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THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON THE CONTEXTS FOR MISSION AFTER COVID-19

The author takes a theologically interpretative look at the contributions of the webinar with their different individual perspectives. For mission to take place he highlights the fundamental task of listening to the Spirit and discern as communities what tasks are placed before the congregation. The more oral discourse is maintained.

What might be an adequate theological grounding for our thinking about and practicing mission by members of the Arnoldus Family in what we hope will soon be a post-COVID world? To answer this question, I'd like to propose a deeper, missiological reflection on the work of the Holy Spirit. It strikes me that thinking about the Holy Spirit—so central in Arnold Janssen's and SVD and SSpS spirituality—in perhaps new ways might help us break through into the creativity and courage needed in a post-COVID era in which the world, the church, and our congregations and lay partners have been turned inside out and upside down. We turn to the Spirit—as the hymn *Veni Sancte Spiritus* prays—to wash what has been soiled, refresh what has become barren, heal what has been wounded, bend what has become rigid, warm what has become frigid, and gather us after we have gone astray.¹ We turn to the Spirit for her generous seven-fold gifts, especially wisdom and fortitude, and a sense of reverence or mystery.

Dialogue and Discernment

How do we come to experience the Holy Spirit? In his amazing interview with Antonio Spadaro in 2014, Pope Francis, at one point, speaks of the importance of open and genuine dialogue. If such

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¹ *Veni, Sancte Spiritus*, <http://www.preces-latinae.org/thesaurus/Hymni/VSS-2.html>.

dialogue is truly open and genuine in the church, he says, carried on with real frankness with laity, bishops, and the pope really listening to one another, “then it [the church] is assisted by the Holy Spirit.”² Commenting on Francis’ remark, eminent U.S. American ecclesialogist Richard R. Gaillardetz writes: “Let us not overlook the audacity of that claim. Francis is saying that we can be confident of the assistance of the Holy Spirit to the bishops *on the condition* that they are open to listen to others.”³

Francis was talking in the context of the universal church. He has spoken much about synodality, and synodality, he announced, is the theme of the upcoming 2022 Synod of Bishops (which if it is to be on synodality, of course, needs to include lay men and women as well as voting members). What I want to suggest here, however, is that such frank, open, and genuine dialogue will open any group to the presence, the power, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and that this is the key to our discernment about mission in our post-COVID context. Such dialogue will, I am convinced, open us up to the surprising, fortifying, creative, and wise presence of the Spirit and will guide our actions in this new and dangerous time. Mission, former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams once remarked, is nothing more (or less) than finding out where the Holy Spirit is at work, and joining in.⁴

Benedictine Sister Mary Benet McKinney writes that when a community is gathered together to discern or make a decision, the wisdom for the right decision is present in the community as a whole. No one, however, has *all* of the wisdom, but everyone has a *piece* of the wisdom, and everyone has a *different* piece. As the community gathers everyone contributes their piece and the community—with prayer and respectful discussion—lets all the ideas and opinions simmer like a big pot of vegetable soup. When the community is ready, it makes a decision by consensus, confident that “the God of the gathering”—or the Holy

² Pope Francis, *A Big Heart Open to God: A Conversation with Pope Francis*, Interviewed by Anthony Spadaro, SJ, New York: HarperOne/America Press 2014, 26.

³ Richard R. Gaillardetz, “Pope Francis and the Reception of Vatican II,” in: *An Unfinished Council: Vatican II, Pope Francis, and the Renewal of Catholicism* (A Michael Glazier Book), Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press 2015, 122.

⁴ Rowan Williams, quoted on the Fresh Expressions website, www.freshexpressions.org.uk, front page, September, 2006, in Kirsteen Kim, *Joining in with the Spirit: Connecting World Church and Global Mission*, London: Epworth Press 2009, 1.

Spirit—is present, inviting the community to “join in” the Spirit’s work.⁵

The Practice of Dialogue

So in order to know what mission in our context is we SVDs and members of the Arnoldus Family need to practice dialogue—practice it in the sense to *do* it, and in the sense of continuing to *learn to do it*. But this is a certain kind of dialogue, a *theological* dialogue. The dialogue we need to practice is a dialogue of contextual theologizing, bringing all the factors in our context that we have heard in these last hours—COVID’s devastating psychological effects, the economic disaster it has caused, the racial and caste realities it has unmasked, the horror of sickness and death we have endured, the heroism of our front-line workers—with our experiences, with our struggles, with God’s Word as we hear it in our daily scripture readings.

It is a *theological* dialogue in faith that seeks not just understanding but action, and a dialogue that is rooted deeply in the Word and in commitment to Christ’s mission.

