

INTRODUCTION

1. Dialogue, specifically ecumenical dialogue and interreligious dialogue, has steadily occupied a place that is more and more central in recent theological reflection. Theologians, of the most diverse backgrounds, have investigated this theme and, thus, contributed so that dialogue has become a recurrent subject not only in theology, but also in the pastoral ministry of the church. Names such as Yves Congar, Jacques Dupuis, Michael Amaladoss, Claude Geffré, among others, stand out in this field. For its part, since the Second Vatican Council, the Magisterium of the church has produced some outstanding texts relating to this subject. In fact, following the Council, innumerable initiatives were born in the Catholic Church, on the local, national and international levels, for the promotion of dialogue, both with other Christian denominations as well as between Christianity and other religious traditions. Because of its symbolic value, one event that stands out is the World Encounter of Prayer for Peace, which took place in Assisi on 27 October 1986, when the leaders of the great religions took part.

The Society of the Divine Word, in its XV General Chapter in the year 2000, coined the expression “prophetic dialogue” to define its identity and mission in the contemporary world. In a concise formulation, the members of the Chapter affirmed that the concept of prophetic dialogue expressed the deepest and most adequate understanding of the specific missionary vocation of the Society, and, obviously, of its members. This understanding comes as an answer to a question that arises regularly in a multi-faceted missionary Society such as the SVD, that is, how can it be possible to build a common vision capable of embracing its ethnic and cultural diversity, welcoming the diverse spiritual, theological and pastoral sensitivities of its members and serving as an inspiration for their missionary work in the different contexts and countries where the Society is present? As a missionary Society *ad gentes*, the SVD has always had an active presence in plural religious and cultural environments. It is worth noting that its members come from a vast complex of ethnic identities and cultures. At the time of the XV General Chapter (2000) the 5961 members of the Society of the Divine Word came from sixty-two countries, enriching the Society with their cultural and linguistic diversity and, naturally, giving rise to a continuous intercultural dialogue on the internal level. Not only is the diversity of apostolates which the members of the Society of the Divine Word exercise in all continents vast, but also the variety of cultures where they carry out their pastoral ministry. On their side, the missionary work which the SVDs carry out in parts of the globe where other religions are in the

majority, especially in Africa and Asia, leads spontaneously to a reflection on the role of the Society in the mission *ad gentes*. Confronted on a daily basis with situations where religious and cultural pluralism is an integral part of social reality, it became necessary to discover adequate methods of proclaiming the Gospel in these specific pluralist contexts.

Following the XV General Chapter, prophetic dialogue entered rapidly into the language of the Divine Word Missionaries, not only as the theoretical reference of official documents and pastoral orientations, but also as material for spiritual reflection, internal debate and missiological investigation. However, when concepts are overused, they run the risk of becoming worn and threadbare, mere ideological clichés. The terms “dialogue” and “prophetic” signify different things for different readers, thus making it possible that they take on contradictory meanings. On the one hand, the expression “prophetic dialogue” became so common in SVD circles that it seemed to lose the force which the XV General Chapter wished to give it. On the other hand, we may also ask if the concept of prophetic dialogue has already reached its high point in meaning and relevance. For this reason, in an effort to arrest this wearing away, which is inherent in its indiscriminate use, and inspired by the suggestion of Bernard Lonergan regarding the function of systematic theology,¹ this study aims to offer some intelligibility to the concept of prophetic dialogue.

This work has as its objectives: 1) to trace the path travelled by the concept of prophetic dialogue in the Society of the Divine Word, situating it in the wider context of the mission of the church and of contemporary theological thought regarding the mission. We know, however, that there will always be opportunities for adjustments and modifications in light of new elements and evidence; 2) to verify in what measure dialogue may be, or may come to be, prophetic; 3) to clarify the measure in which the notion of prophetic dialogue is a new concept in the theology of mission.

