



MISSIO INTER GENTES: A PASTORAL RESPONSE FOR THE CICM RELIGIOUS MISSIONARIES IN DOING MISSION IN TODAY'S PLURALISTIC WORLD

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In a world where rivalry, jealousy, hatred, and competition among religions are taking root in the heart of our society, the Church needs to look for a new trajectory to bring together the people of God. Therefore, The suggestion of the new paradigm inter gentes, defined as mission among the nations, would contribute to a peaceful interreligious dialogue. This paradigm involves understanding and respect, building bridges between different faiths, and fostering a warm and inclusive atmosphere among religions. This article presents missio inter gentes as a CICM's pastoral response to doing mission in today's pluralistic world. The CICM (Congragatio Immaculati Cordis Mariae) is an international religious missionary dedicated to the Incarnate Word under the name and patronage of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. It is a missionary Congregation founded to participate in the mission Jesus entrusted to the Church. As the world evolves, the Church also evolves and, therefore, seeks new ways to relate with others. CICM missionaries play a vital role as agents of reconciliation for interreligious dialogue as the Church faces pluralism of religions. They facilitate dialogue among the leaders of other religious denominations by promoting respect and harmony for peaceful coexistence.

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INTRODUCTION

If before *missio ad gentes* was a bit covered by the imperialist intention of spreading the Western culture wherever the Church was implanted, *missio inter gentes* should bring another image of what our Church is to be: a Church that unites, reconciles, coexists with other religions without imposing her doctrine to non-Christians; subsequently, a Church that witnesses to God's love, mercy, and compassion towards every living creature. In the sphere of theology, authors like Ray Anderson lay out a new, renewing foundation for engaging in Christian ministry in his book, *The Shape of Practical Theology*. It is, therefore, the moment for us to shift from theory to praxis, enabling us to be participative through actions we take in society as a response to the present issues.

This article shows how *inter gentes* paradigm can be considered the appropriate pastoral response in doing a mission in today's pluralistic world. To do so, we shall recall Jesus' ministry to see some aspects of his life that can be considered a manifestation of *inter gentes*. Then, through the ecclesiological aspect, present the attitude of the Church vis-à-vis *inter gentes*. Next, we shall explore some moral implications of this new paradigm in the life of Christians or, in other words, the impact of *inter gentes* on the attitude of Christians toward other religions. How do we react towards other religions? What spirituality can be promoted here, and what practical actions can be taken in the pastoral field to foster the relationship between the Church and other religions?

I. JESUS' INCARNATION AND MINISTRY: THE CONCRETE MANIFESTATION OF *INTER GENTES*

A. JESUS' INCARNATION: JOHN 1: 1

Missio inter gentes is more about how to do mission¹, specifically in today's pluralistic world. A throwback in Jesus' Incarnation and ministry enables us to see how Jesus is the prime example of *inter gentes* paradigm as an appropriate pastoral response to doing mission in a context of interreligious dialogue. The Gospel of John 1:14 states: "And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth." [NABRE]. We see in the Incarnation of Jesus that God decided to make his dwelling among his people by sharing their humanity. "The Greek word that describes the dwelling of the Word literally means 'to pitch one's tent' and possibly alludes to the instances in the Old Testament where Yahweh is said to dwell in the tent or tabernacle."² Torrence, a biblical scholar talking of the Incarnation of Jesus, says:

*The Incarnation of Jesus, in which he, the eternal Word and Son of the Father, became flesh and took on human form, is the beginning of his incarnate work of revelation and reconciliation. It is the miraculous event in which the Word through which the universe was made out of nothing became himself one of the creatures he had made. In love and compassion for the creation he had made, but through sin and rebellion in the process of disintegration, Jesus came to undo sin and death by himself becoming human.*³

In his article *The Incarnation of God in Jesus*, Dermot Lane presents the Incarnation as the centerpiece of Christology, which holds

1 Jonathan, Tan Y. "From 'Missio ad gentes' to 'Missio Inter Gentes'. II: Shaping a New Paradigm for Doing Christian Mission in Asia." *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 69, no. January to December 2005, Academy Press, 31.

2 Daniel Durken, *New Collegeville Bible Commentary: New Testament*, Liturgical Press, 2009, 312.

3 Torrence, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, edited by Rober T. Walker. (Inter Varsity Press: 2008), xxxi-xxxii.





everything together. “Jesus is the eternal Son of God made man, and He is the objective presence of God in the world.”⁴ Therefore, by accepting to pitch his tent among us, Jesus became the point of unity between the world above and below. By his exemplary life, we become like Jesus, capable of loving others without judging them. From that view, we can see how our life has been transformed through Jesus’ Incarnation, the Word made flesh. Living among our brothers and sisters from different religions should no longer be a problem because, through his Incarnation, Jesus taught us how to live together even though we do not share the same faith or beliefs. What is more important is to be able to show goodness and kindness to others, especially in today’s pluralistic world.

Athanasius⁵ once said: “By taking on a mortal human body, God ‘came to heal and teach suffering men,’ and he “ensured that men should recognize Him in the part who could not do so in the whole and that those who could not lift their eyes to His unseen power might recognize and behold him in the likeness of themselves.”⁶ Since Jesus is in the likeness of ourselves, why are we divided? Why do we reject others? These simple questions help us understand that we should examine our attitude toward others from different denominations.

