

Marist Mission as Prophetic Dialogue

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I begin with an anecdote. An Indian Jesuit friend of mine expressed an element of doubt regarding the expression “prophetic dialogue.”¹ To him, Christian mission was more appropriately expressed by the terms ‘witness’ and ‘service’ rather than ‘prophecy’ and ‘dialogue.’ My intention here is not to argue the relative merits of his case so much as to use the category of ‘prophetic dialogue’ to examine the Church’s recent teachings on mission and evangelization, extend its significance with reference to Mary’s Magnificat, and then suggest ways in which our reflection on Marist mission can be enriched by a Magnificat spirituality of prophetic dialogue. In the process, I hope to show that ‘witness’ and ‘service,’ as well as ‘prophecy’ and ‘dialogue,’ are all integral expressions of the Christian and Marist missionary vocation.

There is one further caveat. I do not (and dare say cannot) write as a Marist, Biblical or Church historian. Writing as a theologian I am heavily dependent on these esteemed scholars—as on the work of other theologians. I also apply a fairly liberal symbolic imagination which, I trust, will not be too annoying to those with expertise in specific academic disciplines. However, I also write as a Christian, Catholic and Marist, one who is deeply convinced of the abiding relevance of the Gospel and the Church—as of the contribution which a Marist missionary spirituality has to offer the work of evangelisation. My hope is only that the following reflection on Marist mission as prophetic dialogue may assist Marists to deepen awareness of the treasures we hold and are called to share with others in creative fidelity to our calling.

Christian Mission: Text and Context

We might say that the Church’s mission is one and the same in every age: to proclaim the Gospel to all peoples and nations. Yet, the Church’s evangelising mission never occurs in an historical or cultural

¹ The term “prophetic dialogue” is used by the Divine Word Missionary (SVD) congregation at its 2000 General Chapter and is later developed by Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, both SVDs, in their books *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004, and *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011. It is in this later book where they attempt to develop the idea of “prophetic dialogue as a synthetic theological and missiological concept” (3).

vacuum. The ‘text’ (proclaiming Christ to the world) must always take account of the ‘context’ (reading the ‘signs of the times’). At the start of the third millennium, the context is one of complex social change marked by post-colonial independence and liberation movements, technological and communication revolutions, advances of (and reactions against) globalisation and secularization, cultural (e.g. Aboriginal, African, Asian) and religious (e.g. Islam, Hindu, Buddhist) resurgence, the greatest migration of people in world history, and much more. After many centuries, it also appears we are at the end of European hegemony.

If the context for mission has changed, so has our way of understanding the text. Vatican II signals a theological shift by insisting that: the source and origin of mission is not the Church but the Holy Trinity;² the goal of mission is not membership of the Church but openness to the reign of God.³ There is new emphasis on personal freedom and conscience as well as a more positive attitude to other religions.⁴ Missionary activity is now described in terms of witness, solidarity, mutual encounter and enrichment as well as proclamation.⁵ The former conquest model of mission is replaced by a model of reciprocity in which we dialogue with others and learn from them of “the riches which a generous God has distributed among the nations.”⁶ In other conciliar language, if we are to announce the Gospel in ways the modern world will understand, we need first listen to the “hopes, joys, griefs and anxieties” of all people.⁷

Mission as Evangelisation

Subsequently, Paul VI and John Paul II presented the Church with an extended charter for mission with emphasis on evangelisation—or bringing “the Good News into all the strata of humanity.”⁸ Such evangelisation must begin at home—with the Church “being

² “It is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that (the Church) draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father.” *Ad Gentes*, 2.

³ “The Church has but one sole purpose—that the Kingdom of God may come and the salvation of the human race may be accomplished” *Gaudium et Spes*, 45.

⁴ See *Dignitatis Humanae* and *Nostra Aetate*.

⁵ *Ad Gentes*, 26.

⁶ *Ad Gentes*, 11.

⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, 1.

⁸ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 18.

evangelised herself.”⁹ It is not the Church or its missionaries but “the Holy Spirit (who) is the principal agent of evangelisation.”¹⁰ Evangelisation specifically includes the work for justice, peace, human development, liberation of peoples and rights of minorities (such as Indigenous, the urban poor, youth, immigrants, refugees, women and children).¹¹ Ecumenism and interreligious dialogue are integral to the Church’s mission.¹² New expressions of evangelisation focusing on communications, scientific research and international relations are also required.¹³ The notion of mission as dialogue with peoples, cultures and traditions is explored in multiple documents, including those which emanate from the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples.¹⁴

This new emphasis on dialogue and inculturation highlights the reality that evangelisation is not—or should not be—a one-way communication process. Rather, it recognises that the Spirit of God is already present among those who know little or nothing of Jesus Christ or his Church. The importance of dialogue is specifically developed in the Asian context where Christianity is a small and comparatively insignificant presence. Here the Christian missionary is inspired to be sensitive and listening rather than announce him or herself in any kind of dominating fashion. As developed by The Federation of Asian Catholic Bishops’ Conferences, Christian mission requires what they call a “triple dialogue” with the poor, local cultures and other religions.¹⁵ It is also made very clear that such dialogue is a two-way process of mutual encounter. Consequently, while the term ‘evangelisation’ (bringing the “Good News”) may appear to give priority to ‘prophecy,’ as developed in Catholic Church teaching and praxis, authentic evangelization is also genuinely dialogical.

