



Secular Europe

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Editorial



Dear Readers,

The theme of this Bulletin, *Mission in a Secular Europe*, resulted from the SEDOS Mission Symposium 2021, where Fr. Daniel Huang, SJ, gave a lively talk on the theme of “Mission in a Secular Age.” His article will appear in the book of the Mission Symposium that is scheduled to appear mid-June, published by Orbis Books. In this Bulletin we have gathered the texts of the talks by different renowned speakers focused on mission and secularization in Europe. The introduction will be by Sr. Marie-Hélène, OLA, who together with Sr. Lieve Stragier, ICM, helped us to set up the program of this seminar, SEDOS Spring Session 2022.

We would like to give a short summary of the article by Fr. Daniel Huang, SJ, which will help us to enter the problems, and opportunities, of a secular society.

First, it is important aspect is to understand the “secular”:

- ✓ in opposition to “religious”, relating to worldly or temporal matters, e.g. secular concerns;
- ✓ not overtly or specifically religious, e.g. secular music
- ✓ not ecclesiastical or clerical, e.g. secular landowners

Thus, “secularization” is the process of “becoming secular”.

However, the term “secularism” refers to the political system, which in French is called “*laïcité*”. It discourages religious involvement in government affairs, especially religious influence in the determination of state policies; it also forbids government involvement in religious affairs, and especially prohibits government influence in the determination of religion (separation of Church and State).

Now, according to Fr. Huang, “what makes a culture secular is not simply the absence of religion, but the presence of a new ‘social imagery’, a different cultural construct of society, a new set of conditions of plausibility for belief that affect religious believer and unbeliever alike.” He then gives three features of a secular culture:

- 1) Faith becomes an option;
- 2) A tendency of “exclusive” humanism;
- 3) Suspicion of institutional religion.

The way to answer and accept these challenges in mission is by:

- 1) Embracing pluralism as a value;
- 2) Enhancing Human flourishing and Spiritual experience;
- 3) Reforming the Church.

In a nutshell, this is what mission in a secular age is about. In this issue of the SEDOS Bulletin we will find many of these aspects back, but now in the context of the Mission in Europe. We will end this short intro on the topic of the seminar with a prayer formulated in a “secular” way, written by Karem Barratt:

A Prayer For Oneness

*I rest in you, Spirit of Life.
I place in you my feet, my legs, my torso,
my arms, my shoulders, my head
and allow you to support all that I am.
I rest in you, Spirit of Life,
and give to you my worries,
my fears, my doubts, my hopes,
my joys, my pains, my anger,
my love, my hate, and allow you
to take in all that I am.
And as I give all that I am,
I find the place of truth, stillness, still,
eternal where you and I are one.
I breathe in, deep, deeply, down, up,
all that we are, as I stand on my toe
at the edge of the universe, in oneness.
And all that we are expands,
until forever.*

La Mission en Europe

La mission en Europe a-t-elle quelque chose de particulier? L'Europe du 21^e siècle, en particulier l'Europe occidentale, accueille de plus en plus de personnes de tous les continents, de diverses cultures et religions. Dans ce contexte, les repères se brouillent parfois mais les expériences s'enrichissent les unes par les autres. L'Église en Europe est partie prenante de ce mouvement transnational, qu'elle connaît en fait depuis toujours. Les frontières politiques à ses yeux sont des réalités qui sont appelées à être dépassées: l'Église annonce le Royaume, le rassemblement des nations.

Mais concrètement, les accueillants comme les accueillis n'ont pas toujours les clés pour se comprendre et s'épauler dans des situations inédites. Ce qui manque peut-être le plus aux uns et aux autres, c'est de sortir de l'illusion que la foi se vit comme un en soi, en dehors des cultures. La foi transcende les cultures mais ne se vit pas sans elles!

Or les cultures de l'Europe contemporaine sont profondément marquées par la sécularisation, au sens où la religion n'est plus une donnée sociale et culturelle partagée. La foi se vit plutôt à l'intime, ou en privé comme dans certains cercles familiaux, les mouvements et les paroisses. Elle est aussi en perte de vitesse si l'on se réfère au nombre des baptisés et des personnes engagées dans la vie de l'Église et dans sa mission.

Pourtant le marquage des lieux reste très christianisé: la toponymie, le nombre important d'édifices religieux, les calvaires, les statues marquent l'espace.

Pour les missionnaires venant en Europe il n'est donc pas très facile de se repérer! L'Europe qui a valeureusement porté l'Évangile sur tous les continents est-elle en train de renier ses racines, sa fierté, son âme? Qu'est-ce qui est permis, interdit, pour un missionnaire, au plan de l'annonce de sa foi?

Le missionnaire peut chercher quelques clés pour mieux servir:

1^e clef: De quelle Europe est-il question ?

L'Europe est une réalité complexe. C'est un continent tout en contrastes, en nuances. Au plan religieux, tout d'abord, des pays de tradition catholique (Espagne, Italie, Malte, Pologne, Belgique, Irlande) côtoient des pays majoritairement orthodoxes (la Grèce, la plus grande partie de l'Europe de l'Est) ou marqués par le protestantisme (Angleterre, Allemagne, Scandinavie, Norvège, Danemark, une grande partie des pays au Nord de l'Europe). Le judaïsme a lié une grande partie de son histoire avec l'Europe, pour le meilleur et pour le pire; l'islam et le bouddhisme sont en croissance dans bon nombre de pays européens. La mission ne se vit pas de la même manière dans des contextes marqués par telle ou telle confession et religion. En effet, la religion draine avec elle des cultures, des modèles sociaux, une histoire.

Il est important de se demander comment nous délimitons l'Europe lorsque nous l'évoquons: par les racines chrétiennes, par les frontières géographiques, par l'histoire, la politique, l'économie, la culture gréco-latine, les idéologies? Il est encore plus intéressant de repérer nos préjugés sur l'Europe, à partir de nos expériences, de nos rêves, de nos peurs, des médias, etc.

Il existe de forts contrastes entre les images de l'Europe et ses réalités. Par exemple, l'Europe connaît une grande tradition d'accueil et des replis identitaires meurtriers; la science a désenchanté le monde et de nouvelles spiritualités éclosent, qui peuvent être des passerelles entre les contemporains; des ministères de l'écologie et des militants de l'écologie intégrale côtoient des gaspillages insolents. On constate une baisse de la natalité, voire un rejet de la procréation, un vieillissement de la population, un repli sur

soi et un engagement très fort pour l'accueil de migrants de diverses religions, une grande générosité pour l'adoption d'enfants, des initiatives solidaires inédites. La liste serait longue.

L'Europe, c'est aussi des espaces où se vivent dialogues et collaborations, dans un contexte de déchristianisation et de laïcité. En 2006, une rencontre de l'IAMS Europe s'interrogeait sur *l'Europe après les Lumières. Oser la mission dans une Europe qui se construit*.¹ La rencontre montrait ce qui a été rendu possible par les Lumières: l'universel, la liberté, la mutation des relations sociales, l'appel au bonheur, la dignité et les droits de l'homme, la solidarité, des espaces publics ouverts, une culture du dialogue (dialogue religieux, social, entre hommes et femmes), une approche critique de la religion, qui a permis les récentes enquêtes et réparation des abus sexuels et des emprises. Mais aussi la valorisation du progrès à tout prix a causé bien des injustices sociales; le mépris de la religion a causé un réel traumatisme pour les Églises (exécution de personnes, de communautés entières, exils, spoliations de biens); il est difficile de comprendre la complexité législative, on peut se sentir démuni devant l'abus de pouvoir des «laïcards» qui veulent déchristianiser les esprits et les espaces; le règne de la subjectivité et de la liberté sans frein trouve ses propres limites.

Chacun peut essayer de se rendre attentif à quelques contrastes qui l'interrogent. C'est peut-être à leur croisement que le missionnaire est appelé à se tenir, pour aider l'Europe à retrouver ses forces de vie, d'espérance, d'hospitalité, de fraternité, qui ont fait son renom pendant des siècles.

2^e clef: Quelle mission?

La mission en Europe est active et pluriforme. Elle va de la nouvelle évangélisation à l'action sociale dans des réalités très diverses (accueil des migrants, service des malades, éducation des jeunes, gens de la rue, et tant d'autres réalités). Il s'agit de combiner le service de la foi (paroisse, mouvements, évangélisation) et le service effectué au nom de la foi.

Dans une Europe sécularisée, l'espace social n'est pas régi par la vie religieuse, même si des traditions religieuses demeurent (les jours fériés, le repos le dimanche); il est régi par les lois du travail et de la citoyenneté. Comment alors affronter l'ambiguïté de la mission dans le monde du travail? Parler de sa foi est vite dénoncé comme un prosélytisme, au moins en France, au nom de la laïcité, alors que la liberté de croire, de s'exprimer et de parler de sa foi est un droit en France comme dans beaucoup de pays d'Europe. La laïcité signifie le respect de toutes les croyances, non leur abolition! La question des signes religieux varie d'un pays à un autre, et il importe de bien se documenter.

Le relativisme et le pluralisme sont la règle dans la vie sociale. L'annonce missionnaire ne peut pas s'effectuer sans assumer les scandales du passé et du présent, ni sans respecter les convictions des non croyants ou celles des croyants d'autres religions.

3^e clef: Comment valoriser les richesses culturelles respectives?

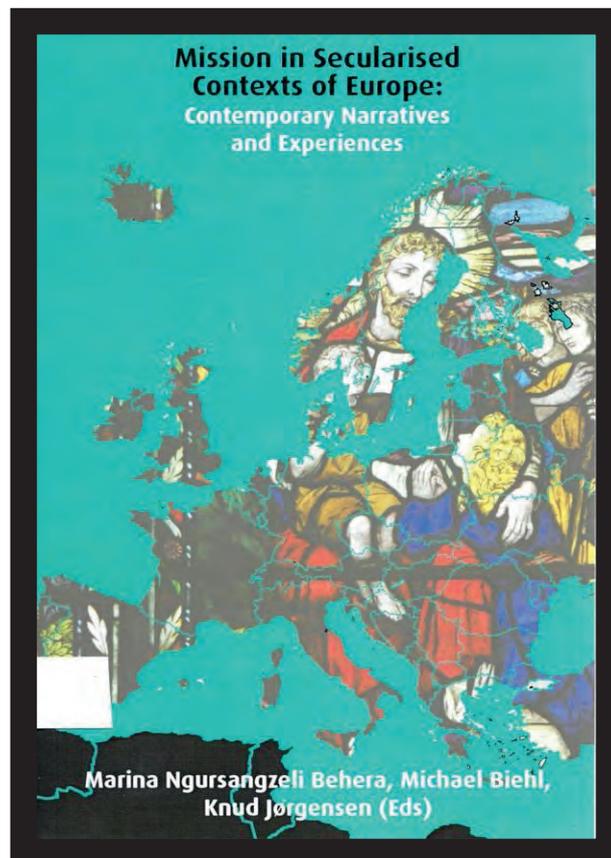
Les instituts missionnaires internationaux sont une chance pour la mission en Europe. Comment valoriser les cultures de l'accueil, de la relation, de la patience? Comment échanger nos richesses respectives dans les domaines de la formation, de la pastorale, dans l'apprentissage des espaces de mixité proposés en Europe (mixité sociale, recherche œcuménique et interreligieuse, brassage des cultures, des genres...)?

¹ Les actes ont été publiés en anglais dans *International*

Review of Mission, et en français dans *Perspectives missionnaires et Spiritus*,

Les textes qui vont suivre nous font entrer plus en profondeur dans la compréhension de la mission en Europe, en deux temps. Dans le premier temps, les textes de Christian Tauchner, SVD, Directeur de Mission Institute, Sankt Augustin, Allemagne, et de Timothy Radcliffe, ancien maître de l'ordre des Frères prêcheurs, nous aident à décrypter la complexité de la mission dans une Europe sécularisée. Le second temps propose quelques éclairages de mises en pratique dans divers domaines où se joue la transmission: l'éducation, avec Mr. Lieve Boeven, directeur général de l'Éducation Catholique en Flandres, en Belgique; la Nous allons ainsi rencontrer de nouvelles formes de mission, qui se cherchent en collaboration. Leur but est que nos contemporains, dans un contexte

parfois anxiogène, découvrent la joie de se tourner vers Dieu, la source de la joie et de la paix profondes. C'est à un véritable «pèlerinage de la confiance» que le numéro nous invite. spiritualité du soin, avec Sr. Kristina Wolf, des Medical Mission Sisters, Frankfurt (Allemagne), qui depuis 2007 est membre d'une équipe de Holy Cross – Center for Christian Meditation and Spirituality à Frankfurt, Diocèse de Limburg; le catéchuménat en France, à Vaulx-en-Velin, une paroisse en périphérie de Lyon (France), avec Sr. Rose Quansah, OLA, and Fr. Dieudonné Baloitcha, SMA; l'œcuménisme vécu avec des jeunes: l'expérience sur la colline de Taizé, avec Frère Jean-Marie et Sœur Agnès Granier, responsable générale des religieuses de Saint André.



Mission in Secular Contexts

There can be no doubt that I don't have any definite recipes or instruction manuals for the themes of this SEDOS study day. In my contribution I shall expose several points of principle which I consider fundamental, and the consequences will follow more or less "automatically", though, of course, in questions of religious life and discipleship, there is practically nothing automatic or, at times, even logical.

Europe and Mission

In this millennium at least Europe is considered a difficult place for mission. This has to do with the traditional layout of mission: Europe has been *sending* missionaries, we don't *receive* them. The processes when Christianity spread into European countries are not referred to as "mission" but meant the constitution of European civilisations.

The modern concept of "mission" changed from the theological reflection on the Trinity to the activity of the church only with the beginning of the European expansion into new worlds along the coasts of Africa into India and into what was to become (Latin) America. This design of expanding the gospel from Europe in a centrifugal manner is somehow still functioning in many quarters. Thus, for example in the SVD [Divine Word Missionaries], it was only after 1990 that missionaries from Africa, Asia and Latin America could take up their mission also in Europe. Previously, many SVDs had studied in Europe for their mission elsewhere –

another European contribution to the development of the world church. But they were not supposed to be missionaries in Europe.² Local churches and communities in Europe have been quite generous in *offering* their support and sharing their faith with others, but are still rather *reluctant to learn* from others: manners of celebrating, forms of reflection on the faith, approaches to reality and its transformation, theological insights.

Religion in Europe

It is rather complicated to think of Europe in the singular and as an identity with certain more or less uniform religious characteristics. Rather, Europe is quite complex in the religious field. Moreover, in a worldwide perspective, Europe is the exception with regard to the withering importance of religion, contrary to the flourishing in other continents.³ It is not only Germany – and within Germany, there are also several major differences between traditionally catholic Bavaria in the south or the more protestant north and the particular situation of the *Bundesländer* in the east, where there is a majority of people without any sense for religion – or France with its particular development from "the church's eldest daughter" to a society in an advanced state of unreligiosity. There are also highly catholic countries like Poland, where the government has close ties with the hierarchy and uses the church for their inhuman politics, for example regarding refugees and migrants.⁴ There are other countries in south-east Europe with

² Today, of the 980 SVD missionaries in Europe, around 70% are Europeans, 20% from Asia and 7% from Africa (this includes students in their different stages of formation as well as retired missionaries).

³ This has to do with the sociological thesis on the advance of secularity and the subsequent extinction of religion which was quite popular in the 1970s, but which has proven to be wrong. See e.g., Paul M. Zulehner, *Wandlung. Religionen und Kirchen inmitten kultureller Transformation. Ergebnisse der Langzeitstudie Religion im Leben der Österreicher*innen 1970–2020*, Ostfildern: Grünewald 2020, 28; Grace Davie, Religion in Modern Europe: Stabilities and Change, in Marina

Ngursangzeli Behera/Michael Biehl/Knud Jørgensen (eds.), *Mission in Secularised Contexts of Europe*, Oxford: Regnum Books International 2018, 17-30.

⁴ Referring to the policies over the last years; there is an astonishing solidarity now towards Ukraine. During the SEDOS conference on March 11, 2022, several participants wondered about my comment that some sort of secularisation might be welcome for Poland. I have in mind such situations where the hierarchy is too closely tied into the government politics and the church maybe cannot communicate its commitment to serve their neighbours in the sense of Matt 25:35, or the example of the Good Samaritan as proposed by Pope Francis in *Fratelli tutti* – no wonder Francis has few friends in the Polish Church.

strong national identities building on orthodox Christianity.

Other countries like Ireland have undergone quite a rapid transformation from an extremely catholic country to something different. While several decades ago it was considered awkward for a priest not to dress up in clerical outfit, in recent years such dress might imply being insulted and mistreated in public, due to the scandals of child abuse and sexual misbehaviour. Spain and Portugal also may go through similar developments.

There are studies in the transformation of religious identities for different countries. For Austria, as an example, Paul Michael Zulehner has produced extensive analyses. For the time between 1970 and 2010, the data shows a reduction of clearly church-related sectors from 23% to 5%, and of the religiously defined group from 36% to 24%. Instead, the sceptical or agnostic group has grown from 32% to 45% and the secular oriented one from 9% to 26%.⁵ In this paper, I shall refer more to the situation in German-speaking countries.

Secularisation

Secularisation has taken on different characteristics. In principle today, the term stands for the cultural process of transformation that strips modern humanity of its Christian characteristics (“*Entchristlichung*”). The term refers to the transfer of a person from the religious domain of a congregation or order into the state of a “secular” cleric. It also means the transfer of church property into the control of the state. Only later on, the term “developed into a concept of the humanities, politics of ideas and social theory. In this sense, the concept embodies a category of self-perception of

modernity with regard to the conditions of its religious origin”.⁶

There are specific forms like the French *laïcité*, other countries like Germany have arrangements with treaties like the Concordat (a treaty between the state and the Holy See). Among the consequences, many people today are not so much *religiously neutral* as *religiously illiterate*.⁷

Modern societies consider the state of secularisation as progress, as it means that civil society gets organised around central values of freedom and human rights, through a rational process of consensus building. In Germany, Jürgen Habermas might stand as a prominent thinker of this conception.⁸ Charles Taylor dedicated a 1200-page study to this topic, and from the *Introduction*, he points to the complexities of an apparently simple term:

What does it mean to say that we live in a secular age? Almost everyone would agree that in some sense we do. [...] But it's not so clear in what this secularity consists. There are two big candidates for its characterization—or perhaps, better, families of candidate. The first concentrates on the common institutions and practices—most obviously, but not only, the state. The difference would then consist in this, that whereas the political organization of all pre-modern societies was in some way connected to, based on, guaranteed by some faith in, or adherence to God, or some notion of ultimate reality, the modern Western state is free from this connection. Churches are now separate from political structures [...]. Religion or its absence is largely a private matter. The political society is seen as that of believers (of all stripes) and non-believers alike.

