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## Church's Mission to Foster Human Well-Being of All

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**Abstract:** The article looks at the change that Vatican II has brought about in the perception of mission and how this new understanding of mission has been at the heart of many documents of Vatican II as well as the teachings of all post-conciliar Popes. It explores the way Pope Francis interprets this concept of mission in the present context giving it concrete expression. The article indicates that People of God in their baptismal commitment constantly reach out to everyone in need with the same love and mercy of God. Baptised and sent on the mission the Church is a missionary by her very nature.

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In the past, to be precise, before the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), mission was often understood and explained primarily from the perspective of the mission command of Jesus “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And look, I am with you always, yes, to the end of time” (Mt 28:19). Mission was essentially seen as a response in obedience to a command of Christ. Missionary commitment came to be regarded as an entrusted duty, especially to some people engaged in full-time missionary activity. The mission command was, therefore, considered to be the foundation of the missionary commitment. As a result of this understanding, the territorial concept of mission predominantly prevailed the Church’s evangelising activity. A command is not given for its own sake and so is not an end in itself. The Second Vatican Council without diminishing or minimising the importance of the mission command, and without making an iota of difference to it, placed the mission of the Church on a more solid, broader, theological and trinitarian foundation. The council fathers of Vatican II realised that not only the mission command of Christ but also his entire life and mission on earth go back to God’s will for the salvation of the entire human race. The Church is sent forth to participate in and continue this same mission of God’s love made manifest in Jesus Christ and continued through the actions of the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

## **1. Ad Gentes**

The Second Vatican Council in its famous decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes of AG*) categorically states, “The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary

since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit according to the will of the Father” (AG 2). This indeed was substantially a radical statement in the sense that it greatly influenced the way the post-conciliar Church understood and explained what it means to be a member of the Church and more specifically what it means to be a missionary. Mission is a participation in the life of the Trinity and this participation begins in and through one’s baptism. Thus, the Church, which Vatican II defined as the “People of God” (LG 9-17), is missionary by its very nature. In *Ad Gentes* for the first time in her long history, the Church teaches that the Church’s mission (and her missionary nature) is rooted in the mission of God. Mission springs from the very nature of God who is love. This teaching has two essential implications from the perspective of practical evangelisation. The first is that all the disciples of Christ are called to be missionaries by participating in the very life of God in and through baptism. The second is that this divine mission (divine life) entrusted to the Church in general and to every Christian in particular reaches out to all, especially those who are poor or in need. “The Church, sent by Christ to reveal and communicate the love of God to all men and all peoples, is aware that for her a tremendous missionary work still remains to be done” (AG 10).

## **2. Lumen Gentium**

Vatican II proposes many meaningful definitions of the Church. It is interesting to note that the first definition of the Church given by the Council in its dogmatic constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (LG) states “the Church, in Christ, is in the nature of a sacrament - a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and unity among all men...” (LG 1). It is true that after the

Council this definition of Church exposed by the Council, unfortunately, did not attract the attention it deserved from the theologians. However, from the point of view of mission and mission theology, this understanding of Church as the sacrament, sign and instrument of communion with God and unity among human beings is of enormous significance. The Church is sent forth to bring human beings to God (communion with God) and to bring human beings to one another. Indeed this is her identity, her mission and the primary purpose of her existence. A Christian's deepest identity emerges from this fundamental definition of the Church set forth in *Lumen Gentium*. The entire second chapter of *Lumen Gentium* dealing with the Church as the People of God too manifests her missionary nature and commitment to the whole human race because all humanity is related to the Church in various ways (LG 12-16).

### **3. Sacrosanctum Concilium**

In fact, the very first document of Vatican II *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, SC, the constitution on sacred liturgy in its very opening paragraph makes explicit reference to this missionary nature of the Church and of all her sons and daughters. It states that the Council intends to “foster whatever can promote union among all who believe in Christ; to strengthen whatever can help to call all mankind into the Church's fold” (SC 1). It goes on to substantiate this missionary task of the people of God. Through the reform of the liturgy, according to *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, “the faithful are enabled to express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church... increase their power to preach Christ and thus show forth the Church, a sign lifted up among the nations, to those outside, a sign under which the scattered children of God may be gathered together...” (SC 2). *Sacrosanctum Concilium* also makes an explicit reference to the universal salvific will of God in the context of the Church's mission to

preach the Gospel to every creature (SC 5; 1 Tim. 2:4). Thus the constitution on sacred liturgy observes “just as Christ was sent by the Father so also he sent the apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit. This he did so that they might preach the Gospel to every creature and proclaim that the Son of God by his death and resurrection had freed us from the power of Satan...” (SC 6).

#### **4. Dei Verbum**

The dogmatic constitution on divine revelation *Dei Verbum* (DV) also makes both explicit and implicit references to the missionary nature of the Church and her duty to foster human beings’ communion with God and unity among themselves. *Dei Verbum* states that it is the Church’s duty to proclaim the Word of God with reverence and faith. “That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (DV 1). This vocation to proclaim the Gospel to all people is undertaken seriously by the Church because she “wants the whole world to hear the summons to salvation, so that through hearing it may believe, through belief it may hope, through hope it may come to love” (DV 1). In preaching the Gospel the Church is to communicate the gifts of God to the entire humanity.

