

## **MISSIONARY INSTITUTES OF MEN AND WOMEN FOUNDED IN ITALY**

### **JOINT DOCUMENT**

Pope Francis announced the Extraordinary Missionary Month in October 2019 to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Pope Benedict XV's Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud* (1919), «with the aim of fostering an increased awareness of the *missio ad gentes* and taking up again with renewed fervor the missionary transformation of the Church's life and pastoral activity» (Letter of the Holy Father Francis to Cardinal Filoni).

We missionaries, in deeper harmony with Pope Francis' intentions, hope that this Extraordinary Missionary Month of October 2019 will become a privileged opportunity for us to renew the *ad gentes* missionary zeal. So that our whole life, our programs, our work, our own structures can draw vital energy and criteria for renewal from the mission and the proclamation of the Gospel.

As representatives of missionary Institutes of men and women founded in Italy (Combonians, Consolata's, PIME and Xaverians), we want our voice to be heard by sharing joys, hopes and concerns in a period of changes in which, in relation to the challenges of the modern world, we missionaries sometimes find ourselves unsure but also encouraged to find new approaches.

We write on behalf of many missionary brothers and sisters to whom we are sincerely grateful. People who work with passion and commitment, in inaccessible and dangerous places, in solidarity with people with whom they share distresses and dangers, often by risking their lives. Their example, their passion and self-denial, their life spent for others "in a crucifying effort" comfort and encourage us to continue. They are the ones who bear witness to us that it is good to devote one's life to the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who died and rose for our salvation, and to devote ourselves to others. They are the ones who remind us that life is found only by giving it.

We are particularly grateful to the many African, Asian and Latin-American missionaries that have revitalized our Institutes. The new vocational geography forces us to reconsider our community life and our way of living with people of different cultures. We know, indeed, that building intercultural communities will be an important challenge for the immediate future.

#### **1. AN ENCOUNTER THAT HAS CHANGED US**

At the beginning of our vocation, which common foundation are Baptism and Confirmation, there is a transforming experience that changes the lives of each one of us: the encounter with Jesus Christ that, as Pope Benedict XVI wrote, «gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction» (*Deus Caritas est*, n.1). It is from this that our passion for the mission rose: because a true encounter, which transforms life and the way of thinking and feeling, can only lead to the proclamation.

The words that Saint Paul VI pronounced in Manila in 1970 have a special echo for us, and they well summarize the sense of our life and of our vocation:

«Yes, I feel the need to proclaim him, I cannot keep silent [...]. I must bear witness to his name: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God [...]. He reveals the invisible God, he is the firstborn of all creation, the foundation of everything created. He is the Teacher of mankind, and its Redeemer. He was born, he died and he rose again for us. He is the center of history and of the world; he is the one who knows us and who loves us; he is the companion and the friend of our life. He is the man of sorrows and of hope. It is he who will come and who one day will be our judge and – we hope – the everlasting fullness of our existence, our happiness. I could never finish speaking about him: he is

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the light and the truth [...]. He is the bread and the spring of living water to satisfy our hunger and our thirst. He is our shepherd, our guide, our model, our comfort, our brother».

Yes, our life and our mission make sense only from Him because – as Saint Paul VI wrote – «there is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the Kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed» (*Evangelii nuntiandi* n.22).

All that we live: joys and hopes, sorrows, tears of the people to whom we have been sent, fears of the suffering and of the persecuted; all that we do: healing the body and soul's wounds, staying near to these brothers and sisters even if it costs us our lives. All this is motivated by the desire to share the Life of Jesus Christ, His dream of a just and fraternal world, His passion for the Kingdom.

#### **1.1 Missionary Community**

Aware that the mission is not an individual but an ecclesial fact, we affirm the importance of living our missionary vocation with the people that share our own charism and with all the men and women of good will who aspire by vocation to build the Kingdom of God. We know, indeed, that service to the mission is a community event because our encounter with Jesus, which leads to proclamation, occurs in the shared history of the particular charism of our Institutes and in the participation in the charism of our Founders. Because of that, we reiterate that the mission cannot be an individual and solitary fact but, essentially, is a community event, a *sentire cum ecclesia*: with the universal and particular Church of which we missionaries are an expression and from which we are sent, and with the particular Church to which we are sent. Furthermore, we believe that the witness of the common and fraternal life of our communities in our missions is already a first proclamation of Jesus Christ's Gospel:

«Communion begets communion: essentially it is likened to a mission on behalf of communion.... Communion and mission are profoundly connected with each other, they interpenetrate and mutually imply each other, to the point that communion represents both the source and the fruit of mission: communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion». No religious community [...] is turned in on itself; rather it is announcement, *diakonia*, and prophetic witness. The Risen One, who lives in the community, communicating his own Spirit to it, makes it a witness of the resurrection» (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Fraternal Life in Community*, n.58).

