

NOTABLE ASPECTS  
OF THE APOSTOLIC LETTER  
*MAXIMUM ILLUD*  
(November 30, 1919)<sup>1</sup>

The twentieth century has rightly been called “the century of the missions.” During these hundred years in the life of the Church, which was born at Pentecost and continues over time, some important events strengthened its dynamism and missionary commitment. Of course, this affirmation does not exclude many great missionary initiatives preceded that century. Indeed, without them, this modern flourishing of mission work would have been impossible.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, without the dynamism of the twentieth century it would be difficult to discover the “passion for mission” and the “passion for people” that marks the Catholic Church today.

Near the beginning of this “century of the missions,” we find the papal missionary document *Maximum Illud* (MI), issued by the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XV (November 30, 1919). To understand it well, it is important to grasp the social and ecclesial circumstances at the time of its publication. Despite being one of the most frequently cited documents in mission literature, *Maximum Illud* can rightly be considered “a great unknown.” And so Pope Francis, in proclaiming October 2019 to be an Extraordinary Missionary Month, on the occasion of the centenary of Benedict XV’s apostolic letter, stresses that this is a providential opportunity to do justice to this fundamental and prophetic text on mission.

<sup>1</sup> The numbering of the sections of *Maximum Illud* used here refers to the official Spanish translation of the text available on the Vatican’s website, [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va). (No English translation of *Maximum Illud* is available on the Vatican website.)

<sup>2</sup> “The Church of God, mindful of its divine mandate, never ceased, through the course of the centuries, to send to all places messengers and ministers of the divine word who proclaimed the eternal salvation offered to the human race by Christ” (MI 2).

It is important to note that the celebration of this centenary cannot simply be considered another anniversary in the Church's calendar. For this reason, it is the will of the Holy Father that all the Churches, in all the regions of the earth, place themselves in a permanent state of mission. The words of Francis are clear: the celebration of the Extraordinary Missionary Month is a magnificent opportunity for "fostering an increased awareness of the *missio ad gentes* and taking up again with renewed fervor the missionary transformation of the Church's life and pastoral activity." It is the great occasion to "open [ourselves] to the joyful newness of the Gospel" (Letter to Cardinal Filoni, October 22, 2017).

### 1. The historical context of *Maximum Illud*

*Maximum Illud* appeared in the context of a challenging time for the missionary commitment of the Church – or perhaps it is precisely this situation that prompted its publication. The First World War had recently ended, and the Church was experiencing a loss of missionary "fervor," as a consequence of both the great tragedies of that conflict and the factors that eventually led to the Second World War. It is not an exaggeration to say that the origin of this postmodern crisis lies in the West. However, Benedict XV did not hide his satisfaction and joy in seeing the expansion of some foreign missions and apostolic vicariates, which had never stopped preparing new growth for the kingdom of God (see MI 11, 23). The countries being evangelized were Western colonies and, therefore, colonialism often took priority over any evangelical objective, especially in cases where those who were announcing the Good News came from the nations that had colonized the very people they were evangelizing. The demands of progress, industry, and development to find new lands to sell their products and new places from which to obtain raw materials caused conflicts among European nations. Economic motivations led to wars and extended into the

colonies, especially in Africa, where European missionaries were at work. In short, and without going into detail, the peoples to be evangelized were also victims of the consequences of the world wars.

For this reason, Pope Francis insists today on the need to purify the exercise of missionary activity from any distortion, as happened during the colonizing activity of that time, and especially to avoid the danger of nationalist tendencies and ethnocentrism.<sup>3</sup> Even today evangelical purity can be distorted by other interests, social or partisan, that obscure the universal and Catholic dimension that is at the heart of mission.

## 2. The problem of missionary vocations

Benedict XV published *Maximum Illud* as a prophetic and missionary papal document, to the point that it is sometimes considered the beginning of “the century of the missions.” Throughout the nineteenth century, numerous papal documents on mission appeared, including *Probe Nostis* (Gregory XVI, 1840), *Quanto Conficiamur* (Pius IX, 1863), *Sancta Dei Civitas* (Leo XIII, 1880), and *Catholicae Ecclesiae* (Leo XIII, 1890), each with the aim of strengthening the Church’s mission of cooperation, through the many missionary institutions that the Holy Spirit was bringing to birth in the world, especially in Africa.

