An historian’s reflections on contemporary Catholic mission theology

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Through the study of mission history, we can come to appreciate the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church. What does it mean? Why is it important not only to study the past but to dialogue with it? This article explores, in a tentative way, answers to these questions. It examines mission theology in the decades since the end of Vatican II: presence and witness as part of the mission task; the importance of local cultures in creating local Churches; a respect for other religions and a call for dialogue; ecology; reconciliation; and globalisation. Dialoguing with the past means letting the missionaries of the past tell us how they saw what they were doing and why—their work and their spirituality. But it also means listening to the people responding to the missionaries, recognising and accepting the baggage from the past and being ready to ask forgiveness. In this way we can be proud of past accomplishments even while realising their limitations.

I have been teaching Church history for 40 plus years. I have truly enjoyed it and felt that I learned many new things with each course that I taught. Since most students come with a certain bias against history, I found that I had to persuade them of its importance.

I gave them many reasons why they should study it and why they would find it interesting. Among the goals that I always listed was coming to appreciate the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church (although one Filipino seminarian, after hearing me talk about the Arian controversies, thought I did not even believe in the Holy Spirit).

But this dialogue with the past must be not only with the missionaries as they saw themselves, but also with those they approached as they saw them.

In their eyes, the missionaries not only put down their culture, but also robbed them of their history. If they were to be Christians, it would be at the price of accepting the missionaries’ judgment on their culture. It is clear from research on the early development of the Catholic Church in Western Africa that the earliest converts came from those who were marginalised in their society—those who had nothing to lose culturally by becoming Christians.

But it is only in the last few years that I have been asking myself the question: what do I mean by that? And why do I constantly repeat that it is important for us not only to study the past, but to dialogue with it—and what do I mean by that?

I am hoping to explore in a tentative way answers to these questions in this article. This is just a superficial (but accurate—at least in terms of our present understandings, I hope) glance at our mission history.

I had two somewhat recent experiences which challenged me to pursue this topic. One was my commission to write two articles

As I struggled to summarise the two topics, I began to realise how even in my own thinking it is so easy to keep the two topics apart: to talk about mission and missions in its contemporary understanding without even a nod in the direction of history; and to look at history as if it is something in the past, which has no impact on our present understandings and activity.

A second experience was offering a seminar on missionary spirituality in 2001 at the Missionary Institute London. Eight of the 10 students were from Africa. One of the exercises in the seminar was to have them talk about their missionary heroes and heroines.

As the Africans did this, I was surprised not only at what I thought were caricatures of missionaries that were presented (and they were talking about their own experience and not that of their parents), but also at the deep resentment that was felt at the way the missionaries treated their cultures and their religious traditions in the past.

I guess I expected that since they had been in formation programmes already for several years, they would have had a more sympathetic understanding of what the missionaries were doing. It made me realise that dialogue with the past was not going to be an easy thing to do—nor was it always going to be pleasant.

**An historian’s look at contemporary mission theology—or, where have we come from and where are we going?**

Mission theology, like Jacques Brel, is alive and well, and living not only in Paris, but also in the six continents. An historian might describe the situation under three headings: developments that have come out of Vatican II; developments due to changing circumstances; and finally, the recognition and acknowledgement of the important role that the Holy Spirit plays in the development of mission and, therefore, of mission theology today.

Many of the developments of mission theology in the decades since the end of Vatican II can be grouped according to the three new insights that came out of *Ad Gentes* and *Nostra Aetate*.

The first new insight for Catholics was that presence and witness is already part of the mission task. For centuries, missionaries had been concerned about the corporal works of mercy; but these were often seen as pre-evangelisation, or a means of making converts.

However, *Ad Gentes* pointed out, and Paul VI later developed this in *Populorum Progressio*, that missionaries must be concerned about the full development of peoples for the sake of the kingdom, even when the gospel cannot be preached. This led mission theologians in the late 1960s and early 1970s to develop the theology of development.

Not only were missionaries in this period taken up with development projects, but some theologians were even suggesting that development was the new name for mission. Under this heading could be put liberation theology. It was the recognition that development, as it was being practised in the western nations and by western missionaries, was not working in Latin America, and that led Gustavo Gutierrez and others to realise that what was needed was not more development, but a change of unjust structures—liberation.

The literature of mission theology in the 1970s and 1980s was filled with books and articles that explored liberation theology, not only as it was developing in Latin America, but also in the African-American community in the United States of America, the women’s communities in the west and the minority communities in Asia.

