

Mission as *Missio Inter Gentes*: From Everywhere for Everyone

Antonio M. Pernia, SVD

“*From Everywhere for Everyone*” is the theme of the celebration in 2025 of the 150th founding anniversary of the Society of the Divine Word (SVD). This theme expresses, I believe, a new mission paradigm, namely, mission as *missio inter gentes*. As Stephen Bevans, in a talk given at the Second National Mission Congress of the Philippines in April 2022, put it: “Mission *ad gentes* in our time is no longer carried out simply *ad gentes*, but *inter gentes*.”¹ Further, he states:

The new direction of mission *ad gentes* in our day is to understand it as *inter gentes*. The more traditional understanding was one that moved from already Christianized countries to those who still needed to hear the gospel, or be strengthened in their fragile faith and fragile church structure. It was an understanding that emphasized the superiority of Western culture and ways of thought over all others. It was an understanding that went hand in hand with colonialism and with white privilege and racism. Understanding mission *ad gentes* in terms of *inter gentes* starts with the fact that mission today is “from everywhere to everywhere,” and “by everyone to everyone.” The frontiers of our time are not the frontiers of place, but the frontiers of people.²

¹ Stephen Bevans, “New Directions of *Missio ad Gentes* in the Changing Mission Frontiers of our Time,” in *Gifted to Give: Proceedings of the Second National Mission Congress of the Philippines*, ed. by Fr. Andrew Recepcion and Fr. Antonio M. Pernia, SVD (Manila: Episcopal Commission on Mission of the CBCP [Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines], 2023), 20.

² Bevans, “New Directions of *Missio ad Gentes* in the Changing Mission Frontiers of our Time,” 31.

The notion of “*missio inter gentes*” contains a number of nuances which have resulted from the different matrices from which it has emerged in missiological discussion. Three of these nuances in particular are relevant to mission in our time, namely (1) first, the Local Church as the subject of mission; (2) secondly, multiculturalism as the context of mission, and (3) thirdly, dialogue as the mode of mission. The aim of this essay is to explore these different but interlocking nuances of “*missio inter gentes*” and draw out their missiological implications.

The Local Church as Subject of Mission

As is now well known, the expression “*missio inter gentes*” was first proposed by missiologist William Burrows in his response to the plenary paper of Michael Amaladoss at the 2001 convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America.³ Burrows stated that “Christian mission in Asia is already primarily in the hands of Asians, and is better termed *missio INTER gentes* than *missio AD gentes*.”⁴ This statement highlights the contrast between “*missio AD gentes*” and “*missio INTER gentes*.” Indeed, one of the nuances of *missio AD gentes* was the coming to a local Church of foreign missionaries sent from Christian Europe. In contrast, the notion of *missio INTER gentes* emerged from the awareness that mission is no longer carried out principally by foreign missionaries but by local missionaries.

Mission by Local Missionaries

And so, “*missio inter gentes*” underscores the phenomenon of mission now being carried largely by local missionaries. This is, in fact, one of the developments in mission today, namely, mission being carried out more and more by missionaries originating from the “global South” and less and less by missionaries of European or North American origin. Europe and North America are no longer the primary source of missionaries. As we know, this has to do with, on the one hand, the drastic drop of religious and priestly vocations in Europe and North America, and, on the other hand, with the growth of

³ William Burrows, “A Response to Michael Amaladoss,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 56 (2001): 15-20, as cited by Jonathan Y. Tan, “Missio Inter Gentes,” in Lazar T. Stanislaus, SVD and Martin Ueffing, SVD, eds., *Intercultural Mission*, Vol. 2 (Sankt Augustin: Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut, 2015), 189. The paper of Michael Amaladoss is “Pluralism of Religions and the Proclamation of Jesus Christ in the Context of Asia,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 56 (2001): 1-14.

⁴ Burrows, “A Response to Michael Amaladoss,” 15, as cited by Tan, “Missio Inter Gentes,” 189 (emphasis added).

vocations and the maturity of what formerly were called “mission churches” or the churches of the so-called “mission receiving” countries.

