Ecumenical Missiology
Changing Landscapes and New Conceptions of Mission

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TOGETHER TOWARDS LIFE:
A CATHOLIC ASSESSMENT

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Introduction
As I read an account of the development of the World Council of Churches' (WCC) document Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes (TTL), I became interested both in its theological foundation and the landscapes that were included. The description written by Kirsteen Kim rang true with me and I found it to be very engaging. When I was asked to write a Catholic response to TTL for publication in the International Bulletin of Missionary Research, I went back to it and found much food for thought. My task in this essay is not to report, but to assess the document using a Catholic lens. My lens has been calibrated and focused on post-Vatican II Catholic mission documents. I have chosen certain elements that I will use for my assessment: Ad Gentes (AG), Evangelii Nuntiandi (EN), Redemptoris Missio (RM), Doctrinal Note (DN), Evangelii Gaudium (EG), and Laudato Si’ (LS). They have much in common, and hopefully this will be revealed as we move along through the assessment.

The Theological Foundation – Trinitarian Mission
The Second Vatican Council, particularly in Ad Gentes, stressed the ‘missionary nature of the church’, basing it on the very nature of the Trinity as a sending community. It was this document that provided the Catholic Church with a theology of mission that was not based on missionary work,
but rather on the mission identity of the whole church. The origin of mission is the very life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The sending action of the Father, through which he sends the Son, whose mission is a gradual revelation of the Father’s will and plan for all humanity, is the foundation of the Catholic Church’s teaching on mission. The Father, then, through the mediation of the Son, sends the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit continues to send the ecclesial assembly. This is a key area of agreement of Catholic mission theology with *TTL* (§11, §43). It also reflects the intention of the drafting committee: ‘The new statement aims to promote renewed appreciation of the mission of the Spirit... as the Life-giver as stated in the creeds of Nicea and Constantinople.’ Within this renewed appreciation for the Holy Spirit, *TTL* nevertheless asserts that ‘a pneumatological focus on Christian mission recognizes that mission is essentially christologically based and relates the work of the Holy Spirit to the salvation through Jesus Christ’. The Holy Spirit is seen ‘as the continuing presence of Christ, his agent to fulfill the task of mission’ (§16).

Attention is placed firmly on ‘the Triune God who is the creator, redeemer and sustainer of all life’ (§1). This is accompanied by a forthright conviction that ‘mission begins in the heart of the Triune God and the love which binds together the Holy Trinity overflows to all humanity and creation’ (§2). It is the Gospel of John that demonstrates this most clearly in chapters 14–16. Here the focus is on how the Spirit will act in the community of believers. Jesus assured the apostles that the ‘Holy Spirit whom the Father will send will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you’ (John 14:26). Senior and Stuhlmuehler point out that the presence of the Holy Spirit is to enrich the post-resurrection community and strengthen its faith so that they can bear witness to Jesus as the true Son of God. In its Spirit-prompted mission to the world, the church discovers the true meaning of the Word made flesh. *TTL* §3 echoes this same idea: ‘Life in the Holy Spirit is the essence of mission, the core of why we do what we do, and how we live our lives. Spirituality gives deepest meaning to our lives and motivates our actions.’ This emphasis on the inner dynamics of the Trinity does not in any way diminish the mission of Jesus; instead it is an enrichment of our understanding of the *missio Dei* as revealed in Jesus in the Gospels.

Biblical and historical sources testify that both the celebration of the liturgy and mission were the most striking hallmarks of the early Christian community. It was in the context of worship that the community of believers experienced the presence of Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit. This was the birth of mission spirituality. *TTL* makes this point when it affirms that the Holy Spirit is the source of energy for mission (§104). In

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the end, *TTL* calls all of us to transformation, a deep conversion that hopefully leads us to shape the choices we make in a way that gives witness to our commitment to participation in God’s mission in the world.

Cardinal Walter Kasper, writing about Pope Francis, observed that the Pope’s thought develops between two poles of ‘encounter and praxis’, meaning that Pope Francis works in reality. He analyzes a situation, talks with others, prays, then sets in motion a plan of action based on discernment. He is praxis-oriented and the action is for the common good. It is a method that can be used in mission in the context of any of the landscapes described in *TTL* – in fact, in any landscape.

**The Landscape of Creation**

‘Creation’s life and God’s life are entwined’ (*TTL* §19). This document and the recently published encyclical by Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home* both give a clear expression to creation as a gift of God’s love.

Nature is usually seen as a system which can be studied, understood and controlled, whereas creation can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all, and as a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion (*LS* §76).

