

# Crossing the Threshold: Mission as Encounter

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**Abstract:** *Awareness of the centrality of mission has been growing in the Catholic Church since Vatican II. The author traces this growth from Ecclesiam suam (1964) to the writings of the current pope, highlighting the link between dialogue and mission. He draws attention to some features of Francis's message using four words: "kairos," the "why," "how," and "where" of mission, and situates the ongoing dialogue between Catholics and Shia Islam within this broad framework.*

I would like to offer some simple reflections on the topic of mission. These reflections were stimulated by two factors: a) the growing awareness within the Catholic Church of the meaning of mission in the period between Vatican II and Pope Francis;

and b) the unusual experience of unity in diversity between Christians and Muslims that we are living in Wings of Unity.<sup>1</sup>

I will start by quoting Paul VI's seminal encyclical, *Ecclesiam suam*, from 1964, one year before the 1965 conclusion of Vatican II, which represented a reawakening of the church's deepest and most authentic consciousness and a commitment to renewal. Here, the pope speaks of dialogue as a privileged way to live the mission with which the church has been endowed, indeed the very essence of the church itself. He writes:

Neither the preservation nor the defense of the faith exhausts the duty of the Church in regard to the gifts it has been given. The very nature of the gifts which Christ has given the Church demands that they be extended to others and shared with others. This must be obvious from the words: "Going, therefore, teach ye all nations," (Mt 28:19) Christ's final command to His apostles. The word apostle implies a mission from which there is no escaping. To this internal drive of charity which seeks expression in the external gift of charity, We will apply the word "dialogue."<sup>2</sup>

This is a passage of paramount importance; indeed, I would say it marks a decisive step ahead in the awareness of the church's missionary identity. Only now are we beginning to take measure

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1. Wings of Unity is a unique experience of dialogue between Christians and Shia Muslims promoted by the Sophia University Institute and the Islamic Centre of England. See <http://islam-today.co.uk/wings-of-unity-history-methodology-outcomes>. This talk was delivered at a meeting of Wings of Unity.

2. *Ecclesiam Suam*, 64: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_06081964\\_ecclesiam.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html).

of the meaning and consequences of this passage. In fact, this statement by Paul VI redirects the church's attention to the living center of the Gospel of Jesus in order to understand itself and live on this basis.

Building on the pope's words, I would like to emphasize three things. First, the church is urged to mission by its awareness of having received *a gift* from God in Jesus for all humanity. Second, this fact—that the church bears a gift that is a testimony of God's love—commits the church to living the mission by *sharing* a gift, in other words with an approach composed completely of love: this is why mission is called “dialogue,” which means precisely talking together, conversing, respecting one another, indeed, mutually loving one another. As Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, teaches:

In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (see Eph. 1:9). . . . Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (see Col. 1:15, 1 Tim. 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Ex. 33:11; John 15:14–15) and lives among them (see Bar. 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself. (n. 2)

Third, as Vatican II clarifies, the church is neither the launching pad nor the goal of mission; the launching pad is God's love and the goal, mission's end, is not the church as the community of those who believe in Jesus but the “Kingdom of God” (using Jesus's own language)—in other words, human life in accordance with God's plan of love, being one with him.

Despite misunderstanding and resistance, Paul VI's inspiration was a fertile seed that has borne much fruit in these more than fifty years. Pope Francis restores this inspiration today. Speaking on June 21, 2019, in Naples, the current pope says:

At the center is evangelizing, which is not the same thing as proselytizing. In dialogue with cultures and religions, the Church announces the Good News of Jesus and the practice of evangelical love which He preached as a synthesis of the whole teaching of the Law, the message of the Prophets and the will of the Father. Dialogue is above all a method of discernment and proclamation of the Word of love which is addressed to each person and which wants to take up residence in the heart of each person. Only in listening to this Word and in the experience of love that it communicates can one discern the relevance of kerygma. Dialogue, understood in this way, is a form of welcoming.<sup>3</sup>

I wish to develop the meaning of Francis's message using four words that express the fruit and a further understanding of the teaching of Vatican II and Paul VI. The first word is “kairos,” which concerns the theological relationship that links two slogans coined by Pope Francis to express the kairos of the church's mission today as a challenge and an opportunity. The other three words are “why,” “how,” and “where”—namely, why, how, and where this challenge and this opportunity may be taken up in a pertinent and promising way.

3. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/june/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190621\\_teologia-napoli.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/june/documents/papa-francesco_20190621_teologia-napoli.html).

The first of these two slogans that express the *kairos* of the church is “a Church reaching out,” which operates in the radical sense that the church is born and lives always and only “outside of itself.” This slogan expresses a performative understanding of the church whereby “mission” is its reason for being. In this sense, it is a sign and instrument of the coming of God’s kingdom inasmuch as it shares and promotes this kingdom with and for everyone. The route leading from Vatican II to Paul VI’s *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), then to John Paul II’s *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) and now to Pope Francis’s *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) progressively draws the church’s attention not so much to what the Gospel of God’s kingdom is as to how God’s kingdom comes to be in history, how it “comes” into history.

The second, equally striking, slogan focuses on the epochal sign of our times: humanity is “not merely living an epoch of change, but a change of epoch.” Such a radical change requires a paradigm shift in the performative interpretation of reality, a paradigm that must overcome the creeping, all-consuming dictatorship of the technocratic paradigm; it must effectively respond with urgency to the situation into which humanity is currently skidding: a third “world war piece by piece.”