¹ B. Lonergan defends the view that the goal of systematic theology is not to increase certainty but to promote intelligibility. Cf. B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 335-353. The function of systematic theology is “understanding,” in other words, to understand the doctrines that a certain person or community affirm, in terms that can be transmitted in the reigning culture. In this way, understanding is not disincarnated, because each historical period faces determined cultural challenges. One of the main tasks of the theologian is to provide a mediation between the basic affirmations of his community and the culture in which he lives. Cf. V. Gregson, *Theological Method and Theological Collaboration II*, 111.

2. This investigation of prophetic dialogue cannot be understood outside the framework of my own missionary journey in Africa and Portugal, nor in isolation from the reading and study which I did while seeking to understand the social, political, cultural and religious reality of the contemporary world and its dynamics. In truth, it arose following, and very much linked to, my personal itinerary, where I always sought, through critical reflection, to integrate within a horizon of meaning the kaleidoscope of pastoral services which were progressively entrusted to me.

In Ghana I had the possibility of working in a rural region still marked by the omnipresence of traditional African religion, with its traditions, rites, values, and worldview. This daily contact, both with people who lived profoundly the traditional religion and with Christians who originated in the same religious context, awakened me to the immense richness of cultural and religious diversity present in the world and made me appreciate the importance and the urgency of dialogue in the mission. In Portugal, I had the opportunity of working for various years in campus ministry, a task diametrically opposed to the experience in the African savannah. If, in Africa, I lived in a universe totally imbued with the “religious” and open to the transcendent, now, the university seemed to me, at first sight, to be a secularized and religiously indifferent field. There were, however, people there who questioned themselves about the faith, or its absence. For this reason, campus ministry constituted a platform for dialogue with those who sought faith, or, at least, wished to find consistent reasons which would allow them to make a convincing reading of history and of their own existence in a wider horizon than that of the present moment. In the period between the mission in Ghana and the campus ministry in Portugal, I had the opportunity of taking part in a course on Religion and Culture in the United States. Years later, in the Catholic University in Lisbon, I studied the contribution of Jacques Dupuis to the Christian theology of religions.

In this framework, the present project of investigation about prophetic dialogue represents not merely a research into the theoretical-practical foundations of the concept of prophetic dialogue, but also a gratifying exercise of personal search in the sense of illuminating the paths of mission in the turbulent but also fascinating contexts of the epoch in which we live. However, due to the fact of our belonging to an institution which coined and divulged the expression “prophetic dialogue,” and the experience of life, I am conscious of the personal limitations and contingencies which may condition this study. Perhaps there is lacking, in this investigation, the necessary distancing of oneself, so dear to the scientific method. It is certain that today many question the

possibility of a totally neutral and impartial vision in social and human sciences, given that the investigators are conditioned by the context and that they themselves are inserted into a concrete tradition.² For this reason, the awareness that the context and the point of view of the investigator may affect the research and influence the results should cause us to be much more vigilant and critical.

3. The first part of this work has as its goal to identify the moment in which the expression “prophetic dialogue” emerged, to trace its antecedents, but without forgetting the context in which it developed. To this end I will delineate the path trodden by the Society of the Divine Word, during the time period which began, speaking generally, in the years after the Second Vatican Council until the year 2000, when the XV General Chapter took place. In outlining this itinerary I will stress the reflection carried on by the SVD about its own identity and role in the church and the world. I will pay particular attention to the decisions of the various General Chapters which took place in this period, not forgetting the contribution of other forums of reflection and debate within the Society.

In the second part I seek to situate prophetic dialogue in the wider context of contemporary theological reflection. Taking into account recent church teaching, I present dialogue as an attitude which is rooted in the newness of the evangelical message. This means that dialogue cannot be considered as a transitory fashion or a modern pastoral strategy, but is, rather, part of the essence of the mission of the church, just as the proclamation of the Gospel. In the XV General Chapter, the SVD qualified the concept of “dialogue” with the adjective “prophetic”; for this reason, I will also emphasize the prophetic role of Christianity and the church and its consequences in missionary activity.

