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EXTENSIO DEI: THE NEED TO GO BEYOND MISSIO DEI

After the International Missionary Council conference in Willingen 1952, the expression “Missio Dei” assumed unparalleled significance in missiological literature. However, this paper argues how in the post-colonial context and that of a globalized world, “Missio Dei,” with its emphasis on sending, has lost much of its relevance. The paper shows how the God of the bible, by nature, is a God who reaches out. Even the instances of sending in the bible are to be situated in the context of this divine-self reaching out and, hence, mission today is to be a spelling out of the divine-self reaching out, “Extensio Dei.”

Since the International Missionary Council conference at Willingen, Germany (1952), the phrase *Missio Dei* has become for many mission theoreticians and practitioners the basis and foundation of the church’s service to the world. Further, the phrase has been interpreted to be referring to the Trinitarian existence of God and how this God is a sending God, which together is taken to be the justification for the missionary nature of the church. This has been systematically articulated in the Vatican II decree on mission, *Ad Gentes*, in its introductory chapter (nos 1-5).

This paper proposes to show how despite the many positive values of *Missio Dei*, it is not without serious drawbacks, especially in a post-colonial missionary era and, thus, we need a new paradigm for mission that is more biblical and true to the ministry of Jesus Christ and at the same time relevant to the contemporary context.

Origins of Missio Dei

Contrary to the common presumption, the Willingen Conference did not use the phrase *Missio Dei*.¹ Tormod Engelsen points out

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¹ Tormod Engelsen, *Missio Dei: The Understanding and Misunderstanding of a Theological Concept in European Churches and Missiology: International Review of Mission* 92 (2003) 482.

how it was Karl Hartenstein who introduced the phrase into his report on Willingen, a phrase probably initially coined by the German missiologist George F. Vicedom.² Even if the Willingen Conference did not use the phrase *Missio Dei*, it did emphasize the Trinitarian basis of mission. “The missionary movement of which we are part has its source in the triune God Himself. Out of the depths of His love for us, the Father has sent forth His beloved Son to reconcile all things to Himself, that we and all men might, through the Spirit, be made one in Him with the Father, in that perfect love which is the very nature of God.”³

The IMC conference Willingen, working under the duress of the expulsion of missionaries from China in 1948/49, and fearing the repeat of the same in other countries, more so in the wake of the end of colonialism, wanted to give a solid foundation to mission by linking it to the Triune God, rather than considering it to be an attribute of the church. Mission is “a dynamic and total response to the dynamic activity of the Triune God in the Gospel and in the present situation.”⁴ *Missio Dei* referred primarily to the fact that the church’s mission is not a human responsibility or of human origin, but of God. Based on Jn 20:19-23, *Missio Dei* is understood as the Father’s sending of the Son and the Son’s sending of the church with the Spirit.

The divine activity of sending, expressed through the sending of the Son and Spirit, continued in the sending of the church, is the significant factor. The Trinitarian God is a sending God and thus a missionary God. The church, taking its origin from the sending God, is missionary by its very nature. The activity of sending is the core experience around which all other factors are understood.

The notion of sending received high priority since the beginning of colonialism. In fact the very concept of mission⁵ as sending has its origin with colonial expansion and it is associated with the fourth vow of mission that St. Ignatius introduced for the Jesuit Order that he founded in 1540. Initially the vow of mission meant whatever assignment the Pope would give to the Jesuits. However, it soon assimilated

² Ibid. Georg Vicedom, *Missio Dei – Einführung in eine Theologie der Mission*, München: Kaiser 1960.

³ Engelsviken, *Missio Dei*, 482.

⁴ Wolfgang Gunther, The History and Significance of World Mission Conferences in the 20th Century: *International Review of Mission* 92 (2003) 529.

