

What is the Mission of Church? (Roman Catholic Perspective)

The following seven reflections are based on the work done by the National Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Uniting Church in Australia. The Roman Catholic members of the dialogue drew deeply from the Scriptures and the documents of the Second Vatican Council in their work.

You are invited to engage in these reflections to stimulate your own thinking about the nature of the purpose of the church and more specifically the Roman Catholic Church in Australia. The reflections can be used either as a personal devotional or as the basis for a group discussion.

Each reflection begins with a piece of scripture followed by a précis of the Roman Catholic sections of the dialogue document. There are questions for consideration. A brief prayer is included to close your reflection.

1. The Mission of God in Jesus Christ

John 17: 20 – 25 (NRSV)

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I am in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that they world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made you name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.

What words or phrase stand out for you in this passage?

Précis

The Second Vatican Council's *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* understands the "sending" of the Son and the Spirit as the origin and purpose of the church and its commission to be a sign and instrument of unity. However, the document precedes its reference to these "sendings" with reference to the one who sends: the eternal Father. Accordingly, "the universal Church is seen to be a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" and has its own identity of "being sent" in the missions of the Son and the Spirit.

The foundation of the church's mission in the life of the Trinity is the basis for the church's understanding of its missionary activity; indeed, the church is missionary "by nature", and all the baptised have a part to play in the church's mission.

Share/reflect:

How do you personally define the word mission?

Who has inspired you to believe "through their word"?

What do you think it means as a Christian to be "completely one" in the world today?

How do you see us working together so that "they may all be one"?

Prayer:

Loving God help me to receive wisdom from the presence of your Holy Spirit and so listen for Jesus, your eternal Word, leading and guiding my life as his disciple. Amen.

2. Worship as Mission

Colossians 3: 14 – 17 (NRSV)

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

What words or phrase stand out for you in this passage?

Précis

The Roman Catholic Church understands the church to be in the nature of a sacrament, a sign and instrument of communion with God and unity among all people. As such it reflects the light of Christ and carries out its “sole” purpose, to see “that the kingdom of God may come and the salvation of the human race is accomplished.” It is a people brought into “unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” that receives a mission of “proclaiming and establishing among all peoples the Reign of Christ and of God”, so that it understands itself as “the seed and the beginning of that kingdom.”

Pre-eminent among the ways in which the Roman Catholic Church makes itself fully present to the world in is its liturgical life. Through its liturgical life, the church is drawn into the God-given gift of the fullness of divine worship that is Jesus Christ, the one mediator between God and humanity, the means of our salvation.

The whole liturgical life of the Roman Catholic Church revolves around the church’s seven sacraments, the heart of which is the Eucharist. Every liturgical celebration is the action of Christ and his Body, the church.

The Roman Catholic Church also realises that for this full effectiveness to take place those who are the church need to be enabled to participate in the liturgical life of the church, aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the church’s rituals so as to be enriched by them: for “it is through the liturgy, especially, that the faithful are enabled to express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church.”

Share/reflect:

*In what way does liturgy connect to the mission of God in Jesus?
When gathered together for liturgy, do you feel part of “one body”?
Do you “do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus”?
Why do you gather on Sunday? Why do WE gather on Sunday?*

Prayer:

Gracious God, help us to clothe ourselves in love, to do all things in your name, and to come together as one body and share with others the mystery of Christ. Amen

3. Communion as Mission

Ephesians 4: 1 – 6 (NRSV)

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

What words or phrase stand out for you in this passage?

Précis

The 1985 meeting of the Synod of Bishops deliberated on the nature of the church and came to the conclusion that “communion” is the driving principle for the church.

What is the relationship between the missionary nature of the church and the nature of the church as a communion? Pope John Paul II offers a way of understanding this relationship in his Pastoral Exhortation, *On the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World (Christifideles Laici)*.

Communion begets communion: essentially it is likened to a mission on behalf of communion ... Communion and mission are profoundly connected with each other; they interpenetrate and mutually imply each other, to the point that the communion represents both the source and the fruit of mission: communion gives rise to the mission and mission is accomplished in communion.

This is the key to understanding the Catholic approach to the relationship between *koinonia* and mission. The church is a communion whose mission is to build communion, communion among people, communion of all people with God, communion of all people with the larger creation. Because of this, work to restore unity among Christian churches, efforts to build relations with other world religions, work for justice and peace, and work to protect the environment are integral to the mission of the church, as expressions of the fundamental mission of proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all the nations. All of these in their own ways build communion among people, of people with God and of people with the rest of creation. This communion is centred on and initiated by the Triune God. It is a communion in Christ. All are bound together in him by the Holy Spirit and in Christ all are given a share in his relationship with the Father. The mission of the church is to share in the Spirit’s work of extending that communion to the ends of the earth. Everything which brings people closer together, even if they do not know Christ, can be part of this mission.

Share/reflect:

How do you show your unity with others in your every day actions?

What does your parish do to develop relationships with (the communion of) the whole church?

How do you show that you share in a relationship with the “Father of all”?

When the church struggles to exhibit the unity we have in Christ how does the world respond?

Prayer:

Father, Son and Spirit draws us into your communal way of life so that we might honour your name and help the world believe through our visible unity. Amen.

4. Service as Mission

Galatians 5: 6b (NRSV)

The only thing that counts is faith working through love.

What words or phrase stand out for you in this passage?

Précis

The church is a communion of people in Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit, that seeks the fullness of the Reign of God, as it bears the message of salvation in, with and for the world. The church's mission is of a religious nature, which in itself includes all aspects of human life.

