

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI FOR THE 81st WORLD MISSION SUNDAY 2007

"All the Churches for all the world"

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On the occasion of the World Mission Day, I would like to invite the entire People of God -- Pastors, priests, men and women religious and lay people -- to reflect together on the urgent need and importance of the Church's missionary action, also in our time.

Indeed, the words with which the Crucified and Risen Jesus entrusted the missionary mandate to the Apostles before ascending to Heaven do not cease to ring out as a universal call and a heartfelt appeal: "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 he added, "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

In the demanding work of evangelization we are sustained and accompanied by the certainty that he, the Lord of the harvest, is with us and continues to guide his people. Christ is the inexhaustible source of the Church's mission. This year, moreover, a further reason impels us to renew our missionary commitment: the 50th anniversary of the Encyclical of the Servant of God Pius XII, "Fidei Donum," which promoted and encouraged cooperation between the Churches for the mission ad gentes.

"All the Churches for all the world": this is the theme chosen for the next World Mission Day. It invites the local Churches of every continent to a shared awareness of the urgent need to relaunch missionary action in the face of the many serious challenges of our time.

The conditions in which humanity lives have of course changed and in recent decades, especially since the Second Vatican Council, a great effort has been made to spread the Gospel.

However, much still remains to be done in order to respond to the missionary call which the Lord never tires of addressing to every one of the baptized. In the first place, he continues to call the Churches of so-called "ancient tradition", which in the past provided the missions with a consistent number of priests, men and women religious and lay people as well as material means, giving life to an effective cooperation between Christian communities.

This cooperation has yielded abundant apostolic fruit both for the young Churches in mission lands as well as in the ecclesial situations from which the missionaries came. In the face of the secularized culture, which sometimes seems to be penetrating ever more deeply into Western societies, considering in addition the crisis of the family, the dwindling number of vocations and the progressive ageing of the clergy, these Churches risk withdrawing into themselves to view the future with ever less hope and weakening their missionary effort.

Yet, this is the very time for opening oneself with trust to the Providence of God, who never abandons his People and who, with the power of the Holy Spirit, guides them toward the fulfilment of his eternal design of salvation.

The Good Shepherd also invites the recently evangelized Churches to dedicate themselves generously to the *missio ad gentes*. Despite the many difficulties and obstacles they encounter in their development, these communities are constantly growing. Fortunately, some of them have a large number of priests and consecrated persons, many of whom, although there are so many needs in loco, are nevertheless sent to carry out their pastoral ministry and apostolic service elsewhere, even in lands evangelized long ago.

Thus, we are witnessing a providential "exchange of gifts" which redounds to the benefit of the entire Mystical Body of Christ. I warmly hope that missionary cooperation will be intensified and that the most will be made of the potential and charisms of each one. I also hope that World Mission Day will contribute to making all the Christian communities and every baptized person ever more aware that Christ's call to spread his Kingdom to the very ends of the earth is universal.

"The Church is missionary by her very nature", John Paul II wrote in his Encyclical "*Redemptoris Missio*," "for Christ's mandate is not something contingent or external, but reaches the very heart of the Church. It follows that the universal Church and each individual Church is sent forth to the nations.... It is highly appropriate that young Churches "should share as soon as possible in the universal missionary work of the Church. They should themselves send missionaries to proclaim the Gospel all over the world, even though they are suffering from a shortage of clergy"" (n. 62).

Fifty years after the historical appeal for cooperation between the Churches at the service of the mission of my Predecessor, Pius XII, with his Encyclical "*Fidei Donum*," I would like to reaffirm that the Gospel proclamation continues to be timely and urgent.

In the Encyclical "*Redemptoris Missio*" cited above, Pope John Paul II, for his part, recognized that "the Church's mission is wider than the "communion among the Churches"; it ought to be directed not only to aiding re-evangelization but also and primarily to missionary activity as such" (n. 64).

Therefore, as has often been said, missionary commitment remains the first service that the Church owes to humanity today to guide and evangelize the cultural, social and ethical transformations; to offer Christ's salvation to the people of our time in so many parts of the world who are humiliated and oppressed by endemic poverty, violence and the systematic denial of human rights.

The Church cannot shirk this universal mission; for her it has a binding force. Since Christ first entrusted the missionary mandate to Peter and to the Apostles, today it is primarily the responsibility of the Successor of Peter whom divine Providence has chosen as a visible foundation of the Church's unity, and of the Bishops directly responsible for evangelization, both as

members of the Episcopal College and as Pastors of the particular Churches (cf. "Redemptoris Missio," n. 63).