## **2. AD GENTES MISSIONARY INSTITUTES**

Our Institutes, while sharing the common passions for the mission, have different ways of living its demands, in fidelity to the charismatic heritage of each Institute. This heritage, lived in different conditions of time, place and culture, is a "multifaceted" grace of the only mission of the Church, sign and instrument of the Mission of God's Son, who takes flesh and becomes history in several situations of the people.

We welcome Jesus' invitation to be with Him to be sent to the mission. In Him, with Him and for Him, the Church sends us to be the sign of the communion and hope as consecrated for the mission *ad gentes*, being at the service especially of the poor and marginalized people, in fidelity to the spirit and the charism of our Founders. We are grateful to the Lord for the journey that He has enabled us to take over the years. We thank the Lord for the gift of the missionary vocation that we receive and that we try to deepen and shape in light of today's challenges, living it open to universality.

#### **2.1 Discomfort**

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We cannot but state that many of us live with some discomfort the challenges to which the mission *ad gentes* is subjected today. For some people the claim that “everything is mission and everywhere is mission” in reality reveals the fatigue and lack of motivation for the mission *ad gentes*, whose complexity and variety (see AG 6) if subjectively interpreted, often become a reason to claim his/her “own” mission.

The discomfort also involves formation and missionary animation, where criteria and methods are in question because of momentous and quick changes. Likewise, in religious life we can note a weakening of the feeling of belonging, accompanied by marked reduction and aging of missionaries (especially in western countries).

We are going through a time of crisis that involves all dimensions of our life: identity, feeling of belonging, ways and places of commitment, structures.

Faced with these real difficulties that result in instability and insecurity, we do not want to be discouraged. Rather, we want to take them as the Holy Spirit’s invitation of discerning God’s will for our time. Because of that, we also feel the need for an initial training that is more experimental and less theoretical, attentive to the human, relational and motivational aspects of the candidates. From the beginning of the formation process, we need to be clear about the charism *ad gentes*, *ad extra*, *ad vitam* and its implications.

We believe that audacious humility is required to keep exploring new grounds and to allow ourselves to be challenged by the mission, the poor, the people with whom we share our life.

## 2.2 Our Institutes and the Local Church

Our Founders had deep roots in the Church they came from: just remember Msgr. Angelo Ramazzotti, Bishop of Pavia; Msgr. Guido M. Conforti, Bishop of Parma; Giuseppe Allamano and Msgr. Daniele Comboni. We just have to recognize that, with regard to the local Church of origin – in a sort of charismatic self-reliance – we sometimes have forgotten we are the expression of her mission and martyrdom.

Because of that, we want to reiterate with keener awareness that our contribution has to be considered as a missionary proclamation to people far away, to the outskirts of existence and beyond the geographical borders of our own Church. Even though the missionary reflection also speaks about *inter gentes* mission, which is a global mission not linked to geographical and juridical criteria, for us the *ad gentes* qualification remains a strong statement, as Saint John Paul II’s missionary Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* (n.34) authoritatively affirms:

«The mission *ad gentes* [...] it is distinct from other ecclesial activities inasmuch as it is addressed to groups and settings which are non-Christian because the preaching of the Gospel and the presence of the Church are either absent or insufficient. It can thus be characterized as the work of proclaiming Christ and his Gospel, building up the local Church and promoting the values of the Kingdom».

Furthermore, we believe that our task – especially today when fear and suspicion of strangers and immigrants is increasingly insinuated – is also to encourage the encounter between people and the dialogue between different cultures and religions; to facilitate a fruitful exchange among local Churches on the different Continents and – we say it with humility – to recall the local Church to her missionary role against the temptation of self-absorption. This echoes the same appeal that Pope Benedict XV made with the Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud*, when following the missionary crisis caused by the First World War, he asked to European Churches to open up again with courage to the Mission.

## 3. THE MISSION

For us, as Saint Paul VI already affirmed, evangelizing is in fact the grace and the vocation proper to our Institutes, their deepest identity (see EN n.14). It is, indeed, the missionary choice that makes us capable «of

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transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation», as Pope Francis underlines (*Evangelii gaudium* n.27).

However, it is important to point out that this mission does not belong to us, because it flows from the mercy of God. Pope Francis, echoing Benedict XVI's words, writes: «the first word, the true initiative, the true activity comes from God and only by inserting ourselves into the divine initiative, only begging for this divine initiative, shall we too be able to become – with Him and in Him – evangelizers» (EG n.112).

### **3.1 Rethinking the Mission**

Today, the changing situations in the world and the Church compel us to reconsider the ways of doing mission. For this reason, we need new models that give reference framework to missionary action.

