



2022 Christmas Letter

A New Missionary Era...

Dear Confreres and Lay Spiritan Associates,

This year the Church commemorates the foundation, 400 years ago, of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, better known by the Latin name of Propaganda Fide – today the Dicastery for the Evangelization of Peoples. A three-day international conference, on the theme “*Euntes in mundum universum*”, was held at the Pontifical Urbaniana University in Rome, from November 16 to 18, to examine the centuries-old history of this Congregation, its missionary mandate in new territories, including its global impact today. Missionaries brought the message of revealed truths and salvation to new peoples and places. The work of evangelization and mission carried out by the missionaries – especially men and women religious – was greeted with deep gratitude. The Venetian historian, Gianpaolo Romanato, professor of modern and contemporary Church history at the University of Padua, summarizing the conclusions of this conference, praised the contribution of this institution in the proclamation of the Gospel, while recognizing the imperfections that marred its journey. He insisted that many ideas that have emerged from the past in the wake of Propaganda Fide can suggest very innovative approaches for the present and future of the Church’s mission.

A missionary Congregation like ours cannot remain indifferent to such an event given the role played by one of our founders, Francis Mary Paul Libermann, in particular the originality of his thought, with his important missionary text entitled *Mémoire à la Propaganda* in 1846, in which he presents the guidelines for the organization of missionary work and the reasons why his Society should engage in it; which, at the time, was an eminently innovative approach. And as Roger Pasquier says, “*the modernity of his thought is revealed through his request to his disciples not to bring Europe to Africa, but to “become black with the blacks” in order to achieve as soon as possible the establishment of an indigenous church with its own priests and bishops.*”¹ In many ways, Father Libermann’s approach and vision have been a precious treasure that has concretely inspired the work of the Congregation and of Propaganda Fide. Father Libermann would have been delighted if he had been able to witness the development we are witnessing today. We rejoice and give thanks to God, in this Christmas season, for the fruit of this beautiful work, of the establishment of the local Churches, which today show such great vigour. With the establishment of the local Churches, a new missionary era opened before the missionary congregations. We have moved from the era of planting the local church to the phase of consolidation and collaboration. The vision of mission that inspired the great missionary movement of the 19th century is now far behind us.

The world in which we live has changed remarkably and the language of mission has also changed a great deal. The geographical shift in mission is very striking. The missionary movement “from Europe to the rest of the world” has evolved into a global mission on all continents; all continents being both territories of departure and reception of missionaries. Pope Francis orients the Church in a perspective of the synodal mission in which all people are missionary disciples, and invited to walk together, to listen to each other, to participate and to collaborate for the mission, according to the charism and the specificity of each status of all the baptized. New societal questions are entering the public debate, in particular in reaction to the traditional positions of the Church. Scandals surrounding sexual abuse by missionaries and clerics have created a crisis of identity and legitimacy in Christian communities. It behoves missionaries to be alert to these new developments affecting mission today.

¹ Roger Pasquier. *L'histoire des missions. Nouvelles approches*. In: Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer, tome 79, n°294, 1er trimestre 1992. pp. 127-142 ; p. 129


A similar conviction of having to fix our gaze on the changing world in which we live animated the exchanges and the deliberations of the General Chapter of Bagamoyo II. The need for a profound conversion in our way of living the Spiritan mission today was mentioned several times in the last chapter. Bagamoyo II insisted: a) on a change of approach and style of mission, b) on the courage to abandon commitments which are no longer in conformity with our charism in favour of those which are more so.

Faced with current missionary challenges, the first phase of the animation plan on the theme of Mission, launched this past October 2, invites the whole Congregation to reassess, in prayer and reflection, our current commitments, with a view to a better missionary organization and efficiency. In the same perspective a reflection on the change of the status of some circumscriptions is being considered with the circumscriptions concerned in light of the needs of the mission today. Prayer and reflection are essential in this process of discernment. The success of the mission of the apostles in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, following that of their Master, was carried by the triptych: prayer, reflection and organization, as Fr. Paulin Poucota points out: *“Faced with the challenges constantly encountering new ones, the first Christians had to think about mission, enlightened by the Spirit, which helps them to actualize the words and actions of the Risen One.”* (Revue Spiritus, n° 246, p.5). The situations the apostles faced in their mission were not foreseen by the Master. But the Holy Spirit, sent by the Father, guided them in all things, on all decisions to be made in the face of new situations without these opposing the word of the Master. The same can be said of the relationship between the intuitions bequeathed by our founders and their successive evolutions, because the latter had not foreseen the events that make the news in today’s world.

It is in the light of the action of the Holy Spirit that we want to live this first phase of the animation plan. Evaluation, disengagement, change are not self-evident! They challenge us to question our habits and force us to make choices. And where the need for change is felt, the very fragility of our circumscriptions does not always facilitate the taking of new initiatives. We find in Libermann some light on this precise point of disengagement. At the beginning of his work, Libermann was very clear on the purpose of the latter: *“It consists in giving ourselves and in devoting ourselves entirely to Our Lord for the salvation of the Blacks, as being the most miserable souls, the furthest from salvation, and the most abandoned in the Church of God”* (N.D.II, 69). But gradually it passes from the exclusivity of the “blacks” to the “neediest”. Responding to someone who experienced difficulty about the extent of his work, he wrote: *“difficulty about the extent of the work means nothing. It will always be large enough to occupy two hundred apostolic workers for fifty years... But if, in fifty years, all the Blacks are in good condition, who will prevent the missionaries from then running to the aid of another part of the Church, which, at that time, will be found the most abandoned and the most despised?...”* (N.D.II, 182). For Libermann, his missionaries will always go first to where the needs are greatest, although, for a requirement of continuity, he specifies that the missions begun and still meeting the criterion of being among the “most needy” must not be abandoned. (N.D.II, 241; Provisional Rule, Chap. 3, a. 6).

The last General Chapter invites us to awaken the missionary spirit, to breathe new life into the dynamics of the Spiritan mission: *“Behold, I am doing a new thing”* (Is 43, 19). The Holy Spirit today calls for new things; better still, he is already arousing them, with his creativity, calling each of us to enter a new missionary phase, in the midst of the turmoil of a world that is writhing in the sufferings of a painful and unexpected birth.

As we reflect together on the theme of mission, may the Lord who comes among us at Christmas give each of us the grace to welcome new calls, outside the box, in this new missionary era that is upon us.



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