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Holistic mission concept. Mission today.  
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Abstract:

What do we mean by mission? The integral concept of the mission of the Catholic Church is in a constant development since the Second Vatican Council. The milestones in the development of the concept can be found in four mission documents: *Ad Gentes* (1965); *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975); *Redemptoris Missio* (1990); *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013). Today we can say that mission is not primarily a geographically localized specific religious activity, but it is a constitutive aspect of every ecclesial practice.

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Introduction

If we follow the teaching of Pope Francis or even his apostolic visits, we can conclude that one of the central motivations of his papacy is the rediscovery of the Church's missionary goal and the actualization of the Church's evangelizing task. But what do we mean today by mission, what is the difference between mission and evangelization, and in what way does a current concept of mission challenge the theology of the 21st century? While not intending to be exhaustive, I will attempt to provide in the following reflections some answers to these questions.

The development of the concept of mission during and after Vatican II

The mission is a reality naturally imbedded in the Church, the church's DNA, and thus a constitutive aspect of every ecclesial practice. In the following, I will elaborate shortly this statement with four most important mission documents of the Magisterium<sup>1</sup> issued during and after the Second Vatican Council.

The first great document that works out the theology of mission of Vatican II and serves as a foundation for other reflections is *Ad gentes*, the decree on the missionary activity of the Church approved in 1965. It was followed by the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* published in 1975 by Pope Paul VI, the missionary encyclical *Redemptoris missio* in 1990 by Saint John Paul II, and finally the apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis *Evangelii gaudium* published in 2013. These four documents of the Magisterium have gradually built the concept

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<sup>1</sup>See Bünker, Arnd: *Missionarisch Kirche sein? Eine missionswissenschaftliche Analyse von Konzepten zur Sendung der Kirche in Deutschland*, Münster 2004; Bevans, Stephen / Schroeder Roger: *Prophetic Dialogue. Reflections on Christian Mission Today*, New York 2011; Müller, Karl: *Die Mission der Kirche in systematischer Betrachtung*. In: Bürkle, Horst (Hg.): *Die Mission der Kirche*, 43-167; Collet, Giancarlo: „...bis an die Grenzen der Erde“, 223). Die Konzilstexte wurden aus der CD-ROM-Ausgabe von Rahner, Karl / Vorgrimmler, Herbert: *Kleines Konzilskompendium*, Freiburg 1996 entnommen. Markante Textstellen wurden mit der neueren lateinisch-deutschen Herder-Ausgabe (2009) verglichen: Hünermann, Peter / Hilberath, Jochen (Hg): *Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil I (HThKVat.II/1)*, Freiburg 2009.

of holistic mission of the 21st century, which poses a serious challenge to theology and the ecclesial practice for the coming years.

### 2.1 Decree *Ad gentes*

To those skilled in missiology, it is well known that the Second Vatican Council's decree on the mission activity, *Ad gentes* has a problematic background. The first draft read in the council hall was rejected by the Council Fathers several times.<sup>2</sup> The main reason for this was that the preparatory commission consisted largely of bishops and theologians without missionary experience, whose overly European missionary vision, reflected also in the document draft, was not accepted by the Fathers of the universal Church who would rather had the Propaganda Fide Congregation dissolved, thus transferring the responsibility of the mission areas to the local churches.<sup>3</sup> After the failure of the draft, Pope Paul VI addressed the issue himself and appointed Fr. Johannes Schütte, SVD superior general, to be the leader of the editorial committee. Being an SVD father, Schütte had missionary experience. The draft produced under his leadership was almost unanimously approved by the Council Fathers.<sup>4</sup> I will now try to point out the meaning conveyed by the decree's mission terminology by three conceptual contexts:

#### a. The missionary nature of the Church.

„The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father.” (AG 2)

This quotation became well-liked among the missionary theologians in the post-Council period. But what makes it so important? The Church is missionary by her very nature. This missionary nature is a consequence of the trinitarian processions, the economy of salvation, and of eschatological promises. This is the *missio dei* (divine mission), the binding force, the essential reality of the Church which becomes present among people through her missionary activity.<sup>5</sup>

#### b. The missionary activity of the Church.

The decree distinguishes the missionary activity of the Church from the pastoral activity of the Church, emphasizing at the same time that the two are closely interdependent, since both of them reveal the vocation and mission of the Christians. In pastoral care, the faithful should be strengthened and motivated in their zeal for the missionary activity of the Church, and must be given the opportunity to support the missionary work (AG 6,6 and 36,2). According to the nature of the Church, the decree emphasizes that the missionary activity must express the responsibility of the Church towards the world and all mankind, since the mission of

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<sup>2</sup> See Paventi, Saverio: Entstehungsgeschichte des Schemas „*De activitate missionali ecclesiae*“. In: Schütte Johannes: *Mission nach dem Konzil*, Mainz 1967, 48-81, here 69.

