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### **FIFTY YEARS AFTER VATICAN II: LIGHTS AND SHADOWS IN THE SVD**

*The Second Vatican Council has had a profound influence on the Church over the last 50 years. The article singles out three fields of particular importance for the SVD: the understanding of mission, religious life and the perspective of dialogue. Within the SVD, the Trinitarian foundation of mission has been further developed through the conception of “missio Dei” and dialogue. After the Council, the Congregation’s constitutions have been re-elaborated and grounded again in the spiritual tradition of the Society. Finally, missionary outreach is characterized by dialogue. For each of these fields the author discovers much progress but also some shortcomings.*

The commemoration of the accomplishments of Vatican II over the past four years, as we remembered the promulgation of the various documents of the Council, has reminded us of the broad range of changes introduced by the Council. From the way we celebrate the liturgy and the sacraments, to the way we think about revelation, other religions, religious liberty, and the nature of the Church itself, all of these have been profoundly influenced by the Council. In order to talk about the lights and shadows that we have experienced in our journey as SVDs in the 50 years since the Council, I would like to concentrate on just three results of the Council that have been especially important for us: mission, the renewal of religious life, and what has been called “the spirit of the Council,” that is, dialogue.

#### **1. Mission**

We all know that the Council document on mission, *Ad Gentes*, was influenced in part by our former Superior General, Johannes Schütte, and much of the work on the document was done at our own

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Ad Gentes Center in Nemi. The great accomplishment of the document was in promoting the understanding that the Church is, by her very nature, missionary. Mission is not just one activity, among others, of the Church, nor is mission the task of a certain group within the Church. The very purpose of the Church, and of each member of the Church, is mission. Implied in this is an idea that has become very important in our own understanding of mission as SVDs in the last two decades, that is the idea of *missio Dei*, of mission as God's mission, and that we have been invited to participate in this mission. Mission is not something that we choose or that we plan for, rather, God is the proponent of mission, and we have been invited to participate in God's plan for mission. As two of our own missiologists, Steve Bevans and Roger Schroeder, have expressed it,<sup>1</sup> the Church doesn't have a mission, rather the mission has a Church. God's mission precedes the Church, and, in time, God established the Church to participate in his mission.

One important implication of the idea of *missio Dei* is that, just as we have been invited by God to participate in his mission, this invitation is also given to others, and we are therefore called to collaborate with them in God's mission. God's invitation to participate in his mission is given, first of all, to all the members of the Church, the laity, other religious, bishops and diocesan priests, and we are called to collaborate in mission with all of these. God's invitation to mission is also extended to those outside the Church—members of other Christian communities as well as all people of good will—and we are called to collaborate with them as well. And it is in terms of this collaboration that we can speak of some lights and shadows in our journey as SVDs.

We have been growing in awareness of our call to collaboration, and we have taken some concrete steps in this direction. Our collaboration with lay mission partners has been one focus of our more recent general chapters. At the Generalate level, and in many of our provinces as well, our collaboration in mission with the SSpS has been institutionalized in periodic common meetings and Bible Sharing, as well as in projects like the Arnold Janssen Spirituality Center and Vivat International. Our collaboration with other religious has been expressed, for example, in initiatives such as Solidarity with South Sudan, a project in which over one hundred religious congregations share finances and personnel for mission in South Sudan. Our collaboration with bishops and diocesan clergy takes various forms,

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen B. Bevans/Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 2011.

from participation in common meetings and retreats, to offering personnel for positions within the diocese or bishops' conference.

However, in the midst of all these positive steps, of these lights, we can also see some shadows. We are reminded occasionally, perhaps especially by our sisters in the SSpS, that collaboration doesn't mean that we start a project and then ask them if they would like to be involved, but that we collaborate already from the planning stages, that we plan together. Perhaps our lay partners, or the laity in the parishes where we minister, would like to say the same thing. We are also aware that sometimes we see diocesan clergy or other religious as competitors rather than collaborators, and we want to set up our own institutes, our own ministries, and we want to claim certain parishes as our own. But perhaps our greatest failing is collaboration among ourselves. There seems to be something in our nature as SVDs that leads us to want to work on our own. There was a joke among SVDs in the United States that I first heard when I was still a seminarian, that if two SVDs are together in a parish there would soon be two parishes. We have a tendency towards individualism, and an aversion to teamwork. I wouldn't say that it is in our DNA as SVDs, but rather that it is our original sin—it is the sin that we keep coming back to, the sin that seems to have affected our very nature. It is the weakness for which we need to pray constantly for God's grace, that we might better realize the different gifts that we bring when we collaborate together in God's mission.