⁵ Paul M. Zulehner, *Verbuntung. Kirchen im weltanschaulichen Pluralismus. Religion im Leben der Menschen 1970–2010*, Ostfildern: Schwabenverlag 2011, 295. Also id., *Wandlung*.

⁶ Ulrich Barth, Säkularisierung I, in *TRE (Theologische Realenzyklopädie)*, Vol. 29, Berlin: De Gruyter 2006, 603–634, 603.

⁷ Several participants in the SEDOS study day wondered about this suggestion. It is first of all an invitation to observe the situation: It cannot be presupposed any more that our dialogue partners have any or the same idea of /God/, /Holy Spirit/ as we might have. It is further an invitation to explain our concepts – what later will be

explained in terms of translation, communication and hospitality. See also: Behera et al., *Mission in Secularised Contexts of Europe*.

⁸ From his extensive work on this theme see: Jürgen Habermas, Religion in der Öffentlichkeit. Kognitive Voraussetzungen für den “öffentlichen Vernunftgebrauch” religiöser und säkularer Bürger, in id., *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion. Philosophische Aufsätze*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2005, 119–154; see also his conversation with (then) Cardinal Ratzinger: Jürgen Habermas/Joseph Ratzinger, *Dialektik der Säkularisierung. Über Vernunft und Religion*, Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder 2005.

*Put in another way, in our “secular” societies, you can engage fully in politics without ever encountering God, that is, coming to a point where the crucial importance of the God of Abraham for this whole enterprise is brought home forcefully and unmistakably. The few moments of vestigial ritual or prayer barely constitute such an encounter today, but this would have been inescapable in earlier centuries in Christendom.*⁹

This may be the consensus regarding secularisation: religious rationality does not articulate any more how society is organised and structured. However, there are also indications that secularisation does not explain sufficiently the shifts in religion; rather, the panorama has become more “colourful”¹⁰ and complex. It is interesting also for its positive effects:

*What kind of God do people deny or what kind of God do they believe in? It is assumed that the believers in God themselves have very different images of God. Their personality, their upbringing and their life experiences seem to shape them. Conversely, maybe atheists as well as cultural atheization are the response to certain images of God. They may then “deny a God who, thank God, does not exist anyhow” (Karl Rahner).*¹¹

There is, though, some doubt about the autonomous subject’s and civil society’s capacity to constitute solid grounds. In the German discussion, there is reference to the “Böckenförde Theorem”:

The liberal (German “freiheitlich”), secularized state lives by prerequisites which it cannot guarantee itself. This is the great adventure it has undertaken for freedom’s

*sake. As a liberal state it can endure only if the freedom it bestows on its citizens takes some regulation from the interior, both from a moral substance of the individuals and a certain homogeneity of society at large. On the other hand, it cannot by itself procure these interior forces of regulation, that is not with its own means such as legal compulsion and authoritative decree. Doing so, it would surrender its liberal character (Freiheitlichkeit) and fall back, in a secular manner, into the claim of totality it once led the way out of, back then in the confessional civil wars.*¹²

This opens space for religious citizens to contribute essential values to the public space, without returning to the control and delimitation of civil society. It becomes a strong invitation to participate in public discourse.¹³ Such participation in civil society and public discourse implies that the central input from religions needs to be translated into secular rationality, Habermas demands.¹⁴ The possibility of translating religious insights and values into other cultures is one of Christianity’s big assets, according to Lamin Sanneh who dedicated much of his work to these aspects of Christianity.¹⁵

The Task of Mission

In the first place I think it is important to acknowledge that mission (as well as church) exists really only in the plural: There are so many different conceptions and practices of mission and church, and they should be taken into account.¹⁶ Nevertheless, I stick to a perspective of church and mission following Vatican II insights and developments within the SVD.

⁹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, Mass./London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2007, 1.

¹⁰ Therefore Zulehner’s title “*Verbuntung*“ (2011) – „becoming more colourful“.

¹¹ Zulehner, *Verbuntung*, 95 (my translation).

¹² Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, *Staat, Gesellschaft, Freiheit*, 1976, 60. Translation from the Wikipedia entry on Böckenförde [28 February, 2022]. Böckenförde was a German legal scholar and constitutional judge.

¹³ See Jürgen Habermas, “Das Politische” – der vernünftige Sinn eines zweifelhaften Erbstücks der Politischen Theologie, in Eduardo Mendietta/Jonathan VanAntwerpen (eds.), *Religion und Öffentlichkeit*, Berlin: Suhrkamp 2012, 28-52; Habermas/Ratzinger, *Dialektik der Säkularisierung*.

¹⁴ I’d have my doubts about the reality of such a public and civil rationality, given the more recent developments in Germany and Europe, as the pandemic – and more recently the attack on Ukraine – sadly have shown.

¹⁵ See his seminal book: Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message. The Missionary Impact on Culture*. Revised and expanded ed., American Society of Missiology Series, No. 42, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books 2009.

¹⁶ Some participants of the SEDOS study day referred to the question of truth, particularly after Timothy Radcliffe’s presentation. I think it should be taken into account that “truth” as well as “mission” is wider and bigger than the individual approach and capacity. Even if I don’t appreciate some practices for example of charismatic groups, catholic as well as protestant or pentecostal, they should be taken into account.

There is a general shift in understanding mission: While some time ago, mission was seen mostly as the primary task of churches, in the last few years there is a growing awareness of what can be termed “God’s mission”: Mission is in the first place a dynamic put in motion by God herself. It is the faith that God holds the world in his hands and leads it to its fulfilment. The recent “SEDOS Mission Symposium 2021” (October 11–15, 2021)¹⁷ was quite unanimous in that respect. Virtually nobody spoke of mission as the church’s or a congregation’s task. Nevertheless, there might still be space for further reflections as to what that means in practical terms.



It is exactly 70 years this summer that the proposition of a “*missio Dei*” was presented prominently in missiological and theological reflection. At a mission conference of protestant mission organisations in July 1952 at Willingen (Germany) this concept was formulated. It draws on reflections of some duration: In the 19th century, missions were considered the task of European nations and had a relation to civilisational responsibilities for the colonised peoples. Often, such missions were understood as nationalistic enterprises. Pope Benedict XV demanded in

his seminal encyclical *Maximum illud* (1919) that mission be related to Christ’s kingdom and the church, not nations. In the 1920s, Karl Barth developed his theological views and shifted the ecclesiological focus from religion to Christ; he was rather cautious towards the religions and emphasised the transcendental aspects of church. On these grounds, the Protestant mission conceptions built their understanding of mission as it was formulated at Willingen.¹⁸

This view of mission as a dynamic of God himself was taken up by Vatican II:

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 (Ad gentes [AG] 2).

This excellent introduction in AG in the first chapter laid a theological grounding. But due to the rather complicated process of elaborating the decree, this theological foundation could not be drawn out through the entire document, and from chapter 2 onwards, it falls back into the old scheme of talking about “the missions” in geographical terms. Nevertheless, the perspective of God’s mission remains as the firm basis for missiological and ecclesiological reflection. Later perspectives on mission by John Paul II put emphasis more on christological aspects – notably in the seminal *Redemptoris missio* ([RM] 1990) – and the *missio Dei* view was somehow subdued.

It was only at the turn of the millennium that this view of *missio Dei* was taken up again. Several journals returned to the concept, partly in remembrance of the 50 years since Willingen.¹⁹ My congregation, the SVD, built its mission perspective on this proposal in its General Chapter in 2000: The first moment is a contemplative communitarian presence in the world, in order to understand what might be signs of the times. The second moment is a

¹⁷ Papers to be published by Orbis Books in June 2022. 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*, in *SEDOS Bulletin* 53 (11-12.2021) 44-48.

¹⁸ For a recent summary, see Henning Wrogemann, *Theologies of Mission*.

Translated by Karl E. Böhmer, *Intercultural Theology* Vol. Two, Downers Grove:

InterVarsity Press 2018, 66-70.

¹⁹ See particularly Tormod Engelsen, *Missio Dei: The Understanding and Misunderstanding of a Theological Concept in European Churches and Missiology*, in *IRM* 92 (4.2003) 481-497. The entire issue is dedicated to the Willingen Conference.

confession and statement of faith: We believe that God is taking care of the world and leads it in grace from creation to new creation. Contemplation and discernment reveal where the Spirit is acting – the *missio Dei* perspective – within the church and certainly also beyond. Whoever acts within such an obedience to the Spirit – whether conscious of it or not – would be a partner in dialogue for the SVD, and this exercise of dialogue would be the practice of mission. It is this last step of dialogue which has become the keyword for SVD mission as “prophetic dialogue”.²⁰ Due to its fundamental source, mission is the outer perspective of church. Hence it relates to others and does not orient its perspective to inside themes. This means it is realised in encountering others and understanding them in their difference of cultures and beliefs.²¹ That makes the mission fundamentally a space for listening and learning. It is mission as a practice of dialogue.

What Mission is *Not* Supposed to Mean

We are not living any more in a situation of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, which maintained that mission was the only way to make sure people could attain baptism and thus find their salvation and eventually enter heaven. Today, the basic conviction is rather different, and I am aware that for many Christians, a formulation like this may be a rather challenging statement:

All people are God’s people, and God’s grace relates to all people from birth, whether they believe in a God or not. The reference to God is itself to be thought of and experienced as infinitely plural. God is the source of all freedom, without the threat of sanctions of withdrawal of love in case of misbehaviour. According to a universally understood

²⁰ This perspective has been treated in many publications and is meanwhile also important for other congregations and missiological perspectives. See particularly the publications of Stephen Bevans SVD, who has dedicated a major part of his work to this aspect: Stephen B. Bevans/Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue. Reflections on Christian Mission Today*, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis 2011; see the in-depth study of the SVD General Chapter 2000 by José Antunes da Silva, *Prophetic Dialogue. Identity and Mission of the Divine Word Missionaries*. Foreword by Stephen Bevans, *Studia Instituti Missiologici SVD* 119, Siegburg: Franz Schmitt Verlag 2021. For a recent evangelical view, see Michael Kibkalt, “Prophetische Mission” als Dimension der Mission Gottes. Zum Wandel des

*theology of justification, God loves human beings as sinful and as godless, unconditionally. Even the worst realisation of this freedom does not break this “covenant”. And no one has to come to faith in order to be loved by God.*²²

Mission does not have as first aim increasing church membership. If someone wants to join the church community due to its witness, this person is most welcome, but it is not the purpose of the mission. In consequence, there is no room for proposals in the sense of “marketing strategies” for mission. Obviously, “the mission” is not a project of fund-raising, nor is it a folkloristic exhibition of costumes on special days in the parishes, but a way to show Gods love and mercy.

Articulations

The relationship between the kingdom *of God, church and society* is one of the key questions.

For a long time, there was an identification of the church with the kingdom of God, an idea which was developed in connection with the idea of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* and led to an understanding of the church as a *societas perfecta*.

A different articulation started with the church in opposition to the pagan world. There is a fascinating image attached to this idea: The church is a ship, the new Noah’s ark which brings the redeemed into the safe place in heaven. Whoever does not take this vessel, will get lost in the deadly waters of the flood, in the ocean of opposition to God. Crude ecclesiocentrism is a logical consequence of such a perspective, God’s priority, presence and action in creation does not come into view, it all depends on the church’s activity.

Missionsverständnisses in der evangelikalen Missiologie, in *ÖR* 70 (4.2021) 441-451.

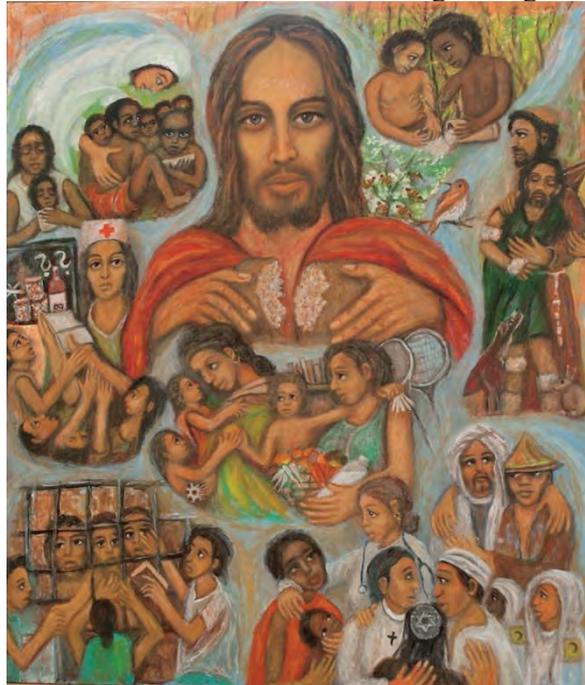
²¹ Synodality and Pope Francis’ views of a church going out point to such an understanding of mission. Thus, mission deals with questions of human rights, ecology and creation, sharing and solidarity, among others.

²² Ottmar Fuchs, “Mission im Horizont des christlichen Glaubens”, in Michael Biehl/Klaus Vellguth (Hg.), *Christliches Zeugnis in ökumenischer Weite. Konvergenzen und Divergenzen als Bereicherung des Missionsverständnisses*, Aachen/Hamburg: Missio Aachen/EMW 2016, 116-122, 116 (my translation).

Certainly, this view finds support in the Great Commission:

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matt 28:18-20; see also Mark 16:15-16)

In church history and with the beginning of the age of discoveries, this was the articulation the church wanted to impose: God as the creator of the world sent his Son into the world and all power belongs to him. This dominion lies now with the Son's representative on earth, the Roman Pope, and it is his task to charge different kings and empires with different territories in order to establish the correct world order. Thus, Portugal and Spain were entrusted with



the new lands along the African shores and in what eventually became the Americas, in order to civilise and order the peoples there. This is the *Padroado* or Patronage system under the presupposition that the Pope actually represents all power in the world. I'd like to propose a different articulation taking as an entry point the fact that we are God's creation placed in this world. This world still develops – the universe expands at light speed, physics postulate – in order to become, in terms of faith, a new world. Thus,

there is a dynamic in operation that issues from God.

The task of the faithful – and basically of all human beings – consists in blending into this dynamic. It is a position within a community, sharing a culture, living together within a certain context. The purpose of such a community lies in the transformation of this context into a better world, more equitable, in solidarity etc. These are not necessarily exclusively Christian values, rather they are genuine human aspirations. In recent years, with the growing awareness of the state of the

world in terms of climate change and ecology, such a collaboration across boundaries between communities has become more feasible. What does church mean, then? In terms of Vatican II:

Since the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race, it desires now to unfold more

fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission (Lumen gentium [LG] 1).

I find this proposal of the church as "sacrament – a sign and instrument, that is" ("*sacramentum seu signum et instrumentum*") highly attractive, as it does not imply the requirement that all humans must eventually form part of it. It further stresses the communicative and action-related aspects and is oriented beyond itself, towards God's kingdom and *as people of God*.²³

²³ "People of God" is another characteristic of Vatican II ecclesiology that was eclipsed in recent times, particularly by sectors in the church that were afraid of losing their hierarchical privileges. See: Peter Hünermann, Theologischer Kommentar zur dogmatischen Konstitution über die Kirche Lumen Gentium, in Peter Hünermann/Bernd Jochen Hilberath (eds.), *Herders Theologischer Kommentar*

zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil, Vol. II, Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder 2004, 263-582; Álvaro Quiroz Magaña, *Ekklesiologie in der Theologie der Befreiung*, in Ignacio Ellacuría/Jon Sobrino (eds.) *Mysterium liberationis I*, Luzern: Edition Exodus 1996, 243-261; Juan Antonio Estrada, *Volk Gottes*, in Ignacio Ellacuría/Jon Sobrino (eds.) *Mysterium liberationis II*, Luzern: Edition Exodus 1996, 809-822;

A further key articulation refers to the place of *religious life in church and world*. The main characteristic of religious life consists in its charismatic structure and its place at the margins – what has been called its *liminality*.²⁴ Religious life is constituted from the calling of the Spirit: Within a given context and in response to particular demands, disciples of the Lord come together in a community and share in their engagement for tasks and contexts. It is a rather particular manner of understanding God’s action in the world and the demands resulting from it. Normally, the calling refers to a particular aspect of any disciple’s life: education, health care, scientific perspectives, contemplation, among many others. The calling by the Spirit is a particular gift to the disciple, to the community (as congregation or order) and to the church for a particular role in the transformation of the world.

The roles of the religious are definitely different from the roles of the faithful in the diocesan communities. The charism of the religious is not placed at the centre of the diocese, rather it pushes the disciple to the margins of both the world and the church itself. This is actually quite a traditional view of religious life: When virtually nobody took care of sick and elderly people, of pilgrims, of children or of education, religious vocations started to accept these tasks.

Meanwhile, many of such social challenges are being met – at least in many European countries – by the state. The big educational institutions, hospitals and so on have often become more of a burden than covering a social need.

In a different domain, there is the temptation particularly for the *religious priests* to aspire

to a place at the centre of the church community. Parishes are such central structures. In the context of the present-day lack of priests in many dioceses, the temptation to take on tasks of the normal pastoral care is often too great for religious priests to resist. Taking over such tasks of the ordinary pastoral care in the local church²⁵ may result in a double detriment for the church: In the first place, these religious are most likely not doing what their charism is intended for – they administer a parish instead of doing mission at the margins or preaching spiritual exercises or join in the care for the environment. The second detriment for the church consists in the fact that by supplying priests they give the bishops the wrong impression that the system could go on without their taking steps to solve the problems of priestly vocations for their parishes.²⁶ Furthermore, in many places, bishops are obviously prepared to abandon the pastoral care and employ the priests in ever bigger administrative structures where they are reduced to dispensers of a few sacraments, without any time left for actual pastoral care: talking with people, listening to their needs and sharing in their ordinary life. Apparently, many bishops are reluctant to take the intellectual and spiritual courage for the necessary steps to assure their communities an adequate access to the Eucharist and spiritual accompaniment; a couple of decades ago, they feared to “sadden the Pope’s mind” through even the slightest hint towards discussing topics like the ordination of *virii probati* or women.

Liminality has a further characteristic: Often, religious are used to taking leading positions in their missions. We manage institutions and

Christoph Theobald, Die Kirchenkonstitution *Lumen gentium*. Programmatisc Vision – Kompromisstext – Ansatz für einen Paradigmenwechsel, in Jan-Heiner Tück (ed.), *Erinnerung an die Zukunft. Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil*, Wien: Herder 2012, 201-220; Gerhard Kruip, Wer ist das Volk? Papst Franziskus zur “Legitimität des Volksbegriffs”, in Ursula Nothelle-Wildfeuer/Lukas Schmitt (eds.), *Unter Geschwistern? Die Sozialenzyklika Fratelli tutti: Perspektiven – Konsequenzen – Kontroversen*, Katholizismus im Umbruch 14, Freiburg: Herder 2021, 207-219.

²⁴ Some participants in the SEDOS study day wondered about marginality: It is a physical space, but most of all a social location. For example, work with homeless.

Parishes may be support structures, but still, the homeless etc. would be served first. This has to do with “taking on the smell of the sheep” (see *Evangelii gaudium* 24), and smelling and actually stinking of sheep will ordinarily set the disciples apart from the centralised and well-ordered structures of church and society.

²⁵ See John Paul II’s distinction of three situations for evangelisation in RM 33.

²⁶ It comes a bit as an irony of history when bishops at times convene their diocesan councils for deliberations on the pastoral needs in their dioceses but starkly ignore and exclude the religious priests. I have seen such complaints in a diocese where 40% of the parishes were taken care of by religious priests, but they were not invited to the pastoral planning discussions.

decide on procedures and approaches. Liminality would in a different manner also mean giving up such leadership positions, or rather not look for them. It would imply getting integrated into other groups and their tasks and manners of going about things. Such an attitude has consequences: There may be different rules for time dedicated to work. This may enter into conflict with spaces for daily mass or the communitarian times of prayer and meals. The assigned holiday time would have to be used for the annual retreat or community meetings, provincial assemblies, meetings for ongoing formation and so on.

I see a further problem with a *prophetic stance* at the margins of society. At this moment, many of the younger religious are foreigners in their mission places. The moment such a missionary commitment in liminality takes on political implications – the normal course of development – these religious might face problems with their legal status. To give an example: There are many groups of environmentalists who protest at coalpits against the continuing exploitation of coal for energy. Even if a religious group should decide that such a protest against corporations and their deadly business is what God asks of them for the benefit of the integrity of creation, participating in such protests might call the attention of the police and lead to visa problems. Or the committed work with refugees: Sooner or later, such an engagement will lead to conflicts with public structures.

If one accepts these presuppositions of what mission is and what it is not supposed to be, and under the suggested articulations, mission in the secular contexts of Europe could be seen in several perspectives.

Perspectives

Gratuity: As the call to religious life and discipleship is unmerited grace, mission is shared in such a gratuitous manner: taking part in the life of the community, in the announcement of good news, of consolation and practical help. If God heals and saves all out of grace, such is the attitude of the missionary disciple.

Dialogue: The term of dialogue is somehow tricky and certainly has a long tradition of developing different meanings. The point of dialogue consists in approaching together a bigger truth that both participants somehow are looking for and can't quite comprehend from their own viewpoint. Dialogue is not understood as a gentle method of transmitting my truth to others who need it for their salvation and worldview, as opposed to previous methods of imposing our message.²⁷

It is a shift in understanding one's own position. Mission in Europe could mean, in Christoph Theobald's analysis, a hospitality, and accepting the hospitality of the others:

*It can first be understood as hospitality, which transforms the host into a "guest" of the guest, especially also of the guest who, according to human judgement, will never become a disciple of Jesus and will also never belong to the church. His elementary faith in life and his competence in language and interpretation are the focus of our interest. The second chapter of the Decree on the Mission begins precisely with this "witness" and speaks in this context of conversatio, colloquium and dialogus. Yes, one can even add that "church" is born in such significant encounters where the pure interest in the always threatened "faith" of the other in the meaning of his life becomes the "space" where this other may discover Christ.*²⁸

²⁷ Particularly in Timothy Radcliffe's presentation, this aspect of how to go about "truth" was vividly discussed.

²⁸ Christoph Theobald, *Christentum als Stil. Für ein zeitgemäßes Glaubensverständnis in Europa*, Veröffentlichungen der Papst-Benedikt-XVI-

Gastprofessur an der Fakultät für Katholische Theologie der Universität Regensburg. Hrsg. von der Fakultät für Katholische Theologie der Universität Regensburg in Verbindung mit der Joseph Ratzinger Papst Benedikt XVI.-Stiftung, Freiburg: Herder 2018, 88 (my translation).

Theobald's insistence is not on being hospitable, that the church and the community offer hospitality, but to the contrary: In a secularised Europe after religion and Christianity, mission means accepting the hospitality of the others and responding to their guidance and questions. This returns to the fundamental question of how to go about the crisis of credibility in Europe:

[It] either leads to defending the same faith in its dogmatic, liturgical and moral-theological form and formulation in a kind of inward discourse – at the price of its “exculturation” – without making an effort to render it credible and understandable, or to allowing oneself to be asked again – in our context – the question: What is faith actually all about? The individual and ecclesial capacity to learn that is shown in this way is already in itself a sign of credibility, especially when such learning, reflection, “conversion” and questioning takes place in the space of hospitality and possibly holy hospitality.²⁹



(Two SVD confreres in dialogue)

This dialogical approach to the question what faith in the end is supposed to be about leads to a shift in the choice of the motivational and grounding texts for mission: It will be less the Great Commission in Matthew and Mark, but rather build on the Spirit and her careful teasing, according to Zach 8:23:

Thus says the Lord of hosts: In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.”

It is such an attitude of dialogue that lets the other ask for the rationality of hope which has become visible in a life project:

[I]n your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect (1 Pet 3:15).

This “reason for the hope” means also the rationality of Christian hope in the present-day social context, and it has implications for the translation into the “illiterate” religious situation: Careful communication, answering cautious questions by the “other” who have invited the missionary disciples into their own hospitality are the fundamental attitudes.

Witness: Such responsiveness regarding the hope within a communication process has fundamentally to do with witness. This is not new, as the *Letter to Diognetus* shows (in the 2nd century):

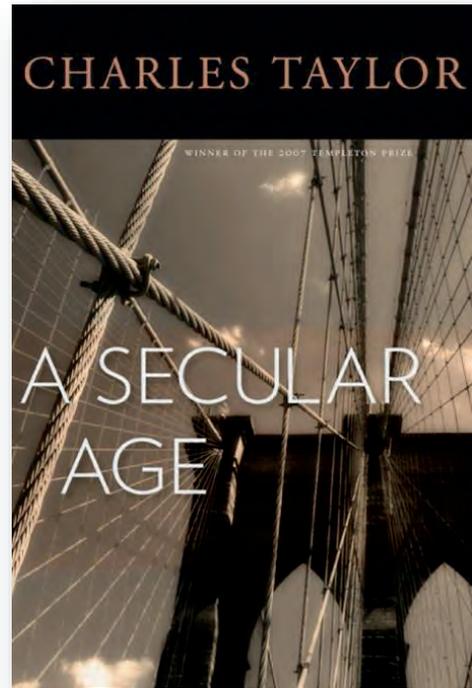
For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. [...] They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if they were foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring [lit.: “cast away foetuses”]. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich.³⁰

²⁹ Ibid., 68f.

³⁰ See: <https://bkv.unifr.ch/de/works/46/versions/900/divisions/184060>

Conclusion

Mission takes place at the margins of society, in meaningful relationships of disciples with people around them and among themselves. The disciples take an attitude of listening and responding to the host's gentle questions and insinuations regarding motivations for solidarity, mercy, service and hope. The church that becomes visible in such communities of disciples and their hosts will be rather different from what we used to know in the past as a socially and ideologically dominant institution, it will resemble more what Pope Francis calls a battered and bruised community, a field hospital smelling of sheep and vulnerability, but full of hope and confidence in the Lord.



Does Europe need Missionaries?

The SEDOS Director, Peter Baekelmans, gave me this question: ‘Does Europe need missionaries?’ When I was a school boy learning Latin, we learnt about questions expecting the answer “Yes”. I am sure that if I replied “No”, Peter would be most upset! [smile]

Of course, Missionaries are needed everywhere, but why especially now in Europe? Firstly because of Europe’s pervasive secularism, of which Father Christian Tauchner has just spoken. God’s existence is no longer self-evident for Europeans, especially in the West but increasingly elsewhere as well. But how can we proclaim our faith when religion is usually considered to be a private matter between God and the individual? Certainly, in Britain, it would be considered very bad manners to try to convince anyone else of one’s faith. The reaction would be: ‘How dare you try to impose your beliefs on me!’ Some beliefs can be championed, for example veganism. Question: “How do you know if someone is a vegan? Answer: “Because they will tell you!” But in the case of religion one cannot...

There are conversions to Christianity, but usually because people knock on the door of the Church, and not because the Church has actively gone out to seek them. To do so would be considered proselytism, which is reckoned to be a sign of arrogance.

At the end of every Mass we are sent to proclaim our faith. But why? Firstly, because we believe it to be true. It belongs to our human dignity that we seek and share the truth. Truth is the basis of all human community. Human beings flourish in the shared pursuit of truth as fish do in water and birds in the air. Without it we perish and society disintegrates. To share what I believe to be most deeply true expresses my belief in the dignity of the other person. She or he is not just a consumer, or statistic, but someone made for the truth. The motto of the Order of

Preachers is Veritas, truth. It was this motto that drew me to the Dominicans even though I had never met a Dominican, which might have been just as well!

Our post-truth society has largely lost confidence in the possibility of objective truth even to some extent in science, so the task of the missionary is both necessary and difficult. It is necessary because the loss of the love of truth is filling the media with fake news and crazy conspiracy theories such as Qanon, which believes the world is run by a small elite of Satan worshipping paedophiles. Whereas we all know that it is really ruled by the Jesuits! [smile] In the USA and in Britain we have some politicians who seem to have lost all conception of the truth.

Today there is a battle within Russia, and it is over the truth. The Russian regime is ordering classes on the difference between truth and falsehood. It has declared that the truth is that there is no war in Ukraine. It has decreed that anyone who asserts otherwise must be silenced and punished. The greatest conflict in Europe in my lifetime is about the possibility of truth. George Orwell foresaw this in his novel 1984, published in 1949. He portrayed a world in which the government declares that war is peace; freedom is slavery, and ignorance is strength. That is Putin’s Russia. Yet that hunger for truth lies deep within our humanity and it cannot be entirely eliminated. A Polish Dominican, Pawel Krupa, made a TikTok clip. He enacts a dialogue in which someone asks him, “Have you got any message to the youth?” He replies, “You know. You happen to ask a priest, and even more specifically a priest of the Catholic Church. I have something for both young and old. Seek for the truth and the truth will set you free....” Within two or three days, there had been 5 million views. At the time of writing, it was up to over 10 million views and 1.7 million likes. Very few of the people who liked it even knew that Pawel was quoting

Jesus, but those gospel words touched a deep hunger, 'Seek for the truth and the truth will set you free.' So the missionary is impelled by the love of truth without which there is only bondage.

But we shall speak with authority only if we are seen to be deeply truthful men and women: truthful about our beloved but wounded Church, which has been so hideously damaged by sexual abuse and its cover up by the Church leadership. Why should anyone believe that our faith is true if we are not truthful about everything? We shall only be authentic witnesses if we are eager to learn from other people, and receive the gift of the truth that they treasure. A preacher is a beggar who begs of everyone what they can teach us. The French Dominican Marie-Dominique Chenu was one of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council. Even when he was eighty years old, he was out every night meeting academics, trade union leaders, artists and poets. He was impelled to share his faith and learn from them. When we met for a beer in the refectory late every night, he would ask us, 'What have you learnt today?'. This great scholar always had 'a beginner's mind.'

But above all, we shall only be credible witnesses to the truth if we open our hearts and minds to people with whom we disagree even within the Church, even within our own communities! We must transcend narrow party-political ideologies and refuse the poison of polarisation. Yves Congar, OP, said 'I have loved the truth as I have loved a person'. So, Europe needs missionaries, because it needs to fall in love with truth again. If it does not, before us lie conflict and division and the loss of all mutual trust. Already we see alarming signs of this within the United States of America, with the rise of violence.

We all contribute to this love of truth differently: academics, journalists who are facing prison all over the world, pastors and contemplatives: Isaac of Nineveh, the seventh century hermit, famously said, 'If you love truth, be a lover of silence.' We religious need

that interior silence in which the truth can greet us and set us free.

But why is the truth of our faith urgently needed in Europe today? Not all truths matter equally. I expect you know the story of a man who went up in a hot air balloon and drifted over the south of England. Eventually he came down in a tree, but he had no idea where he was. So he asked two passers-by: "Where am I?" They replied: "You are in a tree!". He said, "You must be Dominicans". "How do you know?" Because what you say is true but completely useless'. [smile] So why is the death and resurrection of a man in the Middle East two thousand years ago good news for Europe today? Why does it matter?

Contemporary Europe is afflicted by two great wounds. The loss of hope for the future, and a disbelief in the forgiveness of the past. These lay terrible burdens on our young. How can you live now if there is no future and you are crushed by the past?

Our young desperately need hope. An ecological crisis is looming. All over the world democracy is weakening and strong leaders, usually men, are claiming power. War has again broken out in Europe. Putin threatens the use of nuclear war. The daily lives of the young are filled with stress. Most find it impossible to afford to buy houses and have somewhere to call their own. Millions of migrants are on the move, seeking peace and security. So it is understandable that many young people do not want to have children. Why bring another human being into our doomed planet? The natality rate of Europe is plummeting, especially in Catholic Italy and Spain. So at the end of Mass we are all sent out to be missionaries of hope.

There are myriad ways in which we can do this, through words or deeds, explicitly or implicitly, through kindness and compassion, poetry or painting. Some of us even do it through writing! [smile] But SEDOS did not ask me to explore how we are to be missionaries, only why!

But let's look at the grounds of our hope. That might suggest both why and how we can share it. The secret of our Christian hope was unlocked for me personally in places in which

there seemed to be none. Above all in Rwanda during the genocide and then in Iraq and Syria.

One example: I visited Syria a few years ago. Our base was a monastery in the hills between Damascus and Homs. We were just three miles from the front line with Isis and we were kept awake at night by the artillery fire from a gun emplacement just fifty yards away. Actually I was delighted because it was the only thing that woke up the Anglican clergyman with whom I had to share a room and who snored like a pneumatic drill. [smile] Every morning, the monastery bell rang out defiantly, summoning us to the Eucharist. I wonder what the terrorists in their nearby trenches thought of its sound echoing across the small valley that separated us. There is nothing like being close to people who would take pleasure in cutting off your head for disclosing the hope of the Last Supper. Every morning, we were transported back to that last night when everything was descending into chaos. Judas had betrayed Jesus, Peter was about to deny him, and the others were getting ready to flee. All that lay ahead apparently was failure, suffering and death; the future had disappeared. It looked as if Jesus had totally failed. Then Jesus took the bread and broke it saying, 'This is my body given for you.' Every Sunday we gather to remember the worst of all crises, the Last Supper, when Christ gave us the sacrament of hope. The Eucharist is not a cheerful gathering of nice people who sing songs and feel good. It is an outrageous expression of hope in defiance of everything that could destroy it.

In our perilous world, many young people endure crisis, leading to self-harm, despair or even suicide. Why carry on? The Eucharist carries us back to the most terrible crisis that the world has ever known. Love Incarnate came to us with open arms and we hanged him on a cross, arms still open wide. But this crisis was fertile beyond anyone's wildest imagination. On Easter Day, the dead wood of the cross flowered. The Eucharist is our hope that however dead or barren our lives may seem to be, a flowering lies ahead. And so we need not fear a crisis. The American

Dominicans once gave me a T-shirt which read: '*Have a good crisis!*' [smile]

We witness to this hope by being unafraid of crisis. Many of your congregations are probably passing through a crisis at this moment in Europe, some with no vocations at all. Many of your communities will die, and perhaps also the beloved projects to which you have given your lives: your schools and hospitals. And of course, each of us must face our own deaths. All this we can do in joy and sorrow, which are woven together, because we trust that the Lord will grant some fruit that we cannot imagine and may never know. The authenticity of our witness to our faith is inseparable from the truthfulness with which we face all these sorts of death, our own and that of the institutions which we love.

When I was elected Provincial, my first duty was to visit a Dominican monastery of contemplative nuns, called Carisbrooke. I went with the previous Provincial, Peter. They had reached the end of the road and had to face closure. One of them said to me, "But our dear Lord would not let Carisbrooke die, would he?" To which Peter replied: "He let his own Son die." So we are missionaries of a hope for a future which we cannot imagine but we trust the Lord will give. We shall be so if we face death with joy.

Here is a question to which I do not have a clear answer. Each community must answer it in their own way. If our congregation or community is dying in Europe, how do we live this in hope? Do we spend lots of money in ensuring that our aging brothers or sisters have the greatest comfort and security, often way beyond what most people could afford? Or do we give everything that we can, even at the cost of our own comfort, to support young people who struggle for the future, or communities in other continents which will be the future? That is a tough question! Somehow, we must live this moment with the insane generosity of Jesus at the Last Supper. What will that mean for you? How much insecurity can we embrace in hope?

One expression of this hope is just getting up each morning and doing whatever good deed the Lord gives one to do that day. St Paul says

that we are 'created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.' (Ephesians 2:10). Terry Eagleton writes: 'The most flourishing acts are those performed as though they were one's last, and thus accomplished not for their consequences but for their own sake.'

Again it was in the war-torn Middle East that I saw this most beautifully. One of our brothers had been reluctant to come back to Baghdad. He had been afraid but now he was happy to be there. He said to me: 'Hope means that I live now, whatever may happen tomorrow.' The Sisters of Charity care for disabled kids who have been abandoned by their families. I cannot forget the grave face of Nora, born with no legs or arms, and who feeds the youngest children with a spoon in her mouth. We had great joy in a home for women of all faiths abandoned by their families which is run by two consecrated virgins.

I also found hope in the good deeds that Muslims did for Christians. Just below the monastery in Syria at which we stayed, lies the village of Qara. A few years ago it was captured by Daesh or ISIS. The icons in our churches were defaced, the graves in the Christian cemetery dug up and the bodies scattered all the place. When the village was recaptured, the Christians had nowhere to celebrate Christmas, and the imam said: "Come and celebrate it in the mosque."

These are good deeds just done for their own sake, and not as part of a political program. They are not means to an end. The Italian Jewish writer Primo Levi met Lorenzo in the concentration camp of Auschwitz. Lorenzo gave him part of his ration of bread every day. He wrote: 'I believe it was really due to Lorenzo that I am alive today; and not so much for his material aid as for his having

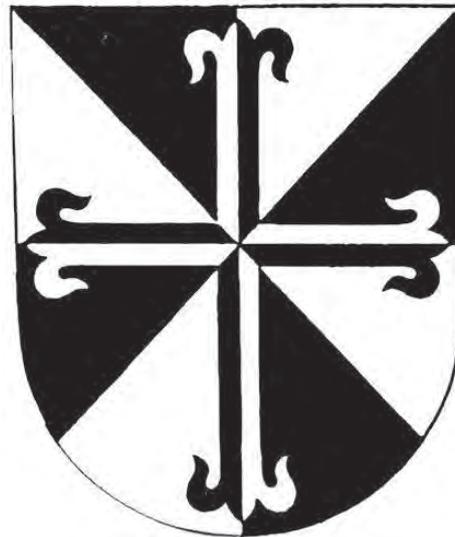
constantly reminded me by his presence, by his natural and plain manner of being good, that there still exists a world outside our own, something and someone still pure and whole, not corrupt, not savage...something difficult to define, a remote possibility of good but for which it was worth surviving. Thanks to Lorenzo I managed not to forget that I myself was a man.³¹

Thomas Merton wrote to a friend who was discouraged by the failure of their peace campaign to produce any results: 'Do not depend on the hope of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on...you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even

achieve no results at all....As you get used to this idea you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself.³² So to live in hope is to do the good deeds the Lord puts before one, not knowing what fruit they will yield. The Lord knows. He is the Lord of the harvest.

I cannot resist mentioning one activity in which the passion for truth and hope

for the young perfectly coincide: teaching. It recognizes their dignity as seekers after the truth, whether one teaches science, literature or religion. It embodies our hope for their future. Every school is a sacrament of hope. When I visited Homs in Syria, the city was virtually destroyed. We found a small school where children with disabilities are taught. Here it was that the Dutch Jesuit, Franz van de Lugt, had been assassinated. We prayed at his tomb, and then in a class we found an old Egyptian Jesuit still teaching. He was there because these children were made for the truth and because they are our unknown future. True teaching is a rejection of the blind fundamentalism which is consuming the



³¹ 'Survival in Auschwitz' *The Tablet* 21 January 2006

³² *Hidden Ground of Love* p.294.

world. The Baghdad Academy of Human Sciences, founded in 2012, has as its emblem the Dominican Shield with a large question mark. Here, they say, no questions are forbidden! Ultimately the only response to ISIS is to encourage people to think! A famous Dominican novice master at the beginning of the last century used to say to the novices: 'Think; Think of anything, but for God's sake think!'³³

So we proclaim our faith because we believe it to be true. And the truth of our faith embodies the hope for which the young long today. They also need the liberation of forgiveness, freedom from the chains of the past. The cup blessed at that Last Supper was 'the new and eternal covenant poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins'. Judaism and Islam both believe in a forgiving God, but it is the heart of Christianity as of no other faith. Without forgiveness, Christianity would be nothing.

But here is the dilemma. We are representatives of a Church which is tainted by the horrible scandal of sexual abuse of minors. Who are we to tell other people that their sins are forgiven? This could sound like a refusal to face the horror of what has happened. Forgiveness might seem to trivialise the failures of the Church. Secondly, the young are deeply uneasy with the whole language of "sin". Sin evokes the world of 'Catholic guilt', of people crushed by scruples especially about sex. The Irish writer Brian Moore begins one of his early stories with the sentence: 'In the beginning was the word and the word was NO.' I hardly ever use the word 'sin' when I talk about my faith. One of the criticisms of Pope Francis by his enemies is that he does not tell people often enough that they are sinners who should repent, especially the divorced and remarried and gay people!

People often complain that the young have lost their sense of sin. I believe that this is profoundly untrue. It has shifted. Our young do indeed have a high moral idealism. They

are far kinder and more tolerant than my generation ever was. There is a deep sense of the equality of all men and women. Prejudice against people on the grounds of their colour or their sexual orientation is abhorred. There is an acute sense of the damage we are doing to the environment and of the horror of sexual abuse. When has there ever been a generation with such high moral idealism as the young of today?

But this very same idealism can be crushing. How can they bear that there is no forgiveness for all of our failures? We say in Britain that today 'everything is permitted but nothing is forgiven.' The atmosphere of our society is heavy with accusation. The world is divided into victims and perpetrators. Social media records every transgression. Google remembers everything and forever. We are tainted by any association with the wrong doings of our ancestors. Any connection with slavery is intolerable. So statues are torn down, schools and buildings and roads are renamed. Heroes, like Mahatma Gandhi and Aung San Su Kyi are vilified. Because we must be pure, untainted, uncontaminated. This is called the 'purity spiral'. People work ever harder to disassociate themselves from the impure, the offensive. One test case for moral purity at the moment is the right of transgender people to self-identify. So secular Europe, heavenly burdened by accusation, is in urgent need of the scandalous news of forgiveness.

But who are we to proclaim this when the authority of the Church is so compromised? How can we preach what is the very heart of our faith, the forgiveness of sins? I do not really have an answer but I can offer two principles which may suggest a way forward. Neither victim nor perpetrator should be defined forever by what they have done or suffered. Both are human beings made for the eternal joy of God's kingdom. Both are children of God who need healing. My most beloved example of this is an American

³³ Anniversary Sermon for Fr Vincent McNabb' by Hilary Carpenter OP in *A Vincent McNabb Anthology: Selections from the Writings of Vincent McNabb O.P.* ed F.E Nugent London 1955 p.ix

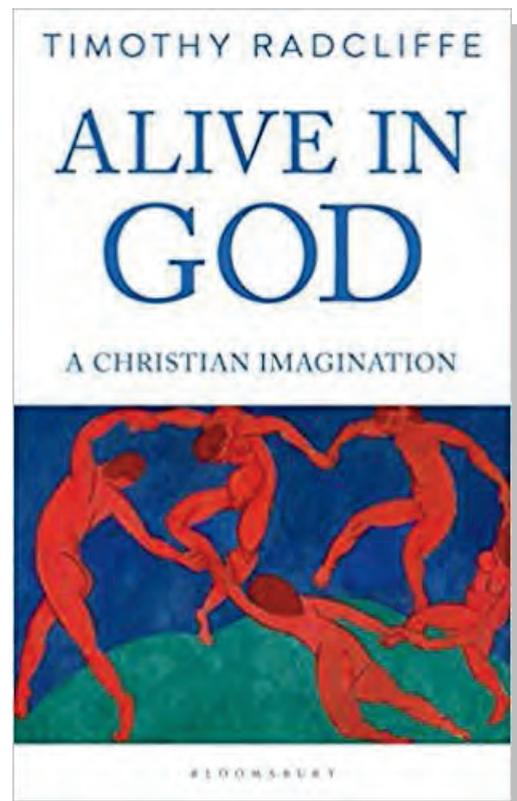
fraternity of Lay Dominicans whose members are mostly people in prison for murder. They are our brothers and sisters. They may have committed murder but they are not forever imprisoned by the definition, ‘murderer.’

I also think of Southdown near Toronto, a place for the healing of priests and religious who have committed sexual abuse or have been swallowed up by alcoholism or pornography and so on. I visited Southdown at the request of the then Director, a Dominican sister, Donna Markham. Actually, I was supposed to give talks at the leadership center there, to Canadian bishops but I was accidentally delivered to the other side, and almost could not get out. [smile] Donna asked me to stay on for a day and give a day of recollection. I noticed an image of Christ hanging from the ceiling of the chapel. But there was no cross. Donna explained that everyone brought their own cross which Christ shared. So that is the first principle. We are all marred and wounded human beings and so we dare to associate with each other. No one is to be imprisoned for ever by the definition of victim or perpetrator. We can go out with each other without taking purity checks.

The second is that it can take a long time before one is able to forgive. We pray every day, ‘forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us’, but we cannot demand of other people that they forgive. That would be another form of abuse. When people are lost in in what Stephen Cherry calls ‘the wilderness of hurt’³⁴, they must have time for forgiveness to emerge. The people of Northern Ireland understand this well. The wounds of centuries cannot be healed at command, any more than can our wounded bodies. My surgeon tells me it will take 18 months for the wounds of my last operation to fully heal. Think of the vast time that will be needed before the Ukrainian people will be able even to contemplate the forgiveness of those who are even now bringing about its appalling suffering. Forgiveness is inseparable from patience.

But here is a tough question: how can we forgive priests and religious who have committed sexual abuse and those who covered it up? To forgive them would be one scandal; not to do would be another. There must be forgiveness. But what form can it take? What are your congregations learning about forgiveness today?

So does Europe need missionaries? Yes, because we believe that our faith is true, and to fail to share the truth of the gospel with others would be to treat them with contempt. Secondly, because the young desperately need hope. And thirdly, because the heart of Christianity is forgiveness. The young have such high moral ideals, but this can be crushing. The atmosphere is heavy with accusation. The good news is that “the accuser of our brothers and sisters [...] has been thrown down.” (Revelation 12:10). How can we embody that?



(New book of Fr. Timothy on the theme of secularization in the West)

³⁴ *Healing Agony: Re-Imagining Forgiveness*, Continuum, London and New York,

2012, p. 190 et passim.

How to Provide Catholic Education in a Post-Secular and Post-Christian Flanders?



Introduction

I would like to tell you today the story of the catholic dialogue school in Flanders: *How to Provide Catholic Education in a*

Post-Secular and Post-Christian Flanders? I would like to illustrate how, since 2015, we with Katholiek Onderwijs Vlaanderen are engaged in an attempt to re-contextualise the catholic identity of our 2419 schools, centres, boarding schools, art academies, colleges and universities. After a rather personal comment I will set forth our development of vision on the catholic dialogue school, on the social and the ecclesial-theological legitimacy of the project and on its practice in the life of schools: in the big and in the small things, in the ordinary and in the special things of concrete school life.³⁵

“Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

In 1997 I was invited to attend a congress organised by the Office of Catholic Education in Flanders. This congress was designed to appraise how in the 21st century starting from a Christian inspiration one can contribute to education. A Bible verse in Isaiah was the congress’ lead: “Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19). Looking back, I

would say it was a prophetic occasion in more than one respect!

I was asked to comment on the congress’ dealings with the question at hand.³⁶ My most important critical observation was that one should be aware that catholic education could shift into a faceless values education of which the Christian inspiration hardly could be recognised. I truly remember the remark of a participant, she was a teacher of religion, who put forward: ‘we ensure values for the young people like being polite, helping each other, autonomy, solidarity, environmental awareness’. I asked what precisely turned these values into Christian values? Because, finally, each school, also the state schools, will claim these same values. No answer was given to the question at that moment and so I thought that it was necessary then to take on the question myself.

Two years later, in 1999, at KU Leuven, my home university, I was asked to reflect on how the university could deal with its catholic identity in a thoroughly secularised context. I set out four points of view a university with a catholic tradition could take: secularisation, reconsecration, values education and identity in dialogue.³⁷ Afterwards I broadened these four models to reflect on catholic identity to education as a whole. In this context the concept of what we call today the project of the catholic dialogue school, came although embryonic, into being. Didier Pollefeyt, my colleague in Leuven, elaborated these models into an empirical instrument,

³⁵ This text is based on the first chapter of my book: *Het evangelie volgens Lieven Boeve: mijn ambitie voor onderwijs*, Leuven: Lannoo Campus, 2019. Another version of this text served as a contribution to the 2019 conference of the Conférence Européenne de l’Education Catholique: *Catholic Dialogue Schools under Construction: From Theory to Practice*, gepubliceerd in *The Catholic School and the*

Intercultural and Interreligious Challenges: CEEC Acts of the International Symposium, Brussels March 14-15, 2019, 142-155.

³⁶ The result can still be read in the record book: *Kienkracht*, Tiel: Lannoo, 1998, 136-144.

³⁷ Published in *Ethische Perspectieven* 10 (2000) 4, 250-258

which he called the *Melbourne Scale*: an instrument to measure among pupils, teachers, parents ... the existing ideas on the catholic identity of their school, and the possible public support for a change and renewal of it.³⁸

In these 1999 reflections, I assumed we should take seriously not only the secularisation of our society, but particularly the increasing pluralisation. The once very catholic Flanders did not evolve into an irreligious region, but rather into a region of multiple ideological and religious positions. Consequently we cannot assume that everyone's thinking is alike: previously Christian, now secular.

From now on identity always is about dealing with difference, and especially about the way we are related to others. Do we turn ourselves against the other to ensure our identity? Or can the encounter with the other provide opportunities to learn something about ourselves, about who we are or could be? Especially at this point the dialogue appears: when we make room for the other's voice, then our own self-securing ideas are being put under pressure. And so opportunities are offered to discover, through the confrontation with the other, our own identity. In other words, the starting point of encountering the other is no longer the search for similarities, but the attention we pay to how we differ from each other. Because difference makes it interesting to engage in dialogue. Through dialogue we learn about the other while at the same time we get to know better who we are, and so doing, through engaging the difference encountered in dialogue, we may be able again to discover what we have in common. Not despite our differences but by respectfully working through them. When catholic dialogue schools engage into this dialogue, they as well might be able to become once again more aware of their identity: precisely by opening oneself up to the other, they might rediscover the inspiration they stem from. For identity is

what makes one specific. One learns about one's identity especially in relation to difference, from the encounter or confrontation with the other.

The catholic dialogue school: mission statement

In 2015, the management board of Katholiek Onderwijs Vlaanderen, the Catholic Education Office which supports Catholic education in Flanders and Brussels, agreed to a mission statement on the project of the catholic dialogue school. As a result, since then the catholic dialogue school serves as the framework for Flemish catholic schools to conceive of their own pedagogical projects. This short mission statement consists of five sections.

The introductory section addresses all those involved in catholic education: pupils, staff, parents. All of them, whatever their religious or ideological convictions, are welcome in our school provided they are willing to actively engage in the pedagogical project of the school, together with all others belonging to the school's community.

The following three sections concern the kind of education we offer. In the first paragraph we mention our intent to provide a qualitative and inclusive education: a broad personality development for everyone, taking into account that education is more than just training and instruction. The second paragraph about the *catholic* approach of the school, is relying on the so called theological virtues (faith, hope and love) and remembers that our school's project is inspired by the core intuitions of the Christian tradition: proceeding from the belief in God's creation that our freedom is a given freedom and invites us to take responsibility, proceeding from the love we have come to know in Jesus and which is the mystery of reality, and

³⁸ Cf. D. Pollefeyt e.a., *Katholieke dialoogschool: wissel op de toekomst*,

Antwerpen: Halewijn, 2016.

proceeding from the hope of the belief in the resurrection, stimulating us over and over again to look beyond, making room for the unexpected. The third paragraph, about the catholic *dialogue school* states that we realise this catholic inspiration today through the dialogue with everyone at school, whatever his or her philosophical background. In this dialogue we all are looking for identity, for what distinguishes us and what unites us, in a society in which identity is no longer pre-given nor taken for granted. In this way we prepare pupils and students to live together in difference. It is the assignment of the school to make the Christian voice sound in this conversation in a contemporary and refreshing way.

The last concluding paragraph indicates what the catholic dialogue school brings about: for schools it provides the possibility to recontextualise their own inspiration; for pupils and students it offers a training ground that prepares them to live and live together in a meaningful way in our VUCA-society (*volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous*). And as regards the broader society, with the project of the catholic dialogue school Flemish catholic education intends to actively contribute to an open, meaningful, tolerant and sustainable society.³⁹

The empirical research results from KU Leuven as well as the decision-making process within Katholiek Onderwijs Vlaanderen made it clear that the project of the catholic dialogue school did not just come out of the ivory tower of some academics. On the contrary, it picked up on an implicit dynamic already present in many schools,

especially in the ones that already had been confronted with religious and cultural plurality. The project of the catholic dialogue school offers them a frame, a way of thinking and a language to address those challenges through entering into the dialogue with their traditions and with the current context, so as to renew their own pedagogical projects.

Schools cannot but follow their own pathway in these. Because as much as the catholic school as such never existed, neither does the catholic dialogue school. Within the great family of catholic education, there is much room for a proper approach, inspiration and dynamic. For a lot of schools,

recontextualising their identities along the lines of the catholic dialogue school, means that they are actively looking – once again – for the tradition they inherited, for the inspiration of their founders, and that they inquire after what has motivated the former

generations to take up their engagement for children and youngsters. By continuing this engagement in an appropriate and renewed way, they themselves more consciously follow in the footsteps of their predecessors. By doing so they as well become heir and testator. And such exercise concerns schools founded by a religious order or congregation as well as schools founded by the parish, diocese ... For all of them it is a necessary and at the same time inspiring exercise to recontextualise their tradition into the present period, answering to the contemporary contextual challenges; 2419 schools therefore means 2419 different catholic dialogue schools



³⁹ Cf. <https://pincette.katholiekonderwijs.vlaanderen/meta/properties/dc-identifier/Sta-20180416-53>

Social legitimacy: dialogue, identity and difference

As said before, secularisation is no longer up to explain how we look at religious identity, religion, church. Pluralisation makes the religious and ideological landscape no longer a continuum between churched catholic people and secularist atheists, with many positions in between (unchurched Christians, agnostics ...). That landscape rather is a patchwork of different ideological and religious positions, which are at the same time internally pluralised as well. This pluralisation has become extremely visible in our society because of the growth of the Muslim community. However, this growth is less overwhelming as some would have us believe. Nevertheless, the presence of Islam is a new identity- and culture-defining factor, asserting itself, certainly also in socio-political discussions. Moreover other religions beside the Islam are visibly present in the public space. The alternative for catholic confessionalism is no longer atheism and secularism, but a variety of positions and persuasions. According to the European Value Study (2011),⁴⁰ a lot of people also consciously indicate that they do not belong to one of the established religious and ideological traditions and communities. Which is not to say that they would not be in their own ways in search of sense and spirituality away from the classical religious paths. Living together in difference more and more becomes an assignment. In this context the project of the catholic dialogue school finds its reason to be.

