

“COME, FOLLOW ME . . . !” VOCATION, COMMUNION, AND MISSION

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An Invitation to Communion and Mission

“Come, follow me . . . !” These are the words of Jesus in the first chapter of Mark’s gospel, and they are addressed to the fishermen Simon and Andrew as Jesus saw them casting their nets into the sea. Together with the rest of the sentence that Jesus uttered—“...and I will make you fishers of women and men”—these words express beautifully the theme of this Year of the Laity that the Diocese of Hong Kong has begun in this new solar year of 2011: “Vocation, Communion, and Mission.”

Jesus *calls* us as he called his new disciples all those years ago: “Come!” “To call” in Latin is the word “vocare,” from which comes the English word “vocation.”

Jesus calls us, as he called his disciples, to *communion*: “Follow me!” It is a communion with him, and a communion with one another. The journey is with Jesus, without whom we—and they—can do nothing (Jn 15:5). And the journey is with one another, because those who follow Jesus can never be and will never be alone.

Jesus calls us—and his disciples—to *mission*: “I will make you fishers of women and men.” By God’s amazing grace, those of us who follow Jesus are called to share in his saving work. Communion with Jesus is a communion with one another that is, in the words of John Paul II’s apostolic exhortation on the laity, “the source and fruit of mission” (CFL 1988: par. 32).

Rooted in the Mission of the Trinity

The church is called to be, as I like to say, a Communion-in-Mission. That is its deepest vocation. As such, it is rooted in the very life of God, who is in Godself a Communion-in-Mission. Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff wrote that “Christianity’s most transcendent assertion may well be this: In the beginning is not the solitude of One, but the communion of Three eternal Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the remotest beginning, communion prevails” (Boff 1993: 389). But this communion is not static. It is a Communion-in-Mission. It moves out of itself in the act of creation, which is the first act of mission, and from the first nanosecond of time God is present within creation, flowing through it, embracing it, guiding it in the process we call evolution, wooing it, calling it to fullness and—because it is free—calling it to healing.

The Mission of the Spirit

This presence of God in creation is the presence of the Holy Spirit—God fully present, and yet mysterious, moving through the billions of years before the emergence of life. Chinese philosophy has called this presence *Qi*, the energy that flows through all things (see Lee 1996: 95-123). Then, when human beings began to emerge, the Spirit,

that *Qi* was there to speak a Word of truth in their hearts and minds, a truth that, whenever human beings responded, became the basis for what is good and true in every one of humankind's variety of religions and ways of life, including the great Chinese ways of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism (see *FABC* 2000: 242-258).

Out of all the peoples of the earth, the people of Israel received the vocation to be God's especially chosen People, so that they might be blessing for all nations (Gen 12:3). Notice the pattern of vocation, communion, and mission!

In Israel's scriptures, God's all-pervading presence, God's *Qi*, from the beginning of time was named with images that described God's closeness on the one hand and God's mystery on the other: images like wind, breath, fire, water, and oil. All these images are of concrete things, and yet are not easily contained or controlled. Even before creation, we read in Genesis, God's mighty wind swept over the "formless wasteland" that was to be the created universe (Gen 1:2). In the story of the creation of humanity, Genesis describes how God blew into the first human's nostrils the "breath of life" (Gen 2:7).

Later in the history of Israel, the prophet Samuel anoints Saul king, and the confirmation of this is that, when he meets a band of prophets, the spirit of God rushed upon him and he became completely changed from an ordinary young man to the king of Israel (see 1Sam 9-10). When Israel was in exile several hundreds of years later, the prophet Isaiah described the origin and task of prophecy in these ringing words: "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; God has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and release to the prisoners ... to comfort all who mourn" (Is 61:1-2). The prophet Ezekiel wrote powerfully of God's spirit bringing life to the dead in the Valley of the Bones, and of the life-giving, healing water that flowed abundantly from the Temple (Ex 37:1-14; 47:1-12).

God's mission in creation, in summary, as described in what we call the Old Testament, is one of life-giving, healing, life-restoring, calling people to prophecy. As a group of Asian theologians put it in 1997: "The Spirit of God is present and is at work everywhere bringing the whole of humankind into the fullness of life and the glory of the children of God" (*Spirit* 2000: 281).

