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THE MISSIONARY NATURE OF THE SACRAMENTS

The Second Vatican Council brought about a profound change in perspective of Christian identity, as becomes evident particularly in the documents on laity and on mission. While much of the teaching has been accepted in the Church, the understanding of the sacraments and the practice of sacramental pastoral care seem to lag behind and still draw on older understandings. The author recalls the theological development and reflects on the practice during his missionary life. He goes through the traditional seven sacraments of Catholic Church tradition and suggests an understanding and practice of these sacraments in the light of Vatican II.

0. Introduction

I had arrived in Papua New Guinea (PNG) in 1962 for a short field experience after completing my doctoral studies in missiology. After two years in the Dirima parish I moved into a new area in the South Simbu to answer the insistent call by the people of that area for a missionary to prepare them for baptism. I was working full time in adult catechumenates when the documents of Vatican II arrived. The key document for me was the one on the Church's missionary activity. It stated: "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."¹

That statement confirmed me in my missionary approach. Slowly I was realizing that I was sent primarily not to save souls but to call

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¹ Vatican II, *Ad Gentes*, (Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity) in: Walter M. Abbot, SJ (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II*, American Press 1966, 2. In this article AG stands for *Ad Gentes* and AA stands for *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity.

people to be co-workers with Christ in announcing and witnessing to the Kingdom of God. I began to realize that I was pioneering in that newly opened area of PNG not because people there were bad and their culture was evil, but because God saw creation as “good” and needed them and their culture to establish the “Kingdom of God.” The long pre-catechumenate of a few years that preceded the catechumenate proper—itsself never less than half a year—intended to prepare the catechumens for that mission. I tried not to impose my Western Christian traditions on them but to challenge their culture, their traditions, and their values with the Cross, with the example of Jesus who, trusting in the Father’s love, gave his life so that we might have life. The darkness in their traditions, which indicated a lack of trust in God’s care, and in their personal and clanic egoism, needed to diminish to allow the light in their traditions to grow. It was a long and difficult process we were beginning but Vatican II encouraged us on the way.²

In baptism, those who were ready to receive it, standing in the open, surrounded by the whole community, accepted the call to mission by Jesus, and were empowered by the sacrament, and then were nourished by his body and blood in the Eucharist.³

Today I see a danger of theologically accepting the Vatican II view of an outgoing, missionary Church while pastorally stressing the pre-Vatican II personalistic understanding of the sacraments.

1. Vatican II

What struck me in the documents of Vatican II was the opening of the Church to the world and to the others. Up to that point, the Church was inward-looking, individualistic, stressing the eternal salvation of individuals. The individual was at the centre. We missionaries were there to bring eternal, personal salvation to as many individuals as possible. In the new documents, as in the life of Jesus himself, the others, society was at the centre.

² See Ennio Mantovani, *Sent to Baptize or What? Letters from Papua New Guinea 1962-1977*. Ballan, VIC: Modotti Press 2011.

³ One of the newly baptised Church leaders, a woman, on her own initiative gained the interest of a few communities that asked for catechists and served them. What she did has been the rule for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in PNG.

1.1. Document on the Laity

The document on the laity showed me this change in the Church's stance. What I call the personalistic, inward-looking spirituality gives way to an altruistic one. Salvation and sanctification do not come directly from the sacraments and their grace, but by being active in caring for others. The sacraments are expressions of faith, of one's decision to follow Christ by continuing his mission to the others. A Christian is not primarily the one who has reached the harbour of salvation, but the one who has received and accepted the mandate to continue the work of Christ, to be for others. (AA 2)

The document continues:

All activity of the Mystical Body directed to the attainment of this goal is called the apostolate, and the Church carries it on in various ways through all her members. (Ibid.)

The Council is not talking about the clergy or the religious but about every Christian. The time when I was the missionary while my mother was "only" a committed Christian belonging to a missionary association praying for the missionaries and supporting them materially, was over. This, however, has serious consequences:

Indeed, so intimately are the parts linked and interrelated in this body (cf. Eph. 4:16) that the member who fails to make his proper contribution to the development of the Church must be said to be useful neither to the Church nor to himself. (Ibid.)

The Council takes seriously the words of Jesus in Jn 15:2: "Every branch of mine that bears no fruit he takes away" and "the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned" (Jn 15:6). What John says in this text is not much different from the text found in Matthew 25:46.

