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justice and in the very living of life, the nurturing and nourishing of life, God is at work among us.

In passing, I would like to note several things about the gifts and mission of the Spirit as described in Rosato's argument. First, all these images of God’s action in the Spirit are continuous, yet not static. It is not that the Spirit gives unity, for example, and then we have it and there is no further need for it. Rather, the Spirit is continually making things one and inviting us into further depths and dimensions of community in God. Second, all these gifts of the Spirit are things we share, not things which separate us. This is not to deny diversity, but rather to rejoice that in the community of the Spirit there is hospitality to difference, so that these aspects enrich our life rather than undermine or threaten our solidarity. Finally, all these aspects of the Spirit's mission are things in which we participate. They are not things God does without our being part of it all. Indeed, as with the Gospel itself, these things are both gift and task.

I would like to propose that there is at least one further dimension to the mission of the Spirit within and beyond the church. I suggest that we can think of the Spirit as Artist. To talk of the Spirit as an artist is to include many possible guises: the musician or the dreamer, the dancer, the builder or the engineer, the potter. Here we want to say something about the creative beauty of God. We also want to recognize beauty as a dimension of life which is all too little valued for its own sake, as a medium of grace, as part of the meaning of life and part of the character of God’s salvation.

We have basically ignored beauty in the church, especially in Protestant word-fixated forms of faith, and we do so to our impoverishment. Our theology and preaching has been concerned about truth and goodness, but we have scarcely recognized beauty as one of the great and fundamental values of our humanity. But despite this, the Spirit does not ignore beauty. She has brought her gifts to us, continually. This is part of what God is doing in the world and part of the scope of God’s salvation.

Within the church (unless we have already lost all those with any sense of aesthetics), there is the Spirit’s quest for beauty. I think of many people, women and men, whose artistic or musical gifts, or flair for design and construction, are offered to the churches, even when at a time these gifts are not deeply
understood or appreciated. In the world at large, the Spirit gives us art, music, constructions of great things and the sheer beauty of many places. God is an artist and is continually taking the ordinary stuff of life, from paint and fabric, wood, concrete, steel, words and sounds, as well as human bodies and lives and is together working a world of infinite beauty, a tapestry of many colours, a symphony of life itself.

A conversational church can be a genuine participant in this multi-layered and richly diverse mission of the Spirit. This means that the church must always be asking the questions: Where is God, here, seeking out truth? And so how can we be part of the quest for truth, and learn from it? And where is God, in our place, today, evoking a sense of community, reconciling, making whole what was divided. Who is seeking to build bridges and restore relationships: and are we with them, or are we standing apart, or even working against the Spirit’s way of unifying, making things one?

So too, our participation as a partner in the human conversation must look to see where God is liberating, or seeking to restore justice; and we must begin with asking this in our own house of faith, our own communities. This will quickly help us to find ways to work with others, as the Spirit guides. Then too, we will find ourselves seeing and celebrating the ways the Spirit gives us life, constantly, and restores the wind in our sails. More than that, the Spirit gives courage and hope to those who stand in the jaws of death and say, ‘No.’ Sometimes this ‘No’ is the courageous way in which people walk faithfully towards their death; they die, not defeated, but affirming life and the Spirit who is life. Sometimes this ‘No’ is the way people resist the deadly fixations of our age, the bombs and weapons, or with the deadly powers of consumption, pollution, and the social consequences of what we call our life-style, but is in some ways our death-style. The Spirit works for life and the church is called also to seek out the ways of life, to celebrate them and enhance them wherever we can.

Then, finally, a conversational church must engage with all the ways women and men, in the mysterious and often unrecognised power of the Spirit, work for beauty, elegance, efficiency, colour and music, joy and wonder. We can celebrate and learn from these gifts and find ways to draw them into the offering of our praise to God, deep calling to deep, beauty to beauty.
The Conversation Embodied: Conversational Church

Now it is time to try to say what it might mean practically for a church to engage with the mission of God in the world, as a conversational community. How exactly is this divine-human conversation to be embodied in individual lives and group activities?

Here it is crucial to remember that there are two inter-related dimensions of the church's life, which might be called the gathered church and the dispersed church. The church is not only a gathered community, where people come together for worship, to pray together and to hear God's word addressed to them. The church is also a dispersed community, as these same people engage in the numerous other activities and contexts which make up their lives. Christians are the church at home and at work, when they are involved in sporting clubs and when they are in the voting booth or sit at the restaurant table – wherever they go and whatever they do, they are the church as much as when they 'go to church.' My contention is that the divine-human conversation of which we have been speaking takes place at least as much in the dispersed life of the church as in the gathered life. Both dimensions of the church's life find expression in this conversation. Both dimensions provide contexts for the conversation and from each of these contexts Christians bring elements of the conversation to the other context. From their life in the wider community, people bring experiences and insights into the gathered life of the church and from this gathered life they also bring experiences and insights into their life as the church dispersed. The conversation flows both ways.

There is a fundamental rhythm to the conversation here, which I would describe in terms of discovery and witness. The rhythm can be seen in the stories we find in Luke chapter 10. After Jesus had been preaching and teaching, he calls or appoints 70 'others,' that is, not the disciples already designated earlier. These people have heard Jesus' message, but are now given a specific commission to go and bear witness to what they have heard. They are to travel lightly and to bring greetings of peace to those they encounter. Jesus gives them this summary word of profound encouragement, even when they do not receive a warm welcome: 'Yet know this, the kingdom of God has come near' (v. 11). So, inexperienced and probably understanding little of what their message really entails, they go. From their initial witness, however, they move into a time of profound discovery. For, as we are told, they return with joy,
telling stories of amazing things. They may have thought they were bringing
the peace of God’s reign to these places, but what they found it that God was
marvellously at work ahead of them, bringing healing and hope to so many
distressed individuals and communities. So now it is these disciples who bring
to the ‘gathered’ community a new phase of witness to what they have discovered
when dispersed among the towns.

