

What Is the Mission of the Church?



A Guide for Catholics

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How the Concept of Mission Has Changed

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An Introduction

From Ransoming Pagan Babies to Mission on Every Continent

Jesus was on a mission from God! God created the world and humanity out of love, but people unfortunately distanced themselves from God's love and from one another. God made a promise through Abraham, Moses, the prophets, and other holy men and women of Israel to reestablish that right relationship of love and that way of salvation. God sent Jesus Christ, who had existed from the beginning of time, to our world to show human beings who we are and how we are to live. Jesus taught us about God's love, which embraces all people, including the "impure" lepers and tax-collectors, which calls us to treat everyone as our neighbor and brother or sister, including our enemies, and which requires all of us as sinners to turn from our old ways to the new life of God. Jesus Christ was God's love, forgiveness, salvation, healing, justice, and compassion *in the flesh*, and he reestablished the right relationship with God through his life, death, and resurrection. Jesus was on a mission from God, and we Christians need to continue that mission *in the flesh*. People today search and yearn for God's love, forgiveness, salvation, healing, justice, and compassion.

For over two thousand years Christians have understood and practiced mission in many different ways. One of my earliest

images of mission comes from my Catholic grade school days in the early 1960s: collecting pennies in a little cardboard coin box to “ransom a pagan baby.” I wrote the baptismal name a child would receive at baptism by a missionary in a faraway land on the outside of the box. My classmates and I proudly processed with our “mission boxes” to the front of the classroom. That was the understanding of mission for me and most Catholics at that time.

The why, who, where, what and how of mission in pre-Vatican II days were quite clear and straightforward. “Pagan” babies (or adults) needed to be saved from the fires of hell by the act of baptism that would bring them safely on board the church—that is, the *Roman Catholic Church*, the ark of salvation. The stereotypical missionary picture was that of a white priest baptizing a non-white person in such mission lands as Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. Mission was clearly seen as unidirectional, that is, basically from Europe and North America to everyone else. The missionary brought God to “those people.” The twofold motivation for mission was the salvation of souls and the establishment of the visible church around the world.

New Understanding of Mission

Since the renewal of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), many things have changed within the Catholic Church. The liturgy is celebrated in a language and style that promote fuller understanding and participation; lay people have become more actively involved; the attitudes of Catholics toward Protestants have shifted from competition and suspicion to cooperation and understanding. Vatican II likewise marked a dramatic turning point in the understanding of mission.

How do we understand and define mission today? Some twenty-five years after the council, Pope John Paul II in a key document on mission described mission in this way: “Proclamation is the permanent priority of mission. The Church cannot elude Christ’s explicit mandate, nor deprive men and women of the ‘Good News’ about their being loved and saved by God” (RM 44). The pope wrote about mission as “a single but complex reality, and it develops in a variety of ways” (41). “The witness of a Christian life is

the first and irreplaceable form of mission” (42), and such witness includes a “commitment to peace, justice, human rights and human promotion” (42). Other elements of mission involve forming local churches (48–50), incarnating the gospel in all cultures (52–54), dialoguing with brothers and sisters of other religions (55–57), and promoting development by forming consciences (58–59). Earlier, Pope Paul VI drew the definition of mission from the central message and explicit purpose of Jesus to preach the good news of the kingdom/reign of God (EN 6) and also pointed out that mission has many elements (17–18), must respect culture and the context (20), and does not always require words (21). This last idea is captured nicely by the phrase associated with Francis of Assisi: “Preach always, and if necessary use words.”

Popes Paul VI and John Paul II and other Catholic writers often use the term *evangelization* instead of *mission*. In a broad sense *evangelization* is intended to sum up the church’s entire mission. While there is a tendency at times to restrict the meaning of *evangelization* to explicit verbal proclamation, a 2007 Vatican document stresses the broad intention of this term: “In any case, *to evangelize* does not mean simply to teach a doctrine, but to proclaim Jesus Christ by one’s words and actions, that is, to make oneself an instrument of his presence and action in the world” (*Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization*, 2). The term *evangelization* in this book is understood as another word for *mission* in this broad sense.

In an attempt to capture the all-embracing dynamic of mission in a one-line definition, one can say that *mission is proclaiming, serving, and witnessing to God’s reign of love, salvation, and justice*. This working definition will be filled out as we proceed, but this gives us a starting point. Now, back to the Second Vatican Council and how it affected the practice of mission.

First of all, the church reclaimed its identity, from its early years, of being missionary by its very nature in the Vatican II *Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity* (AG 2). Therefore, every local church and diocese is to be both mission sending and mission receiving. The local churches of the “global South” used to be considered the “missions,” and now they are the most vital centers of mission. And the Catholic Church in North America and Europe, which used to see itself only as mission sending, is now

in great need of what Pope John Paul II called “re-evangelization.” Local churches, as a whole, and individual Christians of the North and South, are all part of the one body of Christ, and therefore they should relate to and work with one another with mutual respect. It is no longer a one-way relationship.

