

A Missionary Parish

Beyond the Spiritual Service Station

Stephen Bevans

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Gas stations used to be places where you could pull in and get your car serviced by one, two, or even three friendly attendants. You would pull up to the gas pump, roll down the window, call out “fill ’er up” or “five dollars’ worth, please,” and the attendants would do the rest—along with checking your oil, your radiator, and even your tire pressure. One particular oil company even aired a TV commercial that boasted that their gas station attendants were really friendly, showing three or four of them happily singing as they serviced a car. The same company also ran ads that guaranteed clean rest rooms anywhere across the United States—so *all* your needs could be met!

Today, though, except in a few stations and in a few states that forbid it, we are in an age of self-service at the gas pump; and if you have a credit card you don’t even have to see or talk to anyone as you fill up your tank. Service stations are now often connected to a mini-mart, a coffee bar, a fast-food restaurant. Some even have cash machines and car washes attached.

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The Parish as Service Station

In many ways, a number of Catholics think about their local parish in the same way they think about a gas station. The parish is where we go on Sundays to “fill up” on grace so we can get through the rest of the week dealing with difficult situations at work, or with our children, the neighbors, or even with our spouse. If we go to the parish at other times during the week, we are met by a number of—hopefully cheerful!—ministers who offer us all sorts of services: religious education, marriage counseling, help with grieving, baptismal preparation, daycare for our children. When we have urgent needs, we expect the ministers of the parish—especially the priests—to be available to us day or night. The church—our parish—is a place where we can go to get our spiritual needs met, truly a “service station.”

A good parish in this way of thinking would be a “full service church”—open 24/7. The priests of the parish, the parish staff, the deacons or deacon, the other lay ministers: all of these are there for our service and should be available whenever and however we want them. A good parish, in other words, is one that cares for the spiritual health (or perhaps the spiritual *maintenance*) of the Catholics within its boundaries and maybe those outside it as well. It offers what the people consider in their context great liturgies with interesting homilies and a place where their kids can get a good education by women and men deeply committed to Catholic values and Catholic teaching.

Beyond the Service Station: From “Maintenance” to “Mission”

A parish that is just a “service station” or “spiritual gas station” is simply not enough in today’s world. A parish should be more than a place where people *come* to have their spiritual needs met, as they go to a gas station to have their car filled with gas, replenish their cash, and get a snack or a pick-me-up cup of coffee. Rather, the parish needs to be a community from which Catholics *go forth* to make a difference in the world. It is a community where Christians try to be signs and instruments of God’s work in the world—signs and instruments of God’s reign, the way that Jesus imagined that the world could be if people took his teachings seriously. It is not enough for parishes to *maintain* Christian life; parishes need to be places that equip, challenge, and support all members to take part in the church’s mission. The task of parishes today is to move from a stance of *maintenance* to one of *mission* (Rivers).

Why is this so? It all goes back to a deeper understanding of some of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. A lot of people believe that Vatican II was the most important religious event of the twentieth century and that its full meaning has yet to be unpacked.

People often think that the major change that Vatican II brought was in the church's liturgy—the Mass and the other sacraments could now be celebrated in English (or other local languages), instruments like guitars were allowed to be played in church, and the altar was turned around to “face the people.” These were certainly the things that were most visible to ordinary Catholics, but the major changes that the council brought about were actually much more radical. Probably the most important ideas at Vatican II—and the ones with the most long-term effects—had to do with a completely different way of thinking about or imagining what the church was all about.

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Interestingly, or maybe ironically, when we say “completely different” we don't mean “completely new.” Actually just the opposite! Since the eleventh and twelfth century, the church had imagined itself as a “hierarchical” (made up of the clergy) or even a “monarchical” (led by the pope) *visible* society. One great theologian in the sixteenth century, St. Robert Bellarmine, spoke of the church as “visible as the Republic of Venice.”

In this way of imagining the church, the task of the hierarchy (pope, bishops, and priests) was to be leaders and channels of grace. The task of the rest of Catholics was to be followers and recipients—to be, in a word, passive. They were to be the “objects” of the hierarchy's ministry. In 1906, for example, Pius X wrote that the church is “an unequal society” composed of two kinds of persons: “the pastors and the flock.” The pope went on to say that the laity had “no other duty but to allow itself to be led and to follow its pastors as a docile flock.” This led to a “trickle down theory” of grace and responsibility in the church.

Another way to talk about this idea of the church is to speak of it as a “linear model” of imagining the church. As we go down the line, power and responsibility get less and less, and so by the time we get to the laity there is really nothing they can do except receive services from the clergy. An old joke spoke of the “threefold role of the laity in the church”: pray, pay, and obey! It is this kind of thinking that set the stage for the “service station” mentality we spoke of before.

