

NOVATE
VOBIS
NOVALE

FURROW

The

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Thomas R. Whelan

Liturgy, Mission
and Ministry in
Ireland Today:
*Random
Reflections and
Thoughts*

December 2022

Liturgy, Mission and Ministry in Ireland Today: *Random Reflections and Thoughts*

Thomas R. Whelan

PART THREE: MISSION AND WORSHIP

The move in many dioceses in Ireland (copying the USA and the UK) to create an Office of Mission and Ministry – under which the local liturgy office would function (if this survives) – is confusing. Positively, it seeks to give new focus and energy to ministry. However, it leaves us with an administrative and marketing solution to a deeper funding problem that reveals a questionable understanding of evangelisation. Further, the role of sacramental life in the church is seen as if it is subordinate and decorative.

The word ‘mission’, in popular speak, can refer to a range of things, from ‘business to be undertaken’, ‘a duty, a trade, a quest ...’, to ‘a set of tasks that fulfil a goal’. ‘Mission statements’ set out the goals and objectives of organisations. Churches followed suite. Now it is common to encounter several dioceses and theology schools which employ the term ‘mission’ alongside ‘ministry’. Has this been clearly thought through by these groups? To engage in an ecclesial context a word commonly used for strategic planning and marketing, but now *also* with an implied faith subtext, could be misleading and unhelpful. Here, ‘mission’ can mean everything and nothing. A better and more theologically honest term might be ‘evangelisation’ or ‘pastoral ministry’ coupled with a resolve to employ ‘mission’ in a narrower christian theological sense.¹ The

1 The RC Archdiocese of Paris, for instance, recently created a mission centre (‘le Pôle Mission’) but its task relates directly to explicit ‘missionary’ outreach of the local church (see, polemission.fr). This model is worth examining.

Thomas R. Whelan, Spiritan Missionary, has taught liturgical and sacramental theology for over 30 years in West Africa and Ireland (including at the National Centre for Liturgy) and has guest lectured throughout Europe, Africa and in the USA. He was a long-time member and a former President of the British and Irish Association of Mission Studies (BIAMS) and has published on the relationship between worship and mission. This is the third of four essays relating to contemporary issues for liturgy in Ireland. The opinions expressed here are solely those of the author.

idea of ‘*accomplishing* mission’ can be implied by such an agenda. Apart from suggesting arrogance on our part, ‘*accomplishment*’ cannot be spoken of if mission is entirely the work of God, albeit actively participated in by us. Business ‘*efficiencies*’ cannot measure the workings of grace, and the workings of grace are not confined to the agency of church. Mission is accomplished only when God’s Reign permeates and finds expression in every culture and society – and ultimately, at the *parousia*. Mission is, in the first place, a mode of christian *being* rather than a church activity.²

There is nothing new to most people in any of this. Most of us accept that to be baptised means that we are ‘together, mission’. However, our difficulty seems to lie in a reluctance to translate the implications of what we already know into pastoral practice in such a way that it shapes the way we live – and therefore, the way we model pastoral policy in our dioceses and parishes. The adoption of the catchphrase ‘Mission and Ministry’ supplies a handy marketing tool but it does beg for a serious theological scrutiny which may have been absent or, at best, superficial when it was adopted.

MISSIO DEI

Originating in reformed church circles in the mid-30s, the term ‘mission of God (*missio Dei*)’ has come into general theological use over recent decades. Some Roman Catholic scholars, however, are reluctant to use it unless it is read through specific lens of sacramental ecclesiology. While the Council’s Decree on Mission, *Ad gentes 2*, avoids the term *missio Dei*, it does affirm that mission as exercised by Church originates in the Trinity: the Father sends the Son who in turn sends the apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit (see John 20:21-22).³ ‘Sending’ implies a ‘return’ to God from whom the *missio*/sending emerges. This is more than a simple ‘return’: rather, it is a ‘consummation’, an eschatological fulfilment that brings together in God all that does not resist Love, even purifying and transforming that which earlier had refused God’s outreach (Moltmann). The fulness and ‘completion’ of mission (in terms of its trinitarian centre) is found precisely here.

This movement of sending/return exemplifies a cosmic and eschatological dimension which is at the very core of everything

- 2 People engaged in mission *ad extra* – overseas – generally speak of evangelisation as primarily consisting of simply ‘being with’ others, accompanying people on their journey and in this, bearing witness to God’s Kingdom. In practice, evangelisation is not a ‘holy’ form of activism; nor is it primarily a promotion of ‘Church’.
- 3 ‘As the Father has sent me, so am I sending you ... Receive the Holy Spirit ...’. In this Johannine account of the resurrection appearance, the *gifts of the resurrection* are listed as Peace; Mission; the Holy Spirit; and forgiveness of sin.

