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Mission in the Catholic perspective

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The theme of this Conference, *Witnessing to Christ today*, not only affirms the evangelical faith that binds us together, but presents us and our churches with a burning challenge. The Spirit is surely asking what we have done with the grace of 1910, and what we intend to do with it at the beginning of the third Christian millennium.

In our Catholic calendar we commemorate the Uganda Martyrs: around 1885 Anglican and Catholic faithful witnessed to Christ to the extreme sacrifice of their lives. Their faith was the result of missionary activity – their common witness an articulation of the ecumenical movement. May they encourage us on our way!

I. Mission in the long perspective

Catholics live by memory. They feel strongly the continuity from the beginning. In the Catholic tradition, mission is co-natural with being Christian: “the pilgrim Church is missionary by its very nature” (Vatican II, *Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church (Ad Gentes)*, 2). Responding to the ‘great commission’, which Catholics usually refer to as ‘the missionary mandate’, missionaries in every age have taken the Gospel message to the four corners of the world. Beginning from Jerusalem, on through Samaria and to the ends of the earth, the apostles, in the words of St. Augustine, “preached the message of truth and gave birth to churches” (*Exposition on Ps 44, 23*). Down the centuries countless heroic and faith-filled women and men have witnessed to Christ, preaching the word and making disciples; the religious congregations and missionary societies carried the message to every land as it was discovered, and they continue to do so in that “mission territory” that still includes three quarters of the world’s population. Today, lay missionaries and lay volunteers, lay ecclesial movements are in the forefront of Catholic mission in all its forms.

In the hundred years since Edinburgh 1910 many things have happened. But above all, it is our outlook on “the other” that has changed. The worth and dignity of every human being, human rights, including religious freedom and freedom of opinion, are becoming a shared consciousness of a large part of the human family. Mission must take into account that the Gospel cannot be imposed on anyone, and that it is only by persuasively and respectfully announcing the message of salvation that the world will come to believe. In this sense, for interreligious relations, the *Code of Conduct on conversion* being drafted in collaboration with the World Council of Churches and the Catholic Church, with the participation of the Evangelical World Alliance deserves keen attention.

Two thousand years on, the mission continues within the flow of human history, as Dana Robert amply outlined. But it clearly stands in need of a fresh theological justification and a renewed spiritual impulse, if it is to meet the challenge issued in

Luke's gospel (18:8): "When the Son of Man comes will he find faith on the face of the earth?"

II. Some aspects of Catholic thinking on mission in the present

As you will know, many Catholic documents of reference have appeared in recent decades on the theme of mission. A certain pride of place belongs to Pope Paul VI's *On Evangelization in the Modern World (Evangelii Nuntuandi)*, and to the *Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church (Ad Gentes)* from the Second Vatican council. Equally substantive is Pope John Paul II's *Mission of the Redeemer (Redemptoris Missio)*, the new spaces where people meet, with its examination of the today's new *areopaghi*. Pope Benedict recently took up this idea calling on missionaries to give attention to "the nerve centres of society in the third millennium".

Recent debates in Catholic Circles have focussed on a number of issues related to mission.

- 1) Fundamental is the discussion about the core question, the universal salvific character of Jesus Christ, the one mediator: "No one comes to the Father except by me" (Jn 14:6). It is precisely this uniqueness of Christ which gives him an absolute and universal significance; he is history's centre and goal: "the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Rv 22:13). But is He the only one to have the words of life? That debate was at the heart of *Dominus Jesus*, which caused much discussion on various issues, but whose principal purpose was to uphold the very ground of the missionary mandate itself.
- 2) Secondly, Catholic missiology today is deeply involved in reflection on the precise relationship between evangelization and inculturation of the Gospel, as well as on the impact of the Gospel on justice, peace and the safeguarding of creation, and on the need for a New Evangelization of the vast sectors of traditionally Catholic societies that have drifted away from the Church. In the Catholic view, the transformation of the world is a *constitutive dimension* of the preaching of the Gospel; in other words, humanity's liberation from every oppressive situation is an indispensable part of the Church's missionary activity. It has been the proclamation of Christ *together with* the promotion of the human person through works of justice and peace that has brought the power of the Gospel into the heart of human cultures and societies: building a civilization of love.
- 3) Another important debate concerns how to proclaim the Gospel in the light of Christ's call to the unity of his disciples. Edinburgh 1910 initiated a journey of discovery of all that the churches had in common. It is true that a hundred years later churches are experiencing a re-assertion of difference, not just between them but also within themselves. Still, so much has been achieved and so much has changed! [Brotherhood rediscovered] We have not yet become one with the oneness that Jesus prayed for, but we know that our divisions are a scandal and they damage that most sacred cause, the convincing proclamation of the Gospel. The spirit of this centenary celebration must serve to remind us that mission requires that the churches seriously

undertake to eradicate every form of rivalry and competition in missionary engagement.

III. Mission in a pneumatological perspective

So, what will future missionary outreach look like? I don't believe we have a blue print. A first simple but pregnant thought comes to mind. Near and far, our world is broken in infinite ways. And yet, we Christians are bearers of the reconciling and healing power of the Spirit. As a key to understanding mission today, we should retrieve and lift up the work and message of the World Mission Conference in Athens in 2005. The theme of that Conference, *Come Holy Spirit, heal and reconcile*, opens up a vast horizon of guidance, motivation and practical proposals which we would do well to nurture. Throughout the Christian family there is a growing awareness that while mission centres on Jesus Christ, it is the Holy Spirit – bound up with and not separated from Jesus Christ – who sustains the Church in carrying out God's mission. This pneumatological dimension of mission was the central part of Pope John Paul's encyclical on Mission (*Redemptoris Missio*), entitled 'The Holy Spirit, Principal Agent of Mission'. The Spirit gives the *parresia*, the boldness with which we confess and proclaim our faith in Jesus Christ (cf. Heb 3:6; 4:16; 10:19-22).

Our young people in particular are demanding that we *witness to Christ today* with substance and in harmony. There are endless possibilities for common witness, if only we are bold enough to really seek God's truth together, and be converted to the One who still calls us his friends. If we become friends ourselves and walk the ecumenical miles of hope together, the Spirit of Christ will bring life to his people and mission will thrive and blossom, until "all things are restored in Christ and in Him humankind can compose one family and one people" (*Ad Gentes, 1*).