



The Great Commission: *Ad Gentes*

I couldn't believe my eyes! What was this doing in church? That thought troubled me some thirty years ago standing in the Cathedral of Chartres, fifty miles outside of Paris. I was puzzled by a marvelously colorful but pictorially confusing stained glass window. It included four immense panes depicting men—would you believe—riding piggy-back. Now, really! With the help of the tour guide, I soon discovered these were the four New Testament evangelists sitting on the shoulders of Old Testament prophets.

What a powerful image to recall as we unpack the Catechetical Sunday 2009 theme, "Catechesis and the Proclamation of the Word." Theoretically, if that cathedral window were tall enough, we modern-day evangelists would be a part of that imagery. We build on the shoulders of the past, from earliest times to twenty-first century catechists. The Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist initiate and nurture us as members of the Body of Christ, the Church. That relationship brings both privileges and responsibilities. Disciples are mandated to bear witness and to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Background

Before we get into the practical suggestions and do-able options for catechesis, I'd like to offer background information that is not always conspicuous at the local parish level. Evangelization begins with *witness*. It is primarily by the Church's conduct, by living fidelity to the Lord Jesus, that the Church will evangelize the world. "The witness of a Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission" (Pope John Paul II, *On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate [Redemptoris Missio]* [RM] [Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), 1990], no. 42).

Witness, in imitation of Christ, is expressed in a solid prayer life, simplicity of lifestyle, respect for the dignity of all people, and a compassionate participation in the works of charity and justice: "in short, the witness of sanctity" (Pope Paul VI, *On Evangelization in the Modern World [Evangelii Nuntiandi]* [Washington, DC: USCCB, 1975], no. 41).

After witnessing, disciples *proclaim* Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. To catechize is to tell it like it is. Our faith is strengthened when it is shared, whether it's over a cup of coffee, or in the classroom in a remote village in Asia, or in a big city in the United States of America. "Proclamation is the permanent priority of mission" (RM, no. 44). Whenever we meet another person we ought to take off our shoes, for we are standing on holy ground. When we proclaim the Good News it can be with the conviction and expectation that God is already present.

Within our homes, parishes, parochial schools, and catechetical centers—and wherever we find ourselves in the marketplace—we tell the story of Jesus in words and by example. In our everyday lives we are the hands and feet, the heart and mouthpiece, to make Christ present. The commission to proclaim the Gospel calls us to cross county boundaries and state lines. It challenges us beyond the borders of the United States. The very word "catholic" means "universal"! (See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. [Washington, DC: USCCB-Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000], nos. 849-856.) Even if we never leave our homeland, through our prayers and sacrifices, we are missionaries.

Ad Gentes

If every Christian shares in the missionary character of the entire People of God, then it certainly follows that there is a missionary dimen-

sion to every vocation. “The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Second Vatican Council, *Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity [Ad Gentes] [AG]*, no. 2, in *Vatican Council II: Volume 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, new rev. ed., ed. Austin Flannery [Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996]). I suggest a rather simple analysis of this missionary dimension of the Christian life. In the Church, both “stationary” missionaries and “foreign” missionaries are commissioned to continue the mission of Jesus. At the end of Mass the celebrant announces, “Go, the Mass is ended.” In both small-town America and the grasslands of Africa we are sent off from every Mass as “missionaries of the Eucharist.” Fed by Word and Sacrament, we nurture one another.

The Latin expression “*ad gentes*,” literally “to the nations,” refers to the Church’s mission to peoples everywhere, with particular attention to those who have not yet been evangelized. That expression provided the Latin title for the Second Vatican Council’s *Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity*.

If we get up close and personal with Scripture, we can make an interesting observation. Jesus gave the Church a “mission *ad gentes*.” We can identify “*ad gentes*” from varying points of view, relating to the pastoral purpose of each Gospel and perhaps even the personality of each evangelist. Consider the following:

- In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus sends the Church to baptize and to make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:19).
- Filled with the Holy Spirit, as St. Luke records in Acts, we are to bear witness “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Really, the mission “*ad gentes*” of the Church is the principle theme in Acts. Every event in the narrative is related to the Church’s universal mission.

- In St. Mark’s Gospel, we learn of tough times for disciples, but still the Gospel must be brought to all nations (Mk 13:9-10).
- Behind bolted doors, St. John notes, the risen Jesus appears and offers peace: “as the Father has sent me, so I send you” (Jn 20:21).

The challenge that the Gospels present to us is to move outside our spiritual comfort zone. Jesus’ whole life and teaching were directed toward announcing the Kingdom of God and bringing it about. These actions continue to be fulfilled today whenever disciples open themselves to the love of the Father, manifested and given by Jesus through the Holy Spirit. Yes, earthly kingdoms are limited to a particular people or place. But in the Kingdom of God, Jesus, the Word made flesh, shares in God’s dominion over the whole world. The Kingdom is not fulfilled until it embraces the entire human race: “You will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Through prayer, study, service, and sacrifice we can embrace global Kingdom ministry, without ever leaving home.

