

MISSIOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS FROM VATICAN II IN THE CONTEXT OF THE VIETNAMESE CHURCH: 50 YEARS AFTER

Jerome Nguyen Dinh Cong*

Saint Joseph Major Seminary of Xuan Loc, Vietnam

1. Introduction

Vatican II is seen as a great event initiating a colossal change with far-reaching repercussions in the Catholic Church in the 20th century. Fifty years later, its fruits continue to flourish in new and surprising ways and to mature in local churches worldwide. It is compared to a gust of fresh wind that has brought to the universal Church new vigour and new vistas. In other words it has compelled the Church to change her countenance in response to her mission in the modern world. This alteration is also being realized in the Vietnamese Church seeking a new vision and a new way of being Church. This article reflects on the response of the Vietnamese Church to the challenge Vatican II launched during these last 50 years. To do this, the opportunities and ordeals encountered will be presented. Finally, the paper will try to propose an approach to the current reality.

It is impossible to discuss all dimensions of Vatican II because of its magnitude. I will limit the reflection on the mission perspective to selected documents. Consequently, I will try to show their implications for the missionary task of the Vietnamese Church. Therefore, this article is organized into two main sections. The first will discuss the missiological dimensions in Vatican II focusing on the

***Jerome Nguyen Dinh Cong**, a Vietnamese priest belonging to the diocese of Xuan Loc, Vietnam, holds a Licentiate in Sacred Theology and MA in Theology from the University of Santo Tomas, Manila Philippines, with a specialization in Missiology. At present he is pursuing his doctoral studies and teaching at the Saint Joseph Major Seminary of Xuan Loc. At the same time, he is serving as the assistant principal of the Evangelization Center of Xuan Loc. Email: frcongxuanloc@yahoo.com

following five documents: *Dei Verbum*, *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Ad Gentes*, and *Nostra Aetate*. The second section tries to show the effort of the Vietnamese Church to implement Vatican II in the last 50 years. However, missiology cannot be separated from ecclesiology and it is impossible to have a technical missiological reflection without ecclesiology. From this viewpoint, I shall start from the ecclesiological dimension and move toward the missiological dimension, namely a new vision and a new way of being Church.

2. Vatican II: Missiological Dimension: A New Vision of the Church

To understand well a “new vision” of Vatican II we should avoid the opposite attitude of comparing it to Vatican I and the previous Councils. It is easy to be prejudiced into thinking that the “new is good” and the “old is bad,” hence, Vatican II *new-good* and Vatican I *old-bad*. The risk of this kind of thinking is to degrade the past and to distort the facts. Vatican II indeed tremendously transformed the vision of the Church as the discussion below will show, but it did not simultaneously end the past; on the contrary, it was faithful to the path traced by the previous Councils.¹ So it is improbable to understand fully a new vision of the Church of Vatican II without Vatican I.

The Ecclesiology of pre-Vatican II, generally, focused on the legal dimension rather than on communion and union. It is easy to recognize the key words used to describe the Church in this era: *society*, *perfect* and *hierarchy*. A definition of the Church that Saint Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621) stated was typical of that period: the true Church is “the assembly of men gathered in the profession of the same Christian faith, and in the communion of the same sacraments, under the reign of legitimate pastors, and especially of the one Vicar of Christ on earth, the Roman Pontiff.”²

In the context of the Pre-Vatican II Church, this vision attempted to consolidate the Church’s existence and independence in relation to

¹The documents of Vatican II quoted 93 times from the previous Councils including 21 times from the Trent, and 24 times from Vatican I. The Council also quoted from or referred to the documents of pope Pius XII 201 times. See E. Innocenti, “Le citazioni pontificie nei documenti conciliari,” in *Concretezza* (16-7-1966) 6-10.