The Church as Community

The way that Vatican II spoke about the church was completely different. It was what we might call a “circular model.” In this way of imagining the church, the emphasis was not put on how hierarchy, women and men in the vowed

life, and clergy and laity were different from one another, but how they *all* were one in Christ through their baptism and how they all were equal in terms of their membership in the church as members of God's people. *Baptism* (as George Hunsberger explains in this issue) is the key.

The new image of the church at Vatican II was "the People of God." What this image says is that the church should not first be imagined as an institution or society, but as a *community*. What this means is that every Christian has an active role to play in the church's life and the church's work. Every Christian, in other words, has both the privilege and responsibility of sharing in the church's mission.

This great change in understanding the church was expressed in other important phrases or images in the documents of the council. The first was to image or imagine the church not first of all as a society with structure but as a community with relationships. Even better than the term "community," in fact was the more theological term "communion." There is something organic, something *living* about the church, where all have a voice, all have a role, all have a share in responsibility. As is often said today, there are no passive Christians. Every Christian has something important to give, something important to share. Every member of the church brings a "piece of the wisdom" to decision making in the church and to what the church can offer the world.

The Church as Sacrament

Another way that Vatican II spoke of the church was as a sacrament—in its own words, "a kind of sacrament or sign" of the unity between both God and humanity and the unity of all peoples of the earth, and also "an instrument for the achievement of such union and unity" (*Lumen Gentium* 2). We often think of the seven sacraments that we celebrate in the church, but Vatican II proposed that the most *basic* sacrament—the greatest "sign" of who God is—is Jesus Christ himself! He is the clearest sign of God's love and presence in the world, and the church is the sign of him and an instrument of God's grace in our everyday lives. What this means is that the way we live as a community and the way we act as a community is how the church expresses what the church is all about.

A sacrament is always something that points beyond itself. When we say that the church is a sacrament, we are saying that the church points to something else—what we've called above the reign or kingdom of God. This is what the church—and our parishes—need to be "signs" and "instruments" of: communities in which people really "get along" together, where they can find friendship and support, where they can find healing from so much of the brokenness that happens in their lives, where they can celebrate the large and small victories of life, and where they can find inspiration for living in a way that shows the world the power

of Jesus' message. The reign of God has not yet come in all its fullness, but a parish community can be a real sign and in a sense a guarantee that God's reign *will* come, and *that it is possible to live this way already*.

The Church as the Body of Christ

Still another image, found especially in the letters of St. Paul, is of the church as the Body of Christ (see LG 7). The church is the way that Jesus continues his ministry on earth: proclaiming the good news of God's reign, identifying with the world's suffering, being a place where all find welcome and forgiveness. Paul talks about how when we are baptized we put on Christ—we become who he is in our world (Gal 3:27). He talks also about how when we celebrate eucharist we, though many, become one body by sharing in the one bread and the one cup (1 Cor 10:16-17). St. Augustine once said in a sermon that when we receive Christ in the eucharist it is the mystery of ourselves that we receive—the eucharist celebrates our identity as Christ in the world so we can continue to carry on his work. Just as the body has many parts and yet is still one, we as the body of Christ have many gifts and are called to various ministries in the church and in the world.

Missionary by Its Very Nature

A phrase that appears in the Council's document on missionary activity sums all of this up wonderfully: the church is "missionary by its very nature" (see *Ad Gentes* 2). The church, the council says, comes to be because it is called to participate in the overflowing love of God, who sends the Word into the world at a particular moment in history and who sends the Spirit into the hearts of women and men at all times and in all places. When people come to know what God has done through the incarnate Word and the ever-present, all pervasive Spirit, and accept this in baptism, they themselves become sharers in God's very life and saving activity in the world. God's "mission," in other words, becomes the mission of those who believe in God, whom we call the church.

This might all sound very mystical and beyond us, but it really is a very simple truth. In baptism we share the life of God. God's life is a life of loving service to humanity. To be baptized is to do what God does, to be "marked for God's service," to be on mission! To be church, then, is not to be just a member of a "salvation club" to which we have access any time for consolation and grace (that's the "spiritual service station" model). Being church is not just being a member of a group that is only concerned about itself, a kind of "spiritual support group." To be church is to be a community that is concerned with changing the world—witnessing to the coming reign of God!

To name the church as sacrament is to say that is a *sign* of God's love and mercy, a community that really *is* what it says it stands for. But if it is *only that*, then that is not enough. The church as a sacrament means the community also needs to be an *instrument* of God's love, God's mercy, and an instrument that assures and affirms the equality and dignity of all women, men, and children in the world.

The bottom line is that to be a Christian is to be in service to the world. To be a *saved* people is at the same time to be a *saving* people. To be church is to be a missionary community. As our U.S. bishops said eloquently, "To say 'church' is to say 'mission'" (1986, no. 16).