⁵ The word “missio” as such has a Patristic origin, in so far as St. Augustine used it to refer to the processions within the Trinity (*De Natura Boni*, 27) and that was followed by Thomas Aquinas who spoke of *Missio Dei* to refer to the life within the Trinity (ST 3a 32.2.2).

lated a territorial aspect, i.e., to whatever places they are sent, and to whatever peoples, Turks or other infidels, and to the Indies.⁶ Soon the term “mission” became restricted to a geographical sending out to a place other than where one normally resides. Thus, the then Jesuit General Aquaviva in his letter made a distinction between Jesuits in the “missions” and those involved in other ministries.⁷ This understanding of mission was taken up by other Catholic religious congregations and eventually by other churches as well. No wonder, for William Carey the basic mission text was Mt 28:19-20 that he qualified as the great commission.⁸

Drawbacks of “Missio Dei”

Whatever might be the justification for the phrase, today *Missio Dei*, with its emphasis on the sending, cannot be used indiscriminately in the changed world reality in which we find ourselves. Colonial mission theology was very much rooted in the spirit of the times, with its fascination with the new world across the seas, a world that was presumed to be subject to demons who took control of the souls whom the Lord Jesus Christ had purchased with his blood. European Christians discovered that even fifteen centuries after the Christian church was founded, there were still millions of people who knew nothing about salvation in Christ and presumed that, since they did not confess Jesus Christ and were not baptized, they were all heading for eternal punishment. How the colonial Christianity viewed those who were not Christians can be learned from a letter the Franciscan General Fr. Francisco de los Angeles wrote to his friars in Mexico, in 1523. Referring to the Mexicans he writes: “Since its vintage is being gathered by the devil and the flesh, Christ does not enjoy the possession of the souls which he purchased with his blood. It seems to me that, if Christ lacks for no insults there, neither was there reason for me to lack any feeling concerning them.”⁹

Though post-colonial theology has changed much from such a pessimistic outlook, there is no denying the fact that the emphasis on mission as sending had its origin in that context. We have come a long way and, except for some hardcore exclusivists, most Christians

⁶ Bull of Jules III, 21st July, 1550.

⁷ *Letters of the Generals*, Vol. 1, Rome: Jesuits Curia 1845, 66.

⁸ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1991, 340.

⁹ See H. McKennie Goodpasture, *Cross and Sword: An Eye Witness History of Christianity in Latin America*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1989, 20.

would not consider the followers of other religious traditions as sitting in the shadow of death and the darkness of sin. Today we realize how the kingdom project is to be realized in collaboration with all.

Further, with the impact of globalization and rapid people movements, there is a global presence of both Christians and the followers of other religions anywhere in the world and this makes the idea of mission-sending countries as opposed to receiving countries rather meaningless. That does not mean the significance of mission has been lost or has become irrelevant. On the contrary, with the phenomenon of de-Christianization and the talk of the “new evangelization,” evangelism assumes all the more urgency. What is required is a new paradigm that is biblically rooted and meaningful for our times.

“Extensio Dei”

Missio Dei refers chiefly to an activity of God, that of sending, whereas the very nature of God is mission, reaching out. The biblical narrative is not primarily a story of sending or of missions within a Trinitarian God. In fact the bible does not speak of a Trinitarian God, at least directly.¹⁰ Admittedly, we do have in the bible instances of calling and sending including that of Jesus Christ, especially in the Johannine gospel. However, all those instances of sending are to be situated in the larger biblical perspective, as we shall see immediate-

¹⁰ Though the doctrine of the Trinity has become foundational to Christian faith, the concept as such is a later development. “One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God the Father of all” is St. Paul’s teaching (Eph 4:5-6). In fact, Paul always makes a distinction between God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph 1:2; Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1; etc.). Peter in his address as reported in the Acts of the Apostles chapter 2, speaks of “Jesus of Nazareth a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst... But God raised him up...” (2:22-24). Even the Johannine gospel that presents the pre-Incarnate Word as divine, makes a distinction between the divinity of the Word and of the Absolute God by using the definite article “the” – *ton Theon* – “the Word was God and was with *the* God” (Jn 1:2). St. Clement, third successor of Peter as Bishop of Rome from about 90 to 99, wrote to the Corinthians: “The church of God which dwells as a pilgrim in Rome to the church of God in pilgrimage at Corinth – to you who have been called and made holy by the will of God through our Lord Jesus Christ. May you be filled with grace and peace from Almighty God through Jesus Christ” (*Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 1, Washington: Catholic University of America 1969, 9). The Trinitarian formula in the baptismal command in Mt 28:19 is problematic in so far as all the baptisms in the Acts of the Apostles are performed in the name of the Lord Jesus, even after the risen Lord’s explicit instruction to baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit! (Acts 2:38; 8:12; 8:16; 19:5; etc.)

ly. It is also to be remembered that the church's mission began much before the doctrine of the Trinity and hence the concept of mission is not referring to the concept of the Trinity as many authors would suggest.

