Mission as the Nature of the Church: Developments in Catholic Ecclesiology

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Abstract: This article traces Catholic developments in an ecclesiology that recognizes the essential missionary nature of the church. Starting from Vatican II it treats various documents of papal magisterium, and then surveys selected documents of episcopal magisterium in the last fifty years. After a survey of Catholic theologians who build their ecclesiology on the church’s missionary nature, the author outlines in very brief detail his own project for the construction of a missionary ecclesiology.

Key Words: church, mission, Vatican II, ecclesiology, FABC, CELAM

The essential missionary nature of the church is a theological perspective that has not always been recognized as central in Catholic ecclesiological thinking. With the shift from an emphasis on the church’s institutional and hierarchical reality to an emphasis on the church as mystery and communion at Vatican II, ecclesiology has neglected the strong evangelizing and missionary emphasis in the Council’s final documents. Today, however, the crucial importance of the church’s missionary nature has begun to emerge with greater clarity, especially since ecclesiologists have begun to realize that Christians are called to be, in the words of Pope Francis, “missionary disciples” in a “community of missionary disciples.”

Perhaps it is time to bring the essential missionary nature of the church to the forefront of our ecclesiological reflections, given today’s global ecclesial reality on the one hand, and the “new chapter of evangelization” into which we have entered on the other.

What I would like to show in this article is that, despite the neglect of this essential missionary perspective, it does appear very clearly in both documents of the Magisterium—both papal and episcopal—and in theology since Vatican II. I will develop my reflections in four parts. Part I will survey the important thought of the Second Vatican Council on the church’s nature as mission. Part II will reflect on the topic as it is developed in post-conciliar papal teaching from Paul VI’s 1975 Evangelii Nuntiandi to Pope Francis’s 2013 Evangelii Gaudium. A third part will focus on the missionary ecclesiology of two Conferences of Roman Catholic Bishops—the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) and the Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM), and a final, fourth part will briefly examine representative ecclesiological developments of Roman Catholic theologians from 1965, immediately after Vatican II, until the present day.

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1 Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium (henceforth EG). All quotations from this and other Vatican documents are taken from the Vatican website www.vatican.va. I follow the translation provided by the Vatican website, but use more inclusive language when appropriate.

2 EG n.1.
MISSION AS THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH AT THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

Although the practice of mission was flourishing in Roman Catholic contexts in 1910 at the time of the Edinburgh Conference, there was little or no awareness among Catholics of the church’s essential missionary nature. Roman Catholic ecclesiology at that time was a product of reaction to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, a certain centralization of papal and Roman curial power in the aftermath of the Council of Trent (1545-63), and a strong development of the institutional understanding of the church over against the politics and culture of the nineteenth century that was solidified at the First Vatican Council in 1870 and the reaction to “Modernism” about 1907. The church, in official documents and approved textbooks of the time, saw itself as a “perfect society,” essentially monarchal and hierarchical. Ecclesiology, in the famous words of the great twentieth century French ecclesiologist Yves Congar, was “hierarchology.”

The years from 1919 to 1959 saw the publication of five “Mission Encyclicals” published by Popes Benedict XV, Pius XI, Pius XII, and John XXIII. These are important documents for understanding the development of missionary thinking in the Catholic Church, particularly in terms of appreciating the values of local cultures and the call for the establishment of an indigenous clergy. One might make the argument that these encyclicals presaged the Council’s statement that the “church is missionary by its very nature.” However, it might be more exact to conclude that although mission was of supreme importance in the church, for its task was to establish or “plant” the visible church with its hierarchy in all parts of the world, it was not yet seen as constitutive of the church itself. Such a perspective would depend on the Council’s more biblical, patristic, and Trinitarian perspective of ecclesiology, developed, in part, at least, as a result of the church’s growing ecumenical openness throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Yves Congar intimates, for example, that the pivotal statement on the church’s missionary nature quoted above—that “the pilgrim church is missionary by its very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit that it draws its origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father” (AG n.2)—is influenced as much by the Missio Dei theology of Willingen as it is by more traditional Catholic theology.