⁹ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 15.

¹⁰ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 75.

¹¹ See, for example, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and *Redemptoris Missio*, passim.

¹² This is explicitly recognised in such documents as *Dialogue and Proclamation* and *Redemptoris Missio*.

¹³ See *Redemptoris Missio*, 37, where John Paul II speaks of cultural sectors as modern equivalents of the Areopagus.

¹⁴ Also John Paul II’s “Address to the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders,” Alice Springs, Australia (Nov. 1986) which demonstrates a profound understanding of the importance of dialogue with the rich spiritualities of these Indigenous traditions. *The Australasian Catholic Record* 83, 3 (2006) 259-263.

¹⁵ *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences. Documents from 1997 to 2002*, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2002.

Prophetic Dialogue and Missionary Approaches

If my Indian Jesuit friend had problems with the term “prophetic dialogue,” this flowed from his critique of the manner in which Christian mission has often so identified with a particular culture (e.g. context of European colonisation) that it either seemed incapable of dialogue or simply used dialogue as a tool for conversion. In his view, dialogue should precede prophecy rather than merely modify it. In other words, it is not adequate to perceive dialogue as a missionary strategy. Rather, dialogue flows from the relational reality of who we are as human persons.¹⁶ It follows that to live, speak and act authentically we must engage with others in an attitude of respect and even friendship, an attitude that can be called “the spirit of dialogue.”¹⁷ This implies an openness and willingness to learn from others in our human encounters.

However, it is equally true that dialogue does not preclude prophecy. To the contrary, authenticity in dialogue requires that one live, speak and act in fidelity to truth as one perceives it. In this regard, the words of the philosopher of dialogue, Raimon Panikkar, spring to mind: “Truth is not something that we possess, but something that possesses us, or besets us, something in which we find our being.”¹⁸ From a Christian perspective, there is only one absolute truth, namely God. It is this self-giving, self-communicating God who calls us into a living relationship with Godself and God’s creation. This prophetic call is ongoing and, for Christians, first and foremost addressed to them. Further, when Christians encounter others, they are also encountering the prophetic Word mediated to them through the lives, words and actions of others. In turn, they hope to be prophets of the Word and mediators of Gospel truth to all they encounter. Prophecy, like dialogue, is a two-way process.

¹⁶ I am indebted to Tom Ryan SM who drew my attention to this point underlined in the theological anthropology of John Paul II for whom “dialogue is an indispensable step along the path toward human self-realisation...of each individual and of every human community.” *Ut Unum Sint*, 28.

¹⁷ See *Dialogue and Proclamation* (9) where various understandings of dialogue are proposed including this “attitude of respect and friendship which permeates, or should permeate, all those activities constituting the evangelising mission of the Church.” This is the understanding of dialogue that is the focus of Bevans and Shroeder in *Prophetic Dialogue*; see 21.

¹⁸ Raimon Panikkar, *The Existential Phenomenology of Truth in Philosophy Today* 2,1-4 (Spring 1958), 16.

All this has implications for Christian missionary praxis which I will attempt to develop under the rubric of “prophetic dialogue” and in fidelity to the Catholic Church’s renewed call to mission. Missiologists propose different models which imply diverse assumptions about what Christian mission involves.¹⁹ The crusader model, for example, does not reflect the Church’s contemporary theology of mission. In our terms, it does not engage others in a spirit of dialogue; nor is it open to the prophetic challenge mediated by other cultures and traditions. However, rather than focus on missionary models, I suggest a more discursive approach drawing from three scripturally-based, missionary images—“sending out,” “gathering in,” “walking with”—in order to illuminate a missionary spirituality of prophetic dialogue.²⁰

The first image gives priority to the explicit announcement of the Gospel: the “sending out” of the disciples two-by-two to the far corners of the earth. Based on the Scriptural injunction, “as the Father sent me, so I send you” (Jn. 20:21), the image also captures the missionary vitality of the first Marist missionaries to Oceania. The second image highlights witness and worship at the heart of Christian community: the “gathering in” model of the first Jerusalem community (Acts 2:42-5:11), later Christian monasteries and the newer charismatic-type communities. This image is arguably the one that best expresses Fr. Colin’s own understanding of Marist mission.²¹ The third image is one of solidarity or “walking with” people, especially those on the margins of society, something at the heart of Jesus’ own life and ministry. Today, solidarity manifests itself in dialogue with cultures and religions, option for the poor, work for peace and reconciliation, respect for creation and care for the earth.²² Each image has something to contribute to our understanding and re-imagining of mission today, especially when viewed through the prism of prophetic dialogue.

