NEW DAYBREAK IN MISSION: FROM AD GENTES TO INTER GENTES

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1. Rupture or Continuity?

On the evening of 11th October 1962, John XXIII spoke from the heart to the thousands gathered in St Peter’s square. As the moon shone above, he spoke of the universal council, which he had opened that very morning, as a “new daybreak”. He himself already knew something we had yet to learn: that he had cancer and had just seven months to live. In the evening of his life he bequeathed to us a new dawn: a church of hope and renewal. Fired by a “new Pentecost,”¹ the church was about to embark creatively on a new phase in mission.

As a high school student in Britain I followed the Johannine council session by session through the Catholic and secular press, and fully concur with the recent evaluation of Time journalist Robert Blair Kaiser:

¹John XXIII gave a positive assessment of the first session of the council as it concluded on 8th December 1962 – despite the struggle between a newly formed reforming conciliar majority who battled with an intransigent Curial minority. As Yves Congar remarked two years later [20 April 1964], “... the reactionaries are being progressively sidelined. We are slowly coming out of the tunnel.” Congar, My Journal of the Council, Collegeville Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2012, 514.
The council changed the way we thought about God, about ourselves, about the bible, about the liturgy, about poverty and injustice, about our spouses, about holiness, about the community called church, our Protestant cousins, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Jews, even the way we thought about the Russians.²

And, as this paper claims, it changed the way we thought about mission.

More trenchantly still, the historian John O’Malley sums up the drama of the Johannine council in the following words:

... at stake were almost two different visions of Catholicism: from commands to invitations, from laws to ideals, from threats to persuasion, from coercion to conscience, from monologue to conversation, from ruling to serving, from withdrawn to integrated, from vertical and top-down to horizontal, from exclusion to inclusion, from hostility to friendship, from static to changing, from passive acceptance to active engagement, from prescriptive to principled, from defined to open-ended, from behaviour modification to conversion of heart, from the dictates of law to the dictates of conscience, from external conformity to the joyful pursuit of holiness.³

John XXIII’s image of his council as a “new daybreak” as the council opened and as a “new Pentecost” as the first session concluded (8th December 1962) lead us to interpret the council as commencing a new era which is to be inaugurated through aggiornamento (updating). This is the hermeneutic that will be used in this paper in revisiting Ad gentes divinitus (AG) and its reception over the past half century, with a special focus on Asia.

For when the future of mission looked uncertain, the Johannine Council painted a cosmic vision which has allowed us to negotiate the tectonic changes of the past half century. The inspiring vision of the decree AG was later taken up by regional bodies such as the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) which progressively outlined clear directions for turbulent times.⁴

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²In mid-August 1962 at Castel Gondolfo John XXIII spoke with Robert Blair Kaiser informing him that he did not intend his council to be a strictly churchy event, but a worldly event designed to bring people together, people of all faith. He stated clearly “there must be “no more crusades”’. See, Tablet Lecture November 2012, www.thetablet.co.uk accessed 30 November 2012.


⁴See, Edmund Chia, “Thirty Years of FABC: History, Foundation, Context and Theology,” in FABC Papers No.106, Hong Kong, 2003. See also the four collections of FABC documents that have been published under the title, For All the Peoples of Asia,
2. Context

The Johannine council brought to an end the post-Enlightenment era. In the face of secularising rationalism, for centuries the church had turned increasingly inwards becoming a fortress, a buttress against the evil world outside.

2.1. Social and Political Context

The “new Pentecost” of John XXIII came to the Asian and African Churches within a generation of most countries reclaiming their political independence. Three years before the announcement of the council, the leaders of Third-World countries had gathered at the invitation of Jawaharla Nehru of India, Sukarno of Indonesia and Josip Broz Tito of Yugoslavia in Bandung, Indonesia, to establish the Non-Block Movement (1956). Accordingly, as Asian and African nations re-appropriated their political and cultural identities and embarked on nation building, so Christian communities, rapidly increasing in Africa while remaining lively though scattered pockets in most of Asia, rediscovered themselves and threw in their lot with the common struggle for a more just and humane society. This double dynamic decides how we are to interpret the impact of AG and subsequent ecclesial documents on the church’s mission. The same dynamic also informs us as to how prepared the churches were for mission in the coming years.

The council had little choice but to rethink the church’s mission. The Second World War with the Shoah (1939-1945) had destroyed the political establishment in which the church’s mission had become entangled. The Soviet empire now reached into central Europe (1945) and China had reunited under Mao Zedong (1949). European colonialism was coming to an end, and the United Nations had


proclaimed the 1960s as the development decade. The council itself opened just five days before the Missile Crisis when the world faced possible nuclear annihilation (16th–28th October 1962).  

