

Meeting of the SVD Brothers in the Subzone Brazil
Curitiba, PR, 05-07 September 2011.
"In preparation for the XVII General Chapter"



Introduction

After reflecting for a few days over the most appropriate way of giving my input to this meeting, I concluded that I should begin with a reflection on the larger context of mission, and not just focus on our Congregation, and by extension, on the SVD Brother vocation. So, my first talk today has the title, "*Preparation for the General Chapter in the context of mission today.*" Several sources were consulted, of which I would like to highlight the recent book "*Prophetic Dialogue*" of our confreres, Stephen B. Bevans and Roger Schroeder (both from the USC province).

In this first talk I will concentrate more on the theme of *Mission*, sharing with you a reflection that was not meant only for Brothers, as the preparation for the General Chapter is the duty of all SVDs. However, Brothers will surely take advantage of the content presented here. In the second conference, I will speak more specifically about the Brothers' role in mission, inspired by the theme, "*Promoting Fraternity in Mission.*" Other issues, such as Brother Formation we will discuss tomorrow, in view of revising that program for the Brothers in Brazil.

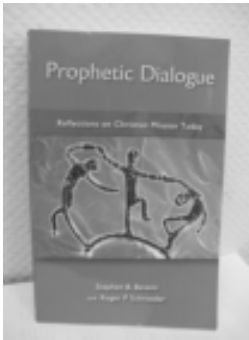
1. Preparation for the General Chapter in the context of Mission Today

I would start with a few experiences that surprised me. When I arrived in Rome, at the XV General Chapter (2000), having been elected General Councilor, I had two "theological surprises." The first was related to the idea that "God had a mission," the so called *Missio Dei* (IDW 1, n.34), echoing the Papal encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*, 24). Until then it was clear to me that Jesus Christ had a mission, and that he continued that mission through the church, and other means (e.g. through the action of the Holy Spirit in the world). So, I had to revise my *perception* of mission, no longer focused on the primary role of human actors in mission but the recognition that we are participants (in a secondary level) in this mission, either individually or in communities.

The second "surprise" came from the terminology related to "prophetic dialogue". In the beginning, due to my limited knowledge of English, I thought the dialogue was with the *world*, which made more sense to me at that time. But I had to admit that it was the dialogue with the *Word*, to emphasize the dialogue with that Word through the encounters with others in faith, acknowledging His presence in them and in us. From that General Chapter onwards, we insisted on a spirituality marked by "dialogue": an attitude of attentive listening, respectful behavior, along with a living response to that Word. As a result, we started publishing the brochures "*In Dialogue with the Word*" (IDW), whose last number (10) was published last year.

In the meantime, "much water has passed under the bridge", with missionary reflections that have tried to clarify not only the theoretical aspect of "prophetic dialogue" but also its actual practice in SVD mission, "*ad extra*" and "*ad intra*". Let us recall here the XVI General Chapter (2006), when it chose five important aspects of our religious and missionary life: *Spirituality, Community, Leadership, Finance* and *Formation*. How much progress was made in the

implementation of prophetic dialogue through these aspects, in the SVD? Difficult to say for sure... However, I feel that, after the last general visitations and having read provincial reports in preparation for our next General Chapter, I believe there has been a progressive awareness of the value of *prophetic dialogue* as missionary practice, though less as *consecrated life* for the mission...

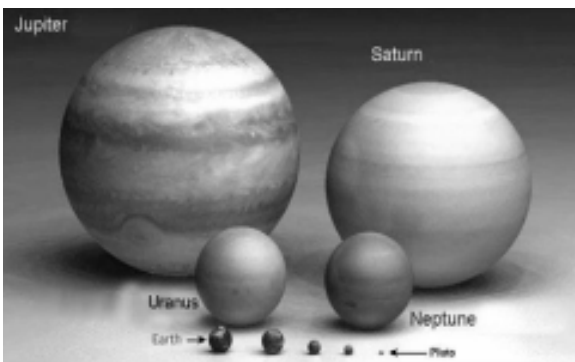


Returning to the main point of this talk, I'd like to share some thoughts that I think appropriate in our preparation for the next SVD General Chapter (2012). For this purpose, I will "borrow" some insights and reflections of our confreres S. Bevens and Roger Schroeder; in their latest book "*Prophetic Dialogue, Reflections on Christian Mission Today*, Ed Orbis Books, 2011. (Both authors have already published in 2004, *Constants in Context, a Theology of Mission for Today*).