For me, this teaching was a breath of fresh air. Those mass baptisms—up to 500 in one ceremony—that smacked of ritualism, of people caring only for their souls, raised a serious question mark for me about our celebration. Catechumens had to prepare themselves to lead an active life, to carry out the apostolate to which they were called by Christ. It was neither I nor the bishops who invited the one or the other as a co-worker in our mission. It was Christ himself.

The laity derives the right and duty with respect to the apostolate from their union with Christ their Head. Incorporated into Christ's Mystical Body through baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit

through confirmation, they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord himself. (AA 3)

The lay people have the *right*, not just permission, to exercise their apostolate in the community. It is their birthright. That right, however, entails a duty, a responsibility. (AA 3) The catechumenate, as a consequence, ceases to be just a time of learning the Christian doctrine, but it must become a training in Christian life, in the apostolate.

The catechumenate is not a mere expounding of doctrines and precepts, but a *training period* for the whole Christian life. It is an *apprenticeship* of appropriate length, during which disciples are joined to Christ their Teacher. (AG 13) (My emphasis)

1.2. Missionary by Nature

The foundation for this theology of the laity is the new understanding of the nature of the Church. In a note in Abbot's Documents of Vatican II, *Ad Gentes*, we read: "It should be pointed out that the great contribution of *Lumen Gentium* to 'the missions' was to locate the activity of the Church within the centre of the Church's life instead of its periphery."⁴ After Vatican II, if we talk about the Church we talk about a people called to mission. If we are consistent, we must assume that the sacraments of the Church share in her missionary nature.

Theologians today see the Kingdom of God at the centre of Jesus' mission. He lived and died for the Kingdom, for the reign of God. This was the programme he announced at the beginning of his ministry, the mission he entrusted to his followers. The theology of liberation, in a way, helped us to bring God's reign down to earth. As Karl Marx rightly saw, our faith helped us to carry our cross but not to change the cause of evil in the world. The Church was at the forefront in the alleviation of suffering through her works of charity, but not necessarily in the changing of the structures that caused it.

Gaudium et Spes echoing *Pacem in Terris* of John XXIII shows the new position of the Church, speaking "to all men in order to shed light on the mystery of man and to cooperate in finding the solutions to the outstanding problems of our time." (GS 10) Now the Church does not only alleviate the pain, it works together with the world to find solutions. The mission of the Church and the sacraments need to be seen in this light.

⁴ *Ad Gentes* I, 2 footnote 5.

2. *The Sacraments of the Missionary Church*

The missionary aspect of the sacraments is based on the fact that in baptism we die and are reborn to new life; it is Christ who lives in us (Gal 3:20) and his mission becomes our mission. He is the one who told us: “I have loved you just as the father has loved me” (Jn 15:9). He is the one who told us: “As the Father sent me so I am sending you” (Jn 20:21). This mystical union, this knowledge of being loved, of being sent, is what enabled and sustained people in their missionary dedication.

The missionary aspect of the sacraments is for sure not the only aspect but, in my opinion, it is the forgotten one, hence needing special reflection. I am writing as a Roman Catholic and hence I mention the seven sacraments of my tradition, speaking of my experience in this ministry. For me, the seven sacraments are pastoral aspects of the positive response to the call of Christ to follow him; to continue his mission. In various stages of life, people renew their commitment to Christ’s mission. My ecumenical work as lecturer, working in ecumenical orientation courses for new and old missionaries and for Church leaders, has led me to distinguish between what is theological and what is pastoral.⁵ We might disagree theologically; however, we are very close to one another when we talk about pastoral issues.

2.1. *Sacrament of Baptism*

Baptism, in the pre-Vatican II days, was seen in terms of personal, eternal salvation. The Johannine *nisi quis*—“unless one is born anew” (Jn 3:3 RSV)—was the driving motif. Catholic nurses were urged to baptize the foetus in the womb of dead or dying mothers. Baptisms *in periculo mortis* (in danger of death) were very common in PNG. We were very quick in invoking the *ecclesia supplet*, i.e. that the Church will make up for the shortcomings in the ritual. We had to save souls!

The shift I witnessed and experienced since Vatican II was from the liturgical rite to the faith it was meant to express.⁶ It is faith ex-

⁵ I worked part-time at the Melanesian Institute, an ecumenical institution, from 1969 and full-time from 1977 to 1997. See Ennio Mantovani (ed.) *Silver Jubilee of the Melanesian Institute* (Goroka: Melanesian Institute, 1995).

