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## Promoting Evangelization at Home and Abroad

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Every baptized person receives from Christ, like the Apostles, the missionary mandate: “Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation” (Mk 16:15). (Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI, The Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean at Aparecida, Brazil [AD], no. 3)

A new evangelization is synonymous with mission, requiring the capacity to set out anew, go beyond boundaries and broaden horizons. (Synod of Bishops, XIII Ordinary General Assembly, *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith, Lineamenta* [LNE], no. 10)

Go to any parish on any given Sunday and ask the congregation who among them know of a missionary, and only a few will raise their hands. Then ask who among them are baptized, and the majority, if not all, will raise their hands. This has been my experience for the past four years, asking the same questions every time I go to a parish to preach about mission and evangelization.

All of us, by virtue of our Baptism, are missionaries! However, we are seldom referred to as missionaries. In fact, if one looks at the different programs we have in our parishes—religious education, RCIA, sacramental preparations, youth ministry, young adult ministry—we seldom hear about our identity as missionaries, despite the fact that we claim that the Church by its very nature is missionary (see Second Vatican Council, *On the Church’s Missionary Activity [Ad Gentes]* [AG], no. 2, in *Vatican Council II: Volume 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery [Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996]). Or as the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, reminds us through his address to the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, “The Church has the great task of guarding and nourishing the faith of the People of God, and reminding the faithful of this Continent that, by virtue of their Baptism, they are called to be disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ” (AD, no. 3).

We need to reclaim and celebrate our identity as missionaries to be able

to promote evangelization. As Pope Paul VI stated, beginning by quoting the Assembly of 1974, “Evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church.’ It is a task and mission which the vast and profound changes of present-day society make all the more urgent. Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize” (Paul VI, apostolic exhortation, *Evangelization in the Modern World [Evangelii Nuntiandi]* [EN], no. 14, [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html)).

### **Rooted in Christ**

The call to participate in God’s mission and to proclaim the Good News requires rootedness in Christ Jesus who calls and sends us out: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (Jn 20:21). The same Jesus who said “receive the holy Spirit” (Jn 20:22) continues to enkindle in our hearts the passion for God’s mission. It is Jesus Christ, the fountain of Good News, who calls us to discipleship and mission, the Good News we are called to proclaim. “Discipleship and mission are like the two sides of a single coin. When the disciple is in love with Christ, he cannot stop proclaiming to the world that only in him do we find salvation. In effect, the disciple knows that without Christ there is no light, no hope, no love, no future” (AD, no. 3).

In the same way, in order to evangelize, a missionary by Baptism must have a deep relationship with him who is the Good News. Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever

remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). Jesus is indeed the way, the truth, and the life (Jn 14:6). As Pope Benedict XVI echoes, “To be disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ and to seek life ‘in him’ presupposes being deeply rooted in him” (AD, no. 3). Simply put, the *Lineamenta* reminds us, “What is not believed or lived cannot be transmitted” (LNE, no. 12). We cannot be witnesses to Jesus and the Good News he proclaims if we do not know who he is or what he is about. Discipleship is, after all, “participating in the Life that comes from the bosom of the Father; it means being formed to take on his own style of life and his same motivations sharing his lot and taking on his mission of making all things new” (AD, no. 131). The evangelizing mission of the Church is “not limited to a program or project, but it is sharing the experience of the event of the encounter with Christ, witnessing it and announcing it from person to person, from community to community, and from the Church to the ends of the earth” (AD, no. 145).

### **The Church Is Missionary by Her Very Nature**

Mission is part of our DNA as Catholics. It is integral to who we are and what we are about. It belongs to the very being of the Church (“Preamble,” *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World, Recommendations for Conduct*, World Council of Churches, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and World Evangelical Alliance, 2011, 1). Without mission, there is no Church. In the words of our bishops, “To say ‘Church’ is to say ‘mission’” (*To the Ends of the Earth: A Pastoral Statement on*

*World Mission*, [old.usccb.org/wm/earth.shtml](http://old.usccb.org/wm/earth.shtml), no. 16). This claim has deep implications to how we promote evangelization. The very beat of our heart should be the words of St. Paul: “Woe to me if I do not preach it [the Gospel]” (1 Cor 9:16).

