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Mission *ad Gentes* Today: A Biblical Perspective

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1. Problematic of Speaking of “Mission to the Nations” Today

The perspective or standpoint from which one views an object or an issue determines, conditions and shapes what one sees. The presentation invites us to review the church’s mission to the nations today from the biblical perspective. An important question raised today from this biblical perspective and other perspectives is whether there is need and even whether it is correct to speak today of mission to the gentiles/nations, especially given the UN declaration of religious freedom as a fundamental human right. We may lay this question to rest before we proceed by acknowledging that the mission to the nations is not an option for us Christians but a duty laid on us by our brother, Jesus. Furthermore, this mission is not one of bringing people to subjection but of proclaiming to them the good news of their liberation. If in the past we had not undertaken mission in the spirit of proclaiming the good news, we accept responsibility for that, perhaps join John Paul II in his *Mea Culpa*’s,¹ but move on with the mission mandate we received from Christ by understanding it aright in this century.

Secondly, though the mandate to proclaim the Good News to the nations implies a going forth (for Jesus himself went forth from God to us and from Nazareth to Samaria, Judea and Jerusalem), it did and does not necessarily mean proclaiming only to unbelievers. Indeed Jesus asked that the Good News be proclaimed from Jerusalem, the Vatican City of his religion, to the regions of Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. His mandate to the disciples to be his witnesses excludes no one and no corner of the world from hearing and benefiting from this Good News of God’s general amnesty to the entire creation. The proclamation is to start from Jerusalem itself, and from there spread to Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (*Acts* 1:8). If, therefore, in the past we have tended to understand mission almost exclusively in terms of going to foreign lands to save or convert unbelievers who would otherwise be lost, we may need to review this mentality as we carry out the same mandate in this new century. Today going forth may require above all, our own going forth in mind, heart, attitude towards others, conversion, in the fullest sense of the word, to the Gospel.

Thirdly, in the biblical perspective, the mission to the nations is an integral part of the biblical faith that God created the world good, very good, but that evil entered into that world through human sin. God’s response to that sin was to promise the restoration of creation through salvation effected by the woman and her seed (*Gen* 3:15). Biblical history tells us that God kept this promise through the mission of Jesus, Son of Mary (*Mark* 4:6). In this perspective, therefore, no part of creation or nation can or should be excluded from benefiting from this divine redemption.

Fourthly, the Bible itself is a book born of mission and about mission. *Genesis* 12:1-3, arguably the genesis of the Old Testament, narrates how God called Abraham and Sarah to go from Ur of the Chaldeans to a land which God would show them, as a first step in the divine mission given to them, to be the father and mother of faith from whom would be born a multitude of nations. From their seed, too, would come the Messiah through whom God would fulfill the divine promise to deliver humanity from the self betrayal caused by the sin of the first man and woman (*Gen* 3:15). The rest of the Old Testament narrates the different stages of this divine missionary work and journey in and through different people. Key among them, from the time of Exodus, are Moses with Aaron and Miriam, Joshua, Deborah, David and the prophets. Throughout these stages, the combination of being and doing remain inseparable. Both are geared towards the final transformation of humanity and creation in the establishment of the new heaven and the new earth proclaimed in *Revelation* 21:1-22:4. Jesus and his Mother play a key role in this divine missionary work. Jesus’ role constitutes the new way, the new covenant or testament.

¹ Luigi Accattoli, ed., *When a Pope Asks Forgiveness: The Mea Culpa’s of John Paul II*, trans. Jordan Aumann, OP, (Boston: Pauline Book and Media, 1998), gives twenty-one events (past and present) for which the Pope asked forgiveness as part of the atonement in preparation for the Great Jubilee of Our Lord, 2000.

This study naturally focuses on Jesus' mission as the determinative guide and norm for what it means to be a church on mission in our twenty-first century. His mission, continued by his disciples, is the climactic biblical perspective on mission. A central message of this mission is that God's creation and salvation through Christ is for everybody. Therefore all, without exception, have a right to hear about it. In the view of John Paul II, for the past two thousand years, we have been as it were toiling all night and catching nothing in the exercise of this mission. At the dawn of this millennium, we need to see and hear Jesus within our boat (Peter's boat), inviting us to do it right this time, that is, to launch into the deep and let down our nets for the catch of the century.² To obey this command, we need to undertake mission in a new way (new wine, new skins). This awareness challenges us, like wise scribes (*Matthew 13:52*), to discover new methods, concepts and approaches for carrying out the same old mission to the nations in the twenty-first century in our contexts of pluralism (religious and otherwise), diversified cultures, growing individualism (personal and national), religious, economic and political fundamentalism, globalisation and moral permissiveness.³

2. To Be Church Is to Be Mission – the New Testament Evidence

The Missionary Constitution of the Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes* (2,22) declares, among other things, that where the church is, there is mission. This statement reverses the older concept of mission understood as outreach to pagans, unbelievers in foreign lands. It reverses the understanding that only certain people are called to be missionaries. It affirms that to be a church, members of Christ's body, is essentially to be on mission. Why is this so? Is it in the Bible, as the Pentecostals would ask in Nigeria?

Jesus is essentially one sent; he is God in person coming to show us how to be truly and fully human.⁴ Or as Hebrews says, he became "like us in all things, but sin" (*Hebrews 4:15*). His preferred name for God in John's Gospel, and the concept which defines his relationship with God, is "the one who sent me"; he himself is one sent by God. Any Christian, one baptized, incorporated into Christ (christened), made a branch of his vine and tended by God to bear fruit in mission, is essentially sent to be Christ in the world, in the same way as Jesus was one sent by God into the world. To be church in and as mission is to be Christ in and for the world.

As Jesus himself was missioned by God at his baptism through the endowment of the Holy Spirit, he likewise, after his resurrection, missioned his disciples: "As the Father sent me, so am I sending you . . . Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive people's sins, their sins will be forgiven. If you retain them they are retained" (*John 20:21-22*).⁵ This Holy Spirit was to dwell in them, inspire, teach, guide, defend and empower them to be in the world, sent as he himself had been sent from the crib to the cross and resurrection. On the cross, Jesus gave birth to the church (the water and blood from his pierced side symbolizing the sacraments of initiation, baptism and the Eucharist); at Pentecost, God's baptism of the earth with transforming fire (*Acts 2:16-21*), the Holy Spirit gave birth to this church as a church on mission.

