

Diarmuid Murchu – *Consecrated Religious Life  
The Changing Paradigms.*

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TRANSITION SEVEN:  
**MISSION VIS-A-VIS MINISTRY**

*It seems that Jesus did a lot of theology at marketplaces.*

C. S. SONG

The distinction between mission and ministry has arisen in recent decades, partially in response to the desire to serve the Kingdom of God more authentically. While ministry often locates us in the life of the Church, the call to mission as a Christian people, and as liminal visionaries, often invites us to larger horizons of faith and outreach.

All Christian life is rooted in mission. Everybody is sent to bring new life and hope. One could even suggest that mission is the purpose of God's own existence, poignantly verbalized by the 13<sup>th</sup> century mystic, Meister Eckhart when he asks: "What does God do all day long?" And he responds: "God lies on a maternity bed giving birth all day long" (quoted in Fox 2000, 41). God is forever birthing forth new possibilities. All God's creatures are empowered and invited to do the same. This is the primary and most enduring feature of the call to Christian mission.



### A New Distinction

Mission, therefore, is larger and more encompassing than ministry, and not all forms of ministry are necessarily congruent with the mission of God at the heart of creation. The Church, in the name of ministry, has sometimes supported oppressive regimes, or at least colluded with them. Because the Church sanctioned such undertakings we assumed that they were congruent with mission. Today, we realize that this was not always so.

The call to mission embraces every aspect of creation and seeks to foster and promote the key values of the Kingdom of God: justice, love, compassion and liberation. Forms of ministry which favor the rich over the poor (e.g., selective schools, private hospitals) or uncritically endorsed competitive practices, e.g., the exam system in education, are not congruent with the values of the Kingdom of God. Such undertakings, even when approved and ratified by Church authority, require fresh assessment as we grow into a deeper understanding of our call to Christian mission.

In making these observations and distinctions, I am not trying to create a polarization between mission and ministry. For a long time, both notions were considered as synonymous, and for many Religious Orders and Congregations the two terms tend to be used interchangeably. However, there is a shift in perception and understanding. A new consciousness within Religious Life leads to the conviction that there is a great

deal more to our life-witness than just ministry. Every aspect of our lifestyle—prayer, community, personal giftedness, Congregational resources, as well as ministry—contribute to the *raison d'être* of our existence which is to be people in mission. Mission is a way of being responsive to God in the world and not just a particular ministry or outreach through which we serve God or the Church.

The changing consciousness marks a transition in theological self-understanding, in fact, a deepening sense of vocation. In terms of the emerging theology of the vowed life, we seem to be at the early stages of clarifying and naming this transition. For Religious, it reflects a growing sense that there is more to the vowed life in the following of Christ, than allegiance to a particular church or denomination, articulated through ministerial involvement. The witness required in the name of mission is to the God who co-creates across the entire spectrum of creation, across time and history, forever inviting humans to collaborate in that global and cosmic process of birthing possibilities for new hope.

Mission in this sense is about global priorities, in the light of which Religious feel called to discern and evaluate ministerial choices. And the criteria for such choices are not just the guidelines of one or other denominational church, or faith system, but a true reading of the signs of the times evoking fresh and courageous responses. In the contemporary world, globalization, with the accompanying support of advertising



and market economics, dictates indiscriminately the leading values of our age. Globalization pays little attention to either cultural norms or religious values. It objectifies the earth, exploits natural resources, and commodifies human beings. How do Religious of our time provide a counter-cultural challenge to this insidious force? Not without new skills which will incorporate the wisdom of economics, politics, law and the modus operandi of social systems.

### *Charism in a New Light*

In the vocabulary of the vowed life, charism denotes the particular set of gifts a specific Order or Congregation claims to have inherited from its founding person, establishing the uniqueness of its identity amid all the other charisms within the Church, and inspiring the members in their dedication to God and the Church. Charism refers to that indefinable distinctiveness whereby members identify with one particular family rather than another, even though they may be carrying out similar ministries and living very similar lifestyles. Frequently, it translates into specific apostolates, such as education and nursing.