The Mission of Jesus

"In the fullness of time" (Gal 4:4) God's elusive and mysterious mission through the Spirit took on human flesh and a human face in Jesus of Nazareth. When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan, all four gospels relate how the Spirit descended upon him. Matthew, Mark, and Luke describe the Spirit as a dove—another image that is hard to control as the dove soars in the sky and floats on currents of air. These first three gospels then describe how the Spirit leads, even drives, Jesus into the desert to be tempted—and where his vocation is confirmed. Luke describes the beginning of Jesus' ministry with Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth reading from the prophecy of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord" (Lk 4:18-19)—a prophecy that, Jesus said, was fulfilled in the people's hearing that day (Lk 4:21).

The Spirit was the source of Jesus' vocation. The Spirit called Jesus to mission, and his mission was to build and witness to communion—people with God, and with one another. Jesus continued the mission of God that was operative from the first nanosecond of creation. He did it by telling stories—stories of God's amazing, incredible, even lavish mercy, generosity, and inclusiveness. Think of the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son and his loving father, the generous employer, the wedding banquet. Jesus continued the Spirit's work in his healings and exorcisms—absorbing, as it were, according to Matthew, people's diseases (8:17) and struggling with the power of evil. Such actions are like stories or parables in action. Scholars today talk about Jesus himself as a story or parable. The fact that he associated with people on the margin of his society—women, lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors—demonstrated the accepting and inclusive love of the God to whom he was witness.

It was to involve women and men in his work that Jesus issued his call to discipleship for mission: "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of women and men." Some, like Peter and Andrew, Martha, her sister Mary, Mary Magdalene and his own mother Mary, accepted Jesus' invitation. Some, like the unnamed rich young man (Matt 19:16-22) or, presumably the unnamed scribe in Matt 8:19-20 or the anonymous disciple in verses 8:21-22, did not. Some, like Peter, Andrew, James, John and Jude, were appointed to represent the restoration of Israel in its fullness as members of "The Twelve" (Mk 3:13-19). Still others, numbering seventy-two in a reference to those who helped Moses in the desert, were called to go ahead of Jesus to the places he intended to visit (Lk 10:1-12; see Num 11:16-17).

God's Mission Has a Church

When Jesus was arrested and crucified because his message was seen as blasphemous and even subversive by the religious leaders of his day, his band of disciples—except for a few faithful women and his beloved disciple John—scattered and hid in fear. But after a few days they began to come back together again when they began to experience that Jesus was not dead, but alive. Fifty days after Jesus had died so brutally on the cross, on the Jewish feast of Pentecost, the disciples experienced the power of the Holy Spirit who began leading them, as Jesus had told them (see Jn 16:13). On this day of Pentecost, the same Spirit that had descended upon Jesus at his baptism and in the synagogue at Nazareth descended upon the community, confirming and clarifying for them the vocation that Jesus had given to them to be a community that would go to the "ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8) in mission. The Jesus community now gradually began to realize that it was to carry on the very work of Jesus in the world, in the same way that Jesus had carried on and made concrete the work of the always and ever-pervading Spirit before him. Thus was born the communion that is the church, a communion-in-mission, "missionary by its very nature" (AG 1965: par. 2)—like God is a communion-in-mission, and so by nature missionary. God's mission now has a church.

Like the church as a whole, every person who follows Jesus today has a vocation to communion and to mission, and this is what the Diocese of Hong Kong is celebrating in this Year of the Laity. The vocation to communion and mission is something that every lay person in the church has received, and the vocation of Bishop Tong and his clergy is to ensure that the laity's vocation is understood, nurtured, and lived out; that the church

of Hong Kong grows more and more into a communion that reflects God's trinitarian nature, and that that communion, like the triune God, pours itself out in mission here in Hong Kong, in China, and in the entire world. The rest of my reflection this evening will try to focus more specifically on the three interrelated words of this year's theme in Hong Kong: vocation, communion, mission.

Vocation

For every one of us Christians, be we lay, vowed, or ordained, the most important day of our lives was not the day of our wedding, or the day of our perpetual vows, or the day of our ordination. The most important day of our lives was the day of our Baptism. It was on that day that we received our primary vocation to work to be in communion with others in the church and to be in mission in the world. For Christians, if I may say so, this is the primary day of our ordination.

Right before the water was poured, we promised—many of us through our parents and godparents—to turn from a life of sin and toward a life with God. Then we were brought to the font, a symbol of both tomb and womb, where we died to our old self and were reborn a new creature. Then we were anointed with the fragrant oil of chrism as priests, prophets and servant kings—notice the word: *chrism*, like *christos*, which means anointed. In other words, we became Christs—other Christs—and given the vocation of doing his ministry of priestly worship, prophetic witnessing, and royal service. Then we were given a white garment to wear—a sign of how we had indeed become new creatures, neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female, Chinese or British, Hong Kong or Mainland, but all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:27-28). Finally, we or our sponsors were given a candle, lit from the Paschal Candle symbolizing Christ, expressing the fact that we are to be lights to the world as Christ is the Light of the World.

