

Maximum Illud and its Relevance in Contemporary Mission

Valentine U. Iheanacho

Pope Francis on Mission Sunday of 2017 announced an Extraordinary Missionary Month that would take place in the month of October 2019. The occasion is the centenary of the publication of the missionary encyclical by Pope Benedict XV on 30 November, 1919. This write-up examines the importance and applicability of that epoch-making document in the light of today's missionary challenges.

Introduction

One of the remarkable features of the post-bellum Catholic Church from 1919 onwards was a vibrant display of an inner vitality when the missions beyond the shores of Europe were accorded a primacy of place and attention. The summer of 1914 began in a gloomy manner because of World War I. It ushered the western world into unknown territory, with portents of mutual slaughter on a scale hitherto unknown. That same mournful year and the new epoch that came with it, equally inaugurated an era that witnessed the expansion and growth of Christianity in which, for the first time, Christianity truly became a global religion.¹

Towards the twilight of the 19th century, Pope Leo XIII in his missionary encyclical issued in 1888 wrote: “the care of propagating the Christian Faith devolves upon the Roman Pontiffs” (*Sancta Dei Civitas*, # 2).² From the purview of the mission

¹ Kenneth S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity—Advance Through Storm AD. 1914 and After*, vol. VII (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1947), 5.

² http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_03121880_sancta-dei-civitas.html (accessed: 1 May, 2019).

territories and their place within the general scheme of papal policies, one must assess the popes and their missionary commitment through the institution of the papacy. This must be done on the basis of the historical importance of the pope at any given epoch and, which to a great extent, also depends on the higher standpoint of historical continuity in the realisation of the overall purpose of the Church's universal mission.³

Therefore, to be able to assess the relevance of *Maximum Illud*, it is important to do so through the prism of the missionary pronouncements and commitments of subsequent popes after Benedict XV. As it were, he set the pace and also provided the rudder for his successors to navigate through the labyrinths of different contemporary circumstances in the execution of their missionary obligation to the Church.

The thoughts of Benedict XV on the missions

The papacy under Pius X had various other concerns because of the turbulence that characterised the political landscape of Europe during his pontificate. Chief among the turbulent situations was the diplomatic row that ensued between the Vatican and the French government over the latter's anticlerical policies which culminated in the severing of diplomatic ties in 1905. Although the pontificate of Pius X may be described as a "religious pontificate", predicated upon his motto, "*Instaurare omnia in Christo*", in contradistinction to Pope Leo XIII (often and unfairly called "the political pope"), yet Catholic missions outside Europe did not so much feature prominently in that pontificate. On the contrary, Pope Benedict XV, his immediate successor, did not allow himself and his pontificate to be totally consumed by the challenges and problems of the First World War (1914-18). Seeking avenues and means to disseminate the Christian message, Benedict XV revived papal concerns for the missions. The missionary revival launched by Benedict XV was almost reminiscent of a similar revival in the second half of the 19th century. That was a period when the Church saw the birth of

³ George F. La Piana, 'From Leo XIII to Benedict XV'. *The American Journal of Theology*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (April 1917), 175.

numerous missionary congregations alongside the multiform participation by the lay faithful with spiritual support through prayers as well as financial contributions for the maintenance of missionaries and their various projects in mission territories.

Pope Benedict XV in 1919 published *Maximum Illud*. This year 2019 marks the centenary of its publication. Naturally, Pope Benedict XV's thoughts were focused on the universal mission of the Church after the ruins of the First World War that ended in armistice. His concerns went far beyond the shoring up of funds for the missions. He addressed the thorny question of the day concerning missionary personnel and the place of indigenous or local clergy within the framework of the missionary activities of the Church. His anxieties were expressed with paternal preoccupation about the future survival of the missions outside Europe after the missionaries might have gone or might have even stopped coming altogether. He also worried about the missionary methods in use at that time which he considered inadequate in view of the vast multitude that was still beyond the influence of the Christian Gospel. In terms of method, he proposed "the adoption of an extensive missionary method as a veritable strategy, in clear opposition to an intensive strategy where missionaries tended to concentrate their energies and resources on small flocks of converts in given mission territories."⁴ As far as he was concerned, missionaries and their small flocks were never to become "tiny islands surrounded by a large population of people who were outside the embrace of the Gospel of Christ."⁵

