

THE PASSOVER OF JESUS CHRIST: THE FOUNDATION OF THE CHURCH'S MISSION

In his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Paul VI declared that “Jesus Himself, the Good News of God, was the very first and the greatest evangelizer; He was so through and through: to perfection and to the point of the sacrifice of His earthly life” (n. 7). John Paul II took up the same idea in *Redemptoris Missio* when he affirmed that “Since the ‘Good News’ is Christ, there is an identity between the message and the messenger, between saying, doing and being” (n. 13). Not only does Christ proclaim the Kingdom, but he *is*, also and above all, the Kingdom itself made present, to such an extent that we can say the effectiveness of his mission resides in the total identification of his person with the Good News that is proclaimed. More precisely, the Son’s mission is nothing less than the communication of God’s own life to humanity in a continuous self-giving, from his Incarnation to his Resurrection from the dead, and including along the way his miracles, his actions, and his teachings. The Mystery of Christ and his earthly ministry are a double offering: the gift of his life to the Father, from whom he received his mission, and the gift of his life to his brothers and sisters, the sons and daughters of God, which he wished to call together into one family. In carrying out this mission, Jesus’ *modus operandi*, before and after Easter, is differentiated, the latter building upon the former. In the pre-Easter period, the mission that Jesus entrusted to his disciples seemed limited in time and space (see Mt 10:1-16), while after Easter, there is a universalization and globalization of the mission (see Mt 28:16-20). This enhances the character of the Paschal Mystery as center and source of the mission and as the action of God and the gift-responsibility of the Church.

In his passion-death-resurrection, Jesus the Christ pursues and accomplishes in a more incisive, decisive, and definitive way his mission of self-giving, which consists in the communication of divine life for the salvation of the multitudes (see Mark 10:45). In the post-Easter mission entrusted to his apostles, the gift of new life is universalized and spreads to the ends of the earth. In *Redemptoris Missio*, 22, John Paul II observed that “all the Evangelists, when they describe the risen Christ’s meeting with his apostles, conclude with the ‘missionary mandate’” (see Mt 28:18-20; Mk 16:15-18, Lk 24:46-49, Jn 20:21-23). This concomitance or link between mission and resurrection is so strong that one can accurately say that *resurrection means mission*, since the glorification of the Risen One is the founding event of the universal mission (see Mt 28:18). Mission, and therefore the resurrection of Christ, are none other than the transmission of new life in the Spirit, divine life to which all of humanity is called to take part thanks to the centrifugal movement of the universal mission which the Risen One initiates by sending his disciples into all the world. This mission of communicating the life of God through the outpouring of the Spirit of the Father and the Son is universalized in the paschal event of Pentecost. Proclamation, baptism, and discipleship are the framework, starting from Jesus himself, of the sending on mission of the twelve apostles and the disciples.

Before Easter, the Spirit dwells in the Person of Christ and works through him. After his resurrection, the Paraclete is transmitted to the apostles and acts through them and with them to make the Risen Christ present. Starting from the outpouring of the Spirit at Easter, John Paul II, in *Redemptoris Missio* n. 23, taught that each mission has two common aspects. On one hand, there is a universal dimension, that is, a catholic one, which is found in the expressions “all nations” (Mt 28:19), “all peoples” (Lk 24:47), “into the whole world . . . to every creature” (Mk 16:15), “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). On the other, evangelization has a pneumatological foundation that is expressed by the omnipresence and omnipotence of

the Spirit. The gift of tongues means, fundamentally, that the Spirit is the architect of unity in diversity and the protagonist of diversity in unity, both in the Church and in the world. The divine plan for the gathering of humanity into one flock is realized through the Church. Through the Death and Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, humanity is not only reconciled with God, but enjoys, in the Church and through the gift of the Holy Spirit, true communion with God.

The building up, permanent “renewal,” and, in general, the mission of the Church, are realized thanks to the “two hands of God” (as Saint Irenaeus of Lyons beautifully put it), Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The Church of God is radically marked by the “Event” of the Cross. Starting from the Death-Resurrection, humanity is reconciled with God. It is introduced into “God’s time,” and the Church is constituted as a privileged space of communion with God. “God’s time” is the time of grace for the Church. Through his Cross, Christ breaks down the wall that separated sinful humanity from God. “God’s time” becomes the “time of the Church” in Jesus Christ. With his Resurrection, Christ, the firstborn among the dead, draws the ecclesial body into the communion of the Most Holy Trinity. The Church is thus in communion with the holiness of God. A community sanctified by the sacrifice of the Cross, the Church is the body of Christ who is, in turn, the Head of the Church. It is not a static community but is rather dynamic and growing in time and space, a community enriched and permanently assisted by the Holy Spirit.

