

# THE BAPTIZED FAITHFUL AND THE ORDAINED MINISTERS IN THE *MISSIO AD GENTES*: THE PONTIFICAL MISSION SOCIETIES

## The Pontifical Mission Societies (PMS)

The centenary of the apostolic letter *Maximum Illud* offers a good opportunity to reaffirm, promote, and look again at the meaning that the PMS have today, through the fourth Society, the Pontifical Missionary Union (PMU), which is known as their heart and soul. At the time of Benedict XV, the Holy See, through what we today call the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, strengthened its role in the universal mission of the Church, above all the charisms of the religious orders, nations, ideologies, politics, and economics. Rome committed itself decisively in its service of communion and plurality, guaranteeing a global outlook, a true Catholic identity of mission. Moving the central headquarters of the various missionary societies, which had arisen largely in France, to Rome meant their universality would be more explicitly demonstrated. And not only would direction of this missionary activity pass through Rome, but mission would be at the very heart of the Church's administrative concerns. This does not imply that there had been, before this, a lesser missionary dynamism; it means, rather, that the International Secretariats of the PMS would make more possible the empowerment for mission of the various Christian communities scattered in the local Churches and animated by the people of God. This is why the local Church has a prominent place in *Maximum Illud*.

The decade from 1916 to 1926 was a significant period for the Church. On May 3, 1922, the three missionary societies that were the main in-

struments for missionary development and cooperation were designated as Pontifical. The Society for the Propagation of the Faith (established in 1822), the Association of the Holy Childhood (established in 1843) and the Society of Saint Peter the Apostle (established in 1889 for the formation of indigenous priestly vocations) each became an instrument to express the Pope's solicitude towards all the Churches of the world by virtue of his mission as successor of Peter and Universal Shepherd.

### Formation of the missions of the PMS and the PMU

Benedict XV concludes *Maximum Illud* with an exhortation to the bishops to do everything possible to establish in their respective dioceses the Missionary Union of the Clergy, which he himself approved on October 31, 1916. He calls it a marvelous and fruitful reality that is giving new encouragement to the missionary commitment of the people of God, "because through it the action of the clergy come to be wisely ordered, both to interest the faithful in the conversion of many pagans and to give development and increase to all the works already approved from this Apostolic See for the benefit of the Missions" (*Maximum Illud*, 107). It was conceived because, through priests and bishops, the baptized faithful were increasingly aware of their own missionary responsibility towards the world in support of the work of those who dedicate their whole life to the *missio ad gentes*.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons the Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, Cardinal Fernando Filoni, interpreting the sentiments of Pope Francis, informed all the bishops of the world that "the Pontifical Mission Societies (PMS) together with this Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples are directly involved in the work of preparing and implementing the Extraordinary Missionary Month" (Letter from Cardinal Filoni to the Bishops, December 3, 2017). He also recalled that "the na-

tional and diocesan PMS Directors, present and active in your particular Churches, are asked to work together with you so that this initiative of the Holy Father may indeed bring about renewed passion for the Gospel, greater zeal, and missionary fervor within our Churches.” Together with the three Mission Societies more directly involved in the distribution of subsidies and economic aid, the International Secretariat of the Pontifical Missionary Union has worked to coordinate the preparation, formation, and development of the Extraordinary Missionary Month October 2019.

The missionary spirit that *Maximum Illud* wanted to develop and reinvigorate, under the impulse of the Missionary Union of the Clergy, found support in the other three Pontifical Mission Societies, which, through different paths, sought to promote among the people of God their commitment to mission. Recovering the baptismal missionary dimension of the whole People of God, the Pontifical Missionary Union, a continuation of the Missionary Union of the Clergy, owes its birth to Blessed Paolo Manna. Having been a missionary in Burma, he was aware that the task of spreading awareness of the mission could no longer belong only to the missionaries who were thousands of kilometers away, busy in their work of evangelization and service to the peoples who lived in mission territories.

The main purpose and reason for the existence of the PMU is to help in the missionary formation of leaders of the Christian communities and, in particular, of those involved in missionary activity – in essence, whoever is called to participate actively as a missionary among the People of God. The missionary formation of bishops and priests is central, because the missionary commitment of the Church needs their commitment and service as a principle of vital and evangelizing unity that stimulates the missionary responsibility of each person and of each institution entrusted to them. “The task of proclaiming the Gospel everywhere on earth pertains to the body of pastors, to all of whom in common Christ gave His command, thereby imposing upon them a common duty” (*Lumen Gentium*, 23). Furthermore, bishops are urged to be an active part of mission: “the bishop,

stimulating, promoting and directing the work for the missions, makes the mission spirit and zeal of the People of God present and as it were visible, so that the whole diocese becomes missionary” (*Ad Gentes*, 38).

