



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II FOR THE WORLD MISSION DAY 1996

1. *"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On the threshold of the third millennium, the Lord Jesus repeats with particular force to the whole Church those same words he spoke one day to the Apostles before the Ascension, words which express the essence of the Christian vocation. Who, in fact, is the Christian? A person whom Christ "has made his own" (Phil 3:12) and who therefore longs to make him known and loved everywhere, "to the end of the earth". The faith spurs us to be missionaries, his witnesses. If this does not occur, it means that our faith is still incomplete, partial and immature.

On the occasion of World Mission Sunday, I therefore urge each of you to let yourselves be personally summoned by the Lord to the apostolic challenges of our time.

The Lord continues to send out witnesses

2. *"Mission is an issue of faith, an accurate indicator of our faith in Christ and his love for us" (Redemptoris missio, n. 11). Faith and mission go hand in hand: the stronger and deeper the faith, the more we will feel the need to communicate, share and witness to it. If, on the contrary, it weakens, missionary ardour wanes and the ability to witness loses its vigour. This has always been the case in the Church's history: a loss of vitality in the missionary impulse has always been the symptom of a faith crisis. Does this not happen because of a lack of deep conviction that "faith is strengthened when it is given to others" (ibid., n. 2), that it is precisely by proclaiming and bearing witness to Christ that we find new enthusiasm and discover how to live a more evangelical life? We can say that mission is the surest "antidote" to a crisis of faith. Through missionary commitment, each member of the People of God invigorates his own identity, fully understanding*

that unless we are witnesses, we cannot be authentic Christians.

3. Incorporated into the Church by Baptism, *every Christian is called to be a missionary and witness*. This is the Lord's explicit mandate. The Holy Spirit sends every baptized person to proclaim and bear witness to Christ to all nations: a *duty* then and a *privilege*, since it is an invitation to co-operate with God for the salvation of each individual and all humanity. Indeed, we have been *granted "this grace ... to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ"* (Eph 3:8).

Just as the Spirit transformed the first band of disciples into courageous apostles of the Lord and enlightened preachers of his word, he continues to prepare witnesses to the Gospel in our times.

4. World Mission Sunday reminds us all of this duty and this "grace" of communicating to men not "merely human wisdom, a pseudo-science of well-being" (*Redemptoris missio*, n. 11), but the joyful experience of a "*living presence*" which must be apparent in every baptized person, stirring up in others as my venerable predecessor Paul VI pointed out "irresistible questions: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way?" (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 21). Thus mission "means witness and a way of life that shines out to others" (*Redemptoris missio*, n. 26). In fact, if we are truly docile to the action of the Spirit, we will succeed in reflecting and radiating to others the Mystery of love that dwells within us (cf. Jn 14:23). We are its witnesses. Witnesses of shining, integral faith, of active, patient and kindly charity (cf. 1 Cor 13:4), of service for the many forms of poverty experienced by contemporary man. Witnesses of the hope that does not disappoint and of the deep communion which reflects the life of God the Trinity, of obedience and the Cross: in short, witnesses of holiness, "people of the Beatitudes", called to be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect (cf. Mt 5:48). Such is the identity of the Christian witness: he is a "copy", a "sign", a "living radiance" of Jesus.

New martyrs are giving heroic testimony

Numerous *missionary vocations* will surely come from a People of God thus committed: young people prepared to lose their lives for Christ (cf. Mk 8:35) in the fascinating adventure of the mission *ad gentes*. How many times during my Apostolic Visits have I seen the harvest ripening (cf. Jn 4:35), and yet I have been told that missionaries, priests, brothers, sisters, persons consecrated for the Gospel are lacking! World Mission Sunday has meaning if it encourages prayer for missionary vocations in parishes and families, if it creates a suitable environment for their growth.

5. The identity of the Christian as witness is marked by the unavoidable and distinctive presence of the *Cross*. There can be no authentic witness without it. Indeed, the Cross is the necessary condition for all who have firmly decided to follow the Lord: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23). All the witnesses of God

and Christ, beginning with the Apostles, have known persecution because of him: "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you" (Jn 15:20). This is the legacy which Jesus left to his followers and which each one must accept and incarnate in his own life. Golgotha is the only way to the Resurrection.

The "Cross" in fact is the imitation of Christ in faithful witness and patient and persevering daily work. The "Cross" is swimming against the tide, making decisions according to God's commandments despite misunderstanding, unpopularity, marginalization; the "Cross" is the prophetic denunciation of injustice, of trampled freedoms, of violated rights; it is having to live where the Church is most opposed, obstructed and persecuted.

How can we fail at this point to think of *our brothers and sisters and entire communities* which in so many parts of the world offer a splendid witness of a Christian life totally dedicated to Christ and the Church despite being surrounded by persecution and hostility? Every year there are reports of the heroic witness given by new "martyrs" who shed their blood in order to remain faithful to the Lord. The Church pays homage to their sacrifice. She draws close in prayer and fraternal love to believers who suffer violence, inviting them not to be discouraged or afraid. Christ is with you, dearly beloved brothers and sisters!

6. The *Pontifical Mission Societies* play an important role in mission promotion. They have the task of forming local Churches and the faithful in the missionary spirit of the faith. Their role is very important for the growth of Dioceses, parishes and Christian families.

Today Christ asks the baptized: "*Are you my witnesses?*". And each one is invited to question himself sincerely: "Do I offer the world the witness the Lord asks of me? Do I live a strong, serene and joyful faith, or do I portray the image of a Christian life that is flagging, marred by compromises and easy conformity?".

God is preparing a great springtime for Christianity

Fittingly, the Pontifical Mission Societies intend to put themselves *at the service of missionary witness* by stressing the *primacy of holiness* in their work of sensitization. As I wrote in *Redemptoris missio*: "A missionary is really such only if he commits himself to the way of holiness.... What is needed is the encouragement of a new ardour for holiness among missionaries and throughout the Christian community, especially among those who work most closely with missionaries" (n. 90).

7. This work of sensitization will be all the more effective, the more the family of believers takes on, before the world, the aspect and role of an *authentic community of witnesses for the mission "ad gentes"*, and every believer can have a renewed awareness of his duty to open his heart to all those in the missions who often live in conditions of critical material and spiritual need. This

awareness will certainly lead to the commitment to take responsibility for the needs of our poorest brothers and sisters. In this way there will be a growing missionary awareness of the Church's universality. The result will be active participation in the effort of the new evangelization, which marks these years of immediate preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000.

"As the third Christian millennium of the Redemption draws near, God is preparing a great springtime for Christianity, and we can already see its first signs" (*Redemptoris missio*, n. 86). With this certainty, I renew my invitation "to live more intensely the mystery of Christ by gratefully cooperating in the work of salvation" (ibid., n. 92). As I invoke the protection of Mary, Star of evangelization, particularly on missionaries and on all who, in various ways put their energies at the service of the Mission, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to each of you.

From the Vatican, 28 May 1996.

IOANNES PAULUS PP. II