²Robert Bellarmine, *De Ecclesia*, III, 2, Colonia, 1619, 108. See also, Charles Moreo, *l’Eglise – et la recherche humaine de la vérité*, Lethielleux Parole et Silence, 2010, 114. Robertus Berllaminus, *De controversiis christinanae fidei aversus hujus emporis haereticos*, II, lib.3, *De Ecclesia militante*, caput II, Neapoli: Apud Josephum Giuliano, 1857, 75.

the earthly society. It also kept the Church's union with the highest apostolic authority. However, negatively, the Church was considered as a visible community comprising of individuals who are united by a legal institution. From this viewpoint, an institutional dimension was too emphasized at the expense of the dimension of mystery. Similarly, formula of faith was stressed and given more weight than faith's action and sacramental rites were over-esteemed overshadowing the reality of sacramental graces.

Vatican II totally transformed the ecclesiology to bring out a new vision and a new way of being Church in the modern world. If pre-Vatican II's image of the Church was institution, Vatican II focused on communion and mission.³ Indeed, communion and mission are like the light and the "red-thread" that shines and connects all relationships between the Church and others, for example: the Church and the Trinity, the universal Church and the local churches, the clergy and the laity, the Church and other churches of Christ, the Church and other religions, the Church and the world... Vatican II did not deny the terms "*perfect, society, and hierarchy,*" but still used these (LG, 8, 14, 20) as a way of thinking of communion and mission. The terms *perfect, society* and *hierarchy* were completely shifted, from: *society* to *Mystery*, *perfect society* to *Sacrament*, and *hierarchical society* to *People of God*.

2.1. From Society to the Mystery

Vatican II went beyond the Church's social dimension and focused on the Trinity as the source of all things. The Church, though a society, is marvellously a non-sensible reality, too. That is the Church's mysterious dimension which was mentioned in the first Chapter of *Lumen Gentium*.⁴ The Church is seen as an economy that shows the Love of the Triune God in history (LG, 2-4; AG, 2); hence she is considered as "a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (LG, 4). This consideration was more clarified in detail by the Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*: "This is the sacred mystery of the unity of the Church, in Christ and through Christ, the Holy Spirit energizing its various functions. It is a mystery that finds its highest exemplar and source in the unity of the

³Morris Pelzel and Thomas P. Walters, *Ecclesiology: The Church as Communion and Mission*, Chicago: Loyola Press 2001, 2-115.

⁴See Bonaventure Kloppenburg, *The Ecclesiology of Vatican II*, translated by Matthew J. O'Connell, Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press 1974, 12-19.

Persons of the Trinity: the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit, one God" (UR, 2). The communion and mission of the Triune God is at the very source of the Church, its origin, paragon and goal.⁵ The Church is essentially communion flowing from the Trinity.

Vatican II totally went beyond the Church's legal dimension that Saint Robert Bellarmine had defined. Thus, to distinguish between being *inside* or *outside* the Church is wholly based on the relationship with the Trinity that was declared in *Lumen Gentium*:

They are fully incorporated in the society of the Church who, possessing the Spirit of Christ accept her entire system and all the means of salvation given to her, and are united with her as part of her visible bodily structure and through her with Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops (LG, 14).

From this viewpoint, the Church is considered as both the hierarchical society and the mystical body of Christ; at once the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things. A person belongs to the Church depending on visible and invisible elements that he/she more or less participates in. It is no longer absolutely saying: *yes* or *no*, but *much* or *little*, *full catholic* or *half catholic*. From this viewpoint, Vatican II did not equate the Church of Christ with the Catholic Church, but said that it *subsists* (exists) in the Catholic Church (See, LG, 8).

2.2. From Perfect Society to the Sacrament

Vatican II had absolutely departed from the ambition of having a Christian's world, a position which the Church used to occupy. Also, the Council did not consider the Church as a cultural, socio-political influence that embraces all organizations and power to compete with the earthly society. This awareness compelled the Council's participants to go back to the Apostolic Fathers' concept of *sacrament* to apply to the Church, which was affirmed by *Lumen Gentium*: "The Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race" (LG, 1).

