

INCLUSIVE MINISTRY OF EXORCISM: A PARADIGM FOR ECUMENICAL AND INTER-FAITH RELATIONS

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“Don’t forbid him... for whoever is not against us in our side”
~ Mk. 9:39-40

Ecumenical and inter-faith relations among different Christian denominations and world religions are no longer optional for them to face the challenges of the new millennium; dialogue is the most opted method of carrying out the relations. Every religious group would draw out from their own sources a paradigm or a model as a basis for a dialogue that is acceptable within one’s own religious tradition. For the Christians, that source is the bible and we presume other groups have their own stories to draw from. This article draws from an event in the life of Jesus as narrated in the gospel in which an exorcist who does not belong to the group of the disciples performs an act of exorcism. Jesus’ disciples complain to him and entreat him to forbid the outsider-exorcist to perform exorcism, a ministry they think belong only to them. But, Jesus tells them to allow him for, in fact, the exorcist is on their side since he does a work of the Kingdom. This God’s Kingdom of peace, justice, love, and reconciliation would be fully realized at end-time (eschaton), although it is already partially realized here on this world. Jesus’ followers do not have a monopoly on those activities which includes exorcism. The outsider-exorcist still does it in view of the Kingdom (without even realizing it) and the Spirit that breathes “energy” into his act is the Spirit that transcends any religious affiliation. Different Christian denominations and world religions can learn from the inclusive ministry of exorcism because here is affirmed the Kingdom-oriented acts which are, after all, acceptable to all and advocates belief in a Spirit that hovers over all. The exorcist story also gives the eschatological message that

we are all still journeying towards the finalization of God's Kingdom and there is no finality yet to what we say and do in our pilgrim way.

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone who doesn't follow us casting out demons in your name; and we forbade him because he doesn't follow us." But Jesus said, "Don't forbid him, for there is no one who will do a mighty work in my name and be able quickly to speak evil of me. For whoever is not against us is on our side. For whoever will give you a cup of water to drink in my name, because you are Christ's, most certainly I tell you, they will in no way lose his reward" (Mk. 9:38-41).¹

This passage on the exorcist follows the story of Jesus presenting a child who, when received, represents Christ himself (Mk. 9:37). The verse that follows the exorcism story is also about "little ones" whose stumbling brings condemnation to those who cause scandal (9:42). The message to Jesus' disciples is that their election to the inner circle of the discipleship is for service and not an exclusive privilege.

Most likely this anonymous exorcist witnessed the exorcism in 9:14-29 and attempted to exorcise by using the name of Jesus. It is not known if he succeeded in the attempt but he was seen and heard by the disciples mentioning Jesus' name. John reported to Jesus that they forbade him because he was not a follower ("he does not follow us"). John did not say, "because he does not follow you (Jesus), instead, "he does not follow us." Reading it in the context of the disciples arguing about who is the greatest among in the kingdom, John, representing the sentiments of the insiders, viewed their ministry of exorcism as an expression of exclusive privilege. John forgot that Jesus would frequently say "Come after me" (1:17; 2:14; 8:34; 10:21) and not "come after us."

The exorcist in Mark 9:38ff was allowed by Jesus to operate the exorcism ministry. The recognized disciples of Jesus wanted to

¹ John is saying "he does not follow us" hints a view of the disciples' privileged membership in Jesus' ministry. This is disclosed when Jesus talked about his impending death a second time; at the same time that the brothers, James and John, were impertinently hinting at their personal ambitions.

have him forbidden because he was not one of them. The mindset of John and others is that the ministry is exclusive to the inner circle, explicitly sent by Jesus to heal and cast out demons. Jesus' argument in not forbidding the exorcist is that if he is not against us, he is with us. Here, Jesus is more welcoming and assumes an inclusive stance to those who do not oppose his cause and, on the contrary, wish him well.² In the case of the outsider exorcist, Jesus acknowledges "a mighty work": the casting out of demons. It is a beneficial act done to a victim of possession by an adversary of Jesus. Also acknowledged is the exorcist's use of Jesus' name. This name is not expected just to work magic even if used in vain, but Jesus' approving comment indicates the exorcist must have used the name properly and authentically.³

It is clear in this incident that one does not have to belong to the inner circle of the apostles in order to exorcize. In a way, those who have faith in Jesus and consequently using his name are also authorized for such ministry, for they are serving God's Kingdom or Reign. It is presumed that such a person is ready to take the fight against Satan. After all, Satan means *adversary*, one who consistently tries to frustrate the saving activity of God.⁴ The fact that Jesus said only through prayer (Mk. 9:29) and faith (Mt. 17:20) can exorcism succeed means that the exorcist does not depend on his personal skill but on God's agency. We can correctly speculate that this outsider exorcist, in exorcising in Jesus' name, has entered into discipleship, implicit though it is, under Jesus. It can be implied here that "being with them" (Jesus and the recognized disciples) "is due to his having submitted to the ethics of discipleship lived and proclaimed by Jesus after the Spirit has sanctified that exorcist for believing in the Master and putting on

² Mathew's version is: "he that is not with me is against me" (Mt. 12:30a). It is a rather exclusionary statement, unlike that of Mark, but it accurately expresses the seriousness of the war against Satan. Here, one cannot be neutral or indifferent, if you are, then you can be treated as an enemy.

³ *Book of Acts* (19:13-16) reports a story of Jewish exorcists who used Jesus' name but failed to exorcise; instead, the demon in the possessed person beat them. This shows that Jesus' name can be misused and can only be effective in the context of faith.

⁴ Even Peter was called Satan by Jesus because he opposed the fulfillment of redemption by objecting to Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (see Mt. 16:23).

the latter's mind.