This powerful statement of the church’s missionary nature as rooted in the Trinity appears in one of the last documents to be approved by the Council, Ad Gentes. It is,

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4 Congar, Lay People in the Church 39.
6 Vatican Council II, Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church, Ad Gentes (henceforth AG) n.2.
7 This is, I believe, Kroeger’s point toward the end of his article, when he suggests that the Missio Encyclicals deal with “the missionary nature of the church.” See Kroeger, “Papal Mission Wisdom” 99.
9 The Decree was approved on December 7, 1965, the day before the Council concluded. See Stephen B. Bevans and Jeffrey Gros, Evangelization and Religious Freedom (New York / Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2009), 28.
however, I believe, the fruit of the Council’s deliberations and at the same time a lens through which its other documents can be read. A reading of the documents of the Council from a missiological/ecclesiological perspective, in fact, reveals just how central mission was to the Council, and its vision of the church.\(^\text{10}\) We can see this perspective in the four major Constitutions, in some other documents, and in the new “style” that the Council embraced.\(^\text{11}\)

**THE FOUR CONSTITUTIONS**

Each of the four Constitutions issued by the Council—documents that are recognized as the primary sources for interpreting the Council\(^\text{12}\)—begin with a missionary statement of one sort or another. The opening statement of the first document approved by the Council, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, articulates the four goals for the Council expressed by John XXIII in the years prior to the Council—goals that would enable the church “to present the gospel message to the world and explain it to human beings with the same power and immediacy that marked the first Pentecost.”\(^\text{13}\) The text reads:

> This sacred Council has several aims in view: it desires to impart an ever increasing vigour to the Christian life of the faithful; to adapt more suitably to the needs of our own times those institutions which are subject to change; to foster whatever can promote union among all who believe in Christ; to strengthen whatever can help to call the whole of mankind into the household of the Church. The Council therefore sees particularly cogent reasons for undertaking the reform and promotion of the liturgy.\(^\text{14}\)

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, is often interpreted as focusing on the internal, communion nature of the church, but in the light of *Ad Gentes* n.2 it presents as well a thoroughly missionary ecclesiology. It opens with a missionary vision. By proclaiming the gospel to the ends of the earth, it says in its first paragraph, Christ’s light will be shed on all peoples. The church is, as it were, a sacrament—not only a sign but also an instrument of the unity of God with humanity, and women and men with each other.\(^\text{15}\)

The Council’s Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, opens by saying that it intends, like the Councils of Trent and Vatican I, to present a teaching on divine Revelation and Tradition, “so that by hearing the message of salvation the whole world may believe; by believing it may hope; and by hoping it may love.”\(^\text{16}\) The document presents in

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\(^{10}\)This is my argument in “Revisiting Mission at Vatican II: Theology and Practice for Today’s Missionary Church,” *Theological Studies* 74 (2013) 261-83. The next several pages are based on several sections of this article.

\(^{11}\)Because of space, I am being quite sketchy with my evidence here. For more detail, see Bevans, “Revisiting Mission at Vatican II” 263-73.


\(^{15}\)Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (LG) n.1.

\(^{16}\)Vatican Council II, Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* (DV) n.1.
particular a more personal and dynamic understanding of God’s revelation as God’s call of humanity to friendship and relation. Australian theologian Ormond Rush notes that the change in the church’s presentation of Revelation is one more step “to renew and reform the Catholic Church ... for the sake of making the church a more effective sacrament of God’s mission in the world.”

Finally, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes, opens with the often-quoted statement that “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.” This document is one of the crowning achievements of the Council, like the document on mission one of the last to be approved, and is thoroughly imbued with an understanding of the church’s missionary nature. In a dramatic turn from the stance of the church just a century before, this Pastoral Constitution recognizes that to be church means to be engaged in dialogue with and transformation of the world in which it exists.

