

THE RADICALLY MISSIONARY IDENTITY OF THE PRIEST*

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Originally I was asked by CELAM to present some reflections on “The Missionary Dimension of the Priest: A Requirement of Globalization”. I then asked myself if apart from the present-day context of globalization, the priesthood would not have a missionary dimension. At any rate, the title of the paper was changed to “The Missionary Dimension of the Priest: Personal Witness and Missionary Animation in the Light of the Theme of the VCG”¹ I see a certain ambiguity in the phrase “missionary dimension”. Dictionaries tell us that the term “dimension” can be understood in at least two ways: physically, as the external measure of an object or, metaphorically, as one of the elements or factors making up a complete personality. In this paper I opt for the second definition. For theologically the “being missionary” is not something external to priestly existence, but rather constitutes the radical identity of the priest. This is what I intend to explore in this paper, desiring to follow in great part the thought of John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

We can pose the basic question in two ways: Is the priest fundamentally a pastor called to assume certain missionary responsibilities? Or rather, is the priest fundamentally a missionary called to assume certain pastoral responsibilities? I clearly maintain the latter position.²

I begin by stating a paradox. There is a clear teaching in documents of the official Church Magisterium since Vatican II on the profoundly missionary identity of the priestly ministry (that of the bishop and presbyter). This teaching is based on the most fundamental basis of Christian faith: the mystery of the Holy Trinity revealed in the paschal mystery of Christ.

Nevertheless the pre-Conciliar way of thinking and acting seems to carry more weight in practice. The priestly ministry is generally seen as essentially “pastoral”, to which a “missionary dimension” can be added. This can be seen particularly in orientations on the formation and education of seminarians and priests, who are trained to be first of all “pastors” or shepherds of those who already are the Catholic faithful, serving them through the administration of parishes, rather than as missionaries called to evangelize those who are beyond the visible limits of Church.

The methodology used in this paper:

We shall begin with a summary of the affirmations in the documents of the Magisterium regarding this topic.³ Then we shall try to understand the theological thinking that underlies this official teaching of the Church, point by point. Finally we shall offer some personal reflections and recommendations.

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¹ VCG= The Fifth General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate, to be celebrated in Aparecida, Brazil, in May 2007 and whose theme is “Disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ so that our people may have life in Him”.

² I am deeply grateful to Fr. William Frazier, M.M., S.T.D., for the unpublished research done by him on this topic, which was indispensable for this paper which I drafted in Spanish for the CELAM symposium in Panama.

³ A 20 page collection of relevant texts was offered in the CELAM Panama Symposium.

My operative theses:

1. The priest is fundamentally a missionary, often called upon to assume certain pastoral responsibilities.
2. Every priest is called to be a missionary “ad gentes”, according to the perspective of John Paul II, which we shall explain below.
3. Some priests are called to be ad gentes missionaries “ad extra”, beyond their home Churches; of these some are called to be missionaries “ad vitam”, with a life-long commitment to world mission (as in the case of members of mission sending institutes or religious congregations).
4. The personal encounter with the living Christ is central in missionary activity. The starting point of mission is a personal experience of Christ. The ultimate objective of mission is communicating this experience to others, who in turn also become missionaries.
5. Although all the faithful are called to share in the mission of the Church, priests, with and under the bishops, have a special missionary responsibility. They are charged with the transmission of the Apostolic Tradition and for being instruments and signs of ecclesial communion. Thus by announcing the Gospel through sacramental ministry they enable full human participation in the paschal mystery of Christ and in the life of the Trinity.

Now we explore this problematic step by step:

The Second Vatican Council profoundly changed the way of thinking in the Church and the Church's evangelizing mission. John Paul II and Benedict XVI have deepened this thinking. I will try to highlight its main elements in what follows:

1. The pilgrim Church is missionary by nature (AG 2). We will see below that the term “missionary” has a very specific meaning in the Decree *Ad Gentes*, reiterated by John Paul II.
2. The Decree states that there is only one evangelizing task of the Church, but the way it is carried out differs according to the concrete situation of the peoples and human groups (AG 6, RMis 33):
 - a. The evangelization of those who do not know Christ yet or know him slightly is called “missionary activity”, the fruit of which is the birth of autochthonous Churches in the different cultures;
 - b. The on-going, progressive evangelization of those who are already faithful Catholics and members of ecclesial communities mature in the faith is called “pastoral activity”.
3. In RMis 33 Pope John Paul II reiterated this distinction and introduced two important changes:
 - a. He calls missionary activity in its specific sense the “mission *ad gentes*”;
 - b. He introduces another category as an intermediate term between the two categories of mission and pastoral care: the “new evangelization” of those who are no longer Christians.
4. In the same Encyclical (No. 37), the Pope affirms that “*ad gentes* mission” is not reduced to the vast ***geographical context*** (people never or hardly evangelized in their cultures), but that it extends to ***other social contexts*** (new structures of human relations, such as the phenomena of urbanization, migrations, youth and the poor) and ***cultural contexts*** (the means of communication, the commitment for justice and peace, the promotion of women and children, ecology, scientific research, international relations, etc.).⁴

⁴ The *territorial sphere* of missionary activity is still extensive. It encompasses two-thirds of humanity or more than four billion people, mainly, but not exclusively, in Africa and Asia. The pope admits that this situation exists also in traditionally Christian regions, like Latin America. Historically the Pontifical Mission Societies (and certain mission sending institutes) have prioritized attention to these territorial-based missionary situations.

