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# A CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON MISSION

The Catholic theology of mission was expressed in various documents of the Council, especially in the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes*) of December 7, 1965. Critical self-examination in the wake of the Council has alerted many Catholics to the need for inner conversion as a response to "living change." The malaise felt with regard to earlier missionary efforts may be studied in the context of *Nostra Aetate* and Vatican documents of recent years.

## I

### *Nostra Aetate* and the Vatican Guidelines

On January 3, 1975, the new Vatican Commission for relations with the Jews issued "Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate* No. 4."<sup>1</sup>

Although this text is addressed to Catholics, it was printed in the secular papers and received comment in the Jewish press and journals. Certain statements received special attention;<sup>2</sup> we shall consider one of these: "In virtue of her divine mission, and of her very nature, the Church must preach Jesus Christ to the world" (*Ad Gentes* 2).

Some Jewish commentators quote this statement with no reference to the context;<sup>3</sup> one merely refers to the "missionary spirit" of the

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1. This is published in *SIDIC* (Rome) 8 (No. 1, 1975) pp. 38-40.
  2. On the absence of a reference to the bond between the Jewish People and the Land of Israel, see *SIDIC* 8 (No. 2, 1975) pp. 33-35.  
Leon Klenicki, "The Guidelines: A Jewish Point of View." *Face-to-Face* (ADL, New York) 1 (Summer 1975) pp. 10-13.  
Joseph Lookstein, "The Vatican and the Jews 1975." *Tradition* 15 (Spring-Summer 1975) pp. 5-24.  
Henry Siegman, "Ten Years and Two Documents: Their Significance." *SIDIC* 8 (No. 3, 1975) pp. 4-12.
  3. Joseph Lookstein, *art. cit.*, p. 12.

document.<sup>4</sup> To appreciate the meaning of the sentence, it must be read in its proper context. It occurs in a section entitled "Dialogue."

Dialogue presupposes that each side wishes to know the other, and wishes to increase and deepen its knowledge of the other. It constitutes a particularly suitable means of favouring a better mutual knowledge and, especially in the case of dialogue between Jews and Christians, of probing the riches of one's own tradition. Dialogue demands respect for the other as he is; above all, respect for his faith and his religious convictions.

In virtue of her divine mission, and her very nature, the Church must preach Jesus Christ to the world (*Ad Gentes*, 2). Lest the witness of Catholics to Jesus Christ should give offence to Jews, they must take care to live and spread their Christian faith while maintaining the strictest respect for religious liberty in line with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council (Declaration, *Dignitatis Humanae*).

Basic to a proper understanding of the words about the mission of the Church is the fact that Jewish-Christian relations are seen in the light of a philosophy of dialogue.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, the Catholic is reminded of the Vatican Council's declaration on religious liberty. Its principles apply to the Catholic's relationship to the Jewish people as well as to other groups of human beings.

The Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. Freedom of this kind means that all men should be immune from coercion on the part of individuals, social groups and every human power so that, within due limits, nobody is forced to act against his convictions in religious matters in private or in public, alone or in association with others. (*Dignitatis Humanae* No. 2).

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4. Henry Siegman, *art. cit.*, pp. 9-10.

5. See the position of the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Believers, "De Dialogo cum non credentibus" *Acta-Apostolicae Sedis* 60 (1968) pp. 692-704. A translation is found in *The Pope Speaks* 13 (1968-69) pp. 364-376; see also the working paper of the Secretariat for Christian Unity (Nov. 18, 1970) entitled "Reflections and Suggestions on Ecumenical Dialogue," *The Pope Speaks* 15 (1970-71) pp. 418-431. My quotations of Council documents are from Austin Flannery (editor), *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 1975.

Another point neglected by commentators is that the sentence on the Church's mission alludes to another conciliar document, the Decree on Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes*).

Having been divinely sent to the nations that she may be "the universal sacrament of salvation", the Church, in obedience to the command of her founder (Mark 16:15) and because it is demanded by her own essential universality, strives to preach the Gospel to all men (Preface).

But essential to a proper understanding of this effort to proclaim the Gospel is a later sentence:

The Church strictly forbids that anyone should be forced to accept the faith, or be induced or enticed by unworthy devices.

Perhaps the realization that such precisions are explicitly recalled by the *Guidelines* would help readers to sense the way in which the Church wishes to remain true to a basic conviction about her own nature, while carefully respecting the right of others not to heed her proclamation of the Gospel.