DECREES AND DECLARATIONS

We have already seen the most important statement from Ad Gentes—that the church is missionary by its very nature because of its participation in the life of the Trinity. While this missionary nature is realized specifically by preaching and witnessing among those peoples who have not yet accepted the gospel, the Council nevertheless includes in the missionary task “undertakings aimed at restoring unity among Christians ... because the divisions among Christians damages the most holy cause of preaching the gospel to every creature.” In the Declaration on non-Christian religions, Nostra Aetate, the Council acknowledges that the world’s religions “often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all peoples,” the church still “proclaims and ever must proclaim Christ”—no doubt due to its essential missionary nature. To give one more example from the Council’s documents, the Declaration on Religious Freedom, Dignitatis Humanae, while emphasizing that any religion, including Christianity, should not be imposed upon a people, nevertheless insists that “religious bodies ... have the right not to be hindered in their public teaching and witness to their faith.” For the church, this is of paramount importance given its essential missionary nature. The church exists to evangelize.

A NEW STYLE

Historian John W. O’Malley has insisted over the last several years that Vatican II adopted a new “style” in its conduct and communications. Rather than the language that reflected

19 Perhaps the strongest statement in this regard is in Pius IX’s Syllabus of Errors in 1863, n.80: “The Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism and modern civilization.” http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius09/p9syll.htm
20 AG n.6.
21 Vatican Council II, Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, Nostra Aetate (NA) n.2.
22 Vatican Council II, Declaration on Religious Freedom, Dignitatis Humanae (DH) n.4.
the isolated, institutional vision of itself—language of pessimism, juridicism, and dismissal of peoples beyond the church—the Council chose to conduct and express itself in ways that reflected the more open, more persuasive, more dialogical vision it had discovered. The Council’s documents, O’Malley points out, are filled with words like “brothers/sisters, friendship, cooperation, collaboration, partnership.” Such a vision, I would suggest, is one that comes from its understanding of itself as essentially missionary. The church exists to really communicate the gospel, not just to offer the world haughty proclamations or decrees.

MISSION AS THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH IN POST-CONCILIAR PAPAL DOCUMENTS

Evangelii Nuntiandi

Ten years after the Council, on December 8, 1975, Paul VI published the Apostolic Exhortation on evangelization in the modern world, Evangelii Nuntiandi. Although this document does not root the church’s missionary nature in its Trinitarian life—the notion of Missio Dei had been used to downplay the church’s role in mission—what is strongly developed is a passage in Lumen Gentium that speaks of a distinction between the church and the Reign of God, which it serves. The first chapter of the document is entitled “From Christ the Evangelizer to Evangelizing Church,” and the key idea in it is the passing on of the mission to preach, serve, and witness to the Reign of God from Jesus to the Christian community. Jesus “first of all proclaims a kingdom ... and this is so important that by comparison, everything else becomes ‘the rest’, which is ‘given in addition.’ After Jesus’ Resurrection, the ‘little flock’ ‘gather[s] together in Jesus’ name in order to seek together the Kingdom, build it up and live it’.” In this way, the church “prolongs and continues” Jesus mission of proclamation, sign, and witness. What this means is that “evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, its deepest identity. It exists to evangelize.” Mission, therefore, the church’s service to the Reign of God, is what gives the church its identity. Its nature, in other words, is missionary to the very core.