¹⁹ For an extended and helpful reflection on diverse missionary models, see Donal Dorr, *Mission in Today’s World*, Dublin: The Columba Press, 2000.

²⁰ See also G. Hall, *Marist Approaches to Mission: Then and Now*, in Alois Greiler (ed.), *Catholic Beginnings in Oceania: Marist Missionary Perspectives*, Hindmarsh, SA: ATF Press, 2009, 201-214, esp. 209. There I referred to these images as ‘metaphors.’

²¹ Alois Greiler argues this case. See his *Studying Colin, the Marists, the Catholic Church and Oceania*, in *Catholic Beginnings in Oceania*, 7-22, esp. 10-12. See also, Gerard Hall, *Marist Approaches to Mission*, 209.

²² These missionary priorities are evident in recent Marist Documents such as *Declaration on Mission* (2001; endorsed by 2009 General Chapter) and 2005 Council of the Society.

We can also deepen our understanding of prophetic dialogue with reference to the Trinity in which the missions of Son and Spirit flow from their eternal communion with the Father and overflow into the world drawing all creation to share in the divine mystery, our origin, source and goal.²³ Or we can look to Jesus who continues the prophetic tradition by calling people to faith and repentance while also speaking words of hope and redemption. Specifically, we remember Jesus fearlessly proclaiming the reign of God while also sharing meals with outcasts and sinners, signifying how God's reign and communion are offered to all.²⁴ In our Catholic tradition we have saints and martyrs, founders and foundresses, who in diverse ways manifest both prophetic and dialogical qualities. Our Marist contribution will be to highlight the manner in which Mary, mother of the Lord, is model of missionary praxis as prophetic dialogue.

Mission as Dialogue²⁵

“We were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her children. We are determined to share with you not only the Gospel of God but also our own selves because you have become very dear to us” (1 Thess. 2:5f)

Mission implies a task to be accomplished; dialogue suggests that task be undertaken in spirit of respect, openness and willingness to learn. To speak of a missionary spirituality of dialogue implies the ability to communicate with a listening heart. It gives priority to establishing relationships, first and foremost with God and, secondly, with those to whom we are sent on mission. The approach is one that underscores the importance of mission being done in a spirit of vulnerability and humility as well as patience and courage. One must also be open to being evangelised by those whom we seek to evangelise—recalling that God's gifts and the seeds of the Word are already present in the lives of others. In this way, mission is mutual encounter among persons. Paul VI long ago described the ideal relationship between the Church and the world as one of dialogue.²⁶ We

²³ See Bevans & Schroeder, *Mission as Participation in the Mission of the Triune God (Missio Dei)*, in *Constants in Context*, chapter 9, 286-304.

²⁴ See *Mission as Liberating Service of the Reign of God*, in *Constants in Context*, chapter 10, 305-322.

²⁵ See especially ‘*We were Gentle among You*’: *Christian Mission as Dialogue*, in *Prophetic Dialogue*, 19-39.

²⁶ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964).

could also learn much from the Asian Churches for whom the Church is the “sacrament and community of dialogue.”²⁷

A missionary spirituality of dialogue includes the spirit of repentance and reconciliation. John Paul II’s initiatives in this regard are significant in seeking forgiveness for the Catholic Church’s “sins” against Jews, Muslims, women, Indigenous peoples and other religions.²⁸ Such “betrayal of the Gospel” includes misplaced attempts to evangelise via “methods of violence and intolerance” and “acts of persecution.”²⁹ The Pope’s admission of guilt on behalf of the Church and individual Christians displays a remarkable humility, reliance on God’s mercy, and confidence in the Holy Spirit to achieve authentic reconciliation with aggrieved parties. In the current climate, the Church is now finding itself needing to ask forgiveness for sins of sexual abuse especially against children. These and other examples are clearly issues of serious moral failure. Perhaps even more poignant has been the failure of contrition and a tendency to cover-up for such grave misdeeds in the mistaken belief of protecting the Church’s image. This demonstrates in a profound way the Church’s need for ongoing self-evangelisation and repentance which, in turn, demand a commitment to heartfelt dialogue with the Lord and those who have suffered at the hands of the Church and her members.

Dialogue highlights both presence and witness. The mission of presence and witness is what distinguishes the Church in its foundations. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, believers came to experience the risen Christ in their midst empowering them to live in communion with one another and the living God. To be Christian is to witness to this experience as the very foundation for mission. This experience of the divine presence overflows into the mission of loving service, liberating action and the dialogue of life. To speak of witness, service and dialogue as ways of being present to people demands that one be self-effacing in imitation of Christ who humbled himself and became as

²⁷ See, for example, Edmund Chia and Jonathan Tan, cited in *Prophetic Dialogue*, 27. The theme is also explored in many works by Peter Phan, such as, *Crossing the Borders: A Spirituality for Mission in Our Times*, in *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003, 139-150.

