

## MISSION AND CONSECRATED VIRGINITY

Jesus Christ is the first missionary, totally consecrated to the mission entrusted to him by his Father (see Lk 4:16-22). His whole existence is marked by love for the Father and for his brothers and sisters. Whoever chooses to follow him must be a missionary disciple, participate in Christ's own life as the Son of God, assuming his own attitudes, witnessing to the same love of the Father for the life of humanity. The Passover of the death and resurrection of Jesus, in which we participate through baptism and the Eucharist, makes the proclamation of his Word the source of salvation and hope for all. Dying and rising with Christ (see Rom 6, Jn 6) becomes the heart of the Christian experience to the extent that it calls some people to offer the total gift of self in body and spirit even now. Those who are called to a life of special consecration experience the radical nature of this baptismal belonging by making a total gift of themselves to God for the cause of his mission in the world, which is the Church (see 1 Cor 7). A community's original charism, given by the Spirit, determines, from its foundation, the different personal and communitarian forms of virginal consecration for the service of the mission in the Church.

The proclamation of the Good News must be the only passion of the missionary, so that people who do not know Christ can come to know him. The mission entrusted to her, therefore, is to help others encounter and know Christ and to live a personal relationship of communion with him. The primacy of evangelization as a form of the missionary vocation is not something extrinsic and accessory to the life of the disciple who is called to virginal consecration. Rather it is an intensely felt choice that touches the

soul. Thus we become subjects of this choice, which involves our faith, our heart, our conscience, our freedom, our body, and our relationships. Taking up one's cross to follow and witness to the Master is a demanding process of conversion and, for some chosen ones, a motive for total consecration to him and to his Kingdom (see Mark 8:34).

One of the fundamental aspects for a consecrated virgin is the missionary dimension *ad vitam*, which must be understood in a quantitative and qualitative sense: quantitative because one dedicates his or her whole life to it, and qualitative because mission constitutes the profound reason of life itself. For the mission of Jesus in his Church, some are called to leave everything, to follow him in order to proclaim the kingdom of God, helping to build his Church. In a world where people are afraid of making definitive choices, where everything changes rapidly and nothing seems to last over time, where one lives in a culture of the instant and the provisional, an *ad vitam* choice is certainly neither easy nor obvious. But precisely for this reason, consecrated virgins ought to be the paradigm of this mission *ad vitam*, of this baptismal radicality of belonging to Christ in his Church for the sake of one's brothers and sisters.

Baptismal consecration, in its virginal radicality, immerses us in the mystery of Christ, making us "come out of ourselves and our things" in order to fully know cultures, languages, customs, communities, peoples, and hearts that await divine salvation through an authenticity and fullness of life, through a dignified and happy human existence. In order to be able to penetrate the heart of humanity, in the depths of a culture, it is necessary that those who are intimately pervaded by the Spirit of the Risen Lord give their whole lives, and to stay with Jesus and with the sisters and brothers to whom they are sent for life.

Today, a new reality that accompanies insertion into contexts far from one's own country, culture, family, and friends is, paradoxically, the abundance and accessibility of the means of communication that are available almost everywhere. While they represent a precious way of communicating

and also of evangelizing, they are at the same time a “dangerous” bond that can keep us anchored to our habits, interests, and relationships. Creating a healthy detachment in order to be truly free in evangelizing becomes more and more necessary for acquiring authenticity in mission. In a world no longer used to familiarity with God and the Church, technologically structured with ever more rapid forms of connection, leaving everything to follow Jesus requires courage, clarity, and determination to embrace silence, prayer, and loneliness, living new forms of community and apostolic life. No consecrated person leaves the world to escape from the world or to oppose the world. Being enraptured and embraced by the Lord, encountered as overflowing love and meaning of the world, pushes and moves some chosen disciples to new Christian forms of life and courageous virginal consecration for the mission.

One aspect of proclamation is to know and love the other: the Other who is God, and the other who is one’s brother or sister in Christ. One does not proclaim to abstract figures, but to real people, wrapped in a particular culture and view of the world, of things, of relationships, and of the relationship with the transcendent, which has always determined the course of life beyond death. For this reason, it is necessary to look in every setting for the most appropriate and specific terms of encounter – not just words, but also gestures and attitudes that can translate with the greatest fidelity what is essential about Jesus’ mission and about the kingdom of his Father. In the proclamation there must be mutual enrichment in the logic of Christian communion and of human fraternity. It is the experience of the disciples of Emmaus (see Lk 24:13-35). Jesus approaches, listens, understands, acknowledges what is positive, and then dispels ignorance and disbelief. The breaking of the bread of the Eucharist brings to fullness the thirst for life and salvation that since the creation of the world dwells in the heart and in the desire of every man and woman.

