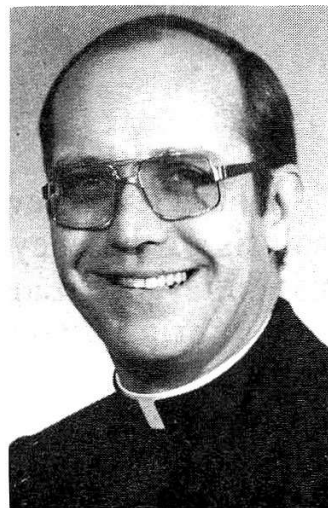


REKINDLING MISSION VITALITY AND ENTHUSIASM

Redemptoris Missio: A Commentary

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Mission statistics of the 1990s confront Christian churches in a dramatic and disturbing way. Consider: Christians of all denominations are only one-third of the world's population. Before the year 2000, Islam will claim more followers than Roman Catholicism, currently the world's single largest religion; Asia, where 60 percent of the human race lives, is less than 3 percent Christian. More than 23 percent of all peoples have never come into contact with Christianity, Christ or the Gospel.



Why should Catholics want to answer these challenges? While there is much discussion and many publications from the churches, at least 99 percent of these address only Christian interests. Of all foreign missionaries, 91 percent target populations in the Christian world with 90 percent of all evangelization efforts directed toward those who are at least nominally Christian. Only 3 percent of all Christians have contact with people of other faiths. An embarrassing fact is that the Christian world spends 99 percent of its income on itself.

These mission statistics, drawn from respected Catholic and Protestant sources, underscore the urgency behind Pope John Paul II's recent mission encyclical: *Redemptoris Missio* (The Mission of the Redeemer). The Pope asserts: "Missionary activity specifically directed 'to the nations' (*ad gentes*) appears to be waning." This fact "must arouse concern among all who believe in Christ." Why? Because "...in the Church's history, the missionary drive has always been a sign of vitality, just as its lessening is a sign of a crisis of faith"(2).

The Pope urges a "fresh impulse to missionary activity," the deepening of "the commitment of the particular churches," and the

harnessing of "all of the Church's energies to a new evangelization" (2-3). In a word, the focus of John Paul is direct and clear: "I wish to invite the church to *renew her missionary commitment*"(2).

Capturing the highlights of a lengthy document--and doing it in inviting language--is a formidable task but the effort must be made since the Pope summons, "*Peoples everywhere, open the doors to Christ!*"(3).

Vision of Evangelization

What view of evangelization emerges from a comprehensive analysis of the encyclical? Repeatedly, the document speaks of mission, evangelization and salvation in a holistic fashion: "Jesus came to bring *integral* salvation, one which embraces the whole person..."(11); "evangelical witness...is directed towards *integral* human development"(42); "action on behalf of *integral* development and liberation...is most urgently needed"(58).

Integral evangelization, as repeatedly affirmed in the encyclical(20, 41-60), reflects current missiological thought as well as recent magisterial teaching. Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* clearly encouraged Catholics to view mission holistically. The second chapter of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* speaks of the complexity of the evangelizing action and its various complementary and mutually enriching elements.

Another Roman document, issued by the Secretariat for Non-Christians (now called the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue), which elucidates the holistic approach to evangelization and salvation appeared on Pentecost Sunday, 1984. Entitled: "The Attitude of the Church toward the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission," this source affirms that mission is presented "in the consciousness of the Church as a single but complex and articulated reality" (13); the new encyclical echoes this vision: "Mission is a single but complex reality, and it develops in a variety of ways" (41). Again "mission is one and undivided, having one origin and one final purpose; but within it, there are different tasks and kinds of activity"(31).

The vision of mission that the Pope urges remains focused on

integral evangelization; it is not a narrow, anti-pagan (much less anti-Muslim) crusade as one early press release charged.

The fifth chapter of *Redemptoris Missio*, labeled "the Paths of Mission," views mission *holistically*. Key dimensions are: the witness of Christian living, the service of humanity, inculturation and interreligious dialogue, explicit gospel proclamation, and sacramental-liturgical-ecclesial life. All these elements are part and parcel of the Church's total mission of evangelization and follow the example of Jesus who lived mission in silence, in action, in dialogue, in teaching, and in prayer.

Foundational Mission Theology

This mission encyclical, which commemorates the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Ad Gentes*, clearly affirms the foundation of mission theology and the centrality and urgency of mission in the life of the Church.

The years following the Second Vatican Council were a golden opportunity to explore and debate, renew and clarify the Church's mission; and, it is true that "The Council has already borne much fruit in the realm of missionary activity...Above all, there is a new awareness that *missionary activity is a matter for all Christians* (2) Yet, at this time John Paul also discerned a need to reaffirm diverse aspects of the Catholic Church's foundational theology of Christian mission.

