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A BRIEF HISTORY OF GOD'S MISSION

The understanding that mission originates in God and invites the churches to participation in it is a widely shared perspective today. The basic idea of it was formulated as missio Dei seventy years ago at a mission conference in Willingen (Germany). This overview places the concept in its development over the last century, with developments before World War II and the event of the Willingen Conference. Catholic missiology took some time to receive the term, but it became prominent in the theological foundation of mission at the Vatican Council II. In the decades after the Council, mission theology received other accents and only in the last two decades, the perspective of missio Dei has become prominent again.

In October 2021, SEDOS held a symposium on new trends in mission which was attended in virtual reality by around 250 people from all over the world. It was fascinating to realise that almost all speakers and commentators set out from the perspective that mission certainly and “obviously” belongs to God and starts from God. As a matter of fact, there were practically no views about mission as an ecclesial enterprise or for the expansion of the church.¹ The papers at this symposium have been published in the meantime.²

While there is a notable shift in the perspective of mission, there still seems to be some uncertainty about how to deal with this view in practical consequences. That appears in the verbs employed to describe the action and the different roles of the actors implied: Some would “realise,” “practice,” “forward” or “do” God’s mission, others would “join in,” “share,” “participate,” etc. This option of verbs reveals the position

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¹ For a first summary on the symposium see Chris Chaplin, MSC/Marie-Hélène Robert, OLA/Peter Baekelmans, CICM/Rachel Oommen, ICM (Redaction Committee), *The Emerging Future in Mission. Summary of the 2021 SEDOS Mission Symposium Talks: SEDOS Bulletin 53 (9-10.2021) 44-48.*

² Peter Baekelmans, CICM/Marie-Hélène Robert, *New Trends in Mission. The Emerging Future. Essays from SEDOS Mission Symposium October 11-15, 2021, Rome, Italy, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 2022.*

and attitude an actor takes in relation to God's mission. Obviously, with God as one of the actors there is a fundamental imbalance in the field. The traditional actor in mission—the missionary, probably white, powerful, resourceful, active—might return to the old paradigms and hang on to the accustomed ecclesial and even ecclesio-centric activities. The question then arises and acquires some urgency: What is the purpose and the consequence of taking this perspective of “God's mission?”

In this reflection, I take a look at the development and reception of the perspective centred in God, limited to the last hundred years, and obviously, mine is a rather limited overview from my context (in Germany, Catholic...). There are several waves to be distinguished, with different perceptions in different churches. In our century, there is a strong view and submission to a mission which has its reference point in God, but the relationship to missionaries' actions and activities within this overarching dynamic is not yet sufficiently spelt out, as far as I can see.

The Greatest and Most Holy Task

A century ago, Western Christianity and its missionary outreach faced serious problems: the Christian nations of Europe had engaged in the terrible Great War with all the subsequent suffering and death toll on the battle fields and in the civilian spheres. As a consequence, the colonial maps were re-drawn, the missions had to be redesigned according to the results of the Great War. Beyond the practical tasks of missionary congregations, there was the even more pressing question of credibility that supposedly Christian nations could engage in such warfare and involve the entire world.

Mission was practiced heavily along national interests. France had taken on the role and privilege to function as a “protector of missions” and exerted that influence within its colonial perspective. As a consequence, there were loads of problems between German missionaries and French authorities in the China missions, to mention just one example from the SVD mission history.³

³ For the general perspective see: Karl Josef Rivinius SVD, Die Missionsfrage auf der Konferenz von Versailles (1919): *Verbum SVD* 59 (3.2018) 281-304 and 59 (4.2018) 379-401; Andrzej Miotk SVD, The Responses to the Great War (1914–1918) by the Vatican and the Society of the Divine Word (SVD): *Verbum SVD* 61 (4.2020) 432-464. Regarding the particular problems for the missions in China see: Karl Josef Rivinius SVD, Vor 100 Jahren: China und der Versailler Friedensvertrag von 1919: *China heute* 37 (4.2018) 243-249; Leopold Leeb, “Theologisches Kolloquium zum hun-

When after the Great War Pope Benedict XV issued his seminal encyclical *Maximum illud* (1919)⁴ and shifted the emphasis of mission towards a Christological perspective, there was both a liberation for the missions and a loss of political influence of European nations which used the missionaries as pioneers and avant-garde agents for their colonial expansion projects. According to *Maximum illud*, mission should be much more related to the church—in the sense of the “only real church,” the Roman Catholic Church, as it was—and Christ’s kingdom. Mission cannot be understood in terms of national interests: “It would be tragic indeed if any of our missionaries forgot the dignity of their office so completely as to busy themselves with the interests of their terrestrial homeland instead of with those of their homeland in heaven. It would be a tragedy indeed if an apostolic man were to spend himself in attempts to increase and exalt the prestige of the native land he once left behind him. Such behavior would infect his apostolate like a plague.”⁵ The centenary of *Maximum illud* was a great opportunity to return to this seminal encyclical.⁶ It inspired Pope Francis to launch a special mission month in October 2019 which was meant to rekindle

