Moving towards a global mission: introductory remarks
by Carmelo Dotolo

The missionary movement today is experiencing a period of change. It is not just about changing models in the theory and practice of mission. It is the acknowledgement that a mission is an event that renews itself through dialogue with the world, culture and society. The need for sincere dialogue, in fact, is one of the most significant signs of the times, showing how the mission is called on to operate a constant process of discernment, so that it can meet the demands of the men and women of our times. This entails the strength to identify a new paradigm. It is no accident that missions today are becoming increasingly global. They must live within the confines of the different cultures, within geographical spaces that are becoming ever closer in the struggle for a worldwide ethics, in the meeting with other religions. The mission is the place where humanity invokes the right to life and to better quality in relationships.

This framework seems to require a redefinition of the objectives of missionary reflection and practice. It is no longer a case of thinking, reflecting and operating within the context of a Christian society; or of aspiring to a form of Christianization which, to many, appears like proselytism. Rather, the focus should be on promoting processes of liberation/salvation according to the criteria of the Kingdom proclaimed and practiced by Jesus and by the first Christian communities.

1 Missions and the signs of the times

To maintain that the theology of mission is engaged in rethinking its identity, with respect to both theoretical reflection and pastoral practice, is nothing new. It could not be otherwise, because it is a specific aspect of the Christian event to consider oneself constantly a part of the historical process, which means translating the innovations introduced by the Gospels into the lives of men and women who are searching for the meaning of life. The decisiveness of the logic of inculturation, therefore, is the characteristic trait of the mission of the Church, which looks on the rhythmic flowing of time with the attention of one whose task it is to account for the revelation as the sign of a reality that directs the course of history differently.

Yet it is also known that the relationship between the Gospels and culture, the Church and the world, is not the result of a humanitarian marketing operation, nor a rebalancing act within a system of religious, political and cultural forces. Instead, it is the laborious development of a relationship between the project of the Kingdom and man’s desire to build a more dignified and better world in which to live. Therefore, no mission can be conceived without a suitable focus on the signs of the times, which are the issues that spring from the different visions of life, mankind and the world, which interrogate the most genuine intentionality of the mission.

This is the groundwork for understanding the creative tension that animates the self-understanding of missiology, regardless of whether a change of paradigm is taking place or the dynamics of evangelization are being overhauled. The history of the 20th century does not just bring to the fore the paradoxical appeal of the Christian project, but also a certain disenchantment for certain lifestyles, models of thought, ethical criteria, which, inspired by the innovation of the kerygma, collide against referential horizons demanding project-making autonomy and decision-making freedom. In this state of affairs, the indication of a crisis of the Christian message is not marginal, because it affects the capacity of Christianity to build its own future and, consequently, its missionary capability. As stated in Redemptoris Missio 36, «one of the most serious reasons for the lack of interest in the missionary task is a widespread indifferentism, which, sad to say, is found also among Christians. It is based on incorrect theological perspectives and is characterized by a religious relativism which leads to the belief that “one religion is as good as another”». The question, therefore, concerns the problematic nature of certain ways of translating the meaning of the mission, its legitimacy, with respect to the assumption that every culture and religion contains a response for the concerns of mankind. The reason lies in the complexity of the new areopaguses. In
particular, we are faced with a cultural plurality that highlights the importance of *alterity* and of *difference*. Without exceeding in final interpretations, it can be said that we are at a delicate and crucial crossroads: pluralism represents the cultural atmosphere of our times, the vital context in which stable convictions, ingrained principles, criteria capable of generating consensus and mobilization are all mixed up. The impact is not indifferent compared to certain *standards* of evangelization and pathways of pastoral training, or to the interpretation of certain philosophical and theological categories. In short, today, no theological and missiological reflection is possible without the perception of the claims of pluralism and without understanding certain trajectories that affect the possibility of announcing the Gospels. Pluralism is modifying the *structures of plausibility* of culture, revealing the face of a necessary relativism, which, however, is not separate from an aggresive relativism, which seems to translate *anything goes* into a theorem. At the same time it has changed the way in which we look on the role and meaning of the religious experience, within the context of human existence. What counts is the indication of a religious meaning appropriate to the needs of man. It is of little interest if this entails a contamination of the world we belong to or the use of a larger number of religious suggestions.