Today more than ever, dialogue is a challenge. We are living in a time in which identity, the desire for it and especially the claiming of it, are the order of the day. In this sense, approximately three strategies are emerging. So you can obtain identity by opposing yourself to the other: historically this is a classical strategy that starts from an

us-them opposition. The other is a stranger and therefore does not fit into your world. You see him as a threat to your identity. It is a tried and tested way of acting, at best presented in the scapegoat mechanism. In resisting the other we feel one. Moreover, the negative attitude towards what is strange, relieves us from the task of speaking out positively about what might connect us.

Another strategy, opposite to the first one, considers the far too big obsession about identity as the real problem. It makes us intolerant, self-enclosed. Supporters of the second strategy praise plurality and diversity as such. For them, diversity is an asset: the other is no longer an outsider, to the contrary, he or she is already one of us. The trap of this second strategy lies in the welcoming of the plurality so that the differences with the other are disappearing far too easily. His or her strangeness is no longer recognised. Such an attitude can lead to cultural relativism or an all too easily equating the other with ourselves.

The third strategy is one of dialogue. It does not start from a self-securing and -enclosing identity, nor from welcoming the other unconditionally. On the contrary, it proceeds from recognizing the difference which comes along with the recognition of plurality. Precisely because he or she is strange to us, the other challenges us in who we are. He or she forces us to ask ourselves how we relate to that other person, and what he or she stands for. Therefore, in the dialogue with the other we first of all are invited to get to know ourselves. And through such we might find out what we can have in common despite our differences. More succinctly formulated, one could say that thanks to dialogue we learn that what we think we have in common often contains major differences. And simultaneously the dialogue makes it visible that in the difference there can be a concealed commonality. Judaism, Christianity and Islam

⁴⁰ K. Abts, K. Dobbelaere & L. Voyé, *Nieuwe tijden nieuwe mensen: Belgen over*

arbeid, gezin, ethiek, religie en politiek, Tiel: Lannoo, 2011.

say they believe in the same God, however, if we take a closer look there is still a big difference between those religious beliefs. And Ramadan and Lent seem to be similar religious practices, although they have a completely different meaning. But that being the case, in many words and practices in which the worldviews differ from each other, we can discover at the same time a common longing for understanding and respect, for love and security, for meaning and cohesion.



So what is dialogue then? It is a conversation in which we first of all listen and try to understand each other in all differences so as to come closer to each other and to live together in a better relation to each other. This requires a lot of goodwill, suspending prejudices and judgments and above all much empathy and a considerable amount of imagination. As a result a catholic dialogue school can never be a monologue school starting from its own self-secured identity, thinking there is nothing to learn from the conversation with the other. Perhaps Catholic circles once thought they had a monopoly on

the truth, but that claim was probably enough proof of the contrary.

Moreover, differences are not simply absolute, as sometimes is said today. 'We have a Christian culture, they are Muslims, or Hindus. And those are not compatible.' This insight applies to both interreligious and intercultural differences. At the same time, at the other end of the spectrum, it is also dangerous to presume too easily a ground of commonality, as if it were just available, let alone could be imposed. The commonality I was referring to a moment ago, can only be acquired through the hard labour of dialogue. It is a commonality the partners in dialogue are in search of, but once they have found it, it can serve to strengthen the cohesion of our internally pluralised contexts and to underpin the rule of law in our democratic societies. Only through such dialogue can the so-called Böckenförde-paradox be adequately dealt with.

In his 1976 book, *Staat, Gesellschaft, Freiheit*, the German philosopher, Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, observed that modern democracy is based on values which democracy itself cannot provide nor guarantee.⁴¹ Modern democracy thus consumes the values from which it receives its legitimacy, without itself being able to replenish these values. In other words: democracy does not lead from itself to more democracy, nor does it automatically result in more democracy. For a society can democratically choose to be ruled by a dictator.

History, and especially the 1930ies, has taught us that this is not just a harmless thought experiment, but constitutes a real possibility. Also today, this risk is not imaginary: tolerance, the protection of minorities, an attitude of dialogue, resistance to violence, attention for human integrity, freedom in solidarity, the search for

⁴¹ Cf. E.-W. Böckenförde, *Staat, Gesellschaft, Freiheit: Studien zur Staatstheorie*

und zum Verfassungsrecht, Suhrkamp, 1976, p. 60.

connections and for resolving conflicts ... all these values are not pre-given, self-evident to all, and thus to be taken for granted. The so-called modern universal values, upon which democracy is founded, do not exist from themselves. They only exist in as much as they are carried along in the identities of individuals and communities, when narratives and practices, ideas and attitudes become anchored in who people are, in what motivates them, in what they believe. When democracy is not supported by the people themselves, from their identities and traditions on, democracy will not survive.

Precisely at this point, education, and especially free initiative in education, can take on an important role. Indeed, it is because of this that the freedom of education is under pressure in less democratic societies. Because active freedom of education, of organisation and of religion are antidotes to political and ideological dictatorship. The project of the catholic dialogue school therefore is a training ground in democratic citizenship. From a Christian anthropology and worldview it actively nurtures the insights, values and attitudes needed for such a society. Hospitable to all, the catholic dialogue school invites children, youngsters and adults, to search for identity, for what unites them and what distinguishes them, and so doing to contribute to an open, meaningful, tolerant and enduring society.

Theological legitimacy: the critical voice of the Gospel

We choose explicitly not to become just dialogue schools, but to grow into *catholic* dialogue schools. So, our pedagogical project intends to be no less catholic as was the obvious confessionalism of our schools, at the time when almost everybody was self-evidently catholic. And likewise the project is not less catholic than the project of the Christian values education in the second half of the former century, when catholic schools were looking for their place and role in a

secularizing society. Because it should not go unnoticed: a catholic dialogue school is not about a free and noncommittal dialogue, nor is it about a dialogue starting from a blank sheet of paper.

It is precisely because our schools intend to be catholic, be it in a new way, that they are open to the other and enter into dialogue. And in this dialogue we introduce the Christian tradition from which the school emerges, in the same way that the other is invited to share his or her tradition. The catholic dialogue school starts thus from its own Christian tradition and translates it into the contemporary context.

This kind of open dialogue today is highly necessary and never value-free. Each dialogue partner brings in his or her story, questions and beliefs and invites the other to share them. The questions stemming from this dialogue are: What do you hold on to? What is important to me? And do these values differ that much from one another? Or do we perceive something we have in common beyond the difference? In a catholic dialogue school we enter into dialogue based on the catholic reference framework. We do not hide the identity from which we are making school. At the same time we invite everyone to see if they are able to engage themselves from their own background into this dialogue. We want to be very clear about it, also to those who are not choosing our schools, because they are catholic schools.

Dialogue is not just about exchange. Within the dialogue we are not just equals, because our positions shift depending on whether we are speaking or being spoken to. In other words: a dialogue does not involve symmetry, but a continually shifting asymmetry. When speaking we put ourselves into a vulnerable position towards the other; when really listening we (temporarily) set on hold our immediate judgment. The pedagogical translation of the catholic dialogue school adds another dimension of asymmetry to this:

also the pedagogical relation between teacher and pupil does not start from symmetry but from asymmetry – and even this asymmetry, depending on one’s role, is reciprocal. From his or her expertise the teacher teaches the pupils (he or she has something valuable to offer), and at the same time the teacher learns from the pupils when he or she starts working with them in the classroom.

A choice for dialogue, therefore, is not a neutral one. Even more: it is precisely within this dialogue that the Christian voice can sound and may contribute to the search for identity of all at school, Christians and non-Christians alike, and this with a new kind of freshness. ‘In a contemporary and challenging way’ as is written in our mission statement: this Christian voice indeed continuously puts us to the test, Christians as well as non-Christians. At the least, it makes Christians look over and over again for where the God of Jesus of Nazareth may reveal Godself again today. Because the real secret of the catholic dialogue school is indeed a booklet of two thousand years ago, with stories and words of Jesus going to publicans and sinners, to Samaritans and other people who did not really belong to the default, and he did so often to the great displeasure of those close to him, and to the concern of the authorities. It is this Jesus who taught us about God as love par excellence. It is the same Jesus who in his meeting with the Syro-Phoenician woman, learned himself to radicalise this love (“because the dogs also eat the crumbs falling from the table of the children”). Catholic education lives from the conviction that the greatest experience of freedom consists precisely in the love for one’s fellow human being, and certainly the fellow human being who is in danger of being marginalised - a freedom in solidarity with those who are vulnerable, which can go as far as the cross.

Theologically, this thick concept of dialogue is linked to the concept of revelation as defined by the second Vatican Council.⁴² In the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, the insight that God reveals himself through dialogue with humanity, history and the world, is put into words.⁴³ The Holy Scriptures are the first and therefore the normative testimony of this revelation and of the faithful answer that people gave to this revelation. In the history of Israel, in the life of Jesus and in the event of the first Church – and its interpretation by later generations and communities of faith – God actually allows us to get to know God and up till this day God is doing so. Throughout it is a history of narrative and interpretation, which is ongoing up till today. In this history God reveals Godself as a God of interrupting love, concerned about people, taking them away from false certainties, calling for love of neighbour, justice and peace, disclosing closed stories, rescuing people from sin, and creating perspective beyond human expectation. Based on this faith, for Christians dialogue can never just be a pedagogical or anthropological opportunity, but is first and foremost a theological necessity. Because it is through dialogue with actual people in actual histories that God reveals Godself – possibly also today.

Calling upon the active contribution of all – a new statement of commitment

Until recently somebody who wanted to apply for the position of teacher in Flemish catholic education had to sign added to the employment contract, the ‘mission statement of catholic education’. This ‘mission statement’ is dated 1994 and rather strongly based on the Christian faith of both the school and the teacher, taken for granted. If one does not share this faith, one is called to respect the Christian identity of the majority in school, as

⁴² Cf. For this paragraph, L. Boeve, *Faith in dialogue: the Christian voice in the catholic dialogue school*, in *International Studies in Catholic Education* 11 (2019) 1, 37-50.

⁴³ Cf. the first chapter of my: *Theology at the Crossroads of University, Church and Society: Dialogue, Difference and Catholic Identity* (T&T Clark), London: Bloomsbury, 2016.

well as the Christian education project of the school.

In other words: the catholic character of the school was actually presumed to be supported and realised by the faithful. Non-believers or non-Christian-believers were supposed to respect it and certainly not contradict it aloud. The project of the catholic dialogue school is changing that presumption. Respect is no longer enough. Whichever his or her religious or ideological background, everyone is asked to commit oneself and to actively contribute to the realisation of the pedagogical project of the school. As from 1st September 2019 we therefore have a new ‘statement of commitment of catholic education’ in Flanders.⁴⁴ The change of the term ‘mission statement’ into ‘statement of commitment’ illustrates this change of attitude:

“Even if [to members of staff] the catholic identity of the school is no longer evident, nevertheless they will choose from within their assignment, to fully engage this specific pedagogical project. Even more: they are its privileged and essential partners. That is why the school expects all of them to actively contribute to the life at the catholic dialogue school in conversation with pupils, each other and the school leader(s). Whatever their convictions may be, that is where they can find the inspiration to collaborate in the catholic pedagogical project of the school.”

Teachers do not have to be catholic, but are called upon to contribute from their own inspiration to the project of the catholic

dialogue school. That is why not only non-believing, but also believers of other faiths can find their way to our schools. In the first place we expect them all, from their own religious or ideological background, to appreciate dialogue and connection. For also non-Christians may hold to a relational anthropology. By actively participating in the conversation and by letting their own voices resound in that dialogue, they help to start the exchange and mutual learning processes. Moreover, they can even colour the dialogue when the Christian voice is brought into the dialogue, precisely because of the difference. If I spoke earlier about searching for a ground of commonality, on which we can build a



society in difference, then the catholic dialogue school is a place of practice to find that consensus. And a teacher who is not religious or adherent of another religion can also contribute to this: by equipping young people and

challenging them to take account of their own identities and to see how they can contribute to that ground of communality.

I was privileged to witness this when I attended two years ago a religious education class on Candlemas day (2 February), in a religiously and culturally very diverse primary school in Ghent. Two teachers in front of the class: a Catholic and a Muslim. Formally the catholic teacher was the teacher of the Roman Catholic religious education class but by working in team they cleverly used the religious difference to explain the meaning of light and thus also Candlemas within the Christian tradition. And as Flemish

⁴⁴ Cf. [https://www.katholiekonderwijs.vlaanderen/Statement of commitment](https://www.katholiekonderwijs.vlaanderen/Statement%20of%20commitment)

tradition has it, they concluded the class with a lot of pancakes, which all children enjoyed tastefully.

Also the 2018 declaration on religious education by the Flemish bishops endorses this and thus enables hiring also non-Catholic teachers as teachers in catholic primary schools. The bishops confirm that one can no longer expect all teachers to teach religious education. Until recently this was a standard practice. At the same time the bishops call upon schools to be creative with this new reality, in order to guarantee qualitative religious education, for example by team teaching, hiring a special teacher for religious education, and so on.

Very interestingly, there is the additional effect of such an opening that also baptised young people who want to become teachers actively ask themselves whether they are willing or able to teach religion. Willing but also able to do so: do they have sufficient expertise? Are they sufficiently familiar with the Christian faith? Are they in one way or another involved in the Christian faith community? Teacher training programs at our catholic university colleges respond to this: they offer two distinct paths: on the one hand, a path for all those who want to work in a Catholic dialogue school, and on the other hand, a more specific path for those who want to teach religion as well. Because that too is a commitment with specific expectations in terms of expertise, commitment and attitude.

To be realised in things big and small, ordinary and special

How then do you realise the catholic dialogue school? I already said it is mainly a way of looking, a perspective. The project offers a language and a framework to search together for identity through dialogue, and to introduce the Christian faith as a privileged dialogue partner into that conversation.

Then how do we do that? First of all in ordinary school life, everyday schooling. That's the reason why our new curricula for primary and secondary education are explicitly based on the pedagogical project of the catholic dialogue school. In these curricula one can find connections to the project in all subjects and domains. By working with those curricula in classes and programs, schools already partly realise the catholic dialogue school.



(Cathedral of Orvieto, Italy)

More concretely, to embody our pedagogical project, we focus on seven signposts, based on the biblical intuitions: unicity in solidarity, vulnerability and promise, hospitality, justice, sustainability, imagination and generosity. Furthermore, schools are free in choosing a specific signpost they intend to concentrate upon. Based on their own background, target group or pedagogical approach, they can put forward for example sustainability or imagination, or vulnerability and promise. Moreover, they can add an additional signpost out of their own pedagogical tradition. A school founded by a diocesan sisters congregation which cherished 'serving love' as motto could possibly choose that motto as its eighth signpost. It is up to the team of teachers and school leaders to decide how these signposts may take shape in subjects,

projects and the rest of school life and how they will colour it.⁴⁵

But the catholic dialogue school also crystallises in school regulations, special care policies, personnel policies and leadership. Striving for adequate conflict mediation as a core dimension of a relational school climate can be an example of this. Our Office offers professionalization initiatives for schools to become proficient in this.

As a matter of fact, the pedagogical project of the catholic dialogue school constitutes the background for all kinds of support and pedagogical guidance offered by our office of Katholiek Onderwijs Vlaanderen, whether it is about new curricula, professionalization or quality development at school. Whether a school intends to upgrade its assessment policy, its school organisation, its guidance of pupils, participation of personnel, participation of parents, or quality development: just by doing the things a school is expected to do, schools are already on their way to become a catholic dialogue school. To conclude this first point, the catholic dialogue school can and should become visible in the major educational matters of ordinary school life.

But also with regard to the small things in ordinary school life, the catholic dialogue school is to be realised: in the generosity of teachers and pupils towards each other, the caring and attention for those who experience difficulties at school, the atmosphere in the teachers' room, the commitment to the school project, the work on behalf of children of refugees ... and the appreciation for all of this. In a catholic dialogue school dealing with differences in dialogue stimulates being in relation and understanding.

At the same time the catholic dialogue school can (and has to) become visible at special

occasions and special moments, for example when a new school has been built and is offering space for pupils to encounter each other. Or when the chapel has been reorganised and receives a new place on the campus. Indeed, infrastructure as well can be important for the realisation of a catholic dialogue school. Once I visited an American catholic university building with very small corridors, so designed that students would not have the opportunity to enter into conversation with each other. On the other hand, I have the opportunity to celebrate the opening of a new school building and I can't help but notice the size of the corridors and halls. Or when a reorganisation of the school yard resulted in a lot of space for encounters. But the catholic dialogue school can also be given special attention when giving a new name for the school or for a clustering of schools. Or at the festivities at the opening of a new wing of a school building (and the blessing of the crucifixes), or the celebration at the beginning of the school year explicitly referring to the inspiration of the school. Or in the speech of the headmaster at the proclamation ceremony, in which she or he looks back on the past years and recalls what the school wanted to offer to its pupils. Initiatives such as Community Service Learning, in which pupils get to know themselves by engaging voluntary social work and reflecting on it. Of course, the catholic dialogue school also has to do with the way in which Roman Catholic religious education is dealt with at school, and how in this subject the dynamics of the catholic dialogue school, including the explicit sounding of the Christian voice, is made visible. The same can happen during school retreats but then with even more personal and group involvement.

The catholic dialogue school realises itself not only in things big, but also in things small, and this concerns the special as well. It gains visibility, for example, in the attention to the questions of children in the event of the death

⁴⁵ For more information we refer to our supporting publication *Hoop doet leren*,

Antwerpen: Halewijn, 2019.

