

The *missio Dei* challenged by postmodernity

**Beyond the mission *ad gentes*:**  
**inhabiting peripheries, crossing borders, opening paths**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Modernity and postmodernity seen from the South assume the hegemonic character of coloniality, a perspective that in turn denounces the colonial nature of the Christian mission. Can this mission, which is the inalienable essence of the Church's identity, adopt a decolonial method and promote proposals for dialogue and encounter with all peoples? Without renouncing the core of its message, the Christian community needs to rethink some of its theological and pastoral premises, to move out from herself, to reposition herself in frontier places, to engage contextually in universal actions that foster life, encounter and care.*

The title of this exposition came to me when I recalled a fascicle about a symposium held in Melbourne, Australia, ten years ago, in October 2015, an event that had the participation of a group of theologians and biblical scholars of the Divine Word missionaries, which had as its theme - the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Decree *Ad Gentes*, and focused on the mission of the Church and the new challenges for humanity in the twenty-first century.

The title of the book, "Mission beyond *Ad Gentes*", caught my attention, but it referred primarily to the conciliar decree. However, as stated in the introduction, "the history of understanding the Church's mission does not end with *Ad Gentes*" (KAVUNKAL; TAUCHNER, 2016, p. 11). In fact, the Second Vatican Council was much more a starting point than an arrival point for the Church at the threshold of the new millennium. Thus, in the face of a global world that is undergoing profound and accelerated transformations, what is at stake is not so much "the ardour, methods or expressions" of the Christian mission (JOHN PAUL II, 1983)<sup>2</sup> as its very meaning and statutes (cf. RMi 4).

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<sup>2</sup> John Paul II will repeat this slogan several times. At the opening of the Santo Domingo Conference (October 12, 1992) the Pope stated the following: "The new times demand that the Christian message reach the people of today, through new methods of the apostolate, and that it be expressed in a language and form accessible to the Latin American man, in need of Christ and thirsty for the Gospel: how to make accessible, penetrating, valid and profound response to the people of today, without altering or modifying in any way the content of the Gospel message?" (emphasis added). In fact, we believe that the content of the Gospel message needs to be better understood in the light of new times and new challenges. "The Gospel does not

The document of Aparecida states that today every evangelizing action of any institution of the Church is called to "enter decisively, with all its strength, into the constant processes of missionary renewal and to abandon outdated structures that no longer favour the transmission of the faith" (DAP 365). What are these obsolete structures and what are the paths of renewal for this mission, 60 years after the promulgation of the Decree *Ad Gentes*, is what we will try to address.

### **Modernity/postmodernity seen from the South**

We live in an "epochal change" that is not simply the result of a process of evolution, but a time of total revision of paradigms. As we know, the prefix "post" of "post-modernity" does not indicate an overcoming, a dissociation from a previous era or a passage to a higher stage, but a time of uncertainty, of undefinition, a time of threshold and transition between promises and threats, fears and hopes, enchantments and disenchantments.

In this era of many "posts", we can glimpse the ambivalence of profound, real, virtual and multidimensional transformations that impact the existence of all human beings, all peoples of the world and the life of the entire planet. But this is not to say that the perception and understanding of postmodernity is the same and has the same value everywhere. This notion, as well as so many others, is neither universal nor global, as it is most often fed by Eurocentric debates and, therefore, regionals.

With effect, modernity and postmodernity seen below the equator take on a distinct and peculiar meaning that highlights their hegemonic, totalitarian and predatory character, dubbed by some Latin American theorists as "coloniality".<sup>3</sup> Unlike colonialism as a historical event/process, coloniality presents itself as the underlying structure of Western modernity, its "dark side", not only with regard to the perpetuation of the economic, political, and military domination of First World nations (coloniality of power), but also to the cultural, cognitive, and spatio-temporal hegemony of the West (coloniality of knowledge). as well as the supposed ontological difference between the rationality of being white, civilized, (post)Christian, cultured, emancipated in relation to the animality of being Indigenous/black, savage, pagan, poor, slave (coloniality of being).

There is not and never has been modernity – nor post-modernity – without the coloniality of power, knowledge and being. There is not and never has been modernity – nor post-modernity – without the domination of souls, without the imposition of an imaginary, without the seduction of minds, without epistemic arrogance, without the eradication of cultural identities, without the hierarchization of races and without the denial of others.

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change, we are the ones who begin to understand it better," John XXIII is said to have said a few weeks before his death.

