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**“Church Mission and P.M.S.”**
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**INTRODUCTION**

«Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you» (Mt 28, 18-20)[[1]](#footnote-1).

Dear friends,

For a start, I would like to welcome you to this seminar, which reunites us to understand and live better the mission of working aside the National Directions of the Pontifical Mission Societies. In the following days, you will have the opportunity to discover either from a theological point of view and from a pastoral one, our charisma. It's first and foremost a missionary one! That is why I would like to start the program of the day with a theological reflection. Why is the Church missionary? What does mission mean today? It is quite important to go back to these fundamental questions to give an even deeper meaning to our activity.

We know that the missionary mandate comes from Jesus himself, at the end of his earthly existence, when he met the apostles for the last time. This is why the missionary mandate makes of evangelization the grace and vocation proper to the Church, its deepest identity (*Cf, Evangelii nuntiandi, n.14*). Thus the missionary mandate continues to be an absolute priority for all baptized as members of the Church. The mission of evangelization that the church received from Christ is called to take form in time and space, in a concrete place and to reach concrete populations, visible and tangible human beings. Even the Lord became man so we can enter in contact with him. So the church must become visible in the Christian communities, present through the announcement of the Word, the sacraments and divine fraternal love. This is the reflection I would like to share with you, using the following path: the origins of the Church; the mandate of preaching and the constitution of new Churches in the *Acts of the Apostles*; the sacraments of the Church and the Church as sacrament. At the end I will spend a few words on the mission of our PMS.

**1. THE MISSIONARY MANDATE OR THE URGENCY FOR NEW ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES**

* 1. THE ORIGINS OF THE CHURCH

But let's start with a different question. Where does the Church come from?

«But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth» (Acts 1, 8). This promise made by Christ to his Apostles before his Ascension, is immediately fulfilled; announcing Christ, they manifest themselves as witnesses. That's already the Church. There is a neat bond between the Word announced and the Church.

In fact, the Apostles, having received the Holy Spirit, found the courage to leave the cenacle where they were imprisoned out of fear. They started to witness the resurrection of Christ right away, to disseminate his teaching and to baptize. That is the Pentecost which will radically transform the heart and the spirit of the Apostles; through their words, the Church will become manifest, by the active presence through them of Jesus Christ, crucified and yet truly risen and alive.

However, the birth of the church has more deep origins from which the Paschal Mystery comes and takes shape. **The Fathers of the Church** like Saint Augustine or the Great Gregory speak of ***Ecclesia ab Abel***, of a Church constituted of the righteous of the Old Testament, who form a preparation of the manifestation of the Church of Christ. The Bishop of Hippo[[2]](#footnote-2) explains « Abel was the beginning of the city of God» extending this way the Church to all times and men. Yves Congar used the term *Ecclesia ab Abel* as well to equally include the righteous of the Old Testament in the chosen People[[3]](#footnote-3). Certainly, this «family of God» is constituted and is gradually realized along the history of mankind, according to the dispositions of God, the Father.[[4]](#footnote-4) This presence of the Church since the beginning of times, means that God, from the very beginning, wills to save every man and that his intention is to exclude no one.

In fact, the gathering of the Church began at the moment when sin destroyed the communion of men with God, and that of men among themselves, as it were God's reaction to the chaos provoked by sin (Cf. CEC 761): after the fall, he reveals his attention to save humanity. And the remote preparation for this gathering together of the People of God begins when he calls Abraham and promises that he will become the father of a great people. (Cf. Gn12,2:15,5-6).  Its immediate preparation begins with Israel's election as the People of God (Cf. Ex 19,5-6: Dt 7,6). By this election, Israel is to be the sign of the future gathering of all nations (cf. Is 2, 2-5 ; Mi 4, 1-4);(CEC 762) which will be fulfilled in the new covenant that Christ will institute (LG 9). These are the words we pronounce at every Eucharist; in the blood of Christ, in his death and his resurrection, the New Covenant is achieved for the forgiveness of sins and the salvation of every man. We are invited to learn how to contemplate the overall history of salvation: God wants all human beings to be saved and that is the reason why he sent us his Son to die for us. It is not by chance that blood and water poured out of the pierced side of Christ, symbol of the sacraments of the Church. It is through sacraments that the salvation of Christ is made accessible to us.