THE FURROW

we do as church. It underpins the commitment of believers who respond to the mandate to unveil God's Reign and to empower people to make it more explicit through work guided by justice, egalitarianism, and right relations with others and with creation. The manifestation of God's Reign, however imperfectly in this world, is already an experience of the eschatological interruption of God in our midst. It unfolds in this dynamic created by the sending of God.⁴ It is in Christ that we see, first hand, the *missio* of the Father, and its empowerment through the gentle but pervasive presence of the Spirit.⁵

MISSIO DEI AND CHURCH

Church finds both its origins and its source in the mission of God and is, therefore, *lodged in the Trinity*. This is true both historically as well as theologically.⁶ Mission defines church. It alone colours an understanding of church which has no meaning apart from mission. The Liturgy Constitution, *Sacrosanctum concilium* (SC), opens with an articulation of this in a way that is simultaneously focused and expansive. The opening sentence is unapologetically trinitarian, developing its discussion of liturgy from the perspective of 'mission':

As Christ was sent by the Father, he also sent the apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit. Their mission was, first, by preaching the Gospel to every creature, to proclaim that by his death and resurrection Christ has freed us from Satan's grip and brought us into the Father's kingdom. But the work they preached they

- 4 There is so much more that needs to be said of mission than can be said here, not least because a consciousness of the *missio Dei* enriches our sense of the salvific workings of a Triune God, and of how we understand the person of Christ. It enriches what it means 'to be church'; ecumenism and inter-faith living; sacramentality ...; and, most importantly, the attitude we might carry with us in our daily work as participants in the mission of God.
- 5 Over many years, I have attempted to open questions relating to mission and worship: 'Problems in Reconciling Mission: Worship and the Language of Violence', in Joe Egan and Thomas R. Whelan, eds., *The City and The World: Mission Issues in Postmodern Times* (Dublin: Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy, 2004), 93-108; "'The Liturgy is Missionary": Elements of a Fundamental Liturgical Theology of Mission', in Brendan McConvery and Joe Egan, eds., *Faithful Service: Glimpses of the Kingdom* (Dublin: Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy, 2005), 357-375; 'Multicultural Worship: Theological Reflections on Experience', in Stephen Spencer, ed. *Mission and Migration* (Calver [Sheffield]: Cliff College Publishing, 2008), 173-187; 'Edinburgh 2010, Ecumenism, and a Contemporary Challenge to the Roman Catholic Mission Movement', *Irish Theological Quarterly* 75 (2010): 251-272; and, 'The "Reign of God" as Primary Goal of Liturgical Formation', *Studia Liturgica* 47/1 (2017): 61-73.
- 6 Both of these dimensions are clear from the Acts of the Apostles; see also, inter alia, Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), 15.

LITURGY, MISSION AND MINISTRY IN IRELAND TODAY

were to also to bring into effect through the sacrifice and the sacraments, the centre of the whole liturgical life. (SC 6)

Here, Church has no meaning apart from the *missio Dei*: proclamation (and mission) finds completion and actualisation in sacramental worship.

We cannot opt in or opt out of this: the election of our baptism immerses and, therefore, implicates us in mission. Believers are called to demonstrate through their lives the possibility of transformation in and of the world, thanks to the life-giving statement of God that is Jesus. All of creation participates in the sending/*missio* of God so that it will return to God, fully renewed, healed, reconciled, and transformed. Because it is born from the mission outreach of God in Christ, church must participate fully in it so that it might be sustained. Otherwise, it remains an institution of well-wishing people, aspiring do-gooders, who look to a somewhat remote figure for inspiration and invoke the presence of this Divine person to urge them on the way. Without diminishing its reality as a sacrament of God's Presence in world, church is also a very human experience, and cannot exist except as mission in perpetual motion. Rather than simply 'being', it is in a constant state of 'becoming'. The criteria for its very existence are supplied by and measured against the *missio Dei*. When church stops being 'mission', its essence is, at the least, compromised, if not totally repudiated.

When church is self-serving,
when it seeks out its own purpose and good,
when it tries to protect itself from harm,
when it does not self-identify as the field hospital (Pope Francis),
when it is not a church *of the poor* among the poor,
when it is concerned about declining Mass attendance numbers
(liturgiolatry),
when it sees as its primary purpose an increase in church-
membership,
or when it competes with other denominations for numbers or
prestige ...
– then it has lost a sense of itself and no longer serves the *missio Dei*.

