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Mission on a Divine Horizon

“Missio Dei” seventy years later

In October 2021, SEDOS organized a virtual symposium on the new trends in mission and missiology.¹ It was a great success and about 250 people participated at all the sessions. Topics such as evangelization, the paths of mission, different ways of exercising the mission and those involved in mission were discussed. We started with the emphasis Pope Francis places on the peripheries and his existential cries as the framework for our reflection and concluded with a look at the integrity of creation, another topic that the Pope highlights in season and out of season. SEDOS has organized several notable symposiums on mission, particularly in 1981,² with special emphasis on dialogue and the local Church in the perspective of mission.

At the 2021 Symposium it was very interesting and pleasing to observe that everyone and all the Speakers were unanimous in affirming that the mission belongs to God, it comes from God and it is a movement of God that involves the whole world. “An important observation was that the ‘Mission starts in the mind of God’, as Sister Rekha Chennattu, RA, explained so vividly based on her study of the Bible. Therefore, the four foundations [Bible, experience, Holy Spirit, cry of the world] have to be understood as one under the umbrella of the *missio Dei*, the mission of God.”³ Indeed, practically no one spoke of a perspective centred on the Church, that the Church’s exclusive task was to carry out the mission, that it had to bring the world to God or God to the world, that it had to renew itself through new members, or similar expressions.

I think that this shift in emphasis on mission has only occurred in the last two decades, and certainly not in all the sectors of the Church. Understanding mission as something that comes to us from God is therefore relatively new, at least in the discourse regarding theological understanding from the perspective of practice. Thus, we speak of the “*missio Dei*” which presents two aspects: On the one hand, it is worth looking at the history of this concept which dates back to a meeting on mission just 70 years ago in Germany. On the other, as it is a relatively new understanding, there are still difficulties in reaching a consistent renewed practice. The difficulty of placing oneself in the correct perspective of the *missio Dei* is evident from the verbs used to talk about it: practice, participate, advance, integrate into, carry forward.

Place yourself in the context – Mission in the 20th century

The World Missionary Conference, held in Edinburgh in 1910, had also considered the conversion of the entire world during the next century.⁴ John R. Mott, one of the great protagonists of this conference, declared: “It is our hope that before we close our eyes in death, all the peoples of the earth will have had the opportunity to know and await the living Lord Christ.”⁵ It was a conference of great optimism and not at all free of colonialist tones that nevertheless motivated great enthusiasm and effort to promote the mission worldwide. The Catholic Church did not attend formally in Edinburgh, but shared the same enthusiasm. The Two World Wars checked this project: “How could Christian mission still be justified when Western Christianity had so thoroughly discredited itself through colonialism, imperialism and then especially also through the First and

Second World Wars? Had the signs of the times been misinterpreted? In 1910, many had still been convinced that humanity was rushing toward unity, led by Western civilization. But this vision had turned out to be false, had it not? The focus of mission-theological consideration now turned to issues of the interpretation of history with a focus on the doctrine of the last things, that is, eschatology,” Wrogemann concluded.⁶ In 1919 the Catholics reacted first with the Encyclical *Maximum Illud*, by Benedict XV, which abandoned the idea of the mission as a national enterprise – there could not be French missionaries opposed to German ones, etc. This particularly affected France, since it had functioned as a protector of the global mission. For example, in China too, *Maximum Illud* reminded the missionaries to: Never forget that one is not sent by one’s country because “one’s mission is an embassy of Jesus Christ and not a patriotic legation.”⁷ From then on, the mission of the Church had to be oriented to the Kingdom of God, which, however, was still closely related to the Church.⁸

In the Evangelical context,⁹ an International Missionary Council (IMC, 1921) was established, which undertook to organize world conferences to guide the missionary endeavour: 1928 in Jerusalem (dedicated to the issue of secularization), 1938 in Tambaram (central theme: the religions), 1947 in Whitby (on association and cooperation [“partnership”]), 1952 in Willingen (central concept: *missio Dei*) and in 1958 Achimota/Accra (theme of Independence). At the 1961 New Delhi Conference, the IMC was integrated into the World Council of Churches and a different dynamic began.

With one’s gaze on God

Immediately after the war a smaller conference was held in Whitby, Canada. It concerned taking a step forward after the great tragedy and it was understood that mission could no longer be viewed from a Western optic but from the larger world.