* 1. PENTECOST AND THE MANDATE OF PREACHING

How can the Church with its mission reach us today? Let us go back to Pentecost Day to understand that. It seems to me quite important to underline that Pope Francis pointed out the Acts of the Apostles as a model reference for evangelization during the Audience with the PMS last year. It is good to stop at this point. The gift of the Holy Spirit radically transformed the heart and the mind of the Apostles, converted them and enabled them to face crowds, the Sanhedrin, the authorities, the nations. They were prompted to witness the Risen Lord up to martyrdom to fulfill the missionary mandate left by the Risen. Following the footsteps of the Apostles, their successors, filled with the Holy Spirit, were empowered to announce the faith as well. The fundamental path for missionary work has to be found in the Acts, firstly in the account of Pentecost Event: the Apostles impelled by the Holy Spirit proclaim the Gospel (kerygma); the crowd is open to conversion and gets baptized: thus the Christian communities are born and formed.

The great speeches of Peter to the crowds of Jerusalem after Pentecost, develop around thekerygmatic core of the Gospel: Jesus died because of our sins, and has been risen to free us and share divine eternal life with us. In the same way, our preaching should be focusing on this clear and simple message. At least three reasons why we should be molded by the apostolic kerygma in our mission:

1. this announcement has a divine saving power in itself, which is that of the Word of God, who touches the heart of men touching and echoing in our hearts thanks to the Holy Spirit;
2. if the mission must aim at the personal encounter with Jesus Christ, the Son of God, then he is the one we must publicly profess and witness;
3. this announcement carries us beyond ourselves, our subjective opinions and immanent feelings, this means it contains a message that exceeds us: the announcement is not about what we think of God, but what God says about Himself.

Pope Francis also explicitly refers to this in his first document, a kind of orientation of his pontificate, his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium.* The apostolic kerygma of Christ’s death and resurrection should be the foundation of all our preaching, he states. That kerygma should shape personal relations, contents, methods and structures in our missionary work, overall. The first apostolic proclamation must keep resonating and invigorating every other word we utter. Thus, the first content of the Church mission for us too entails the explicit witness and proclamation of Jesus Christ. We follow, echo and take part into the same foundational events of the Acts of the Apostles.

In the accounts of the *Acts of the Apostles*, the announcement requires and is followed by the existential commitment of those called to conversion, this is the act of faith. I believe this announcement is true for me as well, therefore I entrust my life to Christ who died and rose from the dead. This act of faith also implies a conversion: I give up my initial life to start a new life with and in Christ who saved me. The aspect of conversion is not simply a moral issue. The conversion points out to a radical metanoia, namely a radical change in mind, heart, relations and deeds. This process invitation is very well spelled out in the first words of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark: «*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel»* (Mc 1,15). The presence of the Kingdom of God in Christ is a call to conversion. Unfortunately, we think of conversion too often in moralizing terms, just as a change of habits and moral integrity. No: conversion is born out of a personal adhesion to Christ. It's like a merchant who has found the precious pearl and sells everything to buy it. Conversion is exactly to "leave everything" and to fully adhere to the Son of God, dead and risen for me.

It is clear that this adhesion implies ascetic purification, and therefore a commitment to give up evil and pagan idols. However, this is not an act that arises once and for all; all life remains an open process of conversion. It is necessary to accompany this process with a deepening of the faith, for a greater knowledge of Christ and adhesion to his Church.

Why does the act of faith, the adhesion to Christ, require conversion? Nowadays, we have lost sight of a fundamental point of the Catholic doctrine: original sin. The Church’s doctrine on original sin has always affirmed that man, and with him all creation, is not corrupt, but interiorly wounded. It is an interior wound that causes suffering. Every man – myself included – each and every one of us, every person we meet, is profoundly affected by original sin. Man seeks happiness, a happiness that he seems to know and desire, and nevertheless cannot achieve by himself. He often believes he can attain this happiness seeking pleasure, money, drinking, etc. In truth, man seeks life; he seeks the source of life that is God Himself. Through original sin man lost his friendship with God, that is, he separated himself from the source of life. Conversion, therefore, is man’s search for life in God the Creator and not in his creatures. It is necessary to recognize man’s fallen state if we really wish to help him.

