

Mission on a divine horizon

“Missio Dei” seventy years later

In October 2021, SEDOS organized a virtual symposium on new trends in mission and missiology. It was a great success and had about 250 people participating during all the sessions. Topics such as evangelization, the paths of mission, different ways of practicing mission and the actors in mission were discussed. As a framework for the reflections, we started from the emphasis that Pope Francis places on the peripheries and his existential cries and concluded with a look at the integrity of creation, another topic that the Pope highlights in time and out of time. SEDOS has organized several notable symposiums on mission, particularly in 1981, with an emphasis on dialogue and the local church as a subject of mission.

In this 2021 Symposium it was very interesting and pleasant to observe great unanimity on the part of everyone and all the presenters in affirming that the mission belongs to God, it comes from God, it is a movement of God that involves the whole world: “An important observation was that the ‘Mission begins in the mind of God’, as Sister. Rekha Chennattu RA explained so vividly from his Bible study. Therefore, the four foundations [Bible, experience, Holy Spirit, cry of the world] have to be understood as unity under the umbrella of the *missio Dei*, the mission of God.” That is, practically no one spoke of a perspective centered on the church, such as that the church had an exclusivity 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 expressions. Similar.

In my observation, this shift in emphasis on mission has only occurred in the last two decades, and certainly not in all sectors of the church. Understanding mission as something that comes to us from God is therefore something relatively new, at least in the discourse regarding theological understanding and a perspective of practice. We speak then of the “*missio Dei*”. This leads to two things: 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 hand, as it is a relatively new understanding, there are still difficulties in arriving at a coherent renewed practice. These difficulties in correctly locating oneself within a *missio Dei* perspective can be noted in 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 great missionary conference of Edinburgh in 1910 had also considered the conversion of the entire world during the century to come. John Mott, one of the great protagonists of this conference declared: “It is our hope that before we close our eyes at the hour of death, all the peoples of the earth will have had the opportunity to know and wait for the living Jesus Christ.” It was a conference of great optimism and not at all free of colonialist tones that nevertheless motivated great enthusiasm and effort for the mission worldwide. The Catholic Church was not formally involved in Edinburgh, but shared the same enthusiasm. Two world wars put this projection in check: “How could a mission be justified when Western Christianity had been so fundamentally discredited by colonialism, imperialism and particularly the First and Second World Wars? Had the signs of the times been misinterpreted? In 1910, many had been convinced that humanity would rush towards unification, oriented towards Western civilization. Obviously, this vision had been

proven false. Therefore, missionary and theological reflection was now directed to topics of the interpretation of history, with a focus on the doctrine of last things, that is, eschatology,” summarizes Wrogemann. From the Catholic side it came as a first reaction in 1919 with the encyclical *Maximum illud*, by Benedict XV, which abandoned the idea of the mission as a national enterprise – there could no longer be French missionaries as opposed to German ones, etc. This particularly hurt France, since it had functioned as a protector of the global mission, for example also in China. *Maximum illud* declared to the missionaries that “their mission is an embassy of Jesus Christ and not a patriotic legation.” From then on, the mission of the church must be oriented towards the Kingdom of God, which, however, was still closely related to the church.

On the evangelical side, an International Mission Council (WCC, 1921) was established, which was in charge of organizing world conferences to guide the missionary task: 1928 in Jerusalem (dedicated to the issue of secularization), 1938 in Tambaram (central theme: the religions), 1947 in Whitby (on association and collaboration [“partnership”]), 1952 in Willingen (central concept: *missio Dei*) and in 1958 Achimota/Accra (theme of independence). At the 1961 New Delhi Conference, the WCC was integrated into the World Council of Churches and a different dynamic began.

With an eye on God

Immediately after the war a conference was held in Whitby, Canada, in a very small setting. It was about taking a step forward after the great tragedy and it was understood that a mission could no longer be thought of from a Western center to a world beyond.

