

Church Mission Today in the Context of the *Acts of the Apostles*

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With due respect to the great Divine Commission in Matthew 28:20 – “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” –, the goal of this article is to illustrate that the current mission of the Church can be biblically and catechetically contextualized in the *Acts of the Apostles*. Indeed, in living her missionary life, in evangelizing through the *missio ad gentes* as the Second Vatican Council termed it, the Church can and should read and interpret her missionary endeavors and experiences today under the light of the *Acts of the Apostles*, so as to develop effective response to the variety of challenges facing its mission in the present world.

1. Mission as Viewed by the *Acts of the Apostles*

The role of the Holy Spirit in the catechetical-evangelizing mission of the Church is evident in the *Acts of the Apostles*: “And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Lk 24:49). Thus, in obedience to the Lord’s command, the Apostles stayed in Jerusalem and waited for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. From this, the Church learns that without the Holy Spirit and its action, the best skills and qualifications may be of little or no use in the mission of evangelization.

Mission in the *Acts of the Apostles* is largely viewed as the transmission of the doctrine of the faith. This is fundamental to the Church since the Lord Jesus Christ entrusted to her the saving message of salvation which has been handed on through the centuries to the present day. This quality distinguishes the Church as the sacrament of salvation. The apostolic preaching (kerygma) in the *Acts of the Apostles* focuses on the Lordship of Christ after the Resurrection

(Acts 2:22-36). This historic and ground-breaking event of the resurrection is the basis for the Christian faith as a lived experience and also is the foundation for the formulation of the Christology in *Acts of the Apostles*. In this, Jesus Christ is recognized as the Servant (Acts 3:13-26; 4:27.30; 8:32-33) and Jesus Christ is also seen as the new Moses (Acts 3:22 ff.; 7:20 ff.).

The Church's mission of reaching out to other people is founded in *Acts of the Apostles*. Salvation as presented in the *Acts of the Apostles* is not only for the Israelites but for all people. This universality of salvation is evident in Peter's act of going to the house of Cornelius after having received a vision (Acts 10:1-33). This reaching out, the *missio ad gentes* or even *missio ad extra* was one of the first crucial problems and blessings for the infant Christian community. Paradoxically, it was a problem and a blessing. It was a problem because it was hard for the traditional Jews to accept that even the Gentiles can be and are invited to salvation. This means that the coming of Jesus Christ was not only a restoration of 'the new covenant with Israel' but rather the restoration of all the people of God. The same experience was a blessing because it gave the Christian faith, even in her infant stages, a Catholic, that is a universal outlook.

Geographical expansion of the Christian faith is also a key aspect of mission in *Acts of the Apostles*. The focus is first on Jerusalem (Acts 2-7) and it is a very strong focus to the extent that it forms the reason for the accusation against the Apostles that "they have filled the whole Jerusalem with their teaching" (Acts 5:17-28). Later, after the focus on Jerusalem, the faith spread to other Hellenistic places (Acts 8-11). This expansion is in harmony with the exhortation of Jesus Christ Himself, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8), and also with the teaching of St. Paul, "God wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). This shows the need for a more vigorous and well-organized missionary activity in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, the expansion was also facilitated by the persecutions that broke out against the Church in her very early stages. Providentially, God brought good out of the persecutions even when the persecutors of the Church aimed at destroying the Christian faith. This was the experience recounted in the *Acts of the Apostles*, and is still the living and lived experience in many other places where the Christian faith is still young. In the early

Church, the persecutions caused the Christians to scatter, and in this “human scattering” the Word of God was also scattered to other places where they fled (Acts 8:1-4). Uganda is a practical example of this Christian experience because the first Christians in Uganda were martyred by Kabaka Mwangi between 1885-1887. In these and other similar persecutions is fulfilled the dictum of Tertullian (a second century author), who stated that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christianity” (*sanguinis martyrum semen Christianorum est*, Apologeticum 50:13).

2. Catechetical Methods that *Acts of the Apostles* Offers the Church

In her evangelizing mission, the Church can learn some methods of catechesis from the *Acts of the Apostles*. The Aeropagus experience of St. Paul in Acts 17:16-34, in which he encountered the Athenian life of worship and led the people in Athens to the worship of the true God, can be used as a model of catechesis and inculturation. In this context, inculturation goes beyond liturgy and embraces other facets of Church life, among which is catechesis. St. Paul did not begin by condemning but by recommending the Athenians for being so religious (Acts 17:22). The Church, most especially in some parts of the world where the Christian faith is still young, should like St. Paul see the positive values in the cultures that she encounters on the face of the earth. It is the responsibility of the Church to study, evaluate, and interpret the values in other cultures in the light of the Gospel. It is after due study and interpretation that the positive values can be accepted as normative for Christian living, while the negative values are discouraged. Some of the positive values that are common in the majority of the African cultures are hospitality, respect for the elders, care for life, and honesty. On the other hand, the negative practices that should be discouraged include but are not limited to female genital mutilation and widow-inheritance.

