



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II FOR WORLD MISSION DAY 1979

To all my brothers and children in Christ

On inaugurating the apostolic ministry on Sunday 22 October of last year—a date that happily coincided with World Mission Sunday in the Catholic Church—I could not omit, among the primary intentions ardent in my mind on that solemn circumstance, reference to the problem, always a topical and urgent one, of the spread of the Kingdom of God among non-Christian peoples. In fact, addressing all the faithful scattered throughout the world, I recalled how, on that day, the Church prayed, meditated, and acted in order that Christ's words of life might reach all men, to be accepted by them as a message of hope, salvation, and complete liberation (cf. A.A.S. LXX [1978] 947).

That thought was renewed in me while I was composing the [first Encyclical Letter](#) and dealing with the subject of the mission of the Church in the service of man; and now it stirs in me even more insistently, in view of Mission Sunday next autumn. In this connection, it seems to me opportune to take up again and develop an affirmation which I could do no more than state in the aforesaid Encyclical, when I wrote that "the mission is never destruction, but instead is a taking up and fresh building" (n. [12](#)). The expression, in fact, can offer an adequate subject for our common reflection.

The mission is not destruction of values

What and how many are the values present in man? I will mention rapidly the specific values of his nature, such as life, spirituality, freedom, sociability, the capacity of dedication and love; the values that come from the cultural context in which he is integrated, such as language, the forms of religious, ethical, and artistic expression; the values that come from his commitment and his experience in the personal sphere and in those of the family, of work, and of social relations.

Now it is with this world of values, more or less authentic and unequal, that the missionary comes

into touch in his work of evangelization. With regard to them, he will have to take up an attitude of attentive and respectful reflection, taking care never to suffocate, but on the contrary to save and develop these goods that have accumulated in the course of centuries-old traditions. It is necessary to recognize the constant study by which missionary work is, and must be, inspired in accepting these values of the world in which it is exercised: the fundamental attitude in those who bring the good news of the Gospel to peoples is to propose, and not impose, Christian Truth.

That is required, in the first place, by the dignity of the human person, which the Church, following the example of Christ, has always defended against all aberrant forms of coercion. Freedom, in fact, is the fundamental and indispensable premise of this dignity (cf. Declar. *Dignitatis Humanae*, n. 2). That is required, also, by the very nature of faith, which can spring only from free consent (cf. *ibid.*, n. 10).

Respect for man and esteem "for what man has himself worked out in the depths of his spirit concerning the most profound and important problems" (Encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, n. 12), remain fundamental principles for all correct missionary activity, understood as the prudent, timely and industrious sowing of the Gospel, not as the uprooting of what, being authentically human, has an intrinsic and positive value.

The mission is a taking up again of values

"The young Churches", we read in the Decree *Ad Gentes*, "borrow from the customs, traditions, wisdom, teaching, arts and sciences of their people everything which could be used to praise the glory of the Creator, to manifest the grace of the Saviour, or contribute to the right ordering of Christian life." (n. 22). Evangelizing action must aim, therefore, at emphasizing and developing what is valid and wholesome in the man evangelized, as in the socio-cultural context to which he belongs. With a careful and discreet method of education (in the etymological sense of "drawing out"), it will bring out and mature, after purifying them of the incrustations and sediments that have formed in the course of time, the true values of spirituality, religiousness and charity which as "seeds of the Word" and "signs of God's presence", open the way to acceptance of the Gospel.

Adopting "the riches of the nations which have been given to Christ as an inheritance" (cf. Decree *Ad Gentes*, n. 22), and illuminating with the Master's word that sum of customs, traditions and concepts which make up the spiritual heritage of peoples, the Church will contribute in this way to building a new and universal civilization, which, without distorting the nature and typical aspects of the different ethnico-social contexts, will reach perfection by acquiring the highest evangelical contents. Is not this the testimony that comes to us from so many mission countries (I am thinking, for example, of the Churches of Africa), where the power of the Gospel, accepted freely and consciously, far from wiping out, has strengthened the best trends and aspects of local cultures, and has encouraged their further development?

The Council, in a fine page of the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, further recalls: "The good news of Christ continually renews the life and culture of fallen man; it combats and removes the error and evil which flow from the ever-present attraction of sin. It never ceases to purify and elevate the morality of peoples. It takes the spiritual qualities and endowments of every age and nation, and with supernatural riches it causes them to blossom, as it were, from within; it fortifies, completes, and restores them in Christ. In this way the Church carries out its mission and in that very act it stimulates and advances human and civil culture..." (n. 58.)

