

**Encyclical Letter**

**REDEMPTORIS MISSIO**

**On The Permanent Validity Of The Church's Missionary Mandate (Excerpts)**

December, 7, 1990

***The Spirit Is Present and Active in Every Time and Place***

**28.** The Spirit manifests himself in a special way in the Church and in her members. Nevertheless, his presence and activity are universal, limited neither by space nor time.(35) The Second Vatican Council recalls that the Spirit is at work in the heart of every person, through the "seeds of the Word," to be found in human initiatives-including religious ones-and in mankind's efforts to attain truth, goodness and God himself.(36)

The Spirit offers the human race "the light and strength to respond to its highest calling"; through the Spirit, "mankind attains in faith to the contemplation and savoring of the mystery of God's design"; indeed, "we are obliged to hold that the Holy Spirit offers everyone the possibility of sharing in the Paschal Mystery in a manner known to God."(37) The Church "is aware that humanity is being continually stirred by the Spirit of God and can therefore never be completely indifferent to the problems of religion" and that "people will always...want to know what meaning to give their life, their activity and their death."(38) The Spirit, therefore, is at the very source of man's existential and religious questioning, a questioning which is occasioned not only by contingent situations but by the very structure of his being.(39)

The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only the individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions. Indeed, the Spirit is at the origin of the noble ideals and undertakings which benefit humanity on its journey through history: "The Spirit of God with marvellous foresight directs the course of the ages and renews the face of the earth."(40) The risen Christ "is now at work in human hearts through the strength of his Spirit, not only instilling a desire for the world to come but also thereby animating, purifying and reinforcing the noble aspirations which drive the human family to make its life one that is more human and to direct the whole earth to this end."(41) Again, it is the Spirit who sows the "seeds of the Word" present in various customs and cultures, preparing them for full maturity in Christ.(42)

**29.** Thus the Spirit, who "blows where he wills" (cf. Jn 3:8), who "was already at work in the world before Christ was glorified,"(43) and who "has filled the world, holds all things together [and] knows what is said" (Wis 1:7), leads us to broaden our vision in order to ponder his activity in every time and place.(44) I have repeatedly called this fact to mind, and it has guided me in my meetings with a wide variety of peoples. The Church's relationship with other religions is dictated by a twofold respect: "Respect for man in his quest for answers to the deepest questions of his life, and respect for the action of the Spirit in man."(45) Excluding any

mistaken interpretation, the interreligious meeting held in Assisi was meant to confirm my conviction that "every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in every human heart."(46)

This is the same Spirit who was at work in the Incarnation and in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and who is at work in the Church. He is therefore not an alternative to Christ, nor does he fill a sort of void which is sometimes suggested as existing between Christ and the Logos. Whatever the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures and religions serves as a preparation for the Gospel(47) and can only be understood in reference to Christ, the Word who took flesh by the power of the Spirit" so that as perfectly human he would save all human beings and sum up all things."(48)

Moreover, the universal activity of the Spirit is not to be separated from his particular activity within the body of Christ, which is the Church. Indeed, it is always the Spirit who is at work, both when he gives life to the Church and impels her to proclaim Christ, and when he implants and develops his gifts in all individuals and peoples, guiding the Church to discover these gifts, to foster them and to receive them through dialogue. Every form of the Spirit's presence is to be welcomed with respect and gratitude, but the discernment of this presence is the responsibility of the Church, to which Christ gave his Spirit in order to guide her into all the truth (cf. Jn 16:13).

### ***Dialogue with Our Brothers and Sisters of Other Religions***

**55.** Inter-religious dialogue is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission. Understood as a method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment, dialogue is not in opposition to the mission *ad gentes*; indeed, it has special links with that mission and is one of its expressions. This mission, in fact, is addressed to those who do not know Christ and his Gospel, and who belong for the most part to other religions. In Christ, God calls all peoples to himself and he wishes to share with them the fullness of his revelation and love. He does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression, even when they contain "gaps, insufficiencies and errors."(98) All of this has been given ample emphasis by the Council and the subsequent Magisterium, without detracting in any way from the fact that *salvation comes from Christ and that dialogue does not dispense from evangelization.*(99)

In the light of the economy of salvation, the Church sees no conflict between proclaiming Christ and engaging in interreligious dialogue. Instead, she feels the need to link the two in the context of her mission *ad gentes*. These two elements must maintain both their intimate connection and their distinctiveness; therefore they should not be confused, manipulated or regarded as identical, as though they were interchangeable.