The Congregation of Propaganda Fide (now called the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples) in its implementation of the stipulations outlined in *Maximum Illud*, through a series of instructions to vicars and prefects apostolic as well as to superiors of missionary institutes, demanded to know, for instance: "What is the portion of your vicariate which is not yet reached by the Gospel, and what percentage of the population that

⁴ Valentine Iheanacho, "Missions through the prism of *Maximum Illud*". *Our Mission* (edition 20 – 1/2019), 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*

is still outside the influence of the Christian message.”⁶ This extensive approach as a missionary method was a re-echo of the memo previously sent to it by Mgr. Jean-Baptiste de Guébriant (MEP, bishop of Canton and Apostolic Visitor to China, 1918), who asked Propaganda Fide to hold the heads of missions accountable by enquiring from them the progress of their various mission circumscriptions in respect of the number of Catholics to the entire population of the areas in which their missions were located. It was also a recall of the operative principle initially espoused by the American priest, Mgr Joseph Freri who coined the slogan: “to cover maximum ground with the minimum number.”⁷ In a letter dated 20 May, 1923, Propaganda Fide further directed missionary institutes to ensure that their members designated for the missions must get the right preparation through the study of missiology (then a nascent academic discipline) and the acquisition of proper language skills in preparation for the missionary apostolate. It also demanded that the formation of the local clergy in mission territories must be given the utmost priority in every missionary consideration.⁸

Sustaining the tempo

After the brief pontificate of Benedict XV, the duty of the practical implantation of *Maximum Illud* fell on the shoulders of Pope Pius XI (1922-1939). Both pontiffs share the title “Popes of the Missions”. In the first instance, as a measure of continuity, the new pope left Cardinal Willem van Rossum in his post as the prefect of Propaganda Fide. It was a wise and an opportune decision on the part of Pius XI because with van Rossum at the helm, the missionary visions of Benedict XV were guaranteed to live on. It was a vision with which the Dutch cardinal was closely associated. As a matter of fact, on account of his inestimable

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Joseph Freri, “Native Clergy for Mission Countries”. *Catholic Missions*, vol. XI (New York: Society for the Propagation of the Faith, 1917), 4.

⁸ *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* (1923), vol. XV, 369-373. See also, Valentine U. Iheanacho, *Maximum Illud and Benedict XV's Missionary Thinking: Prospects of a Local Church in Mission Territories* (Starbrücken: Scholar's Press, 2015), 297.

contributions in the repositioning of Propaganda Fide in the light of contemporary missionary demands and challenges, Joseph Drehmanns, the first biographer of van Rossum, called him “the second founder” of Propaganda Fide.⁹ Also in recognition of his work with regard to the implementation of *Maximum Illud* and his sagacity in the direction of Propaganda Fide, Claude Prudhomme agreed with Drehmanns’ views:

The fourteen years that the Dutch Cardinal van Rossum was at the head of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide (1918-1932), the dicastery in charge of the missions, were characterised by an exceptional concentration of affirmations and important decisions. They are probably unparalleled in the history of the congregation.¹⁰

Van Rossum in many ways was the executing arm of the missionary policies of Benedict XV and Pius XI. He was the loyal collaborator of both pontiffs in their missionary visions. And more particularly, with regard to the relationship between Pius XI and van Rossum, the Dutch cardinal as head of the Propaganda Fide, “found in Pius XI a willing sharer” of his grand missionary vision¹¹ which he had in common with the previous pontificate of Benedict XV. Upon his election to the pontificate, Pius XI promptly gathered the missionary impetus of Benedict XV and gave it further momentum by stressing the importance of the Propaganda Fide which under the able leadership of van Rossum evolved to become one of the most influential Vatican dicasteries. The episcopal ordination of indigenous clergy in mission areas was given added

⁹ Joseph M. Drehmanns, *Kardinal van Rossum: Korte Levensschets* (Roermond-Masseik: Romen, 1935), 86.

¹⁰ Claude Prudhomme, “Le Cardinal van Rossum et la politique missionnaire du Saint-Siège sous Benôit et Pie XI (1918-1932)” in Vefie Poels, et al (eds.), *Life with a Mission—Cardinal Willem Marinus van Rossum C.Ss.R 1854-193* (Nijmegen : Trajecta, 2011), 123. See also, Valentine U. Iheanacho, *ibid.*, 225.

