

‘MISSIO’ MASS

WESTMINSTER CATHEDRAL

9th SEPTEMBER 2009

On June 29th, Pope Benedict issued his Encyclical Letter, ‘Caritas in Veritate’. Its theme is the work of integral human development, the task, common to all humanity, by which we strive to bring to fulfilment all the God-given potential of every person. This potential covers every aspect of human endeavour – cultural, intellectual, entrepreneurial and, of course, spiritual. In his Encyclical the Holy Father reminds us of this truth: ‘that the whole Church, in all her being and acting, when she proclaims, when she celebrates, when she performs works of charity – is engaged in promoting integral human development.’ (Para. 11)

An important expression of this vision of the Church, in her being and acting, is the world-wide network of Pontifical Mission Societies. It is this work and our participation in it here in England and Wales that we celebrate at this Mass and for which we give thanks to God.

The Pontifical Mission Societies are the formally coordinated network of support of the entire Catholic Church for its youngest churches, especially in Africa and Asia. Through these Societies help is given to all the mission dioceses, all 1,069 of them. World-wide the Pontifical Mission Societies support 194,855 schools, 5,246 hospitals, 17,530 dispensaries, 577 leprosy centres and 80,560 social and pastoral projects. We thank God for this work, for the inspiration and generosity which make it possible and for all in this country who contribute to it.

Many of you will know that the Pontifical Mission Societies are made up of four distinct enterprises: the Association for the Propagation of the Faith, aimed at proclaiming the Gospel and raising funds; the Holy Childhood Mission Together, bringing children and schools into this great effort; the Society of St Peter the Apostle, offering help to over 30,000 seminarians and 10,000 religious around the world; and the Pontifical Missionary Union, raising general awareness of the importance of overseas mission work. It is this network of effort which today, in England and Wales, formally adopts the new name: 'Missio', thereby striving to make itself new for this time and place.

These initiatives in the life of the Church have an instructive and inspiring history. Their story is of the courageous initiatives of lay women and priests, whose determination has given birth to such creative institutions in the Church today. The first to appear was the Association for the Propagation of the Faith which was founded in 1822 by a young French woman, Pauline Jaricot, who had resolute commitment to social justice coupled with a deep devotion to the Rosary. The APF started in this country in 1837, here on Victoria Street, and really took off in 1935 when the Bishops asked the Mill Hill Fathers to work with the APF. Thus were born the famous Red Boxes which are still a source of income in over 200,000 Catholic homes.

The Holy Childhood Mission Together was founded in France in 1843 by Bishop Charles Forbin-Janson. He gave it the focus of 'children helping children' and struck a chord which found resonance here for the last 160 years. Last year, world-wide, over £11 million was raised by children to assist other children more needy themselves.

The Society of St Peter the Apostle also started in France, in 1889, when a mother and daughter, Stephanie and Jeanne Bigard responded to an appeal from the Bishop of Nagasaki for help with his seminary, and the Pontifical Missionary Union has its origins in the work of a priest, Fr Paulo Manna in far away Burma in 1916.

This family of Societies, today taking on its new name, is testimony to that cooperation between lay people and their priests, a cooperation which is not new but which is as important today as ever. Indeed the example of these founders can encourage us not to be timid in our response to the urgent needs of the world around us.

The new title of these Societies is to be 'Missio'. Both the readings reveal quite clearly the suitability of this new title.

St Paul, in his reflection on the outreach of faith to the Jewish community of his day, reminds us of the need for people who will speak of Jesus, who will act as missionaries. He asks 'And how will there be preachers if they are not sent?' This 'missio', this 'sending' is central to the dynamic of the Gospel. It is a dynamic in which we all share, for at the end of every Mass there is indeed a 'missio'. We are sent out to fulfil our share in the mission given to us by the Lord.

St Matthew gives us the words and actions of the Risen Christ in 'sending out' his disciples and commissioning them to proclaim the Gospel and to baptise. It is, indeed, a co-missioning because Christ also gives us his unfailing and consoling promise to be with us always.

Yes, the mission we receive is one and the same as the mission of Christ himself. He was sent by the Father ‘that we might have life and have it to the full’ (cf. John 10.10). And this mission of the Son exists from and in all eternity. Here is its deepest meaning on which we must reflect today.

The Father ceaselessly ‘sends out’ the Eternal Word, that expression of the very mystery of God, and does so in the utter, self-emptying love which is also the nature of the Godhead, the love which is the Holy Spirit. This giving out and receiving in of love, which is the very life of the Holy Trinity, is the first and unequivocal meaning of the word ‘missio’. God, of his infinite nature, is ‘missio’ and, of course, ‘communio’. These are the foundations of our use of this word, its most profound truth for us to keep in mind always.

The first outward expression or fruit of this inner ‘missio’ of the Godhead is, of course, the work of creation. St John tells us that all creation, every being, has its existence through the eternally spoken Word of God.

And so that this creation might indeed find its integral and full development or salvation, that Word become flesh in a particular and historical Incarnation. This ‘missio’ of the Eternal Word into our flesh and history gives all the defining characteristics of our sharing in that mission, in our work of ‘missio’ today. It is the full revelation of ‘integral human development’ and establishes for ever the need for the Gospel to be present as an essential part of human progress. Only in the Gospel is the full truth of our humanity told; only in the Gospel, which is Christ, does our humanity come to its true source and fulfilment, the mystery of God and God’s unequivocal love.

For this reason, prayer and contemplation are inseparable from ‘missio’ and essential to it. In her own way, Pauline Jaricot understood this clearly, in her linking of her initiatives in promoting the Rosary, through ‘Living Rosary circles’, alongside her work for social justice and the promotion of the Gospel. Everyone today who seeks to be a herald of the Gospel, to act in the promotion of truly integral human development, must also be a person of prayer, a contemplative in his or her own way, caught up into the mystery of the God of love. The promotion of daily prayer, of stillness before the Lord, of permitting the Lord to fill us, is the essential partner of outreach and social care. We must be recipients of the mission of Christ given by the Father before we can truly be missionaries of that love in our world.

It is so right, then, in establishing a new name for this work, in seeking to represent this work to the wider world, we do so in the celebration of Mass. Here all is made clear: we are invited, through the proclaimed Word, to enter deeply into the mystery of God. Through and with and in Christ we are carried into the very inner life of that eternal love. Then –only then – do we receive our commissioning.

Today we thank God for the work in this country of the Pontifical Mission Societies – now known as Missio. We thank God for the invitation to know, love and serve the Gospel. It is our greatest treasure and true hope. It is our privilege to do all we can to let it be known. Amen.

+Vincent Nichols