5. The Council (AG 2), states, “The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father”. This text is very important not only because it affirms the radically missionary identity of the Church, but also because it bases it on the Trinitarian mystery, on the mission of the Son and the Spirit.

6. In the documents of the Magisterium on the ordained priesthood, there are several constant affirmations:

- a. The mission of the Church is based on the missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit;
- b. The mission of the ordained ministers is based ultimately on the identity and mission of Jesus;
- c. The mission of the ordained ministers is also grounded in the mission of the Twelve Apostles;
- d. The primacy of the proclamation of the Gospel in the ministry of priests.

In the following pages I shall offer my reflections on these affirmations of the Magisterium

1. The missionary identity of the priest is based radically on the missionary identity of Jesus

a. The traditional juridical understanding of this grounding of the priestly ministry

In the constant Catholic and Orthodox tradition, the ministry of those ordained to the ministerial priesthood (bishops and priests) gets its origin in the ministry of Christ and the Apostles.

During many centuries Catholic theology in the West understood this from a juridical and vertical perspective:

- a. The Father confers his universal authority to the Son;
- b. The Son passes on this authority to the Apostles, and to Peter in a particular way;
- c. The Apostles pass on this authority to their successors.

But the pontiff draws our attention to two other large, non-geographical “spheres” of mission. What is interesting is that he considers these not only challenges to evangelization in general, but to mission *ad gentes* in its proper sense. Whereas the territorial sphere is perduring, related to people with centuries-old religions and cultures, these are new situations, one “social” and the other “cultural”. The distinction I see is this. The “social sphere” refers to new ways of living together or of structuring relationships among human groups. The “cultural sphere” refers to new value systems and new ways of thinking.

The first non-geographical sphere that demands missionary activity is that which pertains to new social worlds and realities. It is the situation of those human groups involved in the phenomena of urbanization and migration, and particularly the new cultures of the poor, the marginalized and of youth. John Paul even dares to affirm that big cities should be “the privileged places” of *ad gentes* mission today.

The third sphere of *ad gentes* mission, and the second non-territorial sphere, are the *cultural areas or modern “Areopagi”*, toward which the Church’s missionary activity should be directed. A modern “Areopagus” (a public meeting place) is the world of social communication, which shapes and diffuses new modern and post-modern cultural models. Another “Areopagus” of the modern world is constituted by the phenomena of generalized awareness (John XXIII and *Gaudium et Spes* call them “signs of the times”) regarding human rights, promotion of women and children, integrity of creation, and the culture of politics, economics and scientific investigation.

In the teaching of John Paul II, all of these human situations or “spheres of mission”, whether historic-geographical or socio-cultural, demand *ad gentes* missionary activity. The traditional territorial sphere refers broadly to *traditional cultures*, the peoples of Africa and Asia and the culturally non-Western populations of America, perhaps somewhat “Christianized” historically, but hardly evangelized. The new, non-geographical spheres, the social and cultural spheres, refer to *new cultures* or new cultural situations. Both old and new cultures call for missionary activity.

This juridical way of understanding the continuity of the apostolic ministry in the Church is not false, but it seems to me to be an incomplete and impoverished understanding of the revealed truth. It corresponds to the mind set and language of a particular culture and period of history. The Declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (issued 24 June 1973) admits the possibility of the historical-cultural conditioning of the doctrinal pronouncements of the Magisterium.⁵ This Declaration calls for theological and ecclesial efforts to express the doctrine of the faith “in a fuller and more perfect way” within “a wider context of faith of human knowledge”. We shall see in what follows how the theologian Joseph Ratzinger precisely did this in a book on the theological meaning of the priestly ministry. He did not repeat the customary juridical grounding of the priesthood but rather based his reflections on the self-awareness of the historical Jesus.

b. An alternative: grounding the priestly ministry in the historicity of Jesus

An alternative to the juridical way of understanding theologically the apostolic ministry is a historical understanding of the person of Jesus, the awareness he had of his own identity, and his intention in instituting the ministry of the Twelve (identified as “the Apostles” in the theology of Luke, which has influenced the tradition of the Church so much in the understanding of apostolic ministry).

It is obvious from the current biblical studies that Jesus was aware of having a very special and unique relationship with God: that of being the “son of the Father”. This awareness of being “the Son” has important implications for our understanding of how human beings are called to share in the paschal and Trinitarian life, being “sons (and daughters) in the Son”. This is central in John Paul II’s thinking when he speaks about the “ultimate end of the mission”, which is “to enable people to share in the communion which exists between the Father and the Son” (RMis 23).. One basic aspect of the Son's being is to receive life from the Father, to submit himself to the Father's will. Obedience is central in being a son. This also has its implications with regard to the end of the apostolic ministry: to lead the peoples to the “obedience of faith”.

The missionary identity of the priest in the theology of Benedict XVI before he became Pope

Thirty-five years ago, Joseph Ratzinger emphasized another fundamental aspect of Jesus’ awareness of his identity: that of “being sent”:

Jesus sees himself as someone who is carrying out a mission... He knows that he is the one who has been sent. This is a total reality. His “being sent” does not come as a modification of his “already constituted being”. His being is “one who is sent”, a being that comes from another and a being sent to others. The fundamental structure of the Christian ministries is seen clearly once we grasp this understanding that Jesus had of himself... .

