Mission as Transfiguration: Commemorating the Second Vatican Council

by Clemens Sedmak

Introductory Comments

In the summer of 1962, Pope John XXIII reflected in his famous spiritual diary upon the large audiences: “They were perhaps too crowded, as they included representatives from every country in the world, but full of spiritual and religious fervour, and a sincere and pious enthusiasm which is edifying and encourages optimism.”1 He continued with a reflection on the visitors coming to Rome to encounter either the sacred or the profane, the sacred being Rome as the capital of Catholicism and the profane being Rome as a city of ancient ruins and the whirlwind of the secular. “All this however with mutual respect among the various human elements, and no unfriendliness between Italians and non-Italians.”2 Here, one could say, we can see the Council’s main concerns, enthusiasm and encounter. John XXIII talked about an atmosphere of fervor and enthusiasm, about edification, encouragement, and optimism. There is a sense of vitality and vibrant joy. And he described cultures of encounter between Italians and non-Italians, and between visitors of the sacred and visitors of the profane.

Father Louis J. Luzbetak commented on the Second Vatican Council in the second edition of “The Church and Cultures” and made three key points: (1) It was the first time that the Church had manifested herself as a supra-cultural World Church, conceived as an entity with a very clear task: “It must be at home with every way of life and every mentality.”3 (2) He read the signs of the times (the Council being one distinctive sign) as pointing towards “contextualization,” “inculturation,” and “incarnation.”4 The task of the Church is to care about cultural relevancy and the distinctiveness of local churches. (3) Father Luzbetak also reminded us of the primacy of the Holy Spirit and the primacy of spirituality in missionary activities: “The most important and most desirable ingredient in a person engaged in mission is genuine and deep spirituality.”5 The effectiveness of mission is not to be sought in human cleverness. It has to have its foundation elsewhere. It is a spirit-driven, spiritual undertaking; it is theocentric by its very nature. Here again, we have the basic concerns of the Second Vatican Council in a nutshell—we could summarize this approach as to be moved by the Spirit to be at home in the World. The Second Vatican Council was an invitation to allow the Church to be moved by the Spirit, to become everything that is needed to be in a given cultural context.

Clemens Sedmak is F. D. Maurice Professor of Theology at King’s College, London. He is the author of Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity (Orbis, 2002).

---

2 Pope John XXIII, 321.
4 Luzbetak, 106.
5 Luzbetak, 2.
to everybody, and to be at home in the world. The message to be at home in the world is especially relevant if one compares pre-Vatican II approaches towards the relationship between the Church and the world to post-Vatican II developments.

There is a certain temptation to talk about the Second Vatican Council in our day and age—commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of its official opening—in a language of an ethics of memory that lays down what we ought to remember and what we must not forget. This approach is perhaps misleading, since it treats the Council as a past event, a closed chapter in a book, or a piece of news no longer new. There is also a temptation to frame discourse on the Second Vatican Council with the language of a politics of theology, using insights and *topoi* of the Council to discount theological positions or to protect certain theological points of view. This attempts to instrumentalize the Council as if it were a device to be brandished in theological battlefields instead of a tool encompassing the deep hermeneutical challenge all of us are faced with, wherever we may find ourselves on the theological map. For the purposes of this lecture, I propose viewing the Second Vatican Council not as a past event or an instrument for attack or defense but as a point of reference that helps us to find orientation and put things in perspective; I suggest that we embrace the Council as a source of inspiration and as a fountain that continues to energize us.

The Second Vatican Council can be understood as enthusiasm, encounter, and commitment to be moved by the Spirit to be at home in the world. It is with this in mind that I would like to open a biblical window into these concerns. *Ad Gentes* (AG) defines mission as a manifestation of the divine: “Missionary activity is nothing more and nothing less than an epiphany” (AG 9). Where can we find a biblical window into mission that considers enthusiasm, encounter, the dynamics of being moved by the divine, a feeling of being at home in the world, and the experience of epiphany? I would suggest we look at the account of the transfiguration. I will focus on the version of this story (notably absent in the Council documents) as found in St. Matthew (Mt 17: 1-9). I will further suggest that the *topos* of the transfiguration is key to open the doors towards an understanding of mission in the tradition of the Second Vatican Council.

The story of the transfiguration is well known. Matthew’s account contains the following key points: after six days, Matthew tells us, Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John, the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them, his face shining like the sun and his clothes becoming as white as light. Then Moses and Elijah appeared and talked with Jesus. At this point, Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three dwellings/tents—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” Peter was still speaking, when a bright cloud covered/overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” When they heard that the disciples were terrified and fell to the ground. Jesus came, touched them, and told them to get up: “Do not be afraid. ” When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself, alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed/ordered them not to tell anyone what they had seen.

It is against this background that I propose three claims: (1) Mission is an invitation and a commitment to the transfiguration of the Church and the World; (2) mission happens through people who have experienced the transfiguration of Christ; and (3) mission is an invitation to allow people to experience the transfiguration of Christ.

I will now examine Matthew 17:1-9 *epistemologically*—this is to say that I suggest looking at this passage from an epistemological perspective, analyzing the epistemic status of the people involved and looking at the epistemic situation we encounter. In other words, I put forward this question: What knowledge is generated before, during, and after the transfiguration, according to the passage in question? I will distinguish four kinds of knowledge generated in the situation described above, and I will suggest, of course, that these four kinds of knowledge are
all relevant to understanding mission in the tradition of Vatican II. These four kinds of knowledge are directed knowledge, demonstrative knowledge, overwritten knowledge, and redefining knowledge.

**Directed Knowledge**

There is a kind of knowledge that we could call directed knowledge. It is knowledge that is imposed upon rather than chosen or construed by the subject. Jesus carefully selects three disciples and calls them to share this experience. He leads them to a high mountain. Furthermore, Matthew notes that this happens after six days, which may indicate a moment of new creation and new divine action. Maximus Confessor, in his interpretation of this passage, emphasizes the idea of a new creation and points out that the three disciples symbolize the key virtues of faith (Peter), love (John), and hope (James). Directed knowledge is knowledge based on and generated via experience—the experience of being guided. The epistemic subject is drawn to or into an experience. Directed knowledge partly overcomes a subject. The experience of transfiguration leads the three disciples to directed knowledge, knowledge that they cannot control or construe. They are exposed to dynamics that change their epistemic situation.

In trying to gain a better and deeper understanding of this kind of knowledge, it may be helpful to turn to two twentieth century philosophers who have both explored such knowledge: Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch. Simone Weil, who suffered from migraine and was afflicted by ill health during her short life time, and died from exhaustion in 1943, aged 34, talks about beauty and affliction as two main sources of knowledge that teach us about the laws of the world. Simone Weil sees beauty and affliction as two primary routes to truth. The experience of beauty is an experience of the order and depth of the universe. It attracts and guides our attention; it leads us into knowledge. Directed knowledge implies an experience of something that pushes us to our limits and sets boundaries. This experience evokes a sense of humility. Simone Weil sees a connection between the study of mathematics and the love of God—solving a geometry problem, where we have to follow set rules and laws, offers us an insight into

---

9 Weil, 511.
a fragment of eternal Truth. Thus, beauty and affliction generate directed knowledge that leads a person away from herself.

Directed knowledge also plays an important part in the moral philosophy of British philosopher Iris Murdoch. For Iris Murdoch, the moral challenge does not consist of identifying universal truths or impartial reasons but of attending to the reality of others—to allow oneself to be directed by others. Similar to Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch considers aesthetic perception as key in being taught modes of selflessness. The ego is overcome by the experience of beauty and the true experience of the other. A self-interested ego is the major obstacle in the way of truly seeing other. Loving a person is connected with seeing the other. In order to love a person, one has to push beyond boundaries of oneself and move outside of oneself. One has to seek and accept, so to speak, directed knowledge. Murdoch emphasizes the unselfing of the ego and the importance of being able to see in the right way. Vision or perception is the primary moral faculty for appropriating, understanding, and knowing the Good. If we get connected with what is real, we understand Good by responding to the real world with all its messy situations. This is not a matter of abstract principles or rules but a matter of obeying the demands reality makes upon us. Murdoch insists that human beings have a fundamental ability to learn and seek a more perfect way of responding to reality. The loving regard of a person leads to knowledge that is based on a response similar to obedience. In a frequently quoted passage, Iris Murdoch compares loving a person with learning a foreign language: “If I am learning Russian, for instance, I am confronted by an authoritative structure which commands my respect. The task is difficult and the goal is distant and perhaps never entirely attainable. My work is a progressive revelation of something which exists independently of me. Attention is rewarded by a knowledge of reality. Love of Russian leads me away from myself towards something alien to me, something which my consciousness cannot command, swallow up, deny or make unreal.”