A second implication of *missio Dei* is that God's mission continues in all places in the world, wherever there is a need for God's love to be proclaimed. Mission is not restricted to certain mission territories, nor is it ever finished or exhausted. Although it takes different expressions in answering to the needs of various concrete situations, God's mission is as universal as his love, and it continues until that time when we will finally all be united, from every nation and people and language, before the throne of the Lamb, in the heavenly banquet. As SVDs we have realized this new awareness of the universality of mission in concrete initiatives such as the Roscommon Consensus, recognizing Europe as a major field for God's mission; in identifying the poor and marginalized, cultures, other religions, spiritual seekers as our dialogue partners, the particular focus of our participation in God's mission; and in establishing the ten priorities for SVD mission *ad extra* today, as we did at the most recent general chapter.

Here again, in the midst of these lights, we can notice some shadows. Although we have made the commitment to God's mission in Europe, we perhaps have sacrificed creativity in mission on that continent today to our desire to maintain the structures to which we

have become accustomed, a kind of nostalgia for the past over a willingness to “set out into the deep” in following the call of the Spirit to mission in Europe today. Perhaps the same nostalgia, or complacency—the idea that we are already doing enough—has prevented us from fully embracing the understanding of mission as prophetic dialogue or undertaking new initiatives in line with the priorities that we have identified as God’s call for us in mission today.

## **2. *Renewal of Religious Life***

The second point that I would like to highlight as one of the gifts of the Council to us is the renewal of religious life that was called for in the document *Perfectae Caritatis*. The document offers two principles to direct this renewal: “the constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time” (2). These two opposite movements, going back to the sources, to the original charism, and adapting to the changed conditions of our time—what has been called “creative fidelity”—have sometimes led us along an uneasy path, with much tugging and pulling back and forth, and, at times, seemingly unending arguments as to which course we are to follow. I think we can say that this has been not only our history, or the history of religious life in the post-Council era, but the history of our Church as well. And it is certainly not over yet, and probably won’t ever be over, as long as the Spirit continues to call us to both go back to the sources and adapt them boldly to the situation of today. But there have been certain “markers” on the road that indicate the progress we have made in following the path of renewal called for by the Council, and I would like to make mention of two of these “markers” today: the renewal of our constitutions, and the establishment of the Arnold Janssen Spirituality Center, both accomplished under the leadership of our former superior general, Henry Heekeren.

The renewal of our constitutions was a long process spanning four general chapters, starting in 1967 and finally completed at the 12<sup>th</sup> General Chapter in 1982. I think we have been, generally, happy with the result of this long process, even inspired, and proud of some of the statements in our constitutions. From the Prologue: “God’s loving grace has gathered us from various peoples and continents...” “His life is our life, his mission our mission.” “As a community of brothers from different nations and languages, we become a living symbol of the unity and diversity of the church.” Or from the constitutions themselves: “The poor have a privileged place in the gospel. In a world deeply scarred by injustice and inhuman living conditions,

our faith calls us to recognize the presence of Christ in the poor and oppressed” (112). “Communication at its most profound level is the giving of self in love and consequently a basic attitude necessary for us Divine Word Missionaries” (115). “In a world where so many seek to impose their will upon others, our vowed obedience proclaims unity among all people under the sovereignty of God’s will” (216). “Sincere brotherly love, more than merely living and working together, will make us truly one... We share each other’s joys, sorrows, hopes and problems” (303). “All should be aware that both our life and our vocation aim at constant growth and maturity. We never reach the goal but are always on the way” (523).

The second “marker” along the road to the post-Council renewal of our religious life that I would like to call special attention to is the establishment of the Arnold Janssen Spirituality Center and joint spirituality teams with the SSps in many of our provinces, whose 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary we celebrate this year. The same two movements in renewal identified by the Council, going back to the roots and adapting to the changed conditions of our time, can be seen in the activities of the spirituality center at Steyl and the local animation teams. We have identified what is the essential spiritual heritage of our founder and founding generation—his devotion to the three persons of the Trinity, the Word Incarnate and alive in the hearts of all people, the movement of the Spirit who directs us in mission—and to adapt this spiritual heritage to our lives and the lives of the people with whom we work today.

Both of these “lights” along the road to renewal of our religious life, however, have also revealed their own shadows. Perhaps the biggest shadow is that we take for granted both our constitutions and our spirituality. We have the feeling that they are what they are and there is no need for further reflection, for meditation, for appreciating the gift that they are for our religious life. There is a word in Japanese, *terukusai*, which means to be embarrassed, but it is not the embarrassment that goes with shame, but rather the embarrassment at showing or receiving signs of affection, of making public displays. Perhaps that is part of what is going on here, especially in regard to our spirituality. Even ten years after the canonization of our saints—a process by which the Church acknowledges that they are examples for the whole People of God—we still seem to be reluctant, even embarrassed, to share our spirituality with the people among whom we work. Or perhaps it is that we don’t really “own” our constitutions or our spirituality, we don’t acknowledge them as our own personal possessions. We see them rather as something that was decided upon by “others,” perhaps even sometimes as an imposition limiting our free-

dom and our own personal expression. Rather than something freely accepted, even accepted as a gift from God, by our decision to join the Society, they are sometimes seen as “baggage” that must be accepted if we are to be an SVD, and ignored as much as possible. How much richer we all could be if we were to celebrate these “markers” along the uneasy path of religious renewal as the gifts of the Spirit that they truly are for us.