⁶ We Roman Catholics spoke about sacraments working *ex opere operato*, i.e. by the work done (by Christ). Sometimes, in my experience, what was supposed to be an expression of our faith in Christ’s salvific work was in danger of becoming an empty ritual.

pressed in love that saves. The document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, of Vatican II expresses this clearly when it states:

Catechumens who, moved by the Holy Spirit, seek with explicit intention to be incorporated into the Church are by that very intention joined to her. With love and solicitude Mother Church already embraces them as her own. (LG 14)

It is faith that motivates and saves these people. The rite only expresses it officially. If this active faith fails, baptism not only does not help, as a matter of fact it makes things worse for the one who received it.

He is not saved, however, who, though he is part of the body of the Church, does not persevere in charity. ... If they fail moreover to respond to that grace in thought, word, and deed, not only will they not be saved but they will be the more severely judged. (LG 14)

The Abbott commentary to this passage refers to Lk 12:48: “Much will be expected from the one who has been given much.” For me, working in the catechumenate, Matthew 25 with the parables of the ten maidens, the three servants, and the last judgment was of basic relevance. The catechumens were challenged with those parables of Jesus to be active. Baptism was not a magical rite, but a commitment to mission, to work with Christ for the Kingdom.

In Baptism, the symbol we came to adopt, the pouring of water over of the head, led us to stress the washing from sin, and St. Augustine, with his teaching on original sin, did not help one to attain the full understanding of Baptism.⁷ The present symbol stresses only one aspect of the sacrament. The biblical idea of rebirth, of dying and rising again (Rom 6:4; Col 2:12), of the new life in Christ (Gal 2:20) is not called to mind—signified—by the present symbol. The new life in and for Christ, however, should be at the centre of the sacrament.

If it is not I but Christ who lives in me (Gal 2:20), the one who lived and died for the Kingdom, Christ’s mission ought to be our mission. It is not an option that one might choose; this is integral to the Christian identity. We are branches of the vine; we are needed by the vine to bear fruit. “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you” (Jn 20:21). Seen from the “missionary nature of the Church” perspective, Baptism is the response to the call by Christ to follow him, to continue his work. The vine—Christ—needs branches to bring the

⁷ In the area in which I was working in PNG, I often heard people say, “I am already washed” to mean I am baptized.

fruit of salvation. God wants to need co-workers for God's plan for the world.

For the infant, without the faith and commitment of the parents and godparents, baptism is in danger of becoming a cultural, social ritual. If baptism is seen as the taking away of the original sin and opening the way to personal salvation, then one could be a minimalist and invoke the *ecclesia supplet* principle. What matters is the eternal salvation of the child and, hence, let us baptise him or her. If, on the other hand, mission is at the centre, the work for the Kingdom of God here on earth, then the active commitment to the mission of the Church must be present in those who present the child for baptism. Infant baptism provides a golden opportunity for catechising the parents and godparents of the child.

2.2. Sacrament of Confirmation

In the post Vatican II theology, Baptism and Confirmation, together with the Eucharist, are part of the one rite of Christian Initiation.⁸ If in Baptism one expresses one's acceptance of the call by Christ to continue his work, in Confirmation the Holy Spirit is given to the person to enable that mission to be carried out. Even in the pre-Vatican II theology, the Holy Spirit in Confirmation made one a *miles Christi*, a soldier of Christ.

Today in Papua New Guinea, for adults, the two sacraments of Christian Initiation are conferred together. The catechumenate prepares them for this commitment to continue the mission of Christ. Those who have been baptized as children need to go through a kind of catechumenate, in which confirmation is seen in the light of God's plan for salvation, for God's kingdom and one's commitment to it. The stress should be on continuing the mission of Christ in their context.

I was told in PNG that the reason for confirming the children at primary school age is that otherwise most of them will not be confirmed at all, missing the sacramental grace of confirmation. In acting this way we are in danger of going back to a pre-Vatican II theology, away from that of a Church which is missionary by nature. If the parents agree to or ask for this sacrament, it would offer a chance for catechizing the adults in our communities.

⁸ Orthodox Churches confer the three sacraments of Christian Initiation at infant baptism.

2.3. Sacrament of the Eucharist

The Eucharist together with Baptism and Confirmation completes the Christian initiation. Through Baptism/Confirmation we are called and we accept to continue the mission of Christ, and the Eucharist is the food that enables us to carry out the mission of Christ.

The Eucharist is the memorial, the making present of the mystery of God's love for us, "God loved the world so much that he gave his only son," and of the love of that son who loved us so much he gave his life for us. We are thus confronted by Christ, our model who shows us the way to carry out God's mission: total trust in the Father, even and especially in time of total failure, forgetting oneself for the good of the others to the point of giving one's life.

The Eucharist is both nourishment and reminder. "As the father has sent me, so I am sending you."

