Proclamation & Dialogue — a seeming contradiction —

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Prophetic dialogue

A new way of doing mission?

by Larry Nemer

Larry Nemer is a member of the Divine Word Missionary Society (SVD) who has been teaching mission theology and mission history since 1962 in the United States, The Philippines, Vietnam and England. He has recently returned to Melbourne from six years' service as president of the Missionary Institute London.

Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your consciences clear… 1 Peter 3: 15-16

Prophetic dialogue is a term that was introduced into mission literature by the Divine Word missionaries. It emerged at their general chapter (a meeting of about 120 representatives from the 6,000 plus members of this international missionary congregation) in the year 2000.1

One of the major concerns of the chapter had been to identify what mission ad gentes would mean for the congregation in the 21st century.

In the first draft of the working document prepared for the chapter, the language used to describe the challenges facing the congregation was new frontiers of mission.

New language

But when a second preparatory commission for the chapter came together, it suggested that rather than talk about frontiers (which had overtones of both geographical boundaries and conquest), it was more important to talk about dialogue.

The word dialogue, the commission members felt, put the stress on the people (rather than the territory) to whom the Divine Word missionaries were being sent.

Dialogue, in other words, needs to eschew all arrogance or bitterness. What gives Christian mission authority is its authenticity and transparency. ‘It is peaceful, has no use for extreme methods, is patient under contradiction and inclines towards generosity’

The term dialogue also would force the congregation to identify the groups of people whom they would take as partners for this dialogue. Finally, the term dialogue implied a respect and humility (rather than conquest and domination) in relationships with the others.

Four dialogue partner groups

The commission proposed four groups as dialogue partners for the Divine Word Missionary Society (SVD):

- faith-seekers or people, who have no faith community or religious affiliation
- people who are poor and marginalised
- people of different cultures
- people of different faith traditions and secular ideologies.

Prophetic

The general chapter accepted the description of this proposed fourfold dialogue, but it insisted on adding the word prophetic before the word dialogue. The reason for doing this was the desire to make it clear that the SVD missionaries did not begin dialogue with others from a neutral position, but were starting the dialogue from their Christian faith and convictions.
To quote the chapter document:

"It is in dialogue ... that we are called to acknowledge our own sinfulness and to engage in constant conversion, and that we witness to God's love by sharing our own convictions boldly and honestly, especially where that love has been obscured by prejudice, violence, and hate."

It is clear that we do not dialogue from a neutral position, but out of our own faith. Together with our dialogue partners we hope to hear the voice of the Spirit of God calling us forward, and in this way our dialogue can be called prophetic."

The chapter concluded that prophetic dialogue is "the deepest and best understanding of this call" to mission today for SVD missionaries.

Dialogue

Dialogue is a term that has been present in Christian literature for a long time. Ecumenical dialogues between Christians have been going on at least since the end of the 19th century. But the idea that dialogue is also to be carried on with people of other faiths, or no faith at all, is rather new for many churches – and certainly is for the Catholic Church.

It was definitely something new for Catholic missionaries and missionologists. However, ever since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), dialogue has been seen not only as a task to be carried out in its relations with other Christian churches but also as a significant missionary task.

Call of Vatican II

The missionary decrees of Vatican II both called for such a dialogue and laid the theological foundations for it. In the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (Ad Gentes Divinitus), the council proclaimed that the basis for missionary activity, and implicitly dialogue, is the Trinitarian life of God.

"Just as the triune God's missionary presence in creation is never about imposition, but always about persuasion and freedom-respecting love, mission cannot proceed in ways that neglect the freedom and dignity of human beings." In number six of the decree, it says explicitly that the church must walk the same path that Christ walked.

Therefore, a church that is rooted in a God (who) that saves through the self-emptying life and death of Christ, cannot think of itself as superior to the peoples among whom it walks, with gifts to give but no gifts to receive.

Dialogue is also seen to be necessary because it was acknowledged that the presence of God's saving grace is not confined to the church alone.

