

# EXPLORERS, GUIDES & MEANING-MAKERS

*Mission Theology for Catholic Educators*

Jim and Therese D'Orsa

THE BROKEN BAY INSTITUTE  
MISSION AND EDUCATION SERIES

This volume has been written in honour of  
missiologist extraordinaire Fr. Cyril Hally S.S.C., who over a long and fruitful life has been a  
great friend and guide to Catholic educators.

It is further gratefully dedicated to Catholic educators past and present.

Jim and Therese D'Orsa

Published in Australia by  
Vaughan Publishing  
32 Glenvale Crescent  
Mulgrave VIC 3170

Vaughan Publishing  
A joint imprint of Broken Bay Institute and Garratt Publishing

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Reprinted in 2012, 2013

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Cover design by Cristina Neri, Canary Graphic Design  
Text design by Ian James, JGD Graphic + Web  
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9780987306029

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## FOREWORD

Several years ago, Jim and Therese D’Orsa knocked on my office door at Catholic Theological Union (CTU) and introduced themselves to me. They explained that they had come to CTU on sabbatical to attend classes on mission and to reflect on how they might make their own area of expertise – Catholic education – more mission-focused. Therese sat in on Tony Gittins’s classes, and Jim sat in on my course in ecclesiology. As we talked during their stay, but particularly in an hour’s conversation as they were about to return to Australia, I realised just how great their expertise was and how passionate their desire was to help Catholic educators understand the immense opportunity they had for Christian evangelisation in their schools and classrooms. Here were people of immense experience, and with a far-reaching vision. I could only express my admiration for them and encourage them with my support.

Jim and Therese, on their return to Australia, were appointed by the Broken Bay Institute (BBI) in the diocese of Broken Bay, New South Wales, to teach courses in mission and education. Therese was also appointed to the head of the BBI’s Department of Mission and Culture. Her task is not only to teach in the area of mission, however, but also to infuse the whole panoply of courses that BBI offers with a missionary spirit. Christianity, the church, is not simply about itself, but about those outside its boundaries, witnessing to and caring for people who are unchurched and unsure about their faith, and for people of faith who are not members of any Christian church.

The D’Orsas’ concern, however, is focused particularly on how teachers and administrators in Catholic schools can have such an outward-looking focus. This present volume is testimony to their concern and is truly a landmark work. As far as I know, there is no book that attempts – and succeeds – to do what Jim and Therese set out to do here. They have sought to encourage educators to engage in mission theology themselves, as well as providing necessary understanding to enable them to do this. They have digested and summarised the best of thinking on mission and intercultural studies, and have shown how such thinking is relevant and challenging to the area of Christian and Catholic education.

This book is a masterful overview of reflection on such important topics as culture, inculturation, globalisation and evangelisation, and the D’Orsas use their reflections to show educators how they can infuse their schools and classrooms with Christian values and convictions. Jim and Therese embody the title of their book. They are themselves explorers of their faith, interpreters

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of its meaning, and guides to exciting ways to present it and proclaim it.

Australia is a country in which Catholic education is thriving, and in which the state provides financial help for faith-based education. The D’Orsas’ reflections and recommendations come from this context but they speak to a wider audience. Indeed, they are highly relevant for the situation in my own country – the United States of America. While Catholic education may not be as widespread as it once was in the United States, it is still nevertheless a vital force in American Catholic life, and has great potential for proclaiming the gospel in this country.

Teachers in Catholic schools in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Ireland need to be inspired and challenged to explore their own faith more deeply so as to be guides and makers of meaning for the students they teach. Church leaders, ministers, teachers and parents will be grateful and delighted when they read these wisdom-filled pages.

**Stephen Bevans, SVD**

Louis J Luzbetak Professor of Mission and Culture  
Catholic Theological Union  
Chicago, USA



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# CHAPTER ONE

## Orientations

### Genesis

Catholic educators are aware that a qualitative difference exists between the way teachers and leaders operated even a decade ago and the way they need to operate now. What educators sense, and what they have conveyed to us, is *fundamental change*. In the chapters that follow, we will discuss elements of this fundamental change and the new horizon within which educators need to operate in order to be effective in terms of their mission or purpose.

