Interpreting Mission Today and into the Future
The Impact of Culture

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I bow my head in acknowledgement and gratitude to all the Irish missionaries, both men and women, for the immense good they have done in different parts of the world, more so, in Asia. Though they have not contributed much to the gene pool of Asia as they did elsewhere, their role in the spread of the faith and for the betterment of the quality of life in Asia through their initiatives in education, health care, as well as through the many welfare services for mitigating suffering and exclusion, is remarkable.

Since this paper is presented in the context of the conference on Mission and Development, jointly organized by Misean Cara, Irish Missionary Union and Kimmage Development Studies Centre, I will speak about Mission Today and Tomorrow, integrating also the biblical basis for the mission of holistic development so that the paper can become a sort of background material for the Conference.

Prophetic Contemplation

Tom Lynch SVD, an Irish missionary to India, was the founder and inmate of an Indian Ashram for over 40 years. By nature he had a contemplative bent of mind that he inherited from the Celtic spirit what made him unique was his contemplativeness and Mysticism, characteristic to Indian way of mission and witnessing.

Mission in Asia must take into account the rich and varied forms of prayer and mysticism enshrined in the Asian philosophical and theological systems. Contemplation and mysticism have a natural appeal to the masses in India. The recent Mahakumbhamela (Religious gathering) at the auspicious confluence of three rivers at Prayag, Allahabad, India that attracted over 300 million people from all over India, led by Sannyasis and spiritual persons speak for the impact that genuine spirituality can have on the Indian mind even if mixed with popular devotion and cultic elements.

What is to be noted is that Fr. Tom encountered God not in a beautifully ornamented western chapel but in the vast expanse of the Dhar desert in Madhyapradesh, India, where his Ashram was situated. Fr. Tom reminds me how Jesus himself had his forty day retreat in the wilderness with the serene sky and solitude. The desert, the wide terrain, enormously wide, flat, dry land covered in low scrub. There he had the immediacy of God whom he experienced as his intimate parent – abba, who anointed him at the moment of his baptism for his messianic mission.

Desert has attracted hermits, monks and saints. Why? Because in the desert you experience the immediacy of God in silence, in timelessness. It is a place of spiritual power where the Australian Aboriginal people and many others experienced the divine presence for over 50000 years.

In our modern culture in suburban Dublin, God is to be experienced and listened for, not as Michael Angelo’s old man, but the awesome, omnipresent, encompassing God who is so near with God’s
constant presence. We have to be open to this God, the immense Mystery, whom we can never grasp fully, nor God’s ways. The best we can say is ‘netti-netti’, not this not that, the apophatic approach of Pseudo-Dionysius, except for what we have experienced in Jesus Christ. That experience, as we shall see later, calls for mission, not for denying the God-experience of others.

Probably fractal geometry can teach us more about God than St. Patrick’s shamrock leaf that surely had relevance in those days. God is beyond the range of human concepts and categories, “beyond all being and knowledge” (St. Augustine). Fractals, the mathematical shapes discovered by Benoit Mandelbrot, enable us to understand the infinite complexity of nature. Each natural object has a shape, yet different from others. This is only a remote comparison to the divine being. This in turn must make us infinitely humble, and open – *mutational people* – i.e., people capable of making the transition leading to a new passage into the world of the future, rather than arrogantly holding that only our understanding of God is the right one and it is the exhaustive understanding of God!

At this point I may point out how the North African church of the early centuries that was too busy with theological obsessions got decimated while the St. Thomas Christians of India who were in the least involved in doctrinal issues, but focused only on worship and life, have survived and continue to flourish to our own days. We must collaborate in the shared re-appropriation of the divine in the weakness of wonder and the sense of Mystery that made Moses cry out at the burning bush: “I must turn aside and see what this great sight is!” (Ex 3:3). We have to be dedicated to recognize the divine as it is manifested in our secular society where more and more people tend to describe themselves as “nones.”