The Constitution on the Church (Lumen gentium) speaks of the possibility of salvation for all people of good will, whether they have explicit faith in God or not. The Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church and the Declaration on The Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate) both talk about the "seeds of the Word" that are planted in the cultures and religions of all peoples, and say that missionaries can learn "by sincere and patient dialogue what treasures a bountiful God has distributed among the nations of the earth."

Nostra Aetate even speaks of religious ways other than Christianity possessing "a ray of that Truth which enlightens all women and men." Finally the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et spes) recognises that the concerns of the world are indeed the concerns of the followers of Christ, and that Christians must seek to discern the "signs of the times" as they are manifested in history.

It speaks of the presence of the Holy Spirit who "in a way known to God, offers to every person the possibility of being associated with the paschal mystery." Therefore, through dialogue, the church exhibits an attitude of "solidarity, respect and love" in all of her activities. She walks not only with gifts to give but also with an openness to receive new gifts.

Even while the council was still in session, dialogue became an important topic for Catholic consideration. Paul VI, in his first encyclical, The Church in the Modern World (Ecclesiam Suam), talked about the need for dialogue as well as about its characteristics.

He said that there are a variety of valid ways for the church to approach today's world (one might say to approach the way of doing mission as well). However, "It seems to Us, that the sort of relationship for the Church to establish with the world should be more in the nature of a dialogue."

The method

It is this method; he goes on to say, that "is demanded nowadays by the prevalent understanding of the relationship between the sacred and the profane. It is demanded by the dynamic course of action, which is changing the face of modern society.

"It is demanded by the pluralism of society, and by the maturity women and men have reached in this day and age." He points out that dialogue has its origin in the mind of God, and says that "the whole history of humanity's salvation is one long, varied dialogue, which marvellously begins with God and which God prolongs with women and men in so many different ways."

The Spirit's presence was (and still is in some cases) a "secret presence," a gentle and persuading
presence calling women and men to participation in what would be revealed in time as the "Paschal Mystery", within the context of peoples' histories and cultures.

Jesus, too, is remembered in the gospels as a man of dialogue, open to foreigners, to people of non-Jewish background like the Samaritan woman and the Canaanite (Syro-Phoenician) woman, and responsive to the pleas of the centurion, of Jairus and blind Bartimaeus.

In other words, God's very nature is to be in dialogue: Holy Mystery (Father), Son (Word) and Spirit in an eternal stance of openness and receiving, of total giving and acceptance, spilling over into creation and calling creation back into communion with Godself.

Almost ten years later, Paul VI, in another encyclical (which followed on the Synod on Evangelisation), On Evangelisation in the Modern World (Evangelii Nuntiandi), which addresses primarily the topic of evangelisation and proclamation, implies that there must be a dialogue, not only with individuals, but with the culture itself, if these are to be evangelised not just in a superficial way, as with a veneer, but by a mutual penetration of faith and culture.

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, which came into existence at the suggestion of Paul VI when he visited Asia, has issued many statements about dialogue. Christianity, being a minority religion in a world often hostile to it, the bishops see the need for dialogue with the others not only as a strategy for survival or for evangelisation but as a necessary stance of respect and honour for the religious traditions which surround them.

Since its beginning, the conference has talked about a three-fold dialogue being necessary: with the poor, with people of other cultures and with people of other religions.

A passage from its Fifth Assembly is representative of what is constantly being called for in its documents:

Therefore, mission includes: being with the people, responding to their needs with sensitivity to the presence of God in cultures and other religious traditions, and witnessing to the values of God's Kingdom through presence, solidarity, sharing and word. Mission will mean a dialogue with Asia's poor, with its local cultures, and with other religious traditions.10

A first time dialogue

Stephen Bevans, commenting on this statement in an unpublished talk he gave, says: first there is the dialogue with the poor, a dialogue that can also be widened to a dialogue with any marginalised people, such as women, people of colour, the disabled, gays and lesbians; and second, there is a dialogue with particular contexts, using context instead of cultures in order to point to the wider arena in which the church engages in mission, i.e. any particular situation in which mission takes place: in dialogue with people's particular experiences (death in the family, or a social experience like a hurricane), with people's social location (again, an attention to people of colour, to gender, to wealth or poverty), or to culture and the various changes happening within a culture (for example, globalisation).