The disciples tried to exclude exorcism from the inner circle, but Jesus expanded the outreach of the Kingdom. The one who cured lepers ate with tax collectors and public sinners and took little children into his lap reminded his disciples that the exorcist is not an enemy; he performs the work of the Kingdom. Jesus sympathized with him and expected the disciples to do the same. Discipleship in Jesus is not based on juridical or legislated membership. It is more of becoming towards perfect conformity to Christ in the eschaton, hence, its eschatological dimension. But this growth in conformity to Christ is inseparable from the commission given to the disciples to proclaim the coming Kingdom of God, "a new eschatological reality," a life of communion, prefigured by the eucharist.⁵ The threat of the Adversary, however, gives no room for complacency.

This article is introduced by the above story on the inclusive Christian ministry of exorcism⁶ even by that outside of the formal boundaries. What follows is my explanation of what makes a ministry, like an exorcism, an inclusive ministry, meaning it breaks the barriers of formal affiliation and juridical authorization. The elements of an inclusive ministry will give rise analogously to an inclusive ecclesiology. I hope that the theological understanding of this inclusive ministry of exorcism and the ensuing ecclesiology will serve as a guide and paradigm for ecumenical and inter-faith relations.

EXORCISM: MINISTRY FOR THE KINGDOM IN JESUS' NAME THROUGH EXORCISM, GOD'S KINGDOM WARS AGAINST SATAN'S KINGDOM

The Kingdom or Reign of God was the focus and center of Jesus' preaching, at least, in the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus performed

⁵ Petros Vassiliadis "Eschatological Ecclesiology": *Beyond the Conventional Eucharistic Ecclesiology*, https://www.academia.edu/1806478/_ESCHATOLOGICAL_ECCLESIOLOGY_BEYOND_THE_CONVENTIONAL_EUCHARISTIC_ECCLESIOLOGY

⁶ This can also be applied to other ministries like healing but our focus is on exorcism in this section of the paper.

so many mighty works and signs to accompany this proclamation of God's Reign and one of them was exorcism or casting out of demons. "The kingdom of heaven is at hand! Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out devils (Mt. 10:8). "But if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you" (12:28).

If the synoptic gospels are regnocentric, that is, the Kingdom or Reign of God is at the center of Jesus' message, so, whoever works for the Kingdom is doing Christ's work and therefore is an insider in Christ's circle of exorcists. Here, we can also say that the role or function of Christ (soteriological dimension) rather than his person is emphasized. The expression "In Jesus' name" should not be considered in terms of a magical chant that causes an automatic or magical effect. "In Jesus' name" can mean one who follows the mission and messianic program of Christ.

In the gospels, the Kingdom or Reign of God is the spiritual realm or dimension over which God reigns or the fulfillment on earth for the will of God that creation dwells in peace, justice, and love. Jesus associated his person and ministry with the "coming of the Kingdom," which in his time was being inaugurated; he perceived and claim that he was the agent of God intervening in history.

Jesus' miracles, which included the casting out of demons were clear signs of the liberation that marked the coming of the Kingdom of God. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* echoes the agenda: "By freeing some individuals from the earthly evils of hunger, injustice, illness, and death, Jesus performed messianic signs." (CCC 549). Here, we can include demonic possession as one of the earthly evils broadly mentioned and pointing to a cosmic struggle between God's plan for the eschaton and satanic forces to frustrate it.

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF GOD'S REIGN

The miracles for Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God assumed an eschatological meaning in that they all pointed to God's Ultimate Reign, not as purely in the future but that it already

has begun and directed for ultimate achievement. In the gospels, the casting out of demons or other miracles for that matter is not seen as merely isolated acts; they are perceived as the “beginning of the ultimate reign of God.” In the expulsion of demons, Christoph Schonborn, a theologian of Christology, points out that the “various names for chief demons (Satan, Beelzebul, Belial) are clearly understood as powers that belong together” and that evil is not just an “isolated, fortuitous event,” that “behind its various manifestation stands the disruption of creation.”⁷ He continues: “The rule of God, which becomes effective in Jesus’ actions, forces back the rule of Satan: that is what the banishment of demons signifies.”⁸ A particular case of exorcism cannot just be considered by itself without putting it in the context of the final liberation of the cosmos from the Evil One. Humanity is constantly being threatened by corruption and demonic powers are the main contributors. Luke, in his account of the Temptation, presents Jesus as deflecting and countering the devil’s alluring arguments with the truth of his being the true Son of the Father.⁹

In a particular exorcism, as narrated in the gospel, the body of the individual possessed became the battleground of a cosmic struggle between good and evil, between the demonic and divine forces. The “abyss” referred to and the devil’s complaint that Jesus came “before the right time” hint at a cosmological struggle and the subsequent victory of the Kingdom of God over the forces of evil.¹⁰ In this understanding is the message of the good news (*kerygma*) that Satan’s final overthrow has already begun in this particular exorcism. The exorcism story becomes a paradigm of other soteriological issues like “personal healing and social integration,” “larger political struggles, and eschatological cosmic conflict.”¹¹

But before an ultimate conflict in the eschaton is current political struggle expressed in the naming of the Gerasene

⁷ Christoph Cardinal Schonborn. *God Sent His Son. A Contemporary Christology*. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2004) 237.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁹ Karl Allen Kuhn. *The Kingdom According to Luke and Acts. A Social, Literary, and Theological Introduction*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 231.

¹⁰ Eric Sorensen. *Possession and Exorcism in the New Testament and Early Christianity* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 130.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 131.

demoniac as “Legion.” The bystanders upon hearing the word “Legion” could not but think of the Roman occupation of Judaea and its surroundings. The Roman legions were notorious for the systematic and machine-like execution of their war machine against people in places they occupied. Here is the identification of the demonic possession with the local population’s resentment and restlessness with their Roman masters, who were symbolically and vicariously being driven out and destroyed. They were sent, of all places to the swine, a most unclean animal among the Jews. What an insult to the overbearing and haughty occupiers!¹²

If exorcism above was making an oblique reference to the Roman colonial occupation, we can expand our concept of exorcism as the need to get rid of present-day evils for these are countersigns of God’s Reign. Evil still exists in the world in many forms, threatening God’s promise to triumph over evil. There are still wars, violence, pains, and sufferings, often the products of mankind’s misguided thinking. Only when God’s name is made holy, and His will be done can we sense the coming of the Reign of God which will spell salvation for mankind and the cosmos. The New Testament tells us that Christ’s paschal mysteries have already inaugurated the advent of that Reign and that Christ himself would bring it to completion.