An indication of this is my own congregation, the Society of the Divine Word (SVD). Today in the SVD, the primary source of missionaries is now its Asia-Pacific (ASPAC) zone. In recent years more than two-thirds of those receiving first assignments in the Society have come from its Asia-Pacific Zone. Consequently, there are now over a 1000 SVD Asian missionaries working, outside of their home countries, in Europe, the US, Latin America, Africa, Oceania and other parts of Asia. And it is a fact that a similar situation obtains in many other religious missionary congregations today.⁵ In the words of Maryknoll Missioner, William Grimm, the publisher of UCANews,

The days when mission meant Westerners sharing the Gospel with non-Westerners have ended Now what was once a flood of Western missionaries to Asia has dwindled to a trickle, and Churches that once provided pastors for Asian Catholics now look to Asia to alleviate their own clergy shortages.⁶

Missiological Implications

“*Missio inter gentes*,” therefore, places the stress on the local Church as the primary subject of mission. And this requires a new way of understanding the idea of the “universal mission of the Church” and the reality of “cross-cultural mission.”

The universal mission of the Church

While traditionally the universal mission of the Church was, explicitly or implicitly, understood as mission emanating from the center (Europe in general or Rome in particular), now it needs to be seen as mission emanating from every local Church. Mission is universal not because it proceeds from a common center, but because it is carried out everywhere where there is a viable local Church. Thus, the primary subject of mission is no longer the center in Europe or Rome, but every local Church in every continent.

Missio inter gentes, therefore, places the primary responsibility for mission on the local Churches rather than on the “Universal Church” represented by Rome. The mandate for mission is seen no longer as emanating from the

⁵ See Rose Nkechi Uchem, “Shifting Perceptions of Mission,” *SEDOS Bulletin* 41/11-12, November-December 2009, 261-270.

⁶ UCA News, “The Changing Face of Asian Mission,” December 22, 2021, <https://www.ucanews.com/the-changing-face-of-asian-mission>.

center in Rome, but as arising from the fact of being Church. As Vatican II's Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes* (AG),⁷ puts it, "the pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature (AG 2)." In other words, the "missionariness" of the Church arises not from an external mandate but from the Church's very nature. Indeed, with *missio inter gentes*, this statement of Vatican II is realized no longer simply with the "Universal Church" based in Rome sending out missionaries to the "pagan world," but with each local Church living out its missionary vocation.

The centrality of the local Church in mission has also been stressed by Pope Francis. In his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG),⁸ he states that

Each particular Church is the primary subject of evangelization, since it is the concrete manifestation of the one Church in one specific place, and in it "the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and operative." It is the Church incarnate in a certain place, equipped with all the means of salvation bestowed by Christ, but with local features (EG 30).

This emphasis on the local Church is also implied by Pope Francis' vision of the Church as a Church of "closeness and proximity." This was underlined by John Christian Young in his talk to the above-mentioned Second National Mission Congress of the Philippines, claiming as a result that the local Church is the proper locus of missionary discipleship. It is in the local Church that this "closeness and proximity" manifests itself concretely for it is in the local context that the Church is most proximate or near to the people. Thus, it is also in the local Church that the challenges to mission can be better discerned and responded to.⁹

Cross-cultural mission

This insight about the local church being the primary subject of mission does not, however, necessarily make "foreign missionaries" or "cross-cultural missionaries" irrelevant, just as it does not by any means invalidate the notion of *missio ad gentes*. Understanding the "Universal Church" as a communion of local Churches, there will always be need for the presence of "cross-cultural

⁷ Vatican II, *Ad Gentes*, 1965, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html.

⁸ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

⁹ See John Christian Young, "Missionary Discipleship in the Local Church," in *Gifted to Give: Proceedings of the Second National Mission Congress of the Philippines*, 2022, 36.

missionaries” in local Churches. For the gospel of Jesus Christ always brings something new to the local culture. And this “newness” is represented and offered by the presence of the “foreign” missionary or the missionary who is not native to the local culture. Indeed, the “newness” of the gospel is not something that any culture can reach or achieve on its own. It is, fundamentally, grace or gift from the outside. Herein lies the enduring validity of the notion of *missio ad gentes*.

Thus, “cross-cultural mission” needs to be understood in a new way—no longer the coming from outside of missionaries with a “superior” faith and culture, but the partnership of missionaries who collaborate in mission despite the diversity of their experiences of the faith and the diversity of their cultures. In the universal communion of local Churches, the relationship will be characterized not by paternalism but by fraternity, not by domination but by communion, not by superiority but by mutuality, not by power and control but by mutual respect and appreciation.