B. JESUS’ MINISTRY: PROCLAMATION OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

To illustrate this point on Jesus’ ministry, it behooves us to go back to the historical account of Jesus of Nazareth or what we call in Christology

the historical Jesus. If there is one thing that all scholars of antiquity agree on, it is that a historical human Jesus existed. Bart Ehrman wrote: “He certainly existed, as virtually every competent scholar of antiquity, Christian or non-Christian, agrees, based on certain and clear evidence.”⁷ As we can see, Jesus truly existed in this world, and he lived within a particular context with its customs and beliefs; it is that context of diversity, clothed with conflicts about cultures, beliefs, and the question of worship, that arose in his time that Jesus will strive to announce the kingdom of Heaven. According to Albert Nolan:

Jesus lived in an age when it seemed that the world was about to come to an end. Despite differences of opinion about how, why and when, very many Jews at that time were convinced that the world was on the brink of an apocalyptic catastrophe. It was in view of this catastrophe, and in terms of his own understanding of it, that Jesus set out on his mission.⁸

We can see that all these opinions that could have hindered him from doing his mission did not prevent Jesus from carrying out the mission entrusted to him by the Father. Jesus saw the way out to total liberation and fulfillment for humankind amidst the trouble in his time. During his lifetime, Jesus strove to preach the Kingdom of Heaven through the compassion he has shown to others. Nolan asserts Jesus “did not feel called to save Israel by bringing everyone to a baptism of repentance in the Jordan. He decided something else was necessary, something which had to do with the poor, the sinners and the sick, the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”⁹ This truly goes in line with the spirit of *inter gentes*. Today’s purpose should not be to convert people or convince them to join our religion. Instead, we need to ask ourselves how we can do our

⁴ Dermot Lane, “The Incarnation of God in Jesus”, a public lecture delivered on the] 2 July 1978 at St. Michael’s College, Winooski, Vermont, U.S.A. published April 17, 2015, p. 159.

⁵ A fourth-century theologian.

⁶ Michael Faletta, “Medieval Christian Theology”: The Incarnation”, <https://michaelfaletta.weebly.com/incarnation.html>. [Accessed on Feb. 19, 2024].

⁷ B. Ehrman, “Forged Writing in the Name of God”, New York time Best seller, (2011), 256-257.

⁸ Albert Nolan, *Jesus before Christianity*, (Maryknoll: New York, 1978), 8.

⁹ Albert, *Jesus before Christianity*, 21.





mission today so that people may see the face of God through our actions. “The people to whom Jesus turned his attention are referred to in the gospels by a variety of terms: the poor, the blind, the lame, the crippled, the lepers, the hungry, the miserable (those who weep), sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, those possessed by unclean spirits, the persecuted, the downtrodden, the captives, all who labor and are overburdened.”¹⁰ For Jesus, everyone matters despite their political and religious differences. Jesus was attentive to the needs of those considered impure in society and rejected by the community because of their disease. We recall the episode of the blind Bartimaeus. The text says, “When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Mark 10: 47-48. NRSV) The poor Bartimaeus was certainly rebuked because of the mindset of that time. For many people, he was impure and had no right to address Jesus. Surprisingly, “Jesus stopped and said, call him” Mark 10: 49.

In addition, the episode of the Syrophenician woman is also a concrete manifestation of the spirit that we intend to promote in the *inter gentes* paradigm through Jesus’ attitude. The woman who approaches Jesus breaks through every traditional barrier that should prevent her from doing so. She is “a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin” (Mark 7: 26 NRSV). In other words, she is implicitly impure, one who lives outside of the land of Israel and outside of the law of Moses, a descendant of the ancient enemies of Israel. She is also a woman, unaccompanied by a husband or male relative, who initiates a conversation with a strange man, another taboo transgressed during the time of Jesus. The woman was so determined that even Jesus’ first attitude did not push her away; instead, she kept the faith and said, “Sir, even the little dogs under the table eat

the children’s crumbs.” (Mark 7:28). Through that affirmation of faith of the woman, Jesus can only agree that God’s love and healing power knows no ethnic, political, or social boundaries. In our way of doing mission today, nothing should hinder us from doing what is good. Though we are different and belong to different denominations, we are called to be united. In the account of John 17:21, Jesus therefore invites us to be one as he and the Father are one.

C. JESUS’ ENCOUNTER WITH THE GENTILES

The encounter of Jesus with non-Jews during his ministry perfectly manifests the interreligious aspect of our Christology. After Jewish leaders refused to hear him, Jesus went to the pagan territories of Tyre and Sidon¹¹. Moreover, there, he met the Canaanite woman. This encounter with the Canaanite woman in the gospel of Matthew (Matthew 15: 21-28), known as the Syrophenician in the gospel of Mark (Mark 7:24-30), indeed shows the concern of Jesus for the Gentiles.