Obviously, the bible is the norm and foundation of all our discourse on mission. It is not a process of proof texting, but by conforming ourselves to the divine anthropology that we come across in the bible, right from the beginning. The entire biblical discourse can be encapsulated in one phrase: *extensio Dei* (*extendere* = to reach out), divine self-reaching out. It is God's going out of God's self, in love. It can be described as God's ecstasy – *ex stare*. Humanly speaking, the first moment of this divine self-reaching out is creation. Creation is the manifestation of divine love, divine goodness. Hence, the bible repeatedly asserts creation is good, and very good (Gen 1:1-31). Diarmuid O'Murchu describes creation as the divine dance, a spontaneous and graceful movement.¹¹ What is to be underlined is that God's reaching out to the world is not a second moment or an attribute of the divine being but just an expression of God's very being.

This divine self-reaching out is continued through the covenants that God establishes, both universal (Gen 9:9-17) and particular (Ex 20) as well as through the judges, the Prophets and ultimately through God's Word Incarnate, Jesus the Christ. The whole process is a manifestation of the divine identity, as that of reaching out. The Exodus, the first moment of Israel's experience of YHWH, spells out this divine reaching out, divine compassion: "I have seen their affliction, I have heard their cry" (Ex 3:7-9). God has come to deliver them from their unnatural, inhuman situation. The Exodus is not just a once for all event, but the paradigm of all divine dealings. The psalms sing how God has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight (Ps 72:1-4).

Similarly, every prophet is sharing in God's feeling and speaks God's word. Is 58:6-7 and 61:1-2, that Jesus made a part of his manifesto, so to say, retrieve the Exodus spirit of God: "Is not this the fast that I choose: to lose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?" (Is 58:6-7) Prophet Amos mints his words to express God's anger at the perpetrators of injustice and oppression of the poor: "Hear this, you who trample upon the needy,

¹¹ Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Quantum Theology*, New York: Crossroads 2004, 46.

and bring the poor of the land to an end, saying, ‘When will the new moon be over, that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great, and deal deceitfully with false balances that we may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and sell the refuse of the wheat?’” (8:4-6). The verses that follow bring out God’s anger at such ill-treatment of the poor. In fact, Amos reminds Israel that the exodus experience they had is not unique to them, but other nations like the Ethiopians, the Philistines, the Syrians, and others had their exodus as well (9:7). In the context of king Shallum’s ill-treatment of the poor, Jeremiah warns him: “Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? Says the Lord” (22:15-16).

Ministry of Jesus

The whole biblical narrative is a continuous one without interruption or discontinuity and this is continued in the community of the disciples of the Word Incarnate, the church. The very name of the Incarnate word is Emmanuel, God with us (Mt 1:23). At the Nazareth synagogue he proclaims how his mission is to be a good news to the poor, freedom to the captives and prisoners, a soothing presence to the broken-hearted and thus, the annunciation of the arrival of the acceptable year of the Lord (Lk 4:16-18). The acceptable year of the Lord in the Old Testament was the Jubilee year (Lev 25), a time when the poor experienced the divine nearness. In the New Testament this comes to be proclaimed in terms of the arrival of God’s reign, the Kingdom of God. To quote Anthony Gittins, “Jesus exemplifies par excellence the person who is relevant to ordinary people yet converses with experts and gives a life to extend the *missio Dei*. ... He did not come to add to religious restrictions but to manifest God’s revelation and invite people to enjoy the freedom of God’s children.”¹²

Jesus initiated a marginal movement that insisted on the quality of the life of the members so as to become the salt, light and leaven in the society, all minority images, through the quality of their other-centred life, rather than a mighty religious force, claiming validity only for itself as a religion, positioning itself at the centre of God’s plan. All those who do God’s will are his brothers and sisters (Mk

¹² Anthony J. Gittins, *The Universal in the Local: Power, Piety, and Paradox in the Formation of Missionary Community*, in: Stephen B. Bevans (ed.), *Mission & Culture*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 2012, 135.

3:40). Even when someone is using his name to cast out demons, though not belonging to the group of his disciples, Jesus does not stop it because his concern is not his own name, but the realization of God's will, that is, all humans becoming fully free from the power of demons and thus belonging to the reality of the Divine reign (Mk 9: 38-40). Jesus makes God's *shekinah*, presence, a reality by accepting the sinners and tax collectors, by his table fellowship with the excluded of the society, by his manifesting love for the afflicted by casting out demons, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, restoring sight to the blind, forgiving sins, and similar activities.