The Pentecost event embraced all nations. Both those inside the Upper Room and those dwelling in Jerusalem from "every nation under heaven" were drawn out from their respective places, propelled together into one place, outside the Upper Room and outside their houses, to form a new community, to be a church on mission. Born of the paschal event, the church's life before Pentecost may be compared to the period of the Incarnate Word in Mary's womb and his hidden life. The newly born church at Pentecost is essentially a church on mission, launched on mission as Jesus was, from his baptism till his ascension (the final step of the completion of his mission on earth): "But when the Holy Spirit comes, you will be filled with power and you will be my witnesses from Jerusalem and Judea, and Samaria, yes to the ends of the earth" (*Acts 1:8*).⁶

² John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2001), no. 15 and *passim*.

³ See further on this, T. Okure, "Drawing from Our Treasury the New and the Old: Challenges of Mission in the Twenty-First Century" in *The Church in Mission: Universal Mandate and Local Concerns*, edited by Thomas Malipurathu, SVD, and Lazar Stanislaus, SVD (India: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash), 181-210.

⁴ This thought is amply elaborated in *Ad Gentes* of the Second Vatican Council and in subsequent encyclicals of John Paul II, especially in *Redemptor Hominis* and *Redemptoris Missio*. For a collection of the latter, see, *The Encyclicals of John Paul II*, edited with Introductions by J. Michael Miller, CSB (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1996).

⁵ When Jesus completed his unique mission from the God who sent him, by his climactic passion, death and resurrection, he in turn commissioned all his disciples, without exception, to be on mission in the world, be ones sent as he was sent. As he himself had been fashioned into a human being by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary and led by the Spirit throughout his life, he in turn gave his disciples the gift of the same Holy Spirit to transform them personally, make them new creatures and lead and empower them in mission.

⁶ This verse, it will be recalled, formed the mantra of the 1994 African Synod with the theme, "The Church in Africa and Its Evangelizing Mission towards the Year 2000: 'You shall be my witnesses' (*Acts 8:1*)"; see the Post-Synodal Exhortation

Jesus passed on, in a special way, the chief stewardship baton of being church on mission to Peter, the rock on whom he would build his church. He commissioned him to: “Feed my lambs”, “tend my sheep”; “follow me” (that is, remain essentially a disciple; *John* 21:15-19). Administration in the church and in religious congregations is consequently an integral part of the call to be church on mission. At the same time, it remains essentially a call to discipleship of Jesus in the company of other disciples. Feeding and tending or stewardship (not governing and ruling), are central to this administrative work. Jesus remains the real leader while all others are disciples, followers on equal terms.

The New Testament evidence is conclusive that to be a disciple and to be church is to be missioned. The early church clearly saw itself as a missionary church. The early Christian community visibly constituted a missionary church, where living in Christ, reaching out to one another and to others, and proclaiming the Good News formed an inseparable package. In this early church, we hear only of key figures: Peter, James, John, Philip, Paul, Barnabas, Priscilla, Aquila, Apollos, Lydia, Phoebe, Dorcas, Timothy, Titus, Silas and so forth. But the churches in which these figures lived and worked were all churches of God on mission - built by God into one great family, knit and joined into the one body of Christ, as “bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh” (for the church is the bride of Christ; *Ephesians* 5:31-33), nourished and sustained by his body and blood to be Eucharist, giving thanks to God for God’s great love in action by sending his Son to save the world (*John* 3:16).⁷

3. Basic Aspects and Challenges of Mission

Once we have established that our ancestor church was a church on mission and that Jesus wants us to be a church on mission, sent, as God sent him, into the world, we need to identify and delineate the content, contours and basic aspects and tasks of mission, since the new trends will of necessity revolve around such tasks.⁸ At each step we raise the question of how we have been, actually are or could better be a church on mission in our own time and contexts. If, in the light of *Novo millennio ineunte*, we have not always done mission in the right manner,

- Why, how and where did we deviate from the gospel and from Jesus’ express commission that we proclaim the Good News (not ourselves, our church or even the universal lordship or uniqueness of Jesus, rightly or wrongly construed)?⁹
- What must we do to get back on track and, like Peter, fish in a way that will enable us to catch abundant fish, even in broad daylight, contrary to the established laws of fishing?
- How do we pay out our nets into the deep at the command of Jesus, even against our better judgments and expertise, as people who have been church for over two thousand years?

For practical reasons, we focus here only on the importance of relationship in mission and the task of the disciples’ mission viewed essentially as a harvesting. We pay attention to Jesus’ own mission statements in *Luke* 4:18-19 and *John* 10:10, and also in the life of Paul, apostle of the Gentiles. How was Jesus sent, and how was he permanently on mission? In the process we may touch upon methods in mission and the expected outcome of mission.

3.1 Importance of relationships

Mission implies a complex set of relationships between the sender, the one sent, the audience to whom one is sent and the task to be accomplished. The **relationship between the one sent and the sender is a key element in mission**. Where representation is involved, the one sent must have the same

of John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, [Reprinted by Assumpta Press, Owerri, Nigeria), no. 8. The *Lineamenta*, now in circulation, of the proposed Second African Synod with the theme, “The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace: ‘You are the salt of the earth.... You are the light of the world’ (*Mt* 5:13-14)” sees the coming Synod as a time to review the achievements of first Synod and move ahead with the church’s mission.

⁷ The Eucharistic character of the church is indicated in the “thanksgiving” section of Paul’s letters (except Galatians where Paul apparently sees no reason to give thanks, because of the “stupidity” of the Galatians in abandoning with speed the Gospel message they had first received). The Pauline injunction, “Always and in all things give thanks” (*Eph* 5:20), registers the same sentiment of an essentially Jewish religious piety.

⁸ In *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4:1-42* (WUNT 2/31; Tübingen: J.C.B Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1988, pp. 197-226), I listed “humility in the exercise of mission”, “fellowship in mission”, “the need for dependence” and the need to pray, as among the essential aspects of mission.

