

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 Mendieta/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.

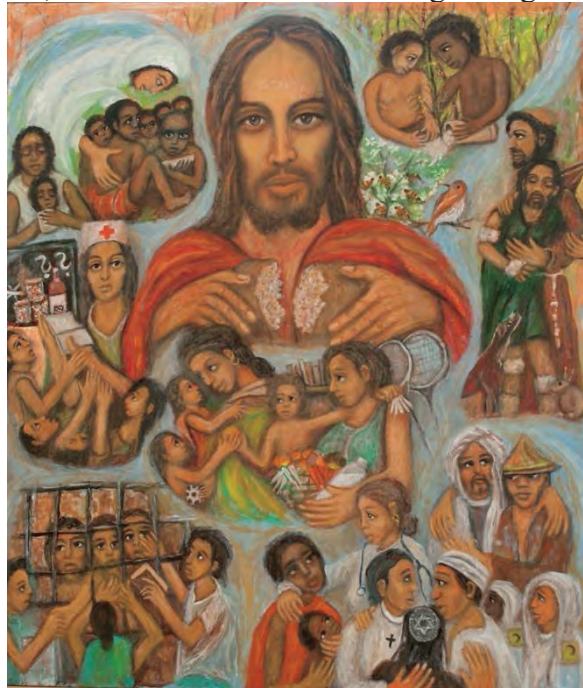
²¹ Synodality and Pope Francis’ views of a church going out point to such an understanding of mission. Thus, mission deals with questions of human rights, ecology and creation, sharing and solidarity, among others.

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*. Programmatistische 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.