Jesus’ exhortation to seek first the Reign of God and its righteousness does not just mean waiting for his return at end-time. Seeing the Reign means that we focus on it in the present and base our everyday decisions on God’s word, which in the process transforms us. To live eschatologically means between now and the coming of God’s Reign we are continually given the chance and are being challenged to live according to the standards that the Gospel has bidden us to follow. We know that God’s Reign is not here yet but to live as if it is already here is to live the Gospel just as well. To live in the “as-if” milieu is to live in the dynamic and transformative *kairos* of the “already” and the “not-yet.” Our yearning and movement towards God’s Reign should affect what we say and do in our everyday life.

¹² Ibid., 130.

But entrance into the Reign of God qualifies as the narrow gate (see Mt. 7:13) that Jesus talks about in the gospel. Entrance to it is not an easy walk in the park; it is through repentance and belief can one enter into it. Repentance involves, as Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans, turning away from humans' line of least resistance, "the desire of the flesh" (not subject God's law) to a mind that subjects to the law of God (Rom. 8:7). Jesus has previously said, "If you want to have eternal life, you must obey God's commandments" (Mt. 19:17). For believers in Christ, qualifying for the divine governance is an ongoing act of being conformed to Christ; but who will inspire and guide us into that journey? It is the Holy Spirit. As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are children of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit Itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs - heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ... (Rom. 8:14-17). We cannot separate the Reign of God from the eschaton that will be disclosed by Christ in his second coming; neither can we ignore the role of the Spirit on the eschaton for it is the Spirit that will guide us to be conformed to the criterion and standard of God's Reign: Jesus Christ.

THE PNEUMATOLOGICAL DIMENSION

Thus, the ministry introduced by Jesus which includes the casting out of demons gives an important role to the Spirit, that is, to the pneumatological dimension. In the gospel, the evil spirit played the role of an adversary to the establishment of God's Reign by Christ, but it was the Holy Spirit that guided Christ along; this gives rise to what is later called Spirit Christology. But before looking at the role of the Spirit in Christ's mission of establishing the Reign of God, let us look at the Spirit's role¹³ in the Old Testament.

¹³ Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Incarnation. A New Evolutionary Threshold* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 44-45. For Murchu, the effective presence of God was already articulated in times and places antecedent to the biblical world. One such articulation, especially among indigenous peoples, is the term the Great Spirit.

In the first Genesis creation account, it is written that before creation, the Spirit of God hovers the waters of chaos. The next chapter narrates that after God has shaped a lump of clay into later on known as a human body, God sends the divine Spirit (breath) into Adam's nostrils, and he becomes alive (see Gen. 2:4b, 7). In consequence, Donald Gelpi, a theologian on the Holy Spirit, makes this observation, "Adam, therefore, rises from the earth constrained to cling to the God of life or suffer the deadly consequences of sin."¹⁴

In the Book of Prophets, God's Spirit is reported to have inspired the prophets in their prophecy and the most dramatic account of the role of the Spirit among the prophets is described in the vision of Ezekiel. This prophet acknowledges freely that the Spirit of God inspires his prophecies (Ezek. 3:12, 14; 8:3). He also announces the Spirit's power to give life back to the whole nation of Israel. The Israelites appear to be unexcited, lifeless, and strewn like dry bones of slain soldiers, but God's word would re-assemble the bones and fill them with flesh and sinews. But then, only when the Spirit of God has given back its life would Israel stand up in its feet in dignity and freedom like it once was" (37:1-14). The prophets did not just engage in mystical visions but also confronted and challenged in God's name the most crucial issues in society, in political and economic life during their time. They called upon their fellow Israelites to be aware and conscious of the injustices and inequalities in their midst and to repent of their sinful ways. Prompted by the Spirit, these prophets strongly encouraged the people to be faithful and obedient again to the covenant they had made with Yahweh.¹⁵

The Spirit gives life and order in the creation of the whole world and therefore, the Church cannot just limit within its ecclesiastical sphere the presence and activities of the Spirit.

Many of these people without the benefit of contact/ communication with each other, uphold religious convictions on the notion of the Great Spirit. "This seeks to describe God's intimate and enduring presence to all organic life primarily and through the material creation itself. It is through our cosmic interaction as earthlings that we encounter and experience the Great Spirit."

¹⁴ Donald Gelpi, *God Breathes the Spirit in the World* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988), 8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

Consequently, the Spirit is present in all human experiences and these are all where grace can become present. This erases the traditional sacred-secular, holy-profane dichotomy. To denounce social injustices and inequalities is to vindicate God's will and His reign.

“THE HOLY SPIRIT IS UPON ME” (JESUS)

Still, in the area of pneumatology, we remind ourselves of the inseparability of Christ and the Spirit; thus, we need a Christology and a soteriology in which the Holy Spirit is a constituent agent. The Son of God came into an earthly existence by the power of the Holy Spirit as announced by an angel to Mary. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC 744) says this: “In the fullness of time the Holy Spirit completes in Mary all the preparations for Christ’s coming among the People of God. By the action of the Holy Spirit in her, the Father gives the world Emmanuel ‘God-with-us.’” In the same book is written, “From the beginning to the end of time, whenever God sends his Son, he always sends his Spirit: their mission is conjoined and inseparable” (CCC 743). One of these joint and inseparable missions is overcoming Satanic power. If “the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” (1Jn. 3:8), it makes sense that “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, and he went about doing good and healing all who were in the power of the devil” (Acts 10:38).