¹¹ Kenneth S. Latourette, *Christianity in a Revolutionary Age: A History of Christianity in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries—The Roman Catholic, Protestant and Eastern Churches*, vol. IV (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1961), 45.

impetus under Pius XI in 1926 with the ordination of six Chinese bishops in Rome. Such a policy continued uninterrupted, albeit with slow progress at times. It eventually “led to greater internationalisation and internal diversity within the Catholic world episcopate.”¹² According to Karim Schelkens and others, this “internationalisation and internal diversity” had their “effects on the presence of bishops from all parts of the world during Vatican II.”¹³

Within the same parameter of *Maximum Illud* is the reinsertion of the missions at the very heart of all successive papal considerations. That reinsertion obviously made the Vatican the clear leader in directing the missions of the Church outside Europe. It is true to acknowledge with Raymond Hickey that the growth of the Catholic Church in mission territories after the publication of *Maximum Illud* and up to the Second Vatican Council was “largely due to a vigorous missionary outreach inspired and animated by successive popes.”¹⁴ As a matter of fact, it can be positively affirmed that it was a consistent policy personally directed by the popes especially until the convocation of Vatican II in 1959. The council sought to make the missionary outreach a major concern incumbent upon every member of the Church and more particularly upon the bishops since the council placed a lot of emphasis on episcopal collegiality with the pope.¹⁵

The four great missionary encyclicals issued by Benedict XV and his two immediate successors left nobody in doubt in terms of whose main responsibility it was with regard to the missions. After the publication of *Maximum Illud*, came the *Rerum Ecclesiae* by Pius XI in 1926, to be followed in 1951 by *Evangelii Praecones* and in 1957 by *Fidei Donum* of Pius XII. With the popes effectively leading the way, and Propaganda Fide as their missionary executive arm, the Vatican missionary dicastery, especially in the missions in

¹² Karim Schelkens, et al, *Aggiornamento?: Catholicism from Gregory XVI to Benedict XVI* (Leiden, Boston: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2013), 96.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Raymond Hickey (ed.), *Modern Missionary Documents and Africa* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1982), 3.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Africa, extended its influence through missionary congregations that were operative on the continent.¹⁶ More often than not, it made its presence felt and also extended its sphere of influence through what Pope Pius XII once referred to as “indirect missionary means.” Those means included schools, the press, medical care and social work.¹⁷ It is not surprising that African Catholics as heirs of the missionary labour of those years were of the younger generation¹⁸—and the population within the same younger generation even presently tends to increase proportionally on a yearly basis.

The centralisation of the direction of the missions in the able hands of the three “missionary popes”: Benedict XV, Pius XI and Pius XII, brought as a consequence, the internationalisation of Catholic missionary forces which prior to 1919 were almost the exclusive reserve of the French Church. Acknowledging this fact does not in any shape or form belittle the gratitude that the universal Church owes to the French Church for its great missionary contributions. The French Church especially from the second half of the 19th century gave birth to many missionary congregations that were solely dedicated to the missions beyond the shores of Europe. While it may be true to assume that Pius XI directed most of his missionary attention to Asia and, particularly to China, similar assertions can be made about Pius XII in reference to Africa. However, it must never be glossed over that the establishment of an apostolic delegation to South Africa in 1922, to a great extent, showed the attention of Pius XI and van Rossum towards a country that was then regarded as the privileged domain of protestant missionaries, especially those of the reformed churches.¹⁹

¹⁶ Karl Müller, “The main principles of centralized government for the missions”. *Concilium*, vol. 13 (New York, Glen Rock: Paulist Press, 1966), 14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁸ Walbert Bühlmann, “The African Church: The Council of Jerusalem to Vatican II”. *Concilium*, vol. 13 (New York, Glen Rock: Paulist Press, 1966), 47.

¹⁹ Kenneth S. Latourette, *Christianity in a Revolutionary Age: A History of Christianity in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries—The Roman Catholic, Protestant and Eastern Churches*, 44.

