MISSION AS PROPHETIC DIALOGUE

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Introduction

Three Understandings of Mission

In 2004, my colleague and friend Roger Schroeder and I published what we called a "theological history" and "historical theology" of mission: *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*. Toward the end of the book Roger and I presented three approaches to mission that had developed in the last half century after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), but were also prominent in Protestant circles (Conciliar, Evangelical and Pentecostal) as well. These were an understanding of mission as a participation in the trinitarian *Missio Dei* or mission of God, as the liberating service of the Reign of God, and mission as the proclamation of Jesus Christ as universal savior.

Each one of these understandings of mission were valid, we argued. Mission, indeed, does not belong to us, but is done as we participate in the very mission of God. It is not simply about the expansion of the church, but about the transformation of the world, hoping for the day when God will establish God's Reign within the whole of creation. But nor is mission simply working for justice, or cooperating with the other great faiths of humanity, or committing oneself to human solidarity. Mission is the witness and proclamation of God's love and action revealed in the concrete history of Jesus of Nazareth, and is an invitation to relationship and partnership with God through relationship with him, in the power of his Holy Spirit. Any adequate understanding of mission today, we said, needed to be the result of a synthesis of these three positions. Mission is, in the words of John Paul II (echoing earlier formulations in church teaching), a mission is a "single but complex reality, and develops in a variety of ways."[1] The name that Roger and I gave to the synthesis we offered in our book was "prophetic dialogue."[2]

Prophetic Dialogue

The term "prophetic dialogue" was not Roger's and my invention. It was the understanding of mission proposed by the Tenth General Chapter of our religious congregation, the Society of the Divine Word.[3] Roger and I have developed the term in

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[1] John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1991), #41.
[2] Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants and Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 281-398, esp. 348.
[3] See *In Dialogue with the Word Nr 1* (September, 2000) (Rome: SVD Publications, 2000), 31. It is interesting that, in an essay on mission and prophecy published in 1992, Indian missiologist Michael Amaladoss uses the phrase in passing: "Religion is called to enter into a prophetic dialogue with the world." See Michael Amaladoss, "Mission as Prophecy," in James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, eds., *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization 2: Theological Foundations* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 64-72 (the quotation is from 72). The original article appeared in French in *Spiritus* 128 (September, 1992): 263-275.

our own way, however, and this differs significantly from the way it was developed in the Chapter document, and in other SVD publications.[4] The term has not always been received very well in the SVD world. Many of our confreres don't like it. Asians often insist that mission today should be focused almost exclusively on dialogue. We should especially avoid an explicit preaching of Christ and calling for people's conversions. One can understand this in the context of countries like India or Indonesia. On the other hand, Latin Americans tend to emphasize the prophetic aspect of mission. Mission is about a strong stand for justice, confronting oppressors, not dialoguing with them.

Since 2004 Roger and I have tried to unpack the term "prophetic dialogue" even more than we did in *Constants and Context*. Several years ago we wrote an article that concentrated on the "dialogue" part of the term.[5] In this article I would like to briefly summarize what we said there, but my main purpose is to reflect a bit more in detail on the "prophetic" aspect of prophetic dialogue. The first section of this presentation, then, will focus on "Mission as Dialogue." Then, in a second section, it will reflect on "Mission as Prophecy."

One note, however, before I begin Part I. Roger has suggested that the phrase "Mission as Prophetic Dialogue" might be best interpreted as "Mission as Prophecy and Dialogue," or "Mission as Dialogue and Prophecy." Putting it this way keeps both aspects equal. Both are necessary. In some contexts, for example India, the "Dialogue" part will be the one that is more appropriate to the context. In others, for example in secuarlized Europe and North America or economically poor Latin America, the "Prophecy" part is more relevant. Roger's insights should be kept in mind in what I have to say here.

Mission as Dialogue

Dialogue and the Missio Dei

That mission is dialogical is rooted in the reality that God, in God's deepest reality, is dialogue. God is not a lonely monad but a communion of persons, distinct from one another and yet one in identity and purpose. Leonardo Boff has written: "Christianity's most transcendent assertion may well be this: In the beginning is not the solitude of One, but the communion of Three eternal Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the remotest beginning, communion prevails."[6]

This communion of giving and receiving Love overflows into the entire cosmos that God created out of sheer grace, and calls it into communion with Godself. This is what we mean by God's mission, the *Missio Dei*. Through the Holy Spirit from the first nanosecond of creation, and through the concrete life, ministry, death and resurrection of

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[4] See L. Stanislaus and Alwyn D'Souza, eds., *Prophetic Dialogue: Challenges and Prospects in India* (Pune: Ishvani Kendra / ISPCK, 2003); Thomas J. Ashceman, *Mission in Prophetic Dialogue* (Rome: Divine Word Missionaries, 2004).

