



Does the Mission *ad Gentes* still Make Sense?

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Abstract:

In "Does the Mission *ad Gentes* Still Make Sense?", the author affirms the enduring relevance of the Church's mission to all nations. He emphasizes the necessity for the Congregation of the Mission to adapt its missionary approaches in response to contemporary cultural shifts and the guidance of Pope Francis. Turati advocates for a synodal approach—characterized by listening, communion, and participation—to rejuvenate the Congregation's charism. He explores various mission models, including proclamation, encounter, service, fraternity, liberation, and integral ecology, urging a discerning integration of these frameworks to address current global challenges. Turati concludes that revitalizing the Congregation's missionary identity requires embracing diverse mission models and fostering openness to multiculturalism, aligning with the evolving dynamics of the 21st century.

Dans « La mission *ad gentes* a-t-elle encore un sens ? », Giuseppe Turati, C.M., affirme la pertinence durable de la mission de l'Église auprès de toutes les nations. Il souligne la nécessité pour la Congrégation de la Mission d'adapter ses approches missionnaires en réponse aux changements culturels contemporains et aux orientations du Pape François. Turati plaide pour une approche synodale - caractérisée par l'écoute, la communion et la participation - afin de rajeunir le charisme de la Congrégation. Il explore divers modèles de mission, notamment la proclamation, la rencontre, le service, la fraternité, la libération et l'écologie intégrale, et préconise une intégration judicieuse de ces cadres pour relever les défis mondiaux actuels. Turati conclut que la revitalisation de l'identité missionnaire de la Congrégation exige d'embrasser divers modèles missionnaires et de favoriser l'ouverture au multiculturalisme, en s'alignant sur la dynamique évolutive du 21^e siècle.

En «¿Sigue teniendo sentido la misión *ad gentes*?», Giuseppe Turati, C.M., afirma la perdurable relevancia de la misión de la Iglesia a todas las naciones. Enfatiza la necesidad de que la Congregación de la Misión adapte sus enfoques misioneros en respuesta a los cambios culturales contemporáneos y la orientación del Papa Francisco. Turati aboga por un enfoque sinodal - caracterizado por la escucha, la comunión y la participación- para rejuvenecer el carisma de la Congregación. Explora varios modelos de misión, incluyendo la proclamación, el encuentro, el servicio, la fraternidad, la liberación y la ecología integral, instando a una integración perspicaz de estos marcos para hacer frente a los desafíos globales actuales. Turati concluye que revitalizar la identidad misionera de la Congregación requiere abrazar diversos modelos de misión y fomentar la apertura al multiculturalismo, en consonancia con la dinámica cambiante del siglo XXI.

Keywords: Mission *ad Gentes*, Vincentian, Charism, Encounter



Among the priorities to which our Superior General wants to give new impetus and vigor is certainly the mission *ad Gentes*. A question immediately arises: does the mission *ad Gentes* still make sense today? In the case of a positive answer, in what forms?

In the face of prophecies that speak of “the end of Christianity and a return to paganism,”¹ is it realistic to think of forms of mission that are still capable of bringing Christianity into the 21st century, giving new vitality to the Church and its missionary action in the world and in history?

The aim of this article is to answer the question in the affirmative, although it will require our missionary action to measure up courageously to the current epochal change and be able to reinvent new models of mission, in response to the movements of the spirit of Christ and in fidelity to the charismatic gifts proper to our missionary charism.

It is a matter of making an honest and profound discernment of the cultural context in which we move and a choice of mission models that can only be carried out in an ecclesial setting of listening, communion, and participation between charism and institution. The synodal dynamism of listening, in communion, participation, and mission, initiated by Pope Francis, also offers our Congregation the opportunity to regenerate (“revitalize”) itself in an increasingly secularized global world and challenges us to seek new models of mission, with renewed apostolic dynamism, that is capable of overcoming those pretensions of domination and power that have characterized, at least in part, the missions *ad Gentes* in the era of European and Western colonialism in general.