The devil, however, does not fight head-on; subtle that he is, he cajoles and tests cunningly. In the temptation story, Jesus could have boasted and flaunted his power as God's son and heir in his resistance to the devil's offer. By itself, there is nothing wrong with turning stone into bread and casting oneself from the top of the temple and expect God through His angels to save him from the law of gravity. But that would be tempting God and misuse the divine power. Jesus did not take the bait. Instead, he used obedience to God's will as his weapon in his victory over the enemy. As the letter to the Hebrews says, “Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered (Heb. 5:8). Schonburn offers an insight:

“The struggle with Satan is not carried on with a massive array of power, like a struggle of titans; rather, it begins in secret, when Jesus is completely alone with and before God. That is when the decisive victory is won, the counter image and archetype of which is the event of the Cross, when Jesus is once more abandoned (as in the temptation in the wilderness) and alone before and with God.”¹⁶

But in all this, the Gospel narrates to us that the Spirit that assisted Jesus was the same Spirit that led him to the wilderness in the first place. “And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time. And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country” (Lk. 4: 13-14). When Jesus cast out the devil, the Pharisees accused him of doing this by the power of no less than the prince-devil, Beelzebul. Jesus considered that accusation as a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Why did he say this? It is because, as portrayed consistently in the gospels, Jesus worked miracles not out of divine privilege but out of his being one working through and by the Holy Spirit dwelling in him. Jesus performed exorcism by the power of the Holy Spirit. After all, Jesus’ all other miracles began after his baptism, where and when the Holy Spirit descended upon him.

Here is Schonburn’s reminder. “God’s Kingdom comes wherever the Father’s will is done, not in an apocalyptic scenario, but through simple obedience. Anyone who does not see that that is Jesus’ authority has invariably missed the meaning of the expulsion of demons.”¹⁷ Can't we say, then, that "in Jesus' name" means to be obedient as Jesus was to the Father's will and the prompting of the Spirit? Instead of assuming the arrogance of the evil spirit, the anonymous exorcist in Mark 9 must have exercised similar obedience.

¹⁶ Schonburn, *God Sent His Son...*, 239.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 240.

EXORCISM MINISTRY IN ITS DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS

The passage on the exorcist (Mk. 9:38ff) is included in the context of Jesus' mention of the greatest in the Kingdom: the marginalized children. In saying this, Jesus was opposing the mind of the disciples, represented by John, that the Reign of God would be an earthly rule with the recognized disciples serving as a privileged and empowered group, which is the way of the "rulers of the gentiles" (see Mt. 20:25). Obviously, if that is the way of God's Reign, then, the anonymous exorcist had no business in doing exorcism even if it is said that he was doing it in the name of Jesus. But the earthly is not the way of the heavenly reign; on the contrary, in the *Our Father*, it is prayed that God's Kingdom and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven. This Kingdom, the focus and center of Jesus' preaching, is eschatological, that is, to be attained in end-time but that it has already been inaugurated in his ministry. Jesus, in the manifestations of God's Reign through miracles of healing and exorcism, is being obedient to the promptings of the Spirit. In summary, Jesus' ministry is centered on the Kingdom (regnocentric), has been initiated but to culminate in end-time (eschatological), and in obedience to the Spirit's prompting (pneumatological).

About the outsider exorcist, why did Jesus tell his disciples, "Do not forbid him" even if he did not belong to the circle of the "official disciples?" First, he was performing a mighty deed that signified fighting against the Satanic reign on behalf of God's Reign (regnocentric character of the exorcism ministry). This fight or struggle was not an isolated individual act against Satan but pointed towards God's Ultimate Reign (eschatological character). All these mighty works and deeds done for the divine Reign were inspired and energized by the Spirit (pneumatological character). All these are summed up in the phrase, "in Jesus' name." The following section below will delineate the ecumenical and inter-faith relations among Christians and non-Christians respectively with the inclusive exorcism ministry as a model. In short, for Catholics engaging in ecumenical and inter-faith relations, these three characters or dimensions would be considered helpful. This article contends that ministries other than exorcism in which these

dimensions are found are ports of entry into more meaningful relationships in ecumenical and inter-faith relations.

TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE ECCLESIOLOGY

MINISTRIES ARE MIGHTY WORKS AND DEEDS OF THE KINGDOM (REGNOCENTRIC DIMENSION)

Traditionally, all religions have, in the past at least, have experienced struggles with evil spirits and evil, in general. The modern world with its scientific orientation has lessened interest in the existence of evil spirits and this orientation has influenced most religions; but the turning away from the evil spirits has enabled contemporary believers to discover evils in other forms: social, political, economic. If the Reign of God is characterized by peace, justice, and love, then, whatever frustrates these values is inimical to God's interest. Whatever diminishes the fullness of life in the world and human society is countersign and counter-witness to the realization of God's Kingdom and Reign. In the Book of Revelation (Rev. 6:1-8), there is a dread against the Four Horsemen representing conquest, war, famine, and plague, respectively. These are not life-giving events and therefore are inimical to God's reign. Believers in God are certainly called to eliminate them in any way they can. There have been examples of crusades against them. There has been no shortage of peacemakers, food assistance, borderless doctors, and disaster reliefs. Here, some are faith-inspired, others are simply humanitarian (e.g., International Red Cross, Doctors Without Borders) and there is no inquiry as to the religious status of the beneficiaries. From the believer's perspective, all are ministering to the Kingdom and are helping in the realization of God's Reign. On them Jesus could have easily said: "Do not forbid these humanitarians for they are on our side."

Positively promising ecumenical and interfaith relations have been exemplified in a pluralistic society like the United States at the height of natural disasters like the earthquake in Haiti and flooding in New Orleans. Peter Leithart, who vouches for an end to denominationalism, sees promise in the responses of Christians, especially, the Lay.