This citation of the background presupposed by the *Guidelines* may help to relieve the difficulties of the "International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations." Their statement which accompanied the release of the *Guidelines* includes these words:

The affirmation of the obligation of Catholics to "witness" to their faith leaves unanswered the question of the compatibility of such witness with the admonition contained in the Guidelines that "dialogue demands respect for the other as he is; above all, respect for his faith and his religious convictions."<sup>6</sup>

Rather than neglect or ignore what is an integral part of the Christian's vision of himself and the Church's self-definition, it is more honest, to ourselves as well as to our neighbours, to explain how

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6. Printed in *SIDIC* 8 (No. 1, 1975) p. 40. The most careful statements of a Jewish commentary are made by Rabbi Klenicki (*art. cit.*, pp. 10-11) and Rabbi Lookstein (*art. cit.*, pp. 12-13).

this theological position can be consistent with the rights of others and the principles of dialogue.

This is attempted in the paper of Professor Tommaso Federici which was presented to Catholic and Jewish scholars who met in Venice from March 27-30, 1977.<sup>7</sup> He reviews the biblical background and then develops the declaration that witness is a vital necessity to the Church. However, this must not be confused with proselytism, a term which has come to mean unsavory practices associated with some missionary enterprises.

No one should think that the Church plans to turn from her vision that the world at large needs and should hear the message of God's revealed Word. On December 8, 1975, Pope Paul VI gave an apostolic exhortation on the proclamation of the Gospel (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*).<sup>8</sup>

Both of these texts follow the venerable tradition of weaving numerous biblical quotations and allusions into the fabric of the thought being presented. Our study will investigate the pertinent themes within one Gospel within the context of life in the early Church and contemporary Judaism. This should provide a firm basis for assessing the modern Church's response to a perennial challenge, since the process of renewal includes a search for deeper insights into the Bible itself.

## II

### The Fourth Gospel Concerning the Church's Mission

A perusal of the documents of Vatican II shows that the text at the end of Matthew's Gospel, known as "the Great Commission" among English-speaking Protestants, is quoted several times.

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7. This was the sixth world session of the Liaison Committee between the Catholic Church and the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations. The corrected and final text is published in *SIDIC* 11 (No. 3, 1978) pp. 25-34. Earlier versions may be found in *Origins* of October 19, 1978 (pp. 273-283) and *Face-to-Face* 3 (Fall-Winter 1977) pp. 23-31, with comments and notes by Rabbi Leon Klenicki.
  8. The official text is published in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 68 (1976) pp. 1-96. A translation and commentary has been edited by Austin Flannery, *Evangelization Today*, Newport (N.Y.): Costello Publishing Company, 1977.

Full authority has been given to me both in heaven and on earth; go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you. And know that I am with you always, until the end of the world! (Mt. 28:18-20, *New American Bible*).<sup>9</sup>

It is noteworthy that the first use of the Great Commission is preceded by a statement alluding to the Fourth Gospel: "Just as the Son was sent by the Father, so He too sent the Apostles" (*Lumen Gentium* 17; cf. John 20:21).<sup>10</sup> This thought is developed in the Decree on Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes*) to which the *Guidelines* allude.

The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature. For it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she takes her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father (No. 2).<sup>11</sup>

With this in mind, we shall review some of the Fourth Gospel's teaching on the nature and mission of the Church.<sup>12</sup> The narratives which follow Jesus' cleansing of the Temple indicate the practice of dialogue. Jesus discusses spiritual realities with a Pharisee named Nicodemus, addressed as a teacher of Israel (3:10), then with the Samaritan woman. If the royal official whose son Jesus heals (4:46-54) is a Gentile,<sup>13</sup> the evangelist may intend to describe the

9. On No. 17 of *Lumen Gentium*, see M. J. Le Guillou, "La vocation missionnaire de l'Église." *L'Église de Vatican II* (edited by G. Barauna and Y.M.J. Congar), Paris; Editions du Cerf, 1966, Volume II, pp. 681-698.
10. See Peder Borgen, "God's Agent in the Fourth Gospel," *Religions in Antiquity* (editor Jacob Neusner), Leiden: Brill, 1968, pp. 137-148.
11. See also *Lumen Gentium* No. 19; *Ad Gentes* No. 4-5; *Presbyterorum Ordinis* No. 2, 14.
12. This section complements the articles of James McPolin, "Mission in the Fourth Gospel," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 36 (1969) pp. 113-122. J. Radermakers, "Mission et apostolat dans l'Évangile johannique," *Studia Evangelica* 2 (Berlin 1964) pp. 100-121.
13. See Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1968, Volume I, pp. 465-466. Perhaps this should not be stressed. As Bruce Vawter remarks (*Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p. 449) on the Greeks' request to see Jesus (12:20-26), they do not actually enter into his presence; "the Evangelist is being faithful to history in that Jesus' earthly ministry was directed exclusively to his own people (cf. Matthew 15:24 par.)".