I want to suggest that charism needs to be reconceptualized with a bias towards mission rather than its current link with specific ministries in an exclusively Church context:

1. I want to make the bold claim that Religious Life itself is a charism—to the world, rather than to any one church or religion. In which case, each

Order or Congregation is a particular manifestation of a global charism, the core element of which is liminal witness to crucial values (see Chapter Four). Consequently, in our different Orders and Congregations what unites us is more important than what divides us.

2. To claim that the initial inspiration of a charism is inspired primarily by an individual founding person may undermine the richer meaning of a charism. It is doubtful if several individual founding persons would have launched their Religious families without the close collaboration of other significant people, e.g., Ignatius and the seven companions. It is probably more accurate and historically more responsible to argue in favor of communal founding rather than individual founding. And this invites us to see the purpose and meaning of the charism in quite a different light.

3. Several Religious have tried to respond to the invitation of Vatican Two (*Perfectae Caritatis*, no. 2) to return to the spirit of the founding person. But it has been a response of mixed blessings. Some interpreted the challenge as a reenactment now of what the founding person did at one time in the past. Others moved in the direction of greater historical allegiance by recreating historical artifacts of the founding person or of his/her place of birth. What people seem to have missed is the notion that charism is a moving energy of the Spirit. It inhabits living people first and foremost, and if



the charism is not in the living members now, then it has effectively died out.

4. Return to a charism in our time effectively means a communal discernment now of what the living Spirit of God wants to call forth in the members now, encouraged and inspired by the primordial example of their founding person. *It is never a return to the past.* It may be envisaged on what would the founding person/group invite us to do now with the vision and courage that they exhibited in terms of what they did in their time.

5. All chartisms are about big vision, although often expressed in specific local projects. In the early history of several Congregations we read stories of a tiny fragile group embracing challenges that seemed to defy all rationality, and often despite heavy odds the group made a distinctive contribution to the world of its time. In this light, it seems to me that all chartisms are primarily for the service of the Kingdom, and the communal base from which each springs, itself is evidence to a Kingdom validation and orientation.

### ***A New Heart for Mission***

I suggest that we adopt the great foundresses (Angela Merici, Louise de Marillac, Mary Ward, Mary McKillop, Elizabeth Seton, Margaret Ann Cusack) as our primary models for appropriating founding chartisms today. These women read the reality of their respective times with disturbing clarity and undaunting

courage. They encountered opposition from within and outside mainstream Churches and religions. They assumed challenges considered to be "inappropriate," even deviant by prevailing norms. And they paid a price for their prophetic audacity.

A charismatic voice in a globalized culture must emulate these pioneering women. To confront globalization and call it to accountability in the name of the liberating values of the New Reign of God, Religious today need to embrace pastoral choices largely unknown even in our recent past. Today, our members need to be versatile, not just in theology and scripture; they also need to be skilled in the language and procedures of macro-economics, in the subtle and persuasive powers of mass media, in the intricacies of law, in the dynamics of cultural and social systems, and in the operations of mainstream political systems. These are the areas where the crucible of critical values operates in our time. Without these "secular" engagements, we cannot hope to serve the Kingdom of God in a mature and responsible way.

In the past, "charism" was largely identified with teaching, hospitalization, the dispensation of charity, and care to the poor and marginalized. Today, we are called beyond what was a focus largely on charity, to one that makes justice-making for the sake of the Kingdom our absolute priority. This requires a whole new set of skills for mission and ministry. And the skills for this new endeavor are not so much about individual specialization, but rather about group or communal



resourcefulness. All our members cannot be specialists in law, consumerism, politics, mass media, etc., but all our members need to be open to, and supportive of, those who are specialized; all must be willing to embrace a process of lifelong learning. And where we are not equipped with the skills from within our own ranks, then we will happily seek them in our associates, collaborators and partners in mission. Collaboration now takes on a substantially new meaning—far beyond what it has come to signify in the ecclesial deliberations of the post-Vatican Two Church.