The man who adheres to the proclamation of Christ and converts is baptized afterwards, that is, he receives in the sacrament, this life of God, who is the Holy Spirit, and also in him the sin is defeated. Christ gives him the life of the risen. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches us that: «*Baptism not only purifies from all sins, but also makes the neophyte "a new creature” (2 Cor 5, 15), an adopted son of God, who has become a "partaker of the divine nature" (2 Pt 1, 4),  member of Christ and co-heir with him, and a temple of the Holy Spirit*» (n° 1265).

As a result, preaching and sacrament mutually integrate.

It is important to underline that the mandate to baptize also falls in the missionary mandate of Jesus. The announcement of the Word involves baptism. Whoever believes will be baptized. The outside sign of faith and repentance for the remission of sins, is definitely baptism. The *Acts of the Apostles* are full of examples where the announcement of Christ, is accompanied by repentance and baptism, after the speech of Peter on Pentecost day (Ac 2, 37-41); the Eunuch with Philippe (Ac 8, 26-38); the centurion Cornelius with Peter (Ac 10, 44-4); the jailer of Philippes with the Apostle Paul (Ac 16,33).

We find ourselves in this long chain that is the living tradition born of preaching and sacraments in different generations.

* 1. THE CONSTITUTION OF NEW ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES

Thanks to its missionary mandate, the first community of Jerusalem announces and constitutes new Churches.

It is rather remarkable to point out that the missionary mandate leads the Apostles naturally towards establishing Churches. It was not only a question of sharing faith. In effect, in the New Testament, all big challenges of the evangelization are principally calls to create «communities of disciples» therefore to establish Churches, they should be domestic Churches. The missionary command (Mathew 28, 18-20) is not only a call to make individual disciples, but communities of disciples, therefore to equally establish Churches as the experience of the primitive Church points out to us.

As we already saw on Pentecost Day, Peter's long predication to the Jewish gathered that day in Jerusalem led to the conversion and baptism of «about 3000 persons» (Acts 2,41). The Christian communities were first born in Palestine on the impulse of the Apostle Peter, then in Asia Minor and in Greece thanks to the action of Paul of Tarsus. In all the cities, he visits and wherever he stays, Paul establishes Christian communities with whom he will maintain epistolary relations. He wouldn’t finish his evangelization unless a Church is established with elders he ordained by the imposition of his hands. So the proclamation of the good News has as a natural and logical follow-up which is the constitution of Churches where the institutional element already appears.

It is not a chance that the Second Vatican Council, the Constitution *Ad Gentes* n ° 6 points out at this double importance of the announcement and the constitution of new Churches in the missionary mandate: «*‘****Missions’*** *is the term usually given to those particular undertakings by which the heralds of the Gospel, sent out by the Church and going forth into the whole world, carry out* ***the task of preaching the Gospel and planting the Church*** *among peoples or groups who do not yet believe in Christ. ....* ***The proper purpose of this missionary activity is evangelization, and the planting of the Church***among those peoples and groups where it has not yet taken root*»* (*Ad Gentes* 6).

The announcement of the Gospel as a constant commitment is inseparable from the reality of creating new ecclesial communities. Any community animated internally by disciples aware of their baptismal missionary duty, is called to reach out for the sake of its faith and to work on the construction of other Churches. «The missionary impulse, reminds Pope Francis by quoting his immediate predecessor, is a clear sign of the adulthood of an ecclesial community»[[5]](#footnote-5). He goes on by pointing out that«each *community is "mature" when it professes faith, celebrates it with joy during the liturgy, lives charity, proclaims the Word of God endlessly, leaves one’s own to take it to the “peripheries”, especially to those who have not yet had the opportunity to know Christ. The strength of our faith, at a personal and community level, can be measured by the ability to communicate it to others, to spread and live it in charity, to witness to it before those we meet and those who share the path of life with us*»[[6]](#footnote-6).

Therefore, we can say that the missionary model involves the above dimension that attains the world. Indeed, the Church exists and fulfills its mission for the salvation of the world; it does not exist for itself. So, if the proclamation of the Gospel drives to the foundation of new Churches, this is achieved to show the world in every corner of the earth, that God wants to save it by the mediation of Jesus Christ.