“Lay Christians are involved in the many interdenominational mission and ministry efforts that give much energy to American Christianity. Lay Christians go on short- or long-term mission trips to help rebuild New Orleans or Haiti... Lay Christians serve at soup kitchens and homeless shelters and homes for women escaping from the sex trade. In each of these contexts, they serve alongside Christians from many other churches. They can engage in these forms of ministry with the deliberate intention of crossing denominational barriers. Lay members might seek opportunities to serve churches in other denominations.”¹⁸ Can we hear Jesus say again, “Do not forbid those who belong to other denominations!”

Jesus' proclamation of God's reign was accompanied by his exhortation for repentance. It is wrong to believe, then, that just because God's *ecclesia* is inclusive it does not mean that there is no exclusion at all. Clearly, Matthew's account at the end-time of "harvesting for" and "weeding out" of the Kingdom is a great reminder of God's judgment (see Mt. 25: 31-40). An inclusive ecclesiology sees God "taking sides" at the end where and when there are those who are saved and those who are damned. God, the Judge, does not show here arbitrariness or whimsicality. The "saved" are those who assisted the brothers and sisters (anybody in need) even without thinking of God taking note of what they have done ("when did we see you hungry and gave you food?") and so forth. B. Viviano takes note of "God taking sides": "Unlike perhaps in Paul's idea of the covenant (unconditional divine commitment), here covenant presupposes human moral responsibility and conscience and God taking human actions seriously."¹⁹ The "damned" are those who have not given assistance to the needy brothers and sisters and are surprised to learn that God is affected by their neglect. As we see that divine choice, salvation, and damnation, are preceded by other choices. Again, we have Viviano's sharp observation:

¹⁸ Peter J. Leithart, *The End of Protestantism. Pursuing Unity in a Fragmented Church*. (Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 188.

¹⁹ Benedict Thomas Viviano, OP, *Choosing Sides: Matthew 35:31-46 The Bible Today* 58, no. 1 (January/ February 2020): 35.

“For this text to be relevant we must presuppose a prior series of choices by those gathered before the divine ruler. They are humans, nations, Christians. They are people who have chosen to feed the hungry, the thirsty, to welcome the stranger (the homeless), to clothe the naked, to nurse the sick, to visit the prisoners – or not! The king’s choice depends on their own prior choices or the orientation of their lives.”²⁰

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL DIMENSION MAKES AN INCLUSIVE ECCLESIOLOGY

The eschatological *ecclesia*, as we have seen in the “last judgment,” “God’s “taking of sides” depends only on the “mighty works and deeds” for the Kingdom (assistance to the needy); there is no test on doctrine or mention of religious affiliation. Not one is judged according to scriptures alone (*sola scriptura*) or justified by faith alone (*sola fides*); rather, they are “saved” or “damned” depending on how they have lived the Word of God and enliven their faith through good deeds for the needy brothers and sisters.

But, the eschatological dimension of an inclusive ecclesiology does not just wait for end-time. At present, it generates hope for the final fulfillment of God's reign. Hope in the same Reign of God transcends all boundaries since hope by itself is an attitude or a state of mind that is defined by what it is being drawn to. If hope is essential to the human condition, expect hope in every human heart and thus, hope is a unifier. Those who hope to look in the same direction and aspire for that same "object of desire." No matter what situations or life settings those hope-filled faithful are in, they are united by the object of their hope: future glory. The present conditions of the different *ecclesia* or assemblies generate their own "pledges of future glory." I can only mention a pledge of future glory for the Catholics and that is the Eucharist.²¹ For

²⁰ Ibid., 37. Mentioned in these verses (35-36) concerning the criteria of the Ultimate Judgment are six of the seven corporal works of mercy in catechetical tradition.

²¹ O sacred banquet, in which Christ is received, the memory of his Passion is renewed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to

believers in the Eucharist, their hope is activated for the bringing about of God's plan and the fulfillment of divine peace, justice, and love for all creation. So, those who celebrate the Word of God and those who participate in the Eucharistic communion anticipate in the hope of the final transformation of the whole cosmos into a New Creation.

**THE PNEUMATOLOGICAL DIMENSION
MAKES AN INCLUSIVE ECCLESIOLOGY**

The pneumatological dimension orients for an inclusive ecclesiology for two reasons: it takes us away from two “isms”: Christomonism and clericalism. Christomonism (identifying Christ as the singular representation of God) harps on the exclusive soteriology of Christ “whose name is above all other names” (see, Phil 2:9). We shall see later that Spirit Christology gives us another perspective that, without watering down Christ's human-divine identity and his uniqueness for the Christians, does not stress divine privilege and power but on his own act of obedience. Also, that the Spirit even precedes the *ecclesia* and its hierarchy makes an ecclesiology that depicts the whole Church (with its lay majority) as being “breathed upon” by the Holy Spirit, which transcends borders and religious affiliations.

In interfaith relations, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) foresaw problems with the other major faiths of Asia if we adopt a Christology of the unique Christ. It is not that the Christian Church in Asia would renounce the dogmas on the person and unique function of Christ but that it would give more emphasis on Jesus' content of preaching that would deflect an alienating depiction of a superior Christ. First, FABC reminded the faithful that Christ did not proclaim himself but rather the

us. The original in Latin (*O Sacrum Convivium*) is attributed to St. Thomas Aquinas. For the eucharist as the generator of hope which is also popular among the orthodox churches, see Vassiliadis “Eschatological Ecclesiology.”

Kingdom or Reign of God,²² which we have already shown above on the regnocentric character of the exorcism ministry and of the Church as a whole. There is another way of depicting Christ in theology that makes an inclusive ecclesiology and is more faithful to the synoptic gospels. It is Spirit Christology. What basically is it?

A Christology that has been popularly used in the past is logos Christology. It is that Christ pre-existed Jesus of Nazareth and that the logos, the second person of the Trinity, took our flesh in what we call the Incarnation. Also called Christ from above, he embodies God's power, and all his "mighty works and deeds" including the casting out of demons can be attributed to his power inherent in his divinity. Christ has power because he is God, and the Church to which he has given the key has been delegated the divine power. This makes for an exclusive ecclesiology in which Church authority is defined more by a power which, if shared, is believed to be diminished.

