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Pastoral Challenges: Diakonia and Mission Today

Isaac Mar Philoxenos

The primary challenge that we face in today's world is to understand human life in a changing cultural, social and political context. In such a context, contrary to the positivist assumption, the impact of the religion on life has become more visible. We often see the emergence of new religious consciousness that calls for the preservation of the identity of a community or of religious groups. Such a consciousness sometimes poses the danger of adapting to an exclusivist or extremist way of thinking. In other situations, religious consciousness has to exist in the face of the emergence of a consumerist society which sees the meaning of life in terms of goods, power and gadgets. In this context, many look for a spirituality and ministry that can counter the contextual challenges. The mission of the church and the nature of *diakonia* have to be redefined and rearticulated in such a pastoral context, which calls for academic reflection on new forms of pastoral ministry. This paper explores some of the challenges faced, especially by the Mar Thoma Church, in pastoral ministry in the contemporary context, particularly in relation to *diakonia* and the mission of the church.¹

1. Challenges and possibilities in mission

The mission of the church has a long history of change and development in its self-understanding and method. The nature and agenda of mission has always been set and decisively determined by the contextual challenges that the people of God have faced. Though the church in general considers mission to be *missio Dei*, its theological and missiological grounding and contextual manifestations have been expressed differently in each specific life situation. It could be said that most colonial Christian mission was shaped by the attitude of the epistemology of modernity and that triumphant missionary enterprises preserved a close relationship between the state/power and church/mission. However, this gave way to an ever-in-

¹ An earlier version of the paper was presented at the International Conference "Indisches und Europäisches Christentum im Dialog: Die ökumenischen Beziehungen zwischen der Mar-Thoma-Kirche und den altkatholischen Kirchen als Quelle interkulturellen Lernens" organized by the Department of Old Catholic Theology of Bern University, 5–6 May 2017.

creasing tension between the church and secular authorities. David J. Bosch describes this paradigm shift, in which, he notes, “the church-in-mission” found itself “facing a world fundamentally different from anything it faced before”²; this called for a new understanding of mission. This shift resulted in a move from an understanding of a church-centered mission to a perception of a mission-oriented church. It also affirmed that the church is neither the beginning nor the goal of the mission: mission ultimately belongs to God. The church was considered as being itself sent into the world rather than as being the sender of the mission. In this ecclesiological interpretive frame, the church was seen as a pilgrim community “called out” of the world and sent back into the world.

The ecclesiological understanding of the church as sacrament, sign and instrument was very much dominant in the debate dealing with the missiological nature of the church. Lesslie Newbigin put it vividly: “All things have been created that they may be summed up in Christ the Son. All history is directed to that end. All creation has this as a goal. The Spirit of God, who is also the Spirit of the Son, is given as foretaste for that consummation, as the witness to it, and as the guide of the Church on the road towards it.”³ The earlier Enlightenment epistemological understanding of the church as the conqueror of the world was being replaced by the new perceptions of the church in solidarity with the world. The church, ultimately the sign and sacrament of the Kingdom of God, has relevance in the local context. Therefore, the local church was accorded prime significance in the mission of the Kingdom of God and it was strongly upheld that the church is the church because of what happens in the local church’s *martyria*, *leitourgia*, *koinonia* and *diakonia* (witness, worship, fellowship and service). This was well articulated in the “Munnar Statement”, the statement produced by the theological conversation between the Old Catholic and the Mar Thoma Syrian Church. It affirms on the question of ecclesiology: “Both Churches agree that life in the church is life in communion (*koinonia*) after the paradigm of the Trinity; this life is characterized by witness (*kerygma* or *martyria*), worship (*leitourgia*), and service (*diakonia*). This life in communion is salvific because it participates in the renewal of all things in Christ until all is restored to communion with

² David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission. Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 375.

³ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Trinitarian Faith and Today’s Mission* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1964), 78.

God.”⁴ Hence it can be seen that there has been a consistent attempt to redefine and re-blend the service dimension of the church and the mission aspect of the church.