This confirmation embraces important meanings. First, dogmatically different from the previous opinions, Vatican II confirmed that the Church has no self-purpose nor is she a goal but

⁵Morris Pelzel and Thomas P. Walters, *Ecclesiology*, 12-29.

she is as a sign and an instrument of salvation. The Church does not equate herself to God's kingdom but is present in mystery, growing visibly through the power of God in the world (See LG, 3) and is "the initial budding forth of that kingdom" (LG, 5). In this sense, the Church is the Sacrament of the Kingdom of God and close to it because the Kingdom of God, which even if it was started in the Church, is an eschatological reality. The Church, though a sign of God's Kingdom, is a pilgrim one. "The pilgrim Church in her sacraments and institutions, which pertain to this present time, has the appearance of this world" (LG, 48).

Secondly, as the Sign (Sacrament) of unity between humankind and God, humankind and others, the Church cannot be separated from the world, on the contrary, she must accompany, dialogue with, and serve the world. In the light of Vatican II, the Church is no longer a perfect society to rival or to confront the earthly society, but further, she has become the salt, the yeast, the light and the universal Sacrament of Salvation (LG, 48). For this reason, at the beginning of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, the Council declared: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts" (GS, 1).

2.3. From Hierarchical Society to People of God

Vatican II neither denied the hierarchical Church nor refused Vatican I but reserved Chapter III of *Lumen Gentium* to discuss about the hierarchy, still mentioning the supreme authority of the Pope (LG, 18). However, the Council no longer considered the Church as a pyramid and framed by the hierarchy but considered her as the People of God.

The term "people of God" first recalls the history of salvation and the stages of the Jews' pilgrimage in the desert (Is 40). It also shows that the Church, the new Israel, is in a pilgrimage along the vicissitudes of life towards the Everlasting Life. Secondly, it focuses on the community life of the faithful. "God does not make men holy and nor saves them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. He brings men together as one people" (LG, 9). Finally, this term does not mean that the Church is an abstraction or an institution but it primarily refers to real persons who are reborn

since they trusted in Christ; secondly, the Church comprises persons who are called from among the people to carry out a mission in the world.⁶

From this viewpoint, Vatican II opened the consciousness to the reality of living local churches. "People of God" is a unique community but it is present specifically in every nation worldwide. Every local church is a full manifestation of the Church's mystery because the episcopal ministry, the Word of God and the Eucharist are present there⁷ and the unique Church of Christ is present and really lives through those local churches. We see the Church which is present in particular places, not an abstract Church.

The local churches, as people of God in particular places, carry in them socio-political, cultural and historical vestiges of the place and era to which they belong. The local churches are always regionalized in space and time. This is not accidental but a consequence of the Incarnation. Awareness of the local Church means the very awareness of the essential of the incarnation to reveal in its particularity the mystery of the Church, and simultaneously is an inculturation of it.

When considering the Church as people of God, Vatican II wished to highlight the basic equality among Christians. The Church is not a hierarchy but a community embracing all persons who trust in Christ. This grace we have, thanks to the Baptism and the Eucharist by which we are connected with Christ and with each other to become members of the People of God. The term People of God embraces both the hierarchy and the laity, all the faithful, because "all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ" (LG, 32). Hence, hereafter the laity is no longer named the marginal Church or a tributary of it, but are sent to carry out an important and specific mission in the world. "The laity are called in a special way to make the Church present and operative in those places and circumstances where only through them can it become the salt of the earth" (LG, 33). The Church cannot complete her mission of sanctification of the world if there are no laity who live like yeast that is mixed with three

⁶See Bonaventure Kloppenburg, *The Ecclesiology of Vatican II*, 41-44.

⁷See LG 23. See also Vatican II, Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church *Christus Dominus* (Oct 28, 1965), no 11.

measures of wheat flour, and through their living “in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven” (LG, 31). Their mission is not shared from the clergy but originates from the Baptism that they received.

3. A New Way of Being Church

Vatican II, as shown in the above discussion, brings out a new vision of the Church. The Council also indicates a new way of being Church as will be discussed in what follows. We can see this through the following five selected documents: *Dei Verbum*, *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Ad Gentes*, and *Nostra Aetate*.