Why this choice? Because I consider that the texts deal clarity with some aspects of prophetic dialogue, such as missionary praxis, but above all, as a fundamental attitude in mission. In their first book (*Constantes en Contexto, Teología para la Misión Hoy, Ed. Verbo Divino, 2009*) – Spanish version of the book *Constants in Contexts* of 2004-, I liked the method of reflection; Constants (Jesus Christ, Church, Kingdom of God, Bible, Trinity, etc.) are placed in different historical and cultural contexts in which mission took place. For example, there is a story about the beginning of the church's mission, from the Jewish world to the gentiles; a process of opening the church to them (Samaritans, Hellenists, the peoples of Asia Minor, European peoples, etc.). The reference book is *Acts of the Apostles*, a title rather questionable, because during the narrative of the Acts we see the Apostles in action, but above all it is *God* who works in them!

Another aspect that I appreciated about this first book was its "comprehensive view" of mission, not only restricted to Catholic mission, but also including historical data about Protestant missionary practices and Protestant theology. In the end, we must recognize that *Missio Dei* is much broader than all that Catholics and Protestants can do together. Moreover, *Missio Dei* begins before the Old Testament (OT). In fact, our faith recognizes the existence of God the Father and Creator, as an overflowing fountain of love and life-giving source, which called humanity to participate in the fullness of life and love of God (*cf. Ad Gentes, 2*). In this sense, the whole of creation expresses the first word of God, then the second, the OT, and above all, the third, the NT, when "*the fullness of time*" (*Gal 4:4*) came, and the *Word was made flesh (Jn 1: 14)*. We might add that after the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the Holy Spirit continues "revealing" the word of God in the church and in the world...

2. Looking beyond our nose...



To get an idea of the immensity of *Missio Dei*, I would like to show you some slides (PowerPoint) on the creation of the universe and its evolution in time, taken from the interesting PPT *A New History of Creation*, prepared by Sean McDonagh, SSC & Leonor La Santa, FMM (Assisi, Italy, May 2009). He is a missionary priest of the Servants of the Sacred Heart (SSC) and she a Franciscan Mission (FFM) nun; both are very much engaged in matters of Justice and Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC).

(The relative size of the planets)

As you can see, the authors of this *Power Point* draw our attention to the vastness of the universe, its complexity, and our co-responsibility in the world. It starts with a feeling of awe (contemplation!) at the creative love of God, present throughout the evolution of nature and human beings to the critical reading of the new "signs of the times" (cries of the earth and the poor), to stimulate in us a missionary engagement in favor of ecology (JPIC). Participation in this mission brings us into contact with people who often are very different from us (in terms of beliefs, ideologies or cultures, etc.), with whom we can practice prophetic dialogue.

From what I mentioned above, we can see that today's mission cannot only address "what is close to our nose" (e.g. the immediate pastoral concerns, those of the SVD, etc.), but we must also take into account the urgency of preserving the integrity of our planet, if we want to have a future as human beings. We can recall that several NGOs are already working on this issue (e.g. *Greenpeace*, the *World Social Forum*, *Vivat International*, among others). What about our collaboration?

3. The Mission has a Church



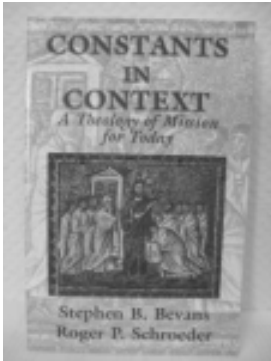
No, it's not a typo. This is the title of the first chapter of the recent book "*Prophetic Dialogue*" of our confreres S. Bevans and R. Schroeder. Their reflection starts with their belief that God is a dynamic entity, which should be described not as a noun, but rather as a *verb*. As a result, all creation reflects the action, the movement, the "dance" of our God. He "creates" human beings, inviting them also to take care of the earth (cf. Gen 1: 26-27), a way of sharing in his mission. In addition, the authors realize that he does not *have* a mission, but *is* mission, expressed in his love diffused in the whole of creation, redemption and salvation of this creation. "*God is like an ever-flowing fountain of living water, poured out on earth through the Holy Spirit, and actually made part of creation through the Word-become-flesh*" (cf. p. 10).

God is present in the world, but at the same time, He transcends it through his Spirit, which is perceived, but cannot be "tied down" since He/She is free like the wind. This "*Ruach*", a *feminine* portrayal given to the Holy Spirit, "accompanied" the whole of creation, has "spoken" through the prophets in the OT and produced the miracle of the Incarnation of the Word (Luke 1: 35-38). Also, she inspired the life of Jesus of Nazareth, and above all, his mission of proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God (Lk 4: 16-30). Later on, she encouraged the church to give "continuity" to the mission of Jesus Christ (Ac 2: 1-11). From there comes the insight that the *Mission has a Church*, putting emphasis on God's role in Mission (EN n.75) and the secondary involvement of the church. In fact, the Holy Spirit acts in different ways: in the Catholic Church, in other churches and in the world. An example of this "freedom" of the Holy Spirit we find in the Acts of the Apostles, in the narrative of "Cornelius' conversion" (Ac 10: 1-48), which was both a great conversion of St. Peter, and of the Jewish-Christian Church at that time.

In the book *Prophetic Dialogue* (cf. p. 11), the authors, in describing the Holy Spirit with *feminine* traits, mention a very interesting book, "*The Shack*" by William P. Young. I had the opportunity to read it in 2009, when I was resting a few days on the "*Ilha Comprida*" beach, near Iguape, SP, after the general visitation of BRS and BRC. It is a "novel", but with some wonderful theological insights. Basically, it questions the "patriarchal" image of God, still very widespread among Christians, a stereotype of a "white" and old God, oblivious to what happens in the world. In fact, the author describes God as an *African-American woman*, who loves music and cooking (mother); but in the end, God is also described as a *man*, as a parent. Jesus is represented roughly as many think (man, carpenter, etc.), focusing much on his humanity. But the

Holy Spirit is described as having a very *feminine* character, with an *Asiatic* profile, as someone who enjoys working in the garden, and "reveals" many truths about life...

4. At the service of the Kingdom of God



In their book, "Constants in Context" (2004), the same authors began the first chapter with another "shock therapy", when they state, "*One of the most important things Christians need to know about the church is that the church is not of ultimate importance*" (p.7). This is not to deny its divine origin or its role as the "universal sacrament of salvation" (LG 48; AG 1). The issue is that the church is not an end in itself; it must point beyond it, to the Kingdom of God. In this way, the church follows the example of Jesus of Nazareth, who preached not himself, but the Kingdom of God, including the God of that Kingdom, who in the Gospels, especially in St. John, is identified as "ABBA," Father (cf. Jn 4:21).

Therefore, the church is at the service of God's Kingdom through its participation in mission, expressed in the proclamation of the Good News, through the social services it provides, by the liturgy it celebrates, in catechism, and the testimony of faith in everyday life, among other initiatives. So Vatican II, in the Decree *Ad Gentes* states, *The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father* (AG 2). With regard to this subject, the book "Prophetic Dialogue" (2011, p. 16) states, "*We are most church, not when we are building up the church, but when we are outside of it: being good parents,... being diligent and honest in our workplace, treating our patients with care if we are health workers,... sharing our resources with the needy, standing up for social justice, etc.*"

Of course, this does not mean that the church doesn't need temples and rooms for catechism or for other pastoral/social activities. It needs them, but always in view of its mission in the local context and beyond it! For example, in Latin-America today, the local church should invest more energy in the preparation of the *laity* so that they can adequately respond to their mission as "*Disciples and Missionaries*" of the Lord (cf. DA, nn. 174; 209-212). It is interesting to note how DA emphasizes the mission of the laity "in the world" and only secondarily, speaks of their contribution "internally" (liturgy, other forms of pastoral care, etc.). I mention this because at times I get the impression that some confreres are more concerned with "filling up" the church, asking lay people to help them in their mission, instead of helping the laity in their mission...

5. Mission as Dialogue

How should we participate in mission? *All* (religious, priests, laymen/laywomen), should participate in the mission that God entrusts us with an attitude of respect, love and solidarity with those we encounter on our way. It is a dialogical attitude, knowing that God is *also* in the lives of others, that He has arrived there, at the house we visit, prior to our arrival. Therefore, we should "take off our sandals"



(as did Moses, when he felt God's presence - cf. Ex 3: 5) in encountering others in mission. Of help would be also a behavior that enhances the participation of others, meaning to work less *for* others and more (mostly) *with* them. This necessarily implies an attentive listening to others, to God who speaks through them and in the circumstances of life, which requires more 'contemplation', fewer individualistic actions, and above all, less activism!

In our Congregation (SVD) we are increasingly working in "multicultural" missionary settings due in part to internal migration or to the immigration of people from abroad. Even our SVD communities become ever more international and intercultural. Therefore, the theme of the next General Chapter (2012) *"From Every Nation, People, and Language: Sharing Intercultural Life and Mission"* is very timely. We recall that, since 2000, we SVDs are trying to live and work in a perspective of *prophetic dialogue*, with some progress, but also with various difficulties in the implementation of this missionary paradigm.

For this reason, the "Interpretative Summary" (cf. P01/2011) that was sent to the provinces/regions in January this year, offers some valuable clues to better reflect on our missionary practice at local and provincial levels. At what point are we in this preparatory phase? Based on the responses of the provinces and regions, the next General Chapter will seek to achieve a "consensus" on an *Action Plan* for the SVD. Obviously, the implementation of it will depend on the missionary and cultural contexts of the provinces and regions.

Now, I would like to add some *images* to this theme of *mission as dialogue*, taken from the book "Prophetic Dialogue" (Ed. 2011, pp. 31-33). The first corresponds to the *"Treasure Hunter"*. The missionary (man/woman), when reaching out to others, especially if the latter live in a different cultural context, certainly brings his/her experience of faith, his "treasure", but he/she should seek first of all the "treasure" that God has "hidden" in the people's lives to whom he/she was sent. This is a hard task for it involves knowing the "maps" of the place (language and culture), to gradually discover the presence of Kingdom values in people's daily life and culture. In the end, both, the missionary and the others will be enriched by this "exchange of experiences," by mutual esteem and cooperation in the Kingdom of God.

The second and third images (*Guest and Stranger*) in some way complement the first one; they suggest respect for those who welcome missionaries as guests and strangers. This is noted especially in African and Asian cultures where the guest is often seen as someone who brings a blessing from God (cf. Gen 18: 1-15). Still, the fact that a missionary is a stranger/foreigner requires from him/her an attitude of listening, of respect, before speaking. (I remember that in Togo, Africa, a new missionary was given the advice to listen, see, and ask a lot, especially in the initial phase, before saying a lot). Sometimes this experience brings along a feeling of limitation, of needing the "others", to let them correct us, both in language and in missionary work. In contrast, this "kenosis" (Phil 2:5-11) often produces positive results: better communication, a more objective reflection and a more communitarian missionary engagement.



The last image of mission as a practice of dialogue is that of *entering someone else's garden*. Obviously, here it does not mean entering another's garden "to plunder it", but it refers to those visits we pay to friends, neighbors and others. *"One enters another's garden not to compare its beauty and variety with one's own, but to appreciate another way of gardening, another way of arranging the flower beds or vegetables patches, another way of pruning and weeding"*(p. 33).

Therefore, the basic attitude is always that of respect, openness to learn from each other, to know how to be "amazed" at some new and interesting things. During the visit, it may happen that we see some "strange" herbs, which easily can be considered "weeds." But beware! Often, the owner of the garden considers these plants as "medicinal herbs". So what? (Incidentally, this is a very common thing in the garden

of my mother). From the point of view of faith, the garden can represent the life of the community/country, with its cultural values, but also with its limitations and evils, with signs of God's presence and absence in that context...

6. Mission as Prophecy

When we speak of *mission as prophecy*, almost spontaneously we remember the OT prophets (e.g. Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc.). By extension, we recall the great prophet of the New Testament, Jesus of Nazareth, who was also recognized by his disciples as the Messiah and Son of God (Mt 16: 17), and later on even as God (Jn 1:1; Jn 20:28). Note that not only does the prophet "proclaim" the word of God; he first "listens" to it, in the events of everyday life or in a situation of larger scale (e.g. socio-political crisis in the country, ecological disasters, etc.). The perception of the word of God is largely possible thanks to the "familiarity" of the prophet with God in prayer/contemplation. In this sense, Jesus sought moments of intimacy with his *Father* through prayer (Mark 1: 35-39) to discern his mission...

Mission as Prophecy also brings to mind the witnessing of the prophet's life (or of the prophetic community) in accordance with the will of God. Thus, Pope Paul VI, already in 1975, said that "*the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life*" (EN, n. 41). Also, prophets proclaim a word that does not belong to them, because it belongs to God. They announce "God's future" for humanity, based on his promises, and not on their own capacities.



