Mission at the Second Vatican Council 1962-1965

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A Missionary Council

The Vatican Council (1962-1965) has often been called the most significant theological and religious event of the twentieth century.¹ For the Catholic Church, the Council was a watershed moment of reform and renewal, a moment toward which much of the church’s energies had moved in the fifty years that preceded it and from which the church has been nourished and challenged in the half century since the Council took place.

Despite much controversy and even movements of “restoration” in the last several decades, after Vatican II the Catholic Church—and, indeed, many other Christian churches and communities—would never be the same.² In 1864, Pope Pius IX boldly condemned any thought that the Roman Pontiff could reconcile himself with progress and the “modern world.”³ Just one hundred years later, Pope John XXIII called for aggiornamento—literally, updating—and the Church issued a document on the Church in the Modern World. In 1928, Pope Pius XI forbade any Catholic to become involved in the growing ecumenical movement in the encyclical Mortalium Animos.⁴ Some three decades later, Christian unity was held up by Pope John XXIII as one of major goals of the Council.⁵

When one thinks of how the Council treated the church’s mission at the Council, one naturally looks to its Decree on Missionary Activity, entitled Ad Gentes (AG) after its first two words. This would be correct, of course, but it is also important to note that “mission” or “evangelization” is really at the heart of everything that the Council was about.⁶ In its deep-

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est intent, in fact, Vatican II was a missionary council. Its central theme, as it turned out, was the mystery of the church in its interior reality as a community that is a sacramental sign to the world and as an instrument of grace and wholeness in the midst of the world (see LG 1).

Vatican II, unlike many, if not all, previous ecumenical councils, was not called to attend to any particular crisis in its doctrinal system or governing structure. At least on the surface, during the reign of Pius XII from 1939 until 1958, the papacy had never been stronger, and the church was growing vigorously throughout the world. Nevertheless, in a move of prophetic insight, John XXIII’s reason for calling the Council was to help the church preserve and teach Christian doctrine in a more effective way in the light of major political and cultural changes in the twentieth century. Aggiornamento was not a call for change for change’s sake but a call to mission. Mission is what gave the Council its basic direction.7

Each of the Council’s four main “Constitutions”—on the church, the church in the modern world, the liturgy, and divine revelation—which, said the Special Synod of Bishops in 1985, are the main documents by which the Council can best be interpreted, contain elements that illumine the church’s evangelizing mission and provide a firm theological foundation for the document on missions proper. The seminal idea that the church is a “sign and instrument” of God’s salvation being worked out in the world (LG 1); the truly radical notion that all Christians have a different but equal share in the church’s mission (LG, Chapter II; LG 32); the recognition that the “joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties” of humanity are those also of the “followers of Christ” (GS 1); the move from an understanding of revelation as a set of propositions to a personal call to friendship (DV 2); and the great sensitivity to culture that inspired much of the reform of the liturgy (SC 37-40)—all of these and more are motivated by a spirit of evangelization and mission.

In addition, to single out only two other documents, those on religious freedom and non-Christian religions, the Council provided a vision that has challenged traditional understandings of mission to the core and yet has offered a new, basically more evangelical, motive for the preaching of and witnessing to the gospel among all peoples. The Council’s declaration that all peoples have a right to religious freedom has forever cut the ground from under any effort of proselytism in the name of the church or the gospel (DH 1). In addition, the Council’s recognition that every religion contains “rays of that Truth that enlightens all women and men” (NA 2) opens up mission not only to a clear proclamation of the gospel message but also to a proclamation in the context of dialogue and an effort to understand the sincere beliefs of those to whom the gospel is presented.

From another perspective, as church historian John W. O’Malley has explained in several significant works, not only did the Council offer a different content on many issues, it also offered a new form or style. The Council eschewed the usual canonical, legal language of Roman documents, studded with “power words” or words “of threat and intimidation, words of surveillance and punishment, words of a superior speaking to inferiors, or, just as often, to an enemy,”8 and chose the language of persuasion, more pastoral and positive in tone. Such a change in tone was emblematic of the change in the church’s entire missionary commitment: the church is missionary by its very nature, not only or even primarily because Christ commanded it to “make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19) but because it is rooted in the missionary life of the Trinity (AG 2); Christians on mission respect and cherish the cultures of the people that they evangelize, as well as their religious beliefs (AG 11; NA 2); Not only do Christians have something precious to share with the world, they can learn as well from its struggles, its sincerity, and its progress (GS 43-44). If Vatican II was a missionary Council, it also set a new tone to what mission was all about.