In the 1970s the epistemological break in the theology of mission took the form of contextualization, and from that point on contextual theologies assumed a central place in theological discourses. Alongside (and sometimes in opposition to) traditional and systematic theologies, contextual theologies that emerged from “below”, with priority on praxis, began to make a new impact. The emergence of liberation theology in its different manifestations, which was very much discussed particularly in Latin America and in many Asian and African countries, and which also caught the attention of Northern and Western theologians, was an important development in the understanding of mission. However, liberation theology could not fully break out of the epistemological grip of modernity.

Another shift in the mission paradigm is seen in the approach which associates mission and unity, which took seriously the recognition of mission in unity and unity in mission. This called for self-reflexivity and self-criticism among the various mission bodies. Ecumenical conversations became prominent in this context, and particularly the affirmation that ecumenism would be possible where people welcome each other regardless of their differences. The general understanding that diversity represented lack of unity or that unity would suppress diversity, paved way for a new understanding which speaks of “unity which preserves diversity and diversity which strives after unity”. As Jean-Marie Tillard has pointed out: “Unity without diversity makes the Church a dead body; pluralism without unity makes it a body which is dismembered.”⁵

Today the agency of mission and ministry is not confined to a few chosen or selected persons. The biblical basis for the mission of the whole people of God, with the mandate that all should witness Jesus Christ as part of their call as members of the “priesthood of all believers”, is being taken seriously in many churches. Here, together with ordained clergy, the role of laity is being emphasized. Mission and ministry are considered as

⁴ Statement of the consultation of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church and the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht, Mar Thoma Retreat Centre, Munnar, Kerala, India, 17–19 February 2014; published in *IKZ* 105 (2015) 159–166: 164.

⁵ Jean-Marie Roger Tillard, *Church of Churches. The Ecclesiology of Communion* (transl. R. C. De Peaux; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 320.

the responsibility of the whole people of God, gathering around the Word and the sacraments.

This understanding of mission as witness is highly relevant to the context where the Mar Thoma Church existed for centuries in the Indian subcontinent. As the Senior Metropolitan of the Mar Thoma Church, Mar Chrysostom, affirms: “The mode of Christian witness of our ancestors was not preaching but permeation. They went and lived with the people. That is the incarnation principle.”⁶ Witnessing by the people amongst the people was the missionary pattern that the church adopted; it emphasized that evangelism is possible only through permeation.

In this postmodern era, one of the distinctive characters of mission is the appreciation of relationality and differences. It can be explained with the help of the Trinitarian model as revealed in the Godhead. In the Trinitarian model a certain level of “difference” is envisioned, and it is important to recognize that, as David S. Cunningham puts it:

the divine Three are not merely modalities of God or “masks” that God wears in various historical circumstances. They are of the same being or substance, but they differ sufficiently from one another that we can meaningfully speak of one being “sent” by another (Jesus “breathes” the Holy Spirit upon the apostles in John 20:22), or of any two having a conversation with one another (as the Garden of Gethsemane, Matthew 26 and parallels). In the postmodern era, plurality and difference has reemerged as something for which human beings can rejoice and be thankful rather than as something that needs to be subordinated to an all-embracing desire for uniformity.⁷

2. Understanding Mission from the Margins

The need for re-imagining the church’s mission in the world arises out of the recognition that often mission has been done from a position of privilege, power and possession. But mission as seen on Christ’s way clearly indicates an attempt to articulate an understanding of mission from the perspective of the least or the marginalized. Therefore, “Mission from the Margins”, referred to in the new WCC mission statement, aims to share

⁶ Jesudas M. Athyal/John J. Thatamanil (eds), *Metropolitan Chrysostom on Mission in the Market place* (Tiruvalla: Christava Sahitya Samithy, 2002), 80.