In order to witness, the Church needs witnesses. To engage in missionary activity, the Church needs missionaries. The great commission is clear. What to do? Go, make disciples. How to do it? Baptizing and teaching. In whose name? In the name of the Trinity. “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt 28:19).

Stories Abound

Here are several stories of ways in which Christians have lived out the call to carry on the Church’s missionary activity. These stories come from materials distributed by Pontifical Mission Societies, USA, for World Mission Sunday.

- One local priest of Bluefields, Nicaragua, travels by boat to visit about ten small

communities along Pearl Lagoon. He says his vocation was inspired by missionaries he met while growing up. “Now I am a missionary myself,” he says, “bringing Christ to others in my own country.” After those visits, the parish catechists continue to teach the people about the faith.

- “We must be the Lord’s voice to the poor, telling of his great love,” says Sr. Christine. Sr. Christine and others in her religious congregation manage HIV/AIDS programs and care for orphans in Zambia.
- Fr. Pierre Kitengiie was called out of his native Africa and sent as a missionary to Mongolia. “My presence brings them to ask questions.” He continues, “These questions call me to tell them about the faith, about Jesus. I introduce the Gospel.” In Easter 2007, seventy people were baptized in his mission, bringing the total number of Catholic converts in Mongolia to 345.
- “The youngsters here are most grateful for the missionary children of the United States,” wrote Bishop Stuart O’Connell of Rarotonga on the Cook Islands. “Support offered through the Holy Childhood Association keeps our religious education program running.”
- A woman confined to her home in the Philippines because of illness tells how the missionaries encouraged her to offer her prayers and sufferings for the missions. Their message changed her life. “I felt useless, but the missionaries brought me hope. I who never thought of going out of my little village have reached other continents through prayer.”
- Catechists in Louisiana say their work with Confirmation classes help them to grow spiritually in their own lives. When breaking open God’s Word with the youth or while sitting with them in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, catechists say, they are challenged to deepen their own faith commitments.

Evangelization of Peoples

“Faith is not something that only happens to each of us individually or privately, within

ourselves. The Gospel also speaks to society itself, with its values, goals and systems. . . . Sometimes this means that, as believers, we must confront the world as did the prophets of old, pointing out the claims of God to societies that are blind to God” (USCCB, *Go and Make Disciples: A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States*, 10th anniversary ed. [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2002], no. 17). In bringing the Gospel to the nations of the world, the foreign missionary meets different cultures and embarks on the long process of inculturation. (Teaching high school students today may give one a similar feeling.) Inculturation requires both the transformation of authentic cultural values through integration in Christianity, and the insertion of Christ into the values of various cultures. The Church enriches a culture in which she makes the Gospel incarnate. Ah! But the Church herself is enriched by diverse cultures in areas like evangelization, worship, theology, justice, and charity. Throughout the process of inculturation, missionaries and all catechists are to be guided by two principles: compatibility with the Gospel and communion with the universal Church.

Together with the pope, bishops are responsible for the mission of the Church *ad gentes*: “All bishops . . . are consecrated not for one diocese alone, but for the salvation of the whole world” (AG, no. 38). Under the direction of the Holy Father, the task of directing and coordinating throughout the world the ministry of evangelization and of missionary cooperation is entrusted to the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, in the Vatican.

The leading role in fostering a global missionary spirit among the People of God belongs to four societies of the universal Church: the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, the Holy Childhood Association, the Society of St. Peter Apostle, and the Missionary Union of Priests and Religious. These are the Pontifical Mission Societies, whose mobilizing motto is “all of us committed to the worldwide mission of Jesus.” To become more familiar with the amazing outreach of each society, see the Web site

www.onefamilyinmission.org. As part of this “one family in mission,” all are urged to foster the missionary zeal that is so central to the Christian life. The Church’s universal mission is about forming and informing through catechesis, promoting vocations “*ad gentes*,” and encouraging cooperation in the work of evangelization (see AG, no. 41).

