FROM REFUGE TO COMMUNION: A THEOLOGICAL SYNTHESIS OF A MISSIONARY EXPERIENCE IN GUATEMALA

Nollen Jed D. Mendoza, MJ

Introduction – The Landscape of Encounter

When I first arrived in Guatemala, everything felt foreign: the language, the food, even the rhythm of everyday life. Though I had come as a missionary, I felt more like a refugee searching for a place where I could find comfort and a sense of belonging. Amid those uncertainties and struggles, I discovered that the mission begins not with confidence but with dependence. My heart clung to the words, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1). This experience led me to what I now call a *theology of refuge*, of *kanlungan*. An understanding that the missionary must first learn to take shelter in God before becoming a shelter for others. Like many other missionaries, I arrived bringing God in a book, with everything I had learned from the four corners of the classroom, plus my own image of God; instead, I found God, who has never left the land.

The Guatemalan landscape, together with its volcanic surface, the relentless sun, the sudden rains, old cities, and ruins, became a primary scripture, the very revelation of God who is present and intimately involved in the chaos and the messy, yet beautiful, process of growth and decay. Like the early Christian community, which "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship" (Acts 2:42), I learned

https://publications.lst.edu/

that God gathers the fearful and forms them into communion before sending them forth.

Refuge, therefore, is not merely physical safety but a spiritual dwelling in God's faithfulness. It is the first movement of the mission, a sacred pause where the heart learns to rest and trust. Pope Francis reminds us that missionary discipleship begins when we allow ourselves to be renewed by the Lord's love (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 3). In my early days in Guatemala, the chapel became that refuge where I met the God who understood my doubts and fears.

Yet refuge was not the end of the story. As I delved deeper into the lives of the people, their struggles, faith, and hospitality, I encountered the beauty of communion, or *koinonia*. Rooted in the life of the Trinity, this communion fulfills the prayer of Jesus "that they may all be one... as you, Father, are in me and I am in you" (John 17:21). Communion is not only about unity but about participating in God's own relational love. The Church is essentially a reciprocity shaped by dialogue. Just as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are in relatedness to each other, and thereby one, so it must be *communio* that establishes the unity of the Church.[1] In the laughter of children, in shared meals, and in collective prayers, I saw that communion is both God's gift and God's mission.

What began as my search for refuge became an invitation to communion. God transformed my fears and vulnerabilities into a relationship and my isolation into a sense of belonging. The movement from refuge to communion is the missionary path itself, a journey from isolation to solidarity, from questioning to listening, from fear to trust, from self-protection to

1 Peter Neuner, "The Church as *Koinonia*: A Central Theme of Vatican II," https://www.theway.org.uk/back/30Neuner.pdf (accessed October 2025).

https://publications.lst.edu/

shared life. I have learned that a person who seeks refuge in God eventually becomes a testimony of communion for others.

The Theology and Practice of "Refuge"

The "Theology of Refuge" is not without its biblical and theological merit. Scripture frequently portrays God as a "refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble."[2] The early Church, facing persecution, found refuge in domestic communities, devoting itself "to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."[3] This model emphasizes the Church as Ecclesia, a people "called out" from the world, a holy sanctuary set apart for God.[4] In missiology, this can manifest as a focus on preserving doctrinal purity and providing a safe haven from the perceived chaos of a non-Christian or suffering world. In the Guatemalan context, this theology took practical, tangible forms:

The Mission Compound Mentality: The physical space of the mission house often became a symbolic fortress for us. Within its walls, we spoke our own language, cooked and ate familiar food, and debriefed about "the field" as a place we entered and exited. It was a base of operations, a place to retreat from the overwhelming sensory and emotional stimuli of profound poverty and the challenges of the mission.

The Service-Delivery Model of Mission: Our initial work was largely transactional. Like many other missionaries, we

2 Psalm 46:1 (New International Version).

3 Acts 2:42 (NIV). For a discussion of the early Church's community life as a form of koinonia, see Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 290.