dertjährigen Jubiläum von *Maximum illud* – Verkündigung, Sakrament und christliches Zeugnis in der *missio ad gentes* in Asien” in Macau: *China heute* 39 (2-3.2020) 80-81; Alfredo Verdoy Herranz SJ, Los desafíos de la *Maximum Illud*. Las misiones católicas libres frente a los antiguos intereses coloniales y frente a la nueva política internacional: *Misiones Extranjeras* 293 (abr/junio 2020) 111-139; Pierre Jeanne, MEP, Confusion lors de la réception de *Maximum Illud*: *Missions Étrangères de Paris* #572 (juillet-août 2021) 44-50.

⁴ Regarding this encyclical, see Andrzej Miotk SVD, *Das Missionsverständnis im historischen Wandel am Beispiel der Enzyklika “Maximum Illud”* (Veröffentlichungen des Missionspriesterseminars St. Augustin bei Bonn 51), Nettetal: Steyler Verlag 1999; Valentine Ugochukwu Iheanacho MSP, *Maximum Illud and Benedict XV’s Missionary Thinking. Prospects of a Local Church in Mission Territories*, Saarbrücken: OmniScriptum Scholar’s Press 2015.

⁵ “Esset haec quidem apostolatus pestis teterrima”: Benedict XV, *Maximum illud* #19 (see the text in different languages on the www.vatican.va site).

⁶ See Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples/Pontifical Mission Societies, *Baptized and Sent. The Church of Christ on Mission in the World. Extraordinary Missionary Month October 2019*, Cinicello Balsamo (Milano): San Paolo 2019; Christian Tauchner, SVD, The Greatest and Most Holy Task. Editorial: *Verbum SVD* 60 (1-2.2019) 5-10; this entire issue of *Verbum SVD* was dedicated to *Maximum illud*: Andrzej Miotk, SVD, The Historical Significance and Prophetic Resonance of the Apostolic Letter *Maximum illud* on the Centenary of its Publication: *Verbum SVD* 60 (1-2.2019) 11-41; Edgar Javier, SVD, Walking Back in Time: Revisiting *Maximum illud* today: *Missio Inter Gentes* 5 (1.2019) 1-21; Michael Sievernich SJ, 100 Jahre *Maximum illud* (1919). Das epochale Missionsschreiben von Benedikt XV.: *ZMR* 103 (3-4.2019) 319-326.

the missionary engagement, with several “profound shifts. For Francis, the basic question of mission is no longer a formal mandate from the Risen Lord to make all peoples Catholics (as Benedict XV might still have seen it), but rather, through the emphasis on baptism, Francis arrives at the concept of discipleship, which again becomes missionary by itself. This was the great step taken at the CELAM conference in Aparecida 2007 and the continuation in *Evangelii gaudium* (19ff.; 119ff.). In the meantime, the World Mission Conference of the World Council of Churches also has taken up this central idea of discipleship and change. Because the disciples of Jesus comprehend themselves as called and live from the encounter with Jesus, they not only *have* a mission, but they *are* a mission, as EG 273 puts it.”⁷

Systematic Doubts

The questions regarding mission and where it originates from were tackled also in Protestant theology. Like the suspicion against any nation as an apt and overarching social structure to assure the correct performance of mission, which is one of the central statements of *Maximum illud*, Karl Barth’s theology expanded and radicalised these doubts and expanded them to include also religions altogether as equally insufficient structures.⁸ In his seminal commentary on Romans (1919), Barth turned to a biblically grounded theology of the kingdom of God. Against the experiences of the Great War, he emphasised God’s judgement over all earthly reality, including religions.⁹ Instead, Barth started to think from God’s revelation of grace which cannot be reached through reason and human systems, but is to be simply accepted. Rather, history should be seen from an eschatological perspective—a fundamental shift towards the “dialectical theology”: “History stretches from the ascension of Christ to his return, but history

⁷ See Christian Tauchner SVD, Eine hohe und heilige Aufgabe. 100 Jahre “Maximum illud” und der Missionsmonat Oktober 2019: *Ordenskorrespondenz* 60 (1.2019) 5-15, 13.

⁸ See Sarosh Koshy, *Beyond Missio Dei. Contesting Mission, Rethinking Witness* (Postcolonialism and Religions), Cham: Springer/Palgrave Macmillan 2022, 184-186.

