

Both/And Missional Thought

Review by Daniel H. Martins

In the current milieu among Christians in much of the world, any mention of *mission* is immediately tagged as presumptively timely and relevant. Books, conferences, and workshops on the subject abound. Parishes and dioceses, and those who lead them, are judged in many quarters by how effectively they engage mission. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has dubbed the church that he leads “the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement,” a distinctly missional appellation.

Various scriptural and theological taproots are adduced by the advocates of mission-based thought and behavior on the part of Christians, making it possible to be quite principled and high-minded in such advocacy. It is simply impossible to argue against the notion that the Church, by its nature, ought to engage in missionary endeavors. At the same time, it is equally impossible to deny that much of the rhetoric of mission masks an ever-rising tide of neuralgic anxiety about the substantially degraded influence of Christianity in Western society, to which the aging and shrinking Christian communities in Europe and North American bear chilling witness.

This much is widely agreed. Beyond that consensus, however, considerable differences emerge. These differences generally coalesce in one of two directions. A great many mission-minded Christians find their prime directive in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16-20). In this paradigm, mission is simply tantamount to evangelism, but “with an attitude,” that is, not mere dutiful proclamation of the gospel, but proclamation of such an effective sort that it results in numerical growth of biblical (e.g., Acts of the Apostles) proportions. Missionary faithfulness cannot but yield church growth.

Pushing back against this mission-equals-evangelism viewpoint is what

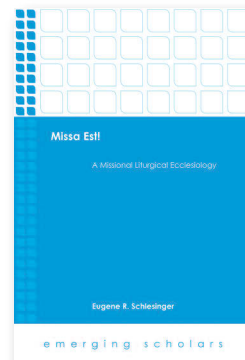
might be called the *missio Dei* school. From this perspective, missionary work involves first observing and discerning where God is already active in the world — renewing, reconciling, redeeming — and then intentionally tagging along in that divine activity. Mission, after all, is *God’s* mission, not the Church’s, *per se*. “The Church doesn’t have a mission,” we often hear. “God’s mission has a Church.” What such cooperative tagging along tends to look like, in practical terms, involves a good bit of attention to political, economic, and social structures and the ills that flow from them. Mission is ultimately the work of promoting justice and love in human relationships and social institutions.

Into this rich and dynamic conversation comes *Missa Est!*. The volume is a slightly revised version of the author’s doctoral dissertation at Marquette University. Eugene R. Schlesinger is a recently minted Episcopalian who, notwithstanding his free-church evangelical background, demonstrates a clear and thorough familiarity with the Book of Common Prayer (1979). One cannot help but surmise that, at some level, this academic offering is autobiographical, an artifact of Schlesinger’s embrace of the Catholic tradition as a source of personal refreshment and encouragement.

Apropos of this is the considerable attention he devotes to the question of whether it is possible for a church that is liturgical — adhering to an ordered discipline of worship and sacramental life — not to be fatally compromised in its missionary endeavors. This is simply not a debate that rages within the historic ecclesial mainstream, whether Catholic or Reformed. That the author of this volume deems it worthy of being engaged with formidable zeal says something about the provenance of the dust on his shoes.

In attacking his subject, Schlesinger declines to accept the philosophical di-

Missa Est!
A Missional Liturgical
Ecclesiology
By Eugene R. Schlesinger
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chotomy regarding mission as I have laid it out here. Rather, he carefully includes both perspectives (mission as evangelism and mission as tagging along with God) in his vision. His approach, however, is no mere synthetic fusion of the two. He stipulates the *missio Dei* perspective; indeed, he embraces it. Of course all mission originates from God and belongs to God, and anything the Church does by way of mission is in service to the *missio Dei*.

But instead of just accepting the way some of its proponents frame it — that is, in terms of social engagement on behalf of justice and love — Schlesinger grabs the notion of *missio Dei* by the scruff of the neck and drags it through a close and critical dialogue with the likes of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Bernard Lonergan as they do battle over trinitarian theology. Then, with his captive still firmly in hand, he makes various pit stops in the realm of ecclesiology, sacramental theology, and even pastoral liturgy (including the 1979 baptismal rite and the Roman Catholic *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*). He pays an extended call on St. Augustine for a tutorial on the learned doctor’s understanding of sacrifice as it relates to his overarching and ambitious idea of the *totus Christus*, the multiple bodies of Christ — the historical body, the sacramental body, and the ecclesial body — operating as a single organism in the dynamic exchange of gifts that forms the

heart of both the life of the Trinity and the action of the Eucharist.