It is a great challenge, but also a great opportunity: mission can restore credence and vigor to our identity and also to the Church itself, in the current cultural context of the end of Christianity in the Western world and the onset of a globalized world that is becoming increasingly secularized, in which the Christian message and religion in general are being relegated to the private sphere, without any social and cultural relevance. Will we be able to meet this challenge and “revitalize our identity” (cf. the title of GA 2022) at the beginning of the fifth centenary of our existence as a Congregation “of the Mission”?

Charisma and institution

Two major tasks lie before us. The first is to ascertain what aspects of the current magisterium of the Church, particularly that of Pope Francis, can be enhanced to revitalize our charism. The second task is to discern which mission model, among those currently emerging in the Church, can be adopted in fidelity to our charism.

Let us not forget one important thing: in addition to the reminder of the urgency of updating the charisms proper to the congregations, Pope Francis also proposes a way to implement them: it is the synodal way, because “synodality is an expression of the Church’s nature, her form, style and mission.”² But beware: this is not about gathering opinions by *brainstorming*: it is about listening to the Holy Spirit.

We must recognize that the journey of revitalizing the charism is by no means easy and, as far as mission is concerned, it is even tiring: we struggle to listen to each

¹ See Chantal Delsol, *La fine della Cristianità e il ritorno del paganesimo* [*The End of Christianity and the Return of Paganism*], Cantagalli 2022, pp. 112-113.

² Francis, *Address to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome*, 18 September 2021.

other and walk together. It is the Pope himself who tells us that “great docility is required of us, and great humility, in order to recognize our limitations and accept to change outdated ways of doing and thinking, or methods of the apostolate that are no longer effective, or forms of organization of internal life that have proved inadequate or even harmful.”³

Above all, the path of revitalizing charism is challenging: it must not privilege the apostolic dimension while leaving other more personal dimensions, such as the spirituality of the founder and members, in the shadows. In other words, it must not privilege institutional *doing* over charismatic *being*. Reflection on the original charism must be inclusive and interior, able to restore value and relevance to the personality of our founder and his spirituality.

Effective revitalization of institutional charism may come not so much from an amalgamation of voices and opinions of individual members of the institution, but rather from the attractive power of the charismatic witness of the founder expressed in appropriately updated ways and forms. It is not we who possess the charism; if anything, it is the charism that, dynamically and as divine grace, possesses us in the various ages and generations. Therefore, it is important to know how to incarnate it in the new situations we face in our ministry.

We Vincentians, too, if we really want to revitalize our missionary identity, are called to test the effectiveness of our ministries in relation to evangelization and mission. Now, the missionary evangelization that Pope Francis dreams of is “for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her [the Church’s] self-preservation.”⁴ We live in a time when mere updating is not enough: new forms must be found to serve the gospel and propose the way of Christian life.

In Europe, where I live, there does not seem to be a mission model really capable of conveying the energy of the gospel and the style of the Christian walk. In some provinces of CEVIM, there has been an attempt to maintain a certain public relevance by espousing various causes in the political arena (migration, homelessness, drug addiction, etc.) at the risk of having people forget the other dimensions of evangelization (proclamation, Christian initiation, etc.). The generalized shortage of missionary vocations says something about the eradication of the missionary charism among the new generations of European Catholics.

In other continents (Africa, Asia) the situation appears more encouraging. However, even in them, the need for a review of current mission models cannot be avoided, under pain of losing the missionary identity of us Vincentians and relevance in the Church.

There are new models of mission here and there; we could call them “under construction,” but they are struggling to find institutional placement. They are left somewhat to personal initiative. When they are discussed in General (and probably Provincial) Assemblies, it is usual to decide on priorities and update one’s vocabulary, in order to stay in tune with the magisterium of Pope Francis. But it seems evident to a sociological reading that there is a struggle to make basic choices at the institutional level, preferring to leave discernment to individuals, who identify with one or another model depending on their personal charism.

³ Francis, *Address to the Participants in the Meeting of Moderators of Lay Associations, Ecclesial Movements and New Communities*, 16 September 2021.

⁴ *Evangelium Gaudium*, 27.

