

# acts

of the General Council  
of the Salesian Society  
of St John Bosco

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OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

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## **SPIRITUALITY AND MISSION**

### **Disciples and apostles of the Risen Lord**

Starting point. – 1. PASCHAL ORIGIN OF THE MISSION. – 2. THE EXISTENTIAL DYNAMISM OF THE MISSION. – 3. WAYS OF CARRYING OUT THE MISSION. – 4. THE PROFOUND MYSTICAL NATURE OF THE MISSION. – Conclusion.

Rome, 24 April 2011

*Solemnity of Easter*

My Dear Confreres,

I greet you with the great joy of the Risen Lord, the new Adam, who makes us disciples and apostles to carry out His mission of renewing the human race to its very depths, freeing it from every kind of evil and transforming it with the power of Love. It was on the Solemnity of Easter that Don Bosco was finally able to find a 'lean-to shed' in which to begin his educational and pastoral mission on behalf of poor and abandoned boys. It was on the Solemnity of Easter that our founder and father was canonised, confirming with sainthood his spiritual and pedagogical experience at Valdocco. It is on this Solemnity of Easter that I am inviting you to live your lives in every part of the world with a genuine missionary spirit.

After my last letter in which I presented the commentary on the Strenna "Come and see" and invited you to foster a 'vocational culture' the fruit of an environment marked by an attractive and involving family spirit, by a strong spiritual experience and by a demanding apostolic dimension, there have been some quite significant events which I will now tell you about.

First of all, on the subject of the Strenna for 2011, at the "Salesianum" in Rome were held the Spirituality Days which attracted a large attendance of the different groups of the Salesian Family. It is a great pleasure to see how this occasion has become a powerful means of bringing together the various

branches, increasing a sense of the identity, communion and the mission of the entire Family of Don Bosco.

Between 8 and 11 February, with Fr Francesco Cereda and Fr Juan José Bartolomé, I took part in a theological Seminar, organised by the Union of Superiors General (USG) and the International Union of Female Superiors General (UISG), on the subject "The theology of the consecrated life. The nature and significance of apostolic consecrated life". Taking part were 30 men and women theologians from around the world and 20 Superiors General, male and female. The subject was chosen by the two Unions of Superiors in order to identify the emerging and vital questions, which apostolic consecrated life is encountering, encouraging a spirit of dialogue between questions and answers, between expectations and proposals, between challenges and the ways ahead. In different forms and according to different needs, two questions immediately emerged as needing further attention and analysis; they are the two questions to be found in the title of the Seminar: the significance and the nature.

The *significance* of Consecrated life can only be found in its gospel relevance, and therefore is to be sought not so much in the recovery of its visibility and prestige in society and/or in the Church but rather in its charismatic, evangelical and prophetic nature: its being a living memorial of Christ's way of life, according to the charism of the foundation, wrapped up in the Mystery of God and committed to throwing light on it in the midst of the world loved by Him. The *nature* of Consecrated life is to be understood more and more nowadays as a "relational" one, and one which is "in progress". Such a nature is founded on the common baptismal consecration; in this is recognised a profound fraternity with all Christian vocations; from this, by the gift of God, it draws its greatest grace, in trying to re-propose and put into practice Jesus's way of life. It is a nature "in progress" precisely because it is balancing between one point of reference, which is always the same, the life of Jesus,



and another which is constantly changing, the actual historical situation.

Then, the first three “Team Visits” took place: to the South Asia Region at Bangalore in India; to the East Asia and Oceania Region at Hua Hin in Thailand; and to the America South Cone Region at Santiago in Chile. The topics chosen by the two Regions of Asia are especially worth mentioning, they regard the inculturation of the Salesian charism, and evangelisation in societies which are post-Christian, Christian and multi-religious.

Finally we have been living in these days in solidarity with the people of Japan, severely tried by an earthquake and by a devastating tsunami which, especially after the severe damage to some of the reactors in a nuclear power station, terrified the whole world and led them to raise their voices demanding reflection and a rethink.

This new letter of mine, again along the lines of the GC26, is closely linked with the last two Strennas of 2010 and 2011 and in perfect harmony with the next Synod of Bishops, which has for its subject “*New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*”. This is a reflection on the missionary nature of the Church and of the Congregation and, in particular, on evangelisation as the context of the normal activity of the Church, of the proclamation of the Gospel “ad gentes” and the work of evangelisation “intra gentes”.

The conviction is now shared by many that the whole world has become mission territory. Article 6 of our Constitutions says in this regard “the Salesian vocation places us at the heart of the Church and puts us entirely at the service of her mission”. For us this is translated into the mission of being evangelisers of the young, paying special attention to apostolic vocations, education to the faith for the working classes, particularly by means of social communication, and in proclaiming the Gospel to those who have not yet received it. It is my hope and prayer

that reading my letter will encourage you to be joyful and convinced disciples and apostles of Jesus.