<sup>3</sup> Német László: *Ad gentes*. Határozat az egyház missziós tevékenységéről (1965).

Kommentár a zsinati missziós határozathoz, 395. In: Kránitz Mihály (Hg.): *A II. Vatikáni zsinat dokumentumai negyven év távlatából 1962–2002*, Budapest 2002, 393–418.

<sup>4</sup> The decree was passed by a vote of 2394 to 5. See *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> See Hünermann, Peter: *Theologischer Kommentar zum Dekret über die Missionstätigkeit der Kirche Ad gentes*. In: *HThKVat.II/4*, Freiburg 2009, 223-336, here 247.

the Church is to communicate the love of God by her activities. The Church fulfills this task by – using the terms of post-Vatican II theology– *martyria*, *diaconia* and *liturgia* (AG 5). At this point, the decree partially relativizes the missionary activity that is primarily geographically localized and, through the example of Christ, emphasizes the essence of the missionary activity and conduct, its boundlessness and holistic perspective. The life and practice of the incarnate Logos, the joy of resurrection obliges the Church to follow his example in communicating God's tangible, concrete love to all people. That is why the Council also teaches that it is more important to practise the teaching about God's love than to have knowledge of it (AG 13), for true renewal will only be achieved through practical exercises (AG 14). The decree keeps this in mind even when it carefully describes the training of those who are prepared for explicit missionary work that is to become missionaries.

c. Mission/missions.

AG 6 explains that "missions" commonly define "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" (AG 6). These areas are proclaimed by the Holy See as mission areas until the Church has taken root, that is, till autochthonous churches with hierarchies of their own are not instituted. In this regard, the decree emphasizes the importance of *plantatio Ecclesiae*, which, however, does not constitute a primary purpose in itself. The founding of a church is primarily important so that the local churches, being the "sign" and "means" of salvation, can communicate more effectively the freeing love of God in their immediate environment.<sup>6</sup>

## 2.2 Evangelii Nuntiandi

The keyword of the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* of Pope Paul VI is "evangelization". With this document a relatively new theological term was introduced into the vocabulary of the Catholic theology and ecclesial practice.<sup>7</sup>

Pope Paul VI prefers focusing on the effectiveness of the activity of the Church. This can be deduced from the introductory part of the document, where Pope Paul VI. puts the key question: „does the Church or does she not find herself better equipped to proclaim the Gospel and to put it into people's hearts with conviction, freedom of spirit and effectiveness?" (EN 4) It is worth looking at the Latin version: „cum spiritus libertate atque efficacitate cordibus hominum inserendum“ (EN 4)? The Latin original underlines efficiency [efficacitate]. In order to measure the effectiveness of the ecclesiastic practice and thus make the answer to the question decisive, Pope Paul VI sets up a *critériology* in the document, which is normative for the Church if she would like effectively to spread the good news. He goes back to the biblical term of evangelization. In Scriptural context, *euangelion* and *euangelien* are so-called *nomen actionis* and *verbum efficax*, which means that their pronouncement is effective. They have performative effect.<sup>8</sup> The Gospel is, therefore, not a book, but a reality that is constantly

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<sup>6</sup>See Zulehner, Paul Michael: *Dienende Männer – Anstifter zu Solidarität. Diakone in Westeuropa, Ostflidern* 2003, 36.

<sup>7</sup>See Polak, Regina: *Mission in Europa? Auftrag-Herausforderung-Risiko*, Innsbruck-Wien 2012, 51.

<sup>8</sup>See Polak, Regina: *Mission in Europa?* 57.

evolving, and evangelization is, in this sense, an event that transcends and transforms the world, thus it is an effective activity. Using the term evangelization, Pope Paul VI elaborates the mission content of this complex, theologically profound term in accordance with the missionary nature of the Church.

