

Extraordinary Missionary Month October 2019

Baptized and sent: the Church of Christ on Mission in the World

1. Baptized

“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...” (Mt 28:19). The Gospel of Matthew talks about baptism “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” This Trinitarian expression is unique in the New Testament, which talks about the baptism “in the name of Jesus” or “in the Spirit.” The triple designation comes from the baptismal liturgy, which is in effect in Matthew’s Church¹. The Mission continuously intends to create a community, one of people whom, through the rite of baptism, want to root their mutual relationships into a common belonging “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Baptism stands as a missionary sacrament *par excellence*. It is by receiving the baptism that a person makes public his or her decision to believe, to become a Christian. The baptized person enters the Kingdom’s realm and becomes a citizen openly, and he or she enters the Church². Baptism is the most beautiful and magnificent gift of God... We call it gift, grace, unction, illumination, incorruptibility cloth, regenerating bath, seal, and everything that is most precious³.

Baptism is the rite through which the adherence to Christ is fulfilled. It allows the baptized person to enter into the mystery of Easter “death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” It is through Him that every person who is baptized in water and in the Spirit is immersed in order to reborn into a new life. Baptism is the sacrament of faith in God—Trinity. The necessary faith for baptism is not a mature and perfect faith, but rather a beginning that is called to grow within the Church. Faith still grows after baptism. That is why, each year, the Church celebrates during Easter Vigil, the renewal of the baptism’s “profession of faith.”⁴ Let us remember this expression: “Christians are made, not born,” said Tertullian, Father of the Church. Baptism is not a formality, but rather an act that deeply marks our existence by immersing us in life’s infinite source.

According to Pope Francis, “Baptism is the foundation of our faith. It makes us members of Christ and his Church. Together with the Eucharist and Confirmation, these sacraments form the Christian initiation, which is a great sacramental event that configures us to the Lord and turns us into a living sign of his presence and of his love... Throughout history, a chain of Grace was formed from baptism to baptism, a chain of brotherhood and filiation to the Church,” because that sacrament “is a gift which is bestowed in a context of care and fraternal sharing. In its celebration, we can see the most genuine features of the Church, who like a mother continues to give birth to new children in Christ, in the fecundity of the Holy Spirit⁵.”

2. Sent

“He summoned the Twelve and began to send them out two by two.” (Mk 6:7) Jesus established a group of Twelve “to be with him” and share his ministry (Mk 3:13–19). Now, he sends them on a mission. The Twelve will later receive the title of *apostles*, in other words, to be *sent out* on a mission (Mk 6:30). Jesus gives some fundamental instructions about the mission. He begins by sending out his disciples “two by two.” According to Moses’ law, it is necessary to have two witnesses to authenticate a disposition (Dt 19:15). The number two also represents the symbol of a community: the missionaries must not work alone, but rather in a team. The first Christians took Jesus practice literally. In the Acts of the Apostles, the missionaries always walk along by two: Peter and John (Ac 3:1); Paul and Barnabas (Ac 13:2); Judas and Silas (Ac 15:22).

This speech of sending out on a mission may seem to us today as very archaic in its form. In fact, it is marked by the period that witnessed its birth, which is the rustic customs of the antiquity. But it remains because of its very current substance. The Good news must always be brought with mobility everywhere, through poor means. It is offered freely, and it calls upon the free welcome of consciences. It is a Word that must accompany the signs of Christ’s victory upon evil and death. The message of that old tale remains relevant⁶.

“Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature” (Mk 16:15). According to Pope Francis, obeying this mandate of the Lord is not an option for the Church: in the words of the Second Vatican Council, it is her “essential task,” for the Church is “missionary by nature.” Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity; she exists in order to evangelize⁷.

¹ Claude Tassin, “L’Évangile de Matthieu” (Matthew’s Gospel), in Gruson, P. (dir.). *Les Évangiles. Textes et commentaires* (The Gospels. Texts and annotations), Paris Bayard Compact, p. 296.

² Marc Spindler, «Baptême et mission» (Baptism and mission), in *Cent mots pour la mission. Dictionnaire œcuménique de missiologie* (A hundred words for the mission. Ecumenical dictionary of missiology), p. 34.

³ S. Gregory of Nazianzus, or. 40, 3–4; PG 36, 361C.

⁴ Mgr André Vingt-Trois, *Petit guide de la Foi Catholique* (A short guide of the Catholic Faith), Paris Éditions Le Sénevé/Cerf.

⁵ Reflection by Pope Francis during Catechesis on the Sacraments, in particular on Baptism, January 2014.

