



Curriculum Theologiae

Networking: Our Discussions Retraced, Our Challenges Ahead

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The Sense and Purpose of Theology:

Context and Methods of Theological Teaching in Africa and Asia

Networking: Our Discussions Retraced, Our Challenges Ahead

John Mansford Prior

It has been a privilege to be invited to listen to the eleven remarkable papers presented on the 50th anniversary of Missio Aachen, opening with Cardinal Tagle's keynote address. The depth of the analyses and the commitment of the speakers was inspiring, a true tribute to Missio Aachen which has accompanied the Churches of Africa and Asia academically and pastorally over the past half century. Proficiat!

This conference is being held during the global Covid-19 pandemic, at a time of universal uncertainty, when plans and projects are in abeyance. Yet, if we look back on the 50 years of Missio Aachen, we notice how every decade or so Missio undertook a thorough reappraisal of its work and reset its priorities before setting out on the next stage of its mission research, training and publications. So naturally enough, on this 50th anniversary Missio is once again listening to Africa and Asia and re-evaluating its work and direction to prepare to embark on a new future.

Intercultural Exchange for Evangelisation

If uncertainty and vulnerability express how we are in today's world, then that is where we commence our theologising on mission. Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, after looking at philosophical and theological developments in the 1970s and the emergence of inter-contextual work by theologians in the 1980s, outlined the impact of globalisation since the beginning of the present century. This formed the basis of his four key points in responding to this uncertain situation and so fulfil the ecclesial mission vision of *Gaudium et Spes*. The Second Vatican Council envisaged a Church one in Truth but diverse in expression. His four points are: 1) Contemplation leading to mysticism, 2) Wide-ranging dialogue (an exchange of gifts), both local and global ("*glocal*" to use the terminology of the World Council of Churches), 3) The necessity of an inter-disciplinary and intercultural approach to doing mission theology, and 4) The vital need for networking at every level. Luis Antonio Tagle pushed for intercultural philosophical and theological studies whereby they would be in constant dialogue with each other, and so embrace a dialogical Church where communion and communication come together. Thus, for Cardinal Tagle intercultural exchange is at the heart of the Church and its mission, where missionaries are none other than "transcultural mediators". Indeed, our values are meta-cultural, informed by hybridity and cultural intelligence. This makes sense when we are ready to discard divisions between "us" and "them", when we encounter the poor and the excluded as "us".

Cardinal Tagle's keynote was followed by three short papers from Asia (Sebastian Painadath, India), from Latin America (Diego Irarrazaval, Chile) and from Africa (Georgette Ndour, Senegal). They took up the importance of experience and mystique for a spirituality of

global solidarity. Coming from diverse economic and cultural backgrounds, these three papers were remarkably similar in their grounded spiritualities of global solidarity in the contemplative process as we move from our core identity of “I” to “We”.

Sebastian Painadath from India outlined the five phases whereby we move from “I” to “We”: [1] at the body level, [2] in the mind, [3] with inner psychic factors, [4] with the intuitive faculty (*nous/budi*, the inner eye, the inner light), [5] and so enter into inner space, the heart, the core of the person, with Divine vibrations. God the Father is “I”, God the Son “Thou”, God the Holy Spirit “We”. Thus, diversity is beauty, and oneness is truth. This “we consciousness” leads to global solidarity. Following the Gospel, we see each and every one – whoever, wherever - as “sister” or “brother”; there are no exceptions.

Diego Irarrazaval from Chile addressed three issues: [1] art and prophecy from below, from the outcasts of society, [2] that we are spiritual bodies and so our bodies and the earth from which they come and to which they belong are major concerns, and [3] of fragility in leadership, for leadership grows creatively when it faces its fragility with few words but with much courage and silence. We listen and dream together.

Georgette Ndour from Senegal reminded us that in Africa there is no clear division between culture and religion. She spoke of the traditional ways of knowledge that continue to be the living root of thought and intelligence. She concluded by relating how victims of society move beyond their fragility.

