

Integrity of Mission in the Light of the Gospel: Bearing the Witness of the Spirit

Presidential Address

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Dear colleagues, sisters and brothers,

Taking a look around these conference rooms, the world appears to us as peaceful, wealthy and carefree. But taking a look in the newspapers of Malaysia and after our "Exposure Program" we got an idea of the problems of the world and their effects on Asia and, more specifically, on Malaysia. Everywhere, Christians and theologians live with global agenda, which we try to consider in the light of the Gospel and according to our Church's tradition.

By "global agenda" I mean the problems of the people, the social conflicts on all levels and on all continents. The problems of the people are not destinies beyond our control. They are problems that have been caused by human beings, and consequently, human competence and intelligence can master these problems. We as missiologists attempt to read conflicts of the world as signs of God in history. We perceive them as challenges to prove the relevance of the Gospel and our teaching in the world. This results in priorities and real options.

Our conferences are privileged occasions for this kind of joint worldwide thinking. Here at the 11th International Conference of IAMS in Port Dickson, our reflection focuses on two key aspects: first, what does "integrity of mission" mean to us? and second, where and how do we observe the "witness of the Spirit"? We are not considering particular aspects but the essence of the mission. We are not standing above or below or outside the world. We are in this world but not from this world. We are interested in the hermeneutics of world affairs and the maieutics of the spirit. Both, hermeneutics and maieutics, are based on our professional competence and our prophetic mission. "Integrity of mission" is related to the integrity of our worldview in an incarnated-spiritual perspective. "Witness of the Spirit" is the birth of God in us and in the world.

I.

In this historic moment, when human community is increasingly forced to live under the anarchic conditions of globalization, all of our peoples struggle with great problems such as economic stagnation, mass unemployment, and impoverishment of families, criminality, drugs and violence. Newly elected governments are often mirror images of those that have been ousted from power. Formally independent governments are embedded in the framework of a more or less denationalized world society that is dominated by a hegemonic liberalism. These countries have to obey the economic imperatives of the world market. Human beings, neighbors, and friends are registered only in the category of customer files. The interests of the poor majority are barely perceived.

Between the last IAMS conference in South Africa (2000) and this one in Malaysia (2004), people in most countries have become poorer. Between these two dates lies - aside from the terror of global impoverishment caused by foreign debt, unemployment and unequal trade conditions - the terror attack of 9/11, which constitutes a challenge for us, missiologists. The terror and the revenge for the terror have caused the deaths of many innocent people. We, as Christians, were outraged with both sides and have protested in many ways against revenge. Those who rejected revenge, those who wanted

to halt the spiral of violence and insisted on fighting terrorism within the framework of the rule of law and respect for civil rights, were suspected to be on the side of the terrorists. Terrorism provokes death and feeds off the numbers of people killed. Revenge legitimizes the continuation of criminal acts. Therefore, we do not accept a justified terrorism against an unjustified terrorism. Not responding to these issues at our ecumenical world congress of missiologists would be a serious omission, as it concerns the future of humanity, peace, justice, and solidarity.

The attempt to roughly outline the world's panorama is in many ways one-sided, due not only to the one-sided professional competence of the missiologist, but also to the particularity of the speaker's context. But despite all contextuality, there are always overlapping joint tasks, which are determined by the Gospel. The evangelic option for the poor and the marginalized is not just a Latin-American option, it is the purpose of mission itself and therefore, a universal task. The bearers and agents of mission are the poor. They inspire our theology and our practical work. They fill it with Pneuma, the Holy Spirit. Given that the Holy Spirit is called the father of the poor, the poor and those on the margins of society are not only brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ but also daughters and sons of the Holy Spirit.

This leads me to another point which holds not only true for us, missiologists, but also for all Christians: The basic intention of the Gospel is missionary, and this is because of the poor, the homeless, the migrants, the outcast: the spirit of the Lord and the wisdom of the spirit rest on all those who know they have been sent to announce the Gospel to the poor, liberation to the prisoners as the year of the mercy of the Lord (cf. Lk 4,18f).