The independence of the other can only be grasped by our obedient attention. Humility, patience, attention, and an understanding of otherness are key to loving a person, as well as to learning a foreign language. It is in this sense that realism can be seen as a moral achievement based on directed knowledge. These sources give a sense of what acquiring directed knowledge can mean.

Directed knowledge is knowledge engendered by forces outside of the epistemic subject that lead it into particular situations of learning and experiencing, bringing about a sustainable and significant transformation of the subject's epistemic status that the knowing subject cannot construe or control. We see directed knowledge in the transfiguration story, developed through the leadership of Jesus, who chooses his companions and leads them to a high mountain to undergo a particular experience. We could then ask, in the light of the missiological orientation of this lecture, what is the possible relevance of directed knowledge for mission? Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch make the point that it is by being led by reality that directed knowledge is rooted. Humble attentiveness towards an order beyond an epistemic subject's control brings about directed knowledge. The Second Vatican Council calls for a culture of encounter; mission as encounter can be seen as exposure to particular contexts and to particular cultures. A

10 Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 89. It may be of interest that exposure to “praxis” can also be understood as producing directed knowledge. Matthew Crawford in his philosophical defense of “working with our own hands” quotes this very passage by Murdoch within the context of the command of the material. “In any hard discipline, whether it be gardening, structural engineering, or Russian, one submits to things that have their own intractable way.” See Matthew Crawford, *The Case for Working With Your Hands* (London: Penguin, 2009), 65. There is a “finality” about material realities that forces people into humble submission. Skilled manual labour “entails a systematic encounter with the material world” and leads to a kind of knowledge, “acquired through disciplined perception” (Crawford, 23). Here again, we see the dynamics and force of directed knowledge. There is no doubt that this thought is relevant for missionary activity with its sharing of praxis as well. The famous monks of Thibirine, for instance, acquired directed knowledge, by being led to experience a particular understanding of their (more and more dangerous) Algerian village context.

person who shares life and culture with other people will be molded, formed, and changed by this experience; she will receive directed knowledge, and be led by the culture to particular epistemic places. These dynamics can also be seen in the famous final verses in the Gospel of St. John. Peter is reminded that he will be led: “When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and take you where you do not want to go” (Jn 21:18b). Jesus indicates that living as a follower of Christ means trusting in messy situations, as well as accepting and appropriating directed knowledge. Two telling examples of lives spent witnessing to Christ under adverse circumstances are Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Alfred Delp, S.J., who were sent to prison; they both acknowledged that they learned so much about life in prison and neither gave up a sense of service and dedication. They interpreted their experience as directed knowledge that opened up new ways of encountering God, thereby creating a path they would not have chosen themselves. There are countless examples of missionaries who, finding themselves in adverse circumstances that they would not have opted for, grew in recognition of the challenge. Directed knowledge, we could say, means, in the context of mission, the readiness to be exposed to a particular cultural reality and to trust in messy situations.