[5] Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, "'We Were Gentle Among You': Christian Mission and Dialogue," *The Australian E-Journal of Theology*, Issue Number 7. Pentecost edition, 2006. http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_7/svd.htm

[6] Leonardo Boff, "Trinity," in Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, eds., *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 389.

Jesus of Nazareth, God has always been present in creation, "inside out" in it.[7] This presence is a presence in dialogue. God has created all in freedom, and while always present and active in creation, never interferes with the freedom with which God first endowed it. As Paul VI wrote in his great encyclical of dialogue, *Ecclesiam Suam*, "No physical pressure was brought on anyone to accept the dialogue of salvation; far from it. It was an appeal of love. True, it imposed a serious obligation on those toward whom it was directed but it left them free to respond to it or to reject it. Christ adapted the number of His miracles and their demonstrative force to the dispositions and good will of His hearers so as to help them to consent freely to the revelation they were given and not to forfeit the reward for their consent."[8]

Mission as Dialogue

God's mission-in-dialogue, always present through the Spirit and incarnate and concrete in Jesus, has now been entrusted to the church. Through Baptism, Christians share the very life and of the Trinity, and so they are enjoined to carry out God's mission in the same dialogical way. Concretely, this means that Christians who engage in mission need to make real efforts to "bond" with the people among whom they minister. They need to do this by constantly working to master the language of the people they work among. They need to respect and be challenged and changed by the local people's culture. They need to recognize the holiness of their religious traditions—traditions that reflect, as Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate* put it, "a ray of that Truth which enlightens all peoples."[9] They need to practice the asceticism of real listening and of letting go of many of their presuppositions about correct behavior and delicious food.

One of the most powerful speeches at the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference was given by Indian churchman V. S. Azariah. Although his words at the end were greeted with stunned silence and cries of disagreement, Azariah's talk unmasked the racism and superiority of many foreign missionaries in India. He spoke of "a certain aloofness, a lack of mutual understanding and openness, a great lack of frank intercourse and friendliness . . . . Too often you promise us thrones in heaven, but will not offer us chairs in your drawing rooms." His address reached a climax with the following words: "Through all the ages to come the Indian Church will rise up in gratitude to attest the heroism and self-denying labours of the missionary body. You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We also ask for *love*. Give us FRIENDS."[10] Mission as dialogue is ultimately about ministering out of real relationships, about making friends.

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[7] See Stephen Bevans, "God Inside Out: Toward a Missionary Theology of the Holy Spirit," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 22/3 (July, 1998): 102-105.

[8] Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 75. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam_en.html.

[9] Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate* 2, in Walter M. Abbot, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herder and Herder / Association Press, 1966), 662.

[10] V. S. Azariah, quoted in Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 125.

Mission as dialogue means doing ministry with a "hermeneutics of generosity," or, as Filipino theologian José de Mesa puts it, with a "hermeneutics of appreciation."[11] It means practicing what my colleague Claude Marie Barbour speaks of as "mission in reverse"—letting the people among who we work be our teachers and even evangelizers.[12] It means, in the famous words of British missiologist Max Warren, recognizing that when we enter into anyone else's territory we must learn to "take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy."[13]

Images of Mission as Dialogue

In our previous article, Roger Schroeder and I offered three images of mission as dialogue: the missionary as treasure hunter, the missionary as stranger and guest, and the missionary as someone entering another person's garden. Mission can be imaged, first, as a hunt for treasure that is buried in the soil of the context in which one engages in mission. The minister or missionary serves the community not by bringing in her or his own treasure, but by being one who leads the search for this treasure. As such, she or he engages the community, learns to read the "maps" that are available, encourages the community with the assurance that if they dig deep enough, they will find the treasure that can be enhanced and explained by the good news that the missionary does indeed bring. But the missionary always recognizes that she or he is a stranger and guest. As a stranger he or she needs to realize how little he or she knows, and how much she or he needs to rely on the local people for knowledge in that place. And as a good guest, missionaries should not presume too much. Even presuming to help out by doing the dishes or something like that could be an insult to the hosts. The missionary needs to look and listen long and hard so as not to abuse the privilege of being hosted by the people of a certain place. One does not enter another's garden lightly. One enters first of all to gaze and admire, to enjoy the beauty of what is there. Maybe after getting the trust of the gardener the visitor might be able to give advice about planting or watering or arranging—but even then it should probably be done gingerly.