Four years ago in South Africa we celebrated the third millennium as the beginning of this year of mercy in the hope that after a century of barbarity, bureaucratic mass murder, ethnic cleansing and apartheid, we would be given years of peace. We hoped that in these years we could intensify the ecumenical and macro-ecumenical dialogue between Christians of different denominations and between different religions. An important and fundamental missiological task would be dialogue with a world stamped by atheism, secularization and fundamentalism. The ethic resources of this post-religious and fundamentalist world for itself were not in condition to establish an overlapping normative self and world conception.

The tasks and challenges that we are facing are bigger than we ever imagined. Ahead of us lies the transition from right of nations (*ius gentium*) - which never effectively protected the indigenous people in Latin America or India or Africa - to a cosmopolitan civil law able to keep together all states, nations and peoples. Neither the bilateralism, which made the two blocs East and West face each other, nor the hegemonic unilateralism with its super power politics, show the future for an increasingly complex world. The asymmetry between sophisticated war machinery, on the one side, and stone throwing youth in the Gaza Strip or rural ground troops in Iraq and Afghanistan on the other side, is more than crude. At the checkpoints of Ramallah I witnessed the inhuman treatment forced on to the Palestinians by the occupying force.

There are many different causes for such conflicts, and historically they reach far back. We don't have to offer any ready-made solutions, apart from our willingness to dialogue by showing compassion for the victims and being vigilant against fundamentalist tendencies under our own theological roof and within our churches. We protest against colonialism, but we have been sometimes far too busy with our own academic rituals to identify the shameless rituals of production and speculation of neo-liberal capitalism as challenges facing mission and theology. Instead of a so-called world-social policy which is breeding fringe groups, the prophetic inspiration of the "integrity of our mission" could and should have worked towards the integration of all peoples, by giving support to a new immigration policy based on solidarity and redistribution of capital.

In the long run, peace and freedom cannot be achieved by the military means of a hegemonic super power, but only through fair trade relations, through constitutional legality and tolerance, through human rights and the principle of proportionality. Lasting peace cannot be built on poverty and oppression. By using weapons, missiles or fences we can neither protect ourselves nor the poor against barbarianism. What can we do then to protect the others and ourselves? What is the message of a sermon of hope in a society stamped by market economy, consumerism and global and contextual insensitivity for human beings?

II.

Where we succeed to tear down fences designed to protect social asymmetry, where we are reminded that Jesus of Nazareth from the very start of his mission rejected privileges, prestige and power, where we are reminded that God in the gesture of giving is called in our Churches the Holy Spirit, there we will find a way out of the silent approval of being prisoners of the market. "The way out" means to turn our lives and our research into a relevant gift for all those who ask: "Give me a coat!" and "Give me water!" (Jn 4.7). "If you knew who it is that is asking you for a drink, you would ask him and he would give you life-giving water" (Jn 4.10). If we accepted the logic of giving and sharing and allowed all nations to participate in the political administration and in the distribution of all goods on earth, we could experience God in a field force of communication, revelation and grace.

Based on the options of our faith, hope and love, the cause and the project of the poor and the marginalized are part of the larger project of the Kingdom of God with its historical and eschatological dimension. The larger project of the Kingdom of God is present in our lives through the articulation and the relevance of our academic teaching with small victories and defeats of the poor and social movements.

Without this close connection, the practice of theology lacks the dimension of wisdom and spirit. Without this close connection to the poor, our faith lacks hope which in turn gives meaning to our lives.

The spirituality of an integrated mission, which brings us into communion with ordinary people, draws our attention to three dimensions of our responsibility:

- We attempt never to lose sight of the universal horizon of our missiological responsibility - despite all institutional, cultural and geographic interconnections, borders and limitations.
- We attempt to take up the conflicts resulting from the interests of the poor in a prophetically militant way, which will provide an opportunity for social transformation. Our theology has always a militant dimension because the poor and the different of our nations are always at the focal point of a social conflict.
- We attempt to live Easter experience of death and resurrection in relations of contextual presence of sharing and of gratuity.