Jesus is the perfect example of love. Hence, his love is endless and, therefore, available to all of us. He cared for the poor and healed the sick during his life on Earth. Moreover, He never turned away those who sought his help; instead, He would shelter them so they might feel secure. We remember the episode of the adulterous woman: “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? [...] Neither do I condemn you (John 8:10-11 NRSV). Nowadays, missionaries are expected to be “another Jesus” to others most especially in today pluralistic world. Today’s world is full of diversity, such as cultures, ethnicities, religions, etc. Therefore,

¹⁰ Albert, *Jesus before Christianity*, 21

¹¹ Ligonier, “A Gentile Meets Jesus” July 30, 2007. <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/gentile-meets-jesus>. [Accessed on October 13, 2023].





how can missionaries do God's mission today if they cannot forgive others, acknowledging that the other can also bring something new to them. As we face this phenomenon of diversity, we are called to look back on the life of Jesus to see how we can live together with the people who do not profess the same faith as we do.

Therefore, Jesus's ministry could be considered a ministry of reconciliation. Indeed, through this ministry, we see the very purpose of *inter gentes*: mission taking place among the people. Today, people are divided in the name of their faith. Hence, people are fighting to show how right they are, forgetting the most essential aspect of their lives: to love others despite their degrees of impurity. We tend to forget that we are not God and that God is the only one with the right to judge.

D. JESUS'S INCARNATION AND MINISTRY AS CICM'S INSPIRATION FOR *INTER GENTES*

The CICM spirituality lies in the Incarnate Word. It is stated in the CICM Constitutions: "The incarnation of the Word inspires us as we engage in the missionary task of the Church." Hence,

Through the Incarnation, the Son of God entered into the history of the Jewish people. While sharing the life of his people, he took a prophetic stance in view of the kingdom. His example always inspires [CICM] in [their] efforts to integrate [themselves] among the people to whom God sends [them].¹²

The Incarnation of Jesus is indeed a thorough and genuine manifestation of *inter gentes* in today's pluralistic world. As mentioned in the above session, Jesus lived among his brothers and sisters with a heart full of compassion.

¹² Congregation of Immaculate Heart of Mary, *Constitutions*, Art. 13.

He shared their joys and sufferings. In doing mission in the context of interreligious dialogue, the CICM missionaries strive by their testimony to follow Verbist's footsteps, their founder. He is the one who laid them on this adventure. The question, therefore, remains. How is CICM following Jesus as incarnate Word in today's pluralistic world? Above all, the CICM religious missionaries "adopt a lifestyle which brings [them] close to the people with whom [they] live. [They] share in their legitimate aspirations, joys, and sufferings, and thus participate in the important moments of their life."¹³ This is already a concrete impact of Jesus' Incarnation in the CICM missionary activity. We become one with the people to whom we are sent.

Additionally, Jesus's Incarnation in the CICM mission brings unity and transformation. The CICM, therefore, animated by the spirituality of the incarnate Word, will be able to minister and unite diverse communities through the divine example. Jesus's Incarnation through CICM missionaries brings transformation in imparting hope and guidance in the lives of people. Doing mission in the context of interreligious dialogue requires the missionary to be a person, who can easily relate with the people, and Theophile Verbist, CICM founder, had that capacity to relate with others; hence, he was a man of peace and, most importantly a man of prayer. In addition, he was open and "a docile disciple in the hands of the Lord."¹⁴ CICM religious missionaries follow Jesus as an incarnate Word in a concrete way in their respective ministries by fostering interreligious dialogue among different religious denominations. The suggestion of the new paradigm shift *inter gentes* will enhance the CICM missionaries' zeal to carry out God's mission more actively. It will no longer be the

¹³ Congregation of Immaculate Heart of Mary, *Constitutions*, Art. 13.1.

¹⁴ Congregation of Immaculate Heart of Mary, *Theophile Verbist, Founder of CICM (Scheut)*, (Ferdinand Verbiest Institute, 2023), 23.





task of an individual but rather a task of everyone to work for harmony and peace. Becoming one with the people we are called to minister to is not easy. Indeed, missionaries can face the challenge of rejection and even sometimes conflicts.

Nevertheless, Saint John Paul II “speaking to the participants at the World Conference on Religion and Peace held at the Vatican in 1994”¹⁵ will remind us that “Religion is not, and must not become a pretext for conflict.”¹⁶ Mission *among* the nations rooted in Jesus’ Incarnation inspires the CICM religious missionaries in their contact with other religions. The latter enables them to learn from each other. So, “in coming to know each other better, in growing to esteem one another, and in living out, with respect for consciences, the various aspects of their religion, they will be, in part of the world and elsewhere, ‘artisans of peace.’”¹⁷

In our world today, we are still influenced by a certain mentality thinking that others have no place among us, that they are the least, and they do not deserve anything; it might be because of their religion or their disability, and we are harsh to judge them and condemn them. Nevertheless, through Jesus’s Incarnation and ministry, we see the importance of being merciful. Jesus showed mercy regardless of appearance or origin. What mattered to Jesus was who the people were for him. This is a living and concrete example of how we should do mission in today’s pluralistic world. Living among our brothers and sisters requires us to incorporate Jesus’ attitude by going beyond our cultural boundaries, our usual way of doing by breaking barriers of hatred and building bridges of love, compassion, awareness, and kindness towards others.

¹⁵ Byron L. Sherwin and Harold Kasimow. *John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue*, 1.

¹⁶ Byron L. Sherwin and Harold Kasimow. *John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue*, 2.

¹⁷ Byron L. Sherwin and Harold Kasimow. *John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue*, 2.