PARTICIPATION IN MISSION

Participation in the *missio Dei* cannot be reduced to an exercise in bureaucracy. While good management procedures should apply in all pastoral initiatives, mission is not achieved through the

THE FURROW

efficient running of programmes, less by small group meetings or any decision-making mechanism of a diocesan agency. 'Mission' is more than just a sign hanging over an office door.

Fidelity to the mission mandate of Christ requires of us that we resist a godless desire for church-survival for its own sake.⁷ Mission has nothing to do with bums on seats and has everything to do with immersion in *kenosis*, a consequence of participation in the paschal mystery.⁸ Mission embodies *kenosis*. There is not, nor can there ever be, an identifiable moment, marked off from others, in which church 'does mission'; nor can church be identified with Kingdom. Nevertheless, the work of church ought to reflect what God's Reign means in our 'here and now'.⁹ Jesus did not preach holy stuff: he spent his time healing, reconciling, preaching justice and a new standard for love. This cannot be simply reduced to a study of pastoral theology: all of theology, in all its subdisciplines and expressions, is a study of the meaning and implications of the *missio Dei*.

This means we witness to God's preferential identification with the margins and those considered to be the 'scum of the earth'. We *do* mission in many ways: from the solidarity of local church with those abused in domestic settings, to its support of anti-homophobic action and those who self-identify as LGBTQI+; from its capacity to be a quiet presence with those sick and bereaved to its outward movement to embrace those of other religious beliefs; from its ministry to those in prison and in hospitals to its capacity to stand with the voiceless in any and every dimension of social existence; from its willingness to be in contemplative prayer with and on behalf of the world to public action to draw attention to injustice (inside and outside of Church), especially where there is abuse, state-sponsored violence, and social inequality; from its welcome embrace of refugees to its stance with those suffering from racism. This list is endless. Such outreach is unconditional.

7 Not to think *instinctively* of collaboration with other christian churches as equal partners is to ignore and be blinded to one of the important insights and mandates of Vatican Two. The mission of God is not the preserve of the Catholic Church. The serious sin of denominationalism in the Church of Christ flies in the face of the desire of the Crucified Jesus that 'all be one ...' (John 17:21). The presumed unity of the *missio Dei* demands nothing less.

8 'Paschal mystery' is generally taken to be shorthand for the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ: however, more correctly and completely it refers to the entire mystery of Christ from his Incarnation, through his ministry, suffering, death, resurrection and ascension, sending of the Spirit, to its consummation at the *parousia*.

9 Just as it was with Christ, everything is contextualised by the proclamation of the Kingdom. 'Only the Kingdom is absolute, and it makes everything else relative': *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 8.

LITURGY, MISSION AND MINISTRY IN IRELAND TODAY

MISSION AS TRINITY

'Mission' is what happens when Church reflects the Reign of God back into the world around. It betrays its *raison-d'être* when it becomes an exercise in ecclesial self-promotion. Nor can mission be reduced to one 'pastoral' activity among others. It must be assumed that there are credible ways that believers can account to society 'for the hope that is in' them (1 Peter 3:15) without having to resort to producing a 'mission statement' with its programmed efficiencies. We can only consider mission in its biblical sense, and with the richness with which Christian faith and lived tradition have endowed it.

A problem in the practice of 'mission' (and Catholic theology in general) since medieval times has been the tendency to confuse Christocentrism (Christ, the embodiment of God's salvific action, at the centre) with Christomonism (Christ only, without Father and Spirit). A creation-centred theology of salvation, related to Trinity, is necessary. This will instinctively protect the essential Christological dimension of the unfolding mystery of God. We can now develop a greater awareness of the birth of the church from the *missio Trinitatis* and the invitation to trinitarian *koinonia* which was inaugurated in baptism. Mission, baptism, *koinonia* ... can only be seen as participation in the cosmic wonder of a God of surprises who is, at once, awesome and personable, incomprehensible and self-revealing, unknowable and yet fully known to us and to the world through love and as Love. Christianity is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived. This is at the very core of what the *missio Dei* is all about and it requires that we move from an ecclesiocentric missiology to one that is theocentric (without losing a sense of church). Church is not the object of mission. But church must always, in Christ and drawn by God's Spirit, discern what the *missio Dei* is in our time and for this place.