2.4. Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation

The sacrament of penance was not treated in Vatican II. Originally, penance was a new chance for those who in a serious way had broken the baptismal commitment. Sometimes penance was postponed to the deathbed, to be sure not to fall again. Thomas Aquinas taught that the case when one comes to confession with a mortal sin was a borderline case, because if one repents, that person is already forgiven. From that point of view, there is no special need for a sacramental ritual.

But there is another aspect. A grievous sin is one that betrays in a radical way the commitment to Christ expressed in Baptism. One, through such an action, puts oneself outside the Christian community. One cannot come back into the community at will. One needs to repent and ask to be readmitted and to be granted readmission by the leader of that community. In our Church, the leader is the bishop.⁹ He needs to authorize somebody to officially readmit the penitent. Sometimes the bishop reserves certain serious cases to himself personally. In our present praxis, the bishop authorizes the priests to readmit to the Christian community those who repented and, in the sacrament of penance, ask to be readmitted.

This explains also the procedure with the so-called "third rite." One is absolved of sins, however, for the grievous ones, for those put-

⁹ According to Canon Law, a newly ordained priest cannot absolve, except in an emergency. Any priest needs the explicit authorization of the Bishop of the diocese to do so.

ting one outside the Christian community, one needs to ask and to be officially readmitted into the community. This is the ecclesial aspect of the sacrament.

Penance in a missionary sense provides an occasion for judging one's activity in terms of one's behaviour towards others, in terms of one's missionary commitment.

For me personally, the understanding of penance, as a renewal of my commitment to Christ and his mission, is very meaningful and satisfying.

2.5. Sacrament of Matrimony

Marriage, in my opinion, is the missionary sacrament par excellence. Theologians might have thought differently, however, many people considered marriage the rite that made licit a marital sexual relation with no special commitment to others.

In Baptism we give our life to Christ to work for the Kingdom, to help Christ establish God's kingdom here on earth. Marriage, in every culture, is a turning point for the individuals involved and for the community as well. Most cultures express this fact through appropriate ceremonies involving very often appropriate instructions for those getting married. One takes on new and greater responsibilities for the community. One becomes a full adult.

It is not that sexual expression of love offends God. On the contrary, God appreciates that expression of marital union so much as to want to use it to change and save the world. In this missionary view of marriage, it is not avoidance of sinfulness that is stressed, but the beauty and relevance of the union for the mission of Christ. It is the implicit or explicit refusal to live one's baptism in and through that marital union, the implicit or explicit refusal to allow Christ to use that union as a visible and efficacious sign for the Kingdom, that puts a Christian outside the believing Church.

In a Christian marriage, the couple allows Christ to use their union as a building block for the Kingdom. Their union ought to be a witness to the love of Christ for the Church and of God for the world. The Christian marriage is not better or superior to other marriages, but is one where one consciously lives that witness of God's love. The Christian marriage is not one in which there are no quarrels but one in which, because of one's promise to be a witness to Christ's love for the Church, one tries to forgive, thus helping the coming of the reign of God's love. Because of this missionary nature of the sacrament, a

Christian marriage ought to be indissoluble; one ought to forgive as Christ did.¹⁰

I see society as a safety net in which marriages are the knots that build it and keep it together. To heal society, marriage seems a good starting point. Christian marriage ought to be the healthy cell in society, healthy in that it lives the justice of the Kingdom.

This for me is the missionary sacrament par excellence. As children, they have been baptized and confirmed; now they have a chance to reflect on their baptismal commitment and renew it together as adults; as a couple.

2.6. Sacrament of Holy Orders

The sacrament of Ordination is a special call and empowerment to serve the missionary community, the community of those called and sent to continue the mission of Christ.

As a seminarian I was looking forward to being ordained a priest, to becoming an *alter Christus*, as theology told us we would become, namely another Christ. Preparing for ordination, I was reading and meditating on the treatise on the sacrament of ordination. I did not read it to prepare for an exam but to reflect on the grace to have been called to be an *alter Christus*.

When Vatican II came and the documents became available, I realized that every Christian was an *alter Christus* through Baptism. Every Christian was assigned to the apostolate by Christ himself. I was not the only minister but one among many. My role was that of reminding the community of its dignity and mission and of enabling the community to live up to that responsibility. My task, in dialogue with the community, was to establish structures that help the laity to exercise their birthrights. Another task, given my philosophical and theological preparation, was to be the spokesperson for the community, the one who presents their insights in a philosophical and theological language to the leadership and to the wider Church.