Jesus' mission is to be understood primarily as the very expression of the nature of God. Therefore, at the end of his ministry in the fourth gospel, he exclaims: "those who have seen me have seen the Father!" (Jn 14:9; 12:45) His ministry has to be seen not only as that of the sent one, but more so as the mission of the Son, with the awareness of his intimacy with God. This self-consciousness of his "intimate relationship with his Father determined his public life from the time of his baptism," observes Jan Jongeneel.¹³ In other words, Jesus' ministry is a spelling out of the divine reaching out, God's being, to God's creation. Jongeneel writes further: "Jesus' self-determination as Messiah can be interpreted correctly only in the framework of his intimate relationship with God as 'abba' as his recognition of God's goal-directed presence in the history of Israel and in the world history at large."¹⁴ Jesus was gripped by a strong sense of vocation by God whom he experienced as "abba," implying a specific role as the Son. Through his ministry Jesus showed how God is a compassionate and other-centred Abba of all humans, including those whom Israel considered as Gentiles, and God's dealings with humans was an uninterrupted saga of love beginning with creation (Mk 12:1-9).

It is in this spirit that the church is formed and sent out as the Markan gospel attests: "He called unto him whom he was wanting to call, to be with him and to be sent out, to proclaim and to cast out demons" (Mk 3:13-15). For the evangelist Mark, proclaiming the Good News and casting out demons is a summary of Jesus' own ministry (Mk 1:39). The underlining message even of the Johannine mission mandate, "As the Father has sent me so do I send you" (20:21), is pointing to the actualization of what he was: the concrete expression of God's self-reaching out to humanity, to the world at large. Jesus' ministry was a diffusion of the divine goodness, divine love, through various ways including the formation and the sending of the commu-

¹³ Jan Jongeneel, *Jesus Christ in World History*, Frankfurt: Lang 2009, 70.

¹⁴ Jongeneel, 72.

nity of disciples. The sending of the Son is a historical action of God in the world to promote the divine interest, the *shalomaization* of the world, expressed in the language of the divine reign (Mk 1:15 and par). It is God's work in the universe beginning with the ur-moment of creation. The Son proclaims and embodies God's liberating and healing action through the ushering in of the divine reign.

The Church's Mission

From what has been said it follows that mission is not just central to the understanding of God, it is the very nature and being of God which is seen as *Extensio Dei*. *Extensio Dei* unites the church with the life in God as well as life in the world in so far as the latter is ordained to be conformed to the divine reign of which the church is the sacrament. The church derives its existence out of the process of this divine reaching out, as an ongoing continuation of the same. Thus, the church's mission is seen in terms of its origin, God, and not in terms of its end, like places or followers of other religions.

The church is mission by being the presence of God, by spelling out the divine goodness that it has experienced in Jesus Christ. What is important is the transformative mission, the expression of love that does not exclude any, though we have a special service to render. This transformative mission is described in Lk 4:18-19 and Lk 14:12-14. Evangelist John describes this transformative mission in terms of the "deeds of light," "for every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God" (Jn 3:20-21).

Discipleship is to follow Jesus in his cause. "The following of Jesus is the totality of the Christian life," insists Jon Sobrino.¹⁵ In the same vein, Leonardo Boff argues that it is only by following Jesus, trying to live what he lived, that we can enter into the mystery of who Jesus was.¹⁶ Jesus through his kingdom ministry made God present to the people in their history, and he invited his disciples to continue that practice when he invited them to follow him. The community of the disciples has to be faithful to the gospels that narrate how God's presence became experiential in God's Word Incarnate. This is the

¹⁵ Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1988, 51.