⁷ David S. Cunningham, ‘The Trinity’, in: Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 186–202: 192.

the experiences and perspectives of the less privileged and other socially oppressed communities. The statement emphasizes that

the tasks of the churches in the *missio Dei* include: (1) proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ; (2) protection and reverence for all life, both human and non-human; (3) denunciation of all exclusionary practices in our communities; and (4) modeling a way of living together that demonstrates that we are sincere in what we profess regarding God's saving activity in Christ.⁸

The work of many missionaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the later indigenous mission movements, especially in India, consisted in reaching out to the margins. Mission was an essential service to people who were marginalized and who to some extent responded to the gospel. Out of this emerged a holistic understanding of mission, according to which mission is seen as the participation of all in the life of the church. Holistic mission means that the entire church is united, willing and geared up to be concerned about all human beings and each human being in his or her totality. Since systems and structures continue to dominate our lives, the church's authentic mission is to struggle against those structures and systems which oppress human beings. This approach has had a great impact in the approach of various denominations and has inspired and shaped its social and development initiatives.

3. Mission as journeying in the presence of God

God who journeys with the people is clearly seen in the Bible, as the people of Israel move out from Egypt and journey to the Promised Land. God in Christ reached out to the people in Galilee, and particularly to the least and the lost, proclaiming the Kingdom of God. Diaspora communities that move to different parts of the world also experience divine guidance in both their journey and the process of settlement. Today the question of migration poses the greatest challenge in the life of the nations. How to welcome the "other" becomes a question of choice and debate. As the church emphasizes the pilgrimage of justice and peace, what it means to be an accompanying presence with the other and to walk together in faith needs to be understood in the present-day context. It has been realized that the church is called to be diaconal in today's highly technocratic world. In

⁸ Beverly E. Mitchell, 'Introducing "Mission from the Margins"', *International Review of Mission* 101 (2012) 415–417: 417.

a time when many countries face economic crisis, the increasing flow of migration and refugees and the climate change are challenging realities that we face today. As Konrad Raiser recognizes: “The economic, political and cultural effects of globalization have exacerbated the tensions and conflicts between religion and politics in many countries and have led to the formation of new religiously based movements and parties.”⁹

4. Diakonia and the ministry of the Church

The servant ministry of the church has its significance while reflecting the model of the ministry of Jesus Christ. In a fragmented world the call to serve will bring healing touch to keep the relationship and unity. Therefore *diakonia* should be considered as an essential element that connects the church with the *oikoumene* [the entire cosmos]. Through its *diakonia*, the very being of the church is, and must be, expressed to the entire *oikoumene*.

In the present context, the important questions to be raised are the following: what should be the nature of this *diakonia*? What are the prospects and challenges of the contemporary world where we are asked to be diaconal? It always calls for the commitment of the faith community to carry on the diaconal ministry as a response to the dominant culture that at many times bring disharmony in the life of the people. As the WCC general secretary, Olav Fykse Tveit, has emphasized, *diakonia* is truly a “response of the churches to the suffering of this world.”¹⁰ Diakonia is an expression of faith that “embodies the signs of God’s reign and makes it visible in all experiences of hope amidst turmoil, in actions that heal and nurture people and relationships.”¹¹

5. Transformative diakonia and the celebration of life

Diakonia is the service that makes the celebration of life possible for all. It is faith effecting change, transforming people and situations so that

⁹ Konrad Raiser, *Religion, Power, Politics* (transl. S. Brown; Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), 54.

¹⁰ Olav Fykse Tveit, ‘Greetings to the *Diakonia* 21st World Assembly in Berlin’, 2 July 2013. On the internet: <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/general-secretary/speeches/greetings-to-the-diakonia-21st-world-assembly-in-berlin> (accessed 09.07.2018).

¹¹ Ibid.

God's reign may be an experienced reality in the lives of all people, in every here and now. Commenting on the phenomenological dimension of faith, Oliver Davies argues, "the process of knowing Christ is a mode of responding to him, whereby constitution of our own being, as body, feelings, and mind is itself made subject to that relation and so dialectically transformed."¹² Therefore, *diakonia* as an action in God's love must strive to transform people, systems and cultures. This has to be expressed with the help of the Triune God through the power of the Holy Spirit. It has to be celebrated by the whole *oikoumene* as the celebration of life.