Among the many fruits of Vatican II, these two would most obviously be important for us as SVDs, since they touch directly upon the two fundamental characteristics of our congregation, religious and missionary. As our constitutions express it: “Missionary service and religious life form a unity in our Society: the missionary mandate determines the form of our religious life, and the spirit of the evangelical counsels permeates our whole missionary work” (502). It is interesting to note how these dual characteristics of our life as SVDs have found expression in our more recent general chapters, in every general chapter, in fact, since the constitutions were finalized in 1982. We can see a movement back and forth between the two in successive chapters, perhaps an unconscious attempt to keep the two in balance. The general chapter in 1988 dealt primarily with our missionary service, and asked us to reflect on “passing over” and the “frontiers” of mission. The chapter in 1994, dedicated to community at the service of mission, was more about religious life, and led to rather extensive changes in our constitutions, transferring the responsibility for many appointments and other decisions from the superior general to the provincial or regional superior. It could be called our “decentralization chapter.” In 2000 we took up the call to mission again, and refined our understanding of mission in terms of prophetic dialogue—that is, proclaiming the Word of God with the attitudes of solidarity, respect, and love. In 2006, we returned to our religious, community life, under the rubric of “living prophetic dialogue,” and identified the five areas of our religious life—spirituality, community, leadership, finance, and formation—that have become essential to all our discussions on our religious life together in the following years. The most recent chapter in 2012 can be seen as combining the two, our missionary service *ad extra* with our religious, community life *ad intra* in attempting to draw up an action plan for the Society for the following six years.

### *3. Dialogue*

The third and final result of the Council that I would like to explore is dialogue, which, I believe, is a key to understanding all of the

results of the Council. Indeed, it has been called “the spirit of the Council.”<sup>2</sup> Halfway through the Council, Pope Paul VI issued the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, almost an ode to dialogue, and the term became central to the work of the Council. The one document that came out of the Council itself, in the sense that it was not planned in the preparations for the Council but rather was developed in response to requests of the bishops gathered in the Council itself, *Gaudium et Spes*, is founded on dialogue—a Church in dialogue with the modern world. Our own definition of prophetic dialogue, as formulated by the general chapter in 2000, is based on the definition of dialogue proposed in *Gaudium et Spes*—an attitude of solidarity, respect, and love that is to permeate all of our missionary activities.

I believe that the expression of our participation in God’s mission as prophetic dialogue is a gift of the Spirit to us and to the Church. Like *Gaudium et Spes* in Vatican II, prophetic dialogue was a formulation of the general chapter in 2000 itself, it was not part of the preparatory documents. Early discussion at the chapter revealed some problems with the term “dialogue” by itself, the term that had been proposed by the preparatory commission before the chapter to express our best understanding of mission. Some felt that the term “dialogue” was too weak, or too open to misinterpretation. Many people seem to think that dialogue means compromise, that it is a watering-down, or even a betrayal, of our faith. Of course, Paul VI and the Council, as well as documents issued by the Vatican and other Church bodies in the years after Vatican II, make clear that this is not the case. As our own document from the 2000 chapter states, “It is clear that we do not dialogue from a neutral position, but out of our own faith.” To avoid any confusion regarding dialogue, therefore, the chapter proposed that we speak of “prophetic dialogue”: “Limited as we are by our personal and cultural viewpoints, none of us has attained the whole truth contained in God and revealed fully in Christ. In dialogue we search together for this truth... Together with our dialogue partners we hope to hear the voice of the Spirit of God calling us forward, and in this way our dialogue can be called prophetic” (53-54). Dialogue—doing everything with the attitudes of solidarity, respect, and love—is the mode in which we proclaim our faith. We speak the Word of God in our missionary service, with the attitudes of solidarity, respect, and love, because that is how God has chosen to reveal himself to humanity. That is what we mean by prophetic dialogue. And we live prophetic dialogue in our community life together,

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<sup>2</sup> John W. O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2008, 204.

sharing our faith, sharing our own convictions, all in the spirit of solidarity, respect, and love.

