

FORMATION FOR THE CONTEXT OF MISSION

Presentation of

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1. Defining what we mean by *mission* from the perspective of religious formation:
 - A. Some assumptions laden in the use of the word mission in US culture that need to be nuanced in order to understand the Christian notion of mission:
 1. Mission is a specific task that one is sent to accomplish as in military parlance
 2. Mission is the functional purpose of an organization or group as in US corporate and organizational parlance
 3. The language of mission compels us to be pragmatic and operational in contrast to the dreamy, contemplative language of vision
 4. In a recent article about the US men's institutes, I shared ten fairly distinct uses of the word mission in conversations in the men's institutes about the role of religious life in church and world, and how the word mission shifts the focus for many internal operations of religious institutes.
 - B. Mission, throughout the history of Christian theology and praxis, was not ours or the church's but God's, pouring forth from the Trinitarian life, the fundamental reality of all that is, and manifested as God's purposes in history revealed in Jesus Christ and in the presence of the Spirit of God among us.¹
 1. Any language that implies that we have a mission or that groups have a mission in this context violates the most profound aspects of the theology of grace and the basic mysteries of Christianity (Trinity, Incarnation, grace and charism, paschal mystery, etc.) We enter the mystery of God by call and grace, and are privileged to dance the dance, sing the song, take our place in the drama that is God's mystery for the world. It is fundamentally a phenomenon of contemplation of the wonder of God, God's call to us to find our destiny in God, and to open our hearts and lives to grace which we then live out in mission and ministry.
 2. It cannot be attained by careful analysis, by planning, by organizational restructuring, but by life in grace. Nor can it be attained without these activities in a complex world.
 3. Nothing has been the subject of more ferment, development, and change since Vatican II as mission theology. Vatican II was about shifting the praxis of the Church in a new and changed world that had emerged. It re-situated the

¹The Letter to the Ephesians is a sustained meditation on the mystery of mission.

church socially and culturally in the contemporary world, developing and re-articulating the mission of the church that it has been called to from the beginning.

4. This call to mission is about Baptism, and does not first emerge with religious profession or the call to ordained ministry. People come to the religious life and ordained ministry to break open and respond to their baptismal call in a specific way.
 5. Combing through thirty-five years of magisterial documents (from *church in the Modern World* and *Lumen Gentium* of Vatican II through *Evangelization in the Modern World* of Paul VI and up to the *Mission of the Redeemer* of John Paul II) and the developments in mission theology itself, five integral and essential elements of mission emerge:
 - a) The *proclamation* of the mystery of God among us in Jesus Christ present in the Spirit;
 - b) The integral liberation of human beings and humanity, the service of humanity (the church is the Sacrament of the unity of the whole human race--Vatican II);
 - c) Inter-religious dialogue and cooperation;
 - d) The contemplative life shown forth in Liturgy and Sacrament, and the development of life in the Spirit;
 - e) The witness of life in the Spirit.
 6. These elements have no ranking in the documents and must all be present in any model of mission to be faithful to Vatican II. Without proclamation, they lose their Christian base and are not faithful to Scripture. Without the witness of life, they are empty of human meaning. But all are necessary. Most often today, polarization in the church can be shown to be an over-emphasis on one or another of the elements as over against some other element.
 7. The context of mission has radically shifted since the collapse of the Berlin wall and the implosion of the Soviet empire. Mission has become critical once again because the context for mission has dramatically shifted for the first time since the end of World War II, a shift that spawned much of the analysis of Vatican II itself.
- C. *Vita Consecrata* emphasizes over and over again that the religious life--whether monastic, contemplative, mendicant, or apostolic--is mission in this sense (especially Paragraph 72 but all of Chapter 3). It shows how the baptismal consecration based in Christ's consecration is the foundation for mission in religious life (as in the ordained ministry, as in the life of Christians everywhere). Vatican II did its work on mission and mandated that

the religious life change and adapt to this new articulation of mission and find new ways to be faithful to charism in a changed church and world. We have been reeling from this ever since even though we embraced it with enthusiasm.