In 1984, the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians (now the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue) presented a reflection on the forms that dialogue can take. Though their reflection was focussed on specifically interreligious dialogue, their insights apply just as well to other forms of dialogue.

Four forms of dialogue

They suggested that dialogue can take one of four forms: a dialogue of life, a dialogue of action, a dialogue or prayer, and a dialogue of theological reflection. These four forms were highlighted again in the document, which was produced by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, Dialogue and Proclamation, in 1991.

Dialogue of life

The first form, a dialogue of life, takes place wherever people of various social, religious and cultural backgrounds strive to live together in peace and neighbourliness. So often, people of various faiths live side by side with one another and form friendships.

As people of one faith begin to see people of another faith, not in the abstract but as people with faces and personalities, much of the fear and tension that so often exists between religions can be dissolved.

Dialogue of action

The second form, a dialogue of action, is seen to be going on wherever people of different faiths or cultures collaborate on concrete projects, such as helping victims of natural disasters, promoting human rights or improving education for the poor.

There is much evidence of such a dialogue in the world's response to natural tragedies, such as the Boxing Day tsunami of 2004 or of the earthquake in Pakistan in 2005.

Dialogue of prayer

Thirdly, people of different backgrounds can also
engage in a dialogue of prayer. A good example of this was the gathering of various religious leaders at Assisi in 1986 to pray for peace. The document Dialogue and Proclamation prefers to call this form a dialogue of religious experience. This may most often be engaged in by so-called experts or religious leaders, but it is a way of dialogue accessible to ordinary religious practitioners as well.

As all religions have a spirituality, forms of prayer and an exchange about the meaning and practice of these, at times even a sharing in them, dialogue can lead to a deeply mutual enrichment.

Dialogue of common reflection

Finally, there can be a dialogue of common reflection, where people share their ideas, opinions and convictions emerging from their own faith or worldview. This is a form of dialogue usually done by theologians or officials of particular religions; it can be either an exchange of information or a mutual wrestling with a particular religious topic.11

The 1991 document, Dialogue and Proclamation, reminds us that the term dialogue can be understood in a number of different ways. In the first place, it can refer to a practice that leads to good communication between persons, or even to a sense of intimate communion between friends or lovers.

Secondly, dialogue can mean “an attitude of respect and friendship, which permeates or should permeate all those activities constituting the evangelising mission of the church,” an attitude that can be called “the spirit of dialogue.”

Thirdly, dialogue can be understood as the practice of openness to, fairness and frankness with, respect for, sincerity towards and appreciation of people of other Christian churches or religious ways, those who hold to a particular ideology (eg. Marxism), those for whom faith commitment is meaningless (eg. secularists) or those who have no faith at all.

This latter meaning of dialogue is what is known as ecumenical, interreligious or interideological dialogue, and, in regard to the last two types, is one of the elements that make up the “single but complex reality” of the church’s evangelising mission as a whole.

The document makes clear that in no way does dialogue replace proclamation or the necessity of an invitation to Christian conversion. As it states: “God, in an age-long dialogue, has offered and continues to offer salvation to humankind.” And so, “In faithfulness to the divine initiative, the Church too must enter into a dialogue of salvation with all men and women.”12

However the document also says that “... it will be in the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious traditions and by following the dictates of their conscience that members of other religions respond positively to God’s invitation and receive salvation in Jesus Christ, even while they do not recognise or acknowledge him as their saviour.”