Realizing how “everything came through him and neither was anything made without him” (Jn 1:3), mission today has to be open to all religious traditions and cultures. Forms of exclusivism and even the so-called preparation and fulfillment theory, are to be fine-tuned. I may add also that some mission theologians refer to the “ray of truth” present in other religions or that they have a certain influence of the “Spirit of God,” or the “Word of God.” There is some sort of hidden paternalism present in these approaches and we must admit openly that all genuine religious traditions are part of the divine plan, even if they are also subject to human selfishness, even as Christianity also is not free from that, which does not minimize the significance of Christian service, but always in the spirit of partnership.

**The Language of Salvation**

As all other missionaries, the Irish missionaries too went out to save, if not the “heathens,” the non-Christians. Fr. Pete Melony SVD, had great love for the people of India and he loved them so much that he had no difficulty in sharing their food and drink, to the extent of damaging his health, compelling him to return to Ireland. However, there was no mistaking the fact that he had come to India, a mission country, to save the souls of as many people as possible. Vatican II expressed this motive by saying: “Therefore, all must be converted to Him, made known by the Church’s preaching, and all must be incorporated into Him by baptism, and into the Church which is his body” (AG 7). The church was necessary for salvation and through baptism, as though through a door, all must enter this community of the saved. As successors of the Hiberno-Scottish mission led by the great Columcille who founded the Iona monastery in 563, and continued by Columbanus and his twelve companions, giving rise to Celtic Christianity, the Irish missionaries never had any doubt about their motive.
However, we have to be aware how the Ad Gentes’ theology of mission was not free from its colonial precedents and that Vatican II’s mission theology is spread out in other documents as well. Today we have to use a language that is more familiar to the people and less offensive to them and in conformity with the bible.

Jesus explained his mission as good news to the poor, and spelt it out in terms of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and as the acceptable year of the Lord (Lk 4:18-19). It was a celebration of life, to have it to the full, already now and transform the world so that it sustains life in its fullness, for individuals, for societies and for creation. In fact Jesus made that as the defining characteristic of his mission. When the disciples of John the Baptist approached him enquiring if he were indeed the Messiah, Jesus replies to them using the same language (Lk 7:20-23, Mt 11:4-6). That theme is reflected again in the last judgment scene as we have in Matthew 25:31-46.

The first point to be noticed is that Jesus uses the Jubilee language of the Old Testament. Jesus quotes directly Isaiah 61.1-2 that was part of the synagogue reading for the feast of Jubilee in the Old Testament times. By quoting this very passage Jesus is claiming how the Jubilee, the acceptable year of the Lord, has come in him. The Jubilee was good news to the poor insofar as the main elements of Jubilee were the return of the land as well as the freeing of the slaves and giving them sufficient means of livelihood. The poor benefitted by the arrival of Jubilee. It was a divine revolution to retrieve the original equality and fraternity, which the Israelites enjoyed when all had their own fig trees and vineyard (1Kgs 4:25), a symbolic expression of social and economic well-being. Due to human weakness, this ideal situation could be destroyed. However, God did not want such an unnatural situation to continue endlessly and hence, we have the Jubilee prescription.

At the time of Jesus, the poor, the blind, the lame and the bonded were eking out a dehumanizing existence insofar as they had to beg for their livelihood – they were not considered to be fully human. By healing them and restoring them to their ability to fend for themselves, Jesus not only enhanced their life but also their human dignity. Jesus’ respect for human dignity is manifested also in the oft-repeated table fellowship with the excluded of the society. In fact even the last supper has to be seen in the light of these table fellowships as hinted also by St. Paul (1Cor 11:20ff). It is sad that even today this aspect of the Eucharist is not perceived by many. In the light of the ministry of Jesus we have to re-write our missionary purposes as full human life for all on earth with all its glory and dignity. By this we would include not only ecology but also the transcendental dimension of human life that is integral to the dignity and rights of human persons.

Even the all-too familiar Sabbath disputes in the gospels, a major contributive reason for Jesus’ arrest and killing (Mk 3:6), is, in fact, a relativizing of the Divine in terms of the human person. For the Jews, the Sabbath rules could not be broken since they were given by God, the Absolute. But Jesus’ standard attitude is, the Sabbath is made for human beings, for their well-being. The same respect for human persons is manifested in Jesus’ approach to the many purity pollution laws as well. Restoring the dignity of the human person was his mission manifesto (Lk 4:18-19); it was his very Messianic identity (Lk 7:22-
Elsewhere he summarized the law and the prophets in terms of the respectful treatment of the neighbour: “So always treat others as you would like them to treat you; that is the meaning of the Law and the Prophets” (Mt 7:12).