Missiology is that quick step that follows in the footsteps of missionary practice, which can be read as signs of justice and images of hope. Macro-structural transformations are not part of our professional competence. But it is precisely these signs of justice and images of hope that are the beginning of a profound macro-structural and personal transformation. Our missiology tries to produce signs of justice and images of hope against the never-ending messages and seductive images of mass media in service of the market. In a world in which the privileged have lost the meaning of life and the poor lost the power to resist, the hermeneutics of missiology is a hermeneutics of resistance and hope. Human life can be meaningful despite the contingency of death and despite a structural injustice. Our faith is an endless source of reasons for hope, reasons for a real possibility of liberation.

Mission means memory and project. It is the memory of a colonial and colonizing environment that surrounds us. The memory interrupts the obsessive and traumatic reproduction of the past. The project is the vision of a different society. Fragments of this different society are present among the poor and the marginalized. Among indigenous societies, for example, we find elements of a different social order, where the shaping of human beings is more important than the production of goods, where participation is more important than competition, where sharing is more important than amassing goods, where freedom is more important than the secondary virtues of obedience and order.

This different society which is under construction and which is possible, will be a society without marginalized people in which we all will be free and equal. In this society it will be pointless to accumulate. Small cells of this new society can be discovered among all peoples and all nations and have attracted more and more attention at the Social World Forum that met in Porto Alegre and last year in Bombay.

III.

In the past the practice of the mission and the reflection of this practice were rightly criticized for their claim of universality, which implied a will to dominate the world. The missionary discourse was in a way hegemonic and exclusive. However, the universality of mission today has to be understood as an alternative to the globalization under the dictates of a social-Darwinistic liberalism. Communication technology has created societies and human beings in constant contact with each other, through words, images and business.

Nevertheless, at the same time, this global connected societies are separated by a social gap between winners and losers of globalization. Mission and missiology are universal, and its universality is an aspect of the integrity of the mission because it does not exclude anyone. If mission was limited geographically, culturally or ethnically, and only addressed to a small audience of chosen, then it would be exclusive like globalization under a neo-liberal agenda. We cannot accept a regional liberation or the salvation of a privileged few. Christians do not have the status of a "redeeming class" or that of an "elected race". Redemption takes place through those who are different, those who have fallen into the hands of thieves.

The experience of liberation and redemption is made possible through the victims of the systems not through the pure of the Churches or the elites of society. There is no redemption without an alliance with the poor who have become the victims of the systems. The cause of the oppressed and all those who fell into the hands of thieves is a common cause. Hope for redemption and liberation is given us because of the hopeless. It is because of the universality of victims that our mission is universal. Mission follows the suffering servant of God into the most remote areas of the world. By its very nature mission is boundless, although time and time again mission is obliged to recognize its limits and to respect the limits of others. Mission is universally contextualized. The missionary project in its contextual universality can be understood as an alternative to cultural colonization and social exclusion.

This alternative has its roots in the fundamental principles of the Gospel:

- Practicing greater love and proclaiming the Kingdom of God as liberation from imprisonment and corruption,
- Understanding global unity as the articulation of many projects of life with different horizons which do not insist on their own hegemony, we call this diversity in unity of the Holy Spirit,
- Approaching local life and specific projects with a universal responsibility for humanity as a whole and for our planet.

The missionary project has the power of orientation based in the unity of love of humanity and love of God. This is the origin of organization and protest against the powerful force of hunger, against the fatality of exclusion and against the banality of artificial paradises. To maintain hope in a sensible way, hope has to be organized. But doesn't this lead us into a dead-end, in a dead end of systems, of party organizations, of church structures and consequently into a one-way road of God's kingdom?

The missionary project means 'to be in a state of motion' in an organized way. Because of the universality and the dynamics of God's kingdom we are not political party but movement, we are the constructors of life in its integrality, missiologists of an integral mission. To be on the move is the most radical form of sharing. To be on the move is like a filter protecting against subtle infiltration of bourgeois influences, bureaucratization and accumulation.

IV.

Global economic activity and the problems of the poor and marginalized also concern us, not only as individuals, but also the institution IAMS as a whole. Unemployment, a worldwide process of impoverishment of a growing number of people, and new priorities of our church institutions caused by the necessity to cut costs has affected IAMS as an institution. In the future we cannot continue all our past activities in the same manner. This is not because it was too large but because the institutions that support us had to give up tasks and redefine their priorities.