2.2. Ecclesial Context  
Mission for half a millennium had been closely bound up with colonial empires. This Eurocentric bias was questioned in 1960s with the rise of autonomous churches in former colonial lands, the need to engage with Asia’s majority religions, and the willingness to appreciate resurgent indigenous cultures in Asia and Africa as the latter gave birth to myriad independent churches. 

John XXIII brought to an end Pius X’s anti-modernist purge of the church’s intellectuals. With the biblical, liturgical and ecumenical movements, the early patristic period in church history had begun to replace neo-scholastic theology and practice as a model for theology and worship.  

A good third of the council’s participants came from “mission” dioceses bringing with them fundamental questions: If salvation is available to those outside the church, what are church and mission all about? AG was written as a response to the concern of many bishops in council that the positive attitude towards other religions expressed in other conciliar decrees would dampen missionary zeal; for instance, Lumen gentium, 16, Nostra aetate, 2, Dignitatis humanae and Gaudium et spes, 22, 26, 38, 41 & 57. The resultant decree, in particular its first visionary chapter, introduced a clear rupture with much of the Western mission theology and practice of colonial times, that is, from the 16th to the 20th centuries. The theological vision of the decree, however, was in continuity with Patristic theology and much of the mission outreach of the first millennium. Nonetheless, tension between “direct proclamation of the Good News” and “inter-faith dialogue” was not resolved on the council floor nor in the decree AG.  

2.3. Ad Gentes Divinitus: Rupture or Continuity?  
A rupture with the past was not only possible but necessary if the church was to announce the gospel in all sincerity. This the council  

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7 The nuclear standoff between Moscow and Washington (over missiles in Cuba) was resolved after John XXIII quietly agreed to mediate.  
did by stepping back from the post-Constantinian, the feudal, monarchical and colonial eras to the post-apostolic Church of the early centuries when bishops, like the North African Augustine of Hippo, were theologians close to the people, when Christian communities were a scattered, dynamic minority inter gentes. The council returned to a Patristic theology of mission on which to construct a new approach to mission in rapidly changing times. Thus, the decree opens with a grand vision painted on a large canvas, and precisely in this opening chapter we find the ongoing inspiration and relevance of the decree Ad gentes divinitus (AG).

3. Re-Imaging Mission

3.1. A Cosmic Vision

The magnificent Trinitarian opening of AG Chapter One® and the far reaching guidelines of Chapter Two together with the centrality of the local church in Chapter Three have inspired new ways of mission in Asia and beyond. The opening cosmic vision played a crucial role in the re-visioning of Catholic mission at a time of great political, cultural and economic upheaval:

The church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the holy Spirit. This plan flows from “fountain-like love”, the love of God the Father. As the principle without principle from whom the Son is generated and from whom the holy Spirit proceeds through the Son, God, great and mercifully kind, freely creates us and moreover, graciously calls us to share in his life and glory. God generously pours out, and never ceases to pour out, his divine goodness, so that the One who is creator of all things might at last become “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28), thus simultaneously assuring his own glory and our happiness. It pleases God to call men and women to share in his life and not merely singly, without any bond between them; God formed them into a people, in which his children who had been scattered were gathered together (see Jn 11:52) (AG, 2).10

®Yves Congar (1904-1995) drafted, and subsequently took part in the editing and re-editing of the Introduction, first, second and third chapters of AG. See, My Journal, passim. We need not concern ourselves with the numerous “balancing” juridical sentences inserted by the powerful Propaganda Fide Congregation who steered the drafting commission, for it is the clear vision and the far reaching guidelines that inspired new ways of being a church-in-mission in Asia and beyond. The AG decree is provisional in nature; it is not, and was not intended to be, definitive. Thus the subsequent Synod of Bishops on Evangelisation (1974), the Apostolic Exhortation of Paul VI Evangelii nuntiandi (1975), and the encyclical letter of John Paul II Redemptoris missio (1991).

10The comprehensive vision of AG’s opening chapter was taken up by the council’s Central Commission and re-worked as integral parts of other documents, most importantly in Sacrosanctum concilium (1963), and Lumen gentium (1964).
Mission, then, is God's work: God wishes to unite the whole of humanity in the divine self. This commanding vision of missio Dei reappears towards the end of the chapter: “Missionary activity is nothing else, and nothing less, than the manifestation of God’s plan, its epiphany and realisation in the world and in history; that by which God, through mission, clearly brings the history of salvation to its conclusion” (AG, 9).