II. ECCLESIOLOGICAL ASPECT OF MISSION *INTER GENTES* IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Missio inter gentes appears as a way par excellence of doing mission today. The Church on its way of fostering harmony and unity with other religions, strives by its universal character to be more inclusive by considering and acknowledging the differences of others. Through the Church documents, we will see how the Church embraces interreligious dialogue in today’s pluralistic world. We are all aware of the expression “Church is mission”. The word “mission” comes from the Latin word *missus* (“sent”), and the notion of being chosen and sent by God is at the heart of the biblical understanding of mission¹⁸. Barnett, trying to explain the essence of mission, defines the latter as originating from God¹⁹. Those entrusted, therefore, with that mission are called not to do their will but the will of God. Hence, by the example of their life, they are called to bear witness to the faith, hope, and love that dwell in them. Jesus himself said, “I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.” John 6:38 NRSV²⁰ We can see that mission begins with God, and it flows out of God’s immense love to restore and bring the fullness of life to all of creation.²¹ Pope John Paul II says, “the purpose of evangelization is “transforming humanity from within and making it new.”²²

Thus, saying the Church is mission, means the Church is sent. The Church is always in

¹⁸ Peter Baekelmans, CICM, Marie-Helene Robert, OLA. *New Trends in Mission: the emerging future* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2022), 7.

¹⁹ Mike Barnett. *Discovering the Mission of God*. Edited by Martin Robin (New York: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 12.

²⁰ Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version updated edition. <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-Revised-Standard-Version-Updated-Edition-NRSVue-Bible/>. [Accessed on Feb. 7. 2024].

²¹ Mike Barnett. *Discovering the Mission of God*, 19.

²² John Paul II, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia in Africa*, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_14091995_ecclesia-in-africa.html, 55. [Accessed on 11/6/2023].





perpetual movement to announce the Good News of Salvation through its members by being a sign visible of God's love, mercy, and bounty through the encounter of others. "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mk 16:15) [NRSV]. Such is the mandate that the Risen Christ before returning to his Father gave to his Apostles: "And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere" (Mk 16:20).²³ Pope John Paul II made it clear in his *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia in Africa* saying:

The task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church ... Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize". (69) Born of the evangelizing mission of Jesus and the Twelve, she is in turn sent forth. "Depositary of the Good News to be proclaimed ... having been sent and evangelized, the Church herself sends out evangelizers. She puts on their lips the saving Word." (70). Like the Apostle to the Gentiles, the Church can say: "I preach the Gospel ... For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel! (1 Cor 9:16)."²⁴

By its very nature, we can see the finality of the Church, which is to make God's love visible to us. However, religious pluralism makes it a challenge for the Church today to proclaim the kingdom of heaven. Consequently, in search of new ways to do mission more efficiently, especially in these times, the Church needs new strategies. Among those strategies is inter gentes, which, in its very essence, comes to enrich the Church's desire to recognize differences among other religions. Differences among us can be an obstacle in the field of evangelization. We cannot ignore that criteria. That is why there is a need to see how we can combine what we have by setting aside our differences to build a world of peace and harmony. The Church has always shown a particular interest towards other religions and

²³ John Paul II, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia in Africa*, 56.

²⁴ John Paul II, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia in Africa*, 55.

has also developed the desire to initiate dialogue with other religions. This can be found in many of its documents on mission.

In the Catholic Church today, we are witnessing synodality, a call to journey together as one family. This does not only concern the Catholic faith; it is an inclusive movement, a desire to see our brothers and sisters from different denominations journeying together and reflecting on the issues that hinder our respective communities nowadays. For instance, when Pope Francis reflected on *Laudato si'* the latter's message was not only for Catholics but also for the whole world, Christians and non-Christians alike. We are all concerned with what is happening in our "common home," and that is the reason why Pope Francis said: "the urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change."²⁵ It is not a task reserved for a specific group of people. Instead, it is our common task. When we decide to make common our issues, we start to understand our call to be one family despite our differences.

A. CATHOLIC CHURCH DOCUMENTS ON MISSION AND THEIR IMPACT ON INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

From the point of view of salvation history, Vatican II can undoubtedly be considered the face of the Church in the present century. Many theologians saw the necessity of reflecting with renewed interest on "*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*." This reflection allowed the Church to recognize and acknowledge the good in other religions. Hence, with the development of the new ecclesiology, which sees the Church as mission, the latter becomes more involved in the world and more concerned with other religions'

²⁵ Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si' on care for our Common Home*, (Rome, 2015), no. 13.





growth and contribution. Barnett believes, for instance, that the Church is called to become a community of God's people, the temple of God, a foyer of love that builds up communities of faith where everyone can experience God's reigning presence and enjoy the fullness of life.²⁶ Therefore, The Church strives to contribute to today's pluralistic world by producing some documents to help interact with other religions and enter into dialogue with the world religion.

