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**Challenges Today to Mission "Ad Gentes"**  
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### **Where is mission "ad gentes" going?**

Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, subtitled "On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate", was an eloquent appeal to renew missionary fervor within the Church. In the encyclical, the Holy Father presented once again the theological foundations of mission as had been set forth at the Second Vatican Council (nearly twenty-five percent of all the references in the encyclical are to the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity *Ad gentes*). He then goes on to expound upon the horizons of mission today, the means to achieving it, and closes with a reflection on missionary spirituality. It was the first encyclical on missionary activity since the Vatican Council, and carried with it a tone of urgency about refocusing the Church's efforts toward mission.

A submerged theme in the encyclical -- which surfaces in the text from time to time--is that missionary motivation had been flagging, and missionary activity itself diminishing. Indeed, anyone conversant with the discussions about the theology and direction of mission in the past three decades recognizes the Pope's concern here. The very need for an encyclical such as *Redemptoris missio* was indicative that a problem existed. There had been an acute questioning of the purpose of mission immediately after the Council even by missionaries themselves. The crisis of the 1960's and 1970's was not just a theological one; the decolonization and new statehood of many mission lands had led to calls -- especially in Africa -- of a "moratorium" on mission. For Catholic missiology as practiced within the mission-sending religious institutes, the SEDOS symposium of 1981 represented a turning point in the discussion. With that meeting one could discern a shift from questioning the purpose of mission at all to focusing instead upon how mission was to be carried out.

Yet even with this kind of reorientation of mission, concerns about mission, and necessarily therefore about mission *ad gentes*, continued to lurk below the surface of discussions. That *Redemptoris missio* was issued nearly a decade after that meeting is evidence of that. Now ourselves nearly a decade beyond *Redemptoris missio*, it is good to return to the question again of just where mission is and where it is going, especially as it is posed for the mission *ad gentes*.

In this presentation, I have been asked to look at the challenges to mission *ad gentes* which lie ahead of us. None of us is able to see the future, of course. But on the basis of what we know now, we can make some cautious and judicious proposals about what that future might be. In order to do that, we need to look first at what causes the question: that is, why do we think that mission *ad gentes* might be going in a somewhat different direction in the immediate future than it has gone up to now? In the first part, then, I will look at the factors which create the climate for asking the question about challenges lying ahead for mission *ad gentes*. On the basis of those factors, I want to look then at the conditions which have helped shaped the mission *ad gentes* in the recent past. Some of those conditions are indeed changing, and these changes are bound to have an impact on mission *ad gentes*. From that, we will move to a third and final section which makes suggestions about where mission *ad gentes* may indeed be going. The purpose of this is to give some sense of orientation to the discussion, as well as provide one way of thinking (and there are bound to be others) of the current and future state of mission *ad gentes*.

### **Why do we ask the question?**

To begin, then, this discussion, we need to address why we ask the question about challenges to mission *ad gentes*. It seems to me that there are three sets of changes that we have experienced which lead us to consider mission *ad gentes* perhaps going in a different direction than it has heretofore. These are: changes in the theology of mission, changes in the world in which mission is being conducted, and changes in the agents of mission. Let us consider each in turn.

### **Changes in the theology of mission**

In the last half century, there have been significant shifts taking place in theology which have had their effects on thinking about mission *ad gentes*. In one way or another, these shifts have their origins in the theology of mission found at various places in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. It is important to note here that the origins of these shifts are to be found in the Second Vatican Council, but the directions these theologies have taken may not represent what the original documents may have had in mind. Indeed, both Paul VI and John Paul II plead time and time again for a more authentic reading of those documents in face of theological positions which have subsequently emerged.

There are three such shifts that deserve some attention here. The first shift is toward seeing the whole Church as missionary, as found in *Ad gentes*. This was a move away from seeing missionary activity as one thing in which the Church engages alongside others. The theological grounding for seeing mission as something pertaining to the whole Church is to be found in understanding mission itself being an action of the Holy Trinity toward the world; and mission is then entrusted to the Church as the Church's participation in the saving work of God. The very purpose for the Church's existence, then, is mission.

