



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO THE PONTIFICAL MISSION SOCIETIES

28 June 1979 Beloved Brothers in the Episcopate, beloved Daughters and Sons, It is with particularly warm feelings that I receive you today, thanking you also for having expressed the desire for this meeting. I extend my most cordial greeting to everyone, seeing in you, and in the many members of the Pontifical Mission Aid Societies which you represent here, particularly active members of the Italian Church who have a mature sense of responsibility as regards the missionary requirements of the People of God. On the sixtieth anniversary of the Encyclical *Maximum Illud*, issued by my Predecessor Benedict XV of revered memory, your Meeting opportunely chose as its subject of study "The mission in the heart of the Church". The Church, in fact, was born missionary. On the very day of the first Pentecost, according to the narrative of the Acts of the Apostles: (chapter 2), peoples of various origin were the spectators and at the same time the addressees and first beneficiaries of what the Spirit of God operated powerfully in the disciples gathered in the Upper Room in Jerusalem. Irresistibly invested by that Spirit, they could not but proclaim in different languages "the mighty works of God" (ib. 2:11). The Apostle of the Gentiles echoes these first heralds when he affirms: "If I preach the gospel... necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16). All this applies in the first place and personally to individual missionaries, on the basis of their specific vocation. But it also applies, by extension, to the whole Christian community, whose members, already because of the baptismal call alone, must "shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life" (Phil 2:15-16), that is, must spread and communicate that treasure of faith and communion that every Christian possesses. The Second Vatican Council, therefore, expressed itself rightly: "Missionary activity flows immediately from the very nature of the Church. Missionary activity extends the saving faith of the Church, it expands and perfects its catholic unity, it is sustained by its apostolicity, it activates the collegiate sense of its hierarchy, and bears witness to its sanctity which it both extends and promotes." (*Ad Gentes*, n. 6.) And it is in this sense of common participation that the aforesaid Encyclical of Pope Benedict XV must be read when, in advance of his times, he called upon the Bishops to give some diocesan priestly vocations for the vaster and more urgent needs of the universal Church (cf. AAS 11 [1919], p. 452). The mission, therefore, is not a marginal commitment, far less a superfluous one. To say that it is in the heart of the Church means stressing that it is a vital question for the Christian community. Not for nothing does St Paul compare the proclamation of the Gospel to the action of planting (cf. 1 Cor 3:6), laying the foundations (ib. 3: 10), and begetting (ib. 4:15). They are all images which describe so many activities of primary importance, and which all converge in highlighting the fundamental value of the evangelizing mission. And they are not activities which are carried out once and for all, since it is necessary to cultivate the seed sown, to build the construction, to bring up what was born, "until Christ be formed in you" (Gal 4:19). That calls for constant and careful attention; in fact, according to the parable of Jesus, it is not impossible, unfortunately, to fall asleep and thus encourage the intervention of the enemy who sows

weeds (cf. Mt 13: 24 ff.). You, members of the Pontifical Mission Aid Societies, are certainly among those who watch out diligently and solicitously so that missionary action may really be fruitful and continuous, and that living consciousness of her responsibility in this connection may never fail in the Church. To you, therefore, go my most cordial applause and encouragement, with the sincere wish, entrusted to the hands of the Lord, for an ever-greater impact of your useful action. As a token of these wishes, I am happy to impart the most ample Apostolic Blessing to you all, extending it particularly to the well-deserving Missionaries operating all over the world.

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