A second new insight of *Ad Gentes* that impacted on the development of mission theology was that local cultures were good things and these are what made the Church local. This meant two things. First, the new Christian communities were to be citizens of their countries, active in its political development (a missionary in China in the early 1900s would have been surprised to hear this).

Secondly, they were to be at home in their culture and allow their Christian faith to be enriched by their cultural traditions and understandings. This was a sea-change in missionary thinking from the 19th century, when missionaries were still constricted by the condemnations resulting from the Rites Controversy.

The basis for this new respect for the local cultures was the acceptance of Justin’s teachings about the “seeded word of God.” Since the early 1980s, discussion on this topic has come under the heading of inculturation.

The third new insight of Vatican II that impacted on mission theology in the subsequent decades was found in *Nostra Aetate*: a respect for other religions and a call for dialogue. This was accepted in principle. Again, the theological basis offered was Justin’s “seeded word of God.” Guidelines have been laid down for dialogue; but an accepted theology of religious pluralism is still being worked out.
This is evident from the controversy surrounding the work of Jacques Dupuis and of the Congregation for the Faith’s Dominus Jesus. If inculturation seems to be the preoccupation of African theologians, then religious pluralism could be said to be the preoccupation of Asian theologians.

A second category of developments in mission theology since Vatican II could be described as issues that do not come from the insights of Vatican II, but from a changed situation in the world in which mission is lived and done.

The first issue which has attracted the attention of some mission theologians, especially since the late 1980s, is ecology. At every international meeting of missiologists since the early 1990s, this topic has at least been on the agenda of the meeting, if it has not actually dominated the meeting. The concern comes from the damage that is being done to our universe and the danger this poses for future generations. Australian Catholic theologians, such as Denis Edwards and Tony Kelly, continue to develop this theology.

A second issue which does not come out of the insights of Vatican II, but which has become prominent in the writings of mission theologians such as Robert Schreiter, is reconciliation. Over the past decades there has been an increase of violence due to ethnic and racial hatred.

The constant remembrance of the Holocaust is meant to make sure that something like that never happens again. Yet it has; and it has left peoples with a hatred for one another that makes reconciliation very difficult.

Many mission theologians, along with Robert Schreiter and Claude-Marie Barbour, are working not only to develop a theology that would underpin this ministry, but also a spirituality that would support one in carrying it out.

A third issue that has turned up in almost every recent missiological meeting is globalisation. Perhaps it is too early to summarise the thoughts of mission theologians on this topic. There is still a large variety of definitions; and there seems to be no agreement on its impact on the world and the Church. That such a process is taking place and that it is causing a cultural and identity crisis for peoples seems obvious; what one is to think about it, does not.

A final point in a historian’s summary of contemporary mission theology is that, in the writings of mission theologians since Vatican II, there is a more explicit acknowledgement that mission theology, like missionary activity itself, is under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Mission theology is always bound to be one of the most exciting disciplines to study, because its agenda is set not by the needs of the Church and the interests of theologians, but by the work of the Holy Spirit in the world.

This can possibly be seen in the leadership of John Paul II in his dealings with the Jews and other religious leaders. He does not seem to have been guided by theological insights carefully worked out, but rather has gone forward and invited religious leaders to pray with him for peace at Assisi and prayed with the Jews at the Western Wall of the Temple; he has left it to theologians to figure out on what theological basis he could do this.

Dialogue with the past: are there foundations for what we are doing?

What is meant by dialogue in this case? It means letting the past talk to us and our having a willingness to listen. We must be ready to let the actors in history describe, declaim and explain their experience. We must listen to them describe what they were doing and why—in a non-judgmental way. Our purpose is to know, understand and appreciate them and their activity. When we do this, we find that there are indeed foundations in our tradition for contemporary mission theology.

There are many different experiences that might be considered but in this article, I would like to focus on just three characteristics of missionaries in the past that provide foundations for what we are doing in mission today: concern for individuals; openness to circumstances; and emphasis on a profound spirituality.

In the long history of missionary activity, there are many examples of missionaries being concerned about the peoples to whom they went, concerned not only for the salvation of their souls, but also for the improvement of their lives.

From the Irish and Benedictine monks, who built their monasteries in the swamps and forests of Europe in order to develop the land and teach people farming, to the Franciscans, Dominicans and Augustinians, who went to Latin America and The Philippines and established their conventos with their schools to teach people reading, singing, and the industrial arts, these missionaries sought to improve the lives of the people, even when they were slow to become Christians.