⁹ See the overviews regarding Barth: Wilfried Härle, Barth, Karl, in: *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (hrsg. Walter Kasper et al.), Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder 1994, Bd. 2, 35-37; Eberhard Jüngel, Barth, Karl (1886–1968), in: *TRE (Theologische Realenzyklopädie)*, Berlin: De Gruyter 1993, Bd. 5, 251-268. On Barth’s early positions see particularly John G. Flett, *The Witness of God. The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community*, Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans Publishing Company 2010, 11-17.

itself is nothing more than a framework; it does not permit us to expect certain developments for better or for worse, let alone of any theological significance. [...] The so-called salvation-historical approach to mission theology [is] an approach that sees history simply as the framework within which mission takes place and that rejects an evolutionary understanding of history.”¹⁰

After Barth, the names of Karl Hartenstein and Walter Freytag appear in this time as prominent and influential promoters of this understanding of mission.¹¹ In a 1958 lecture, Freytag “defines mission as follows: ‘Mission means participation in the action of God, in what he does to carry out his plan in view of the coming kingdom by bringing about among the heathen the obedience of faith towards our Lord Christ.’ [...] For Freytag, Jesus Christ is the mediator of mission who is sent by God and who in turn sends people to be his witnesses. Christ thus continues to mediate the mission. The goal of this mission of God, the *missio Dei*, is the kingdom of God. Hence it is the purpose of history to bring this kingdom about, and that means: the purpose of history is mission.”¹² Both Hartenstein and Freytag were already influential missiologists at the conferences of the International Missionary Council (IMC)¹³ from the Tambaran Conference 1938 onwards. There, they seem to have caused some controversies with their views.¹⁴

Turning to God – The Willingen Conference

World War II implied naturally a major disruption of all missionary activity and reflection. The IMC held on to a conference planned to be held in Whitby, Canada, in a very small setting in 1947. The aim was to take a step forward after the great tragedy and to restart the missionary engagement. However, it was realised that any mission could no longer be thought of from a Western centre to a world beyond.

Soon after, the next conference was convened for the year 1952 in Willingen, Germany—given the recent history with Nazi Germany and

¹⁰ Henning Wrogemann, *Theologies of Mission*, translated by Karl E. Böhmer (Intercultural Theology Vol. Two), Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press 2018, 50.

¹¹ For an overview, see Wrogemann, *Theologies of Mission*, 49-58.

¹² Ibid., 54f.

¹³ The International Missionary Council organised after the Edinburgh Conference of 1910 several global meetings until 1961, when it merged into the World Council of Churches at the New Delhi Conference.

¹⁴ See Wrogemann, *Theologies of Mission*, 57f. and 62-64 for the entire Tambaran conference. I follow Wrogemann regarding the developments.

the war experience, this step of accepting an invitation to Germany is remarkable. In 1950, the IMC had embarked upon a “series of studies under the general heading of ‘The Missionary Obligation of the Church’”¹⁵ with the aim of restating the universal missionary obligation, of re-examining the missionary vocation, of assessing the position of Western mission societies, of defining the missionary role of younger churches, and of considering policies for the mission task. These questions should have been treated in a “Sending Countries Conference” in 1951, with the hope “that the studies will result—without too much delay—in new understandings within the field of missionary policy [...]. Particular importance is attached to aims I and II, which take us back to first principles. What is the theological ground of missions? What is the theological meaning of the events which characterize this present moment in history, and what is the churches’ missionary word on those events? Again, what new accent is God calling us to sound to-day in regard to Christian vocation, with its special sharpening in the vocation of the missionary? In a day when the whole world is more manifestly than ever a *pays de mission*, does there, in fact, remain a distinctive vocation justifying ‘Societies’ or ‘Orders’ of missionaries? How can we better demonstrate the vital unity between the task hitherto carried by such agencies in Africa and the East and the new ‘frontier’ tasks of the Church in the West?”¹⁶ In subsequent issues, the *International Review of Missions* (IRM) published reflections towards these questions.¹⁷

The Willingen Conference was to become one of the most theologically fruitful in the history of world mission conferences. Some 180 delegates from all over the world took part. They took stock of the state of the world after World War II in a context of uncertainty about the future: In China, the communists had seized power in 1949 and expelled all Western missionaries (the *China shock*). There was the conflict between the Soviet Union and the Western powers in the *Cold War* and the armed conflict in Korea from 1950 onwards. The colonial era was coming to an end and former colonial territories gradually became independent: Indonesia in 1945, the Philippines in 1946, the Indian sub-

¹⁵ Norman Goodall, First Principles: *IRM* 39 (3.1950) 257-262, 257.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 259.

¹⁷ As examples for the topics that were prepared in the journal ahead of the Willingen conference: A. G. Hebert, The Missionary Obligation: *IRM* 39 (3.1950) 385-392; M. A. C. Warren, The Missionary Obligation of the Church in the Present Historical Situation. With Consideration of the Radical New Relationships between East and West: *ibid.*, 393-408; I. W. Moomaw, Missions and Human Need: *ibid.*, 418-424; A. G. Hebert, The Mission of the Church: *IRM* 40 (3.1951) 385-392; Tracey K. Jones, The Missionary Vocation, *ibid.*, 401-410.

continent in 1947, Burma [since 1989 Myanmar] in 1948. The ensuing nation states were also faced with the task of having to establish a national identity, so the question arose as to which ideological or historical basis could be integrated. The Christian churches in these countries were seen as allies of the former colonial powers and therefore could not be considered an option. The new states then had to construct their identities in relation to the local population and in a difficult relationship with the churches of the former regime.