The Decree on Missionary Activity

The Development of the Decree

Except for a virtual hiatus in explicit foreign missionary activity at the end of the eighteenth century,9 the church has always engaged in what Pope John Paul II called mission ad gentes. Because of such a long and constant history of missionary commitment, therefore, it may come as a surprise that the Council’s Decree on Missionary Activity (Ad Gentes) represents the first time in history that an ecumenical council had issued a document dedicated explicitly to the church’s evangelizing mission in the world.10

Interestingly, however, the document was almost abandoned during the course of the Council as pressures mounted to end its deliberations with the third session in 1964. The path of Ad Gentes was, as one historian of the decree put it, “strewn with ambushes.”11 What follows is a brief summary of a very complex process.12

In June 1969, it was announced that Cardinal Gregory Peter Agagianian, prefect of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Propaganda Fide), would head the commission that would draft a document on the church’s missionary activity. The fifty-four member commission was almost entirely European in makeup, and although there were several fine theologians and missiologists on it, it was dominated by churchmen who, in the words of commission member André Seumois, were “stuck . . . in the old canonical schema . . . and unable to conceive a new authentically missionary schema that would really and frankly address the major missionary problems that face the church today . . . ” 13

A first draft of a document was produced that was strongly canonical, hardly theological, and took into little account suggestions submitted from bishops in Asia and Africa. It had seven chapters, beginning with the governance of the missions and moving through chapters on clergy and lay formation, questions around the sacraments and liturgy, and a finally dealing with missionary cooperation. Since there was so much material that overlapped other schemas submitted to the council, the Central Preparatory Commission (CPC) decided that only two of the chapters—on governance and on missionary cooperation, along with a rather inadequate preface—would be submitted for consideration of the Council.14

This rather inadequate schema never made it to the Council floor, however. The first session of the Council was marked by a strong reaction of the Bishops against the legal, triumphalistic, and canonical tone of the documents presented for discussion, and of the four drafts discussed in 1962, three of them—the document on the church, on Mary, and on Revelation—were rejected outright and sent back to the drawing board. Only the schema on the

14 See Bevans and Gros, 13.
liturgy had a positive reception and was assured of passage during the next session in 1963. There was a strong anti-curial atmosphere among the bishops, and—relevant to any discussion on mission—the Francophone bishops actually circulated a petition calling for the Propaganda Fide to be deprived of all power and reduced to a fund-raising body. The bishops from missionary areas demanded that they themselves, not Roman bureaucrats, have a active role to play in the governance of the missions.

In the intersession from December 1962 until October 1963, the commission preparing the document on mission met again but with very unprofitable results. It did manage to submit a document to the CPC entitled *De Missibus* (On the Missions), but it was basically rejected and sent back for more revisions during the second session of the Council in 1963, with the hope that a document could be discussed at a third session in 1964. In the meantime, however, it was announced in April 1964 that all documents not yet discussed on the Council floor were to be reduced to a number of propositions. In this way, time would be saved, and the Council would be able to close at the end of the 1964 session. In May of 1964, therefore, although a longer revision had been written, a new document was drafted entitled On the Church’s Missionary Activity. It consisted of six pages containing thirteen—eventually fourteen—propositions. Commentator Evangelista Villanova writes that, compared to the previous schema, this new set of propositions “was even more feeble from the standpoint of theology and as a reading of the historical moment: decolonization, the globalizing of problems, and poverty remained outside its scope, as did the ecclesiological criteria recognized in the schema on the Church.”

In this intersession period, however, a very significant move had been made. The Commission on Mission had been expanded to include more African, Asian, and North American participation, and, most significantly, Fr. Johannes Schütte, superior general of the Society of the Divine Word, had been appointed to eventually serve as vice-president. Under his leadership, together with members of the Commission of the caliber of Yves Congar and Joseph Ratzinger, a new, more adequate schema would be developed. Such a schema, however, only came about after the rejection of the set of propositions when they were presented on the Council floor. Even though Paul VI had explicitly spoken in their favor, the bishops, after several strong speeches calling for a full schema once again, called for a revision of the fourteen propositions in favor of a more adequate document on missionary activity. Under the leadership of the “tireless German” Johannes Schütte, the Commission drafted during the remaining days of the third session and in the intersession of 1964-1965 the document that was to become *Ad Gentes*.

The final editing of the document on mission took place at the Society of the Divine Word’s continuing formation house in Nemi, just outside Rome. After a brief introduction of the text by Cardinal Agagianian on October 7, 1965, Fr. Schütte gave a long presentation on the schema, concluding that he considered the document the “Magna Carta” for the church’s missionary activity and that it “would shape the universal church into a truly missionary church.”