Mission, therefore, belongs to God, and flows from the heart of God. Mission is God’s initiative in creating and redeeming the world, an holistic vision that brings together personal and cosmic salvation, a mission to transform the world and herald a new humanity of love and fellowship, justice and peace, freedom and wholeness, solidarity and sharing, together with all people of good will. God reaches out to the world in Christ, through the power and presence of the Spirit, inviting all people to enter into a loving communion of human and divine persons.

Mission is God creating and saving the world, not just humanity but also the natural world. In that case mission is something immensely greater than the church for which the church is sign and witness. The mission of God comes first, and the church was created as a response to that. The church is a product of mission; the church is for mission, not mission for the church. In the words of South African missiologist, David Bosch, missionary activity cannot simply be the planting of churches or the saving of souls; rather, it has to be service of the missio Dei, representing God in and over against the world, pointing to God, holding up the God-child before the eyes of the world in a ceaseless celebration of the Feast of the Epiphany. In its mission, the church witnesses to the fullness of the promise of God’s reign and participates in the ongoing struggle between that reign and the powers of darkness and evil.

The church does not own or control this mission but is privileged to participate in it as a sign and agent of transformation. This

Trinitarian vision liberates us from trying to depend upon our own limited resources: we depend on life in Christ and the Spirit.

3.2. The Incarnational Principle

Applying this inspiring vision, AG begins chapter two by underscoring the key incarnational principle of cross-cultural evangelisation:

If the Church is to be in a position to offer all women and men the mystery of salvation and the life brought by God, then it must implant itself among these groups in the same way that Christ, by his incarnation, committed himself to the particular social and cultural circumstances of the women and men among whom He lived (AG, 10).

The aim of such an incarnational mission, first through witness but also through proclamation, is the establishment and nurturing of self-reliant, self-propagating Christian communities (AG, 15).

3.3. Particular Churches

At the request of many bishops from the Southern hemisphere, the section on particular churches was expanded into a separate chapter. Inspired by the vision of chapter One it implements the incarnational principle of chapter two by affirming:

In harmony with the economy of the Incarnation, the young churches, rooted in Christ and built up on the foundation of the Apostles, take to themselves in a wonderful exchange all the riches of the nations which were given to Christ as an inheritance (cf. Ps 2:8). They borrow from the customs and traditions of their people, from their wisdom and their learning, from their arts and disciplines, all those things which can contribute to the glory of their Creator, or enhance the grace of their Saviour, or dispose Christian life the way it should be (AG, 22).

Mission work, therefore, is not aimed so much at individual conversions as the establishment and nurturing of authentic Christian communities. To establish such self-reliant local communities of faith, among other directives, AG asserts:

To achieve this, it is necessary that in each of the great socio-cultural regions, as they are called, theological investigation should be encouraged, and the facts and words revealed by God, contained in sacred scripture, and explained by the fathers and magisterium of the church, submitted to a new examination in the light of the tradition of the universal church (AG, 22).

Accordingly, the bishops of Asia, through the various Offices of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC), have for the past half century developed a cordial and creative collaboration with
outstanding theologians from the region and beyond. The explosion of Asian contextual theologies is simply amazing.\textsuperscript{14}

### 3.4. Propaganda Fide

As with other preparatory commissions, the De Missionibus commission was largely run by the appropriate curial congregation, in this case, Propaganda Fide. While they eventually accepted Patristic Trinitarian theology as crafted by Yves Congar, Propaganda insisted on their central and determining role in running “the missions.”\textsuperscript{15} A young assistant to Yves Congar, Joseph Ratzinger,\textsuperscript{16} fashioned a compromise that would preserve the theology of Chapter One while leaving the authority of this powerful curial congregation intact. He distinguished between “missio” and “ecclesiae missiones,” the first being the missio Dei (“The primary reason for the missionary activity of the church is derived from God’s decree ... that all who make up the human race should form one people and grow together into one body of Christ, and be built into a temple of the holy Spirit”), the latter mission activity under the aegis of Propaganda Fide (“plantatio Ecclesiae”). Accordingly, the three final chapters of AG largely leave the cosmic vision, incarnational principle and centrality of the local church of the first three chapters to one side, and work on practicalities in “mission territories” (a concept rejected by Congar) all of which come under Propaganda Fide and the local hierarchy.\textsuperscript{17}


\textsuperscript{15}Both the Alberigo History and Congar’s Journal recall the heated debates in some detail. Notes Congar on 7 November 1964, “The missionary bishops are very much against Agagianian [Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda Fide] and the Propaganda ... the heart of it is opposition to Cardinal Agagianian and a desire to escape from the tutelage of Propaganda. The young churches want to be churches like the others.” Congar, My Journal, 660-661.