¹⁶ Leonardo Boff, *Images of Jesus in Brazilian Liberal Christianity*, in: José Míguez Bonino (ed.), *Faces of Jesus: Latin American Christologies*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1984, 13.

way blazed for us to collaborate with God in continuing God's presence to the world today. As Joseph Lobo has underlined, through his ministry Jesus showed how revelation primarily is not information about the being of God, but an experience of God's saving activity in history.¹⁷ Accordingly the church's mission must respond to the world situations of the cry-for-life, cry for dignity, cry for meaning.¹⁸

As Johannes Christiaan Hoekendijk has invited, we must "speak more of God's work in the secular world, in the political, cultural and scientific movements of the time."¹⁹ For Hoekendijk the church is "the laboratory, the diakonia of a little group, living in a concrete situation, and serving each other and their environment by reforming the structure of a segment of society."²⁰

We come across almost similar ideas in Pope Paul VI's Apostolic Exhortation on Mission, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*:

For the Church, evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new. ... the Church evangelizes when she seeks to convert, solely through the divine power of the Message she proclaims, both the personal and collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete milieu which are theirs (EN 18).

The divine presence in the world calls for a certain secularization of the church to be expressed in its service to human history. The church primarily is not an agency to propagate a particular religion; it has to address the whole world with its transforming presence which in turn calls for ecclesial communities to be present everywhere. This the church does by making the love of God that it has experienced in Jesus Christ, meaningful to all. The church becomes an agent of gathering all into that communion, the divine reign, like a huge tree, in the branches of which all the birds find their shelter, or like the yeast that leavens the dough (Lk 13:18-21).

¹⁷ Joseph Lobo, *Encountering Jesus Christ in India*, Bangalore: ATC 2005, 189.

¹⁸ George M. Soares-Prabhu, The Jesus of Faith: A Christological Contribution to an Ecumenical Third World Spirituality, in: Francis D'Sa (ed.), *Theology of Liberation: An Indian Biblical Perspective*, Pune: JDV 2001, 276.

¹⁹ See Mark Laing, The Church Is the Mission: Integrating the IMC with the WCC: *International Review of Mission* 100 (2011) 222.

²⁰ J. C. Hoekendijk, *The Church Inside Out*, London: SCM Press 1967, 20, in: Laing, *The Church Is the Mission*, 223.

In this process mission is not so much a task or a commission to be fulfilled as the integral Christian existence, the community's very being as the participation in God's own being, even as Jesus was "God with us." In this context Jesus' mandate to the community, "you are the salt of the earth" and "you are the light of the world" (Mt 5:13-14), becomes significant. Even as mission is the externalization of the divine nature, with no stage of divine existence without self-reaching out, mission, reaching out, is the characteristic existence for the church.

Mission is not a second thought for God, but it is the very being of God as reaching out, so the church exists always with its face turned to the world, and in relation to the world. Similarly, mission cannot be exclusively considered the monopoly of the church alone. In so far as all people are sharing in the divine self-reaching out, they too have a mission though the church as the community constituted by God's Word Incarnate, directly inherits what took place in Jesus Christ.

It has also to be pointed out that some of the theological attempts that try to give some recognition to other religious traditions, describing them as recipients of the work of the Spirit or the Word, or having a ray of Truth, without directly linking them to the work of God, do not do justice to these religions. This is untenable in the light of what we have been saying. All are God's people though the church has a special service to render as the light, salt and leaven to the world.

The root metaphor of mission as divine self-reaching out is the "other," followers of other religious traditions, people of other cultures, the migrants, the poor, i.e., the neighbor understood integrally as we have in Mt 25:31-46. The other is an invitation for the Christian to reach out, in so far as the Christian self-realization, and the self-realization of the other, require that both are to be transformed into "thou" from a mere "it" category, to borrow the language of Martin Buber. It is an invitation to relationship and communion. The other becomes the grammar of interpreting the scripture and expressing mission.

Concluding Remarks

Though *Missio Dei* with its emphasis on sending has certain biblical evidence, in the bible sending is in relation to God's very being as reaching out to the other. We have presented this reaching out with the phrase *Extensio Dei*, formulated from the Latin verb *extendere*. This divine self-reaching out has to be retrieved in our times, especially when it does not make much sense to differentiate between

sending and receiving nations, as far as mission is concerned, despite the abiding relevance of intercultural mission to ensure Christian presence in all cultures. An era of a specific understanding of mission may be over. However, we cannot think of mission as over in so far as the church is the continuation of the Incarnate Word, God's reaching out to the world. Mission is where the Christian is. As John Flett has argued, "it is the community's concrete visible form."²¹ It is primarily a matter of the Christian reaching out to the neighbor to realize the divine reign, with the awareness how the Christian call is to be the light and salt to the world (Mt 4:13-15).

²¹ John G. Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans 2010, x.