²⁸ John Paul II’s most extensive apology occurred at St Peter’s Basilica, Rome, 12th October 2000.

²⁹ See International Theological Commission, *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past* (December, 1999).

we are, offering his life that others may live. It is this self-emptying, self-giving love that establishes and transforms life-giving relationships. Examples such as Mother Teresa, Francis of Assisi, Charles de Foucauld, Peter Chanel, Francis Xavier and Therese of Lisieux exhibit in various ways this gentle, non-imposing mission of presence and witness—or what we are calling mission as dialogue.

Mission as Prophecy³⁰

“And this Gospel of the Kingdom must be preached to the whole world as testimony to all nations; and then the end will come” (Mt. 24:14)

While “dialogue is . . . the norm and necessary manner of every form of Christian mission,”³¹ the evangelist or missionary is also called to prophetic action. Israel’s prophets, including Jesus himself, not only share their own selves in dialogue with others; they also live, speak and breathe a radical message that is not their own, but God’s message, God’s truth, God’s Word. The prophet’s role is to nurture, nourish and evoke an alternative consciousness and way of life that stands in contrast to the dominant culture of the times.³² Consequently, Christian prophetic mission involves the two-fold task of criticising dehumanising, un-Gospel values and energising a new vision based on the reign of God. Jesus, the “eschatological prophet,” models these realities in both word and deed. He is no stranger to denouncing immoral and unethical behaviour whether among the Pharisees or his own disciples. We have also noted Jesus’ counter-cultural actions in forming relationships with those who are most denigrated by the society of his time. It is this counter-cultural, prophetic activity that eventually turns people against him, resulting in his crucifixion and death.

However, prophetic mission is not only, or even mainly, about social and ethical critique. While prophets speak out against corrupt and evil practices, they are called to both energise and embody a new way of being. In the Christian context, the prophetic missionary announces the good news that God is with us through Jesus of Nazareth and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Words fail if this good news is not evident in the witness of Christian lives and community. This is what is implied in the saying attributed to Francis of Assisi: “Always preach the Gospel;

³⁰ See especially *‘I Am Not Ashamed of the Gospel’: Mission as Prophecy*, in *Prophetic Dialogue*, 40-55.

³¹ Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Mission*, no. 29.

³² See Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, rev. ed., Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001.

if necessary, use words.” The prophetic mission of the Church is to be a sacrament (that is, sign and instrument) of the liberating reign of Christ and the kingdom already present in the world (like a seed) and yet to be fully revealed only in the future: “and then the end will come.” Jesus’ own way of announcing the kingdom through parables, stories and healings is effective on account of its basis in dialogue with the Father (whom he knows intimately) and with the people of his time (awareness of culture). He awakens people’s curiosity, leads them imaginatively and then surprises them with his wisdom.

What should now be evident is that Christian mission and ministry require both dialogue and prophecy. This becomes even more evident in relation to the third missionary image which stresses evangelisation in solidarity with marginal and oppressed minorities. The missionary is called to “let go” negative or patronising attitudes that may stem from over-identification with particular cultures, educational levels and other classes or races of people. The prophetic call to work for justice, peace and reconciliation is first and foremost a call to self-evangelisation in which the missionary’s ingrained prejudices and attitudes are confronted and overturned through engagement with others.

Obviously, though, self-critique and dialogue are insufficient. As Jesus’ own ministry demonstrated, one is also called to speak and act out against prejudice, discrimination and violence wherever they are encountered. This protest which the Gospel itself proclaims will sometimes be against society’s policies and laws; at other times, as noted, against the actual state of the Church’s life.³³ However, in all this, we must not lose sight of the fact that the prophetic challenge is as much God’s challenge to ourselves as it is our challenge to society, church or others. Or in the words of David Bosch, the missionary is called to live and act with “bold humility.”³⁴ The lives of saints and martyrs—including in recent times Oscar Romero—model what it means to be an authentic prophet of the Gospel.

Mary’s Magnificat: A Song of Prophetic Dialogue

“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost

³³ For example, J. B. Metz, *Emergent Church*, New York: Crossroad, 1981, 1-16.