⁶ Jacques Hervieux, “L’Évangile de Marc” (Mark’s Gospel), in Gruson, P. (dir.). *Les Évangiles. Textes et commentaires*. (The Gospels. Texts and annotations), Paris Bayard Compact, p. 388.

⁷ *Ad gentes* decree on the Church’s missionary activity (december 7, 1965), n. 7: AAS 58 (1966), 955-948.

In his encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, Saint Pope John Paul II exhorted the Church to renew its missionary commitment, firmly believing that the mission renews the Church. We would like to reiterate his words, that is, “The Mission of Christ the Redeemer, which is entrusted to the Church, is still very far from completion. An overall view of the human race shows that this mission is still only beginning and that we must commit ourselves wholeheartedly to its service. *Faith is strengthened when it is given to others!* It is in commitment to the Church’s universal mission that the new evangelization of Christian peoples will find inspiration and support⁸.” In the Church’s life, all the baptized people are in charge of the mission. They have ecclesial, ethical and missionary responsibilities. They constantly meditate these words: “woe to me if I do not preach it!” (1 Cor 9:16)

3. The Church of Christ

“*But they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs*” (Mk 16:20). The early Church had a keen awareness to be sent out on a mission throughout the world. It had to announce the crucified and risen Messiah, who opens the sources of the universal salvation to all humans. The active and efficient presence of the Lord in the missionary activity is also emphasized. The Risen Christ works with the believers. The Gospel is the power of Salvation for all; those who bear witness of it and those who welcome it through faith (Rm 1:1–7).

Christ’s Church is called to always correspond with its missionary identity, to preach Jesus crucified and risen for all, the living and merciful Saviour, as stated by Pope Francis.⁹ Therefore, the Pope recalls the Council’s affirmation that it is necessary that the Church “prompted by the Holy Spirit, she must walk the same path Christ walked: a path of poverty and obedience, of service and self-sacrifice.” In this way, she will effectively proclaim the Lord, “model of that redeemed humanity, imbued with brotherly love, sincerity and a peaceful spirit, to which all aspire.”¹⁰

Furthermore, it is important to consider the dynamic and historical nature of the Church. Missiology opens a new perspective on ecclesiology. Through the mission, the Church is made, not born. It seeks its form, it feels like a creature of the Word, fully subject to the contingencies of the history of populations in which she recruits itself, while being fully promised to the glory of God’s Kingdom. In this sense, the mission is an *ecclesiogenesis*¹¹: it is born from its own mission. In this missionary work for the glory of God and the salvation of the world, the Lord accompanies its Church.

For the Church is compelled by the Holy Spirit to do her part so that God’s plan may be fully realized, whereby He has constituted Christ as the source of salvation for the whole world. By the proclamation of the Gospel, she prepares her hearers to receive and profess the faith. She gives them the dispositions necessary for baptism, and incorporates them in Christ. Through her work, whatever good is in the minds and hearts of men, whatever good lies latent in the religious practices and cultures of diverse peoples, is not only saved from destruction but is also cleansed, raised up and perfected unto the glory of God. In this way the Church both prays and labours in order that the entire world may become the People of God, the Body of the Lord and the Temple of the Holy Spirit, and that in Christ, the Head of all, all honour and glory may be rendered to the Creator and Father of the Universe¹².

4. On Mission

“Jesus said to them again, Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” (Jn 20:21–23). The Paschal apparitions lead to a mission. The disciples are sent out, literally *became apostles*, in order to continue Jesus’ work. It is the first time that John assigns the title of apostles to the Eleven in his gospel. The theme of the sending out is exposed in the priestly speech (Jn 17:17–19). Just as God breathed his spirit of life into Adam (Gn 2:7), just as the Spirit descended upon Jesus (1, 33–34), Jesus breathed his spirit on his disciples (Jn 14, 26)¹³.

In this time of exaltation of the humanitarian activism, the theological reflection on the mission’s foundation becomes necessary again. The mission’s theological foundation cannot be different from the Church’s foundation, gathered through the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, passed on by the ministers given by the Lord. The Church has meaning only if it bears the project of God. The mission’s source can be found in the living heart of the Trinitarian God: God himself is “mission.” Well understood, the order of Mt 28:18–20 reflects the “missionary” dynamism of the divine life; throughout the world, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit’s creative energy, create disciples, gathers them in order to form a new community, which in turn, is sent out on the Kingdom’s path¹⁴.

The conciliar decree on the *ad gentes* mission, in turn defines the mission as “nothing else and nothing less than an epiphany, or a manifesting of God’s decree, and its fulfillment in the world and in world history” and assures that “the Church is missionary by

⁸ Encyclical letter *Redemptoris missio* (December 7, 1990), n. 1: AAS 83 (1991), 249–251.