But there are just too many pieces of evidence in the gospels which reveal another kind of Christology, other than the pre-existent Christ and the logos Christology of the Johannine gospel. In the Synoptic gospels which portray Christ from below, we see Christ Himself who is obedient to the Spirit; we have seen this in the pneumatological dimension of the exorcism ministry. It was the Spirit that gave him life in the virgin womb of his mother, it was the same Spirit that gave life back in the resurrection. His struggle with his enemies was not accomplished by the brandishing of his divine power, like in Greek mythology, but rather through the assistance of the Spirit. His exhortation for us to be perfect as the Father is perfect can be made doable only because we can imitate Christ in his obedience to the Spirit. We cannot imitate Christ in his perfect imaging of the Father if he invokes his divine nature as the source of his being a perfect image of the Godhead. Why would the image of Christ as a Spirit-filled man make for an inclusive ecclesiology?

²² FABC, BIRA (Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs) II (Dialogue with Muslims), BIRA IV/2 "Theology of Dialogue: The Church at the Service of God's Reign on Earth" in *For All the Peoples of Asia, Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. Documents from 1992-1996* ed. F.J. Elders, (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997).

An inclusive ecclesiology would diminish the alienation of people of other faiths, especially in Asia. Christomonism is a factor in that alienation, so to revert to the Spirit as a leading agent in the history of religions would provide an opening to other faiths without at the same time denying the centrality of Christ in our faith. We mentioned above how the Spirit has preceded the existences of all religions and cultures in their respective stories. Every religion has its own story to tell in which the Spirit has a role to play. Our own story which we don't necessarily expect others to own is that Christ our Savior himself was obedient to the Spirit; this led him to his self-sacrificing love and service for humans and creation. Christ's life of service and ministry culminated in the Cross, followed by his being raised back to life, after which he went back to the heavenly abode to sit at the right hand of the Father. This is our story as Catholic Christians, but in owning this as our story we can still listen to the story of others. Unlike dogmas and official ecclesiastical statements, a story is not imposed but simply shared. A religious group that insists on the imposition of its beliefs (corollary to Christomonism) would in itself contradict and goes against the very nature of a story that thrives in its uniqueness and distinctiveness. Faithfulness to one's story calls for respect for the unique and distinctive character of other stories.

Like Christomonism, clericalism thrives on a superior and exclusive attitude of the clergy resulting from an exclusive Christology. I contend that the further we go away from clericalism,²³ the closer we are to being a church of inclusive ecclesiology. Even before the claim by the official disciples of Jesus at Pentecost that the Spirit had descended upon them, according to Karl Rahner, "God has already communicated himself in his

²³ Pope Francis said this in his homily at St. Martha Chapel (December 16, 2019). "Lord, free your people from a spirit of clericalism and aid them with a spirit of prophecy." "Clericalism could be defined as a false or sycophantic respect and esteem for clergy. It lends to the persons of priests, in view of their clerical office, an excessive deference and acquiescence. In a clericalist culture, the clergy often stand above and aloof to their flocks, to which distance the faithful can respond in a childish spirit of obedience and false reverence." Kathleen N. Hatrup, *5 Of the Many Times Pope Francis has Railed Against Clericalism*, accessed at <https://aleteia.org/2018/08/23/5-of-the-many-times-pope-francis-has-railed-against-clericalism/>.

Holy Spirit always and everywhere and to every person at the innermost center of his existence.”²⁴ The Spirit is given ahead as a gift before any claims by institutions and before any legislation made by them as to the exclusive circle of membership. Dermot Lane describes well a scenario on Rahner’s participation in the Council. “It is against this background that we should understand Rahner’s passionate plea on the eve of the Second Vatican Council to take the Spirit more seriously in an address entitled ‘Do not stifle the Spirit,’ a title taken from I Thessalonians 5:19.”²⁵ Lane takes note partially quoting the German theologian:

Rahner is very clear that the stirring of the Spirit ‘is not ... confined to official pronouncements of the Church or the holders of official positions’ and that a creative inter-play should take place between the charismatic and the hierarchical elements within the Church.²⁶

Further on, Lanes makes a conclusive remark:

If we accept this view of the Spirit, then we can approach other religions not as strangers, not as heathens, not as pagans, but as persons with whom we are one in the Spirit, and who have already received the fruits of the Spirit in varying degrees.²⁷

For an inclusive ecclesiology in the ecumenical and inter-religious relations, we do not have to depend alone on private reflections of theologians. The magisterium itself has made pronouncements favorable to unity with pneumatology as a common denominator. Vatican II in its *Decree on Ecumenism* (*Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964) avers that dialogues for a favorable

²⁴ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1978), 139.

²⁵ Dermot A. Lane, *Pneumatology in the Service of Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue. A Case of Neglect?*, *Louvain Studies*, vol. 33, nos. 1-2 (2008), 136-158.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 140.

climate of relations were happening “under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”²⁸ Furthermore, the *Decree* states that it is the Spirit that realizes “the communion of the faithful”; so it is the Spirit, then, that constitutes “the principle of Church’s unity.”²⁹ A step towards unity or, at least, a harmonious and productive relationship among religions, that transcends doctrinal differences is a faith-in-action response to Christ’s reminder that exorcism cannot happen except through prayer and fasting. So let us look at prayer, fasting, and almsgiving (inseparable practices in all faiths) as an example of praxes that all Christian denominations and non-Christian religions can undertake with a unified vision for the common good (God’s interest) and under the same living Spirit “that blows where it wills” (see Jn. 3:8).