At the heart of the Roman Church's mission of service of all people is its belief that human persons, in deep relationship with one another as social beings, are created in the image of God to know and love their creator. This is revealed most fully through the mystery of the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, the image of the invisible God.

The Second Vatican Council teaches that as all people are created in the image of God, they have the same origin and nature. Through Christ's redemption they enjoy the same divine calling and destiny; there is here a basic equality between all, which needs to be given greater recognition. In this respect, all "forms of social or cultural discrimination in basic personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, colour, social conditions, language or religion" need to be eradicated as incompatible with God's design.

The responsibility of the whole church is to practise love.

Share/reflect:

How have you experienced God's love for you?

In what way have you practised love in the last month?

How is Christ's love expressed through the Roman Catholic Church?

How does the church encourage people to overcome forms of discrimination through love?

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, you sent your Son into the world to serve through love. In following his example, may our faith come alive through actions of love. Amen.

5. Proclamation as Mission

Romans 10: 13 – 17 (NRSV)

For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved'. But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!' But not all have obeyed the good news, for Isaiah says 'Lord who has believed our message'? So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.

What words or phrase stand out for you in this passage?

Précis

The proclamation of "the full and living Gospel" is, for Roman Catholics, at the heart of the mission of the church. This proclamation includes telling the story of salvation achieved through Christ in the power of the Spirit, demonstrating its power through lives of faith, as well as offering to others the possibility of salvation through present encounter with Christ in the Spirit. This proclamation is central to the worship of Catholics; it is central to the church's outreach of evangelisation to the whole world.

The close relationship between the church as communion and the mission of the church, highlights the special place of the proclamation of the Gospel in the life of the church. This proclamation incites its hearers to personal faith in Jesus Christ and adherence to the Christian community.

While the mission of the church takes many forms, all are related to communion, where the proclamation of the Gospel has a central place. Communion exists in Jesus Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit and opens up for all people the possibility of their entering into a life-transforming relationship with God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, a relationship that will save and liberate, will bring reconciliation, redemption and sanctification. This is only possible if all Christians share in the mission of witnessing to Jesus Christ by their lives and in their words.

Share/reflect:

When did you last share your faith in Jesus with another person?

Can you tell about a homily which impacted on your life?

Do you think people are reluctant to share their faith? Why?

What ways do you see the Roman Catholic Church proclaiming the message of salvation to the world?

Prayer:

Loving God, assist us to proclaim the story of God's love in Jesus in all that we say and do and so provide the opportunity for all people to respond to your love. Amen.

6. Witness as Mission

Philemon 1: 4 – 7 (NRSV)

When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith towards the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

What words or phrase stand out for you in this passage?

Précis

Christians are called to witness to Christ at all times and places, for example, when they are engaged in dialogue with other world religions and other people in the pursuit of justice and peace. They never cease to be ambassadors to Christ by their words and actions. Paul VI reflects on what he names a “wordless witness” in his meditation on the preaching of the Gospel, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. He mirrors the approach of St Francis and his companions, who saw their mission as preaching the Gospel, but only “using words if necessary.” St Francis’ focus is on a Gospel life lived in action that reflects the love of God in Christ.

Witness to the Gospel, as the ordinary way of life for Christians, reflects the teaching of the Catholic Church in its understanding of the universal call to a holy way of life. The Second Vatican Council grounds this call to holiness in the one holiness of God, Father, Son and Spirit. The church is holy only in the gift of God’s holiness, but all in the church are called to a holy way of life in Christ, who is the “author and maker” of holiness. Holiness is the gift of the Spirit who moves Jesus’ disciples “interiorly to love God with their whole heart, with their whole soul, with their whole understanding, with their whole strength, and to love one another as Christ loved them.”

For the Catholic Church, this gift of holiness is expressed in the church’s teaching on the communion of saints, and the singling out of some witnesses as sure signs of holiness to inspire others in their imitation of Christ. These are called saints, but all are called to be saints.

Share/reflect:

Where and when do you witness to Jesus Christ in your life?

How does the Roman Catholic Church witness to the work of God’s Holy Spirit in the whole of creation?

How do you “refresh” the hearts of those you encounter?

How is witness expressed in action that reflects the love of God?

How can you live as a saint today?

Prayer:

Loving God in your Son we come to know you. Help us to act with joy and love, so that our lives are may be an encouragement to others. Amen.

7. Teaching as Mission

Luke 1: 1 4 (NRSV)

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

What words or phrase stand out for you in this passage?

Précis

Jesus Christ is both the model and the content for the teaching dimension of the Roman Catholic Church's understanding of mission.

The Holy Spirit, as the divine animator, is the living memory of the church. This same Spirit establishes the church's continuity with its apostolic beginnings founded by Jesus, so that the Gospel is proclaimed everywhere for all time. The whole church retains this mark of apostolicity, as the "Christian vocation is, of its nature, a vocation to the apostolate," which is constitutive of every action of the church. However, within the church there is a diversity of ministry while there is unity in mission.

Since the whole body of the faithful participate in the prophetic office of Christ, it might also be said that the church is a community of teachers. Together, each and all in the church are called to be teachers on mission.

Also, all the laity are called through their baptism and hence by their participation in the prophetic office of Christ to the proclamation of the Gospel.

Share/reflect:

When did you last attend a Bible Study or read a spiritual book, "investigating everything carefully"? (Can you share something that you learnt?)

What knowledge of the faith do you pass on, and to whom?

Is teaching and catechesis given a high value in the life of your parish?

How does the Roman Catholic Church engage in the teaching ministry of Jesus?

Prayer:

Jesus, you are the way the truth and the life. Help us to seek the truth about you, and to share that truth faithfully with others. Amen.