Along with these circumstances were some difficulties that came from within the Church, the most serious of which was the missionary vocation crisis in the countries of origin. Many missionaries sent by the Church in the West were recruited to serve in their own nations’ military forces. The

<sup>3</sup> Benedict XV provides an example that makes clear the danger of such nationalist tendencies: “Let us assume that he [the missionary] has not completely put aside these human intentions and does not behave fully as a true apostolic man, but rather gives reason to suppose that he is acting in the interests of his country; certainly all his work will become suspect by the population, which will then easily be led to believe that the Christian religion is nothing more than the religion of a given nation, and that embracing it means being dependent on a foreign state, thus renouncing one’s own nationality” (MI 46).

world war had a major impact on the missionary process: the geographical and cultural areas from which these vocations had traditionally emerged were in ruins. Lacking economic, institutional, or personal resources, young people enrolled for military service, and vocations diminished. The situation was also worrisome from other points of view, as in the case of missionaries from defeated countries, such as Germany, or those who acted primarily as defenders of the interests of their own country (see MI 46).

Benedict XV also addressed another important issue, which until then had been neglected in the Church's missionary activity: the lack of attention to indigenous vocations. These had always been given a subordinate place of concern, with the consequent weaknesses in doctrinal, missionary, and spiritual formation. "In fact, it is true that converting and saving souls is immensely more important than knowledge; however, if one has not first acquired a certain grasp of doctrine, the result would be that he lacks the equipment he needs to achieve success in his holy ministry" (MI 54).

### 3. A prophetic and audacious document

*Maximum Illud* opened the doors to a reflection on mission *ad gentes* that remains highly relevant even a hundred years after its promulgation, such that it can well be considered a guiding text on missiology, helping us recognize that "mission can renew the Church," without saying it explicitly. It is enough to consider the missionary activity of the 1960s, with the political emancipations of the former colonies, to realize that that situation was in some ways foreseen by Benedict XV. Our reading of this apostolic letter cannot ignore these analyses and historical considerations.

Besides being the most quoted papal document on mission of the twentieth century, Benedict XV's successors on the Chair of Peter have taken several opportunities to return to its teaching and further develop

its content. We see this with Pius XI's *Rerum Ecclesiae* (February 28, 1926), in which many of Benedict XV's ideas are further developed. For his part, Pius XII, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Rerum Ecclesiae*, published *Evangelii Praecones* (June 2, 1951). Pius XII called for thanksgiving for the evangelizing work of the Church, but one of his great achievements was his openness to universality; while Benedict XV had highlighted this concern, Pius XII developed it, calling for more native clergy to be made bishops in their homelands. To these we can also add Pius XII's well-known *Fidei Donum* (April 21, 1957), and the document that ties itself most explicitly to *Maximum Illud*, on its fortieth anniversary, John XXIII's encyclical *Princeps Pastorum* (November 28, 1959). While reading those earlier documents can help us understand the thought of Benedict XV, John XXIII's is essential. For this reason, Pope Francis, in his October 22, 2017, letter to Cardinal Filoni, affirms that "Pope Benedict XV sought to give new impetus to the missionary task of proclaiming the Gospel."

#### 4. The universality of the missionary activity of the Church

From its first words, *Maximum Illud* insists that proclaiming the Gospel is not only about increasing the number of those who are baptized, but that it is the fruit of an encounter with Christ, born of faith, beyond races, cultures, peoples.<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis appreciates Benedict's document because, among other reasons, it shows that the Church is Catholic, missionary, and universal, and because it is all these things, missionary action is paradigmatic of the whole work of the Church. The missionary task, then, is not optional, but necessary and paramount.

<sup>4</sup> Benedict XV laments "missionaries who, forgetting their dignity, would think more of their terrestrial homeland than of the heavenly one; and who would who be more concerned about their power and glory above all things" (MI 44).

At the time, the proclamation of the Gospel seemed to imply revising or replacing a people's culture; colonialism was not only political and social, but also cultural, and it did great damage to evangelization. But *Maximum Illud* makes a very positive assessment of what the inculturation of faith is and means, placing the Church in a permanent state of mission. Pope Benedict XV assumes the duty of affirming that mission is defined by the universality of salvation and by the catholicity of the Church destined for all peoples. For the first time, mission clearly becomes part of the Church's concerns, fixing its attention on the need to take care of indigenous Churches, including their organic and inculturated development.