Second, the church recognized that God was and is somehow also present in other religions, non-Western cultures, and in the world and society in general. The mysterious and wonderful movement of God’s spirit, like the wind, cannot be captured within church walls or certain geographical territories. Within this context we must shift from the old heroic, paternalistic model of mission—reaching down to “save” and “help” another person—to a model of humility and mutuality—developing a reciprocal relationship out of respect for how God is already present in the other.

These two changes in understanding challenge those deep and dangerous attitudes that see mission efforts as some type of church foreign-aid program. It is not the “rich” of the North helping the “poor” of the South. In other words, attitudes of paternalism and superiority are to be replaced by mutuality and respect. Each local church and individual in mission is enriched through the others. In this ongoing relationship and process, everyone is called to conversion from the “old ways” to the “new ways” to be in right relationship with God and God’s world. This understanding of mission since the Second Vatican Council does not discredit the good accomplished by the many committed and well-intentioned Christians and missionaries of the past. However, just as the church has changed over time to remain faithful to God’s call in new situations, there is a call for new attitudes and approaches as God’s Spirit leads the church into today’s world.

Pope John Paul II affirmed that “there is a new awareness that missionary activity is a matter for all Christians, for all dioceses and parishes” (RM 2). A few years earlier, the U.S. Catholic bishops published *To the Ends of the Earth: A Pastoral Statement on World Mission* to educate and animate Catholics with this new understanding of mission. How is this promoted in North America? The Pontifical Mission Societies, particularly the Society for the Propagation of the Faith (SPF) and the Holy Childhood Association (HCA), play a key role in this regard. For example, the activities of the SPF include coordinating the annual

mission appeal with a visiting missionary coming to every parish (Missionary Cooperative Plan) and the worldwide celebration of Mission Sunday on the penultimate Sunday in October in order to promote mission interest and support. In place of “ransoming pagan babies,” the HCA continues to find new ways to open the eyes of children to the larger world and to help them participate in mission. They particularly focus on children helping children. Catholic Relief Services (CRS) sponsors the Lenten Operation Rice Bowl program, inviting individuals, families, and parishes to pray, fast, and sacrifice in solidarity with the hungry and poor around the world. Religious and lay mission societies through their publications and other activities act as catalysts for stirring up interest and involvement in mission. Diocesan mission offices promote mission cooperation through their work with the Pontifical Mission Societies, and in addition, some have initiated and supported a variety of parish and diocesan programs such as immersion trips, short-term mission opportunities, and social justice programs. A number of parishes in the United States have entered into a “twinning” program with another parish either outside or within the country. Rather than simply sending money and prayer in one direction to help the “less fortunate,” both parishes enter into a relationship of mutual support and participation in mission. Both parishes are to be mission sending and mission receiving.

The prayer proposed by the HCA in preparation for the third millennium closed in this way: “Strengthen in us our full-hearted response to our sisters and brothers, whether they live next door or in a faraway village. May we all be one in you” (1998). This powerful prayer for children highlights aspects that are foundational for all programs of mission today. Mission calls Catholics not only to donate money but also to be open to having their daily lives, attitudes and actions transformed by God’s grace. All Christians—laity, ordained, and religious—by virtue of their baptism and through their lives, actions, and words, are to participate in God’s mission of drawing all people to the reign of God and the fullness of God’s life. The call of mission is not restricted to certain peoples or geographical areas (“mission lands” or “missions”); it includes peoples of all races, nations, and generations. Mission is not just out there but also in here. Parish twinning

occurs both across and within national boundaries, and while most of the funds from Operation Rice Bowl support programs outside the United States, 25 percent is devoted to alleviating hunger and poverty within the country. Finally, these programs promote a sense of unity within the body of Christ and solidarity with the wider human family. These particular themes have been developed by U.S. Catholic bishops in their 1998 statement including practical suggestions for parishes, *Called to Global Solidarity: International Challenges for U.S. Parishes*.

Mission and Table Fellowship

One image and symbol of mission is a table. In many ways mission is concerned with responding to physical and spiritual hunger. As we cannot live without bodily nourishment, neither can we live without food for our souls. While we often do this on an individual basis, our most memorable moments of being fed occur with others. When we gather as a family or with friends around a table to eat, whether for a daily meal or on special occasions, we are renewed in both body and spirit. Praying during mealtime reminds us of this fact. All cultures recognize the importance of sharing food to maintain, strengthen, and reestablish relationships. Families gather in homes to eat together at the end of a day and during vacations; feasts are held to celebrate weddings, anniversaries, holy days, and holidays; villages, spouses, and friends share a meal to mark their reconciliation.

Around the eucharistic table we are also nourished, as individuals and as a community, by God's word and by sharing the Body and Blood of Christ. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. The one who comes to me will never be hungry; the one who believes in me will never thirst" (Jn 6:35). Signs of the coming of the reign of God included Jesus feeding the multitudes and eating with sinners and tax-collectors. This latter action was scandalous for many religious authorities because it went against social and religious customs. The same attitude threatened early Jewish Christians who felt that eating with Gentiles was unclean, and even unthinkable. If such daily table fellowship was considered impossible, how could Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians

share the same table in the “breaking of the bread” (Eucharist)? Facing and eventually overcoming this challenge enabled the early church with its diversity to share one baptism and one table as the body of Christ.

Time and time again the church has struggled with this fundamental Christian principle of gathering in table fellowship as brothers and sisters of Christ. Indigenous peoples of the Americas and Africa were considered less than human; Catholics transported and owned slaves; African Americans were not allowed to study in seminaries in the United States until the 1920s; Catholics slaughtered fellow Catholics in Rwanda; and many U.S. small towns until recently had one Catholic Church for whites and another for “people of color.” In today’s global village we are more united through communication, mass media, and travel, but we are more divided between the haves and the have-nots.

In 2002 the U.S. Catholic bishops published a pastoral reflection called *A Place at the Table*. It begins with a description of three “tables”—the family dining-room table, the table of the Eucharist, and the worldwide “table” of God’s diverse peoples. The document includes the following from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “The Eucharist commits us to the poor. To receive in truth the Body and Blood of Christ given up for us, we must recognize Christ in the poorest” (no. 1397). This pastoral reflection is focused on one aspect of mission: “A Catholic recommitment to overcome poverty and to respect the dignity of all God’s children.” However, this image of the three tables can apply to all aspects of proclaiming, serving, and witnessing to God’s reign of love, salvation, and justice, if we think in terms of the physical and spiritual hungers of the whole person and of entire communities. It is interesting that Jesus’ call to conversion was often followed by a meal together.

The parish-twinning program in the United States provides a creative, pastoral opportunity for developing face-to-face mutual relationships of table fellowship that draw parish communities beyond their parochial boundaries. Operation Rice Bowl explicitly promotes such a vision, expressed in its 2006 *Home Calendar Guide*: “Just as we celebrate the Eucharist on Sundays, we can use Operation Rice Bowl as a way to ‘break bread’ together with family and loved ones. We . . . learn about the joys and challenges in

the lives of our brothers and sisters all around the world, and give concrete assistance to those most in need.” Along with the activities of organizations like the Pontifical Mission Societies and diocesan mission offices mentioned above, one can think of local parish initiatives such as soup kitchens, neighborhood outreach, parish human-concerns committees, and peace-and-justice committees. Actually, who the church is and what it does is imaged as instrument and sign of feeding the hungers and thirsts of today, drawing women and men of diverse backgrounds into community, witnessing through word and action the good news of Jesus Christ, and inviting people to baptism and the eucharistic table. Pastors and parish councils, liturgy and music directors, catechetical leaders and prayer groups, evangelization teams and ministers of care, directors of the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) and deacons, hospital and prison chaplains, counselors and youth ministers, Christian parents and health-care workers all contribute to and participate in drawing God’s people to the table. “There is a variety of gifts but always the same Spirit; there are all sorts of service to be done, but always to the same Lord” (1 Cor 12:4–5).

Flowing from what has been said, we see that table fellowship is a powerful model and motivation for mission—linking Jesus as the bread of life with our daily life (dining-room table), our Christian faith (eucharistic table), and our relationship with people both near and far (the table of the “other”). This image will be developed throughout this book.

Additional Considerations and Challenges

While we have been talking about mission in a broad and basic sense as the responsibility of all Christians to participate in God’s mission, at the same time we must not forget those Christians from every local church (not just from North America and Europe) and every age who are called to be missionaries. Their particular vocation to participate in God’s mission in more intentional and explicit ways both near and far from home is an essential part of the body of Christ. The number of North American-born and European-born missionaries has decreased but these areas need to continue to support missionary efforts. The Society for

the Propagation of the Faith is particularly committed to reminding dioceses and parishes about their connection with and responsibility for missionary activities beyond their national borders. On a worldwide scale, the Catholic Church and other Christian churches of the growing Christian majority of the South—Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific Islands—are sending an increasing number of missionaries within and outside their countries.

Other questions emerge in our post-Vatican II church and the world today. While we recognize that God is somehow already present in the lives, cultures, and religions of others, why and how do we continue to proclaim the gospel and call people to baptism and membership in the church today? What does mission mean for missionaries and Christians working and living as a small minority among the followers of other faiths? What does mission mean for those living under communist and repressive political regimes? What does mission mean in the face of poverty, HIV/AIDS, violence, war, starvation, migration, and natural disasters? What does mission mean among the street children of the exploding populations of our cities around the world?

