



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER FOR WORLD MISSION SUNDAY 2002

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. The evangelizing mission of the Church is essentially the announcement of God's love, mercy and forgiveness revealed to mankind through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. It is the proclamation of the good news that God loves us and wants all people united in his loving mercy, he forgives us and asks us to forgive others even for the greatest offences. This is the Word of reconciliation entrusted to us because, as St Paul says *"God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself not counting men's transgressions against them and he entrusted the message of reconciliation to us"* (2 Cor 5,19). These words are the echo and a reminder of the supreme cry from the heart of Christ on the cross *"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do"* (Lk 23,34).

This, in synthesis, is the fundamental contents of Mission Sunday which we will celebrate on Sunday 20 October, with the stimulating theme: *"Mission is Proclamation of Forgiveness"*. Although this event is repeated every year with the passing of time it loses none of its special significance and importance, because mission is our response to Jesus' supreme command: *"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations ... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you"* (Mt 28,19).

2. At the beginning of the third Christian millennium the missionary duty is ever more urgent, because as I said in the *Redemptoris missio* Encyclical "The number of those who do not know Christ and do not belong to the Church is constantly on the increase. Indeed since the end of the Council it has almost doubled. When we consider this immense portion of humanity which is loved by the Father and for whom he sent his Son, the urgency of the Church's mission is obvious" (n. 3).

With the great apostle and evangelizer St Paul, we wish to repeat: *"Yet preaching the Gospel is not the subject of a boast: I am under the compulsion I have no choice. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel ... it is a charge entrusted to me"* (1 Cor 9,16.17). Only God's love, able to make brothers and sisters of people of all races and cultures, can heal the painful divisions, ideological conflict, economic unbalance and violence which still oppresses humanity.

We are all aware of the horrible wars and revolutions which bloodied the last century and the conflicts which, unfortunately, still afflict the world almost endemically. However undeniable also is a longing of men and women who, despite dire spiritual and material poverty, have a deep thirst for God and for his loving mercy. The Lord's call to proclaim the Good News is still valid today: indeed it is ever more urgent.

3. In the apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio ineunte* I underlined the importance of contemplating the face of Christ suffering and glorious. The heart of the Christian message is the proclamation of the paschal mystery of Christ, crucified and risen. Contemplating the face of the Crucified one in agony "we confront the most paradoxical aspect of his mystery, as it emerges in his last hour, on the Cross" (n. 25). In the Cross God revealed to us all his love. The Cross is the key that gives free access to *"wisdom which is not of this world, nor of the rulers of this age ... God's wisdom, mysterious and hidden"* (1 Cor 2,6.7).

The Cross, in which the glorious face of the Risen Christ already shines, introduces us to the fullness of Christian life and perfect love, because it reveals God's longing to share with mankind his very life, his love, his holiness. In the light of this mystery of the Church, remembering the words of the Lord: *"Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect"* (cf. Mt 5,48), understands ever more clearly that her mission would be senseless if it did not lead to fullness of Christian life, that is to perfect love and holiness. Contemplating the Cross we learn to live with humility and forgiveness, peace and communion. This was the experience of St Paul who writes to the Ephesians: *"I plead with you, then, as a prisoner for the Lord, to live a life worthy of the calling you have received, with perfect humility, meekness and patience, bearing with one another lovingly. Make every effort to preserve the unity which has the Spirit as its origin and peace as its binding force"* (Eph 4,1-3). And to the Colossians he adds: *"Because you are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with heartfelt mercy, with kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another; forgive whatever grievances you have against one another. Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you. Over all these virtues put on love, which binds the rest together and makes them perfect. Christ's peace must reign in your hearts, since as members of the one body you have been called to that peace"* (Col 3,12.15).

On the Cross, Christ's total forgiveness, even of his executioners, establishes the new justice

4. Dearest Brothers and Sisters, the cry of Jesus on the cross (cf. Mt 27,46) is not the anguish of a desperate man, it is the prayer of the Son who offers his life to the Father for the salvation of all mankind. From the cross Jesus shows the conditions which enable us to forgive. To the hatred

with which his persecutors nailed him to the Cross, he responds with a prayer for them. He not only forgives them, he continues to love them, to want their good and to intercede for them. His death becomes the full realization of Love.