Unlike the other Pontifical Mission Societies, the PMU does not have a specific, pre-established agenda, but acts permanently within and in co-operation with the others, as their soul (see Paul VI, *Graves et Increscentes*, September 5, 1966). If missionary awareness is the indicator of the vitality of a Christian community, if pastoral life is to be filled with missionary zeal, if every Christian faithful must look to the vast horizons of evangelization, those responsible for ordinary pastoral care will go about their work by means of constant information and missionary formation so that the immediacy of the internal urgencies of the community itself do not stand in the way of pastoral projects. This is the great challenge of the Pontifical Missionary Union within the PMS, with its objective of contributing with its specific provision and its peculiar characteristics so that the local needs for ongoing formation of the Churches are open to the universal horizon of the Catholic faith and its ecclesial mission.

### Contributions of the PMS

The task of the PMS reflects a desire expressed by Paul VI and John Paul II. The latter wrote, “It is not right to give an incomplete picture of missionary activity, as if it consisted principally in helping the poor, contributing to the liberation of the oppressed, promoting development or defending human rights. The missionary Church is certainly involved on these fronts but her primary task lies elsewhere: the poor are hungry for God, not just for bread and freedom. Missionary activity must first of all bear witness to and proclaim salvation in Christ, and establish local churches which then become means of liberation in every sense.” (*Redemptoris Missio*, 83). Moreover, wrote Paul VI, “Evangelization will also

always contain – as the foundation, center, and at the same time, summit of its dynamism – a clear proclamation that, in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, who died and rose from the dead, salvation is offered to all men, as a gift of God’s grace and mercy” (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, 27). In this way, three fundamental features can be guaranteed:

### 1) *Ecclesial Consciousness*

The PMS testify to the universality of the Church by promoting “a bond of close communion whereby they share spiritual riches, apostolic workers and temporal resources” (*Lumen Gentium*, 13). This means that the PMS must tirelessly promote the mutual exchange of gifts that the Lord, through his Spirit, has distributed throughout the particular Churches and in the universal Church; they must arouse a spirit of fraternity among all the Churches which have as their aim the evangelization of the world; and, ultimately, they must act, on the one hand, as a privileged means of union between the particular Churches among themselves, and on the other, between each of them and the Pope, who, in the name of Christ, presides over the universal sharing of charity .

### 2) *Catholic mentality*

In the heart of the Church, the PMS are addressed to all the baptized, to all the Christian communities; they are concerned with the needs of all the missionary Churches, and principally of the poorest; and they are an expression of universal communion, because through them “the individual churches bear the burden of care for them all, and make their necessities known to one another, and exchange mutual communications regarding their affairs” (*Ad Gentes*, 38). For this reason, they are also the

privileged channel for a fraternal sharing and an equitable distribution of goods among all the Churches, united in the common effort to support the evangelization of peoples.

### *3) Personal call: to help global evangelization*

Benedict XV, in *Maximum Illud*, affirmed, regarding the formation that the local Church offers to those who are considering priestly ministry or the consecrated life, that “therefore any rudimentary formation is not enough to be admitted to the priesthood, but rather it must be complete and perfect” (nn. 32-33).

The PMS do not exclude collaboration for the needs of the various Churches in the fields of education, health, charity, etc. But their primary commitment is to make it possible for the Good News of Jesus – his mystery, his person and his message, his Passover – to reach every corner of the Earth, and that new Churches are born and develop that, in and from the heart of every people and race, bear witness to the values of the Gospel.

## **PMS characteristics**

To understand the character of an institution and for that institution to be faithful to the reason for which it exists, it is necessary to know its origins. In the case of the PMS, the following factors are important.

### *1) Established through private initiative*

PMS originated as a lay and private initiative. The PMS are not born as a structure imposed upon ecclesiastics or upon the church’s hierarchy. The

founders of each took personal initiative as an answer to the call of the Holy Spirit and in harmony with ecclesiastical authority. This highlights the vocational character of this initiative. Its insertion in each community always takes into consideration the needs and conditions of the community itself, of the parish, of the diocese, and the formation of the workers who are entrusted with this task, so that they serve the whole community. It is time to recognize the countless initiatives at the service of the mission.

### 2) *Accepted and recognized by the ecclesiastical hierarchy*

The role of the ecclesiastical hierarchy cannot be limited to merely guaranteeing and approving these services, but it must assume full responsibility for them. Thus the decree *Ad Gentes* decree insists that “it is only right to give these works pride of place, since they are the means of imbuing Catholics from their very infancy with a real universal and missionary outlook; and they are also the means of making an effective collection of funds to subsidize all missions, each according to its needs” (*Ad Gentes*, 38).

### 3) *Necessary coordination*

From private initiative to the responsibility of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, there is a wide range of real possibilities for the service of missionary cooperation. Therefore, to show the ecclesial union found at the base of this great work, a general coordination is recommended, keeping institutional structure from getting in the way of its work and helping to ensure that these initiatives are carried out amicably in the same missionary breath. “Episcopal conferences should take common counsel to deal with weightier questions and urgent problems, without however neglecting

local differences. Lest the already insufficient supply of men and means be further dissipated, or lest projects be multiplied without necessity, it is recommended that they pool their resources to found projects which will serve the good of all as for instance, seminaries; technical schools and schools of higher learning; pastoral, catechetical, and liturgical centers; as well as the means of social communication” (*Ad Gentes*, 31).

