



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 23 May 1979

1. Tomorrow ends the period of forty days which separate the moment of the resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ from his Ascension. This is also the moment of the Master's definitive separation from the Apostles and disciples. In such an important moment, Christ entrusts to them the mission that he himself received from the Father and began on earth: "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (Jn 20:21), he said to them during the first meeting after the resurrection. At this moment they are in Galilee according to what Matthew writes: "Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age'" (Mt 28:16-20).

The words quoted above contain the so-called missionary mandate. The duties that Christ hands down to the Apostles define at the same time the *missionary nature of the Church*. This truth found its particularly full expression in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, "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" (*Ad Gentes*, 2). The Church, born of this salvific mission, is always "in statu missionis" (in a state of mission), and is always on her way. This condition reflects the interior forces of faith and hope that animate the Apostles, the disciples and the confessors of Christ the Lord during all the centuries. "In these places, a good many do not become Christians only because there is no one to make them Christians. It often comes into my mind to run and shout here and there in the academies of Europe... and to address those who show more doctrine than charity with the following words: 'Oh, how great is the number of souls excluded from Heaven by your fault!'... Many of them should, on the contrary, practise listening to what the Lord says to

them. Then they would exclaim warmly: 'Here I am, Lord; what do you want me to do? Send me wherever you want'" (St Francis Xavier, "Lettera 5 a S. Ignazio Loyola" of 1544: H. Tursellini, *Vita Francisci Xaverii*, Rome 1956, Lib. 4; quoted according to "Roman Breviary", *Officium Lectionis for 3 December*).

In our age these forces called by the Council by name, must ring out again. The Church must renew her *missionary conscience*, which, in the apostolic and pastoral practice of our times, certainly calls for many new applications; among them, a renewed *missionary activity* of the Church motivates this activity even more deeply and postulates it even more strongly.

2. Those whom the Lord Jesus sends—those who after the ten days following the Ascension will emerge from the Upper Room at Pentecost and also all the others; generation after generation until our times—*bring with them a testimony* which is the first source and the fundamental content of evangelization: "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). They are charged to *teach by bearing witness*. "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than teachers, or if he listens to teachers he does so because they are witnesses" (*Paul VI, Address to Members of the "Consilium de L.aicis"*, 2 October 1974; AAS 66 (1974) p. 568; cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41, AAS 68 (1976) p. 31).

When we re-read, both in the Acts of the Apostles and in the Letters, the recording of apostolic catechesis, we see how exactly the first executors of Christ's apostolic mandate incarnated this task in their lives. St John Chrysostom says: "If the leaven, mixed with the flour, does not transform the whole mass into the same quality, will it really have been a ferment? Do not say that you cannot sweep others along; in fact, if you are a true Christian, it is impossible that that should not happen" (St John Chrysostom, *In Acta Apostolorum* Homilia XX, , 4. PG 60, 163).

He who carries out the work of evangelization is not first and foremost a teacher. *He is a messenger*. He behaves like a man to which a great mystery has been entrusted. And at the same time like one who has discovered personally the greatest treasure. like the one "hidden in a field" of Matthew's parable (cf. 13:44). The state of his soul, then, is marked also by readiness to *share it with others*. Even more than readiness, he feels an interior imperative, on the line of that magnificent "urget" of Paul (cf. 2 Cor 5:14).

We all discover this interior character by reading and re-reading the works of Peter, Paul, John and others, in order to know from their works, from the words spoken, from the letters written, who the Twelve really were. The Church was born "in statu missionis" in living men.

And this missionary character of the Church was subsequently renewed in other individual men, from generation to generation. We must walk in the steps of these men to whom the Gospel was entrusted, in the different ages, as the work of salvation of the world. We must see them as they

were internally; as the Holy Spirit moulded them; as love of Christ transformed them. Only then can we see from close up that reality which the missionary vocation conceals.

3. In the Church, where every faithful is an evangelizer, Christ continues to choose the men he wants "that they might be with him so that he might send them to preach to the nations" (*Ad Gentes*, 23). In this way the story of the sending of the Apostles becomes the history of the Church from the first to the last hour.

The quality and the number of these vocations are the sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit, because it is the Spirit "who shares his gifts as he wills for the common good": for this supreme good he "implants in the hearts of individuals a missionary vocation" (*ibid.*). It is certainly the Spirit who inspires and moves the men chosen, in order that the Church can assume her evangelizing responsibility. The Church being, in fact, the mission incarnate, she reveals this incarnation of hers first of all in the men of the mission: "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (Jn 20:21).

In the Church, the presence of Christ, who calls and sends as during his mortal life, and of the Pentecostal Spirit who inflames, is the certainty that missionary vocations will never be lacking.

These people "marked and designated by the Spirit" (cf. Acts 13: 2) "have a special vocation, whether they are natives of the place or foreigners, priests, religious, or lay people. Having been sent by legitimate authority they go forth in faith..." (*Ad Gentes*, 23). The arising and multiplication of people consecrated for life to the mission is also an indication of the missionary spirit of the Church: from the general missionary vocation of the Christian community there springs up the special and specific vocation of the missionary. Vocation, in fact, is never in the singular, but touches the man through the community.

The Holy Spirit, who inspires the vocation of the individual, is the same who "raises up in the Church Institutes who take on the duty of evangelization, which pertains to the whole Church, and make it as it were their own special task" (*ibid.*). Orders, Congregations and Missionary Institutes have represented and lived the missionary commitment of the Church for centuries, and they still live it fully today.

The Church, therefore, confirms her trust and her mandate to these Institutions, and greets with joy and hope the new ones that arise in the Communities of the missionary world. But they, in their turn, being the expression of the missionary spirit also of the local Churches from which they have sprung, in which they live, and for which they operate, intend to dedicate themselves to the formation of missionaries who are the real agents of evangelization on the line of Christ's Apostles. Their number must not diminish; on the contrary, it must adapt itself to the immense necessities of the not distant times in which the peoples will open up to Christ and to his Gospel of life.

Furthermore, no one can fail to see a sign of the new missionary age which the Church is

expecting and preparing. The local Churches, old and new, are vivified and shaken by a new anxiety, that of finding specifically missionary forms of action with the sending of their own members to the nations, either on their own account or cooperating with the missionary Institutes. The mission of evangelization "which falls (precisely) on the whole Church" is increasingly felt as the direct commitment of the local Churches, which therefore give their priests, men and women religious and laity to the mission fields. Pope Paul VI clearly saw and described it: "An evangelizer, the Church begins by evangelizing herself... That means, in a word, that she always needs to be evangelized if she wishes to keep freshness, élan and strength to proclaim the Gospel."

Consequently, every Church will have to put itself in the perspective of that apostolic vocation which Paul recognized himself as having among the Gentiles and because of which he groaned: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (1Cor 9:16).

4. The first Sunday in May was dedicated particularly to prayer for vocations. We have prolonged this prayer for the whole month, commending this problem, which is so important, to Mary, Mother of Christ and of the Church.

Now in the period of the Ascension of the Lord, preparing for the solemnity of Pentecost, we wish to express in this prayer the missionary character of the Church. Therefore we also ask that the grace of missionary vocation, granted to the Church from apostolic times throughout so many centuries and so many generations, may ring out in the modern generation of Christians with a new force of faith and hope: "Go... and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19).

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