2. Clarifying what we mean by the *context of mission*.
 - A. God's purposes in history are mysterious and eternal and beyond our capacity to ever fully articulate (see the Letter to the Ephesians). But our understandings and articulations do shift and change with growth and insight as a church. Also the world in which God's purposes are acted out shifts and changes as well. But God's mission of reconciling all things in Christ in the power of the Spirit never changes.
 - B. The fundamental insight of Vatican II, bubbling up for decades, was that the church was out of touch with the contemporary world and that it needed to shift its pastoral praxis (especially its social praxis) in order to continue to be faithful to the Word of God and its call. This is evident in key language of both John XXIII and Paul VI and the most important documents of the council. Contra Pius IX and Pius X, it was called to look at its role anew in the world.
 - C. The *signs of the times* became a key rhetorical marker for the decades ahead. The phrase crystallizes what we mean by context of mission for religious formation. After centuries of essentialist theology and philosophy, and fortress-like enmeshment in a dying Christendom and classical medieval world, the church re-opened itself to context.
 - D. The most salient dimensions of context for the church's pastoral praxis since Vatican II have been in the social sphere and culture. Neither of the constructs behind these words had much meaning before this century. They are super-structures of modernity and need to be dealt with care before they are rendered too objectively real in false ways. (We jumped on a band wagon that is already in serious critique from post-modernism and inter-cultural dialogue.) But they provide the context for mission in our time in any way that we can put handles on it.
3. A brief history of religious formation since Vatican II and why the issue of *formation for the context of mission* is a current concern.
 - A. Without engaging in too much negative characterizing, it can be said that pre-Vatican II formation for religious often reflected the rigidities and authoritarian style of the context and culture of its times. People were being prepared for obedience and the uniformity necessary to maintain large organizational structures in which they would find their role, their place, and their peace. If they could not hack it in this world, it would be better for them and for the religious life for them to go home early.
 - B. Our adaptations to the call of Vatican II for renewal surfaced some clear areas of change

and development for religious formation:

1. The processes of formational regimentation violated basic principles of human development and even human dignity and had to be rethought.
2. Ministry for religious had moved from role and slot-filling in service providing bureaucracies (including ordained ministry) into a world of complex tasks and operations that could no longer be fulfilled by religious unless they were creative, could take initiative on their own, and accept responsibility for their decisions in accountability. Religious would now need to get the training and develop proficiency in the professionalized ways that they were called upon to fulfill their ministries. Moreover, they were being educated and developing critical thinking skills.
3. Human growth and development required that religious have the freedom and responsibility for moving out of a childlike world of obedience, passivity, and deference into a world where they could continue to grow into fully mature, individuated, self-differentiated adults. New insights into the nature of mature community demanded this as well.
4. Vatican II had called the whole church to return to the well springs of Scripture, the Christian mysteries, and the historical sources of Christian spiritual life. Religious formation did so, unlocking as well the rich traditions of spirituality of our own institutes. Tanqueray had become the basic text in a *manualized* world that was a little too certain of everything.
5. For a number of reasons, the 1980's were characterized by a significant shift toward the therapeutic in formation. Religious formation had long made use of psychology, but candidates were changing (often coming from wounded backgrounds), society was changing (the dysfunctional family became the byword of the 1980's and as the decade closed the issue of addictions became paramount, and suppressed memory was everywhere). The abuse cases of the late 1980's flamed out into a crisis by the early 1990's focusing leaders and formators on human development issues and preparation for celibacy.
6. A widespread counter-critique began emerging in society and religious just after mid-decade.² As Szaz had predicted long ago, the therapeutic had triumphed. While all of these new elements for integral formation were important, what had happened to mission in the midst of it? At the same time, some of the best new mission theology has been written and popularized in this decade. The buzz everywhere by 1997-98 (at CMSM, at RFC, even among diocesan seminary formators) was that something was out of balance. We were building therapeutic communities (whether or not we were even succeeding was questioned), but were we building communion for mission?

²Psychology itself was coming under strong critique from family systems theory and group theory demonstrating how a reductive focus on the self in isolation could never truly be therapeutic and could harm the person in the context of his or her relational world.