Relatively shortly after, in 1952, the next conference was convened, in Germany. This conference in Willingen, a small municipality in the north of the German state of Hesse, would become one of the most theologically fruitful in the history of world missionary conferences. About 180 delegates from all over the world participated. 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 had taken power in 1949 and expelled all Western missionaries (the China Shock). It included the conflict between the Soviet Union and the Western powers in the Cold War and the armed conflict in Korea starting in 1950. The colonial era was coming to an end and the former colonial territories began to become independent: Indonesia in 1945, the Philippines in 1946, the Indian subcontinent in 1947, Burma in 1948. The national states that were established also faced the task of having to establish a national identity, so the question arose on ideological or historical bases that could be integrated. The Christian churches of these countries were seen as allies of the former colonial powers. Then the new states had to build their identities in relation to the local population and in a difficult relationship with the churches of the previous regime.

Eloy Bueno summarizes this event in these terms:

Under the theme *Missionary Obligation of the Church* (its final conclusion published as *Missions under the Cross*) it was the scene of the passage from a missionary ecclesiology to a missionary theology, from a mission centered on the Church to a Church centered on the mission, in the *Missio Dei*: given the inability of the Church to fulfill its mission, the missions had to be refounded from a theological rather than an ecclesiological root (in line with Barth's theology [...]). The Church is nothing more than the servant and sign of the presence of God. The triumphalist language is 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.

This conference in Willingen thus achieves a change of perspective. The church is no longer seen as a center of expansion, attraction or as an actor in a conversion movement, but rather the church itself is located and integrated within a broader and universal movement. J. Moltmann summarizes 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 encompasses the entire Church, not just parts of it, or even just the members sent by it. [...] Mission encompasses all activities that serve to free man from his bondage in the presence of the coming God, from economic need to abandonment of God. [...] If the Church understands its mission within the framework of the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit from the Father, then it also understands itself within the framework of God's history with the world and discovers its place and its function in this history." The *missio Dei* is a movement that comes from God but goes beyond the Church and reaches 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.

It is interesting to note that the word "*missio Dei*" does not appear in the minutes and deliberations of Willingen, but the entire discourse of the conference was soon summarized in this term proposed and introduced by the missiologists Karl Hartenstein and later elaborated especially by G. F. Vicedom .

Wrogemann sees several axes of Hartenstein's and Willingen's understanding of God's mission: (1) *Missio Dei* is penance. Since God himself carries out the mission, because in his very being he is a missionary and a movement – the processions, as they were called –, ecclesial activity has to leave aside aspects of the mission that do not take into account this divine protagonism. (2) *Missio Dei* is promise in its eschatological orientation, beyond contingent history. (3) The church is active in a secondary way: integrated and assumed in a more universal dynamic its own action. (4) With the *missio Dei*, a geographical conception of mission was definitively put to an end. The mission is not an activity "over there", where others, but rather addresses all aspects of the life and culture of all peoples.

The reception of the *missio Dei* perspective

Although this perspective of a mission that starts from God and concerns all of creation has been very striking, its reception and acceptance was not unanimous in Protestant circles. Fifty years after this conference, Wilhelm Richebächer presented the trajectory under the dilemma: "*Missio Dei*, foundation or wrong path of the theology of mission?"

I 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* – 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 the Propaganda Fide in Rome. The magazine *The Catholic Missions*, edited by the Jesuits, reported towards the end of 1953 on this conference and emphasized the "call to unity": Willingen would have called for internal unity around the Lord of the world mission, Jesus Christ, by the mandate missionary, but also in the face of the threats of communism. He echoes the criticism of Western Christianity: "In this terrifying vision, the people gathered before the Lord of the Church,

immersed themselves in the indispensability of his Great Commission, and realized that there was no participation in Christ without participation in its global mission. It was even said: "The Church is mission, and the mission is Church." The big problem is the internal division of the Protestant churches, especially in Africa, and the projection of the Protestant mission now to the Catholic continent of Latin America, after the loss of China. The report claims that Protestants should respect the Catholic church. The entire report does not mention the centrality of a 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 missionary by its nature, since it takes its origin from the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit, according to the plan of God the Father... (AG 2).