WORSHIP AND MISSION

Worship and mission, each in their own unique way, describe the essence of what it is to be a disciple of Christ. The difficulty is compounded by an overly introverted liturgy (reduced to piety and a springboard for an individualistic approach to God) and an overly extraverted mission (detached and reduced to activism with a measurable output). A centripetal activity against a centrifugal one. Theology has done much to address this false dichotomy, but it does not seem to have filtered into some areas of theological and pastoral discussion. In this old narrative, cultic acts are seen to be an interruption in the Church's participation in mission: worship

THE FURROW

is now reduced to being a *means to* mission, rather than being a facet of the divine activity and therefore a participation *in* mission (but never reduced to it). If worship becomes a moment of respite from mission – even if just to ‘refill’ the spiritual and missionary energies – then liturgy is not an act of mission *in itself* but an act *in function of* mission. If everything serves the one *missio Dei*, then liturgy – which also originates in the Trinity (see SC 5-6) – must embody God’s salvific desire that all be saved. Unfortunately, some commentaries on the Mass today (including thinking that is found in the writings of Ratzinger/Benedict XVI), speak of the initial ‘gathering’ as centripetal to strengthen people for the mission ‘sending’ at the end (centrifugal).¹⁰

WORSHIP AT THE PAROUSIA

Both worship and *missio Dei* share in the life and internal communications of the Triune God. Each relates to and complements the other. Worship finds its origins and source in the dynamic life of the Trinity, and thereby becomes a participation in God’s mission. And baptism makes us collaborators, with Christ and driven by the Spirit, in the unfolding of the salvific will of God: SC begins its focused discussion of worship by situating the liturgical event in the context of God’s desire that ‘all be saved ...’ (1 Tim 2:4; see SC 5). This ‘desire’ came to be most strongly articulated in the ministry of Christ (as one ‘anointed by the Spirit ... to preach to the poor, to heal and to effect reconciliation’). Christ achieved his task *principally* through the paschal mystery (SC 5). Likewise, the mission of God is rooted in the paschal mystery and flows from the Trinity.¹¹ It is from this same paschal mystery, through which, ‘as he slept the sleep of death upon the cross ... there came forth the sublime sacrament of the whole church’ (SC 5). The church is born in and of the paschal mystery of Christ and his mission outreach/mandate.

10 This (mis-)understanding is given official standing in the 2011 translation of *The Roman Missal*. Since the eighth century, the dismissal at the end of eucharist was ‘Ite missa est’, the exact meaning of which is uncertain. At best it was a formulaic statement that the ‘office’ or ‘missa’ was now finished. Nothing more. The (early ninth century Irish) Stowe Missal has ‘Missa acta est’, carrying, presumably, the same meaning as its contemporary Roman form. To create of this a mandate for mission, as was asked for in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of 2007, *Sacramentum Caritatis* 51 which hoped that new and expanded translations of the Latin would ‘succinctly express the missionary nature of the Church’, is to create a novel idea not found previously. This was never subjected to theological scrutiny. It speaks of a certain understanding of mission that has no foundation in liturgical texts of any previous era, and that misrepresents ‘mission’ in relation to worship.

11 Mission flowing from the Trinity, see, see AG 2; worship flowing from the Trinity, see SC 5-6.

LITURGY, MISSION AND MINISTRY IN IRELAND TODAY

In the mind of SC 5 and 6, the sacramental event opens to the assembly the actualisation of the paschal mystery of Christ which is the principal sign of how Christ ‘achieved’ his task of redeeming humankind. Liturgy, therefore, must be seen to be the most assured form of continuation/prolongation of the salvific work of Christ in the ongoing life of the church (see SC 7).¹² It is both a *sacramental anticipation and a realisation* of salvation history and of the *missio Dei*, although not its completion: its completion (in the sense of eschatological fullness rather than simply *telos*) is to be found in worship.

As participants aspiring to personify the paschal mystery through baptism and eucharist, we are also participants in the eschatological banquet (SC 8), even if just as a foretaste. The eschatological is not something for the future but rather a reality we already experience as Christians because Christ inaugurated the ‘end times’ and brought with him a new vision for understanding life and the world around us. This ‘new vision’ involves a total upturning of life as we perceive it. Living, now, in the ‘end times’ means we are infiltrated, already, by the reversal of everything we thought ‘normal’, thanks to the Kingdom. Everything is upside down! The voiceless and disenfranchised are now at the centre. The homeless and those side-lined by society are now guests at the top table of the Banquet.

