



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
ON OCCASION OF THE 40th ANNIVERSARY OF
THE CONCILIAR DECREE "AD GENTES"**

*Hall of Blessings
Saturday, 11 March 2006*

*Your Eminences,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I greet with affection all of you who have taken part in the International Conference organized by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and the Pontifical Urban University on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the conciliar Decree *Ad Gentes*.

I greet first of all Cardinal Crescenzo Sepe, Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, and thank him for his words on your behalf. I greet the Bishops and priests present and all those who have taken part in this initiative, which is as timely as ever since it responds to the need to continue to deepen knowledge of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council in order to bring out the impelling power that this Council session impressed upon the life and mission of the Church.

Indeed, the approval on 7 December 1965 of the Decree *Ad Gentes* gave a new impetus to the Church's mission. The theological foundations of missionary commitment were more clearly spelled out, as well as its value and timeliness in the face of the changes in the world and the challenges of modern life to the preaching of the Gospel (cf. n. 1).

The Church has acquired an ever clearer awareness of her innate missionary vocation, recognizing it as a constitutive element of her very nature.

Out of obedience to the command of Christ, who sent his disciples to proclaim the Gospel to all the nations (cf. Mt 28: 18-20), the Christian community in our time too feels sent to the men and women of the third millennium in order to acquaint them with the truth of the Gospel message and thereby give them access to the path of salvation.

And this, as I said, is not an option but the vocation proper to the People of God, a duty incumbent upon it by the command of the Lord Jesus Christ himself (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 5).

Actually, the proclamation of and witness to the Gospel are the first service that Christians can render to every person and to the entire human race, called as they are to communicate to all God's love, which was fully manifested in Jesus Christ, the one Redeemer of the world.

The publication of the conciliar Decree *Ad Gentes*, on which you have opportunely reflected, has made it possible to highlight better the original root of the Church's mission, that is, the Trinitarian life of God from which comes the movement of love that the Divine Persons pour out upon humanity. It all flows from the Heart of the heavenly Father, who so loved the world that he gave his Only-begotten Son so that those who believe in him should not perish but have eternal life (cf. Jn 3: 16).

With the mystery of the Incarnation, the Only-begotten Son was made the authentic and supreme Mediator between the Father and men and women. In the One who died and rose, the Father's provident tenderness reaches every person in forms and ways he alone knows.

It is the Church's task to communicate this divine love ceaselessly through the vivifying action of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, it is the Spirit who transforms the life of believers, freeing them from the bondage of sin and death and making them capable of witnessing to the merciful love of God, who wishes to make humanity a single family in his Son (cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 19).

From the outset, the Christian People has been clearly aware of the importance of sharing the riches of this love with those who do not yet know Christ through constant missionary activity.

The need to reaffirm this commitment has been felt even more forcefully in recent years, because in the modern epoch, as my beloved Predecessor John Paul II observed, the *missio ad gentes* has sometimes seemed to be slowing down because of difficulties due to changes in humanity's anthropological, cultural, social and religious contexts.

Today, the Church is called to embrace new challenges and be ready to enter into dialogue with different cultures and religions, seeking with every person of good will to build peaceful coexistence between peoples.

Thus, the area of the *missio ad gentes* appears to have been considerably extended and cannot be defined solely on the basis of geographical or juridical considerations; indeed, the missionary

activity of the People of God is not only intended for non-Christian peoples and distant lands, but above all for social and cultural contexts and hearts.

Carrying out this mandate faithfully demands patience and foresight, courage and humility, listening to God and alert discernment of the "signs of the times". The conciliar Decree *Ad Gentes* reveals the Church's awareness that, in order that "what was accomplished [by the Lord] for the salvation of all men may, in the course of time, achieve its universal effect" (n. 3), it is necessary to take the same way as Christ, a way that leads to death on the cross.

Indeed, evangelizing action "must walk the road Christ himself walked, a way of poverty and obedience, of service and self-sacrifice even to death, a death from which he emerged victorious..." (*ibid.*, n. 5). Yes! The Church is called to serve the humanity of our time by trusting in Jesus alone, by allowing herself to be illumined by his Word and imitating him in the generous gift of herself to his brethren. She is an instrument in his hands and therefore does what she can, conscious that the One who does everything is the Lord.

Dear brothers and sisters, thank you for the reflection you have developed in these days, deepening your knowledge of the content and style of missionary activity in our epoch and reflecting in particular on shedding light on the role of theology, which is also a systematic exposition of various aspects of the Church's mission.

With the contribution of all Christians, the proclamation of the Gospel will undoubtedly be ever more comprehensible and effective. May Mary, Star of Evangelization, help and sustain those in many regions of the world who work on the front lines of the Mission.

In this regard, how could one forget those who, also recently, have given their life for the Gospel? May their sacrifice obtain a renewed springtime, rich in apostolic fruit for evangelization. Let us pray for this, entrusting to the Lord all who in various ways work in the great vineyard of the Lord.

With these sentiments, I impart my Apostolic Blessing to you who are present here, and I cordially extend it to your loved ones and to the Ecclesial Communities to which you belong.

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