**Demonstrative Knowledge**

The transfiguration story tells us about a second kind of knowledge. The disciples are witnesses of a scene that can only be described in metaphorical and comparative language, e.g., “like the sun” and “as white as light.” They are exposed to a powerful and extraordinary event that tells them something by its very nature. They are taught a lesson without words. Jesus does not talk to them. He is transfigured. Jesus does not provide them with knowledge based on propositions; they are exposed to something that is shown to them. In other words: the scene described in the second verse of Matthew 17 is not about saying, but about showing. Ephrem the Syrian, in his “Sermon on the Transfiguration of our Lord and God and Saviour, Jesus Christ,” points out that Jesus wanted to show his disciples his glory. He wanted to show them his true identity. He interprets the transfiguration story as a story about identity and the challenge of accepting the transformation of identities. This lesson is given not by saying but by showing. The disciples are led into an experience that left an impression. The point of the experience, according to Ephrem, was to show them something and thus to teach them. Let us call this kind of knowledge, generated by showing rather than by saying, demonstrative knowledge. It is knowledge on the basis of being shown something rather than having been told something. It is non-propositional rather than propositional knowledge. It is knowledge based on witnessing rather than analyzing.

An important interlocutor to help us get a deeper sense of demonstrative knowledge is the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. The distinction between saying and showing is, of course, famously associated with Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. In the famous passage 6.54, Wittgenstein writes, “My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.” This is the penultimate proposition in Wittgenstein’s text and gave rise to a particular reading of the *Tractatus*. Philosophers such as James Conant, Cora Diamond, Juliet Floyd, and Michael Kremer suggest a particular resolute or therapeutic reading of the *Tractatus* in light of this key passage. According to a therapeutic reading, Wittgenstein does not intend to present a view or theory but a way of speaking and looking. The *Tractatus* provides us with, we could say, demonstrative knowledge. It reminds us that philosophy is the practice of an activity and not the construction of theories. Clarification is provided to Wittgenstein’s method to expose metaphysical sentences as nonsensical and to demarcate the meaningful from the meaningless and an “ineffability reading” (Wittgenstein distinguishes misleading from illuminating nonsense whereby the illuminating nonsense “shows” what cannot be said).

---

12This reading is distinguished from a “positivist” reading (Wittgenstein is seeking to construe a theory that would enable him to provide a method to expose metaphysical sentences as nonsensical and to demarcate the meaningful from the meaningless) and an “ineffability reading” (Wittgenstein distinguishes misleading from illuminating nonsense whereby the illuminating nonsense “shows” what cannot be said).

is to be understood as the aim of philosophy. Diamond and Conant ask the question: What does the Tractatus say about the status of its own propositions? They make the claim that the form of the Tractatus is connected with its philosophical ambition and with what it wants to express. The key term in the resolute reading of the Tractatus is elucidate; Wittgenstein’s text is regarded as an exercise in elucidation. The sentences used have succeeded in elucidating when we recognize them as Unsinn (non-sense). An important premise underlying the Tractatus is the idea that our deepest confusions manifest themselves in confusions about meaning. The most important image to understand the Tractatus is the image of the ladder. “On this reading, first I grasp that there is something that must be; then I see that it cannot be said; then I grasp that if it cannot be said it cannot be thought (that the limits of language are the limits of thought); and then, finally, when I reach the top of the ladder, I grasp that there has been no “it” in my grasp all along (that which I cannot think I cannot “grasp” either).” Hence, the elucidatory strategy of the Tractatus consists of inviting the reader to engage in traditional philosophy up to a certain point. The results are not doctrines but elucidations. “And the attainment of this recognition depends upon the reader’s actually undergoing a certain experience.” The reader is invited to experience something that teaches her that language shows what language is about. One has to fully enter the experience and climb the ladder: the person entering the experience cannot treat the ladder like an elevator. The sentences of the Tractatus serve as the rungs of a ladder. The reader is drawn into the illusion of having a perspective—which has to be abandoned precisely in working through these sentences. It is in this sense that the Tractatus can show something: not in the sense of a quasi-propositional content but in a genuine sense, one not built on saying.