My priesthood blossomed after Vatican II. My role was clear and the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity guided my ministry. I would never do what one of my lay co-workers could do. As a matter of fact, I would encourage and support them to go as far as they could in their ministry. On the other hand, I would be supportive and stand up for them. I needed to foresee the problems that would emerge,

¹⁰ If a couple, for whatever reason, breaks the marital bond and enters a new marriage, it has a new chance and, in my opinion, should be invited again to allow Christ to use their new union for the Kingdom.

given the clerical structure of the present Church, and stand by and support them.

2.7. The Anointing of the Sick

This sacrament has to do with sickness and healing, based on James' recommendation in his letter (Jas 5:14-15). Today the Church no longer uses the traditional term of "extreme unction," stressing the point instead that it is the sacrament not only for the dying and the grievously sick but also for the old and the frail. This is relevant in a Church missionary by nature. Each sacrament has to do with our commitment to the mission of Christ; however, the context of that commitment varies during our life. When old age and sickness come, we enter a new phase in our life. In this sacrament one renews one's commitment to Christ and his mission, accepting as Jesus did in Gethsemane, the will of the Father, and one offers one's pain and suffering for the coming of the Kingdom of God.

When I visit the old and sick I share with them my conviction that they are greater missionaries than myself in the sense that I enjoy my ministry while they must suffer with Christ, carrying their cross, witnessing to their trust in God, and so helping the coming of God's Kingdom, the coming of justice and peace in our world today. I always ask them to include my ministry in their prayers, as I need their help.

3. Conclusion

When I became a Divine Word Missionary, I was convinced that outside my Church there was no salvation. My task as a missionary was to bring the light where there was darkness of sin and death. Vatican II and my work in PNG changed my life in a radical way. I still thank God from my whole heart that I am a Christian, however, not because I am saved while the others are not, but because Christ called me and sent me out to continue his mission, God's mission.

The special call by Christ to continue his mission gave my Church not only a task but a clear and unique identity. As a Christian, I am not superior to or better than others are, but I still believe that I am unique because of that specific call and mission by Christ. I cannot thank God enough for the grace of my vocation. As a missionary, I shall invite and challenge people of good will to be co-workers with Christ in creating a better world, a society in which individuals care for one another. I shall dialogue with brothers and sisters of other religions to work together for the justice of the Kingdom. I see my

task as reminding my fellow Christians of their dignity and responsibility as people called and sent out by Christ to continue his mission. I see my responsibility as minister in the Church in helping my fellow Christians carrying out our mission today, in our Australian context. I will endeavour to help those who are or want to become Christians to celebrate the sacraments as a calling, acceptance, and empowerment for mission.

ABSTRACTS

Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil führte zu einer tiefen Veränderung im christlichen Selbstverständnis, wie es sich besonders in den Dokumenten über das Laienapostolat und die Mission zeigt. Die Lehre wurde in der Kirche zum guten Teil angenommen, aber das Verständnis der Sakramente und ihre pastorale Praxis hängen noch nach und folgen oft einem veralteten Verständnis. Der Autor ruft die theologischen Entwicklungen in Erinnerung und reflektiert über die Praxis während seines Missionarslebens. Er behandelt die sieben Sakramente der katholischen Tradition und schlägt ein Verständnis und eine Praxis der Sakramente im Licht des Konzils vor.

El Segundo Concilio Vaticano implicó un profundo cambio en el entendimiento de la identidad cristiana, como se desprende particularmente de los documentos sobre el apostolado de los laicos y la misión. Si bien mucho de esta enseñanza ha sido aceptado en la iglesia, la comprensión de los sacramentos y su práctica pastoral parecen haberse quedado atrás y se basan en comprensiones anteriores. El autor recapitula los desarrollos teológicos y reflexiona sobre su práctica como misionero. Repasa los siete sacramentos de la tradición católica y sugiere una comprensión y práctica de estos sacramentos a la luz del Concilio Vaticano II.

Le concile Vatican II a apporté un profond changement dans la perspective de l'identité chrétienne, comme cela devient particulièrement évident dans les documents sur les laïcs et sur la mission. Tandis qu'une grande partie de son enseignement a été accepté dans l'Église, la compréhension des sacrements et la pratique de la pastorale sacramentelle semblent être à la traîne et reposent encore sur d'anciens schémas. L'auteur rappelle le développement théologique et réfléchit sur sa pratique au cours de sa vie missionnaire. Il passe en revue les sept sacrements traditionnels de l'Église catholique et propose une conception et une pratique de ces sacrements à la lumière de Vatican II.