

Preface

A book for the “providential occasion” of the Extraordinary Missionary Month October 2019 announced by Pope Francis to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Pope Benedict XV’s Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud*: this is *Church’s Mission: History, Theology and the Way Forward*, one of the latest work by Prof. Fr. Gianni Colzani, Emeritus Professor at the Pontifical Urbaniana University, featured within the series *Omnis Terra* – PMU CIAM Publications. At a time when all *Baptized and Sent* are urged to strengthen their missionary identity, awareness, and skills for the sake of *The Church of Christ on Mission in the World*,¹ Fr. Colzani here shares his reflections on the Catholic mission and witnessing of faith, as a tool for missionary formation and pastoral guidance.²

By tracing the various stages of the history of mission, which are deeply tied to the role of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, and by addressing its theological foundations and the development of the Church’s magisterium, Fr. Colzani gives us the opportunity to understand how mission represents not only the very nature of the Church (cf. *Ad Gentes 2*), but also its origin, purpose, and life. Therefore, this volume is a precious contribution to the discussion encouraged by the Holy Father on “how to render the work of the *missio ad gentes* more effective”³ for the sake of the young

¹ The chosen theme for Extraordinary Missionary Month October 2019, *Baptized and Sent: The Church of Christ on Mission in the World*, reveals “the missionary dimension of our Baptism”, as being sent on mission is a call that comes with Baptism and is for all the baptized (POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the National Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies*, 1st June 2018, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/june/documents/papa-francesco_20180601_pontificie-opere-missionarie.html).

² The content of this book features the author’s reflections on Church’s mission from a historical and theological perspective, as well as his insights on the contemporary challenges to evangelization.

³ POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples*, 3rd December 2015, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/december/documents/papa-francesco_20151203_plenaria-propaganda-fide.html/.

Churches in missionary territories, as well as of those Churches of more ancient tradition in need of renewed evangelization.⁴

The author is mindful of the necessity to bring about a major missionary awakening based on the revitalization of the *missio ad gentes* “as engine and horizon of the faith,”⁵ as Pope Francis has advocated since his pontificate began. To this end, he offers an interesting examination of the Pontifical teachings and ecclesiastic policies revolving around the conception of *missio ad gentes*, which the Second Vatican Council confirmed as the ever-valid foundational model and paradigm of the mission of the Church throughout the whole history of salvation, until the coming of the Kingdom of God.⁶

The *Decree Ad Gentes*, as the author emphasizes, stems from the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* and from the “new and different ecclesial awareness” raised by the prophetic contents of *Maximum Illud*. In addition, he duly brings forth the Trinitarian, Christological, and pneumatological roots of the mission as defined by *Ad Gentes*, whose pronouncements frame the theological context in which the Church’s mission should be understood: from the creation in Christ through the redemption accomplished in the Paschal Mystery until its eschatological fulfillment.⁷ Hence, the divine universal mandate to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19, cf. Ac 1:6-8) that the Church has derived “from the mission of the Son and from the mission of the Holy Spirit [...], in accordance with the decree of God the Father” (AG 2).

⁴ A valuable contribution to the publication of this volume was given by Mr. Emiliano Stornelli, Chairman of the Religion & Security Council.

⁵ POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples*.

⁶ There can be no substitution for the *missio ad gentes*, which already encloses in the scope of its divine mandate every mode of dynamic presence of proclamation and conversion of nations, cultures, religions, and peoples who encounter and open themselves to the Gospel of Jesus and His Church (cf. F. MERONI, “The Mission of the Church and the Missio Ad Gentes: Some Initial Observations”, in CEP-PMS, *Baptized and Sent. The Church of Christ on Mission in the World*, EMMS OCT 2019, San Paolo, Milano 2019, 77).

⁷ The Paschal Mystery and the historical mission of Jesus highlight how the need for love, the need for salvation from evil and death, sin and pain, hatred and division, is constitutive of the human person who, through creation in Christ, longs for divine sonship. The interest in dialogue, peaceful coexistence, social and economic justice, ecology, and otherness, must be profoundly configured and built upon the superabundant offer of salvation the heart of which is the Paschal Mystery (cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 22).