Jesus, Reign, Church

In years past many members of the church thought that there were only certain people in the church—the pope, bishops, priests, nuns, "missionaries"—who were responsible for the church's mission to the world. The church truly *was* simply a "service station" to which they went for regular spiritual nourishment or for occasional "boosts" of grace in confession, novenas, retreats, marriage counseling. But Vatican II shifted that vision, because baptism now figured more prominently in the lives of Christians. It became clear that *every Christian* is given gifts for ministry, *every Christian* is marked with the identity of Christ, *every Christian* is called to serve, *every Christian* is in some sense a missionary.

Ten years after the close of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI wrote a marvelous document, *Evangelization in the Modern World* (EN), part of the commemoration of the tenth anniversary of Vatican II's document on the church's mission, which spoke of the church as "missionary by its very nature." In writing about "evangelization" (a word that basically means the same as mission in this exhortation), Paul VI began with the mission of Jesus which, as we have already said, was all about the kingdom or reign of God. This witness to the Reign of God sums up Jesus' entire mission, the pope says (no. 6). At the heart of the message and witness of the reign is the reality of "salvation," and it is expressed in Jesus' parables about the surprising and forgiving nature of God; in his deeds of healing illness and driving away the causes of evil within human beings; and by his expansive, welcoming presence to all those who ordinarily are "outside"—outside the culture, outside of respectability, and outside the rules of religion. The way the pope paints Jesus is

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as a man focused not on himself, but on his God and his fellow human beings, in a way so selfless that he was willing to give his very life for them.

But the pope goes further. He says that after Jesus' ascension the work of witnessing to and proclaiming God's reign passes on to Jesus' followers. In one particularly powerful passage we read this:

The Church is born of the evangelizing activity of Jesus and the Twelve. She is the normal, desired, most immediate and most visible fruit of this activity: "Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations." . . . Having been born consequently out of being sent, the Church in her turn is sent by Jesus. The Church remains in the world when the Lord of glory returns to the Father. She remains as a sign—simultaneously obscure and luminous—of a new presence of Jesus, of His departure and of His permanent presence. She prolongs and continues Him. And it is above all His mission and His condition of being an evangelizer that she is called upon to continue. For the Christian community is never closed in upon itself. The intimate life of this community—the life of listening to the Word and the apostles' teaching, charity lived in a fraternal way, the sharing of bread—this intimate life only acquires its full meaning when it becomes a witness, when it evokes admiration and conversion, and when it becomes the preaching and proclamation of the Good News. Thus it is the whole Church that receives the mission to evangelize, and the work of each individual member is important for the whole. (EN 15)

Once again here we have a powerful way of speaking of and imagining the church, one that goes way beyond the image of a "service station." Vatican II had spoken of the church as "missionary by its very nature." Paul VI expresses this same idea in another way: "Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity" (EN 14).

Evangelization / Mission Means Many Things

For some Catholics, the term "evangelization" carries with it notions of standing on street corners or pushing opinions on others to convert them. But evangelization/mission in a deeper sense is more subtle and respectful of other people's beliefs and opinions. The Catholic way—and the way that most Christians agree on—is that the church needs to do its mission with the utmost respect for people of other faiths and opinions. In another one of his important writings, Pope Paul VI insisted that the basic attitude the church must have today in *all* that it does is the attitude of "dialogue" (1964). In other words, mission is not about a one way, "hard sell" to a group of potential "customers." Mission is really *just the opposite*. It is much more like a conversation that the church has with the world around it—respecting the culture it is working in, taking care to learn the language,

developing real relations with the people in whose midst it works, and appreciating the faith and customs of the people in its neighborhood.

This attitude of “dialogue” would mean, for instance, that a church community in an African American neighborhood in a U.S. city would be one that identifies completely with African American culture and with causes that especially concern the local population. This kind of community would serve the *entire* neighborhood. A rural parish in Appalachia, in contrast, might be one that works against the environmental pollution of the area and whose members have developed deep friendships with Baptist and Pentecostal Christians in the *entire* county.

When we speak of mission or evangelization today we mean much more than preaching a message. In his 1990 encyclical *The Mission of the Redeemer*, John Paul II said that mission needs to be understood as a “single but complex reality” (no. 41)—in other words not reduced to only one thing like verbal communication. Because of this, the pope speaks about mission as involving first of all the witness of a truly Christian life and then as a clear presentation of the message of the Gospel.

