

MESSAGE OF POPE FRANCIS FOR WORLD MISSION DAY 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The 2015 World Mission Sunday 2015 takes place in the context of the Year of Consecrated Life, which provides a further stimulus for prayer and reflection. For if every baptized person is called to bear witness to the Lord Jesus by proclaiming the faith received as a gift, this is especially so for each consecrated man and woman. There is a clear connection between consecrated life and mission. The desire to follow Jesus closely, which led to the emergence of consecrated life in the Church, responds to his call to take up the cross and follow him, to imitate his dedication to the Father and his service and love, to lose our life so as to gain it. Since Christ's entire existence had a missionary character, so too, all those who follow him closely must possess this missionary quality.

The missionary dimension, which belongs to the very nature of the Church, is also intrinsic to all forms of consecrated life, and cannot be neglected without detracting from and disfiguring its charism. Being a missionary is not about proselytizing or mere strategy; mission is part of the "grammar" of faith, something essential for those who listen to the voice of the Spirit who whispers "Come" and "Go forth". Those who follow Christ cannot fail to be missionaries, for they know that Jesus "walks with them, speaks to them, breathes with them. They sense Jesus alive with them in the midst of the missionary enterprise" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 266).

Mission is a passion for Jesus and at the same time a passion for his people. When we pray before Jesus crucified, we see the depth of his love which gives us dignity and sustains us. At the same time, we realize that the love flowing from Jesus' pierced heart expands to embrace the People of God and all humanity. We realize once more that he wants to make use of us to draw closer to his beloved people (cf. *ibid.*, 268) and all those who seek him with a sincere heart. In Jesus' command to "go forth", we see the scenarios and ever-present new challenges of the Church's evangelizing mission. All her members are called to proclaim the Gospel by their witness of life. In a particular way, consecrated men and women are asked to listen to the voice of the Spirit who calls them to go to the peripheries, to those to whom the Gospel has not yet been proclaimed.

The fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's Decree *Ad Gentes* is an invitation to all of us to reread this document and to reflect on its contents. The Decree called for a powerful missionary impulse in Institutes of Consecrated Life. For contemplative communities, Saint Theresa of the Child Jesus, Patroness of the Missions, appears in a new light; she speaks with renewed eloquence and inspires reflection upon the deep connection between contemplative life and mission. For many active religious communities, the missionary impulse which emerged from the Council was met with an extraordinary openness to the mission *ad gentes*, often accompanied by an openness to brothers and

sisters from the lands and cultures encountered in evangelization, to the point that today one can speak of a widespread “interculturalism” in the consecrated life. Hence there is an urgent need to reaffirm that the central ideal of mission is Jesus Christ, and that this ideal demands the total gift of oneself to the proclamation of the Gospel. On this point there can be no compromise: those who by God’s grace accept the mission, are called to live the mission. For them, the proclamation of Christ in the many peripheries of the world becomes their way of following him, one which more than repays them for the many difficulties and sacrifices they make. Any tendency to deviate from this vocation, even if motivated by noble reasons due to countless pastoral, ecclesial or humanitarian needs, is not consistent with the Lord’s call to be personally at the service of the Gospel. In Missionary Institutes, formators are called to indicate clearly and frankly this plan of life and action, and to discern authentic missionary vocations. I appeal in particular to young people, who are capable of courageous witness and generous deeds, even when these are countercultural: Do not allow others to rob you of the ideal of a true mission, of following Jesus through the total gift of yourself. In the depths of your conscience, ask yourself why you chose the religious missionary life and take stock of your readiness to accept it for what it is: a gift of love at the service of the proclamation of the Gospel. Remember that, even before being necessary for those who have not yet heard it, the proclamation of the Gospel is a necessity for those who love the Master.

Today, the Church’s mission is faced by the challenge of meeting the needs of all people to return to their roots and to protect the values of their respective cultures. This means knowing and respecting other traditions and philosophical systems, and realizing that all peoples and cultures have the right to be helped from within their own traditions to enter into the mystery of God’s wisdom and to accept the Gospel of Jesus, who is light and transforming strength for all cultures.

Within this complex dynamic, we ask ourselves: “Who are the first to whom the Gospel message must be proclaimed?” The answer, found so often throughout the Gospel, is clear: it is the poor, the little ones and the sick, those who are often looked down upon or forgotten, those who cannot repay us (cf. Lk 14:13-14). Evangelization directed preferentially to the least among us is a sign of the Kingdom that Jesus came to bring: “There is an inseparable bond between our faith and the poor. May we never abandon them” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 48). This must be clear above all to those who embrace the consecrated missionary life: by the vow of poverty, they choose to follow Christ in his preference for the poor, not ideologically, but in the same way that he identified himself with the poor: by living like them amid the uncertainties of everyday life and renouncing all claims to power, and in this way to become brothers and sisters of the poor, bringing them the witness of the joy of the Gospel and a sign of God’s love.

Living as Christian witnesses and as signs of the Father’s love among the poor and underprivileged, consecrated persons are called to promote the presence of the lay faithful in the service of Church’s mission. As the Second Vatican Council stated: “The laity should cooperate in the Church’s work of evangelization; as witnesses and at the same time as living instruments, they share in her saving mission” (*Ad Gentes*, 41). Consecrated missionaries need to generously welcome those who are willing

to work with them, even for a limited period of time, for an experience in the field. They are brothers and sisters who want to share the missionary vocation inherent in Baptism. The houses and structures of the missions are natural places to welcome them and to provide for their human, spiritual and apostolic support.

The Church's Institutes and Missionary Congregations are completely at the service of those who do not know the Gospel of Jesus. This means that they need to count on the charisms and missionary commitment of their consecrated members. But consecrated men and women also need a structure of service, an expression of the concern of the Bishop of Rome, in order to ensure *koinonia*, for cooperation and synergy are an integral part of the missionary witness. Jesus made the unity of his disciples a condition so that the world may believe (cf. Jn 17:21). This convergence is not the same as legalism or institutionalism, much less a stifling of the creativity of the Spirit, who inspires diversity. It is about giving a greater fruitfulness to the Gospel message and promoting that unity of purpose which is also the fruit of the Spirit.

The Missionary Societies of the Successor of Peter have a universal apostolic horizon. This is why they also need the many charisms of consecrated life, to address the vast horizons of evangelization and to be able to ensure adequate presence in whatever lands they are sent.

Dear brothers and sisters, a true missionary is passionate for the Gospel. Saint Paul said: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16). The Gospel is the source of joy, liberation and salvation for all men and women. The Church is aware of this gift, and therefore she ceaselessly proclaims to everyone "what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes" (1 Jn 1:1). The mission of the servants of the Word – bishops, priests, religious and laity – is to allow everyone, without exception, to enter into a personal relationship with Christ. In the full range of the Church's missionary activity, all the faithful are called to live their baptismal commitment to the fullest, in accordance with the personal situation of each. A generous response to this universal vocation can be offered by consecrated men and women through an intense life of prayer and union with the Lord and his redeeming sacrifice.

To Mary, Mother of the Church and model of missionary outreach, I entrust all men and women who, in every state of life work to proclaim the Gospel, *ad gentes* or in their own lands. To all missionaries of the Gospel I willingly impart my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 24 May 2015

Solemnity of Pentecost

FRANCIS