I recently wrote to the bishops of Asia: "Although the Church gladly acknowledges whatever is true and holy in the religious traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam as a reflection of that truth which enlightens all people, this does not lessen her duty and resolve to proclaim without fail Jesus Christ who is 'the way, and the truth and the life.'...The fact that the followers of other religions can receive God's grace and be saved by Christ apart from the ordinary

means which he has established does not thereby cancel the call to faith and baptism which God wills for all people."(100) Indeed Christ himself "while expressly insisting on the need for faith and baptism, at the same time confirmed *the need for the Church*, into which people enter through Baptism as through a door." (101) Dialogue should be conducted and implemented with the conviction that *the Church is the ordinary means of salvation* and that *she alone* possesses the fullness of the means of salvation.(102)

**56.** Dialogue does not originate from tactical concerns or self-interest, but is an activity with its own guiding principles, requirements and dignity. It is demanded by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he wills.(103) Through dialogue, the Church seeks to uncover the "seeds of the Word,"(104) a "ray of that truth which enlightens all men";(105) these are found in individuals and in the religious traditions of mankind. Dialogue is based on hope and love, and will bear fruit in the Spirit. Other religions constitute a positive challenge for the Church: they stimulate her both to discover and acknowledge the signs of Christ's presence and of the working of the Spirit, as well as to examine more deeply her own identity and to bear witness to the fullness of Revelation which she has received for the good of all.

This gives rise to the spirit which must enliven dialogue in the context of mission. Those engaged in this dialogue must be consistent with their own religious traditions and convictions, and be open to understanding those of the other party without pretence or close-mindedness, but with truth, humility and frankness, knowing that dialogue can enrich each side. There must be no abandonment of principles nor false irenics, but instead a witness given and received for mutual advancement on the road of religious inquiry and experience, and at the same time for the elimination of prejudice, intolerance and misunderstandings. Dialogue leads to inner purification and conversion which, if pursued with docility to the Holy Spirit, will be spiritually fruitful.

**57.** A vast field lies open to dialogue, which can assume many forms and expressions: from exchanges between experts in religious traditions or official representatives of those traditions to cooperation for integral development and the safeguarding of religious values; and from a sharing of their respective spiritual experiences to the so-called "dialogue of life," through which believers of different religions bear witness before each other in daily life to their own human and spiritual values, and help each other to live according to those values in order to build a more just and fraternal society.

Each member of the faithful and all Christian communities are called to practice dialogue, although not always to the same degree or in the same way. The contribution of the laity is indispensable in this area, for they "can favour the relations which ought to be established with the followers of various religions through their example in the situations in which they live and in their activities." (106) Some of them also will be able to make a contribution through research and study. (107)

I am well aware that many missionaries and Christian communities find in the difficult and often misunderstood path of dialogue their only way of bearing sincere witness to Christ and

offering generous service to others. I wish to encourage them to persevere with faith and love, even in places where their efforts are not well received. Dialogue is a path toward the kingdom and will certainly bear fruit, even if the times and seasons are known only to the Father (cf. Acts 1:7).

## Notes

35. Cf. Encyclical Letter *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 53: *loc. cit.*, 874f.
36. Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church *Ad Gentes*, 3, 11, 15; Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 10-11, 22, 26, 38, 41, 92-93.
37. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 10, 15, 22.
38. *Ibid.*, 41.
39. Cf. Encyclical Letter *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 54: *loc. cit.*, 875f.
40. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 26.
41. *Ibid.*, 38; cf. 93.
42. Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 17; Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church *Ad Gentes*, 3, 15.
43. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church *Ad Gentes*, 4.
44. Cf. Encyclical Letter *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 53: *loc. cit.*, 874.
45. Address to Representatives of Non-Christian Religions, Madras, February 5, 1986: AAS 78 (1986), 767; cf. *Message to the Peoples of Asia*, Manila, February 21, 1981, 2-4: AAS 73 (1981), 392f; Address to Representatives of Other Religions, Tokyo, February 24, 1981, 3-4: *Insegnamenti IV/I* (1981), 507f.
46. Address to Cardinals and the Roman Curia, December 22, 1986, 11: AAS 79 (1987), 1089.
47. Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 16.
48. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 45; cf. Encyclical Letter *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 54: *loc. cit.*, 876.
98. Paul VI, Address at the opening of the Second Session of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, September 29, 1963: AAS 55 (1963), 858; cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Declaration on the Church's Relation to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate*, 2; Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 16; Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church *Ad Gentes*, 9; Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 53: *loc. cit.* 41f.
99. Cf. Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesiam Suam* (August 6, 1964): AAS 56 (1964), 609-659; Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church *Ad Gentes*, 11, 41; Secretariat for Non-Christians, Document *L'atteggiamento della Chiesa di fronte ai seguaci di altre religioni: Riflessioni e orientamenti su dialogo e missione* (September 4, 1984): AAS 76 (1984), 816-828.
100. Letter to the Fifth Plenary Assembly of Asian Bishops' Conferences (June 23, 1990), 4: *L'Osservatore Romano*, July 18, 1990.
101. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 14; cf. Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church *Ad Gentes*, 7.
102. Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3; Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church *Ad Gentes*, 7.
103. Cf. Encyclical Letter *Redemptor Hominis*, 12: *loc. cit.*, 279.
104. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church *Ad Gentes*, 11, 15.

105. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Declaration on the Church's Relation to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate*, 2.
106. Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, 35: *loc. cit.*, 458.
107. Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church *Ad Gentes*, 41.