³⁴ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991, 489.

thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.” (Lk: 1:46-55)

Speaking of prophets and martyrs, German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was killed by the Nazis, draws our attention to the ‘revolutionary’ words which Scripture places on the lips of Mary in what we know as the Magnificat. This is what he says:

It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings: this is the passionate, surrendered, proud, enthusiastic Mary who speaks out here. This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic or even playful tone of some Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind. These are the tones of the women prophets of the Old Testament that now come to life in Mary’s mouth.³⁵

As inspiration for prophetic dialogue, we need go no further than Mary’s Magnificat. The prophetic element is clear in the verses that sing of “collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world,” about God protecting the weak, raising the lowly and scattering the proud-of-heart. Mary, speaking in the long tradition of Israel’s women prophets (Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Judith), proclaims God’s liberation for oppressed peoples everywhere. There are political overtones: God’s justice includes a new social order in which the poor are empowered, the lowly uplifted, the hungry fed. Equally, its spirituality is clear: God is Saviour; God is faithful; God is merciful. In particular, God’s bountiful mercy is extended “from generation to generation, upon those who fear him.” In a world where cruelty and violence all too often reign, the Magnificat proclaims that God’s mercy and justice will be finally victorious. The Magnificat is Mary’s version of Jesus’ Sermon of the Mount (Mt. 5:1-12).

The Magnificat is not only a song of prophecy; it is also a song of dialogue. The first half of the Magnificat is clearly a song of praise and thanksgiving resulting from Mary’s intimate experience of relationship with the living God. There is ecstasy in her voice as she proclaims her

³⁵ E. Johnson, *Truly Your Sister*, New York & London: Continuum, 2003, 267.

soul ‘glorifying’ the Lord, meaning to celebrate the Lord’s greatness with all her body, mind and heart. The song is also dialogical in a structural sense: it is Mary’s response to Elizabeth who initiates the conversation by praising Mary and sharing in her joy. In another sense, it is Mary who initiates the dialogue by responding to her cousin’s situation and heading out in dangerous territory to visit her. The image is one of two poor, pregnant women responding to each other in need—and placing God at the centre of their lives. Through prophecy and dialogue, Mary and Elizabeth minister to each other in a situation of personal confusion, social exclusion and political oppression. Here, in this lowly place, they sing of God’s transforming power coming to life in the birth of the Messiah.

Whatever the precise origins of the Magnificat, it is clearly associated with the early Church in Jerusalem. By placing the hymn on Mary’s lips, Luke acknowledges her as representative of the Jewish *anawim* (lowly servant; one of the poor) now participating in the post-resurrection community of disciples. For Luke, Mary’s faith in the impossible ways of God models the path of true discipleship. Yet, according to some scholars, the prayer may also represent the wider struggle for political survival. The conflict imagery, especially in the verbs describing God’s actions—*show strength, scatter, pull down, lift up, fill with, send away*—resonates with the first century milieu of Palestinian resistance against Roman oppression. Pointedly, though, it is God alone, not a political movement, which brings liberation.³⁶ Whereas Mary’s passionate dialogue with God is evident in the first part of the Magnificat, her prophetic call for God’s liberating action is unmistakable in the second.

Equally instructive is the manner in which the Magnificat has been interpreted throughout Christian history.³⁷ St Ambrose speaks of Mary’s hurried visit through the hill country of Judea as symbol of the Church’s stride across the centuries. This vision places emphasis on the

³⁶ The question of the historical origins of the *Magnificat*, whether in the religious life of the Jerusalem community or in the political struggle of the Palestinians against their Roman oppressors, is unresolved. Raymond Brown argues for the first, Richard Horsley for the second. Elizabeth Johnson suggests both may be at play. See *Truly Your Sister*, 267f. In whichever case, the prayer makes it clear that Mary’s hope-for-liberation is entirely focused on God rather than on political movements. I am indebted to Alois Greiler SM for highlighting any possible misinterpretation.

³⁷ For St Ambrose and St Irenaeus on the Magnificat, see *Truly Your Sister*, 259.

proclamation of the Gospel so evident in the image of missionaries being “sent out.” However, the vision also gives due importance to the Church’s task of inculturating the Gospel (e.g. Hellenistic world) requiring deep dialogue with peoples and cultures. For St Irenaeus, the Magnificat expresses the heart of the Church’s liturgy, especially through its opening refrain: “my soul glorifies the Lord.” For almost two millennia, the Magnificat has been and continues to be sung as evensong in Christian monasteries throughout the world. This reminds us that liturgy, prayer and contemplation are central elements of the Church’s evangelising mission. Here the second missionary image comes to the fore.

In our own day, the Magnificat is also properly interpreted in relation to the Church’s “option for the poor.” Emphasis on solidarity with the world’s most marginal and oppressed peoples is highlighted in the third missionary image with its focus on works of justice, peace and liberation. Linked to this is the Church’s mission to care for the earth—or preaching, serving and witnessing to “ecological justice.”³⁸ Yet another aspect of the Church’s missionary task given prominence today is the ministry of reconciliation—at personal, cultural, political and religious levels.³⁹ Clearly, these approaches to Christian mission demand a prophetic response to the call of the Gospel as well as commitment to dialogue, accompaniment and solidarity. Mary’s Magnificat, as a song of prophetic dialogue, continues to be a “dangerous memory”⁴⁰ calling Christians to ever more authentic Christian life and missionary praxis.

