

MISSION IN RECENT CHURCH DOCUMENTS

Vatican II Era Perspectives

A great wealth of pastoral-theological reflection on mission and evangelization is found in Church documents. Indeed, for the Church, missionary evangelization, in the words of Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (14), is “the essential mission of the Church..., the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize.”

This presentation explores the Church’s “missionary wisdom” which spans a half-century, beginning with the mission renewal initiated by the Second Vatican Council and extending into the pontificate of Pope Francis. Although the presentation is quite short and compact, it is the dream of the author that it will inflame the hearts of readers to engage in missionary evangelization with renewed enthusiasm and passion.

Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). According to Pope John Paul II, Vatican II was the most significant religious event of the twentieth century. It has also been correctly described by ecclesiologist Joseph Komonchak as the most important event in the history of the Roman Catholic Church since the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s.

Vatican II was a Council “of the Church about the Church.” It sought the renewal, the *aggiornamento*, of the Church in all its dimensions—both *ad intra* (internal) and *ad extra* (external). Undoubtedly, the Council, prompted by the action of the Holy Spirit, initiated profound changes in the Church’s vision and praxis of mission. In this “Vatican II Era” four Church documents emerge as milestones for appreciating a contemporary view of missionary evangelization: *Ad Gentes* (Vatican II, 1965); *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Paul VI, 1975); *Redemptoris Missio* (John Paul II, 1990); and, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Pope Francis, 2013). A brief synopsis of these pivotal mission documents now follows; these materials prove most helpful in guiding the Church’s concrete missionary activity.

Ad Gentes. The “mission document” of Vatican II, *Ad Gentes* [AG] (“To the Nations”) is of modest length; it was adopted by 2,394 positive votes with only 5 negative votes; interestingly, the number of positive votes was the highest reached for any single Vatican II document. One must also note that this is the *first time* in the history of the Church that “the missions” were treated specifically by an Ecumenical Council.

Commentators on *Ad Gentes* often highlight the breakthrough achieved by the Council on *foundational doctrinal principles* of the Church’s mission. *Ad Gentes* asserts that the mission of the Church is modeled on the *missio Dei*, the divine missions of our Trinitarian God; thus, mission is centered on the design of the Father, the mission of the Son, and the mission of the Holy Spirit. In the words of *Ad Gentes*: “The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father” (AG 2). Succinctly stated, mission is not just one of the many tasks or apostolates that the Church should engage in; mission is the very essence or fundamental nature of the Church. Mission is not something that the Church “does”; mission fundamentally is what the Church “is”; mission is the core identity of the Church.

The mission document *Ad Gentes* further asserts: “This decree flows from the “fount-like love” or charity of God the Father who, being ‘principle without principle’ from whom the Son is begotten and the Holy Spirit proceeds through the Son ...” (AG 2). In a word, mission flows from the very heart of a Trinitarian God, who is described in the original Latin text as *fontalis amor* (fountain-like love or fountain of love). The Church and her mission emerge from the very heart of God, a God who is love in itself! “God is love and anyone who lives in love lives in God, and God lives in him” (1 Jn 4:16). Mission is thus an epiphany of our God, whose very identity is love. Truly, a beautiful insight into the origin and mode of all missionary activity!

Mission activity itself “is nothing else and nothing less than an epiphany, or a manifesting of God’s design” (AG 9); it includes going out and “planting the Church” in places where people do not yet believe in Christ, as well as renewing the Church in places experiencing problems or suffering from various weaknesses. The Church engages in missionary activity “for the same motive which led Christ to bind Himself, in virtue of His Incarnation, to certain social and cultural conditions of those human beings among whom He dwelt” (AG 10).

Ad Gentes asserts that the task of mission is shared by all the baptized: priests, deacons, religious, and laity—each “according to their own state” (AG 26). “The Christian faithful, having different gifts (cf. Rom 12:6), according to each one’s opportunity, ability, charisms and ministry (cf. 1 Cor 3:10) must all cooperate in the Gospel” (AG 28). It is crucial that missionary activity be carefully planned (AG 28-34) and done collaboratively (AG 35-41). Undoubtedly, “the whole Church is missionary and the work of evangelization is a basic duty of the entire People of God” (AG 35).

Evangelii Nuntiandi. Pope Paul VI (1963-1978), canonized in 2018, will always be remembered as a modern missionary pope; he made missionary journeys to all continents; he authored *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN), which became the *magna carta* for Catholic evangelization in the post-Vatican II era. EN is the most quoted document in Pope Francis’ 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*.

During a year-long gestation period after the 1974 Synod on Evangelization, Pope Paul VI labored to produce a document that is clearly the work of discernment and synthesis. He notes that his words are designed to be a “meditation on evangelization”; he hopes that they will succeed “in inviting the whole People of God assembled in the Church to make the same meditation” (5); the theme of meditation appears often throughout EN (cf. 40, 76). Another pivotal theme centers on fidelity, a double fidelity—to God’s message and to people (cf. 4, 39, 63). This fidelity is “the central axis of evangelization” (4). In numerous places throughout EN, Paul VI carefully defines, nuances, and balances diverse elements within the evangelization process (e.g. local and universal Church, culture and faith, liberation and evangelization, strengths and limitations of popular religiosity, etc.). The unique genius of Paul VI is to have achieved integration and balance on so many topics.