Dialogue: Creating a Culture of Encounter

The second day reflected on inputs from Nigeria, the Lebanon and Indonesia where new narratives and paradigms are arising in the face of the radical change in contexts in a process towards a new humanism.

Gideon Pwakim from Nigeria, focused on dialogue rooted in a theology of hospitality, Souraya Bechealany from the Lebanon spoke on the challenges of theology since the Arab Spring Revolution of 2010 and the declaration of the Islamic State ISIS, while Max Regus from Indonesia, read his paper on “Bridging the differences: Context, challenges and responsibilities of theology and mission in Indonesia”. In Indonesia, home to many religions and indigenous beliefs, socio-religious diversity forms the country’s primary context and character. Indonesia’s portrait of social diversity has two sides: the beauty of diverse religions and beliefs, but also diversity that triggers inter-group conflict, tension and violence. Hence the need for new fields of theology in bridging the differences and in strengthening religious moderation. Missio Aachen will surely play a significant role here.

Inter-disciplinarity: On the Way to Contextual Relevance

We then had inputs from Europe, Asia and Africa provided by Patrick Becker (Germany), Shalini Mulackal (India), and Jean Messingué (Côte d’Ivoire).

Patrick Becker examined European theology which is facing modernization and is being transformed in the processes. In this context a relativistic epistemology is becoming the norm. In this situation the question arises: do we continue to form candidates for the priesthood in

seminaries somewhat separated from society, or do we return to the pre-Tridentine manner of formation whereby candidates lived with ordinary people?

For Asia, Shalini Mulackal examined the Interdisciplinarity and Contextual Relevance of Theological Education with some positive examples from India.

In Africa Jean Messingué sees interdisciplinary as a means to engage with abuse effectively in mission and in the Church. The one way to avoid abuse is a truly transparent system of training and formation.

And on the final day, Friday morning, we listened to Archbishop Bashar Warda of Erbil, Kurdistan speaking convincingly of the role of the Catholic University in war-torn Iraq. The university, the best English language university in the country, is a major source of hope to the small Christian minority of around 6% of the nation's population. Given that 40% of the population is under 14 years of age, and that the total population is projected to grow from 35 to 50 million by 2030, the university will continue to play a pivotal role in advancing moderation and cooperation between the majority Muslims and the minority Christians.

From these papers we can recognise four ongoing paradigm shifts, namely:

- 1) From faith seeking understanding to faith seeking transformative understanding.
- 2) A movement towards Empathy, Vulnerability, "*Ubuntu*", that is, to relational responsibility.
- 3) It is becoming clear that inter-disciplinarity is not enough – the process is more than the content.
- 4) And finally, the question arises: can contextual theologies be understood and practised only in seminaries, or do we need to live and experience people at the edge of society - for instance in India theology students would not live isolated in seminaries but in contexts, with living in tribal communities perhaps, then moving on to more Hindu environments and so on to other related contexts.

Also, in reflecting on God's mission, we are being drawn to a new way of listening, to "transformative listening". Here faith seeking justice, equality and harmony is at the heart of our theologizing in each and every context. This leads us to appreciate diversity, which in turn necessarily leads to a transformation of our systems and structures.

Challenges Ahead

Listening to these rich inputs from Africa, Asia and Europe, I note three major challenges that we have to face.

Firstly, in this uncertain world, there is no meaningful mission without networking: locally and globally ("glocally") at every level. Accepting our vulnerability we constantly listen to and reflect with others. There is no alternative.

Secondly, a key term here is "inter" – primarily inter-cultural and inter-faith. There is no more going alone as Catholics or indeed as Christians – no "us" and "them" but always "We". We live and think and believe and act together or not at all. No exceptions.

And thirdly, as our traditional structures of mission become less and less viable, so we must be open to new mission movements wherever they appear. Online communication has expanded our horizon immensely. Sitting in my room on Flores island Indonesia, or in our SVD House in London, England, makes little difference when I am in communication with sisters and brothers in five continents, such as today.

I'll leave it at that. Now I must listen and learn from fellow participants.

Thank-you!