### **Starting point**

In this letter of mine on spirituality and mission, I should like to start from *Mt 28,16-20*, the classic Gospel text on the missionary mandate which the Risen Lord entrusts to his disciples and with which Matthew's Gospel concludes. It is a passage which we Salesians, sent to the young, certainly carry in our hearts as the way to give real meaning to our lives, and as an inner stimulus for what we are doing. In the few words of the Gospel text the genuine nature of the Christian mission is expressed in a wonderful synthesis, the great value of which needs to be always rediscovered in constant prayer, in the task of reflection and in the living by obedience. I invite you therefore to listen with open hearts and fresh minds to the words which the Risen Lord addressed to the Eleven in his final meeting with them. They sum up and provide a key to the full understanding of the whole Gospel narrative.

*The eleven disciples set out for Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had arranged to meet them. When they saw him they fell down before him, though some hesitated. Jesus came up and spoke to them. He said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time".*

In this short passage one thing is immediately striking: the imperative commanding way in which the Risen Lord consigns to the apostles and through them to the Church of every age the missionary mandate "Go make disciples of all the nations". This is enclosed within two affirmations in the indicative,

which concern Jesus himself and express His identity: a declaration about his universal authority – “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” – and a re-assuring word – “I am with you always, to the end of time”. The missionary mandate therefore is preceded by a declaration by Jesus who proclaims his sovereign and universal authority; it is then followed by the promise to remain always and everywhere with those He has sent.

The *literary structure* of the account describes very effectively the *essential Christological nature* of the mission. The apostolic mandate is enclosed within two statements which refer to the Risen Lord, since it is in starting out from Him that the nature and the significance of the Christian mission can be understood. What the apostles and missionaries of every age have to *do* derives from what He *is*, which has its origin in Him and with Him grows. What Jesus risen from the dead has become has inevitable consequences for what his disciples have to do; to put it in other words, since the Risen One is the Universal Lord and the constant companion of the disciples who have seen and adored Him, He can send them out with a precise task; to change the nations into disciples, consecrated by God, through the baptism administered by them, to carry out the will of the Lord Jesus.

I am therefore going to offer you some reflections on this central theme, developing four points which this very rich gospel account proposes: the paschal origin of the mission; its existential dynamism; ways of putting it into practice; its profoundly mystical nature.

## 1. PASCHAL ORIGIN OF THE MISSION

As I have already indicated, the first affirmation in the text is a solemn declaration on the lips of Jesus himself of the absolute Dominion of the Risen One. In a profound manner it

expresses the effect of the paschal event: through the resurrection, Jesus has been given the full exercise of his power, and even in his human nature fully shares the saving Dominion of God over the cosmos and over history.

On this account, to Him can be attributed the name which in *Mt* 11,25 is addressed to the Father: "Lord of heaven and of earth". In this title we hear the echo of the prophecy of Daniel concerning the Son of Man (cf. *Dn* 7,14), which Jesus applies to himself before the Sanhedrin: «You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming on the clouds of heaven» (*Mt* 26,64). In this way we can understand that Jesus solemnly proclaims to the disciples his victory over the powers of evil and of death, and shows himself to them as the one bringing renewal for creation.

There is another element not to be undervalued: the universal Dominion which God has given to the Risen One is not spoken of as a personal achievement but as something received. God has given Him a dominion which belongs to Himself alone; on his part Jesus knows that he has received a sovereignty which belongs only to God. Jesus has freely and consciously accepted a power which belongs to God. The immediate consequence of this recognition on his part of his being universal Lord will be the missionary mandate.

The apostolic mission, therefore, is not an act of benevolence by Jesus who sends; it does not come from the compassion aroused by seeing his own people lost. The apostolic mission is in the first place the consequence and the explicit expression of the Dominion of Jesus. Since He is aware of being Lord of heaven and of earth he sends his disciples changing them into apostles. There is a universal mission, because there is a universal Lord. It is most important for someone sent by the Lord, who day after day comes into contact with the most varied and painful forms of human, material and spiritual poverty, to contemplate and meditate on this mystery. A person feels himself

sent by the Lord when he believes that He is his only Lord; precisely because he submits himself to the authority of the Lord Jesus, the believer in the Risen Lord is conscious that he has been sent by Him.

Pastoral work, especially in the most desperate and poor places on the planet makes one experience at first hand the brutal power of selfishness and the abuse of power from which result the inhuman conditions in which so many brothers and sisters are forced to live. Daily contact with this harsh reality can even lead to discouragement and to the wearing down of inner strength or to the temptation to seek solutions which are not those suggested by the Lord Jesus. An apostle's gaze of faith therefore has to be permanently fixed on the One who has full power in heaven and on the earth, to be able to confirm himself in the deep conviction that Jesus is the escatological source from which flows the renewal of the world (cf. *Jn* 7,37-39; 19,34). In Him and only in Him is a power which is seen to be more powerful than any power on earth because it is the power of God Himself that nothing can resist. The one sent by Jesus can never forget, without losing his very reason to live, that he comes into being as a result of the exercise of the authority of his Lord.