widening range of Jesus' ministry. The positive response of the Samaritans may be intended as a confession of an earlier statement of the Son's mission:<sup>14</sup>

Yes, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not die, but may have eternal life (3:16).

A brief allusion to the disciples' mission occurs in the context of Jesus' success with the Samaritans.

Listen to what I say: Open your eyes and see! The fields are shining for the harvest! The reaper already collects his wages and gathers a yield for eternal life, that sower and reaper may rejoice together. Here we have the saying verified: "One man sows; another reaps." I sent you to reap what you had not worked for. Others have done the labour, and you have come into their gain (4:35-38).

Schnackenburg argues that the "sower" is the Father, the "reaper" is the Son, and the harvest really begins with his exaltation (cf. Jn. 11:52; 12:32; 17:2). The disciples begin their task only after they have been sent forth by the risen Lord (20:21), guided and strengthened by the Holy Spirit (20:22, cf. 15:26-27; 16:7-11).<sup>15</sup>

The Johannine Jesus emphasizes that God is the only maker of converts:

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him (6:44) . . . no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father (6:65). Father, the hour has come! Give glory to your Son that your Son may give glory to you, in as much as you have given him authority over all mankind, that he may bestow eternal life on those you gave him. . . . I have made your name known to those you gave me out of the world. These men you gave me were yours; they have kept your word. Now they realize that all that you gave me comes from you (17:1-2, 6-7).

14. Vawter, *op. cit.*, p. 432.

15. *Op. cit.*, pp. 451-452. The aorist "I sent you" (4:38), which recurs in 17:18, must be explained in terms of prophetic prevision.

The key-text, of course, for an insight into the bond between the nature and mission of the Church is Jesus' prayer at the Last Supper (John 17). However, there are earlier indications of the task accomplished by Jesus in the "hour" of humiliation-and-exaltation. The Good Shepherd shares a covenantal relationship<sup>16</sup> with his followers which is patterned after the intimacy of life with the Father (cf. 10:30). There are other sheep who will hear his voice and become part of the one flock (10:14-18). The evangelist interprets Caiaphas' words as a prophecy "that Jesus would die for the nation—and not for this nation only, but to gather into one all the dispersed children of God" (11:51-52).<sup>17</sup>

The parts of Jesus' priestly prayer which refer to his disciples and then to all believers are essential background to the theology of Vatican II.

O Father most holy, protect them with your name which you have given me that they may be one, even as we are one. . . . Consecrate them by means of truth—"your word is truth." As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world; I consecrate myself for their sakes now, that they may be consecrated in truth (17:11, 17-19).

Many are the insights which may be drawn from this passage. Important for our purpose is the consecration effected by God so that the disciples may share in Jesus' mission. The discussion related to the feast of Hanukkah (10:22) is background to this prayer.

Jesus answered: "Do you claim that I blasphemed when, as he whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world,

16. Frequently (from 6:56) the Johannine Jesus uses formulae of reciprocity patterned after "I will be your God and you will be my people" (Leviticus 26:12; Ezekiel 36:28; 37:27). André Feuillet, "Réflexions d'actualité sur les recherches exégétiques" *Revue Thomiste* 71 (1971) p. 252, links John 10:14-18 with Ezekiel 34:30-31 with the new insight that the relation between Christ and his disciples is an imitation and reflection of the eternal relation between the Father and the Son. See also his *Le Mystère de l'Amour divin dans la Théologie johannique*, Paris: Gabalda, 1972. See R. Schnackenburg, "Community with God According to John," *Present and Future: Modern Aspects of New Testament Theology*. University of Notre Dame Press, 1966, pp. 143-162.
17. See Severino Pancaro, "'People of God' in St. John's Gospel," *New Testament Studies* 16 (1970) pp. 149-162.