In the context of the Old Testament expectations Jesus spoke of the divine reign, the Kingdom of God as the core of his message (Mk 1:14; Mt 4:17; Lk 4:43). Though Israel was restored to its own land from exile in Babylonia, it continued to experience suffering under foreign overlords, which was interpreted as punishment for Israel’s sins. Hence, the promise of forgiveness spoken by the exilic prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, continued to ignite the hopes of Israel, making the post-exilic prophets speak of the liberation still to be completed.¹ They described this liberation by employing the language of the return from exile: the new exodus, when God would rule as the absolute ruler over Israel. Jesus begins his ministry claiming that that rule has dawned with his ministry. Resurrection, in the Marcan gospel, as in other gospels and the Acts, is the sign that God has vindicated Jesus and his deeds and words, and thereby, the coming of the divine reign through him. Jesus’ resurrection affirms God’s kingdom has been launched on earth as it is in heaven.² What happened in Jesus should be repeated through the disciples, for the world.

What is to be noted is that the coming of the divine reign in and through Jesus is not a set of truths or a new religion, but the practice of radical love towards others as the pinnacle of Israel’s story and its climax, its decisive moment.³ The entire ministry of Jesus is a systematic unfolding of the divine reign, though radically different from the prevailing expectations. He showed through his ministry how the Kingdom would look and how his followers could associate themselves with him in this work by reversing the situations of those who are poor, who mourn, who hunger, the voiceless, by their compassionate and selfless service (Mt 5:3-11).⁴ Through the mission of his disciples the poor of all times must experience the coming of the Kingdom.

Frequently scriptural commentators present the Johannine gospel as a spiritual one in contrast to the synoptics. However, even the fourth gospel is to be understood from the perspective of radical love and righteousness towards the poor. The key text is John 3:16: “God so loved the world ... whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” This verse is to be read along with the following verses, more so vs.20:

For all who do evil hate the light, and do not come to the light, lest their deeds should be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been wrought in God.

Eternal life results from an engagement with the world choosing the deeds of light over those of evil. It is a question of how one responds to people and structures that are dark, evil and bring death to the world.

Mission Today
To begin with, to be a Christian is a call to follow Jesus in his mission. Vatican II placed mission at the core of the Church by saying that it is missionary by its very nature (AG 2; LG 2-5). The theme of mission comes through every conciliar document. Though there is always the need for intercultural and “professional” missionaries to have communities of the disciples everywhere culturally and geographically, every Christian is called to share the mission of reaching out to the neighbor with radical love and service and thus sacramentalising the love of God made present in Jesus Christ. In so far as the very Incarnation and ministry of Jesus was the affirmation of the human person, Christianity is a human centered religion. While all religions believe in God, Christianity tells how the way to God is through one’s neighbour.

Contrary to the common presumption of the God of sending, what we have in the bible is a God of constant reaching out. Though we have instances of God’s calling and sending, they are all manifestation of the God whose narrative is: “I have seen their affliction, I have heard their cry” (Ex 3:7). The biblical narratives of creation, covenants, sending of prophets and the sending of God’s Word Incarnate, are the spelling out of this divine-self reaching out, “God with us” (Mt 1:23). By his constant reaching out to the poor, to the afflicted, to the marginalized, Jesus manifests God and can say ultimately: “Those who have seen me have seen the Father” (Jn 12:45; 14:9). Thus, God is mission, self-reaching out. Mission is the ecstasy of God! Vatican II expressed this in terms of God being a “fount-like love” (AG 2).