It is a dialogue that is rooted in what has to be a *renewal of community life*, of respect for one another, a trust in one another, a commitment to “sincere brotherly love, not merely living and working together,” as Constitution 303 tells us.

In short, as Andrzej Pietrzak⁶ puts it, it is a dialogue of “Christ-centered *poiesis*,” an exercise in mysticism and contemplation.

Our dialogue that will discover where the Spirit is at work, and what we need to do in mission, needs to take place in *every local community*. But it needs to be wider as well. It should take place as local communities come together for provincial assemblies and chapters, and as provinces in the various zones come together as well. It should take place on a worldwide level too—like we are doing in this conference, although perhaps with more space for discussion. As we do this, the Holy Spirit will guide us in our missionary work.

⁵ Mary Benet McKinney, *Shared Wisdom: A Process for Group Decision Making*, Valencia, CA: Tabor 1987.

⁶ In his contribution during the webinar on “Dialogue with Priests, Religious and Lay Ministers.”

Steps in a Continuing Process

This dialogue that seeks the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit is actually the first step in the process of prophetic dialogue. We dialogue together, discern and pray and contemplate together in order to discover what prophetic action the Spirit is up to. It may be that we need to engage in dialogue. This might mean to continue the “dialogue of life” in the context in which we do mission, being present and available to the people among whom we work—practicing mission *inter gentes*, as it were. Or it might mean a dialogue of action as we work with other people of faith or no faith in meeting the needs of our community: food banks, clinics, counseling services, for example. Or it might mean discovering together the riches of one another’s beliefs and spirituality. But prophetic action—also sometimes done in tandem with people of other religions or no religion—might be offering words and actions of hope, or making sure people are receiving truthful information—for example about the virus or the vaccine—or standing up to injustice and greed, working for more equitable distribution of vaccinations. Perhaps in some situations, if the Spirit “opens a door”⁷ to the possibility of proclaiming the gospel, this may be the prophetic action in which the community decides to engage. When we do this, however, we have to make sure that the message that we offer is contextually relevant and faithfully expressed. As we dialogue together, we will discern where the Spirit is working so we can join in, and the Spirit will guide us in our participation.

Open Future

What will SVD mission and mission in the Arnoldus Family be like in a future post-COVID world? I think we have to say that we don’t really know. What we do know is that mission must be a response to real situations, real problems, and real issues, and the only way we can know those contexts will be to discern them together, confident that if we do this faithfully and trustingly, then we “will be assisted by the Holy Spirit.”

In this way we acknowledge what Nigerian missiologist Joseph Ola insists on: that the future is not something that we enter but something we create, and that we need to make ourselves responsible for

⁷ Vatican Council II, Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, *Ad gentes* (AG), https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html, 13.

creating the future.⁸ Pope Francis last year set up a commission that was not so much, he said, to “prepare *for* the future” but to “prepare the future,”⁹ that is, to have a hand in *creating* it as we *respond* to it. The best way, I think, to do this, as SVDs and members of the Arnoldus Family, is to rely on the guidance, the warmth, the wisdom, the challenge, the creativity, the surprise of the Holy Spirit. And we do this by relying on each other, renewing our communities, relying on the love of Christ, being rooted in the Word, and practicing—in both senses of the word—prophetic dialogue.

ABSTRACTS

Der Autor wirft einen theologisch interpretierenden Blick auf die Beiträge des Webinars mit ihren unterschiedlichen individuellen Perspektiven. Damit Mission stattfinden kann, hebt er die grundlegende Aufgabe hervor, auf den Geist zu hören und als Gemeinschaften zu unterscheiden, welche Aufgaben den Kongregation gestellt werden. Der eher mündliche Diskurs wird beibehalten.

El autor hace una mirada teológicamente interpretativa de las aportaciones del webinar en sus diferentes perspectivas individuales. Para que la misión pueda realizarse destaca la tarea fundamental de escuchar al Espíritu y discernir comunitariamente qué tareas se ponen ante la congregación. Se mantiene el discurso más oral.

L’auteur porte un regard d’interprétation théologique sur la contribution du séminaire en ligne avec ses différentes perspectives individuelles. Pour que la mission ait lieu, il souligne l’importance fondamentale d’écouter l’Esprit Saint et de discerner en tant que communautés quelles tâches se présentent à la paroisse. On a gardé le ton oral du discours.

⁸ Joseph Ola, “A Missiology for a Youthful Continent,” Presentation at GATHER, a conference sponsored by the Church Mission Society, Oxford, UK, 21 April, 2021.

⁹ Inés San Martín, “Vatican COVID-19 commission seeks to prepare the future,” *Crux*, 1 July, 2020, <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2020/07/vatican-covid-19-commission-seeks-to-prepare-the-future/>.