In the light of this understanding of cross-cultural mission, the principal role of the foreign missionary in the local Church is, I believe, twofold: First, foreign missionaries provide the connection of the local Church with the Universal Church, or with the universal communion of local Churches. A local Church is never sufficient unto itself. The local Church is truly Church only insofar as it is in communion with all the local Churches around the world. Secondly, foreign missionaries serve as a reminder of the newness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; a reminder that there is something the Gospel offers which is not found in the local culture; that the Gospel indeed elevates and ennobles the local culture; that on its own, a local culture cannot reach or achieve the newness which is entailed by the Gospel of Jesus.

Missio inter gentes, therefore, underlines the fact that, all local Churches, while they may not be equal in material resources and possibilities, are nevertheless equal in Christian dignity and missionary responsibility. In other words, there is no longer a local Church that is only “mission-sending” or only “mission-receiving.” All local Churches are both “mission-sending” and “mission-receiving,” for all local Churches, in the words of Vatican II’s decree *Ad Gentes*, are missionary by their very nature.

Multiculturality as the Context of Mission

The notion of *missio inter gentes* can also be said to have arisen out of the situation of the growing multiculturalism of our globalized world—that is, the situation whereby various cultures co-exist side by side each other in the same

society or community. This situation has been brought about largely by the phenomenon of international migration, or the massive movement of people around the world. While migration is an age-old phenomenon, the global character of migration in our time is what gives it a particular prominence. International migrants come from all over the world and travel to all parts of the world. In 2020, the estimate was that there were 281 million international migrants worldwide, which equates to about 3.6 percent of the global population.¹⁰

“Gentes” Everywhere

The situation of multiculturalism in today’s world has led to the breakdown of the traditional demarcation between the Church and the “*Gentes*.”

Since the time of the early church, a clear distinction and demarcation existed between the “*gentes*” (*ethne*) and the “*populus Dei*” (*laos tou theou*)—that is, the distinction between the chosen people of God and the nations, or the Jews and the gentiles, the circumcised and the uncircumcised, the believers and pagans. In fact, this distinction became the basis of the division of labor between Peter and Paul. As Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians: “... they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter to the circumcised, for the one who worked in Peter for an apostolate to the circumcised worked also in me for the Gentiles” (Gal 2:7-8). Thus, a clear demarcation between the Church on one side and the “*Gentes*” on the other.

This distinction was also expressed as the distinction between the “center of faith” and the “periphery of unbelief,” or the distinction between “inside” and “outside.” In the early church, the center of faith was Jerusalem and the surrounding nations the periphery of unbelief. In much of the history of the church, Christian Europe was the center of faith and the rest of the world the periphery of unbelief. In the context of this dual distinction, “*missio ad gentes*” was necessarily “*missio ad extra*.” Mission was “going out” (*ad extra*) to the “pagan nations” (*ad gentes*). Mission was a one-way movement from Christian Europe to the pagan world. In a sense, the Church was neatly divided into the “missionary Church” of Europe and North America and the “mission Churches” in Africa, Asia, Oceania, Latin America. Likewise, the world was divided into the “mission-sending” countries of Christian Europe and the “mission-receiving” countries of the rest of the world.

With the massive movement of people around the world and the consequent multiculturalism of the world, it follows that today *missio ad gentes* can

¹⁰ See IOM (International Organization for Migration), *World Migration Report 2024* (Geneva: IOM, 2024), <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/msite/wmr-2024-interactive/> (accessed 28 October 2024).

no longer be identified exclusively with *missio ad extra*. For the “*gentes*” are no longer only those who are out there, those who are outside, those on the other side. The “*gentes*” are also here among us and around us. It may be the family that lives next door, the person I sit beside in the bus, the young man who comes to fix my computer, the lady in the market I buy vegetables from. Today, more and more, *missio ad gentes* needs to be understood in terms of *missio inter gentes*.

Missiological Implications

Two implications, among others, may be drawn from this situation where multiculturalism is the context of mission today—that is, first, an enlarged understanding of mission and secondly, mission as the promotion of interculturality.