The spirit of focusing on the communities is fundamental in the evangelizing practices of the *Acts of the Apostles*. The individual person is not forgotten but is also well-catered for as it was in the life of the early Church as we read that “all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44-45). In following this example, each person is therefore invited

to bring his or her personal talents and gifts to the evangelizing mission of the Church. In doing so, the varying contexts of time, place, and culture should be taken into consideration, and the Gospel will have an incarnational model in which “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).

The participation of all people in the evangelizing mission of the Church was present in the *Acts of the Apostles*. Even when there were Apostles who directly received the Divine Commission, the *Acts of the Apostles* shows that there were also other co-workers. This collaboration between all the members of the Christian community has been and still is fundamental to the proclamation of the Gospel and to Catechesis. It is noted of St. Vincent de Paul that he worked greatly with the laity, both men and women in coming to the spiritual and material relief of the destitute in his time. It is the responsibility of the Church to read the signs of the times and identify the ways in which this cooperation and mutual participation of the entire Christian community can be involved and useful in its evangelizing mission. This will be based on the Second Vatican Council perception of the Church as “the people of God”, and thus a paradigm shift from considering the Church as the Pope, Cardinals, Bishops, and Priests, which is a view that has no more place in the present evangelizing mission of the Church.

Pastoral visitations are a key catechetical method that the leaders of the first Christian communities used in *Acts of the Apostles*. In founding the Church in various places, plans were made to visit and strengthen the new converts to the Christian faith in the new way of life that they had embraced. An outstanding example in carrying out pastoral visitations is St. Paul as is well-noted in *Acts of the Apostles* 14:21-22 and 18:23. This model was also applied by the first Catholic missionaries to Uganda. The missionaries often visited the outstations and this was a great help for them to celebrate the sacraments. The pastoral visits ensured more time to share the Word of God, and to consolidate a close and humane contact with the natives of the land. It is the position of this article that even the pastoral agents of our time should emulate and strengthen this evangelizing method.

3. The Evangelizing Mission of the Church Facing the Current Theological Concerns

The evangelizing mission activity in *Acts of the Apostles* shows the foundation for inculturation. In the context of Africa and Asia, there is a growing concern of interpreting and living the Christian message of the Gospel in the setting of the various cultures and other legitimate human institutions. This is in strong harmony with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that “(Bishops) They should show [...] that earthly goods and human institutions according to the plan of God the Creator are also disposed for man’s salvation and therefore can contribute much to the building up of the body of Christ” (*Christus Dominus*, Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops, No. 12) This Conciliar teaching was very much preceded by the experience of the first Christian community. There was an issue as to whether the Gentiles (all non-Jews) who had become believers in Jesus Christ had to be circumcised in order for them to follow the Mosaic Law together with the faith in Jesus Christ. The Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:6-21) decreed that it was not necessary to burden the Gentiles with the obligations of the Mosaic Law. Consequently, an opening of a new possibility was offered and this possibility was that Gentiles can and indeed should participate in salvation as Gentiles without having to first become Jews. Similarly, for the Church in Africa, Africans can authentically be Africans and Christians at the same time. However, the Church needs to guard against the dangers of syncretism. Therefore, the basic questions for the Church to consider in the context of the *missio ad gentes* in Africa are: “How far can one live his or her Africanity without compromising his or her Christian identity?”, and “What does it mean to be an African-Christian?”

Inclusive perspectives drawn from the *Acts of the Apostles* are essential for the evangelizing mission of the Church. This inclusive aspect has links with ecumenism, which involves focusing on what binds us together as Christians and understanding our differences without prejudices, hatred, and malice. A striking example in the *Acts of the Apostles* is of St. Stephen. He was a Jewish-Christian, and despite his diaspora background was recognized as speaking under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and was appointed to serve as a Deacon (Acts 6:1-6). This ecumenical aspect of the Church from her infant stages was later to form one of its four marks, namely, Catholicity. The other three marks are Unity, Apostolicity, and Holiness.

4. The Early Church as a Model of *Missio ad Gentes*

This article clearly shows that mission is central to the life of the Church. The Church exists insofar as it lives and carries out its mission mandate of proclaiming the Good News to humanity. This has as its example the infant Church in the *Acts of the Apostles* in which the proclamation of the Good News takes priority and this leads to the creation of the office of Deacons in the Church (Acts 6:1-7). The mission being central to the life of the Church further means that the agents of evangelization need to have an ecclesial spirit since their mission starts with, in and for the Church as it was the case in the Acts of the Apostles: “And when they arrived in Antioch, they gathered the people of the Church together and told them about all that God had done with them and how He had opened the way for the Gentiles to believe” (Acts 14:27). This significance of the Church community should not however overshadow the fact that a true and an authentic *missio ad gentes* is both *missio Dei* and *missio ecclesiae*.