



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI FOR THE 80TH WORLD MISSION SUNDAY 2006

"Charity: soul of the mission"

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. World Mission Sunday, which we will be celebrating on Sunday, 22 October, is an opportunity to reflect this year on the theme: *"Charity: soul of the mission"*.

Unless the mission is oriented by charity, that is, unless it springs from a profound act of divine love, it risks being reduced to mere philanthropic and social activity. In fact, God's love for every person constitutes the heart of the experience and proclamation of the Gospel, and those who welcome it in turn become its witnesses.

God's love, which gives life to the world, is the love that was given to us in Jesus, the Word of salvation, perfect icon of the Heavenly Father's mercy.

The saving message can be summed up well, therefore, in the words of John the Evangelist: "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him" (1 Jn 4: 9).

It was after his Resurrection that Jesus gave the Apostles the mandate to proclaim the news of this love, and the Apostles, inwardly transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, began to bear witness to the Lord who had died and was risen. Ever since, the Church has continued this same mission, which is an indispensable and ongoing commitment for all believers.

2. Every Christian community is therefore called to make known God who is Love. In my Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, I wanted to pause and reflect on this fundamental mystery of our faith. God imbues the entire creation and human history with his love.

In the beginning, man came from the Creator's hands as the fruit of an initiative of love. Later, sin obscured the impression of the divine within him.

Deceived by the Evil One, Adam and Eve, our first parents, failed to live up to the relationship of trust with their Lord, succumbing to the temptation of the Evil One who instilled in them the suspicion that the Lord was a rival and wanted to limit their freedom.

So it was that they preferred themselves to divine love freely given, convinced that in this way they were asserting their own free will. They consequently ended by losing their original happiness and they tasted the bitter sorrow of sin and death.

However, God did not abandon them. He promised salvation to them and to their descendents, announcing in advance that he would send his Only-begotten Son, Jesus, who in the fullness of time was to reveal his love as Father, a love capable of redeeming every human creature from the slavery of evil and death.

In Christ, therefore, immortal life was communicated to us, the very life of the Trinity.

Thanks to Christ, the Good Shepherd who did not abandon the lost sheep, human beings of all time were granted the possibility of entering into communion with God, the Merciful Father who was prepared to welcome home the Prodigal Son.

An astonishing sign of this love is the Cross. Christ's death on the Cross, I wrote in the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, is "the culmination of that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and save him.... This is love in its most radical form.... It is there that this truth can be contemplated. It is from there that our definition of love must begin. In this contemplation the Christian discovers the path along which his life and love must move" (n. 12).

3. On the eve of his Passion, Jesus bequeathed as a testament to his disciples, who had gathered in the Upper Room to celebrate the Passover, the "new commandment of love - *mandatum novum*": "This I command you, to love one another" (Jn 15: 17). The brotherly love that the Lord asked of his "friends" originates in the fatherly love of God.

The Apostle John noted: "He who loves is born of God and knows God" (1 Jn 4: 7). Therefore, to love according to God it is necessary to live in him and of him: God is the first "home" of human beings, and only by dwelling in God do men and women burn with a flame of divine love that can set the world "on fire".

It is not difficult, then, to understand that authentic missionary concern, the priority commitment of the Ecclesial Community, is linked to faithfulness to divine love, and this is true for every individual Christian, for every local community, for the particular Churches and for the entire People of God.

The generous readiness of disciples of Christ to undertake works of human and spiritual advancement draws vigour literally from the awareness of this common mission. These works, as the beloved John Paul II wrote in the Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, witness to "the soul of all missionary activity: love, which has been and remains the driving force of mission, and is also "the sole criterion for judging what is to be done or not done, changed or not changed. It is the principle which must direct every action, and the end to which that action must be directed. When we act with a view to charity, or are inspired by charity, nothing is unseemly and everything is good" (n. 60).

Consequently, being missionaries means loving God with all one's heart, even to the point, if necessary, of dying for him. How many priests, men and women Religious and lay people, have borne the supreme witness of love with martyrdom even in our times!

Being missionaries means stooping down to the needs of all, like the Good Samaritan, especially those of the poorest and most destitute people, because those who love with Christ's Heart do not seek their own interests but the glory of the Father and the good of their neighbour alone. Here lies the secret of the apostolic fruitfulness of missionary action that crosses frontiers and cultures, reaches peoples and spreads to the extreme boundaries of the world.

4. Dear brothers and sisters, may the World Missionary Day be a useful opportunity to understand ever better that the witness of love, the soul of the mission, concerns everyone. Indeed, serving the Gospel should not be considered a solitary adventure but a commitment to be shared by every community.

As well as those who are in the front line on the frontiers of evangelization - and I am thinking here with gratitude of the men and women missionaries - many others, children, young people and adults, with their prayers and cooperation, contribute in various ways to spreading the Kingdom of God on earth. It is to be hoped that this participation will continue to grow, thanks to the contribution of one and all.

I willingly take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and to the Pontifical Mission Societies (PMS), which are dedicated to coordinating the efforts made in every part of the world to support the activity of those on the front lines on the missionary frontiers.

May the Virgin Mary, who collaborated actively in the beginning of the Church's mission with her presence beneath the Cross and her prayers in the Upper Room, sustain their action and help

believers in Christ to be ever more capable of true love, so that they become sources of living water in a spiritually thirsting world. I wish this with all my heart, as I impart my Blessing to you all.

From the Vatican, 29 April 2006

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