BLESSINGS AND CHALLENGES OF COMMUNION AND MISSIONARY DISCIPLESHIP

Stephen Bevans, SVD

United States Catholic Mission Association

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INTRODUCTION

We are gathered here in Miami at this annual USCMA Mission Conference to “push out into the deep”—to reflect together, in other words, on the implications of the 2007 Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops at Aparecida, Brazil for our life and service in mission. My task in this presentation is to reflect on the Blessings and Challenges involved in two of the foundational concepts of the Aparecida Conference: the concept of communion, which roots Christians within the reality of the Trinitarian God as the church, and the concept of missionary discipleship, which expresses how Christians need to live out that communion in their lives in the world.

What has become clear to me as I have reflected on my task over the last several months is how all the various elements in my title are paired together and explain one another. The first example of this is a rather often quoted line of Pope Benedict XVI in his Introductory Address (IA) at the Aparecida Conference, talking about the connection between the words “missionary” and “discipleship.” “The disciple,” he said, “feels driven to bring the Good News of salvation to his (her) brothers and sisters. Discipleship and mission are like the two sides of a single coin . . .”¹ This idea is echoed in the Concluding Document (CD) itself when the bishops say that “every disciple is a missionary, for Jesus makes him (or her) participate in his mission, while also binding him (or her) to himself as a friend and brother.”²

In the same way, communion and missionary discipleship might be described as two sides of a coin. “The vocation to missionary discipleship,” the bishops insist, “is con-vocation to communion in their church. There is no discipleship without communion.”³

Finally, the blessings and challenges of communion and missionary discipleship are also like two sides to a single coin. One of my big insights in reflecting on my task this afternoon is to realize that, on the one hand, the blessings of being a missionary disciple in the communion that is the church are the challenges. As is clear from many of the Pauline Letters, the great challenge Christians is to be what they are. On the other hand, the stretching that it takes to be an authentic disciple in mission is discipleship’s greatest blessing. To struggle to be

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³ CD 156.
a true missionary disciple is to participate deeply in the paschal mystery, and such participation blesses us with experiences, relationships, and views of the world that are greater and more filled with life and joy that we ever could imagine. Or, as Tony Gittins writes in his book on discipleship, *A Presence that Disturbs*, "every true experience of God in whatever form, makes a person less insular, less complacent, and less isolated—and more restless, more inspired and more engaged with the world and humanity."4

Because of this, if you will, *perichoresis* or intertwining of the elements of my theme, I’m going to divide my reflections this afternoon into three parts. My first part will reflect on how missionary discipleship is rooted in trinitarian communion. My second part will reflect on how the blessings of missionary discipleship are its very challenges. And my third part will reflect on how these challenges are, at the same time, missionary discipleship’s overabundant blessings.

*One: Missionary Discipleship as Rooted in Trinitarian Communion*

“In the remotest beginning,” Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff writes, “communion prevails.”5 The God revealed by Jesus is not an omnipotent monarch who dominates the world, however lovingly. The God of Jesus is a God in radical relation to the world, flowing through the world, calling the world to the fullness of life, healing, and justice. The community of love and justice that God calls God’s creation to, as Karl Rahner famously argued, what God is in Godself.6 God is relationship, community, communion, and that communal reality spills over into the act of creation of the universe. The medieval mystic Mechtilde of Magdeburg speaks of the “restless Godhead,” an “overflow . . . which never stands still and always flows effortlessly without ceasing.”7 God’s deepest self is communion, but even more. God is movement, flow, embrace, dance—communion-in-mission.

From the first nanosecond of creation God has been present in the world through the Spirit who empowers, guides, and cajoles the processes of evolution as stars and planets formed, life developed, and human consciousness emerged. Theologian Ilia Delio writes that God—I would say the Spirit—“works through the messiness of creation and is less concerned about imposing design on processes

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6 I am referring, of course, to Rahner’s famous dictum “The ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity.” See Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 22. The italics are Rahner’s.
than providing nature with opportunities to participate in its own creation.”