Alongside broad societal and cultural change there has also been change in the Catholic culture within which educators operate. This in turn reflects a change in the students’ experience of Catholic community – the majority of students have at most one parent who has any substantial commitment to the local church, and many parents who acknowledge themselves as “Catholic” often do so on their own terms.

In the conversations which took place in our own diocese, the Diocese of Sale, Victoria, Australia, during a recent major diocesan planning process,<sup>1</sup> this intuition was expressed in terms of the need to reconceptualise and to re-state the mission of the school in order to deal with a changed reality. Teachers and school leaders recognised that a point of discontinuity had been reached. The image of “frontier” was often invoked to express this new reality. It is an image which recognises that Catholic educators are now operating in largely uncharted territory, and there is a need to make new “maps”.

Catholic schools are communities of faith.<sup>2</sup> They have taken life from the faith commitment of those who founded them, and they are sustained because people of faith – parents, teachers, parishioners, clergy and religious – believe in their efficacy in carrying on Jesus’ mission. Given the fundamental nature of the societal and cultural changes that have occurred in the past two decades, teachers and leaders recognise that things that could once be taken as givens can no longer be assumed. People’s beliefs have become less easy to predict and so controversy arises more readily than formerly. Also their motivation in associating with a Catholic school is more complex. This means that developing

<sup>1</sup> Catholic Diocese of Sale Pastoral Planning Document, *Journeying Together*, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Evelyn and James Whitehead in their classic work *Community of Faith* (Minneapolis: The Winston Seabury Press, 1982) provide a basic understanding of community as a group linked by common goals, shared values and mutual commitments. Within this image of community, individuals have degrees of association. See especially Chapter Two “Community Is a Way to Be Together”, 21–33.

a vision and working towards common goals to which people are committed is something that demands more time and effort than was once the case. One consequence is that educating adult members of the community, including staff, becomes an important pre-condition for educating students.

Our own conviction is that two types of conversation about mission need to be brought into systematic contact with each other. Firstly, there are the conversations of professional theologians, which are occurring predominantly, though not exclusively, in mission institutes and academia. Secondly, there are conversations about mission, which might be termed “grassroots theology”,<sup>3</sup> taking place in the variety of contexts where people engage in mission. The latter conversations occur between people with very mixed levels of theological training – members of local school, parish and diocesan communities – who are trying to make sense of their present situation. This second type of conversation, grassroots theology about mission, will be referred to as “grassroots missiology”.<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that, while not generally professionally qualified as theologians, those engaged in grassroots missiology are likely to be highly qualified in a variety of other professional areas.

Having promoted missiological conversation among educators through the present volume, we are presently seeking to promote a further, related, conversation in a subsequent volume – *Walking with Mystery: Education as Evangelisation*. The present volume deals more specifically with the dialogue between missiology and education. Set at the interface of missiology and education, this dialogue is pursued at the level of the disciplines themselves. The work is designed to demonstrate that much practical insight is to be gained when the disciplines of missiology and education meet in a substantive way.

### **Exploring the Idea of “Frontier”**

In this book an image, that of the “frontier”, is used to evoke the newness of the contemporary environment in Catholic education. The image of the frontier or an associated term has currency in a number of “New World” countries such as the United States of America, Canada and Australia. The image, though widely used, is far from innocent. As originally used in the United States the frontier marked the division between “settlement” – the known world – and “wilderness” – the unknown world. However, this world was not unknown

<sup>3</sup> James and Evelyn Whitehead provided something of a primer on “grassroots theology” in *Method in Ministry* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1981). A less structured, but equally perceptive treatment is found in Clemens Sedmak *Doing Local Theology* (Maryknoll New York: Orbis, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Missiology is, in broad terms, the field of study incorporating how the Christian community understands and pursues its mission and so continues the mission of Jesus. The place of missiology within the formal structure of tertiary studies tends to differ from one Christian denomination to another. In Catholic tertiary institutions in recent years its place is tending to move from the area of applied theology to a more central and integrating position within the overall curriculum.

to the native peoples who lived there. The white European settlers' "frontier" proved to be the "skirmishing line" for native peoples as they attempted to resist the intrusion of unknown people into their lands. The frontier in the United States, and the bush in Australia, are symbols which have become integral to what Cote calls the "dynamic myth" of the cultures of these respective peoples. In both cases the myth is ethnocentric in its origins.<sup>5</sup> In the case of the United States, Frederick Turner argued that the frontier experiences provided the furnace in which key aspects of the American character were forged.<sup>6</sup> The bush played a similar role in Australia. In both cases the gaining of a shared identity on the part of the white settlers resulted in a corresponding loss of identity of the native peoples. Both images carry with them considerable ethnocentric baggage.