In this way, Christians proclaim the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the *Good News* that gives meaning to human existence. But also, they, like us, denounce what in personal and social life is not in line with God's Kingdom values. As you know, the history of Latin America in recent decades has had many martyrs because of their work with the poor and their standing up for social justice/human dignity. Let us recall some of them: Fr. Josimo Tavares, Abp. Oscar Romero, Mr. Chico Mendes, Sr. Dorothy Stang, Bp. Enrique Angelelli, among others.

Now, I would also like to share some *images of mission as prophecy*, taken from the book *Prophetic Dialogue* (Ed. 2011, pp. 48-52). The first is the *Teacher*. Although this image can give us the impression of a "one-way teaching," there is the possibility of this profession being carried on in dialogue (cf. IDW 10). In fact, the *teacher* can stimulate the creative participation of students, motivating them to share their experiences and reflections with which to create an appropriate educational environment. But the figure of the teacher is also related to his/her ability to bear witness to what he/she believes, being consistent with these values in his/her own life, besides the authority by which he/she teaches (familiarity with the teaching subject).

The second image is that of the *Storyteller*. A good storyteller is someone who knows how to entertain, who is able to capture the listeners' attention. So, we can remember the attraction of fables/tales (e.g. Judges 9: 8-15 - "*One day the trees went out to anoint a king to rule over them...*"; or that little story of Nathan the prophet, when he denounced the incorrect behavior of King David (cf. 2 Sam 12: 1-7). Other narrators also made history (e.g. Aesop's tales by using the symbolism of animals - the *Ant and the Grasshopper*, the *Rabbit and the Tortoise*, etc.); and what about Jesus of Nazareth, telling his parables? (e.g. the Prodigal Son, the mustard seed, the seed that falls on the ground, the guests at the king's banquet, among others). Jesus has chosen parables as a privileged means of proclaiming the Kingdom of God and addressing unjust behaviors.

The last image of *mission as prophecy* (according to the book quoted here) is the *Trail Guide*. This is someone who knows the art of walking paths little known, or paths that are difficult to walk. Trail guides know how to read the "signs" of danger (e.g. any storms that are approaching, slippery terrain, cliffs, etc.). These guides also know how to keep the group of people walking on the track that leads to the intended destination on time. By their own experiences, they can animate those who become discouraged along the way. The trail guide recognizes that there are different "paces" among walkers, and sometimes motivates them to help those in need.

This image illustrates the *prophetic role* of Christians as *individuals*, but also as an *ecclesial* community in the world. In the early church, Christians were recognized as people of the "Way," disciples of the One who is *The Way* (John 14:6). So, also today they can share this experience with others in everyday life, giving an answer to everyone who asks them for the reason for their *hope* (cf. *1 Pt 3: 15*). With this it is equally clear that a trail guide is not the only person who knows the route, as others have done it before (church tradition). What matters is that he/she knows how to motivate others to know Jesus Christ and the values of his Kingdom so as to give fuller meaning to life, despite experiences of pain, frustration and death...

Conclusion

The preparation for the next General Chapter (2012) should have as "background" *Missio Dei*, which is broader than we sometimes imagine and in which we participate, thanks to God's love and his invitation to that mission. In this sense, we become aware of the need to "join forces" with other people, also invited by Him to his mission, often identified with the Kingdom of God. Our Congregation, among other ecclesial and social institutions, is called to serve this Kingdom, especially through the witnessing of intercultural communities, a sign of the openness to diversity and inclusiveness of that Kingdom (cf. IDW 6, n.6). With this experience, we are called to build "bridges" between different social groups in order to improve this world.

Sometimes the missionary setting will require us to emphasize the "dialogical" aspect of mission, and at times, the "prophetic" one. Thus, the practice of *prophetic dialogue* in mission combines an attitude of *respect* for our partners in dialogue with *prophetic action*, based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The complexities of the world, with cities becoming increasingly multi-ethnic, with some racial conflicts and persistent situations of poverty, represent a major challenge for current mission. Nevertheless, we cannot forget so many individuals and human groups, belonging to faith communities or not, who already cooperate with God's mission in the world. May the Holy Spirit inspire us always in this shared mission!



Rome, 30 August 2011.

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