In our changing cultural context, teeming with death and death-dealing forces, such as violence, war, or utter selfishness, especially in Asia, mission is life-centered ministry. Despite all talk of development and progress, impressive as it is, more than 40% of Asians are excluded from a life style that is consonant with human dignity, whether it is a question of the denial of genuine freedom, or the equal availability of opportunities for all in decision making and in resources (not only the resources of the earth, but also other resources like health-care, education, housing, and others), or the human rights as defined by the United Nations. God’s concern for the wholeness of life for all that was manifested in Jesus Christ, has to be continued through the work of the community of his disciples. The expression of it, the ways in which we seek to have it and nourish it, naturally, will depend on the context.

Such a life-centered service will lead to the transformation of the civil society with the emphasis on justice and the practice of human rights. As the WCC’s Affirmation on Mission & Evangelism put it: “The church is the gift of God to the world for its transformation towards the Kingdom of God.” The church carefully maintains the openness to the world that Gaudium et Spes ushered. The church is for the sake of the world, to be at its service, so that the world becomes a campus of God’s reign. Authors like Bryant

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L. Myers speak of Transformational development, a change in the whole of human life materially, socially, psychologically and spiritually.

The significance of mission to the civil society can be understood only when we realize that that the purpose of mission is transformation of the world and not the growth of the church or the safeguarding of its interests. The church is called to be the salt, light and leaven to the world. The Kingdom movement is at the service to the society at large. Nothing is outside the radius of the Kingdom transformation. Even as Jesus’ mission was not a self-proclamation or the expansion of his own interests, today mission is not primarily a question of the growth of the church or its wellbeing, but that of God’s interest and God’s reign for the world. This idea is at the root of Vatican II’s description of the church as the sacrament of intimate union with God and the unity of all humankind (LG 1). The church is important, not for its own sake, but for the sake of God’s reaching out to the world.

For this we will have to foster, what David J. Kettle named, a “garden spirituality,” as opposed to a spirit that spontaneously multiplies in the world. Formerly we used to speak about “the frontier” missionaries. In today’s context, the frontier is not so much the Christian faith as opposed to other religions, as much as the ideas and values that are dissonant with the Kingdom values. This implies a prophetic denunciation of all that is truncating life, marginalizing and exploiting others. Our theological discussions and reflections are not to be confined to theological schools and universities but must influence the decision making bodies in public life, such as city councils and board rooms.

The fundamental malaise of our culture, also in Asia, is the lack of hope, while the basic call of the Gospel is a call to hope. This has to be at the root of any reflection on mission today and tomorrow. Pope Benedict XVI in his Spe Salvi highlighted hope as the critical virtue of Christian life and suggested it distinguished Christian existence from others. The church must become a roadmap for the people of our times in their journey through life. In the face of unbridled consumeristic drive, fostering narcissm and exploitation of the needy the gospel can become an inspiration for altruism that Jesus Christ offered on the cross as “the ultimate encounter between God and the power of human evasion.” He went to the extent of losing himself that others might have life and this in turn made God’s affirmation of him by raising him from the dead, the basis of all hope.

In sharp contrast to the existing hopelessness and alienation Christians can reach out to others with genuine hospitality, reminding all of God’s own hospitality for all. Refugees and internationally displaced persons have become a challenge to Christian mission. Christian hospitality can prove to be a harbinger of hope especially when it is extended to situations of homelessness, rejection, those seeking refuge and so on. Christian hospitality has to be extended even to the unborn through our pro-life movements.

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An important expression of hospitality in our times is the reaching out in genuine friendship to migrants and asylum seekers. This becomes all the more significant in the context of the process of globalization and the search for better economic prospects, if not to escape sheer hunger, poverty or violence. We can become catalysts in their search not only to find a house to stay in but to make a home there. Frequently we come across the need for peace in the world. However, there cannot be genuine peace without justice. In the bible justice precedes peace: peace to the people of good will! Christian mission has to be at the forefront of creating a just society where each can live with the God-given dignity, where his/her rights are accepted and respected. The Christian approach to justice is animated by a radical love in so far as the social transformation Jesus initiated is based on radical love. This made Jesus to reach out to the periphery. Jesus’ reaching out to the periphery reminds us of God’s own exodus to the poor, the victims of the Egyptian oppression. In the context of speaking about mission the talk of periphery is significant in as much as formerly mission was directed to the periphery, but today we realize the need to accept the mission from the periphery. We cannot ignore the fact how mission in the apostolic times was a movement from the periphery. We could speak of the need to have an exodus from the centers of power and importance to the insignificant people who do not count for much. Associated with such a shift is also the exodus from self-centeredness to other-centeredness.