\textsuperscript{16}On 9\textsuperscript{th} July 2012 Joseph Ratzinger, as Pope Benedict XVI, paid a visit to the Ad Gentes Tertiate Centre of the Divine Word Missionaries (SVD) in Nemi, not far from Castel Gandolfo. He recalled his stay there when assisting Yves Congar during the final plenary session of the preparatory De Missionibus commission under the chairmanship of the commission’s vice-President, Johann Schütte, Congregational Leader of the SVD (1958-1967). Benedict reminisced, “I am truly grateful for the opportunity to see this house in Nemi once again after 47 years. I have fond memories of it, perhaps the most memorable of the entire council.” Other theologians drafted into the reconstituted De Missionibus commission were S. Seumois, Joseph Neuner, Domenico Grasso and J. Glazik.

\textsuperscript{17}For Congar’s diary on the final plenary of the preparatory commission at the SVD House in Nemi see My Journal, 743 ff. “What a house! Everything is complete:
Fifty years later a radical rethink of the self-understanding, structures, procedures and relationships of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, vis-à-vis the communion of local churches, to bring it into line with the opening vision of AG, is as necessary as ever. For a brief moment on the council floor, bishops from the Southern hemisphere thought it might be possible to effect structural reform of the powerful Propaganda Fide. This hope was quashed, however, when Paul VI claimed that reform of the curia was within his own exclusive competence without intervention by the council. Whether Bishop Francis of Rome will initiate such a root and branch remodelling remains to be seen.

4. Ad Gentes Divinitus in Asia

This reimaging of mission was taken up by FABC which initially described evangelisation as a threefold dialogue with the poor, with cultures and with faith traditions with the aim of developing a truly local church. “... incarnate in a people, indigenous and inculturated... in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions ... with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own.”

This local church-centred vision was vital in the immediate post-conciliar period as small Christian enclaves, somewhat insulated from the majority population, redefined their identity as Asian Churches rather than Western churches in Asia. Over the years this dialogical vision has been expanded and the Asian bishops have re-centred the three-fold dialogue on the Reign of God: with the poor and other faith traditions we engage in witnessing to a more just and compassionate society. This move from Church communities primarily centred on the spiritual needs of their own members to become “light, salt and leaven” in the wider secular, multi-faith and multi-ethnic societies of Asia, involved, in the words of then secretary general of the FABC, Archbishop Orlando Quevedo, a sevenfold movement...

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marble and panelling, ornaments, everything ... We had a much too copious fare. Not only no sign of Lent, but a real excess of everything. In the evening, there was a gathering for drinks. It is obviously useful for creating an atmosphere of cordiality, and that is why Johann Schütte does it. But what expense!!” To the end, Congar defended the notion and definition of mission as referring to the whole people of God, not primarily to and through the hierarchy (thus the understanding of “apostolicity” by Paul VI), and to people, not territories.

18Statement, FABC First Plenary Assembly, Taipei, 1974, par.12.
from passivity and anxiety to active integral evangelisation; from an abstract and non-involved universalism to the building of a truly local church; from institution to deep interiority; from individualism towards an authentic community of faith; from clericalism to lay empowerment; from comfortable and uncritical relationships with the rich and powerful to a church of the poor and a church of the young; a move towards active involvement in generating and serving life in Asian societies.\textsuperscript{19}

These seven “movements” can function as indicators of how far the local churches of Asia have implemented the cosmic vision-mission of AG. In much of Asia, we live a “mission in vulnerability,” without the trappings of economic or political power, relying simply on the message that we announce through our life.

5. The Contemporary Context

5.1. New Social and Political Context

The face of the world and the church of 50 years ago is hardly recognisable today, and the world continues to undergo further tectonic shifts, both rapidly and fundamentally. With the globalisation of communications and the economy, the world is experiencing vast migrations of peoples creating pluralistic cities where a majority of humanity now live. Gone are the homogenous village cultures where the majority of Asian Catholics once lived from China to India, the Philippines to Indonesia. Today, the majority live in multi-ethnic, multi-religious cities.

This calls for a new focus on urbanisation and migration, the latter a theme imbedded throughout the bible, but has yet to be plumbed for its depths.\textsuperscript{20} Uprooted from local cultures while being swept along by the global consumeristic culture of the market place, just about everybody is experiencing a cultural crisis. As nation states lose their power to global conglomerates, so the gap between rich and poor locally and globally has radically expanded leading to grave injustice, endemic poverty and increasing violence.