⁹ For a discussion on this thorny issue of the uniqueness of Jesus, see, beyond *Dominus Iesus*, Paul F. Knitter, “The Abiding Task of the Church in Mission: To Proclaim the Uniqueness of Jesus”, Malipurathu, et al. eds, *The Church in Mission* (n. 3 above), 117-146.

mind and heart as the sender. The Johannine prologue declares that nobody has ever seen God, only the uniquely begotten Son/God (*monogenēs theos*) has revealed him (*John* 1:18). Jesus himself declares that to have seen him is to have seen the God who sent him. This perfect correspondence between him and the sending God is evidenced concretely in his life, words and works (*John* 14:9-11). To send a person is to have sound confidence in the person. It also requires of the one sent never to lose sight of the sender, but always to be conscious of what the sender would do and how the sender would act in any given situation. This sheds light on Jesus' saying "The Son can do nothing except what he sees the Father doing" (*John* 5:19). Later, Paul would say, in turn, "Imitate me as I imitate Christ". In John's Gospel, this sender-sent motif not only colours the relationship between Jesus and the sending God; it also shapes Jesus' own fundamental self-understanding as "the one sent".¹⁰

Sending empowers the one sent to carry out the mission in the name of, and with the authority of, the one who sends. Jesus gave this empowerment to his disciples in two ways; he sent them the Holy Spirit to be with them as teacher, guide-memoir of all he had taught them and to serve as advocate and co-witness in a hostile world (*John* 14:15-21; 16). In addition he himself promised to be with them always (day and night, or twenty-four hours of the day) till the end of the ages, that is, till the completion of their missionary task (*Matthew* 28:20). This promise and empowerment implies that the one sent should have great confidence in carrying out the mission.

Awareness that the mission is just that, a mission, not a personal enterprise, should energize the one sent to carry out the mission "in bold humility" (to borrow a phrase of David Bosch). Success or failure in the mission is actually not the issue. What matters is to stick with the mission to the end. Jesus himself did that. His faithfulness to his mission ended in his death, apparently in total failure, but because it was done in absolute faithfulness and ultimate love for the one who sent him (*John* 14:31), it bore lasting fruit. It is impossible that evil should overcome and overrun the world which Jesus won at the cost of his own life, as an act of ultimate invincible love (*John* 13:1; 15:13). We are encouraged by his assurance, "I have overcome the world" (*John* 16:33).

Relationship between the one sent and the audience. Those to whom one is sent need to see, feel, hear and touch the sender in the one sent. The idea of witness through life and deeds comes into force here. What an awesome responsibility! Jesus said of himself to Philip, "One who has seen me has seen the Father" (*John* 14:9). He proclaimed that his works and words were those of the God who sent him. Similarly, he expected people and the world to see him in his disciples. To complicate matters even more, he reminded his disciples that he himself was equally in the poor to whom he sent them, even as he was in them. "Whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me" (*Matthew* 25:40). "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me" (*Matthew* 10:40). It is not enough to expect people to see Jesus in us as missionaries and church without our being equally ready to see and welcome Jesus in those to whom we are sent, whether locally or in foreign lands. Jesus modeled this respect for persons in his relationship with people who were outside the fold of Israel: the Syrophenician woman (*Matthew* 15:21-28); the Samaritan woman (*John* 4:1-42); and the centurion whose faith he said surpassed anything he had seen in Israel (*Luke* 7:1-10). This awareness invites us to go down memory lane and ask whether in the past we really saw Christ in the people to whom we were sent.

- Do we see Christ in people today, even in our fellow Christians, of all denominations and in those within our closest ecclesial and religious communities?
- What would being church on mission today require of us in this regard, as we recall that action on behalf of justice (social and otherwise) is a constitutive aspect of proclaiming the Gospel, and that ultimately justice has to do with truth in relationships (to self, to others and to God)?

Seeing Christ in those to whom we are sent is very important in our new approach to mission in the twenty-first century. It applies to all, whether those to whom we are sent are fellow believers, or people with and among whom we live on a daily basis, or those yet to believe in Christ or to be evangelized for the first time.

To be sent also requires developing a sound relationship of brotherhood and sisterhood with those to whom one is sent, despite cultural, geographical, biological and other differences. Jesus' relationship with us led him to see us no longer as slaves or even friends, but, after his resurrection, as brothers and sisters, siblings (*John* 20:17).¹¹ Not only did he make known to us all he had learnt from God,

¹⁰ Okure, *The Johannine Approach*, pp. 140-147, on the analysis of "the Father's work" (*John* 4:34; 17:4).

¹¹ On the sibling nature of our relationship with Jesus based on the commission to Mary Magdalene, see T. Okure, "The significance Today of Jesus' Commission to Mary Magdalene". *International Review of Mission* vol. LXXXI, no. 233 (1992): 177-188. Reprinted as "Jesus and Mary Magdalene" in *Feminism and Theology* (Oxford Readings in Feminism); edited by Janet Martin Soskice and Diana Lipton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 312-326.

but by calling us his brothers and sisters, God's children, he made us heirs of God and coheirs with him (*Romans* 8:15-17). This particular aspect of mission today has many ramifications for the church as mission. The African Synod opted for the notion of "church-as-family of God" as the model which best suited the understanding of church in Africa. Benedict XVI reinforces this in his Encyclical, *Deus caritas est*, and also in his 2006 Mission Sunday message. These affirmations by the Synod and the Pope are only recognitions of what God has already done for us in Christ and given to us through the grace of baptism. Awareness of the need to relate to those to whom one is sent as brothers and sisters would serve as a most natural cure for our broken and hurting world today with its diverse and often divisive cultures, life-styles, ideologies and political and religious persuasions.