Dei Verbum, the self-communication of God, the source of Church's mission: This is one of the two dogmatic constitutions issued by Vatican II, the other one is *Lumen Gentium*. As such *Dei Verbum* is the most authoritative and important document of Vatican II. Its purpose is to spell out the Church's knowledge of revelation that is the process whereby God communicates with human beings. One of the core ideas, which is discussed in this document, is the self-communication of God. It is considered as the source of the Church's mission.

The term self-communication of God is used to describe an interior and mutual relationship of the Triune God (*ad intra*) and revealed to human beings (*ad extra*) as the Revelation. The document declares:

In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, humanity might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature. Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God out of the abundance of His love speaks to men and lives among them, so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself (DV, 2).

Our God is not lonesome but is a communicative Community. He communicates himself to us and thus, enables us to enter into communication with each other and also removes everything which hinders our Communication.⁸ *Dei Verbum* announces that the plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity, it had been revealed in its full integrity to be handed on to all generations, and Jesus Christ, the Word of God, is the completed

⁸Franz-Josef Eilers, *Communicating in Community*, Manila: Logos Publication 2009, 44.

Revelation (DV, 2, 7). The Constitution declares: "Then, after speaking in many and varied ways through the prophets, now at last in these days God has spoken to us in His Son" (DV, 4). Jesus is not only the one who reveals but is the very Revelation of God. He, is the one whom whoever sees, sees God the Father. "Jesus perfected revelation by fulfilling it through His words and deeds, His signs and wonders, but especially through His death and glorious resurrection from the dead and final sending of the Spirit of truth" (DV, 4).

Self-communication of God is contemplated as the source of Church's mission because of its un-separated relation with Jesus. As the Body of Christ, the Church encompasses the totality of God's Revelation together with the responsibility to keep its "full integrity be handed on to all generations" (DV, 7). In other words, self-communication of God is the source of the Church's mission because God is a Community of communication. God's self-communication is not only exchanging and sharing information but it is more deeply and more importantly, the sharing of himself. Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnated God's communication, the self-communication of God made flesh is present in the Church, has become the Source of the Church's mission.

Lumen Gentium, the Church's mission as essential to her nature: Explicitly, *Ad Gentes* declares that "the Pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature" (AG, 2). However implicitly, *Lumen Gentium* previously mentions the same. *Ad Gentes* explains the Church's mission in her nature thus: "since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father" (AG, 2). This is also mentioned in *Lumen Gentium* Chapter I (LG, 1-8).

Indeed, in shifting to a new vision of the Church as Mystery, Sacrament and People of God, Vatican II completely followed through its missiological orientation. As a Mystery and Sacrament, the Church is rooted in the Triune God and becomes the Body of Christ and "a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race" (LG, 1). As the People of God, the Church "is to be spread throughout the whole world and must exist in all ages, so that the decree of God's will may be fulfilled" (LG, 13). *Lumen Gentium* emphasized that, "the Church has received this solemn mandate of Christ to proclaim the saving

truth from the apostles and must carry it out to the very ends of the earth" (LG, 17). Hence, mission is her nature; Furthermore, *Ad Gentes* will describe the traits of the Church's mission.

Ad Gentes, the characteristics of the Church's mission: We must understand fully how *Ad Gentes* is interrelated with *Lumen Gentium*. The relationship between the two documents is marked by their first words: "*Lumen Gentium*" (light for the nations) and "*Ad Gentes*" (going to the nations). These terms refer to the words of Isaiah: the Servant of the Lord was sent to the world to bring light to the nations and to save them (Is 42:6; 49:6). First of all these words were applied to Christ, then to the Church because the Church continues the mission of Christ. The Church *is* and permanently *will be* the light and an instrument of salvation to the world; and the Church will complete this main role by doing its mission in the world. Hence, *Lumen Gentium* affirms that mission is the Church's nature and *Ad Gentes* continues this topic in the present context by concretizing the characteristics of this mission.

