“Together towards Life”: Catholic Perspectives

Stephen B. Bevans

What might a Catholic theologian and missiologist have to say about “Together towards Life” (TTL), the new document of the World Council of Churches (WCC) on mission and evangelism?1 What follows are my reflections from such a Catholic perspective, for the sake of brevity made in six points. Before I begin, however, I should say up front that I like this document very much; this Catholic perspective, while not uncritical, is one of basic appreciation of what the WCC has given us here.

First, I think it is important to note a real difference in the nature of this document compared with documents that are issued by the Roman Catholic Church, particularly documents coming from the pope and the Vatican, such as the documents of the Second Vatican Council or Pope Francis’s recent document on the joy of the Gospel, Evangelii gaudium.2 Catholic ethicist Charles Curran puts it well when he says that documents from the WCC are documents that do not speak for the church, but to the churches. Just as important as the content of a document such as TTL is the discussion it creates among the churches and the churches’ feedback to the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME). A Catholic document, particularly one coming from Rome, is by contrast a document that speaks for the Roman Catholic Church. Unlike a WCC document, which has no real authority other than that it comes from an esteemed body of churches, a Catholic document is very authoritative and demands, according to the authority that it claims for itself, various degrees of acceptance from Catholics. Because of this, and perhaps ironically, Curran observes that a WCC document can actually be quite prophetic and groundbreaking, as TTL certainly is. It seems to me that documents such as Evangelii gaudium are also quite prophetic, but the pope has to take pains to make sure that his teaching is more relevant to the entire Catholic Church, in all its variety.3

Second, as a Catholic I applaud the focus of TTL on the mission of the Holy Spirit, who, as the document says, “works in the world often in mysterious and unknown ways beyond our imagination” (§15). Such focus on the Spirit points to the activity of God in mission since the dawn of creation and to God’s presence in all of history and the world’s religions. It emphasizes that mission is not so much about bringing God into a godless or evil situation, but the naming of God always present among the world’s peoples and cultures. Such focus on the Spirit is a welcome enlargement of Catholic understandings of mission, which, along with other Western churches, has treated the Spirit as the “Cinderella of the Trinity.” In her wonderful book She Who Is, Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson quotes the eminent Dominican theologian Yves Congar, who wrote that Catholic piety often functions “to displace many functions of divine Spirit onto the pope, the cult of the Blessed Sacrament, or the Virgin Mary.”4 It is time for Catholics to recognize the pervading presence of God through all of history that is poured out upon Jesus at the beginning of his ministry and poured out upon us as we engage in mission.

Third, Catholics will resonate with TTL’s call “to move beyond a narrowly human-centred approach and to embrace forms of mission which express our reconciled relationship with all created life” (§19). Pope John Paul II spoke often of the need for ecological awareness as a moral issue and called for an ecological conversion.5 Pope Francis called on Catholics to protect creation in his inauguration homily in March 2013,6 and in Evangelii gaudium he wrote eloquently, “Thanks to our bodies, God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can

Notes

2. Stephen B. Bevans, SVD, a contributing editor, is Louis J. Luzbetak, SVD, Professor of Mission and Culture at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago.
3. Asociación de teólogos/as Juan XXIII, Congresos de Teología: Mensajes, 2010).
4. "Más de 14,000 misioneros españoles dan su vida en el mundo para..."
5. “Más de 14,000 misioneros españoles dan su vida en el mundo para...”
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feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement. Let us not leave in our wake a swath of destruction and death which will affect our own lives and those of future generations” (EG 215). Protecting creation is at the heart of the church’s mission, which both Catholics and WCC member churches can affirm.

Fourth, according to Geervarghese Coorilos, metropolitan of the Niranam Diocese of the Syrian Orthodox Church in India and moderator of the CWME, the “defining perspective” of TTL is its strong conviction that mission is no longer from the affluent center to the poor or pagan periphery, but rather is done from the margins by the marginalized. “People on the margins have agency,” the document insists. It is they who “can often see what, from the centre, is out of view. People on the margins, living in vulnerable positions, often know what exclusionary forces are threatening their survival and can best discern the urgency of their struggles; people in positions of privilege have much to learn from the daily struggles of people living in marginal conditions” (§38). One can almost hear the echo of these words in Pope Francis’s Evangelii gaudium when he calls for a “Church which is poor and for the poor.” We need to be evangelized by the poor, the pope writes. We need to “acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the center of the Church’s pilgrim way” (EG 198). The robust Catholic tradition of social justice finds strong resonance in TTL.

In the fifth place, Catholics may be challenged and somewhat taken aback by the rather uncompromising condemnation in TTL of the “market ideology” of capitalism. The document unmasks the myth that “the global market will save the world through unlimited growth,” arguing rather that it is “a threat not only to economic life but also to the spiritual life of people, and not only to humanity but also to the whole creation” (67). Similarly, Pope John Paul II railed against a “culture of death” in his 1995 encyclical “The Gospel of Life,” and Pope Francis speaks strongly against today’s “throwaway culture” (EG 53). “Mission,” the document says, “is to denounce the economy of greed and to participate and practice the divine economy of love, sharing, and justice” (§108). Nevertheless, Catholics might also listen to Pope Francis’s commendation of business as “a vocation, and a noble vocation” (EG 203), and recognize that neither capitalism nor socialism is good or evil as such (a recognition that, I believe, is Catholic teaching). If those who participate in the market economy “see themselves challenged by a greater meaning in life,” they will truly “serve the common good by striving to increase the goods of this world and to make them more accessible to all” (EG 203). Catholics, I think, would be somewhat less ideological than the WCC document.

Finally, I want to offer a Catholic critique of the understanding of evangelism advanced by TTL. It speaks of evangelism as focusing on “explicit and intentional articulation of the gospel” (§81). The document goes on, however, to speak of evangelism as including witness, sensitivity to cultures, and interfaith dialogue (§§86, 97, 93). This is simply unclear. The Catholic perspective of basically equating evangelism (or evangelization, as we prefer to call it) and mission, and then recognizing that mission has a number of constitutive elements, is to my mind a much simpler and richer way of thinking. There is one evangelism or mission in this view, which cannot be reduced to verbal proclamation or working for justice or any other single activity. Roger Schroeder and I, for example, speak of mission as constituted by six elements: witness and proclamation; liturgy, prayer, and contemplation; justice, peace, and the integrity of creation; interreligious, secular, and ecumenical dialogue; inculturation; and reconciliation. I think the document could learn from such a more inclusive understanding of mission.

I might say much more. There are resonances between the perspective TTL offers on cultural sensitivity, interfaith dialogue, spirituality, liturgical life, and community and those of Catholic theology, spirituality, and missiology. Although there might be a few places in the document that would cause a Catholic to raise an eyebrow, she or he can read this document with much profit, much consolation, and much challenge. Such is certainly true for this Catholic missiologist and theologian.

Notes

1. “Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes” was prepared by the WCC’s Commission on World Mission and Evangelism and adopted by the WCC Central Committee in 2012.
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