As Fiorenza Schussler has underlined, the focal point of the early Christian self-understanding was a relationship, and not any rite or book. It was a relationship based on the experience of God’s presence in and among them and through one another. With regard to the early church we notice that the proclamation of the gospel brought about first a communitarian or relational change forming a church, along with a transformation in the life pattern of the individuals and the society, as the breaking in of the divine reign. This relationship Jesus described in the gospels as a wedding feast. For the Semitics, as for Asians, especially in those days, wedding was a time when close and distant relations gathered together for celebration for several days. It was not an occasion to be confined to a catered reception dinner, as we have today. This in turn, challenges us to a series of relationship of concentric circles, with deeper understanding and cooperation for the realization of the divine reign.

Women in Asia, as elsewhere, are victims of the patriarchal paradigms, imposed marginality and invisibility. They are the poorest of the poor in Asia as they suffer a double discrimination, the woes of discrimination against the poor and as women, doing most of the household chores, like drawing water, fetching firewood, cleaning and washing as well as other duties. We witness heinous crimes against women in various countries. Obviously the world continues on a path of patriarchal domination. Christian mission is not only liberating women from patriarchal structures in general but also within the Christian society and structures. Our advocacy can create the necessary changes to usher in a social order that will accord respect and dignity to women.

Speaking about the role of women in apostolic times, Schussler draws our attention to the fact that though the primary interest of Luke in writing the Acts of the Apostles was to highlight the words and

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10 Schussler, 345
deeds of Paul and Peter, we do come across women not just auxiliaries, “but as prominent leaders and missionaries who – in their own right – toiled for the gospel.” Aloysius Pieris describes the gender and racial equality in the early church imaginatively by qualifying the basic sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist as “sacraments of social transformation.” The experience of God’s gracious goodness in the life and ministry of Jesus must enable the church to radical openness that does not allow room for any member to feel marginalized or excluded.

The youth everywhere experience a feeling of uncertainty and distress in their search for meaning in the face of anxiety and uncertainty, broken homes, rejection from the economic system, marginalization from the religious system and the need to be affirmed and acknowledged. They become skeptical about the content of the faith that they have inherited, looking more like an information-package than a living experience. They fail to recognize the existential relevance of it in their life. Are we prepared to walk with them as the Lord accompanied the dejected disciples at Emmaus? We need to learn to understand young people, their language and culture, or else we stand in danger of losing future generations. We have to guard against providing answers which are irrelevant to the youth. We must be capable of deciphering their “emotional alphabet.”

Jonathan Sacks narrates a story given by John von Neuman to prove that maximum wealth is produced not when people act out of selfishness, as Adam Smith is attributed to have advocated, but when people act with mutual trust and communication. I am of the view that this is very true of our mission of ringing in the divine reign. Police arrested two men on suspicion of a serious crime. But failing to get any evidence from the two, the police separated them without any communication and offered them the following choice. If one of them informs about the other and the other keeps silent, the informant would go free and the silent one would get ten years of imprisonment. If both inform, both will get five years each. If both were silent both would get one year each. The result was that each got five years as each one could not trust the other since there was no communication between the two, though the best choice would have been to keep silent and go with one year! Thus Neumann challenged the Smithian theory of wealth production based on selfish interest.

I would suggest this is true of the church service to the contemporary culture as well. The maximum cultural transformation, and thus, making the cultures more Kingdom like, can be achieved only by communicating and cooperating with all in trust.