#### **5. Gaudium et Spes**

Second Vatican Council’s famous pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world *Gaudium et Spes* (GS) is a document that substantiates the Church’s missionary nature and her missionary commitment to the entire world. The Church is not for herself but for others. She reaches out to one and all in her resolve to remain faithful to the missionary character. Thus, *Gaudium et Spes* declares “The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our

time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts” (GS 1). The Church is depicted as a community of disciples of Christ moving forward to the kingdom of the Father and bears a “message of salvation intended for all men” because of which “Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race” (GS 1). The Council, having deeply studied the mystery of the Church (missionary by her very nature) is interested not only in the sons and daughters of the Church but the whole of humanity as well (GS 2). Today the human race is troubled and perplexed due to various reasons. With solidarity and respectful affection for the whole humanity, the Church desires to enter into dialogue with them. She “offers to cooperate unreservedly with mankind in fostering a sense of brotherhood to correspond to this destiny of theirs” (GS 3).

All the four constitutions of Vatican II demonstrate and underline, at the very beginning itself, the missionary nature of the Church and her missionary commitment to the entire human race. This is also very true of many other documents of Vatican II like *Nostra Aetate* and *Dignitatis Humanae*. After Vatican II all the four Popes have deliberately carried forward this conciliar emphasis on the missionary nature of the People of God and the Church’s missionary commitment to humanity as a whole.

## **6. Pope Paul VI**

Pope Paul VI in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN, Evangelisation in the Modern World) reiterated this nature of the Church and the people of God. He pointed out that the Church’s mission is to follow Christ the missionary (the greatest evangeliser). “We wish to confirm once more that the task of evangelising all people constitutes the essential

mission of the Church” (EN 14). Mission is the reason for her existence. “Evangelising is, in fact, the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelise” (EN 14). *Evangelii Nuntiandi* taught that to be a missionary (evangeliser) means to bear witness to God’s love for the whole human race, “to bear witness that in his Son, God has loved the world” (EN 26). In the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (ES), which Pope Paul VI wrote during the Council, he compared the Church to a mother. “The Church was founded by Jesus Christ to be the loving mother of the whole human family and minister to its salvation” (ES 1). Thus, in his first encyclical the Holy Father points out that the Church has the mission to reach out to all human beings like a mother.

## 7. Pope John Paul II

Pope John Paul II wrote his significant encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (RM, Mission of the Redeemer) precisely to emphasise the missionary responsibility of the whole people of God. John Paul II said, “From the beginning of my Pontificate I have chosen to travel to the ends of the earth in order to show this missionary concern” (RM 1). In his opinion, the teaching of *Ad Gentes* that the Church is missionary by her very nature would imply that the Church is on mission always and everywhere. Therefore, further developing this teaching of *Ad Gentes* Pope John Paul II explains in *Redemptoris Missio* that the Church is always and everywhere on the mission. Looking at today's world from the view point of mission and evangelisation Pope John Paul II distinguished three mission situations. First, there is mission to peoples, groups and socio-cultural contexts in which Christ and his Gospel are not known. This is mission *ad gentes*. Then there is another mission situation where there are Christian communities with adequate and solid ecclesial structures.

They are fervent in their faith, Christian living and bear witness to the Gospel in their daily life. They also have a commitment to the universal mission of the Church. In these communities also the Church is engaged in the mission activity and it is called pastoral care. Thirdly, there is an intermediate situation where the entire groups of the baptised have lost a living sense of the faith and often no longer consider themselves members of the Church. In these places the Church engages in the mission of new evangelisation or re-evangelisation (RM 33).

Pope John Paul II reminded every Christian that with the Second Vatican Council “there is a new awareness that missionary activity is a matter for all Christians, for all dioceses and parishes, Church institutions and associations” (RM 2). Substantiating this view further, he said, “The need for all the faithful to share in this responsibility (mission) is not merely a matter of making the apostolate more effective; it is a right and duty based on their baptismal dignity whereby the faithful participate...in the threefold mission of Christ as Priest, Prophet and King” (RM71).

## **8. Pope Benedict XVI**

Pope Benedict XVI in his first encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (DCE, God is Love) stated that Church in her mission does essentially three tasks. The Church worships God, she takes care of the poor and finally, she teaches, preaches and evangelises. They are so intimately related that the Church cannot do one without the other two. Pope Benedict XVI stated that the love of God and love of neighbour are intimately and profoundly interconnected (DCE 1). Jesus united the love of God and love of the neighbour into one single precept. The Church’s mission is to love God and love one another and in that process, Christians become witnesses, missionaries and evangelisers. God is love (1 Jn 4:8), Jesus Christ is the incarnate love of God and the Church is a continuation of this



love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ. “Love of neighbour, grounded in the love of God, is first and foremost a responsibility for each individual member of the faithful, but it is also a responsibility for the entire ecclesial community at every level: from the local community to the particular Church and to the universal Church in its entirety. As a community, the Church must practise love” (DCE 20).