But mission, he says, involves much more. At the heart of mission is also a decision on the part of Christians to work for social justice and peace, to find ways to talk about the faith in ways that peoples of various cultures can understand, and to be involved at various levels in developing good relations with people of other religions—like Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims. In the last several years people have also recognized that the way we celebrate liturgy has a missionary aspect: how we greet people when they visit our churches, how we preach in a way that is nourishing and inspiring, how our music attracts people, for example. The whole current discussion on climate change and global warming has made people realize that actions to protect creation (e.g., recycling, creating “green” architecture, buying food more wisely) are also an act of mission. And in an ever-increasingly violent world, the work of protecting abused spouses and children, reconciling disputes between families or between people in our parishes, and providing safety and job opportunities for migrants is also at the heart of what the church does as it continues Jesus’ work.

Mission is Everywhere!

In the past, mission meant leaving one’s homeland, often for life, and learning a new language and a new culture—and often undergoing a lot of hardships in the midst of the very poor of the world.

This understanding of mission is certainly still valid, and we know that the world still needs men and women—lay, religious, or ordained—who can respond to this special and holy missionary call. But when we put the idea of “mission” and “evangelization” together, as Paul VI and John Paul II did, we see that a

missionary church or a missionary parish can be *anywhere*. What is most important is that the church live in a way that is open to and responsible for the world around it, whether that “world” in the United States is shared with those who are homeless in its neighborhood, or the wider world that is suffering from lack of respect for the environment, or a “world” of another parish in Guatemala or the Philippines that is struggling to educate its children or to put in a new water system in the village. Today, it is probably more important to think not *where* is mission, but *who* is mission. Mission is about people—youth, young adults, men, women—outside the boundaries of the church and the parish but nevertheless loved by God and destined by God for the fullness of life that faith in Jesus and in his vision can bring.

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Being a community in mission—a missionary parish—is much more a state of mind than anything else. It is being really *present* to the world in which we live. Again, it is recognizing that our Christian faith is not something that is for ourselves alone, but one that needs to be lived out by caring for the people among whom we live. Those people may be just down the street, but they could also—especially in today’s “globalized” world—be in a village in Cameroon in Africa, a halfway house for street children in São Paulo, Brazil, the island of Leyte in the Philippines, in our inner

cities or barrios, in our rural areas or suburbs, or among the huge numbers of immigrants and refugees who grace our country by their presence.

Doable for Everyone

To say that every Christian—and every Catholic Christian parish—is called to mission is to point to something that is really doable for everyone. The main thing is that we begin thinking about our Christianity not as something for ourselves, but as something for others, something for the world. St. Paul speaks several times in his letters about how, as the body of Christ, not everyone is called to do everything, but that each person in the community has been given a gift for the sake of the whole (see 1 Cor 12:4-30; Rom 12:3-8; Eph 11:4-13). There is something that all of us as a community can do—for example, be friendly to visitors at our Sunday Eucharist or make a real effort as a community to live more simply for the sake of the environment—and there are things that each of us as individuals can do, like be ready to tell people about our faith, and about the joy we find in our faith community. But there are some things that some can do and others can’t—like get involved in music ministry, be willing to join a trip to protest at the

School of the Americas in Georgia, volunteer at a homeless shelter, or join a group of Christians who meet regularly with a group of Muslims. What matters is not that everyone does everything; what matters is that we as a community, a parish begin thinking of ways to speak about and demonstrate the fact that “the reign of God has come near” (see Mark 1:15).

Parishes like this do exist. St. Pius X parish, for example, in El Paso, Texas is one in which ministries abound under the collaborative leadership of its pastor. Recently, when this pastor celebrated his silver jubilee (twenty-five years as a priest), he asked the parish not to give him any material gifts, but to give him the gift of extra hours in ministry. The result was overwhelming, with thousands of hours pledged by people to minister both within the parish and across the border in Mexico. In the Chicago area there are parishes like Old St. Pat’s downtown, where in celebration of its 150th anniversary as a parish, parishioners signed up to do 150,000 hours of ministry. Or, in Brooklyn, New York, there is Transfiguration Parish in which its Mexican, Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Central American parishioners combine contemplation and eucharistic adoration with advocacy for immigrants in the neighborhood and the poor of the neighborhood and beyond.

Being Grace in Our World

Being a Christian is more than receiving grace from the sacraments. Being a Christian means being grace in our world, being a sacrament. Our parishes need to be more than service stations, more than places that make us feel safe and “saved.” They need to be places that call us and equip us for a Christian life in our world; they need to be beacons of hope for the people of our neighborhood and town or city; they need to be places where we become aware of the needs of the world—of others much more in need of God’s love and people’s care than we are; they need to be places where we can somehow touch those places and offer rays of hope and lines of help. The church, God’s special People, Christ’s body on earth, is “missionary by its very nature” and so must our parishes be. To embrace the vision of Vatican II and papal teaching of the last few decades calls us to think in a new way about our parishes and to shape them more like a missionary parish than a service station.

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