Resources and Activities

The following is a practical checklist of things you can do to increase personal awareness and support catechetical encounters:

- Reflect on the theme of mission in the Scriptures and church documents. What comforts, challenges, or confuses you? Pray with that.
- Subscribe to *Mission Magazine*. It is a free publication. The magazine is also available in bulk with a study/discussion guide for junior and senior high school students, RCIA programs, or other parish organizations. This sixteen-page magazine, published three times a year, carries up-to-date photos and succinct articles of general interest. For a subscription, call (800) 432-2222 or e-mail mission@propfaith.org. Read other mission magazines as well. Are such magazines available on the parish pamphlet rack or in the school library? Use mission magazines to supplement catechetical texts and to teach “Church-in-mission.”
- Contact the local diocesan office of the Pontifical Mission Societies. What can the parish plug into? World Mission Sunday is the second-to-last Sunday of each October. Brainstorm about what can be done to make World Mission Sunday a more vibrant liturgical celebration in your parish. Perhaps invite a returned missionary to speak in the pulpit or classroom. Use world artifacts to recall our cross-cultural connectedness. Pray the intercessions in several languages. (Similar ideas work well for the solemnities of Christ the King and Pentecost.)
- During Sunday liturgical celebrations, regularly include an intention for world missions as a consciousness-raiser. Pope Benedict XVI publishes monthly mission intentions that can be included in the parish bulletin or used in other creative ways. Remember to pray for missionary vocations and the missions before classes or parish meetings. Make the prayer more personal by getting from your local mission office names of people in your (arch)diocese serving outside the United States. Consider praying for a particular part of the world by country or continent. Use the Internet to search for a few facts regarding mission areas’ population, food and water issues, religion, education, and health concerns to inform prayer intentions.
- Visit www.worldmissionrosary.org to learn about the mission rosary initiated by Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen in 1951. Plan a parish or school event with a “living world mission rosary.” Promote the connection between continents and colors of bead (yellow for Asia, white for Europe, red for the Americas, and so on). There are endless possibilities for promoting awareness, with plenty of good information on the Web site. Hail Mary decades could be represented by colored T-shirts or wide ribbons, or in some other way. Use a bulletin board or a “page fence” (a chain-link fence with plastic cups wedged into the holes) for a public display.
- Talk about the meaning of sacrifice. Encourage the People of God to “offer up” something in the name of Jesus for the strength and courage of foreign missionaries and those they serve.
- Enduring physical suffering, doing difficult things without complaining, and giving monetary offerings (perhaps through the sacrifice of a candy bar or one less music CD) are all forms of sacrifice we can offer in union with the crucified Christ in the spirit of the Gospel. Discuss what financial gifts can accomplish to promote evangelization and human dignity. Given as a class or a parish, the group’s offering of \$5 can support a seminarian for a day, while \$25 can help feed a lay catechist for a week, \$75 can provide

Bibles for religious instruction, and \$100 can help a mission church make repairs.

- Fast-food containers can make great props for reminding young missionaries that forgoing a sundae could help buy medicine for a sick child.
- Are you familiar with missionary saints? Do some research about the holy persons who first brought the faith to your (arch)diocese. Become familiar with their joys and struggles. Realize that only slightly more than a hundred years ago, the United States was considered mission-dependent—that is, in need of financial support from the Society for the Propagation of the Faith.
- Visit the Web site www.onefamilyinmission.org to learn specifically about the Holy Childhood Association (HCA). Explore the different sections, such as “What’s New Now?” or “HCA for Educators/Catechists.” You will find downloadable, print-ready materials that you can use for catechesis about missions. Print out the calendar with suggestions for mission education: stories about missionary saints, prayers, facts, and “fund”-raising ideas. Let the young missionaries go directly to www.hcakids.org for creative, kid-friendly mission animation and cross-cultural appreciation. Become an HCA member and get the bright and informative newsletter, *It’s Our World*. Little ones will delight in Polly Parrot, the HCA mascot. They can even write to Polly or participate in one of the contests.
- Use the Internet to research the phrase “10/40 window.” This term was coined in 1990 by the Christian missionary strategist Luis Bush to refer to those regions in the eastern hemisphere located between 10 and 40 degrees north of the equator. Look at the maps turned up by the Internet search, and be astounded by the data available. Did you know that more than 3,000 groups of people are still waiting for the Bible to be translated into their language?
- Visit other Web sites of interest, including the following:

- www.usccb.org/wm. Best mission practices from the USCCB’s Committee on World Missions, for dioceses, parishes, classrooms, etc.
- www.iamamissionary.org. Sixty-second stories that are lessons from the missions, found in the “Publications and Media” section of the Pontifical Mission Societies’ Web site.
- www.themissionreport.org. A blog with reflections on missionary journeys.
- www.youtube.com/pmsusa. Video footage from the missions.

In addition to these Web sites, various Web sites of religious congregations can offer a treasure trove of mission information. For example, both the Columbans (www.columban.org) and the Maryknoll Fathers (www.maryknoll.org) have online adult faith formation materials for mission education, as well as exciting kid-sized projects.

The prophets foretold the coming of the Messiah. The evangelists recorded the public life and ministry of Jesus and, through the power of the Holy Spirit, passed on to us his mission. “The present century thirsts for authenticity. . . . Do you really believe what you are proclaiming? Do you live what you believe? Do you really preach what you live?” (EN, no. 76). May our ministry of catechesis and evangelization be a mosaic of stained glass shining brightly “*ad gentes*.”

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