3.2 Harvesting: the basic task of the church's mission

The multifaceted task of mission includes proclaiming the good news, teaching people to observe all that Jesus had commanded them, baptizing them into the family of our Trinitarian God. Comprehensively, Jesus describes the mission of his disciples as that of harvesting (*John* 4:35-38). He sent them to reap a harvest they had not planted, but which God and he had secured for them. In *Matthew* 9:38-10:42, he sent them in a praying asking capacity into the harvesting: The work is great but the labourers are few, pray the Lord of the harvest to send labourers into the harvest. In the Pauline context, the disciples themselves are God's own garden and tilling. Again this is important in our globalized world. The temptation to think that we own the work, or that its efficacy and durability depend on us, is a serious obstacle to carrying out the mission to the nations. Today people hardly believe that there is need for a mission to the nations understood as primary evangelization, the winning of people for God in Christ. Perhaps if we paid greater attention to our mission as a harvesting, we would know/believe that the fish is already there, and would delight in letting down our nets for the catch of the century (*Duc in altum*). The fishing episode reveals that Peter and his companions had very little to do in this work. The fish in the sea was not created by them; neither did they believe they could catch fish at that hour of the day, especially after a fruitless night's labour. Their task was simply to obey, in faith, Jesus' instructions.

Today we tend to believe that the era of catching fish is over. We have toiled for over two thousand years and caught nothing or very little. So why should we bother? After all, do not all religions lead to God? Perhaps we have not prayed sufficiently the Lord of the harvest not only to send labourers into the harvest, but also to teach us how to catch human beings. The imagery of catching human beings may be somewhat repulsive. In its own context, the imagery reminds us that, like reaping/harvesting, it requires that we take home, claim as ours, those we have baptized in the Trinitarian name (the baptismal formula) and into Trinitarian communion, thereby making them members of Christ's body and our own brothers and sisters.

- Was this dimension of fellowship, of welcoming those we baptised as brothers and sisters present in our doing mission in the past?
- If not, what must we do today in order to get back on track and do mission in the way Jesus did? What cultural, racial, psychological baggage must we rid ourselves of in order to move out freely to embrace one another with the very love of Christ?

3.3 The human being as the route to follow in mission

In his inaugural encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, John Paul II, following the Second Vatican Council, declared that the human being was the road which the church needed to travel in mission. He repeated this in his classic missionary encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio* (nos. 10, 14). Before him, Paul the VI, in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, had reminded us that the missionary work is incomplete until the evangelized, those who have received the Gospel, become, in turn, evangelizers. All these are different ways of saying that to be church as mission is to pay irreplaceable attention to the human person in his/her own context, to meet his or her needs, to empower the person to live a fully authentic human life. This life is hinged on justice, truth in relationship. The human being in question is another Christ, for as Augustine says, "a Christian is another Christ". We fondly cite St. Jerome who says that "ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ". If a Christian is another Christ, then we must conclude that ignorance of Christ is ignorance of self, of one's own God-given dignity, status, worth, rights, duties and privileges as another Christ, God's child.¹²

How in the twenty-first century do we help every Christian to know his or her true self and accept personal responsibility for living fully this life in collaboration with others? I believe this is the core of our

¹² *Hebrews* assures us that every Christian has the dignity and status of the firstborn, because every Christian is incorporated into the Firstborn. This applies to all Christians, "baptized" or "anonymous". The "anonymous" Christian is so only to humans, not to God or Christ, who knows all his sheep, far and near, by name.

interest in mission from the biblical perspective as we celebrate the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Society for African Missions (SMA). As we attempt to answer these questions, we remember that each of us individually are that road, the human being which the church needs to travel in the work of evangelisation. We remember that when we say, “church” we are speaking of a reality which is us and of which we form a part. If the entire body, the church, is to be on mission, then the members who make up that church must assume personal responsibility to be church on mission. Each must assume a personal responsibility for that mission.

Paul as an Example

That the human being is the only solid foundation on which to build the work of mission cannot be overemphasised. Paul is a typical example here, starting with himself. There was a clear difference between his previous life without Christ and his new life in Christ. He accepted a personal responsibility for his own new life as one who was “in Christ” (his favorite phrase) and for the mission. He took pains to get to know Christ Jesus and the power of his resurrection. He returned to his own Jewish roots and culture to critique and challenge that culture with the canon, the yardstick, God’s gospel, which is Christ (*Romans* 1:2, 16). His *curriculum vitae* (*Philippians* 3:4-11), sums up his efforts to be in Christ and in the church on mission. His previous life was elective, exclusive, and full of pride, based on merit and personal achievement: pride of birth and nationality (a Hebrew born of Hebrews); pride of being male (circumcised the eight day); pride of personal achievement (as to righteousness under the law blameless); pride in fanatically defending his own religion (as to zeal, a persecutor of the church). But once he was in Christ, he realized the uselessness of all these achievements in relation to other peoples who were equally called to be in Christ. Accordingly, he waxed stronger in faith, ran faster and worked harder even than those who were in the faith before him. As he did this he remained essentially a disciple, entering fully into the race and running to the finish, lest having preached to others, he himself should be disqualified (*1 Corinthians* 9:24-27).

In his missionary approach, he used the method of persuasion with those he evangelized, challenging them to reflect on their new life in Christ and accept personal responsibility for it. Just a few examples: To the Galatians he asked: Are you in Galatia mad? Has someone cast a spell upon you? How can you begin in the Spirit and end in the flesh? He challenged the Corinthians to admit that their boasting of spiritual gifts was evidence that they were still infants or worse in the faith, since they did things unheard of even among pagans, such as a man living with his father’s wife. He accordingly challenged them to admit that instead of being proud, they should be ashamed. These few examples are concrete evidence of how seriously he took the human person as the road to travel in mission.

3.4. Preferential option for the poor, a new approach

Over the past two thousand years, the church in mission has adopted a preferential option for the poor as its main thrust in evangelization. Celsus in the second century sarcastically described the early church as made up of “the foolish, dishonorable and stupid, and only slaves, women and little children”,¹³ Such New Testament texts as *1 Corinthians* 1:26-29 and *James* 2:1-7 would corroborate this, though Pliny writing to Trajan described them as “many of every age, of every rank and of both sexes”.¹⁴ A recent statistics report states: “the average Christian in the world today is poor, often living as a minority in a non-Christian country”.¹⁵ The author further adds that “By the year 2020, 80% of all Christians will be people of color who live in the southern hemisphere.” According to these statistics, the preferential option for the poor would lead us to focus not only on the poor outside our ranks but among our very members. The call to return to our roots and let down our nets for a catch reminds us of the early Christian community. They too were a minority in a predominantly non-Christian world. But the rich ones among them did not sit on the fence or exploit the poor. People sold, not only their businesses but also (e.g., Barnabas) their landed property, to ensure that all the members of the community had the basic necessities of life.