Inspirations for Mission as Dialogue

Roger and I also proposed several "inspirations" for doing mission as dialogue (rather than call them "patrons," we felt that "inspirations" carried a more positive tone). The first figure we proposed was St. Francis of Assisi, particularly as he is remembered as traveling with the crusading army to Egypt, and entering into a three day conversation or dialogue with Caliph Al-malik al-Kamil. We offered as well the inspiration of the early twentieth century priest Charles de Foucauld, who spent years living in the Algerian desert, simply *being* among the Muslim inhabitants there. He never made a convert, and only after many years did he have any followers in the religious community that he

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[11] José M. de Mesa, *Why Theology is Never Far from Home* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 2003), 112-149.
[12] Footnote for this.
[13] Max Warren, Preface to John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 10.

founded. And yet he remains an example of a mission of presence that speaks volumes to the women and men of today. Finally, we spoke of the Indian Pentecostal Pandita Ramabai, who was born a Hindu, converted to Christianity, and called on Christians and missionaries to love and respect Hindu ways.

A Biblical Foundation

Among many biblical texts that can be offered as a foundation for a dialogical understanding of mission, my personal favorite is from St. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. In the second chapter Paul writes of how he came among the Thessalonians—not with words of flattery or out of greed, nor seeking praise. Rather, he writes, "we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our very selves, because you have become very dear to us" (1Thess 2:7-8). If the gospel is to be brought to people effectively, it must be presented worthily—it must be lived. A dialogical spirit is not simply a prerequisite for preaching the gospel, in other words. Even less is it merely a means to attract. It is an integral part of the Good News itself: the God of the gospel is a God who really cares, who is really involved in this world, is a God who respects human freedom. Our gentleness and self-gift in mission are sacraments of the gentles and self-giving of God as such.

Mission as Prophecy

Prophecy and the Missio Dei

If Mission is dialogical because God is dialogical both in God's deepest nature and in the way God acts in the world, mission is also prophetic because God's inner nature is also prophetic, and because God is prophetic in dealing with creation. In the dialogue that is the Trinity, Holy Mystery eternally "speaks forth" the Word and, through the Word, breathes forth the Spirit. From the first moment of creation, that Spirit has been breathed forth upon the whole of creation and has been made concrete in the incarnate Word. It is the Spirit who comes with power upon the prophets who anoints them to speak God's Word faithfully, to bring good news to the oppressed, healing to those who are discouraged, liberty to captives, release to prisoners, comfort to those who mourn, but condemnation to those who have betrayed the convenant (see Is 61:1-4). As we read in 2Peter 1:20, "no prophecy ever came through human will; but rather human beings moved by the holy Spirit spoke under the influence of God." It is this same Spirit who comes upon Jesus at his baptism in the Jordan (Mt 3:16; Mk 1:10; Lk 3:22), "drove" him into the desert to be tempted (Mk 1:12), and anoints him for his ministry of bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to captives, healing the blind, liberating the oppressed (see Lk 4: 18). As Edward Schillebeeckx and many others have argued in their works, the best way to understand Jesus and his ministry is to understand him as he understood himself—as a prophet, the eschatological prophet who preached,

demonstrated and embodied the Reign of God, the fulfillment of all the hopes of Israel, and through Israel, humankind.[14]

If, then, God is a God of prophecy, and the church shares in God's mission, mission must be lived out as prophecy as well. It is our task, as members of Christ's body and conformed to him in Baptism, to preach, demonstrate and embody the Reign of God in our ecclesial and individual lives.

The Nature of Prophecy

What, however, does it mean to be a prophet? First of all, and perhaps somewhat ironically, being a prophet means to be someone who is rooted in dialogue: someone who listens, who is attentive, who sees, who has a sensitivity to the world and to women and men.[15] Prophets are women and men who have listened carefully to God, who are able to discern the signs of the times, who are attentive to people's expressions, tone of voice, body language. Jesus, the great prophet, was also a person of dialogue.