4. Some processes occurring in RFC and CMSM with regard to formation and mission.
 - A. As early as 1996, the Mission Committee of CMSM was in dialogue with diocesan seminaries and the bishops about why missiology or mission theology had dropped out of the seminary curriculum. It began a pilot project at St. Mary's in Baltimore and gathered three missiologists to help summarize and render thematic the key aspects of mission theology since Vatican II. Conversations were held with the Bishops Committee on Priestly Formation, and a draft core curriculum was presented to them from the working group, including not only core courses but also one-day, weekend, and multi-weekend workshops and retreats based on developments in mission theology, integrating all of the other fields of theology in and for mission.
 - B. The same materials were presented to the Formation Committee of CMSM (where the director of RFC has a seat) and to the Religious Formation Conference with the suggestion that the theological elements be worked through for their formative dimensions.
 - C. Independently, RFC was going through similar questions about contemporary models of formation. It was seriously questioning whether the social and cultural contexts of religious life and its mission today were making their way through the thick therapeutic consciousness of contemporary models. It gathered an advisory group and began a process of reflection on the context of religious life in the late 1990's. After almost a year of work, including a number of short papers on the social, cultural, religious (in the broad sense), and global context of religious life, a draft statement was created for discussion by religious throughout the US to see how much consensus could be developed around the current context of religious formation.
5. The social context of mission:
 - A. The church's experience of mass violence and the developments in arms technologies of two World Wars shifted its emphasis on and involvement in international issues toward a pastoral praxis of international justice and peace (Pius XII's late war Christmas radio addresses through UN involvement and up to John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* presaged Vatican II's conciliar articulation of a socially involved Catholicism). Even a fortress church could no longer ignore what was happening internationally.
 - B. The church watched with shock the development of an international economic system that was exploiting if not savaging the world's underdeveloped peoples for the benefit of the Northern economic and international elites. It began developing a highly articulated critique that has continued forward throughout John Paul II's pontificate.
 - C. The totalitarian systems of this century re-enforced by technologies of violence and control of communication awakened papal teaching to what is now a highly developed mis-

sion theology of the role of human rights in the church's pastoral mission.

- D. The intense globalization of the international system fed by developments in transportation, communications, and organizational technologies has exploded since the collapse of the US/ Soviet face off and the virtual death of socialism as an alternative to capitalism since 1992. It is compelling the church to move beyond A, B, and C above and to search within the tradition for sources for mission theology for dealing with the chaos/ diversity that has emerged and what the role of the church will be in the midst of it. The example of an effective moral critique of free trade that more astutely understands its dynamic for development is the most paramount at the present time. Negative railings against the effects of free trade and market economics are not enough today. The reduction of all international relationships and realities to finances, trade, and economics can only be countered with an alternative vision for globalization, not just *nay saying*.
 - E. The religious life both in its own self-articulation and in key church documents places itself into the perspective of the underside of this development--how it impacts the poor and marginalized, making a conscious choice to see it from their viewpoint and make that the center of mission.
 - F. The phenomenon of violence pervades all analyses of the world and society today. Many commentators think that we may be in for decades of it because of the collapse of the easy client-state method of world control ushered in by the Cold War and the US/Soviet superpower hegemony, now gone forever. Sociological analysis and social trends see violence increasing in direct proportion to the broadcasting of consumerism and media culture across the face of the world through globalization.
 - G. The capacity of religious to network informal systems of connection and communication across the world below the radar screen of the formal structures of globalization, which enables the creation of grassroots networks between marginalized peoples with no access to money or technology, may be a central gift that religious life needs to nurture and develop for this coming era.
6. The cultural context of mission.
- A. The invention of the notion of culture beginning late last century and developed into a highly sophisticated analysis of the diversity of peoples highlighted by the church's missionary activity confronted the church by mid-century with developing an approach to the world's diversity that was less Eurocentric and imperialist, and more truly global. It still has far to go in this area and cultural developments around the world church may well toll the death knell of European Catholicism. By the early 1960's, traditional missionary activity and the *ad gentes* mission of the church as practiced was already perceived as too allied with European colonialism, arrogantly destructive of local indigenous cultures and religious sensibilities. By the end of the century, the question of inculturation of the Gos-

