and freedom and inclusiveness as an affront to their tradition, even a blasphemy to the God of Israel. And they intuited—probably correctly—that if people continued to take Jesus’ message seriously it would prove a threat to the Roman occupation of their country. And so they killed him. But even here Jesus reveals the nature of God. God is vulnerable, God will not override human wickedness, but will suffer because of it. In many ways, the image of Jesus on the cross is the dearest image we have of God. God will go to such lengths to reveal a love that so deeply respects human freedom.

But you can’t kill God! You cannot stop the Movement that is overflowing

¹³See http://miatorgau.melbourneitwebsites.com/page/jesus_laughing_exhibition.html.

¹⁴Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Theology* (New York: Vintage Books,

life and love. The Mission continued. The disciples experienced Jesus as alive in their midst, especially when they gathered to break bread and share the cup of wine in his memory. They began to realize now that Jesus had been no ordinary man. Jesus had in one way been taken from them in death, but in another way—one that was even more real—he was still with them, guiding them by the Spirit to whom he gave a face. Gradually they began to realize that his mission—the mission of God—was their mission. The mission began to have a church.

The Mission Has a Church

Gradually. As Jesus' disciples experienced his living presence among them—and especially after the extraordinary experience that took place some fifty days after his death, on the day of Pentecost—they realized that they had been given the task to continue Jesus mission of proclaiming, demonstrating and embodying God's Reign. But, most probably like Jesus as well, they understood this mission as (1) quite temporary, for Jesus would soon inaugurate the Reign of God when he returned in glory, and (2) only for the Jews. Although Judaism had engaged in some mission to bring Gentiles into the covenant people, the prevailing understanding was that, once God's Reign had been inaugurated, the nations would stream toward Jerusalem and acknowledge the God of Israel as the God of all the earth (e.g. Is 2:2-5). The members of the Jesus community almost certainly thought that, after Pentecost, the Jews had been given another chance to accept Jesus' vision of God and the radical change of mind and heart that it entailed, and when the Jewish nation would change its mind and believe the good news (see Mk 1:15),

1981), 156, 158.

the Reign would be established and the Twelve would be set up on the twelve thrones that Jesus promised to judge (i.e. rule, govern with righteousness) the twelve tribes of Israel that the coming of the Reign of God would reconstitute. The fact that they were having such success—three thousand converts here (Acts 2:41), five thousand there (Acts 4:4), people added every day (Acts 2:47)—probably convinced them that the time was very near.

But soon there began to be doubts about all of this. Stephen, with some Greek-speaking disciples perhaps, may have been the first to intuit that what Jesus meant went beyond Judaism. When he was killed for preaching such a radical, unthinkable doctrine and many Greek-speaking Jews had to flee the city lest they suffer the same fate, strange things began to happen. One of Stephen's companions, Philip, preached to Samaritans—half-Jews, halfbreeds—and they accepted the Lordship of Jesus and his vision of God and of the world. Philip was also led to preach to an Ethiopian eunuch—by law excluded from becoming a Jew—and he was moved to admit him into the Jesus fellowship. Peter was amazed to be led to the house of a Roman centurion—a *good* Gentile but a Gentile nonetheless—and when he preached about the Lord Jesus the same Spirit that had fallen upon the disciples of Pentecost fell upon Cornelius and his household. This was unbelievable! Peter could only baptize them, even though he had to face the grave doubts of the Jerusalem community when he returned. When he explained they exclaimed “*even to the Gentiles has God granted repentance unto life!*” (See Acts 11:18).¹⁵

What had started out as a movement *within* Judaism had become something

¹⁵ For a more detailed treatment of the movement of Acts, see Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY:

much different. The Spirit was moving the community to another place, taking Jesus' vision to where perhaps even he had not imagined it would or could go. The climax came—according to Luke's theological / historical retelling in Acts—when some unnamed men and women who had fled persecution after Stephen's execution,¹⁶ arrived in the great urban center of Antioch in Syria (the third largest city in the world at the time) and preached not only to Jews, but also to Gentiles. The result was that “a great number turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:21).

My contention over the last several years has been that it was here in Antioch that the church was born. We often speak of the day of Pentecost as the “birthday of the church,” but I don't think this is true. I think it is here in Antioch, where the disciples were first called “Christians” (Acts 11:26). My reasoning is that before Antioch—although the realization was growing all through Acts up to this point—the disciples saw themselves as Jews, not as a separate, discrete religion. Now, however, at least in germ, they began to see that in Jesus something new had begun, that God's mission in the world—begun in the Spirit from the first moment of creation and continued concretely in Jesus—had been handed over to them. And now they were called to continue this mission to the ends of the earth—in every nation, in every culture, in every time period. Now it became clear—or at least they saw glimmers of it—that God had chosen a particular people to carry on the divine mission, to be the face of the Spirit, the bodily presence of Jesus in the world. At Antioch and thereafter, what began to become clear is that God's mission has a church.