Redemptoris Missio

Fifteen years later, in 1990, Pope John Paul II issued his massive encyclical on the “permanent validity of the church’s missionary mandate,” Redemptoris Missio. Perhaps the most significant section for the theme of this chapter is found in Chapter 2, a chapter that focuses on “The Kingdom of God.” The pope’s concern is to emphasize not only the distinction between the church and the Reign (or Kingdom) of God, as Evangelii Nuntiandi did, but the close connection between the two, and the connection of both with Christ. While the church is not a separate reality from God’s Reign, the church is nevertheless

25 LG n.5.
26 Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi (EN) n.13.
27 Ibid. n.15.
28 Ibid. n.14.
distinct form it as the “seed, sign and instrument” of it. Nevertheless, the church “is not an end in itself.” The church’s task, in other words, rather than focusing on its own extension, exists to announce and inaugurate God’s Reign among all peoples. While the pope’s treatment is quite cautious, the fact that an entire chapter is dedicated to the relationship between church and Reign of God is immensely important for discerning in the document an ecclesiology that points in a definitely missional direction. The church’s existence is not for itself; it exists for another reason: to be the sacrament of God’s presence already revealed in Christ, and to continue Christ’s mission of preaching, serving, and witnessing to the eschatological fullness of that presence in history. The church does not properly, therefore, have a mission. The mission—God’s mission of redeeming, healing, loving the world—has a church to serve it.

**Evangelii Gaudium**

On November 26, 2013 Pope Francis published his much-anticipated Apostolic Exhortation in the wake of the 2012 Synod of Bishops on the “New Evangelization,” Evangelii Gaudium. This is a long, wide-ranging document of over 150 pages, but one of its key teachings is the missionary nature of the church. Reflecting on Pope John Paul’s insistence on the centrality of mission for the church, Francis says that if we would take his ideas seriously “we would realize that missionary outreach is paradigmatic for all the Church’s activity.” Referring to John Paul II once again, Francis makes the point that the church’s nature as a community is “profoundly interconnected” with its outreach in mission. Indeed, he speaks of the church time and again in the document as a “community of missionary disciples,” with other references to the church as an “evangelizing community” or a “missionary communion.” He insists that we can no longer think of ourselves as “disciples” and “missionaries,” but always together as “missionary disciples.” He dreams, he says, “of a ‘missionary option’, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for its preservation.” Although the Missio Dei perspective is not fully articulated in the Apostolic Exhortation, it is certainly implicit in it. The pope speaks of the church as evangelizing always as “an instrument of that divine grace which works unceasingly and inscrutably,” and insists that the “primacy of grace must be a beacon which constantly illuminates our reflections on evangelization.”

What we see here in these three major papal statements in the fifty years since the conclusion of the landmark Second Vatican Council is a remarkable consistency in emphasizing the nature of the church as missionary. As the popes explain it, the church’s

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30 Ibid. n.18.
31 EG n.15. Original emphasis.
32 Ibid. n.23, quoting John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici* n.32.
33 EG n.24.
34 Ibid. nn.24, 31.
35 Ibid. n.120.
36 Ibid. n.27.
37 Ibid. n.112.
missionary nature is lived out in its witness and proclamation, its public and private prayer life, in its commitment to justice, in its commitment to dialogue—interreligious, secular, and ecumenical—in work for inculturation, and in efforts of reconciliation.\(^{38}\) Mission is indeed the church’s “deepest identity.”\(^{39}\)

**MISSION AS THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH IN THE CATHOLIC EPISCOPAL MAGISTERIUM**

Roman Catholicism’s rich tradition of official, normative teaching is not confined to papal teaching. Since the Second Vatican Council there have emerged national conferences of bishops in many countries, and every area of the world has a kind of federation of these Episcopal conferences. This chapter will focus on two of these larger bodies of bishops, both of which have distinguished themselves in the articulation of a missionary ecclesiology. We will first survey the thinking in this regard of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) and then turn to the work of the Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM).