From October 7 to 13, forty-nine speeches were given and many applications to speak were denied for lack of time. On October 12, the day’s moderator, Cardinal Pericle Felici, called for a vote, and the results, made public the next day, were 2,070 in favor and only 15 against. Speeches continued the next day, but the schema had made it safely through the Council. The Commission members scrambled the next several weeks to incorporate what seemed

15 See Paventi, 157.
17 Bevans and Gros, 18-22.
18 Villanova, 391.
like countless suggestions of the bishops who spoke or who submitted ideas in writing, but the schema was ready for the final vote on December 7, 1965. The Decree on Missionary Activity was the last document that the Council approved, and it was approved by a vote of 2,394 in favor and only 5 against—the highest number of “yes” votes of any document approved by the Council. A new age of missionary activity had begun.

**The Content of the Decree**

*Chapter I*

*Ad Gentes* contains a brief introductory statement, six chapters, and a short conclusion. Perhaps its most important and enduring chapter is Chapter I, entitled Doctrinal Principles, and the first line is perhaps the most significant statement in the entire document, although there are several other wonderful passages. The line reads: “The pilgrim Church is missionary by its very nature, for it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Spirit that it takes its origin, in accordance with the decree of the Father” (AG 2). With this sentence, inspired both by Protestant missiological thinking going back to Karl Barth and by elements somewhat forgotten in the Catholic tradition, the Council roots the reality of mission not in an extrinsic command of Jesus (the “Great Commission” of Mt 28) but in the very “fountain of love” (AG 2) that is God as such. In a reflection rich in scriptural quotations and patristic references, the Council speaks of creation as God’s first act of mission, made explicit in the incarnation (for some reason the history of Israel is not mentioned, although it is alluded to) and handed on to the church (AG 2-5).

From this general reflection on the missionary nature of the church, the document takes a crucial turn in paragraph 6, which focuses on mission in the strict sense of “preaching the Gospel and planting the Church among peoples and groups who do not yet believe in Christ.” In this sentence, the Council settled the debate between the Louvain (planting of the church) and Münster (salvation of souls) schools of thought. Mission is not “either-or.” The theology of mission in the decree takes another step forward in the sense that mission is not spoken of in a strictly territorial way—although the document vacillates on this in several places—but as an outreach to persons. In this way, mission is not simply confined to particular _places_—the “West to rest” as was the common understanding of mission, for example, at the 1910 Edinburgh Conference and among Catholics as well. Mission might be carried out in European or Australian cities among immigrants or among unbelievers in a secularized North America with the same integrity as in the African bush or the highlands of Papua New Guinea.

Another noteworthy section of Chapter I is paragraph 9, in which the Council comes as close as it could to defining the missionary endeavor: “Missionary activity is nothing else and nothing less than a manifestation of God’s will, and the fulfillment of that will in the world and in world history.” God “works out the history of salvation by means of mission,” and its goal is to bring about “the presence of Christ, the Author of salvation.”

Nevertheless, in words that sound a recurring theme of the document, Christ’s presence does not destroy a culture but brings it to perfection. This is because in each culture there is “a sort of secret presence of God” that the gospel makes manifest as that culture is healed and ennobled. Mission, paragraph 9 and Chapter I say in conclusion, has an ultimately eschatological goal. It works toward that unity of the world and humanity that “will come at the end of time.”

*Chapter II*

Chapter II is entitled Mission Work Itself and lays down several important principles in the way that mission is to be carried out among the peoples of the world. Paragraphs 11 to 12 reflect on Christian witness, paragraphs 13 to 14 speak of the actual preaching of the gospel, and paragraphs 15 to 18 deal with the dynamics of forming
a Christian community as women and men respond to the gospel and commit themselves to Christ. These three activities are engaged in within three contexts, as paragraph 10 points out: among adherents to the world’s great religions, among people with no religious faith whatsoever, and among people who are actually hostile to religion and belief in God.

Paragraph 11 is one of the more eloquent passages in the document. It speaks of the need for Christians to witness to the gospel by their very life, lived in full participation with the culture and values of the people. As they “become familiar with their national and religious traditions,” they “gladly and reverently “lay “bare the seeds of the Word which lie hidden in them.” The phrase “seeds of the Word” is from Justin Martyr and has been often cited after the Council. It points to the fact that mission is not done in a vacuum but in the context of the already-present Spirit and mysterious presence of Christ. This is why missionaries must engage “in a sincere and patient dialogue” in order to discover “what treasures a bountiful God has distributed among the nations of the earth.” It is this basic holiness of peoples, their history, and their cultures that grounds the Council’s strong and clear prohibition of any kind of proselytism that would force people to embrace the faith or would entice people “by unworthy techniques” (AG 13). We see echoes of the Council’s discussion of religious freedom here, as well as in its insistence that all persons have a “right not to be deterred from the faith by unjust vexation on the part of others” (AG 13).