Relatively soon, in 1952, the next conference was convened in Germany. This conference that was held in Willingen, a small municipality in the north of the German State of Hesse, would prove to be one of the most theologically fruitful in the history of world missionary conferences. About 180 delegates from all over the world attended. They took stock of the state of the world after World War II in a context of uncertainty about the future. In China, the Communists gained power in 1949 and expelled all the Western missionaries (the *Chinese Communist Revolution*). It addressed the conflict between the Soviet Union and the Western powers in the Cold War and the armed conflict in Korea that started in 1950. The Colonial Era was coming to an end and the former colonial territories began to gain Independence: Indonesia in 1945, the Philippines in 1946, the Indian subcontinent in 1947, Burma in 1948. The national States that were instituted then had the task of establishing a national identity, so the question arose as to which ideological or historical bases could be integrated. The Christian churches in these countries were seen as allies of the former colonial powers. Furthermore the new States had to build up their respective identity in relation to the local population and the difficult relationship with the churches of the previous regime.

Eloy Bueno summarized this event in these terms. Under the title *Missionary Obligation of the Church* (the final version was published as *Missions under the Cross*)¹⁰ which described the passage from a missionary ecclesiology to a missionary theology, from a mission centred on the Church, to a Church centred on the mission through the *Missio Dei*; given the inability of the Church to fulfil its mission, the missions had to be re-founded from a theological rather than an ecclesiological root (in line with Barth’s theology [...]). The Church is solely the servant and sign of

the presence of God. The triumphalist language was definitively abandoned [for] the missionary project, since it is a mission in solidarity with the incarnate and crucified Christ. The Church, 'God's People in the world', must bear witness to 'what God has done, is doing and wants to do in Christ'. This solidarity is under the sign of the Cross, so it cannot be conformism but rather discernment of the signs of the times.¹¹

The conference in Willingen thus achieved a change of perspective. The Church could no longer be seen as a centre of expansion, attraction or as an actor in a conversion movement, but rather the Church itself is located and integrated within a broader, universal movement. J. Moltmann concluded two decades later: "To understand the missionary Church theologically on the world horizon is to understand it on the horizon of the *missio Dei*. The *sending forth* encompasses the entire Church, not just parts of it, or only the members it sends out.... Mission encompasses all the activities that serve to free man from his bondage in anticipation of the God who comes, hence from the loss to abandon God would imply. [...] If the Church understands its mission within the framework of the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit sent by the Father, then it also understands itself within the framework of God's history in the world and discovers its place and its role in this history." The *missio Dei* is a movement that comes from God but goes far beyond the Church to reach its goal in the culmination of creation in God. Hence the Church understands its global mission in the Trinitarian history of God with the world. It is not about the expansion of the Church but about the Kingdom of God.¹²

It is interesting to note that the words "missio Dei" do not appear in the Minutes and deliberations at Willingen. However the entire discourse of the conference was soon summarized in this term which was proposed and introduced by the missiologist Karl Hartenstein and later elaborated more especially by G. F. Vicedom.¹³

Henning Wrogemann noted several points in Hartenstein's and Willingen's understanding of God's mission: (1) *Missio Dei* as *penance*. Since God carries out the mission, he is both missionary and movement – the processions, as they were called – ecclesial activity had to set aside aspects of the mission that did not take into account this divine Protagonist. (2) *Missio Dei* as *promise* in its eschatological orientation, beyond contingent history. (3) The Church acts in a secondary way: integrated and assumed in its own more universal dynamic. (4) The *Missio Dei* put a definitive end to the geographical conception of mission. The mission is not an activity "over there for others", rather it addresses all aspects of the life and culture of all peoples.¹⁴

The reception of the *missio Dei* perspective

Although this perspective of a mission that starts from God and concerns all of creation received acclaim, its reception and acceptance was not unanimous in Protestant circles. Fifty years after this Conference, Wilhelm Richebächer presented an alternative trajectory as: "Missio Dei: The Basis of Mission Theology or a Wrong Path?"¹⁵

