



## The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI  
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE MEETING OF THE  
SUPERIOR COUNCIL OF THE PONTIFICAL MISSION SOCIETIES  
AND IN THE WORLD CONGRESS OF "FIDEI DONUM" MISSIONARIES**

Clementine Hall

Saturday, 5 May 2007

*Your Eminence,  
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,  
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I am particularly pleased to meet you after the solemn Eucharistic Celebration at which Cardinal Ivan Dias, Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, presided. In the first place, I address my cordial thoughts to him and thank him for his words to me on your behalf.

I extend my greeting to the Secretary and collaborators of the Missionary Dicastery, to the Prelates and priests present, to the men and women religious and to all who have taken part in the Congress held in the past few days to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Encyclical Letter *Fidei Donum* of the Servant of God Pope Pius XII.

Fifty years have passed since this venerable Predecessor of mine, facing the evolution of the times and looking out onto the scene of history of new peoples and nations, realized with farsighted pastoral wisdom that unheard of and providential horizons and missionary openings for the proclamation of the Gospel in Africa were unfolding.

Indeed, Pius XII was looking especially to Africa when, with prophetic intuition, he thought of that new missionary "subject" which takes its name "*Fidei donum*" from the first words of the Encyclical.

He was intending to encourage another type of missionary cooperation - parallel to the traditional

forms - among the so-called "ancient" Christian Communities and those born lately or which are coming into being in recently-evangelized territories. He asked the "ancient" Churches to send several priests to help the "young" Churches, whose growth was promising, to collaborate with the local Ordinaries for a specific period.

This is what Pope Pacelli 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 long since become Christian, 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 announced 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 of God to all the world. 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!" (n. 4).

Consequently, the purpose that inspired the venerable Pontiff was twofold: on the one hand, to kindle a renewed missionary "flame" in every member of the Christian people, and on the other, to encourage a more aware collaboration between the Dioceses of ancient tradition and the regions of first evangelization.

In the course of these five decades, Pius XII's invitation has been reaffirmed on several occasions by all my Predecessors, and thanks to the impetus provided by the Second Vatican Council, the number of *fidei donum* priests has continued to multiply. They depart with religious and lay volunteers, bound for a mission in Africa and in other parts of the world, sometimes costing their Dioceses many sacrifices.

I would like here to express my special thanks to these brothers and sisters, some of whom poured out their blood in order to disseminate the Gospel.

The mission experience, as you well know, leaves an indelible mark on those who carry it out and at the same time helps to foster that ecclesial communion which makes all the baptized see themselves as members of the one Church, the Mystical Body of Christ.

During these decades, contacts and missionary exchanges have intensified, partly because of the development and increase in the means of communication, so that the Church has come into contact with practically every civilization and culture.

Moreover, the exchange of gifts between Ecclesial Communities of ancient and recent foundation has been a reciprocal enrichment and has fostered an increased awareness that we are all "missionaries", that is, we are all involved, albeit in different ways, in proclaiming and bearing witness to the Gospel.

While we thank the Lord for today's missionary commitment, we cannot fail to perceive at the same time the difficulties which are occurring in this context today. Among them, I limit myself to stressing the dwindling numbers and the ageing of the clergy in Dioceses that once sent missionaries to distant regions.

In the context of a widespread vocations crisis, this is undoubtedly a challenge to be faced. The Congress organized by the Pontifical Missionary Union to commemorate the 50th anniversary of *Fidei Donum* has made possible an attentive analysis of this situation which the Church is living today.

Although we cannot ignore the problems and shadows, nevertheless we must raise our gaze confidently to the future, giving a renewed and more authentic identity to "*Fidei donum*" missionaries in a world context which has undeniably changed in comparison with the 1950s.

If there are many challenges to evangelization in this age of ours, there are also many signs of hope in every part of the world that witness to an encouraging missionary vitality among the Christian people.

Above all, may people never forget that before leaving his disciples and ascending into Heaven, in sending them out to proclaim his Gospel in every corner of the world, the Lord assured them, "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28: 20).

Dear brothers and sisters, this certainty must never abandon us. The Lord of the harvest will not let us lack workers for his harvest if we ask him for them with trust and persistence, in prayer and in docile listening to his words and teachings.

In this regard, I would like to take up the invitation which Pius XII addressed to the faithful of that time: "Especially in this our time on which the future growth of the Church in many areas is perhaps dependent", he wrote in his *Encyclical*, "let many Masses be offered for the sacred missions.... 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" (n. 52).

I make my own this same exhortation, convinced that in coming to meet our ceaseless requests the Lord will continue to bless the Church's missionary commitment with abundant apostolic fruits.

I commend this hope to Mary, Mother and Queen of the Apostles, while I cordially impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you who are present here and to all the world's missionaries.