At least one third of the encyclical (three chapters out of eight) deals with theological questions. Chapter One includes core elements of the dogmatic theology of Revelation and Faith, Christology and Soteriology, as well as Ecclesiology and Missiology. Chapter Two focuses on biblical theology, particularly the kingdom of God. And, to the delight of missiologists, Chapter Three is completely devoted to pneumatology, examining the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church and its mission.

The following are the key emphases in these opening chapters.

1. All mission is centered in God's wonderful, generous loving plan of salvation (*mysterion*), made known through Jesus and accepted in faith. Jesus is the "definitive self-revelation of God" and "the fundamental reason why the Church is missionary by her very nature" (5).
2. While affirming with the Scriptures (I Tim

2:4) the universality of salvation, "the Church believes that God has established Christ as the mediator and that it has been established as the universal sacrament of salvation"(9). 3. The Pope unhesitatingly reaffirms these basics of Church teaching, noting that "*Mission is an issue of faith*"(11).

The biblical theme of the kingdom (*basileia*) is the integrating leitmotif of the second chapter. Preaching the kingdom and promoting its values are the missionary tasks of the Church which is "effectively and concretely at the service of the Kingdom"(20). The encyclical offers clarity and interpretation on other dimensions of kingdom theology: the kingdom of God and the Christ-event are complementary proclamations(16); the kingdom necessarily has a transcendent horizon(17); the kingdom "cannot be detached either from Christ or from the Church"(18); theocentrism and ecclesiocentrism demand a nuanced critique which is consistent with Church teaching(17-18).

Currently, the theology of the Holy Spirit (pneumatology) is of particular interest to missiologists and missionaries alike. "The Holy Spirit is indeed the principal agent of the whole of the Church's mission. The Holy Spirit's action is pre-eminent in the mission *ad gentes*(21). The Spirit's centrality is emphasized because the Holy Spirit's "presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions(28). Ask any missionary and you will receive an eloquent personal testimony of the presence and power of the Spirit active in peoples, cultures, and religions--renewing the face of the earth! The acts of today's apostles continuously write the gospel of the Holy Spirit!

Transmitting the Urgency of Mission

The English title given to John Paul II's mission encyclical is: "On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate." Thus, mission is always and everywhere essential; it is "not considered a marginal task for the Church but is situated at the center of her life, as a fundamental commitment of the whole People of God"(32). Mission is "the greatest and holiest duty of the Church"(63). The Pope's affirmations resonate throughout the work: "I have chosen to travel to the ends of the earth in order to

show this missionary concern"(1); "mission *ad gentes* is still in its infancy"(40); "I see the dawning of a new missionary age"(92).

No one seeks to minimize the Pope's assertions about the centrality and urgency of mission; however, it is a valid question to ask about strategies for implementation. Words of exhortation must give way to programs of concrete actualization. In the considered judgment of this author the encyclical is strong on the *why* of mission, but is only moderately successful on the *how*.

Mission animation--the *how?* of mission--requires continued discussion. While it is best accomplished locally, one can highlight some creative suggestions found within the encyclical.

The Christian family is a key and irreplaceable force in mission motivation(42); this insight is consistent with the teaching of Vatican II which termed the family the "domestic church (LG 11). Promoting Christian family life should redound to mission awareness and animation. Material and financial donations are gratefully received, yet families are challenged to offer "a special contribution to the missionary cause of the Church by fostering missionary vocations among their sons and daughters"(80).

John Paul challenges Christians: Do you wish to promote mission? True disciples are urged to "carry out a sincere review of their lives regarding their solidarity with the poor"(60). As followers of Jesus, "we should reassess our own way of living"(81); "fight hunger by changing your lifestyle"(59); "We cannot preach conversion unless we ourselves are converted anew every day"(47).

The role of missionary institutes and societies is crucial in mission animation; missionaries themselves should continue their "radical and total self-giving," initiate "new and bold endeavors," and "not allow themselves to be daunted by doubts, misunderstanding, rejection or persecution"(66). Diocesan seminarians and priests "must have the mind and heart of missionaries"(67). The Church must seek to expand the spheres "in which lay people are present and active as missionaries"(72). Missionary dynamism should become contagious!

Youth involvement is essential to lasting mission animation. They should be offered opportunities to visit overseas missions(82), to meet and offer hospitality to non-Christians and migrants within their own country(82). The idealism of youth is a potential resource--their rejection of violence and war, their desire for freedom and justice, their rejection of racism and closed na-

tionalism, their affirmation of the dignity and role of women(86). The vision of Charles de Foucauld (as a "universal brother") can fire the imagination of youth(89), can be a path toward missionary commitment.

Additional Major Emphases

An author seeking to compose a popular synthesis of a papal encyclical faces the challenge of providing a balanced presentation. This writer sees several other major emphases with the work. A paragraph is devoted to each.