Furthermore, Fr. Colzani reviews other official Conciliar documents relevant to the *missio ad gentes*, such as the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* and the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* on the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions, along with the post-Conciliar papal doctrinal efforts: inter alia, the Apostolic Exhortations *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Encyclical Letters *Redemptoris Missio* and *Deus Caritas Est*. The *Acts of the Apostles* are also singled out as a major source of biblical “inspiration”⁸ for all Christians in the mission of faith witness that they are called to execute as members of the Church, coherently with Pope Francis’ definition of the *Acts* as the “regular book for prayer and meditation”⁹ for the *Baptized and Sent* of all times.¹⁰

The author’s presentation of these documents is an invaluable compendium of the fundamental theological teachings of the Church on the *missio ad gentes*. The author highlights the fact that *missio ecclesiae* does not respond to a human initiative: it is *missio* and *actio Dei*, “a fundamental work of God”, as he has termed it.¹¹ The principal agent is the Holy Spirit, and mission is His project (cf. RM 21).¹² The Church is servant of the mission. It is not the Church that makes the mission, but the mission that makes the

⁸ POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the National Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies*.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Cf. F. MERONI (ed.), *Missio Ad Gentes in the Acts of the Apostles*, Urbaniana University Press, Roma 2019.

¹¹ The divine nature of the missionary mandate of the Church was reaffirmed also by Pope Benedict XV: “Before He returned to His Father, Our Lord Jesus Christ addressed to His disciples the words: ‘Go into the whole world and preach the Gospel to all creation’ (Mk 16:15). With these words He committed to them a duty, a momentous and a holy charge, that was not to lapse with the death of the Apostles but would bind their successors, one after another, until the end of the world as long, that is, as there remained on this earth men whom the truth might set free. Entrusted with this mandate, ‘they went forth and preached everywhere’ (Mk 16:20) the word of God, so that ‘through all the earth their voice resounds, and to the ends of the world, their message’ (Psalm 18:5)” (*Maximum Illud* 1).

¹² “It is the Holy Spirit who sends us, accompanies us and inspires us. He is the source of our mission. It is he who guides the Church forward, not us. [...] He, the Holy Spirit, does everything; we are simply His servants” (POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the National Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies*).

Church.¹³ Mission is not the instrument, but “the point of departure and the goal,”¹⁴ and Church’s mission is to proclaim the Gospel and to witness it among those who have yet to embrace the Christian faith. In doing so, the Church opens the way to the divine action of the Holy Spirit in places where women and men still yearn for salvation from sin and death.

The author focuses notably on *Evangelii Gaudium*, “a turning point for the Church and her mission”. This Apostolic Exhortation identifies *missio ad gentes* as the paradigm of all the Church’s ordinary work and pastoral action (EG 15). Mission is a force capable of transforming the interior of the Church even before the life of peoples and cultures. Therefore, Fr. Colzani upholds Pope Francis’ appeal to everyone throughout the world to be “permanently in a state of mission” (EG 25), meaning a permanent state of intimate missionary communion with Christ, and a personal encounter with Jesus alive in His Church, as the only way to bring about an authentic missionary and pastoral conversion of the Jesus’s disciples and of the structures of the ecclesial community (cf. EG 25, 27).

An evangelizer by nature, the Church should always begin by evangelizing herself to preserve the freshness and Apostolic courage required to be re-created and reformed with new modes of Christian presence and witness. This will allow the Church to continue to effectively respond to Jesus’ command “to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel” (EG 20). The mission of Jesus placed in the heart of the Church thus becomes the criterion of spiritual discernment to evaluate the effectiveness of her pastoral structures, apostolic work, and ministers¹⁵ being engaged in “the communication of the Gospel in the testimony of living faith”, as the author puts it.

¹³ Cf. F. MERONI (ed.), *Mission Makes the Church*, Aracne Editrice, Canterano (Roma) 2017.

¹⁴ POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples*.

