

Preface

Since the outset of his magisterium, Pope Francis has repeatedly called our attention to the necessity to bring about a major missionary awakening based on the “evangelical approach to the Church’s mission in the world”.¹ This calling is in keeping with Pope Benedict XV’s insight in the Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud*, and on the revitalization of the *missio ad gentes* “as engine and horizon of the faith”.² A renewed missionary engagement of all Christians is indeed necessary at a time when mission needs to regain its true significance, life force, and evangelizing drive, “so that the spirit of the *missio ad gentes* may animate the path of the Church”³ today and for the future. An evangelizer by nature, the Church should always begin by evangelizing herself:⁴ this is the only way to ensure that she is able to preserve her freshness and the Apostolic courage to be re-created and reformed with new modes of Christian presence and witness (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, 130-132), so as to continue to effectively respond to Jesus’ command “to go forth and preach the Gospel to all: to all places, on all occasions, without hesitation, reluctance or fear” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 23).

¹ POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the National Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies*, 1 June 2018, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/june/documents/papa-francesco_20180601_pontificie-opere-missionarie.html/.

² POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples*, 3 December 2015, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/december/documents/papa-francesco_20151203_plenaria-propaganda-fide.html/.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Mission is a force capable of transforming the interior of the Church even before the life of peoples and cultures. Therefore, mission must become the paradigm of the life and daily work of the Church, as a permanent state of intimate missionary communion with Christ, of personal encounter with Jesus alive in His Church, as the only way to bring about an authentic missionary and pastoral conversion of the disciples of Jesus and of the structures of the ecclesial community (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 25, 27).

The Extraordinary Missionary Month October 2019, announced by the Holy Father to celebrate the 100th anniversary of *Maximum Illud*, is thus a “providential occasion”⁵ to revive in the faithful the missionary “boldness”, “courage”, and “zeal of those who first proclaimed the Gospel”.⁶ The chosen theme for this initiative, *Baptized and Sent: The Church of Christ on Mission in the World*, reveals “the missionary dimension of our Baptism”,⁷ as being sent on mission is a call that comes with Baptism and is for all the baptized. And the “regular book for prayer and meditation”⁸ of the *Baptized and Sent* of all times – Pope Francis highlights – cannot but be the *Acts of the Apostles*. The “community of missionary disciples”⁹ that began evangelization from “Jerusalem [...] to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8) is their main source of “inspiration”¹⁰ and guiding star in the mission of evangelization and faith witness they are called to execute as members of the Church.

To meet Pope Francis’ call to awake the missionary awareness, ardor, and engagement, the Pontifical Missionary Union (PMU) has promoted the creation of *Missio ad Gentes in the Acts of the Apostles* (Omnis Terra – PMU CIAM Publications), a collection of essay authored by a group of eminent New Testament scholars from all the continents.¹¹ By examining the extraordinary events and deeds nar-

⁵ POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the National Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies*.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Pope Francis’ book titled *Go Forth: Toward a Community of Missionary Disciples* published June 2019 by Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, within the series American Society of Missiology Series.

¹⁰ POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the National Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies*.

¹¹ The publication of *Missio ad Gentes in the Acts of the Apostles* is part of the PMU contribution to the engagement of the Pontifical Mission Societies (PMS) in laying the groundwork to the Extraordinary Missionary Month October 2019 upon request of Pope Francis himself. On 22 October 2017, the same day of the Angelus Prayer held on the occasion of the World Mission Sunday, Pope Francis sent a letter to Cardinal Fernando Filoni, Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and President of the PMS Supreme Council, entrusting him with “the work of preparing for this event, especially by raising awareness among the particular Churches, the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, and among associations, movements, communities, and other

rated in Luke's writing, the chapters that make up this volume allow a thorough understanding of how mission represents not only the very nature of the Church (cf. *Ad Gentes*, 2),¹² but also its origin, purpose, and life, contributing to the reflection on "how to render the work of the *missio ad gentes* more effective".¹³

In the first place, the essays bring out the Trinitarian, Christological, and pneumatological roots of the mission as defined in the *Acts of the Apostles*, which provide the theological context in which the Church should be understood: from the creation in Christ through the redemption accomplished in the Paschal Mystery until its eschatological fulfillment.¹⁴ Hence, the divine universal mandate to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19, Acts 1:6-8) that the Church has derived "from the mission of the Son and from the mission of the Holy Spirit [...], in accordance with the decree of God the Father" (*Ad Gentes*, 2).¹⁵

Along these lines, the authors dispel any doubt about the fact that *missio ad gentes*, as received by the Apostolic Tradition and sealed by the Second Vatican Council, is the ever-valid foundation-

ecclesial bodies". The letter is available at <https://press.vatican.va/content/sala-stampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2017/10/22/0727/01588.html#ing/>.

¹² PMU promotion of this book does not entail the endorsement of all the statements and the exegetical approaches featured in the essays.

¹³ POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples*.

