

**Some theological Frameworks for thinking about “mission”
vis-à-vis the Seraphic Mass Association**

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From the beginning: Mission has been a consistent aspect of the Christian vocation, and a central mark of the Church since it was born from the side of Christ on Calvary¹ and revealed to the world on Pentecost.² While the New Testament is filled with texts well interpreted as mission sending directives that flowed directly from the teachings of Jesus,³ exemplary is the so-called great commission from the close of Matthew’s gospel:

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:16-20)

Missionary activity as the central action of the Church: While this missionary charism has been at the center of Christianity from its birth, understandings of mission have evolved over the centuries. There is much scholarship that has documented the history of Christian missions and sometimes explicitly and more often implicitly underscores this activity as a primary task of the followers of Jesus.⁴ Paul of Tarsus is the premiere exemplar of this apostolic task and is not only celebrated as the first true missionary to the Gentiles but some would also consider that in his efforts this Greek speaking internationalist emerged as the true progenitor of Christianity.⁵ One could characterize an underlying thesis to this approach as one which considers “mission” a primary and enduring ministry of the Church.

The turn to *Missio Dei*: More recently, a different approach to mission has emerged among forward looking missiologists, which looks beyond specific missionary activities and instead considers the identity of the church as a missionary venture at its core. A phrase that epitomized this evolution, developed by the missiologist David Bosch (d. 1992), is that of *missio Dei* (Lat., “The mission of God”). Bosch’s basic insight was that mission is not so much a work of the church as an attribute of God. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is a “missionary God.”⁶

This revolution in thought prompted the now widely accepted maxim by Catholic-Christian missiologists and other theologians that it is not so much that the church has a mission, but that God’s mission has a church. As Roman Catholic theologians Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder summarize, the *missio Dei* is “the very mission of God in creation, redemption and continual sanctification.”⁷

Vatican II: The teachings of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which deeply influenced Bosch’s theology, clearly point us in the same direction. For example, the opening paragraph of the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*⁸ speaks about the church not only as a sign but also as an instrument of communion with God and the unity of the whole human race (no. 1). The vision of church here is both for the benefit of the faithful but also for the entire world. Thus, that document confirms that the church has a “universal mission” (no. 1). The Johannine text about God’s love affair with the

world (John 4:16) quickly comes to mind here. An even more potent teaching from Vatican II on the missionary character of the Church is found in a seldom read document of the church. *The Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church (Ad Gentes)*⁹ clearly teaches that “the pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature” (no. 2).

Recent Papal Teaching: Multiple popes in recent years have stressed the evangelizing and missionary work of the Church. It was Pope Pius XI who established World Mission Day – also known as World Mission Sunday – in 1926. Pope Paul VI issued a revolutionary apostolic exhortation in 1975, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*,¹⁰ that affirmed that “It is the whole Church that receives the mission to evangelize, and the work of each individual member is important for the whole” (no. 15). In 1990 Pope John Paul II issued *Redemptoris Missio*,¹¹ in which he stresses the “urgency of missionary activity” (no. 1). While the pope does hope to confirm those dedicated to missionary activity and foster missionary vocations, he also recognizes that “Peoples everywhere, open the doors to Christ” (no. 3). More recently, Pope Francis issued an apostolic exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel (Evangelii Gaudium)*.¹² In that exhortation, which repeatedly invokes the direction of Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Pope Francis calls all the baptized to be missionary disciples, committed to a church that is permanently in a state of mission (120ff).

The Franciscan lens: As Franciscans in general, and Capuchin Franciscans in particular, have revisited and renewed our charism in light of Vatican II, the missionary identification of the Capuchin-Franciscan vocation has been richly renewed. Already at the Third Plenary Council of the Order in 1978 the friars asserted: “Fundamentally, every Franciscan vocation is missionary” (no. 10).¹³ This and other documents will also reference the founding spirit of St. Francis of Assisi, who not only embarked on a particular mission to the Saracens, but more broadly understood his own vocation and that of his friars in this sense: “God has chosen and sent the friars for the benefit and salvation of the souls of all peoples in this world. They will be welcomed not only in the countries of the faithful, but those of unbelievers as well, and they will win many souls” ([*Mirror of Perfection*, no. 65]; Third Plenary Council of the Order, no. 10). The Constitutions of the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin reiterate and expand upon this position, acknowledging that:

- the Church by its very nature is missionary (no. 175),
- St. Francis renewed the missionary spirit in his day through his own life and the force of his rule (no. 175)
- and, by consequence, the Capuchin Order undertakes missionary work as one of its principal apostolic tasks (no. 175).

Seraphic Mass Association: At the instigation of a Secular Franciscan from Switzerland (Frieda Folger), the Seraphic Mass Association as we know it (in Latin: *Opus Seraphicum Missarum pro Missionibus Exteris*) was established in 1889. The SMA is officially recognized by the Capuchin Order, and its statutes were published under the direction of the General Curia in 1921.¹⁴ Those statutes make it clear that this effort focused on raising money for the missions is to be extended to all of the provinces of the Order. To oversee this work, the General appoints a director for the worldwide order.

Blessed Solanus was a persistent advocate and promoter of the Seraphic Mass Association. He had a deep and personal relationship with the foreign missions through his younger brother, Monsignor Edward Casey, who was a missionary in the Philippines and became a prisoner of war during World War II. In his writings he makes untold references to the Seraphic Mass Association, and four of his notebooks – undertaken at the direction of his provincial minister in 1923 – record an astounding

number of requests that came to him through his ministry through the SMA, including multiple accounts of cure.