For this reason, one of the main challenges to which Benedict XV had to respond was the need to overcome the temptation of a colonial mindset based on nationalistic and ethnocentric concerns, which directly affected not only countries but also some missionary institutions that behaved as though the Holy See had given them a certain mission territory as property.<sup>5</sup> The time had come for the Holy See to clarify the difference between geographical/political boundaries and the ecclesiastical boundaries of the Church. Benedict XV for the first time addressed the problem of restoration to the local Church of those territories that had previously been entrusted to a missionary institution. In these situations, there were other problems that could not be ignored, such as the right of commissions or the assignment of mission territories to religious congregations. Every missionary institution to which the Congregation *de Propaganda Fide* (now "for the Evangelization of Peoples") had entrusted a mission territory dealt with these boundaries and sought vocations or means for its missions.

<sup>5</sup> Moreover, *Maximum Illud* warns of the damage that can come from evangelization closing its doors to other cultural or social realities: "And what tremendous responsibility [a missionary order] would bear when it came to face the eternal Judge, especially if finding its little Christianity – as often happens – almost lost in the midst of a multitude of infidels, being inadequate to the task of catechizing among them because it refused to invite the help of other cooperators!" (MI 25).

## 5. Mission *ad gentes*, origin of the local Churches

This distinction is not simply theoretical or strategic, but fundamental to promoting the mission *ad gentes* in the particular Churches. It is a decisive step towards the establishment of local Churches, which will give rise to the development of a greater missionary awareness in the life of the Church of the twentieth century. With Benedict XV, the missions became local Churches. Also derived from this was Benedict's attention to the situation of the bishops in these local Churches, who until then were mostly of Western origin: "They must be, as is said, the soul of their Mission. Therefore, let them be so especially in their zeal for exemplary edification of their priests and collaborators, exhorting them and encouraging them always to greater good" (MI 15). One of the great contributions of the document was to acknowledge the establishment of the local Church presided over by an indigenous bishop and clergy as a sign that the proclaimed Gospel has taken root. It called for the creation of new training centers to give life to local communities through well-formed collaborators (see MI 22, 33).

Benedict XV called for missions that are led and served by these indigenous priests, because they will have a better approach with the local people; these vocations will be the fruit of developed and mature communities. Also, in the case of armed conflicts, these clergy would not be expelled from the nations in which they are working, as happened to Western missionaries in the first decades of the twentieth century. Thanks to these new and opportune directives to the apostolic vicars and to the bishops of the various places, a long and laborious process of the creation of Churches (*plantatio Ecclesiae*) began. The effects of these recommendations were not long in coming; only a few years later, the first ordinations of indigenous bishops took place.

## 6. Indigenous vocations

*Maximum Illud* supports the need to promote indigenous vocations. The document notes that the best evangelizers are people who know the local language and culture and are members of the community to which the Gospel is proclaimed. This is not simply about effective planning, but because no one should be deprived of the gift of the missionary vocation. Foreign missionaries who refuse to adapt to local circumstances and do not speak the language of the natives, but instead address them through intermediaries, were associated with the European colonial powers. Even the members of the indigenous clergy ended up being seen as their auxiliaries, foreigners in their own land, with the risk of creating isolated and independent groups.

Although women have never ceased to be present in evangelization, the document makes a decisive and surprising challenge in favor of the missionary vocation of women, not only in order to assign them the social roles associated most closely with women, but to identify them simply as sent by the Church. This is why many female missionary organizations were established at that time (see MI 76).

## 7. Theology of mission

The apostolic letter offers some directions that will be further developed later by other papal documents and become part of a Theology of Mission. Among the reasons for developing such a theology is the necessity of preparing and training missionaries. Benedict XV insists that their sending must be preceded by a preparation and formation that is the basis of all missionary work. Many defections by those who left their vocations had to do with the absence of such formation. It is true that the theology of the time did not yet make available to Benedict XV an organic and

systematic missiological foundation, but early suggestions of it appear in the conclusion of the document, where vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life in the emerging Churches are seen as the best indicator of the maturity of these Christian communities. To this end, the Pontiff promoted collaboration between the missionary institutions, beyond the territorial boundaries assigned to each of them. The practice of assigning mission territories to missionary congregations and institutes had once been an adequate response to evangelization, but these institutions ran the risk of closing in on themselves, often refusing to consider, when it might be needed, collaboration with other missionary institutions. *Maximum Illud* disapproves of these limitations and pushes for more cooperation.