First, the document brings out a definition and the basic principles of mission. "Mission is the term usually given to those particular undertakings by which the heralds of the Gospel, sent out by the Church and going forth into the whole world, carry out the task of preaching the Gospel and planting the Church among peoples or groups who do not yet believe in Christ" (AG, 6). This definition indicates a very important character that mission is *going beyond the Church's boundaries* because mission "flows from the "fount — like love" or charity of God the Father" (AG, 2) and continues to the ends of the world. Mission is not an option between "yes" or "no" but is always yes! Hence at its beginning *Ad Gentes* declares: "the Church, driven by the inner necessity of her own catholicity, and obeying the mandate of her Founder, strives ever to proclaim the Gospel to all men" (AG, 1).

Secondly, mission is always imperative and fresh. The first lines of *Ad Gentes* expresses that the Church, being the salt of the earth and the light of the world, is more urgently called upon to save and renew every creature (AG, 1). This exerts a force for the Church's incessant call to renewal for mission.

The third is the eschatological sense of mission. The Decree envisions missionary activities towards its eschatological fulfilment. The Church must be finally directed towards full conformity to God's

will. To realize this completely, the role of mission cannot be taken lightly. Once again, the Decree asserts that mission is very necessary. Thanks to missionary activity the people of God increase in the measure and time which the Father has fixed in His power. And "By missionary activity, the mystical body grows to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ" (AG, 9).

Gaudium et Spes, the Church's mission to accompany humankind and the world: The main purpose of this document is to explain to everyone how it conceives the presence and the activity of the Church in the world today" (GS, 2). The Church is not a mechanism but a community, which is truly linked with humankind and its history by the deepest of bonds. Hence, at the beginning of the document, the Council declared: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ" (GS, 1). This is made more evident in the main points of the document.

First, the document mentions humankind as the centre of the world and object of Church's mission. It brings out a completed vision of the human being in relationship with God, the Creator. Human dignity is very elevated because the human being is the image of God even though it has been damaged by sin. For by his innermost nature man is a free and social being; and unless he relates himself to others he can neither live nor develop his potential (GS, 12). Human dignity is revealed fully in Jesus Christ (GS, 22).

Secondly, the document talks about the role of the Church in the world. The Constitution affirms that "the Church goes forward together with humanity and experiences the same earthly lot which the world does" (GS, 40), hence the relationship between the Church and the world is inseparable. We can understand better this relationship through Numbers 40-45, which emphasizes the role of the Church in the world through particular dimensions. (1) To everyone: the role of the Church is the preservation of human dignity and the enlightenment on the meaning of his own existence. (2) Towards society: the Church tries to unify humankind and integrates the value of Gospel into social structures. (3) With regards social activities, the Church exhorts Christians to strive to discharge their earthly duties conscientiously and in accordance with the Gospel spirit because it is their duty as the faithful (GS, 43). At the same time,

the Church is also enriched by her service of the world. "Just as it is in the world's interest to acknowledge the Church as an historical reality, and to recognize her good influence, so the Church herself knows how richly she has profited by the history and development of humanity" (GS, 44).

Nostra Aetate, the Church's mission for union and dialogue: This is the shortest document of Vatican II but its importance is equal to the other documents. The Church, through this document, claims that all nations are a united community. The Church respects the moral and religious values of the non-Christian religions and the Church also assures that whoever, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience can attain to everlasting salvation (LG, 16).

Together with the appreciation of non-Christian religions, the Church longs for dialogue and for union among religions:

The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men (NA, 2).

Towards the Jews, the Church specially pays great attention because of the deep connection between Catholics and Jews. The document writes: "Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is so great, this sacred synod wants to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues" (NA, 4).

Vatican II has, indeed, brought out a new vision and a new way of being Church in the modern world. In summary, the essential characteristics of the Church's mission as emphasized by the Council in the five documents mentioned are: *Dei Verbum*, the self-communication of God, the source of the Church's mission; *Lumen Gentium*, the Church's mission in her very nature; *Ad Gentes*, the characteristics of the Church's mission; *Gaudium et Spes*, the Church's mission in accompanying humankind and the world; *Nostra Aetate*, the Church's mission for union and dialogue. These are ceaselessly transforming the whole universal Church as well as the local

churches. The Church in Vietnam finding herself within the context of a Communist nation, how does she live out this new vision and new way of being Church?