Then it should be added, as the *Letter to the Hebrews* teaches, that this power has been acquired by Christ precisely through the path which has led him to make himself intimately at one with man and with his state of frailty. From the priestly perspective so typical of this book of the New Testament, it is said that Jesus has been "made perfect" in his role as mediator between God and man through suffering (cf. *Heb* 2,10; 5,9). The High Priest who has gone through to the highest heaven and had been enthroned at the right hand of the Father is the one who has become "completely like his brothers" (*Heb* 2,17) and "has been tempted in every way that we are" (*Heb* 4,15).

For this reason the author of this splendid homily can encourage persecuted Christians, reminding them that Jesus “because he has himself been through temptation he is able to help others who are tempted” (*Heb* 2,18). It is an overwhelming message, powerful as it is consoling: the victorious power of the Risen One is that of the One who has made every man His brother, sharing totally in human misery, and for precisely this reason He has become victor. “The glory of Christ”, Cardinal Vanhoye affirms in one of his commentaries, “is not the glory of an ambitious person, pleased with his own undertakings, nor the glory of a warrior who has defeated his enemies with the force of arms, but it is the glory of love, the glory of having loved to the end, of having re-established communion between us sinners and his Father”.<sup>1</sup>

When therefore Jesus tells the Eleven that He has been given every power, He certainly doesn’t do so to inform them of His success, but to transmit to them and through them to every human being, the best news ever: He *has conquered for us*; he is the Lord of all so that everything may be ours and we may be God’s (cf. *1 Cor* 15,28). For this reason we are called upon to abandon the old world, the world of corruption and sin, of lies and senselessness, in order to enter a new creation in what we could call a new *habitat*, of which Jesus is Lord. It is the *habitat* of the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of justice, love and peace, in which one enters putting on the new man. The power of witness of the missionaries comes precisely from having discovered in their own lives this belonging to the Kingdom, from having experienced in themselves the powerful solidarity of Christ and his dominion of love which renews and transforms everything with His power.

The universal character of this Dominion of love is forcefully emphasised by the fact that in these verses the adjective

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<sup>1</sup> A. VANHOYE, *Accogliamo Cristo nostro Sommo Sacerdote. Esercizi Spirituali con Benedetto XVI*, LEV, Città del Vaticano 2008, 28.

“all” is used four times: “*all* power”, “*all* the nations”, “*all* that I have commanded you”, “*always*”. Insisting on this adjective, the evangelist certainly wanted to show that there is nothing in space or in time that is outside the influence of the Lord Jesus, that can be beyond the reach of the renewal which He has introduced in history, which is not included in the scope of His action.

Among the various considerations to which this fact could give rise, it is of interest to us to link together the saving Dominion of Jesus with the universality of the mission. The text of Matthew is quite explicit: evangelisation has to be directed towards “all nations”. Already at the Last Supper Jesus had clearly spoken about the universal dimension of His saving work, declaring that His blood, in which is established the new and eternal covenant, would be shed “for many” (*Mt* 26,28). It was therefore clear to the newly-born community that following the death and resurrection of Jesus it was necessary to overcome every kind of sense of exclusivism regarding salvation; but the effort needed to translate this certainty into practical attitudes and decisions was certainly not small. What was needed was a complete turning upside down of their way of thinking, in which an outstanding role was played by the activity of the great Apostle of the Gentiles, who is the model for every missionary, Paul of Tarsus. At the thought that “one man has died for all” (*2 Cor* 5,14), he feels himself possessed and driven by the love of Christ: *caritas Christi urget nos*. Although born and grown up with a mentality of the most extremely exclusive Hebrew view of salvation, Paul learned to view the men and women of other places and cultures through totally new eyes, because “God wants everyone to be saved and reach full knowledge of the truth” (*1 Tm* 2,4).

Dear confreres, for us too nowadays the universal horizon of the mission continues to be an open challenge and a goal far from attained. Clearly it is not a question of an ecclesial colonisation of the planet, but of the service of love and of truth with

regard to the millions, hundreds of millions of men and women who do not yet know the newness of Christ and the sweetest experience of his love and of his companionship. John Paul II in his great encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, referring to the good news of the Gospel writes: "Indeed, all people are searching for it, albeit at times in a confused way, and have a right to know the value of this gift and to approach it freely. The Church, and every individual Christian within her, may not keep hidden or monopolize this newness and richness which has been received from God's bounty in order to be communicated to all mankind".<sup>2</sup>