Demonstrative knowledge, gained by entering into an experience completely and step by step, suggests that there are no short cuts. If we go back to the transfiguration story, we will also find hints of demonstrative knowledge—knowledge that cannot be translated into propositions. The comparisons “like the sun” and “as white as the light” express the limits of language. The transfiguration story uses language as metaphor. Ted Cohen has argued that the ability to imagine self as other is an important ability, and that this ability implies a talent of identification that is key in using, developing, and understanding metaphors. Demonstrative knowledge invites imagination and the capability to creatively connect separate discourses and different spheres. Demonstrative knowledge cannot be expressed in propositions with a clear truth value. It is conveyed through stories and poetry rather than treatise and report. Again we can ask in a missiological context: What is the relation between demonstrative knowledge and mission? Demonstrative knowledge emphasizes that it is entering into an experience that provides those dynamics and conveys a kind of non-propositional knowledge, one based on showing and being shown. The role of non-propositional knowledge in mission can be better understood by looking at the role of convivenza, the experience of sharing life beyond doctrine. Ted Cohen reminds us of the metaphor skills needed in mission, skills of going beyond a superficial understanding of culture based on face value. Mission is about entering a dialogue with experiences that show truths that cannot be expressed in a propositional way. It is the truth about what it is like to be in a particular situation. Mission is an invitation to draw people into an experience of transfiguration; hence, it is an invitation to share life, to invite people to “come and see” (Jn 1:39). Mission is about allowing people to show you something and is about showing people truths of life through the testimony of life.

---


14 Conant, 422.
15 Conant, 422.
Overwritten Knowledge

Peter expresses a sense of well-being and his desire to stay by saying: “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” (Mt 17:4). Peter is still speaking when he is interrupted by a bright cloud and by a voice. The cloud is bright but the disciples experience darkness since the cloud has covered them. Here we have an experience of an abrogated knowledge claim. Peter’s desire to stay is frustrated. His speech is not only interrupted but also disrupted. He is moved into darkness by a bright cloud. The claim of knowing the dynamics of the situation—we are here and we could stay here together with Jesus and the two prophets—is overwritten; we could call the knowledge that Peter and the other two disciples obtain through this experience overwritten knowledge. It is knowledge that replaces another knowledge claim; it is knowledge that re-validates the map of knowledge claims and renders certain claims invalid. John Chrysostom, in his commentary on Matthew’s gospel, highlights Peter’s frustration. He has understood so little. He wants Jesus to be safe and secure and invites Jesus to stay so as not to suffer in Jerusalem. He is clearly moved by his love for the Lord but fails to understand some key points. He suggests building three dwellings as if Jesus were on the same level with Moses and Elijah. It was necessary for Peter to learn the painful lesson of overwritten knowledge, teaching him that Jesus is not to be kept and that Jesus, as the Savior, is superior to the prophets.

The key point of overwritten (or even abrogated) knowledge is its disruptive nature. Susannah Ticciati develops an account of disruption as a way of revelation in her reading of the book of Job. She shows that disruption can be understood as God’s self communication. The book of Job lends itself to interpretation through the lens of overwritten knowledge. Job has to learn that there is yet another language than that of justice and Tun-Ergebnisse. He has to learn that there is not only prophetic justice but also the experience of the mystery of God. God revealed his divinity by way of disruption. The experience of a disruptive God was also part of the painful experience C. S. Lewis went through after the death of his beloved wife. In his account of his grief, he recognizes God as iconoclastic: “My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast … Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of the marks of His presence?” C. S. Lewis has to learn and accept what it means to be in an epistemic situation of disruption where grief feels like a loss of foundations and where the sense of life one has is like entering a permanently provisional state. He was happy in his marriage and ready to say, “It is good to be here.” While he was still experiencing this comfort, the experience was taken away, and his life situation was disrupted. This is overwritten knowledge. It is not only knowledge acquired, it is knowledge painfully replacing other knowledge, establishing itself as an alternative to a well received and well accepted, even loved, knowledge claim. Overwritten knowledge is at the same time about something and about the frustrated knowledge of something; overwritten knowledge is not only “knowledge that p” but also “knowledge that the knowledge claim q is wrong.” It is in this sense conflictual knowledge, obtained through a letting go.

What is the meaning of overwritten knowledge for mission? It tells us something about the authority of the found, the authority of what has been encountered, or the authority of experience that tells a much more complicated story than systematic doctrinal accounts. Mission is also a mission towards disruption—the disruption of perceptions, judgments through experience, and established patterns. Charles de Foucauld is an eminent example of a missionary whose life plan was frustrated and whose claims to know about efficacy of mission were disrupted and overwritten. A missionary is not only a person who is able to offer hospitality but is also a person ready to come and see. We have seen that this readiness leads into contexts of directed and demonstrative knowledge.