Every member of the IAMS executive tried in a very democratic process to contribute towards reducing the administrative costs of IAMS. I would like to thank all colleagues in the executive for these efforts. My special thanks go to Birger Nygaard for his professional and competent administration. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank Areopagos, which carried the institutional burden of the secretariat in the last four years. I would like to thank all other church institutions that, with remarkable selflessness and solidarity, made it possible for many of us to be here today. May I also use this opportunity to convey my best wishes to the succeeding executive?

We have tried to consider and to shape the institutional future of IAMS under the current conditions of general downsizing and outsourcing within the churches. In this context, important questions need to be discussed and, in order to come to decisions we need the advice, participation and insight of all of you.

- What are the challenges from people, societies and world that IAMS will be confronted with and to which we seek solutions, insofar as we look for relevance based on the Gospel?
- Given those challenges, what are the priorities and main tasks of IAMS which we can and have to face, despite less and less resources?
- What are not only the limits we have to face but also the chances of this institutional downsizing that is imposed on us?

IAMS as an institution is present, but not in equal measure, in the north, in the south, in the east and in the west. All over the world we try to testify, to the very ends of the earth, the potential of peace rooted in the Gospel and in our academic discourse. Perhaps more than we have up to now we must keep the whole spectrum of IAMS in mind, its continuous going in a southerly direction and its opening up particularly in light of other religions and challenges outside of the territory of the churches. We can only actualize the IAMS-Agenda when we integrate the entire scenario of the world in the context of the poor.

V.

The opening up to the world of the poor, our conference describes it, as "bearing the witness of the Spirit". We encounter the wisdom of the Spirit side by side with the oppressed, the excluded and the marginalized. They reveal the unrecognized God in the world, as guests of Abraham (Gn 18) and as a foreigner for the disciples of Emmaus (Lk 24,13ff). They question a theoretical theology taught at universities the same as they questions the simulated agitation of our churches. They are aware that the comforts of the gilded cage do not weigh up the suffering that it causes. They live the gifts of the Spirit in a community. Dancing and singing, suffering and struggling they create a network of responsibility. At their festivities they remember a victory of the past and anticipate their dream of a world that can't be bought by individuals but belongs to everyone.

Our spirituality is a spirituality of open eyes, empty hands, and the experience of the Spirit on the way. The traveling companions share their bread and their time, their experiences and their wisdom. God loves empty hands. To expose yesterday's achievements and securities to today's drifting of the Spirit could mean opening a door to life here and now. To transform oneself and the system means to be on the way with open hands. LIFE is given only to those who give away themselves in the daily process of death and resurrection. Hope is the obstinate "in spite of that", which lies in all life resisting death.

The quintessential theological gift, Augustine emphasized that, is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is *theodatus*, given by God. The Holy Spirit is God in the gesture of giving. With the Holy Spirit the reciprocal logic of giving is replaced by the logic of grace. Redeemed through grace i.e. through the gift that replaces our asymmetric relationship to God with that new covenant in which we fight as serfs so that the marginalized and the poor can proudly refuse servitude. The transformation of a gift, that always implies an obligation, into a given grace, the transformation of reciprocity into a positive-asymmetric gratuitous love of one's enemy and servitude - that is the quintessential utopia of Christianity: the greater love (Jn 15,13) and greater justice (Mt 5,20). Greater love and greater justice liberate us from fear and hatred from violence and injustice.

Institutions, including Churches, have their problems with this, like we all do, not in theory but in practice. Institutions concerned with power and prestige are seldom merciful. Institutions are quite literally expensive as well they have structural obstacles to displaying gratuitous behavior in practice. The institutional downsizing that started because of financial shortcomings can, if the priorities are set right, achieve more gracious behavior.

This applies to all of us, who always struggle to throw away ballast to stay on track. All Christians and theologians are responsible in equal measure for the institutional downsizing in their churches. The witness of the Spirit, God in the gesture of giving, is the way out of the gilded cage of self-relevance. In the process and in the logic of the divine gift of grace, of gratuity and forgiveness, the practice of theology will become worn on the stony ground of daily life, but precisely for that reason it will become a place of the Spirit and a horizon of hope. Hope for liberation and redemption is given us because of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the live of the hopeless.