

PEACE AND HOPE, IN DIFFICULT AND OPPORTUNE TIMES FOR MISSION!

Daniel Rocchetti¹

“We cannot fail to affirm what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20).

It is with this biblical verse from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles that I introduce a brief reflection to my confreres and sisters, lay people, priests, nuns and religious, and, perhaps, Pallottine bishops who accompany us in this formative event promoted by the St. Vincent Pallotti Institute of Rome... and from Rome to the whole world!

“We cannot fail to affirm what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20) is what the apostle St. Peter, along with St. John, replied to a group of accusers there in the Sanhedrin, who threatened them, forcing them to silence the proclamation of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, the proclamation of his Risen Life and the spread of his teachings. No, no! They could not, under any circumstances, under any threat, not proclaim the Wonders that God had worked and to which they were witnesses.

Found by Christ, they decided to follow him, became his disciples, lived with him, learned from him and, once fortified by his Spirit, set out, facing challenges and attempts to silence them... until, year after year, decade after decade, from century to century, the Truth and Beauty about our Lord Jesus Christ came to us, reached us, involved us, formed us and, in turn, sent us... because this Mission is His and He continues it!

The life of the Church is truly mission. The Church was born from the Mission and serves the Mission. The Holy Father Paul VI, in *Evangelii nuntiandi* n.15, took up the historical self-understanding of the Church in the history of the world and the conciliar self-definition found in *Ad gentes* n.2 and confirmed that the essence of the Church is proclamation, is mission. The Church is a community of witnesses! It exists to witness to Jesus Christ and it does so through the different activities it carries out: teaching (*didaskalia* as *kerygma* and catechesis), worship (leitourgia), service (*diakonia*) and, in itself, the experience of unity and community (*koinonia*).

From here we understand that it is not the Church that has a mission to carry out in the world, but that it is the Mission that has the Church. Missiologist David Bosch in his work and also authors Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder in their text argue what is already admitted by contemporary missionary reflection and the ecclesial Magisterium:

“[...] mission has its origin in the heart of God. God is a source of love that sends. This is the deepest source of mission. It is impossible to penetrate deeper; mission exists because God loves people.”

The Trinitarian God, who is revealed and communicated in Jesus Christ, is an overflowing Love God, Infinite Love, Unconditional Love that pours out and never ceases to pour out His divine goodness.

“Another way to affirm this is to affirm that God is Mission. It is not that God has a mission, but that He is mission. This is what God is in His deepest nature: a self-dispensing love, freely creating, redeeming, healing, challenging this creation. As my colleague Anthony Gittins spoke at a conference, God “strikes out with love across the cosmic spectrum.” Or, to be a bit more prosaic, God is like an inexhaustible spring that is always flowing with living water, bubbling up in the earth by the Holy Spirit and truly being part of creation through the Word who became flesh”.

¹ Fr. Daniel Luz Rocchetti SAC - Brazilian Pallottine priest - holds a Doctorate in Missiology from the Pontifical Urbanian University (Rome). He is currently Assessor of the Pastoral Episcopal Commission for Missionary Animation of the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB).

Therefore, if “God is the source of love that sends” being a Missionary God, we understand that the expression *Missio Dei* is the very activity of God, the fruit of his loving essence making itself known, manifesting and spreading by itself. And that the Church, in turn, is at the service of this *Missio Dei*, and for this reason discovers her most essential characteristic identity:

“Missionary activity is no more and no less than the manifestation or epiphany, and the realization of God's plan in the world and in history: through mission, God clearly fulfills the history of salvation.” The Church is, by its very nature, a missionary.

The Church is, by its very nature, missionary. Mission understood in this way will not be something optional, like an appendix that may or may not be realized! No, mission is not one more activity of the Church among others, but it is her very nature. The Church is mission!

Writing the Message for World Mission Day 2012, Pope Benedict XVI taught that mission is the paradigm of every ecclesial activity. Then Pope Francis confirmed that “missionary activity is the model of all the work of the Church”. And in his apostolic journey to Colombia, meeting in 2017 with the Steering Committee of the Latin-American Episcopal Conference (CELAM), he explained that the definitive mission

“is the effort to put the mission of Jesus at the center of the Church itself, transforming it into a criterion for measuring the effectiveness of structures, the results of the work, the fruitfulness of its ministers and the joy they are capable of arousing. Because, without joy, no one is attracted”.