4. How the Vietnamese Church Lives Her Mission Today

Although Vatican II was concluded 50 years ago it seems to be still new for many persons, especially the laity in Vietnam. The reason is that during the time of the Council (1962), Vietnam was in the midst of a devastating war. The nation was split into the North and the South. The Church was also similarly divided, until 1980. The North which was under Communist control, did not know anything about the Council; meanwhile the South, which was under the Americans, did not know much either. However, now, 50 years later, the Church in Vietnam is being gradually transformed by Vatican II.

One of the first and most important effects was the eagerness to translate the Bible to Vietnamese. Today, there are six Vietnamese Biblical translations that have appeared from 1964 to 1985. At the same time, movements of Bible sharing groups among priests, religious and laity have been developing. This indicates that the Church in Vietnam is making up for the lost time by being transformed at a rapid pace by Vatican II. This transformation is the first step to a great passion for evangelization. The second important effect is the establishment of the Missionary Committee in dioceses to improve its missionary activities. Almost all dioceses have trained grassroots missionaries who do full-time or part-time mission work.

Challenges that the Vietnamese Church is encountering are from both *ad extra* and *ad intra*. For the *ad extra*, the core challenge is that Vietnam is a Communist nation hence, the ideological disharmony and difference between the Christians and the Communists. Ideologically, the Communists are by nature atheists and they believe that religions are opium. So an enmity with religions is deep in their psyche. Any idea of "mission" or "evangelization" is inconceivable and unacceptable. For the Communists, what we call "mission" or "evangelization" is only religious expansion and propaganda. Historically, Catholicism, in the case of Vietnam, because of its connection with the French missionaries who initially came to evangelize, is still considered as an alien religion. Christianity is also seen as the religion of the invaders because its arrival was simultaneous to the invasion by the French Government. Moreover,

the Communists are very afraid of an overthrow of their unpopular administration. For this, they have built up a strict system of Constitution and laws with many unreasonable provisions to protect their position. For example, the paramount position of the Communist Party of Vietnam is described in no uncertain terms in Article 4 the Constitution where it says: "The Communist Party of Vietnam, relying on Marxism-Leninism, is the only leading power in the state and in society and the main factor which guarantees the success of the Vietnamese Revolution."⁹ This dictatorial ideal is a cause of other challenges for example in culture and in society which are controlled and politicized.

For the challenges *ad intra*, there is the lack of awareness of the mission *ad gentes* by the parishioners, religious and priests, especially the parish priests, and the lack of communion between parishes. Awareness of mission and communion is, theoretically, present in every parish but it is practically very ambiguous! Most of the parishes are satisfied and contented with traditional pastoral activities and sacraments so that their attention is not "directed to peoples or groups who do not yet believe in Christ, who are far from Christ, and on whom the Church has not yet taken root and whose culture has not yet been influenced by the Gospel."¹⁰ Even in the same area exist side by side rich and poor parishes.

The main reason for this state of affairs is that the Vietnamese Church has not yet fully understood what a renewed mission or evangelization according to the teachings of Vatican Council II and of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) is all about. The great majority of Vietnamese Christians lack an updated knowledge of mission. What they understand about mission is very simple and basic: mission means baptizing non-Christians. The Christians, with this simple basic knowledge of mission have difficulty in responding to the problems that non-Christians bring out. For example, "every religion is also good. There is no need to give one up in order to follow another." The parishioners, encountering these problems, usually react in ways they know how. Their responses to questions

⁹This article has been retained in the new Constitution of 1992 as well in the constitutional reforms of 2001 without any changes. See, Georg Evers, *The Church in Asia*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2005, 334.

¹⁰John Paul II, Encyclical on the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate, *Redemptoris Missio* (December 7, 1990), no. 34.

from non-Christians are not only unpleasant but can sometimes be offensive.