Local churches around the world are the central actors in mission today; all evangelization necessarily is harmoniously accomplished in, with, and through the local church which is responsible for the totality of mission. This is a sea change in the dynamics of mission; both local churches and missionaries alike must explore the ramifications of this new reality. Many leads are found in the encyclical (26,30,39,48-52, 62-64, 71, 83-85,92).

Missionary activity is not an external imposition which violates human dignity and freedom. Or again, witnessing and proclaiming Christ are not at odds with people's dignity as persons or their freedom of conscience(7-8). Authentic mission does not restrict freedom, but rather seeks to advance it; the document is clear: "*The Church proposes; it imposes nothing*"(39).

Individuals who receive the permanent, life-long vocation to foreign, transcultural mission are a treasured resource of the Church. Their vocation is necessary for the Church (32); it is a unique calling(27,65); it is the model of the Church's missionary commitment(66); it is to be assiduously cultivated(79,84), particularly by mission institutes themselves(65-66).

The encyclical looks positively upon interreligious dialogue, devoting several sections to presenting it comprehensively(55-57). Interfaith dialogue "is part of the Church's evangelizing mission,...is not in opposition to the mission of *Ad Gentes*, ...[and] *does not dispense from evangelization*." This same section speaks of God's call to all peoples and his presence to them "of which their religions are the main and essential expression." The Church's reverence for the followers of other faiths and religions is clearly affirmed by the encyclical; it is not a "turning back

the clock" as some critics may purport.

Women receive the Pope's praise and gratitude for their outstanding contribution to mission: "I extend a special word of appreciation to the missionary Religious Sisters" (70); "How can we forget the important role played by women"? (71). "It is necessary to recognize--and it is a title of honor--that some Churches owe their origins to the activity of lay men and women missionaries" (71).

The process of inculturation and its relationship to mission receives extensive treatment (25, 52-54, 76). Authentic evangelization involves the Church in the inculturation process, an "intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures." This task is never finished and today it encounters new challenges--especially in large cities, "where new customs and styles of living arise together with new forms of culture and communication" (37). Mission and inculturation demand fresh initiatives and creativity in the techtronic age of the megapolis!

The entire final chapter of *Redemptoris Missio* treats "missionary spirituality" (87-91). Four elements characterize Jesus' disciples-become-missionary; the missionary is to be led by the Spirit, to live the mystery of Christ who himself was sent, to love the Church and humanity as Jesus did, and to desire the holiness of saints. In a word, mission spirituality is "a journey towards holiness" and the success of renewing the urgency of the Church's missionary impulse "demands holy missionaries."

Details--Not to be Lost

In a work as long as this papal mission encyclical one would expect to find details that demand further reflection. Any synthesis presentation must take note of them.

The personalist philosophy and orientation of John Paul II is manifested throughout the work. The person is always central in diverse mission apostolates, in work for justice (42), in fostering interreligious dialogue (55-57), in promoting development; the human person "is the principal agent of development, not money or technology" (58). In uniquely personalist terms, the missionary is described as "a person of the Beatitudes" (91) and it is love that is

always "*the driving force of mission*" (60).

The encyclical profusely expresses the Church's gratitude to its missionaries (2, 57, 60, 70). The Church's theologians provide an important service to the cause of mission (36) and should promote the study of world religions and science of missiology (83). The church needs a renewed commitment to ecumenism within mission (50).

In looking at today's world from the viewpoint of evangelization, the document distinguishes three situations: non-Christian peoples, Christians requiring pastoral care, and the so-called "post-Christians"; all require special approaches (32-34). Geographically, the Pope emphasizes the missionary demands within Asia (37, 55, 91).

The theology of the "implantation of the Church" (*plantatio Ecclesiae*) is specifically mentioned twice (49, 72). This approach is not inimical to mission when read with the full ecclesiology of the documents of Vatican II. Its pastoral implementation is served well by the basic ecclesial communities as a force for evangelization (51).

Significant and surprising is the fact that one unique quote appears verbatim no less than three times in the text (6, 10, 28): "we are obliged to hold that the Holy Spirit offers everyone the possibility of sharing in the Paschal Mystery in a manner known to God." Certainly, one cannot mistake the Pope's assertion that God's loving plan for salvation includes each and every person!

Mission as "God's work" (24) is clearly affirmed; it is based "not on human abilities but on the power of the Risen Lord" (23). Missionaries are conscious that they owe their faith and vocations "not to their own merits but to Christ's special grace" (11). They must believe that "it is not we who are the principal agents of the Church's mission, but Jesus Christ and his Spirit" (36). A missionary's faith journey "proceeds along *the path* already trodden by the Virgin Mary" (92).

Fifteen years ago Pope Paul VI wrote that "The modern person listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses" (EN 41). This passage is recalled in *Redemptoris Missio*. It must continue to remain a central focus if the Church wishes to respond "with generosity and holiness to the calls and challenges of our time" (92). In simplicity and profundity, the entire Church prays with constantly renewed vigor and urgency: *Veni Creator Spiritus*.