Introduction: A New Book on Roman Catholic Mission

This past summer there appeared a new book on Catholic Mission, A Century of Catholic Mission: 1910 to the Present Day (Bevans 2013). Although the book focuses on being Catholic, its origins were thoroughly ecumenical. In 2019, Wonsuk Ma, my colleague on the GETI faculty, director of the Oxford Center for Mission Studies, and publisher of Regnum Books, asked me if I would edit a volume on the history and theology of Catholic mission as part of the multi-volume series on the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference, a conference to which, as I’m sure you all know, history traces the origin of the modern Ecumenical Movement and the development of the World Council of Churches.

What I’m going to share with you in this presentation comes largely from my introduction to this new book, in which twenty-four Catholic authors—and one Presbyterian—reflected on the history, the theology, and the spirituality of Catholic missionary thinking and practice in the last century. Probably more than any book I know, this book represents current perspectives on Catholic Mission.
What I’m going to share with you has two parts. Part I offers a brief history of Catholic Mission in the last century. This historical perspective provides a context for Part II, which will lay out six perspectives of Catholic Mission which, if not unique to Catholicism, is certainly distinctive of it. Much, much more could be said, but in the short time allotted to me in this presentation, I can only offer a brief outline.

Part I: Catholic Mission 1910 to the Present

The time span of the book is extremely significant, for it marks an era of monumental transition in the understanding of mission and the way it was carried out. The year 1910, of course, was the year in which the monumental Edinburgh World Mission Conference was held, a truly landmark event for Protestant and Anglican church communities in mission, and, as it turned out, as I have said, a moment to which can be traced back the origins of the Ecumenical Movement. For Roman Catholics, their presence at Edinburgh was confined to a letter from Bishop Bonomelli of Cremona that was read to the Conference by Baptist Silas McBee (see Delaney 2000). However, like other Christian churches and communities, the Roman Catholic Church in 1910 was experiencing what would later be recognized as the height of the modern missionary movement. For Protestant communities the origin of this movement is usually traced back to 1793, when William Carey wrote a short treatise that inspired mission among churches that had not, since the Reformation, been much engaged in mission at all. For Catholics, a renewed missionary spirit can traced back to the second decade of the nineteenth century, when Europe had regained some semblance of order after the terror of the French Revolution and the final defeat of Napoleon, and when the church began to
find new vigor as it experienced a virtual explosion of religious and missionary communities of both women and men. The Catholic missionary movement was flourishing in 1910.

The optimism of that period, however, would be forever shattered in the next several decades by two World Wars that brought in their wakes both the end of the European colonialism that served in many ways as a foundation for the missionary expansion of the previous century, and by the independence of the colonies that had been the places where missionary work had flourished and had been basically successful in establishing educated local leaders and local churches. Such new independence, together with a renaissance of local religious sensibility, worked to bring about a new understanding of mission marked by the documents of the International Missionary Council, the Second Vatican Council, the World Council of Churches, and the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization.

At the same time, this new era of independence brought about a crisis regarding mission itself, a crisis that is only being resolved in our own day with an expanded understanding of mission to include work for justice, reconciliation, dialogue, and reconciliation. A new missionary attitude has begun to emerge as well among women and men in mission. For Catholics, Pope Paul VI and the Asian Bishops have described this attitude as one of openness for dialogue (ES 1964; FABC I 1997; FABC II 1997; FABC III 2002; FABC 2007). Recently, inspired by our own missionary congregation, the Society of the Divine Word, Roger Schroeder and I have spoken of it as “prophetic dialogue” (e.g. Bevans and Schroeder 2004; 2011), a synthetic or even dialectical understanding of mission as both open to dialogue and yet committed to announce Christ.
faithfully and effectively and to *denounce* any structures of evil or injustice that hold humanity or the rest of creation captive.