It is true that God grants his gifts to concrete individuals, not abstractly to a community or structure. It is, therefore, important to discern starting from the charisms granted to the individual members of the Congregation. However, this path has a limitation: if discernment and identification with a mission model is left to individual members, the consciousness of a common, shared charism and mission fades. Moreover, in this case the experience easily is doomed to be short-lived, not having the follow-through that only the institution can ensure. One possible solution might be to initiate processes of verification and discernment of personal experiences that give the various provinces the possibility of configuring themselves according to certain models of mission rather than others.

Models of Mission

We have mentioned several times the expression “models of mission” or “models under construction.” Concretely, what does it concern? Portuguese Combonian missionary Manuel Augusto Ferreira, former Superior General of his Congregation, listed a number of such models in a recent publication of his, from which we draw inspiration here.⁵

Model of Mission as Proclamation

This is certainly the oldest model from a historical perspective and one that has been established consistently throughout centuries of Christianity’s history. In this model, mission is seen first and foremost as the “proclamation of the salvific event” accomplished by God in our lives. At the center of this model is the Word, proclaimed and preached.

The model is inspired by the very activity of Jesus, who in the synoptic gospels often instructs the crowds with his teaching, announces the reign of God among us, and emphasizes the centrality of the Word (e.g., in the parable of the sower).

Paul is perhaps the emblem of this model, since he himself declares himself “an apostle sent to preach the gospel” (see, e.g., 1 Corinthians 1:17). For him, the presence of missionaries in the Church is essential and the gospel is a Word to be proclaimed, with a power and efficacy that are not human but proper to the Holy Spirit.

The model of proclamation took hold in later centuries, beginning in the 4th century, when Benedict of Norcia and his monks began to spread the Word, embellished by liturgy and art, from a geographical center: the monastery.

After him, in the midst of the Middle Ages, the friars of the great itinerant orders (Franciscans and Dominicans) took the Word out from the monasteries and convents, and from their preaching a renewed Christianity was born, as the Church increasingly felt it had a proclamation to make to the world.

Between the end of the 15th century and the beginning of the next, with the discovery of new worlds and the encounter with other cultures, the opportunity opened up for the gospel of Christ to become incarnate in new peoples. In particular, the Jesuits demonstrated great vigor and capacity for openness to the peoples they encountered to whom they proclaimed the gospel of Christ. However, the model seems to lose bite with

⁵ Manuel Augusto Ferreira, *Modelli di missione. La riconfigurazione della missione con papa Francesco* [*Models of Mission. The Reconfiguration of Mission with Pope Francis*]. Messaggero Editions, Padua 2023.

the passage of time, weakened by multiple doctrinal considerations and political influences that undermined its strength of witness.

It was necessary to wait until the missionary movement of the 19th century for the power of the proclaimed word to regain its former enthusiasm and vigor. Numerous missionary institutes that sprang up in the second half of the 19th century freed mission from the constraints and interests of the great political powers of Europe, as well as the great religious orders.⁶

With the Second Vatican Council, this model began a process of revision and enrichment, with the integration of new elements, such as inculturation (especially in Africa) and social and political transformation (in Latin America).

The current pontiff has further reinforced the importance of this model especially with his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelium Gaudium*, in which he even goes into detail to propose his tricks for good gospel preaching (see the entire third chapter).

Today, however, the model of mission as proclamation appears to be under threat, or at least under pressure: any explicit proclamation of Christ as the one Savior of humanity now is labeled easily as religious fundamentalism and undue proselytism, useless claims to truth and uniqueness. Whether we admit it or not, missionaries today are called to operate in a cultural climate that pushes them “to procrastinate the moment of explicit proclamation.”⁷

Model of Mission as Encounter

This is a model that has enjoyed particular support in the magisterium of the two most recent pontiffs, Benedict XVI and Francis. Both have repeatedly affirmed that at the origin of mission is not a morality, a doctrine, but an encounter with the person of Christ and his word. In other words, the purpose of mission is to encounter people and peoples, and the mission of the Church is to facilitate that encounter, to build bridges and not to erect walls.

In particular, what Pope Francis dreams of with his idea of an outgoing Church is to seek an encounter with individuals, peoples and their cultures, in the context of a new missionary initiative that is attractive, since “the Church grows in the world through attraction and not through proselytism.”⁸ It is therefore beauty and gratuitousness that characterize this model of mission.