**2. THE MISSIONARY MANDATE AND THE CHURCH AS PLACE OF MANIFESTATION OF THE PRESENCE OF JESUS CHRIST AND HIS GRACE**

Let us now see better what the Church is.

* 1. THE CHURCH IS THE BODY OF CHRIST

The Church is understood only with relation to Christ; it is only in him, the light of nations, that one should try to understand the deep nature and universal mission of the Church.

The various images of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium* (LG) help us enlighten it: people, body, spouse, and mystery. But all these images have their light in Christ, who is the source from which the Church receives herself and without which she cannot exist. Because in reality, every man has this possibility to enter in contact with the person of Jesus Christ and to have a personal relationship with him through the mystery of the Church.

The Church will have therefore this mission to transmit the truth in person by announcing to every human being the presence of Jesus and his life. And it is precisely what the experience lived by Paul made him discover. Struck down by grace, he is going to acknowledge Jesus in the Church and the Church in Jesus as one and same reality: «I am Jesus whom you are persecuting» (Acts 9,5). Jesus already shows himself to Paul at the time of his conversion. Paul persecuted this community which claims to be of Jesus and that Jesus, precisely, claims as well.

The Church sacramentally reveals Jesus living in our history. There lies his living Body, by means of which we enter in touch with him, we become one with him. It follows from the law of Incarnation: to be able to enter in communion with men, God becomes one of them. The same law is worthy today: God still needs our humanity to save us. God needs the Church, the visible community of believers, to reveal himself to contemporary people. Even if the Church is formed by sinners, and that it will be marked by stains and of wrinkles on its face till the end of time, however its strength lies precisely in being in continuity with Jesus whose incarnation is extended to his body which is the Church.

Besides the biblical history of salvation shows us that God never makes alliance with isolated individuals, but with men who are members of a People. The Church is the People of New Covenant, “the Called”, the “Gathered”, the “convoked” by Christ Lord. In *Lumen Gentium,* in 9, the Council asserts: «*God does not make men holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. Rather has it pleased Him to bring men together as one people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness*... He called together a new people made up of Jew and gentile, making them one, not according to the flesh but in the Spirit. *That messianic people* *is a lasting and sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race. Established by Christ as a communion of life, charity and truth, it is also used by Him as an* ***instrument for the redemption of all***, *and is sent forth into the whole world* *as the light of the world and the salt of the earth*».

* 1. THE SACRAMENTS OF THE CHURCH

What is now the aim of the Church? We can understand it only in the light of her mission in and for the world.

As the Apostle is called and sent, the Church is convoked and sent. The Church is not aimed at itself. Even today, the Lord calls all who are still far away to be part of his people. And the People of God have a specific mission: to manifest the love of God. Therefore, the Christian community is fundamental, because it consists of specific persons who, through their lives, bear witness to the fact that they have been saved by God. The missionary is not an isolated hero; rather, he is a member of the Christian community that evangelizes through its presence. Jesus says, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13: 35). The very life of the Christian community exclaims that Jesus is alive. This is not a merely human task. Rather, it is carried out in us through the sacraments, that are a gift of God for us.

The sacramental expressions say it clearly: «*This is my body delivered for you*». The sacrament resists to any subjective appropriation. No one can baptize himself; no one can conquer the salvation of God on his own. The Church itself proclaims the divine origin of the acts of salvation which she celebrates. The sacraments are therefore first and foremost «sacraments of God».

And this is why the Pope says that the mission is not proselytism, but rather the communication of divine life. Through the mission the Church communicates the life of God. We receive this divine life through the sacraments, in and through which God acts. Through them, the body of Christ is built and the covenant relationship with God is actualized. Through them, the person is brought into the filial relationship with God and the fraternal relationship with his fellow men and women.

We understand the importance of the sacraments looking back at the life of Jesus of Nazareth. The paschal mystery does not evacuate the whole historical journey of Jesus. For this reason, it is only in the light of the acts and words of the historical Jesus that we can definitely grasp the signification of sacraments. He was “baptized” by John and his mission was “confirmed” by the Spirit; he preached the Gospel of mercy, "forgive the sins" and "heal" the sick to manifest the coming of the Kingdom of God; he gave back to marriage he its original vocation; he "chose his Apostles and sent them on mission" ensuring them his Holy Spirit; he gave his life under the "sign of the broken bread and of the blood shed ". An inexhaustible source of life in which the Church constantly drinks, Jesus continues to be the "sign", to be an event in our life of believers. Every sacrament is for each one of us a personal encounter with Christ because it is Him who baptizes, confirms, forgives and consecrates today.