This importance of mission and evangelization to the life and being of the Church is what makes the Synod on New Evangelization announced by Pope Benedict XVI exigent! The Catholic Church, as a whole, must once again enter into a profound discernment on this aspect of her identity. The *Lineamenta* for the synod is clear in its message. “Being Christian and ‘being Church’ means being missionary; one is or is not” (LNE, no. 10). It is emphatic in proclaiming, “Loving one’s faith implies bearing witness to it, bringing it to others and allowing others to participate in it. The lack of missionary zeal is a lack of zeal for the faith” (LNE, no. 10).

This process of discernment requires moments of listening, understanding, and interpretation (see LNE, no. 3). It is a process that calls on us “to discern the changes in various cultural and social settings and their impact on Christian life, to reread the memory of faith and to undertake new responsibilities and generate new energies to joyously and convincingly proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ” (LNE, no. 5).

Confronted with today’s realities, we are summoned as individuals, and as a Church community, to have “the courage to forge new paths” (LNE, no. 5) to effectively respond to the challenges of mission. The *Lineamenta* is clear regarding “finding new approaches to evangelization so as ‘to be Church’ in today’s ever-changing

social and cultural situations” (LNE, no. 9). This call echoes that of the concluding document of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean at Aparecida (sometimes called the Aparecida Document) where the bishops reminded the Church of its call “to a deep and profound rethinking of its mission and [to] re-launch it with fidelity and boldness in the new circumstances of Latin America and the world” (AD, no. 11). It is not simply about repeating the past or a judgment on its failures, but it is proposed “to reawaken and elicit renewed efforts in a new missionary and evangelizing undertaking on the continent” (LNE, no. 5). This mission stance challenges the “‘business as usual’ attitude” (LNE, no. 10) in our evangelizing efforts. Instead, we, as a Church community, are called “to evaluate [our] pastoral practice[s] on the basis of the missionary character of [our] programs and activities” (LNE, no. 10). In the midst of the abiding and ever-changing realities of our times, the call to evangelize has never been more urgent. Mission and evangelization must permeate every action, decision, and commitment we have as a Church. It is the blood that runs through our veins as a living Church.

### **What Constitutes Mission and Evangelization?**

Someone asked me once what we mean when we say mission and evangelization. I gave an etymological discourse and some definitions from missiologists, but that did not satisfy. I soon realized that person was not asking for a technical definition or an account of the evolving meaning of the terms used throughout the years. I

realized that the person was asking for what constitutes mission and evangelization for this day and age.

SEDOS, the documentation and study center on global mission in Rome established by the many religious orders engaged in mission, held a ten-day consultation meeting in 1981 at which its members affirmed four dimensions of mission: proclamation, dialogue, inculturation, and commitment to the liberation of the poor. (For the proceedings of the meetings, see Joseph Lang and Mary Motte, eds., *Mission and Dialogue* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982].) In 2000, the first Mission Congress in more than twenty years was held in the United States. At that congress, five components of mission and evangelization were affirmed: proclamation, social transformation (justice and peace), witness, dialogue, and spirituality/prayer. Like *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, what these two gatherings emphasized was the multidimensional aspect of mission. These gatherings recognized the complex reality of evangelization (EN, nos. 17 and 24) and the fact that the evangelizing mission of the Church must penetrate all strata of humanity (EN, no. 18). This, however, has sometimes added to the confusion (at times discomfort) of what constitutes mission and evangelization. On several occasions, I heard people proposing only one component over the other as if one can exist without the other.