It is in this moment of being sent that we discover the meaning, definition and constitution of the meaning of the Christian office of ministry. It is only by starting from the guiding objective of this office, an objective that refers directly to the self-understanding and mission of Jesus Christ, that we can understand this ministry.⁶

⁵ The text says: “...Regarding this conditioning, it should be observed before all that the sense of statements about the faith depends in part on the expressive quality of the language of a given historical period and in given circumstances. It also happens that, not infrequently, a dogmatic truth may be expressed in the beginning in an incomplete, although not false, way, and that eventually, seen from a wider context of faith and human knowledge, it comes to be expressed in a fuller and more perfect way”. (quoted in P. Hünermann, *Enchiridion Symbolorum, Definitionum et Declarationum de rebus Fidei et Morum*, n. 1266 [Herder, Barcelona: 1999]).

⁶ RATZINGER J., *Priestly Ministry - A Search for its Meaning*, Sentinel Press (New York, 1970, pp. 7 and 10). In addition to the 40 texts from the Gospel of John in which Jesus states that he is the one sent by the Father, there are others in the Synoptic Gospels in which Jesus says, “I have been sent” or “I have come” or its equivalent (See: *Mk* 1:38; 2:17; 10:45; 12:2-8; *Mt* 5:17; 10:34; 11:27; *Lk* 4:17-21; 9:48; 10:16; 12:49; 19:19. See also: *Rm* 8:3; *Gal* 4:4; 2 *Cor* 8:9; *Phil* 2:7; Jesus is also called “apostle” (“one sent”) in *Hb* 3:1.

He then explains the consequence of this theological fact by saying that the priest of the New Testament is essentially missionary:

If the priestly being is precisely a being who is sent, then to be a priest necessarily means to be for others... If the priest is... a preacher and herald of the Gospel, and if, moreover, the concept of mission, of being sent, is the key to understanding his ministry, **he is essentially a “missionary”** of the Good News. This vision then entails weighty consequences with regard to the form of priestly life and the educational model for priestly life.⁷

His priority, moreover, is the ministry of the word in the priest's life, which of course is based on the Conciliar Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (No. 4):

... Priests, as co-workers with their bishops, have the primary duty of proclaiming the Gospel of God to all. In this way they fulfil the command of the Lord: "Going therefore into the whole world, preach the Gospel to every creature" (*Mk* 16:15), and they establish and build up the People of God. Through the saving word the spark of faith is lit in the hearts of unbelievers, and fed in the hearts of the faithful. This is the way that the congregation of faithful is started and grows, just as the Apostle describes: "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (*Rom* 10:17). To all men, therefore, priests are debtors that the truth of the Gospel which they have may be given to others. And so... they bring people to the worship of God... and it is to conversion and holiness that they exhort all men.⁸

Having seen how Ratzinger establishes the radically missionary of the priest not on the customary juridical model but rather on the self-awareness of the historical Jesus, we shall try to approach the apostolic basis of the priestly ministry from an historical perspective.

2. The missionary identity of the priest also flows from the ministry of the Apostles

The priestly ministry flows ultimately from the identity of Jesus and concretely from the ministry of the Apostles. In the New Testament, the term “apostle” has various meanings. When the Magisterium affirms the apostolic aspect of the ordained ministry, it does not use the term “Apostle” in a broad sense (different kinds of heralds of the Gospel, sent by the different local Churches: See *Acts* 14:14; *Rom* 16:7; *Eph* 4:11, etc.), but rather in a more restricted sense.⁹ The theology of the Magisterium is based on the theology of Luke,¹⁰ in which the term, “the Apostles”, means the Twelve in a strict sense, the chosen witnesses who knew the historic Jesus from his baptism until his death and resurrection.¹¹

2.1. Peter himself was a missionary “ad extra”. And the other Apostles?

In the theological thought popularized especially after the fourth century, it was believed that the Twelve, who were sent in accordance with *Mt* 28 to proclaim the Gospel to all peoples, had literally gone out to do this, according to the canonical conclusion of *Mk* 16. We know with reasonable historic certainty that among the Twelve, Peter did exercise an evangelizing ministry in various places (in Antioch, according to *Gal* 2:11-14, in Corinth, according to *1 Cor* 1:12, in Asia Minor, according to the recipients of the first letter attributed to him, *7 Pt* 1:1), until his martyrdom in Rome. There are ancient traditions regarding John's missionary activity in Ephesus and that of Thomas in India. In subsequent centuries, legends grew attributing the foundation of important Churches to others from among the Twelve, such as the Church of Spain attributed to St. James, and that of Byzantium to Andrew. Peter and Paul carried out an itinerant missionary ministry by evangelizing the different peoples. They were the prototypes and examples par

⁷ Ibid., p. 11,

⁸ Ibid., p. 18.

⁹ See LG 19, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Nos. 858, 880, etc.; the Twelve offer the base of ecclesial apostolicity.

¹⁰ See J. RATZINGER, *La Iglesia. Una comunidad siempre en camino*, Ed. San Pablo (Madrid: 2005), pp. 36-41.

¹¹ Paul is also considered an “apostle” because the Risen Lord appeared to him. Luke seems to repeat a tradition of Antioch which confers this title on him in *Acts* 14:14; it is an exception to his basic theology according to which only the Twelve are Apostles. See Luke's criterion for being one of the Twelve in *Acts* 1, 21-22.

excellence of the apostolic mission “ad gentes”.¹²

2.2. The Twelve, direct witnesses of Jesus in his historic ministry and his resurrection: experts in the personal encounter with Jesus

The missionary nature of the priestly ministry does not only follow the example of Peter and Paul's apostolate “ad extra”. It is based more radically on the ministry of the Twelve conferred by Jesus as the chosen witnesses to “be near to him”. The unrepeatable experience of the personal encounter with the historic Jesus from his baptism until his exaltation (*Acts* 1:22) gives foundation to the faith of the Church. The Twelve were sent as heralds of the Gospel in order to bring together the dispersed, the dispersed of the twelve tribes of Israel. They were set up as the apostolic college that will take part in the last judgment. In the Acts of the Apostles, we read that “the Apostles and elders” are found in Judea and are mentioned together until the so-called “Council of Jerusalem”. If they did not go out as itinerant missionaries, what did they do to be considered as foundations of the Church?