4 "Does the NT Word 'Church' Mean 'Called Out Ones?' Not Really..." *The Reformed Reader Blog,* https://reformedreader.wordpress.com/2025/02/24/does-the-nt-word-church-mean-called-out-ones-not-really/?utm_source=chatgpt.com (accessed November 2025).

arrived with pre-determined projects: building chapels, forming communities and ministries, and teaching catechism. While these actions were beneficial, the underlying dynamic or primary relationship is that of provider and recipient. We were the active subjects possessing resources; the communities were the passive objects of our charity. As missiologist Robert Schreiter critiqued, this model risks reducing the Gospel to a commodity, a pre-packaged product from another culture that fails to become truly incarnate.[5] Although it can offer vital short-term relief, its natural tendency to foster dependency, to weaken local communities, and to lack sustainability limits its long-term effectiveness.

Defensive Evangelism: Our proclamation, at first, was a monologue. Eager to share theological concepts without understanding their preexisting worldview, their interrelated faith, and their profound, often unspoken trust in Divine Providence, we developed solutions to questions they had not always raised.

Indeed, this Refuge model provided an essential initial structure. It offered a psychological and spiritual foothold in an unfamiliar place and culture. However, its walls, designed for protection, soon began to feel like an excuse or, even worse, a limitation.

The Cracks in the Walls: The Limitations of a Refuge-Only Model

Theologically, a mission strategy rooted exclusively in *refuge* stands in tension with the central Christian mystery of the Incarnation. God did not remain in the safe refuge of heaven, dispensing salvation from a distance. Instead, God "emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the

5 Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 112.

https://publications.lst.edu/

likeness of men."[6] Through my own experiences, I have come to see that any model of mission that resembles a "Refuge," where we primarily provide services from a place of perceived superiority, can unintentionally foster a clericalist or elitist mindset. It is the very attitude Pope Francis constantly warns us against, where the missionary, perhaps without even realizing it, positions themselves as "above and afar" from those they serve, rather than walking alongside them as a humble brother or sister. [7]This contradicts the very *missio Dei* (the mission of God), which is an outward movement into the world God so loved.[8]

Practically, the limitations became evident in the relational dynamics. The service-delivery model fostered a subtle paternalism that undermined the dignity and agency of the local community. It is subtly implying, "We have what you need, and you are incapable of obtaining it yourselves." This prevented the possibility of reciprocal evangelization. A profound truth is that the missionaries themselves are also evangelized by the poor. The things they had to offer me—their perseverance, their steadfast faith in the face of adversity, and their strong sense of community, and yes, even the very image of Christ were missing in me because I was too concentrated and too busy doing things for them to just be with.

Furthermore, the Refuge model proved inadequate for addressing systemic injustice. I became aware of a risk in our work: if we merely addressed the symptoms of poverty and focused on providing immediate, sympathetic relief, we risked becoming a pacifying force. This was managing poverty, not a

6 Philippians 2:7 (NRSV).

7 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Pasay City: Paulines Publishing House, 2013), p. 93-97.

8 John 3:16 (NRSV).

true mission. Frequently in Latin America today, certain priests are considered "subversive". For the defenders of the status quo, "priestly subversion" is surprising. But we know that in exposing the deep causes of these injustices, many priests and religious had to confront the great economic and political forces of their countries.[9] As Pope Benedict XVI reminded us, "Charity goes beyond justice, because to love is to give, to offer what is 'mine' to the other; but it never lacks justice, which prompts us to give the other what is 'his' ...I cannot 'give' what is mine to the other, without first giving him what pertains to him in justice."[10]

True mission must also raise the prophetic question, "Why are we poor?" and work together to find solutions. Although the refuge was an essential place to begin, remaining there would constitute an abandonment of the Christian faith's fundamental incarnational call to action.

The Theological Foundation of "Communion" (*Koinonia*)

The alternative to refuge is not a rootless immersion in the world, but a deep grounding in the theology of Communion (*Koinonia*). This concept derives from the inner life of the Trinity—a perfect, dynamic communion of love among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. [11]Jesus prayed that his disciples would share in this unity: "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you...