Francis of Assisi was willing to let his friars go and serve among the Muslims, even though he knew they could not preach Christ. Francis Xavier, on his arrival in Goa, before preaching or baptising, went to the hospital to look after the dying.
But it was especially in the 19th and 20th centuries that the missionary movement took on this characteristic of care for the physical well-being of individuals. One has only to open the mission magazines of these times to read the stories about and see the photos of schools, clinics and hospitals.

While some sisters had come to Canada already in the mid-1600s, it was not until the 1800s that women began to go out in large numbers. Some congregations of women were founded specifically to serve in the foreign missions (as they were then called); others, like the Daughters of Charity, simply took the ministry they were doing in Europe and transferred it to wherever they were going, building schools, orphanages, clinics and hospitals. Their story is only beginning to be told now.

It was not only women who were engaged in this ministry of witness—development—liberation. Brothers also began to go out in the 19th century and establish schools and trade shops. They would educate young men to read and write, as well as to develop skills that they might need to make a living in the developing colonies.

Sometimes these Brothers would go to areas where there was little hope of making converts, but not always by their own choice, as can be seen in the Holy Cross Brothers’ work in Bangladesh (Pope Pius IX would only give final approval to their congregation if they accepted the mission in Bangladesh). However, they were there to improve the life of the people.

No doubt every missionary congregation can point to one or more of their missionaries who were engaged in this kind of ministry. One well-known example of this would be Damian de Vuerter. His volunteering to stay on Molokai with the lepers changed their lives. Where there was hopelessness and a disregard for their own lives, he brought the desire to care for themselves, to build houses, to respect one another and, eventually to bring a hospital that would stop the development of the disease.

These are just some of the people who in the past have shaped the identity of missionaries and with whom there must be dialogue. Perhaps the rapidity with which the Catholic Church embraced the missionary tasks of witness—development—liberation can be understood when their past history is considered.

In the past, there were also missionaries who, for the most part, have been open to unexpected circumstances and have adjusted their missionary task, or at least the focus of it, accordingly. The ancient Irish monks might fit into this category. They left Ireland not to convert peoples, but to “wander for the sake of Christ”—the highest form of asceticism that an Irish monk could practice.

But once they settled in Scotland, northern England, or on the Continent, they quickly found that for their own security they had to Christianize the people around them. Boniface might be a better example of a person who had to adapt to a missionary task he had not set out to do. He went to the continent from England to convert his Saxon cousins. However Rome directed him to reform and organize the Church in the Frankish Kingdom instead. And this he did in a most faithful way.

However, one need not look to the long-distant past to find missionaries who adapted to unexpected circumstances and developed new and creative ways of doing mission. No doubt every missionary congregation, male and female, can tell stories of such people.

The case of Constant Lieneux SJ is not exceptional. He worked in northeast India at the end of the 19th century. When he found that Indian landlords were oppressing the tribals, he studied law and then took the landlords to court to win the rights of the tribals.

Missionaries went out to preach and found themselves establishing institutions of higher learning. Sisters went out to heal and found themselves establishing teaching hospitals and training nurses. In Nigeria, in the late 19th century, a group of Spiritan missionaries were not sure what to do about the young men who were becoming Christians, but felt dislocated in their own villages, so they set up an institution to teach them farming. The English government was so impressed by this that it was even willing to give these French Catholic missionaries financial subsidies and government awards.

The stories of men and women, who did remarkable, but unexpected things in the 19th and 20th centuries, are legion. Missionaries became explorers, road-builders, well-diggers, farmers, nurses, doctors, airplane pilots, university professors, kindergarten teachers and many other things. This willingness to do whatever the circumstances demanded became a characteristic of modern missionaries.

Finally, missionaries of the past often talked about their spirituality. Their love of God and commitment to save souls prompted them both to go and to stay. Down through the centuries they would talk about it differently.

The Irish monks would focus on their asceticism and their commitment to auricular confession. The friars
going to Latin America would talk of their commitment to the poor and to the service of the truth (even if it meant using the Inquisition).

Francis Xavier wrote many letters to Ignatius articulating the spirituality he had developed through the Spiritual Exercises. Isaac Jogues spoke openly of his desire for martyrdom. Each of these would have reflected both the spirit of the times and the formation they received.

The missionaries of the 19th and 20th centuries also talk about their spirituality and it is one that was very much shaped by the devotional life of the times. They were dedicated to the Sacred Heart, a devotion they would spread around the world.

French missionaries, before leaving for their mission, would visit several churches in Paris. In each of them there was a statue or picture of Mary, which had spoken or cried or smiled; no missionary would venture forth without a deep devotion to Mary. There were also visits to the Blessed Sacrament—a desire to keep Jesus, the prisoner of love in the tabernacle, company. This form of devotion was often incorporated into the rules of many missionary congregations that were founded at this time. These were the devotions that nourished, refreshed and strengthened them, especially in difficult times. They were deeply spiritual people.

So dialogue with the past will put us in touch with missionaries who had some remarkable characteristics—a great concern for people, an openness to circumstances, and a deep spirituality.

The expressions of these characteristics may not be suitable for contemporary persons and times. But in them there is a basis for what the Catholic Church does today in mission. One can be grateful, not only for what they did, but also for the example they have given. Dialogue with the past can both refresh and strengthen today’s missionaries.

Dialogue with the past: is there baggage that we must acknowledge and accept?

Dialogue with the past, which focuses only on the good that was done and the sincerity and dedication of missionaries, is, however, only a selective dialogue. In many ways it is hearing only one voice. As mission is carried out in the future there must be constant dialogue, not only with other persons, religions and cultures in today’s world, but also with those who, in the past, were the people the missionaries approached.

In exploring this aspect the book of Rowan Williams, Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement, can be helpful. In his second chapter, entitled Remorse, he says: "Remorse involves thinking and imagining my identity through the ways in which I have become part of the self-representation of others, groups or individuals; and so learning to see me (or our) present style of self-presentation as open to question. It is in some degree to make internal to myself what I have been in the eyes of another" (p110).

Rowan Williams is saying that we all have a self-representation of ourselves in which we see our motives and our actions through our own eyes. But generally we do not connect with our identity or personal history the impact that we have on others as they see it. He suggests that when we can do this, our response often will be remorse.

In our dialogue with the past, it is important that we look not only at the missionaries’ self-representation through their own eyes, but also at their actions through the eyes of those on whom they have had an impact. Three examples can serve as illustrations of what this means.

Throughout missionary history, with some exceptions along the way, missionaries have had an enthusiasm to make converts. They used a variety of means—and always for a good purpose. When Charlemagne gave the Saxons the choice of baptism or death or when the Crusaders drove the Wends into the river with their swords to be baptised, it was because they believed that a Christian prince could rule only over Christians and so they had to be either baptised or killed. They saw nothing evil in this; baptism would be to the benefit of those upon whom it was imposed.

Missionaries going out in the 19th and 20th centuries also were enthusiastic for converts. The sword was no longer used. But often their service was provided in a way to entice converts. Orphanages were established, not only to care for abandoned children, but also to raise and form good Christians.

Famine relief at the times of the terrible famines in China (nine million died in the famines of the late 19th century) and India was meant to provide for the sustenance of the Christian communities. They felt obliged to help out their own first; and if this encouraged others to become Christians—rice Christians, as they were known—this was fine with them. They built schools and funded teachers to educate the children; however, becoming a Christian was often a pre-requisite for entering the school. And the list could go on.

This is not to criticise the missionaries. It is important
to understand their thinking and put them in their context. But in dialogue with the past, it is important to see the missionaries not only as they saw themselves, but also as others saw them. And the people who observed them, unfortunately, did not always say: See how they love one another and provide for one another. Rather they often said: If I want what they can provide I must first become a Christian.

Because of their need, they felt they had no choice. For this behaviour, we need to feel remorse. Ad Gentes insisted in the most explicit terms that charity must be charity and people must not be enticed to become converts. In some ways the judgment on this manner of acting can be seen in the violence which is sometimes expressed towards Christians in the former mission territories.

A second example of the missionary approach which might have been seen differently by the missionaries and by the people they approached would be the nationalism and sense of cultural superiority which the missionaries communicated.

This did not just begin in the 19th and 20th centuries. It was present already in the arguments that Remigius of Rheims used to persuade Clovis to become Christian in the fifth century, in the cultural impositions that the German priests and bishops made on the Moravians in the ninth century, in the letter the pope sent to the Khan in the 12th century inviting him to submit to the papacy, in the Spanish language, culture and even city planning that the missionaries brought to Latin America and the Philippines.

But this attitude was especially prevalent in the 19th and 20th centuries. Missionaries for the most part went out under, if not actually wrapped in, their national flags. They claimed lands and people for their national sovereigns. They believed the people had no culture, or a very underdeveloped one, and so they meant to provide them with one.

One can smile today at the instructions given to a group of Anglican missionaries who were going to Uganda in the late 19th century, as they were told to be sure to play cricket regularly, because it would have a humanising effect on the natives. But it was the conviction of the missionaries that the more the people they approached became like them, the more civilised and cultured they would be. They even presumed quite regularly that these people were impoverished by having no history of their own and so they wanted to enrich them by sharing their own history.