I shall focus more on the Catholic reception. A first observation is that at first, Willingen was completely ignored: The reference missiological journal – *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft*¹⁶ – does not mention Willingen anywhere until the end of the decade. The same goes for the *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* and the *Missionary Bibliography*, edited by Propaganda Fide in Rome.¹⁷ The journal *The Catholic Missions*, edited by the Jesuits, reported on this conference towards the end of 1953¹⁸ and emphasized the "call to unity": Willingen would have called for internal unity around the Lord of the world mission, Jesus Christ,

with the mission mandate, but for the threat of communism. It echoed the criticism of Western Christianity: “In the face of this terrifying vision, the people gathered before the Lord of the Church, shielding themselves in the indispensability of his Great Commission, as they realized *that there would be no participation in Christ without participation in his global mission*. It was even said: ‘The Church is mission, and the mission is Church’.”¹⁹ (“The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary”, *Ad Gentes*, n. 2, 7 December 1965).

Now, the main problem was the internal division of the Protestant churches, especially in Africa, as well as the projection of the Protestant mission to the Catholic continent of Latin America,²⁰ after the loss of China. The Report claims that Protestants should respect the Catholic Church. Nowhere does the Report mention a central theological perspective, that is, of a mission from God.

It is therefore striking that ten years later, the Second Vatican Council adopted this vision as its central perspective for mission: The pilgrim Church “is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit...” (*Ad Gentes*, n. 2).

As is known, the Decree *Ad Gentes* reached its final formulation after much difficulty. Nevertheless, in November 1964, the draft of the document was submitted to the commission to ensure a *theological* foundation and it was theologians of the stature of Joseph Ratzinger and Yves Congar who “saved” it.²¹ This resulted in a more consistent connection with the Church, which in turn acknowledged that “the central text of the Council, on the nature, task and exercise of the mission, resumes all the other Conciliar texts on the mission, including the Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity. The starting point of mission can be found in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*, 21 November 1964), in numbers 13-17.”²² The theological section of AG follows the perspective of the *missio Dei*, although it does not explicitly mention the concept.²³

After the Council, awareness of the Church’s natural missionary nature spread on the one hand. On the other, important documents on the mission emphasized other aspects, such as evangelization (Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975) or the Kingdom of God (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 1990). In the 1990s the concept of the *missio Dei* did not play a great role in theological and missiological reflection.

Perspectives

This changed with the advent of the new century. On the one hand, there were commemorations of the Willingen Conference, for example at the 50th anniversary in 2002, this perspective was highlighted.²⁴ It should be said that this discussion was more evident in the German context, even in *Spiritus* I found only few references to this concept.²⁵

On the other hand, there were congregations and religious communities that adopted this vision. One of them was my congregation (Divine Word) that, at the General Chapter in 2000, envisaged the mission in the following way: the community discerns the community spirit (in the Declaration in Chapter #4-7: “permanent discernment”) and in this way it can evaluate the current context (“Our contemporary world”: #11-23) marked by globalization, urbanization and migration. Starting from this context one reviews the situation of the Church as well as one’s own congregation. It’s the *seeing part*. The next part refers to *judging* and begins with an assertion of faith: we see the “mission of God, from the first creation to the new creation” (#35-41) and that God leads the world on the right path through people within and outside the Church; the mission regards the entire

world. The Church is “called to participate in the mission of the Trinitarian God” (#42-45). Thus, the SVD confrère is called to participate in this ecclesial mission (#46-51); specifically with those (inside and outside the Church) who follow the Holy Spirit and are distinguished by their obedience to the Spirit, and to enter into *dialogue* (#52-71) in missionary situations. – The “prophetic dialogue” has become the motto of the Congregation which has treated missiology amply.²⁶

At the same time, the theological reflection on “the mission from God is far broader than the Church” has increased. Pope Francis’ pontificate has contributed enormously with *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), which emphasizes a vision and practice of the mission well beyond traditional parameters:

“Though it is true that this mission demands great generosity on our part, it would be wrong to see it as a heroic individual undertaking, for it is first and foremost the Lord’s work, surpassing anything which we can see and understand.... In every activity of evangelization, the primacy always belongs to God, who has called us to cooperate with him and who leads us on by the power of his Spirit. The real newness is the newness which God himself mysteriously brings about and inspires, provokes, guides and accompanies in a thousand ways”.²⁷

Francis also does this by pushing the Church towards other fields: the care of the ‘common home’ (*Laudato Si’*), on Fraternity and Social Friendship (*Fratelli Tutti*), cooperation (on the synodal path, with the first steps taken at the Synod on the Amazon: *Querida Amazonia*). Through such emphases, the Church could emerge from its preoccupation with itself. It would no longer be about the lack of priestly vocations (for example, in Germany there are still plenty), the restructuring of parishes, the lack of funds (so far this is not a real problem in Germany). Rather, it would be about seeing that the community of disciples and ‘missionary disciples’ put themselves at the service of suffering humanity, as stated in the Second Chapter of *Fratelli Tutti* (nn. 56-86).