Second and etymologically, a prophet is someone who "speaks forth" (Greek: pro ephein), and this in two senses. In a first sense, once having heard or discerned the Word of God, the prophet faithfully announces a message, either in words (e.g. the message of consolation in Is 41; Jesus sermon on the mount in Mt 5-7, or amazing parables) or in deeds (Jeremiah and the loincloth in Jer 13:1-11; Jesus healings and exorcisms). In a second sense more associated with popular notions of a prophet, the prophet "speaks forth" the future. Such predictions of the future, however, is not mere "fortune telling," but the setting out a vision of what God has in store for people in God's plan of salvation (e.g. Isaiah's marvelous imagery of the "mountain of the Lord" in Is 2:2-4, or Ezekiel's memorable prophecy over the dry bones in Ez 37; Jesus' promise of blessing for those who live the values of the Reign of God in Mt 5:1-11).

Third, prophets speak *out* in God's name when people refuse to live lives worthy of their calling. Thus Amos railed against the injustices that Israel committed against the poor (Am 2:6-7). Hosea and Jeremiah call Israel back from unfaithfulness and idolatry (e.g. Hos 6:1-11; Jer 18:1-17), as does Joel in the passage we read every year on Ash Wednesday (Joel 2:15-17). Jesus condemns any narrow understanding of Judaism that fails to recognize it as a religion of the heart (e.g. Mt 12:1-14; Mk 2:13-17).

Speaking out also entails predicting the future, for if Israel continues on the path of unfaithfulness it will see destruction. Joel predicts the coming of "day of the Lord . . . a day of darkness and gloom" (Joel 2:1-2) if Israel does not repent. Jesus laments over Jerusalem as "the city that kills the prophets," and predicts the destruction of the temple (Mt 23:37-24:2). Such news of destruction is something the prophets deliver not so much in anger but in sorrow, born out of love for their people. Jeremiah laments bitterly; Jesus weeps over Jerusalem.

Prophecy, like mission itself, is a complex reality. It has several aspects, often intertwined. It is accomplished through words, and it is accomplished through deeds as

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[14] See Edward Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report on the Books **Jesus** and **Christ*** (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 64-74; and N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 147-197.

[15] Larry Nemer, "Prophetic Dialogue: A New Way of Doing Mission?" http://www.instrumentsofpeace.ie/Prophetic%20Dialogue.pdf.

well. The prophet is someone steeped in God's Word. The prophecy that she or he delivers is never her or his own word, but God's. Sometimes prophecy is a joyful task (Jesus rejoicing in the Spirit in Lk 10:21-22); sometimes it is difficult (as when Jeremiah complains about his task in Jer 20:7-18). But the prophet must be faithful to the task, even to the point of persecution and death.

Mission as Prophecy

"Speaking Forth" without Words: Witness

Always listening, always open, always learning from the peoples among whom it works, the church witnesses to the truth, the joy, and the life-giving power of the gospel. Pope Paul VI says that the "first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life."[16] In the same document, the pope speaks famously about the power of witness. People today, he says, do not listen very much to what people *say*—to teachers. They listen rather to witnesses. And if they do listen to teachers, "it is because they are witnesses."[17] The pope talks eloquently about how a community of Christians might be witnesses in a way that is a truly prophetic act:

> Take a Christian or a handful of Christians who, in the midst of their own community, show their capacity for understanding and acceptance, their sharing of life and destiny with other people, their solidarity with the efforts of all for whatever is noble and good. Let us suppose that, in addition, they radiate in an altogether simple and unaffected way their faith in values that go beyond current values, and their hope in something that is not seen and that one would not dare to imagine. Through this wordless witness these Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst? Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one.[18]

The great British missiologist Lesslie Newbigin spoke of the Christian community as a "hermeneutic of the gospel," the way Christians interpret the gospel to the world and the way the gospel *is* interpreted by others. As Christians life a life of vital community, of community service, of ecological integrity, of shared prayer that is beautiful and inspiring to visitors, they speak forth without words what the gospel is, and what human life might be if the gospel is lived authentically. To allude to a phrase attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, this is the way that Christians can preach always, but without words.

"Speaking Forth" with Words: Proclamation

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[16] EN 41. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid., 21.

Christians in mission prophecy the future. Like Jesus they explain to one another and to the world—if asked (see 1Pet 3:15)—what the future of the world will be under God's loving providence. Like Jesus, in other words, they proclaim the message of the Reign of God. They can only use images, stories or symbols, but they proclaim with conviction that God's plan for creation is one of full flourishing. Women and men will live in peace and justice, and will enjoy the fullness of freedom; all creatures, animate and inanimate, will live in harmony. When and how this will come about is not certain, but that it will come about is. It will be a time when "swords will be turned into ploughshares" (Is 2:4), when "the veil that veils all peoples" will be destroyed (Is 25:7), when people "from every tongue and nation" (Rev 7:9) will live together in joy and friendship.