⁹ Letter of the Holy Father Francis for the centenary of the promulgation of the apostolic letter “*Maximum Illud*” of Pope Benedict XV.

¹⁰ *Ad gentes* decree, n. 5: AAS 58 (1966), 952–957.

¹¹ Word taken by Marc Spindler in “Dictionnaire œcuménique de missiologie” (Ecumenical dictionary of missiology) p. 102.

¹² Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, n. 17.

¹³ Alain Marchadour, « Évangile de Jean » (the Gospel of John), in *Les Évangiles, textes et commentaires* (The Gospels. Texts and annotations), op. cit., p. 1078.

¹⁴ Marc Spindler, « Fondement théologique de la mission » (The mission’s theological foundation), in *Cent mots pour la mission. Dictionnaire œcuménique de missiologie* (A hundred words for the mission. Ecumenical dictionary of missiology.), op. cit., p. 140.

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.”¹⁵ This double theocentric and ecclesiological perspective is biblically founded based on the sending out notion (apostolate) which is at the heart of the New Testament.

It is important to emphasize on this double impulse of the mission. God’s sending out, the *missio Dei*, means that the mission depends on God; it belongs to him from its origin to its end, and God himself is his agent. The Church’s sending out, the *missio Ecclesiae*, designates the sending out of people throughout the world by the Father and the Son, and the sending out of people by other people, the sending out to which the Church proceeds¹⁶. In short, the mission remains a logical and theological sequence of the Gospel. Every church has its challenges, its opportunities and its crisis. A continuous theological and biblical reflection on the mission is then necessary to find the elements to resolve these different challenges, by taking into consideration the knowledge of the missionary experience, everything for the glory of God and the salvation of the world.

5. In the World

“As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (Jn 17:18). The mission of the Christians who are sent out into the world, following Jesus’ steps, is therefore identical to his mission: engage in combat against the reign of the children of the darkness, to be exposed to the same risks of Jesus. This hostility is not tragic; it is experienced through joy because Jesus ensures victory to his loved ones (see Mt 5:11; 1 Th 1: 6). Saint John the Evangelist talks about the world with nuances¹⁷.

In order to refer to the world, John uses the Greek word *Kosmos*, which designates the ordered universe, in opposition to chaos. In this world, mankind plays an important role, because it is through this setting of order, inaugurated during the creation that it continues. The expression “world” can also designate the whole human society (humankind). Moreover, two aspects are brought up from the conception of the world in Saint John. On the one hand, the world is described as a space in which God manifests his love (Jn 3:16) and his willingness of salvation for the world (Jn 1–12). On the other hand, the world represents the universe which is under the influence of evil, where the disciple can only expect hate and hostility (Jn 13–21). Today, we know that the world is a place called to salvation and that the believer has the mission not to desert it but rather to evangelize it¹⁸.

Speaking about the world, it comes into our mind to evoke an old testimony about the Christians in the world, *the Letter to Diognetus*. We can read the following words: “Christians are indistinguishable from other men either by nationality, language or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life. Their teaching is not based upon reveries inspired by the curiosity of men. Unlike some other people, they champion no purely human doctrine... They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through... Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country... To speak in general terms, we may say that the Christian is to the world what the soul is to the body.”¹⁹ A Latin saying informs us about the conception of the identity of the Christian in the world: *communia non communiter*. It means that the Christians, yesterday as today, share the common life of all humans, men and women, but they don’t live in the same way as those who are not Christian. They are in the world without belonging to the world.

In the farewell prayer (Jn 17 : 18), the world designates at the same time the place in which the mission happens and its recipient, following the example of the Son’s mission; “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (Jn 3 : 17).

May the Virgin Mary, Queen of the Apostles and Mother of God and Mother of the Church, pray for us with the intercession of Saint-Thérèse, patroness of the missions, so that the work of the salvation of the world continues throughout the world until its realization, and that the baptized people and those who are sent out in the Church of Christ, work together for the mission in the world, in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen.

¹⁵ Ad gentes, n. 2

¹⁶ Jean-François Zorn, in *Cent mots pour la mission. Dictionnaire œcuménique de missiologie* (A hundred words for the mission. Ecumenical dictionary of missiology), op. cit., p. 217.

¹⁷ Alain Marchadour, « Évangile de Jean » (the Gospel of John) in *Les Évangiles, textes et commentaires* (The Gospels. Texts and annotations.), op. cit., p. 1039.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 1040.

¹⁹ « Les chrétiens dans le monde » (The Christians in the world.), in *La lettre à Diognète*. (The Letter to Diognetus)