¹⁴ The Paschal Mystery and the historical mission of Jesus highlight how the need for love, the need for salvation from evil and death, sin and pain, hatred and division, is constitutive of the human person who, through creation in Christ, longs for divine sonship. Interest in dialogue, peaceful coexistence, social and economic justice, ecology, and otherness, must be profoundly configured and built upon the superabundant offer of salvation the heart of which is the Paschal Mystery (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 22).

¹⁵ The divine nature of the missionary mandate of the Church was reaffirmed also by Pope Benedict XV: "Before He returned to His Father, Our Lord Jesus Christ addressed to His disciples the words: 'Go into the whole world and preach the Gospel to all creation' (Mark 16:15). With these words He committed to them a duty, a momentous and a holy charge, that was not to lapse with the death of the Apostles but would bind their successors, one after another, until the end of the world – as long, that is, as there remained on this earth men whom the truth might set free. Entrusted with this mandate, 'they went forth and preached everywhere' (Mark 16:20) the word of God, so that 'through all the earth their voice resounds, and to the ends of the world, their message' (Psalm 18:5)" (*Maximum Illud*, 1).

al model and paradigm of the evangelizing mission of the Church throughout the whole history of salvation, until the coming of the Kingdom of God. There cannot be replacements for the *missio ad gentes*, which already encloses in the scope of its divine mandate any mode of dynamic presence of proclamation and conversion of nations, cultures, religions, and peoples who encounter and open themselves to the Gospel of Jesus and His Church.

Moreover, the authors make clear that mission does not respond to a human initiative: it is *missio* and *actio Dei*. The principal agent is the Holy Spirit: mission is His project (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 21).¹⁶ The Church is servant of the mission. It is not the Church that makes the mission, but the mission that makes the Church. Mission is not the instrument, but “the point of departure and the goal,”¹⁷ and Church’s mission is to proclaim the Gospel and to witness it among those who have not yet encountered Jesus Christ and the Christian faith is absent. In doing so, the Church opens the way to the divine action of the Holy Spirit in places where women and men still yearn for salvation from sin and death.

Missio ad Gentes in the Acts of the Apostles also highlights the need to rediscover the intrinsic link between mission and salvation, which is one of Luke’s recurring motifs (cf. *Ad Gentes*, 7), through another fundamental theological truth set out in the *Acts of the Apostles: the sacramental logic of the event of Jesus Christ*, of His Incarnation and Passover. Mission has the experiential and theological need to rediscover this logic, in order to determine the nature, life, and structures of the Church, as the “universal sacrament of salvation” (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 1, 9, 48; *Ad Gentes*, 1; *Gaudium et Spes*, 45).¹⁸ Mission is the historical and sacramental participation in the

¹⁶ “It is the Holy Spirit who sends us, accompanies us and inspires us. He is the source of our mission. It is he who guides the Church forward, not us. [...] He, the Holy Spirit, does everything; we are simply His servants” (POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the National Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies*).

¹⁷ POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples*.

¹⁸ Mission makes the Church because it designates it to be much more than an instrument for salvation. It constitutes the Church as a community of the saved, since it is truly a family of God, sons and daughters in the only Son – an eschatological design of all creation (Easter, Baptism, and Eucharist). The Church,

missions that God the Father has assigned to the Son and the Holy Spirit in the world. Therefore, limiting mission to proclaiming and witnessing the values of the Kingdom means not only making a true reduction, but also depriving the Word of God and His Kingdom of the concrete historical-eschatological reality of the Incarnation, as well as of the saving and transforming effectiveness of the missionary work of the Church founded on the Passover of Jesus.

The Beatitudes, the precept of love, and the liberation of the poor are theologically concrete and pastorally effective only in the context of the sacramental foundation they all share.¹⁹ What was very clear to the Second Vatican Council – namely, the Church as the “universal sacrament of salvation” and its necessity rooted in the need for theological faith and Baptism for the salvation of all, baptized or not – seems faded in some contemporary missiological reflections. But, without the sacrament, love and mercy remain vague intuitions of fraternity and reconciliation to be shaped by worldly criteria and treated as welfare programs and non-governmental organizations, as often pointed out by Pope Francis.²⁰

Only in the sacrament can one understand the true meaning of the world, of matter, and of the body which, sick in sin, yearns for

the “universal sacrament of salvation” is much more than a means or a sign that will one day be discarded. Cf. F. MERONI (ed.), *Mission Makes the Church*, Aracne Editrice, Canterano (Roma) 2017.

¹⁹ *Baptism and confirmation* as immersion in and pneumatological identification with the Paschal Mystery; the *Eucharist* as the communal form of the true and corporeal unity of God in Christ with our humanity in the order of sacrifice and oblation; *marriage* as a sacramental unity of God with his human creature and of Jesus Christ with his Church; *reconciliation* and the *anointing of the sick* as true liberation from sin and re-creation of full life; the *sacrament of order* as a ministry at the service of the Eucharistic form of the world and of redeemed humanity – these all need to be rediscovered in theological reflection and pastoral activity concerning mission (F. MERONI, *The Mission of the Church and the Missio ad Gentes: Some Initial Observations*, in CEP-PMS, *Baptized and Sent. The Church of Christ on Mission in the World*, EMMS OCT2019, San Paolo, Milan 2019, 78).