2.3. The Twelve were responsible for shaping the apostolic Tradition

Here I offer a very personal reflection. From the theological viewpoint, something very important happened in the first twenty years after the Lord's resurrection. The principal elements of Christian preaching were shaped: since Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the writings in “the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms” (cf. *Lk* 24, 27 and 44) are fulfilled in him. This kerygma had its substantial form before Paul, who received a tradition that was already drawn up by the first Judeo-Christian disciples (cf. *1 Cor* 11 and 15). Although Paul developed in his way the basic elements of Christian doctrine, he did not invent it.¹³ I suspect that the great historical contribution of the apostolic college of the Twelve was the direction of this fundamental theological work: namely, drawing up the great Apostolic Tradition (first oral and lived) that would constitute the doctrinal basis of the proclamation of the Gospel to the nations. It was an essential task for the proclamation of the Gospel, especially before the books of the New Testament were written.

2.4. Factors in shaping the apostolic Tradition: the memory of Jesus and knowledge of the Scriptures

Two necessary factors had entered into this process. The first was the memory of the deeds and words of the historic Jesus. The Twelve were the expert witnesses of this, and without this witness an encounter with the living Jesus Christ is not possible. The second factor was a good knowledge of the writings of the Old Testament. In this we cannot discard the influence of the interpretative keys given by Jesus himself. What can we attribute directly to the Twelve? It seems that they must have relied on the collaboration of other Judeo-Christian disciples who had a more expert knowledge of the Scriptures, perhaps the “multitude of priests” who converted in *Acts* 6:7.

It is my personal opinion that the office of the bishops and their priest collaborators as the ones responsible for the faithful preservation and transmission of the doctrinal Tradition of the Church (through the word, sacrament and ecclesial communion) flows from this apostolic work. The fundamental apostolic office of being witnesses of the Risen Jesus is historically unique, an unrepeatable experience. But the office of being faithfully responsible for the apostolic Tradition is, and has to be, transmitted from one generation to another in the Church and proclaimed to the peoples so that they will share fully in the paschal mystery of Christ.

¹² Two further observations on Peter and Paul: It is interesting that the Church of Rome should attribute its foundation precisely to the witness (martyrdom) of these two Apostles. It is also interesting that Peter and Paul seemed to see their apostolic mission more as itinerant missionaries rather than «installed pastors» (in Jerusalem Peter acted as the head of the apostolic college, but St. James acted as the pastor of the community; the Letter of St. Ignatius of Antioch to the Church in Rome suggests the persistence of the Judaic model of a presbyteral college there, and not yet the Hellenic model of a monarchical episcopate).

¹³ See R. PENNA, *Un cristianismo posible. Paulo de Tarso* (Madrid: 1992), pp. 42-49.

So I see two ways in which those ordained to the priestly ministry continue the office of the apostolic ministry of the Twelve. Some, like Peter and Paul, are called to be “missionaries *ad gentes ad extra*” (according to tradition, Peter combined in his person both the missionary ministry and the pastoral office more on the universal than the local level). Others are called to carry out their missionary ministry, which is also “*ad gentes*”, starting from a local pastoral office. All those who are ordained are called to be “experts” in the personal knowledge of Christ and are obliged to preserve and transmit faithfully the doctrinal Tradition of the Church so that living persons and peoples will encounter the living Christ.¹⁴

2.5. Jesus' original intention in creating the Twelve: “to gather the dispersed”

Another dimension of the ministry proper to the Apostles is based on *Jesus' intention to create “the Twelve”*. Recent exegetic studies, which were already well known by Ratzinger in the above quotation, show us that Jesus' original intention was eschatological: “to gather the dispersed”. For Jesus, God's definitive government over the world, the “Kingdom of God”,¹⁵ is unthinkable without fulfilling the prophetic expectations regarding the reunion and reconstitution of the twelve tribes of Israel (cf. *Jr* Chapters 3,18 and 31; *Ez* 36; *Is* 27; *Ps* 36).¹⁶ So during his public ministry, Jesus sent the Twelve to “the lost sheep of Israel”. In Jesus' message, those who are lost are called not only to be freed from the ancient slavery of sin, but also to take joyful part in the banquet of the Kingdom, in which the poor, suffering and hungry will be fed at the table that God himself prepares for them. Before the powerful manifestation of God's victory over sin and death, priority is given to the convocation of the dispersed from the twelve tribes of Israel. This is the original, pre-paschal mission of the Twelve. The apostolic Church, formed by Jesus' theological thought, sees in the event of his death and resurrection, his paschal mystery, the definitive realization of God's victory, which is called the “Day of YHVH” in Scripture. The Day of YHVH is the day of the gentiles.¹⁷ So the Risen Christ now sends the Twelve to proclaim the Gospel to the dispersed of all nations and to call them to conversion, and all the peoples will be summoned to take part in the paschal life and the banquet of the Kingdom. The Good News of the “Kingdom of God”, a basic element in Jesus' kerygma destined to Israel, is transformed into the Good News of the “Lordship of Jesus Christ” in the apostolic preaching to the nations. The post-paschal apostolic kerygma is no longer “the Kingdom of God is near”, but “Jesus is the Lord”. Now the Kingdom is personalized in Jesus. God reigns in the crucified and risen Jesus. His kingdom extends to the whole universe, to the whole of history. Christ reigns over persons and peoples not through the imposition of an external force, but rather through personal, trusting, free and responsible surrender. This surrender is called “conversion” and it is aroused by the proclamation of the Gospel. It is a fully human participation in the paschal mystery.