Solanus not only understood that the SMA was supporting what was then understood as foreign missions, but also believed that those who contributed to the missions through the SMA were actually sharing in the missionary activity. In one letter to a Mr. Bracken (3 January 1943), initially prompted because of a medical problem faced by Mr. Bracken's son, he writes:

Now, what can we each of us do to help to induce the Good God to lift this cross from the boy? If you send me his name, I shall inscribe him in our missionary work whereby he will have the benefits of prayers and holy Masses continually and, in a way may become – indirectly a foreign missionary.¹⁵

In a similar vein, he once extended heartfelt gratitude to a long-time support of the foreign missions. While Solanus was grateful for the financial support received, he also understood that this was not simply a disembodied handout. He writes, "I am sure that the Good God will bless – has blessed – you in many ways for your practical interest in this outstanding phase of really Catholic action."¹⁶

What prompted his superiors to require Solanus to keep these notebooks was the endless stream of folk with an alphabet of medical, financial, familial and personal problems whom he enrolled in the SMA. It didn't matter if they were faithful or "fallen away" Catholics, Protestants or Jews, believers or non-believers. Solanus enrolled them all. Occasionally, such an encounter and enrollment – as the vast majority of this ministry was accomplished face to face – would result in a return to the sacraments or even a "conversion" to the Roman Catholic Church. More generally, the SMA could be understood as a ministerial strategy for this persistent door opener to bring solace and sometimes healing to the thousands who sought him out. In a word, the SMA helped Solanus himself evolve into a missionary who promised prayer but so much more in this process. For the simplex priest who could not administer the sacrament of reconciliation or what we now call the sacrament of the sick, the SMA seems to have evolved as a distinctive sacramental exercise for Solanus of healing and forgiveness. In this enduring ministry, he could connect a local church with the global church, unite personal burdens of ordinary lay folk with the sacrifices of those who labored as foreign missions, and promote personal and spiritual development in union with this deeply traditional form of Catholic action.

The Evolution: Our understanding of Christian mission over the centuries has evolved. It remains rooted in Jesus' call to discipleship and unfolds in a world so unlike the one he inhabited. It is that same rootedness and evolution that marked the Second Vatican Council that did something new while maintaining many continuities with previous Councils (including Trent).¹⁷ It is a similar rootedness that seems to have prompted Pope Francis, in the spirit of Pope Paul VI' *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and his other predecessors to move the baptized from supporting the mission of others to accepting the baptismal challenge to become missionary disciples.

Change is not an act of rejection, but from an ecclesial perspective an honest response to John XXIII's call in 1961 to read the signs of the times.¹⁸ Interestingly enough, Solanus himself played with creating a "Seraphic Mission Association," what he alternately called "The Seraphic 'Men-of-God-Will' Association" and "The Seraphic Good Will Association."¹⁹

The evolution of SMA from Seraphic Mass Association to Solanus Mission Association could be such a rooted yet visionary move. It is not simply inviting folk into a one-way form of gift giving. Rather, in the

spirit of Jesus, and St. Francis, and Blessed Solanus, it is inviting new ways of thinking about collaboration. People's financial treasure is one gift they have to give, and friar's prayer is one gift we have to give. Yet, in the spirit of being a church of missionary disciples, the possibilities are much broader. A Solanus Missionary Association could invoke the Blessed's own consistent request to folk who came to him with a need for prayer or healing or comfort: what will you do? The possibilities are not simply endless, they are enlightening and evangelizing in a mutually respectful and collaborative mode. Does this allow a rethinking even of the tradition of a "spiritual bouquet" no longer couched in how many prayers might be offered for another, but how many actions of service might be invoked in their name?

When Pope John Paul II recognized the Capuchins as a community of lay and ordained of equal dignity,²⁰ he (maybe inadvertently) provided us with a distinctive vision of being church. It is not simply the Capuchins who are a community of lay and ordained of equal dignity, but that is often ignored nature of the Roman Catholic church. Maybe this evolution of the SMA could be a step, even through our prayer, of moving the church forward in that visionary direction.

¹ John Chrysostom, Cat. 3:13-19.

² John Paul II, General Audience (30 May 1979), https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_19790530.html.

³ E.g., Mark 13:10; Mark 16:15; Matthew 24:14; Acts 1:8; Acts 13:47; Romans 10:13-14; Revelation 14:6.

⁴ See, for example, Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 2nd rev. by Owen Chadwick (Penguin Books, 1991).

⁵ A popular version of this position is found in A.N. Wilson, *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle* (New York – London: W.W. Norton, 1997).

⁶ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 389-90.

⁷ Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for today* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2004), 288.

⁸ https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html

⁹ https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html

¹⁰ https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html

¹¹ https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html

¹² https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.pdf

¹³ <https://www.ofmcap.org/images/docs/cpo/iicpo-en.pdf>

¹⁴ *Analecta Ordinis Fratrum Minorum Capuccinorum*, Vol. 37 (1921) 132-134.

¹⁵ *Collected Writings of Blessed Solanus Casey*, Vol. 2:84.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. 2:242

¹⁷ See John O'Malley, *What happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008) and *When Bishops Meet: An Essay Comparing rent, Vatican I and Vatican II* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019).

¹⁸ "Human Health" (*Humanae salutis*), no. 4 at https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/la/apost_constitutions/1961/documents/hf_j-xxiii_apc_19611225_humanae-salutis.html

¹⁹ *Collected Writings of Blessed Solanus Casey*, Vol. 2:288.

²⁰ Letter of John Paul II to John Corriveau, 18 September 1996 as cited in *Analecta OFM Cap* 112:3-4 (1996) 566; cf. *Vita Consecrata*, no. 61.