This is offered not to judge the missionaries; in our dialogue with the past it is important to see them in the context of their times. But this dialogue with the past must be not only with the missionaries as they saw themselves, but also with those they approached as they saw them.

In their eyes, the missionaries not only put down their culture, but also robbed them of their history. If they were to be Christians, it would be at the price of accepting the missionaries' judgment on their culture. It is clear from research on the early development of the Catholic Church in Western Africa that the earliest converts came from those who were marginalised in their society—those who had nothing to lose culturally by becoming Christians.

The resentment to what missionaries did through this attitude is still felt today among many Christians. And for the damage that was done there is a need to feel remorse.

A final example of a missionary approach that might have been seen differently by the missionaries and those they approached would be their judgments about the religious attitudes and expressions of the people to whom they were reaching out.

The missionary movement, with some rare exceptions, does not have a good record on this point. The advice of Gregory the Great to Melitus not to destroy the sacred places, but just change their content, is often quoted. The approach of Roberto de Nobili, who identified himself with the Brahmin caste, became a sanñyasi and studied the Vedas, is offered as an example of cultural sensitivity.

But for the most part Catholic history is one of violent destruction, from Martin of Tours in the fourth century, who cut down sacred trees and 15th century, who forced Moctezuma to empty his temple so that he could put a shrine to Mary there, to Francis Xavier in the 16th century, who had the children bring out their parents' sacred pictures or images so that he could burn them when he was on the Fisheries Coast of India.

This attitude continued to be expressed by the missionaries who went out in the 19th and 20th centuries. They were not in a position always to destroy the sacred images or desecrate the sacred places; but they could attack the people for being idolatrous and superstitious. Often without understanding the religious significance of certain customs and rituals, they would simply forbid them (one thinks about the veneration of ancestors).

One can understand the conviction of the missionaries who believed that they alone had the truth and that all other worship was false and idolatrous. But one can also understand how the people perceived this, seeing
their traditions despised and their religious experiences discounted. And one can feel remorse for the hurt that was done as one listens to the pain that is expressed.

Conclusion

In the last part of the paper, I have focussed on the way missionaries have been seen by others and the remorse that can be felt. I think this is important. Rowan Williams writes:

...what is most fundamentally required...is the relinquishment of an identity placed beyond challenge or judgment, and the moving into a sense of identity that admits not simple guilt but the manifold ways in which we are real in the language and narrative of others rather than in a privately scripted and controlled story. This admission is unavoidably and painfully a loss of power" (p111).

One of the characteristics of today's missionary movement is that missionaries for the most part undertake their task not from a position of power but of weakness. This is true in a political sense. Missionaries in the past would have found themselves supported and protected by the colonial or national powers. The missionaries' claim to this protection might not always have been as blatant as it was at the time of the French Religious Protectorate in China. But today's missionaries are coming from countries that are politically weaker than the countries to which they are going.

This is true also in an economic sense. Previously, missionaries coming from Europe and the US could sense the power they had from their economic resources. They not only could support themselves, but they could erect buildings, develop programmes, pay mission personnel and exercise economic control. But this too is no longer true, at least among Catholic missionaries. Today's and tomorrow's missionaries are coming from poor African and Asian countries. These are facts, and it is important that missionaries embrace this loss of power. It is a difficult position to be in. But through dialogue with our past and through the remorse that needs to be felt, it is possible to accept, if not actually embrace, this loss of power.

There are also two other conclusions that can be drawn from dialogue with the past. First, the missionaries today can reclaim its heroes and heroines from the past without embarrassment and be grateful for the example they have given.

Dialogue with the past means not only letting the impact of the missionaries' actions on others in the past become part of our story and thus sense remorse, but it also means putting the missionaries in the past in their own context and appreciating them for who they were in themselves. Today's missionaries can be challenged by their commitment to serve and their flexibility and creativity in the way they served, and they can be inspired by their deep spirituality.

Finally, a sincere dialogue with the past will give missionaries a new freedom to choose new and different paths in going forward. For it is only in their sincere dialogue with the past that they can find the freedom to follow the Spirit wherever it might lead.

We have learned from history that the guidance of the Spirit does not mean missionaries will never make mistakes. These must be recognised when they happen and there must always be an openness to a questioning that suggests they might happen again. But the guidance of the Spirit means that missionaries will be nourished in their commitment and be creative in their ways of bringing the Gospel to others.

FURTHER READINGS

- NEMER, L, Anglican and Roman Catholic Attitudes on Missions, (St Augustine: Steyler Verlag, 1981)