“I see the Church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. You have to start at the bottom,” Francis explained.²⁸

Of course, much still needs to be done. Entering into a dynamic of obedience and following the Spirit certainly frees one of worries and burdensome tasks. It also depends on the community practice of discernment in the historical context, and since everything ultimately depends on God there is much greater commitment and freedom to follow God’s actions. That the Congregations recognize that God is at the origin of our mission, as explained at the SEDOS Symposium that I mentioned at the beginning, is certainly a good orientation. What is still needed is to spell it out and apply it in practical ways more in accordance with the Spirit.

In the 70 years since Willingen, the mission has been exercised in a great many ways. In some sectors of the churches, the *missio Dei* is exercised as a worldwide dynamic of God himself, and orientates the disciples and missionary disciples to join this movement, follow it freely, as they pay attention to the world in transformation in committed service to those who have become neighbours.

FOOTNOTES:

1). SEDOS: <https://sedosmission.org> — Symposium held from 11-15 October 2021 with the title *New Trends in Mission. The Emerging Future*, with a Preface by Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle,

Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis Books 2022. Summary of the 2021 SEDOS Mission Symposium Talks, in *SEDOS Bulletin*, n. 53 (9-10.2021), pp. 44-48.

2). Mary Motte, F.M.M./Joseph R. Lang, MM (eds.), *Mission in Dialogue. The Sedos Research Seminar on the Future of Mission*, March 8-19, 1981, Rome, Italy, Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis Books 1982.

3). Chaplin *et al.* *The Emerging Future*, p. 44. One very important remark was that “Mission starts in the Mind of God”, as Sr. Rekha Chennattu, RA, so vividly explained from her study of the Bible. The Four Foundations therefore are to be taken as a unity under the umbrella of *missio Dei*, the mission of God.

4). Jean-François Zorn, La mission au rythme de l’œcuménisme, in: *Spiritus*, n. 246 (63. 1, March 2022), pp. 42-52.

5). In Henning Wrogemann, *Theologies of Mission*. Translated by Karl E. Böhmer, Intercultural Theology, Vol. Two, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press 2018, p. 30. There was a tone of tremendous optimism in John Mott’s words at the conference.

6). *Ibid.*, p. 49. “How could Christian mission still be justified when Western Christianity had so thoroughly discredited itself through colonialism, imperialism, and then especially also through the First and Second World Wars? In 1910 many had still been convinced that humanity was rushing toward unity, led by Western civilization. But this vision had turned out to be false, had it not?”. The focus of mission-theological consideration now turned to issues of the interpretation of history with a focus on the doctrine of last things, i.e. eschatology.

7). Benedict XV, *Maximum Illud*, n. 48. https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xv/fr/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xv_apl_19191130_maximum-illud.html ... “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ” (Gal 3:28). ...“neither circumcised nor uncircumcised, Barbarians, Scythians: there is only Christ, who is all in all”.

8). For an evaluation of *Maximum Illud* see the documents of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples/Pontifical Mission Works, *Bautizados y enviados: La iglesia de Cristo en misión en el mundo. Mes misionero extraordinario, Octubre 2019*, Cinicello Balsamo (Milan): San Paolo 2019 (available at www.october2019.va; accessed 10-06-2022); Pierre Diarra, Mois missionnaire extraordinaire octobre 2019 en France, *Spiritus* 238 (61.1, Mars 2020) 116-121.

9). For this development see Wrogemann, *Theologies of Mission*, Chapter 5, “De Edimburgo a Achimota 1910 to 1958”, 59-72. For a good resumé see Eloy Bueno. World Council of Churches, in Eloy Bueno/Roberto Calvo, Eloy Bueno/Roberto Calvo (eds.), *Diccionario de Misionología y Animación Misionera*, Burgos: Monte Carmelo 2003, pp. 264-272).

