



MISSION: THE ABSOLUTE PRIORITY OF THE CHURCH

In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis underscores that the Church's mission to evangelize the contemporary world must be her top priority and then proceeds to sketch out what that mission involves. In this article, I would like to draw on this document, allowing the Pope to speak for himself in the hope that his words will echo in our hearts and move us to act in fidelity to his teaching.

The Holy Father says: "Missionary activity represents the greatest challenge for the Church and the missionary task must remain foremost" (15). Mission is the very essence of the Church, which was constituted by Christ, who entrusted to her the mandate he received from the Father (Jn. 20:21). Today, this mandate is more urgent than ever due to the secularization of society, which has resulted in dechristianization. Because of this, "we cannot passively and calmly wait in our church buildings: we need to move from a pastoral ministry of mere conservation to a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry" (15). From this springs the twofold, complementary image of a Church that "goes forth" (20ff.)—a Church involved in mission (97); a Church that goes out from herself—and a Church "whose doors are open" (46) to welcome everyone. These are the two coordinates of mission: to go forth and to welcome.

Due to this priority, "missionary outreach is paradigmatic for all the Church's activity" (15). It is necessary to "put all things in a missionary key" (34). "The Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures must be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation.... All renewal in the Church must have mission as its goal if it is not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion" (27). This requires, on the part of the Church, "a missionary transformation" (19ff.), that is: to be "permanently in a state of mission" (25).

The Church is missionary in all her elements and therefore no one can feel that his/her vocation and call to "missionary conversion" (30) is something secondary or optional: "In virtue of their Baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples" (120). Disciples from the aspect of listening, and missionary from the aspect of going forth. Mission springs from discipleship and thus a Christian is a disciple in view of his/her call to mission. It is necessary to take a relationship that is unbalanced due to a self-referential and spiritualistic discipleship and repolarize it on mission. Christian spirituality does not lead Christians to focus on themselves. It is a "missionary spirituality" (78) that results in a growth in holiness through evangelization in love. It makes each Christian more keenly aware of the fact that "my mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take off; it is not an 'extra' or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self. I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world. We have to regard ourselves as sealed, even branded, by this mission to bring light and blessing, to enliven, raise up, heal and free" (273).

At the same time, it should be kept in mind that mission involves both giving and receiving: "The work of evangelization enriches the mind and the heart; it opens up spiritual horizons; it makes us more and more sensitive to the workings of the Holy Spirit, and it takes us beyond our limited spiritual constructs. A committed missionary knows the joy of being a spring which spills over and refreshes others. Only the person who feels happiness in seeking the good of others, in desiring their happiness, can be a missionary. This openness of the heart is a source of joy, since 'it is more blessed to give than to receive' (Acts 20:35)" (272).

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