

## **THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL'S TEACHING ON MISSIO AND SUBSEQUENT PAPAL TEACHING**

This document summarises the Church's teaching on mission during and since the Second Vatican Council. It is not exhaustive but highlights several key themes including (i) the Church was founded by God to spread the Good News (ii) evangelising is the responsibility of every baptised person (iii) mission is needed in both new lands and here at home (iv) evangelising involves both witness of life (including works of charity) and proclamation (v) new evangelisation is required (vi) new opportunities are always unfolding for mission (vii) advice for evangelising in a secular society (viii) God is always with us.

Please don't worry if some of the language appears to be too technical at first. Just take your time and read what you can. It is important that we have the Church's teaching to guide us and then we will be better placed to discern how these principles can take shape within our own local circumstances. This document is a reference to which you can return over the next few months.

### **The Second Vatican Council**

Vatican II's Constitution *Lumen Gentium* reflected on the Church's nature and mission. The first two paragraphs stated:

*1. Christ is the Light of nations. Because this is so, this Sacred Synod gathered together in the Holy Spirit eagerly desires, by proclaiming the Gospel to every creature,(1) to bring the light of Christ to all men, a light brightly visible on the countenance of the Church. Since the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race, it desires now to unfold more fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission. This it intends to do following faithfully the teaching of previous councils. The present-day conditions of the world add greater urgency to this work of the Church so that all men, joined more closely today by various social, technical and cultural ties, might also attain fuller unity in Christ.*

*2. The eternal Father, by a free and hidden plan of His own wisdom and goodness, created the whole world. His plan was to raise men to a participation of the divine life. Fallen in Adam, God the Father did not leave men to themselves, but ceaselessly offered helps to salvation, in view of Christ, the Redeemer "who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature".(2) All the elect, before time began, the Father "foreknew and pre-destined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that he should be the firstborn among many brethren".(3) He planned to assemble in the holy Church all those who would believe in Christ. Already from the beginning of the world the foreshadowing of the Church took place. It was prepared in a remarkable way throughout the history of the people of Israel and by means of the Old Covenant.(1\*) In the present era of time the Church was constituted and, by the outpouring of the Spirit, was made manifest. At the end of time it will gloriously achieve completion, when, as is*

*read in the Fathers, all the just, from Adam and "from Abel, the just one, to the last of the elect,"(2\*) will be gathered together with the Father in the universal Church.*

Lumen Gentium insisted that all Christians are called to holiness and to mission. Both of these callings are rooted in our baptism.

*10. Christ the Lord, High Priest taken from among men,(100) made the new people "a kingdom and priests to God the Father".(101) The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, in order that through all those works which are those of the Christian man they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the power of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvelous light.(102) Therefore all the disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God,(103) should present themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.(104) Everywhere on earth they must bear witness to Christ and give an answer to those who seek an account of that hope of eternal life which is in them.(105)*

*Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ.*

## **Pope Paul VI**

In 1975 Pope Paul VI began his exhortation on Evangelisation in the Modern World, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, with these words: "There is no doubt that the effort to proclaim the Gospel to the people of today, who are buoyed up by hope but at the same time often oppressed by fear and distress, is a service rendered to the Christian community and also to the whole of humanity."

Pope Paul reflected on both the need for personal witness by lifestyle as well as proclaiming the Word of God:

*21. Above all the Gospel must be proclaimed by witness. Take a Christian or a handful of Christians who, in the midst of their own community, show their capacity for understanding and acceptance, their sharing of life and destiny with other people, their solidarity with the efforts of all for whatever is noble and good. Let us suppose that, in addition, they radiate in an altogether simple and unaffected way their faith in values that go beyond current values, and their hope in something that is not seen and that one would not dare to imagine. Through this wordless witness these Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst? Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one. Here we have an initial act of evangelization. The above questions will ask, whether they are people to whom Christ has never been proclaimed, or baptized people who do not practice, or people who live as nominal Christians but*

*according to principles that are in no way Christian, or people who are seeking, and not without suffering, something or someone whom they sense but cannot name. Other questions will arise, deeper and more demanding ones, questions evoked by this witness which involves presence, sharing, solidarity, and which is an essential element, and generally the first one, in evangelization."*[51]

*All Christians are called to this witness, and in this way they can be real evangelizers. We are thinking especially of the responsibility incumbent on immigrants in the country that receives them.*