What comes out at the bottom of this funnel is the compelling assertion that the *missio Dei* is nothing other than the paschal mystery: the complex of divine actions and events beginning with the Annunciation to Mary and concluding with the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, with station stops at the nativity, life and ministry, passion, death, resurrection, ascension, sending of the Spirit, and second coming. “To share in the life of the church is to share in the paschal mystery, is to share in the *missio Dei*, is to share in the divine life” (p. 90).

It then flows organically, since the liturgy of the Eucharist and the paschal mystery are hopelessly intertwined, that mission is connected to liturgy in a way possibly analogous to the hypostatic union of the human and divine natures of Christ — not to be confused, but not in any way separable. The liturgy is an end in itself and a good in itself, not some sort of sourdough starter for mission. And the Church in mission (Schlesinger is fond of language from Pope Francis’s encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium*, which speaks of the Church being ever “in departure”) is valid in its own right; it is not just a codicil on the Eucharist. Yet, each is fully coherent only in relation to the other. Schlesinger says repeatedly that mission “veri-fies” [his hyphen] the performance of the liturgy, and alone makes it intelligible:

If the church becomes what it receives in the Eucharist, then the church too must be at the Father’s disposal for the life of the world. Just as the Eucharist distributes Christ universally, the church is to be dispersed throughout the world so that all may come to share in Christ. (p. 146)

What, then, is mission for Schlesinger? It’s a both/and scenario. Clearly, there is no Christian mission that does not involve baptizing and disciple-making. Mission must be about evangelization. And evangelization of necessity imme-

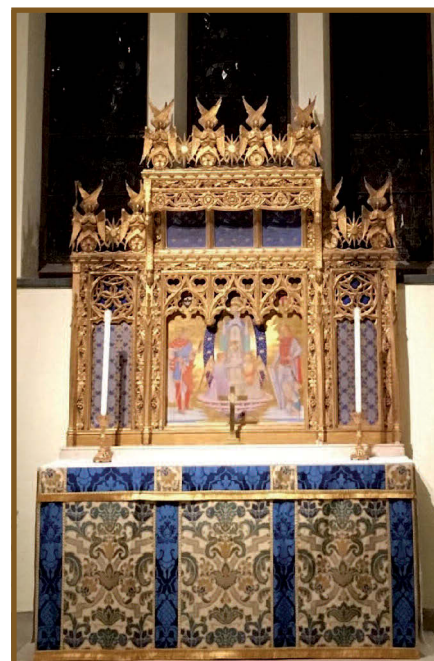
diately leads back to mission; a baptized disciple automatically becomes a missionary before even drying off. Such missionaries are then, per Schlesinger, necessarily concerned with issues of justice in society. The Church’s *ad intra* life and its *ad extra* mission are both integrally necessary. They are symbiotic; neither can be sustained without the other.

This is seriously academic theology, copiously footnoted (sadly, in a scarcely readable font size), with an extensive bibliography. As such, it is relatively unconcerned with practical theology — either missionary strategy or tactics. There is an almost mystical reliance on robust ecclesiology and sacramental theology effecting what they signify:

The path of mission is not a detour, but, rather, the shape of the pilgrim church’s peregrination. ... However, we must be on guard against overly didactic approaches to the liturgy that view the solution as thinking the right things during the Mass or learning lessons to be applied later. ... Instead, the liturgy itself ought to be doing this work, not because of its instructional value, but because through it, we share in the paschal mystery, and to share in the paschal mystery carries sharing in mission as part of its intelligibility. (pp. 206-07)

The writing is often repetitive, in keeping, one might surmise, with the material’s origin as a dissertation. But, in a manner somewhat evocative of Dom Gregory Dix in *The Shape of the Liturgy* (and I mean this as a compliment), there are strewn throughout the text snippets of rhetorical luminosity that manifest a heart full of unquestionably earnest zeal for the gospel. Case in point: “It is the breaking of the bread, the pouring out of the cup, which constitutes the Christian community. In other words, the Eucharist makes the church, and it makes it by being a meal.”

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