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that the most ancient traditions of the New Testament describe the apostolic ministry with missionary images of the fisherman (Mk 1:17) and the sower (Mk 4; / Cor 3:5-9, etc.). The subsequent traditions, in reflecting the needs of the communities already formed, introduce the image of the “shepherd/pastor” (Jn 10, Acts 20:28; / Pt 2:25; Heb 5:4, etc.), possibly based on Jesus' missionary concern for “the lost sheep of Israel” (cf. Mt. (10:6).

¹⁵ Jesus was aware of the arrival in his own person of the powerful and definitive manifestation of God's final victory (called the “day of YHVH” in the prophets and the “Kingdom of God” in Jesus' message). While John the Baptist emphasized a conversion motivated by the severity of God's judgment, Jesus emphasized that God's power is manifested supremely in life-giving mercy.

¹⁶ See J. MEIER, *A Marginal Jew* (Doubleday, New York: 1999), Vol. III, p. 268.

¹⁷ On that day the different peoples will see the epiphany of God's glory, they will hear his word and accept it, they will walk on the road that God prepared for them, and they will reach the house of God, the house of prayer for all peoples, and they will be invited to sit down at the table of the Kingdom with the saints of Israel. See the studies by J. JEREMIAS, *Jesus' Promise to the Pagans*, SCM Press (London: 1953); by C.H. DODD, *According to the Scriptures; The Substructure of New Testament Theology*, Nisbet (Digsweil Place, U.K.: 1961); also R. PENNA, *Paul the Apostle. Jew and Greek Alike*, Liturgical Press (Collegeville, MN-USA:1996). Soon I hope to publish a study on the “first inculturacion of the Gospel”, how the first Judeo-Christian disciples realized a “re-reading” of the religious-cultural history of Israel in the light of their knowledge of Jesus and the paschal mystery of Christ.

The Twelve, therefore, have a fundamental office in the history of salvation. They are the direct, personal witnesses of God revealed in the person of Jesus. This is a historically unique and unrepeatable testimony. They are the chosen instruments of God's definitive revelation in Jesus. They are the ones sent to reunite the dispersed through preaching that invites to the faith. They are the college that reunites the faithful around the Lord's Table so that they can be nourished by Christ's own life. Through the ministry of priests, with and under the bishops, this apostolic mission continues.

3. The primacy of the ministry of the word in the missionary identity of the priest.

The Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (No. 4) states: "Priests, as co-workers with their bishops, have the primary duty of proclaiming the Gospel of God to all. In this way they fulfil the command of the Lord: "Going therefore into the whole world preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mk 16:15). No. 6 reiterates the primacy of the ministry of the word in that men are attracted to the faith and the sacraments of salvation by the evangelical message. Let us explore the implications of these statements after considering some factors that go against the primacy of the ministry of the word.

3.1. The "crisis of the word" in modern functionalism as well as in the ritualism of customary and manners

In the years after the Council, many gave more importance to "orthopraxis" than to "orthodoxy" owing in part to the mentality popularized by the "political theologies" and perhaps more fundamentally, to the strong influence of the functionalism typical of the cultural of modernity. So in modern missiology, some see as the end of the mission the promotion of human well-being, the liberation and development of the poor and oppressed through the cultural and social frontiers "at the service of the Kingdom". What is "useful" is of great value in modern culture. This mentality, which is based on some positive values, leads nonetheless to a "crisis of the word" which, in my opinion, is linked to the crisis in priestly vocations, particularly the missionary priestly vocation *ad vitam*. If the mission is to promote personal and social human well being, can't lay missionaries or volunteers do this? Why is a lifelong commitment lived in celibacy as a missionary priest necessary?

Apart from this recent "social functionalism", we have to ask if evangelization as such has been, and is, a great priority among our priests' usual occupations. We must admit that "side-lining" the ministry of preaching is not just a recent phenomenon. There are other tasks attributed to the priest by the customary religiosity of the Catholic faithful or by socio-cultural patterns that in practice have been and still are considered of more importance and urgency than the ministry of the Word. The priest is often more valued for his performance of certain ritual actions, for constructing or maintaining church buildings, supervising parish personnel and organizing social and charitable projects. Many priests in practice are expected to give priority to the administration of their parishes and attention to the sacramental requests of their faithful.