According to EN 14, evangelization is nothing more than grace, vocation, and the “deepest identity” of the Church.<sup>9</sup> We see that the fundamental missionary reality formulated in AG 2 is concretized in the “new term” of evangelization. Evangelization is therefore an event, an effective implementation of the Church that has a missionary nature; it is a concrete practice. Its origin is the dynamics of life of the Trinity that wants to penetrate the world. Through evangelization, the Church is devoting all her efforts to make tangible this love that radiates towards the world.

Pope Paul VI, with the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, introduces not only the concept of evangelization into the vocabulary of the catholic ecclesial practice and theology but also defines the integrity of this practice. The Church that is missionary in her nature effectively manifests God's love in the world through martyrdom, diaconia, and liturgy. Evangelization has a transforming power that affects all aspects of human life. By means of evangelization, God's love for the people can be experienced. It could be said that this is the analogy of incarnation because through the specific ecclesial practice, the Divine Word is taking flesh again and again in the world.

We can call this *asinculturation* of the Gospel, which is realized and embodied in every person's life in a different personal way.

### 2.3 Redemptoris missio

In 1990, commemorating the 25th anniversary of the *Ad gentes* missionary decree, Saint John Paul II released the encyclical letter *Redemptoris missio*.

John Paul II systematizes the evangelizing activity of the Church in the 33. point of his encyclical. He distinguishes three forms of the one unique mission of the church: the specifically missionary activity *ad gentes* (1), the pastoral work (2) and the new evangelization (3). He uses in his reflections as “criteriology” for this mission activity the notion of the Kingdom of God, and the importance of dialogue.

The theology of the Kingdom of God as the criteriology of the concept of mission

The theology of the Kingdom of God as the normative standard of the *ad gentes* missionary activity is exposed in RM 12-21. In Jesus Christ God reveals his universal salvific will (RM 13). Jesus's healing and freeing actions are important here; they were always directed to every human person in his wholeness: spiritually, mentally, and physically and at the same time it touch the whole human family and all creation. The Kingdom of God is not a concept, or a doctrine, it is not even a program, but a living reality and it has a concret name: Jesus Christ. In the activity of the Church the Kingdom of God takes shape in this world although in an imperfect way. Just as Jesus manifested the Father's love in the world, the Church, following Christ, makes visible and builds the Kingdom of God whenever she

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<sup>9</sup>Literally expressed this way in the German, English, Spanish, French, Italian, Latin and Portuguese translations: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/de/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/de/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html) (2017.01.18)

conveys the love of God to the wounded creation.<sup>10</sup>(By the theology of the Kingdom of God, as presented by the encyclical letter, once more God's love towards people becomes a normative measure for the Church's missionary activity.)

The dialogue as an integral part of the concept of mission

In addition to the theology of the Kingdom of God, we can observe one of the key words of the encyclical, namely dialogue. Dialogue is not a tactic or a strategy, but the way of life of the Church, which derives from the essence and mission of the Church (RM 2,1 and 55,1). It has to be present in the missionary activity of the Church: in the cooperation with non-Christian religions (RM 2,1), in the testimony, in which God's universal salvific will becomes an experience (RM 20,3), in the situations, when the church helps people becoming increasingly more aware of the meaning of their lives (RM 29,3), in intercultural dialogue in which fraternity manifests itself (RM 82,4), in projects that support life (RM 37c, 4), in a variety of activities, which should serve to increase the understanding of new socio-cultural worlds (RM 53,1), in ways and means of interreligious encounters, in mission ad gentes (RM 53,1), as well as in bearing witness to Christ (RM 57,3). According to the encyclical, only dialogue can be considered a way of life that is worth of the Church's universal mission, and in that sense it can never be regarded as a selfish or tactical step (RM 56).<sup>11</sup> We can see that despite the fact that *Redemptoris missio* emphasizes the mission ad gentes, a wider missionary activity unfolds before us. John Paul II develops further the understanding of the missionary nature of the Church, which was introduced by the Council with the *Ad gentes* decree; he applies the essence of the integral practice formulated in *Evangelii nuntiandi* to the missionary activity of the Church addressed specifically to "peoples" (*ad gentes*). The mission concept taken in a purely geographical sense is increasingly relativized, and the necessary diversity of the ecclesial practice is stressed upon, through which, in fact, God's love has to take a concrete form in every generation.