The United States Catholic Mission Association (USCMA), the official network of all U.S. Catholic missionaries serving all over the world, has taken its mandate to promote mission and global solidarity to mean integration of all five components. Proclamation without

social transformation or dialogue is incomplete as is the work for social justice without spirituality or witnessing. Each component is integral to the other, and only when we integrate the five components can we truly appreciate the expansive challenge of mission and evangelization. When it speaks of the varied elements that may comprise the complex process of evangelization, USCMA has adopted the same attitude expressed in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. “These elements may appear to be contradictory, indeed mutually exclusive. In fact they are complementary and mutually enriching. Each one must always be seen in relationship with the others” (EN, no. 24). The bishops clearly express their directives on mission and evangelization in the *Lineamenta* for the Synod on New Evangelization. “[Proclamation] is not a matter of preaching a word of consolation, but rather a Word which disrupts, which calls to conversion and which opens the way to an encounter with the one through whom a new humanity flowers” (LNE, no.13, quoting Benedict XVI, post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *On the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church* [*Verbum Domini*], no. 93, [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_exh\\_20100930\\_verbum-domini\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini_en.html)). The *Lineamenta* is equally direct when it addresses the integration of witnessing, dialogue, and justice and peace. “The Church must convincingly sustain her efforts at uniting all Christians in a common witness to the world of the prophetic and transforming power of the Gospel message. Justice, peace, living with others and the stewardship of creation have characterized ecumenism over the



decades. Together, Christians can also offer them to the world as places where the question of God in people's lives can be addressed" (LNE, no. 7).

Integrating these basic components of mission and evangelization is integral and fundamental to our faith response as baptized people. We cannot simply pick and choose that which for us is convenient or easier to address. Mission and evangelization must indeed penetrate all levels of our life as Christians: culture, social sector, means of social communication, the economy, scientific and technological research, and civic and political life (see LNE, no. 6). And as these five components are integrated, so is the outcome of our evangelization holistic. "The fruit of evangelization is changed lives and a changed world—holiness and justice, spirituality and peace" (*Go and Make Disciples: A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States* [Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), 1993], no. 18).

### **Where Do We Go from Here?**

In 2006, the USCMA silver jubilee mission conference dealt with the theme "Short Term, Long Term on Whose Terms?" In the dialogue that ensued, it was affirmed that neither the length of stay nor geographic boundaries determine mission. Indeed, in the age of globalization, neither physically crossing a geographic border nor living in a different country for a long period of time necessarily constitutes mission. Mission and evangelization are much more complex and multifaceted. More importantly, as Fr. Robert Schreiter, CPPS, emphasized in his keynote speech "On Whose Term

Is Mission?," mission is ultimately on God's terms! "This is not our mission; it is God's mission, in which we are called to participate" (see

[www.uscatholicmission.org/files/uscatholicmission/files/schreiterkeynote.pdf](http://www.uscatholicmission.org/files/uscatholicmission/files/schreiterkeynote.pdf)).

In that same conference, a missionary from Africa sent to the United States commented, "How come when priests and sisters go to my country, they call themselves missionaries, but when we go to the U.S., they do not want to call us missionaries but pastoral workers?" This comment points to another dynamic of missionary activity. Mission is both sending and receiving, it is both at home and abroad. "Today, all five continents are fields of missionary activity. . . . Transcending the geographic confines of former missionary activity means having the capacity to raise the question of God at every moment in the encounters created by the mixing and rebuilding of the fabric of society, a phenomenon which is taking place in almost every local setting" (LNE, no. 6).

Three things to remember from the above statements: First, mission belongs to God (*Missio Dei*) and we are called to participate in it. Second, geography and the length of stay do not necessarily determine mission. Third, mission is both sending and receiving, both at home and abroad.

### **How Then Do We Promote the Evangelizing Mission of the Church at Home and Abroad?**

Jesus said, "I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!" (Lk 12:49). As we look

into our own response as individuals and as communities of faith, can we truly say that our hearts are burning for mission and evangelization? How can we claim truth to our identity as missionaries and to the evangelizing mission of the Church? Or in the words of the *Lineamenta*, “Are we truly missionary at heart?” (LNE, no. 10)

As I go around the country preaching about mission and evangelization, many are surprised whenever I share stories about North Americans who have dedicated their entire lives to mission—some here in the United States and others abroad. I also make them aware of North American missionaries who have been killed in recent years. Their comments range from “I did not realize that there are Americans in mission abroad” to “I did not know that we have missionaries in the United States” to “I did not realize that missionaries are still being killed in this time and age.” And of course I always hear the usual comment that “I never thought of myself as missionary.”