Unfortunately today, the rich, even within the Christian and Catholic fold, do not, as a rule, believe it is their responsibility to cater for the poor men and women disciples in their locations. Stories abound of rich donations made to the church – building big projects, churches, Fathers’ houses, and so forth, and being given big names, places and titles in the church. Yet these same rich people may not even think it is their duty in justice to pay their workers their basic wages. Some are owed for up to six months. This happens not

¹³ Origen, *Contra Celsus* 3.44.

¹⁴ Tertullian, *Epistles* 10.96.6; see further, Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), esp. chapter 2, pp. 51-73.

¹⁵ Keith F. Peckers, S.J. “Sharing the ring. When the archbishop meets the pope” *International Herald Tribune* (Thursday November 23, 2006), 8.

only in Nigeria but in other parts of the third world, as I found out from Third World colleagues in my recent theological encounters. Do these people understand that they are to be another Christ in the world? How do we get them to personally understand and imbibe the message that, though Jesus was rich, he personally opted to become poor in order to enrich us out of his poverty, and that as people called to be Christ in the world, they have a first obligation to pay their workers in justice, before they embark on prestigious projects for the church and other humanitarian projects that will give them big names? How do we get them to understand that no name or title is greater than that of being called and actually being God's child" (1 *John* 3:1-9)?

The option for the poor, following the example of Christ, requires more than helping the poor from a situation and position of the rich. Actually Christ did not merely opt for the poor; he opted to become poor so as to enrich us out of his poverty (2 *Corinthians* 8:9). Whether we like it or not, our religious life places us among the rich, as compared to those who are actually poor: who lack the basic necessities of life – food, clothing, shelter and employment. We thank God that we have been able to share our riches with these poor peoples. But are we satisfied with where we are in relation to our use of these materials when we think of the poor? Can we hear Jesus tell us, as he told the rich young man who said he had kept the law all his life, that we lack one thing more: we should sell some if not all of our rich properties, land, etc., and give to the poor if we really want to be his disciples in this century? Or have we developed a theology of wealth that has dulled our awareness and made us comfortable to be rich in the midst of even abject poverty? Here we think not only of material wealth and poverty but of impoverishment through ignorance, lack of education, spiritual and moral poverty included.

3. 5 Imperative to evangelise the rich

A preferential option for the poor is entrenched in the Bible and in Jesus' own mission and personal lifestyle. But the belief that Jesus is God's Gospel for everybody, or that in him God has reconciled to the divine Self things in heaven and things on earth, making peace by the blood of his cross, would move us not to dismiss the rich *a priori*. When Jesus told his disciples that it would be harder for a rich person to get into heaven than for the camel to pass through the eye of the needle, he did not thereby dismiss the rich. Among his disciples, though in secret, were rich people: Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. Martha and Mary would have been rich people to offer the kind of hospitality that he enjoyed during his visits to Jerusalem. His religious leaders were no doubt rich people who swallowed the property of widows under cover of their long prayers.

Nonetheless, Jesus did not neglect them in his proclamation of the Good News. He directed such parables as Dives and Lazarus and the rich fool to the rich to help them rethink their propensity to impoverish themselves by accumulation of wealth, thereby depriving the poor of the vital necessities of life: food clothing and accommodation. Dives learnt only too late that it did not pay to neglect the poor while he himself feasted sumptuously on goods that God had given for the benefit of all. Theirs was a covenanted community, a people of God. The jubilee spirit which they were all enjoined to keep, at least every sabbatical year (*Leviticus* 15), or at least every fifty years (*Leviticus* 25), would have helped to check this spirit of reckless consumption of the goods of the community to the detriment of their brothers and sisters. Today we have many Dives and Lazaruses in the church and even in our religious communities. These people delight in increasing the size for their stock markets, declaring huge profits, true or false, and laying off workers to maximize profit.

Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus (*Luke* 19:1-10) as he entered Jericho on his way to Jerusalem is a good example of what is meant by evangelizing the rich. Here the method in mission also comes into play as well as the task of mission. Because Zacchaeus was too small to see Jesus because of the crowd, he climbed a tree to get a better view of Jesus. In Jesus' view, his curiosity was enough opening for him to invite himself to dinner in Zacchaeus' house: "Come down hurry, for I must eat in your house today" (*Luke* 19:6). What a joy to be noticed! Sometimes we believe our rich people are totally sold out to money. This is not true, for in the heart of each person rests the fundamental gene as one of those created in God's own image and likeness, whose hearts, in Augustine's words, "are restless until they rest in God". We need to use the kind of approach Jesus used to reach the hearts of these people and enable them to undertake the work of their own conversion. When the holy ones criticized Jesus for eating with tax collectors and sinners, Zacchaeus declared that he would restore four-fold, not the usual two-fold, any wrong he might have done to another. In addition, he opted to divide into two what was authentically his own property, so that he and the poor would break even.¹⁶

¹⁶ For a further discussion of the story of Zacchaeus, see Beate Kowalski, "Conversations about Poverty in the Lukan Church", in J. Haers and P. de Mey, eds., *Theology as Conversation: Towards a Relational Theology* (BETL CLXXII; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003), 125-144.

Today we list the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, Trans National Corporations and the other world banks as the real source of poverty and impoverishment of nations with poor economies. Again we speak in generality of the USA, Great Britain, the Group of 8 (heavily industrialized wealthy nations), the Group of 22 (developed economies), and so forth. Yet individuals both in the developed and developing world count among the few rich whose astronomically piled up wealth impoverishes others. Globalization that is largely responsible for the widening gap between the rich and the poor is engineered and sustained by individuals. Recognition that in Jesus God has declared a divine general amnesty to all, would lead us, as a matter of urgency, to devise effective ways of reaching the hearts of the rich, while praying and counting on God to work the miracle of conversion for them, in God's own way. In this way we invite the rich, in a non-threatening manner, to surrender their lives to Christ and so save themselves or their nation, which though considered as the greatest, may yet be among the world's poorest morally. The recitation of the Lord's Prayer that God's reign may come on earth as it is in heaven leaves us with no option about praying for the conversion of the rich, be they individuals, communities, nations or geographical areas.