9 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation,* rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), p.106.

10 Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate,* Encyclicals, June 29, 2009, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html, 6.

11 Vatican II, "Lumen Gentium," in *Documents of Vatican Council II*, edited by James H. Kroeger (Pasay City: Paulines Publishing House, 2011), 4.

https://publications.lst.edu/

that they may be one as we are one."[12] The early Church made this reality tangible, sharing life and possessions so that "there were no needy persons among them."[13]

The practical path to achieving this communion is the Incarnational Mission, modeled on Christ's *Kenosis*. For the missionary, this means a deliberate "self-emptying" of one's cultural superiority, pre-packaged solutions, and the need to be in control. It is to enter into the world of the other, not as a benefactor, but as someone willing to learn, a guest, and even as a friend. This aligns perfectly with Pope Francis's call for a "culture of encounter," where we step out from behind our walls to meet the other, to share their life, and to see the face of Christ among them - going forth from our own comfort zone to reach all the "peripheries" in need of the light of the Gospel.[14]

From this communion perspective, the preferential option for the poor is no longer a paternalistic charity but rather a form of solidarity and friendship. The poor—indeed the "crucified peoples" produced by unjust structures—are not merely objects of mission but a privileged place where God discloses the Kingdom in history. As Jon Sobrino says, the crucified peoples are the principal "signs of the times" of God's presence in our world.[15] To be in communion with them is to participate in the school of their faith and to struggle alongside them for a more just world. With this change, the ultimate objective shifts from a project to a relationship.

---

12 John 17:21-22 (NRSV). For a deep theological exploration, see John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985). p.36-41.

13 Acts 4:34-35 (NRSV).

14 Pope Francis, *Evangelli Gaudium,* 21-24.

15 Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 69.

The Practice of Communion in the Guatemalan Context

The theory of Communion took flesh and became concrete in a series of "sacramental awakenings" that dismantled and opened my eyes beyond the walls of my Refuge mindset. Although it was never easy. I had to convince myself many times and remove the prejudices I had.

The first was seeing Christ in the faces of the poor. I recall sitting with a middle-aged father, Don Agustin, when I visited their home. We were not building anything or distributing goods. We were simply drinking *un vaso de cafecito*. As he spoke and shared about losing his child while crossing the Mexico-US border and his unwavering trust that "*God would provide and maybe God has another plan for my child*," his face, etched with years of struggle, was transfigured. In that moment, he was not an object of my mission; he was my teacher, a great storyteller, evangelizing me about a profound, tested faith. That very moment, I was receiving a gospel revelation from him. That even in great loss and suffering, God does not erase God's presence. It can even become an opportunity to see His face closer and most revealed. Indeed, Don Agustin's story highlighted one aspect of the "crucified peoples," making it a privileged location where Christ is present.

The second awakening was recognizing God's presence in the beauty of the Guatemalan landscape. Watching the mist rise over Lago Atitlán, surrounded by majestic volcanoes, and walking among the bricks, ruins, and beautiful churches of Antigua became for me deeply theological experiences. This was not a "God-forsaken" land I had come to save. These were God's glorious creations, and the indigenous people I had talked with, lived with, laughed with, and dined with had been reading this "first book of revelation" long before my arrival. My "mission" shifted from one who brings God to being one

who discovers that God has always been present with and in them. This led directly to new practices:

From Service to Solidarity: Solidarity finds concrete expression in service, which can take a variety of forms in an effort to care for others.[16] From assigning work to asking how we could help with community-identified needs. This often meant doing less "visible" work and spending more time in shared meals and conversations, the building blocks of *koinonia*. Solidarity is a word that means much more than an occasional gesture of generosity. It is thinking and acting in terms of community.[17]

From Monologue to Dialogue: We began to listen to their stories, pray how they are praying, practice their devotions to local saints, most especially to La Guadalupana (the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe), and their blending of Catholic and Mayan spirituality and traditions. This was not a threat to orthodoxy but an invitation to see the many-colored wisdom of God.[18]

From Charity to Justice: Hearing stories of corruption, discrimination, oppression, land dispossession, and economic exploitation moved our community from building *capillas* to empowering and accompanying our lay leaders and elders of the indigenous group to meetings with local officials. Our mission became more concrete and clearer about being with them and walking with them in their struggle for human life and dignity.

