



The Holy See

THE HOLY FATHER'S MESSAGE FOR WORLD MISSION SUNDAY 1998

October 18, 1998

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judea, Samaria and indeed to the ends of the earth”. (Acts 1,8)

1. World Mission Day in this year dedicated to this Holy Spirit, the second in preparation for the Great Jubilee of the year 2000, cannot fail to have Him as its reference point. The Spirit in fact is the principal agent of the whole of the Church's mission *ad gentes* as can be clearly be seen in the early Church (*Redemptoris missio* 21).

It is certainly impossible to comprehend the work of the Spirit in the Church and in the world by examining statistics or other means of human knowledge, since it exists on another level, the level of grace perceived by faith. His work is often hidden, mysterious, but always effective. The Holy Spirit has lost none of the propelling force of the time of the early Church; He acts today as in the time of Jesus and the Apostles. The wonders He worked, described in the Acts of the Apostles, continue to happen in our day too, but often go unrecognized since in many parts of the world humanity lives in secularized cultures which interpret reality as if God did not exist.

World Mission Day comes then to opportunely direct our attention to the marvelous undertakings of the Holy Spirit, so that we may be strengthened in our faith and there may be, precisely due to the power of the Spirit, a great missionary re-awakening in the Church. After all is not the primary objective of the Jubilee the strengthening of the faith and witness of Christians?

2. The knowledge that the Spirit is at work in the hearts of believers and intervenes in the events of history, is a reason for us to be optimistic and have hope. The first great sign of this action, which I wish to propose for common reflection, is paradoxically the situation of crisis which exists in our modern world: a complex phenomenon whose negative factors often provoke, as a reaction,

heartfelt invocations for the vivifying Spirit, revealing the longing for the Good News of Christ the Saviour which is present in human hearts.

How can we fail to recall, in this regard, the accurate assessment of the contemporary world made by the Second Vatican Council in the pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (nos. 4-10)? In recent decades the epochal crisis described in the document, has deepened: the lack of ideals and values has become more widespread; the sense of Truth has been lost and moral relativism has increased; not rarely there would seem to prevail an individualistic, utilitarian morality with no firm points of reference; on many sides it is underlined that modern man, when he rejects God, is less man, full of fear and tension, closed in himself, dissatisfied and selfish.

The practical consequences are clearly visible: the model of consumerism, although widely criticized, is ever more dominant. There is a danger that concern, often legitimate, for many material problems, may become so absorbing as to render human relations cold and difficult. People find they are becoming arid, aggressive, unable to smile, to greet others, to say “thank you”, to take to heart the problems of others. Due to a complex series of economic social and cultural factors, in the more developed societies there is a preoccupying “sterility”, which is both spiritual and demographic.

But it is often precisely situations such as these, which often bring people to the limits of desperation, which provoke the urge to invoke the One who is the “Lord, Giver of Life” because man cannot live without meaning and without hope.

3. A second great sign of the presence of the Spirit is the reawakening of a sense of religion among the peoples. This is a movement not without ambiguity but which demonstrates unequivocally the theoretical and practical insufficiency of atheistic ideologies and philosophies, of systems of materialism which reduce man’s horizons to the things of the earth. Man is not content with himself. It is now the widespread opinion that man is not content to dominate nature and the cosmos, the most advanced science and technology do not satisfy man, because they are unable to reveal the ultimate meaning of reality: they are merely instruments, but not ends for the life of man and the journey of humanity.

Together with this religious re-awakening, it is important to note “the affirmation among peoples of the Gospel values which Jesus made incarnate in his own life (peace, brotherhood, concern for the needy)” (*Redemptoris missio* 3). If we consider the history of the last two centuries, we realize how people have become more aware of the value of the human person, of the rights and men and of women, a universal longing for peace, a desire to do away with frontiers and racial division, a tendency to encounter between peoples and between cultures, tolerance towards those who are different, commitment to solidarity and voluntary work, rejection of political authoritarianism and the consolidation of democracy and an aspiration to a more balanced international justice in the economic field.

How can we fail to see in all this the work of divine Providence, who guides humanity and history towards more dignified conditions of life for all people. Therefore we cannot be pessimistic. Faith in God stirs us, on the contrary, to optimism, that optimism which springs from the evangelical message: "If we look at today's world, we are struck by many negative factors that can lead to pessimism. But this feeling is unjustified: we have faith in God ...God is preparing a great springtime for Christianity, and we already see its first signs" (*Redemptoris missio* 86).

4. The Spirit is present in the Church and he is the guide in mission to the nations. It is comforting to know that not we, but He is the principal agent of mission. This fills us with peace, joy, hope and courage. It is not the results that must concern the missionary, because they are in God's hands: he or she must work with all his resources and let the Lord work in profundity. The Spirit, what is more, broadens the prospects of the Church's mission to the ends of the entire world. Of this we are reminded every year by World Mission Day, which stresses the need never to restrict the horizons of evangelization but to keep them always open to the dimensions of the whole of humanity.