The understanding of the term “evangelization” found in EN reflects a comprehensive and inclusive view. Sections 17 and 24 of EN provide a long list of the various elements comprising the evangelizing action of the Church. Both sections also strongly insist upon integrating and balancing

all facets of evangelization. “Any partial and fragmentary definition which attempts to render the reality of evangelization in all its richness, complexity and dynamism does so only at the risk of impoverishing it and even distorting it” (17). “Evangelization, as we have said, is a complex process made up of varied elements; ... they are complementary and mutually enriching” (24).

Note the broad and inclusive manner in which Paul VI speaks: “evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity” (18).

Paul VI presents numerous key themes in the mode of a pastoral synthesis: salvation and liberation (9, 27, 30-38), non-Christian religions (53, 80), religious liberty (39, 80), secularization (55), secularism (55-56), atheism (54-56), ecumenism (54, 76, 77), basic communities (58), diversified ministries (73), popular piety (48), sacraments in evangelization (23, 28, 47, 68), mass media (45, 80), Church as sign and sacrament of salvation (23, 59), violence (37), signs of the times (75-76), the local-universal Church dynamic (60-68), culture (20, 58), and the role of the Holy Spirit (75, 82). In EN the Church has renewed her commitment to being a community of disciples and evangelizers (13, 15, 21, 24, 59, 66, 80), filled with joy and enthusiasm (73, 80), eager to give authentic witness (41, 76), under the dynamic action of the Holy Spirit, the principal agent of evangelization (75) and guided by Mary, the Star of Evangelization (82).

Redemptoris Missio. John Paul II’s eighth encyclical was issued on December 7, 1990. In RM, the pope sounds a clarion call to all Church sectors to renew their enthusiasm and commitment to evangelize the world. Composed of eight chapters plus an introduction (1-3) and conclusion (92), RM has a “doctrinal” section (4-30) and a “pastoral” section (31-91), respectively treating the “Why” and “How” of contemporary missionary evangelization.

John Paul II, canonized in 2014, begins by stating his conviction about “the *urgency of missionary activity*, a subject to which I am devoting the present Encyclical” (1). The pope urges a “fresh impulse to missionary activity,” the deepening of “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 II is direct and clear: “I wish to invite the Church to *renew her missionary commitment*” (2). All are invited to participate: “*Peoples everywhere, open the doors to Christ!*” (3). 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 makes several assertions about the centrality and urgency of missionary evangelization. The Christian family is a key and irreplaceable force in evangelization (42). True disciples are urged to “carry out a sincere review of their lives regarding their solidarity with the poor” (60). 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!

This writer sees several other major emphases on evangelization within RM. *Local Churches* are the central actors in mission today. Authentic evangelization is a *freely-offered gift*. The Church needs *missionary vocations*. The encyclical looks positively upon *interreligious*

dialogue. Women receive the Pope's praise and gratitude for their outstanding contribution to evangelization. The process of *inculturation* and its relationship to mission receives extensive treatment. The entire final chapter of RM treats *missionary spirituality*.

Fifteen years earlier (1975) Paul VI wrote that "Modern people listen 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 RM 42. 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).

Evangelii Gaudium. Pope Francis' first apostolic exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, is over 50,000 words long. In it Francis is proposing a profound missionary renewal of the entire Church. He asserts that we need an "evangelizing Church that comes out of herself," not a Church that is "self-referential" and "lives within herself, of herself, for herself." "I dream of a 'missionary option,' that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation.... All renewal in the Church must have mission as its goal if it is not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion" (27).

"Missionary outreach is *paradigmatic for all the Church's activity*... We need to move 'from a pastoral ministry of mere conservation to a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry' (15). "I want to emphasize that what I am trying to express here has programmatic significance and important consequences.... Throughout the world, let us be 'permanently in a state of mission'" (25).

Pope Francis' convictions come from his deep personal relationship with Christ. He writes: "I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ.... I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day" (3). A Christian "drinks of the wellspring of his [Jesus'] brimming heart" (5). Indeed, in "this encounter—or renewed encounter—with God's love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption.... Here we find the source and inspiration of all our efforts at evangelization" (8).

A pivotal insight of Pope Francis is that "we are all missionary disciples" (119); through baptism, "all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples" (120). All Christians are "agents of evangelization." "The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized.... Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are 'disciples' and 'missionaries,' but rather that we are always 'missionary disciples'" (120).

For Pope Francis, salvation history is a "great stream of joy" (5) which we must also enter. Let the joy of faith be revived, because God's mercies never end (cf. 6). Unfortunately, "there are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter" (6). "An evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral" (10). We must *not* become "querulous and disillusioned pessimists, 'sourpusses'" (85). "We feel that we must disagree with those prophets of doom" (cf. Saint John XXIII). "May the world of our time, which is searching,

sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the good news not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ (10; cf. EN 75).

“Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (8). Every Christian “ought to grow in awareness that he himself is continually in need of being evangelized” (164). Francis also notes: “Challenges exist to be overcome! Let us be realists, but without losing our joy, our boldness and our hope-filled commitment. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary vigor” (109).

Reflection Questions: What is the “Trinitarian foundation” of mission? Why is mission the fundamental “core identity” of the Church? What does it mean to say: “Every Christian is a missionary”? What does Paul VI mean by noting that evangelization requires a “double fidelity”? Explain this statement of Paul VI: “evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity.” Comment on John Paul II’s statement: “I wish to invite the Church to *renew her missionary commitment*.” What are your reflections about who modern people are willing to listen to? For Pope Francis, why is a deep personal relationship with Christ essential for missionary engagement? How does one truly become a “missionary disciple”?

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