Eloy Bueno summarises the event in these terms:

Under the theme *Missionary Obligation of the Church* (its final conclusion published as *Missions under the Cross*¹⁸) was the scene of the passage from a missionary ecclesiology to a missionary theology, from a mission centred on the church to a church centred on the mission, on the *Missio Dei*: given the incapacity of the church to fulfil its mission it was necessary to re-found the missions from a theological rather than an ecclesiological root (in line with Barth's theology ironically promoted by J. C. Hoekendijk). The church is but the servant and sign of God's presence. Triumphalist language is definitively abandoned for the missionary project, for it is a mission in solidarity with the incarnate and crucified Christ. The church, the "people of God in the world," must bear witness to "what God has done, is doing and wants to do in Christ." This solidarity is under the sign of the cross, which is why it cannot be conformism but discernment of the signs of the times.¹⁹

The Willingen conference therefore achieves a change of perspective. It is no longer based on the church as a centre of expansion, attraction or as an actor in a conversion movement, but the church itself is placed and integrated into a wider, universal movement. J. Moltmann summarises two decades later:

To understand the missionary church theologically on the global horizon is to understand it on the horizon of the *missio Dei*. *Sending* involves the entire church, not only

¹⁸ Norman Goodall (ed.), *Missions under the Cross. Addresses delivered at the Enlarged Meeting of the Committee of the International Missionary Council at Willingen, in Germany, 1952*; with Statements issued by the Meeting, London: Edinburgh House Press, published for the International Missionary Council 1953.

¹⁹ Eloy Bueno, Consejo mundial de Iglesias, in: Eloy Bueno/Roberto Calvo (eds.), *Diccionario de misionología y animación misionera*, Burgos: Monte Carmelo 2003, 264-272, 268 (my translation).

parts of it, or even only the members sent by it. [...] Mission embraces all activities that serve to liberate humankind from its slavery in the presence of the God who comes, from economic need to the abandonment of God. [...] If the church understands her mission in the framework of the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit from the Father, then she also understands herself in the framework of God's history with the world and discovers her place and her function in this history. Recent Catholic and Protestant missiology, therefore, rightly speaks of a *missio Dei* as a movement starting from God, in which the church arises and gains its own dynamic, but that goes beyond the church and reaches its goal in the culmination of creation in God. Therefore, the church must understand its worldwide mission within the Trinitarian history of God with the world. In all its activities and sufferings, she is one factor within the history of God's kingdom. The point is not the expansion of the church but the expansion of the Kingdom of God.²⁰

It is interesting to note that the term "*missio Dei*" does not appear in the proceedings and deliberations at Willingen, but the entire conference discourse was soon summarised in this term proposed and introduced by the missiologists Karl Hartenstein and Walter Freytag, and later on elaborated above all by G. F. Vicedom.²¹

Wrogemann summarises the achievements at Willingen: "The love of God is seen as the basis for the divine mission, or more precisely the love of the triune God. Hence in Willingen, Christian mission was justified no longer on the basis of a whole variety of rationales, as had been the case with Warneck, but was unfolded purely on the basis of God's being. This was then summarized under a term introduced by Karl Hartenstein: the *missio Dei*, the mission of God."²² Therefore mission means: (1) *Missio Dei is repentance*. Since God himself carries out the mission, because in his own being he is missionary and movement—

²⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *Kirche in der Kraft des Geistes. Ein Beitrag zur messianischen Ekklesiologie*, München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag 1975, 24 (my translation).

²¹ Georg F. Vicedom, *Missio Dei. Einführung in eine Theologie der Mission*, München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag 1958, reedited together with another of his important contributions regarding God's action: id., *Missio Dei. Einführung in eine Theologie der Mission. Actio Dei. Mission und Reich Gottes*. Neu hg. von Klaus W. Müller, mit Beiträgen von Bernd Brandl und Herwig Wagner (edition afem mission classics 4), Nürnberg: VTR 2017.

²² Wrogemann, *Theologies of Mission*, 68 (his emphasis).

the *processiones*, as it was called since medieval times—, the church activity has to leave aside aspects of the mission which do not take into account this divine protagonism. (2) *Missio Dei* is promise in its eschatological orientation, beyond contingent history. (3) *The church is active in a secondary way*: its own action integrated and assumed in a more universal dynamic. (4) With the *missio Dei*, a *geographical conception* of mission is definitively ended. Mission is not an activity somewhere “over there,” where the others are, but is directed to all aspects of the life and culture of all peoples.