This is a key convergence from a Catholic point of view. *TTL* invites humanity to a ‘new conversion’ and a ‘new humility’ (§22) in relationship to creation. Pope Francis incorporated not only his own thoughts, but also those of his predecessors Pope Saint John XXIII, Blessed Pope Paul VI, Pope Saint John Paul II, and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI who urged human beings to take cognizance of the devastation of the planet through excessive damage from pollution and the exploitation of the earth’s natural resources.

The core concern of *TTL* and *LS* is what is happening to God’s gift to all humanity, especially to poor people who are deprived of the earth’s goods because of the rapacious appetites that cry out for immediate gratification. *TTL* §21 stresses that ‘our participation in mission, our being in creation, and our practice of the life of the Spirit, need to be woven together, for they are mutually transformative’. The ‘new conversion’ called for in the document invites humans to ‘participate in communion with all creation in celebrating the work of the Creator’ (*TTL* §22). In that communion we come together in a common dance learning to step lightly upon the earth and celebrating God’s gift to us. It is well known that the Greek word *oikos*
meaning ‘house’ is the root of ‘eco’ which forms the words ‘ecology’, ‘economy’, and ‘ecumenical’.

Pope Francis has added to this trio of words by bringing to the attention of the human community the need for consideration of human ecology, a phrase first used by Pope Saint John Paul II in his encyclical letter, Centesimus Annus (CA). Referencing this letter, Pope Francis writes that:

The destruction of the human environment is extremely serious, not only because God has entrusted the world to us men and women, but because human life is itself a gift which must be defended from various forms of debasement. Every effort to protect and improve our world entails profound changes in lifestyles, models of production and consumption, and the established structures of power which today govern societies (LS §5).

TTL §23 echoes these observations and clearly states that the greed of humanity is contributing to the global warming and climate change that leads to the disfigurement and damage of the earth, and adds more burdens to the lives of poor people. As Christians, we have a responsibility to care for our common home. If we allow our societies to continue to be obsessed with power and profit, we will continue to not only destroy the earth, but also deprive our sisters and brothers of their share of the earth’s resources.7

This is a challenge that calls for a profound commitment to the common good, something that many people in the western world do not find easy because of individualism and materialism. Anthropologist and missiologist Paul Hiebert has pointed out that people from the western world tend to judge people by what they own, and judge success by the material goods they have accumulated.8 This is an assault on human dignity. ‘Authentic human development has a moral character. It presumes full respect for the human person, but it must also be concerned for the world around us and take into account the nature of each being and of its mutual connection in an ordered system’ (LS §5).

The Landscapes of Mission on the Margins

The widening gap between rich and poor is a reality for countries throughout the world. ‘In many ways, inequality is not just a financial issue,’ notes Richard Wike.9 He cites the UN Secretary-General’s Special

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Adviser on Post-2015 Development Planning, Amina Mohammed, who has skillfully pointed out that ‘inequality is a major problem, in part, because it is linked with so many other challenges, such as “poverty, environmental degradation, persistent unemployment, political instability, violence and conflict”’.

Mission history is filled with expressions of missionary activity that viewed people on the margins of their societies as passive recipients. The drafters of TTL drew attention to the fact that such an approach ‘is too often complicit with oppressive and life-denying systems’ (§41). Further, they judge that this approach was ‘generally aligned with the privileges of the centre and largely failed to challenge economic, social, cultural and political systems which have marginalized some peoples’ (§41). Pope Francis, commenting on such an approach to mission, says: ‘We have to state, without mincing words, that there is an inseparable bond between our faith and the poor’ (EG §48). Faith and life cannot be separated. This is why a praxis-oriented and communal method of mission is essential. From a Catholic perspective, the task of evangelization, to use the words of the Pope, ‘demands the integral promotion of each human being’ (EG §182).

TTL reminds us that ‘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). In the light of this important observation about the perspective of people on the margins of society, in TTL there is an even stronger call made to the member-churches of the WCC to not just move people from the margins to the centres of power, but to learn to confront those who sit at these centres – to ‘transform power structures in society’ (§40). ‘Participation in the misio Dei requires a willingness to be of service to all others in all the realities of life. Whatever form of service is rendered needs to be characterized by mutuality, reciprocity and interdependence’ (TTL §45). In this, words and deeds find concrete expression of our commitment to those on the margins, and in the process, we gain the ability to see more clearly the human dignity inherent in all people as our sisters and brothers in Christ Jesus.