¹⁵ Every parish should make the style of the *missio ad gentes* its own, so that the Holy Spirit will transform habitual faithful into disciples, and dissatisfied disciples into missionaries, drawing them out of fears and closures and propelling them in every direction, to the ends of the earth (cf. POPE FRANCIS, *Meeting with the Executive Committee of CELAM*, Bogota, 7th September 2017, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/september/documents/papa-francesco_20170907_viaggioapostolico-colombia-celam.html/).

Fr. Colzani reminds us that Jesus' mission, the heart and motivation of the very Church's mission, is indeed a true communication of divine life, of eternal life, of the life of daughters and sons who have always been loved by God, our creator and Father in Christ. Quoting John Paul II, Pope Francis tells us in *Evangelii Gaudium* that "the Church's closeness to Jesus is part of a common journey; 'communion and mission are profoundly interconnected'" (EG 23).

To explain this interconnectedness, the author refers to the *Acts of the Apostles*, where testimony is described as "a gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. Ac 1:8) that incorporates the communion with Jesus in the understanding of His person in the light of His resurrection". Giving the life of God the Father, offering the life of the Holy Spirit, and sacrificing oneself for life in Christ, represents the origin and purpose of mission, from its original form of the *missio ad gentes* led by the Apostles to its fulfillment in the Jerusalem of Heaven, the dwelling place of God among humanity.

The journey starts with Him, Colzani observes, but culminates in the Paschal Mystery of the Crucified Risen One, the heart of the Catholic faith. In the footsteps of the "community of missionary disciples"¹⁶ that began evangelization from "Jerusalem [...] to the ends of the earth" (Ac 1:8), a renewed missionary awareness, ardor, and engagement on the part of all Christians is all the more necessary to meet the challenges to Church's *missio ad gentes* in the contemporary times, which the author helps us to discern.

The inculturation of the Gospel, the evangelization of cultures, the witness and transmission of the faith in ever-changing scenarios and non-Christian majority contexts, in the growing metropolitan areas and in the era of mass-media and technological preeminence, amid migration and humanitarian crises and the ruinous advance of a misleading notion of secularism. The People of God must fully embrace the "evangelical approach to the Church's mission in the world"¹⁷ already urged by Pope Benedict XV in *Maximum Illud*, "so that the spirit of the *missio ad gentes* may animate the path of the Church" also in our current troubled days and in the future to come.¹⁸

¹⁶ POPE FRANCIS, *Go Forth: Toward a Community of Missionary Disciples*, American Society of Missiology Series, Orbis Books, New York – Maryknoll 2019.

¹⁷ POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the National Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Otherwise, Christians will keep sliding into the socio-cultural irrelevance, ill-driven by the demand to be accepted and perceived as commercially appealing, and to conform themselves to the spirit of the times at any cost.¹⁹ If this is a crisis of faith, which brings with it a strong centripetal temptation, the maturity of the Church's faith lies in the effectiveness of the "missionary outreach" (EG 15, 17, 28, 32, 147, 262). To address this crisis, Fr. Colzani shows the way forward for the Church's mission to regain its actual significance and evangelizing force, and fulfill its divine task to transform human history by attracting everyone and everything to Jesus Christ (cf. Jn 12:32).²⁰

Vatican City
June 16th, 2019
The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity

Fr. FABRIZIO MERONI
PMU Secretary General
Director of CIAM and Fides

¹⁹ Cf. F. MERONI, "The Mission of the Church and the Missio Ad Gentes: Some Initial Observations", 73.

²⁰ "Sometimes we lose our enthusiasm for mission because we forget that the Gospel responds to our deepest needs, since we were created for what the Gospel offers us: friendship with Jesus and love of our brothers and sisters. If we succeed in expressing adequately and with beauty the essential content of the Gospel, surely this message will speak to the deepest yearnings of people's hearts: 'The missionary is convinced that, through the working of the Spirit, there already exists in individuals and peoples an expectation, even if an unconscious one, of knowing the truth about God, about man, and about how we are to be set free from sin and death. The missionary's enthusiasm in proclaiming Christ comes from the conviction that he is responding to that expectation'" (*Evangelii Gaudium* 265, quoting JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio* 45).