However a symbol can have value beyond the historical circumstances in which it was generated. Today we talk readily about the frontiers of knowledge, of science and medicine. By this we indicate the limits of what we know and can imagine.

The contention of this book is that today Catholic educators find themselves at another type of frontier – a frontier of meaning. The meanings that have characterised Catholic "settlement" fail to make sense to an increasing number of people inhabiting the new wilderness created by globalisation, secularisation and modern/post-modern pluralism. If our students are to live out the destiny to which God calls them, they will have to learn how to make sense of this new situation. They will struggle to do this if those who teach them, and those who lead them, have not first journeyed into the unknown territory themselves and made sense of the journey. Having done so, they can then help others make meaning, acting as guides and interpreters. They and their students will then be in a position to be serious contributors to bringing the contemporary "wilderness" within the realm of God's Kingdom, and therefore advancing God's mission.

Teachers quickly raise questions, such as those below, when asked to explore the frontier image:

- What is the nature of the frontier? How and why does it challenge old certainties?
- How does one orient oneself in this new and challenging environment?

<sup>5</sup> For a larger discussion of this with reference to the United States see Richard G. Cote *Revisiting Mission: The Catholic Church and Culture in Post-Modern America* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 116ff. For a discussion of the same issue in the context of Australian culture see John Thornhill *Making Australia: Exploring our National Conversation* (Newtown NSW: Millennium Books, 1992), 143ff.

<sup>6</sup> Cote, 117.

- How does one construct a Catholic identity these days, and why are there so many ways of doing this?
- How can we assist educators to understand, adapt to, and be effective in this emerging environment?
- What help does the Church offer in addressing these questions?
- How is the changing environment shaping the way we assess human need and respond as Christ’s disciples?
- Is it still possible to talk meaningfully of a Catholic culture?
- How do we as a group conceptualise and articulate mission?
- As we re-imagine what we are doing, how do we invite others to share the vision and work towards achieving the goals?
- Are there any emerging certainties to replace what is being lost?

These are not everyday staffroom questions, be the staffroom located in the bishop’s chancery, parish, school or tertiary institution, but the way in which they are answered will have a great impact on the day-to-day delivery of education. This is because, in educational institutions, such as schools and colleges, people are generally working towards a common purpose, share a common identity, and feel the sense of achievement that comes from doing something that is perceived to be worthwhile. Mission, when it is authentically conceptualised and carried through into daily living, *is an integrating force in community endeavours*. It is life-giving and provides direction as the community confronts, and is confronted by, questions such as those outlined above.

Doing theology in a frontier situation requires a particular set of understandings and skills. If the understandings and skill-set possessed by leaders and educators were adequate for the current environment there would, in all likelihood, be no sense that something fundamental has changed, and therefore no angst about the present and the future.

### **Grassroots Theology and Academic Theology – Differences**

A premise of this book is that the essential skill in coping with the “frontier” is the ability to “do theology” so as to enable the Catholic educator to develop a mission theology which can underpin a communal sense of mission. Like other branches of knowledge, theology involves both content and process. It is an ongoing endeavour of people within a faith community to make sense of their experience, individual and collective, from the perspective of faith. To the extent that we reflect on our experience in the light of faith, *we are all grassroots theologians*.

Many people see theology as a body of knowledge to be mastered rather

than as a process to be followed. A common misconception is that theology is what you know, not what you do. It is learned from experts. This is a very limited understanding of theology. Such a view does not take into account how theological knowledge is constructed in the first place. Certainly, there is a legitimate field of study which involves accessing the work of the great theologians of our tradition, but there is much more to theology than that. Great theologians have tended to systematise and codify, and in the process render abstract, reflection on human experience that was originally concrete, and bound by the exigencies of context and history.