In a world where inequality is considered one of the most important challenges facing every country, and where in ‘developed and developing countries alike, the poorest half of the population often controls less than 10% of its wealth’, churches cannot ignore the forces that result in the disempowerment of people on the margins because others want to maintain the status quo and keep their profits high. This is what Pope Francis has named ‘an economy of exclusion’ (EG §53). Though the Catholic Church


11 Amina Mohammed, Deepening Income Inequality, 1.
has a long record of social teaching, the Pope places great importance on working for the common good. It is no longer possible to claim that religion should be restricted to the private sphere and that it exists only to prepare souls for heaven. We know that God wants his children to be happy in this world too, even though they are called to fulfillment in eternity, for he has created all things ‘for our enjoyment’ (1 Tim. 6:17), the enjoyment of everyone. It follows that Christian conversion demands reviewing especially those areas and aspects of life ‘related to the social order and the pursuit of the common good’ (EG §182).

Clearly, there is a high level of agreement between the vision presented in *TTL* and the Catholic position on mission to people on the margins or peripheries of societies developed in Pope Francis’s apostolic exhortation, *EG*. The situation of people on the margins often becomes complicated because of immigration issues. Church communities can be places of refuge for people who are struggling with issues surrounding their legal status. Churches are called to move beyond ethnic and cultural boundaries to come to the aid of all people in need and work to create multicultural communities. *TTL* §70 recommends advocacy work to promote justice in regard to legislation for people who want to settle in countries legally. Welcoming immigrants from various countries can enrich the life of nations if support is given to their integration into the larger society. This belongs to what Pope Francis calls a ‘culture of encounter’:

People in every nation enhance the social dimension of their lives by acting as committed and responsible citizens, not as a mob swayed by the powers-that-be. Let us not forget that ‘responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation’. Yet becoming a people demands something more. It is an ongoing process in which every new generation must take part: a slow and arduous effort calling for a desire for integration and a willingness to achieve this through the growth of a peaceful and multi-faceted culture of encounter (EG §220).

The word ‘encounter’ is used in *TTL* in relation to God, people of other faiths, different spiritualities and with people who are different from us. This is most especially true when it comes to immigrants. We can add to their insecurities in being in a new land, or we can help them to feel at home in their new environment. Articles in *TTL* are especially cogent on this point. ‘We are led by the Spirit into various situations and moments, into meeting points with others, into spaces of encounter, and into critical locations of human struggle’ (§26). In meeting and working with immigrants and poor people, we can find ourselves faced with questions that challenge our commitment to Christ. In *TTL* §45 we meet another challenge to our thinking about immigrants in the context of God’s hospitality. Usually sociologists and anthropologists use the binary notions

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of dominant groups as hosts, and minority groups as guests, in issues of
cultural adjustment. \textit{TTL} §71, deepening the discussion on immigration
issues, puts the issues in the context of Christian life: 'In God's hospitality,
God is host and we are all invited by the Spirit to participate with humility
and mutuality in God's mission.'

\section*{The Landscapes of Solidarity}

There is a thread that runs consistently throughout the text, that poor people
must be the concern of the Christian community. It should give witness to
the world of our commitment to a Gospel way of life that can truly be
called 'evangelical'. In \textit{TTL} we find this same idea put more profoundly:

To experience life in the Spirit is to taste life in its fullness. We are '... called
to witness to a movement toward life, celebrating all that the Spirit continues
to call into being, walking in solidarity in order to cross the rivers of despair
and anxiety (Ps. 23, Isa. 43:1-5). Mission provokes in us a renewed
awareness that the Holy Spirit meets us and challenges us at all levels of life
and brings newness and change to the places and times of our personal and
collective journeys (\textit{TTL} §34).

Solidarity with poor people is meant to spur us on to take transformative
action for ourselves and for the poor. We ourselves are called to conversion
and to give preference to the needs of poor people. It is what Henri Nouwen
called 'downward mobility'. Nouwen meant that one would need to choose
voluntarily to scale down one's way of living for the sake of the common
good. Nouwen learned many lessons from letting go of possessions, but
also from self-concern. Indeed, downward mobility is what is needed to be
able to meet everyone's legitimate needs for quality of life. Pope Francis wrote strongly and forthrightly about the need for basic human
rights to be available to all people for the common good.

In the present condition of global society, where injustices abound and
growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and
considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately
becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and a preferential
option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters (\textit{LS} §158).