The key concept of a *missio Dei* was discussed widely by missiologists like Hartenstein, Freytag, Vicedom, Newbiggin and Hoekendijk.²³ In his classical textbook of 1991, David Bosch summarises:

[Mission] was thus put in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology. The classical doctrine on the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another “movement”: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world. As far as missionary thinking was concerned, this linking with the doctrine of the Trinity constituted an important innovation (Aagaard 1974:420). Willingen’s image of mission was mission as participating in the sending of God. Our mission has no life of its own: only in the hands of the sending God can it truly be called mission, not least since the missionary initiative comes from God alone.²⁴

Regarding the Catholic Reception

Obviously, the Willingen Conference received some attention in Protestant missiological circles, starting with the publication of the

²³ For the larger discussion see particularly Dorottya Nagy’s contribution in this issue. Further Flett, *The Witness of God*; and particularly chapter 9 “Mission as Participation in the Mission of the Triune God (*Missio Dei*)” in: Stephen B. Bevans/Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context. A Theology of Mission for Today* (American Society of Missiology Series 30), Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 2004, 286-304.

²⁴ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (American Society of Missiology Series 16), Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1991, 390; on the development around Willingen see his chapter on “Church and World,” 376-393. See also his chapter on *missio Dei* in David J. Bosch, *Witness to the World. The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (Marshall’s Theological Library), London: Marshall, Morgan&Scott 1980, 239-248.

proceedings and reflections afterwards,²⁵ though skimming through *IRM* in the immediate years after it, there is not a lot of discussion there. Nevertheless, Bosch states that

Since Willingen, the understanding of mission as *missio Dei* has been embraced by virtually all Christian persuasions—first by conciliar Protestantism, but subsequently also by other ecclesial groupings, such as the Eastern Orthodox and many evangelicals. It was also endorsed in Catholic mission theology, notably in some of the documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). After having stated that the church is missionary by its very nature, since “it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit,” the Council’s *Decree on Mission* defines missionary activity as “nothing else, and nothing less, than the manifestation of God’s plan, its epiphany and realization in the world and in history” (AG 2, 9). Mission is here defined in trinitarian, christological, pneumatological, and ecclesiological terms.²⁶

In German-speaking countries, books and lectures were dedicated to the theme, so it might be safe to say that there was quite some awareness building going on in Protestant communities.²⁷

In Catholic circles, the Willingen Conference seems to have passed without attracting notice. The influential *Herder Korrespondenz* does not mention it at all though there are several reports on the Aachen Academic Mission Congress²⁸ which took place around the same time as Willingen and dealt with the same pressing and urgent questions of mission.²⁹ Similarly, there are no reports or miscellanea on it

²⁵ Notably Goodall’s *Mission under the Cross* with the conference proceedings and statements.

²⁶ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 390f., with abundant bibliography.

²⁷ See Vicedom, *Missio Dei*; Walter Freytag, *Reden und Aufsätze*, I + II (Theologische Bücherei. Neudrucke und Berichte aus dem 20. Jahrhundert 13, Missionswissenschaft), München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag 1961, containing lectures from 1935 to 1960, not all of them related to *missio Dei*; Hans Jochen Margull (ed.), *Zur Sendung der Kirche. Material der ökumenischen Bewegung* (Theologische Bücherei. Neudrucke und Berichte aus dem 20. Jahrhundert 18, Mission und Ökumene), München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag 1963, where several of the Willingen statements are presented and summarised.

²⁸ E.g.: X. Internationaler Akademischer Missionskongress zu Aachen: *Herder Korrespondenz* 6 (10.1952) 467–471. The report boasts of the 1200 participants from 25 countries, “even from Africa,” who discussed missiological topics.

²⁹ See Johannes Beckmann SMB, *Forderungen der gegenwärtigen Missionslage an die Missionswissenschaft: NZM* 8 (1952) 241–250.

in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* (NZM),³⁰ nor in the *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* (ZMR).³¹ Beyond the German-speaking area the *Bibliografia missionaria* (BM), published by the Propaganda Fide in Rome, does not mention it either; what is more, the BM does not list the keyword “missio Dei.”³² An exception to the Catholic silence is a short note a year later in *Die Katholischen Missionen*, a more magazine-like illustrated periodical published by the Jesuits.³³ There, the author sees the Willingen conference as a plan to infiltrate Catholic mission territories and countries (particularly Latin America), because of the universal dimension and identification of mission with the church. Thus, “the mission concept proposed at Willingen has a totalitarian character,” the author claims.³⁴

After these first years of silence, Catholic missiological reflection arrived at positions quite similar to the Willingen conference, establishing mission from God's dynamic, on a trinitarian basis. Thus, Thomas Ohm's major missiological textbook³⁵ presents God's universal salvation, divine love and the Trinity as the basis for the church's mission.

Then, in 1965, at the II Vatican Council the Catholic Church declared its mission perspective in *Ad gentes* founded in God's mission:

The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father (AG 2).³⁶

³⁰ Initiated in 1945, the *NZM* was dedicated more narrowly to missiology, published in Switzerland, closely related to the Immensee/Bethlehem mission society. After 60 volumes, *NZM* ceased publication in 2004.