This theology in itself does not raise a problem. Indeed, it has been welcomed as a more comprehensive grounding of mission in the Church. The problem is more on the level of perception and strategy than on the level of theology: if the whole Church is about mission, then what is the specific task of missionary institutes or individual missionaries *ad gentes*? Although many attempts have been made to respond to this problem, it does not seem to go away. To be sure, it can be attributed to an insufficient understanding of the theology articulated in *Ad gentes*, but one has to ask the question: why does

the misperception perdure? How does it affect the identity and specificity of those who have a missionary vocation ad gentes?

The second shift has to do with the forms of evangelization. Most important here is the introduction of dialogue alongside proclamation. Redemptoris missio tries to address the relation between dialogue and proclamation; the Vatican document Dialogue and Proclamation, issued jointly by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and the Pontifical Council on Interreligious Dialogue just a few months after Redemptoris missio, tries to go even further. Mission had been rather clearly understood as proclamation of the Gospel to those who had not heard it. The importance given to dialogue by Nostra aetate at the Vatican Council raised a new set of issues. By according respect to other religious traditions, and by promoting dialogue with them rather than an apologetic to prove their errors, how to relate the aims of proclamation and dialogue to each other becomes problematic. While both Church documents and theological publications have tried to explicate and clarify the relationship between them, the confusion continues. If dialogue (or at least certain kinds of dialogue with certain aims of respect of the other) is an end in itself, then what happens to proclamation as traditionally understood, and a fortiori to mission ad gentes?

The third theological shift flows from the previous one. The respect accorded to other religions presupposes some salvific element or character within them. This is something which Lumen gentium, Nostra aetate, and Ad gentes all acknowledged. In each of these documents, that salvific element was posited and affirmed, but not really explained. The full or ultimate salvific action of Jesus Christ was affirmed also in each instance. How these two realities are to be related -- salvation in other religions and salvation in Christ -- has been an area of intense theological debate during the latter half of the twentieth century. It is a debate which has not yet reached its conclusion. It is surely a point of great delicacy, but of fundamental importance for mission. While the Catholic Church does take what has been called an "inclusivist" stand, that does not end the discussion. Even the nature of the categories themselves that are used to characterize the various positions continue to be a matter of debate.

At this point in the discussion, a clarification of the values to be preserved, the categories of discourse to be employed, and the meaning of different trajectories of argument are still being scrutinized. Even while this is going on, however, the question of what is known as a theology of religions continues to arouse passion in the discussion.

For mission ad gentes, how the relationship of the salvation offered in Christ is to be understood in the face of the world's religions is of crucial importance. If indeed salvation from God is to be had in other religions, then what is the purpose of Christian missionary activity? Why indeed should we go out ad gentes, to the nations? Is such activity even legitimate, given these theological understandings?

All three of these questions, which have arisen from the theology of mission which is articulated in the Vatican Council documents, continue to be worked out. In the interim, they raise nagging questions for mission ad gentes about its specificity and identity, its aims, and even its legitimacy. The argument can be made that the true understanding of the relationship between the theological issues in the Vatican documents about the nature of mission, the relation of dialogue and proclamation, and the theology of religions will eventually sort all of this out. But the uncertainties will remain as long as those relationships have not been adequately articulated.

### **Changes in the world in which mission is conducted**

Not only theological changes, but changes in the world in which mission is conducted has an effect upon how we think of future challenges to the mission ad gentes. There are two such changes in the world that I would like to underscore here.

