

From the Missions to the Mission

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Over the course of centuries, the church has acquired diverse figures or patterns, therefore one has to know how to distinguish between the permanent element and the diversity of its historic manifestations. The implementation of the mission is intimately dynamic. It is that which maintains the vitality and permanent youthfulness of the church; it is that which most directly roots it in the history of humanity and at once in a larger way shows its capacity to be faithful to the plan of God in history. The mission therefore, is always a prophetic and challenging dimension in the center of the diverse ecclesial communities as a permanent exigency of faithfulness to the task for which it has been called into existence.

I. THE ERA OF THE FOREIGN MISSIONS

As a starting point to understand the sense of our reflection on the image of the foreign missions, it is important to center on the significance and the novelty of the two words because that is what underlines the understanding of a great majority of Christians.

The term mission or missions in the sense that we use it is a relatively recent phenomenon (start of the 16th Century). Up until that time, to explain the expansion of the church and the proclamation of evangelization, one spoke about the propagation of the faith, the conversion of the gentiles, and the promulgation of the gospel. The Jesuits introduced the “vow of the missions” to express the disposition to accept whatever destiny (mission) that the Pope would assign to them. He could designate also work among the heretics or schismatics. They were also given activity that at that time was achieving great importance: the evangelizing activity among non Christians that were encountered in foreign and distant lands.

Actually during those years, extensive geographic expansion was taking place due to the Spanish and Portuguese journeys. It was the crossroads of human history. The church, by means of the Christians, was present in those circumstances. Therefore the “evangelization mission” would stay marked by the long distances, the risk and the adventure.

In the underlying theology one can outline the following aspects: *a)* Christianity as the only true religion is the only way to salvation; there is a very negative view with regards to the possibility of salvation of the members of other religions and for that reason, Baptism was so urgent; *b)* the Church and Reign of God were identified together in such a way that the missions acquired a strongly church-centered tone; *c)* the ultimate responsibility of the mission fell upon the Pope and the hierarchy, and their protagonists were above all the religious and priests.

This model has been the object of critics for its connection with colonialism and for its tendency to transpose the western world in those far off lands. It has to be recognized nevertheless that thanks to those efforts, the gospel was announced and received in numerous countries, races and cultures. It offered untainted testimony of thousands of missionaries, permitted the development of new evangelization methods whose mighty presence enriched the catholicity of the Church and opened new possibilities of universal evangelization that our historic era needs.

Slowly over time, new horizons opened: a permanent missionary zeal that includes all the people of God, the incorporation of lay people and diocesan priests, spiritual sensibility, financial generosity, a more intense defense of human dignity, incarnation in native cultures, the emergence of the local churches, a deeper and more theological depth.

II. TOWARD A NEW PARADIGM

In the 20th Century, we are crossing the threshold of a new consideration — more profound and real — of the missionary activity in the church; this is due in virtue of a more direct reflection of the data of revelation, a greater attention to the breadth of the missions taking into account the cognizance of the historical circumstances. For this reason, missiology is developing, diverse papal encyclicals about missiology are being published, new elements that energize missiology reflection are being considered.

The expression of the new consciousness and of the new role of the missions is also a frequent topic in the publication of papal encyclicals. They seek to focus the missionary activity in response to new needs, seek the collaboration of all the baptized and the consolidation of the missions as churches.

Benedict XV in *Maximum Illud* (1919) puts emphasis on the native clergy, on the collaboration among the missionary institutions, on the formation and spirituality of the missionaries, on the help on the part of the local churches, and on the priority of the Pontifical Missionary Works.

Pius XI in *Rerum Ecclesiae* (1926) hopes to stimulate the responsibility of the bishops and reaffirms the importance of the native clergy. Pius XII in *Evangelii Praecones* (1951) continues to try to rouse the missionary consciousness of all the dioceses (above all by means of the *Pontifical Missionary Work, OMP*) and calls to mind the need of native clergy and of the specialization of the activity of the missionaries. He emphasizes even more than before, the adaptation to the diverse cultures, participation of the laity, and the importance of the social and economic questions. In *Fidei Donum* (1957) the same Pope focused his address from the point of view of the needs of Africa as a consequence of the rapid process of decolonization (which would require a supplementary evangelizing force). He insisted in the sending forth of diocesan priests for service (that would be for temporal needs). John XXIII in *Princeps Pastorum* (1959) attempts to set an equilibrium between tendencies to be taken into account: conversion and planting the seeds of the church, evangelization and human progress, the consolidation of the church that ought to integrate itself into the new structures of the youth, the importance of the laity and the importance of the native clergy.