<sup>3</sup> The notion of 'coloniality' was introduced by Aníbal Quijano (1930-2018) in a lean and dense article from 1992, entitled "Colonialidad y Modernidad-Racionalidad". In this essay, the Peruvian sociologist stated that "although political colonialism has been eliminated, the relationship between European culture, also called 'Western', and the others, continues to be a relationship of colonial domination" (1992, p. 12). It would not, therefore, be a simple subordination of other cultures to European culture, but an authentic colonization of the imagination of the dominated.

The possible nexus between this modernity/coloniality and the rise of the extreme right wing around the world, concomitantly with a global society that is becoming increasingly plural, exposes the difficulty of the West in dealing with the close otherness, together with the authoritarian ostentation of technocratic capitalism with its inhumane, exclusionary, perverse and sacrificial face (LS 49, 52, 109; FT 18).

Of course, modernity is not only that, and the postmodern challenge also points to the need to "redefine progress" (LS 194) in view of another possible world, where many worlds can fit. In the same way, Christianity itself, "while remaining faithful to its identity and to the treasure of truth which she received from Jesus Christ, does not cease to rethink and reformulate herself in dialogue with new historical situations, allowing her eternal newness to blossom" (LS 121).

What, then, could be the historical contribution of the Christian mission to a promising future for humanity, through the path of mutual recognition, of a dialogue between identities and with denied identities? We need to be convinced that "solutions cannot come from a single way of interpreting and transforming reality" (LS 63), and for this reason it is necessary to invite "each person to assume his or her own partialities, renouncing the pretention of placing himself or herself at the centre, opening himself or herself to welcome other perspectives" (SINODO DEI VESCOVI, 2024, n. 42).

I believe that this is one of the most important challenges of our time, which calls the Church to her fundamental missionary spirit, so that she can correspond meaningfully with her participation in the *missio Dei* to which she is called.

### **Questioning the modern missionary thought**

The first step for the Christian community to rethink and reformulate herself and her mission is to make the "obsolete structures" to be abandoned, as we said a little earlier, trying to discern between tradition and innovation "new ways so that the gift of beauty that does not fade but may reach everyone" (EG 288). One of these structures that need to be reconfigured is the modern model of mission that the Church has adopted in recent centuries, which is a colonial model and which has its special and referential connotation in what has been called the *missio ad gentes*.

The modern Christian mission, as well as the word "mission"<sup>4</sup>, itself, has its origins in the sixteenth century along with historical colonialism, closely linked to European expansion overseas, the exploitation of the natural resources of the new lands, the expropriation of the territories of the original peoples and the extermination of their

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<sup>4</sup> The term 'mission', as a technical term applied to an activity of spreading the faith, does not appear in the Scriptures or in the Holy Fathers and is found only in the medieval theology of the Trinity (ST I, q. 43), concerning the sending (*missio*) of the Son by the Father, and of the Spirit by the Father and the Son. The Jesuits were the first to use it in an operative sense. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), in 1540, established for the members of his Society, in addition to the usual three vows, a fourth vow circa *missiones* (regarding the missions), which was a peculiar vow of obedience to the Supreme Pontiff, to go promptly to wherever they were sent, among the pagans, heretics or Catholics themselves.

inhabitants, their cultures, their social organizations and their gods. This mission, shaped around the paradigm of Christianity, constituted the inspiring principle, structure, thought, worldview, and ethics of Western imperialism. Biblical monotheism, the theocratic structure of the Church – and consequently of empires – the *plenitudo potestatis* conferred on the Pope, salvific ecclesiocentrism, resource to "just war", the eschatological expectation linked to the proclamation of the Gospel and the conversion of all peoples (cf. Mt 24:14), are just some of the elements that, from the beginning, characterized the colonial enterprise as a mystical-religious epic, as well as a military and mercantile one (TORODOV, 2010, p. 12-13).

In the wake of the reforming ferments, they were sent on religious missions highly motivated, capable and well formed in the humanistic spirit of the Renaissance and in the apostolic fervour of the Counter-Reformation. These missionaries addressed people they did not know, considering them in their fundamental dignity as bearers of soul and reason, but whom they did not know how to use. Therefore, it was essential to subjugate them, educate them, convert them, so that they would become "like us".

The methods of evangelization ranged from intercultural dialogue and subjection by force, passing through the soft approach, depending on the type of pagan with whom one had to deal. In the case of enslaved blacks there was no method at all: everyone was Christianized as soon as they were branded with iron. In all cases, the objective was always the same: to lead all peoples to the true religion.

Without doubt, the messianic spirit of the origins of Christianity has always accompanied the mission of the churches, representing a critical device in relation to the events of history and to the very journey of the People of God. However, exemplary testimonies of clerics such as Antonio de Montesinos (1475-1540) and Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484-1566), who denounced the brutalities of the conquerors, unfortunately they do not represent the general picture of ecclesiastical action in many lands outside Europe, whose complicity with the colonial powers was indisputably normative.

