

BOOK REVIEWS

Roger P. Schroeder, *What is the Mission of the Church: A Guide for Catholics*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2008. xvi + 159pp. ISBN 978-1-57075-810-2. Paperback. US\$16.00.

Roger Schroeder is no stranger to Papua New Guinea, having worked in the East Sepik and published on initiation and religion among the Wosera. In this book he takes a more universal perspective, presenting the essentials of scripture, the lessons of history and Catholic Church teaching since the Second Vatican Council as they relate to the mission of the church today.

Schroeder begins by explaining how the concept of mission has changed since the Second Vatican Council. He defines mission as “proclaiming, serving, and witnessing to God’s reign of love, salvation, and justice”. The local church of the “global south” used to be considered “missions” and now they are the vital centres of mission. Mission is no longer characterised by a one-way relationship, and what were mission “sending” churches are now in great need of re-evangelisation. The other major contributing factor to the changing concept of mission is the recognition that God is present in other religions, non-Western cultures, and in the world and society in general.

The author goes on to discuss how mission finds its origins in the Spirit, Jesus Christ and the Reign of God, and how early Christians took mission beyond Jerusalem. This is followed by “snapshots” of various ways in which mission has been carried out from the time of the early church until the twentieth century. One reads about Christians “gossiping the Gospel”, women leading house churches and monastic movements spreading as far as China. He gives examples including Francis of Assisi, Bartolomé de las Casas, Francis Xavier, Mother Theresa, and Dorothy Day. He notes too how the practice of mission became somewhat compromised, being linked with the three “C’s” of colonialism: Christianity, commerce and civilization.

In a further chapter Schroeder takes three recent Catholic documents that provide insights into the contemporary understanding of mission:

“The decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church” from the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI’s apostolic exhortation “On Evangelization in the Modern World,” and Pope John Paul II’s encyclical letter “On the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate”. He shows how these documents act as sign posts on the “why, who and where” of mission today.

The final section summarises presents in a simplified form ideas from the much larger book Schroeder wrote along with Steve Bevans, *Constants in Context*. Mission is seen as a complex reality with six components: witness and proclamation; liturgy, prayer and contemplation; justice, peace and the integrity of creation; inter-religious and secular dialogue; inculturation; and reconciliation.

This is a practical book. Each chapter concludes with helpful “Questions for Reflection,” and “Suggestions for further Reading”. The book ends focusing on a “mission-driven” parish and with a sample assessment tool for parishes. The book is written in an easy conversational style – oriented particularly for Catholics in the USA. Nevertheless, as Schroeder himself notes in the introduction, it aims to be comprehensive, and people from anywhere and various churches will surely learn from the insights of this small book.

Philip Gibbs