Moreover, mission today is beginning to flourish once more due to the increase of missionaries coming from the majority world—for example, in my own Society of the Divine Word, fully one fifth of our membership comes from Indonesia, and Indonesians are working as missionaries in every part of the world. This, of course, reflects the fact that Christianity’s center of gravity has moved to the Global South, evidenced as well by the election earlier this year of the first Latin American as pope. There is also growing recognition that some of the great mission-sending countries of the past are now *receiving* missionaries from Asia, Latin America, Africa, and Oceania. Mission today is indeed, in the often-quoted words of Michael Nazir-Ali, “from everywhere to everywhere” (Nazir-Ali 2009). Particularly because our age is an “Age of Migration” (see Castles and Miller 2009), migrants—whether Filipina maids in Hong Kong, Nigerian students in the UK, Vietnamese sisters in the USA, or Mexican migrants in Canada, like migrants and refugees from the beginning of the Christian era, are themselves becoming missionaries. Catholic Mission is also marked by a recognition of the need for a “New Evangelization,” by which secular societies in the West are being re-evangelized in the wake of the mass exodus of Catholics in these countries.

Traditionally, at least since the beginning of modern times, Catholic Mission work has been carried out by various missionary congregations with particular missionary charisms. Dominicans and Jesuits, for example, besides engaging in primary mission work, have opened and staffed institutes of higher education. Many women’s congregations have dedicated themselves to the education of young people, or devoted
their efforts to ministering to women. Contemplative groups of both genders, like Trappists or Carmelites, have focused on being witness to Christian presence and dialogue—as seen beautifully in the relatively recent film “Of Gods and Men.” While this tradition continues, Catholic Mission has seen an increase of lay men and women, particularly in terms of committing themselves for a shorter time to cross-cultural mission work, and focusing often in the areas of development and social justice ministry.

In these first decades of the third millennium we are seeing a totally new Catholic missionary era.

**Part II: Catholic Perspectives on Mission Today**

In this new Catholic missionary era, in the light of this new book on Catholic Mission, I think we can distinguish at least six perspectives, which point out, as I have said, if not the *uniqueness* of Catholic mission, certainly it’s *distinctiveness*.

First, Catholic mission is distinguished by its *ecumenical* nature. Only a glance at the extensive bibliography at the end of the book will show that Catholic scholars depend greatly on the wealth of scholarship of many other Christians. While the authors here quote one another, and scholars like Joan Delaney, Walbert Bühlmann, William R. Burrows, José de Mesa, Jesús López-Gay, Teresa Okure, Adam Wolanin, they also have recourse to Protestant writers like David Bosch, Mercy Odoyoye, Wilbert Shenk, and Andrew Walls. Catholic missiology is unabashedly Catholic, not only in the sense that it finds expression within the parameters of Catholic doctrine, but in the wider sense as well of drawing on any truth that can help deepen an understanding of the *entire* church’s great commission to proclaim and witness to Jesus Christ to all creation. One could say
that Catholic (capital “C”) missiology is deeply catholic (small “c”)! We have and continue to learn from our Protestant, Anglican, Evangelical, and Orthodox brothers and sisters in Mission.

Second, and perhaps more narrowly Catholic, Catholic missiology and mission practice relies on the wealth of the Catholic Magisterium, the church’s official teaching office, whether papal or episcopal. Catholic mission is deeply rooted in the scriptural witness, of course, and in the tradition that finds expression in the church’s history and doctrinal tradition. Included in that tradition, however, is the great number of documents, going back to 1919, when the first of the five pre-Vatican II Mission Encyclicals, Benedict XV’s Maximum Illud (MI 1919), through the Second Vatican Council’s ground-breaking Decree on Missionary Activity Ad Gentes (AG 1965), and culminating in documents like Paul VI’s Evangelii Nuntiandi (EN 1975) and John Paul II’s Redemptoris Missio (RM 1990), and episcopal documents issued by Asian, African, Latin American episcopal conferences and papal documents resulting from Synods of the African, Asian, European, Latin American, and Oceanian bishops. It might be worth pointing out that the latest document of CELAM or the Conference of Latin American Bishops—issuing form a meeting in 2007 in Aparecida, Brazil—had as it’s principle author Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the present Pope Francis (see Aparecida 2007).