We know about the Spirit’s work in a special way in the Old Testament, where the Spirit is depicted as the closeness of God to women and men, as mysterious as the blowing wind, the gentle breath, the flowing water, the freedom of a dove, who breathes life into the first humans, stirs up the spirit of leadership and prophecy, blows over the bones of Israel in the valley of the dead, and gushes out of the temple providing freshness and life to all it touches. The Spirit is God “inside out” in the world, in mission.

In the “fullness of time” (Gal 4:4) that Spirit of prophecy, healing, freshness, and new life took on a human face in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus began his ministry, as Luke describes it (Lk 4:18-19) by being anointed by the Spirit to “bring the good news to the poor, . . . to proclaim release to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.” Jesus, in other words, does in the ministry of a concrete person what the Spirit had been doing since the dawn of creation, and in this way he manifested the reality of God and what God was doing in the world. “God is like Jesus,” Uruguayan liberation theologian Juan Luis Segundo wrote. There is really no better way to understand who God is, and what God’s mission is. Jesus was about proclaiming, demonstrating, and personifying the Reign, Kingdom, or Kin-dom of God, a community of forgiven and forgiving people, a communion of love and justice.

From the beginning Jesus shared his mission with his disciples, but it was only after he had risen from the dead that the full import of such sharing became clear. At Pentecost and gradually and even painfully thereafter, the community of disciples that Jesus had gathered together became more and more conscious of the fact that now they were the ones to continue Jesus’ mission, in the same way that Jesus continued and gave shape to the Spirit’s mission from the beginning of time. The Spirit, drawing Jesus’ disciples more fully into the Trinitarian communion, called and cajoled and persuaded them to become missionaries, just as the Spirit and Jesus were. In communion with Jesus, and in the communion of the Holy Spirit, the disciples became missionary disciples. “The heart of discipleship is trinitarian,” Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams writes. “Communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion,” proclaim the Latin American bishops at Aparecida. Missionary discipleship is rooted in trinitarian communion.

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11 CD163.
“Being Christian,” the bishops write at Aparecida, “is not a burden but a gift.”

We have been given an amazing grace—as Jesus shared and continued the mission of the Spirit in his ministry, we are called to share and continue the ministry of Jesus, to preach, serve, and witness to the Kin-dom, the communion, of God. But this incredible blessing and gift is not something to take for granted. It does not make us better people or more beloved of God. It is not something about which we can boast. The blessing that the Triune God has entrusted to us is really a responsibility, a challenge. The gift comes with a responsibility; the blessings come with challenges.

In our Christian tradition the blessings that we have been given as Christians have been imaged in a variety of ways. Vatican II has singled out three images particularly to help us understand the lavishness of God’s blessings on us. It speaks of Christians as members of the People of God, the Body of Christ, and the Temple or Creation of the Spirit. In the Eastern Church a powerful image that has been used to express our blessed reality has been the image of “theosis” or “divinization.” What I’d like to do in this second part of my presentation is to reflect very briefly on only three of these images in the light of our calling to be missionary disciples in the communion of the Trinity. What I want to suggest is that each of these images is a missionary image, and points out the rich blessings we have received as missionary disciples, and the powerful challenges that missionary discipleship entails.

People of God

As we all know, the image of the church as the People of God is the major image that Vatican II presents of the church. It is a term rooted in the Old Testament, and was a special term for Israel as God’s specially chosen and blessed people. Hebrew even had a special word to designate Israel as God’s People. All other nations were “goyim,” the Gentiles. Israel was God’s “’am” God’s People. God had promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great people. Moses challenged Pharaoh in God’s name to “let my people go.” God loved Israel like a father loved a son, like a mother loved a child nursing at her breast. Over and over again we read the great covenantal formula between God and Israel: “I will be your God and you will be my people.”

But this preference as God’s special people was not about privilege. Israel often thought so, and touted their chosenness and specialness—their blessings—before the other peoples—the goyim—of the world. But God’s blessings are never for their own sake. They always involve a challenge to work with God in God’s work of salvation in the world. Israel is blessed, ultimately, to be a light to the nations. As Old Testament scholar Christopher Wright puts it, “The election of Israel is instrumental, not an end in itself. God did not choose Israel that they alone should be saved, as if the purpose of election terminated with them. They were chosen rather as the means by which salvation could be extended to others throughout the earth.