3.2. The proclamation of the Gospel and fully human participation in the paschal mystery

According to John Paul II's Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, "The ultimate purpose of mission is to enable people to share in the communion which exists between the Father and the Son" (RM 23). This statement echoes the definition of "evangelization" proposed in the *Instrumentum Laboris* (1973) of the Assembly of the 1974 Synod of Bishops: "Evangelization is everything [the Church] does to promote the people's participation in the mystery of Christ".¹⁸

Specifically, I see the explicit proclamation of the Gospel as a fundamental dimension in the sacramental

¹⁸ Quoted in CAPRILE G., *I; Sinodo dei Vescovi, III Assemblea Generale (1974)*, Ed. Civiltà Cattolica (Rome: 1975), p. 920. The text in Latin: "Vox 'evangelizationis' significat igitur complexum omnium activitatum quibus homines ad participandum mysterium Christi adducuntur".

ministry because it is at the service of a fully human participation in the paschal mystery of Christ. Without this evangelical proclamation and the response of faith that it arouses, I do not see how the people can participate fully in this mystery of salvation. I do not see how the people can experience a personal encounter with the living Christ and become his disciples.¹⁹

3.3. The objective of mission: to arouse filial obedience, participation in Trinitarian life

The obedience of faith, conscious and free sub-mission to the Gospel, is the believer's sharing in divine life, in the mystery of the Trinity. So when we participate through grace in divine life, we do not take the place of the Father who is the origin, source and cause of all life, divine and created. The Father loves by giving life. Instead, we take the place of the Son who loves by receiving all from the Father and subjecting himself in sacrificial love to the Father's will. The Holy Spirit attracts us to union with the Father in and through the Son. The Spirit leads us to likeness with God by making us similar to the Son who accepted the form of a servant in order to save us and reveal the Father to us. By accepting to be creatures aware of our limitations and mortality, we reveal the Creator. By accepting to be servants, we reveal our Lord. By accepting to be disciples, we reveal our Master. By accepting to be obedient Sons, we reveal the Father. In his obedient acceptance of complete solidarity with us "in the form of a servant" until death on the Cross, Jesus revealed his true identity as the Son obedient to the Father and in this way revealed the Father. By conferring the total gift of divine life – the personal gift of the Spirit of God– in the resurrection of the flesh and blood of Jesus, the Father reveals his Son. It is in the death and resurrection of Christ, in the paschal mystery, that the mystery of the Blessed Trinity is revealed. Trinitarian life is not a conceptual abstraction; it is rather the experience of relations.

Another name for this kind of participation in the paschal mystery is *discipleship*, following Christ, what the Council called "the universal call to holiness". But we are not disciples of the Lord only as individuals, but rather as members of a community of his disciples: the Church. The Holy Spirit acts in the world and in the Church by attracting persons and peoples to the paschal mystery of Christ. He attracts us concretely to the glorified body of Christ which, in the New Testament, is the name given to the Church and Eucharistic communion. So in the design of Salvation, the Church is necessary because fully human and historic participation is necessary.

This is how I see the centrality of the proclamation of the Gospel in the priestly, radically missionary ministry. But I see that this ministry also implies fidelity to the action of the Spirit among the peoples.

4. The priestly ministry accompanies the Spirit's action in the Church and the world

The Council states: "The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father" (AG 2). The documents of the Magisterium on the priestly ministry affirm that it has its origin in the mission of the Son, the mission conferred first of all to the Apostles, a mission whose fundamental element is the proclamation of the Gospel. But the same documents do not offer a reflection on how the priestly ministry has its origin in the mission of the Holy Spirit. Below I offer my missiological reflections on this aspect.

¹⁹ I am not saying that without explicit faith salvation is impossible (many good theologians and missionaries did believe this in past centuries, and it is a thought still latent in some texts of the Council). We do not doubt the mercy of God who has his ways to save the people with only an "implicit faith". Catholic theology since St. Thomas Aquinas has proposed various theories about this. But I believe that an unimagined consequence of this emphasis on the sufficiency of an implicit faith for salvation has been a minimization of the importance of *explicit* faith in an objective and historic revelation.

It is obvious in Catholic theology that the Holy Spirit accompanies, directs and vivifies apostolic witness, the Church's missionary action, which is at the service of fully human participation in the paschal mystery of Christ. It is the Spirit that corroborates and guarantees the fidelity of the ordained hierarchy in teaching the doctrine of the faith and administering the sacraments of faith. The Spirit "even visibly anticipates the Apostles' actions" (See AG 4). According to the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (No. 22) and the constant teaching of John Paul II (especially in his theology of the Holy Spirit and in the context of inter-religious dialogue), this action of the Spirit beyond the visible limits of the Church is not something exceptional or infrequent. That text states: "We ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man (not only to Christians) the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery".

Obedience to the Spirit

The principal protagonist of mission is the Holy Spirit, who is active among all peoples and all persons, drawing them to participate in the mystery of Christ, to share in divine life. This action of the Spirit is a reality and people experience it. They express their experience of the Spirit in the language and symbols of their own cultures. The missionary consequence of this reality is to respect it and make it the starting point of evangelization. This implies promoting a dialogue between this experience and the experience of God revealed once and for all in Christ, the experience of the Apostolic Churches of the New Testament and of the Church universal in history and geographical extension. This dialogue is not the product of a spirit of tolerance dictated by modern or post-modern relativism. It is not an opportunistic tactic. It is rather dictated by a profound respect for the action of the Holy Spirit among the diverse peoples and a respect for the human experience of the Spirit. It supposes drawing close to the people evangelized in their concrete historical and cultural situation. It supposes a sincere love for that people. It supposes listening to the people's experience, respecting the particular way they express it. It supposes a humble attitude of wanting to learn from that experience and, if called for, a spirit of repentance. For without such an attitude of sincere and kindly respect it is impossible to understand the experience of others correctly or in depth. The fruit of this a "sharing of the gifts" received from God.