---

18Susannah Ticciati, Job and the Disruption of Identity: Reading Beyond Barth (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2005).
knowledge, by its very nature, overwrites established knowledge claims. We could also cautiously ask whether mission experience could not also serve as a source for abrogation of established theological claims.

**Redefining Knowledge**

The disciples fell face down to the ground. They were terrified. Jesus came to them, touched them, and told them not to be afraid and to get up. They looked up, saw only Jesus, and were told not to tell anyone what they had seen. This is a story of redefining relationships. The experience redefined the relationship of the three disciples to Jesus; it also redefined the relationship between the three disciples and the other members of the inner circle. It may also have transformed the relationship between Peter, James, and John, since they shared a significant experience. The knowledge conveyed in experiences of relational transformation could be called redefining knowledge. It is a knowledge that establishes a new quality in relationships. Leo the Great, in his sermon on the transfiguration, makes the point that Jesus wanted to prepare his disciples to accept and face his suffering and passion by allowing them to experience the transfiguration. The experience served to redefine the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. This experience of transformation was based on the experience of vulnerability (e.g., falling to the ground and being overwhelmed by fear).

Transfiguration reminds us of the transformative power of knowledge. One of the deepest thinkers about the transformative power of knowledge is Jean Vanier. Jean Vanier discovered the transformative power of vulnerability for himself when, in 1964, he gave up his academic career and set up a group home, the first of what would later become L’Arche. In starting his first shared community, he invited two people with severe developmental disabilities to share his home with him. He knew he was letting himself in for a life with people who were especially vulnerable and who, in the social hierarchy, were at the very bottom. He wanted to enable these individuals to discover their own sense of self-esteem. His whole understanding of being and self was transformed over the next few years of day-to-day living with two very vulnerable individuals. Jean Vanier realized that, in discovering his own vulnerability and in recognizing the mystery of each person, he was moving towards an understanding of human dignity. He experienced a redefining of his own self-understanding and concept of self, as well as a redefining of his insights into what it means to be human. The driving force behind this transformation process is the belief in the mission and mystery of each person: “There is a meaning to every life, even if we cannot see it. I believe that each person, in her unique beauty and worth, lives out a sacred story.” Jean Vanier sees each person as having a particular secret and mystery, a particular journey, or a particular vocation to grow. The deepest identity that we can discover is a sense of our own worth. This worth is not to be realized in spite of our vulnerability, but because of it. It is through our vulnerability that we can overcome roles and masks and face ourselves and our mystery. A deep understanding of vulnerability as experienced by the disciples, helps to redefine identity and relationships. In recognising our vulnerability, we discover our fundamental unity and our common humanity. The recognition of the vulnerability and the mystery of a person lead to the basis of what we share as humans. The acid test for the quality of relationships and social structures is how the most vulnerable members of that society are treated. Vanier speaks from his own experience: “People with disabilities who have been rejected or abandoned rise up with new energy and creativity when they feel loved and respected... The presence of someone who loves them reveals to them their value and importance.”

What would redefining knowledge mean for mission? If mission is about transformation, the generation of redefining knowledge is key to missionary activity. Understanding our own vulnerability is critical to transformation

---

22Vanier, 128.
and redefining knowledge. The missionary who knows about his or her vulnerability, both as a human being and as an epistemic subject making knowledge claims, is prepared for transformation. It is then that the missionary can be deeply touched by a culture, a community, and people. One way of expressing this sense of vulnerability can be seen in the account of the transfiguration: silence. The disciples are invited to a ministry of silence. There may be more space for this ministry of silence, listening, and not making claims or giving positions.

The Second Vatican Council

The four types of knowledge outlined above are obviously relevant for mission. How can we connect these insights into missiological knowledge with the project of Vatican II?