To respond to this challenge, therefore, the Church in Vietnam cannot but decide to make crucial and relevant changes in terms of her mission today. In this regard, the writer is deeply convinced that among the first needs to be addressed in the local church is the necessity of having parish communities, envisioned by Vatican II: "The parish offers an obvious example of the apostolate on the community level inasmuch as it brings together the many human differences within its boundaries and merges them into the universality of the church" (AA, 9).

The writer uses the framework of the three principal offices of the Christian as Prophet, Priest and King as the basis to promote ways for parish renewal. First, is the renewal of the parish through catechesis; secondly, the renewal through liturgical celebrations and finally, the renewal through love and service.

Prophetic: the renewal of the parish through nurturing catechesis. The percentage of Vietnamese church-goers is still high, around 90% on Sundays and 70% on weekdays.¹¹ However, this does not prove a living and committed faith in Vietnamese Christians. Many observers consider that the religious lifestyle of most Vietnamese Christians today does not go beyond the church compound. This is to say, that it is a religious practice that just focuses on external activities like going to church, the sacraments, processions, and the like, but does not focus enough on activities of Christian commitment to issues such as justice, truth, peace, so on. Many "holy" youths in the countryside live dissolutely when they go to the city. The main cause of these situations is, according to the writer, a lack of solid catechetical education. For this reason, the first way in the renewal of parish mission is, above all, catechesis.

Priestly: the renewal of the parish through animating liturgical celebrations. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* declares: "The liturgy is the summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows" (SC, 10). The Church, hence, calls her children "to be led to that fully conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by

¹¹Van Phong Toa Giam Muc Xuan Loc, Bao Cao Thuong Nien, 2010 [Office of Xuan Loc, Yearly Report, 2008], Xuan Loc, 2008.

the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people is their right and duty by reason of their baptism (SC, 14).

For parish communities that, in some manner, represent the visible Church constituted throughout the world, the Council says: "The liturgical life of a parish and its relationship to the bishop must be fostered. Theoretically and practically, among the faithful and clergy; efforts also must be made to encourage a sense of community within the parish, above all in the common celebration of the Sunday Mass" (SC, 42).

Many parish communities do not pay enough attention during liturgical celebrations, especially the Eucharistic celebration on Sunday. Parishioners are not carefully prepared to participate fully, consciously and actively in liturgical celebrations. For example, on Sunday mass, only a few parishioners stay inside church but many choose to stay outside. Other people read newspapers or do something else while attending the mass. During the homily, they go out to smoke or talk. The main reason for this phenomenon is weakness in liturgical catechism. Every day or every week they celebrate what they do not fully understand. For this reason, the renewal of the parish through the revitalization of liturgical celebrations is necessary. For example, courses for learning the catechism of the liturgy or other activities to help parishioners understand the meaning of each liturgical celebration.

Kingly: the renewal of the parish by cultivating loving service. The Church in Vietnam should pay special attention to love for the Communists and to the service of the poor.

Love of the Communists: there is, honestly, no human reason for people to love the Communists because of the savage actions that they have inflicted on the citizens of the nation and on the Church in Vietnam.¹² The primary and foundational reason to love them is "love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5: 44). Vatican II also teaches:

Respect and love ought to be extended also to those who think or act differently than we do in social, political and even religious matters. In fact, the more deeply we come to understand their ways of thinking

¹²The answers of 19/45 priests and religious were interviewed by the researcher in 2008-2010.

through such courtesy and love, the more easily will we be able to enter into dialogue with them (GS, 28).

Moreover, the Church' love for the Communists in Vietnam is also one of the best ways to do mission. The CBCV chose, in their general letter of 1980, dialogue instead of confrontation with Communists as a way of doing mission. This choice is in harmony with Vatican II teaching.

Even though she rejects atheism, the Church loves atheists and strives to detect in the atheistic mind the hidden causes for the denial of God; conscious of how weighty are the questions from which atheism rises, and motivated by love for all men, she believes these questions ought to be examined seriously and more profoundly (GS, 21).