An enlarged understanding of mission

When seen not as a replacement of but as a complement to *missio ad gentes*, *missio inter gentes* can enrich our understanding of mission today. Three nuances of *missio “INTER” gentes* suggest an enlarged concept of mission today:

- (a) *Mission as Dialogue WITH people.* While “*ad gentes*” underlines the necessity of proclamation, “*inter gentes*” stresses the indispensability of dialogue in mission. While the direct proclamation of the Gospel remains a permanent requirement in mission, dialogue has also become an imperative in mission. As the 1984 document of what used to be the Secretariat for Non-Christians (*Dialogue and Mission*) puts it, “Dialogue is ... the norm and necessary manner of every form of Christian mission, as well as of every aspect of it Any sense of mission not permeated by such a dialogical spirit would go against the demands of true humanity and against the teachings of the Gospel.”¹¹ In other words, dialogue is no longer simply an option that we are at liberty to do or not do. It is now a missiological imperative that we cannot do without.
- (b) *Mission as Encounter BETWEEN peoples.* While “*ad gentes*” brings out the idea of a specialized group of persons (missionaries, religious, priests) being sent on mission to other peoples, “*inter gentes*” evokes the notion of mission taking place in the encounter between entire communities or

¹¹ See Secretariat for Non-Christians, *The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions* (“*Dialogue and Mission*”), 1984, no. 29, <https://columbanird.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/DIALOGUE-MISSION.pdf>.

groups of people. One can think, for instance, of the dialogue of life between the members of one Catholic parish and those of a local Muslim community, or of the students of a Catholic school and those of a non-Christian school. One can also think of the witness given by Catholic migrant workers in a Muslim country in the Middle East, or the witness of Catholic migrant domestic helpers in the homes in secularized Europe. As Church documents never tire of repeating, mission is not just a prerogative of specialized individuals in the Church but the duty of the entire People of God.

- (c) *Mission as Finding a Home AMONG the people.* While “*ad gentes*” stresses the cross-cultural nature of mission and evokes the picture of the missionary being sent to another people, “*inter gentes*” underlines the fact that the missionary is sent in order to settle in and find a new home among the people. One’s mission is meant not just as a temporary workplace but as a permanent home among a new people. This is part of the whole purpose of inculturation and cultural adaptation. This is part of the logic of the incarnation. Just as the Divine Word pitched his tent among us, so also the missionary is expected to pitch his or her tent among the people to whom he or she is sent. This is exemplified in the life of many of our earlier missionaries. An example is one of the first two SVD missionaries to China, St. Joseph Freinademetz, who strove to become a “Chinese among the Chinese.”

Thus, *Missio INTER Gentes* enlarges our understanding of mission—mission as dialogue WITH people, mission as encounter BETWEEN peoples, and mission as finding a home AMONG the people.

Mission as interculturality

The phenomenon of the multiculturalism of today’s world constitutes a veritable missionary challenge today, recognized as such by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* (see 71-75). He says, “the changes taking place in these great spaces and the culture which they create are a privileged locus of the new evangelization” (EG 73). “What is called for is an evangelization capable of shedding light on these new ways of relating to God, to others and to the world around us, The Church is called to be at the service of a *difficult dialogue* (EG 74, emphasis added). “Interculturality” or “intercultural dialogue” is what this “difficult dialogue” is about.

Perhaps the distinction between “multiculturalism” and “interculturality” needs to be noted at this point. This distinction may be expressed in the

following way.¹² The term “Multiculturalism” refers the sociological FACT or REALITY whereby several cultures co-exist side by side each other in the same society or community. On the other hand, the term “interculturality” refers to the theological IDEAL or GOAL whereby the different cultures in society or in the community are made to interact with each other, so that they do not only co-exist with each other, much less are in conflict with one another, but enrich and transform each other.

In the light of this distinction, interculturality may be defined as the “sustained interaction of people of different cultural backgrounds leading to the transformation and enrichment of each one and everyone.”¹³ And while, in the context of multiculturalism, governments and states and other secular entities seem to be content with the peaceful co-existence among people of different cultures, the Church aims for more than civil tolerance and works towards the mutually enriching interaction among different cultures.¹⁴ Put differently, the Church aims at going beyond the mere fact of multiculturalism towards the ideal of genuine interculturality.

Obviously, interculturality or intercultural dialogue takes place best in the context of what we saw above as the enlarged understanding of mission, that is, mission as dialogue with people, encounter between peoples, and finding a home among the people. In other words, interculturality takes place best in the context of mission as *missio inter gentes*.