Directed knowledge reminds us of the local as a source of normativity; local tradition and local context take us to the road less travelled and confront us with an external authority. British development expert Robert Chambers defended the status of local knowledge.23 It has to be given authority. This is a reminder of a core issue that we can also find in the Second Vatican Council—the documents use one key word to underline the openness to the directive authority of local knowledge: adaptation. Religious institutions are called upon to adapt to the circumstances and demands of culture (Perfectae Caritatis 3). The Church has to adapt to changing circumstances and to modern conditions (PC 2,20). The Church has to adapt to the needs of the times, and the people of the Church have to realize that we are faced with a new set of circumstances (Christus Dominus 13; AG 6). The local is to be recognized as a source of normativity and direction. If we want to adapt to a local context, we need to acknowledge the localness of the context as a signpost.

Demonstrative knowledge bases the transformation of epistemic situations on encounter and the experience of being shown something important. AG states, “Missionary activity is nothing else and nothing less than an epiphany,” reminding us that mission is a practice nourished by the encounter with God (9). Demonstrative knowledge is knowledge generated through a second person perspective—a “thou”-perspective, to use Martin Buber’s terminology. A second person perspective gives us the resistance of a dialogue partner and enables us to enter into a dialogue that shows us contents and concerns beyond propositional knowledge. Knowledge generated in encounters can be expressed by way of narratives rather than treatises and proposition.24 Mission, after all, is about telling stories about God and telling one’s own story with the living God. This second person in mission is oriented towards God, as well as towards the world and particular human beings. Missionary activity is based on the love of God and the concern for the other. If we take to heart the idea that we are invited to try to make God’s plan a reality, the very idea of mission is that of following the plan of our great Thou (AG 9). Mission is not a human enterprise. It needs to be shown the way by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and be moved by love of God (PC 2; AG 7). The key word characterizing missionary activity is, again and again, encounter. The Church is called to converse with human society (CD 13). The Council emphasizes the importance of engaging in conversations with others, whether they are believers or non-believers (Apostolicam Actuositatem 31). Mission is based on a fraternal dialogue with non-Christians (AG 16). It is in need of cooperation and is not carried out by isolated individuals (AG 27). It becomes clear that mission is not mainly about exchanging propositions and claims but about building a shared and common practice that shows truths by experiencing encounter and a shared form of life.

Overwritten knowledge is an epistemic experience that reminds us of institutional humility. The transfiguration scene shows that Peter, the rock of the Church, experiences the abrogation of his knowledge claims (n.b. after he

---

had been made the rock of the Church). Peter has not lost his role, but he has undergone a humbling experience. This indication of abrogation could transmit a sense of institutional humility. The Council underlines this sense of humility by pointing out that the Church is not there to seek earthly glory, but to proclaim through practice humility and self sacrifice (Lumen Gentium 8). We are reminded that Christian charity looks for neither gain nor gratitude, and we are told that humility and self sacrifice are key to mission (LG 12, 8). Peter had to sacrifice his own knowledge claims in the transfiguration account. He had to accept that he had to let go of cherished ideas, personal plans, and missions. He had to accept that his will was not God's will. We could ask the painful question: What would it mean for us to accept institutional humility as a lesson from the transfiguration story, and what would it mean to express such institutional humility in an authentic way? Mission is not the expression of an ecclesia triumphans possibly motivated by external motives and recognition, but the humble expression of an inner necessity by which the Church is moved to mission (AG 1).

Redefining knowledge can remind us of the need for transformation; the transfiguration experience transformed the three disciples, their relationships with Jesus, with one another, and community. This transformation was the basis of the disciples accepting Jesus’ way and his suffering. They were transformed in order to be prepared to transform communities. Mission is not an activity that brings a message without changing the messenger. The key of mission is the testimony of the lives of the faithful (LG 36). Mission is a practice of self-involvement, transforming the people involved. The Council reminds us that one’s own example is the best tool for missionary activities (PC 24). We are called to show Christian identity by our own example (AG 11). We are “ambassadors of the mystery of Christ” (AG 24). This self-involvement also includes the sick and the suffering, who can support missionary activity through their prayers (AG 38, 40). We see a commitment to the transformative power of the weak—just as the weak disciples, who fell to the ground, were filled with the power to transform communities in their missionary work. There is space for an “option for the poor” also in mission, by acknowledging the transformative power of the weak, the suffering, and the poor.