## 8. The relevance of *Maximum Illud*

We mustn't hesitate to underline again that the contents of the apostolic letter continue to be relevant one hundred years after its publication. Let us consider some of its most relevant aspects.

### a) *The vitality of mission*

Today as then, the mission *ad gentes* is in need of redevelopment. It is particularly interesting to consider the content of *Evangelii Gaudium* nn. 14-15, because it helps “to overcome divisions and opposing views between ordinary and missionary pastoral work” (Letter of Cardinal Filoni to the Bishops, December 3, 2017). How are we to deal with this problem today, given the new circumstances? An answer is offered: We must overcome the imbalance “between the challenges of evangelization in previously Christian areas that are now secularized and indifferent to religion and the *missio ad gentes*” (ibid.). It is interesting to discover that this peculiarity is present both in countries with a long Christian tradition and in the Churches that

have emerged in mission countries, and that, despite their differences, the first proclamation of the Gospel is central in both cases. It is the spiritual dimension: if we do not start from here, from evangelical purity and from the passion for evangelization, evangelization will not be possible. It is therefore urgent, as Benedict XV indicated in *Maximum Illud* and as Pope Francis has insisted, to renew our evangelical approach to mission.

### *b) Multidirectional cooperation*

Missionary cooperation up until then had a unidirectional orientation: the Gospel came from outside; the help came from far away. For that reason, local Churches perceived themselves to be only receivers of the message. And when a missionary was sent from one local Church to another, they were seen as auxiliary, as a secondary help, whose role was to serve the primary missionaries in that land. For the first time, mission is placed at the center of the Church's concerns. Unfortunately, despite this document, mission, or the missions, continued to be perceived for a long time as something additional and secondary. Benedict XV insists on one of the most urgent problems, the promotion of indigenous vocations. The fostering and the accompaniment of these vocations are the best signs of growth of a Christian community: "Where then there exists a sufficient number of indigenous clergy, well educated and worthy of his holy vocation, the Church can be said to be well founded, and the work of the missionary accomplished" (MI 36, see 39, 89).

### *c) Universality*

*Maximum Illud*, surprisingly, is strongly characterized by catholicity and cultural and geographical universality. Reading it today suggests that the

expression “missionary disciples,” a favorite concept of Pope Francis, could have been paraphrased from Benedict XV. This expression is nothing more than, in the language of Francis, the union of “passion for Jesus” (disciples) and “passion for people” (missionary). The relevance of *Maximum Illud* becomes clear by re-reading statements such as these: “If everyone, including the Missionaries abroad and the faithful at home, does, as we are certain they will, their duty, we can confidently hope that the sacred missions, recovered from the most serious damages of war, will return to prospering” (MI 109).

*d) Maximum Illud and the Pontifical Mission Societies*

On the occasion of the centenary of *Maximum Illud*, it is appropriate to rethink, promote, and re-evaluate the current meaning of the Pontifical Mission Societies. The Apostolic See, through the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, assumes the missionary responsibility that belongs to it. It is an example of the importance of the primacy of the Successor of Peter at the service of the universality of the Church and the missionary nature of the local Churches: above the particularisms of the congregations, nations, ideology, politics, economy, etc., which ecclesial institution should take responsibility for evangelization? In *Maximum Illud*, the Pope, as Successor of Peter, firmly committed himself to his service of communion, taking a global, Catholic perspective of universality and unity. It was then then that management of the various works of missionary support that had emerged – many in France in the nineteenth century – passed to Rome (in 1922), expressing their charismatic catholicity in a more explicit way. That is to say, the center of support of global missionary efforts was no longer found in Lyons or in France, as it had been; by moving to Rome, it became universal, stimulating collaboration between the universal Church and particular Churches. This helped bring missionary concerns to

the center of the Church's attention. This not only resulted in the recovery of a vigorous missionary dynamism, but it was also an invitation to the International PMS Secretariats to support the missionary responsibility of the Christian communities spread about in the particular Churches and carried on by the people of God. For this reason, too, the local Church, in *Maximum Illud*, acquires its centrality thanks to mission.

