

AD GENTES: ON THE MISSIONARY ACTIVITY OF THE CHURCH

Ad Gentes, one of the sixteen official documents of Vatican Council II, was the subject of many debates by the Council Fathers and numerous drafts by the AG committee (including the young theologian Joseph Ratzinger, later to become Pope Benedict XVI). Ultimately it was approved unanimously on the last working day of the Council in December 1965.

The central message of the decree, amply based on Scripture, is that *this pilgrim church is missionary by her very nature* and that proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all, especially to unbelievers, is a fundamental duty of all the People of God. “*Go into the whole world; preach the Gospel to every creature.*” *Mk 16:15*

Who are the People of God? Each of us - the baptized! While the decree elaborates on the responsibilities of bishops, clergy, religious, catechists, and “missionaries”, every baptized member of the Church shares in this reaching out beyond ourselves. *Ad Gentes* exhorts us to witness to the Gospel in all humility, with an open mind and loving heart, to develop a living faith and an unflinching hope. Most especially, we need to learn to listen and thus to converse, to dialogue. This dialogue is not one of proselytizing but of communicating the universality of God’s love as manifested in Jesus Christ. An example mentioned in the decree is the catechumenate ministry (RCIA) where mutual sharing should occur among catechumens, sponsors, catechists, and the community. (Ch IV Art.25-26)

In foreign lands and in many parts of our own multi-racial, multi-cultural nation, ‘missioners’ serve the people among whom they find themselves in a manner that honors the people’s culture, history and institutions. They should learn the language (if it is not their own) to the extent of being able to use it in a fluent and polished manner...affording more easy access to minds and hearts. (Ch IV, Art. 26)

Mission activity should be collaborative, ecumenical where and when possible, and devoid of racial prejudice and bitter nationalism. (Ch II, Art. 3)

The openness and outreach to the rest of the world announced initially in *Ad Gentes* was expanded in subsequent papal documents on mission, namely, Pope Paul VI’s *Evangelii Nuntiandi* in 1975 and Pope John Paul II’s *Redemptoris Missio* in 1990. In the latter, the terms **mission** and **evangelization** are used almost interchangeably. In our own day, the **New Evangelization**, proposed by Benedict XVI in *Verbum Domini* and further elaborated by the Synod of Bishops in October 2012, invites us to rediscover God through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We are called as individuals, as parishes, as church to an on-going and deep conversion. (cf Rev. Frank DeSiano, “This Little Light,” AMERICA , February 11, 2013)

Our guiding beacon remains the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which continues to shed fresh light on new and diverse realities. Some of the challenges and opportunities facing us today in our witness to and proclamation of the gospel, relate to women, migration, globalization, stewardship of our planet, and inter-religious dialogue especially with Islam. “The synod of 2012 looks (through the New Evangelization) for a renewed Catholic people, this time engaged in faith through their own experience, not just recipients of a Catholic culture... If this occurs the people of God who have encountered their savior in Jesus can transform not only the billion plus who identify as Catholic, but equally as importantly, many beyond the community of faith.” ([This Little Light, De Siano, AMERICA, 2/11/13](#))

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Resources: Stephen Bevans, *SVD Church Teaching on Mission*,
Frank DeSiano, “This Little Light,” AMERICA, February 11, 2013

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