This model, too, has very ancient origins, which can even be found in the Old Testament, where the religious consciousness of the people is linked to the idea of God’s encounter with the people whom He called to a covenant with Him. Israel’s liturgical tradition also was born and built under the sign of encounter: during the exodus, Moses and the Israelites entered the tent to meet God and be in his presence.

⁶ See F. González Fernández, *Il Movimento Missionario del secolo XIX e il mondo neo-africano* [*The Missionary Movement of the Nineteenth Century and the New African World*], in ID, *Daniela Comboni e la rigenerazione dell’Africa* [*Daniela Comboni and the Regeneration of Africa*], Urbaniana University Press, Rome 2003, pp. 37-79.

⁷ Manuel Augusto Ferreira, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

⁸ Francis, *Message to the Pontifical Mission Societies*, 21 May 2020.

Even in the New Testament, particularly in the gospels, we see Jesus seeking an encounter with people, particularly the outcasts of his time and the rejects of society, to present himself to them as their “good shepherd.”

Dialogue of life and faith are the variants of the model of mission as encounter that were inspired by the Second Vatican Council. The Council proclaims the Church’s vocation to encounter and communion with all peoples: “*The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.*” (GS 1).

The model of mission as encounter, with openness to dialogue, is found in the pontifical magisterium following Vatican II. Paul VI, in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelium nuntiandi*, affirms that “*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*” (EN 21).

Although the model most proposed by John Paul II’s magisterium is that of proclamation, the model of encounter also finds important contributions, such as the affirmation of the universal destiny of the gospel and the importance of encountering peoples in the context of their cultures (inculturation), as well as the value of witness and interreligious dialogue, albeit as a function of proclamation.

Pope Francis has revived the model of mission as encounter, on the one hand relocating the encounter with Christ to the beginning of the Christian’s journey, and on the other hand affirming that mission does indeed seek encounter, but not by proselytizing. For Francis, mission is not one of the many forms of Christian existence, but something the Christian cannot eradicate from his heart: “*I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world.*”⁹ After all, this model is also inspired by Jesus’ own life, by “*his way of dealing with the poor, his actions, his integrity, his simple daily acts of generosity, ... his complete self-giving.*”¹⁰

It is especially the document that came out of the synod of bishops on Amazonia that represents the most eloquent expression of Pope Francis’ magisterium about the model of mission as encounter: in it, the Church serves and accompanies indigenous people, values listening to the peoples and their spirituality, and engages in their education, in the defense of their lands, cultures and lifestyles. In October 2022, Pope Francis canonically erected the Ecclesial Conference of the Amazon (CEAMA), a body that promotes synodality in the pan-Amazonian region: this is evidently a clear support of the model of mission as encounter in the Amazon basin regions.

Even with regard to the future of mission on the Asian continent, this model seems to offer the only viable way forward, since Christianity is a minority religion and perceived as “foreign” compared to the many local cultures and religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Shintoism, Confucianism, Islam).

Model of Mission as Service

The model of mission as service has taken on special emphasis since the Second Vatican Council. On the one hand, this model emphasizes mission and service to the

⁹ EG 273.

¹⁰ EG 265.

community with the promotion of ministries necessary for its growth; on the other hand, it emphasizes the contribution of Christians to the transformation of society according to principles inspired by the gospel. In summary, this model finds in the ministry of the Church and social transformation, the missionary context of its very action.

The model of mission as service emphasizes, first, the ecclesial matrix of the Church's ministries and, second, their integration with other ministries, with particular emphasis on the role of the laity. Beginning with the Second Vatican Council, but especially in subsequent developments, the awareness of the involvement of the laity in social transformation has become increasingly consistent; put another way, the relationship between mission and society, culture, politics, economics, and nature.

The model of mission as service has received a new impetus with the pontificate of Pope Francis who, particularly with the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, sees the Church and religions at the service of the universal aspiration to fraternity.¹¹

This model is rooted in the gospels, which show us a Jesus close to the people, attentive to their concrete situations, to their needs. The early Jerusalem community itself is organized according to these criteria of Jesus and constitutes deacons to serve at soup kitchens and respond to the needs of the poor, the orphans, and the widows.

Subsequently, the whole history of the Church testifies to the attention to the poor, upholding the model of mission as service to humanity. Today the Church, just about everywhere, has a vast network of schools, universities, hospitals, which owe their origin to the action of missionaries.

In the 20th century, states took over their responsibilities and claimed education and health for themselves. In addition, civil society has seen the emergence of a large number of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the most diverse fields almost everywhere. For this reason, many missionaries today are moving away from the model of mission as service and becoming aware of other models.

Finally, it should be added that, in certain situations, the model of mission as service represents the only possibility of maintaining a missionary presence, as happens, for example, with schools and hospitals in fundamentalist Islamic environments. The risk, in such cases, is the reduction of mission to social action, the overlapping of missionary action and social action, which lends itself to fostering a kind of confusion between the missionary action of the Church and the proper action of Non-Governmental Organizations (sometimes reducing the Church to an NGO).

Model of Mission as Fraternity

That of mission as “fraternity” is a model that could be called “under construction.”¹²

With the Encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis deserves credit for having re-proposed to the people of our time the dream of a universal fraternity and for having proposed to Christians the value of fraternity as a key concept of the Church's action and mission in our time.

Although already present in the Old Testament, we know that the concept of “fraternity” was applied exclusively to members of the people of Israel; it was, however,

¹¹ See *FT* 9-55; 56-86; 271-284.

¹² See Manuel Augusto Ferreira, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

a dream that was never fully realized, so much so that the prophets ended up projecting it into the future of God's eschatological promise to the chosen people.

Jesus challenges the assumptions of fraternity in Israel, namely blood ties and tribal membership, in order to proclaim a new fraternity, whose foundation is acceptance and obedience to the Word of God. The apostle Paul then becomes the herald of this universal brotherhood, seeing in the Christian community the community of brothers and sisters in Christ, where "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female" (Galatians 3:28).

The Second Vatican Council affirms that Christians feel rooted in the contemporary world, "*truly linked with mankind*"; the world of which the Council speaks is that "*of men, the whole human family along with the sum of those realities in the midst of which it lives.*"¹³ In the aspiration to universal brotherhood the Council recognizes one of the signs of the times, indeed one of the most important signs of our time.

In his proposal for universal fraternity and social friendship (see the subtitle of the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*), Pope Francis continually refers back to this conciliar root and to the magisterium of his predecessors, recalling its theological and spiritual foundation: "*God's universal saving will is offered to history, to all humanity, through the incarnation of his Son, so that all men and women can become his children, brothers and sisters among themselves.*"¹⁴

A decisive contribution to mission as fraternity is found in *Fratelli tutti* in Pope Francis' proposal to understand the Church's mission precisely as the promotion of fraternity and friendship among peoples. What is original here is his proposal to assume fraternity as the *raison d'être* of the Church's mission in our time. He does not hide the ills of our time, the dreams shattered, the rights trampled, the hopes dashed, the conflicts never dormant, the social gap, and differences increased with globalization.¹⁵ But he proposes as a solution to these problems the ways of dialogue and social friendship,¹⁶ which impose a new culture to be built together in the common search for shared foundations.

It is interesting that with *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis extends the proposal of promoting fraternity and social friendship to religions in particular.¹⁷ The idea of an "interreligious mission" stands out in this context. The appeal that Pope Francis makes with the encyclical *Fratelli tutti* is an *ad intra* and *ad extra* appeal, we might say "ecumenical," in that it is also addressed to other Christian denominations and religions in general. The goal of a common mission is that of a new social and political order, characterized by fraternity. Pope Francis identifies in this shared goal a new course of Christian presence and mission in the world.

Unfortunately, the theme of fraternity and Pope Francis' proposals seem to remain within rather limited circles of reflection and struggle to reach wider communities and groups. "*It is surprising, for example, the lack of reaction to the encyclical by missionary institutes and societies of apostolic life, in spite of the clear missionary dimension of Fratelli tutti, or by religious congregations and institutes that have made the universal mission of the Church their own.*"¹⁸ It is a clear sign that this is not an easy model to move

¹³ See *GS* 1-2.