Finally, we can consider the role of John Paul II in promoting dialogue. In his 1990 encyclical, On the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate (Redemptoris Missio), he insists that such dialogue “does not originate from tactical concerns or self-interest, but is an activity with its own guiding principles, requirements and dignity.”

Dialogue with other religions demands “a deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where He wills.”13

But more important than his words on dialogue have been the many practices of dialogue that he has lived out. The images of him praying in and conversing with the rabbi of the Jewish synagogue in Rome, praying at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, his conversation with the political leaders of the State of Israel and his presence in a mosque in Syria, intently listening to the imam, speak more than any words of his about the church’s commitment to dialogue.

Why prophetic?

The SVD missionaries were the first to attach the adjective prophetic to dialogue. Why did they do it and what has it come to mean for them?

First of all, they see a prophet as one who first listens for God’s voice before announcing God’s word to the people. The voice may come through the Word of God, ie. through the scriptures, which are listened to and reflected on in the Christian community. This means that the missionary must not only study the Scriptures but must also have a contemplative attitude towards them – regarding them silently in prayer and with awe. Moreover, the missionary must be constantly attentive to what the Word of God is saying TODAY and to today’s world.

However, because we believe that God has spoken in the past and continues to speak today to other peoples of different cultures and religions as well, the missionary will also need to listen attentively to the voice of God as it is revealed through these other cultures and other faiths. The realisation that the Holy Spirit works beyond canonical boundaries demands that the missionary listen in dialogue to the religious experience of the other in order to find out how God is also speaking to him/her.

Understanding mission as prophetic dialogue

To understand mission as prophetic dialogue implies that when missionaries go out to meet others in
dialogue, they do so filled with their own faith and with the Word, but at the same time open and willing to listen to the Word that comes to them through other peoples, both through their cultures and their religious traditions. In this way, dialogue leads them to join forces with all who are in search of the truth – God’s voice.

Secondly, they see a prophet as one who not only listens to the word of God but also announces it to the community. Prophetic dialogue is not meant to replace proclamation or evangelisation; however, it does describe the way in which evangelisation and proclamation must take place.

Following the example of Jesus who proclaimed the Good News of the kingdom of God and called for a conversion to God, but in dialogue with the people to whom he proclaimed God’s word, missionaries must also evangelise in the same way.

This proclamation need not always be verbal; it is the witness of the evangeliser that is more important (The witness of life has become more than ever an essential condition for real effectiveness in preaching). 14

Sometimes it is not possible to speak the word. St Francis of Assisi is credited with the saying that his friars must preach always, using words when necessary. Hence the SVD chapter document says:

It is in dialogue that we are able to recognise the signs of Christ’s presence and the working of the Spirit in all people, that we are called to acknowledge our own sinfulness and to engage in constant conversion, and that we witness to God’s love by sharing our own conviction boldly and honestly, especially where that love has been obscured by prejudice, violence and hate.

Thirdly, they see a prophet as one who denounces sinfulness, idolatry and injustices. Obviously, there are basic injustices, which are clearly anti-evangelical and inhuman. In dialogue these must be identified and denounced. However, the difference between good and evil is not always so clear.

In many cases, especially when we are strangers in other cultures, we come up against different customs, which we do not understand but which are often of value in the context of the culture which receives us.

In these situations, there is a danger of judging and condemning that which is different, simply because it is different and because it does not make sense to us. This does not necessarily mean that it is evil.

And when we do denounce something as evil, we must also allow ourselves to be questioned, enriched, criticised and to be purified of our ideologies and idolatrous attitudes in this meeting with what is different. If we wish to be authentic witnesses in dialogue, we cannot expect that we ourselves and our way of serving God and humanity will be beyond the criticism of others.

Nevertheless, prophetic dialogue implies having the courage to criticise situations of injustice and sin, just as the prophets and Jesus himself did, even though the consequences may be that missionaries are marginalised, persecuted and even put to death.