The first is the advent of globalization. Although it bears a number of similarities to the imperial expansion of Europe between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, the globalization which arose in the final decade of the twentieth century is distinctive in the extent of its reach, the intensity of the interconnectedness it has created, the velocity with which information and capital are moved, and the impact it is having. One thing that globalization is changing (we will return to others in the final part of this presentation) is the meaning of territory and the nation-state. Because the information and capital flow made possible by communications technology, boundaries of the nation-state, which have been a staple of political economy since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, have ever decreased significance. With the flow and migration of peoples, as well as the incursion of global cultural forces on local communities, "culture" as territory has ever decreasing significance. While neither nation-state nor cultural territory will completely disappear (as was the fear in earlier stages of discussion of globalization), its significance is greatly diminished. What does this mean for a mission that defines itself as ad gentes, if the world is no longer so neatly divided into cultural and ethnic groups? Missionary institutes ad gentes have tried to redefine ad gentes as ad extra (that is, simply going out from where one is), or more recently, as ad altera (that is, to those who are made "other"). The shifting of boundaries which define "the nations" or "the other" raises questions about the conduct of mission as well as its rationale.

The second change in the world has to do with what some would contend to be a settling of the religious geography of the world, that is, that conversion to Christianity in any significant numbers is about to come to an end. There are two dimensions to this hypothesis. The first is that the converts who join the great translocal religious traditions (such as Christianity or Islam) come largely from local, oral traditions. Indeed, history would seem to indicate that people in local, oral traditions (sometimes called indigenous religions) shift rather readily to join a translocal tradition such as Christianity, Buddhism, or Islam. But once having done so, they are unlikely to move from one translocal tradition to another. Only those who have not yet been fully integrated into the translocal tradition or those who have been alienated from it are likely to change their affiliation. If that is indeed the case, then mission ad gentes will end for Christianity (and Islam) when the final indigenous peoples have been reached. Second, the question can be raised whether, despite its intensive efforts at evangelization through the last two centuries, Christianity is really making any real progress. The percentage of the world's population which is Christian today is roughly the same as it was a century ago; indeed, there are indications of a slight decline. Are Christians simply running very fast to stay in place, as it were?

It is not at all certain that this hypothesis about the religious geography of the world will be true for the future. It does give one possible explanation for religious affiliation and conversion of the past. With the migration of peoples today, things may indeed change; it is still too early to tell. But it does give pause to some of the rhetoric intended to stir up passion for the mission ad gentes. Asia, for example, may be "unreached" in the sense that it has not been receptive to the Christian message. But if the hypothesis is true, the mission ad gentes in that part of the world may be largely over.

However one evaluates these changes in the world environment in which mission ad gentes takes place, they do raise questions of singular importance for our discussion here. And they must be taken into account as we look toward the challenges of the future.

### **Changes in the Agents of Mission**

One must look also to the changes in the agents of mission themselves. I am referring here especially to the missionary institutes, although for a full picture, one should take into account lay missionaries, and volunteers who commit themselves to mission for shorter, specific periods of time.

The mission institutes which were established in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as national mission-sending societies have experienced a decline in membership. The mean age is much higher, and new members are very few. What will that mean for their longer-term work? For those who now receive members from areas where they first went to do mission work, most of the newer members come from these one-time "mission areas" while the financial resources to support the mission ad gentes come from the original sending countries.

Two other changes confront missionary institutes ad gentes in the future. In some areas where they first went to evangelize, they now find themselves part and parcel of the local Church, and as such are not really part of first evangelization any longer. For a variety of reasons, they cannot extricate themselves from these situations. A second factor is the emergence of new missionary institutes ad gentes, in countries which were until recently themselves objects of mission. What attitudes and ideas shape these missionaries as they go out from countries of Africa or from South Korea?

All of these changes -- theological, environmental, and within missionary institutes themselves -- play at least a subliminal role in shaping how we ask questions about mission ad gentes today, and especially about how mission shall be carried out tomorrow. I will return to these questions in the third part. Before doing so, however, we must move through the second part, which looks at the immediate past which shaped our understanding of what mission ad gentes was. This is important to combine with what has just been said about changes, so as to make some informed proposals about the future.

### **Conditions shaping the mission ad gentes**

In the first part of this presentation, we looked at three sets of factors which are issues for the directions the mission ad gentes may take in the coming period. In this second part, I wish to concentrate on one factor which shaped much of the mission ad gentes in the last two centuries. This one factor is not a new one to us, but I hope that reflection upon it might yield some insights helpful for charting the road ahead.