These examples could be multiplied. To make the human being the road of mission calls us to go beyond the usual catechism and abstract confession of faith approach. We need to change our methods and focus from generalities and abstractions to the individual in his/her particular beliefs and convictions. We need to get down to the roots of the individual and to the grassroots, the masses (of the poor, mainly women and children or of the few rich who amass wealth to their own detriment and that of others). Jesus did this by speaking to the people in parables, preaching in their streets, in homes and in the synagogues; going through their towns and villages; challenging them right where they were located, and helping them personally to find the answers to their questions and solutions to their problems. When they did so, he praised them for their faith that had saved them or asked them to apply the right solutions they identified in his parables to their own existential situations. In our effort to be church on mission, Jesus himself remains the way, the truth and the life. It is therefore necessary that we review briefly how he defined and personally carried out his own mission.

4. Jesus a Model Missionary

Jesus did not simply send his disciples on mission with a mission mandate or instructions. He himself was aware of his own mission mandate and strove to carry it out throughout his life. His two mission statements in *Luke 4:18-19* and *John 10:10* mentioned earlier serve as guide for reviewing how he carried out his mission.

4.1 *Luke 4:18-19. Anointed and sent by God's Spirit*

In his inaugural discourse in Nazareth, Jesus announced to his synagogue audience, waiting for the coming of the Messiah, that what the prophet Isaiah had foretold long ago was actually being fulfilled even as they listened:

- God's Spirit is upon me. God has anointed/consecrated me
- to bring good news to the poor,
 - give sight to the blind,
 - bring deliverance to captives,
 - set free those who are oppressed and
 - declare God's year of favour – God's general amnesty to the entire creation (*Luke 4:18-19*).

How did Jesus, anointed by God as the Messiah, carry out this in his own context and time?

- **To bring good news to the poor.** In the Beatitudes, Jesus proclaimed the poor "blessed" candidates for the kingdom. The Beatitudes form the great charter of God's reign (kingdom of heaven). Among the poor in Jesus' time would have been women and children and the many country people whom Herod dispossessed of their lands to build estates for himself and his nobles; or widows who were exploited by their religious leaders ("devour widows' houses under cover of long prayers, *Luke 20:47-21:1-4*). By saying that it was difficult (though not impossible) for the rich to enter God's kingdom, Jesus implicitly proclaimed that God's kingdom belonged to the poor. How did it make those considered poor feel when they heard they were candidates of God's kingdom contrary to the dominant theology? The parable of Dives and Lazarus (*Luke 16:19-31*) is a typical example. Impoverished Lazarus did nothing, yet he merited a place in Abraham's bosom after his death. In God's redemptive scheme, however, everybody is poor insofar as all have sinned and fallen short of the glory God intended for them (*Romans 3:23*) as creatures made in God's image and likeness (*Genesis 1:26-27*). Dives, who wallowed in wealth while Lazarus was starving, was

equally poor morally. If he had recognized his moral poverty, he too would have made a move to include himself in the beatitude, as Zacchaeus did.¹⁷ Those who interpret the first beatitude as “Blessed are those who know their need of God”, may not be off the mark here. This is not to rule out the meaning attached to material poverty, especially when, in Jesus’ context, material poverty, misfortune or illness was attributed to personal or familial sin and viewed as a mark of God’s displeasure (cf. *John* 9:2). In today’s context, we need to include the rich among the poor: as those who have a dire need of God, even if they do not know it. This is especially true since money, Mammon, rules the world and has conscripted almost all as his disciples, especially under the guise of globalization and an inordinate concern with booming economy.

- **To proclaim liberty to captives:** We do not hear Jesus visiting prisons.

But he freed people held captive by evil spirits, like the woman bent double for 18 years in the synagogue; or the Gerazene demoniac (possessed by legion), racial prejudices (Jews and Samaritans; *John* 4), religious and cultural taboos, especially the cultic laws of the clean and unclean and 613 fence around the Torah, the multiplicity of laws distorting the Sabbath as God’s gift to humans.¹⁸

- **Recovery of sight to the blind:** This was not simply the physically blind, such as Batimaeus, the blind man near Jericho (*Mark* 10:46-52), the two blind men outside Jericho (*Matthew* 20:29-34), or the man born blind (*John* 9). He declared spiritual blindness to be the worst blindness (*John* 9:41). To this extent his teaching the people the truth about God which opened their eyes to the truth and made them full of admiration for God’s ways was indeed an opening of the sight of the blind. He taught them differently from their religious leaders who had a personal interest in keeping the masses ignorant of their rights as God’s covenanted people.

- **To set free the oppressed.** Here we think of the many peoples oppressed by unjust laws, the 613 stipulations that the Rabbis set around the Torah. Apart from defending his disciples when they plucked ears of corn on the Sabbath, or ate with unwashed hands, Jesus gives, in *Matthew* 23, a comprehensive condemnation of these oppressive laws in his woes to the Scribes and Pharisees (the makers, interpreters and judges of the law). We think also of those who were oppressed by sinful social laws of ritual purity: the treatment of lepers as outcasts, of tax collectors tagged sinners and the woman afflicted with hemorrhage for 12 years who by law (*Leviticus* 15:19-30) was not to be seen with ritually clean people for fear of making them ritually unclean.¹⁹ We think how Jesus reached out to the Samaritans through their morally suspect woman and made her the evangelist both of her nation and of his own prejudiced disciples (*John* 4:9, 27-42); or how he proposed a Samaritan (from a race that *Sirach* 50:25-26 considers “not a people”) as a true neighbour over against a priest and a Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan (*Luke* 10:29-37).