The Magnificat, Marist Mission and Prophetic Dialogue

“They must think as Mary, judge as Mary, feel and act as Mary in all things” (Jean-Claude Colin)⁴¹

For Marists, it is Mary herself who inspires their particular approach to evangelisation by calling them to be a Marian presence in the Church and world of our time. Indeed, they must “think, judge, feel and act as

³⁸ See *Constants in Context*, 375-378; and J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission? Theological Explorations*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Augsburg, 2000, 164-183.

³⁹ See, for example, Robert Schreiter, *Ministry and Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998.

⁴⁰ See J. B. Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, New York: Seabury, 1980, 88-99; and Elizabeth Johnson, *Dangerous Memories: A Mosaic of Mary in Scripture*, New York: Continuum, 2004.

⁴¹ Cit. *Constitutions of the Society of Mary* (Rome, 1988), no. 228.

Mary in all things.” How better to do this than by breathing in and breathing out Mary’s spirit of prophetic dialogue expressed in the Magnificat? As we know, Jean-Claude Colin articulated the Marist vocation in relation to Mary’s presence at Nazareth, in the early Church of Pentecost and, now, “at the end of time.”⁴² Even if his documented references to the Magnificat are modest,⁴³ these three pivotal symbols of Mary’s historical (Nazareth), ecclesial (Pentecost/newborn Church) and eschatological (end of time) roles are intimately connected to the Magnificat prayer.

First, Mary’s initial call to mission—to give birth to Christ—occurs in Nazareth, what Fr. Colin called “the cradle of the Church.”⁴⁴ It is from Nazareth Mary makes her first missionary journey to visit Elizabeth, her cousin-in-need. In other words, the Magnificat arises from and profoundly expresses Mary’s Nazareth experience—just as Marists are called to live the Nazareth virtues as the foundation for their own mission of bringing Christ to the world. Second, as noted, the Magnificat is also a Pentecost hymn of the first Jerusalem community. It is here the disciples gather to sing Mary’s song of praise and thanksgiving in the face of all kinds of opposition. In this singing of the Magnificat the missionary “Church is born,” symbolizing the Marist vocation of “beginning a new Church.”⁴⁵ Third, by envisaging a final age where God’s justice and mercy flourish, the Magnificat is also linked to Mary’s role as “mother of mercy”—and the ensuing missionary vocation of Marists to be “instruments of divine mercy.”⁴⁶

⁴² Gaston Lessard warns against exaggerating Pentecost as a key Colinian symbol, noting that it is Mary’s presence in ‘the new-born Church’ and ‘at the end of time’ which is prominent. Even Colin’s major source, *Mary of Agreda*, focuses her attention on Mary’s presence amidst the apostles rather than at Pentecost as such. Nonetheless, the argument is made that Pentecost is still a foundational Marist symbol, especially in the manner that Mary and the Holy Spirit are so intricately linked in Colin’s thought. See *Marists and Pentecost*, in FN 5, 1 (2000) 52-68. As used in this article, “Mary at Pentecost” and “Mary in the new-born Church” are used somewhat indiscriminately and interchangeably: Pentecost functions as a symbol of the newborn Church. For further reflection on ‘Mary in the Newborn Church and at the End of Time’, see Jean Coste’s article by this title in FN 3,3 (1996) 245-263.

⁴³ Jean Coste, *The Roots of Colin’s Thinking*, in FN 3, 2 (1996) 133f.

⁴⁴ *A Founder Speaks*, edited by Jean Coste, Rome, 1975 (= FS), doc.10.

⁴⁵ Often expressed by Colin in phrases similar to this, for example, FS, doc. 120.1.

⁴⁶ For further reflection on ‘Mary Mother of Mercy’ and ‘Marists Instruments of Divine Mercy,’ see Jean Coste, *A Marian Vision of Church: Jean-Claude Colin*

The three Colinian symbols of Marist mission can be further explored in their own right as expressions of prophetic dialogue.⁴⁷ The prophetic dimension arises from Fr. Colin's cosmic or eschatological vision of the "whole world Marist" so that "there would be at the end of time what there had been at the beginning: *cor unum et anima una*."⁴⁸ This founding Marist vision of Mary's presence in the early Church and the end of time is unquestionably utopian in the manner it evokes an idealised past to critique current negativities and provoke a forward-looking imagination directed towards a transformed future. Marists are privileged to participate in this mission or "work of Mary"⁴⁹ for the radical transformation of Church and society "in these last times."⁵⁰

This cosmic perspective requires Marists to see the world and Church through the eyes of Mary—and, I would add, through the spirit of her Magnificat—naming the forces of resistance while embodying an alternative ecclesial consciousness focusing on divine mercy. We are now aware that Fr. Colin's utopian Marian perspective was foundational to his understanding of Marist evangelisation arising from his time in Cerdon and his Bugey missionary experience. Here, the mystical vision of Mary's presence at "the end of time" is concretely expressed in a missionary approach we could call dialogical: to do whatever is necessary to touch the hearts and souls of all people with "the merciful love of a mother."⁵¹

As the term implies, an eschatological vision focuses on the end times. Subsequently, especially in his years as Superior General, Fr. Colin gives increasing importance to the time of the beginnings: Mary's

(Maristica 8), Rome, 1998, 258ff; and Jan Snijders, *The Age of Mary* (Maristica 1), Rome, 1988, 42-71.