In addition, at the *Ad Limina* of CBCV 2009, Pope Benedict, especially, affirmed that a sound collaboration between the Church and the political community is possible. "The Church does not want to replace the Government but she expects that by dialogue, collaboration, and respect together, she can contribute to the building of the country and the service of the people."¹³

Service of the poor: the poor are to be accorded important concern by the Church in Asia. In this context, the Church in Asia is invited to become a Church of the poor. The Asian Bishops in their first meeting in 1970 in Manila that was presided by Pope Paul VI himself, declared: "we feel that God is calling the Churches in Asia to become the Church of the poor."¹⁴ How is the Church of the poor understood?

To be a community of love and service is to be: (1) a parish that lives in evangelical poverty which combines detachment from material possessions with profound trust in the Lord as the only source of salvation; (2) a parish that defends and vindicates the rights of the poor even when doing so spells for itself alienation or persecution; (3) a parish where the poor, equal to others in Christian dignity, are not only evangelized but become evangelizers themselves; (4) a parish where no one is so poor as to have nothing to give, and no one is so rich as to have nothing to receive.¹⁵

¹³Benedict XVI, an Instruction to the bishops of Vietnam in the *Ad Limina* 2009.

¹⁴Julio X. Labayen, *Revolution and the Church of the Poor*, Claretian Publications, 1995, 33.

¹⁵Message of PCP II to the people of God in the Philippines. Quoted in Julio X. Labayen, *Revolution and the Church of the Poor*, 11.

Doing mission by love and service is very constructive and productive. The Vietnamese, generally, love doing charitable service and give much support to those who serve others. Most of the parish communities in Vietnam take part in the charity program of the diocese. In addition, the theological foundation of a community of service is in continuing the mission of love and service that Jesus Christ received from God the Father and handed over to the Church. A parish as a community of love and service is, hence, a framework that provides a structure where every member fully understands the mission of Jesus as a personal responsibility and comes to awareness of the fact that he/she has been gifted by God for service and ministry. It also provides a structure where each is called and challenged to use those gifts in service and ministry to build up the Body of Christ and further the Kingdom, and is provided opportunities to grow in a spirituality that overflows into action.¹⁶

Renewal of the parish through love and service entails the establishment of core groups, the development of a mission statement and pastoral plan, the implementation of the mission statement and pastoral plan, and the follow up, support and evaluation of the pastoral plan.¹⁷ As a researcher, three years ago, I experienced this process. I could establish about 20 core groups of young people in my parish and accompany them once a month to collect recyclable things to help the poor. These groups themselves, under the guidance of the parish Council, sought out the poor in need of help and made plans to help them. This service pleased the people and attracted even the young non-Christians to join these groups in order to serve with other young Christians. I could interview many of these young non-Christians who joined the Christian groups for serving and they gave meaningful answers. Most of them said that they found meaning in their life through service and that they loved their groups and their Christian colleagues.

5. Conclusion

We have discussed the missiological dimensions of Vatican II based on five documents: *Dei Verbum*, *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Ad Gentes*, and *Nostra Aetate*. Each of them brings out a

¹⁶Loughlan Sofield and Brenda Hermann, *Developing the Parish as a community of Service*, Jesuit Educational Center for Human Development, 1984, 5.

¹⁷Loughlan Sofield and Brenda Hermann, *Developing the Parish...*, 60.

characteristic relevant for doing mission in these modern times: *Dei Verbum*, the self-communication of God, the source of Church's mission; *Lumen Gentium*, Church's mission in her very nature; *Ad Gentes*, the characteristics of the Church's mission; *Gaudium et Spes*, the Church's mission through accompanying humankind and the world; *Nostra Aetate*, the Church's mission for union and dialogue.

The Church in Vietnam in responding to these challenges is trying her best to live out a new vision and a new way of being Church in order to become a witness in the Communist context where she finds herself. The triple way of parish renewal through catechesis, liturgical celebrations and love and service i.e., to love the Communist and to serve the poor, is necessary in Vietnam today.