## **9. Pope Francis**

Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) has reminded the whole Church of the great missionary commitment and responsibility. Reiterating the views of Pope John Paul II, Pope Francis said, “there must be no lessening of the impetus to preach the Gospel to those who are far from Christ because this is the first task of the Church... missionary outreach is paradigmatic for all the Church’s activity” (EG 15). He has, again and again, demonstrated what does it mean to be a missionary by nature. “In all the baptised, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelisation” (EG 119). In his opinion, all Christians are missionary disciples of Jesus. “In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt 28: 19). All the baptised, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith are agents of evangelisation, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelisation to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelisation calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptised. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelisation” (EG 120). From the

magisterium of Pope Francis it becomes all the more clearer that it is baptism that makes us missionaries.

We are all meant to have the divine life in us and having that divine life within us through our incorporation into Christ in baptism makes us holy. In this way Christians are set apart to participate in the divine otherness. Divine life or holiness is primarily a matter of love. It is in our love that we are set apart from the world. In the evening of our life we will be judged on this love (Mt 25:31-46). The legitimate question is; what precisely is this love? In the simplest explanation, love can be understood as willing the good of the other as the other is. Love makes us children of God who loves saint and sinner in the same way, who wills the good of good people and bad people alike (cf. Mt 5:45). Like our God we are also meant to reach out to others without measuring our love and without expecting anything in return. Jesus asks “If you love only those who love you, what reward will you have? Even the tax collectors do the same. If you greet only your brothers, what is unusual about that? Even the pagans do the same. So be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:46-48). Thus, having the divine life in us, we are meant to love God and others in a radical way. This is an important implication of the conciliar teaching that we are missionaries by our very nature.

To be a Christian is to be a missionary and to be a missionary means to be caught up in the very life of God, the Trinity. In the sacred scripture, we encounter God as one who invites us to share his life and glory (AG 2) and reaches out to everyone especially the “poor” with his saving presence and unconditional love (Lk 4:18-19). Pope Francis said to a gathering of the members of the religious orders and charitable groups inspired by St. Vincent de Paul, “Love of God always translates into an active love of the poor, leading Christians to get up and go out to anyone in need. One who loves does not sit in an armchair and watch, awaiting the coming of a better

world, but he gets up and goes with enthusiasm and simplicity”<sup>2</sup> This missionary outreach is “paradigmatic for all the Church’s activity” (EG 15). Thus, the Holy Father invites all Christians to be “permanently in a state of mission” (EG 25).

Pope Francis envisions a Church that goes out with a renewed missionary commitment. The Church is sent by Christ to reveal and to communicate the love of God to all human beings. It invites us to have a sense of duty towards the mission. In his message for the World Mission Day 2019 once again Pope Francis spoke about the importance of renewing the Church’s missionary commitment.<sup>3</sup> It is an invitation “to rediscover the missionary dimension of our faith in Jesus Christ, a faith graciously bestowed on us in baptism.”<sup>4</sup> In baptism, we are born to a new life and are invited to share this new life of love with those around us. The Church of Christ is on a mission in the world and mission is an integral part of our identity as Christians. “Each of us is a mission to the world, for each of us is the fruit of God’s love.”<sup>5</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In line with *Ad Gentes*, *Lumen Gentium* and other Magisterial teachings, Pope Francis reiterates that the Church is not for herself. As a sign of unity and salvation, it needs to reach out to the world. The Church as the community of the missionary disciples of Christ, is sent out to share the love of God with everyone. We can say that the Church does not have a mission but the Church is a mission (cf. EN 14-15; EG 120). In this sense, the whole purpose of the Church’s existence is to call all human beings to the encounter with Christ so that everyone can see and experience the mercy of Christ. Reflecting upon this missionary character of the Church Pope Francis said

that she is “like a field-hospital that must care for the sick.”<sup>6</sup> In the same way the Holy Father asks the priests to bring this healing power of God’s grace and mercy to everyone in need and “to stay close to the marginalised and to be shepherds living with the smell of the sheep.”<sup>7</sup> Christians who do not go out of themselves do not live their missionary vocation faithfully. The People of God in their baptismal commitment constantly reach out to everyone in need with the same love and mercy of God. Baptised and sent on the mission the Church is a missionary by her very nature.

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<sup>1</sup> I believe that Dr Cyril Desbruslais had such a mission and he communicated this mission to the youth with zeal and joy. So this article is written in his honour, for whom his life was a mission.

<sup>2</sup> Cindy Wooden, “St. Vincent de Paul inspired people to pray and reach out, pope says,” Oct 16, 2017, <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2017/10/16/st-vincent-de-paul-inspired-people-pray-reach-pope-says/> Accessed on 10 October 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, *Baptized and Sent: The Church of Christ on Mission in the World. Message for the World Mission Day 2019*. (Mumbai: Better Yourself Books, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis’ message during the General Audience on 28 August 2019. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-08/pope-francis-general-audience-church-cares-for-sick.html>. Accessed on 14 October 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis’ message on 28 March 1913 during the Chrism Mass in St. Peter’s Basilica. <https://www.thecatholictelegraph.com/pope-francis-priests->