Grassroots theology differs from professional academic theology in that *it is carried out in a more or less informed way at the local level*. This form of theologising is common in school communities, in parishes, in diocesan settings and, in the case of communities of religious, at the congregational level. Its focus is on particular contexts and the issues to which they give rise. This is its strength. A characteristic of grassroots theology is that it is often episodic, unsystematic, focused on the immediate, and stops once the issues have been dealt with. It can become partisan and needs to be complemented by, and open to, the insight generated by accessing the experience of others. The fact that it is not approached systematically is its weakness.

The practitioners of grassroots missiology are rarely professionals in theology and often struggle to understand much of the language of the professional conversation. Many would be unaware that the conversations they engage in can be described as “theologising”. For most, theology is more a noun than a verb; it is understood as content rather than process. Very importantly, however, these practitioners bring to their conversations commitment and a depth of knowledge born of experience. They are the people who carry out God’s mission in particular contexts which they know intimately and in which many of them are quite expert. They are therefore not only worthy, but essential, partners in a broader conversation about mission.

In summary, professional missiology is driven in the main by academic concerns and draws its momentum from these concerns. Grassroots missiology, on the other hand, is driven by the challenges, hopes, angst and energy of lived experience in particular settings. As both Tanner,<sup>7</sup> writing from a Protestant background, and Rohlheiser,<sup>8</sup> writing from a Catholic background, point out, these two conversations need to be brought together if the high energy currently invested in each is to be productive. Grassroots missiology needs to be better

<sup>7</sup> Kathryn Tanner “The Nature and Task of Theology” in *Theories of Culture* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), Chapter 4, 61–92.

<sup>8</sup> Ronald Rolheiser *Secularity and the Gospel* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2006), 24.

informed and put on a more substantial footing; professional missiology would benefit from taking up some of the concerns of grassroots missiology as these emerge from particular contexts such as from Catholic schools and parishes, which constitute a major area for applied missiology. The question then is – how do we do this?

### **Building a Bridge**

The present study seeks to answer this question in a particular setting – that of Catholic schools and colleges and the networks in which these are embedded. More specifically, our focus is Catholic schools, colleges and educational systems in western cultures. Our own immediate context is Australian Catholic education and, by travel and association, Catholic education in the United States, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Ireland. We believe that the Australian context is in many ways privileged in that schools and colleges there are substantially supported financially by government, but with limited interference in their organisation and operation. This support ensures there is now minimal financial dependency on parishes or dioceses to meet running costs or a significant proportion of capital costs. Despite some hardship due to the poor funding levels of some state governments,<sup>9</sup> teachers are paid at rates comparable to their colleagues in the public systems, so teaching in a Catholic school is seen as particularly desirable from a range of perspectives. The Australian Catholic school context, therefore, has its unique characteristics, while sharing many common elements with Catholic schools in other countries.

Our experience of grassroots missiology has come from working with a large number of schools, parishes and dioceses as they have developed or renewed their understanding of mission and have endeavoured to live this out. It has come from being part of innumerable conversations about mission and mission issues in these settings. A second level of involvement has come from working with school leaders both in professional development programs and basic theology programs. Perhaps the major involvement, however, has been in our own ministry as leaders in Catholic school systems, with the unique entree this gives to discussion about mission at the grassroots level.

Our participation in the professional conversation about missiology has developed out of a long association with the Columban Fathers and their work in the field, particularly in cross-cultural mission situations. This book deals with many of the major themes being addressed with our tertiary students, teachers

<sup>9</sup> In Australia the major portion of school funding comes from the Australian government, but a significant portion also comes from state governments. The differences in funding levels between the states is currently significant.

and school leaders who are engaged in day-to-day ministries, predominantly in Catholic schools. We believe our experiences ensure we are well placed to take on a bridge-building role, joining the broader professional conversation about mission to that of grassroots discussions about mission in various Catholic educational settings.