Not everyone has been called to be a member of the church, although of course we Christians can never cease to invite everyone to “open the doors to Christ,” as Pope John Paul II put it in his great encyclical on Christian mission (see RM 1990: par. 3). This does not at all mean, of course, that people cannot be *saved* outside of the church. On the contrary, Vatican II teaches that anyone who follows her or his conscience can be saved (LG 1965: par. 16), and that “the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every person the possibility of being associated with [the] paschal mystery” (GS 1965: par. 22). But some of us *are* called to be Christians. And while it is a *privilege* to have such a vocation, it does not mean that we are necessarily *better* than others, or even more beloved by God. Vocation in the Bible and in the Christian tradition is *never* mere privilege; it is, however, *always* a responsibility. God's grace—and our vocation of Christians is the greatest act of God's graciousness—is always to be and do something, to witness by our lives and actions to the loving and healing embrace of God in the world.

Not everyone in the world has received the vocation to be Christian. But all of us who *have* been called have been called *equally*. The pope is not called to be more Christian than bishops, nor are bishops and priests called to be more Christian than lay people. The difference between lay people and ordained is not one of degree, but of a different *kind* of service in the church and the world (see LG 1965: par. 10). But all have a vocation to service. As Vatican II puts it, all Christians “share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of

the Body of Christ” (LG 1965: par 32). It is the affirmation of the equality of our vocation in Baptism that is absolutely fundamental as we celebrate the Year of the Laity.

Communion

The move from understanding the church as primarily a hierarchically-constituted institution to a community constituted by Baptism, a people, a communion is perhaps the most basic change in perspective that the Second Vatican Council offered the church. The implications of this new yet very traditional perspective are so far-reaching that today, almost a half-century after the close of the Council, we are still struggling with them. Papal documents have spoken eloquently about the need for greater communion in the church. John Paul II, for example, speaks in *Ecclesia in Asia* of “Communion and Dialogue for Mission” (see especially EA 1999: par. 24-27). In the same way, the Asian Bishops have made communion one of the major themes in their many wonderful communications over the past four decades.

To speak of Christians’ vocation to create communion is to speak of many aspects, and we can’t go into many details here. However we can give an overview of what is involved in such a vocation, and indicate how a commitment to fostering a church of communion is central to renewing the church of Hong Kong in this Year of the Laity.

A church of communion is built primarily on the recognition of the fundamental equality of all Christians by virtue of their Baptism. All Christians participate differently and yet directly in the mission of the church. All Christians share the same dignity as God’s People. There are different levels of *responsibility* in the church, but all have *some* responsibility. Those with greater responsibility need to recognize, foster, and encourage the responsibility of those with less. Those with less need to accept the responsibility that they are given—not by bishops or priests, but by Baptism itself. Laity are not *helpers* of the clergy. They are collaborators and co-workers, or, as Pope Benedict insists, “co-responsible” (Benedict XVI 2009). Clergy do not *allow* lay people to do ministry. They call it forth and recognize it as their right as fellow Christians. The Bishops of Asia have spoken of a “*participatory Church*” in which the gifts of clergy, religious and laity are “recognized and activated” (FABC 1992: 287).

Once such fundamental equality is realized, we can only imagine what the church would look like. The special gifts of women and youth would be recognized, as has been urged in many meetings sponsored by the FABC (e.g. BILA 1997; BILA 1998). As long ago as 1986, the Fourth Assembly of the FABC focused on the vocation and mission of the laity in Asia, and emphasized how in a church communion that seeks to liberate people from oppression and discrimination, “collegiality and co-responsibility are urgent” (Fourth Assembly 1986: 194). The Asian Bishops have called repeatedly over the years for the development of Small Christian Communities where the Scriptures are shared and lived out, where people listen to each other in trust and share their lives together. Such basic relationships form the building blocks of the church—at the local level like here in Hong Kong, or at the national or regional level as well—as a “community of communities” (Fifth East Asia Regional Laity Meeting 1999: 95). In the last several years, a recognition of the fundamental equality of the People of God has been deepened to include a real solidarity and communion between humanity and the whole of creation. The vocation to communion recognizes that all things are connected, and that

communion is present in the largest expanses of the cosmos and in the most minute particles of matter.