Even more, however, humanity and creation can have a taste of this future now. The joy, the peace, the love, the harmony of God's future Reign can be found in faith in Jesus, and in his community, the church. Of course, to prophecy in such a way demands a commitment on the part of the church to be what it is in its deepest essence—God's holy People, Christ's body in history, the community open to the Spirit's creative power, molding it into a temple that shows forth God's presence. The church, of course, will never fully live the truth that it is, but it can commit itself to try. It can be an open society, confessing its failings and sinfulness. Often that is enough for people—and already a true foretaste of what God has in store for God's entire creation.

Christians prophesy by telling the world about Jesus. It is in the story of Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection that we come to know most fully, Christians believe, who God really is. "God is like Jesus," Uruguayan theologian Juan Luis Segundo emphasized.[19] The phrase is important. It says that perhaps more important than the truth that "Jesus is God," is that the life and death of this human being is the key to understanding who God is. What Jesus reveals "is a God who is anthropocentric. God's cause is the cause of human existence. God is a God who is for humanity, as creator and thus one who is intrinsically interested and concerned about the well being of what God creates."[20]

This is good news. This is something that women and men need to hear. So often people are caught up in either worshiping a God who is truly not worthy to be worshipped—imaged as a judge, or a tyrant, or someone who can be manipulated or persuaded to come to humanity's or the world's aid. Often as well people rightly deny that such a God exists, and so do not believe at all. But the God of Jesus Christ is a God who is truly on the side of God's creation—a loving God (e.g. Jn 3:16), a humble God (Phil 2:6-11), a God who respects human freedom (Gal 5:1), a God who promises life and joy even in the midst of oppression , suffering and death (Mt 1):26-33), a God of unconditional forgiveness (Lk 15), a God of radical inclusion (Mt 90:9-13), a God who calls women and men to work together with God's plan for a free and flourishing humanity and cosmos (1Pet 2:9).

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[19] Juan Luis Segundo, *Christ in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 22-26.

[20] Roger Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 116. I am aware that Haight's book is controversial and that some of his ideas in it have been censured by the Roman Magisterium. As far as I know, however, this very basic idea, so beautifully expressed here, is not one of them.

It is especially the image of Jesus on the cross that speaks most eloquently of the kind of God Jesus presents. As U. S. theologian William Placher says powerfully:

> . . . if God's primary characteristic were almighty power, then . . . the crucified rabbi could not be the self-revelation of God. But if God is, first of all, love, then, odd as it might seem, God is *most* God in coming to us in the form of a servant for the sake of our salvation. Starting with love, we can then even see what Gregory of Nyssa said about God's power: "God's transcendent power is not so much displayed in the vastness of the heavens or the luster of the stars or the orderly arrangement of the universe or his perpetual oversight of it, as in his condescension to our weak nature."[21]

To be prophetic in our mission is to share with the world the good news of God's future, the good news of a gracious, gentle God.

"Speaking Against" without Words: Being a Contrast Community

Christian life goes against the grain. It is not *anti-cultural*, because a faith rooted in the doctrine of the incarnation loves the created world, loves people, recognizes the deep goodness of human culture. But it is profoundly *countercultural*. Living the values of the Reign of God as Jesus articulated them in the beatitudes or in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7; Lk 7:17-49) offers a different vision of the world than what is the natural drift of society. Leading a simple life, standing for peace and justice, learning to forgive people who have offended us, living with the conviction that "unless the grain of wheat fall to the ground and die it cannot bear fruit" (Jn 12:24), learning to serve not to be served (Mt 20:28)—these are all prophetic actions in a world that envisions success as being self-centered and having power over others. Christians live life in openness and dialogue, but even these attitudes are ones that often go counter to prevailing cultural values.

Christian community, being church, is also countercultural and prophetic. This is the people who by their prayer, their life together in community, their attempts to live as reconciled and reconciling, their efforts to mirror the justice for which they work in society form what Gerhard Lohfink calls a "contrast society." "The church serves the world best," Lohfink writes, "when it takes with radical seriousness its task of being a 'holy people' in the sense of 1Pet 2:9-10. The church is the *salt of society* precisely by living symbolically God's societal and social order."[22] Stanley Hauerwas and William Willamon, echoing Philippians 3:20, 1Peter 1:1 and the Letter to Diognetus, speak of the church as a community of "resident aliens" in this world. Christians are to live as a colony of the Reign of God in the midst of the world, showing forth by their lives together and by their care for the world around them what the gospel can be if it is lived

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[21] William Placher, *The Triune God: An Essay in Postliberal Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 44. The quotation is from Gregory of Nyssa, *An Address on Religious Instruction*, 24. Cyril C. Richardson, trans., *Christology of the Later Fathers*, R. Hard, ed., Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 301.