³¹ *ZMR* was founded in 1911 by the father of Catholic missiology in Germany, Joseph Schmidlin, at the University of Münster. The journal is in its Vol. 105/2021 (due to interruptions during World War II). See <https://www.unifr.ch/zmr/de/> [13-06-2022].

³² *BM* was initiated in 1933 as a fairly global missiological bibliography. It ceased publication in 2014 with Vol. 78. For an overview see the note on *BM* at the IAMS website: <https://missionstudies.org/index.php/study-groups/daboh/information-about-bibliographia-missionaria/> [18-08-2022].

³³ Since Vol. 118 (1999) under the name *Forum Weltkirche*.

³⁴ Joseph Peters, Ruf nach Einheit: *Die Katholischen Missionen* 72 (5.1953) 148-149, 149.

³⁵ Thomas Ohm OSB, *Machet zu Jüngern alle Völker. Theorie der Mission*, Freiburg: Wewel Verlag 1962.

³⁶ Text at the www.vatican.va website.

The term *missio Dei* is not used—as at Willingen itself—but it sounds quite similar to one of the Willingen summaries:

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 own 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.³⁷

Nevertheless, it is interesting to see that in the explanations of the Decree, there is not necessarily a reference to Willingen. As an example, Yves Congar offers a fine exegesis of the theological foundation of mission in AG 2-9, without any reference to Protestant reflections or to God's mission.³⁸ The Decree had gone through a rather bumpy preparation process—which cannot be redrawn in this contribution—and therefore still shows a significant rupture between the theological reasoning in the first chapter with the “principles of doctrine” (AG 2-9) and a return to practical questions of earlier, pre-Vatican II mission conceptions, from chapter 2 onwards (conspicuously titled “Mission work itself,” AG 10ff.). As noted by H. Wrogemann: “Thus the church's mission is based on the mission of the triune God. The concept of the *missio Dei* (but not the term as such) has found its way into conciliar theology. A closer look at the decree of AG reveals the inconsistency of the text.”³⁹ In a wider perspective, Eloy Bueno de la Fuente recognises the importance of the *missio Dei* perspective:

In the second half of the 20th century, *Missio Dei* (the Mission of God) gradually became one of the fundamental categories of missiology, mainly in the Protestant area (its birthplace), but with undoubted repercussions among Catholics. In both cases it was due to the desire to bring missions back to a more radical origin, be it the mission of the church or the God who gives rise to mission. The repatriation of missions in mission (one of the fundamental characteristics of the paradigm that was taking shape in order to overcome the narrowness of classical missiology) thus finds a true theological connection, in virtue of which missions cannot be considered as a supplementary or sec-

³⁷ IRM, International Missionary Council: *IRM* 41 (1952) Quarterly Notes 116, October 1952, i-vi.

³⁸ Yves M. J. Congar, Theologische Grundlegung (Nr. 2–9), in: Johannes Schütte (ed.), *Mission nach dem Konzil*, Mainz: Grünewald 1967, 134–172.

³⁹ Wrogemann, *Theologies of Mission*, 172.

ondary activity of the church but as an expression of the very mission of God.⁴⁰

Missiological Perspectives after Vatican II

In the years of reorientation after the Council, Pope Paul VI intervened through several outstanding encyclicals. His first encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* (1964) encourages the church in these modern days,⁴¹ with the emphasis on dialogue. In 1967, there is *Populorum progressio* (PP) on “development, the new name for Peace” (PP 76f.), and finally, in 1975, *Evangelii nuntiandi* (EN) regarding the church’s task of evangelising and transforming society. This is the shift to explain “mission” as evangelisation. Taking up the lead of “the whole Church is missionary” (EN 59), meaning that evangelisation is a communal and “deeply ecclesial” task (EN 60), taking up Jesus’ own preaching of the kingdom and salvation (cf. EN 10). However, as an ecclesial task, “evangelisation” finds its expression in around 20 different fields and is by no means restricted to preaching.⁴² S. Bevans and R. Schroeder underline the centrality of the kingdom of God as the absolute reference (see EN 8), because being “church means to share in the mission of Jesus.”⁴³

At the 25th anniversary of Vatican II’s *Ad gentes* Pope John Paul II issued his mission encyclical *Redemptoris missio* (RM, 1990) on the “permanent validity of the Church’s missionary mandate.” Already this subtitle shows a return to a more church-centred vision of mission. Different from EN, RM received much less attention beyond strictly missionary circles, a sign both of the dwindling missionary awareness of the faithful, but also of the changing theological horizon with the

⁴⁰ Eloy Bueno, *Missio Dei*, in: Bueno/Calvo (eds.), *Diccionario de misionología y animación misionera*, 641-646, 641f. (my translation).