It is him, who is present and acting in his ministers and servants by the Spirit to build, to gather and to lead his Church. All those who confer the sacraments, always act in the name of the Lord to whom they only lend their voice and their hands to actualize and make visible his presence. Saint Augustine says: «*Let Peter baptize, for it is the Christ who baptizes: let Paul baptize for it is Christ who baptizes; let Judas baptize for it is Christ who baptizes*» (Tr VI, 7, p. 357).

There is only one life manifested in the only Passover of Christ where God gives himself. If there are many sacraments, it is because God, through the Church, comes to meet humanity; he meets every man at every stage of his life and in the diversity of the situations where man needs salvation.

* 1. THE CHURCH AS A SACRAMENT

As I just mentioned, the Christian community is in itself a way of evangelizing. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13: 35). Christ continues to make himself present through the action of the Church which in this way becomes the place of experience of the God’s salvation. The Church does not only give the sacraments; she is herself a sacrament.

With the intention of asserting the true nature of the Church and its mission in the world, the conciliar document *Lumen Gentium* uses the expression: mystery of salvation and sacrament. It states : «*Since the Church is in Christ like a* ***sacrament*** *or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race, it desires now to unfold more fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission.****»*** (LG n°1). To better support and complete this affirmation, n° 48 of the same document defines the Church as ***universale* *salutis* *sacramentum* :** «*Christ, having been lifted up from the earth has drawn all to Himself. Rising from the dead He sent His life-giving Spirit upon His disciples and through Him has established His Body, which is the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation*».

It is surely surprising to see apply the term sacrament to the Church, since the Church is a personal and not a ritual reality. It is not a question of an eighth sacrament. However, the analogy with the sacrament is quite legitimate. Indeed, as in the case of the sacraments, the vocation of the Church is to reveal and to realize the intimate union with God and the unity of the entire mankind. She is sign and instrument. As «the Mystical Body of Christ» (L. G. n ° 8), the Church is the place and «milieu» where the intimate encounter with God is lived and where the unity of the entire mankind is prepared.

The rediscovering of the peculiarity of the Church as initiative of God in the world allowed grasping better the true nature of sacraments. «The Mystical body of Christ» (L. G. 7), a unique reality in which the invisible and institutional, the spiritual and visible dimensions are articulated. The Church appears not only as the one who makes the sacraments, but first as the one who receives them from God the Father through Jesus Christ in the Spirit. Meanwhile, by receiving she is molded as the universal sacrament, namely as the saved humanity in subordinated cooperation with Christ for our salvation. At the same time, it carries them in it, as the spouse carries the child to be born. We can say that while the Church is at the same time recipient of the sacraments, because she receives them, she is also subject, because she subordinately mediates and transmits them to us.

In the same way, the sacraments cease to be considered as specific formalities by which the Christian families mark their members, or as the duties which the Catholics must fulfill with regard to the Almighty God. They are signs, in which we participate through faith. In this way, their meaning is restored: through sacraments we participate in the Covenant initiated by God himself. Thus, the sacraments must be thought only in relation to the historical events of salvation. And conversely, while Jesus Christ is the original (origin and fount) Sacrament, the Church is the basic fundamental sacrament due to its universality and apostolicity, without which the sacraments cannot be understood and fully lived out.

Without sacraments, the Church, the people of believers would consist merely of an association among many who would gather its followers, from time to time, to recall the memory of its founder. Without the sacraments, the Church would lose its proper identity, which it receives every day from the living Jesus Christ and the inner energy that she gratuitously obtains from his Spirit.

For the Catholic Church, the mystery of incarnation continues and extends itself in the Eucharist. The Eucharist makes the Church and thus constitutes a visible place where we recognize that Jesus Christ saves: so one of the essential aims of the Eucharist is to build the Christian community, in a particular place and time, because the salvation Jesus Christ is not an abstract salvation, but it is concretely realized in history. The visibility of the Church as a place of salvation corresponds to the visibility of Christ in his incarnation and glorified risen body. Thus, everyone finds his place and we live in communion with each other: all together we witness the salvation that Christ realizes in us, through the Church.