Orbis Books, 2004), 10-31.

¹⁶See Andrew F. Walls, “Culture and Coherence in Christian History,” in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 16.

The Mission Has Us

The church comes to be as the church engages in mission—as it crosses the boundary of Judaism to the Gentiles, and realizes that its mission is the very mission of God: to go into the world and be God’s saving, healing, challenging presence. This is why we can say, with Vatican II’s document on missionary activity, that the church is “missionary by its very nature.” Mission precedes the church. Mission is first of all God’s: God inside out in the world through the Spirit, God in Jesus teaching, healing, including, suffering. Almost incredibly—as an act of grace!—God shares that mission with women and men. Mission calls the church into being to serve God’s purposes in the world. The church does not have a mission, but the mission has a church.

Imagine what our church would be like if Christians really understood this and took this seriously. What it means is, first, that the church is not about the church. It is about what Jesus called the Reign of God. We are most church not when we are building up the church, but when we are outside of it: being good parents, being loving spouses, being diligent and honest in our workplace, treating our patients with care if we are health-workers, going the extra mile with our students if we are teachers, living lives responsible to the environment, being responsible citizens, sharing our resources with the needy, standing up for social justice, consciously using inclusive language, treating immigrants fairly, trying to understand people of other faiths, etc., etc. What we realize too is that people in the church don’t have a monopoly on working for the Reign of God. Maybe people don’t call it that, and maybe people are repulsed by the church. Nevertheless, they are our partners, our allies, and need to be our friends. St. Augustine said it

wonderfully, “Many whom God has, the Church does not have; and many whom the Church has, God does not have.”¹⁷

Imagine what the structure of the church would be like if we recognized that it is mission that needs to be first, and not the church. We need structure in the church, for it is a human institution, and all institutions need to be ordered. But if the mission has a church, then it is the mission that has ministry, not vice-versa. Ministry would exist for the mission and not for itself. So many things that bog us down today would simply fall away: clerical privilege, restrictions on lay people’s ministry, the role of women in the ministry and decision making in the church. What would be important is not people’s roles in the *church*, but how ministers might equip people for ministry in the world.

If mission precedes the church, and constitutes it as such, there will be no “passive” Christians. Baptism will be understood as the main “ordination,” giving every Christian the privilege and the duty to ministry through a life lived in witness of the gospel in the world. Mission will be understood as part of Christian life. It certainly includes, but is not restricted to going overseas, or immersing ourselves in exotic cultures or dangerous situations. Many people in the church are called to this. All Christians, though, are called to minister in ordinary and extraordinary ways in their daily lives.

Imagine how the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, might be celebrated. It would be the celebration of all the people of God, and it would be the result of, a preparation for, and an act of mission. As U.S. lay theologian Gregory Augustine Pierce has beautifully said, we don’t so much *go* to Eucharist as *come back* to

¹⁷Augustine, *De Baptismo*, 5.38, quoted in Richard P. McBrien, *The Church: The Evolution of Catholicism* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 51.

Eucharist, to celebrate, be strengthened for, and share our participation in God's mission in our everyday life. We bring our weaknesses in God's service, the needs of the people whom we meet, and the needs of the people of the whole world—even the wounded cosmos itself—to share with our Christian community. We receive consolation and inspiration from the scriptures and the paschal mystery for our work in the world. We welcome strangers, we celebrate beautifully, we always have something in our homilies for those who might be visiting, or “putting their toes in the water” by coming to our parish. The climax of the Eucharist is the dismissal rite, when we are once again sent forth on mission. Pierce's book is entitled *The Mass Is Never Ended*.¹⁸

Imagine, finally, how recognizing that the mission is primarily God's would ease our anxiety in the church. God has certainly given us the privilege of being co-workers, sacraments of God's movement of healing, reconciliation and life-giving in our world. Ultimately, though, the work is God's. We do our best, we work with all our hearts, but we can realize that is not all up to us. We don't have to burn ourselves out in ministry, we don't have to worry about our children not belonging to the church, we don't have to worry about the millions who will never belong to the church. As Vatican II says wisely—and the phrase is one of the favorites as well of Pope John Paul II—the Holy Spirit, in a way known only to God, offers all peoples ways of participating in the paschal mystery (GS 22).

¹⁸Gregory Augustine Pierce, *The Mass Is Never Ended* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2007).

Do You Want To Dance?

Do you want to dance? Do you want to join in that great Conga Line that has moved through the world since the beginning of time and which is also the heartbeat of God's deepest self? The dance will go on without us. It does not need us to continue its joyful progress among all peoples and in all times. But if we do join, we won't regret it. As we dance to bring wholeness and healing and peace in the world, we ourselves will become whole, be healed, and be graced with peace. Even if we don't join in the dance, we will be its beneficiaries. But the dance goes on, the movement which is God continues to move, God continues—joyfully, indefatigably—to be in mission. The dance has dancers, the verb has subjects, the Mission has a church.

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