Remember that the Spirit active in the world is the Spirit of Christ

The Spirit active in the world is none other than the Spirit of Christ who became flesh for us, was crucified and who rose from the dead. The action of the Holy Spirit is not vague or vapid. It has a definite paschal and Trinitarian dynamism. The Spirit does not merely give life not in general, but a specific life, ultimately a share in the very life of God. The dynamism of the Spirit is manifest in drawing people to union with God and transforming them into the likeness to God. The Spirit is drawing people to Christ, not merely to a disembodied soul of Christ but to the Body of Christ, ultimately to that Body of Christ which is the Church and the Eucharist. The divine aspect of the mystery of salvation is already operative in the action of the Spirit. What is lacking in so many cases is the human aspect: a participation in the paschal mystery of Christ that is realized with intelligence, freedom, responsibility, heartfelt joy and sacrificial love, a participation lived in society, history and culture. For God desires that people participate in the mystery of salvation in a human way, a *fully* human way, lived in real life.

The Spirit is already attracting all people to participate in the paschal mystery of Christ. So then, why is the mediation of the apostolic ministry of the Church necessary? John Paul II enlightens us again with what he states in his Encyclical on the Holy Spirit. When he speaks about the witness of the Holy Spirit in history, he adds, "The witness of the Apostles ensures its human expression in the Church and in the history of humanity" (*Dominum et Vivificantem*, No. 5). Why is this human expression of the Spirit's work necessary? Because it is essential for full human participation in the paschal mystery. This apostolic ministry, actualized in the Episcopal and priestly ministry, is what humanizes the Spirit's work in history.

In this way I see that the priestly ministry is grounded not only in the mission of the Son (and this has been often reduced to a juridical understanding) but also in the mission of the Holy Spirit.

4.1. Priestly missiological discernment of the Spirit's action among the peoples

We can conclude that the ministry of the priest is not limited to the Christian formation of the practicing faithful, of “those who are near”. Their apostolic mission urges them to “gather the dispersed” and “those who are far away”. This implies approaching those who have not been evangelized yet or who are slightly evangelized in their cultural situation (whether their culture is ancient or new), or who no longer consider themselves Catholic Christians (a situation of “new evangelization” in the terms used by RMis 33). A missionary is attentive to their human experience of the Spirit expressed in the language and symbols of their own culture and religiosity (or secularity). He detects authentic elements of the one paschal salvation in that experience. He promotes a dialogue between their experience of God and the Christian experience of God. He formulates a proclamation of the Good News in words and signs that are comprehensible in their culture and in this way arouses faith, which is personal conversion and surrender to Jesus Christ (*Puebla*, 358). Lastly, he leads the converted “to enter the community of the faithful that perseveres in prayer, fraternal life and the celebration of faith and the sacraments of faith, the summit of which is the Eucharist” (*Puebla*, 359).

4.2. Another priestly missiological service: the task of inculturation

The constitution of an ecclesial community is not the goal of the evangelization process. A community is not constituted like a “clone” of an imported ecclesial model, or a “local branch” of a worldwide monolithic and monocultural structure. Instead, a local Church is called to inculturate the faith in the culture of its people (See *Santo Domingo*, 55, 58, etc.). Born of the Spirit in its own culture and through the sowing of the Word, this particular autochthonous Church (AG 6) is the proper subject of inculturation (*Santo Domingo*, 230). Inculturation implies a tripolar dialogue between three fundamental experiences: the experience of God within the different cultures, the unrepeatable experience of the Apostles and the apostolic Churches, and the broader experience of the universal Church, in time and space. It supposes threefold fidelity: fidelity to the living peoples, fidelity to the apostolic Tradition, and fidelity to universal ecclesial communion.¹ It is obvious that the faithful inserted into their own culture (autochthonous priests are obviously also among the faithful) are the “experts” in the first experience. They are the ones who make a re-reading of their own culture in the light of their knowledge of Jesus Christ. The ordained, bishops and priests, have the obligation to be faithful to their apostolic ministry, “experts” in their knowledge of Tradition and the experience of local and universal ecclesial communion. This is how the priesthood carries out a very important responsibility of “humanizing” the work of the Spirit through the inculturation of the Gospel into the particular cultures. Inculturation has as its goal not merely respect for the cultures; it is a basic requirement for the people to be able to share fully in the paschal mystery of Christ and live discipleship starting from their own cultural identity.

4.3. The priestly service of “ad gentes” missionary formation in the particular Church

Evangelization does not end with the constitution of a local Church concerned solely with giving pastoral attention to those who are already evangelized. It does not exist only to perpetuate itself. Instead every local Church is born to be missionary *ad gentes*, missionary to those who are near and those who are far away. Pope John Paul II reminded us that “Missionary formation is the task of the local Church... This work must be seen not as peripheral but as central to the Christian life”, and “Particular churches should therefore make the promotion of the missions a key element in the normal pastoral activity...” (RM 83). The Pope also emphasized that missionary activity in its specific sense, the mission *ad gentes*, is not restricted to the “geographic context”: the evangelization of peoples who are still not evangelized in their cultural identity (RM 34 and 37). In Latin America, for example, situations of first evangelization still exist, especially among some indigenous peoples and Afro-American and Asian-American peoples. But the mission *ad gentes* also includes “social and cultural areas” in need of an original evangelization.ⁱⁱ This also includes the “new evangelization” of those who have really ceased to be Christians. Every priest is called to be a “missionary *ad gentes*, even though not necessarily *ad extra*. In this way, every inculturated local Church, in wanting all human groups to arrive at the personal encounter with Jesus, “sends as missionaries those who have received the Gospel, with the desire that all peoples will be offered to God and all peoples will praise him” (*Puebla*, 360).