¹⁴ Francis, *Address to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome*, 18 September 2021.

¹⁵ See *FT* 9-55.

¹⁶ See *FT* 199-224.

¹⁷ See *FT* 271-287.

¹⁸ Manuel Augusto Ferreira, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

from theory to practice and one that is capable of calling into question the forms of mission to which one is accustomed.

In fact, *Fratelli tutti* challenges not only our understanding of mission, but especially our way of looking at others and ourselves, inviting us to review and rethink our own identity. This encyclical invites us to see others as persons and fellow travelers and to overcome the perception of the other as a threat, rival, competitor or enemy.¹⁹

Universal brotherhood is thus proposed as a response to dangerous phenomena emerging somewhat in all societies today: tribalism, nationalism, populism, and political and religious fundamentalism. *Fratelli tutti* suggests a new approach to the other, in which one's identity is recognized and affirmed not as separation but as openness to the other. A perspective, this, that pushes us to review our habitual way of thinking about our mission in the world.

Model of Mission as Liberation

While the prevailing model of mission in the 19th century (colonial era) is that of mission as proclamation, gradually we realize the transformative power of the gospel, which carries within itself the ability to improve the living conditions of the people to whom it is proclaimed.

This new model of mission, which we could also call “transformation,” is accompanied by the building of schools, hospitals, centers of arts and crafts. It is a model that imposed itself throughout the 19th century and, until the mid-20th century; that is, until the Second Vatican Council. It then evolved to the so-called “liberation” model, with different tonal variants, ranging from “social transformation” to “political liberation.”

Subsequently, beginning with the Second Vatican Council, themes of development, human promotion, peace and justice among peoples and nations emerge with increasing force. A *theology of progress* also develops, re-proposing the conviction that the gospel and the Christian faith should be expressed and lived out as a leaven of social and cultural, political and economic transformation. This theology reinforces the model of mission as transformation, inherited from the 19th century, which is enshrined in the ecclesial magisterium with Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* (1967).

The following years, however, did not produce an evolution of societies in the direction indicated by the Council, particularly in Africa and America: on the latter continent there was a major setback with the assassination of John Kennedy (in North America) and the return of dictatorships and military regimes (in South America).

Especially in South America, the feeling of frustration and disappointment will be strong, leading Christians and missionaries to question their role in the transformation of society. It was in this context that first the so-called “Christians for Socialism” and then “liberation theology” arose, bringing with them the model of mission as “liberation.”

In Africa and Asia, liberation theology and the model of mission as liberation have had different paths of lesser breadth and impact. In Asia, traditional Asian values and inner attitudes were leveraged as a possible response to social poverty.²⁰ In Africa, the

¹⁹ See *FT* 18, 86, 133, 152, 187.

²⁰ See, for example, A. Pieris, *Una teologia asiatica di liberazione [An Asian Liberation Theology]*, Cittadella, Assisi 1990.

colonial condition of dependence, still strong in the mid-20th century, and the assertion of one's cultural identity fostered the debate on the inculturation of Christianity, the emergence of contextual African theology, and a model of mission centered on cultural and political liberation.²¹

As we know, under the pontificate of John Paul II the fundamental concepts of liberation theology were being questioned vigorously and the model of mission as liberation was increasingly losing its bite. In line with John Paul II, Benedict XVI also maintained a critical look at liberation theology.

The model of mission as liberation entered the 21st century with little influence or attractiveness. At the same time, there has been a growing exodus of Catholics to Pentecostal groups, on the wave of prosperity theology coming from the United States of America, which is accompanied in Latin America by the return of populisms and dictatorships, this time at the hands of once revolutionary men (cf. Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua, etc.).

The election of Pope Francis in 2013 was an unexpected factor that gives this model a new breath and a new chance. Of course, to interpret Pope Francis' pontificate as a return to liberation theology or as an exclusive support for the model of mission as liberation would be reductive of his thought and action. Rather, a predominant idea in the current pontiff's thinking would be that of a "theology of the people," which certainly does not coincide with liberation theology. It could be said that, with this expression, Pope Francis takes up the themes of liberation theology by making a new and personal synthesis of it.