LUMEN GENTIUM

This *Dogmatic Constitution of the Church* does not directly deal with the theology of religions but had a particular influence on other Vatican II documents that dealt with the theology of religion, and among those, *Nostra Aetate* and some other Church documents on mission and the Church's relationship with other religions. The Second Vatican Council in *Lumen Gentium* thinks that:

*Through her work, whatever good is in the minds and hearts of men, whatever good lies latent in the religious practices and cultures of diverse peoples, is not only saved from destruction but is also cleansed, raised up and perfected unto the glory of God, the confusion of the devil and the happiness of man (LG, no. 17)*²⁷

Lumen Gentium shows how people of other religions are related to the Church, 'the people of God.' It is stated in these terms: "The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these, there are the Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind." (*LG, no. 16*).²⁸ The Church,

through *Lumen Gentium*, invites Christians to live well with all people. This affirmation and acknowledgment plays a significant role in the dialogue process with other religions such as Islam.

NOSTRA AETATE

Nostra Aetate is known to be the first document in the history of the Church that expressed an appreciation of non-Christian religions and announced the Church's intention to promote friendly interreligious relations. Influenced by *Dei Verbum* and *Lumen Gentium*, *Nostra Aetate* paves the way for a new path of dialogue with other religions. Some scholars think that reading together *Nostra Aetate* and *Dei Verbum* shows that God has also revealed himself to people of other religions²⁹. Therefore, there is a need for consideration. We can also see in *Nostra Aetate* a call to examine the relation of Church with other religions, plus, her duty to foster unity, and charity. That is the reason why, the Catholic Church remains open to the truth found in other religious denomination as it is stated in *Nostra Aetate*: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men."³⁰

Nostra Aetate is the 'magna carta' of interreligious dialogue for Catholics. The document invites Catholics and Muslims to forget past conflicts, work sincerely for mutual understanding, and

²⁶ Mike Barnett. *Discovering the Mission of God*, 19.

²⁷ Vatican II, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, no.17.

²⁸ Vatican II, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, no.16.

²⁹ M. Moyaert. "Dei Verbum, Nostra aetate and interfaith dialogue", January 2016. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304882694_Dei_Verbum_Nostra_aetate_and_interfaith_dialogue. [Accessed on July 11, 2023].

³⁰ Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, no.2.





enhance the *missio Dei*. The objective of *Nostra Aetate* is fundamentally pastoral. Moreover, it invites Catholic Christians to engage in positive and constructive relations with people of other religions without losing sight of their duty to evangelize and re-evangelize all peoples and to maintain good fellowship among the nations³¹. As a person is created in the image of God, we cannot truly call on God, the Father of all, if we refuse to treat any person in a brotherly way. Humanity's relation to God the Father and his relation to others as his siblings are so linked together that Scripture says: "He who does not love does not know God" (1 John 4:8 NABRE). The Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion. Our differences should not divide us but could be a source of strength. These differences are not to be neglected as we immerse ourselves in the interreligious dialogue. Interreligious dialogue is a conversation, and therefore a two-way conversation, between two or more persons holding significantly different views because of each person's own religio-cultural history and upbringing.³² Through interreligious dialogue, we learn and witness God through our way of living with others. When we engage in interreligious dialogue, we acknowledge that religions are different.

B. ATTITUDE OF THE CHURCH TOWARDS OTHER RELIGION: THE CASE OF ISLAM

The Church's relationship with Muslims has not always been friendly in the past due to conflicts

and misunderstandings. However, there is a need to transcend our differences and work for the good of all by learning from its mistakes. The Church on its part has gone through different stages of transformation and thereupon, has come to acknowledge other and give credit to their religions. The purpose is to be an agent of peace and unity a sign of God's love among the people. That is why in its relationship with Islam:

*The Church regards with esteem also the Muslims. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God.*³³

The Church, therefore, in its evaluation of its relationship with Muslims, has urged all during the sacred Synod "to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom."³⁴ In this race of mutual understanding with other religions, the Catholic Church, despite the challenges encountered in the past with other religions such as Islam and Judaism, is willing to communicate to share her faith and experiences with those who are open to her. The Catholic Church promotes dialogue with other religions so that it can listen to the other, especially to the questions our dialogue partners raise. "Hence, in her tasks of promoting unity among men, indeed among nations, [the Church] considers above all [...] what people have in common and what draws them to fellowship."³⁵

³¹ Fr. John Mallare, CICM PhD in Arabic and Islamic Studies during the webinar-workshop on interreligious Dialogue held on November 23-26, 2021 in Quezon City, Philippines organized under the auspices of the CICM General committee on Mission stated.

³² Edmund Chia, fsc (Malaysia). Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. *Dialogue: A resource Manual for Catholics in Asia*, 181.

³³ Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, no.3.

³⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, no.3.

³⁵ Second Vatican Council. *Nostra Aetate*, no. 1.





C. ROLE OF CICM IN THE CHURCH TODAY IN FOSTERING INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

The CICM constitution states: “Religious missionaries of different races and cultures, we live and work together as brothers. ‘One heart and one soul,’ we witness to the Father’s will that all men and women be brothers and sisters in Christ.”³⁶ CICM, from its documents and organization, reflects on the spirit of the *inter gentes* character in fostering interreligious dialogue in such a way that, through the differences in their races and cultures, they are witnessing to God’s love by showing that even though we are different, we can still work and live together as brothers and sisters; this is to highlight the multicultural and intercultural character of the CICM religious missionaries. Indeed, through their multicultural, CICM religious missionaries show that unity is possible despite differences. In its Guidelines for Multicultural Living in CICM, the Institute makes some provisions on the spiritual foundation of its multiculturalism. The document states: “The spiritual foundations of our multiculturalism are the very same foundations that strengthen and support our lives as religious and as missionaries who seek to integrate themselves into another culture and to dialogue with the people among whom we are living.”³⁷