Today, it is clear among all the churches that the church is called to speak to and for the poor and marginalised, to empower them to speak with their own voice, and to be with them in an option of solidarity and praxis.

**Prophets speak of hope**

However, to be prophetic does not mean only to denounce evil and injustice. The prophets also spoke of hope and God’s faithfulness. We find these statements in Deuteronomy, bringing hope of freedom and a good life to the exiles in Babylon.

We also find them in Ezekiel, who speaks of a “new covenant” written on the heart and not in stone – a covenant that speaks of God’s faithfulness in the face of the sin of Israel. Thus, being prophetic means also bringing hope to a despairing world and confidence in God’s faithfulness to a world that often asks: where is God in the midst of this disaster?

Finally, the dialogue itself becomes prophetic in the sense that its very engagement communicates God-in-Communion and promises the kingdom of God. In prophetic dialogue it is not just that missionaries see themselves as prophets in the senses described above, but also that their dialogue with people, who are different from them, points to the kingdom that is now present but not fully present.

They give witness to others, the others give witness to them and they expect that the Spirit will call all of us to deeper conversion. If all are seeking to hear the Word of God in this sharing with one another, then dialogue itself can become a prophetic sign pointing to the universality and openness of the kingdom. 15

**A spirituality of prophetic dialogue**

Much of the literature that has been produced by the SVD missionaries on prophetic dialogue since the term was first introduced, has focussed more on the spirituality that will be needed to carry on prophetic dialogue than on the strategy to be followed. For prophetic dialogue to be carried out, the missionary must develop certain attitudes and certain virtues.

First of all, the missionary himself/herself must be
both a dialogical person and be strongly committed to dialogue as a way of communication. Dialogue cannot, for the missionary today, be something, which is just in fashion at the moment or a modern strategy to be used. Dialogue is born of the nature of mission itself.

Dialogue is the refusal to force on anyone else our vision of the truth. It is the unwillingness to impose the truth — no matter how convinced we are that it is of God — on others. Dialogue is the acceptance of the conviction that we can only propose the truth to others and invite them to our vision of it. Dialogue is, therefore, the opposite of terrorism, as well as of fundamentalism. And in an age of organised terrorism and fanatic fundamentalism, dialogue is the only way forward.\textsuperscript{16}

Respect, openness and listening

To be a dialogical person means developing specific attitudes, such as respect, openness, listening, humility, and a willingness, even a passion, to search for the truth together with one’s dialogue partner.

The SVD General Chapter 2000 spoke of these using the language of Gaudium et Spes, calling for an attitude of solidarity, respect and love. In solidarity one reaches out to others, especially the poor and marginalised. The key to solidarity is participation.

This is what distinguishes it from simple humanitarian help or assistance that comes from the outside. By means of assistance, one gives part of one’s possessions, but in solidarity one shares one’s very life. Assistance is a giving, which moves in only one direction, while solidarity is a dialogue which moves in both directions. In respect, one reverences the uniqueness and the dignity of each person and of every human community. And it is love that binds all together.

Being dialogical means choosing to imitate Christ in his kenosis – the emptying of self. Kenosis cannot just be the fruit or outcome of strategic mission planning. Mission, by its nature, demands that one divest oneself of one’s own human and sometimes Christian points of view when entering a new culture or a new way of expressing the faith.

The SVD General Chapter Document 2002 stated:

Our prophetic dialogue with people of other cultures requires a continual personal conversion, a dying to ethnocentrism and racism and a passing over to a more catholic spirit of appreciation of the other’s cultural identity.

Humility, which kenosis demands, is needed by the missionary in order to value that which gives meaning to each nation. As the chapter affirmed, SVD missionaries "learn from and share in the diversity of gifts and cultures in the dialogue with people from different cultural backgrounds to which our missionary vocation calls us."

Weakness, which accompanies kenosis, is not an option. It is found at the heart of mission because no true dialogue exists except in the place where people are confronted by their own insecurities and vulnerabilities.