In the context of a world ever more marked by globalisation, with those phenomena which flow from it of a meeting of cultures and of different traditions, of migrations, of the supremacy of the market, the challenge of the universality of the mission re-presents itself with extreme urgency. The religious indifferentism and cultural relativism – a feature in particular of the West, tend to dim the perception of the unique nature of Jesus Christ, and to encourage reducing the faith to the private realm and even to the mere subjectivity of a "self-service" religion, from which there can obviously be no missionary outreach. Also our Christian communities, and we Salesians too, run the risk of being contaminated to the extent of no longer recognising the urgent need to evangelise, to open ourselves up to others outside, to meet the brother who is different, to dare to become involved personally in bearing witness. The danger is spreading among us of increasingly not being open to evangelisation and puts at risk our apostolic vocation, precisely because we are not always conscious of the danger. And we make ourselves unaware when we do not live in submission to the sovereignty of the Risen Lord.

We too can be affected by this atmosphere and allow ourselves to be caught up in enterprises which are not directly con-

<sup>2</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris missio*, 11.



cerned with witnessing to Jesus, and becoming satisfied with something which at first sight appears to be more effective than the evangelical sowing of the Word of God. Or else we may be tempted to stay put in places which are stagnant, far from the frontiers of the first proclamation. That word which is born in the heart of Christ the Lord and commands us to lead all people to Him ought to trouble our consciences, re-awaken us from any lethargy and laziness and give us the courage of recklessness: as happened with the first apostles who preached the Christ putting their lives at stake.

## 2. THE EXISTENTIAL DYNAMISM OF THE MISSION

From the affirmation of the Dominion of Christ there inescapably follows the imperative of the mission. The way in which the gospel text is expressed is significant. Having affirmed the Dominion of Jesus it continues: «*Go therefore and make disciples...*». That “therefore” expresses the essential connection between the first affirmation and the second. The establishment of the Dominion of Christ which is then the movement through which the love of God reaches out to man gives rise to the movement of the mission.

The *going out of the disciples* to the whole world derives precisely from the eternal *going out of God* to meet every person in Christ the Lord, and precisely for this reason it should reflect in depth: there can be no decisive journey on the basis of human calculations; it has to allow itself to be continually shaped by its docility to the will of the Lord Jesus. And, in fact, the sending out does not come from the heart of well-intentioned disciples but from the sovereign will of their Lord, it does not depend therefore on the good will of those being sent since it is a precise mandate of the Lord Jesus who is fully aware of his power.

It is this teaching, I think, which is being handed on to us in those episodes in the *Acts of the Apostles* in which the Lord

seems to be indicating very directly the places where the missionary ought to be going. To the Deacon Philip, for example, an angel says: "Be ready to set out at noon, along the road that goes from Jerusalem down to Gaza" (*Act* 8,26); there he will meet an official of the Queen of Ethiopia. To Paul and Timothy, who wanted to go from Mysia to Bithynia, "the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them" (*Act* 16,7) and, while they were at Troas, a vision in the night told the Apostle to go Macedonia. The episode is not a simple anecdote; throughout the whole history of Christianity the saints have in different ways had the experience of the Lord pointing out to them a particular objective to which they were to devote their energies. Don Bosco, we know very well, was no exception; from being a small boy he felt himself being sent on a specific mission and he lived his whole life carrying out this mandate.

At this point I cannot but refer to the missionary dreams of Don Bosco. He dreamt very precisely about some peoples to whom he had to send his first missionaries. This is the sign that the going out of the disciple is in truth moved by the presence of God. Naturally, these extraordinary experiences of divine enlightenment cannot be the usual way of carrying out discernment. In fact, in normal circumstances light regarding the pastoral choices to be made has to be sought in prayerfully listening to the Word of God, in accepting the proposals and the requests of the Church, paying attention to the signs of the times; but their presence in the history of the Church and in particular at the time of the founding of Institutes, remains an eloquent sign of how apostolic activity requires total docility to the will of God and to the breath of the Spirit.

If from the "geographical" point of view the mission has no frontiers, since the proclamation of the Dominion of Christ has to be offered to everyone, we could ask ourselves: from the individual's point of view how far should the journey of the one being sent take him? The reply cannot but be the same: as far as the total giving of himself, without limit, without frontiers,

without resting place. To the apostle, in fact, as to Peter, the Lord says: "*Duc in altum*, put out into deep water" (*Lk* 5,4). The "deep water" is not a particular place to go to, but the situation in which they leave behind them the safety of the shore and the security of the land under their feet to face the open sea. That is a place in which the only security comes from the companionship of the Lord and obedience to his will; it is a place one would never go to on the basis of sound worldly wisdom; it is the place towards which the great biblical personages directed their steps, quite apart from the paths of the world they had already trodden.

