In his reports on Christianity’s global reach, statistician David B. Barrett, consultant to several Protestant mission boards and to the Vatican, reminds us periodically, in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, that more than ninety percent of our professional missionaries are primarily serving Christian populations. This leaves fewer than ten percent engaged mainly in the service of peoples who have not yet been evangelized, or have hardly heard the Good News, or among whom the local church is not yet firmly established on indigenous foundations. This imbalance in personnel and resource distribution is something I have witnessed myself as a missionary for many years in sub-Saharan Africa. It suggests that, in fact, the mission *ad gentes* is frequently treated as supererogatory, and not always as “the greatest and holiest duty of the Church” (*Ad gentes*, no. 29).

Among Catholics in many cultural worlds, this situation might be explained by the Eurocentric canonical requirements for presiding at eucharistic celebrations. One must be male and celibate with a quasi-monastic spirituality and a professional degree (or equivalency) in divinity. As a direct consequence, sufficient numbers of indigenous pastors are unavailable for the care of the faithful. Instead of modifying the canonical requirements, missionaries are widely used to fill the pastoral gaps, often as a lifetime commitment. Another reason might be a fixation on gathering large numbers of converts in one area, by concentrating missionaries on large populations which appear readily convertible (open to alien ideas, values and practices), accessible (passable roads), and opportunistic (seek schools, medical services, business, jobs). In such instances, and lacking sufficient numbers of indigenous pastors, missionary personnel are apt to become fully absorbed by the needs of growing Christian communities, thus inhibiting further missionary outreach to other peoples in fields afar.

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Add to this the soteriology of some missionaries who may feel a need “to save” every individual in one area before moving on. Others might be reluctant to move, because of the cost and inconvenience of living in some remote, “less developed,” and more troubled region of the world. Without excluding such factors, the particular focus of this article—from a Roman Catholic vantage point—is the question whether or to what extent the skewed disposition of missionary personnel and resources noted by Dr. Barrett may be due to the fuzzy missiology, or curious economics, reflected in the priorities of some mission-sending agencies.

Additional elements of confusion are introduced into this discussion by Donal Dorr’s new book called Mission in Today’s World (Orbis Books). Surprisingly, this experienced, erudite and readable global thinker strives mightily to put a missionary label on a large variety of faith-inspired activities in which many Christians are currently engaged: socio-economic and political liberation, justice and peace, options for the poor, aid for refugees and prostitutes, reconciliation, evangelization, re-evangelization, human rights, ecology, debt relief, ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, and much more. In Dorr’s view, these are the “new frontiers” of Christian missionary activity now defined in today’s terms as “social areas,” rather than in terms of specific peoples in their respective cultural matrices and “geographical areas.” Today, unlike Paul and Barnabas, if one has a correct “attitude, approach and spirit,” one can be a frontline missionary without leaving home.

The argument is reminiscent of mainline Protestant missiology in the late 1960s. “My aim in this book,” writes Dorr, “is to help to bridge the gap between the broad meaning of the word mission (where it refers mainly to attitude, approach and spirit) and the more restricted meaning (where it applies mainly to ‘foreign missionaries’).” He leans heavily upon an exceptional reading of (or reading into?) Pope John Paul II’s definition of missionary activity in the 1990 encyclical letter, Redemptoris missio, no. 33. Dorr’s thesis is developed plausibly and with conviction, but in the end it conjures up an image of Jonah sailing to Tarshish in order to avoid his mission to the people of Nineveh.

A Response

While it is true that the Church is a sacramental participant in the one mission of the Incarnate Word, and the whole Church is therefore missionary, a variety of ministries is needed for “building up the body of Christ” worldwide. This task calls for many specialized functionaries. So, some Christians are called “to be apostles; some, prophets; some, evangelists; others, to be pastors and teachers” (Eph 4:11-13), plus whatever other ministries might be needed for the life and growth, fullness and unity, of the believing community which is supposed to become a universal sign of God’s saving presence among all peoples. These diverse vocations represent different gifts and talents required for the functioning, in due measure, of each single part of the witnessing body of Christ.