During the years preceding and preparing for Vatican II some patterns are presented that sound out the base level for a new model to understand in theological terms and to actualize the mission in a practical way.

Prior to this, the missions were reduced to some actions that were developed in far away geographical environments, that were considered in a unidirectional way (the older Christian churches were the ones that missioned and helped the missions that were in need of all support). They were under a juridical disciplinary concept; they were the regions dependent on the Propagation of the Faith. In this way, the missions remained far away, almost in the periphery, while the mission of the Church could be realized even without them, in the countries of older Christianity.

This vision left some open questions: what do these actions have to do with the fundamental and radical mission of the church? In what sense are the missions an expression of the radical mission of the church? Can it exist without them? Can they at least hypothetically be separated without affecting the very reality of the church?

These questions were floating around on the eve of Vatican II and in fact strong requirements existed that the missions not be left in the periphery of ecclesial life. In fact, the Council assumed this concern. The missions remained situated in the heart of the Church as an expression of its deepest dynamism.

Some of these theological threads open a new perspective: you have to pass from the ecclesial centrism to mission centrism. The

mission is in the center, not the church. The priority is the mission of God and the church is at its service. The mission taken alone is not in the periphery, but rather it is the deepest spirit within the Church.

III. RECENT MAGISTERIAL TEACHING

We have indicated the primary papal interventions concerning the missionary action in the recent period, and we have pointed out the questions and perspectives that were being opened up during the 20th Century. In this context, there have arisen diverse documents referring to the missionary theme that tried to offer criteria in light of the present debates. We are now going to point out the most relevant interventions, without getting lost in detail, in order to capture the significance of each one of them.

Vatican Council II (1963-1965)

The Council attempts to reflect on the church in the actual historical moment (the modern world) to identify the testimony that ought to spark and foster a discernment process concerning the values of the present moment.

Given the reality of a Council, with numerous documents, we ought to pay attention to the general vision of the conciliar texts and not only to one of them, even though that one refers to the missionary activity (*Ad Gentes*). However, we have to emphasize the importance of this document because it was the last one approved by the Council fathers and it brings together all the suppositions and profound thoughts that were realized in the various themes and presentations.

The constitution on the church, *Lumen Gentium* as it is significantly called, emphasizes that the church is the “light of the people” in the center of God’s salvific plan. Its catholicity makes it essentially missionary and therefore, all the members of the church are responsible for the mission. The decrees on the laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (AA), priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (PO), and religious, *Perfectae Caritatis* (PC) show forth the missionary obligation of each one of these states of life in the church.

The declarations on religious liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae* (DH), and the one on the relations of the church with non Christian religions, *Nostra Aetate* (NAe) take on the burning issues of salvation of non Christians and what this means in relation to other religions. The pastoral constitution on the church in the modern world, *Gaudium et Spes* (GS) refers to the modern world and its constitutive dimensions. Even though not being of direct missionary character, it

will notably mark the post-conciliar developments as we have indicated. *Ad Gentes* (AG 7.12.1965) is the high point of the conciliar agenda; it received the greatest number of votes of all the conciliar documents. Even though its presentation will receive posterior development, it established fundamental coordinates and offers criteria of equilibrium and mediation among diverse positions; it opens a horizon. The constitution on the trinitarian and the historic salvific nature of the missionary action articulates the relation between mission and missions; it delineates the conversion and implanting of the Church and gives great emphasis to the young churches and to their process of ecclesiogenesis; it leaves space for missionary adaptation and explains the responsibility of each one of the members of the people of God.

***Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975)**

It is considered the most important document of Paul VI and one of the most relevant of the postconciliar period. It is the fruit of the Synod of Bishops of 1974 dedicated to the evangelization of the world. It is important to point out a change in terminology. It avoids the missionary terminology and opts for the term evangelization. This concept encompasses the global activity of the church: it exists to evangelize; to evangelize is the most profound and radical saying. This does not diminish the universal dimension or water down the value of a specific missionary vocation.

It is interesting to observe that this universality manifests itself in an important aspect: the major role of the Episcopal conferences of all the world; the non western conferences make up about two thirds. For this reason, the initial presentation (fundamental concern for the unbelievers and atheists) is widened and enriched; there are other aspects equally important for evangelization of the whole world: the plurality of ministries in the communities, the development of the local churches, liberation and the defense of justice.

Therefore, evangelization is explained as a global, complex and dynamic reality. *Global*, because everything in the church should be understood from the evangelization perspective. *Complex*, because it must include a diversity of elements that do not negate the explicit announcement of Jesus nor cast aside the concerns and concrete needs of humanity and of the countries. *Dynamic*, because it has to implicate all members of the church to bring the good news to all areas of humanity, with the goal of renewing all humanity. (Its criteria of judgment and its principal values and the disassociation between faith and culture constitute the principal drama of our time.)

***Redemptoris Missio* (1990)**

Published 25 years after AG, this attempts to reaffirm the permanent validity of the missionary mandate in the face of some tendencies that question the sense and urgency of the missionary obligation. It is significant that it takes on once again with force, the missionary terminology (speaking normally of the mission *ad gentes*).

Given its radicalness, its force and its wideness of perspectives, this can be considered the most relevant document of the magisterium of Pope John Paul II (that which continues in the fundamental theme of the documents referred to in the jubilee of 2000).

The Pope calls the whole church to maturity and responsibility in a decisive historical moment in such a way that it is especially noteworthy that the mission of the church is still found to be in its beginning stages. This new situation presents a double perspective: from the point of view of quantity, the number of Christians continues to be a minority, a situation that cries out more if you consider the situation of Africa and Asia; from the point of view of quality, it is especially noteworthy that a new civilization is arising whose seeds and whose infrastructure do not have present the values of the gospel.

Confronting this double challenge is made more difficult with missionary zeal diminished and with doubts about the sense of and need for missionary activity. Therefore, it is necessary to recover the missionary spirit that blossoms forth from the most profound center of Christian identity (the centrality of Jesus must be reaffirmed, as well as the newness and peculiarity of the faith, the importance of baptism and the value of belonging to the church).

Taking all this into account, the disruption of situations and the importance of the new missionary situations must be recognized. The new social realities and the new areas of culture have to be valued as missionary environments. For this reason, the distinct ecclesial protagonists ought to abandon their provincialism or their passivity in order to live their missionary responsibility at the height of our historical era. These changes nevertheless ought not to obscure the specific character of the mission *ad gentes*.

IV. THE SPECIFIC CHARACTER OF THE MISSION “AD GENTES”

We have intended to show that the missions (or missionary activity) ought to reintegrate itself to the unique mission of the Church. But this presents an important question: if all is mission, what space is there for the missionary activity if it can be affirmed that the mission is also “here”? Does the mission *ad gentes* have any

sense in regard to far away lands? Can any special value be given to the going out and going forth?

This problem has been treated in a direct way by the magisterium of the church precisely when the paradigms of the mission were changing, with the intention that the missionary activity not be less valued. Let us examine the indications of the documents already mentioned.

AG 6 affirms that the task of the church is unique and identical in all parts and under whatever condition. In the mission of the church there are differences, not coming from the intimate nature of its mission, but rather of the conditions in which it is being realized.

As the mission develops in history, and for a Church that exists in time, it has to adapt to the diverse situations. This is what generates the diversification that is produced from a double point of view: *a)* on the part of the church. When it cannot be present and act with all the means at its disposal, its presence ought to adapt itself to a more humble and simple rhythm and process; *b)* on the part of the recipients. There are diverse degrees in regards to the going away from Christ or the lack of knowledge of the gospel (together with the geographic criteria the anthropological and soteriological criteria must be taken into account). For these reasons, particular initiatives have to arise that can be designated “missions” or “missionary activity.”