Telling us "*Andate*", the Lord is also asking us as individuals and as communities, to arrive primarily at that 'place' which one reaches only by means of a profound act of faith and openness, which increases when and wherever the certain and the unknown danger grows. The experience of missionary life has to make this journey, since it is only in going there where God leads us that we will find Him anew and we shall also become capable of understanding the places and the situations to which God has sent us.

On the other hand was not this perhaps the experience of Paul the apostle? Well before his missionary journeys he had to make a much more demanding one: that deep into his own heart, accepting a radical turning upside down of his previous view of the world and of life. This journey which started on the road to Damascus, saw him arrive at his destination in a way completely different from what he would have imagined: no longer with the self-confidence of a man sure of himself and of his justice who sets out to put into effect his own plans and is convinced of acting in the name of God, but with the humility of someone who has surrendered and handed himself over to a greater Mystery and is anxious to understand what the Lord wants of him.

Without this first and fundamental journey we would not have had the great apostle of the Gentiles, the indefatigable

voyager who travelled the paths of the world as far as the centre of the Empire, to proclaim the folly and the weakness of the cross as the wisdom and the power of God. We would not have the one who spent his life creating communities, of which he always felt himself father and teacher. We would not have had the one who finally proclaims Christ especially by martyrdom, taking the giving of his life to its ultimate conclusion.

We cannot do less than ask ourselves just how far we have really come on this first and fundamental faith journey, and to what extent we are convinced that this is the fundamental requirement so that for all our going about in the world one can really use the term, so elevated from a Christian point of view as is that of "mission". This is the word Jesus uses to describe and introduce Himself, and with which He indicates what the Father has made of Him: the One who has been sent, the Missionary, the Apostle.

The going out of the apostles and of missionaries, set in motion by God's own going out, is not however the only sort of movement these words highlight. In fact, in the affirmation "make disciples" is included the movement of those who, becoming indeed disciples, open themselves to Christ and go out to meet Him. Being a disciple is one way of living one's life which one enters into accepting a 'discipline', that is a way of acting which one learns by staying close to Jesus and by accompanying Him through life. Those first sent out by the Risen Lord were primarily his disciples and they were sent to 'give disciples' to his Lord. Before going out in his name therefore one has to stay beside Him, before having the world as one's destination and "making disciples" as one's task, one has to have learned from living with him what it means to be sent by the One who was sent: only the Apostle of the Father is the master of his own apostles.

It is well-known that the contents of the mission is explained with different shades of meaning by the four evange-

lists, as is also recognised in *Redemptoris missio* n. 23, and that in Matthew the emphasis is placed on the founding of the Church; however, this is not the place for that sort of discussion. Rather more to the point is to say that, since Christian discipleship cannot in any way at all be a question of being forced into belonging, the expression “make disciples”, while it is the handing on of an authoritative teaching, opens the way to a very clear path of freedom.

Becoming disciples of Jesus, in fact, means becoming disciples of the true Wisdom, and hence being reached in the very depth of one’s being by the splendour of the divine light. This implies the exercise of one’s own freedom in taking the person Jesus Christ as one’s pattern of life. At the same time it means entering into the great family of the disciples which is the Church, discovering the company of so many other brothers and sisters not only in communion with us now in this present time, a community which extends to all the continents, but also, in a timeless communion with all those Christians who have gone before us and are now with God, beginning with the Most Holy Virgin and all the Saints in heaven.

What a marvellous movement is that of a freedom which Christian discipleship possesses and which breathes the fresh air of the Gospel, allowing itself to be reinvigorated by the Spirit of Christ! It is like a dance, a celebration of freedom which involves not only individuals, but whole communities and cultures. These in opening themselves to Christ lose nothing of the authentic values they bring with them but they rediscover them at a higher level in Christian discipleship, purified from what might have been ambiguous or transient in them. We can understand how delicate and demanding the role of missionaries is in this service of genuine freedom to those they encounter, what close harmony with the Lord it requires, what theological and cultural preparation it needs, what a capacity for listening and for dialogue it presupposes. Certainly superficiality and improvisation in this field can only do

damage because we always run the risk of “making disciples” of our ideas and our attitudes, of our strategies and our plans, of our way of thinking and our cultural schemes rather than disciples of Christ and of his Word And then rather than encouraging the movement of peoples towards the joy of the faith we would run the risk of being an obstacle to it or of slowing it down.

### 3. WAYS OF CARRYING OUT THE MISSION

Entrusting the mission to the apostles, Jesus tells them what, in a certain sense, will be their “working instruments”: the word and the sacraments. In fact he tells them that they have to “*teach them to observe all the commands I gave you*” and that they have to “*baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*”. This combination of word and sacramental sign, of teaching and salvific action, will always be the characteristic of the mandate of Jesus. The Gospel accounts of vocation say that He sent the Twelve “to preach with power, to cast out devils” (*Mk* 3,14-15) and in the whole gospel tradition the proclamation of the Kingdom is always accompanied, when not preceded (cf. *Mk* 1,21ss), by gestures of liberation and salvation which witness to the effect produced.