Dialogue as the Mode of Mission

A third nuance of “*missio inter gentes*” is connected with the emergence of the notion of “dialogue” in missiological parlance. This dates back to Vatican II which underlines dialogue as an important missiological concept in several of its documents. For instance, *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, states that the Church relates with the world in dialogue characterized by “solidarity, respect and love.”¹⁵ *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, says that the “Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in other religions,” and

¹² See Anthony Gittins, *Living Mission Interculturally: Faith, Culture and the Renewal of Praxis* (Collegeville Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2015), 18-24.

¹³ Lazar T. Stanislaus, SVD and Martin Ueffing, SVD, eds., *Intercultural Living*, Vol. 1 (Sankt Augustin: Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut, 2015), xxiv.

¹⁴ See Maria Cimperman, RSCJ and Roger P. Schroeder, SVD, eds., *Engaging Our Diversity: Interculturality and Consecrated Life Today* (New York, NY: Orbis, 2020), vii.

¹⁵ See Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, no. 3, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

urges Catholics to “enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions.”¹⁶

Post-conciliar documents underline the idea of dialogue even more strongly. Pope Paul VI’s first encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* states that “God Himself took the initiative in the dialogue of salvation We, therefore, must be the first to ask for a dialogue with men, without waiting to be summoned to it by others.”¹⁷ Similarly Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* asserts that “Each member of the faithful and all Christian communities are called to practice dialogue, although not always to the same degree or in the same way.”

A Debate on Prepositions

The emergence of the notion of “dialogue” in missiology has led to what Daniel Patrick Huang, in his talk to the Second National Mission Congress of the Philippines, “a lively discussion among missiologists and theologians precisely about prepositions: whether we should speak and think of mission as *ad gentes* (“to the peoples”), *inter gentes* (“among or between peoples”), or *cum gentibus* (“with the peoples”).”¹⁸ He groups the different opinions on this question into three:

One might identify three basic options, which we might call “retention,” “substitution,” and “complementarity.” First are those who would argue for the *retention* of the exclusive use of *ad gentes* language, judging that any other manner of speaking would erroneously suggest that Christianity is on the same level as other religions, and weaken the effort to call non-Christians to conversion to Christianity. A second position proposes that we *stop* using the language of *ad gentes* in speaking of mission, and *substitute* instead other prepositions, namely *inter* and *cum*: *inter gentes* and *cum gentibus*. A third group views the three prepositions as *complementary*, and proposes allowing *inter gentes* and/or *cum gentibus* to complement or enrich the more traditional language of *ad gentes*.¹⁹

One of criticisms of mission understood solely as “*ad gentes*” is that mission is seen as a “one-way street” where everything is done by the missionary

¹⁶ See Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, 1965, no. 2, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

¹⁷ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 72, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html.

¹⁸ Daniel Patrick Huang, SJ, “Rethinking *MISSIO AD GENTES* in the Context of the Church in Asia,” in *Gifted to Give: Proceedings of the Second National Mission Congress of the Philippines*, 2022, 44.

¹⁹ Huang, “Rethinking *MISSIO AD GENTES* in the Context of the Church in Asia,” 44.

for the people. The missionary is the evangelizer, the people the evangelized. The missionary is the bearer of good news, the people the recipient of the gospel. The missionary is the preacher who proclaims the truth, the people the ones who need conversion. The implicit assumption is that the people are completely devoid of any spiritual treasure, and therefore have nothing to share in return.²⁰

Missio inter gentes corrects this older view of mission and underlines the fact that mission is a two-way exchange of gifts between missionaries and the people. Dialogue implies that the Spirit is at work in the people being evangelized as well as in the evangelizers themselves.²¹ In other words, mission is the process not only of the missionary evangelizing the people, but also of the missionary being evangelized by the people. Mission is not only about what God does to the people through the missionary, but also about what God does to the missionary through the people. Consequently, missionaries must be ready to give and receive, to evangelize and be evangelized, to speak and to listen. They must be prepared to change and be changed, to form and be formed, to invite to conversion and be converted themselves.²²

Missiological Implications

Two implications may also be drawn from this shift of emphasis from *missio ad gentes* to *missio inter gentes*, namely, first, mission as *Missio Dei*, and secondly, mission as spirituality.