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12 CD 28.
... Election is of course, in the light of the whole Bible, election unto salvation. But it is first of all election into mission."\(^\text{13}\)

In the New Testament, writers like Luke in Acts, Paul and the author of First Peter made the bold assertion that, now, those who followed the way of Jesus could claim the title of People of God. This did by no means entail, as Paul argued, that Israel had lost its special status and mission in God’s eyes, but that the Christian Church had been grafted onto the trunk of the old olive tree, and that the blessings accorded to Israel of old were now lavished as well on the church. And with the blessings came the challenges. As the great twentieth century missiologist Lesslie Newbigin wrote, to be elect in Christ Jesus does not mean that we are saved and the rest are lost. Rather, to be blessed with election means to be incorporated into mission, to be bearers of God’s purpose for the world, to be a sign of the communion of God’s Kin-dom, to share in Jesus’ suffering, and to bear the scars of the passion.\(^\text{14}\)

One of the breakthroughs at Vatican II with the image of People of God was the recognition that being church is primarily living in communion, being part of a vital community where people can find real equality, vibrant liturgy, a rich life of prayer and support. The bishops more than once echoed John Paul’s call for the church to be a “home and school of communion.”\(^\text{15}\) If the church can be this kind of community it will be missionary just in its being. One of the concerns of the bishops at Aparecida was the fact that Catholics were leaving the church for other Christian groups. In a perceptive passage, the bishops reflected on the fact that people were not leaving for doctrinal reasons, but because they were seeking a vitality “they had not found in the church, as ought to be the case.”\(^\text{16}\) Being blessed to be numbered among the People of God is to be challenged to be missionary disciples, in our Christian lives, and in the way we live in our Christian communities.

Body of Christ

When we speak about the church as the Body of Christ we usually think of the two powerful passages in Romans and First Corinthians in which Paul compares the church community to the parts of a human body. “...we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually parts of one another” (Rom 12: 5). “There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit” (1Cor 12:4). These passages point to the fact that the Spirit has given every Christian spiritual gifts for the benefit of all, and that we need to work together in harmony. It is a powerful, important, but basically static understanding of the church as the Body of Christ.

Years ago, however, when I was still teaching in the Philippines, I read two amazing articles by the eminent Passionist Scripture scholar Barnabas Ahern who suggested that the image of the church as the Body of Christ as more than that—


\(^{15}\) CD 158.

\(^{16}\) CD 225.
fact he suggested that these passages were not even the primary meaning of the image.  

The image of the church as the Body of Christ, Ahern argued, is one that Paul understands as literally true. It is not just a metaphor but an astonishing reality, an amazing blessing. Paul speaks of how in baptism we die with Christ, are buried with him, and will one day rise with him (Rom 6:3-11). Through baptism, as well, we have been “clothed” with Christ, and so there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female, but all are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:27-28). In Christ, Christians live no longer themselves, but Christ lives in them. In the Eucharist, we participate in the blood and body of Christ, and because of the one bread, Christians are one body (1Cor 10:14-22). Paul and the New Testament even makes the daring move of using sexual imagery to describe the unity between Christians and Christ. Christians who frequent temple prostitutes united the body of Christ to that of the prostitute, and the union between Christ and Christians is compared to that of a husband and wife (Rom 7:1-6 and Eph 5:21-33).

We are Christ! What an amazing blessing. But the blessing is also a challenge. If we are Christ’s presence in the world—in the famous line of Teresa of Avila, Christ has no arms but yours—we are challenged to truly be that presence. Like Jesus, we are challenged to be people who make “the Father’s merciful love visible, especially to the poor and sinners.” We are challenged to proclaim God’s love in a way that people can really understand and be touched by it. We are challenged to be people of Justice. We are challenged to be people who are open to all—to the rejected of our neo-liberal, consumerist, sexist, patriarchal, homophobic society. The image of the church as the Body of Christ is a missionary image; it is an amazing blessing that that challenges us to be missionary disciples.

Theosis or Divinization

In the Second Letter of Peter, we read that God “has bestowed on us the precious and very great promises, so that through them you may come to share in the divine nature . . . “ (1:4). The Eastern Church has taken this passage particularly seriously and spoken about theosis or divinization as the major effect of baptism. While we in the West, especially under the influence of Augustine, have been caught up with the idea that the main effect of baptism is the taking away of “original sin,” the East has concerned itself with this great blessing.