⁴¹ The German version of the encyclical has this heading: “*Ecclesiam Suam* [to all the bishops etc.] on the ways by which the Catholic Church today must fulfil its task” (also in the Latin, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese versions). The English and French versions do not have this explanation in their heading. See the texts on the www.vatican.va site.

⁴² At our Institute we produce the *Steyley Missionschronik* and dedicated it in 2015 to EN. The different reports and particularly the picture sections intended to show this wide field of different “evangelisation” tasks. See the introductory study by Martin Üffing SVD, *Evangelii Nuntiandi und Evangelisierung: Steyley Missionschronik 2015*, Sankt Augustin: Steyley Verlag 2015, 9-16.

⁴³ They dedicate chapter 10 to “Mission as Liberating Service of the Reign of God. *Evangelii nuntiandi* and the Documents of the World Council of Churches”: Bevans/Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 305-322, 306.

more positive estimation of other religions.⁴⁴ John Paul II estimates that the church is actually only at the beginning of its missionary enterprise (RM 1). He centres his reflections on clarifications on the concept of the kingdom of God—against perspectives of the kingdom beyond the church, in the wake of EN⁴⁵—and the centrality of the church as the ordinary means of salvation (see RM 55). Truth becomes a central feature—the church has access to it and every person has a right to get access to it through mission.⁴⁶

With these shifts of accent in the outlook on mission, the concept of *missio Dei* more or less disappeared in the late 1990s from the theological discourse. The term appears again at the turn of the century, with the 50th anniversary of Willingen on the horizon. I have scanned through several missiological journals in our library⁴⁷ to check on articles related to *missio Dei* or the perspective that mission comes from God.⁴⁸ Between 1998 and 2003, there is not yet too much of a reflection on the specific term. An exception is *IRM* with more references: 16 contributions from 1998 to 2002, including the special commemorative issue on the 50th anniversary of Willingen.⁴⁹ Since then, the view that

⁴⁴ See Eloy Bueno, *Redemptoris Missio*, in: Bueno/Calvo (eds.), *Diccionario de misionología y animación misionera*, 781-786.

⁴⁵ See Bevans/Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 322.

⁴⁶ See Bevans/Schroeder, chapter 11 dedicated to “Mission as Proclamation of Jesus Christ as Universal Savior. *Redemptoris missio* and the Documents of the Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches”: Bevans/Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 323-347. – Interestingly, H. Wrogemann, *Theologies of Mission*, does not mention Paul VI’s EN nor John Paul II’s RM at all.

⁴⁷ Obviously not exhaustive, based mainly on titles, abstracts and keywords (where available). I am aware that articles dealing with the trinitarian basis for mission, the Spirit, the kingdom of God, etc., may well place mission in a *missio Dei* perspective, but I have looked for the specific term.

⁴⁸ In *Exchange* I didn’t find any, in *IMBR* 1, in *Missiology* 3, in *Spiritus* (both French and Spanish) 3, in *ZMR* 3, in *Mission Studies* 6, in *Verbum SVD* 13.

⁴⁹ It takes up the contributions made at the commemorative symposium at Willingen in August 2002, *IRM* 92 (2003): Konrad Raiser, Sermon Preached on 18 August 2002 at the Willingen Mission Festival (473-477); Martin Hein, “... That the World Might Be Saved Through Him”: Opening Worship and Meditation on John 3:17 (478-480); Tormod Engelsviken, *Missio Dei: The Understanding and Misunderstanding of a Theological Concept in European Churches and Missiology* (481-497); Klaus Nürnberger, *God’s Mission in Practice: The Struggle for Liberation, Dignity and Justice in African Societies* (498-520); Wolfgang Günther, *The History and Significance of World Mission Conferences in the 20th Century* (521-537); Soo-Il Chai, *Missio Dei – Its Development and Limitations in Korea* (538-549); Paulo Suess, *Missio Dei and the Project of Jesus: The Poor and the “Other” as Mediators of the Kingdom of God and Protagonists of the Churches* (550-559); Theo Sundermeier, *Missio Dei Today: On the Identity of Christian Mission* (560-

mission comes from God and belongs to him has become quite expanded and the number of reflections has grown significantly.

It is striking that in 2000 a congregation the size of the Divine Word Missionaries took this perspective for their mission understanding.⁵⁰ However, it does not seem all too clear what such an option implies, both in theoretical terms for the understanding of creation, revelation, church and the construction of society, and in the manifold practices of mission and the place of missionaries and missionary congregations in church and world. For some churches and communities, *missio Dei* is too open a concept with no meaningful content and practical prescriptions about how to go about converting people and planting churches, it opens up too far for a pluralistic approach to religions and permits too liberal views.

In times of Pope Francis, the emphasis on the practical life of the believers as well as on theological reflection might be placed strongly on discerning God's will, the Spirit's motions, and joining one's own forces and interests with what God is doing in this world. It is more a mission and evangelisation of attraction⁵¹ than previous emphases implied with the ecclesial obligation to announce Christ without compromise—as Pope John Paul II kept repeating, among many other things—or the indispensable insistence on truth—one of Pope Benedict XVI's favourites. Of course, Pope Francis has been a Jesuit all his life⁵² and obviously sticks to this spiritual practice and tradition of freedom, at times much to the annoyance of powerful people around him.