Any student of missionary history knows that the Church's engagement in the mission ad gentes has not been one of consistent activity throughout the two millennia of the Church's existence. There were long periods in which there was little or no such missionary activity. Indeed the stirring passage from the end of Matthew's Gospel (28:18-19), in which Christ sends out his disciples to the nations became a clarion call to mission only in the seventeenth century.

Moreover, missionary activity was rarely haphazard or abstracted from the concrete conditions of the societies from which it sprang and to which it went. It utilized the infrastructures present in those times and those places. Already the missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul as recounted in the Acts of the Apostles followed the trade routes and highways of the Roman Empire.

It should not be surprising, then, that the upsurge of missionary activity which began with the European voyages beyond Europe in the late fifteenth century was intimately connected with the expansionist designs of Spain and Portugal, and later France, the Netherlands, and Great Britain.

The story of empire and mission has been told often, by opponents and defenders of mission alike. It is not my intention to recount that history here once again. Rather, I would like to focus on one aspect of that history: namely, that the expansionist designs of Europe provided the infrastructure for an organized and concerted mission ad gentes. Empire not only provided a necessary infrastructure for transportation, protection, and even fiscal support for missionaries, but no doubt figured into the thinking of how mission itself was to be organized, both on the home front and in the distant lands. Individual efforts of missionaries can be traced through history. But the mobilization of religious institutes -- and later the founding of institutes specifically for that purpose -- followed the pathways and even assumed the military rhetoric of the empire-builders.

In saying this, I do not wish to reduce organized mission ad gentes to a byproduct of empire. That would be simplistic and inaccurate. Missionaries often became the opponents of empire, siding with local people against their colonizers. Missionaries preserved local culture through writing down indigenous oral languages even as empire was crippling or destroying it. What I am trying to do here is trying to indicate some factors arising from this convergence of empire and mission ad gentes which may be instructive for our own time.

Mission cannot be reduced to empire, but one must note three things that this convergence of mission and empire created which still remain with us:

The convergence of mission ad gentes and empire created a powerful way of thinking wherein the notion of mission ad gentes became bound up with territory. One sees this as early as the founding of the Propaganda Fide in Rome in the

seventeenth century and as late as the establishment of the "jus commissionis" in the twentieth century. Rather than models wherein going ad gentes meant going to the sovereign to effect his conversion, mission was seen as Christianizing a territory.

The convergence of empire and mission provided models of mission which were derived from the empire and colonizing process. Most prominent throughout the period of European empire was the civilizing model, which meant bringing European education, technical training, and health care ad gentes. Put in late twentieth century terms, models of human promotion go hand in hand with mission. Today we would think more in terms of social justice or the defense of human rights. In both the earlier and more recent models, what evangelization is becomes extended in terms of an infrastructure which supports mission.

The convergence of empire and mission provided also models of relationship between missionaries and the gentes, as well as metaphors for mission itself. Winning souls for Christ, rescuing them from the clutches of Satan, and expanding the Church all owed a great deal to military metaphors which had parallels in the process of empire-building. Metaphors become important ways of organizing the collective imagination, and mission has used different ones in the course of its history.

Are there lessons to be learned from this convergence of empire and mission which help us see more clearly the future of mission ad gentes? Let me indicate some which strike me as worth pondering:

In what ways does the future of mission ad gentes rely upon the geopolitical and macroeconomic structure of the world today? It is not entirely coincidental, for example, that the crisis in mission in the mid-twentieth century occurred at the same time as the dissolution of European empires. As was noted in the first part, one of the geopolitical and macroeconomic features of the world today is globalization. It bears a number of resemblances to the empire-building -- especially the empire-building of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It also has some distinctive differences as well. To give but one example of how it is influencing mission: the rise of the short-term volunteer in mission. Relative rapid and inexpensive travel makes it possible to consider the possibility of short-term missionaries. Prior to this possibility, missionaries typically left their homelands for life or for very rare visits back to their homelands. On the part of the short-term missionary, thinking about one's commitment in short terms is part of an economic organization in which one can envision changing one's occupation several times over the course of one's lifetime, rather than choosing an occupation in early adulthood with which one continues until retirement or death.