## **Living on the Frontier of Hope**

When a community sets out to consider its mission or to re-vision that mission, whether it recognises it or not, it is constructing a “local theology” and providing a solid basis for hope. The local theology can provide a foundation for spirituality, community prayer, and the unique way in which the Gospel is lived out in a particular context. Identifying this theology is important in sustaining both hope and mission, since *hope is the lifeblood of mission*.

As we have indicated, many teachers in Catholic schools are conscious of living and working on a missional frontier. Sustaining hope in such situations is critical.<sup>10</sup> A feature of life on a frontier is that there are no pre-existing roads or bridges. In this respect being on a frontier differs from being at a crossroads, which is another metaphor often applied to Catholic education. At a crossroads the choice is between two ways that are known. On the frontier the choice is between the known and the unknown. Also, on the frontier there are no fully developed maps to consult except those that are created as the journey proceeds. To move forward, map-making and bridge-building skills are needed, along with a depth of faith and hope. Improving the quality of grassroots missiology is vital in this regard.

This book is for school and system personnel and other Church leaders – lay, religious and clerical – with whom school leaders relate in living out the mission of the school. Hopefully, it also gives professionals in the field of missiology a better understanding of mission issues surfacing in school contexts, and how missiology finds application in the Catholic Church’s efforts to educate young people in school settings. While the focus of our concern is Catholic school education, discussion with colleagues in other education sectors within the Church, as well as those involved in parishes, welfare and health, indicate similar patterns exist in these fields of mission as well.

## **Structure**

The book is organised in five major sections. Part A deals with *foundational* issues. Having named the concerns that need to be addressed in Chapter One, Chapter Two suggests that developing a missiological imagination is an

<sup>10</sup> Therese and Jim D’Orsa “Mission and Catholic Schools: Grounding Hope in Uncertain Times” in Anne Benjamin and Dan Riley (eds) *Catholic Schools Hope in Uncertain Times* (Mulgrave: John Garratt, 2008), 32–44.

essential requirement in addressing them. Our strong belief is that such an imagination is developed through theological reflection. Chapter Three outlines in narrative form the development since the 1970s of theological reflection as a resource for those engaged in the mission of the Church. It focuses on both models and methods.

Theological reflection involves bringing together a number of key elements – personal and communal experience, social and cultural analysis, scripture and Christian tradition – all of which can be considered resources in the process. Each of these resources has an important contribution to make in how we, as individuals and as communities, understand and place a value on mission. Part B deals with two of these resources – *culture and human experience* – treating them as interrelated elements in how teachers understand their present context and the concerns to which this gives rise.

Context has its historical roots, its current manifestations in personal and communal experience, and its cultural expressions. It is part of an ongoing narrative in which we are embedded. Culture is a powerful, though often poorly understood resource, in making sense of the world of experience. This aspect of context is explored in Chapter Four. “Post-modernity” is the subject of the next two chapters. Chapter Five provides perspectives on the exploration of post-modernism and Chapter Six deals with post-modernism’s narrative. As people of faith we believe this narrative has a trajectory and is meaningful.

In Part C we recognise that, while the narrative is ongoing, it is shaped by global processes such as *globalisation, secularisation and pluralisation* which have particular salience in our time. Understanding these influences is important in interpreting our expedience as well as in planning our work as educators (Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine).

Part D explores the contributions our religious tradition, in which we also include scripture, can make to grassroots theological reflection. Ours is a *living tradition* and there has been considerable theological development with regard to how the Church understands its mission and its place within God’s mission since the Second Vatican Council 1962–65 (Chapter Ten). The process by which the Gospels came to life within the early New Testament communities has much to offer those who seek to re-create such communities in the present time in a variety of educational environments (Chapter Eleven).

In Chapter Twelve we seek to bring the various themes of the book together. The overall thesis of this book is that the intuition of many teachers and leaders that something fundamental has changed in Catholic schooling is correct. The “something” is a combination of changing context and changing frameworks of understanding both within culture and within the Church. In the demanding



context of the frontier such changes demand a response which, in turn, entails reconceptualising important aspects of the mission of the Catholic school, and living with the consequences of this work. It is a call to be not just map-readers, but also to become map-makers, thus sustaining the hope of those we lead.