The reflection on pluralism and the mission should be viewed against the backdrop of these issues.

2 Missiology and alterity

A significant figure of alterity is the religious universe, with its multiplicity of languages, rites, ethical codes. Most people nowadays accept the fact that the religious experience is no longer indifferent to the cultural configuration. Men give shape to their experience by means of signs, symbols and models, which live within a certain context (whether geographical, economic, religious …) and according to the rules of *historical memory*. This selects, passes down and develops the cultural elements of the past so that they can be reprocessed and delivered to the future decisions by both individuals and society as a whole, including the risk of altering these elements. Now, the understanding of culture and the focus on interculturality – as the prior dimension of evangelisation – requires making an effort to interpret the *meanings* that mankind has woven and the *core symbols* around which culture is organised. Among these, *religion* emerges as the constituent element of the system, some would even go so far as to say the founding element or, in any case, of decisive importance for culture, to the point that interpreting religion is understanding culture, and vice versa. Regardless of the various positions and interpretations with respect to the religious phenomenon, it presents itself as a form of knowledge producing action and hope; as the assertion of an original order that embraces mankind and the world and supports and brings light into life.

Despite this, it is precisely in the interpretation of religion that pluralism has assumed a leading role. It has become the key issue of the current missiological reflection and practice, starting from the core issue of the Christological specification of the revelation.¹ This claim, however, seems paradoxically to constitute an embarassing stumbling block, for the standard-bearers of pluralism, in the dialogue paths of religions. The reason for this is the surprising peculiarity of the event of the incarnation, which shows the previously unseen of both God and man, with respect to the very meaning of religious experience. Yet that which constitutes an obstacle and a problem could represent the condition for a respectful and authentic encounter with the other religions. The event of the advent of Jesus Christ, in fact, has given Christianity both the opportunity to and the necessity of experiencing the relationship with the other religions as a free donation of the innovation represented by the coincidence of the revelation of God and the singular story of Jesus Christ.

Now, it is precisely the singularity of the story of Jesus Christ that interprets the universal nature of Christianity and allows an open configuration to every culture and religion. This means

that the universal nature of the revelation of God – expressed in the historical concreteness of Jesus Christ – is not a religious *a priori* but a given, an event that belongs to history and which allows a different assessment to be made of religious pluralism. Therefore, it is based on this event, and on the encounter with the other revelations, that we can grasp the pathway inaugurated by God’s project of salvation. The innovation introduced by Christianity consists in the fact that the revelation has achieved its peak in God’s historical communication and donation of himself through the person of his son, Jesus Christ. This is the claim of revelation as the opening of the promise of God, which has already been realised in the Paschal mystery, but which is still on an eschatological path. This *not yet* condition is unquestionably a part of God’s plan, but it is also due to man’s free decision to make the truth that is Jesus Christ his own, because Christ’s definitive nature meets up with the reality of a recognition that experiences the pace of history and its unveiling. From this perspective, Christ and the Holy Spirit are in relation with the universal history of mankind, albeit to differing degrees. This means that the Christian revelation is not just an event that gives space to the other and sets him free, but it is also open to the future, as the manifestation of his most intimate reality.