⁴⁷ Also see Michael Fitzgerald, *A Marian Consciousness: Marist Spirituality as Prophetic* (Maristica 5), Rome, 1991, especially for the manner in which the prophetic aspect of a Marist missionary spirituality is developed.

⁴⁸ *Origines Maristes*, J. Coste & G. Lessard, eds., Rome, 1961-1967, doc. 427.2.

⁴⁹ The "work of Mary" is used by all three Marist founders: Jean-Claude Colin, Marcellin Champagnat and Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn.

⁵⁰ For interpretations of how the Colinian eschatological vision may be interpreted for and by Marists today, see Jan Snijders, 'The End of Time: The Present Age', 20-41; and Michael Fitzgerald, 'The Colinian Eschatological Vision', 94-111; chapters in authors' respective above-mentioned works.

⁵¹ See, for example, an early sermon of Fr. Colin on the "motherly heart" of Mary which extends "to all nations and all peoples, comforts all miseries, meets all needs, grants all prayers." APM 241.42. Cited in Gerard Hall, *Community of Memory and Hope*, Sydney, 1985, 25.

presence in the midst of the apostles supporting the new-born Church. In fact, this is to be the Society of Mary's "only model."⁵² Its mission of beginning a new Church means that "we must recreate the faith of the first believers."⁵³ Here the prophetic element which contrasts an idealised past with the present reality of the Church is certainly evident. However, the call to Marist mission is not so much focused on the critique of current ecclesial practices as it requires Marists themselves to effectively image the first Jerusalem community through their lives and missionary activity. This requires conversion of heart, an alternative Marian consciousness, for Marists to be effective catalysts for the Church's rebirth.⁵⁴ This role also involves 'supporting' the Church in the manner of Mary who reconciles diverse groups or parties which threaten the Church's unity.⁵⁵

Moreover, Fr. Colin's intuition is clear: Marist missionary effectiveness depends on their being like Mary, "hidden and unknown," disappearing into the life of the Church so that the Gospel may be proclaimed through a revitalised Church.⁵⁶ This is not a missionary strategy, but a missionary spirituality whereby the mystery of Mary's hidden presence in the newborn Church becomes the central and most evocative symbol for Marist missionary evangelisation. Why? "Today there's no other way of doing good. *Ignoti et Occulti*. The times demand it."⁵⁷ Arguably, our post-modern, post-secular age is even more demanding of the hidden and unknown Marist way.⁵⁸ Such an approach

⁵² Fr. Colin: "Our model, our only model, must be and is the early Church." *Origines Maristes*, doc. 631.

⁵³ FS, doc.117.3.

⁵⁴ These ideas are developed by Michael Fitzgerald, 'A Prophetic Spirituality' in *A Marian Consciousness*, 112-121.

⁵⁵ Justin Taylor suggests that Mary (in Luke and Acts) plays a mediating role between the two groups: the blood group ("Jesus' brothers") who belong to Jesus' natural family; and the new faith community of disciples and believing women. "Marist Retreat" (Rome 2005), 22-25. Private manuscript.

⁵⁶ Fr. Colin stated that "(Mary) did more than the apostles for the new-born Church, but she did it without any stir" (FS, doc. 190.2). Nonetheless, it is important to note that it is not "Mary in the newborn Church," but "the newborn Church, as such, which includes Mary and the apostles" which is the model for the Society. See Coste, *Mary in the Newborn Church*, 251.

⁵⁷ FS, doc.102.33.

⁵⁸ See Patrick Bearsley, *From Asceticism to Kenosis: The Evolution of the Marist Understanding of the 'Hidden and Unknown'*, in FN 5,1 (2000), esp. 86-94; and Jan Snijders, 'Hidden and Unknown' in *The Age of Mary*, 72-96. Both see the

gives priority to witness, service, dialogue and solidarity with others in the manner of Christ's own kenosis.⁵⁹

Clearly, for Marists, there is also an intimate connection between "hidden and unknown" and "the home of Nazareth," even if this was not an original connection in Fr. Colin's thought.⁶⁰ Insofar as Nazareth stands for the interior virtues—"humility, self-denial, intimate union with God, and the most ardent love of neighbour," as well as "poverty, humility, modesty and simplicity of heart"—these are directly related to apostolic activity and "works of zeal."⁶¹ In relation to Marists' and Mary's role at the end-of-time, Fr. Colin had already articulated his famous "three No's" to greed, pride and power which inevitably obstruct "Mary's work."⁶² Clearly, too, the Nazareth virtues are profoundly evident in the manner of the apostles' and Mary's presence in the early Church.⁶³ Furthermore, Fr. Colin himself often links contemplation and action, dialogue and prophecy, discernment and mission with reference to Mary at Nazareth *and* in the early Church: "Let us imitate her life at Nazareth. She did more than the Apostles for the new-born Church."⁶⁴ Nazareth is a place from where we see more clearly our missionary role: "I place myself at Nazareth; *from* there I see all I have to do."⁶⁵