- pel as it had been lived and preached in Europe for a thousand years is under serious challenge. The Gospel will emerge in forms and ways throughout the world's cultures that will not please many church leaders who still hanker for if not insist upon a Eurocentric church that will only need to minimally change to adapt to what is happening. Theological forms have emerged for understanding the place of the church in this new era but current Vatican leadership and much of the hierarchy are not prepared to accept it. It will more likely come *from below* and bubble up to the top of the church changing it in ways that are impossible to predict.
- B. Having attempted to struggle through the middle of the century with the culture of modernity and the phenomenon of secularization as a social process and as the means by which a new secular culture has emerged, the church, by and large, has given up on it. The battle over life issues, especially abortion, has set off the church as over against the secularized world in ways that have broken down the grounds for dialogue. All cultures seem to be worthy of respect except modernity, the one that rampantly spreads across the world. This dialogue will have to be taken up again if the church is to avoid falling back into a sectarian fortress style of life rejected by Vatican II.
7. The ecclesial context of mission and contemporary religious life.
- A. As said earlier, the religious life situates itself preferentially among the poor and marginalized for its stance within the contemporary world. This has clear consequences for establishing the vantage point from which we do social and cultural analysis. For example, we have no intention of being neutral, objective, and value-free in imitation of social and economic science. We preferentially choose analyses that sees through and looks at the world through the eyes of the poor. The official teaching of the church only more strongly urges us to do that in *Vita Consecrata*.
- B. Even within the church, *Vita Consecrata* affirms that the Gospel radicality that is at the heart of the commitment to the consecrated life requires us to be a prophetic leaven in both church and society (paragraph 84 et al.). We read our baptismal commitment and the vows through this lens.
- C. Yet the church does not well understand religious life and its hierarchial leaders often seek to tame it for the needs of the maintenance of dioceses and parishes, contrary to the foundations of most of our institutes. This issue has become critical for religious priests in the US (see CMSM's book, *A Concert of Charisms*, Paulist Press, 1996). Nygren-Ukeritis clearly show how many women religious have also fallen into parochialization of their mission and identity following their move from the classroom and hospital.
- D. The church's paradigms of mission have been shifting dramatically in recent decades. The move toward the social and cultural has been referred to already. Bosch and Schreiter among others also detect shifts in the church's paradigms of mission from the

expansion paradigm of spreading the church (up until the post-colonial period after World War II) towards the liberationist model during the anti-colonial revolutions of the decades of the sixties and the seventies. Since the end of the Cold War, another new paradigm shift is becoming evident (per Schreiter)--mission as reconciliation.³

- E. We are learning in our general chapters and our world church that the invitation to inclusion of local leadership from around the world carries with it issues of cultural and social conservatism in countries of the South in ways that will challenge much of what we perceived to be progress. Consider the example of the Anglican Lambeth conference that undid decades of work on the church's attitude toward homosexuals because of attitudes toward the lifestyle in Africa and Asia.

8. The religious (in the wider sense) context of mission

- A. As *religious* it is critical for us to know what is happening with *religion* or the phenomenon of *the religious* in society and culture. It is undergoing massive shifts in Western culture. In its structural and institutional form as it has been known in the West since at least the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, it may be in massive decline if not demise. We usually call this the decline of organized religion. The critiques by enlightenment and modernity (which the church has by and large not only integrated but thrived upon) has sheared away many of the cultural and political aspirations of western religion using, interestingly, critiques redolent of the prophetic denunciations of Scripture. But having survived and imbibed Marx, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Freud, et al., its institutional structures still live off of the capital of a previous glory. We often critique the church for what is at base a decline in the institution of Western religion with its penchant for manipulation by guilt, excessive reduction of religious experience to moralism, its polemics for the purposes of situating itself in or maintaining its positions of power, etc. Being true to our name, we should be the most attuned to what is happening with religion in culture and perhaps joining the Spirit in furthering it. Most of our founders were often the only effective critique to these excesses, and often were the ones trying to resituate religiosity on experience and spirituality and the hunger for God.

- B. Inter-cultural dialogue (and clash and confrontation and syncretism) across the face of the world is relativizing much of what we held dear in Western religion. It has given us a contrast experience by which we have been able to see the pretensions and even idols within western religiosity. Its impact on the church has been referred to earlier. These encounters have moved from distant missionary activity to the corner mosque and Buddhist temple in the next town. Ecumenism seems like a distant issue when we confront the

³Robert Schreiter, *Theology Between the Global and the Local*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1997. For a short summary see his article "*Reconciliation as a Model of Mission*" in *New Theology Review*, May 1997, 10:2. His 1992 book *Reconciliation* was a series of case studies on the mission in post-conflict societies.

other of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc. Ecumenical agreements between Christian churches become easier (cfr. the Lutheran Catholic resolution of the justification debate, the agreement between Lutherans and Episcopalians in the US).