A possibility emerges based on these coordinates: the Christian message, in its opening to the anthropological universal, is capable of collaborating with the other religions to rethink their respective identities, within the context of a mutual dialogue that aims not at eliminating them, but of pointing the way to a more fruitful overall unity, outside each one’s fence. In other words, one cannot not grasp – in the opening up of religions to the Mystery – a possible call to meet up with the innovation inherent in the Christological revelation, at a time in which the message and the practice of Jesus encourages one to rethink the meaning and form of the religious experience. He is not simply the content of a hitherto unheard of doctrine, nor a simple historical event the strength of which lies in the shattering impact compared to the manner of conceiving the search for man. Jesus Christ carries within him *something more*, because he is a person who reveals and saves, starting from the admittedly singular claim of being the truth of both God and mankind. It is precisely this claim – which he has legitimised, with the Copernican revolution of love as the gift of himself for all mankind – that we must face up to and measure ourselves with.

It is unthinkable, therefore, for a mission to place between brackets the singular uniqueness of Jesus Christ, in which the Church experiences its tension *ad gentes* and the very reason for its existence in history. The Church’s witnessing purpose is called to a *qualitative mission*, a critical and propositional interpreter of the values of the Gospels. It is precisely in the pedagogical attention to evangelisation, as an announcement and the transformation of history, that we can understand the increasingly urgent instance of a pastoral and a catechesis capable of tackling the challenge of pluralism.

### 3 The creative tension of the mission

Pluralism, after all, is a *chance* for the missionary movement, because it invites people to perceive alterity and diversity as a possible meeting place and a space for solidarity. The evangelising mission of the Church, therefore, exercises a *creative tension*. It springs from the need to repose the question that Jesus asked of his disciples: “*Who do you say I am?*” (Matthew 16, 15), to discover – in the form of the *agape* as the total gift – a style of announcing the Gospels that correlates, albeit critically, at times, the reality of the Christian message and the reality of the religious traditions. At the same time, however, it highlights how the alterity of the Gospel highlights a process of inculturation of faith, through the acceptance of the models and paradigms of the cultures within which it penetrates. The prospect is that of *opening questions* and of offering a value to the salvation process already under way, in a focus on the human condition, with its aspirations, expectations and suffering. In the Gospel message there is a potential unicum of *humanisation*, which gives the Church the boldness to offer an alternative model, capable of making the Earth more hospitable and mankind a more convivial community. It is for this reason
that the Christian community, in the sign of a paradoxical lifestyle, can exercise the role of a critical reserve, with respect to the obvious dehumanisation of mankind and the instability introduced by globalisation. If the objective of the mission is to announce the singular revelatory nature of Jesus Christ and to humanise, in accordance with the values of the Kingdom, then we can identify the following elements inspired by the Redemptoris Missio, 37.

a) The religious factor. Is decisive in helping people grasp the transcendent meaning in history, the closeness of God, who invites every man and woman to a condition of freedom, justice and salvation. Faced with the temptation of a DIY religion, or a religion incorrectly focused on mere mental and physical well-being, it is expedient to teach people a style of faith that focuses on the project of liberation. Spirituality itself must become a criticism of every false spiritualism, capable of an open-eyed mysticism. This is where the ecumenical dialogue between the religions fits in.

b) The social factor. The missionary proclamation must constantly focus on and aim at discovering the other, without whom no genuine experience of growth and collaboration is possible. It is expedient to reiterate a sensitivity that is already a part of the current missionary practice: attention to the poor, minorities (immigrants, women, young people, etc…), people who live within the concreteness of material needs and of the need to be listened to. In particular, it is necessary to be able to live and promote an intercultural style.

c) The cultural dimension. We must not be naive: there is a cultural, scientific, mass media world, whose presence and influence is significant for perceiving and interpreting reality, because it works on the dynamic mechanisms of identification. Whether right or wrong, it is through these channels that models of behaviour and ethical values are passed on, which then condition the day-to-day lives of many people. To interact with these new opinion-making and trend-setting worlds means to identify new strategies and tasks (ministries) capable of modifying a certain idea and practice of the missionary movement.