Conclusion

In this reflection I have tried to follow developments of the shifts in the mission perspective over the last century. However, at this stage, there is no singular concept nor practice of understanding and doing

578); Jacques Matthey, *God's Mission Today: Summary and Conclusions* (579-587); Wilhelm Richebächer, *Missio Dei: The Basis of Mission Theology or a Wrong Path?* (588-605). The articles were also published in German by Evangelisches Missionswerk Hamburg (EMW), *missio Dei heute. Zur Aktualität eines missionstheologischen Schlüsselbegriffs* (Weltmission heute. Studienheft 52), Hamburg: EMW in Kooperation mit Evangelische Kirche von Kurhessen-Waldeck 2003.

⁵⁰ For more details see my reflection on this General Chapter in this issue.

⁵¹ Stephen Bevans, *Pope Francis's Missiology of Attraction: IBMR* 43 (1.2019) 20-28.

⁵² Andreas R. Batlogg SJ, "Unterscheidung der Geister": Ignatianische Erfahrung und Konzeption. Oder: Was die Kirche von einem Jesuitenpapst lernen kann: *Erbe und Auftrag* 98 (3.2022) 258-268.

mission, neither among the different Christian denominations nor within the Catholic Church nor even within a single congregation like the Divine Word Missionaries. There might be the option—or temptation rather—to concentrate the last remaining forces on doing what we have been doing all the time and what we think we have done well—and not reflect too much on conceptual questions. In times of “weak thinking,” apparently an easy way out—it might be enough to profess verbally to engage, further, do, participate, etc. in a mission coming from God. Critical reflections are left to those who idle their time off in the libraries without any practical engagement. However, the spiritual and existential engagement of how to go about taking God seriously as an actor in history might well be worth the effort.

Obviously, missions have to do with a wide field of implications. Many of them boil down to what God means for the missionary disciples, how they view the kingdom of God and live out their obedience to the Spirit. All of that may lead to many more questions than simple answers. That is not really new: Already two thousand years ago, Peter encouraged responding to any demand on what kind of reason lies behind the hope that motivates the disciples in their everyday life (see 1 Pet 3:15)—a task beyond the split between theory and practice.

ABSTRACTS

Das Verständnis, dass Mission von Gott ausgeht und die Kirchen zur Mitarbeit einlädt, ist heute eine weit verbreitete Sichtweise. Der Grundgedanke wurde als *missio Dei* vor siebzig Jahren auf einer Missionskonferenz in Willingen (Deutschland) formuliert. Dieser Überblick stellt das Konzept in seiner Entwicklung während des letzten Jahrhunderts dar, mit Entwicklungen vor dem Zweiten Weltkrieg und dem Ereignis der Konferenz von Willingen. Die katholische Missionswissenschaft brauchte einige Zeit, um den Begriff zu rezipieren, aber auf dem Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil wurde er zu einem wichtigen Bestandteil der theologischen Grundlage der Mission. In den Jahrzehnten nach dem Konzil erhielt die Missionstheologie andere Akzente und erst in den letzten beiden Jahrzehnten ist die Perspektive der *missio Dei* wieder in den Vordergrund getreten.

La idea de que la misión se origina en Dios e invita a las iglesias a participar en ella es una perspectiva ampliamente compartida en la actualidad. La idea básica de la misma se formuló como *missio Dei* hace setenta años en una conferencia sobre la misión celebrada en Willingen (Alemania). Esta visión general sitúa el concepto en su desarrollo a lo largo del último siglo, con desarrollos anteriores a la Segunda Guerra Mundial y al acontecimiento de la Conferencia de Willingen. La misionología católica tardó un tiempo en recibir el término, pero éste pasó a ocupar un lugar destacado en la fundamentación teológica de la misión en el Concilio Vaticano II. En las décadas posteriores al Concilio, la teología de la misión recibió otros acentos y sólo en las últimas décadas, la perspectiva de la *missio Dei* ha vuelto a ser prominente.

Aujourd'hui, l'idée que la mission prend sa source en Dieu et invite les Églises à y participer est largement partagée. Le concept de base en a été formulé il y a 70 ans comme *missio Dei* à la Conférence de Willingen (Allemagne). Ce panorama replace le concept dans son évolution au cours du siècle dernier, avec son développement avant la seconde guerre mondiale et l'événement de la Conférence de Willingen. La missiologie catholique a mis quelque temps à recevoir le terme, mais il est devenu central dans le fondement de la mission au concile Vatican II. Au cours des décennies après le Concile, la théologie de la mission a trouvé d'autres accents et c'est seulement dans les deux dernières décennies que la perspective de la *missio Dei* a repris la première place.