I am thus addressing the Pastors of all the Churches chosen by the Lord to guide his one flock so that they may share in the pressing concern to proclaim and spread the Gospel. It was precisely this concern that 50 years ago impelled the Servant of God Pius XII to bring missionary cooperation more up to date with the times. With particular concern for the future of evangelization he asked the "long established" Churches to send priests to support the recently founded Churches.

Thus, he gave life to a new "subject of mission" which took the name of "Fidei Donum" precisely from the first words of the Encyclical.

Of it he wrote: "As We direct our thoughts, on the one hand, to the countless multitudes of Our sons who have a share in the blessings of divine faith, especially in countries that have a long Christian tradition, and on the other hand, as We consider the far more numerous throngs of those who are still waiting for the day of salvation to be proclaimed to them, We are filled with a great desire to exhort you again and again, Venerable Brethren, to support with zealous interest the most holy cause of bringing the Church to all the world". He added: "Please God, may it come to pass that Our admonitions will arouse a keener interest in the missionary apostolate among your priests and through them set the hearts of the faithful on fire!" (cf. "Fidei Donum," n. 4).

Let us give thanks to the Lord for the abundant fruits obtained by this missionary cooperation in Africa and in other regions of the earth. Throngs of priests, after leaving their native communities, have devoted their apostolic energy to the service of communities which have sometimes only recently come into being in poor and developing areas. Among these priests are many martyrs who have combined with the witness of their words and apostolic dedication the sacrifice of their lives.

Nor can we forget the many men and women religious and lay volunteers who, together with the priests, spared no effort to spread the Gospel to the very ends of the earth. May World Mission Day be an opportunity to remember in prayer these brothers and sisters of ours in the faith and all who continue to work in the vast field of the mission.

Let us ask God that their example may everywhere inspire new vocations and a renewed mission awareness in the Christian people. Indeed, every Christian community is born missionary, and it is precisely on the basis of the courage to evangelize that the love of believers for their Lord is measured.

Consequently, we could say that for the individual members of the faithful it is no longer merely a matter of collaborating in evangelizing work but of feeling that they themselves are protagonists and corresponsable. This corresponsibility entails the growth of communion between the communities and increases reciprocal help with regard to the personnel (priests, men and women religious and lay volunteers) and the use of the means necessary for evangelization today.

Dear brothers and sisters, the missionary mandate entrusted by Christ to the Apostles truly involves us all. May World Mission Day therefore be a favourable opportunity to acquire a deeper awareness and to work out together appropriate spiritual and formative itineraries which encourage inter-Church cooperation and the training of new missionaries to spread the Gospel in our time.

However, let it not be forgotten that the first and priority contribution that we are called to offer to the missionary action of the Church is prayer. "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few", the Lord said; "pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest" (Luke 10:2).

"First of all, therefore", Pope Pius XII of venerable memory wrote 50 years ago, "Venerable Brethren, We trust that more continuous and fervent prayers will be raised to God for this cause" ("Fidei Donum," n. 49). Remember the immense spiritual needs of the numerous populations who are far from the true faith or who stand in such great need of the means of perseverance (cf. n. 55). And he urged the faithful to increase the number of Masses offered for the missions, saying that "this is in accordance with the prayers of Our Lord who loves his Church and wishes her to flourish and enlarge her borders throughout the whole world" (ibid., n. 52).

Dear brothers and sisters, I also renew this invitation, which is more timely than ever. May the unanimous invocation of the "Our Father who art in Heaven" be extended in every community, so that his Kingdom will come on earth.

I appeal in particular to children and young people, who are always ready and generous in their missionary outreach. I address the sick and the suffering, recalling the value of their mysterious and indispensable collaboration in the work of salvation. I ask consecrated people, especially those in cloistered monasteries, to intensify their prayers for the missions.

Thanks to the commitment of every believer, the spiritual network of prayer and support for evangelization is being extended throughout the Church. May the Virgin Mary who accompanied with motherly solicitude the development of the newborn Church, also guide our footsteps in our time and obtain for us a new Pentecost of love. May she especially make us all aware of being missionaries, that is, those who have been sent out by the Lord to be his witnesses at every moment of our life.

I assure my daily remembrance in prayer to the fidei donum priests, to the men and women religious and lay volunteers working on the frontiers of evangelization as well as to all who in their various capacities are dedicated to Gospel proclamation, as with affection I impart my Apostolic Blessing to all.

From the Vatican, 27 May 2007, the Solemnity of Pentecost.

BENEDICTUS PP. XVI

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