²⁰ “The secularized world, in fact, even when it is receptive to the Gospel values of love, justice, peace and sobriety, does not show the same willingness to the person of Jesus: it neither regards Him as Messiah nor as Son of God. At most it considers Him an enlightened man. Therefore, it separates the message from the Messenger and the gift from the Donor” (POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples*).

the Paschal newness of life.²¹ The Church is missionary in nature because it is born and founded in the Passover of Jesus' death and resurrection, the starting point of the *Acts of the Apostles*. The cross, the historical and risen life of Jesus of Nazareth, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, establish the Church in a permanent state of mission (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 25), and characterize its nature as the locus of salvation and the time of reconciliation with God within history and the world.²²

Missio ad Gentes in the Acts of the Apostles, springing from the insistence placed by Pope Francis upon mission and the living example of Peter, Stephen, Paul, and all the other figures portrayed by Luke, also reminds us that Jesus' mission, the heart and motivation of the very Church's mission, is a true communication of divine life, of eternal life, of the life of daughters and sons who have always been loved by God, our creator and Father in Christ. Giving the life of God the Father, offering the life of the Holy Spirit, and sacrificing oneself for life in Christ, represents the origin and purpose of mission, from its original form of the *missio ad gentes* led by the Apostles to its fulfillment in the Jerusalem of Heaven, the dwelling place of God among humanity (cf. Acts 21).²³

²¹ As Pope Benedict XVI reminded us in the Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* 70-71: "Catholic doctrine, in fact, affirms that the Eucharist, as the sacrifice of Christ, is also the sacrifice of the Church, and thus of all the faithful. This insistence on sacrifice – a 'making sacred' – expresses all the existential depth implied in the transformation of our human reality as taken up by Christ (cf. Phil 3:12). Christianity's new worship includes and transfigures every aspect of life."

²² However, salvation and eternal life, the cross and its oblation sacrifice, are somewhat absent from certain pastoral and missionary efforts that are too consumed by the present, by the self-gratification of numbers and exaggerated media exposure. The insistence of Pope Francis on *holiness* in the contemporary world prompts us to focus again on the topic of salvation in Jesus Christ by divine grace, as an experience of new life, conversion from sin, victory over death, and eternal life. See the Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* (March 19, 2018), and *Placuit Deo*, the document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith approved by the Holy Father (March 1, 2018).

²³ The mission of Jesus placed in the heart of the Church must be the criterion of spiritual discernment to evaluate the effectiveness of its pastoral structures, the results of its Apostolic work, the fruitfulness of its ministers, and the joy that we are capable of communicating, because without joy we are not able to attract anyone. Every parish should make the style of the *missio ad gentes* its own, so that

Nowadays, there are significant and creative Christian missionary communities in places that are predominantly indifferent or hostile to the faith, where the Christian witness of ecclesial movements, lay associations, missionary institutes, and new ecclesial forms of community life, experience the tragedy of the martyrdom of blood on a daily basis. These communities can refer to the living example of the Apostles to properly understand the *missio ad gentes* in a paradigmatic reconfiguration of the entire mission of the Church sent into the world for its salvation and transformation.²⁴

May this kerygmatic approach to the faith, which animated the Apostolic tradition and continue to be so familiar among the young Churches today, also find space among the Churches of ancient tradition in need for a new evangelization. *Missio ad Gentes in the Acts of the Apostles* is also addressed to them.²⁵

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Fr. FABRIZIO MERONI
PMU Secretary General
Director of CIAM and Fides

the Holy Spirit will transform habitual faithful into disciples, and dissatisfied disciples into missionaries, drawing them out of fears and closures and propelling them in every direction, to the ends of the earth (cf. POPE FRANCIS, *Meeting with the Executive Committee of CELAM*, Bogota, 7 September 2017, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/september/documents/papa-francesco_20170907_viaggioapostolico-colombia-celam.html/).

²⁴ The Christian faith that penetrates this interculturality opens new horizons, transforms relationships and peoples, transfigures matter, bodies, and the world for the glory of God and the full life of man and woman. Dialogue between people, cultures, and religions and the indispensable respect for each person's religious freedom represent the natural and necessary context of carrying out the Church's mission in the world. The peaceful and orderly coexistence of different and mutually respectful religious communities must always include the free possibility of mission, of conversion, and of religious and community membership (F. MERONI, *The Mission of the Church and the Missio ad Gentes: Some Initial Observations*, 77).

²⁵ A significant contribution in coordinating the publication of this volume was given by Mr. Emiliano Stornelli, Chairman of the Religion & Security Council.