Engaging in interreligious dialogue requires a deep analysis of our attitude. Because how can we relate with other people if we are not able to live in perfect harmony with the people within our communities? Given that today’s pluralistic world is in perpetual movement within which our actions can easily influence those around us, engaging in interreligious dialogue demands a sense of awareness of oneself. We can only foster

interreligious if we can live more concretely our intercultural or multicultural character. “As brothers in the same Institute, we foster a special bond among us that goes beyond all differences.”³⁸

The CICM missionaries are preoccupied with the unity of the people of God. That is why they commit themselves to fostering and promoting interreligious dialogue in the respective countries where they are assigned. Their presence in those countries influenced by the Islamic religion is a challenge for them; therefore, it is an opportunity to live out their communion with the people of God, as stated in *Lumen Gentium*. Consequently, CICM missionaries are invited in the context of interreligious dialogue to foster this spirit of togetherness without any form of exclusivism. Pope Francis will say, “We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all.”³⁹ In short, everyone matters. Our world today faces this phenomenon of discrimination or the tendency to consider one’s religion the best over others or even the culture. Jesus showed us that no one should be left behind. Christians or Muslims, Hinduists, or Buddhists, we are called to journey together, reflecting on the common issues we are dealing with today.

III. THE BENEFITS OF MISSION *INTER GENTES* IN TODAY’S PLURALISTIC WORLD: THE MORAL TRANSFORMATION.

One of the impacts of *mission inter gentes* is the moral transformation in the life of those who embrace the spirit of *missio inter gentes*. Over the past decades, many Christian theologians have claimed that “Christianity has received absolute

³⁶ Congregation of Immaculate Heart of Mary, *Constitutions*, (Roma 1988), Art. 2.

³⁷ CICM, *Guideline for Multicultural Living in CICM*, (Rome, 2010), 12.

³⁸ CICM Constitutions, Art, 48.

³⁹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* no. 14.





religious truth from God in Jesus Christ.”⁴⁰ This mind setting has complicated things, especially when considering other religions as part of this heritage. However, this debate is no longer relevant for us today. We strive not to look at what divides us but instead at what can help us journey together and solve the many issues we are encountering in our society today. Besides, the Church has already transcended this way of thinking regarding other religious denominations. For instance, according to *Nostra Aetate*: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions”⁴¹. Therefore, the inner spirit of *missio inter gentes* comes to renew and strengthen what had been promoted by Vatican II, which is to reconcile and to go along with others. Moreover, Christians, animated by the *inter gentes*’ character, become more aware of the presence of others; hence, they become hospitable and, therefore, able to initiate dialogue with others. John Koenig wrote: “Hospitality is also a matter of human exchanges that restore the spirit.”⁴² In other words, we cannot talk about dialogue if we primarily cannot welcome others by making them feel at home. *Missio inter gentes* makes become religiously minded. Thus, the other is no longer a stranger but a brother, a neighbor, to care for.

The moral setting of Christians is no longer striving to convert non-Christians rather it is seeking to know “how do we talk with them.”⁴³ From that perspective, we see a strong desire to learn from others. Paul Knitter mentioned in his journal regarding the diversity of religions that “they just don’t happen to be there as the

result of the vagaries or aberrations of history; they are intended to be there by the one God of history. In some way, the religions are playing a role in what Christians call the history of salvation.”⁴⁴ According to Knitter, “God seems to love diversity, not only among plants, animals, and peoples, but also among religions.”⁴⁵ Knitter is, thereby, inviting Christians to figure out the role of these other religions. If it is true that God loves diversity, why should it not be the case for all men? As people living together in this world, because of our diversity, there will always be some misunderstandings among us. However, the latter should not stop us from being united. We may be different due to our culture, race, or belief, but we remain all creatures of God as brothers and sisters. There is therefore an urgent need to promote tolerance and forgiveness in today’s pluralistic world.

A. THE SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION IN MISSIOLOGY

One of the questions that will help us tackle this part will be: what are the spiritual transformations of *inter gentes* in the field of missiology? In John 17:21, it is stated: “May they be one.” This prayer of Jesus addressed to the Father for his disciples is a call to unity, communion, and journey together as one family despite our differences. Therefore, with *missio inter gentes*, we could observe some spiritual transformations, such as communion among the people, unity, forgiveness, tolerance, and reconciliation, in the field of missiology. All these values are catalysts for a peaceful and harmonious world.

Concerning communion and unity among the people, the *missio inter gentes* paradigm will specifically renew what has been promoted by

⁴⁰ Don A. Pittman, Ruben L. Habito and Terry C. Muck, *Ministry & Theology in Global Perspective: Contemporary Challenges for the Church* (Cambridge UK: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 291.

⁴¹ Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, no. 2.

⁴² John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia: 1985), 1.

⁴³ Paul F. Knitter, “Christian Attitudes toward Other Religions: The Challenge of Commitment and Openness”, *Prajñā Vihāra*, Volume 5, Number 1, (2000 by Assumption University Press):168.

⁴⁴ Paul F. Knitter, “Christian Attitudes toward Other Religions: The Challenge of Commitment and Openness”, 169.