From the placing together of these two fundamental elements of the Christian mission, clearly emerges the fact that the Word of God which the missionary has to hand on to men is never merely an intellectual doctrine, a collection of abstract truths, a code of moral behaviour but is the expression of the living and real self-communication of God. The Word of God is alive and active, it acts with power so much so that the Lord can introduce Himself to humanity solemnly declaring: “I have spoken and I have done it!” (*Ez* 37,14). And in fact the whole history of the world from the creation onwards is set in motion

by that creative Word of God (*Jn* 1,1-3), which in the incarnation takes the human face of Jesus (*Jn* 1,14). The Word of God is God Himself, manifested in Jesus Christ.

When therefore the missionary proclaims Christ to people he is not introducing into their lives something extraneous from the outside, but rather making accessible that Word which has always been the foundation of their life and which reveals in a definitive way its significance and value. The Church, as the recent Synod of Bishops authoritatively recalled has been constituted the house of the Word not to hold on to it, but rather to spread it throughout the world. A word that no longer says anything, a silent word is a dead word; the Apostle proclaiming the Word, as well as spreading it, saves it from oblivion; it gives life to the world.

In this regard it is worth listening once again to the some passages from the *Message to the People of God* by the XII Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on "The Word of God in the life and mission of the Church".

«"For the Law will go forth from Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (*Is* 2,3). The embodied Word of God "issues from" his house, the temple, and walks along the roads of the world to encounter the great pilgrimage that the people of earth have taken up in search of truth, justice and peace. In fact, even in the modern secularized city, in its squares and in its streets – where disbelief and indifference seem to reign, where evil seems to prevail over good, creating the impression of a victory of Babylon over Jerusalem – one can find a hidden yearning, a germinating hope, a quiver of expectation. As can be read in the book of the prophet Amos, "The days are coming, declares the Lord God, when I shall send a famine on the country: not hunger for food, not thirst for water, but famine for hearing the word of the Lord" (8,11). The evangelizing mission of the Church wants to answer this hunger. Even the risen Christ

makes an appeal to the hesitant apostles, to go forth from their protected horizon: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations... and teach them to observe the commands I gave you" (Mt 28,19-20). The Bible is fraught with appeals "not to be silent", to "speak out", to "proclaim the word at the right and at the wrong time", to be the sentinels that tear away the silence of indifference».<sup>3</sup>

And after having referred to the challenges arising from the new means of communication, in which the voice of the divine word ought also to resound the *Message* continues very effectively:

«In an age of images particularly provided by the dominating means of communication, such as television, the privileged model of Christ is still meaningful and evocative today. He would turn to the sign, the story, the example, the daily experience, the parable: "He told them many things in parables... indeed, he would never speak to them except in parables" (Mt 13,34). In proclaiming the kingdom of God, Jesus never spoke over the heads of the people with a vague, abstract or ethereal language. Rather, he would conquer them by starting there where their feet were placed, in order to lead them, through daily events, to the revelation of the kingdom of heaven. Thus, the scene evoked by John becomes significant: "Some wanted to arrest him, but no one actually laid a hand on him. The guards went back to the chief priests and Pharisees who said to them, 'Why haven't you brought him?' The guards replied, 'No one has ever spoken like this man'" (7,44-46)».<sup>4</sup>

Here some really fascinating spiritual horizons open up for communicating the Gospel, in which the apostle, making his

<sup>3</sup> XII ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Message to the People of God*, 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 11.



own the sentiments and the thoughts of Christ, learns to become His spokesman, according to the splendid image of Paul: "we are ambassadors for Christ: it is as though God were appealing through us" (2 *Cor* 5,20). Like Jesus, the beloved Son of God, before setting himself to evangelise the world, the evangeliser today has to see himself and want himself to be as God has proclaimed and wished him to be: a beloved son. The apostle before seeing the gospel as a task, finds it and treasures it in his own heart. When he proclaims it, like Jesus, he will be a witness worthy of belief who knows how to evoke a response and therefore "make disciples".

And if sometimes we have the impression that the Word we proclaim is not understood and not accepted by many, or that the results of our labours are very small, let us remember the parable of the sower. Jesus told it precisely to respond to the discouragement of the disciples who after their first enthusiasm which He evoked, gradually saw the number of the group of those who followed Him diminish. They had begun in fact to ask themselves how could the salvation of Israel possibly come about from such a humble activity as the preaching addressed to ordinary people without any position in society. Precisely by means of his parable Jesus wanted to produce optimism and confidence: a person with the patience of a countryman can recognise that the thankless task of generous sowing, even though it may be put at risk by sterile soil, is repaid abundantly.