[22] Gerhard Lofink, *Jesus and Community* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 168.

seriously.[23] Another prophetic image of the church is offered by U. S. Reformed theologian Craig van Gelder. Van Gelder appeals to his boyhood growing up on a farm in Iowa where a new farming method, seed or fertilizer were used in "demonstration plots," usually found along a major road in an area, to show rather reluctant farmers that these new ways could improve the yield of their crops:

> It was not uncommon for farmers to remain skeptical throughout the summer as the crops grew. But there was always keen interest in the fall when the crop was harvested. Invariably, the innovation performed better than the crops in the surrounding fields. By the next year, many farmers, including my dad, would be using the innovation as if it had been their idea all along.
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> The church is God's demonstration plot in the world. Its very existence demonstrates that his redemptive reign has already begun. Its very presence invites the world to watch, listen, examine, and consider accepting God's reign as a superior way of living.[24]

Being the church, *truly* being the church, is a prophetic act.

"Speaking Against" in Words: Speaking Truth to Power

In accomplishing its prophetic mission Christians speak out against any form of injustice, and against any form of what John Paul II called "the culture of death."[25] Christians do this individually in the workplace, in their neighborhoods, in politics, on blogs, in letters to the editor of newspapers, through participation in demonstrations like the annual demonstration at the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia. The Teaching Office of the church does this as well, on all levels. John Paul II's encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* is an example of this, as is the entire tradition of Catholic Social Teaching. National Episcopal Conferences have issued important pastoral letters, as did the U. S. Bishops in 1981 and 1986 with their pastorals on Peace and the Economy.[26] In 1975, and again in 1995, the bishops of Appalachia in the United States issued two beautiful documents on their region: *This Land Is Home to Me* and *At Home in the Web of Life*. [27]Both are powerful calls to justice and ecological sustainability. Individual bishops as well have issued important social justice statements, such as Cardinal Francis George's pastoral *Dwell in My Love: A Pastoral Letter on Racism*.[28]

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[23] Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989).
[24] Craig van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 99-100.
[25] John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (EV), 95. http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0141/__P10.HTM.
[26] U. S. Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response* and *Economic Justice for All*, in David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, eds., *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 492-680.
[27] Appalachian Bishops, *This Land Is Home to Me* and *At Home in the Web of Life* http://www.osjspm.org/majordoc_this_is_home_to_me.aspx; and http://www.ncrlc.com/1-pfd-files/At%20Home%20in%20the%20Web%20of%20Life.pdf.
[28] Francis Cardinal George, *Dwell in My Love: A Pastoral Letter on Racism* (Chicago: New Catholic World, 2001).

As the "father of liberation theology," Gustavo Gutiérrez famously argued, the *annunciation* of the gospel involves at the same time the *denunciation* of anything that is contrary to it, in society or in the church itself.[29] As John Paul II put it, the "gospel of life" is the "good news" that the church needs to preach with "dauntless courage." But such good news has to be preached and lived out in confrontation with the "culture of death."[30] To speak truth to power in this way is to risk a lot—the church's position of respect in secular society, the continuation of the privileges it has had in many places since the time of Constantine, persecution in many contexts—even Christian ones. The risk no doubt has to be a calculated one, but there is no doubt that having such a prophetic voice for the poor, for human life, and for the integrity of creation is constitutive of its mission.[31]

Images of Mission as Prophecy

Prophecy, of course, is already an image of mission, as are the images of the church as a community of "resident aliens" and "demonstration plot" about which we reflected above. But because we tend to understand a reality by "seeing through images,"[32] we might explore other, related images. Here I propose the images of the missionary as teacher and the missionary as storyteller.

Teacher

A teacher has something to teach. She or he has to be steeped in the subject to be taught, and has to find ways to present the topics of a lesson in a clear, accurate, interesting and relevant way. A teacher has to be open to questions, not threatened by them, and be able answer them honestly and as fully as possible. While teaching is often imparting information to students, it is also awakening them to things that they already know but are unaware of, and challenging students to learn to think for themselves, both creatively and critically. As every teacher knows as well, only a part of teaching takes place in the classroom. The teacher has to be available for consultation, to answer questions as they come up in study, to clarify things that have been said in the classroom.