Even the fact that in the Church, born from the cross of Christ, still today there exists persecution and martyrdom is a powerful sign of hope for mission. How can we fail to recall, in this regard, that missionaries and ordinary believers continue to give their life for the name of Jesus? Also the history of recent years demonstrates that persecution gives rise to new Christians and that suffering, faced for Christ and his Gospel, is indispensable for the spreading of the Kingdom of God. I also wish to recall and to thank the countless people who, in the silence of their daily service, offer to God their prayers and sufferings for the mission and for missionaries.

5. In the young Churches, furthermore, the presence of the Spirit reveals itself with another sign, just as powerful: these young Christian communities are enthusiastic about the faith and their members, young people in particular, spread it with conviction. The panorama before our eyes, in this respect, is consoling. New converts, or even catechumens, are powerfully touched by the breath of the Spirit and, enthusiastic about their faith, they become missionaries in their environment.

Their pastoral activity is also out-reaching. In Latin America, for example, the principle and practice of "mission ad gentes" have been adopted above all after the two most recent CELAM Conferences in Puebla (1979) and Santo Domingo (1992). There have been five Latin American Missionary Congresses and the Bishops proudly affirm that, although they are still poor in apostolic personnel, they have a few thousand priests, nuns and lay volunteers on mission, above all in Africa

On this continent the sending apostolic personnel from one country to another is a particular practice which is increasing as reciprocal help between the Churches, to which is added also availability for foreign mission ad extra.

The Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops, held in the Spring in Rome this year, highlighted the missionary spirit of the Asian Churches where several missionary Institutes of secular clergy have been founded: in India, the Philippines, Korea, Thailand, Vietnam, Japan. Asian priests and Sisters work in Africa, in Oceania, in the countries of the Middle East and in Latin America.

6. Before the flourishing of apostolic initiatives in every corner of the earth, it is not difficult to see that the Spirit manifests Himself in the diversity of charisma, which enrich the universal Church and make her grow. The Apostle Paul, in his First Letter to the Corinthians, speaks at length about the charisma distributed for the spreading of the Church (chapter 12-14). The “time of the Spirit” which we are living, directs us more and more towards a variety of expression, pluralism of methods and forms, which reveal the richness and vivacity of the Church. Hence the importance of missions in the young ecclesial communities, which have already fostered silently, according to the style of the Holy Spirit, a beneficial renewal of their life. There is no doubt that the third millennium appears as a renewed call for universal mission and at the same time, the inculturation of the Gospel on the part of the different local Churches.

7. I wrote in the Encyclical *Redemptoris missio*: “For the Church’s history missionary drive has always been a sign of vitality, just as its lessening is a sign of a crisis of faith”... missionary activity renews the Church, revitalizes faith and Christian identity and offer fresh enthusiasm and new incentive”. (no. 2).

I therefore call for a re-affirmation, against all pessimism, of faith in the action of the Spirit, who calls all believers to holiness and to missionary commitment. We have just celebrated the 175th anniversary of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, founded in Lyons in 1822 by a young lay woman, Pauline Jaricot, whose cause for canonization is in process. With happy intuition this initiative furthered the growth in the Church of some fundamental values, today spread by the Pontifical Mission Societies: the value of mission as such, capable of regenerating in the Church the vitality of the faith, which increases when there is commitment to communicate it to others: Faith is strengthened when it is given to others (*Redemptoris missio* 2); the value of the universality of missionary commitment, since everyone, without exception, is called to cooperate generously in the Church’s missionary activity; prayer, offering up of sufferings and witness of life as primary elements, within reach of all the sons and daughters of God.

I recall, lastly, the value of missionary vocations for life: if the Church is missionary by reason of her nature, men and women missionaries “ad vitam” are of this the paradigm. I take therefore this opportunity to renewal my appeal to all those, young people in particular, who are working in the Church: “Mission is still only beginning” I underlined in *Redemptoris missio* (no. 1) and this is why we must listen to the voice of Christ who still today calls: Follow me and I will make you fishers of men” (cfr *Mt* 4,19). Do not be afraid! Open the doors of your heart and you life to Christ! Let yourselves be involved in the mission of proclaiming the Kingdom of God: for the Lord “was sent”

(cfr *Lk* 4,43) and he handed on the same mission to his disciples of all times. God, who cannot be outdone in generosity, will reward you a hundred fold and will give you eternal life (cfr *Mt* 19 29).

As I entrust to Mary, model of the missionary spirit and Mother of the missionary Church, all those who ad gentes or in their own territory, in all walks of life, co-operate in the proclamation of the Gospel, I gladly send to all my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, May 31st 1998, Solemnity of Pentecost