6. Transformative *diakonia* involves comforting and confronting

Diaconal ministry involves both comforting the victim and confronting "the principalities and powers" (Eph 3:10, KJV; compare Eph 6:12). It must heal the victim but also the one who victimizes. It is a radical spirituality of struggle and commitment for transformation of sinful social structures and for the liberation of their victims. This has to be exercised by joining together to find new methods and avenues for the diaconal activities of the church. In a post-enlightenment era, any theology must sense "the need of a turn from political philosophy to metaphysics. Metaphysical investigations naturally involve both epistemological questions (those concerning types of knowledge and their validity) and ontological (those that bear the nature of the being) and may be to a meta-experience (knowledge of the conditions that precedes everyday experience and that make everyday experience possible)."¹³ The change of the meta-experience is the search of transformative *diakonia*.

Diakonia is never to be encapsulated as service to the other but is a journeying presence with the other. The other is not understood as a derivative but is the different entity that makes *diakonia* possible. Pastoral theologian Emilio Alberich argues that "[the] Reign of God is realized in love and service of persons (sign of *diakonia*); [the] Reign of God is lived in fraternity and communion (sign of *koinonia*); [the] Reign of God is proclaimed in the salvific announcement of the Gospel (sign of *martyria*); [the] Reign of God is celebrated in the celebratory and liberating rites of

¹² Oliver Davies, *A Theology of Compassion. Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 223.

¹³ Clive Hamilton, *The Freedom Paradox. Towards Post-Secular Ethics* (Crows Nest, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2008), 65.

the Christian Celebrations (sign of leitourgia).”¹⁴ The comforting and confronting dimension of *diakonia* need to be guided to *koinonia* and could be nurtured by *leitourgia*. It is not the similarity that challenges us to serve the other, but rather dissimilarity or difference that disseminates *diakonia*. The wounded, the suffering the weak are the “different other” that enables the Church to reorient and to reconstitute *diakonia* in and for our times.

7. Reforming context and social order

A “context” is not a fixed or static reality. Rather, it continues to change and new factors or elements are added as time moves on or the environment alters. The understanding of race, gender and differently able people and other social stratifications vary from country to country and from era to era, and so too do the responses to these questions. In the Indian context the caste-based social order is evil and needs to be challenged. The challenge to the church is always the same: “How can we change the context and transform the social order?”

The caste system in India has its scriptural roots in the Rigveda, where the human society is said to have divine origin and to have been formed out of the body of the creator god, Brahma. This scriptural reference legitimizes the caste system as something divinely ordered and essentially given. This type of essentialist argument is built upon the preconception that some people are inferior and others are superior. This is totally against the Christian message of equality. The church in India has always had this challenge to face in its life and ministry. We categorically affirm that the caste system is not something that the church can hold together with Christian mission.

Studies of the traditional mission paradigms in India show that Dalits were often considered the objects of the mission. In many cases they found themselves at the receiving end. Today they are on a quest to define themselves and are becoming the subjects of mission. The missionary movement of the Mar Thoma Church in various places helped the less privileged by supporting the development of local communities. It has also helped in building up the dignity and self-esteem of individuals and to

¹⁴ Emilio Alberich/Jerome Vallabaraj, *Communicating a Faith that transforms. A Handbook of Fundamental Catechetics* (Bangalore: Kristu Jyothi Publications, 2004), 39–40.

support them in relating to one another as fellow human beings and fellow Christians.

8. Transforming the boundaries: a mission paradigm

Nonetheless, the question arises; can the church shy away from the harsh realities of gender, race and caste discrimination? Is it joining with other oppressive forces in tarnishing the “image of God” and destroying the “Body of Christ”? The sacramental nature of the church should be demonstrated as a new liberated humanity, fostering human relationship and providing an alternative community of radical egalitarianism as against the unjust and exploitative religious and cultural patterns and structures. Mattijs Ploeger argues:

On the one hand Eucharist is a genuine celebration (in that sense a goal in itself) and must not be tuned into a missionary activity (it is not done for the sake of something else), on the other hand the contents of the celebration – divine-human communion – only reflect a preliminary stage in God’s mission to incorporate the whole creation in this communion.¹⁵

There is a need to move from a culture of silence to this culture of transformation. Raising our prophetic voice and becoming faithful to the kingdom are essential marks of the commitment and directive principles of our mission. It is necessary to re-examine those of our theologies, liturgies and doctrines that are exclusive from the standpoint of justice. Contextual mission has to challenge all the churches to transform their cultural and religious boundaries, their exclusive rituals, so that people can experience the liberation both within the church and outside.