Naturally, too, teaching is much more. It is living an exemplary life, a life of enthusiasm for a subject, and a life of integrity and curiosity. As Paul VI says, students will only listen to teachers if they are also witnesses. Teachers also need to be open to their students, and ready to learn from them as well. Teachers are certainly images of a prophetic approach to mission, but they are also in many ways images of the dialogical aspect of mission. The best teaching is not done, as Brazilian Paulo Freire long ago

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[29] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 265-272.
[30] EV, 1.
[31] See 1971 Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World*, Introduction, in O'Brien and Shannon, eds., 289.
[32] See Stephen Bevans, "Seeing Mission through Images," in Scherer and Bevans, eds., 158-169, and "Images of Priesthood in Today's Church," *Emmanuel*, 102, 7 (September, 1996), 389-398. The idea of "seeing through images" comes from John Shea, "Theological Assumptions and Ministerial Style," in M. A. Cowan, ed., *Alternative Futures for Worship* 6 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 105-128.

pointed out, by employing a "banking method," but by creating an atmosphere where a real community of inquiry can form.[33]

Mission might be characterized by good teaching. Christians in mission have to know what they "speak forth" in prophecy. They have to be convinced of it, love it, and model it in their lives. They need to find ways to present the teaching in a way that is not the mere imparting of information, to be memorized or learned in rote fashion. Rather, their "speaking forth" is "student centered," aiming for the real appropriation of their message. Their task is to awaken curiosity in people, giving adequate answers when they are asked to give a reason for their hope (1Pet 3:15), and they have to challenge those who seem impervious or indifferent to the precious knowledge that they have to offer. Their "prophecy" must always be tempered with dialogue, but they must always be convinced that they do indeed have something to teach.

Storyteller

In his delightful novel *Ireland,* Frank Delaney constructs his own plot around a *shanachie* or traditional Irish storyteller who in the course of the book relates the whole history of Ireland. The man character of the book, a young boy named Rowan, is fascinated when the *shanachie* comes to his home one evening, and spends a good part of his youth searching for and finding the storyteller once again. In the meantime he hears other people tell the stories of the old man, listens to recordings of them, and grows into his identity as an Irishman.[34]

Stories have a way of doing that. Whether we listen to stories our grandfather tells after Sunday dinner, stories by old confreres in religious life, stories about the origins of our nation, stories of saints, or stories from the scriptures, stories not only entertain. They bestow identity, they shake us up, they open us to our own deepest experiences.

A good storyteller is certainly an entertainer. She or he uses words in marvelous ways, knows how to develop suspense in her or his audience, understands how to embed a message and a moral in the most exciting tale. The British philosopher has characterized human beings as "story telling animals." I think we could say as well that human beings are "story hearing animals.[35]

Mission might be characterized as telling a story—the story of Jesus, the story of Israel, the story of the church. Like a good storyteller, missionaries need to know their audience, and they need to find ways of "entertaining" those who hear them. Their witness, their deeds tell a story. Their words, when they are asked, tell a story. The story is informative, it is formative as well, as the *shanachie* in Delaney's novel. It can challenge and convict, as did the singer in Roberta Flack's classic song *Killing Me Softly*. The missionary tells the story with the conviction that that it is everyone's story, that, if the story is told well, any person from any culture and context will recognize that it is her or his own story, and can give light and depth to that person's life.

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[33] See Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury, 1968) and Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 89-113.

[34] Frank Delaney, *Ireland* (New York: Harper Collins Paperback, 2008).

[35] McIntyre's definition is quoted in Delwin Brown, *Boundaries of Our Habitations: Tradition and Theological Construction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 84-85.

The prophets told stories—think of Nathan telling David the story of the poor man with the little ewe lamb (2 Sam 12:1-7), or Ezekiel's story of the dry bones (Ez 37:1-4), or Jesus' many parables—and the church engages in mission by telling those stories as well as new ones with courage and conviction.

Inspirations for Mission as Prophecy

Paging through Robert Ellsberg's marvelous collection of saints' lives, entitled *All Saints*,[36] a number of candidates for "inspiration" appear: prophetic figures like Lanza del Vasto, George Fox, Katherine Drexel, Cesar Chavez, Mary McKillop, Thea Bowman, Chico Mendez, Oscar Romero, and Jerzy Popieluszko. The history of the church and its mission is replete with prophetic figures. Given limitations of space, however, and recognizing that this study is not meant to be exhaustive, I will focus on three prophetic figures in the church's mission: Patrick of Ireland, Ugandan bishop Janani Luwum, and American passivist Dorothy Day.