Therefore, when we say that the Eucharist makes the Church, we want to state especially that the Eucharist makes the dynamic unity of the Church. The Eucharist also makes the Church apostolic and missionary: the word “Mass” comes from the Latin «missa» that is till the sending of the Apostles. The Church gathers to be sent and is sent in order to gather. The heart of the Church is therefore its apostolicity, namely it is received from Jesus Christ through the Twelve Apostles and united to be sent on mission. We understand that **missionary activity cannot happen without the ecclesial and therefore sacramental dimension of the Church.**

“Communion and mission are profoundly connected with each other, they interpenetrate and mutually imply each other, to the point that *communion represents both the source and the fruit of mission: communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion.*It is always the one and the same Spirit who calls together and unifies the Church and sends her to preach the Gospel "to the ends of the earth" (*Acts* 1:8). On her part, the Church knows that the communion received by her as a gift is destined for all people. Thus the Church feels she owes to each individual and to humanity as a whole the gift received from the Holy Spirit that pours the charity of Jesus Christ into the hearts of believers, as a mystical force for internal cohesion and external growth. The mission of the Church flows from her own nature. Christ has willed it to be so: that of "sign and instrument... of unity of all the human race"[[120]](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn120%22%20%5Co%20%22). Such a mission has the purpose of making everyone know and live the "new" communion that the Son of God made man introduced into the history of the world. In this regard, then, the testimony of John the Evangelist defines in an undeniable way the blessed end towards which the entire mission of the Church is directed: "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 *Jn*1:3)” (John Paul II, Christifideles laici, 32).

**3. THE PONTIFICAL MISSION SOCIETIES**

In light of the Church’s mandate to be sign and instrument of salvation, we should consider the Pontifical Mission Societies, their charismatic service for the Church Mission.

How can we define the PMS in one sentence? They are a worldwide network at the service of the Holy Father to sustain the mission and the young Churches through prayer and charity. In a short video that was recently published and that can be found on our webpage, the Pope himself states that the PMS are important but not very well known. That is also my personal experience.

The Pontifical Mission Societies, as you know, are 4. In order of their founding, they are: the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, the Society of the Holy Childhood, the Society of St. Peter the Apostle. These were born in France in the 19th century, two of them from initiatives of women fervently interested in the mission. I must mention in particular the foundress of the first Society, Pauline Jaricot, whose beatification process is underway, because she expressed the fundamental principle that governs all the Societies: to pray and to offer sacrifices for the mission of evangelization of the Church. The Society for the Propagation of the Faith economically sustains the pastoral care of the young Churches; the Society of the Holy Childhood is a pastoral instrument that acts with the following principle: "Children evangelize children"; the Society of Saint Peter the Apostle helps with the construction, the ordinary management and the formation at the local diocesan seminaries and novitiates of religious institutes in mission territories. The fourth Society, the Pontifical Missionary Union, was founded in Italy thanks to the missionary zeal of Blessed Paul Manna, priest and member of the PIME (*Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions)*, who, at the beginning of the 1900s, wanted to awaken and promote the baptismal missionary awareness among the People of God and give a universal missionary dimension to the ministerial priesthood.

In the Letter *Maximum Illud*, of which we celebrate the centenary this year, Pope Benedict XV spoke already about the importance of the Mission Societies. In 1922, Pope Pius XI went a step farther: he gave the Societies the status of "Pontifical" and transferred their secretariats to Rome. The Pope thus formally recognized the charism of the Societies; he made them his own and adopted them as his instrument to support, through prayer and charity, the *missio ad gentes* of the Church. I would like to underline this historical event, because it has a decisive influence on the quality of the Pontifical Mission Societies: they are the Pope’s Societies, and through them the Pope takes care of the many pastoral needs of the young Churches. This deep connection with the Petrine ministry is also evident from the fact that, at the end of the 1920s, Pius XI himself wanted to establish - also at the suggestion of the Seminary of Sassari – the World Mission Sunday. Since then, he determined that the collection taken up on that day be entirely designated to the Pontifical Society for the Propagation of the Faith, exactly as expression of the care of the universal Church for the Churches throughout the world.