Model of Mission as Integral Ecology

A final model, the most recent from a chronological point of view, is the model of mission as integral ecology. Giving strength and content to the idea of including the promotion of integral ecology among models of mission was certainly Pope Francis' Encyclical, *Laudato si'* (2015), although this idea is reiterated continually in later interventions, e.g., in *Fratelli tutti* and *Querida Amazonia* (both 2020).

In this model, three reasons support mission as integral ecology: the intimate relationship between the fragility of the planet and the poor; the conviction that everything in the world is intimately connected; and the critique of the new paradigm of progress and the forms of power that derive from technology and create a culture of waste. These three central themes of the encyclical, *Laudato si'*, connect the theme of integral ecology to the mission of the Church in an intrinsic and inseparable way.

Certainly "that of mission as integral ecology appears as a model *in progress*, as much in Francis' magisterium as in the reflections and initiatives promoted by missionaries and those who feel drawn to this model."²²

There are also three areas in which the construction of this model can be continued: the *informational* (i.e., efforts to make people aware of the problems and

²¹ See, for example, J.-M. Ela, *Il grido dell'uomo africano. Domande ai cristiani e alle Chiese dell'Africa* [*The Cry of African Man. Questions to the Christians and Churches of Africa*], L'Harmattan, Turin 2001.

²² Manuel Augusto FERREIRA, *Mission models...*, cit. pp. 156-157.

challenges we face); the *propositional* (i.e., the promotion of new lifestyles); and the *spiritual* (itself specific to missionaries).²³

Pope Francis emphasizes some fundamental principles that must be kept in mind in view of building the model of mission as integral ecology.²⁴ The first of these principles is contained in the affirmation that every creature (human beings and every other being in the cosmos) are a gift from God and, as such, should be welcomed and experienced. The second principle is that all created realities, even inanimate ones, have an identity, their own dignity, and are an asset to be respected and protected for future generations. The third principle is that because all the realities of creation are a gift, we are not masters, but stewards and custodians of the goods entrusted to us by the Creator.

In the construction of mission as integral ecology, Pope Francis insists on the necessity of its foundation, which is spirituality, because “*a commitment this lofty cannot be sustained by doctrine alone, without a spirituality capable of inspiring us, without an ‘interior impulse which encourages, motivates, nourishes and gives meaning to our individual and communal activity’.*”²⁵

In different ways and on different occasions Pope Francis says that an “ecological conversion” is needed, leading to new lifestyles and consumption, new models of economy, production, and distribution, which make room for the spiritual dimension of the person. We can ask ourselves: within the horizon opened up by *Laudato si’* and continually re-proposed by Pope Francis, is it possible to rethink our mission in today’s world, enriching it with unprecedented and currently unavoidable dimensions?

What is the mission of us Vincentians today?

At the end of this examination of the most recurrent models of mission drawn from the missionary action of the Church throughout the centuries, we can ask ourselves whether there is and what should be the typically Vincentian model or the one that best embodies our charism and spirituality.

I would like to clear immediately the field of misunderstandings: it is my conviction that there is no typically Vincentian model of mission *ad gentes* and that our missionary action must have a place in the broader missionary action of the universal Church and, in particular, in the reconfiguration of mission carried out by Pope Francis, the essential elements of which can be summarized as follows.

The four principles of Evangelii Gaudium

The third part (cf. EG 217-237) of chapter four of this Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis, entitled *The Social Dimension of Evangelization*, contains four basic principles, which constitute, so to speak, the general framework within which to envision mission today.

The first principle says that time is greater than space. Applied to mission, this principle makes us realize that we need to pay more attention to the processes of missionary action and their pull, rather than to strategies for conquering geographic, cultural, and power spaces.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 157-158.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 165-166.

²⁵ LS 216, which refers to EG 261.

The second principle says that unity prevails over conflict. Referring to the models of mission, this principle can help us understand and accept the tensions that may arise among the various models and highlight the profound unity that characterizes the mission of the Church: before the variety of models and different ways of accomplishing mission, comes the unity of its nature.