**THE FEDERATION OF ASIAN BISHOPS’ CONFERENCES**

Since 1974, representatives of bishops’ conferences from all over Asia have met regularly to discuss themes of importance for the Asian church. The meeting in 1974 was in preparation for a then-upcoming Synod of Bishops in Rome, which was to discuss evangelization (Evangelii Nuntiandi in 1975 was the fruit of this Synod). At their Asian meeting, the bishops produced a landmark document that laid out the motives and methods of the church’s mission in Asia. The document uses the “method” of Gaudium et Spes which is rooted in understanding the church as by nature missionary: the church does not exist for itself, but to be engaged in the world. A central idea that emerged, and which has marked all the FABC documents ever since, is the understanding that the church in Asia exists by engaging in a “triple dialogue”—with Asia’s religions, Asia’s cultures, and with Asia’s poor. Such engagement, the bishops say, will form the church community into one where Jesus’ memory is preserved, and Asian Christians will become “the sacrament of His presence in our midst, the sign of His shaping of the future of mankind [sic].”\(^{40}\)

In the end of the 1980s the distinction between the church and the Reign of God began to figure prominently in FABC documents, emerging in a major way at the conclusion of a theological consultation held in late 1991 by the FABC’s Office of Evangelization. Particularly in the light of John Paul II’s Redemptoris Missio, the participants spoke of the church in ways that implied its essential and constitutive missionary nature. The church is envisioned as a servant church, servant of the Reign of God, as the Reign’s “seed, sign and instrument” (quoting Redemptoris Missio 18), the church as its sacrament.\(^{41}\) The Church’s institutional reality is not the point of the church;

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38 See Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context* 348-95.
39 EN n.14.
41 Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, “Church Issues in Asia in the Context of Evangelization, Dialogue and Proclamation,” in Franz-Josef Ellers (ed.), *For All the Peoples of Asia, Volume 2: Federation of Asian Bishops’
rather “church structures were developed to support the mission of the church.” It is as sacrament, servant, and witness that the church lives out its identity. Even though this thoroughly missionary perspective does not appear with complete consistency in the FABC’s documents, it is a perspective that has emerged more clearly as its reflections have continued to develop over the years. At its last assembly in Vietnam in December, 2012, the Federation celebrated forty years of its existence with a document that both looked back on its work of four decades and focused on the importance of the “New Evangelization.” The document spoke of itself as a “community-in-mission,” a “disciple community,” rooted, as Ad Gentes n.2 proclaimed, in the Trinitarian life of Father, Son, and Spirit.

THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF LATIN AMERICA

The four General Conferences of the Latin American bishops at Medellín, Colombia (1968), Puebla de los Angeles, Mexico (1979), Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic (1992), and Aparecida, Brazil (2007) represent some of the most important moments not only in Latin American ecclesial reflection but also throughout the whole world. It was at Medellín where the emerging “theology of liberation” received official church sanction, and that sanction was debated and, to some extent muted at subsequent conferences. After Medellín, however, understandings of the church could never be the same. The bishops’ final message and the several hundred pages of the conference’s conclusions fairly bristle with the spirit of Gaudium et Spes and its perspective of a church of service.

The final document from the Puebla Conference cites evangelization as determining the church’s “identity and the originality of its contribution.” It is through evangelization that the church fulfils its role as universal sacrament of salvation and participant in the salvific dynamic of Trinitarian life. Puebla speaks of the church, in sum, as a people who “lives to evangelize.” The Santo Domingo Conference speaks of the church variously as “communion for mission,” a “missionary communion,” and a “missionary community.”

The most recent CELAM Conference in Aparecida, Brazil in 2007, spoke with particular urgency for an understanding of the missionary nature of the church, and of Christians as “missionary disciples.” One of the principal authors of the long final


42 Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, “Church Issues in Asia” 198, n.24.


44 Ibid. 56.


48 Ibid. n.224.

document was Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the present pope. Like the pope’s Apostolic Exhortation, there is great emphasis on the unity between communion and mission, or between being disciples and being missionaries. To be one is to be the other. The final document quotes Pope Benedict XVI’s Opening Address at the Conference, which spoke of discipleship and mission as “the two sides of a single coin.” Quoting the foundational statement of missionary ecclesiology in _Ad Gentes_ n.2, the document adds that “the missionary impulse is a necessary fruit of the life that the Trinity communicates to the disciples.” Or, from another perspective, the document quotes Puebla: “evangelization is a calling to participate in the communion of the Trinity.”