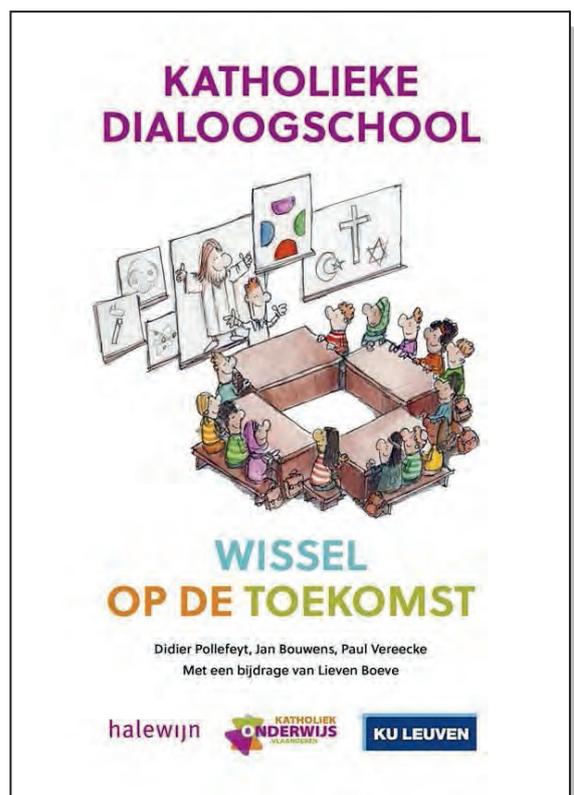
of one of the parents of a fellow pupil, or in dealing with religious festivities (also of other faiths), or important rituals of passage or religious rituals... School pastoral teams or teachers with an interest in pastoral guidance often take care. And Flemish schools themselves are very creative: a school is organizing a dialogue trip to Jerusalem, or sets up an art venue around Easter, or designs a Christmas card, or organises a Christmas celebration for grandparents with a living crib ... Sometimes it is even more surprising. A Saint-Norbert school had to remove the statue of the saint from its facade because of stability problems. Instead of hiding the statue of Saint Norbert in a hall (or giving it away with the building waste), the school decided to put it somewhere in the middle of the school grounds and to move it every three months. Over and over, pupils dashed against the school's identity, both literally and in the spirit.

Designing the catholic dialogue school, and above all making the Christian voice sound in a contemporary and challenging way, requires a large dose of imagination, creativity, but also determination. This was demonstrated recently when a number of school directors started a learning network ('Let them learn') to assist schools that were confronted with (the threat of) expelled refugee children. At the same time, putting the catholic dialogue school to action also requires a sense of reality. One cannot do everything, and certainly not everything at once. Therefore it is very important to give shape to this project, first of all in ordinary school life, by just doing what schools and teachers do anyway (teaching, supervising pupils, speaking to parents, etc.). Further on, it is better, as far as special occasions are concerned, to make some specific choices and then resolutely go for these. Just to give one example, after a process of self-examination using the tools of

the KU Leuven project, a secondary school in Brussels decided to focus mainly on the openings of the day: thoughtfully organised in all classes and in cooperation with a lot of teachers and pupils using well-selected materials.

In conclusion:

The catholic dialogue school is realised in ordinary school life as well as on special occasions and at special moments, in the things big of education as well as in the small signs of attention, care and engagement. With a lot of imagination, creativity, determination, and a sense of reality. And better just one successful realisation rather than too much noise.



**“Catholic Dialogue School,
A Switch on the Future.**

Eastern Spirituality as a Way of Mission

*My reflections are based on my practice and daily work in contact with Eastern Spirituality. I'm a pastoral worker, and since 2007 a member of the team in Holy Cross – Center for Christian Meditation and Spirituality in Frankfurt, Diocese of Limburg.*⁴⁶

Frankfurt

First, some information regarding Frankfurt: the city with its 750.000 inhabitants is an important economic and financial center in Germany and in Europe. Before the pandemic, there were 375.000 commuters daily. In Frankfurt we count 179 nationalities who are living peacefully together; about 54% of the population have a migration background; 19 % are members of the Roman Catholic and 15 % of the Protestant Church; 66 % belong to other denominations or religions. In Frankfurt there are 35 mosques and 10 Buddhist Centers.

Beginnings/Task of the Meditation Center

The Church continues to be in a process of change as a response to the changes in the society. One major aspect is the growing secularism and the declining role of the Church in the society. Within a couple of years, in Frankfurt 52 Roman Catholic parishes were reduced down to 8 big parishes. In 2004, the former Bishop of the Diocese of Limburg, Franz Kamphaus, initiated so-called „Profile Churches“ with priority ministries in order to complement the work of the parishes. Meanwhile, the diocese of Limburg has Profile Churches for Youth, Grieving Pastoral, Art & Culture, Families, as well as an Academy for religious adult-education and a Counselling Center. *Holy Cross – Center for Christian Meditation and Spirituality* is part

of the Missionary Pastoral Concept of the Diocese of Limburg.

In 2007, 15 years ago, Medical Mission Sisters, together with a Franciscan Priest started to build up the Meditation Center. We were tasked to look into two different directions: to people who are well integrated in their parishes and to those who are “searching”.

Holy Cross – Center for Christian Meditation and Spirituality

The Meditation Center is located in a big, nearly 100 years old church and the former house of the Parish Priest. Since the former Holy Cross-parish has merged with another parish, the church Holy Cross is no longer a parish church.

We share the meditation rooms with other groups, for example with a Protestant Contemplation Group, with two Christian Zen groups, two different Buddhist Meditation groups, other ecumenical meditation groups, and with those who do Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) training.

Laetitia Vacui – The Joy of Emptiness

In 2008, the benches in the church were replaced by folding chairs which are now used for services and celebrations. During the week, when there are no services, you will enter an empty church, an open space.

This emptiness speaks to people. They feel attracted, at home and save. People experience having space for themselves. There is no one who dictates moral, faith or belief. There is space to search for truth and for a life-giving spirit. In silence, you can start with a beginner's mind.

The room, the space itself attracts people as well as the vacuity, the emptiness, since the

⁴⁶ Sr. Kristina Wolf is Unit Coordinator of the Medical Mission Sisters Unit Germany/UK, Frankfurt (Germany). She is a Theologian with Post Gradual Studies in Pastoral Psychology, Gestalt Therapy..

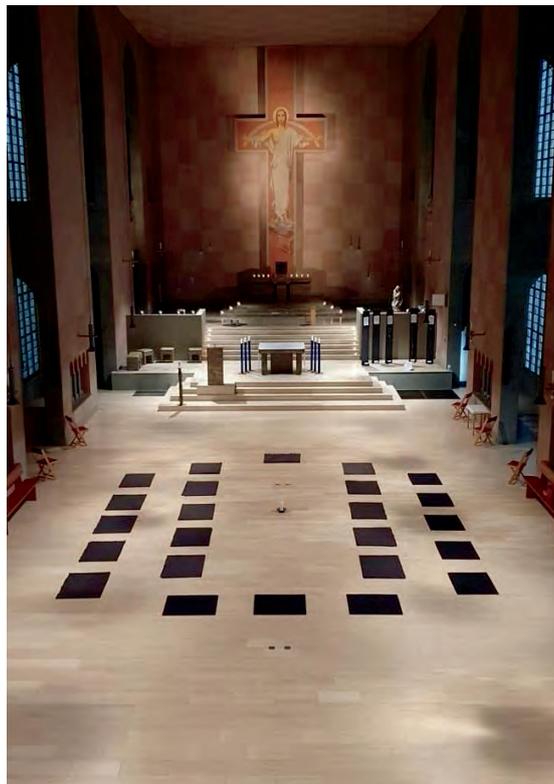
empty space allows for a lot of processing and inner journeys.

Entrance/Come In

Entering the church, you find an installation with God's name "*I am who I am*", projected on a curtain. The invitation is to write the name of someone on a piece of paper and to place it in the space with God's name. Next to this installation you find also an invitation for a breathing meditation, taught by Richard Rohr:

The Hebrew tetragrammaton JHWH is read Elohim (God) or Adonai (Lord). Who God is, remains a mystery and inaccessible for our mind – I am who I am. It is known for a long time that God's name is unspeakable.

Meanwhile we know that the word has not been spoken at all but it has been breathed! The correct pronunciation is the attempt to imitate the sound of breathing in and breathing out. So, breathing every moment of our life – is saying the name of God, if we are aware of this or not.⁴⁷



Invitation to Meditation

Those who are coming are invited to try out how to 'do' meditation. They find short introductions and all that they need for meditation sessions: meditation cushions, mats, Taizé stools, blankets. It is also possible to light a candle or to use incense.

One-Breath Meditation

Next to *Christian Contemplation*, also known as the Jesus Prayer according to Franz Jalics, SJ, we offer groups for *Meditation*.

Participants are coming from different Christian denominations as well as people who are searching but are non-Christians. Some have explicitly practised meditation in Eastern Spirituality, like Buddhism, and after years they want to grow deeper, reconnecting with their Christian roots.

Neither the diocese nor anyone else expects us in the Meditation Center to be missionary in a way of convincing others to become Christians. We keep the space open for the Spirit to guide the persons. We are present to what is developing and evolving. We are

present to the presence (of God) in whatever is coming up.

One meditation, I offer to beginners, is the following:

I invite you to a 'one-breath meditation'. Stop for a moment, close your eyes if you like, place both feet on the ground, feel the ground and the chair that holds you. Bring your attention to your breathing. Just watch it, feel it. Your breath is coming and going, in its own rhythm. Choose one of your next breaths. And now be aware of this one

breath. Exhalation, pause and inhalation. Try to accompany one breath with your full attention, and your full awareness. And then open your eyes again.

This very short meditation experience helps many on a longer journey of meditation. It is good to always come back to one breath, if you find yourself distracted. Some find it helpful to interrupt thoughts or patterns in daily life by the one-breath meditation, to ground themselves in situations of tension, anxiety or in moments of waiting.

⁴⁷ Richard Rohr, *Pure Präsenz, Sehen Lernen wie die Mystiker* (München: Claudius, 2010),

27 (own translation).

Meditation and Archery

The one-breath meditation is usually part of *Meditation and Archery*, a form of meditation which we started in 2014. This has been taking place now for two years in the church – and since then this way of meditating is expanding. I could offer it every week, and we still would have a waiting list. What are we doing? People come and learn how to use a



bow and arrow. Then we sit down for silent meditation. We keep our awareness with the breathing in sitting, in a walking meditation and in archery. It is a rhythm of being in silence and in movement.

Meditative archery has its own ritual: two participants enter the archway, bow down in the direction of the target, they shoot three arrows, bow down again, lay down their bows, walk to the target, pull their arrows out of the target, take up their bows, and hand over the archway to the next two participants by mutual bowing. All happens in silence. You only hear the sound of the flying and hitting arrows. In the end, all participants come back to their meditation place, and sit and meditate again in silence for some minutes.

Eastern Spirituality as a Way of Mission

Meditation and Archery are not sports. It is rooted in the Zen tradition. We are aware that bow and arrows are weapons, they can bring death. Recently, the war in the Ukraine in connection to *Meditation and Archery* became a topic in our talks. Finding (inner) peace with weapons? In the Zen tradition, archery is a cultus, a spiritual exercise. It is an existential approach towards self, including the dimension of life and death. Who am I? What is reality?

Meditation and Archery offers an exercise and training of awareness for the reality, the ultimate reality. This ultimate reality, the reality behind or beyond is the presence within all, is the mystery of God.

Participants of *Meditation and Archery* say: I am at home, I find myself; I am in touch with my inner spring; I have come home; I experienced calmness and inner peace; I gained clarity. Nearly every time somebody expresses the wonder that this is possible in a Catholic church.

Being a Missionary – Anna Dengel and the Needs of the Time

In 1925, Dr. Anna Dengel founded Medical Mission Sisters in order to bring medical care and healing especially to women and children, to those who didn't have access to a health system. She was very much aware of the needs of her time and told us to be aware of the needs of our time.

Anna Dengel started medical missions in India, today Pakistan and later on in many places of our world. She proclaimed "not to forget that our main missionary work is to represent Christ." She represented Christ in covering wounds like the good Samaritan in the Gospel.

Healing is still needed as it has always been. Today, we also see the need for healing within the Church. Abuse of power, sexual or spiritual abuse is brought to our awareness. Many people feel hurt in different ways by the Church. In the Meditation Center, they often share their experiences with us.

Experiencing immediacy and presence, without moral or spiritual demands, can lead into the immediate experience of God and it can be a support for the spiritual search. We foster this search and offer to accompany people on their journeys. This can be a contribution to gain spiritual authenticity (some call it: spiritual autonomy) which is an important aspect to prevent abuse of power in the field of spirituality. Entering a space with an atmosphere of width, of being accepted, of compassion and solidarity, of simply being present can be a healing experience: the Church is open.

To represent Christ as a Medical Mission Sister, as a missionary in the secular Europe, can mean just to be present and encourage people to be there as they are.

Un œcuménisme vécu avec des jeunes

L'expérience réalisée sur la colline de Taizé

Les commencements

[Frère Jean-Marie] Pour réfléchir aujourd'hui sur la mission dans une Europe sécularisée, vous avez voulu écouter sur ce thème le récit de quelques expériences concrètes. Où situer en ce contexte l'appel de l'Évangile à la réconciliation et à l'unité ? Quelle relation y a-t-il entre la mission et l'unité et en quoi cette relation serait-elle pertinente pour la vie du continent aujourd'hui ? La parole bien connue du Christ dans l'Évangile de Saint Jean chapitre 17 fait voir entre l'unité et la mission un lien de fond. «Que tous soient un comme toi, Père, tu es en moi et que je suis en toi, qu'ils soient en nous eux aussi, afin que le monde croie que tu m'as envoyé» (Jean 17:21). La recherche de l'unité des chrétiens, l'intuition que finalement les divisions n'ont pas de sens, plongent leurs racines dans la vie intime de Dieu. L'unité visible est ce signe qui rend la foi du croyant crédible et qui rend Dieu crédible. Au cours d'une catéchèse prononcée pendant la semaine de prière pour l'unité des chrétiens au début de l'année dernière, le pape François a dit: «Le monde ne croira pas parce que nous le convaincrions par de bons arguments, mais il croira si nous avons témoigné de l'amour qui nous unit et nous rend proches de tous» (Audience générale, 20 janvier 2021).

Dans un temps où tant de personnes et tant d'institutions sont rudement secouées, et où des polarisations sont si présentes, que faire pour témoigner d'un amour «qui nous unit et nous rend proches de tous»? Face à la réalité des blessures et des divisions que nous voyons, on pourrait comprendre que certains considèrent de tels propos comme naïfs. Les paroles du Christ pourtant continuent à

résonner. Cet appel du Christ ne serait-il pas justement une bonne nouvelle à écouter à nouveau, une invitation qui éclaire véritablement notre chemin de chrétiens au milieu des complexités réelles du monde d'aujourd'hui? Et si oui, comment?

Avec sœur Agnès Granier, responsable générale des religieuses de Saint André, nous voudrions vous faire part de quelques réflexions sur l'unité vécue dans l'accueil à Taizé. Depuis plus de 50 ans, nos deux communautés collaborent à un service d'accueil et d'accompagnement de jeunes. Pour de nombreux jeunes, l'unité est un désir qui va droit au cœur, elle parle quand elle est vécue, et elle offre un terrain où l'Évangile peut faire sens aujourd'hui.

La communauté de Taizé dont je fais partie est composée d'une petite centaine de frères, catholiques et de diverses origines protestantes, venant d'une trentaine de pays. Elle a été fondée en 1940, au début de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, par un jeune homme de 25 ans qui presque viscéralement ressentait comme un scandale les divisions entre chrétiens. «Comment professer l'amour du prochain et demeurer divisés», demandait-il. Originaire de la Suisse francophone et fils de pasteur, frère Roger, comme on l'appellera par la suite, aspirait, ainsi qu'il le disait à l'époque, à «sortir de l'isolement.» Pour lui, l'isolement était autant une ambiance qu'une réalité physique, une caractéristique forte de la vie de son temps qui faisait que les personnes, quels que soient leur idéalisme, leur choix de vie ou même leur foi, se trouvaient de plus en plus seules. À ses yeux, un être humain même avec les meilleures des intentions s'étiolait dans une ambiance

d'isolement. Chez des chrétiens, il voyait l'isolement à l'œuvre dans les attitudes suffisantes ou indifférentes de ceux qui se contentaient de rester à l'intérieur de leur tradition, plus portés à justifier qu'à questionner le bien fondé des divisions.

Frère Roger est alors «sorti». Il est parti de sa Suisse natale et est allé chercher un lieu en France où vivre et accueillir. L'Europe était en guerre. La France avait été envahie quelques mois auparavant. Après trois jours de recherche à vélo il a trouvé une maison où s'établir, sur la petite colline de Taizé où la communauté vit toujours, et où il a reçu d'abord des gens qui fuyaient, des réfugiés. Plus tard, plusieurs jeunes hommes sont venus le rejoindre et, avec lui, sont devenus les premiers frères de la communauté naissante. Petit à petit leur vie s'est développée. Ils priaient trois fois par jour, partageaient ce qu'ils gagnaient par leur travail, sans accepter de don, et accueillaient ceux qui venaient. Dans la règle de Taizé que frère Roger a écrite dans les années 1952-53, il dit entre autres: «Sois parmi les hommes un signe d'amour fraternel et de joie. Ouvre-toi à ce qui est humain et tu verras s'évanouir tout vain désir de fuite du monde. Sois présent à ton époque, adapte-toi aux conditions du moment... Aie la passion de l'unité du Corps du Christ.»