The mission is a new building

Evangelizing action, aiming as it does at transforming every human creature "from within", introduces into consciences a renewing ferment, capable of "affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, mankind's criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspirations and models of life, which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 19). Under the influence of this inner urge, the individual is led to become increasingly aware of his reality as a "Christian", that is, of the dignity that is specifically his as a human being, created in the image and likeness of God, ennobled in his very nature by the event of the Incarnation of the Word, destined to a superior ideal of life.

We find here the foundations of that "Christian humanism", in which natural values are united with those of the Revelation—the grace of divine adoptive filiation, of brotherhood with Christ, of the sanctifying action of the Spirit.

The birth of the "new creature" then becomes possible, rich both in human and in divine values: here we have the "new man", raised to a transcendent dimension from which he draws the help indispensable to dominate passions and to practise the most difficult virtues, such as forgiveness and love of his neighbour, now his brother.

Brought up in the school of the Gospel, the "new man" feels the commitment to become a supporter of justice, charity, and peace in the socio-political context to which he belongs, and he becomes an architect or, at least, a collaborator in that "new civilization", which has its *magna charta* in the Sermon on the Mount. It is clear, therefore, how the renewal promoted by evangelizing activity, though essentially spiritual, goes straight to the heart of the serious and haunting problem of the economic and social injustices and imbalances, which torment such a large part of mankind, and can contribute to its solution. *Evangelization and human development*, in a word, though remaining clearly distinct (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 35), are linked indissolubly, and this link significantly finds its welding in the highest Christian virtue: charity. "Where the Gospel arrives, charity arrives", my Predecessor **Paul VI** stated in the Message for Mission Sunday in 1970. And in fact missionaries have never failed in this fundamental commitment, always endeavouring to integrate their specific service "pro causa

salutis" with a resolute and constructive action for development. A splendid proof of this is the outcrop, in all mission countries, of schools, hospitals and institutes, flanked by a whole series of initiatives in the technical, welfare and cultural field, which are the fruit of hard personal sacrifices on the part of the missionaries themselves, as well as of the hidden renunciations of so many brothers of theirs who reside elsewhere.

Building the new humanity, permeated by the Spirit of Christ, missionary activity presents itself, at the same time, as a suitable and effective instrument to solve not a few of the evils of the contemporary world: injustice, oppression, emargination, exploitation, loneliness. It is—as everyone can see—an immense and exalting work, to which each Christian is called to make his own contribution.

Cooperation and the Pontifical Mission Aid Societies

Actually, the spread of the proclamation of salvation, far from being a prerogative of missionaries, is a serious duty incumbent on the whole People of God, as the Council authoritatively recalled: "As members of the living Christ, ... all the faithful have an obligation to collaborate in the expansion and spread of his Body." (Decree *Ad Gentes*, n. 36.) I cannot but dwell, therefore, on this duty in conclusion of these words of mine.

Those who, having received the gift of faith, enjoy the teachings of Christ and participate in the Sacraments of his Church, precisely by virtue of the commandment of love and—I would say—by the solidarity of charity, cannot disregard the millions of brothers, to whom the Good News has not yet been brought. They must take part in missionary action, in the first place, with prayer and with the offering of their own sufferings: this is the most effective way of collaborating since, precisely through Calvary and the cross, Christ carried out his work of redemption. They must, furthermore, support it with generous concrete aid, because material necessities are immense and innumerable in mission lands. Such aid, collected through the Pontifical Mission Aid Societies—the central and official organ of the Holy See for missionary animation and cooperation—will subsequently be distributed, according to justice and opportuneness, among the young Churches. "It is right", the Council tells us, "that these works should be given first place, because they are a means by which Catholics are imbued from infancy with a truly universal and missionary outlook..." (Decree *Ad Gentes*, n. 38.) It is these works which ensure efficient coordination in the global view of expectations and requests; it is from them that there starts, branching out, the vast network of missionary charity. But their *raison d'être* is not reduced only to an organizational function; actually, they are called to play a part of active mediation and inter-ecclesial communication, stimulating frequent and brotherly contact among the various local Churches, among those of ancient Christian tradition and those of recent foundation. And this is a far higher function, because it directly reflects and promotes the circulation of charity.

Expressing in advance deep gratitude to those who accept this message with open hearts, I

invoke the fullness of heavenly favours on my revered brothers in the episcopate, on their diocesan communities, and above all on individual missionaries, men and women, and their Institutes, while I impart the Apostolic Blessing to all as a token of grateful affection.

From the Vatican, 14 June, the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ, in the year 1979, the first of the Pontificate.

IOANNES PAULUS II

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana