**The relevance of missionary cooperation**

**in the Church today**

**(Jubilee Year - September 2020)**

**Words of P. Berthier**

364. In order to faithfully fulfill their religious obligations, there must an ideal: ideal of poverty, chastity, obedience. This ideal will awaken in us the generosity needed to observe exactly what we have promised to God. Without this ideal, we will be cowardly. Well, this ideal is Jesus, Mary, Joseph, are our august Patrons. We must, thus, keep our eyes fixed constantly on them, to find their virtues in ourselves. (PI: 76)

**The missionary project of Fr. Berthier**

It is very important to understand well the intention of the Founder and his conception of the Congregation. To his first disciples, Father Berthier said: “We must keep in view the purpose of our work in all that we undertake and do. *We never deviate from this purpose* under any pretext or advice from anyone. Taking on jobs for which the Institute was not founded is walking towards its ruin. " (Ferrand, *Adnotaciones,* 427).

This purpose was formulated in the Constitution of 1895. After having transcribed several paragraphs of the encyclical [*Sancta Dei Civitas*](http://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/it/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_03121880_sancta-dei-civitas.html) , by Leo XIII, the Founder writes: "experience proves that, in profoundly Christian countries and where families are numerous, we meet intelligent young and virtuous, between 14 and 30 years old, who *aspire to the apostolic life* , on condition that a special work sustains the costs of their formation. Therefore, to found a work of this kind and make it accessible to young people from different Catholic nations means filling a gap and taking the point of view of His Holiness Pope Leo XIII ”(n° 10-11).

Despite the variations and inaccuracies in the description of the Charism, it is possible to affirm that, for Fr. Berthier, the purpose of the Congregation is a work in foreign missions; that this aim requires dedication to the formation of missionaries; that a priority means is to welcome apostolic vocations that are usually marginalized (adult or poor); and that the strategy for arousing and forming these vocations are apostolic schools. It is no coincidence that the new Congregation has been registered in the Propaganda Fide, as the body responsible for the missions of the Church.

The Founder did not have the grace to send confreres to foreign missions, nor to attend the opening of Apostolic Schools outside of Holland. But just a year after his death, apostolic schools outside the Netherlands began, and in 1910 the first missionaries were sent abroad. In just 15 years, this missionary perspective will be consolidated: in addition to the significant number of missionaries sent to the north and north-east of Brazil, the mission was extended to the south of Brazil (1922-1923), the Apostolic Vicariate of Borneo was accepted (1925), and the missionaries were sent to the United States of America (1924-1925).

It continued for the following years: in 1931 missionaries were sent to Norway; in 1932 in Java; in 1938 in Argentina; in 1939 in Chile ... Thus, on the occasion of the celebration of 25 years of mission, in a letter-report sent to Propaganda Fide, the General Government presented the following data relating to the mission: 17 missionaries work in Borneo, and 4 work in Java; 11 confreres carry out the mission in the United States; 5 missionaries work in Norway; 20 missionaries work in the north Brazil and 21 in the south of Brazil. In 1936 the 77 confreres lived in missionary lands!

**A new understanding of mission**

The Second Vatican Council promoted a new vision of the world and of the Church and radically changed the concept of mission. The Church recognizes herself as part of the world and profoundly in solidarity with all that is human, and wishes to share the joys and hopes, sadness and anguish of men and women, and sees herself as the messianic people of God, inserted and pilgrim in the world, summoned to announce and promote the Kingdom of God and to be a sacrament of unity for the entire human race (cf. [LG](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_it.html) 1,5,9). The Church's mission acquires a social, solidarity and transformation dimension!

For the Council, the Church is missionary by nature, missions are not just one among the various activities of the Church, and the missionary task has not come to an end. But the mission no longer aims to convert pagans, since religions are human attempts to answer the fundamental questions of life and to propose ways for their full realization. This is why, without neglecting to proclaim Jesus Christ, the Church does not reject what is true in religions; she considers her practices and doctrines as rays of truth that illuminate all human beings and urges dialogue and collaboration with people who follow other religions (cf. NA 2).

