

Response to Prof. Robert M. Doran, S.J.  
As the Father Has Sent Me:  
The Mission of the Church in a Multi-Religious World

Darren Dias  
University of St. Michael's' College

I would like to thank Marquette University and Prof. Doran for the invitation to respond to his paper entitled “As the Father Has Sent Me: The Mission of the Church in a Multi-Religious World.” Prof. Doran’s thesis is, “The mission of the church is to cooperate with the three divine persons as they extend to the ends of the earth and to the end of time the revelation of the invisible mission of the Holy Spirit through the proclamation of the visible mission of the incarnate Word, as these two missions together establish the interpersonal relations with the three divine subjects and among human beings that constitute the state of grace. That mission is fulfilled as the church discerns the presence of the Holy Spirit and announces in word and sacrament the news of God’s love” (7). This thesis is a deep reflection on the mission and nature of the church, and what is clearly and concisely articulated in this paper could be just the beginning of a more developed ecclesiology.

In this paper, Fr. Doran has made a significant development in the ecclesiology outlined in his slim volume *Theology and the Dialectics of History*<sup>1</sup>, which is itself the story of what God’s Reign on earth could look like. The development comes as a result of the integration of his most recent work in Trinitarian theology. In continuity with Frederick Crowe’s articulation of Lonergan’s understanding of the divine missions, Fr. Doran maintains that in the missions God has made a universal offer to humankind to participate in the Trinitarian life. It is from within this context that an understanding of the mission of the church must be located (2).

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<sup>1</sup> Robert M. Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

Further due to this universal gift of God's love to humankind, Christians must discern God's presence outside of the visible confines of the Christian community (15).

What follows is divided into two sections. The first section highlights three areas in the paper that are significant for the way we live church today. The second section contains another three points that could be developed and extended as part of the task of doing theology in a contemporary and multi-religious context.

One of the most significant implications for understanding the mission of the Church in a multi-religious world is in Prof. Doran's understanding of "evangelization." Evangelization is understood and perhaps misunderstood in a variety of ways today; it has gained much use recently, especially in light of the lineamenta, "The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith," prepared for the next Synod of Bishops. I hope Prof. Doran's understanding of evangelization is considered when it comes time to formulating the working instrument.

Prof. Doran articulates two dimensions of evangelization from within the Trinitarian context of the church's mission. First, due to the universal gift of God's love, "Evangelization entails speaking a word that assists others to recognize God's gift of love in their own lives, including in their own cultures and religions" (8). Such a word is a cultural reality, thus, a vocabulary that is culturally significant, in whatever culture and including western culture (which could be considered post-Christian today) is needed. This highlights the pressing need for and challenge of inculturation today as part of the church's mission.

Second, Fr. Doran says that evangelization addresses the problem of evil from the standpoint of the law of the cross as the revelation of the divinely ordained response to evil: the refusal to return evil for evil and instead meeting it with abundant good (8). Thus, the paschal

mystery is placed at the heart of the church's evangelizing mission, making its mission one of prophetic solidarity with all the crosses of the world of today.

These two understandings of evangelization are significant because they create a new paradigm for relations with people who belong to non-Christian religious traditions. A common sense understanding of evangelization is the proclamation of the Gospel in order to effect the conversion of non-Christians to Christianity. From this understanding evangelization is contrasted with dialogue (which does not seek conversion to Christianity). Within this new paradigm the question is not whether the church has an evangelizing mission to non-Christians, but what that mission entails. According to Fr. Doran speaking words intelligible to cultures that help others to recognize the gift of God's love present in their lives, cultures and religions and the soteriological differentiation of consciousness that seeks structures and practices of justice and love are at the heart of the church's mission. This understanding of evangelization is derived from a Eucharistic understanding of the nature of the church since it is consistent with the meaning of the Eucharist when Jesus, at his most vulnerable returned good for evil and showed his love for humankind. I might add that this understanding of evangelization compliments John Dadosky's development of an ecclesiology of friendship.<sup>2</sup>

Another significant area for reflection has already been alluded to in the challenge of inculturation I mentioned earlier; namely, the relationship between the church and culture. I would be interested to hear more from Fr. Doran about the relationship between the church and culture. He has already explicitly treated the relationship between theology and culture in *What*

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<sup>2</sup> John Dadosky, "The Church and the Other: Mediation and Friendship in Post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Ecclesiology." *Pacifica: Australian Journal of Theology*, (October, 2005), 302-322.

is *Systematic Theology*<sup>3</sup> and does so in this paper as well. In this paper Fr. Doran claims that the church is constituted by meaning. It is not a distinct *societas perfecta* but a part within the larger human society (16). Does the church share the culture within which it exists? Does it stand against or contrast culture? Does something similar to the unfolding of culture on the two levels of 'infrastructure' and 'superstructure' take place within ecclesial culture? What would constitute ecclesial infrastructural and superstructural elements?

A second consideration under the broad heading of the relationship between church and culture is how culture functions to transform the meanings and values of the church, toward effecting positive development in carrying out its mission. Do cultural developments directly inform and transform the life and praxis of the church? Here I am thinking about the ecological movement, feminism and anti-racism as a few examples. Would there be a mutual self-constitution between church and culture analogous to theology and culture? How would the church be affected by its relationship with non-Western and non-Christian cultures?

The last significant insight that I will mention in Prof. Doran's theology of the mission of the church is its task of socializing grace. In the evangelizing mission of the church that is an extension of the Trinitarian missions, meanings and values that inform a way of life are transformed. Meaning is the controlling factor in ecclesial affairs and not ideology (14). If this is indeed the case, then the controlling ideologies of the so-called left and right, conservatives and liberals and the atmosphere of mistrust and animosity dissolves as debates are reoriented not around what is valuable and meaningful but which meanings and values are most appropriate to promote and implement at a given time: what in culture and society needs to be transformed at this moment?

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<sup>3</sup> Robert M. Doran, *What Is Systematic Theology?* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

I conclude now with the three points to extend Fr. Doran's thought.

First, Doran's servant model resonates, in many ways though is not identical to the model proposed by Cardinal Dulles. Prof. Doran does not exclude the necessity of the other models but claims that the servant model is the prior condition and foundational context for the others. The other models of church, the institutional, mystical communion, sacramental, herald and community of disciples, is already inchoately present in the paper. For example, the herald model that proclaims the meaning of the Jesus Christ event today and the sacramental model found in the concrete actions of the Church in the midst of suffering or injustice are more obviously present. I would be interested to see where mystical communion and the institutional fit.

My last two questions deal more explicitly with the mission of the church in a multi-religious world. First, how much does the concrete context of the church result in an operative ecclesiology? Particularly in painful situation created or abetted by the church. For example, how much of the church's mission is determined by its responsibility to become an agent of reconciliation and healing after the painful history of Christian evangelization, especially before the Second Vatican Council, when entire cultures and populations were forced to convert to Christianity. To this day, people of others religious beliefs do not trust Christians and are suspicious that offers of friendship are, in fact, ruses aimed toward conversion.

Lastly, the question of the relationship of the church to salvation has not disappeared, even though such terminology as "outside the church no salvation" has disappeared from official ecclesial literature. Prof. Doran's understanding of the church as servant on mission to better approximate the Reign of God in human affairs has the advantage of engaging a more historical and integral notion of salvation. I believe that the relationship of the church to salvation remains

a concern for the church, as evidenced in several Vatican documents over the past several years (*Dominus Iesus* is a clear example but there are others as well). This topic will merit more attention when we speak about the mission of the church in a multi-religious context.