4 The importance of dialogue

The mission, therefore, is openness to dialogue, because we can grasp the signs of the Spirit in the different religious traditions and the plurality of cultures. This is why a dialogic spirituality in the horizon of religious pluralism, requires a confessional humility that is capable of fuelling equality between the interlocutors and the conviction that the other is a gift that can enrich us. This horizon is a fixed point in magisterial and philosophical reflection. Beginning with the cultured intuition from the encyclical letter by Pope Paul VI of 1964, Ecclesiam suam, 108: «But we do not wish to turn a blind eye to the spiritual and moral values of the various non-Christian religions, for we desire to join with them in promoting and defending common ideals in the spheres of religious liberty, human brotherhood, education, culture, social welfare, and civic order». The importance of dialogue as a style and a tool for an open meeting, constitutes one of the key issues of rethinking the mission of the Church, in relation to the other religions. The encyclical Redemptoris Missio by John Paul II (1990), and the documents issued by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Dialogue and Mission (1984) and Dialogue and Proclamation (1991)2, seal an important conviction for dialogue to permeate the existence of believers and communities: religions have played and do still play «a providential role in the divine economy of salvation» (Dialogue and Proclamation, 17), and the opening up to faith of the other implies the capacity to share his vision of the world, with a sympathy that is preliminary to understanding. One’s belonging cannot constitute an obstacle, nor determine the relevance of the interpersonal encounter, just like our convictions must be set aside when they are inadequate in respect of the function of preunderstanding the other. This is why the

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ecclesial communities must experience the style of the dialogue within the mission, which basically means «to transform that humanity from within, making it new» (Dialogue and Proclamation, 8). If dialogue can produce mutual knowledge and enrichment it is because it makes us able to change, to experience the event of conversion as an opening up to the meeting with truth, which the Spirit donates when accompanying any meeting that desires to go to the heart of the problem. It is obvious, however, that the style of the dialogue requires us to rethink the way we consider and experience religion, because where religious experience is insensitive towards the search of a reliable meaning of life, when it violates the dignity of men and women, resorting to unbending and fundamentalist positions, it loses its truest purpose: that of promoting freedom and the exercise of the common good. It is no accident that, where there is no religious freedom, as stated in the Declaration Dignitatis humanæ, then one of the decisive preconditions — dialogue itself — is no more. «Therefore, it is a good thing if we can be aware, in dialogue, of the indispensable nature of the question relating to God and profess it. For Catholic Christianity it is absolutely necessary to pose the question of salvation in religions, of truth and of its claim to sending and, respectively, of its missionary witness»3.

Therefore, the following two points are important:

a) The dynamics of interculturality. A decision that can no longer be postponed concerns the dialogic meeting of cultures, despite the objections according to which intercultural dialogue is the harbinger of a certain cultural relativism. To meet with a different culture is an event that can enable people to come face to face with a different way of thinking, which can, at times, if not often, be radically different. Yet we cannot neglect this aspect if we wish to dialogue in a responsible manner on the questions of life. Therefore, we should not be surprised to learn that interculturality does not just mean welcoming the other, it also creates a conflict in understanding, because it leads towards the construction of a new form of civil coexistence. Within these coordinates the contribution of Christianity aims at building a new culture, capable of focusing on dignity and on rights, especially of those who are excluded and marginalised as a result of imperialist policies.

b) Ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. Lastly, religions must learn how to cooperate in the construction of a new world of rights and duties. This requires a great degree of maturity. The principle of religious freedom and equality is no longer sufficient, although it is still decisive. We need a new style of cooperation between states and religions. It is true that, in the profound transformation-induced crisis of recent years, the forceful demand for an identity and symbols in which one can recognize oneself, has boosted religious membership and religious values. The focus on the social, cultural and political dimension of religion, however, should include all the religions, otherwise there is a risk of recreating ideological blocks and discrimination between strong and well-rooted religious groups and new religious movements, religious minorities and other religions. This highlights the importance of rediscovering the ecumenical tension and interreligious dialogue, as a means for creating the conditions for acceptance and discussion, with respect to functional goals, within a juster society, more attentive to the needs of everybody.