- **To declare the Lord’s year of favour, God’s general amnesty to all.**

This was his climactic work on the cross: “And I when I am lifted up, I will draw all beings to myself” (*John* 12:32). He died not only for the nation but to gather together all God’s scattered children (*John* 11:52), scattered by the sins of sexism, racism and classism, nationalism and political, economic and religious ideologies. Paul expresses this gathering in terms of the ministry of reconciliation: God in Christ was reconciling the world (not just individuals, but the entire world) to the divine self, and entrusting to us (church on mission) the ministry of reconciliation (2 *Corinthians* 5:16-6:13). The Pauline letters, *Colossians* and *Ephesians*, extend the divine amnesty or reconciliation to heaven itself: the fullness of the divinity dwelt bodily in Christ “to unite to the divine self all things, things in heaven and things on earth, making peace by the blood of his cross” (*Colossians* 1:20).

4.2 *John* 10:10, giving life in all its fullness

In the parable of the Good Shepherd, Jesus declares that while false shepherds exploit and abandon the sheep to invaders, he the true/good shepherd has come “so that they [all] may have life and have it ever more abundantly” (*John* 10:10).

This Johannine passage hardly needs commenting upon. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, literally laid down his life for us his sheep. Because of this we do have life in all its fullness, provided we do not pursue

¹⁷ Kowalski’s article mentioned earlier (note 16 above) sees a contrast between the rich official (who went away sad when called to sell his goods, give the money to the poor and become Jesus’ disciple (*Luke* 18:18-30) and Zacchaeus (*Luke* 19:1-10), who responded positively and thus shared in the divine salvation.

¹⁸ Brad H. Young, *Jesus the Jewish Theologian* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995, 103-112), argues that Jesus’ attitude towards the Sabbath was very much in keeping with the Jewish oral law that emphasized the primacy of life over all other laws.

¹⁹ See further on this, T. Okure, “Epilogue: The Will to Arise: Reflections on *Luke* 8:40-56”, in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and Church in Africa*, Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, eds. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), 221-230.

material things and anti-Christ ideologies or live inauthentic lives that imprison us again after Christ had set us free (*Galatians* 5:1-2). In the parable, it is the sheep that determines where the shepherd goes, not the reverse. Our needs as off track or sinful *human beings made Jesus become a human being, like us in all things but sin* (*Hebrews* 4:15). Because he did so, he could feel our pains and plead our cause with God, as our supreme high priest who himself is God. As I discovered elsewhere, in the human context, human beings offer sacrifices to appease God. But in the divine context, according to *Hebrews*, God in the Word incarnate offers the divine self as sacrifice in order to draw us to the divine self.²⁰

Moreover, Jesus did not simply die for us. He left us his body and blood as a lasting food unto unending life. By this he made Eucharist, Thanksgiving, the norm of all Christian prayers and activities. His resurrection defeated the greatest enemy of life, namely death. The life he gave us is not merely a theological proposition, but something real. Jesus actualizes for us, or makes this life ours, through baptism and the imparting of the Holy Spirit, God's life principle in us. Accordingly he no longer calls us slaves, or even friends, but brothers and sisters (*John* 20:17), thus making us heirs of God and co-heirs with him (*Romans* 8:15-17). All this is a matter for wonder and praise. His mission, reviewed briefly above, is a guide and challenge as we rethink mission in the twenty-first century from the biblical, specifically new covenant perspective.

5. Revisiting the Missionary Vocation Today

In light of the above considerations, we may ask ourselves a few questions.

- Do we have or know our mission statements? Most if not all of our Constitutions have a mission statement. That apart, we all have the comprehensive mission statement and mandate of Jesus, that we should go out to the whole world and proclaim the Good News to the entire creation with a promise that he would be with us till the mission is accomplished (*Matthew* 28:20). To what extent do we make this mission statement a conscious part of our daily living and ministering, especially in the light of what was said earlier that where the church is there is mission?
- Who are the poor, the blind, prisoners and captives in our own contexts?
- How today do we open the eyes of the blind, liberate prisoners, minister freedom to the oppressed? Are we ourselves among any of these categories of peoples?
- How do we come to one another and to the world so that all without exception may have life ever more abundantly, more fully and more authentically?
- How do we minister God's general amnesty so that all human beings, without exception may experience it as a God's free, gratuitous and unmerited, undeserved gift?

These are just a few thoughts to inspire our common reflection on how we are to get back on the Gospel track in the work of evangelization and cast our nets into the deep (*Duc in altum*) for the catch of the century.²¹ There is quite a missionary programme here to keep us on track throughout this century and beyond. The message of Benedict XVI for Mission Sunday 2006 makes this very plain. He reiterates the witness of Scripture, that love is the soul of mission: God's surpassing love for the world moved God to **give** his uniquely beloved Son to save the world (*John* 3:16). Jesus' own demonstration of this love led him to give his life as the ultimate proof of love (*John* 15:13). The *First Letter of John* (4:16) underscores that, since love is the soul of mission, we therefore cannot say we love the God whom we do not see yet hate the brother or sister, God's child, whom we see daily.

Jesus bequeaths this legacy of love as the core of our discipleship and our identifying mark as Christians: "A new commandment I give you that you love one as I have loved you. By this will all know that you are my disciples if you love one another" (*John* 13:34-35).²² He also considers this love expressed by unity as the soul of our mission: what will persuade or convince the unbelieving world that God did indeed send him as the Saviour of this world (*John* 17:20-23) which God loves so much. The measure of love here

²⁰ T. Okure, "Hebrews: Sacrifice in an African Perspective," in *Global Bible Commentary*, Daniel Patte et alii., eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 535-538.

²¹ The phrase *duc in altum* is the mantra of *Novo millennio ineunte*, the apostolic letter of John Paul II at the close of the Great Jubilee of Our Lord, 2000.