A major goal of missionary activity is the establishment of a vibrant and vital Christian community that is—as Paul VI would say ten years later in Evangelii Nuntiandi (EN)—in its turn evangelizing (EN 15). In paragraphs 15 to 18, the document addresses the formation of such a community. It focuses on the importance of the lay vocation and then turns to the vocation of women and men to religious life, to ordained ministry, and to training for ordained ministry. In paragraph 16, it echoes the Constitution on the Church by calling for the restoration of the permanent diaconate if episcopal conferences deem it opportune. Finally, in paragraph 17, it focuses on the important role of catechists and their proper training.

Chapter III

This chapter on Particular Churches focuses on local churches that are still “missions” in the sense that they are not quite ready to stand on their own in numbers of Christians, local clergy, or material resources. Nevertheless, the members of the Council insisted, these are churches in their own right and should be treated as such. This is a move away from the word “mission church” as somehow signifying a community that is not complete. This chapter, therefore, is firmly established on the foundation of a vigorous theology of the local church.

Paragraph 20 speaks of the bishop and his clergy. The bishop should be “a herald of the Faith,” and clergy should not only be engaged in pastoral work but also involved in the preaching of the gospel among peoples of the diocese who have not yet accepted Christ. Paragraph 21 is a powerful reflection on the laity, insisting that “the church has not been really founded, and is not yet fully alive, nor is it a perfect sign of Christ among humanity, unless there is a laity worthy of the name working along with the hierarchy.” The laity’s main task is to bear witness in their daily lives, and the document places particular emphasis on the fact that this must be done in the context of their cultures. The Christian community, Ad Gentes asserts again and again, is not to be removed from the midst of the world but is a full participant in it and a contributor to it.

The final paragraph of the chapter is devoted to the encouragement of local, contextual, or inculturated theologies, although the text does not use these terms that would be developed in the decades since. It uses rather the term “adaptation.” Nevertheless, in one of those beautiful phrases, echoing wording often used in the liturgy of the Christmas season, local churches are encouraged to “take to themselves in a wonderful exchange all the riches of the nations which were given to Christ as an inheritance (cf. Ps 2:8)” (AG 22). In this way, “it will be more clearly
seen in what ways faith may seek understanding” (AG 22) in the context of the philosophy, the wisdom, the customs, and the worldviews of local peoples.

Chapter IV

This chapter is entitled Missionaries, and, as missiologist William R. Burrows judges, it “is an excellent, balanced and far-sighted chapter designed to help prepare future missionaries—whether they are priests, brothers, women religious, or lay people, or whether they are foreign or indigenous.”20 Once again the text implicitly acknowledges that missionary activity is based not on geography but on particular needs of particular peoples and includes all Christians. However, while every Christian is called to do his or her part in spreading the faith in word and especially in deed (AG 23), there exists in the church a particular missionary calling by which Christians leave the countries or environments in which they were born and nurtured and cross cultures for the sake of spreading the gospel. This vocation is a gift of the Holy Spirit, but the presence of such a charism is not enough. Future missionaries also need “special spiritual and moral training” (AG 25) to develop their generosity, their sense of dedication, their openness, and their willingness to sacrifice. Missionaries also need training in theology, a training that “takes into account both the universality of the Church and the diversity of the world’s nations” (AG 26). “Above all” (AG 26), the future missionary should be trained in missiology, both in terms of what the church teaches regarding missionary work and the history of that work. While the words are not explicitly used, the theology recommended, as well as the missiology, should be imbued with the social sciences, especially anthropology. “For anyone who is going to encounter another people should have a great esteem for the patrimony and their language and their customs” (AG 26).

Chapter V

Entitled simply Planning Missionary Activity, Chapter V is the chapter about which there was the most discussion during the preparation of the final schema. This is because the chapter deals particularly with the restructuring of the Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith and aims to give local bishops in areas under its jurisdiction a greater say in their churches’ development. Such restructuring of the Propaganda Fide is placed in the context of a theologically-based understanding of the direction of the church’s mission. Paragraph 28 begins the chapter by stating that all the Christian faithful, according to the gifts bestowed on them, are called to participate in the church’s mission. But this missionary activity of all the faithful needs to have direction so that (quoting 1 Cor 14:40) “all may be done in order.” That direction is provided primarily by the entire body or college of bishops, as Lumen Gentium 23 teaches. And so, as a way of exercising that collegial responsibility, the Council directs that the “stable Council of bishops for the entire Church,” the Synod of Bishops, should give special consideration to the church’s missionary activity. The Propaganda Fide, therefore, directs the church’s missionary work, but as the agent of the entire church in general and the episcopal college in particular.