I am struck by the fact that, since then, the Magisterium on the mission has always made reference to the Pontifical Mission Societies. Among other texts, I quote the Second Vatican Council Decree *Ad gentes*, which, at number 38, when mentioning the duties of the Bishop regarding the universal mission, states: “The bishop will exhort and help the diocesan congregations to play a role of their own in the missions; he will promote the works of mission institutes among his own faithful, but most especially the papal mission works. For it is only right to give these works pride of place, since they are the means of imbuing Catholics from their very infancy with a real universal and missionary outlook; and they are also the means of making an effective collection of funds to subsidize all missions, each according to its needs” (AG 38).

From a structural point of view, the Societies are both universal and local. They are coordinated at the universal level by the four International Secretariats, under a single President, and entrusted to the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. The local dimension manifests itself in the fact that we have about 120 National directions that in turn support the diocesan directors. In fact, can. 791 stipulates that in each diocese “*a priest is to be designated to promote effectively endeavors for the missions, especially the Pontifical Missionary Societies*.” The great task of the PMS is that of raising missionary awareness. Indeed, in accordance with the teachings of the Popes and the Council, the mission is a task entrusted to the whole People of God. The PMS have the special mandate to keep this missionary spirit alive, and this is ultimately the goal intended for the celebration of the Extraordinary Missionary Month of October 2019.

Let us keep in mind that we are talking about a charism. I expressly use the term “charism”, because our Mission Societies would not be comprehensible without the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This is evident if we consider the historical context in which they were founded. Various saints lived in the Diocese of Lyon at that time: St. John Maria Vianney, St. Peter Julian Eymard, founder of the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament, St. Peter Chanel, who later became apostle and martyr in Oceania. The missionary charism of the PMS was born in this context of holiness to sustain the mission through prayer and charity. In fact, our foundress, the venerable Pauline Jaricot, gathered her friends to pray and take up collections for the missions. This charism, this gift of the Holy Spirit, is a concrete way to participate in the subjectivity of the Church in the fulfillment of the missionary mandate. The Church, precisely as a body made up of members, is a promoter of evangelization. The support we offer has a very important function: to help missionaries to not feel alone, but rather supported by the whole Church. In fact, just as no one can believe alone, no one can be a missionary alone. The whole Church is subject of evangelization, and therefore no missionary is alone, but supported by the rest of the Christian community, in whose name he carries out his mission.

Furthermore, the mission is a privileged field in which the relationship of mutual enrichment between the universal Church and the local Church is made manifest. If it is true that the universal Church made visible in the local Church, it is also true that the local Church cannot exist without the universal Church. This mutual relationship prevents the local Church from closing in on itself and becoming a national Church. The more the local Church opens up to the mission, the more it discovers that it is a universal Church, open to the needs of all men. In this broad vision we can understand how the activity of the Pontifical Mission Societies can help the pastoral life of a local Church.

Now I am going to mention some specific fields of the activity of the PMS:

1. To keep the missionary spirit alive in the Church through missionary animation and formation. The last Pontiffs insisted on the centrality of evangelization and its intimate union with the faith: the mission is an expression of this dynamism of faith. To encourage the mission means to encourage the spirit of faith and, therefore, the Christian witness. Missionary animation is carried out through preaching, meetings, the promotion of formation, and the preparation of World Mission Sunday.
2. To foment prayer for the missions. Recently, Pope Francis reminded us of the centrality of prayer, which is the soul of the mission. It is indeed the Holy Spirit who keeps the mission of the Church alive. The Pontifical Mission Societies were founded with this spirit of prayer that they still continue to cultivate. Let us not forget that the patron Saint of the missions is a Carmelite nun who prayed incessantly for the missions without ever having been there.
3. To cultivate missionary formation. In collaboration with the International Secretariats in Rome, our Mission Societies offer opportunities of formation for priests, laity, and religious who are interested in the mission. This field of formation is becoming increasingly important, also because the Pope has asked for the “reshaping” of our Societies “in accordance with the demands of the Gospel”: what is the role of the PMS in the context of our modern world and the actual ecclesial situation that greatly differs from the one in which our Societies were originally founded? Offering different levels of formation is a way in which we are trying to respond to what the Holy Father has asked of us.
4. To gather collections in favor of the missions, in particular the collection taken up on the second-to-last Sunday of October, World Mission Sunday. As we know, money is not the most important aspect, but it is nevertheless necessary. As I said, this collection, by the expressed will of the Supreme Pontiffs, is entirely destined for the Universal Solidarity Fund: the International Secretariats of the Mission Societies administer the funds that the faithful of the local Churches throughout the world make available to the Holy Father, so that he may use them to sustain the young Churches. It is significant to the PMS that even the dioceses of the poorest countries contribute to this Fund. I believe that in the Church this is the only case of a constituted institution in which everyone offers something, and what is offered is given to those who are most in need. As you know, the Pontifical Mission Societies finance pastoral projects of different kinds: building churches and seminaries, printing liturgical material, providing support to the Bishops emeritus, training of catechists, etc. They are almost the only institutions that provide funding for pastoral projects that maintain the dioceses in mission territories alive. I would like to stress that this is a great service, which makes it possible to equitably distribute aid and guarantees at least a minimum support to all the circumscriptions of the mission territories. This fair distribution on behalf of the Holy Father through the Societies makes it possible for everyone to have something. Another great service offered by the PMS is the funding of some Roman Colleges where priests and religious sisters from mission countries study. This is a great investment for the future, because allowing young priests and religious to study in Rome means helping to qualify the young Churches with well-formed staff. Thanks be to God, the number of the faithful and the number of the Dioceses continues to grow in the mission territories, and, consequently, the financial effort required of us also increases. For this reason, it is important for us that the National Directions promote the World Mission Sunday Collection taken up in October. I ask you to be creative. It is essential for us to help the faithful understand that the PMS support the action of the Holy Father and have a universal vision, that is, they allow the local Church to support the activity of the universal Church. The missionary cooperation between local Churches does not replace the universal missionary identity of the Successor of Peter who serves as the Universal Pastor who has been entrusted with the care of the whole Church, of all the Churches, of all Catholics. I would like to reiterate that if it is true that by giving you receive, everything that is given for the mission - people, energies, funds - becomes a blessing for the good of the diocese that in turn gains in dynamism, witness of life, and commitment, especially vocational.

**CONCLUSION**

As the Church is missionary by nature, also mission is ecclesial by nature, because it extends in the concrete of the human living the action of Christ which always passes through the concrete persons. The Church is Jesus who lives forever.

So, for us, baptized Christians, in our life, it is about acknowledging the face of Jesus on the Church, to give him our transfigured faces, bodies and hearts, to witness Jesus by letting his presence show through us, so his face can be revealed and accessible to all men and women.

God gave a procreative power to the Church. The Church does not exist only for her members; as a sacrament of salvation, she exists to participate in the mission of God for the redemption of the world. The impact of the Gospel in the life of the first Christians manifested itself through their capacity of living together as one heart one body and sharing a completely new way of life. So, the salvation instituted by Jesus Christ and carried by Holy Spirit in the life of men and women, transforms their existence, and make them discover and practice, receive and share, especially within the ecclesial community. In societies where benefit and competition are fundamental values, sharing and receiving, lived in Christian communities, can call out and open another perspective, a divine one. Even at present, the Church can become a place of experience for every man, a place where the salvation of Christ is visible. That's why the Church is sent *ad gentes*, here the real sense of mission can be found and understood: to show across the Christian community, through Christians transformed by the action of Christ, that Jesus is alive and gives us his eternal life.

1. Mc 13,10; Lc 24,47; Jn 17,18 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Augustin : De Peccato orig., 24, 28 ; 26, 30, 31. See Grégoire, Hom. In Evang., 19,1 (PG 76, 1154). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Congar, “Ecclesia ab Abel”, in Festschrift K. Adam, Düsseldorf, 1952, p. 80-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. LG n 2 « Already from the beginning of the world the foreshadowing of the Church took place. It was prepared in a remarkable way throughout the history of the people of Israel and by means of the Old Covenant. In the present era of time the Church was constituted and, by the outpouring of the Spirit, was made manifest. At the end of time it will gloriously achieve completion » [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum* *Domini*, on the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church, 30 September 2010, n. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Pope Francis, Message for World Mission Day 2013, 19 may 2013, Solemnity of Pentecost. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)