Just as the time of empire may have taught us to think in terms of territory in mission, the compression of space which has been created by globalization may cause us to reimagine what ad gentes means for us today. Missionary institutes are already in that process as indicated earlier. They interpret ad gentes as ad extra or ad altera. The fact that thinking of mission ad gentes in terms of territory is something that only became prominent in the second half of the second millennium of Christianity means that, on the threshold of the third millennium, we should be prepared to think differently again.

What will be the metaphors which will shape the social imagination of mission? If metaphors of expansion and of military conquest shaped the age of empire, what will be the metaphors for mission ad gentes in the twenty-first century? I have suggested elsewhere that metaphors of accompaniment arose in the latter half of the twentieth century thinking about mission to replace those of expansion and conquest. Mission as *inserción*, as walking with the poor, as dialogue (especially dialogue of life), as solidarity -- all bespoke a strong sense of mission as involving a strong attachment to and identification with the people the missionary served. Perhaps this metaphor has contributed to the difficulty mission institutes ad gentes feel now in moving on to other places. Where does a new situation take us?

### **Mission ad gentes in the third millennium**

This brings us to the third and final part of this presentation, which tries to propose what might be the challenges to mission ad gentes in the third millennium. To this point I have tried to lay out some of the factors which lead us to expect changes, followed by a closer look at some of the conditions which shape an organized mission ad gentes. How do all of these factors converge?

The most important factor in this mix is the emergence of globalization as the new world order. Globalization is a deeply ambivalent phenomenon, doing violence to much of the world's population, especially to the poor. As it makes new kinds of communication and relationship possible, so also it excludes vast numbers of people from an improvement of their plight. As Pope John Paul II has put it so well, "Globalization in solidarity, globalization without marginalization" (1997 Message for the World Day of Peace). However we may detest the evils globalization has perpetrated upon the poor, it must be recognized at the same time that it probably does represent the world order with which we now have to contend. There is no alternative at this point, although we do not know how much longer this will be so. Christianity's wrestling with the world order of each time of its existence has always been one of an uneasy relationship, and this time is no different.

Two characteristics of globalization today which are of significance here are its homogenizing power, whereby it interlinks the world and communicates the same message throughout this network; and its fragmenting power, which in local settings disrupts social arrangements, creates resistance, and heightens the sense of the particular and the local. How does this aspect of globalization interconnect with mission ad gentes?

In responding to the interlinkage through communication as a form of homogenization, missionary institutes and the Church itself should utilize its resources as a transnational and non-governmental organization to bring people together in the solidarity of the human family, and form networks of support and advocacy. Missionary institutes should show by how they live and operate that transnational organizations need not be oppressive, but can bring together human and material resources for the betterment of life for humankind. They should use their resources to reach the gentes who are now scattered throughout the world, as a result of migration and refugee status, those gentes who drift into our huge cities and lose their identities in the process. We need to think through as missionaries and missiologists how the homogenizing factors in the world today are shaping our thinking and our relationships.

Globalization also fragments the world. Here it seems to me that the mission *ad gentes* is called to address the consequences of that fragmentation, where people reshape and construct new identities to resist the encroachments of globalization, where refugees and displaced persons have to rebuild lives and heal memories. The work of mission here is a work of reconciliation, that is, restoring human dignity and healing a broken society. It is about telling the truth, seeking justice, and creating a new moral vision. Indeed, it seems to me that reconciliation may well be the metaphor for mission as we enter the twenty-first century. In a world characterized at once by closer interconnection and greater fragmentation, the capacities to "break down the wall of hostility which divides us," as is said in the Letter to the Ephesians (2:14).