I said, 'I am God's Son?' If I do not perform my Father's works, put no faith in me. But if I do perform them . . . put faith in these works, so as to realize what it means that the Father is in me and I in the Father" (10:36-38).

These passages emphasize that mission and works flow from the intimate communion of Jesus, and that of his disciples, with the Father. Consecration by means of divine truth implies imitation of God. As is evident so often in the New Testament, the basic expression of ethical conduct is related to the familiar command of Leviticus: "Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy" (19:2).

The prayer of Jesus continues:

I do not pray for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their word, that all may be one, as you, Father, are in me, and I in you; I pray that they may be [one] in us, that the world may believe that you have sent me.

I have given them the glory that you gave me that they may be one, as we are one—I living in them, you living in me—that their unity may be complete. So shall the world know that you sent me, and that you loved them as you loved me (17:20-23).<sup>18</sup>

Although preaching (ministry of the word) has its place in the thought of John, the essential quality of the mission is the life of the community. The thoughts of this prayer concur with the earlier proclamation of a new commandment, expressing the covenant which is patterned after the intimate life of God.

I give you a new commandment: Love one another. Such as my love has been for you, so must your love be for each other. This is how all will know you for my disciples: Your love for one another (13:34-35).

This reciprocation of love among members bound by a covenant complements that outgoing love commanded by the Synoptic Gospels (e.g. Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-38). In Matthew, the climax of

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18. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Garden City, Doubleday, Volume 2, 1971), p. 769, outlines the structure of this passage:



Jesus' teaching comes in these familiar words: "You must be made perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48, cf. Luke 6:36).

In both developments of the biblical command to love one's neighbour, the early Church sensed an obligation to serve the world at large without any intention other than imitating God. Tragically, other motives entered into the minds and hearts of Christians at various periods; the Jewish people and numerous others have suffered enormously because of this wrong-headed attitude. It is significant that the Council, clearly stating human rights and reflecting on the mystery of relationships among men, has recalled the Johannine theology of mission to explain how the Church sees herself. If Christians recall that the Church draws her life from God and that her mission derives from the divine plan sending the Son and the Holy Spirit into the world, their presentation of the message of Christ will be inspired by the qualities of love pre-eminently associated with God himself. The work of bringing peace, justice, truth and love to the world can be accomplished, not by force or coercion, but only by recognition that the only conversion for which we are responsible is our own.<sup>19</sup>

The climax of John's account of Jesus' public ministry develops the teaching aspect of the mission.

Whoever puts faith in me believes not so much in me as in him who sent me . . . . I have come to the world as its light . . . . I have not spoken on my own; no, the Father who sent me has commanded me what to say and how to speak. Since I know that his commandment means eternal life, whatever I say is spoken just as he instructed me (12:44, 46, 49-50).

Of course the Fourth Gospel penetrates even more deeply into the mystery of God's intimate life and demands that Christians pattern their existence on the relationship of knowledge and love revealed by Jesus.

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19. My use of John 17 is rooted in my understanding that this Gospel speaks to the Church. I disagree with Ernst Käsemann's statement that "from the historical viewpoint, the Church committed an error when it declared the (Fourth) Gospel to be orthodox". See *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), p. 76.

The Christian Church has no mandate to confront evil by physical force, much less to procure converts by coercion or unworthy methods. Regrettably, like Hasmonean kings before them, some Christian rulers and teachers have abused their power. The Church now affirms her vigilance against any form of religious imperialism. Can anyone complain against the witness of mutual love within the Church and of service rendered to others precisely because they are created in God's image?

### Conclusions

In conformity with the deepest convictions of her faith, the Church proclaims her mission towards the world, all the while guaranteeing that she respects the rights and beliefs of those who are already committed to other beliefs, or to no belief. The Church does not consider that she is the sole repository of God's truth. Rather, she proclaims that truth is one, and that a fellowship exists among those sincerely living according to their perception of this truth. One need but recall the declaration on non-Christian religions :

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in (other) religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all human beings. (*Nostra Aetate* No. 2).

While the Church will always proclaim Christ, "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6), she does so very much aware of the burden of history and of the need of interior conversion and growth in all her own members. No one is so mature in the ways of God that the call to conversion is unnecessary; no Christian is so perfect that he is unable to learn from others. In all our activities, the Council exhorts us to maintain good fellowship among the nations (1 Peter 2:12) and, in as far as possible, to keep peace with all men (Romans 12:18), so that we may be truly children of the heavenly Father (*Nostra Aetate* No. 5).