Turning particularly to Europe, North America, and Australia, how can the gospel take root within contemporary secularized Western societies? How does the church reach those who are borderline Christians, no longer Christians, or never Christians? What about young people and those living in the suburbs? What responsibilities do Christians have in nations that yield tremendous political and economic power in the world? The recent waves of immigrants and refugees are changing the face of the church and society. On the one hand, they are raising new and challenging mission questions, regarding diversity, hospitality, justice, and racism. On the other hand, those who are Christians are contributing their own experiences of God and expressions of faith to the church, and many of them are becoming missionaries. What are the consequences of this changing scene of mission for individuals, parishes, and dioceses? Priests, brothers, and sisters from the nations of the South are now coming to the North as missionaries and church workers. How do they contribute, and how are they received? And, at the same time, how does the church of Europe and North America continue to call and prepare men and women,

ordained and lay Catholics, as missionaries to work, short term and long term, both within and outside their national borders?

Aim and Structure of This Book

Although the external practice and devotion of ransoming pagan babies has disappeared, the common understanding of mission is still often tied to such pre-Vatican II images. Television, movies, novels, and even some missionary magazines continue to reinforce the more paternalistic idea of mission. Many Catholics with this understanding continue to support missionary work, no matter how it is carried out in reality. Other Catholics question the purpose of mission because they continue mistakenly to identify mission with approaches that basically forced or enticed people to become Christians. A third group is not concerned at all about mission. Finally, some Catholics are aware, to various degrees, of the changing face of mission, and they are interested and engaged in the challenge and potential it offers. Where do you find yourself? This book is intended for all four audiences. It provides the framework for understanding the ideal and practice of mission since the Second Vatican Council and for addressing the questions that were raised above as well as other issues. This will be quite new for many, while simply filling in gaps for others. It is hoped that these pages will also inspire you to action.

This work attempts to be comprehensive without too much detail and concise without being overly simplified. After this Introduction, Chapter 2 describes the origins of mission in God and how this is seen in the Spirit, Jesus Christ, and the reign of God. Chapter 3 describes how early Christians carried out this mission beyond Jerusalem, as portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles. Chapters 4 and 5 provide a series of snapshots of the variety of ways in which mission has actually been done from the early church until the twentieth century and what lessons we can learn for today. Building upon the ground work of the first five chapters, the next three chapters spell out the understanding of mission since the Second Vatican Council. Chapter 6 focuses on the why, who, and where of mission; Chapter 7 on the what of mission; and Chapter 8 on the spirituality and the practice (how) of mission. This final chapter points to specific parish and diocesan resources

with down-to-earth examples and suggestions. At the end of every chapter there are suggested questions and reflections as well as further readings to guide you through this process to the next step: what mission can mean practically for you, your family, your parish, and your diocese. Two appendices with pastoral resources and an extended bibliography are included at the end. Overall, these chapters provide what is stated in the subtitle of this book: *A Guide for Catholics*.

On one level, this book will satisfy your mind by providing you with a better theological and historical understanding of mission—what it has meant in the past and especially what it means in the present. On a second level, reading these pages will nourish your heart through personal reflection on how God continues to offer you, the church, and the world that bread of life. Third, the book provides a guide and practical tools for doing mission in your parish and diocese. Finally, these printed words may inspire you to committed action for God’s mission of drawing people into table fellowship. Jesus responded with love and compassion to so many hungry and searching people and called them to conversion and a fuller life in God, and we are to do the same—around our table at home, the eucharistic table, and the table of the “other.”

Questions for Reflection

1. In terms of mission awareness and activity, what has been your experience of parish twinning, Operation Rice Bowl, or the annual mission appeal?
2. In which of the four groups—“old”-style supporters, those who question the purpose of mission, the disinterested, or the engaged—would you put yourself?
3. What is the most immediate question about mission that you want to have answered?

Suggestions for Further Reading

Bellagamba, Anthony. *Mission and Ministry in the Global Church*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992. Chapter 1. Overview of current mission trends by an experienced missionary in Africa.

- Bosch, David J. "The Vulnerability of Mission." In *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization 2*, ed. James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, 73–86. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994. Insightful and moving description of the shift in mission perspective and approach.
- Gittins, Anthony. "Mission: What's It Got to Do with Me?" *The Living Light* 34, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 6–13. Entire issue of this publication of short popular articles by the Department of Education of the United States Catholic Conference is on the theme "Mission and Missions."
- National Conference of Catholic Bishops. *To the Ends of the Earth: A Pastoral Statement on World Mission*. Washington, DC: USCC, 1986. Paragraphs 1–21. Introduction and first section, "The New Missionary Context," of major U.S. Catholic document on mission.