A practical consequence of this need for collaboration is the wider ecumenism in relation to other religions. We have to reassure the followers of other religions that Christian service is not directed against their religions or to displace them. In the past somehow mission was seen as a threat to other religions, as it was feared, with justification, that the church with its claim of being the only revealed religion was trying to dislodge other religions. We need to be sensitive to our times and the feelings of

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11 Schussler, 161.
the followers of these religions. In the light of the Johannine gospel, as we saw earlier, we have to realize that the followers of these religions are also enlightened by the same mystery, the Logos, that became Jesus of Nazareth (Jn 1.4). Our call is to follow the ministry of the Historical Jesus, who though he is the same reality of the Logos, has a different function. Pope John Paul II has taken the pain to point out how the church’s mission has only one purpose, to serve humans by manifesting the love of God made present in Jesus Christ (Redemptoris Missio 2). Along with them we pilgrimage to the fullness of the Kingdom. Interreligious dialogue for us is an important expression and integral part of mission as it leads to the realization of the Kingdom, in collaboration with the followers of other religious traditions.

Most Irish missionaries are not ignorant of St. Patrick’s “temper that could flare dangerously when he perceived an injustice – not against himself but against another, particularly against someone defenseless.”¹⁴ An acceptable expression against this outrage today is advocacy against injustice. Local, national and international advocacy is recognized as a major part of mission today, advocacy on behalf of people on the margins, victims of the denial of their rights, the subaltern persons, as it leads to an experience of the divine reign.

All that we have been saying has to do with dialogue with the cultures, inculturation, that has become a leading theme in missiological deliberations. The Irish church is known for its spirit of inculturation right from its days of inception. St. Patrick allowed the Irish to continue many of their former practices like the May Day and the February 1 celebrations. Even private confession, though to some extent it has earned disrepute today, was introduced by the Irish church to spare the public disgrace to which the penitents were subjected on the continent. Similarly, until about the eleventh century marriage separation on February 1, the feast of the god of fertility, said to be Brigid, was common in Ireland.¹⁵ Likewise, fostering personal holiness has even more important than pilgrimage to Rome:

To go to Rome
Is little profit, endless pain;
The Master that you seek in Rome,
You find at home, or seek in vain.¹⁶

Today we need to develop what the Australians call, a “postal-code theology”¹⁷ that responds to specific localities and pastoral situations which in turn can meld into a missional conversation, positioning the local within the range of glocal and global dynamics. We cannot have a “one size that fits for all” model. One thing that we can say for sure, based on the ministry of Jesus, is that the gospel cannot exist independently of the embodied contexts.

¹⁵ Thomas Cahill, How the Irish Saved Civilization: 149.
¹⁶ Ibid, 181.
¹⁷ A Dutney, “Postal-mark Australia,” in From Here to Where? Australian Christians Owning the Past, Embracing the Future, A. Dutney (ed), Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1988, 1-9. Even the postal-code theology is inadequate in so far as there are millions who lack a postal-code as well!
We come across a noticeable fading of Christian cultural impact. The gospel bears less and less impact on daily living with regard to meaning and message. In this context mission becomes a way of life rather than a to-do list item. It is a life of promoting, reminding of a sense of the divine presence in our secularizing world. Christians lead a life of constant wonder and a sense of mystery at the encountering of the divine finger prints in the world. This can influence a fresh experience of the divine in our secularistically tending culture, so that people’s outlook and worldviews are widened to include the transcendent, bringing an impact upon their life and relations.

**Concluding Remarks**

We need more than ever what Pope John XIII outlined in his inaugural address to Vatican II, become ourselves ever fitted to announce the gospel to the culture of our times. This requires that we be open to the signs of the times. We cannot hide behind the façade of grandiose theological claims. A study conducted among the churches of Ireland and the UK and presented to the Edinburgh Conference 2010, revealed how what these churches and agencies said publicly about the theology of mission, did not necessarily match up with their mission practices.¹⁸ What Cardinal Moran spoke of the Irish Catholics of Australia in 1890 is still relevant for mission today: “I find that the faithful entrusted to my spiritual charge have the same piety, the same love for religion, the generosity and spirit of sacrifice which distinctly mark the old church at home.”¹⁹

God’s concern for the wholeness of life for all as manifested in Jesus’ ministry, death and resurrection, is our concern. The promise of the new heaven and new earth (Rev 21:1) is the abundance of life which Jesus presented through the image of the wedding feast, an exuberance of love, life and abundance. Mission is a celebration of life for all.

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