Evangelii Nuntiandi, which gives importance to the terminology with regard to evangelization does not hide that which we understand as missionary activity. The horizon of evangelization has a universality without frontiers that has to arrive at the most remote regions. It warns therefore against the temptation of the very evangelizers to limit, under distinct pretext, its area of missionary action. The church has as its deepest inspiration the words of the Master: to all the world! to all creatures! even to the ends of the world!

This “going forth” ought not to be understood only in the geographic sense, but also in the cultural sense; to evangelize is to take the Good News to all humanity, in order to transform humanity from within to make all things new.

This very dialectic is presented profoundly in *Redemptoris Missio*. It reinforces, as we have said, the identity of the mission *ad gentes*. The moment has arrived to dedicate all ecclesial energy to the new evangelization and to the mission *ad gentes*. It reaffirms the unity of the mission but shows also the circumstances that oblige it to speak of the mission *ad gentes* as a specific action. It affirms that all the church is missionary and does not exclude the fact that there be a specific mission *ad gentes*. The number of those who do not know Christ has grown constantly and therefore it has to be directed

to the South and East, and at the same time it has to go to the centers where a new humanity is being born.

Within this plan a precise and necessary classification needs to be established so as not to confuse the circumstances. The *pastoral* action is directed toward the activity in the center of the ecclesial communities. The *new evangelization* refers to the action among the baptized “post Christians” or those whom in our context are found far from the evangelical message. The *mission ad gentes* affects more directly the non Christians. This last consideration has to be the dynamism and horizon of all the rest, but all considered in the same movement and within the same motivation.

We can therefore conclude that it is necessary to recognize this vocation and this action that is proper to the life of the church. There is one fundamental chord that is the only mission, but this chord is played out in diverse variations according to the circumstances and situations. The universality has to accompany all of the Christian vision, but this universality has to be concrete and therefore must cross frontiers and barriers of very diverse types. Because there is “distance” there has to be going out, leaving the area and also sending forth. The theological and practical discernment ought to strive to identify at all times these frontiers and boundaries that have to be crossed to be faithful to the profound logic of the universal plan of God.

V. THE FRAMEWORK OF THE MISSION OF THE FUTURE

At the end of this treatise, we have been able to identify the central content of the mission of the church in its dimension *ad gentes*. It has to be a holistic mission that includes all the dimensions of reality and addresses all the members of the church. In order that it be truly holistic, it ought to be attentive to identify the crossroads of history, the highways in which the gospel of the Reign of God and the Pascal mystery should be announced. Actually, the framework of the mission ought to take into account five aspects.

1. The mission ought to move forward in the center of the communion of the churches, with its sight set on all the continents, developing inculturation and the involvement of everyone. The mission ought not to reduce itself to the communion among the churches (it is not only a mutual interchange of goods but rather a service to the evangelization in the world) and ought to go beyond the unidirectional concept of the missionary action.

2. The mission has to be contextualized, that is to say it ought to take into account the social, economic and political dynamics that make real and historic the life of all humanity and society. Context is always in flux and demands new answers. Therefore attention to the

context fosters responsibility of all but at the same time ought to avoid breaking the communion or absolutizing the differences.

3. There cannot be Christian mission that does not come forth from *suffering and poverty*, because they constitute some of the most inhuman barriers that have been placed in human history. This option has to avoid violence and hatred, but cannot be deaf to the cry of the marginalized and the poor.

4. The mission has to be realized in the context of plurality of religions; therefore it cannot renounce an *attitude of dialogue and respect* and should listen and accept the religious richness of men and women of other religions and look for cooperation with all religions in favor of threatened humanity. But this should not be done at the cost of the peculiarity of the Christian confession. With respect to dialogue, it ought to manifest the testimony of the true faith itself and therefore the expressed announcement of the salvific action of Jesus, in his radical identity as eternal Son of the Father.

5. The mission ought to plant itself and live with a *global view* even if all the activity has to be *local*. Globalization generates injustice if it is understood from the standpoint of brutal capitalism, but at the same time, it offers new space for communication and new cultural elements that ought to be valued as privileged spaces for evangelization.

Missiology and the missionary praxis, given its characteristics, always supposes the life of freedom and creativity of the Spirit. Therefore, it will always be a prophetic thrust but also a font of joy and optimism, and fundamentally it can give hope and strength to rejuvenate the church and all the church communities.

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