Faced with the great mystery of the Cross we can only kneel in adoration. "In order to bring man back to the Father's face, Jesus not only had to take on the face of man, but he had to burden himself with the 'face' of sin. "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Cor 5,21)" (*Novo Millennio ineunte*, n. 25). The total forgiveness of Christ, also for his persecutors, is the beginning of the new justice of the Kingdom of God for everyone.

During the Last Supper, the Redeemer said to his Apostles: "*I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you too love one another. This is how all will know you for my disciples, your love for one another*" (Jn 13,34.35).

5. The Risen Christ gives peace to his disciples. The Church, faithful to the Lord's command, continues to proclaim and spread his peace. Through evangelization believers help people to realize that we are all brothers and sisters and, as pilgrims on this earth, although on different paths, we are all on our way to the common Homeland which God, through ways known only to him, does not cease to indicate to us. The main road of mission is sincere dialogue (cf. *Ad gentes*, n. 7; *Nostra aetate*, n. 2), "dialogue does not originate from tactical concerns of self-interest" (*Redemptoris missio*, n. 56) nor is it an end in itself. Dialogue, instead, speaks to others with respect and understanding, stating the principles in which we believe and proclaiming with love the most profound truths of the faith which are joy, hope and meaning of life. In fact dialogue is the realization of a spiritual impulse leading "to inner purification and conversion which, if pursued with docility to the Holy Spirit, will be spiritually fruitful" (*ibid.*, n. 56). Commitment for attentive and respectful dialogue is a *conditio sine qua non* for authentic witness of God's saving love.

This dialogue is linked closely with readiness to forgive, because a person who forgives opens the hearts of others and learns to love and understand others entering into harmony with them. Because the act of pardoning, after the example of Jesus, challenges and opens hearts, heals the wounds of sin and division and creates real communion.

6. The celebration of Mission Sunday offers everyone an opportunity for self-examination on the demands of God's infinite love. Love which calls for faith; love which tells us to put all our trust in Him. "*Without faith it is impossible to please him. Anyone who comes to God must believe that he exists, and he rewards those who seek him*" (Heb 11,6).

On this annual recurrence we are called to pray assiduously for the missions and to cooperate with every means in the Church's activity all over the world to build up the Kingdom of God, "an eternal and universal Kingdom: a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a

kingdom of justice, love and peace" (*Preface for the Feast of Christ the King*). We are called to bear witness first of all with our life to our total adhesion to Christ and to his Gospel.

Yes, we must never be ashamed of the Gospel and never be afraid of proclaiming that we are Christians, hiding our faith. Instead we must continue to speak to extend the spaces for proclaiming salvation, because Jesus has promised to be with us for ever and he is always in the midst of his disciples.

Mission Sunday, the feast day of Mission, helps us discover the value of our personal and community vocation. It stimulates us to reach out to "my least brothers" (cf. Mt 25,40) through missionaries in every part of the world. This is the task of the Pontifical Mission Societies which have always been at the service of the Church's mission, ensuring that the least ones are not lacking those who break with them the bread of the Word and continue to bring them the gift of inexhaustible love that gushes from the heart of the Saviour.

Dearest Brothers and Sisters, let us entrust this commitment to proclaim the Gospel and indeed the whole evangelizing activity of the Church to Most Holy Mary, Queen of Missions. May she accompany us on our journey of discovering, proclaiming and witnessing to the love of God who forgives and gives peace to mankind.

With these sentiments, to all missionaries throughout the world, to those who accompany them with prayers and fraternal help, to Christian communities of ancient and new foundation, I gladly send my Apostolic Blessing, invoking upon you all the unfailing protection of the Lord.

From the Vatican, 19 May 2002, Solemnity of Pentecost.

JOHN PAUL II