Should space permit, we could offer many more examples from the FABC and CELAM, as well as from other Episcopal Conferences and Federations throughout the world. What is clear, however, is that in the aftermath of Vatican II and _Ad Gentes_’ important statement, “to say ‘church,’” as the United States Bishops put it in 1986, “is to say ‘mission’.”

**MISSION AS THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH IN POST VATICAN II ECCLESIOLOGY**

Magisterial documents are important official statements of Catholic teaching, but they are by their nature relatively sketchy and directional. They need further theological scholarship for their development, and are dependent as well on such scholarship for their articulation. As Vatican II, for example, draws on an ecclesiological renaissance and ecumenical openness at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the early twentieth century, and ecclesiologists after Vatican II have offered more biblical, patristic, and theological perspectives on the missionary nature of the church. Naturally there have been tensions—some severe—between ecclesiologists and church leadership, but on the whole the tensions have been, on the balance, creative.

In 1967, two years after the close of the Council, Hans Küng published his major work on ecclesiology, _The Church_. Küng began by locating the foundation of the church in the context of the ministry of Jesus. Only in a much nuanced way, he said, can we speak of the church as founded by Jesus; rather, Jesus laid the foundations of the church in the context of his ministry of preaching the Reign of God. After Jesus’ death, as the disciples

51 Ibid. 347.
52 Ibid. 157, quoting Puebla Document (see Eagleson and Sharper), 218. I need to mention here that my friend Gioacchino Campese would probably disagree with my interpretation of Aparecida. See his (unpublished) article, “Modelli di missione e di chiesa nel documento della V conferenza generale dell’episcopato latinoamericano e dei caraibi.”
53 In 2005 I published a much longer survey of Roman and Episcopal magisterial teaching in this regard. It is, of course, outdated now and does not include any teaching beyond that date, but it is still useful. See Stephen Bevans, SVD, “Ecclesiology since Vatican II: From a Church with a Mission to a Missionary Church,” _Verbum SVD_ 46 (2005): 27-56.
gathered together in faith in his resurrection, did the church as such really begin to take shape as the community that understood itself as those who would share and continue Jesus’ Kingdom ministry.\(^{57}\) What becomes clear, and something on which Küng insists, is that the church is not to be identified with the Reign of God; it is rather its servant. “The meaning of the Church does not reside in itself, in what it is, but in what it is moving towards.”\(^{58}\) In other words, the church gets its existence, its \textit{raison d’etre}, form its mission: to preach, serve, and witness to the already-present but not yet fulfilled reality of God’s saving presence in the world.

The same Kingdom-focused perspective was even more clearly articulated in 1969 in Richard P. McBrien’s \textit{Do We Need the Church}? Building on the thought of Anglican John A. T. Robinson—we see here the ecumenical influence at work here once more—McBrien urged a “Copernican Revolution” in ecclesiology. The church needs to move from a “Ptolemaic,” self-centred understanding of itself to a “Copernican” self-understanding that is centred on the Reign of God. Only if the church is the community that comes into being as it becomes a sacrament of the Reign of God can it be said that we “need” the church. “Christians ‘need’ this church because it is the place where, by the choice of God, they ‘have been called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord’ (1Cor. 1.9) and through them ‘spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere’ (2Cor. 2.14). It is the place where they are called upon to become both sign and instrument.”\(^{59}\) As McBrien wrote on one of my papers when he taught me in graduate school, “missiology is ecclesiology.”