It is true that every Christian is called to be a missionary. But priests, with and under the bishops, carry out

a particular apostolic ministry: being responsible for handing down (tradition) the doctrine of faith and the sacraments of faith faithfully, and for local and universal ecclesial communion. This is an essential ministry in discerning the Spirit's action among “those who are far away”, in inculturation, and in missionary animation “ad gentes”.

Recapitulation

Missionary activity –or “ad gentes mission” in the vocabulary of John Paul II– is distinct from pastoral activity. Its objective is the evangelization of those who do not yet know Christ (or hardly know Him) so that a local Church may come to birth and maturity in the people’s culture. Thus mission is both people-centered and Church-centered.

Ad gentes missionary activity is exercised in three “spheres”: geographical, social and cultural.²⁰

The mission of the Church is grounded in the missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The entire Church is missionary by her very nature because her being is grounded in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Consequently the ordained ministries in the Church are also missionary by their nature.

It follows that the radical identity of the priest is missionary before being pastoral.

Priestly ministry in the Church is grounded ultimately in the identity of Jesus, the one sent by the Father.

The ministry of priests, with and under the ministry of bishops, is based more directly on the ministry of the Apostles, in which these elements are outstanding:

- a. To “gather the dispersed” into the communion of the one People of God.
- b. To be faithful witnesses of their own personal encounter with Jesus the Christ.
- c. To guide the reinterpretation of the religious and cultural history of the people evangelized in the light of this knowledge of Christ.
- d. To announce the Gospel message in words and signs that are understandable in the people’s culture, arousing their faith which leads to conversion, entrusting their lives to Christ.
- e. To preside the ecclesial community, united at the Lord’s Table in prayer and sharing of goods.
- f. To form these disciples of the Lord into missionaries to others.
- g. To make a priestly offering of these people, transformed by the Gospel and sanctified by the Spirit, as an offering that is pleasing to God (see Rom 15,16; I Cor 15, 24-28; Rev 5, etc.).

It is true that every Christian is called to be a missionary. But priests, with and under the bishops, carry out a particular apostolic ministry: that of being responsible for Tradition and Communion. The original Apostles were responsible for shaping that Tradition by their personal closeness to Jesus and by overseeing the interpretation of the Scriptures in the light of Jesus. It is the responsibility of the ordained ministers to transmit the doctrine of faith and the sacraments of faith from one generation to another. It is they who are responsible for being instruments and signs of local and universal ecclesial communion.

²⁰ In brief, the “social areas” include new structures of human relations, like the phenomena of urbanization, migrations, the new cultures of the poor and of youth, etc. The “cultural areas” include the challenges and opportunities presented by the means of communication, the commitment for justice and peace, the promotion of women and children, attention to the integrity of creation, scientific research, international relations, etc. (RM 37).

Conclusion

It is obvious from a theological viewpoint that missionary activity, the evangelization of peoples, is prior to pastoral attention for those who are already evangelized. The Church is missionary before it is a structure for pastoral care. But we think of missionaries as a race apart. We are not accustomed to seeing a priest principally as a missionary, an evangelizer of “those who are far away”, someone called as an apostle to “gather the dispersed”. Instead, we normally consider him a “pastor” of an already evangelized and established community. Moreover, the theological formation given to future priests normally stresses the pastoral ministry and in most cases practically omits missiological and missionary formation.

Is it necessary for every priest to go out “beyond the borders” of his diocese or country in order to be a missionary? If we consider the example of the Twelve, which constitute the paradigmatic foundation for the priestly ministry, the missionary movement “*ad gentes ad extra*” is historically clear, especially in Peter's case (Would it be exaggerated to imagine that one out of every twelve priests may have a missionary vocation not only *ad gentes*, but also *ad extra*?). By keeping the concern for the evangelization of all peoples in his heart, every priest should naturally be pleased to respond to a vocation to be a missionary *ad extra* (PO 10). Pope John Paul II opened up the perspective on the “mission *ad gentes*”. It does not only include the geographic context of human areas that are not evangelized yet. It also includes new social and cultural areas, “new areopagi” and de-Christianized situations that call for a “new evangelization”. Don't many situations exist in every one of our local Churches, situations that call for a missionary activity *ad gentes*?

I have been unable in these pages to draw out the concrete consequences and implications that flow from this perspective on the radical identity of the priest as missionary. It certainly affects the shape of formation and educational programs both before and after ordination. It probably implies the attribution of many traditional “pastoral tasks” to non ordained persons so that the priest may dedicate himself prioritarly to “gathering the dispersed” in the world, both those close by and those far away. Above all it calls for the priest to be like the Apostles in their personal closeness to Jesus, with a loving knowledge of him based on the teachings of the Apostolic Tradition and nurtured by a sense of universal ecclesial communion. This implies applying oneself to ongoing study and persevering prayer. It means getting close to the people embraced by the universal and personal love of God, not only those who call for pastoral services but also those “on the outside”, to help them perceive how the Spirit is offering them an encounter with the living God. I am convinced that a priest who sees himself primarily as a missionary will not be less effective as a pastor. In this conviction I am not alone, for it certainly reflects the conviction of John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

Each priest can and should apply to himself the words of Paul: “He has appointed me a priest of Jesus Christ, and I am to carry out my priestly duty by bringing the Good News from God to the gentiles, and so make them an offering, made holy by the Holy Spirit”. (Romans 15:16).