10). Norman Goodall (ed.), *Missions under the Cross. Addresses delivered at the Enlarged Meeting of the Committee of the International Missionary Council at Willingen, in Germany 1952*; with

Statements issued by the Meeting, London: Edinburgh House Press, published for the International Missionary Council 1953.

11). Bueno, Consejo mundial de Iglesias, p. 268/World Council of Churches.

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

13). For an exhaustive investigation into this theology and perspective of the *missio Dei*, see John G. Flett, *The Witness of God. The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community*, Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, UK., Eerdmans Publishing Company 2010; Georg F. Vicedom, *Missio Dei. Einführung in eine Theologie der Mission*, München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag 1958 ... See also Chapter 9 on the perspective of “The mission as the anticipation of God Three in One (*Missio Dei*), in Stephen B. Bevans/Roger P. Schroeder, *A Theology of Mission for Today. Constants in Context*, Estella: Verbo Divino 2009, pp. 491-519. And — American Society of Missiology Series n. 30, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis 2004, pp. 286-304.

14). Wrogemann, *Theologies of Mission*, 68 f.

15). Wilhelm Richebächer, “*Missio Dei*” — Grundlage oder Irrweg der Missionstheologie?, in EMW, *missio Dei heute. Zur Aktualität eines missionstheologischen Schlüsselbegriffs*, Weltmission heute. Studienheft 52, Hamburg: EMW (in Kooperation mit Evangelische Kirche von Kurhessen-Waldeck) 2003, 184-207. This whole volume contains the documents at the Commemorative Conference of Willingen.

16). This Review, founded in 1911, by Fr. Joseph Schmidlin of the misionologia alemana of the University of Münster, is still published mainly in Germany: <https://www.unifr.ch/zmr/de/> (13 June 2022),

17). This Bibliography entitled “*missio Dei*” was last published in 2014.

18). Joseph Peters in the edition of, *Die Katholischen Missionem* 72 (5.1953), pp.148-149.

- 19). Ibid., p. 148: gives “*keine Teilnahme an Christus ohne Teilnahme an seiner Weltmission*”
- 20). It should be admitted that there is no reference to the Catholic continent of Latin America in the Acts of Willingen (Goodall, *Missions Under the Cross*). However they mention that the “los comunistas” considered that the Christin mission compromised development in those lands/”*areas tradicionalmente cristianas*”.
- 21). See Yves M.J. Congar, *Theologische Grundlegung* (nn, 2 - 9) in: Johannes Schütte (ed.), *Mission nach dem Konzil* , Mainz: Grünewald 1967, pp. 134-172 [also available in French and Spanish].
- 22). Joseph Ratzinger, in Schütte (ed.) *Mission nach dem Konzil*, pp. 21-47; 22.
- 23). Wrogemann, *Theologies of Mission*, p. 172. Chapter 11 gives a panorama of the Catholic Church’s missionary theology (pp. 165-185).
- 24). See volume of EMW, *missio Dei heute*.
- 25). See: Pierre Kasemuana “My first steps in Mongolia”, *Spiritus*, 39/2 (#151, junio 1998) 37-46; Michael MacCabe, Missionaries of Tomorrow, *Spiritus* 45/3 (# 176, sept 2004) 39-49; Raymond Rossignol, New Missionaries in Asia, *Spiritus* 45/3 (#176, sept 2004) 62-69; Ishvani Kendra, A Vision of Mission for the new millennium, Conclusions of the Investigation Seminar, Ishvani Kendra, Pune, India, 9-12 March 2000, *Spiritus* 41/4 (#161, 2000) 145-157; Carmelo Álvarez, Missio Dei in a global context. A Latinamerican Ecumenical Reading, *Spiritus* 42/4 (#165, 2001), 109-122.
- 26). S.V.D. texts on mission are plentiful. For example: Edênio Valle, SVD (Org.). *Diálogo profético e Missão*, Campinas: Komedi 2005; Stephen B. Bevans/Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue. Reflections on Christian Mission Today*, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis 2011; 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.

27). Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, The Church's Missionary Transformation, Chapter One, n. 12, also n. 24 (“Evangelizers thus take on the ‘smell of the sheep’”) 19-39f (evangelization), (Kingdom of God/The kingdom and its challenge) 180, (Unity prevails over conflict), 226-230, (Spirit-filled Evangelizers), (missionary power of intercessory prayer — greater freedom) 281-283.