*22. Nevertheless this always remains insufficient, because even the finest witness will prove ineffective in the long run if it is not explained, justified - what Peter called always having "your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have"[52] - and made explicit by a clear and unequivocal proclamation of the Lord Jesus. The Good News proclaimed by the witness of life sooner or later has to be proclaimed by the word of life. There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed. The history of the Church, from the discourse of Peter on the morning of Pentecost onwards, has been intermingled and identified with the history of this proclamation. At every new phase of human history, the Church, constantly gripped by the desire to evangelize, has but one preoccupation: whom to send to proclaim the mystery of Jesus? In what way is this mystery to be proclaimed? How can one ensure that it will resound and reach all those who should hear it? This proclamation - kerygma, preaching or catechesis - occupies such an important place in evangelization that it has often become synonymous with it; and yet it is only one aspect of evangelization.*

## **Pope John Paul II**

For centuries many equated mission with proclaiming the Good News to new peoples (*ad gentes*) who lived in foreign lands – ‘*the Missions*’. In 1983 Pope John Paul first used the phrase New Evangelisation – proclaiming the Good News to those living in lands which had a long Christian tradition but where many people were now indifferent to Christ. The new evangelisation was to be new in its ardour, in its methods and in its expression.

Pope John Paul wrote his encyclical entitled *Redemptoris Missio* in 1990 which he began with these words “*The mission of Christ the Redeemer, which is entrusted to the Church, is still very far from completion.*”

*3. Peoples everywhere, open the doors to Christ! His Gospel in no way detracts from man's freedom, from the respect that is owed to every culture and to whatever is good in each religion. By accepting Christ, you open yourselves to the definitive Word of God, to the One in whom God has made himself fully known and has shown us the path to himself.*

*The number of those who do not know Christ and do not belong to the Church is constantly on the increase. Indeed, since the end of the Council it has almost doubled. When we consider this immense portion of humanity which is loved by the Father and for whom he sent his Son, the urgency of the Church's mission is obvious.*

*On the other hand, our own times offer the Church new opportunities in this field: we have witnessed the collapse of oppressive ideologies and political systems; the opening of frontiers and the formation of a more united world due to an increase in communications; the affirmation among peoples of the gospel values which Jesus made incarnate in his own life (peace, justice, brotherhood, concern for the needy); and a kind of soulless economic and technical development which only stimulates the search for the truth about God, about man and about the meaning of life itself.*

*God is opening before the Church the horizons of a humanity more fully prepared for the sowing of the Gospel. I sense that the moment has come to commit all of the Church's energies to a new evangelization and to the mission ad gentes. No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples.*

In 2001 Pope John Paul wrote *Novo millennio inuente* as the third millennium was beginning. Encouraging us to start afresh with Christ John Paul reflected on Proclaiming the Word:

*40. To nourish ourselves with the word in order to be "servants of the word" in the work of evangelization: this is surely a priority for the Church at the dawn of the new millennium. Even in countries evangelized many centuries ago, the reality of a "Christian society" which, amid all the frailties which have always marked human life, measured itself explicitly on Gospel values, is now gone. Today we must courageously face a situation which is becoming increasingly diversified and demanding, in the context of "globalization" and of the consequent new and uncertain mingling of peoples and cultures. Over the years, I have often repeated the summons to the new evangelization. I do so again now, especially in order to insist that we must rekindle in ourselves the impetus of the beginnings and allow ourselves to be filled with the ardour of the apostolic preaching which followed Pentecost. We must revive in ourselves the burning conviction of Paul, who cried out: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (1 Cor 9:16).*

*This passion will not fail to stir in the Church a new sense of mission, which cannot be left to a group of "specialists" but must involve the responsibility of all the members of the People of God. Those who have come into genuine contact with Christ cannot keep him for themselves, they must proclaim him. A new apostolic outreach is needed, which will be lived as the everyday commitment of Christian communities and groups. This should be done however with the respect due to the different paths of different people and with sensitivity to the diversity of cultures in which the Christian message must be planted, in such a way that the particular values of each people will not be rejected but purified and brought to their fullness.*

## **Pope Benedict XVI**

Pope Benedict established the Office for the Promotion of the New Evangelisation in 2010 and convoked the 13<sup>th</sup> Synod of Bishops in 2012 to discuss The New Evangelisation for the Transmission of the Christian Faith. Pope Benedict began his encyclical *Deus caritas est* (God is love): *“Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.....Since God has first loved us (cf. 1 Jn 4:10), love is now no longer a mere 'command'; it is the response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us.”* The Church is true to her calling by proclaiming the Good News and passing on the Christian faith. This necessitates creating everywhere opportunities for people to encounter Jesus Christ.