It is also significant that, in the missionary decree *Ad Gentes*, the approach to the missionary role of the Churches precedes the question of missionary institutes and works. This means that it is through the commitment of each particular Church that the missionary identity of the Church is realized and that the young Churches can and must also be missionaries. " For their communion with the universal Church will be somehow brought to perfection when they themselves take an active part in missionary zeal toward other nation" ( [AG](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_it.html) 20).

Furthermore, according to the Council, mission is the responsibility of the whole people of God, and in it the laity acquire an ever greater value (cf. [AG](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_it.html) 21). “The lay apostolate, however, is a participation in the salvific mission of the Church itself. Through their baptism and confirmation all are commissioned to that apostolate by the Lord Himself. … Now the laity are called in a special way to make the Church present and operative in those places and circumstances where only through them can it become the salt of the eart"( [LG](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_it.html) 33).

As a result of these changes, the identity and role of missionary Institutes have been considerably modified, and today they must be understood in three directions: a) Being laboratories of universality, through the establishment of pluri-national and intercultural communities and having solidarity action strategies globally; b) Be workshops of missionary spirituality, characterized by self-expression towards the other, by hospitality and humility; c) To be platforms for missionary sending, by offering formation opportunities to people who today feel called to mission in frontier situations, in situations of division and human suffering.

**The relevance of the Church's missionary action**

This innovative perspective of the Council caused a serious crisis in the reflection and missionary practice of the Church and missionary institutes. Voices not so isolated announced the end of missionary activity. But, in 1996, Pope John Paul II posed the missionary question clearly and forcefully: “The mission of Christ the Redeemer, which is entrusted to the Church, is still very far from completion. ... Our own time, with humanity on the move and in continual search, demands a resurgence of the Church's missionary activity ... The mission ad gentes faces an enormous task, which is in no way disappearing. ( [RMi](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) 1; 30; 35).

More recently, Pope Francis has taken up the missionary question in view of a renewed and incarnate evangelization. He provoked the Church as a whole. " Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the “peripheries” in need of the light of the Gospel." ( [EG](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html) , 20). "In fidelity to the example of the Master, it is vitally important for the Church today to go forth and preach the Gospel to all: to all places, on all occasions, without hesitation, reluctance or fear." ( [EG](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html) , 23).

For Pope Francis, mission is not just a part of life, an ornament that we can put aside, an appendix or a moment among many others in our life. Mission is something that, if we leave it aside, we destroy ourselves. Christians are " even branded, by this mission of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing and freeing" ( [EG](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html) , 273). For this reason, the Pope dreams of " a “missionary option”, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation" ( [EG](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html) , 27).

As a religious missionary institute, the Congregation founded by Fr Berthier is called to cooperate, in a way that is its own, in the realization of the missionary nature of the Church. From the perspective of *Evangelii Gaudium*, mission today is articulated around three commitments: a) animation and renewal of pastoral life, in view of ecclesial and missionary conversion; b) the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, giving priority to the prophetic witness of Christians in society; c) missionary cooperation, to promote the participation of local Churches in the universal mission *Ad Gentes*.

On the basis of the 1985 Constitution, we can describe the current situation and the needs of our missionary charism in five ways: a) active participation in the mission *ad gentes* of the universal Church; b) contribution to the strengthening and dynamization of the more fragile local Churches; c) animation of the missionary spirit in the local Churches; d) awakening, welcoming and formation of missionary vocations (presbyteral, religious or lay); e) animation and organization of the pastoral care of the family. These options respond to the needs and urgencies of the Church and help us to be faithful to the purpose of the Congregation which was born from the missionary passion of Fr. Berthier.

**Biblical Illumination - John 3, 1-8**

1. How can the text John 3,1-21 illuminate and guide our missionary action?
2. What does it mean to be born again or to be born from above in the context of mission?
3. What does it mean to be sent to the world to save, and not to condemn?

**Fr. Berthier's prayer for missionaries**

Fr. Itacir Brassiani MSF