Here then is the rhythm of the divine conversation with and within the church.
The talk flows both ways. Within the gathered life people hear and discover the
power of the gospel and its hope for the world. They move then into lives in
which they seek to encounter this hope and respond to its possibilities. Here
they seek to be active witnesses to the gospel. In these situations, they discover,
however, the depth of human need and the amazing presence of God, in people
and situations where they may not have expected it. So from these situations
they make new discoveries and bring these to the gathered life of the church, to
bear fresh witness there to the ways of God in the world and again to seek
insight and inspiration for the continuing engagement with the divine presence
in all places. The conversation moves, continually, and this conversation is not
‘just talk.’ It is made up of lives and relationships, work and action, in both the
gathered community of faith and in the on-going engagement of Christians in
the wider community of life.

It is not only in the gathered life, then, that Christians find themselves to be
immersed in the life and spirit of God. Just as our incorporation into the
community of faith may be signified and enacted in immersion in water, and we
continue to discover the power of this event as we are immersed in God’s word
and spirit with us, so too we find that this immersion continues wherever we go.
We are engaged in conversation with God, in the many contexts of our dispersed
lives. There too we see God raising up the down-trodden and giving hope to
those otherwise pushed aside. There too we discover that the seed of God’s
kingdom has sprung forth in unexpected ways, sometimes demanding more of
us than we imagined, sometimes feeding us with the bread of truth and the
wine of healing. These sacramental expressions of God’s way are not confined
to the gathered life. Indeed, as the people of faith bring the stories and insights
of God’s presence in all the world into the gathered life, their sense of the
significance of the church’s sacraments is deepened and becomes more real.
That is to say, they discover that they, the people of the church, this body and
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blood: it has become real in them, as a body living in and with Christ, in the world today.

As a result of this two-way rhythmic flow of discovery and witness, the liturgies and worship of the gathered church may be profoundly enriched. The ancient words of the faith do not need so much to be changed as to be grounded, ever again, in the lived experience of the people. This is what I am suggesting is possible when the gathered life is seen as part of the continuing divine-human conversation. This conversation may come into self-consciousness in the liturgies and activities of the gathered church, but we should never pretend that the church, as such, is the centre and the focus of his conversation. What comes into focus is the presence and life of God with us— not just with Christians, but with all God’s creation. Those who are alive to God’s presence, who have learned to hear God’s voice, often questioning and challenging, inviting and evoking new directions of hope, will find themselves drawn into this on-going rhythm of discovery and witness. Thus, as they come to the worship services, they bring with them a deep awareness of the anguish and needs of many people and situations, but also some at least will bring stories of new horizons emerging, where justice is being done or healing is emerging. As a result, the prayers of the church become more deeply real, more engaged with the way of God. In the gathered life of the church, then, giving and receiving, failing and forgiving, praying and praising are parts of the rhythm of all life, not just ‘religious’ life. Here too, people affirm the discovery of truth in many places and activities and celebrate the presence of beauty in many forms. Unity, freedom and the sheer depth and strength of life itself, against all that threatens and deadens people and situations, are shared and celebrated. Here, the flow of the divine-human conversation makes worship and the fellowship of the church, κοινωνία, rich and real. All this is possible, if the life and liturgy of the gathered church is open to it.

Whether such possibilities are envisaged and explored, or whether they are seen as threatening or illusory depends very much upon the leadership of local communities and whether that leadership sees the life of the church through something like what I have been calling a divine-human conversation.

Earlier I sketched three things which I suggested are activities of God the conversationalist. These can also be activities of the leaders of the church and
indeed of the conversational church. I spoke of Christ as creative invitation, which opens a context for conversation. I spoke of Christ as the embodiment of the divine-human conversation, exploring and revealing its possibilities; and I spoke of the Spirit as gathering, evoking consensus and enabling others to participate in the continuing conversation.

These too are things the church can do, and for the churches to learn to engage in conversation in this way pastors, priests and leaders need to do these things. Pastoral leaders can be people who invite others into a conversation and create the context in which it is safe for people to find their own voices and venture their own questions and contributions. Pastors can be people who embody such a conversation, and allow others to see them exploring possibilities of life with God, in many different dimensions. Pastors can, finally, be people who seek to maintain not one line, one point of view only, but actively seek to gather a consensus, a community of many voices and cultures and colours, all contributing to a continuing conversation.

In these ways, I would suggest, the church today can be finding its voice in new and positive ways, as the Spirit gifts and guides and challenges us, towards participation in God's mission in the world, a conversational church engaged in divine conversation.

1. Information about 'Conversation Cafe' can be found at http://www.conversationcafe.org/aboutus.html
4. Philip J. Rosato 'The Mission of the Spirit within and beyond the Church,' *Ecumenical Review,* Vol. 41, 1999, pp. 389-397. This essay, together with a number of the other papers on this theme, was re-published in Emilio Castro, (ed.) To the Word of God's Spirit: Reflections on the Canberra Theme, Geneva: WCC, 1990. My page references are to this later edition.