Now here is the interpretive hypothesis: these two realities (“the church reaching out” and “a change of epoch”) are dynamically correlated in that they draw the church, other religious communities, and different human cultural expressions together in a challenge that is today’s opportunity. Pope Francis describes it with a third slogan: “passing over the threshold of the culture of encounter.” On the church’s part, this corresponds to its mission to reach out and share the Gospel of God’s kingdom as a leaven and as a catalyst for the encounter among religions and cultures.

But why? How? Where? These are the three questions we must answer as Jesus’s disciples. First of all: *Why*? It is a matter of carefully examining the experience and making the effort to understand this *kairos*, which is today’s Church’s commitment and highest priority to live this “new chapter of evangelization” (EG 1) responsibly, both in obedience to God and at the service of humanity, implying a deep “transformation” of itself (EG 27).

Let me restate the question. Each authentic culture (and specifically the religious traditions expressing faith in the One God and embodying this in different cultural expressions) is both particular and universal. It is particular because it expresses humanity’s adventure in this people, here and now, where its advancing advent is being achieved under the action of God’s Spirit. Inasmuch as any culture actually expresses what is human, and precisely because of that, it is universal because each authentic culture is open from within itself to all that is human in the concreteness and variety of its different expressions.

Now in itself the gospel of the coming of God’s kingdom in Jesus is at the service of what is human; along the way, it draws from that toward which it is dynamically in tension, with an outlook on time that is both particular and universal. So, the gospel, the coming of God’s kingdom, is manifest and expressed in the strength of the Spirit, and it works according to three dynamics. The first is the dynamic *within*, in the sense not only that it is not external to any religion and culture but also that it lives within that culture; it lies within and dwells in it as if it were its own home. The second is the dynamic *beyond*, in the sense that it makes the thrust that is intrinsic to each culture incisive and compelled to open itself up and to transcend itself. The third is the dynamic *between*, in the sense that each culture is called to

be in a relationship with others and to prepare room for that to happen fruitfully.

Pope Francis talks about “a culture of encounter” in this light. It is fostered by the encounter among different religions and cultures in the Spirit of the coming of God’s kingdom. The question, however, arises: *how* is this to occur? In other words, how should the church’s mission “to reach out” be expressed in order to foster this process of “within,” “beyond,” and “between”?

I would say that for this to occur, these three dynamics require specific spiritual, psychological, and sociological attitudes that make available the fundamental cultural elements for the reform of the church’s profile, which is urgently desired today. This is because the church’s profile that we have inherited, and that largely outlines the identity and the mission for the way we live the church, is a response to a historical and cultural stage of its development that is now outdated.

The first attitude is the one described by the apostle Paul: making ourselves one (see 1 Cor 9:19-23). This means entering into each human expression, not as a tactic for conversion but really in the breath of the Spirit of understanding. This is because the Gospel of God’s kingdom is at home only in the deepest, most creative, and intimate part of each culture.

The second attitude promotes the distinguishing expression of each religion and culture, in its opening up and transcending itself in the encounter with other cultures to become fully itself. It is a matter of respecting the freedom, the times, and how each religion and culture dynamically expresses itself with others, in response to its most intimate vocation.

The third attitude prepares the place where the encounter among religions and cultures can take place; this is the “Marian”

vocation of mission, in other words, the approach that must be taken for the mission to be from *Mary*, so to speak. It means offering the virginal, immaculate womb in which each religion and culture can give birth in the breath of the Spirit to the one and only Word of God clothed with the specific word of that religion, of that culture, in the human discourse through which it engages with other cultures.

Finally, and this is my last point, *where* can this happen? It must come about everywhere, in all the expressions of different religions and cultures, since it is a matter of a “paradigm shift” that involves all of us. From a strategic standpoint, however, a crucial role must be played by experience and by institutions for gathering, study, and research. As Pope Francis says, “A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal” (*Laudato Si*, 202).

With regard to the context of this conference, allow me to conclude with a word about our experience with Wings of Unity, a great gift from the Spirit involving all of us as actors and, even more truthfully, as spectators to the surprise of God’s love. We are experiencing something new that is in harmony with the maturation of the Catholic Church’s consciousness. But in the light of the charism of unity that God gave to Chiara Lubich and owing to our radical availability, we try to live according to a Pact. Through this, we are introduced to the place into which all of humanity is called to enter, beginning with Christianity and Islam. This place is the unity from God and *in God*.

Thanks to the Holy Spirit’s introduction to this place, we know that this is the secret: unity is not simply the goal of our dialogue, as if we were starting from a point of separation and moving to a point of unity. No, there already is unity; it is God and it is God’s

gift to us. We experience this unity when we look to God and when we look upon one another in God; we are one in his love and in the love from and in him that we live toward one another as brothers and sisters, since we are his children.

This “already” is certainly a “not yet”; we must become aware of this. We have to learn to see and manage the differences as riches. We must be purified from what keeps us far apart and what can put us into conflict. But it is essential never to leave this “already” of unity. Rather, we must always go deeper there, opening our wings together to the breeze of the freedom, the love, and the joy of the Holy Spirit.

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