⁴⁵ Paul F. Knitter, “Christian Attitudes toward Other Religions: The Challenge of Commitment and Openness”, 169.





Vatican II, which is the community and the unity of the Catholic Church in the life of its members. This spiritual transformation in the life of the religious missionaries is a starting point for building a world of reciprocal understanding among religions and a missiology of proximity wherein we can go beyond our usual practices to embrace the other, totally different from me. The African bishops have repeatedly reminded Christian communities that the Gospel is a message of reconciliation.⁴⁶ Hence, for the African bishops, the grace of forgiveness and reconciliation goes far beyond the ritual of the confessional to imbricate all human relations and creation.⁴⁷ Reconciliation overcomes crises, restores human dignity, and paves the way for the development of lasting peace among people at all levels.⁴⁸ Living, therefore, and doing mission among the nations or people, the CICM religious missionaries are expected to be a sign of reconciliation among those they are called to serve, regardless of ethnicity, race, culture, or even religious beliefs and develop therefore a spirit of togetherness.

IV. CICM PASTORAL ACTIONS TO FOSTER INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE THROUGH *INTER GENTES*

A. SCHOOL MINISTRY

The primary goal of the CICM is to be a visible sign of God's love among their fellow men through concrete pastoral actions. Religious missionaries from that Institute eagerly engage in diverse ministries such as education, pastoral, healing, justice, peace, and integrity of creation,

youth ministry. These levels of ministries go in line with what O'Collins calls the three Styles of the contemporary Theology⁴⁹: "The first style according to O'Collins predominates in the universities, Colleges, Faculties. The Second Style is shaped with the desire to promote justice and the common good. Finally the third Style works out of the setting of the Church at public prayer. It bears witness to the triune God."⁵⁰

One of the actions that the CICM religious missionaries may take in fostering the relationship with the Church and other religions is the formation at all levels of Christians on the importance of interfaith dialogue. The creation of an educational center that promotes interreligious dialogue is also needed most especially in the peripheries. Hence, CICM religious missionaries could promote the teaching of interreligious dialogue in their administered school via *inter gentes* paradigm. Anthony Kalliath said: "dialogue with the world and its various religious and cultural traditions is an equitable corollary to do mission *inter gentes*. Dialogue has become the vibe and vogue of Christian witness today."⁵¹ Therefore, educating young people on the importance of being open to dialogue with other religions can help us build a better world for tomorrow. Religious missionaries should teach the latter the significance of collaboration in their youth apostolate.

The CICM religious missionaries most especially in the Philippines have oriented their ministry in teaching. From that perspective, school should be an ideal place to foster the culture of awareness. Indeed, the educational project is highly recommended, especially in this context

⁴⁶ Maurice Cheza, ed., *Le Synode Africain. Histoire et textes* (Paris : Karthala, 1996), 130-131.

⁴⁷ Peter Beakelmans, CICM, Marir-Helene R., OLA, ed., *New Trends in Mission: the emerging future*. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2022), 196.

⁴⁸ Peter Beakelmans, CICM, Marir-Helene R., OLA, ed., *New Trends in Mission: the emerging future*, 197.

⁴⁹ Gerald O'Collins, S.J. *Retrieving Fundamental Theology: The Three Styles of Contemporary Theology*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 9.

⁵⁰ O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology: The Three Styles of Contemporary Theology*, 10.

⁵¹ Anthony Kalliath, "Missio *Inter gentes*: Challenges and Opportunities", 4.





of pluralism. The creation of student center and outreach program can strengthen bond between different religions. In addition, schools are good venues for dialogue, for people can gather, share ideas, values, and reflect together on how to build a society where harmony, peace, and unity prevail. Schools, therefore, are appropriate places to train young men and women, whom are the future of the society on the value of interreligious dialogue. By doing so, the young generation will be more equipped to engage in this desire of the Church to reconcile all men. Pope Paul VI hereby, will exhort that all Catholics engage in dialogue and collaboration with prudence and love to recognize, preserve, and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men [and women]⁵². The call of *Nostra Aetate* to Christians to cooperation is not just about speaking but also listening, not just about teaching but also learning. For, without learning from and indeed with the other, Catholic Christians may never understand the *signs of the times*, what God may be saying to the Church.⁵³ In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Christus Vivit*, Pope Francis reminds us that, “the Lord is calling us to enkindle stars in the night of other [...]”⁵⁴ Our main task therefore becomes that of the enlightening other through continual formation.

Education helps in shaping good citizens. If young people from different denominations are well-educated regarding dialogue with others, consideration of other’s religious values by learning how to respect them and journey together, the world will be a better place to live. In *The Republic*, Plato treats the subject of education as an integral and vital part of a wider subject of the well-being of human society. The

aim of education is to help people know the Idea of the Good, which is to be virtuous.⁵⁵ According to Plato, a just society always tries to give the best education to all its members in accordance with their ability. Therefore, CICM religious missionaries should promote in their apostolate educational programs to respond to religious pluralism.