COMMON FIGHT AGAINST THE DEMON OF DISUNITY THROUGH PRAYER AND FASTING

If the casting out of demons is very challenging, equally challenging is resisting their wiles. It is no surprise since, according to St. Paul, even Satan transforms himself to appear as an angel of light (see Cor. 11:14). In ecumenical relations, the *Lord’s Prayer* or the *Our Father* might serve as a mantra prayer of unity in face of contemporary “temptations.” It is not enough that demons be cast out but that their “wiles” or “attractions” are also fended off. In the *Lord’s Prayer*, we ask God not to lead us to temptation. Jesus, upon learning of the disciples’ inability to cast out demons said, “But this kind doesn’t go out except by prayer and fasting” (Mt. 17:21). So, let us have a look at the primary prayer of the Christians and, later on, at fasting. For this paper, we reflect on what they do for ecumenical and inter-faith relations.

Addressing God as “Father” reminds us of the disciples’

²⁸ *Decree on Ecumenism: Unitatis Redintegratio*, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vatii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html, art. 4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, art. 2. See also, John Paul II’s *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), *Dominum et Vivificantem* (1986), and *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), all reiterate the role of the Spirit in the mission of the Church.

status: they are “beloved children.”³⁰ All believers sharing the same Father and, therefore, aware of brotherhood/sisterhood cannot afford to contend as who is superior (be reminded of Jesus’ response to the competing disciples, in Mk. 9:37). Jesus endured temptations because the Spirit of his Father was upon him; the Son trusting Him and banking on His word alone. The disciples cannot do less. When Jesus said that the children are the greatest in the Kingdom of God, the accompanying virtue of humility is a deterrent against the demon of superiority. This is the demon that surreptitiously accompanies a triumphalistic spirit; Pope Francis once pointed this out.³¹

The petition that “the Father’s Kingdom Come” reminds us that only God’s reign and no other ways of governance would flourish at the eschaton. Contemporary times see the apparent flourishing of all kinds of kingdoms: of wealth, of political power, of prestige. The power that comes with the kingdom is very attractive, though. It was not rare in history that the Church with all good intentions of evangelizing “gentiles” and “pagans” had gotten a ride on the colonizing power of their respective countries, at times, at the expense of the Church’s mission. But with wisdom, practically all major religions have learned not to trust these earthly kingdoms. History has been a witness to ephemeral kingdoms which have come and have gone.

According to Macnamara, the third petition (“Thy Will Be Done”) is “an effective way to avoid the illusions of self-will and autocracy.”³² To where have self-will and autocracy (supreme political power concentrated in one person) have brought us? Squandering of natural resources by the domination of others (exploiters overexploited), the illusion of hegemonic power by the “haves” over the “have-nots” have caused disunity. “By adopting the

³⁰ Luke Macnamara, OSB, “Do Not Lead Us into Temptation – Jesus in the Desert (Mt. 4:1-11),” *The Furrow* 71, no.3 (March 2020): 143-150, 148.

³¹ “The triumphalism of the church stops the church. It becomes a church that journeys only halfway to its goal of salvation because people become satisfied with everything being “well organized – all the offices, everything in its place, everything beautiful, efficient. Too many times, we are faith-checkers instead of facilitators of the people’s faith” (Pope Francis, May 29, 2013), <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/francis-chronicles/pope-s-quotes-triumphalism>.

³² Macnamara, “Do Not Lead Us...,” 150.

Father's will, the disciple aligns with the Father's desire for the full flowering of creation, humanity, and each individual disciple."³³ For such reason, Jesus resisted the temptation to test his Father's power to protect him from a possible fall by some sort of a cavalier presumption. That will be employing his divine privilege, thus, belying his kenotic (self-emptying) character.

The second part of the *Our Father* is a humble and trustful request directed to a Father: "Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread." All believers and even non-believers are one in agreement that worldly drive for material prosperity never suffices, that enough is never enough. To have given in to the temptation of changing stones into bread, Jesus would be invoking and depending on his divine privilege and he would be encouraging his followers to be self-sufficient. Is not the lookout for security and self-sufficiency the cause of people warring against each other? Have not the desperate attempts to provide only for one's "tribe" caused so many territorial and regional break-ups? All major religions have practically disowned this mindset by subscribing to the three pillars of religion (possible bases of unity): prayer (acknowledging our relationship with God), fasting³⁴ (acknowledging our needs), and almsgiving (witnessing to love and justice). In referring to the expulsion of the devil from a possessed person, Jesus said, "But this kind doesn't go out except by prayer and fasting" (Mt. 17:21).

What does fasting do to the resistance against the demon of disunity among religions? Isaiah's statement in an oblique way gives us a rationale for fasting. Isaiah, in warning that God would not acknowledge ritual fasting when it did not redound to the well-being of the oppressed, is teaching us that the prescribed fasting is valid only when it is according to the wish of God. Isaiah lamented that those who fasted were still thinking of their own welfare and

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Jessica Coblentz, "Catholic Fasting Literature in a Context of Body Hatred: A Feminist Critique," *Horizons: The Journal of the College Theology Society* 46, no. 2 (December 2019): 215-245. Coblentz observes that in the past the discipline of fasting was the accompaniment of a sacramental dualist that gives rise to body hatred; so, in that way, fasting is a form of "punishing" the body possessing an intrinsically evil nature. On the contrary, she claims to fast in a non-dualistic view of the body (regarded as sacramental) can even be subversive of social injustice and empowering for social justice.

not of others. What is God's desire as the accompaniment of fasting?

"Is such the fast I desire, a day for men to starve their bodies? Is it bowing the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast, a day when Adonai is favorable? No, this is the fast I desire: To unlock the fetters of wickedness and untie the cords of the yoke to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore your own kin." (Is. 58: 3,6-7).

Constitutive of fasting is self-denial (not self-hatred) in which we get out of our comfort zone, including food and entertainment, and enter into a period and area of discomfort. In this time and space of discomposure and deprivation, we rely on the Lord and seek Him. Without playing down the physical hunger, we shift our consciousness to the hunger for justice and righteousness, the deprivation of which we are made aware in our fasting. Prayer comes easily in the process and compassion moves those who fast and pray to come to the assistance of the needy; this is the meaning of almsgiving.