To learn to think about the unity of the human family, people have to be
exposed to others and to various ways of living. \textit{TTL} §72 urges a local
congregation to respond 'to its own contextual realities'. Mission trips and
short-term mission service opportunities often help to stimulate members of
local congregations to consider making a longer-term commitment to a
specific mission location (\textit{TTL} §76). Such experiences expose people to
other cultures as well as to the possibility of developing relationships that
are based on common concerns, solidarity and mutuality, equally enriching
the local congregation and the global partners. Real solidarity with people
creates an atmosphere of trust and mutual support, and we learn to work
together with others for something bigger than ourselves. Both \textit{TTL} and
Catholic teaching support such efforts because they help people to see their mission experience in the light of faith. Although Christian churches often work in a spirit of unity in meeting the needs of people who are oppressed or suffering, a deeper unity that is rooted in our common faith is still not a reality. Efforts have been made on many fronts, but there are still stumbling blocks on the path to unity.

The Landscapes of Unity

The unity that was brought through the joining together of the International Missionary Conference (IMC) and the evangelism desk of the WCC in 1961, to become the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, was indeed a cause for rejoicing. The efforts at collaboration among the Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant, Pentecostal and indigenous churches has resulted in closer relationships and greater consensus on issues concerning worldwide mission. Catholics are now playing a role in the WCC, as evidenced by their participation in the General Council charged with organizing the Edinburgh Conference.

John Paul II linked ecumenism and mission in his encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio* (RM) where he wrote that ‘the missionary thrust belongs to the very nature of the Christian life, and is also the inspiration behind ecumenism’ (RM §1). The structure of *TTL* reflects its foundation in a Trinitarian theology of mission in a way that gives special attention to the work of the Holy Spirit. This resonates with the theology of a Trinitarian mission presented in the *Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity* (AG §2). *TTL* reflects these same elements of a theology of mission rooted in the life of the Trinity.

*TTL* §10 links the creative and abiding presence of the Trinity with working for unity in mission. ‘The church is a gift of God to the world for its transformation towards the Kingdom of God. Its mission is to bring new life and announce the loving presence of God in our world. We must participate in God’s mission in unity, overcoming the divisions and tensions that exist among us, so that the world may believe and all may be one’ (John 17:21). As *TTL* §60 rightly stated: ‘Mission and unity belong together’, and unity is a reality rooted in baptism. Through baptism, the Trinity indwells all Christians and the Trinity continues to send us out to proclaim the Kingdom of God. Nevertheless, ‘the lack of full and real unity in mission still harms the authenticity and credibility of the fulfillment of God’s mission in the world... mission and unity are intertwined’ (*TTL* §61). If we, as Christians, can work together on other issues that affect humanity and the whole of creation, then we need to open up ways to widen a process of discussion among all the churches that leads to concrete steps of working for unity.

For Catholics, the Second Vatican Council was a turning point in terms of ecumenism. This resulted in a very robust effort to engage in dialogue
with various Orthodox traditions, the Anglican Communion, Lutheran World Federation, World Methodist Conference, World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Baptist World Alliance, Disciples of Christ, Pentecostals, Evangelicals and the Mennonites. All these dialogues continue because they are born out of the desire for unity instead of the 'scandal of disunity', and out of the need for common witness. There is now in the Catholic Church a sincere openness to ecumenism.

**AAA §69** is indeed crucial: 'From a mission perspective, it is important to discern what helps the cause of God's mission.' The answer, no doubt, is that the steadfast concern for unity must be evident at every level of church life; otherwise we compromise our commitment to *missio Dei*. Paul VI expressed it well:

It is the test of the credibility of Christians and of Christ Himself. As evangelizers, we must offer Christ's faithful not the image of people divided and separated by unedifying quarrels, but the image of people who are mature in faith and capable of finding a meeting-point beyond the real tensions, thanks to a shared, sincere and disinterested search for truth. Yes, the destiny of evangelization is certainly bound up with the witness of unity given by the Church (*EN §77*).

The early Christian community was of 'one heart and one mind' (Acts 4:32), and the witness of their lives was an attractive sign to others of the difference Christ makes in the lives of believers. The care shown to people in need (Acts 6:1-7; Matthew 25:31-40; James 2:5-8) was a striking image of God's own love for them. Christians have always engaged in mission through care for people in need, and this opened the way for them to accept the Gospel.

**The Landscapes of Mission and Evangelism**

Within the Catholic Church, Paul VI's summation of the ideas raised at the Synod on Evangelization (1974) inspired the use of the word 'evangelization' in missiological literature. His use of the term 'evangelization' instead of 'mission' helped to clarify the role of evangelization within the missionary enterprise, but also caused confusion. Instead of shedding light on the relationship of evangelization to mission, evangelization is treated as something completely unrelated to mission; or, as one colleague explained, mission is something that is done in other countries, evangelization is something which is done in one's home country! This is certainly not the Catholic position. Nevertheless, some Catholic dioceses have created separate offices for evangelization and for mission. This only compounds the confusion because the erroneous distinction between mission and evangelization is cemented into the institutional structure of a diocese.