More than a programmatic dimension, in fact, that is, “the sum total of programmatic initiatives that fill agendas and also waste precious energies”, Pope Francis puts back at the center the mission of Jesus Christ, which is what we have already seen, that is, the realization of the *Missio Dei*, as a self-revelation of Infinite Love.

Since mission is more than programs, planning and activities to be carried out, it must be the center from which all the actions of the Church start, and also the evaluative criterion of this ecclesial activity. Mission must be recognized as a paradigm, and not only as a program of activities:

“For this reason, one cannot reduce the Gospel to a program at the service of fashionable gnosticism, to a project of social promotion, nor to a vision of the Church as a self-promoting bureaucracy; nor can the Church be reduced to an organization run, with modern business criteria, by a clerical caste. The Church is the community of the disciples of Jesus; the Church is Mystery and People (cf. LG 5; 9), or rather: in it the Mystery is fulfilled through the People of God. This is why I have insisted on missionary discipleship as a divine call for today's complex and tense times, a permanent going out with Jesus to know how and where the Master dwells. And, as we go out in his company, we know the will of the Father, who always listens to us. Only a Church that is Bride, Mother, Servant, that has renounced the pretension of controlling what is not her work but God's, can remain with Jesus, even when her nest and refuge is the cross. Proximity and encounter are the instruments of God, who in Christ has drawn near and has always found us”.

This should be the ecclesial self-understanding necessary to understand the role of the Church (and our congregations and religious organizations) before this cultural, civil and social fabric; Yes, before this humanity in crisis to which we are sent, whether in Brazil, Italy, the United States, Zambia, India or Australia, etc., today, in many post-Christian societies, the Gospel is no longer known, it is undervalued and even mocked, and in other societies it is censored and imprisoned.

The life of the Church is mission. Going out to meet people to offer them not a tangle of doctrines or a moral code, but an encounter with a living, risen person.

“The proclamation focuses on the essential, on what is most beautiful, most important, most attractive and, at the same time, most necessary. The proposal ends up being simplified, without losing depth and truth, and thus becomes more

convincing and radiant. All revealed truths come from the same divine source and are believed with the same faith, but some of them are more important because they express more directly the heart of the Gospel. In this fundamental core, what stands out is the beauty of God's saving love manifested in Jesus Christ, who died and rose again.”

This kerygma, proclamation of the Gospel, is the saving and redemptive word that fills our lives with meaning:

“it is the principal proclamation, the one that must always be heard again in different ways and the one that must always be proclaimed again in one way or another. It is the proclamation of a God who infinitely loves every human being, who has fully manifested this love in Christ crucified for us and risen in our lives.”

In the end, it is also important to recognize that this *Missio Dei* to which we have referred in this text, that is, the Mission of God which the Church continues to serve, is not understood merely as a program, and therefore must be understood as a pattern; neither will it be reduced to a mere discourse, but to the reception of a Word of Salvation, which seeks the conversion of attitudes and requires a decisive affirmative response to the way of life of Jesus Christ. Therefore, faith must necessarily translate into works of charity and service, especially to the poorest and most needy, as Our Lord Jesus Christ served them: “the faith you have in our glorified Lord Jesus Christ must not accept the differentiation of persons.”

The Church does not have a mission. It is a mission because it is a community of witnesses. “What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you.” “We cannot fail to affirm what we have seen and heard”. The Church is at the service of God's Mission that continues to love, because it constantly creates, redeems, provides, saves. The way to be Church, therefore, is to continue to love, to welcome, to embrace, to care. If there is a word to be communicated, as a kerygmatic proclamation, this word can never be imprisoned, arrested or chained. Rather, it must always be proclaimed, with voice and with life, translated into deeds, because “it is not words or speech, nor is your voice heard. Its sound spreads throughout the earth and your message reaches the ends of the earth.” Life becomes mission!

And this is the only way to assume, as Christians and religious – as Pallottines - what we are called to be this morning, in this formative meeting: truly witnesses and prophets!

“The mission in the hearts of the people is not a piece of my life, nor is it an ornament that I can put aside; it is not an appendix or a moment among many others in my life. It is something I cannot remove from my being if I do not want to destroy myself. I am a mission on this earth, and that is why I am on this world. It is necessary to consider ourselves marked by fire by this mission to enlighten, bless, enliven, uplift, heal, liberate. In this a person reveals himself to be a nurse in the spirit, a teacher in the spirit, a politician in the spirit... that is, people who have decided, in their innermost part of themselves, to be with others and to be for others. But if a person puts the task on one side and his private life on the other, everything becomes gray and he will live continually seeking recognition or defending his own needs. He will no longer be a people”.