I like to point out that the attitudes that define dialogue have always been characteristic of our best missionary service. In solidarity we identify ourselves with those whom we serve in mission, and St. Joseph Freinademetz is the best example of this when he famously said that “I am now more Chinese than Tirolese, and I hope to be Chinese in heaven.” Respect for individuals and for cultures is part of our spiritual heritage, since our founder would tell his new missionaries during the mission cross ceremony that they should respect those whom they meet in mission because, “They are already your brothers and sisters, purchased by the blood of Christ.” And as for love, in the words of St. Joseph Freinademetz that we all like to quote, “Love is the language that everybody understands.”

Likewise, these attitudes should be the mark of our life together. As expressed in our constitutions: “The principle of solidarity requires each confrere and community to be co-responsible for and contribute to the well-being of the individual and the whole Society” (603). “Respect for the personal dignity of each member is a fundamental attitude...” (602). “Sincere brotherly love ... will truly make us one” (303).

However, once again, in the midst of the “light” given by the reflection of our recent chapters regarding the centrality of dialogue, more specifically prophetic dialogue, to both our life and mission, we must also acknowledge the shadows that have appeared. Perhaps the most dangerous shadow is that we often continue to be confused by what the Spirit is telling us about dialogue, we repeat the mistake of thinking that dialogue, in the end, means compromise. So, rather than share our faith and convictions openly, we look for some common, safe ground, or we avoid the conversation altogether. We try to avoid conflicts over our personal, cultural, or generational differences by avoiding or limiting our interactions with each other. Or, on the other hand, we use the call to dialogue as an excuse to cling stubbornly to our own opinions and views, waiting for the confrere or other dialogue partner to give up and let me do what I want, rather than trying to search together for the truth to which the Spirit is leading us. When we are under the influence of these shadows it becomes difficult to do everything with the attitudes of solidarity, respect, and love, and we perhaps are tempted to dismiss the whole concept of prophetic dialogue as useless, or even dangerous.

These are some of the lights and shadows in our journey that I would like to propose for our consideration, in light of what Vatican II has meant to us as SVDs. There are any number of other lights and



shadows that can be mentioned. For example, we have been blessed with many young confreres still eager to join us in responding to God's call to mission. I believe we are one of the very few major congregations that have experienced a growth in membership in the post-Vatican II era. However, as a shadow, some of our provinces have grown tired, or perhaps discouraged by a rapid decline in the number of vocations, and have even given up on trying to attract young men to join us. Another light would be our interculturality—a gift that we ourselves recognize and for which many other congregations, as well as the people among whom we work, admire us. At the same time we sometimes get irritated with our intercultural communities, and see it as a burden, something that prevents the efficient carrying out of our mission. We get lazy in our attempts to truly understand, and value, our differences. In this, as well as in all of these matters, we pray that the Spirit will continue to help us to appreciate our “lights” and to acknowledge our “shadows” as we continue “on the way” (c. 523).

#### ABSTRACTS

Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil hat über die letzten 50 Jahre einen tiefgehenden Einfluss auf die Kirche ausgeübt. Der Artikel greift drei Bereiche von besonderer Bedeutung für die Steyler Missionare heraus: Das Missionsverständnis, das Ordensleben und die Dialogperspektive. In der SVD wurde das in der Dreifaltigkeit begründete Missionsverständnis weiterentwickelt mit dem Verständnis von *missio Dei* und Dialog. Nach dem Konzil wurden die Konstitutionen der Gesellschaft neu erarbeitet und wieder in der spirituellen Tradition der Steyler verankert. Schließlich wird die Missionstätigkeit durch den Dialog charakterisiert. Für jeden dieser Bereiche entdeckt der Autor große Fortschritte, aber auch einige Schattenseiten.

El Concilio Vaticano II ha ejercido una profunda influencia en la iglesia a lo largo de los últimos 50 años. El artículo selecciona tres campos de una particular importancia para la SVD: la concepción de la misión, la vida religiosa y la perspectiva del diálogo. Dentro de la SVD, la fundación trinitaria de la misión se ha desarrollado más adelante por la concepción de la *missio Dei* y el diálogo. Después del Concilio se han reelaborado las constituciones y se las han refundado en la tradición espiritual de la congregación. Finalmente, la perspectiva misionera se caracteriza por el diálogo. Para cada uno de estos campos, el autor descubre muchos avances, pero nota también algunos obstáculos.

Le second concile du Vatican a eu une profonde influence sur l'Église des cinquante dernières années. L'article relève trois champs particulièrement importants pour la SVD : la conception de la mission, la vie religieuse et la perspective du dialogue. Dans la SVD, la fondation trinitaire de la mission a été davantage développée dans le concept de « *missio Dei* » et le dialogue. Après le Concile, les constitutions de la Congrégation ont été élaborées à

nouveaux frais et réenracinées dans la tradition spirituelle de la Société. Enfin, le mouvement missionnaire est caractérisé par le dialogue. Pour chacun de ces champs, l'auteur relève un grand progrès, mais aussi des manques.