Third, and closely connected to this emphasis on the Magisterium’s teaching, is the fact that Catholic missiology as it has developed in the last fifty years is deeply rooted in the documents and the “spirit” of the Second Vatican Council. The Council was indeed the most important moment in Catholicism in these last one hundred years, and the documents well express both the continuity and new directions that Catholic thinking on
mission have taken in this past century. As I point out in my own chapter in the book on Catholic Mission and subsequent writings, on mission at the Council, missiological thinking was not confined to the official document on mission alone. The documents on Liturgy, the Church, non-Christian religions, the church in the modern world—to mention only a few—were imbued with a strong missionary spirit (Bevans 2013, Bevans 2013a).

Fourth, and once more connected with the two previous points, is the Catholic conviction that mission cannot be reduced to any one of its manifold elements. Mission, as Pope John Paul expressed it, is a “single, complex reality” (RM 41), and so is composed of a number of constitutive elements. One cannot, in other words, reduce mission to proclamation of the gospel on the one hand, or to working for justice and liberation on the other. Authenticity of life, commitment to ecology and eco-justice, prayer for the world and celebration of liturgy, patient interreligious dialogue or constructing of local theologies are all integral parts of the church’s engagement in the mission entrusted to it by Christ’s Spirit. Catholic thinking and practice of Mission is Integral Mission, and here we find real resonance with our new WCC Mission Statement, “Together Towards Life.”

Fifth, Catholic thinking and practice is convinced that mission is only entrusted to the church. It is not in any way something the church possesses on its own. Catholic mission, both in expressions of the Magisterium and in theological reflection, is founded on the principle that the church is constituted by its call to participate in the mission that is first and foremost the mission of the triune God. It is in this radical sense that the church is “missionary by its very nature” (AG 2). Indeed, as it is common to say in these
days, the church does not so much have a mission as the mission has a church. In this context it is important to say as well that every Catholic Christian, by virtue of his or her baptism, is called to mission. Mission is not something “extra” that the church does or that certain people in the church do in the church’s name. To be a Christian, rather, is to be in mission. Catholic missiology has its foundation in faith in a missionary God who endows Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that anoints the church to continue that mission. Christian faith is commitment to mission. Sixth, and finally—although there may indeed be other particularly distinguishing traits—Catholic mission in practice and reflection takes the world seriously. What this means in particular is that women’s and men’s historical, social, and cultural contexts are acknowledged and honored as sources that reveal God’s will and action. This perspective is rooted in Catholicism’s strong commitment to the principles of sacramentality, analogy, and incarnation. Mission, therefore, is never about destruction of the human or of creation. It is rather about their cultivation, perfection and healing. This has always been the case in mission (think of Justin Martyr, Origen, The Heliand, Cyril and Methodius, Matteo Ricci), even though not always practiced. Since the earliest Mission Encyclicals of the twentieth century, however, it has been very much the church’s official policy. As a result, for Catholics, mission always involves a “sincere and patient dialogue” (see AG 11) to discover God’s presence in every situation in which the gospel is preached and witnessed to. Catholic mission, while it can be profoundly counter-cultural or counter-contextual, is never anti-cultural or anti-contextual.

**Conclusion: What the Future Might Hold**
Catholics around the world are excited by the election of their new pope, Pope Francis. They have been amazed by the pope’s clear missionary outreach to people of all sorts—the poor, Muslim prisoners, divorced, GLBT persons. The pope has urged Catholics to go to the world’s peripheries, to be “missionary disciples” in the words of the Aparecida document of which he was the principal author. We see in Francis a new missionary presence, one of authenticity, humanness, friendliness. As one Catholic theologian remarked in a response she gave at a theological meeting, when she saw the photo of Pope Francis bending down to kiss the foot of a young Muslim woman on Holy Thursday of this year, she saw the face of God. Catholic Mission is committed to ecumenism, steeped in its venerable tradition, rooted in Trinitarian faith, clear about its multifaceted nature, empowered by its sacramental vision. This new time in the Catholic Church is hopefully pointing to a future where all of this will be more clearly embodied in the women and men who engage in mission and so participate in God’s holy work in this world.

Bibliography