²² It is important to note what is **new** in this commandment. Love of God and neighbour was equally the core of the OT covenant; this is articulated in the *Schema* Israel (*Deut* 6:4). The gospels reiterate this in the question which the lawyer puts to Jesus, "Which is the greatest commandment in the Law" (*Luke* 10:29-36). But Jesus' new commandment goes beyond this. It is not simply a matter of loving a neighbour as oneself, but of laying down one's very life for the neighbour so that he or she may have life in its fullness. Jesus gave this love first as an example before giving it as a new commandment. Herein lies the newness of the new commandment of the New Covenant.

is the ultimate self-giving, beyond which it is impossible for anyone to go: Greater love than this has no one than to lay down his or her life for the one loved (*John* 15:13). It is for this purpose that Jesus calls, sets us up and commissions us for the lasting fruit that we are to bear as living and alive branches of his vine (*John* 15:1-17).²³

Integral to this mission is the readiness to cancel the moral debts and offences which others owe us, even within our immediate communities. In this connection, Jesus' Easter statement on forgiving or retaining sins (*John* 20:19-23) is often interpreted restrictively either in reference to sacramental confession (the administration of the sacrament of reconciliation reserved only to priests); or that Jesus here asks the ministers to forgive some sins and retain others with the assurance that heaven will endorse their actions. Such an interpretation flies in the face of the core New Testament message of Jesus, God's Gospel (*Romans* 1:1-2, 16), that in him God has reconciled all things to the divine self.²⁴ Rather, the statement is to be read as a warning that if we retain people's sins, such sins are retained and we are the first casualties of such retention, since we ourselves are thereby not free. The comprehensive NT message of love is that it keeps no score of wrongs (*1 Corinthians* 13:4-7). This ministry of love and reconciliation rooted in love is greatly needed in our war torn world today as the most appropriate way of dealing with the problem of the other.²⁵

Love is the greatest virtue, and the one which endures, because God is love. The human being as the road of mission is one who accepts this responsibility of love – owe no one anything except the debt of love (*Romans* 13:8-10; cf. 12:9-10). That is why we cannot restrict mission to outreach to persons in foreign lands, especially if and where this outreach was not motivated, guided and seasoned by the kind of love which Jesus commands and requires of us, and without which we cannot authentically call ourselves Christians, other Christ's and God's children in the world. If we accept and embrace love as the soul of mission, we will have no problem concerning mission *ad gentes* understood as outreach to unbelievers. I have yet to see a human being who rejected or felt oppressed by a love that was prepared to die for him or her.

Rethinking mission in the twenty-first century in a biblical, New Testament, perspective poses exciting challenges. The central challenge is that of locating this mission in the human person, as the one for whose sake mission is undertaken, the one who personally needs to accept responsibility for his/her true identity as God's child, to be another Christ in the world, and the one who as God's child has a mission to love as God loves, right there where she or he is located. Seeing mission in this way rules out the thought that only some are called to be missionaries; it also rules out the practice of equating mission with outreach to nonbelievers. Missionary outreach (whether primary or ongoing) is, of course, still necessary. But if those evangelized do not, in turn, become evangelizers, as Paul VI notes in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (no. 15), then that missionary outreach has not attained completion or the stage of bearing fruit. The document also underscores the absolute necessity of relating the proclamation of the gospel to people's actual lives in their diverse and concrete socio-cultural conditions of life and the need to emphasize and safeguard the rights and duties of the individual person, the family life, community life and nation's life (*EN*, no. 29).

Sadly many Christians today have yet to become aware of their true identity as Christians. The success of Jesus' mission lay in his firm knowledge of, and commitment to, his identity as God's Son and Messiah. Because he was firmly rooted in this knowledge, it was impossible for either Satan directly, in the episode of the temptations, or indirectly (as in Peter's protest in the incident of Caesarea Philippi, and the persecutions of his religious leaders), to derail him from his mission. Jesus lived to the full the mission of personal commitment to God as the first or fundamental step in mission. Paul later embraced the same spirit of staunch commitment. We need to take on the task of staying awake and awakening our people to their noble identity as Christians as a primary task in this new primary evangelization. By "primary" here is meant evangelization according to the New Testament spirit seen above. Many people have been Christian for years, but they may be yet to receive this primary evangelization. Here we are not referring only to the simple "ordinary" or "lay" people but also to ourselves, who are priests, religious and bishops. Quite often the lay people can in practice be more faithful to the law of love and ministry of reconciliation than ourselves.

²³ In *The Johannine Approach to Mission* (pp. 211-213, note 10 above), I discovered that the living branches pruned by God to bear much fruit (while the dead ones are cut off and burnt) refer to missionary fruitfulness.

²⁴ The tense is the past continuous (*ēn*): God was active in Christ throughout his ministry reconciling the world to the divine self. Our mission, therefore, is not to ask God to do this, for God has already done it; rather it is to proclaim to the world "that they are reconciled". This is the good news.

²⁵ See further on this, T. Okure, "'The Ministry of Reconciliation' (2 *Cor* 5: 14-21): Paul's Key to the Problem of 'the Other' in Corinth", *Mission Studies* 23. No 1 (2006) 105-121. This article might be juxtaposed with that of John Mansfield Prior in the same volume, "'Power' and 'the Other' in Joshua: The Brutal Birthing of a Group Identity", 27-43; obviously a non-gospel way of dealing with "the other", very much in vogue today.

As we move the reflection on mission *ad gentes* forward, we need to be very practical.²⁶ The discussion should challenge us to review the issues of race, color, unjust immigration laws (which essentially impede going forth and interaction among peoples of different nations). We need to be guided by God's own hospitality to all peoples, giving all the room and the freedom to inhabit the earth and do so in peace, free of charge. How ultimately do we go out to the entire world today to gather in a harvest of brotherhood and sisterhood which we had not invented but which is God's gift to us through creation and redemption? How do we work collaboratively in this task, knowing that collaboration is a must for us as members of the one family of God, the church? How do we show by our Trinitarian way of life that we are children of a Trinitarian God who exists always in communion and acts always collaboratively for our own good? May the Holy Spirit, God's life principle in us, and "the principal agent in mission",²⁷ who at Pentecost gave birth to the Church as mission, continue to guide and inspire us as we grow in our understanding and deepen our commitment to the mission to the nations as Jesus commissioned us to do.

²⁶ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, chapter IV gives the vast horizons and scope of mission *ad gentes*.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, chapter III, nos. 21-30.