If missionaries wish to make a sincere option for prophetic dialogue their spirituality will need to be nourished both by hope and by patience. For in their attempts to enter into dialogue with various groups of people they will always find both success and failure together.

Four necessary characteristics

In their book, \textit{Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today}, Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder talk about four other characteristics a missionary, who would engage in prophetic dialogue, must have.

A first characteristic, they say – not often mentioned in the literature of dialogue – is that of repentance. Peter Phan, a leading theologian in the United States of America, has remarked that mission is not an innocent word, but one that evokes anger and even disgust. The missionary must be ready to repent of mistakes made in the past and not just his or her own mistakes.

A second characteristic must be orthopraxis. The missionaries’ actions must correspond with their words. It is not enough to speak the truth; one must live it.

A third characteristic mentioned by the Pope Paul VI is confidence – not in the effectiveness of one’s own ability to communicate, “but also in the good will of both parties in the dialogue.” Mutual trust is absolutely essential. Dialogue is first and foremost about establishing and maintaining relationships.
The fourth characteristic Pope Paul VI calls for is a **discernment** that must characterise any and all dialogue. He says in *Ecclesiam Suam* No 87:

*Before speaking, we must give great care to listen not only to what people say, but more especially to what they have in their hearts to say. Only then will we understand them and respect them, and even, as far as possible, agree with them.*

Finally, Paul VI, in *Ecclesiam Suam* No 86, offers several other important characteristics that underlie the basic attitude or spirituality that should inform all missionary activity. The first of these is **clarity** – "before all else; the dialogue demands that what is said should be intelligible. ... In order to satisfy the first requirement, all of us who feel the spur of the apostolate should examine closely the kind of speech we use. Is it easy to understand? Can it be grasped by ordinary people? Is it current idiom?"

Dialogue, in other words, demands an attitude that is **listener oriented** rather than **speaker oriented**. He then goes on to say that dialogue must be carried out in the same spirit of **meekness** that characterised Jesus himself. Dialogue, in other words, needs to eschew all arrogance or bitterness. What gives Christian mission authority is its authenticity and transparency. "It is peaceful, has no use for extreme methods, is patient under contradiction and inclines towards generosity."

There seems to be no end to the virtues that must be developed for prophetic dialogue, and in the end, there must always be the recognition that prophetic dialogue can lead to persecution and suffering.

**Conclusion**

This study of the meaning of prophetic dialogue can perhaps best be concluded with the words that the SVD superior general used recently when talking about this topic: "For me, dialogue seems to be a very 21st century word. For the 21st century is and needs to be an age of dialogue – both in the sense of the urgent need for dialogue in our deeply divided world and in the sense of the tremendous possibilities for dialogue offered by our globalised world. Somehow one gets a feeling that women and men of the 21st century need to dialogue in order to ensure their own – the world’s – very survival."

**END NOTES**

1) *Divine Word Missionaries In Dialogue with the Word, Nr. 2, September 2001, Prophetic Dialogue.*

2) *Statement of the General Chapter of the Divine Word Missionaries, 2000, no 54*

3) *Divine Word Missionaries In Dialogue with the Word, Nr 1, September 2000, Documents of the XV General Chapter, No 53*


5) *Lumen Gentium 16*

6) *Nostra Aetate 2*

7) *Gaudium et Spes 22*

8) *Gaudium et Spes 3*

9) *Ecclesiam Suam 78*


11) cf. unpublished article of ASCHEMANN, Thomas, March 2006

12) *Dialogue and Proclamation 68*

13) *Redemptoris Missio 56*

14) *Evangelii Nuntiandi 76*

15) This idea was developed recently in an unpublished article by ASCHEMANN, Thomas, mission secretary for the Divine Word Missionary Society, March 2006

16) Unpublished talk by PERNIA, Antonio, superior general of the Divine Word Missionary Society


18) *Ecclesiam Suam 81*

19) Unpublished talk by PERNIA, Antonio

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