Commenting on this parable in one of his meditations on the spirituality of the priest, the theologian in those days J. Ratzinger stated: "we need to think about the situation very often almost hopeless of the farmer in Israel, who wrings a harvest from a soil which at any moment threatens to become a desert. And yet, however many the unsuccessful efforts that may have been made, there are always seeds which come to maturity for the harvest, and growing in the midst of all the dangers come to fruition, abundantly repaying all the efforts. Making this allusion Jesus is saying: all the things in this

world which are really useful begin in a small and hidden way [...] That which is small begins here in my words and it will continue to grow, while that which today is made a great fuss of has already some time ago sunk”.<sup>5</sup>

In the proclamation of the word therefore there is a logic of smallness and of humility which every missionary has to learn. Not rarely “they go out full of tears, carrying seed for the sowing”, but he or whoever comes after him will have the joy of “coming back full of song carrying their sheaves” (cf. *Psalm* 125/126). What is asked of him after all is not success but fidelity to his Lord, even when this means misunderstandings and a price to be paid. In the end, only this fidelity to the Word does not lead to disappointment. Let us therefore make our own the words with which Paul, distancing himself from the false missionaries who were disturbing the early church of Corinth, described his own way of proclaiming the Gospel: “we will have none of the reticence of those who are ashamed, no deceitfulness or a watering down the word of God, but the way we commend ourselves to every human being with a conscience is by stating the truth openly in the sight of God” (2 *Cor* 4,2).

Also along these lines are to be found the celebration of the sacraments and more broadly the liturgy of the Church which the text of Matthew refers to introducing the subject of baptism with the Trinitarian formula. From the modern man’s efficiency point of view there is nothing that produces such criticism as the logic of the liturgy. With all the urgent problems in the world, – he is led spontaneously to argue – is it not a waste of time to devote time in one’s life to performing ceremonies? And yet it is precisely the liturgical celebration, and in particular celebration of the sacraments, which has within itself the power of the Passover of the Christ, the powerful action of the life of God.

<sup>5</sup> J. RATZINGER, *Servitori della vostra gioia. Meditazioni sulla spiritualità sacerdotale*, Ancora, Milano 1989, 18s.

Baptising "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" does not only have the meaning, in the ordinary sense of "acting in the name of", appealing to a legal authority who has made us his representative; it also has the meaning, in the biblical sense of "acting in the name of" referring to the living presence and the active power of the Triune God. Here more than anywhere else the mission achieves its proper aim, since it leads men not only to encounter a testimony about God but God Himself in His wholeness.

And men indeed have to be baptised, that is immersed, through faith, in the bosom of the Trinity which is their home; they have to be introduced into the power of love which is revealed in the Paschal Dominion of Christ. This is the real "efficiency" which regenerates the world, without which in vain is our earlier rising and our going late to rest, who toil for the bread we eat, while the Lord pours gifts on his beloved while they slumber (cf. *Psalms* 126). It is from this that the life of the Church comes, that human race renewed by the paschal grace that the Lord makes grow in history also through us.

#### **4. THE PROFOUNDLY MYSTICAL NATURE OF THE MISSION**

The final word Jesus says to the Eleven after having entrusted to them the missionary mandate is a word of re-assurance: "*I am with you always; yes, to the end of time*". It is a great promise which serves as a guarantee of encouragement and a reason for confidence, In it there is the echo of the support which God has also guaranteed in the Old Testament to those He had called for a special vocation: "Do not be afraid, I am with you". In it is seen above all the identity of Jesus. who from the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, in the infancy narratives is presented as Emmanuel, "God with us". The events of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus have not therefore

removed his presence from history, not his desire to stay close to those who shortly before had not stayed close to him; the commitment of the Risen One to be with them has been made definitive and permanent, in time and space, until the end of time.

We are certainly conscious of how much consolation and how much strength come from these words. For someone who knows himself to be and wants to be one of those sent by Him, every day of his life opens and closes in the light of a re-assuring presence, stronger than any loneliness and any fear. The joy of a life of chastity of one who lives awaiting the best of Lovers, the wealth of one who renounces earthly goods while not failing to seek "souls", the freedom of our obedience which makes us similar to our Lord all find here their most authentic foundation, and it is precisely of this mystery that they are meant to be a visible and eloquent sign. Christ is with us, and fills our life to overflowing. The inner fulness which flows from this is indeed the true treasure of the missionary, and the greatest gift that he can hand on to those to whom he is sent. Nothing is more persuasive or convincing than a person who, representing the Lord Jesus in his very being, shows himself to be filled with His luminous presence, even to the extent of letting Him appear in the serenity of his face, in the depth of his gaze, in the humility of his manner, in the sincerity of his words and actions. As Jesus was for the apostles the image and visible presence of the Father so the true missionary is called to be the transparent image of the Risen Lord. And this he can be because Christ really is with him, in a companionship so close that it becomes a real inhabitation: the apostle, like Paul can declare: "I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me" (*Gal* 2,20).