Patrick of Ireland (389-461)

Patrick was born on the west coast of England, and at the age of sixteen was captured by Irish raiders and sold as a slave in Ireland. It was during this time that he experienced a genuine conversion to a deeper Christianity, and after escaping Ireland he decided to study for the priesthood. After some time he was irresistibly drawn back to Ireland as a missionary. Patrick's thirty years as a wandering bishop in Ireland are full of legends of prophetic acts of defiance of local gods, but he must have struck a chord with his message. Within ten years he had established an episcopal see at Armagh, set up a network of churches and monasteries around the country, baptized thousands of people and ordained hundreds of priests. Perhaps his most prophetic act was his return to the place that had enslaved him. His story must have been powerful as he learned not only to forgive his captors, but to love them and their people. Patrick was a courageous preacher of the gospel, the way he preached must have been compelling, but his prophetic witness of forgiveness and love was very likely his most powerful tool of evangelization.[37]

Janani Luwum (1924-1977)

Janani Luwum was the Anglican archbishop of Uganda during the reign of terror of the dictator Idi Amin. In ways reminiscent of the first years of Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador, Luwum at first wanted to have nothing to do with politics, and tried to maintain friendly relations with Amin, frequently saying "We are with you, your Excellency, with all that you do that is good." But Amin was doing less and less good as tens of thousands were executed, sometimes very cruelly. By 1977 Amin began to circulate rumors that the bishops were planning rebellion, and the bishops responded with a strong statement condemning the violence that was wracking the country. Eventually the bishops were called into Amin's presence and accused of amassing weapons to use

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[36] Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets and Witnesses for Our Time* (New York: Crossroad, 1997).
[37] Ibid., 121-123.

against him, and when they were dismissed Amin ordered Archbishop Luwum to stay behind. The Archbishop was never seen again. The government first said that he had been killed in an automobile accident, then as he attempted to resist arrest. Later it was discovered that he had been shot by Amin himself when, knowing that his time had come, he had begun to pray.[38]

Dorothy Day (1897-1980)

The beginning of Dorothy Day's life showed evidence of anything but holiness and missionary zeal. As a young socialist journalist she had an affair with the American playwright Eugene O'Neill, became pregnant by another man and had an abortion, and lived in a common law marriage. When she became pregnant again, however, she decided to have the child, and her relationship with her partner came to an end. She converted to Catholicism because she saw the Catholic Church as the church of the poor, and when she met Peter Maurin, an itinerant French philosopher and mystic, they together founded a house of hospitality called the Catholic Worker and published a newspaper by the same name. The house was open to any and all, and the newspaper championed socialist and union causes and took a strong pacifist stance. Day was jailed many times for her demonstrations against the U. S. government's involvement in World War II (a very unpopular cause!), nuclear armament, civil rights' policies and the Vietnam War. If ever there was a prophet, she was certainly one, even though she sets a high standard for prophetic activity.[39]

Conclusion: Mission as Prophetic Dialogue

In speaking about a biblical foundation for the notion of mission as dialogue, I offered the beautiful passage from the Second Letter to the Thessalonians in which Paul speaks of how he was "gentle among" the people of Thessalonica, like a nurse caring for her children (2:7), and a little further, as "a father treats his children" (2:11). If one reads the entire passage, however, what is evident is that Paul balances these more "dialogical" images with "prophetic" ones. Paul speaks about how he came to Thessalonica after having been "insolently treated" (2:2) in Philippi. Even so, however, he "drew courage through our God to speak to you the gospel of God" (2:2). Paul talks about "being entrusted with the gospel," and so speaking in the name of God (2:4). He speaks about how he worked night and day in proclaiming the gospel, so as not to be a burden on anyone, and exhorted and encouraged the people to conduct themselves worthy of the God that called them (2:9, 12).

Mission is done in dialogue. Mission is done in prophecy. The two go together. While we can distinguish them to better understand the whole, we cannot and are not separate them. Mission is prophetic dialogue. It is dialogical prophecy. The question is not "is it one or the other?" The question is rather *when* should the dialogical aspect of missionary service be emphasized or employed more fully, *when* should one act or speak prophetically in action, in words, in confrontation. Like life itself, engaging in God's

[38] Ibid., 79-80.
[39] Ibid., 519-521.

mission is art. One needs to be in touch with the sources of creativity, the Holy Spirit, to know just how to proceed. It is the Spirit who opens our ears to listen, and who anoints our tongues to speak, who enflames our hearts to witness.