Mission as missio Dei

The notion of dialogue entailed in *mission inter gentes* highlights the understanding of mission as God's mission (*missio Dei*) before it is the mission of the Church (*missio ecclesiae*). While traditionally the origin of mission was traced back to the mission mandate received by the disciples on the day of the Ascension (see Mt 28: 18-20), today mission is seen as originating from the Triune God as such. This is underlined by Vatican II itself. Its Decree *Ad*

²⁰ "We are not the 'haves,' the *beati possidentes*, standing over against the spiritual 'have nots,' the *massa damnata*." David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991); 484.

²¹ See Donal Dorr, *Mission in Today's World* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2000), 202 ff.

²² This idea is also sometimes expressed as "mission in reverse", i.e., "we need to be evangelized by the people before we can evangelize them; we need to allow the people among whom we work to be our teachers before we presume to teach them." See Claude Marie Barbour, "Seeking Justice and Shalom in the City" in *International Review of Mission* 73 (1984): 303-309, as cited in Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 59.

Gentes traces the origin of mission to the sending by the Father of the Son and the Holy Spirit in order to bring about God's universal plan of salvation (see AG 1-2, 9). This idea has now come to be known as "the Trinitarian origin of Mission."

This idea of Vatican II parallels the notion of *Missio Dei* in Protestant theology, by which mission is understood as derived from the very nature of God.²³ Mission is not primarily an activity of the Church, but an attribute of God. As Triune, God is a missionary God, and mission is seen as a movement from God to the world. The Church is viewed as an instrument for this mission. Thus, there is Church because there is mission, and not vice-versa. Or, it is not the Church of Christ that has a mission, but the mission of Christ which has a Church to carry it forward.²⁴ Or as Pope Francis puts it: "It is not the Church that makes the mission, but the mission that makes the Church."²⁵

The theology behind the notion of *missio Dei* is the vision of the Triune God as communion and communication, interaction and dialogue, between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And this inner communication or dialogue overflows into—or better, embraces—creation and history. Mission, then, is the Triune God's ongoing dialogue with the world and with humanity, a dialogue that invites and draws humanity and all of creation into full communion with the Divine community. Thus, there is mission not because it is mandated by the Church, but because God is a Triune God. Before being about what the Church does, mission is about who God is.

So, while traditionally, the origin of mission was traced back to the "mission mandate" received by the Church on the day of the Ascension, contemporary missiology pushes the origin of mission back to the very beginning, i.e., to the very heart of the Trinity, the inner communication or dialogue within the Divine Community itself.

²³ See David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 389-393. As a modern missiological concept, *Missio Dei* can be traced back to the work of Karl Barth in the 1930's. It was first introduced at the International Missionary Conference (IMC) at Wellingin in 1952 by K. Hartenstein, director of the Basel Mission. See also Theo Sundermeier, "Theology of Mission" in *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Perspectives*, ed. by Karl Muller, et al. (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 434.

²⁴ See Adrian Hastings, "Mission" in *Encyclopedia of Theology: A Concise Sacramentum Mundi* (NY: Crossroad, 1975), 967-969. See also Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 8.

²⁵ Francis, "Address to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples," December 3, 2015, No. 1, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/december/documents/papa-francesco_20151203_plenaria-propaganda-fide.html.

Mission as spirituality

The view entailed by *missio inter gentes* on the dialogical nature of mission whereby the missionary not only evangelizes the people but also allows himself/herself to be evangelized by the people leads to the idea of mission as not only activity but also spirituality. Mission is not just what the missionary does, but also what the missionary becomes because of what he or she does. Indeed, the value of understanding mission as *missio inter gentes* is that it integrates both dimensions of mission—activity and spirituality, or action and contemplation

This kind of spirituality is specifically *missionary* spirituality—that is to say, a spirituality that arises from one's mission engagement, rather than a spirituality previously developed through the practice of religious exercises in the religious community. In other words, it is a spirituality whereby mission engagements like inculturation, interreligious dialogue or integral liberation become the source of spiritual nourishment, constituting thereby one's path to conversion and holiness. For instance, the missionary becoming a just and peaceable person because of his or her work for justice and peace, or the missionary becoming a person of the Word because of his or her work in the biblical apostolate, or the missionary becoming a person of dialogue because of his or her work in interreligious dialogue.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 78, Pope Francis laments the fact that for many pastoral workers, “the spiritual life comes to be identified with a few religious exercises which can offer a certain comfort but which do not encourage encounter with others, engagement with the world or a passion for evangelization. As a result, one can observe in many agents of evangelization, even though they pray, a heightened individualism, a crisis of identity and a cooling of fervour.” Thus, Pope Francis proposes a “spirituality of encounter” as today's missionary spirituality—encounter especially with those in the peripheries of society which brings about a transformation of oneself. For as St. Joseph Freinademetz used to say, “the greatest task of the missionary is the transformation of one's inner self.”²⁶