## **Pope Francis: Evangelii Gaudium**

Pope Francis used the phrase ‘missionary disciples’ to describe Christians. It is natural for the Christian to be missionary. Pope Francis urged that Christians reached out and accompanied those on the margins. *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel) was written in 2013:

*119. In all the baptized, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelization. The people of God is holy thanks to this anointing, which makes it infallible in credendo. This means that it does not err in faith, even though it may not find words to explain that faith. The Spirit guides it in truth and leads it to salvation (*Lumen Gentium*, 12). As part of his mysterious love for humanity, God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith – *sensus fidei* – which helps them to discern what is truly of God. The presence of the Spirit gives Christians a certain connaturality with divine realities, and a wisdom which enables them to grasp those realities intuitively, even when they lack the wherewithal to give them precise expression.*

*120. In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt 28:19). All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are “disciples” and “missionaries”, but rather that we are always “missionary disciples”. If we are not convinced, let us look at those first disciples, who, immediately after encountering the gaze of Jesus, went forth to proclaim him joyfully: “We have found the Messiah!” (Jn 1:41). The Samaritan woman became a missionary immediately after speaking with Jesus and many Samaritans come to believe in him “because of the*

woman's testimony" (Jn 4:39). So too, Saint Paul, after his encounter with Jesus Christ, "immediately proclaimed Jesus" (Acts 9:20; cf. 22:6-21). So what are we waiting for?

121. Of course, all of us are called to mature in our work as evangelizers. We want to have better training, a deepening love and a clearer witness to the Gospel. In this sense, we ought to let others be constantly evangelizing us. But this does not mean that we should postpone the evangelizing mission; rather, each of us should find ways to communicate Jesus wherever we are. All of us are called to offer others an explicit witness to the saving love of the Lord, who despite our imperfections offers us his closeness, his word and his strength, and gives meaning to our lives. In your heart you know that it is not the same to live without him; what you have come to realize, what has helped you to live and given you hope, is what you also need to communicate to others. Our falling short of perfection should be no excuse; on the contrary, mission is a constant stimulus not to remain mired in mediocrity but to continue growing. The witness of faith that each Christian is called to offer leads us to say with Saint Paul: "Not that I have already obtained this, or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own" (Phil 3:12-13).

### **Pope Leo XIV**

Of course, Pope Leo has only been the Successor of Peter for about 18 months. Nevertheless, he served as a missionary in Peru as well as in North America and Rome. His catechesis, speeches and writings give us insights into his understanding of mission

During his Inaugural Mass as the Successor of Peter in 2025, Pope Leo preached: "I greet all of you with a heart full of gratitude at the beginning of the ministry that has been entrusted to me. Saint Augustine wrote: "Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you" (Confessions 1.1). . . . With the light and the strength of the Holy Spirit, let us build a Church founded on God's love, a sign of unity, a missionary Church that opens its arms to the world, proclaims the word, allows itself to be made "restless" by history, and becomes a leaven of harmony for humanity....

"So much division, violence in today's world. We are to be leaven. Encourage people to look to Christ! Come close to him and be enlightened. "Listen to his offer of love and become his one family: in the one Christ, we are one. This is the path to follow together among ourselves but also with our sister Christian churches, with those who follow other religious paths, with those who are searching for God, with all women and men of good will, in order to build a new world where peace reigns!....

*This must be our missionary spirit, not inward but outward. Allow the Spirit to enable us create a Church founded on God's love, a sign of unity, a missionary Church that opens its arms to humanity."*

During the Jubilee of Missionaries in 2025 Pope Leo told them that "The entire Church is missionary.....the Spirit sends us to continue the work of Christ to the peripheries".

On the morning of Holy Thursday this year Pope Leo preached during the Chrism Mass: "In this, my first year presiding over the Chrism Mass as bishop of Rome, I would like to

*reflect with you on the mission to which God calls us as his people. It is the Christian mission, the exact same as Jesus', not another. Each of us takes part in it according to our own vocation in a deeply personal obedience to the voice of the Spirit, yet never without others, never neglecting or breaking communion! Bishops and priests, as we renew our promises, we are at the service of a missionary people. Together with all the baptised, we are the Body of Christ, anointed by his Spirit of freedom and consolation, the Spirit of prophecy and unity".*

During the recent Youth event in Assisi entitled 'Go!' Pope Leo told the youth: *"Go! Is a mission, a sending forth onto paths for which we have no maps, because they are opened by listening to the heart, obeying the Holy Spirit, and following the Risen One wherever he has chosen to go before us. Go! Go! Or better, let us go!"*

While visiting France Pope Leo participated in a Youth Vigil during which a young Catholic asked how she should balance her zeal to spread the Good News with respect for her family, friends and colleagues who were indifferent or had rejected Christ. Pope Leo said in reply:

*"We can combine missionary zeal with the spirit of fraternity toward those who do not believe in God or who belong to other religious traditions. This fraternity is built on listening and mutual respect, and is rooted in the unity of the human family, which throughout history has expressed the religious dimension as a vital characteristic of every people.*

*Cultivating a fraternal bond with those who do not share our faith thus contributes to the building of society. Furthermore, it is a way practicing faith and charity, for it is impossible to bear witness to Christ without loving those to whom we wish to proclaim him."*