The Second Vatican Council elaborated on the concept of the mission, stating as its objective the foundation of the Kingdom of God in history. The Church is the «seed and source» (*Lumen gentium* n.5) and the «visible sacrament» (LG n.9) of God's Kingdom and she is at its service, as Saint John Paul II reminded us in the *Redemptoris Missio*:

«The Church is effectively and concretely at the service of the kingdom. This is seen especially in her preaching, which is a call to conversion. Preaching constitutes the Church's first and fundamental way of serving the coming of the kingdom in individuals and in human society. The Church contributes to mankind's pilgrimage of conversion to God's plan through her witness and through such activities as dialogue, human promotion, commitment to justice and peace, education and the care of the sick, and aid to the poor and to children. In carrying on these activities, however, she never loses sight of the priority of the transcendent and spiritual realities which are premises of eschatological salvation» (RM n.20).

### **3.2 The Context**

In this horizon, the mission has to take into account different contexts to come to life in several situations. It requires a commitment to fit into different social, cultural and religious backgrounds, as Pope Francis reminds us:

«The questions of our people, their suffering, their struggles, their dreams, their trials and their worries, all possess an interpretational value that we cannot ignore if we want to take the principle of the incarnation seriously. Their wondering helps us to wonder, their questions question us» (*Gaudete et exsultate* n.44).

### **3.3 A Style Characterized by Reciprocity**

«The Church is an evangelizer, but she begins by being evangelized herself» (EN n.15). We therefore would like to create communities inserted into a missionary reality, in contact with the people that we are called to serve and that are challenging us on the authenticity of our witness. We long for a mission style characterized by reciprocity where missionary men and women are at the same time evangelizers and the evangelized.

### **3.4 Touching the Suffering Flesh of Our Brother**

We remember many men and women missionaries that, right now, touch «human misery, [...] touch the suffering flesh of others» (EG n.270) even if it costs them their lives. In some African countries where violence and war are persisting; in Asia where Christians are an insignificant minority, often persecuted, and our missionaries painstakingly build a platform for dialogue and mutual respect; in some countries of South America where serious human rights violations exist; but also in western countries where the «dictatorship of

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relativism” and intolerance prevail and where people desperately search for the meaning of life «groping their way». (Acts 17:27).

Forty missionaries were killed in 2018, twice as many as in 2017; other missionaries have been kidnapped. We mention, among others, Fr. Pierluigi Maccalli of the Society of African Missions and Sr. Gloria Cecilia Narvaez of the Franciscan Sisters of Mary Immaculate. Cherishing the memory of all the men and women religious, priests, catechists, Christian community leaders who suffer for the Gospel and for the poor and without whom their defense would be impossible. Their witness makes no noise, but it is eloquent because it is inspired by love and compassion; it is effective proclamation of Jesus Christ.

#### **3.5 So That They May Have Life**

We believe that all that we bring, Jesus Christ and the Gospel of the Kingdom, is essential for the life of the people among whom we live and work: «I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly» (Jn 10:10). It is a proclamation that needs a change of heart and mind: there can be no Gospel proclamation without *metanoia*, without conversion (Mk 1:15; Mt 4:17), both for the ones that proclaim it and the ones that receive it: the Gospel is a double-edged sword that judges and judges me. There can be no Gospel proclamation without *parresia*, the courage of proclaiming the Truth and of judging structures of death and alienation that suffocate the weakest: there is no proclamation without prophecy.

#### **3.6 Mission is Cooperation**

We also believe that missionary action cannot exist without cooperation: between missionary Institutes, local Church, laity and community leaders, and all the people of good will.

In particular, we need to find a better synergy between strictly missionary Institutes and the local Churches where they work, so that their specific charisms are effectively at the service of the missionary vocations of the Churches.

The same Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud* emphasized the importance of cooperation between the various sectors of the Church: «Indeed, there are often – Pope Benedict XV wrote – some interests that concern the same region that cannot be looked after without a mutual agreement».

We would like to underline with satisfaction how in the last few years inter-congregational cooperation, especially for project management that requires a lot of qualified staff for specific services and enormous financial commitments, is becoming a common practice and a mission method that, nevertheless, needs to be increased.

## **CONCLUSION**

We, the representatives of missionary Institutes of men and women founded in Italy, want Saint Paul's words to become ours: «If I preach the gospel, this is no reason for me to boast, for an obligation has been imposed on me, and woe to me if I do not preach it!» (1 Cor 9:16). Evangelization is a passion for us, the passion for Christ and His Kingdom and, particularly, the passion for the “poor” of the world, the outcast and the excluded. May the God of Life support us and may the zeal for the mission that motivated our Founders also be a source of inspiration for us today for our missionary action.

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**Comboni Missionaries Sisters**

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**Consolata Missionaries**

**Consolata Missionaries Sisters**

**Xaverian Missionaries**

**Xaverian Missionaries Sisters**

**PIME Missionaries**

**PIME Missionaries Sisters**