Dans les années cinquante, des jeunes se sont mis à venir à Taizé, seuls ou à quelques-uns, pour des temps de retraite surtout. Au tournant des années soixante leur nombre a commencé à augmenter. C'était une période où s'annonçaient d'importants changements de mentalité, avec des tensions grandissantes entre les générations et aussi de nouvelles aspirations. C'est à cette même époque que commença un événement qui allait être décisif pour notre petite communauté comme il allait l'être aussi pour l'Église, le Concile Vatican II. Frère Roger et frère Max, un de ses premiers compagnons, ont été invités à y participer en tant qu'observateurs. Les deux frères ont assisté à toutes les séances des quatre sessions du Concile et participé activement aux échanges. Ils ont accueilli avec d'autres frères, dans l'appartement qu'ils

avaient loué au centre de Rome, des centaines de protagonistes du concile, cardinaux, évêques, théologiens, experts, observateurs orthodoxes et protestants, de toutes nationalités, ainsi que des journalistes. Il y aurait tant à dire sur l'expérience de ces quatre années et de son influence sur Taizé mais l'essentiel, pour ce qui nous concerne aujourd'hui, c'est de souligner une certitude qui prenait forme: il fallait que d'autres, et non pas les seuls évêques, puissent faire l'expérience de tels échanges, se rencontrer venant du monde entier, rester ensemble pour prier et chercher, non pas brièvement mais pendant une certaine durée. C'est cette conviction qui fit naître à Taizé, petit à petit, dans ces années, les rencontres de jeunes organisées de semaine en semaine. Sans que les participants à ces rencontres aient eu l'idée d'utiliser ce mot, on pourrait parler, je pense, d'une expérience de vie œcuménique, c'est-à-dire d'une vie chrétienne partagée au-delà des frontières et des autres barrières qui séparent les chrétiens. Un œcuménisme vécu, si vous voulez, au service des jeunes générations, avec à la base ces éléments simples que sont la prière, la réflexion et le partage.

[Sœur Agnès] Comme communauté, nous avons été «embarquées» dans cette même aventure, un peu comme les disciples ont été embarqués avec Jésus pour traverser les frontières et découvrir des lieux insoupçonnés.

Notre Congrégation est aujourd'hui comme une poignée de femmes, dont les racines de fondation descendent jusque vers 1231. Toute notre histoire dit, modestement, la force évangélique de ces racines qui nous a fait traverser les siècles, d'adaptation en adaptation, selon les besoins qui se faisaient entendre.

Le tournant de l'après-guerre où notre maison-mère et nos archives ont été entièrement détruites en mai 1940, le bouillonnement de la période du Concile Vatican II et le renouveau de l'Église... Toute cette période nous invitait à nous laisser encore renouveler et a suscité l'ouverture de

nos missions sur les trois continents où nous étions présents.

L'attention à l'œcuménisme et l'enthousiasme devant l'ouverture de nouveaux chemins de rencontres et de dialogues entre tous les chrétiens ont été pour nous des aspects importants de ce renouveau. Cela était particulièrement marqué dans notre insertion en milieu universitaire dans la ville de Louvain (Belgique), mais toutes nos communautés au Brésil, au Congo et en Europe, étaient animées du même esprit d'ouverture à l'unité selon les circonstances propres de ces lieux où nous étions envoyées.

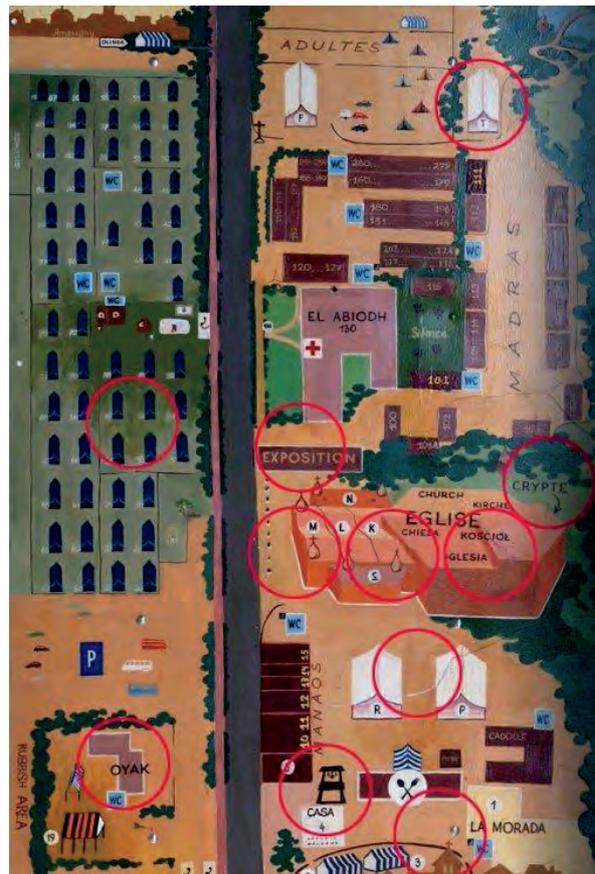
Au printemps 1966, ce sera sans hésitation que nous répondrons à la demande de frère Roger de venir aider pour quelques mois à la salle de vente des produits de la communauté de Taizé et à l'accueil des pèlerins de passage. «Taizé devient central pour la catholicité...» disait alors la supérieure générale à son Conseil. «Tout ce que vous pouvez faire pour l'unité, faites-le» - nous encourageait le Cardinal Bea (du secrétariat pour l'unité des Chrétiens). Ces quelques mois sont devenus des années: nous sommes restées en ce lieu.

La dimension œcuménique à laquelle la Congrégation s'est ouverte peu à peu, n'a jamais été un projet ou une décision venant de nous-mêmes, mais elle a été avant tout accueil du don de Dieu déposé en nous. En allant avec d'autres aux sources de la foi, en puisant à la fontaine des Écritures saintes, nous redécouvrons la catholicité de l'Église et nous faisons l'expérience d'une joie intérieure profonde où nous reconnaissons la joie de nos racines, la joie de notre vocation.

Grâce inattendue: un pèlerinage de confiance

[Frère Jean-Marie] J'aimerais aborder maintenant une autre dimension de l'accueil des jeunes à Taizé. Tout à l'heure je vous citais les paroles de notre règle, écrite au début des années cinquante, «Sois parmi les hommes un signe d'amour fraternel et de joie... Sois présent à ton époque, adapte-toi

aux conditions du moment.» Au même moment où frère Roger écrivait ces lignes, quelques frères allaient vivre loin de Taizé, en petites communautés de quelques-uns. On appelle «fraternités», toujours aujourd'hui, ces petits groupes de frères implantés au cœur de la réalité des grandes villes, en Europe et sur d'autres continents. Nous en avons six actuellement.



(Map of the Taizé Compound)

Quand les jeunes ont commencé à venir plus nombreux à Taizé, il fallait que nous nous adaptions tous à une situation nouvelle. Il fallait nous alléger de certaines habitudes, simplifier encore notre vie, ouvrir notre prière afin que ceux qui venaient y participent activement. Il s'agissait encore de «sortir de l'isolement» en quelque sorte mais autrement, de nous remettre en route nous-mêmes, pour partager avec les jeunes et transmettre la foi qui nous animait et aussi pour recevoir à travers eux ce qui venait de Dieu. L'autre que nous avons en face nous déplace et cela nous fait changer, avancer, nous conduit à oser des nouveaux commencements. C'est là le sens

que nous donnerions au dialogue. Il est de nous rappeler que c'est à travers nos rencontres humaines que Dieu lui-même vient nous rencontrer toujours à nouveau. C'est en nous ouvrant à la possibilité de la rencontre que notre propre foi si souvent grandit, c'est là où Dieu ouvre des perspectives inattendues et de nouveaux horizons.

À travers les années, nous avons essayé de mettre des mots sur cette démarche d'accueil mutuel et de rencontre qui se vit dans la foi. Nous l'appelons le «pèlerinage de confiance». Il s'accomplit dans l'accueil continu à Taizé et aussi en des temps de rencontres, petites ou grandes, ailleurs, sur les divers continents. Du 8 au 15 mai, il y aura une rencontre de jeunes à Jérusalem, que nous préparons en collaboration avec l'Institut œcuménique de Tantur et les Églises de Terre Sainte. Depuis plus de quarante ans, nous animons chaque année une rencontre européenne entre Noël et nouvel an dans une grande ville du continent, en collaboration avec les églises de cette ville d'accueil, catholiques, protestantes, orthodoxes. Les jeunes logent dans les communautés locales, dans les familles et passent le matin dans les paroisses où tous peuvent prier et échanger. Pour le reste de la journée un programme au centre-ville permet à tous de chercher, à partir de l'Évangile, comment répondre aux défis du monde dans lequel nous vivons. En même temps, ce pèlerinage est une réalité très humble, rien de plus qu'une invitation adressée à chacun, à chacune, à être comme un pèlerin qui cherche à vivre de la confiance en Dieu au milieu du monde.

[Sœur Agnès] Dans cette mission partagée avec les frères de Taizé, nous sommes devenues aussi «pèlerines de confiance»!

Sans cesse nous ravivons la conscience et la grâce de pouvoir soutenir, à notre place, l'intuition donnée à la communauté de Taizé, sa vocation propre. Je relève juste quelques caractéristiques: offrir la parole de Dieu et la laisser parler dans les vies, par elle-même; aider à goûter le silence intérieur; susciter la rencontre avec l'autre, différent et pourtant

habité d'un même désir; faire confiance aux jeunes et à l'avenir qu'ils préparent.

À cette école, nos vies de communautés se sont simplifiées, l'espace de notre tente s'est élargi, nos racines ont été revisitées et vivifiées!

En même temps, nous découvrons que notre tradition spirituelle ignatienne se met facilement au service de l'accompagnement des jeunes, chacun selon le point où il en est: aider à nommer la quête de sens, se laisser réconcilier de toutes les déchirures personnelles ou d'appartenances, faire des choix dans le dédale complexes des possibles.

Chaque jeune qui reste plus d'une semaine sur la colline est accompagné. Il découvre souvent que le dialogue auquel il est invité dans les groupes de partage, chaque jour de la semaine, suscite en lui un dialogue plus profond avec lui-même, avec son histoire, ses identités, ses contradictions, ses désirs... Chaque pèlerin fait l'expérience que la Parole de Dieu, sans bruit, sans forcer, s'offre aussi comme un dialogue avec plus intime que lui-même, Celui qu'il nommera, ou pas, «Dieu».

Les jeunes découvrent à Taizé un espace de liberté, sans contrainte (même s'il y a des règles précises et indispensables de vivre ensemble qui sont énoncées à l'accueil). Les réseaux qui se tissent entre eux, n'associent pas des «mêmes» comme le font les algorithmes des réseaux sociaux, mais ils unissent leurs diversités en polyèdres colorés qui témoignent d'une co-existence en harmonie et en dialogue.

Les identités ne sont pas identitaires; les communautés ne sont pas communautaristes. Les jeunes découvrent – et nous découvrons avec eux – la communion qui est en Dieu, qui est par Dieu. A partir de là, le dialogue sur les grandes questions de société peut se faire; les appartenances peuvent se partager, s'ouvrir à l'autre, laisser entrer le pardon lorsque les blessures s'y étaient installées.

L'œcuménisme se tisse à bas bruit, sans grands discours et il se mêle étroitement aux fils de l'interculturalité. Les jeunes font

l'expérience de rencontrer des frères et des sœurs. Retournant chez eux, beaucoup aspirent à ouvrir les fenêtres de leur Église pour que circule une fraîcheur de communion de l'une à l'autre.

Dans ce contexte, nous pouvons témoigner de tant de familles, couples, communautés qui sont nés de cette rencontre des différences de cultures, de pays, d'appartenances ecclésiales. L'œcuménisme se prolonge pour eux dans un œcuménisme du quotidien, de la vie ordinaire partagée qui se heurte encore aux divisions encore visibles et aux traces de l'histoire en attente de réconciliation. Pour beaucoup, cela sera une manière spécifique d'être associé au mystère de la passion du Christ qui a voulu «rassembler dans l'unité les enfants de Dieu dispersés.»

Dans ces jours où nous préparons cette intervention, comment ne pas penser à ce qui a été semé dans le cœur de ces milliers de jeunes russes et ukrainiens qui, ces dernières années, se sont assis côte à côte, à Taizé, dans la prière et le dialogue et dans l'espérance de la paix!

Pour conclure: des appels?

[Frère Jean Marie] Pour conclure, une question. Comment le dialogue et l'œcuménisme pourraient-ils contribuer à préparer en Europe une Église ouverte?

L'an dernier, entre deux confinements, nous avons eu à Taizé la visite de deux amis, le pasteur Larry Miller, ancien secrétaire général du Forum Chrétien Mondial, et sa femme Eleanor. Au cours d'un repas ensemble, notre prieur frère Alois lui a demandé: comment faire avancer l'unité des chrétiens? Sa réponse a été franche et terre-à-terre: «Il n'est pas bon de commencer en disant: "Voici qui nous sommes, voici ce que nous faisons et pourquoi nous avons raison." Il s'agit plutôt de reconnaître nos faiblesses et de demander aux autres Églises de nous aider à recevoir ce qui nous manque – c'est l'œcuménisme réceptif, qui nous donne d'accueillir ce qui

vient des autres.» Ces paroles résonnent profondément avec notre expérience. Alors y a-t-il une découverte simple et vitale que Dieu nous invite à faire aujourd'hui, un «appel», pour paraphraser Saint Augustin, aussi ancien et nouveau que l'Évangile ? Cet appel c'est de comprendre que l'essentiel, dans nos vies comme dans nos missions, ne s'accomplit pas à travers nos projets et nos activités, si important soit-il d'en avoir. Il ne se trouve pas dans nos affirmations. Il est plutôt dans une attitude intérieure où nous acceptons de partir, de sortir toujours à nouveau. Cette attitude demande une certaine vulnérabilité et de l'honnêteté. Nous la mettons en pratique chaque fois que nous osons non pas seulement donner mais recevoir, quand nous reconnaissons que d'autres personnes, différentes de nous-mêmes, sont en fait nos frères et nos sœurs, et quand nous entrons en proximité avec elles à cause de l'amour du Christ. Est-ce que l'ouverture, la confiance et le désir de l'unité qui existent chez tant de jeunes pourraient alors nous surprendre et renouveler notre espérance?

[Sœur Agnès] Comment le dialogue et l'œcuménisme pourraient-ils contribuer à préparer en Europe une Église ouverte?

L'expérience de vivre ensemble sous le même toit, de cultures et traditions ecclésiales différentes, pour quelques jours de rencontres à Taizé ou en y engageant durablement sa vie en couple ou en communauté, est une invitation permanente à quitter son point de vue, à entrer dans la perspective de l'autre, à se laisser déplacer de ses habitudes, à reconnaître de nouvelles résonances de la Parole de Dieu et de l'expérience chrétienne. Ces attitudes sont certainement une terre d'espérance pour enraciner tout dialogue œcuménique et recherche théologique pour parvenir à l'unité visible des chrétiens.

Par les rencontres entre Supérieures générales, ou avec les conférences de religieux et religieuses, je perçois que beaucoup de nos Congrégations ont été sensibles à l'appel évangélique du pape François à aller vers les périphéries, vers les lieux frontières. Mais souvent, je m'interroge:

lorsque nous allons aux frontières de nos Églises, savons-nous reconnaître et découvrir aussi qu'il y a là d'autres Églises. Osons-nous suffisamment passer le pas de ces frontières, percer des portes et vivre l'hospitalité réciproque entre chrétiens? Connaissions-nous nos frères et sœurs chrétiens? Comment nous

éveiller mutuellement à devenir ami.e.s dans le Seigneur, pour marcher ensemble au-delà de nous-mêmes, vers le Christ qui nous précède et nous attend, plus loin, au-delà des frontières de toutes nos divisions, aux périphéries blessées de notre monde?



Fr. Charles Phukuta, CICM, and Sr. Lieve Stragier, ICM

Sharing on the Experience and Challenges of our Mission in Europe

CICM MISSION IN BELGIUM



The Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (CICM), also known as Scheut Missionaries, was founded in 1862 by a Belgian priest, Fr. Théophile Verbist. Our Founder went to China in 1865 with three CICM confreres and one lay helper. After he died in 1868, many Belgians and Dutch CICM were sent there until the Communist takeover in 1949. Later in 1888 and 1907, CICM sent its first missionaries to DR Congo and the Philippines, respectively. The rest of the 20th century was a history of flourishing missionary undertaking when CICM missionaries were sent to many more countries.

After almost a century, all provinces became sending and receiving entities. Today, we no longer have vocations from Belgium or the Netherlands, the two countries where we are present in Europe. Instead, both the European confreres and those from other countries working in Belgium are confronted, just like anyone else, with the reality of secularization.

We have several retirement communities in Belgium for our elderly European members. In addition, several confreres attend to the needs of the homeless, the poor, asylum seekers, immigrants, and others. Their commitment is a response to a specific

missionary challenge, each based on their personal capacity and aptitudes. We also have a presence in parish work as we participate in the revitalization of the local Church with the collaboration and the empowerment of the laity. The dominant attitude toward the church seems to be indifference. In some places, the liturgy is poorly attended, and the average age of the participants is high. As we deal with people in our pastoral activities, we see, on the one hand, many people are concerned about issues such as climate change, holistic health care, the influx of immigrants and refugees, the emergence of a multicultural society, and their children's future. On the other hand, many undertake solidarity actions to fight for change in favor of human rights and the protection of the environment.

Recently, two promising developments have taken place regarding our missionary presence in Belgium: our current presence in Deurne (Antwerp) and a new missionary venture in Mechelen-Brussel.

Our presence in Deurne (Antwerp)

The request to start our missionary presence in Deurne came from Mgr. Johan Bonny, the Bishop of Antwerp. He asked for a missionary presence of a multicultural religious community in an urban environment. In our exploratory meetings with him and his collaborators, we were pleased to see the similarity between his missionary vision and ours. The most important aspect of this vision is witnessing as a community, that is, the possibility of living together as brothers from diverse origins in a multicultural environment. This CICM community is composed of Ghislain Toussé (Cameroonian), Thomas Hendrikus (Indonesian), and Fabio Texeira (Brazilian).

The mission of this community is to commit themselves, each according to his charism and competence, to the following tasks: (1) pastoral services such as catechesis, sacraments, and liturgy; (2) reaching out to people of goodwill and promoting new forms of community in a multicultural environment; and (3) an active presence in the diocesan social and charitable assistance structures, which promote meeting people in the peripheries of society: the poor, migrants, refugees, prisoners, ex-detainees, the young, the elderly, the sick, and people of other faiths. From the beginning, Mgr. Bonny and CICM agreed that the mission of this international community is to be a living and visible witness of religious missionary life in a global community in the city of Antwerp.

To realize this missionary endeavor, the three CICM missionaries organize themselves in this way: each of the three members is involved in the parish pastoral ministry and beyond the parish boundaries. Thomas is engaged in interreligious dialogue with Muslims. Ghislain participated in the preparation and animation of the youth of the diocese for the World Youth Day meeting in Panama. Later, the bishop entrusted Ghislain with the chaplaincy of the boatmen of the Port of Antwerp. Fabio is more involved in the animation of Christian communities in the agglomerated parishes.