This is an idea that is almost beyond belief. I say this from experience. Last year I was teaching an introduction to ministry class at CTU and I had one of our professors of liturgy—Richard McCarron—come into the class to talk about the baptismal roots of ministry. Richard has been doing this in my class for several years, and he always makes a point of talking about this Eastern perspective on baptism and the importance of it for our Christian lives. Baptism is not a once-and-

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18 CD147.
for-all sacrament, but a challenge to constantly live and grow as Christians. He speaks of Christians after baptism as “the walking wet,” “the grateful dead,” and as sharers in the divine nature—as gods. In this particular class, after Richard had left the class and we were discussing what he had talked about, one of the women in the class said that there was no way she could accept the idea that in baptism we became gods. “I am teaching an RCIA class,” she said, “and I could never teach that. No one would believe me!”

It struck me that this was a really teachable moment. Yes, I said, it is truly unbelievable, but it is true. Baptism gives us a share in the divine nature. It is that radical a change in our lives, that great a blessing.

I think, though, that one of the problems we have believing in the doctrine of divinization is that we think of it in a too static a way. I, for one, was never attracted to the doctrine in the past because I imagined it as some kind of “transubstantiation” of my “nature”—that somehow my being would be different, I would have divine powers, omniscience, and so forth. Lately, however, I have realized that this is not the point of the doctrine. I began to realize that that this great blessing of divinization is about how we are called to act. Divinization is about being given the challenge to act like God in the world—to be the Spirit’s gentle but life-giving presence, to be Jesus’ voice in witnessing to the love of God, to be his care of the sick and those trapped by evil, to live with his openness. Divinization, in other words, is a missionary doctrine, a call to missionary discipleship. It is an amazing privilege, an amazing blessing—but it is a radical, powerful challenge as well.

So the blessings are the challenges. It is because we are chosen as God’s people, because we have become Christ’s body, because we share in the divine nature that we are challenged so greatly. At the end of Message of the bishops to the people of Latin America and the Caribbean the bishops lay out fifteen hopes, which are surely challenges to those blessed with the call to missionary discipleship. Let me mention just a few here. The challenges are to be a lively, faithful and credible church, to form lively communities that nourish faith and missionary action, to promote a mature laity, to accompany youth, to value African Americans and indigenous peoples, to engage in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, to work for reconciliation, justice and peace. These are huge challenges, but they are worthy ones for women and men who have been blessed so abundantly. The blessings are the challenges.

Three: The Challenges Are the Blessings of Missionary Discipleship

For several years now I have been telling my students, the people in the Christian community where I preside at Eucharist regularly, and my spiritual directees—perhaps ad nauseam—that there is actually an eleventh commandment in addition to the standard ten. This commandment is “Thou shalt not be comfortable.” Over the years I have come to realize that when I really am challenged to change or grow that is when God is especially present in my life and has in store a special blessing for me. I’m not always happy about this. I’m kind of like the
character Tevye in “Fiddler on the Roof.” I want to say that I’m grateful that I belong
to God’s chosen people, but that sometimes I wish that God would choose someone
else! But over the years I believe that, like Paul Tillich says, God works most
effectively on the “boundaries” of our lives—the boundaries of faith and doubt, of
health and sickness, of Christianity and other religions, of comfort and discomfort. 19

I love the image of God, first suggested to me in a prayer by Pierre Talec, as
an “Alpine guide.” 20 We are not called so much as to be happy in our lives as to be
people of great and deep joy and freedom. God is a challenging God, challenging us
to climb higher, to perhaps risk a bit more, to trek farther than we would naturally.
But at the end the blessing is a fuller life, a deeper capacity for experience. I have
found this deeper and richer life as I’ve struggled with other languages and other
cultures, worked through an always lingering lack of confidence in my abilities,
risked working on a PhD and getting a position at a major theological school, begun
to write and speak around the country and around the world, and faced major
health issues in my life, especially in the last several years.