---

16 Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (Pasay City: Paulines Publishing House, 2020), 115.

17 Pope Francis, *To participants in the World Meeting of Popular Movements,* Speeches, 28 October 2014, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco_20141028_incontro-mondiale-movimenti-popolari.html (accessed November 2025).

18 Ephesians 3:10 (NRSV).

https://publications.lst.edu/

Synthesis – The Dynamic Journey and a Renewed Missionary Identity

The transition from Refuge to Communion is a dynamic integration rather than a straightforward renunciation of one for the other. The Christian community must always be a haven, a place where individuals are molded, healed, and fed by the Word and Sacrament. However, it is a school that prepares disciples for service in the world, a hospital that returns cured patients to the battlefield,[19] and a haven for communion. The ultimate representation of this is seen in the Eucharist, when we go to the altar to be fed in order to be broken and shared for the rest of humanity.

This synthesis transforms our missionaries' identity. We are no longer parachutists, dropping in with solutions, but pilgrims and guests. We are pilgrims on a shared journey of discipleship, and we are guests who humbly receive the hospitality, wisdom, and faith of our hosts. My own identity was fundamentally converted. I arrived as a "missionary" but left as a co-walker, a *compañero*—a term derived from *cum panis*, "with bread," your companions were the ones you ate with, the ones you broke bread with, the ones you shared a common table.[20] This identity, forged in the humility of communion, is the only sustainable and authentic posture for mission, perfectly reflecting David Bosch's insight that mission as "the mother of theology," is first and foremost:

---

19 Antonio Spadaro, *Interview with Pope Francis,* Speeches, 21 September 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130921_intervista-spadaro.html.

20 "'With Bread:' The Etymology & Theology of Companionship," *Missio Alliance,* https://missioalliance.org/with-bread-the-etymology-theology-of-companionship/?utm_source=chatgpt.com (accessed November 2025).

https://publications.lst.edu/

> the *missio Dei*, that is, God's self-revelation as the One who loves the world, God's involvement in and with the world, the nature and activity of God, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church is privileged to participate. *Missio Dei* enunciates the good news that God is a God-for-people.[21]

Conclusion and Implications

This theological synthesis of missionary experience in Guatemala concludes that the heart of mission is a conversion from a self-referential Theology of Refuge to a mutually transformative Theology of Communion. This journey, catalyzed by a sacramental awakening to God's prior presence, redefines mission as participation, not propagation. It is about joining the *missio Dei* already underway in the world. Rooted in the Trinity's self-giving life, shaped by the kenosis of Christ, and embodied as a Church of *koinonia*, mission becomes communion that constantly widens its circle.

The implications of this synthesis are significant. For the global Church, it is a call to self-examination: Are our parishes and ministries fortresses of comfort or wells of encounter that send people out in solidarity? For missionary formation, it underscores that the primary preparation is not logistical but spiritual and anthropological—forming hearts capable of kenosis, listening, and receiving.

My final, lasting image is not of a building or a beautiful church that we all "love" to construct, but of a shared meal after a long day of work. Sitting on a dirty floor, passing a bowl of black beans and hot tortillas, laughing in broken Spanish and Q'eqchi,' the barriers dissolved. In that simple, eucharistic

21 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission, 20th anniversary edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 10, 15.

moment, we were no longer missionary and poor. We were simply the Body of Christ, taken, blessed, broken, and shared for one another. It was a fleeting yet profound foretaste of the heavenly banquet, the ultimate communion toward which all mission is oriented. This is the hope that compels us to continually move from refuge into the risky, beautiful space of communion - communion with God and His people. May every refuge we build become a doorway into communion, and every communion a renewed participation in God's mission.