The cry of the Canaanite woman (Mt 15:21–28) echoes the need of such transformation. Her request to Jesus to heal her daughter was answered with a denial, to which she responded by affirming her faith in the Lord and articulating a new understanding of her own identity. The food of the children must become the food of the “other” so that all can enjoy the happiness of the kingdom and receive the salvation that is offered to all. Though a person’s identity remains the same, the boundaries built by human society are transformed, and thereby all are able to accept the

¹⁵ Mattijs Ploeger, *Celebrating Church. Ecumenical Contributions to a Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Groningen: Instituut voor Liturgiewetenschap – Tilburg: Liturgisch Instituut, 2008), 533.

Lordship of Jesus Christ. Difference, inherent to change and novelty in and between traditions, should not make us feel like strangers.

Doing mission in Christ's way is the pattern that the church has to follow. Christian conversion involves a transformation of one's own being so that the point of orientation for one's habitation of the world becomes more like the person of Jesus Christ, confessed in John's Gospel (14:6) to be the way, the truth and the life.¹⁶ The Gospel of Jesus Christ with its transforming power helps everyone to be open to – and to engage in the process of – renewal and change. Let the openness and a sense of reception to the new understanding of the Gospel make the world a better place of living.

9. Conclusion

This paper offers an attempt to look at the challenges that we face in pastoral ministry in relation to *diakonia* and mission of the church. The local church receives prime significance in the mission of the Kingdom of God, and I have argued that the witness, worship, fellowship and service of the local community matter most in making its life relevant. From this emerges a holistic understanding of mission, according to which mission is seen as the participation of all in the life of the church. In holistic mission, the entire church is united, willing and prepared to be concerned about all human beings, and about each human being in his or her totality. It is necessary to re-visit those of our theologies, liturgies and doctrines that are exclusive from the standpoint of justice. Such a renewed perspective and its associated revised practices should lead to an enriched understanding of *diakonia* and the mission of the church in our times.

Isaac Mar Philoxenos [Isaac Attupuram Isaac] (1951 in Mavelikara, Kerala IND) is bishop of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church and since 2016 in charge of the Diocese of North America and Europe. 1967–1972 College education at Bishop Moore College, Mavelikara, India. 1972–1976 theological education at Bishops College, Kolkata, and 1985–1986 Princeton Theological Seminary (USA), 1976 ordination as priest. In 1990 he obtained his PhD from Banaras Hindu University, India, with a thesis entitled “Doctrine of grace in*

¹⁶ Murray Rae, “‘Incline your Ear so that You may Live’”. Principles of Biblical Epistemology”, in: Mary Healy/Robin Parry (eds), *The Bible and Epistemology. Biblical Soundings on the Knowledge of God* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2007), 162–180: 169.

Vaishnavism and Christianity". In 1993 he was consecrated as bishop. He initiated interreligious dialogue in the Indian context with people of other faiths and many diaconal and educational projects in India. Since 2006 he is a member of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches.

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Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag setzt sich mit den Herausforderungen an Amt und Mission im heutigen Kontext auseinander, in dem neue religiöse Bewusstseinsformen und die Notwendigkeit, «den Anderen» oder «die Andere» zu verstehen, in Erscheinung tritt. Es ist notwendig, die Dienstfunktion der Kirche und ihre gesellschaftlichen Auswirkungen neu zu beschreiben oder neu zu imaginieren. Der Beitrag ruft dazu auf, «Mission» neben dem traditionellen Verständnis von «aussenden» oder «ausgesandt sein» im Sinne von «Zeugnis» zu verstehen. Gottes reisende Präsenz verleiht Kraft und neue Einsicht zur Ausführung der Mission. Die pilgernde Gemeinschaft ist primär für die Veränderung des Lebens von Menschen verantwortlich, allenfalls auch für die Ausweitung von Grenzen zum Wohl des Einschlusses aller in das Gottesreich.

Keywords – Schlüsselwörter

Mar Thoma Church – India – mission – diakonia – presence of God