In this Year of the Laity, the church of Hong Kong is called to work for communion at every level. Our vocation, in the words of Pope John Paul II, is “to make the church the *home and the school of communion*” (John Paul II 1999: par. 43).

Mission

As I mentioned toward the beginning of these reflections, “communion represents the source and fruit of mission” (CFL 1988: par. 32). It is first of all the source, since it is out of the abundant life of Christ lived in community that Christians are impelled to move out of themselves to share that life with the world around them. And when mission is truly engaged in, when women and men cooperate in God’s mission of love and healing, communion and harmony are established or repaired.

To refer once more to the great statements of the Asian Bishops over the last four decades, they have insisted over and over again that the church’s mission in Asia—and I believe this is true in all parts of the world—is best carried out in a triple dialogue with Asia’s poor, Asia’s cultures, and Asia’s religions. Mission in the FABC documents, as Chinese Malaysian theologian Jonathan Yuka Tan interprets them, is not so much *ad gentes*—targeted at people—but *intergentes*—accomplished as Christians live among and live with the peoples they have received the vocation to evangelize (Tan 2004). Roger Schroeder and I have borrowed from the wisdom of our missionary congregation, the Society of the Divine Word, to speak of mission in terms of a *prophetic* dialogue, one that is both open to the Other on the one hand, and on the other hand convinced of the need to proclaim the gospel’s truth and its call for justice (Bevans and Schroeder 2004 and 2011). Basing our development on John Paul II’s statement that mission is a “single, yet complex reality” (RM 41), we speak of six elements of mission: witness and proclamation; liturgy, prayer, and contemplation; justice, peace, and the integrity of creation; interreligious dialogue; inculturation; and reconciliation. For those of you who will be attending the Renewal Camp, we will explore all of these elements of mission, and the concept of “prophetic dialogue,” in much more detail in the next few days.

How do we live out this mission—God’s mission, really, in which we are so privileged to participate? Again, this is something that we will be reflecting on more fully in the next few days at Holy Spirit Seminary, but I can say a few general things here. First of all, for those of us who are lay women and men, we live out mission by living our Christian lives in the world, being, as Vatican II says, like leaven in a mass of dough (see LG 1965: par. 31)—or, to use perhaps a more Asian image, being the spices in the food—the ginger, the pepper, the soy sauce—that gives the food taste, color and texture. The first form of evangelization, says Pope Paul VI in his marvelous document on mission, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, is the witness of an authentically Christian life (EN 1975: par. 41). Being good parents, conscientious students, honest professionals, active citizens—these are all ways by which the gospel may be witnessed and, on occasion, even proclaimed as we answer peoples’ questions with the “reasons for our hope” (see 1Pet 3:15).

But there are also lay ministries within the church, some more informal like greeters and collection takers at liturgy, members of the choir, lectors and extraordinary

ministers of communion; others are more formal, what are being called in my own country “lay ecclesial ministries,” such as pastoral associates, directors of religious education, youth ministers. In 1977 the Asian Colloquium on Ministries, held here in Hong Kong, named a number of ministries that could be exercised by laity in Asia. Among them are the ministry of evangelist, catechist, family apostolate, healing, social concern, peacemakers and communications (FABC 1977: 79-81).

As I have already said, ordained Christians live out their mission principally by calling the church to its priestly, prophetic and servant ministry. Again, we will explore this more in the next several days at Renewal Camp, the identity of ordained Christians is to re-present the Headship of Christ in the church through the service of ordering the church’s worship, ministerial structure, and faith expression. As I like to express it, ordained ministry is a “ministry for ministry.” Speaking of the ministry of parish priests, Pope Benedict says that their specific task is “to nurture the spiritual and apostolic growth of those who are already committed to working hard in the parishes.” These lay women and men will then “form the core of the community that will act as a leaven for the others” (Benedict XVI 2009).

Conclusion

“Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of women and men.” These words of Jesus express our vocation to be people of communion and mission, and they will be the watchwords of the Diocese of Hong Kong in this Year of the Laity. May the Spirit guide all of you in this year of renewal and challenge. May you grow in love and in imitation of Jesus of Nazareth, who poured out his very self in ministry and in sacrifice for the world that he and his Father loves so much. May Jesus’ mother Mary show you the way to true discipleship, and may your response to Jesus’ call to follow him in mission help you recognize ourselves and proclaim to the world the Mystery, “the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God” (Rom 11:33)!

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