The challenges of our presence in Antwerp include reaching out to people inside and outside the church. It goes beyond the boundaries of a traditional parish. This form of evangelization aims to be present among believers, non-believers, and people from different cultures. It also seeks to promote the emergence of small communities where openness to others, understanding, solidarity, and mutual aid are encouraged and made visible. This project challenges us to consider a new missionary vision and play a new role as religious missionaries. Therefore, it requires constant accompaniment and regular evaluation.

Their successful integration in the diocesan milieu and the secularized environment of Belgium at large can be attributed to several factors: the rigorous selection by the General Government of the three confreres, who previously had positive missionary experiences in other mission countries; the openness of the Provincial Government of the Belgium-Netherlands Province who welcomed them with joy and proposed to them a clear vision of mission today and their missionary project, which was supported by the leadership of the diocese; and the professional accompaniment and adequate formation provided by competent persons commissioned by the Bishop.

New Missionary Presence of CICM and ICM in Flemish Brabant

After a positive experience in the missionary project of Deurne, CICM Europe started with the same fervor to prepare for the coming of three young confreres. This time we had to look for a place ourselves, preferably a multicultural setting close to one of our communities. We considered two multicultural cities, Vilvoorde and Mechelen, where the respective mayors had explicitly asked for the help of the church in integrating immigrants. The leaders of the vicariate of Vlaams-Brabant chose the latter. To make this project viable, we teamed up with the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (ICM), who also appointed three sisters.

If everything goes well according to the plan, three confreres and three ICM sisters will be involved in this project together. We are convinced that a team of six members will make the project more sustainable, allowing us to work in a somewhat more extensive area and live out the diversity, benefiting from each other's charism and aptitudes.

It is interesting to see how all those responsible for this plan, both in the vicariate and in the two congregations concerned, take the preparation seriously and work together with enthusiasm to make this project

successful. To move forward with the project, the following measures will be considered:

- Prayer and communal discernment, keeping in mind that this is first of all God's mission.
- Deepening our identity as religious missionaries as Pope Francis constantly reminds us to be open to the world, to look beyond borders, and to be sent to the underprivileged.
- Being clear about what we want: to promote communion in an intercultural environment, committed to our neighbors beyond the usual boundaries.
- Consulting with key players: Bishops and other congregations, ensuring we are all looking in the same direction. Being inclusive and respecting diversity.
- Being clear about what we do not want as we dialogue with key players: no to maintenance mode. Avoid filling gaps or becoming bouche-trous. And avoid the mentality of the 'one-woman(man) show' approach.
- Ensuring the support of the confreres of the province by keeping them informed, communicating with them, and animating them through visits, the newsletter of the province, and information meetings.
- Anticipating the possible implications such as financial constraints and other difficulties; frustrations related to visa applications, language study, or Covid-19 restrictions; etc.

Our missionary commitments are in view of the Reign of God. Faced with a complex world in constant change, the challenges are numerous. That is why the six team members need time to establish an identity, get used to a new place and mentality, and be accompanied and guided by others in their integration. To achieve this, a community such as a Christian parish community is both an ideal and necessary place to serve as a *pied-à-terre* and a springboard to discover a new world and shine... For their part, they will have the task of animating the Christians to

look beyond the parish boundaries and, hopefully, develop paths that have not been explored until now.

Be that as it may, there is always the danger that they may become overwhelmed by the immediate needs of the faithful - religious services, masses, etc. - and be absorbed by a traditional pastoral ministry (liturgy, sacraments, catechesis, diakonia) which could take up a lot of their time and limit their outreach to the peripheries. Despite those challenges, the mission continues. This is the way it is and has always been. Cultural forms change, indifference or opposition to the church ebbs and flows. Sometimes, the Gospel flows with the current, and sometimes it goes against it. But through it all, we are to bear witness to Jesus Christ and his resurrection from the dead. After all, we rely on God and our networking and journeying together. It is God's mission, and God remains our guide.

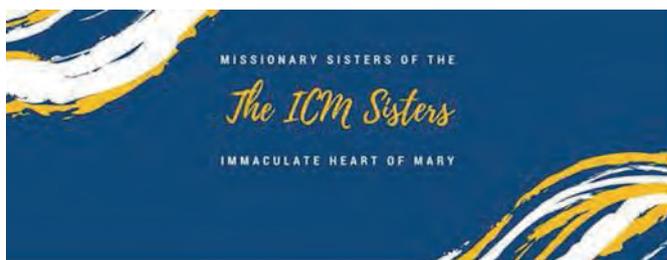
ICM MISSION IN BELGIUM

I have been listening to the different sharings today, bearing in mind the new initiative of my own congregation, the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, ICM, namely, the start of an international community in mission in Belgium, in collaboration with the CICM congregation.

I recognize myself very well in what Fr. Christian shared about Europe and mission. As a missionary congregation that was founded in India at the end of the 19th century by a Belgian sister, Sr. Marie Louise De Meester, our history started with many Belgian sisters who left their country and were sent to different mission countries. For many years that reality remained: Belgium was a sending province. Though in the renewal chapter of 1968-69, with the new understanding of mission, all provinces became sending and receiving provinces, that was not fully enforced for the province of

Belgium. Sisters of other nationalities missioned to Belgium remained exceptions. A few sisters of other nationalities were involved in mission animation work in Belgium, one became part of the leadership team, one stayed on after her assignment in Congo, and another one came for a short term to minister in a community of elderly sisters. Two others were assigned in an inserted community in an area with many Turkish and Moroccan immigrants together with some Belgian sisters.

At the same time there have always been several Belgian sisters who, after returning from their mission, got involved in different projects in Belgium: in parishes, joining other organizations in reaching out to the poor, working with people of foreign backgrounds and the inserted community I was talking about a while ago. From their experience of having lived with people of different nationalities in their mission, they tried to be a bridge between the local population and the immigrants, the marginalized. This is very much part of our charism as missionaries: our Mother Foundress tells us *to have a generous and welcoming heart*, like that of Jesus, where the whole world may find room to dwell in.



Already at the turn of this century there were proposals for starting an international community in Belgium, but at that time it was not welcomed by the church authorities. The bishops had their own reasons not to fill the gaps left by a diminishing number of priests and religious in Flanders with missionaries of other cultures. But maybe it had also something to do with what was mentioned today: the reluctance in learning from others. The movement had always been in the other direction... “Flanders sent out its sons and daughters.” But Flanders receiving

missionaries? I have heard from some of our sisters who were missioned in Belgium: several people frowned upon foreign missionaries coming to Belgium, as if to say: “What are you going to do here?”

At our last general chapter in 2016, the proposal for an international community in Belgium came up again and was accepted to be studied by the general leadership team. Looking at the context of our world and the reality of Belgium with the presence of people of different cultures and religions, refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants, we thought that, as a missionary congregation, we can indeed make a contribution of presence, accompaniment and assistance in the process of welcome and integration of these people. It was therefore decided to explore the possibility of establishing an international ICM community in Belgium. The process accelerated when it turned out that the CICM congregation also wanted to start a second international community in Belgium, in collaboration with another congregation. So, we have now two sisters studying the language in Belgium and one sister who is here with us in this session, impatiently awaiting her visa for Belgium.

For that is not also simple.

Of course, aside from a very multicultural society, another reality is that the Belgian society is highly secularized. The church is going through a turning point and the change is very profound. We are saying goodbye to the era of the popular church, where Catholics made up a very high percentage of the population and the whole cultural landscape was Christian. The Church now has to find its place in this changed society. It is not clear what new form or character the church will take on in the emerging future.

It is in this reality that we have been invited by the diocese of Mechelen-Brussel to have a missionary community. The diocese made it very clear that it doesn't expect the missionaries to restore former church

situations, to recover what was lost. There is no way back. The missionaries are not expected to fill the gaps that have appeared in the pastoral practice. They are given the space to determine for themselves what their field of action will be. The existing faith communities will offer them a starting base and logistical support.

Surely, the missionaries will experience in their contacts with the church in transition that with some Christians there is still nostalgia for the 'success' of the past and the pain for what the church is losing. They will find Christians who are still in a process of mourning. They will find people who have formally left the church, deeply hurt by the cleric sex abuse scandals that have been revealed in the previous decades. It will be important for the missionaries to understand and interpret this grieving process and this experience of hurt. But the diocese doesn't see them accompanying what they call a 'palliative' process. They must not get stuck in the past, but are expected to give shape to a new form of Christian presence in society.

The diocese will give the missionaries space and time to search creatively for new forms of missionary presence. It is their hope that the missionaries will boldly fill that space and dare to add different emphases than what people are used to. They expect the missionaries to challenge them to renewal. For this, it is of course very important that the missionaries have a profound understanding of life in a secular society and the process of secularization. That is what Sr. Marie Helene made very clear in her introduction this morning. Otherwise, they may risk misinterpreting what they see happening.

It will be a mission of patience, of sowing small seeds: by their presence that connects people in the neighborhood, by having a listening ear to people's stories, by their attitude of service, a willingness to meet in depth, an honest witness of their life, creating a space of prayer, by bridging the gaps between peoples of different faiths and

cultures, rediscovering and sharing the richness of their own culture and faith, an openness to their fellow citizens, taking opportunities for deeper conversations and dialogues. Never in a pushing or aggressive way, but always as an offer, an invitation, with respect.

The diocese expects the missionaries to reach out to the periphery. In Mechelen, that can mean that they come home to the world of the young people, make friends with them, enter into listening to their life questions, or reach out to the poor and the people who can no longer fully participate in our society, start conversations and make friends with them.

Another hope of the diocese is that the missionaries will connect the small church in Belgium with the world church, helping the Christians not to fold back on themselves, but to open themselves to what Christians of different cultures can mean to each other in living the same faith. They can point to the needs of the different churches, but they can especially call attention to the wealth of faith and witness that the other churches can offer us in a mutual exchange.

Together with the whole church the essential question will be: How do we engage in a dialogue with our secular environment and what do we have to offer? How can we be unpretentious witnesses of our Christian faith in the different circumstances of life?

In our presence here in this session today, in the sharing of our speakers, I see the desire to walk together, from an awareness that none of us has the answers, none of us knows how and what will emerge from this present situation. In that sense, I experience here the call to the synodal movement which the whole Church is invited to reflect on and live.

Rather than being pessimistic or fearful about a secular Europe and the place of the Church in it, I feel that today we have looked at possibilities and that it is even an exciting space to be in, and as Fr. Timothy reminds us: we don't need to fear this crisis, let us walk ways of hope and reconciliation!

Reaction from a Participant to the Spring Session

Bonjour cher directeur et équipe de SEDOS,

Je m'appelle Peter EKUTT, prêtre missionnaire de la société des Missionnaires d'Afrique (Pères Blancs). Je suis originaire du Nigeria et maintenant en mission à Karlsruhe en Allemagne et cela après 10 ans d'expérience pastorale en RDCongo.

En effet, je vous écris pour vous exprimer ma satisfaction suite au Webinar du vendredi passé. J'ai particulièrement apprécié les interventions des Pères Timothy Radcliffe et Charles Phukuta, mais aussi celles de la Sr. Rose et Frère Jean-Marie. Leurs contributions sont pertinentes car elles sont d'actualité pour moi qui travaille dans un centre d'interculturalité et interreligieuse.

J'ai été très touché par un des intervenants qui avait abordé la mission dans la perspective de collaboration, dialogue et échanges mutuels. Il a souligné la résistance rencontrée parfois devant l'exigence du donner et du recevoir alors qu'ailleurs les missionnaires ne réalisaient pas qu'ils avaient aussi à recevoir. L'Afrique par exemple n'avait qu'à recevoir et devait par conséquent rester passive dans l'évangélisation.

Dans l'après-midi du même vendredi, d'autres ont souligné l'importance de la formation sur l'identité pour une mission vue sur angle d'un approvisionnement mutuel. Mais aussi la question de la réconciliation dans l'Eglise a été bien soulignée également.

Cette formation de SEDOS a suscité en moi un autre thème pour un approfondissement ultérieur sur la mission en Afrique. Il s'agit d'une prise en compte des lectures de la mission que font les théologiens, les agents et les communautés ecclésiales du continent africain. Face à l'époque missionnaire, nombre d'entre eux se positionnent en rupture et qualifient l'époque actuelle de " temps des héritiers ", le moment d'aller évangéliser l'Europe car ils comprennent que l'Afrique a aussi quelque chose d'original à apporter au

niveau universel. Beaucoup d'autres ont le sentiment de frustration et se disent que pendant longtemps l'on a pensé pour eux, sans eux et malgré eux. Ils sont aujourd'hui dans une posture d'insurrection face à l'Occident missionnaire d'hier. Il s'est ainsi développé parfois des théologies fondées sur la revendication identitaire. Cette tendance (feedback) n'est pas générale mais elle est témoin des blessures vécues par les peuples des pays de mission mais aussi un problème d'identité. Y a-t-il possibilité de se réconcilier ?

Le problème de l'Afrique d'aujourd'hui est peut-être moins la sécularisation que la réconciliation. Cette réconciliation devra se faire dans l'Eglise mais aussi au sein des peuples africains. En effet, plusieurs conflits sanglants et interethniques endeuillent l'Afrique. Cela devrait nous conduire à l'humilité et au courage de nous poser la question sur la non impact du christianisme sur des populations entières qui s'entretient alors qu'elles ont été majoritairement évangélisées et baptisés. C'est le cas actuel de l'Ituri en RD Congo ou encore les Igbo au sud du Nigeria. Au regard de ces événements douloureux dans ces régions où les églises sont pleines à craquer, j'ai l'impression que nous sommes des pratiquants mais pas des croyants !

Ma proposition est que l'on puisse ouvrir des réflexions sur la réconciliation avec l'histoire pour nous permettre de vivre la mission sous la seigneurie du Christ crucifié dont la puissance de l'amour se déploie dans la faiblesse du missionnaire qui ne se comprend plus comme un conquérant des damnés mais frère des hommes et des femmes aimées par Dieu. Oui je suis d'avis avec vous : la mission doit se vivre aujourd'hui dans le cadre d'un approvisionnement mutuel.

Merci beaucoup pour cette initiative.
Peter EKUTT, MAfr

OBITUARY

Sr. Mary Motte, FMM, passed away on March 12, 2022, at the age of 85, in North Providence, United States. She has been a great supporter of SEDOS through the years, and was the co-organizer of the former SEDOS Mission Symposium of 1989. We give here the word to one of her co-sisters.

What a tribute to God through Mary Motte's life!!! For, "God is what God does"⁴⁸ and indeed, God did marvelous things throughout her life. Her death reminds us that Creation is God's temple⁴⁹ and Mary's life was one of them allowing her Creator, day by day, to unfold God's love, kindness and care for all Creation.

As you can see below, I have added footnotes and this is significant because days before she died she asked me what she could do to help with her care. I said that she was very brave and didn't need to do anything, but she could promise one thing, not to argue with me while providing her with appropriate care. At that moment, Mary straightened up herself in the recliner and became silent for a few seconds. Then, she said in her stoic voice: *Yes, I made a resolution not to argue with you, but remember there are footnotes to it.* We started to laugh and I asked her if the footnotes could be erased. Again, Mary now in her robust voice said that she would, but I have to remember that there were the endnotes and they are the same as the footnotes. This became our joke lasting to the end of her life. Both of us were born on the same day, December 4th, though not the same year. Mary very often reminded me that girding herself with strength was inscribed into the fourth of December, so questioning her stubborn but loving heart and mind would be no more an argument. Our journey, especially at the end



of Mary's life, became a secret space. I believe, in her heart she knew her journey was leading her back to the Father's House. Two days before she died, she told me that all will be well. My obligation was to visit my family as I had planned for May this year. She said I should go and not to worry about anything, she will be fine and she will take care of it. So she did!

She went with dignity after being diagnosed with Multiple myeloma in November, 2021, a blood cancer that, not unusually, penetrates bones. Hers located itself in the lower back in a form of pathological growth causing fracture to one of her vertebrae and consequently the pain she had to endure to the last moment of her life. As I reflect back on the events, I am convinced she endured more than I ever will know.

On the day of her departure, a peace lily plant in the Mission Resource Center started to blossom. It reached its peak on the day of her funeral reaching high to the Franciscan Cross that hangs on the wall next to it. Mary once again embraced the Mystery of Christ's Death and Resurrection she incarnated fully into and throughout her life. Mary, thank you for being truly our Sister and friend to so many of us, in fact we will never know how many lives you have touched through your love, kindness and sincere care!!!

Personally I would like to express my gratitude to my FMM family, our Fruit Hill extended family: maintenance, kitchen and all care providers for the support you all have extended to me in one form or the other. Most of all, thank you for your prayers.

In gratitude,
Sr. Barbara Dopierala, FMM

⁴⁸ Stephen Bevans, *Love Gives Everything: The Trinity as Ground of Mission, Interculturality, Inculturation, and JPIC* (Rome: SEDOS Bulletin, vol.54, no.1/2 –

January-February, 2022, p.6).

⁴⁹ Stephen Bevans, *Love Gives Everything*, p.8.

A Poem for Peace



(Street art, Rome)

*Pace, pace, Pace
ti cerco, ti invoco!
Vienici incontro, ti supplico
per proteggere tutti.
Pace e vita vanno avanti.
Diamo retta a quell'incalzante,
sofferto, impellente appello,
ma dell'eco inafferrabile?
Ogni essere s'impegni affinché
possa gioire rispetto ed affetto ovunque.
Il passo soave e lesto
della pace può cambiare il destino;
purché le idee divergenti si adeguino.
Vienici incontro,
così, all'arrivo, i vivi festeggeranno
la pace globale.*

Philippa Wooldridge
(Translator of SEDOS)

SEDOS Residential Seminar 2022

from 9 to 13 May,
in Casa Divin Maestro, Ariccia (Rome)



ONLINE (50 EURO) AND IN-PERSON (300 EURO)

FOR MORE INFO, SEE SEDOS WEBSITE: <https://sedosmission.org/>

SEDOS WISHES YOU ALL
A HAPPY EASTER
CELEBRATION

MAY THE LORD ARISE
IN OUR HEART AND MIND
TO ENLIGHTEN OUR
STEPS IN HIS MISSION