In this way the mission truly reaches the mystical depth appropriate to it. From the very beginning in fact, summoning the Twelve, Jesus appointed them: "to be his companions and to be sent out to preach" (*Mk* 3,14). We all know from personal

experience how easy it is to feel in the practical circumstances of our lives a certain tension between these two things, and how it is possible to fluctuate with a sort of interior division between prayer and works, contemplation and action, dedication to God and giving oneself for others. Now from the very start of the call of the Twelve these two aspects are presented together, and closely connected one with the other: only by being in a close personal relationship with Jesus is it possible to reflect for others his presence and to really be bearers of his Word.

The one who has first heard it can take the Word to the world, as Mary did in the house of Elizabeth. The one who stays beside Him becomes the brother of Jesus, fully occupied in listening to His word. In no way can staying with Jesus be understood as something one does *from time to time* in between activities. The Gospel of John is very clear in this regard, when it speaks about the absolute necessity of *remaining* in Him, since without Him one can do nothing. And in fact, precisely because of the new experience of the resurrection, by which the presence of Christ pervades all time and every place, the close connection between prayer and proclamation becomes perceptible in a new way. Contemplation and witnessing become closely intertwined and refer one to the other in a way similar to that of the two-fold beating of our heart.

Naturally in the personal experience of every missionary, this close identification of prayer with proclamation is never the starting point but rather the goal to be reached. It requires an adequate process of formation and constant interior vigilance. Only in this way will it be possible to avoid a false spiritualism, which detracts from apostolic work and gives a false impression of closeness to God which the facts deny; at the same time one can overcome an empty activism, which only results in emptying the life of the disciple, and may even lead to him giving up. The fundamental requirement and the very heart of the mission therefore consists in learning the supreme

art, that of living in Jesus, under his Dominion, profoundly identified with Him, with His thoughts, making His word one's own nourishment.

Asking himself about the way ahead for the Church in the Third Millennium following the celebration of the Great Jubilee, John Paul II wrote in the Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*:

*"We put the question with trusting optimism, but without underestimating the problems we face. We are certainly not seduced by the naive expectation that, faced with the great challenges of our time, we shall find some magic formula. No, we shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person, and the assurance which he gives us: I am with you! It is not therefore a matter of inventing a "new programme". The programme already exists: it is the plan found in the Gospel and in the living Tradition, it is the same as ever. Ultimately, it has its centre in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated, so that in him we may live the life of the Trinity, and with him transform history until its fulfilment in the heavenly Jerusalem. This is a programme which does not change with shifts of times and cultures, even though it takes account of time and culture for the sake of true dialogue and effective communication. This programme for all times is our programme for the Third Millennium."*<sup>6</sup>

He then continues indicating for the Church the urgent need to draw up plans for a pedagogy of holiness, as the "*high standard of ordinary Christian living*",<sup>7</sup> on the basis of the conviction that "this is the will of God, your sanctification" (1 Ts 4,3). He himself was aware of the objection that might be raised that such an approach could seem too generic and too elevated as the basis of pastoral planning, but with great clarity

<sup>6</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 29.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

he replies that only by taking this approach seriously and consistently can a way be found to solve the various problems of pastoral life. Holiness cannot be tacked on at a later stage to an apostolic plan based on other criteria, but needs to be the fundamental inspiration behind all pastoral thinking, otherwise the real danger of getting lost in pointless discussions and idle speculation which do not reflect the mind of God becomes only too real.

## Conclusion

My dear confreres, nowadays the criticism is sometimes made of consecrated life that it provides many services but offers little holiness. Perhaps it is precisely about this that we need to examine ourselves, so that our Salesian Family, our apostolic communities may be true schools in which in a practical way the art of holiness is learned, that is, the art of living a genuine Christian life as our Holy Founder Don Bosco practised it and passed it on to us.

In those places where we find ourselves living, as disciples and apostles we are called to be saints. Everywhere the mission is taking on new tasks; it requires individuals and communities in love with Jesus and courageous in their witness and service. Everywhere, but especially to Europe, the Congregation is now turning its attention and employing its best forces. It is the time of the mission! May genuine missionary vocations, holy and generous, continue to be raised up among us; may we help to produce among the young and the lay missionary volunteers disciples and apostles.

Together with you I entrust this missionary commitment of the Congregation to Mary Help of Christians, Mother of the Church. She has always been present in our history and her presence and her help will not be lacking at this time. As in the Upper Room, Mary expert in the ways of the Spirit, will teach

us to allow ourselves to be guided by Him «to discover the will of God, and know what is good, what it is that God wants, what is the perfect thing to do» (*Rm 12,2b*).

With great affection, respect and gratitude.

  
Fr Pascual Chávez Villanueva  
*Rector Major*