Although some overlapping of functions is surely appropriate, each vocation has its own priorities. More than five hundred believers witnessed the glorified Christ without all thereby being called to apostleship. There are all sorts of specifically different callings: “There are many types of services to be rendered, but always the same Lord, working in all sorts of diverse ways in different people . . . to equip the saints for a work of ministry” (1 Cor 12:4-7, 12; Eph 4:11-13). “Special envoys” or “missionaries,” typified by Paul and Barnabas, were “divinely sent
ad gentes” (cf. Acts 13:1-4; Redemptoris missio, no. 61; Ad gentes, no. 1). Paul was not called to the pastoral ministry (1 Cor 1:17; 3:5, 10), nor to “other ecclesial activities.” He had even to vindicate his being sent ad gentes to proclaim the gospel and expound its mysteries previously hidden from peoples “in the lands beyond” (cf. 2 Cor 10:16; Rom 15:20-21; Eph 3:7-8; Gal 1:1-2, 10, 15; Col 1:25).

“So,” in the words of Vatican II, “missionary work among the nations differs from the pastoral care of the faithful and from efforts aimed at the restoration of Christian unity” (Ad gentes, no. 6). “In the proper sense of the term,” it also differs from “a new evangelization” or “a re-evangelization,” and from “other ecclesial activities” (Redemptoris missio, nos. 33–34). The concern is that if all sorts of ministries are also to be designated “missionary,” then nothing is specifically missionary, and the term becomes ambiguous.

Thus, thirty-five years after Vatican II, Pope John Paul II found it necessary to “clear up doubts and ambiguities regarding the specific nature of missionary activity ad gentes” (Ibid. nos. 2, 34), and to reaffirm the importance of respecting the distinction between the missionary and pastoral ministries—even though each always needs, and gives rise to, the other. The following guidelines are germane:

Missionary activity proper, namely the mission ad gentes, is directed to “peoples or groups who do not yet believe in Christ,” “who are far from Christ,” in whom the Church has “not yet taken root” and whose culture has not yet been influenced by the Gospel. It is distinct from other ecclesial activities inasmuch as it is addressed to groups and settings which are non-Christian because the preaching of the Gospel and the presence of the Church are either absent or insufficient.

This is the first task of the Church which has been sent forth to all peoples and to the very ends of the earth. Without the mission ad gentes, the Church’s very missionary dimension would be deprived of its meaning and the very activity that exemplifies it (Redemptoris missio, no. 34; Ad gentes, nos. 6, 23, 27; Evangelii nuntiandi, nos. 18–20).

Certainly a universal mission implies a universal perspective. But it is also true that missionary activity ad gentes, being different from the pastoral care of the faithful and the new evangelization [or re-evangelization] of the non-practicing, is exercised within well-defined territories and groups of people (Redemptoris missio, nos. 34, 37a).

A Conclusion
The failure to honor, and to translate into unambiguous policies, the foregoing principles of church order might go a long way toward explaining why many Christians, who thought they were divinely called to a life of “missionary activity proper,” have instead ended up in “other ecclesial activities,” or filling the pastoral gaps among peoples or groups for whom the Church already exists indigenously in cultural worlds already touched by the gospel. No doubt, for various historical reasons, one can be called to move from one ministry to another, or to some new ecclesial activity. But this is no reason for confusing the meaning of the pastoral ministry and other ecclesial activities with missionary ministry ad gentes, which is supposed to be “the first task of the Church” (Redemptoris missio, no. 34).
Finally, in view of the contemporary secular uses (political, diplomatic, military, business, scientific, educational, etc.) of the term “mission,” and considering the pejorative connotations sometimes associated with the well-meaning endeavors of ethnocentric missionaries, why try so hard to stretch the papal definition to cover so many other ministerial enterprises? At least where Christianity has already taken root and still influences local cultures, the pastoral ministry is surely broad enough to include activities in behalf of justice, peace, reconciliation, re-evangelization, prostitutes, inculturation, ecology, the least, the lost and the left-out among us. If not, then the new challenges so well articulated by Donal Dorr will hardly be met by substituting the word “missionary” for “pastoral,” or for “other ecclesial activities.”

Hopefully, David Barrett’s statistics will remind us of the already inequitable disposition of our relatively meager missionary personnel and resources committed to the many thousands of “tribes and tongues and peoples and nations” (Rev 5:9; 7:9). Far too many people are still waiting to see the sacramental Lumen gentium raised up among them on firm and indigenous foundations. We continue to need the work of missionaries so that this faith community, consisting of saints and sinners at the same time, will continue to signal, in their earth-stained cultural terms, the coming reign of God.