- C. The church will need to return to its earnest and respectful dialogue with modernity and secularism to help reestablish the role of religious values in the very culture that appears to be spreading across the world with the globalization of media and economics. The so-called secular world has never been more ready to invite a dialogue with religion as it views with shock the challenges of the contemporary world. It seeks to partner with religion in development and in social outreach to the poor. It accepts that religion has something to offer in the formulation of the ethics of policy. It even accepts that religion has a critical role to play in dealing with local conflict around the world.
 - D. As modernity continues to move into post-modernity and undermines its greatest achievements with unbounded critique rooted in the hermeneutics of suspicion, the underpinning of human rights (and all law) is coming under suspicion. This is happening just as human rights violators around the world are raising the cultural relativity argument against human rights, seeing it as a tool of European imperialism. It may well be that only inter-religious dialogue and cooperation can sustain the foundations of human rights theory as a value system. Hans Kung, the Dali Lama, Thich Nhat Hahn, the World Parliament of Religions are all seeking the foundations a new global ethic. The world at end of century and millennium is looking much more religious than any one could have imagined in 1900.
9. Some final points about how the context of mission shifts the formation task and creates a different way of envisioning religious formation.
- A. It is not likely that religious formation will be vastly improved by instituting a host of courses in the social, cultural, and religious context of the religious life. It may well suggest a look at the course of studies that candidates engage in to see if they at least prepare them for the context of the mission of religious life -- or better yet, to evaluate exactly what context they are being prepared for. But the work cannot be done by cognitive and pedagogic methods alone.
 - B. Now that we have developed elaborate models of assessment of candidates for admission and for vows based upon psychological fitness, gifts for community, etc., should we not be asking whether candidates can function in the contemporary context of mission in church and world. Are they precisely fleeing it, for example? What does mission and its context say about who and what we are looking for in candidates? Will we have the chutzpah to begin saying *no* for mission reasons with the courage that we now say *no* for psychological reasons?
 - C. It appears that profound immersion experiences in other cultures and social settings may

- be moving from a *good idea* or an *option* to being a critical part of the formation experience. We need to develop the expectations for supervision and integration of these experiences into the growing sense of religious identity of the candidate including evaluation for suitability for final vows.
- D. Many of the elements of context for the mission of religious life can be seen mirrored in issues in formation for community or communion for mission. *Vita Consecrata* (51) sees religious life in community as the basic witness to authenticity and fidelity in mission. If the context of what is happening in the world around us for mission is not providing a context for our life in community, we have to ask where it is that we are living. Are our boundaries too thick? Are the world's issues our issues? Do we mirror its struggles? Or is our stuckness in white, dominant middle-class reality becoming a tragedy for us? How can the world be changing so dramatically while we remain so statically fixed in the past? What does it mean for us and what dynamics of community and life together need to change for it to change? Are those dynamics present in the formation process so as to socialize our candidates into a non-contextualized style of life that no longer even looks like the world we view in mission?
- E. Now that we have begun careful efforts to understand the family dynamic of our candidates so that we can be better formators need to include efforts to understand their social and cultural context to see how we can help them move into where we all wish to be in mission?
- F. Does our care in choosing formative communities and environments for their prayerfulness and sense of inter-relationship need to extend to carefulness in assuring that they are communities that are in context and open to the context of mission?
- G. Is our formation for spirituality still too rooted in Western neo-platonic models of the atomized self, protecting itself from the messiness of the world of appearances, seeking peace and consolation by withdrawing from the chaos of a world that is often spinning out of control? Can we help candidates more truly following the Ignatian maxim of *finding God in all things* by helping them see the mirroring of their own personal issues in the struggles of culture, society, the religious search of unevangelized people thirsting for God but not finding God in our churches?
- H. Has our deference to the adult model of formation for our older candidates (and often even our younger) weakened our clarity that we do have a mission and a context and a set of values before they come. While we value their life experience, we know what we are about and can offer them a choice to join what we believe we are and do, using their extensive life experience to further it. We cannot permit ourselves to be reinvented for them however. We have more to offer them than psychological and spiritual clarification for their life journey.

- I. If we return to the well springs of mission proffered to us by the long tradition of the church and its difficult process of self-articulation in these decades, will we not better help our candidates realize the ecclesial dimensions of their religious life. To be a prophet does not require rejection of the institution we seek to critique. It offers us the very model of prophecy that we use to suggest its weaknesses and failings. The classic theology of mission can only help us better see our place in the journey of the church in our times and be a part of it.
- J. A spirituality for mission for religious -- and formation that emphasizes the baptismal charism, the Incarnation, the Trinitarian mystery of God's mission in history, the communion of us all in the often dark journey of the church through time -- will better prepare us for the future of religious life than the most astute uses of reductive individualistic psychology. Psychology can then further mission rather than supplant it.
- K. What do as formators need to do to be people of context?