We have many opportunities to change the perception of individuals and our parish communities regarding mission and evangelization. One thing is certain: our local commitment to mission (or lack thereof) affects the promotion of evangelization both at home and abroad. As Pope John Paul II reminds us in his encyclical on the permanent validity of the Church’s missionary mandate, a necessary link exists between the two: “Missionary activity *ad intra* is a credible sign and a stimulus for missionary activity *ad extra*, and vice versa” (John Paul II, Encyclical, *On the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate [Redemptoris Missio]* [RM], no. 34, [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_i](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_i)

[i/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_07121990\\_redemptoris-missio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio_en.html)).

How do we begin? We need to start by claiming our identity as missionaries by virtue of our Baptism and use that as a lens as we look into the different aspects of our faith life. For every program we do in the parish, we can ask “How does this strengthen the missionary identity of the parish?” or “How does this promote the evangelizing mission of the Church?” or “How am I being missionary?”

We can also be intentional in creating opportunities to really reflect on our missionary identity. We can invite missionaries from our local community to share stories about their experiences in mission. We can organize mission immersion trips both locally and internationally. We can be intentional in incorporating mission in our preaching. We can transform the “service learning” aspect of our Confirmation program, CCD classes, or youth and young adult activities to be more mission-oriented. We can build partnerships and relationships with parishes outside our diocese, either within the United States or abroad.

Our Catholic Church offers many wonderful documents that can help us deepen our missionary perspective and strengthen our role as evangelizers. We can enrich our faith response by availing ourselves of the wisdom and learning contained in documents such as *Ad Gentes*, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, and *Redemptoris Missio*, among others. We might also read the Aparecida Document written by the bishops of CELAM, which is one of the most current Church documents on mission and evangelization. All these documents are now accessible through the Internet.

The USCMA has also come out with a bilingual “Study Guide for Use with the Aparecida Document” that integrates the different Church teachings on mission in a usable format. Finally, of course, we want to encourage reading the Scriptures and listening to its message with the ears of a missionary.

We also encourage familiarity with the documents produced by our own bishops in the United States, particularly *Go and Make Disciples* and *Teaching the Spirit of Mission Ad Gentes*. Both documents contain concrete suggestions for individuals, parishes, or dioceses, and both documents are on the USCCB’s website.

The bottom line is that we have many ways to promote mission and evangelization and many resources available to help us in the process. We are only limited by our own creativity and by our own willingness to really embrace our identity as missionaries.

The *Lineamenta* for the synod on New Evangelization has given us basic principles that can guide our efforts. Quoting the late Pope John Paul II’s post-synodal apostolic exhortation *On the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World [Christifideles Laici]* (December 30, 1988, no. 35: AAS 81 [1989], no. 458), the *Lineamenta* affirms, “The Church today ought to take a *giant step forward* in her evangelization effort, and enter into a *new stage of history* in her missionary dynamism. In a world where the lessening of distance makes the world increasingly smaller, the Church community ought to strengthen the bonds among its members [networking/collaboration/partnership], exchange vital energies and means [promoting and building global

solidarity, partnership and exchange], and commit itself as a group to a unique and common mission of proclaiming and living the Gospel [communal witnessing of a mission-oriented community]” (LNE, no. 5).

### **“Go into the Whole World and Proclaim the Gospel to Every Creature” (Mk 16:15)**

In conclusion, we ask, “Why do we need to evangelize?” Our answer is this: because it is the Lord who commanded us to proclaim the Good News (Mk 16:15), to go and make disciples of all nations (see Mt 28:19)! This mandate is as urgent as ever. And the time is now! “We cannot let this hour of grace slip by. We need a new Pentecost! We need to go out to meet individuals, families, communities, and peoples to communicate to them, and share the gift of encounter with Christ, who has filled our lives with ‘meaning,’ truth and love, joy and hope!” (AD, no. 548).

Truth be told, once we embrace our identity as missionaries, we cannot help but proclaim the Good News. As the prophet Jeremiah says:

I say to myself, I will not mention him,

I will speak in his name no more.

But then it becomes like fire burning in my heart,

imprisoned in my bones;

I grow weary holding it in,

I cannot endure it. (Jer 20:9)

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