At the end of paragraph 29, there appears the passage that caused so much controversy during the drafting of the schema as well as on the Council floor. This paragraph states that as part of the direction of the Congregation, there should be representatives of the world’s bishops, moderators of pontifical institutes that support missionary work (e.g. the Holy Childhood Association), missionary congregations of men and women, and lay organization. An earlier draft had spoken of these as “members” of the Congregation, but this was not accepted by the Council. Nevertheless it is clear that the Council intended these groups to play an active part with a deliberative vote in the Congregation’s decision-making processes.

This is quite a radical restructuring, but it must be noted that, sadly, this crucial directive of *Ad Gentes* was never put into practice. In the years following the Council, a series of documents gradually lessened the role of these non-curial groups, and in John Paul II's *Redemptoris Missio* we read that the world's bishops, major superiors, etc. should only “cooperate fully with this Dicastery” (RM 75). Ultimately, as missiologist Josef Glazik has written, practically nothing has changed from what the congregation was before Vatican II. This is a truly unfortunate development.\(^{21}\)

**Chapter VI**

The final chapter on Missionary Cooperation, or how various Christians contribute to the missionary activity of the church, begins with an affirmation once more of the entire church's role in its mission. The text then goes on to outline how bishops and priests, various types of religious—active and contemplative—and then the laity participate in missionary activity. There is, however, a great distance between this chapter and the strong statement about the missionary nature of the local church in Chapter II. Here “missions” basically means “foreign missions.” There are “home countries” and “mission countries.”

Two things might be highlighted in the chapter. First, paragraph 39 offers reflections on the intrinsic missionary dimension of the priesthood. Because priests collaborate with bishops in ordering the church, they are also in some way responsible for the worldwide mission of the church. Part of their ministry, therefore, should be involved in raising missionary awareness among the faithful, fostering missionary vocations, and asking for alms for missionary work.

Second, the document emphasizes the missionary nature of contemplative orders of religious. While it is often thought that missionary work is the purview of active congregations, the Council insists that contemplatives are also an essential part of missionary activity. Because it is *God* who ultimately touches human hearts to open up to the gospel message, the prayers, sufferings, and acts of penance offered by groups of contemplative men and women contribute immensely to the conversion of non-Christians. The text then encourages contemplative communities to establish houses in the lands of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Oceania, so that “living out their lives in a way accommodated to the truly religious traditions of the people, they can bear excellent witness among non-Christians to the majesty and love of God, as well as our union with Christ” (AG 40).

*Ad Gentes* concludes with a salutation to all missionaries, especially those who are suffering persecution. The Council once more affirms the importance of the church's participation in mission but acknowledges as well—as it did in the beginning of the document—that mission is ultimately the work of God. The bishops pray for the conversion of the world to the gospel through the intercession of Mary, Queen of Apostles. Any changes of law that the decree provides for, the document says in its last lines, will take effect on June 29, 1966, and the pope will issue norms for the implementation in due time.

**Conclusion**

Robert J. Schreiter writes that, although Vatican II inaugurated a “period of ferment” in the thinking and practice of Christian mission, it was followed soon after—ironically largely because of the Council's stance on religious freedom, its respect for local cultures, and on the possibility of salvation outside the church—by a “period of crisis” in which the very idea of mission was questioned. While that period of crisis persists in some way today, it co-exists with a “period of rebirth,” in which mission has taken on less of a triumphalistic character and has expanded to include elements of dialogue, justice, peacemaking, ecological sensitivity, inculturation, ministry among migrants,

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\(^{21}\) *Joszef Glazik, Kommentar, in Instruktionen der Kongregation für die Evangelisation der Völker* (Tübingen: Trier, 1970).
and reconciliation. Roger Schroeder and I have suggested that an attitude and practice of “Prophetic Dialogue” should characterize mission thinking and mission work today.

Many things have changed in the fifty years since the end of the Council, perhaps most radically the fact that mission is done much more in short-term commitments, more by laity, and more by women and men from traditional “mission lands” in the majority world. Mission looks very different today than it did in 1965 when Ad Gentes was formally promulgated. And yet there is continuity, all of which has its origins in the amazing event that was the Second Vatican Council.

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