\textsuperscript{19}Archbishop Orlando Quevedo, “A Renewed Church in Asia: Vision and Challenge,” FABC Papers N.o. 95, Hong Kong 2000, 13-14.

5.2. New Ecclesial Context

Two-thirds of Christians now live in the global South and East. With its continuing growth, Africa is replacing Europe as the largest Christian continent, with an equal number of Muslims who are also undergoing a major revival. The European church is struggling to live as a marginalised minority while Asian churches continue to thrive as vibrant minorities. The Asianisation and Africanisation of religious orders reflects this seismic shift in church membership, while indigenous cross-cultural mission societies are making their mark.\(^{21}\) If for 30 years key Asian theologians (ordained) collaborated with some outstanding Asian bishops and together gave clear direction to the FABC (1970-2000), today lay networks of activists are doing theology creatively,\(^ {22}\) often without much contact with the more recent generation of Roman-oriented bishops. Women are breaking their silence\(^ {23}\) while basic communities and ecclesial movements are spearheading mission. All this is leading us to describe mission today as missio inter gentes.

6. From Ad Gentes to Inter-Gentes

The Malaysian lay theologian Jonathan Yun-Ka Tan writes,

In articulating its missio inter gentes approach to the task of doing Christian mission the FABC begins ... with the life experiences and other challenges arising from the ongoing encounter with contemporary Asian realities and specific Asian contexts ... The focus of the Asian local church’s missio inter gentes is identified with Jesus’ own mission of bringing about the Reign of God among his people ... The FABC also perceives the church’s mission as inspired by God’s prior activity in the world, through the missions of the Father and the Spirit ... The principal means of missio inter gentes is the quintessential Asian trait of dialogue.\(^ {24}\)

Undeniably, in Asia we do not speak of mission or dialogue — following the Western logic of “either-or” — but of mission in dialogue, for dialogue is the mode of mission — following the Asian


\(^{22}\)For instance the Centre for Asian Theology Solidarity (CATS) in Seoul and their regular Asian Theological Forum where activists reflect on their social engagement theologically.

\(^{23}\)Among other networks see the website of EWA – Ecclesia of Women in Asia. http://ecclesiaofwomen.ning.com

logic of “both-and”, yin-yang. Mission is a process of “mutual conversion”: what is true and beautiful in the other clarifies and deepens what is true and beautiful in one’s own life and tradition.

Listening to God and to our neighbours across every social boundary, we make our prophetic stand for compassionate justice as we get caught up in Trinitarian relationships of love, a stance expressed always and everywhere in collaboration with every movement and people of good will.\(^{25}\)

To mention a single iconic example of missio inter gentes: while not much more than 2% of Indians are Catholic, no less than 80% of HIV Clinics throughout India are run by Catholics, mainly Sisters. The periphery is at the centre of mission. Crossing borders and living at the margins demands nothing less than everything. As Jean Vanier, who has lived with and learnt from disabled people since the 1940s, says,

If you wish to enter the world of those who are broken or closed in upon themselves, it is important to learn their language ... the non-verbal as well as the verbal language ... you must go deeper and discover what it means to listen: to listen deeply to another, to the cry flowing from the heart in order to understand people, both in their pain and in their gift; to understand what they are truly asking so that you can hold their wound, their pain and all that flow from it: violence, anger or depression, self-centredness and limitless demands; the suffocating urge to possess, the refusal to let go; to accept these with compassion, without judging, without condemning ... If you come open, listening humbly, without judging, then gradually you will discover that you are trusted. Your heart will be touched.\(^{26}\)

Which brings me to conclude with the memorable words of Luis Antonio Tagle during the October 2012 Synod of Bishops in Rome; for individuals, communities and faith-traditions to be places where people meet God, we need to learn “... the power of silence. Confronted with the sorrows, doubts and uncertainties of people, [the church] cannot pretend to give easy solutions. In Jesus, silence becomes the way of attentive listening, compassion and prayer. It is the way to truth.”\(^{27}\)


\(^{27}\)Intervention of Cardinal Luis Antonio (Chito) Tagle of Manila during the October 2012 Synod.
Listening to God and listening to our neighbours, Christian communities discover which type of mission can inhabit which particular locations at this particular time. Missio inter gentes involves contemplative listening, addressing society as a whole, pointing to the inaugurated yet still awaited Reign of God, calling for a personal response and always through collaborative teams.

Clearly, the cosmic and Trinitarian vision of the opening chapter of the decree Ad gentes divinitus, the incarnational principle of mission work (Chapter Two), and the building up of local incarnated churches rooted in their context (Chapter Three), continue to inspire and direct us fifty years later, albeit in a very different world.