So where do we find ourselves with the mission *ad gentes* at the turn of the millennium? Let me summarize where I think we are and where we are going in five points:

Just as empire formed an infrastructure -- for better or for worse -- for the organized mission *ad gentes* to which we are heir, so the world order now being brought about by globalization will -- for better or for worse -- form the infrastructure for where mission *ad gentes* will go.

The *gentes* to which mission is directed will be not shaped so much by territory as by how identities are being shaped and constructed in globalization. Those identities will be much more fluid.

Two of the theological challenges to mission *ad gentes* -- dialogue and the theology of religions -- affecting the aim and the legitimacy of mission *ad gentes* will have to be looked at in light to this new reorganization of the world. In a world where fragmentation constantly threatens the quality of life together, dialogue becomes especially important not only to understand the other, but to create the atmosphere of trust that will make communication and cooperation possible. Religious agency in creating the networks of peace that can respond quickly in times of conflict are becoming ever more important. The heightened pluralism that globalization creates through interconnection will force us into new insights about pluralism itself, something which should aid our articulation of an adequate and faithful theology of religions.

Reconciliation may be the most single important metaphor for mission *ad gentes* in this coming period. It is already coming to emergency and development work around the world as a new theme with which it must contend, as aid workers engage in conflict resolution and the rebuilding of communities and societies. Reconciliation here is no easy peace; nor is it a palliative to replace the hard work of justice and truth-telling.

What all this means for the reorganization of missionary institutes has still to be explored. It certainly means an analysis of reality that acknowledges how things are changing, and then the development of strategies and relationships that will reach out to the *gentes*. It means developing a spirituality to sustain our work which emphasizes interconnection, truth-telling, and the creation of a new moral vision for societies. It means a pursuit of justice and a cultivation of relationships built upon trust, developing communities of memory and hope.

Missionary institutes who focus on *ad gentes* have some considerable tasks ahead of them. I hope that these thoughts and suggestion will contribute to a renewed sense of mission that is faithful to our calling, prophetic in our response, and filled with hope for the coming of the Reign of God.

#### **Notes:**

The proceedings of that event may be found in Mary Motte and Joseph Lang (eds.), *Mission and Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982).

2For a thorough discussion of this issue, see William Burrows (ed.), *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading Redemptoris Missio and Dialogue and Proclamation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

3The literature on the theology of religions is now vast. The controversy raised by the investigation of Jacques Dupuis' moderate summation of the discussion, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), is indicative of the tensions around this topic. For a discussion of the International Theological Commission's attempt to address this in its 1997 document, "Christianity and the World Religions," see Terrence Tilley, "'Christianity and the World Religions,' A Recent Vatican Document," *Theological Studies* 60(1999)318-337.

4The best account of how globalization resembles and is distinctive from earlier movements can be found in David Held, Anthony McGrew, David Goldblatt, and Jonathan Perraton, *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

5One such widely read book making that claim was Hans-Peter Martin and Harald Schumann, *Die Globalisierungsfalle. Der Angriff auf Demokratie und Wohlstand* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1996). To counter some of these older ideas, see Saskia Sassen, *Losing Control? Sovereignty in an Age of Globalization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

6In 1900, 34.4% of the world's population was Christian; in mid-1999, it was estimated to be 33.1%: David Barrett and Todd Johnson, "Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission: 1999," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 23(1999)25.

7On the issue of migration and cultural transformation, see Nikos Papastergiadis, *The Turbulence of Migration* (Oxford: Polity, 2000).

8For a history of Christian mission which looks at patterns of activity as well as the motivations which led to mission, see David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991). The first to invoke the so-called Great Commission was the Lutheran missionary Justinian von Welz (1621-1688).

<sup>9</sup>See for example, Robert Schreier, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 124-126.

<sup>10</sup>I develop this in "World order, conflict, and mission at the turn of the millennium," and "Reconciliation as good news in a divided world?" Philippa Woodbridge and Carlos Pape (eds.), *Las Américas se abren al nuevo milenio/ The Americas open to a new millennium* (Rome: SEDOS, 1998), 195-223.

<sup>11</sup>This is discussed especially in R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).