#### 2.4 *Evangelii gaudium*

In 2013 Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* introduced the idea of a permanent state of mission (EG 25). In this document the first Jesuit Pope in the history of the Church formulates principles and their practical implications that derive from the Church's missionary nature and missionary orientation.

Let us see some of the aspects that Pope Francis considers normative in this missionary reorganization of the Church:

##### The primacy of preaching

He emphasizes the primacy of proclaiming the Gospel (EG 110). The Word of God should always be the first priority, and the ecclesial practice should be optimized accordingly (EG 173-175). He also points out that this is not a Word alien to life, but it is Jesus Christ himself. We are talking about a divine person, who addresses people in their own life situation and confronts them with the transcendental dimension of their life. The encounter with Him

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<sup>10</sup>See Kehl, Medard: *Die Kirche. Eine katholische Ekklesiologie*, Würzburg 1994, 84.

<sup>11</sup> See Hilberath, Bernd Jochen: *Vom Heiligen Geist des Dialogs. Das dialogische Prinzip in Gotteslehre und Heilsgeschehen*. In: Fürst, Gebhard (Hg.), *Dialog als Selbstvollzug der Kirche?* Freiburg-Basel-Wien 1997, 93-116, here 112.

leads the reticent person towards his fellow human being (EG 128). The Church's task is, therefore, to proclaim the word of the Incarnate God, which means to reveal God's infinite love for man.

#### The comprehensive development of man

In this approach Pope Francis always wants to promote the comprehensive, integral development of a person. This is the reason that he would like to direct the missionary activity of the Church towards integral development (EG 182, 186, 188, 203, 204). The target groups of his missionary program are, therefore, the poor and the needy, people on the periphery. According to his apostolic exhortation, poor are the one who, for whatever reason, cannot live in dignity. Poor are those who are injured in their dignity and need healing (EG 75). Pope Francis, however, does not stop at individuals, but goes on and extends the Church's missionary responsibility to all mankind and creation (EG 190).<sup>12</sup> There are problems affecting humanity which cast into shadow many theoretical discourses. Instead he stresses that discourses should serve the practical missionary activity, to promote the realization of justice, peace and mercy.<sup>13</sup> Pope Francis does not encourage a *l'art pour l'art* theology or a *l'eglise pour l'eglise* church, but dreams of a church in the service of mankind as she was founded to be by her very nature. This is actually the driving force of the missionary church and mission theology: to make God's love tangible for man.

Pope Francis follows the logic of incarnation: a concrete life situation is met with the divine love embodied and revealed in Jesus. The Church's mission, in this sense, is to engage in this logic of the incarnation, to constantly manifest the mystery of incarnation to the people. The real meaning of the Church is nothing else than becoming an instrument of redeeming love, renewed in the divine love again and again, so that this love increasingly penetrates the world.

### 3. Concluding thoughts

After having been elected, Pope Francis in his first speech to the cardinals gathered in the Sistine Chapel formulated the task of the Church basically as a missionary program. His speech can be considered as a framework for the Church's missionary task. The Church should step out into the world and reveal the divine love of Jesus Christ in a concrete service to the people:

„If the church does not come out of her shell to proclaim the Gospel, she revolves around herself. Then she gets sick. The misery that the Church's institutions have caused over time has its roots in the Church's detaching from the world. This is theological narcissism. Revelation teaches that Jesus stands by the door and knocks. According to the Scripture, it is more than likely that he knocks from outside and wants us to let him in. But I often think of the many occasions when Jesus knocks from the inside and wants us to let him out. An

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<sup>12</sup>See Waldenfels, Hans: *Sein Name ist Franziskus. Der Papst der Armen*. Paderborn 2014, 134.

<sup>13</sup>See Luber, Markus: *Missio inter gentes und Evangelii gaudium. Die Pragmatik des Apostolischen Schreibens und seine missionstheologischen Implikationen*. In: *ZMR*, 98/3-4 (2014), 254-269, here 264-265.

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egocentric church, that wants to keep Jesus for herself and does not let him out into the world!“<sup>14</sup>

With one word: The church as a sign and instrument (LG 1), in virtue of her missionary nature (AG 2), seeks to communicate God's creative and healing love.  
Thank you for your attention!

More important publications:

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<sup>14</sup>Waldenfels, Hans: Sein Name ist Franziskus: Der Papst der Armen, Paderborn 2014, 30.