Christ’s *parousia* at end-time will see the destruction of the last enemy and eternal death – the end of all that resists love and goodness – and Christ will return everything to the Creator, so that God might be ‘all in all’ (1 Cor 15:20-28). The *extensio Dei*, that outreach of God in the *missio Dei* to all of creation, will have borne fruit and will no longer apply in the sense that, at end-time, all of creation will now be caught up in what Augustine referred to as the *missiones Dei* – the internal relationship between the three persons of the Trinity. Absorption of creation fully into the life of the Triune God (so that God will be ‘all in all’) will find its eschatological completion because whatever reconciliation and conversion that was needed will have now been accomplished (‘Behold I make all things new’ – Rev 21:5). The task of the *missio Dei*, in that sense, will be complete. The Book of Revelation then describes our completion in God using the metaphor of worship and expressed in a wonderful, climatic hymn of praise. Worship continues after mission has been completed.

Two related comments:

a) If the liturgy as we celebrate it in assembly is to be a *foretaste*

¹² Described by Salvatore Marsili (and Andrea Grillo, inter alia) as the ‘final moment of salvation history’.

THE FURROW

of the heavenly liturgy (SC 8), then the latter bears heavily on the former with serious consequences for how Christian assemblies, not just conduct their worship, but become agents of God's Reign. It has implications also for pastoral liturgical studies. The Banquet of the Lamb in Revelation describes the heavenly liturgy as one where everybody, from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, gathers in a unified song of ecstatic worship in which the embrace is one of radical equality. One challenge to our earthly liturgy is to replicate this aspect of 'correct/just living' in worship environments as well as in an overflow that ought to characterise our dominical and other liturgical assemblies. The mission outreach of God, in which earthly liturgy participates, will finally be complete. Now, at the eschaton, it will find its most comprehensive expression in the eternal worship of the Lamb.

- b) The New Jerusalem described in Rev 21-22 is the place in which we will sing the praise of God, the Alpha and Omega. It does not contain a Temple because true worship (see John 4:21-24) now takes place in the Lamb, and this city lives in the radiant light of the glory of God. The gates of the city are open to welcome all who join in the offering of praise and glory: 'the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign for ever and ever' (Rev 22:5). Mission will have achieved its goal; true worship will be our eternal joy. The medieval description of the primary effect of baptism as *deputati ad cultum* – we are destined and set aside for worship – expresses this well.¹³

LITURGY AND MISSION

There is no problem, in itself, with diocesan and other bodies referring to an Office for Mission (and Ministry) so long as it is clear that it is driven by an explicit and deep sense that it is caught up in a vision that is unapologetically Trinitarian in its origin and that is not motivated by a church-centred obsession for numbers, influence and structures. A pastoral programme of a diocese will identify what can be considered to be important arenas of human existence which particularly need to be opened up to the justice of the Kingdom.

How we engage with mission will dictate and shape the ministry we put in place. As I will propose in a final part to this series, the only authentic forms of ministry that can emerge are those rooted in the Trinity, and which come from a desire to promote God's

¹³ See, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Ia IIae, 102, a.5 (see 101 a.4); and IIIa, 63, a.3. This is reflected in SC 59 where it states that sacraments have as their purpose (*ordinatur*) not just the sanctification of people but also the worship of God (*ad cultum denique Deo reddendum*).

Reign, in the first place, rather than church. This is a ministry that radiates the compassion and love of God through Christ and that aims to realise this in our midst. In this way the sense of mission and ministry is lifted from a purely organisational and administrative field of reference to find its true meaning both in a Trinitarian sense (which is not confined to expression in the christian way). For christians, ministry emerges from the church community, but its reference point is Kingdom. Liturgy will be experienced as a sacramental realisation *now, in the assembly*, of the entire salvific plan of God in Christ (David Power: 'Event eventing'). God's Spirit incarnates the same Mystery in sacrament that sends us (*missio*) to ensure that all of humanity and creation will know that they are embraced by God and invited to imbue society with a lifestyle that is centred on the weakest in society.

Funeral Rites. The very clear relationship between the funeral rites and those of baptism is underlined especially in the use of the pall and placing the body near the baptismal area with the use of the Paschal candle. Indeed the rites mirror each other – just as many of us were carried to the church by our parents for our baptism, so we are carried by others to the church for the last time.

- JEREMY CORLEY *et al* (eds.) *Maynooth College Reflects on Facing Life's End*, (Dublin: Messenger Publications), 2022. p.109.