Tony Gittins images God as “A Presence That Disturbs.” The reference of this
image is a line from William Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey”:

. . . And I have felt
   a presence that disturbs me with the joy
   Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
   Of something far more deeply interfused,
   Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns . . . 21

A presence that disturbs, but which leads to joy. It is a presence that stretches, that
leads to a richer life.

Just in the last several months I’ve been highly challenged with a new
position at Catholic Theological Union where I teach. A year ago I was asked to
consider becoming the “faculty advisor” for a program that the school runs called
“Catholics on Call.” This is a program that works with young adults, 18 to 30, who
are discerning a life of ministry in the church—priesthood, religious life, or lay
ministry. When I was asked, I was appalled. I don’t know anything about young
adults, I said, and I said I also wasn’t sure I wanted to know anything. I was perfectly
happy—comfortable—teaching my classes and doing research and writing. The
people at Catholics on Call got someone else last year, but at the end of the year he
was transferred by his religious community and I got a letter from the Dean asking
me to consider the job again. Boy, I didn’t want to! But as I thought about it there
was something there—it was a real challenge and it was making me really
uncomfortable. Could the Spirit be leading me there? Was this a boundary where
God was working? In short I accepted the job, thinking that this was where God was

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21 Gittins, A Presence that Disturbs, x.
calling me—despite my reservations, reservations that increased when we had our first conference. When I was hearing talks about young adults I felt like I was entering the most difficult culture I had ever experienced.

And yet, something is telling me that this is where I’m going to find unexpected growth. Something is telling me that I’m being called to be a new kind of missionary disciple. It’s not comfortable, but so far it is very meaningful. So who knows!

One of the parts of the conference I just mentioned was a sharing session with three young adults who talked about their own discernment to ministry in the church. One of them was a woman named Esther Sanborn, who serves as a campus minister at St. Xavier University on the south side of Chicago. Part of what she said was so moving to me that I thought I’d share it with you, with her permission. Esther was talking about how giving up (I’d say being challenged) was opening up a space to receive (I’d say receiving a blessing). And so she reflected:

At some point, we give it all away. We all give our life to something, the question is to what do we give it to. “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it...what can one give in exchange for his life?” (Matthew 16:25-26). This loss of life is not for the sake of suffering, or deprivation; Christ is not keeping tally and just wants another life to put on his list. Rather, it is because loss, letting go, kenosis, makes way for other possibilities, including an increase in faith, in hope, and in love.

I used to think that if I gave something up, I’d be left only with empty space. But now I know that the emptiness opens me to be filled up, and overflowing, with another good. Letting go of my dream to be a dancer opened the way to me a minister. Letting go of my dream to get a Ph.D. opened the way to study theology and get a M.Div. Letting go of idealism about the Church opened the way to appreciating it in new ways and to see the truth found in other traditions. Letting go of one student opened my heart to another. Letting go of one project opened up time for another. Letting go of pride opens me to accepting help from the rest of the Body of Christ. Letting go of perfectionism opens me to creativity. Letting go of control opens me to freedom. Letting go of judgment opens me to mercy. Letting go of what is fleeting opens me to what is eternal. Letting go of limitations opens me to the limitlessness of God. Letting go of life for my sake opens me to life for Christ’ sake. Letting go of me, opens me to grace.

This, I think, is the Paschal Mystery at work. This is really life—not bios in Greek, which is basically survival, but zoe, which is the kind of life the God of communion offers to missionary disciples, and which missionary disciples offer to the world. As we respond to the challenges that our blessings bring—trying to live up to our dignity as God’s People in this world, struggling to create real community in our churches and religious communities, struggling to be the compassion, the healing, the reconciliation, the tenderness, the prophetic voice of God that Jesus was and in whose nature we share at baptism—this is the kind of person that we will
become, and the kind of person who will speak of and witness to God to the women and men around us.

CONCLUSION

Let me conclude on this note. If we accept the challenge to “push out into the deep...,” as this conference calls us to, we will be amply blessed—I am sure more than we can ever imagine. We have been blessed to be called as missionary disciples. As we accept the challenge that comes with this blessing right now there is no doubt that we will be even more blessed. As God’s people, as Christ’s body, as sharers in God’s nature—push out into the deep!