Mission as *missio inter gentes*, therefore, entails some fundamental attitudes in mission. Among the many, the following three, I believe, are essential:

- (a) *Contemplation*. The origin of mission is the Triune God. Our participation in mission is, therefore, an encounter with mystery—the mystery of the Triune God who calls all of humanity and the whole of creation to share

²⁶ See Josef Hollweck, *Joseph Freinademetz: Serving the People of China*. Short Biography for the canonization. Trans. by Jacqueline Mulberge (Città di Castello: GESPE, 2003), 12-14.

in God's life and glory, the mystery of God's salvific plan for the world, the mystery of the presence and action of Christ and the Spirit in the world. Thus, the very first challenge in mission is to seek out, discern and strengthen the presence of Christ and the action of the Spirit in the world. But it will be impossible to discern if we do not approach mission in contemplation. For to contemplate is precisely to look, to listen, to learn, to discern, to respond, to collaborate. The missionary, then, evangelizes not primarily by doing things for the people but by being with them and enabling them to do things themselves. The missionary's mission method will be marked not by frenetic activity but by contemplative presence among God's people. He or she will give priority to *being missionary* over *doing missionary things*.

- (b) *Humility*. The understanding of mission as *Missio Dei* makes us realize that the missionary is never the "owner" or "master" of the gospel, but only its "steward" and "servant." Today, then, the missionary is called to preach the gospel not as if he or she owned it (like some missionaries in the past), dictating thereby the terms by which it must be understood (doctrine/dogma), lived (morals/ethics) and celebrated (liturgy/worship). The approach of the missionary today must be to share the faith not as one's possession but as a gift received from God and from others. This entails that today the missionary is called to evangelize not from a position of power and superiority where he/she looks down on the people, but from a position of powerlessness, lowliness and humility, where the missionary stands in solidarity with the people. The ultimate reason for humility in mission is that mission is God's and not ours, and the primary agent of mission is God's Spirit and not us.
- (c) *Joy*. Often in the past, mission was understood as a response to a mandate and obedience to a command. Thus, it was seen as entailing a burden and a sacrifice—particularly, the giving up of one's home and country in order to go to far-away lands, and the readiness of live a life of deprivation and hardship in conditions regarded as "primitive." However, seeing mission as *Missio Dei* makes us realize that our call to mission is a call to participate in God's mission and share in God's dream for this world. And this cannot just be a burden and sacrifice, but, above all, a gift and privilege. As St Joseph Freinademetz wrote to his family after he learned that he was being sent to China as a missionary: "Thank God ... that the Lord has given us the grace of having a missionary in our family ... I do not consider this as a sacrifice that I offer to God, but as the greatest gift that God is giving me." In *Evangelii Gaudium* (see Nos. 1-13), Pope Francis says that every genuine encounter with Jesus is an experience of joy. The Gospel

therefore is an invitation to joy. Thus, mission, or proclaiming the Gospel, must also be an experience of joy.

Conclusion

“*Missio inter gentes*” is a mission paradigm that is polyvalent in meaning, containing a number of nuances arising from the different matrices from which it has emerged in missiological parlance. Among these different nuances, the main ones seem to be, as explored in this essay, the local Church as the primary subject of mission, multiculturalism as today’s context of mission, and dialogue as the mode of mission. As such, it resonates with Pope Francis’ vision of the Church. Although he never once explicitly used the term, his many statements about the Church and its mission echo this mission paradigm. In his interview with *America Magazine* in 2013, one of the first interviews of his papacy, he said:

I see clearly that what the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful. It needs nearness and proximity. I see the Church as a field hospital after a battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol or about the level of his blood sugar. You have to heal the wounds first, then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, and you have to start from the ground up.²⁷

A Church of nearness and proximity, a field hospital rather than a bureaucratic institution, indeed, a Church *inter gentes*.

²⁷ Francis, Interview with *America Magazine*, 2013, as quoted in John Christian Young, “Missionary Discipleship in the Local Church,” 36.