As indicated, these three key symbols of Marist life and mission—Nazareth, newborn Church/Pentecost and the end of time—call upon

'hidden and unknown' way as especially relevant for mission in the contemporary age. Our SM Constitutions (1987, no. 24) indicate a similar sensibility: "In this spirit [of 'hidden and unknown'] they are able to hear the longings of the people of God and discern the signs of hope in today's world."

⁵⁹ See Bearsley, *Ascesis*, 83-86.

⁶⁰ See Jean Coste, *Nazareth in the Thought of Fr. Colin*, in *Acta 6* (1960-1962) 299-400. This important study indicates that Nazareth is not a key-symbol in Colin's early years, but becomes important in his later years as General and in his contemplative years at La Neylière. Nonetheless, a later exaggerated contemplative interpretation of Nazareth was not faithful to Colin's more complex and dynamic understanding. See also Fitzgerald, 62-64; and E. Keel, *Jean-Claude Colin: Poet and Prophet*, in *The Study of Marist Spirituality*, Rome 1984, 158f.

⁶¹ SM Constitutions (1872), no.49-50; repeated in SM Constitutions (1987), no. 228.

⁶² See Fitzgerald's chapter on 'Prophetic Criticism' in *A Marian Consciousness* which discusses the significance of Fr. Colin's 'Three No's,' 72-93.

⁶³ Coste indicates how this connection develops in Fr. Colin's thought only after 1850. See Fitzgerald, *Marian Consciousness*, 62.

⁶⁴ FS, doc. 190.2.

⁶⁵ *Origines Maristes*, doc. 839.38 [Emphasis added].

Marists to imitate Mary in their work of evangelisation which is expressed most profoundly in her song of prophetic dialogue, the Magnificat. This is, of course, a prayer for all Christians, a prayer which increasingly draws us to see in Mary the model of true Christian discipleship and “Star of evangelisation.”⁶⁶ If Marists have a particular insight and contribution to make, it is surely the manner in which they instinctively relate to Mary as a model of missionary praxis. Here the creative tension between prophetic proclamation and dialogic engagement is reflected in the various polarities that define Mary’s and Marist mission: hidden life and new Church; Nazareth and Pentecost; diocesan and universal; disappearance and creativity; immersion and dynamism; self-effacement and forming a Marian people; ‘age of evil’ and ‘age of Mary’; all apostolates but preference for works that are hidden, unknown, neglected. Or in Fr. Colin’s cryptic expression: “Hidden and unknown: that is the way to take over everything.”⁶⁷

Finally, our focus on Marist mission as prophetic dialogue demonstrates the intimate connection between the “hidden and unknown” Marist way and the focus on divine mercy as the source, inspiration and goal of evangelisation.

Mercy is a rather silent word and perhaps—of its nature—does not draw attention to itself. Mercy is a special type of love. “It is not boastful or conceited,” St Paul says. It is not “jealous.” It does not “take pleasure in other people’s sins.” It is always ready to excuse (1 Cor. 13:4-7). Mercy sits among the “last” and the “least,” *hidden and unknown* by the powers that be. Mercy never forces its way to gain attention, but always remains *there* nevertheless.⁶⁸

Any missionary spirituality calls on Christians to first experience and then communicate the divine mercy. For Marists, this experience and its communication are highlighted by their identification with

⁶⁶ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 82. For John Paul II and Benedict XVI, Mary is consistently named “Star of the New Evangelisation.” See, for example, Benedict XVI’s Homily at the Mass for the Opening of the Synod of Bishops and Proclamation of St John of Avila and St Hildegard of Bingen as Doctors of the Church, 7 October, 2012.

⁶⁷ FS, doc. 119.9.

⁶⁸ Terry Veling, *The Beatitude of Mercy: Love Watches over Justice*, Mulgrave, Vic.: John Garratt, 2010, 24; “hidden and unknown” emphasis added.

Mary, notably at Nazareth, in the new-born Church of Pentecost, and at the end-of-time. The burden of this article has been to suggest that these three symbols of Marist life and mission express a Magnificat spirituality of prophetic dialogue. Even if this is not my Indian Jesuit friend's favourite expression, I am confident he will agree that the Marist approach to evangelisation has something to learn from reflection on the Magnificat, and something to teach about the Church's mission as proclamation ("sending out"), witness ("gathering in") and solidarity ("walking with").

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