The third principle says that realities are more important than ideas. This makes us realize that missionaries and the models of mission to which they adhere are asked to be involved in reality from within, to transform it into fidelity to the Word of God that mission itself proclaims.

The last principle states that the whole is greater than the part. With regard to mission, it makes us understand that the various models must be brought back to a greater unity, which is achieved only in the perspective of the whole. The icon of wholeness, Pope Francis continues, is not the sphere, but the “polyhedron,” which represents the convergence of the parts, which retain their distinctiveness.

Going to the peripheries.

This expression, so dear to Pope Francis along with that of “a Church going out,” as the proper location of the Church’s mission in today’s world, is well known. What do these and similar expressions suggest to us on the level of our missionary action? They express a tendency or, better yet, an attitude to be held before others: it is a movement precisely of the very nature of mission.

And to be more concrete, Pope Francis points out, “*A Church which ‘goes forth’ is a Church whose doors are open. Going out to others in order to reach the fringes of humanity does not mean rushing out aimlessly into the world.*”²⁶ To missionaries, this attitude suggests a deep openness and inclusiveness toward all, especially the poor and those who are discarded by society. If there is a specificity of Vincentian mission, I believe it is rooted right here.

Moving from exclusion to inclusion

The dominant models until the mid-20th century were based on the axiom *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. The exclusivist perspective was abandoned by the Second Vatican Council, which took a new path: that of ecumenical dialogue, as well as the secular character of society and the autonomy of the sciences.

An inclusive attitude puts gospel values at the heart of mission and frees them from any colonizing schemes: political colonialism has been overcome, but missionaries must be careful not to replicate a cultural colonialism.

Deconstructing for reconfiguring

This expression sums up a constant concern in the magisterium of Pope Francis. For what concerns mission, what he cares about is not proselytism, but attraction; not colonization, but a respectful presence of peoples and their cultures; not clericalism, but the witness of all the Lord’s disciples; not a doctrine, but an encounter with a Person. In other words, it is a divine action, not simply a human one.

²⁶ EG 46.

By focusing on the context, Pope Francis intends to draw attention to some troubling phenomena that characterize today's society, such as the proliferation of new religious movements (which seem to propose a spirituality without God), the secularization of urban cultures (which tends to reduce faith to a private and intimate sphere), and exaggerated individualism (which increasingly weakens community ties).

To know these phenomena thoroughly in order to combat them is the challenge of missionaries today and corresponds to the urgency of "inculturating the gospel." This means "deconstructing for reconfiguring," that is, reshaping society.

The holiness of the missionary's life

Pope Francis stigmatizes the phenomena that "stifle the joy of mission" and "are stealing our missionary enthusiasm," sterile pessimism and spiritual worldliness (see *EG* 81-101). He especially insists on the danger of spiritual worldliness, which consists in seeking one's own glory instead of God's, one's own interests instead of Christ's (see *EG* 93-97). This is an attitude fueled by the allure of subjectivism, of entrusting mission to one's own strengths and organizational capacity instead of to the action of the Holy Spirit.

In conclusion, the view of mission as a "multifaceted reality" recognizes the mysterious and surprising action of the Spirit, who bestows his gifts on different people, without excluding the laity, and sustains different sensibilities for the common edification and good of all.

Instead of binding itself to a predetermined model, mission today demands the ability to interact with each other and constant dialogue among various models. The richness comes precisely from the variety of models of mission, especially in this beginning of the century, which is strongly marked by intolerance and fundamentalism.

No one model, taken individually, can contain all the richness of the reality of the Church's mission in the world. The plurality of models and Pope Francis' contribution to the "missionary reconfiguration" of the Church are also important in the perspective of openness to multiculturalism, a process that has begun in the Church and will be increasingly intensified in the coming years, as we also experience within our Little Company.

A new scenario is already looming on the horizon: the 21st century will not see missionaries originating predominantly from the Western, European and American, world as in the past, but missionaries from the young churches, especially from Africa and Asia. On the ability to operate effectively in this new scenario will depend the future of our mission *ad gentes!*

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