

Nurturing a Missionary Spirit *A Fraternal Sharing on Missio Spirituality*

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1. My Missionary Life Journey
2. A Biblical-Evangelical Icon: Jesus' Multiplication of Bread in Luke

Gospel – Luke 9:11B-17

^{11B} Jesus spoke to the crowds about the kingdom of God, and he healed those who needed to be cured.

¹² As the day was drawing to a close, the Twelve approached him and said, "Dismiss the crowd so that they can go to the surrounding villages and farms and find lodging and provisions; for we are in a deserted place here."

¹³ He said to them, "Give them some food yourselves." They replied, "Five loaves and two fish are all we have unless we ourselves go and buy food for all these people."

¹⁴ Now the men there numbered about five thousand. Then he said to his disciples, "Have them sit down in groups of about fifty."

¹⁵ They did so and made them all sit down.

¹⁶ Then taking the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he said the blessing over them, broke them and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd.

¹⁷ They all ate and were satisfied. And when the leftover fragments were picked up, they filled twelve wicker baskets.

1. The "Missionary" Context of the Multiplication of Bread

Today's Gospel recounts the story of the multiplication of bread according to St Luke. This miracle, found in all four Gospels (a sign of a common ancient tradition), represents a kind of "anticipation" of the institution of the Eucharist by Jesus during the Last Supper, as suggested by the evangelists themselves. However, St. Luke, more than the others, placed the whole event in a missionary context. In fact, the passage begins, as we have heard, with a generic "Jesus spoke" (without any time indication). This actually corresponds to the precise moment of the return of the apostles after being sent by Jesus "to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal [the sick]" (Lk 9:2). Thus, the multiplication of bread has a very significant setting, which states fully, "When the apostles returned, they explained to him what they had done. He took them and withdrew

in private to a town called Bethsaida. The crowds, meanwhile, learned of this and followed him. *He received them and spoke to them* about the kingdom of God, and he healed those who needed to be cured” (Lk 9: 10-11).

In the light of such a precise description of St. Luke, the completely missionary perspective of the event emerges very clearly. The Twelve “apostles”, that is to say the “sent” ones, had just returned from their mission. Jesus then foresaw a time together with them “in private”, but for the crowds who “followed him”, he rested no more. Indeed, He “*received them*” and “*and spoke to them* about the *kingdom of God*, and he *healed...*”, carrying out exactly the two activities entrusted to the Twelve in their mission, as seen above (cf. Lk 9:2). This reminds us of the words of the prophet of God, full of zeal for the salvation of the people: “For Zion’s sake I will not be silent, / for Jerusalem’s sake I will not keep still, / Until her vindication shines forth like the dawn / and her salvation like a burning torch” (Is 62:1). These are words which now find their complete fulfillment in Jesus.

2. The “complete” bread offered by Jesus

Therefore, Jesus’ mission of proclaiming the Gospel even in “inopportune time” (to use St. Paul’s expression) continues, despite physical fatigue. The multiplication of bread is then inserted in this context of Jesus’ tireless mission for the Kingdom of God. And it all begins with the beautiful welcoming action, a sign of limitless love, to the point of forgetting oneself to serve others. In fact, the parallel passage in the Gospel of Mark made it clear that at that moment, “[Jesus] saw the vast crowd, *his heart was moved with pity for them*, for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things” (Mk 6:34).

Furthermore, as underlined by the Lucan account, before feeding the people with bread, Jesus had taught them the things of God until the waning of the day! In this way, on that memorable day, the bread He shared with the crowd was not only the material one made of barley or wheat, but also and above all, that of the Word of God. Jesus offers a “complete” care for the people, giving all of himself in the mission.

This is also the case with the “Eucharistic bread” that Jesus offers with the institution of the Eucharist, when his “hour” has come. It will be the bread of his body and the blood of his flesh “for the life of the world” (Jn 6:51), but at the same time it will also be the bread of the teaching of Him, the Word of God, who has “the words of eternal life,” as seen in the extended Eucharistic discourse of Jesus following the multiplication of bread in the Gospel of John (cf. Jn 6:26-58,68). This is the “complete” bread that Jesus offers with love for the salvation of the world.

In this regard, the reflection of Pope Benedict XVI is quite indicative:

In the Eucharist Jesus does not give us a “thing,” but himself; he offers his own body and pours out his own blood. He thus gives us the totality of his life and reveals the ultimate origin of this love [of God]. He is the eternal Son, given to us by the Father. In the Gospel we hear how Jesus, after feeding the crowds by multiplying the loaves and fishes, says to those who had followed him to the synagogue of Capernaum: “My Father gives you the true bread from heaven; for the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world” (Jn 6:32-33), and even identifies himself, his own flesh and blood, with that bread: “I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh” (Jn 6:51). Jesus thus shows that he is the bread of life which the eternal Father gives to mankind. (*Sacramentum Caritatis* 7)

3. The Bread of Jesus and the Mission of the Community of the Faithful

Returning to the Gospel account of the multiplication of bread, we note that Jesus’ mission was shared with the apostles. The latter, who were already collaborators of Jesus in the proclamation of the Kingdom and in

the care of the sick, will also be called to cooperate in the miracle of bread at the end of that memorable day. In fact, when they wanted to send the crowd away to “find provisions”, “he said to them, ‘Give them some food yourselves.’” Furthermore, the apostles will be asked to make the people sit “in groups of about fifty”, organizing them just as in the time of the journey of God’s People in the desert (cf. Ex 18:21,25). And even more importantly, it will be the disciples who will receive the loaves and fishes from Jesus to distribute to the crowd: “Then taking the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he said the blessing over them [lit. “he blessed them”], he broke them, and *gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd*”(Lk 9:16). Finally, in the mention that “the leftover fragments were picked up, they filled twelve wicker baskets,” it can be understood that it was these disciples who collected them (as stated in the Gospel of John [cf. Jn 6:12-13]).

As in the multiplication of bread, Jesus also involved his disciples in the Eucharistic Mystery with the explicit command to them: “Do this in memory of me.” Indeed, this recommendation is repeated twice in the account of St. Paul in the second reading, both after the words on bread and after those on wine. With this in mind, St. Paul concluded his concise account with a precious observation on the action of proclaiming Christ that goes together with participation in the Eucharist: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes” (1Cor 11:26).

And here is a beautiful reflection by Benedict XVI regarding the Eucharist and the mission of the community of the faithful:

The love that we celebrate in the sacrament [of Eucharist] is not something we can keep to ourselves. By its very nature it demands to be shared with all. What the world needs is God’s love; it needs to encounter Christ and to believe in him. The Eucharist is thus the source and summit not only of the Church’s life, but also of her mission: “an authentically eucharistic Church is a missionary Church.” (234) We too must be able to tell our brothers and sisters with conviction: “That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us” (1 Jn 1:3). Truly, nothing is more beautiful than to know Christ and to make him known to others. The institution of the Eucharist, for that matter, anticipates the very heart of Jesus’ mission: he is the one sent by the Father for the redemption of the world (cf. Jn 3:16-17; Rom 8:32). At the Last Supper, Jesus entrusts to his disciples the sacrament which makes present his self-sacrifice for the salvation of us all, in obedience to the Father’s will. We cannot approach the eucharistic table without being drawn into the mission which, beginning in the very heart of God, is meant to reach all people. Missionary outreach is thus an essential part of the eucharistic form of the Christian life. (*Sacramentum Caritatis* 84).

In view of the aforementioned phrase of St. Paul to the Corinthians in the second reading, we recall the important clarification of the Pope on the nature of the Christian proclamation that starts from participation in the Eucharistic mystery:

Emphasis on the intrinsic relationship between the Eucharist and mission also leads to a rediscovery of the ultimate content of our proclamation. The more ardent the love for the Eucharist in the hearts of the Christian people, the more clearly will they recognize the goal of all mission: *to bring Christ to others*. Not just a theory or a way of life inspired by Christ, but the gift of his very person. Anyone who has not shared the truth of love with his brothers and sisters has not yet given enough. The Eucharist, as the sacrament of our salvation, inevitably reminds us of the unicity of Christ and the salvation that he won for us by his blood. The mystery of the Eucharist, believed in and celebrated, demands a constant catechesis on the need for all to engage in a missionary effort centred on the proclamation of Jesus as the one Saviour. This will help to avoid a reductive and

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purely sociological understanding of the vital work of human promotion present in every authentic process of evangelization. (*Sacramentum Caritatis* 86).

Finally, another reflection of the Pontiff in the same document on the farewell greeting at the end of the Eucharistic celebration will also be useful for us:

After the blessing, the deacon or the priest dismisses the people with the words: *Ite, missa est*. These words help us to grasp the relationship between the Mass just celebrated and the mission of Christians in the world. In antiquity, *missa* simply meant “dismissal.” However in Christian usage it gradually took on a deeper meaning. The word “dismissal” has come to imply a “mission.” These few words succinctly express the missionary nature of the Church. (*Sacramentum Caritatis* 51)

Let us then pray in conclusion that, as Pope Benedict XVI expressed, “through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, may the Holy Spirit kindle within us the same ardor experienced by the disciples on the way to Emmaus (cf. Lk 24:13-35) and renew our “eucharistic wonder” through the splendor and beauty radiating from the liturgical rite, the efficacious sign of the infinite beauty of the holy mystery of God” (*Sacramentum Caritatis* 97). We pray that all of us may always welcome with joy and gratitude the gift of the “complete” Bread that Jesus offers us in every Eucharistic celebration, the Bread of his Word and of his Body and Blood, to share it with others in our life, announcing the death and resurrection of the Lord, “until he comes.”

3. Input From Pope Francis’ Message for World Mission (Sun)Day 2022

“You shall be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8)

Dear brothers and sisters!

These words were spoken by the Risen Jesus to his disciples just before his Ascension into heaven, as we learn from the Acts of the Apostles: “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (1:8). They are also the theme of the 2022 World Mission Day which, as always, reminds us that the Church is missionary by nature. This year World Mission Day offers us the opportunity to commemorate several important events in the Church’s life and mission: the fourth centenary of the founding of the Congregation *de Propaganda Fide*, now the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, and the second centenary of the Society of the Propagation of the Faith. A hundred years ago, the latter, together with the Society of the Holy Childhood and the Society of Saint Peter the Apostle, was granted the title “Pontifical”.

Let us reflect on the three key phrases that synthesize the three foundations of the life and mission of every disciple: “You shall be my witnesses”, “to the ends of the earth” and “you shall receive the power of the Holy Spirit”.

1. “You shall be my witnesses” – The call of every Christian to bear witness to Christ

This is the central point, the heart of Jesus’ teaching to the disciples, in view of their being sent forth into the world. The disciples are to be witnesses of Jesus, thanks to the grace of the Holy Spirit that they will receive. Wherever they go and in whatever place they find themselves. Christ was the first to be sent, as a “missionary” of the Father (cf. Jn 20:21), and as such, he is the Father’s “faithful witness” (cf. Rev 1:5). In a similar way, every Christian is called to be a missionary and witness to Christ. And the Church, the community of Christ’s disciples, has no other mission than that of bringing the Gospel to the entire world by bearing witness to Christ. To evangelize is the very identity of the Church.

A deeper look at the words, “You shall be my witnesses”, can clarify a few ever timely aspects of the mission Christ entrusted to the disciples. The plural form of the verb emphasizes the communitarian and ecclesial nature of the disciples’ missionary vocation. Each baptized person is called to mission, in the Church and by the mandate of the Church: consequently, mission is carried out together, not individually, in communion with the ecclesial community, and not on one’s own initiative. Even in cases where an individual in some very particular situation carries out the evangelizing mission alone, he must always do so in communion with the Church which commissioned him. As [Saint Paul VI](#) taught in the Apostolic Exhortation [Evangelii Nuntiandi](#), a document dear to my heart: “Evangelization is for no one an individual and isolated act; it is one that is deeply ecclesial. When the most obscure preacher, catechist or pastor in the most distant land preaches the Gospel, gathers his little community together or administers a sacrament, even alone, he is carrying out an ecclesial act, and his action is certainly attached to the evangelizing activity of the whole Church by institutional relationships, but also by profound invisible links in the order of grace. This presupposes that he acts not in virtue of a mission which he attributes to himself or by a personal inspiration, but in union with the mission of the Church and in her name” (No. 60). Indeed, it was no coincidence that the Lord Jesus sent his disciples out on mission in pairs; the witness of Christians to Christ is primarily communitarian in nature. Hence, in carrying out the mission, the presence of a community, regardless of its size, is of fundamental importance.

In addition, the disciples are urged to live their personal lives *in a missionary key*: they are sent by Jesus to the world not only to *carry out*, but also and above all to *live* the mission entrusted to them; not only to *bear* witness, but also and above all to *be* witnesses of Christ. In the moving words of the Apostle Paul, “[we are] always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies” (2 Cor 4:10). The essence of the mission is to bear witness to Christ, that is, to his life, passion, death and resurrection for the love of the Father and of humanity. Not by chance did the apostles look for Judas’ replacement among those who, like themselves, had been witnesses of the Lord’s resurrection (cf. Acts 1:21). Christ, indeed Christ risen from the dead, is the One to whom we must testify and whose life we must share. Missionaries of Christ are not sent to communicate themselves, to exhibit their persuasive qualities and abilities or their managerial skills. Instead, theirs is the supreme honour of presenting Christ in words and deeds, proclaiming to everyone the Good News of his salvation, as the first apostles did, with joy and boldness.

(...)

Finally, when it comes to Christian witness, the observation of Saint Paul VI remains ever valid: “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” ([Evangelii Nuntiandi](#), 41). For this reason, the testimony of an authentic Christian life is fundamental for the transmission of the faith. On the other hand, the task of proclaiming Christ’s person and the message is equally necessary. Indeed, Paul VI went on to say: “Preaching, the verbal proclamation of a message, is indeed always indispensable... The word remains ever relevant, especially when it is the bearer of the power of God. This is why Saint Paul’s axiom, “Faith comes from what is heard” (*Rom 10:17*), also retains its relevance: it is the word that is heard which leads to belief” (ibid., 42).

In evangelization, then, the example of a Christian life and the proclamation of Christ are inseparable. One is at the service of the other. They are the two lungs with which any community must breathe, if it is to be missionary. This kind of complete, consistent and joyful witness to Christ will surely be a force of attraction also for the growth of the Church in the third millennium. I exhort everyone to take up once again the courage, frankness and *parrhesía* of the first Christians, in order to bear witness to Christ in word and deed in every area of life.

2. “To the ends of the earth” – The perennial relevance of a mission of universal evangelization

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In telling the disciples to be his witnesses, the risen Lord also tells them where they are being sent: "...in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Here we clearly see the universal character of the disciples' mission. We also see the "centrifugal" geographical expansion, as if in concentric circles, of the mission, beginning with Jerusalem, which Jewish tradition considered the centre of the world, to Judea and Samaria and to "the ends of the earth". The disciples are sent not to proselytize, but to proclaim; the Christian does not proselytize. The Acts of the Apostles speak of this missionary expansion and provide a striking image of the Church "going forth" in fidelity to her call to bear witness to Christ the Lord and guided by divine providence in the concrete conditions of her life. Persecuted in Jerusalem and then spread throughout Judea and Samaria, the first Christians bore witness to Jesus everywhere (cf. Acts 8:1, 4).

(...)

The words "to the ends of the earth" should challenge the disciples of Jesus in every age and impel them to press beyond familiar places in bearing witness to him. For all the benefits of modern travel, there are still geographical areas in which missionary witnesses of Christ have not arrived to bring the Good News of his love. Then too no human reality is foreign to the concern of the disciples of Jesus in their mission. Christ's Church will continue to "go forth" towards new geographical, social and existential horizons, towards "borderline" places and human situations, in order to bear witness to Christ and his love to men and women of every people, culture and social status. In this sense, the mission will always be a *missio ad gentes*, as the [Second Vatican Council](#) taught. The Church must constantly keep pressing forward, beyond her own confines, in order to testify to all the love of Christ. Here I would like to remember and express my gratitude for all those many missionaries who gave their lives in order to "press on" in incarnating Christ's love towards all the brothers and sisters whom they met.

3. "You will receive power" from the Holy Spirit – Let us always be strengthened and guided by the Spirit.

When the risen Christ commissioned the disciples to be his witnesses, he also promised them the grace needed for this great responsibility: "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8). According to the account in Acts, it was precisely following the descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples that the first act of witnessing to the crucified and risen Christ took place. That kerygmatic proclamation – Saint Peter's "missionary" address to the inhabitants of Jerusalem – inaugurated an era in which the disciples of Jesus evangelized the world. Whereas they had previously been weak, fearful and closed in on themselves, the Holy Spirit gave them the strength, courage and wisdom to bear witness to Christ before all.

Just as "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord', except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12:3), so no Christian is able to bear full and genuine witness to Christ the Lord without the Spirit's inspiration and assistance. All Christ's missionary disciples are called to recognize the essential importance of the Spirit's work, to dwell in his presence daily and to receive his unfailing strength and guidance. Indeed, it is precisely when we feel tired, unmotivated or confused that we should remember to have recourse to the Holy Spirit in prayer. Let me emphasize once again that prayer plays a fundamental role in the missionary life, for it allows us to be refreshed and strengthened by the Spirit as the inexhaustible divine source of renewed energy and joy in sharing Christ's life with others. "Receiving the joy of the Spirit is a grace. Moreover, it is the only force that enables us to preach the Gospel and to confess our faith in the Lord" ([Message to the Pontifical Mission Societies](#), 21 May 2020). The Spirit, then, is the true protagonist of mission. It is he who gives us the right word, at the right time, and in the right way.

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The charismatic origin of these four Societies was authoritatively reaffirmed by Pope Francis in the Message for World Mission Sunday 2022:

In light of this action of the Holy Spirit, we also want to consider the missionary anniversaries to be celebrated in 2022. [...]

The same Spirit who guides the universal Church also inspires ordinary men and women for extraordinary missions. Thus it was that a young French woman, Pauline Jaricot, founded the Society for the Propagation of the Faith exactly two hundred years ago. Her beatification will be celebrated in this jubilee year. Albeit in poor health, she accepted God's inspiration to establish a network of prayer and collection for missionaries, so that the faithful could actively participate in the mission "to the ends of the earth". This brilliant idea gave rise to the annual celebration of World Mission Day, in which the funds collected in local communities are applied to the universal fund with which the Pope supports missionary activity.

In this regard, I think too of the French Bishop Charles de Forbin-Janson, who established the Association of the Holy Childhood to promote the mission among children, with the motto "Children evangelize children, children pray for children, children help children the world over". I also think of Jeanne Bigard, who inaugurated the Society of Saint Peter the Apostle for the support of seminarians and priests in mission lands. Those three Mission Societies were recognized as "Pontifical" exactly a hundred years ago. It was also under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit that Blessed Paolo Manna, born 150 years ago, founded the present-day Pontifical Missionary Union, to raise awareness and encourage missionary spirit among priests, men and women religious and the whole people of God. Saint Paul VI himself was part of this latter Society, and confirmed its papal recognition. I mention these four Pontifical Mission Societies for their great historical merits, but also to encourage you to rejoice with them, in this special year, for the activities they carry out in support of the mission of evangelization in the Church, both universal and local. It is my hope that the local Churches will find in these Societies a sure means for fostering the missionary spirit among the People of God.

4. Conclusion: Some Practical Suggestions

Eucharist

Love – Pray – Share

See: **PMS – Charism and actualization 2022 OR Embracing and Employing the PMS Charism** (Working Document)