B. IN SOCIETY

The pastoral actions that CICM can implement in the mission field to foster *inter gentes* paradigm for a genuine interreligious are as follow. In the public or society, CICM can promote understanding. By that, we mean facilitating peaceful coexistence through empathy and awareness. This will be also an occasion for CICM to help people be inspired by the life of Saint Francis of Assisi as mentioned by Pope Francis in his Encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti* : Francis had openness of heart, which knew no bounds and transcended differences of origin, nationality, color or religion.”⁵⁶ Hence, CICM can foster unity in strengthening communities by bringing cultural and religious boundaries; for, “God has created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity, and has called them to live together as brothers and sisters”.⁵⁷ Therefore, in the society no matter our religious beliefs we should strive to develop “universal fraternity.”⁵⁸ Religious missionaries in their pastoral involvement may encourage acceptance by embracing diversity and promoting an inclusive, harmonious society.

52 Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, no.2.

53 Karl Josef Becker and Ilaria Morali, *Catholic Engagement with World Religions*, (New York: Orbis, 2010), 656. <https://www.thinkingfaith.org/> [Accessed on 01/22/2024].

54 Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, (Rome, 2019), no.33.

55 Smith L. Glenn and Joan K. Smith, *Lives in Education: A Narrative of People and Ideas*. (New York: St. Martin's Press 1994), p. 52

56 Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html, no.3 [Accessed on Feb. 28, 2024].

57 Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 5.

58 Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 9.





Henceforth, through the diplomatic outreach program, CICM will be able to cultivate an open dialogue between religious leaders to foster comprehension. In addition, community engagement will be necessary in organizing interfaith gatherings to promote collaboration and solidarity. As Pope Francis says, “No one can face life in isolation... We need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead.”⁵⁹ Hence, this engagement will allow them to unite diverse voices for constructive and inclusive dialogue within society and provide a good opportunity for exchanging perspectives and experiences to foster mutual understanding. Additionally, CICM may raise awareness through workshops and educational campaigns to help build bridges across faiths.

C. WITHIN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

To foster interfaith dialogue within the Catholic Church, the CICM can implement pastoral training to develop capable and compassionate leaders through comprehensive religious training programs. This will sharpen the leaders’ minds as they engage in interfaith dialogue. A missionary outreach program will also be beneficial. It will help extend the message of faith and hope to remote and underserved regions. Hence, among pastoral actions that will promote interfaith dialogue is the creation of spaces for open and respectful exchanges. Moreover, providing educational resources to promote understanding of other faiths will help the Catholic Church in its encounter with other religious denominations.

The *inter gentes* paradigm helps us embrace the beauty of various cultures and religions. Hence, it allows us to recognize and celebrate

the interconnectedness of all people across the globe. We can promote mutual respect and understanding between different religious traditions within this paradigm. Therefore, the Church, in its way of promoting interreligious dialogue, can, through CICM, organize community events that facilitate interaction and relationship building and encourage collaboration and unity through interfaith fellowship groups. These activities will enable the members to develop a sense of belonging and participate actively in building peace and harmony among religions. Interreligious dialogue should also be encouraged at the Parish level. For instance, organize welcoming parish events that include and honor different religious traditions, encourage joint initiatives and activities between parish members of diverse denominations, and foster open dialogues on similarities and differences among faiths at the parish level.

CONCLUSION

This article was about the *inter gentes* paradigm as CICM’s pastoral response in doing mission in the context of interreligious dialogue. We saw how Jesus’s Incarnation, ministry, and encounters with non-Jews have impacted and shaped the life of the Church through centuries. Indeed, to talk about dialogue or even love cannot be done so without referring to Jesus, the perfect example. Henceforth, “Jesus is the “shore” from which we build bridges of dialogue in the world of religions and religious pursuits.”⁶⁰ Moreover, the influence of the Church in fostering harmony and unity with other religions is concretized in the *inter gentes* paradigm. As Anthony Kalliath reminds us about Jesus’ unicity. For him, “the Unicity of Jesus is not accomplished through

⁵⁹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 8.

⁶⁰ Anthony Kalliath, “Missio Inter gentes: Challenges and Opportunities”, 5.





exclusion but by a dialogical inclusiveness and openness.”⁶¹ Therefore, the Church strives to show the way through its teaching by making Jesus’ presence visible in its daily ministry. The Church has the desire to reconcile, to journey together with others. She “rejects nothing that is true and holy in [other] religions.”⁶²

Religious missionaries, especially CICM, become aware of the Church’s needs. Their involvement in the mission field is observed through their dedication to interreligious dialogue worldwide and, most importantly, in countries where their presence is most needed. The impact of *inter gentes* is remarkable in the life of the Church as well as in the life of every soul. Diversity should not be an obstacle to unity but rather a catalyzer that enables us to accept our differences and work together. One of the best things that can help us discover the beauty in each religion could be the enhancement of pastoral activity, such as human religious formation, wherein people from different religious denominations gather and reflect on the importance of journeying together, although they are different.

Other essential points from this article are the changes and transformations in the life of Christians within the *inter gentes* paradigm. As we have seen, *inter gentes* refers to mission among the people. Doing missions among the people implies a certain attitude that differs from the usual or ancient way of doing mission. Mission becomes more inclusivist, and everyone matters. We reflect and plan together on how to do missions through respect, humility, listening, and openness, which appears to be the appropriate pastoral response to doing mission in today’s pluralistic world.

⁶¹ Anthony Kalliath, “Missio Inter gentes: Challenges and Opportunities”, 5.

⁶² Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, no.2.





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