Such a dynamic understanding of the church’s sacramentality is presented by Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez in his ground-breaking work \textit{A Theology of Liberation}. Writing after the 1968 Medellín Conference and in response to the emerging theology of liberation, Gutiérrez’s chapter on the church was entitled “The Church: Sacrament of History.” Vatican II’s use of the term “sacrament” to describe the church, Gutiérrez said, was revolutionary, because it offered a totally new ecclesiological perspective that “uncentred” the church from preoccupation with itself and centred it on God’s saving work in the events and struggles of history.\(^{60}\) One understands the church, therefore, not in terms of itself, but in terms of its purpose, which is to announce to all humanity God’s saving presence in the midst of life, in the midst of history.

While Küng, McBrien, and Gutiérrez do not say it explicitly, their focusing of the church on God’s Reign and God’s saving work in the world implies as well a deeper understanding of \textit{Ad Gentes’} statement on the church’s missionary nature. A more explicit deepening of this statement—and connecting it with the sacramentality of the church and the church’s existence as servant of God’s Reign—was developed by US theologian Roger Haight in the context of a special issue of the journal \textit{Theological Studies} on the theme “Why the Church?”. Like Gutiérrez, Haight notes that the contemporary conviction that salvation is attainable outside the church “uncentres” the church from preoccupation with itself and focuses it on the reality of the Reign of God. Haight quotes British theologian Adrian Hastings, saying that it is “somewhat misleading” to speak about the church as

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\(^{58}\) Ibid. 96.


having a mission “as if the existence of the Church comes first.” On the contrary, “it is because of the mission that there is a church; ... The mission consequently dictates the nature of the Church and so far as the Church fails to live up to the demands of mission, it is effectively failing to be Church.”

Given the fact that women have been excluded from full participation in decision-making in the Catholic Church, women who are ecclesiologists are relatively rare, and women who deal with ecclesiological issues usually focus on the area of ministry. An exception to this, however, is an essay by US feminist theologian Mary Hines, in a collection that surveys Catholic systematic theology. Hines entitles her essay “Community for Liberation: Church,” and suggests that only an understanding of the church that is rooted in the service of the Reign of God—in mission—will be able to develop structures that truly sacrament what God is doing in the world. "The church’s mission," she writes, “is not well served by its present structures.” Structures must be in service of God’s mission, not vice-versa. Such a perspective has many ramifications beyond that of feminism, including important implications for mission in the service of unity.

In 2002 German theologian John Fuellenbach published The Church: Community for the Kingdom, in which he develops an understanding that the church is rooted in its mission to preach, serve, and witness to God’s Reign. The church’s existence is rooted in its discipleship of Jesus, and Jesus is rooted in his vision of God’s Reign. The only way that women and men can live out their discipleship today is by committing themselves to Jesus’ vision and live as sacraments of the Reign of God in today’s world. In 2003, British theologian Paul Lakeland in a book on the laity wrote powerfully of how the church should be a kind of community-in-mission. “While communion can be a very cozy notion upon which to meditate,” he writes, “the validity of the particular expression of communion in the church is to be found in the quality of that same community’s commitment to its mission.”

In 2007 Chicago pastor and theologian Patrick Brennan published The Mission Driven Parish in which he attempted to popularize and develop pastorally some of the missiological and ecclesiological principles that Roger Schroeder and I propose in our book Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today. Toward the beginning of the book, after a powerful, contemporary interpretation of the Reign of God, Brennan writes that “this is the mission that the church must be about. If we were serious about talking about, praying about, studying and conversing about God’s Reign, we would be dwelling

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63 John Fuellenbach, Church: Community for the Kingdom (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).


always on the ultimate meaning of life that Jesus communicated to us through his teaching, parables, and miracles.”