Language is important for communicating with today’s humanity. It must be simple and concrete, so that it reaches the person in what is

essential, touches the heart, engages the intelligence, challenges the conscience, and moves the will towards the good, the truth, Christ. Language is dynamic, because life, history, and relationships are always on the move. The missionary must commit himself to find new languages and means for the communication of the Gospel, ever more suitable to proclaim Christ today. It is not a matter of imposing moral rules or religious practices to be observed in order to obtain salvation, but to invite people to give themselves to Christ for their own and for others' salvation. Moral burdens placed on the shoulders of people do not advance the Church and its mission; the men and women of our times struggle, rightly, to accept this type of religious experience. Instead, it is the joy of believing that gives life and manifests the personal encounter with the Savior of one's life, God and Lord (see Jn 1:35-51; 20:11-29). For this reason, the missionary is called above all to propose a possible journey of life and of faith, starting from his own personal experience of meeting and experiencing Jesus alive in his Church (see *Deus Caritas Est*, 1). The effective form of mission requires authenticity in the witness of the fullness of life where love opens to eternity.

The mission *ad gentes* is therefore the set of dynamisms that are proper to the missionary disciple: to leave his or her own land, to encounter the other, to nurture the seeds of faith in others, to communicate and witness to the faith of the Church in the Crucified and Risen Jesus, to disclose its essence and share its eternal fullness. All this is expressed as proximity to the poor, to the least ones, to human situations of deprivation – material or spiritual – that, being universal, require a struggle against personal sin and the evil of unjust and oppressive social structures. For the encounter with Jesus to be efficacious and fruitful, what is required only of some, by free divine choice, by free human response, is the total gift of self: a missionary journey that lasts a lifetime, beyond the geographical and visible boundaries of one's own culture, land, and people, beyond the exclusivity typical of the bonds and conjugal love of marriage.

Very often missionaries are sent to serve of existing local Churches. Sometimes these are very young Churches that need accompaniment, missionaries with great capacity to listen, learn, and teach wisely. They are communities that have primary needs yet to be met and need concrete help; but they are also communities that wish to walk and grow in faith and in mission. Missionaries, often foreigners, can help by encouraging them and helping them to discover their resources, to look with faith to their own limits and weaknesses. Overcoming the temptation of self-referentiality and pastoral introversion in the name of a mistaken understanding of inculturation, the mission *ad gentes* can help all, local and foreign Christians, to keep their eyes fixed on Jesus (see Heb 12:2), to turn away from oneself and from sin to encounter him where he calls us and awaits us. This can be the way of accompanying a community on its journey towards the discovery and development of its missionary nature. It is sometimes difficult for missionaries to move from the role of protagonists to that of collaborators, from the attitude of leading to that of walking side by side, listening, and accompanying, just as it is not easy for local Christians to overcome forms of ethnic introversion. Reducing the Gospel of Jesus to one's own culture means being closed to the universality of faith and of God's love.

The "ideal" community that one always wishes to encounter does not exist. We encounter individuals, live interpersonal relationships that are sometimes difficult to manage, confront different characters, different cultures, struggles, and joys that challenge us and push us to live our vocation as religious with more responsibility, learning to talk together, to reflect on ourselves, to discern, and also to change in order to grow and better convert ourselves to Christ. Prayer is the privileged place to offer oneself, to encounter Christ and to ask for the spiritual gift of discernment. In the daily dialogue with the Lord and with his Word, and in the grace of his sacraments, we find the strength and the light for mission. Educated in an orderly and structured life of prayer, in mission life we face times, needs, and urgencies that hinder order, regularity, and continuity. And then we

must learn again and in different ways to put prayer always in the first place, to give it the apostolic form of mission without replacing Christ with our self-centered work and creativity.

The divine Word proclaimed by the Church has in itself all its saving power. Not having a product to sell, but the life of God to witness and communicate, missionaries are called to generate, through Christ and the Holy Spirit, themselves and their brothers and sisters as sons and daughters of God, active members of his Church, the universal sacrament of salvation, the beginning and seed of the Kingdom in this land.