Finally, in the third part, I seek to show how prophetic dialogue is at the center of the mission of the Society of the Divine Word. In this task, it will be useful to make a detailed analysis of the final document approved by the XV General Chapter, stressing the notion of mission as *missio Dei* and taking into consideration our prophetic dialogue partners and the characteristic dimensions of the Society of the Divine Word.

² See M. Eliade; J. Kitagawa (eds.), *The History of Religions*. This work, a classic in the field of the history of religions, gathers various studies in the field of methodology, emphasizing a criticism of the illusion of a neutral vision. In the field of anthropology, one of the most outstanding contemporary anthropologists, C. Geertz, affirms that the work of an anthropologist tends to be an expression of his fieldwork, “or, more accurately, of what his research experience has done to him.” C. Geertz, *Islam Observed*, vi.

Seven years after the XV General Chapter, the SVD Generalate published a booklet treating of prophetic dialogue and twelve biblical texts, chosen in order to illustrate the significance and the implications of this concept. In the preface, the Superior General, Fr. Antonio Pernia, affirmed that the reading and study of the document could reveal many stimulating perspectives which are hidden in the notion of prophetic dialogue. Pernia acknowledged that it was only then that the essence of prophetic dialogue had begun to be penetrated.³ Through this investigation I intend to offer a contribution for an understanding of a concept that is so dear to the Society of the Divine Word. I try to throw light on prophetic dialogue, on its genesis and reception in the language of the Society, determine the missiological consequences of this new expression of SVD identity and verify its importance in present-day theology of mission.

4. From a methodological point of view, it seems to me necessary to make the following observations:

a) It was clear, from the outset, that we were not situating ourselves in the field of historical investigation. Thus, this is not a thesis about the XV General Chapter nor about the history of prophetic dialogue. Our objective is simply limited, in a systematic perspective, to highlighting the evolution of the reflection on SVD mission and identity in a constant search for meaning. Documentary analysis and the gathering of some declarations occupied a major part in this process.

b) Most of the documentation of the Society of the Divine Word used in this work was produced originally in English.⁴ During the research carried out in the archives of the SVD General Curia I almost always made use of the original English texts, occasionally using the Spanish text also.

c) In my research I had the opportunity to interview some members of the Society. Even though the choice of some interviewees and not others was subjective, I sought, however, to speak with two types of key people. Thus I interviewed some Divine Word Missionaries who had a

³ Cf. Prophetic Dialogue. Biblical Stories, Images and Insights, *Nuntius XVI*, fasc. 4 (2007) 509-584; here 510.

⁴ At present SVD documents originating in the Generalate are published in English and Spanish. Earlier German was also one of the official languages, given the origins of the SVD, but the presence of members in many English- and Spanish-speaking countries led to emphasis on those two languages. The XVI General Chapter recommended that all should be fluent in English and/or Spanish. Cf. "Approved Resolutions and Recommendations 2006," AG-SVD, *XVI GC*, doc. 103; LPD §102.

relevant role in the preparation of, or during, the General Chapter and those who, because of the roles they then occupied in the Society, could, at first sight, give a more precise vision, based on the questions under discussion. The interviews are gathered in an appendix where some notes will be found, in order to contextualize, for example, the function which the interviewee exercised on the date of the interview, or the language in which the interview was conducted.

d) The proper names of the members of the Society of the Divine Word, as also geographic terms, appear in their original language, except for those which are widely current in English usage.

e) For biblical citations we used the English translation *The New Jerusalem Bible*.⁵ I respected, however, the use of other biblical translations that appear within the quoted texts.

f) The bibliography is divided into three sections: SVD sources, texts of the Magisterium and general bibliography. The SVD sources are part of the documentation produced by the various governing instances, from the local level up to General Chapters, passing through the Generalate. The General Chapters are in chronological order. The texts of the Magisterium are placed in a separate section.⁶

⁵ *The New Jerusalem Bible*. New York, Doubleday, 1999.

⁶ Unless indicated otherwise, all English quotations from documents of the Magisterium are taken from the Holy See website. For this reason, Encyclicals, Apostolic Exhortations, and Apostolic Letters are listed without mentioning the publishing house.