The Church is, in this world, “the concrete portion of humanity” that effectively and visibly manifests the glory of God. This glory passes through “the space of salvation” opened by the Cross, through which Christ unites himself to his Church, or all of humanity, and saves it. The Church does not exist for itself but for the redemption of humanity, the manifestation of the glory of God. The mission of the Church has its origins in Easter. The proclamation of the Risen Christ is at the same time the foundation, the source, and the mission of the Church (see Acts of the Apostles). The

Church's very reason for being consists in continuing the reconciling work of Jesus Christ through his Holy Cross in the Holy Spirit. The mission of the Church is that it is called to be, in its entirety, the sacrament of reconciliation of humanity with God. According to the affirmation of Irenaeus, "For the glory of God is the human person fully alive, and the life of humanity consists in the vision of God: if already the revelation of God through creation gives life to all beings who live on earth, still more the manifestation of the Father through the Word is the cause of life for those who see God" (*Adversus Haereses* IV, 20.7).

The Church, the Body of Christ, participates with the Lord Jesus in the building up and growth of the kingdom of God. The growth of the Kingdom of God is the growth of the Church itself. In Jesus Christ, the sanctification of humanity is realized and increases his Body the Church: "In the human nature united to Himself the Son of God, by overcoming death through His own death and resurrection, redeemed man and re-molded him into a new creation (cf. Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17). By communicating His Spirit, Christ made His brothers, called together from all nations, mystically the components of His own Body" (*Lumen Gentium*, 7).

The Church is holy because in Jesus Christ, its spouse, it shares in the holiness of God. The Church finds in Jesus Christ, its Head, the perfection towards which it progresses and is attracted (see Eph 4:13). The Church is intimately linked to Christ. Only in Christ does she truly exist: "Christ, the one Mediator, established and continually sustains here on earth His holy Church, the community of faith, hope and charity, as an entity with visible delineation through which He communicated truth and grace to all. But, the society structured with hierarchical organs and the Mystical Body of Christ, are not to be considered as two realities, nor are the visible assembly and the spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things; rather they form one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element" (*Lumen Gentium*, 8).

Saint Augustine used the sublime expression “the whole Christ” to speak of the intimate relationship between Christ and the Church and to express the splendor and fullness towards which every Church on the journey strives. The “whole Christ” is the intimate union between the Christ-Head and the Church-Body, in every time and every place. There is no Church without Christ: “In fact, head and body are the one Christ; not because without a body it is not whole, but because the One who, even without us, is complete has deigned to be totally with us; not only inasmuch as he is the Word, the only Son equal to the Father, but also in his very humanity which he assumed and with which he is both God and man. . . . All together we are members and body of Christ, not only we who are here in this place, but everyone over the entire earth. And not just us who live in this time, but what can we say? from the righteous Abel to the end of the world, for as long as there is a human race. Whatever right makes its passage in this life, all of humanity present and far beyond this place, and all of humanity in the future, all form the one body of Christ and each one is a member of it. . . . And since it is said of him that he is the head of every principality and of every power (Col 2:10), it is clear that this Church, now a pilgrim, is to be joined to that heavenly Church where we have the angels as fellow citizens. . . . And when [Paul] that preacher of Christ had to endure the persecutions that he had inflicted on others, he said ‘to make up in my body what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ (Col 1:24),’ thus showing that his suffering belonged to the sufferings of Christ. [These words] should not be understood as referring to the head who, now in heaven, suffers nothing, but to the body, that is to the Church, the body which with its head is the only Christ” (St. Augustine, *Discourse* 341, 11- 12: PL 39, 1499-1500).

From Pentecost onwards, the Lord Jesus Christ is inseparable from the Church, although he transcends it and it owes to him all that it is. There is no Church without the Risen Christ. Augustine’s notion of the “whole Christ” illuminates in a remarkable way the communion between Christ and the Church and also between the members of the Church and Christ,

both personally and communally. The Church is one with Jesus Christ. The “whole Christ” is the Head (Christ) and the Body (the Church).

The Cross, the Resurrection, and Pentecost are decisive moments of ecclesial communion with the Most Holy Trinity. These moments are distinct but not separate. In Pentecost, the linguistic unity once broken by Babel is restored through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The confusion of languages and the separation of the human race that Babel symbolizes in chapter 11 of Genesis (see Gen 11:1-9) corresponds to the reunification of humanity through the preaching of the apostles, in the reconciling power of the Spirit. At Babel, there was only one language, a symbol of unity lived and then broken by human pride; at Pentecost, the multitude of languages, symbol of the barrier raised between peoples, was unified in the common understanding of the apostolic Word. This is the work of the Spirit in the “last days.” The fire of this one Spirit, who takes possession of each individual in his or her singularity, embraces the multitude and forms them into a single unity. The community that is born of Pentecost is reunited in God through the power of the Holy Spirit. In Pentecost, human pride gives way to communion; human diversity is enclosed by unity in the many. Thanks to the active presence of the Holy Spirit, the Church actualizes and proclaims the Gospel. The Church does not exercise this ministry of communion to acquire its own merit. The Church that preaches does so with the duty of the quality of its attachment to Christ. The reconciled Church evangelizes and participates, in time and space, in the building up of the kingdom of God, of which it is itself fully a part *hic et nunc*.