Evangelization and witness are primary elements of Catholic teaching on mission. They are intimately related aspects of mission, but mission is the
wider category that includes other expressions which have long been part of mission as well as those which have arisen in contemporary contexts for mission. There is a footnote in TTL §85 which, though true, is not complete. Two articles in the Doctrinal Note deserve attention:

The term *evangelization* has a very rich meaning. In the broad sense, it sums up the Church’s entire mission: her whole life consists in accomplishing the *traditio Evangelii*, the proclamation and handing-on of the Gospel, which is ‘the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes’ (Rom. 1:16) and which, in the final essence, is identified with Jesus Christ himself (1 Cor. 1:24). Understood in this way, evangelization is aimed at all humanity. In any case, to *evangelize* does not mean simply to teach a doctrine, but to proclaim Jesus Christ by one’s words and actions, that is, to make oneself an instrument of his presence and action in the world (DN §2).

Furthermore, the DN acknowledges the fact of contextualization as a factor in the work of evangelization, and the necessary sensitivity that should characterize what I prefer to call missionary evangelization:

Evangelization also involves a sincere dialogue that seeks to understand the reasons and feelings of others. Indeed, the heart of another person can only be approached in freedom, in love and in dialogue, in such a manner that the word which is spoken is not simply offered, but also truly witnessed in the hearts of those to whom it is addressed. This requires taking into account the hopes, sufferings and concrete situations of those with whom one is in dialogue. Precisely in this way, people of good will open their hearts more freely and share their spiritual and religious experiences in all sincerity. This experience of sharing, a characteristic of true friendship, is a valuable occasion for witnessing and for Christian proclamation (DN §8).

TTL reflects on mission in articles 67-79 and on evangelism in 80-100. Though various elements of mission are considered, such as witness, unity, immigration, liturgy, twinning, advocacy and service, a connection is made in the last sentence that makes up §79. This sentence makes the connection between mission and evangelism: ‘As the Church discovers more deeply its identity as a missionary community, its outward-looking character finds expression in evangelism.’ Despite the conviction one can sense in these words, a question remains: What are all the other dimensions mission if not outward-looking?

The longer section on evangelism – surprisingly, at least to this author – includes sections that as a missiologist, I would consider in conjunction with mission: individualism, secularism and materialism (§91), interreligious dialogue (§93), and cultural issues (§97-100). Now, it is true that there are no hard-and-fast distinctions, but long before proclamation goes on, in the preparation for mission these issues need to be clearly dealt with so that, as the community of faith engages in mission, they have been made aware of the importance of these aspects of mission praxis under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, informed by sound missiological principles.
Conclusion

In the light of the challenges of changing landscapes, the way forward might benefit from the development of some serious discourse around changing how thinking about mission is presented. We need to look at mission as a way of life, not as only a work. This would then be a more inclusive way of looking at missionary identity rooted in baptism. *TTL* uses the word ‘humility’ nine times §23, 71, 83, 87, 89, 106, 109 and 112. In each instance, humility is linked with some of the central aspects of missionary life. The first time it is used in the text is in connection with conversion: ‘We need a new conversion (*metanoia*) in our mission which invites a new humility in regard to the mission of God’s Spirit.’ This is another aspect of preparation for missionary encounters that needs to be revisited because it is the very foundation of how the Holy Spirit works to prepare people not only for mission, but for the whole of Christian life. It prepares us for a life of gradual and systemic attitudes that mark *kenosis*, and manifests itself in choices that lead to self-emptying so that mission in Christ’s way shapes mission praxis.

From a Catholic perspective, *TTL* serves to remind the entire Christian community that we must, through common witness and solidarity with those most in need, reveal God’s desire and invitation that all humanity and all creation share in the ‘Feast of Life through Jesus Christ’ (§112). *TTL* rightly affirms the church’s missionary identity and reasserts the need for us as Christians to commit ourselves anew to live in ways that give witness to God’s revelation in Jesus, that all ‘may have life, and have it abundantly’ (John 10:10). Though there are differences in ecclesiology, sacramental practice and institutional structures that shape mission thinking, there are many more areas of commonality that can benefit the Catholic Church. This is a document that needs to be studied, reflected upon and implemented in ways that actually bring about justice, peace and unity for the sake of humanity and all creation. In this way, the reign of God can become not merely a promise but a foretaste of God’s mission to the world in its ultimate fullness.