One of the finest works of ecclesiology to appear—at least in English—in the last several years is Richard R. Gaillardetz’s *Ecclesiology for a Global Church: A People Called and Sent*. While it is not explicitly missiological in its basic direction, it is imbued with a missiological spirit. Unlike many ecclesologies in which the mission of the church is the last aspect of the church that is treated, Gaillardetz reflects on the church’s mission already in the second chapter. The church is the community first called to carry on Jesus’ mission, and then sent into the world to be the sign of God’s presence among the diversity of the world’s cultures and religions. Gaillardetz’s ecclesiology is done in dialogue with representatives and movements of the global church: Samuel Ruiz in Mexico, the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, and Bishop Francisco Claver of the Philippines.

Australian theologians Neil Ormerod and Ormond Rush both work out of a mission-centred understanding of church. Ormerod writes that “a *missio* ecclesiology ... makes contact with Trinitarian theology, not in terms of *communion* and *perichoresis*, but in terms of *missio* and *processio*. Communion may be our eschatological end in the vision of God, but in the here and now of a pilgrim Church mission captures our ongoing historical responsibility.” Ormerod’s *Re-Visioning the Church*, was published in early 2014. While it is impossible in a summary article such as this to capture the rich complexity and richness of the book’s argument, a central theme that emerges is that the church exists in order to cooperate with the Trinitarian God’s mission of overcoming evil in the world through the power of redemptive suffering. Because of this, mission is what shapes the identity of the church and its ministerial structure. The first half of the book develops this basic theme under the inspiration of Bernard Lonergan and Robert Doran. The second half of the book brilliantly analyses the concrete history of the church by using the criterion of how the “operator” of mission has or has failed to shape the “integrator” of identity and structure. The book is truly a *tour de force*.

My own ambition is to write in the next several years a full-blown Roman Catholic ecclesiology that takes the church’s missionary nature even more seriously than does Gaillardetz in his landmark work. I sketched the outline of my project in an article I published in the journal *Theological Studies* in 2013. Ecclesiology, to my mind, should begin with the Mission of God, particularly the mission of the Spirit present from the first nanosecond of creation. The Spirit’s persuading, creative power is ultimately incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, whose mission concretizes what God has already been doing in the

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68 See Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church* 35-84.
70 See especially Ormerod, *Re-Visioning the Church* 99-113, 205.
71 See, e.g., Ormerod, *Re-Visioning the Church* 239.
72 Bevans, “Revisiting Mission at Vatican II.”
world from the very beginning. Jesus’ mission meets with rejection, but as he was anointed by the Spirit at the beginning, so too his disciples are anointed by the Spirit at Pentecost to carry on his work to the ends of the earth. Here we have the beginning of the church, God’s People in Mission, Christ’s Body in the World, God’s presence as the Temple of the Spirit. The church is first of all apostolic, missionary like the first disciples, and so works for the unity, unity-in-diversity, and holiness of the world. Structure in the church—laity, clergy, papacy—serves the church’s mission. My whole work aims to “unpack” that lapidary phrase of Vatican II: the church is missionary by its very nature.

CONCLUSION

As I hope the reader of this essay has come to see, the understanding of the nature of the church as mission is one that has flourished in Catholic contexts, even if it has flown somewhat under the radar. Perhaps with Pope Francis’s insistence that the church be one that “goes forth,”\(^\text{73}\) that is a “community of missionary disciples,”\(^\text{74}\) that is a community with its doors always open,\(^\text{75}\) that is a “poor church for the poor,”\(^\text{76}\) Catholic ecclesiologists in the future will work to develop an ecclesiology that systematically unpacks the spirit of the Council’s document on the church in the modern world, that grapples with the Council’s documents on the world’s religious ways, Christians from Protestant and Orthodox traditions, and religious freedom. Perhaps the ecclesiology of the future will unpack more fully and more systematically Ad Gentes’ great statement that, because it participates in the Trinity’s healing and saving mission, it is “missionary by its very nature.”

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\(^{73}\) EG nn.20-24.

\(^{74}\) Ibid. nn.119-21.

\(^{75}\) Ibid. nn.46-47.

\(^{76}\) Ibid. n.198.