Almsgiving has its equivalent in the bestowal of the works of mercy to the needy as described in Chapter 25 of Matthew. It is expressed in the "cup of cold water" given to the thirsty mentioned by Jesus (Mk. 9:41; Mt. 10:42). Works of mercy and the cup of cold water sacramentalize God's love and mercy. Later, among the Church Fathers, there was the beginning of situating these "almsgiving" activities to acts of social justice. In a holistic theology, mercy and justice meet and are inseparable. This is what Helen Rhee says on the patristic shift of almsgiving from an act of mercy to an act of social justice:

Based on God's own *philanthropia* ('love of humanity,' compassionate generosity), when Christians practice it mainly through almsgiving to the poor and sharing, they mirror the original image (*eikon*) of God, undo their crime of inhumanity, retain a Christian identity and virtue, and thus

restore a semblance of God's creative intent for the common good. This fundamental social virtue, *philanthropia*, is, in fact, an attendant virtue of salvation (the goal of creation, including humanity), in reversing the effects of the fall and restoring human flourishing.³⁵

Not one particular Church or religion can claim to be the Reign of God, although each aspires to be God's reign in its attempt to manifest, in some kind of "epiphany," the characteristic values of that reign which are peace, justice, love, forgiveness, and righteousness. We showed above how works of mercy and compassion are the marks of epiphany by which a church or a religious group is bringing to fruition the reign of God. The works of social justice that these groups engage in betray an irony that it can be the demon through his works that can initiate unity among Christians (e.g., Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox) and non-Christian believers (e.g., Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus). If each of these groups operates in the ongoing development of the epiphany of God's reign, they can join forces against the Adversary of God. C.S. Song, a theologian with Asian roots, says it well,

And together these epiphanies of God's reign mobilize the power in the human community to bring about the fall of autocratic powers, inaugurate a new era of freedom and democracy, and rekindle the hope of a world built not on exploitation and domination but mutual support and enrichment.³⁶

According to Song, the churches and, by insinuation, other religions can be united to say with Jesus, "If by the finger of God, we drive out the demons, then be sure the reign of God has already come upon us" (Lk. 11:20).³⁷ The same author contextualizes the demonic works when he concludes: "The reign of God is the power

³⁵ Helen Rhee, "Philanthropy and Human Flourishing in Patristic Theology," *Religions* 9, no. 11 (2018), (abstract) <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel19110362>

³⁶ C.S. Song, *Jesus and the Reign of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 282.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

that exorcises the demons of social oppression, political authoritarianism, and economic exploitation.”³⁸

Jesus, referring to fasting, together with prayer, as a way of expelling demons, reminds us that demonic possession hints at the existence of other evils, like the colonization by the Romans, represented by "Legion." The struggle against the current evils of oppression, hunger, homelessness, destitution, and neglect of the needy would constitute praxes that know no religious boundaries. It is obvious that fasting is meaningless without the accompanying "almsgiving." Here almsgiving is represented by the works of mercy mentioned by Isaiah, parallel to their mention in the last chapters of Matthew. Almsgiving is also represented by the "cup of cold water" given to the thirsty in the name of Christ. The one who gives sacramentalizes God's mercy but it also sacramentalizes social justice. This is the point later of the Church Fathers who consider almsgiving an act of justice. Based on God's own *philanthropia* ("love of humanity," compassionate generosity), when Christians practice it mainly through almsgiving to the poor and sharing, they mirror the original image (*eikon*) of God, undo their crime of inhumanity, retain a Christian identity and virtue, and thus restore a semblance of God's creative intent for the common good. This fundamental social virtue, *philanthropia*, is, in fact, an attendant virtue of salvation (the goal of creation, including humanity), in reversing the effects of the fall and restoring human flourishing.

CONCLUSION

Jesus showed in the exorcism ministry of an unknown exorcist (not of the privileged disciples) that anyone who did mighty deeds and works for God's kingdom or reign is in their side. Exorcisms by Jesus and his disciples were not just isolated cases of struggle against a demonic spirit that possessed an individual. One exorcism was emblematic of the cosmic struggle between the reign of God and the Satanic forces that would continually attempt to frustrate the works of God's reign. A successful exorcism is pointing

³⁸ Ibid.

towards an eventual victory over the adversaries of God's providence. It was a challenging undertaking for the Messiah but the Spirit was there and still is to infuse Jesus with such power that no Adversary could overcome. Followers of Christ could not do less; the church that came from this is constantly being "breathed" upon by the Spirit in her fight against all kinds of evils that were not only concretized by possession of demons but by social oppression, injustices, and dominations.

A new consciousness is developing among different Christian and other non-Christian groups: the spirit of the Evil One is still active and alive in many parts of the globe. This evil spirit has incarnated itself in the many evils in the world like famine, wars, oppression, injustices, alienations, and so forth and so on. With the new consciousness come also concrete and specific actions initiated by different religious groups in their own way and from their own resources. These liberative praxes know no boundaries and show no exclusivity in serving their beneficiaries.

We shall not perhaps see the disappearance of denominations among Christians neither shall we see different religions shedding off their unique and distinctive identities. But it will be the common aspiration for God's ultimate reign, the belief in a Spirit that hovers overall since the beginning, and the mighty works and deeds to benefit those in need that, if they cannot be united sociologically and phenomenologically, at least, there is ground for a harmonious and synergetic relationship in ecumenism and inter-faith relations. The Second Vatican Council in its landmark document, *Gaudium et Spes*, enunciated this vision years ago:

For after we have obeyed the Lord, and in His Spirit nurtured on earth the values of human dignity, brotherhood and freedom, and indeed all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise, we will find them again, but free of stain, burnished, and transfigured, when Christ hands over to the Father: 'a kingdom eternal and universal, a kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love and peace.'

On this earth that Kingdom is already present
in mystery. When the Lord returns it will be
brought into full flower³⁹

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³⁹ Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html, no. 39.