Four Practical Suggestions

Enthusiasm and encounter, or the idea of being moved by the Spirit to be at home in the world, can be seen as the key ideas of mission according to the Second Vatican Council. Against this background, I would like to make four practical suggestions: (1) Jesuit priest Alfred Delp, who was arrested in July 1944 and killed on February 2nd, 1945, reflected upon the future of the Church in his prison cell. He was very clear that there is no future for the Church without a clear commitment to Diakonie, a diaconal dimension and engagement; there is no future for the Church without companionship, encounter, and dialogue. How can we build a culture of dialogue that responds to the needs of society? Danish economist Bjorn Lomborg developed his Copenhagen Consensus by inviting economists to prioritize world problems in a dialogue process. I would like to suggest, using Delp’s warning and Lomborg’s practice, organizing a “Council” involving as key speakers two groups that are very often under-represented in public debates: young people and of the suffering and dying. The two groups should be invited to discuss priorities and to ask the question: What does our society need? Young people have a sense of possibility, what Austrian poet Robert Musil called a Moeglichkeitssinn. They look at life from the perspective of the non-realized. Joseph Cardinal Bernardin showed by the example of his life that the suffering and the dying
have an authority and a sense of what is essential. (We could call this *Wesentlichkeitssinn*). I would like to suggest bringing these two groups of people together to answer the question of what is it that our society needs and to set priorities. (2) If we take institutional humility seriously, we could think of a new literary genre of papal documents, namely, prayer epistles—letters addressed to God, expressing concerns that seem doctrinally rigid but pastorally challenged. These would be public prayers, expressions of concerns, or confessions about difficulties. We could, for instance, conceive an epistle to God stating that while the ideal of the indissoluble marriage is valid and important, in the light of many marriages that fall apart after painful struggles, the Church might, with God's permission, move cautiously in another pastoral direction. (3) Mission is about enthusiasm and encounter. I would suggest actively seeking to build a culture of encounter by setting up intellectual base communities where ethical issues (such as abortion, euthanasia, and same sex marriage) can be discussed in a climate of friendship. There is as yet little real encounter between Church members and representatives of positions that cannot be reconciled with the Church. The basis for dialogue is a shared life, and common ground. Within the framework of a shared form of life, where people come together regularly, chances of understanding will increase—and mission as encounter can take place. (4) The Second Vatican Council reminds us that mission is transfiguration, based on encounter with the living God. The key is prayer. Prayer is as difficult as it is intimate. “Teach us to pray” is a very delicate request, and in the light of the importance of a second person perspective, I would like to suggest setting up schools of prayer that explore ways to encounter God as part of mission practice (Lk 11:1).

**Concluding Comments**

Mission as epiphany, and transfiguration is friendship with God. The Second Vatican Council reminds us again and again of the importance and the beauty of friendship. The Council reminds us that God speaks to human beings as friends (DV 2). It exhorts teachers to assist their students with advice and friendship (*Gravissimum Educationis* 8); the laity is invited to a culture of friendship, to promote a culture of Christian friendship and to give spiritual help to one another through friendship (AA 4, 17); the bishops are called to foster friendship and to see the priests as friends (*Christus Dominus* 13, 16, 28). Ministers are described as “friends of God” (LG 41). It is through our friendship with God that we can act, (following?—accepting/taking up?) the invitation in John 15:13 (GS 32). Mission as transfiguration is an expression of a culture of friendship, friendship with God, friendship with human beings. One of the greatest gifts of the great scholar and first holder of the L.J. Luzbetak Chair, Professor Steve Bevans, is the gift of friendship. This does not only make him a wonderful person, but also a great missionary with the gift of transfiguration.

This article is based on “Mission, Hope, and the Depth of Life: Commemorating the Second Vatican Council,” the lecture he delivered as the featured speaker of the 13th annual Louis J. Luzbetak, S.V.D., Lecture on Mission and Culture held on October 8, 2012 at the Catholic Theological Union.