As is known, the *Ad gentes* decree reached its final formulation through a very risky path. As late as November 1964, the draft was sent to the commission to ensure a theological foundation for the document and it was theologians of the stature of Joseph Ratzinger and Yves Congar who "saved" it. From this resulted a more coherent connection with the church, which in turn leads to the understanding that "the central text of the Council on the nature, task and mode of the mission, which carries over all the other texts on the mission of the Council, including the Decree on the Mission itself, and containing the starting points of the same, is found in the Constitution on the Church [LG], in numbers 13-17." The theological part of AG follows the perspective of the *missio Dei*, although it does not use the concept.

After the Council, awareness of the missionary nature of the church expanded, on the one hand. On the other hand, 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 changes with the entry of the new century. On the one hand, there are commemorations of the Willingen conference, for example at the 50th anniversary, in 2002 that highlight this perspective. It will have to be admitted that this discussion has perhaps been more notable in the German context, even in *Spiritus I* found only few references to this conception.

On the other hand, there are congregations and religious communities that adopt this vision. One of them is my congregation (Divine Word) that in the General Chapter of the year 2000 stated the mission in the following way: the community practices a discernment of the community spirits (in the declaration of Chapter #4-7: "permanent discernment ") and in this way can focus on the reality of the context ("Our contemporary world": #11-23), marked by globalization, urbanization and migrations. The situation of the church and the congregation itself also belong to this context. It's the seeing part. The next part refers to judging and begins with an expression 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 with actors within and outside the church; The reference of the mission is the entire world. The church is "called to participate in the mission of the Trinitarian God" (#42-45), the SVD 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, a dialogue (#52-71) is established in missionary situations – the “prophetic dialogue” that has become the motto of the Congregation and which has been widely treated in missiology.

At the same time, theological reflection on the mission coming from God and broader than the church has increased. The pontificate of Francis contributes enormously, since *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) emphasizes a vision and practice of the mission beyond traditional parameters:

Although this mission demands a generous dedication from us, it would be a mistake to understand it as a heroic personal task, since the work is above all His, beyond what we can discover and understand. [...] In any form of evangelization the primacy is always that of God, who wanted to call us to collaborate with Him and encourage us with the force of His Spirit. The true novelty is what God Himself mysteriously wants to produce, what He inspires, what He provokes, what He guides and accompanies in a thousand ways.

Francis also does so by pushing the church towards other fields: the care of the common home (*Laudato si'*), a human system of society (*Fratelli tutti*), collaboration (with the synodal path, with the first steps in the Synod Amazonian: *Dear Amazonia*). Through such emphases, the church could emerge from its preoccupations with itself. It would no longer be about overcoming concerns about the lack (and for example in Germany, still an abundance) of priestly vocations, the restructuring of parishes, the lack of funds (this is not a real problem in Germany – yet) . Rather, it would be about seeing the community of missionary disciples put themselves at the service of a suffering humanity, as stated in the second chapter of *Fratelli tutti* (56-86). “I see the church as a field hospital after a battle. You don't have to ask a seriously injured man about his cholesterol or diabetes. You have to heal his wounds. You have to start at the bottom,” Francisco explained.

Of course, there is much left to do in this task. Entering into a dynamic of obedience and following the Spirit certainly frees you from worries and the weight of heavy tasks. It also depends on the community practice of discernment in the historical context. On the other hand, it is precisely this relief because everything ultimately depends on God, which allows for a much greater and more committed freedom to follow God's movement. The recognition that God is at the origin of our mission in the congregations, as manifested in the SEDOS symposium that I mentioned at the beginning, is a mainly good orientation. What is still needed is to spell it out and apply it in practices that are more in accordance with the Spirit.

In the 70 years of Willingen, the mission is presented in a great plurality of ways of putting it into practice, and in some sectors of the churches, the *missio Dei* as a dynamic of God himself in the entire world can guide missionary disciples to integrate into this movement, free in following, with an eye on a world in transformation and in committed service to those who have become neighbors.