With Pius XI, the papal mission pendulum appeared to have shifted considerably towards Africa and in favour of the continent. All in all across board, Pius XII created about 37 new vicariates and 35 prefectures in mission territories. His support for the missions in Africa may lead to the affirmation that the hour of Africa finally dawned with the pontificate of Pius XII where there was a notable increase of the Catholic population especially in the sub-Saharan part of the continent. Such phenomenal increase was not lost to the pope who gave his support to African indigenous clergy with a native episcopate, beginning with the episcopal ordinations on October 19, 1939 of 12 bishops, representing all the continents of the world.²⁰ The first two African bishops in contemporary times were among those 12 bishops, personally ordained by the pope himself in St Peter's Basilica in Rome. The Africans were Bishops Joseph Kiwanuka (Uganda) and Ignatius Ramarosandratana (Madagascar).

Unfortunately, and sad to note, the initial tempo and enthusiasm about a native episcopate appeared to have lost considerable steam after 1939 because Africa did not get another son of hers elevated to the episcopate until 1950. Given the dragging of feet by the Vatican, Mgr Joseph Faye, the first Senegalese priest to be appointed prefect apostolic in 1939 had to resign in 1946 owing to the lack of good will and cooperation from the white members of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost. It did not matter that Mgr Faye himself was also a member of the same missionary congregation. For the period of seven years that he served as prefect apostolic in Casamance, Mgr Faye knew no respite, as those years "proved to be an extremely difficult and painful period of his life."²¹

The painful experiences of Mgr Faye could be interpreted as symptomatic of a transition from a missionary church to a local church. Bishop Kiwanuka on one occasion adduced the reason for the loss of that initial enthusiasm for the further creation of an

²⁰ Ibid., 61.

²¹ E. A. Foster, "A Mission in Transition: Race, Politics, and the Decolonization of the Catholic Church in Senegal" in Owen White and J. P. Daughton (eds.), *In God's Empire: French Missionaries in a Modern World* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 258.

African native episcopate. He believed that the interval between their very first episcopal ordinations in 1939 and other episcopal ordinations in 1950 was an “interim period, a time set by Rome to prove by experience whether it was safe and opportune to make local bishops in the mission territories.”²² Nevertheless, once the tempo gathered momentum again, it became almost unstoppable so that with the publication of *Fidei Donum*, Africa, as it were, became the central focus of pontifical missionary attention again. In view of the unprecedented papal attention to the missions in Africa, Archbishop Mihayo with a good measure of exaggeration, wrote in 1968 that Africa constituted “the heart of the missionary Church.”²³ It was in that regard that the continent got its first cardinal in 1960 when Pope John XXIII elevated Archbishop Lauren Rugambwa of Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania) to the cardinalate.

Re-launching afresh

A century after the publication of *Maximum Illud*, a very important barometer to measure its relevance today is to look at the threefold scope that runs through the missionary document: (1) the presentation of missionary duty as binding upon every member of the Church; (2) the universal character of the work of evangelisation; and (3) the admission and formation of indigenous clergy in mission lands to take the place of missionaries. While the last focus to a greater extent got a fair share of attention especially from the 1920s to the early 1960s, the first two remain indelible in the self-definition of the Church. In fact, the Second Vatican Council in its decree on missionary activity, *Ad gentes*, underscored the intrinsic missionary identity of the Church by categorically stating that “The pilgrim Church is Missionary by her very nature” (AG # 2). Twenty-five years after *Ad gentes*, Pope John Paul II in *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) reiterated the urgency of mission and the unavoidable task before the entire Church. John Paul II stated:

²² R. D. Robert, “The Development of the Local Clergy in Africa”. *Native Clergy in the Young Churches and the Pontifical Work of St Peter the Apostle* (Rome: Pontifical Missionary Union, 1976), 89.

²³ As cited by Raymond Hickey (ed.), *Modern Missionary Documents and Africa*, 4.

“The mission of Christ the Redeemer, which is entrusted to the Church, is still very far from completion” (RM, # 1).²⁴ The concerns of John Paul II were not different from those expressed by Pope Benedict XV, who at the very inception of *Maximum Illud*, recalled the great command of Jesus Christ to his disciples to go and teach all peoples.

The mission, whether primary or the new evangelisation, will always constitute the very *raison d’être* of the Church for she exists to evangelise and lives by evangelisation (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, # 13). This idea is well explicated in the letter of Pope Francis with which he declared an Extraordinary Missionary Month for the centenary celebration of the publication of *Maximum Illud*. He did so “with the aim of fostering an increased awareness of the *missio ad gentes* and taking up again with renewed fervour the missionary transformation of the Church’s life and pastoral activity.”²⁵ It is worth noting that each historical epoch presents the Church with opportunities to rethink her missionary obligations and challenges in the light of the needs and concerns that are peculiar in any given milieu.

An epoch brings with it occasions and areas where the Church can re-launch and direct her missionary attention and energy, although certainly not without a few subtle dangers. For instance, contemporary missionary undertakings in Third World countries tend to compete with non-governmental organisations at the risk of reducing the proclamation of the Gospel to social work and the provision of humanitarian services. Laudable as those works may be, they remain secondary and not the primary work of missionaries. Pope Pius XII rightly called them “indirect missionary means.” A similar danger is equally present in the First World, especially in Europe where the fear of being called names by the ultra-liberal media tend to suffocate sincere efforts to preach the Christian Gospel so that church organisations like Caritas are rather known

²⁴ http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html (accessed: May 12, 2019).

²⁵ http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2017/documents/papa-francesco_20171022_lettera-filoni-mese-missionario.html (accessed: May 13, 2019).

for their humanitarian services than for the proclamation of the Gospel.

There is yet another issue that must be addressed head-on. It has to do with the lack of vocations to the priesthood and religious life in the developed world. The fostering of local vocations to the priesthood was very dear to the heart of Benedict XV and his successors. The lack of priestly vocations in the developed world is indeed worrisome. Missionaries who now come from Africa and Asia to Europe and to North America must not only staff parishes, but in addition, they must help to foster local vocations. It is good to acknowledge that it is an uphill task but it is never insurmountable. Local vocations help to root the Church in a local community. The Church in Europe is increasingly becoming a Church of migrants which does not augur well for the future. Missionary collaboration was central in the missionary thinking of Benedict XV. He denounced the parochial understanding of mission that fed upon rivalry among missionaries on the one hand, and distrust between missionaries and the native clergy on the other hand. That cooperation is needed today more than at any time in the past especially among diocesan priests, some of whom, and in some places, tend to see missionaries as their rivals who have only come to take over their dioceses. Such an erroneous mentality indicates a half-baked formation in missiology and ecclesiology because the Church is far bigger than the mere geographical confines of any diocese. Beyond the provision of pastoral personnel for any local church, the presence of missionary congregations in a diocese brings to the fore the universality of the Church and the universal outreach of her mission.

Conclusion

The Catholic Church towards the end of the 19th century lost some of its traditional ground in Latin America due to anticlerical policies of nationalist governments in those places. Those territorial losses, notwithstanding, the Church did not arrive lame on the eve of the First World War. On the contrary, it rather came to 1914 with

a high sense of optimism and hope for better future prospects because of its multi-front global missionary outreach in Asia and Africa. However, that war left its scars on those missions due to reduced missionary personnel and the lack of proper ecclesial coordination in terms of fundraising in support of the missions. The immediate needs of the missions led Benedict XV and his advisors at Propaganda Fide to rise to the occasion in seeking ways to remedy the situation. At the end of *Maximum Illud*, the pontiff expressed “the hope of seeing the sacred missions reviving from the wounds and the ruins of the war.”

Pope Benedict XV heralded a new beginning in the missionary history of the Church in contemporary times. As the scars and destructions of the First World War receded, the missions gradually began to revive, sustained and supported by the two immediate successors of Benedict XV. Collectively, the three popes launched the entire Church into a missionary path that was full of missionary initiatives and prospects. Those were years of consolidation that eventually brought about a transition from mission churches to local or native churches on the shoulders and direction of local hierarchies in many places. With the dwindling number of Catholics in the developed world that once provided the missionary personnel and the financial resources for the missions, it now behooves former mission churches to take a central lead in the Church of the future.

Ultimately, missionary formation is now the pre-eminent responsibility of local churches in former mission territories. It is a responsibility that includes self-propagating and self-reliance instead of expecting financial handouts from Europe and America. Put differently, the anticipated lead by the new churches—fruits of the missionary sacrifices of a hundred years ago—may be the greatest re-launch that the Church of today can make if it must remain relevant with the Christian message that is ageless and countercultural.