With the passage of time, inhuman arrogance and oppression were questioned, banished, condemned, without ever disappearing. Colonial rule, apparently stripped of its original violence, was covered up by the noblest of humanitarian narratives. Even when in the West religion has been eclipsed by secular culture, faith by reason, church by society, providence by progress, mystery by science, etc., only the terms of discourse have changed, but not the rules of the game. Asymmetrical and hegemonic relations were even strengthened, with the most absolute conviction that the civilization forged by the modern world represented the end of history and the path to the definitive realization of the "backward" peoples. Basically, we remain somewhat convinced of this, even admitting that our civilizational framework still needs some adjustments.

We must always keep in mind the historical mortgages of the mission – colonialism, ethnocentrism and militant intolerance – so that the old vices do not reappear in the churches, dressed up in a new language. Positions that re-edit a theology of colonial Christianity, disconnecting the mission from the identity of the Church, subordinating it to non-negotiable dogmatic premises, and reducing evangelizing action to a question of

"ardour, methods and expressions", are always active in re-proposing a mission as a consequence of being Church rather than a condition for being Church. New forms of epistemic coloniality prevail every time ecclesiology precedes or incorporates missiology as its pastoral appendix.

We must also always keep in mind the colonial difference inherent in Western modernity, which does not mean living in anguish under the yoke of a paralyzing guilt. The Church lives from the mission: The Church was constituted solely for the mission. The memory and critical awareness of missionary reason in the face of wounds that have no cure, must lead us to a fundamental penitential attitude to "decolonize [our] minds" (DAp 96) and to be able to proclaim the Gospel no longer in terms of proselytism and dogmatism, but in terms of openness, acceptance, dialogue (ES 37) and attraction (EG 14).

The memorial, critical and penitential posture perhaps allows a redefinition of the relations of encounter between different peoples and cultures, a more attentive, more open, more gratuitous, more discreet, more fraternal, more dialogical and more humane path: a path of discipleship learning that we would never finish traveling. If the colonial character of the mission was determined by European expansion, the decolonial character should certainly not be its opposite, that is, strategic withdrawal and closure, but a new openness characterized by the attempt to (dis)encounter with the other: The Christian community must always take this risk.

Moving from domination to encounter presupposes respect, recognition, dialogue, hospitality, friendship: it means passing from the anxiety of "salvationism" to the harmonious living and sharing; from the heroic voluntarism of the candidate for martyrdom to the human simplicity of the guest and the pilgrim; from the triumphant thirst for conquest to the unarmed proximity of those who must ask permission to be able to present their proposals (cf. QAm 26); from the presumption of those who want to teach to the wisdom and willingness of those who want to learn. Mission today needs to be guided by a "culture of encounter" (FT 30; 215-217): for this it needs to go beyond herself and its history, without denying it.

### **Conciliar positions on decolonization**

These issues are not new to Christian denominations. At least throughout the twentieth century, the missionary and missiological debate boiled in schools, in academic studies, magazines, magisterial pronouncements, in the shadows of the crisis of European imperialism, the two world wars and the consequent emancipation of the colonies. Certainly, it can be said that the relationship between mission and colonization was implicitly or explicitly the central point of the whole discussion, since it was perceived as a structural problem for evangelization.

In the Catholic sphere, the watershed that opened the way for a reconfiguration of the practice and concept of mission was undoubtedly the Second Vatican Council. This event set in motion a profound process of reform, taking up the first apostolic tradition and inviting all Christians to go to the sources (*ad rimini fontes*), rediscovering the liberating

message of Jesus through a new hermeneutic, redeeming the works of the Fathers of the Church, as well as the theologies and missionary practices eclipsed over the centuries.

We present here seven perspectives of the lines proposed by Vatican II, in tension between tradition and innovation, which provided the possibility of rethinking the colonial mission towards the configuration of another model.

*a. Theological perspective:* Instead of reaffirming only the need for conversion to one God and one mediator, the decree *Ad Gentes* (AG) chooses to emphasize a mission that springs from the "fountain love of the Father" (AG 2), as an instinct, as a way of being of the divine nature itself. This intention subtly shifts the axis from a soteriological or ecclesiological understanding of mission – the need for the salvation of souls and/or the implantation of the Church – to a question of an eminently theological order: God is like this, God is mission, God is relationship because God is Love (1 Jn 4:8). Missionary reason is now and principally based not on the dogmatic truth that there is only one God and one mediator between God and humanity, but on the adherence of faith to a God of gratuitous and unconditional love who seeks the human being, descends from heaven, fights and gives his life for a more humane world.

*b. Ecclesiological perspective:* The Council also reaffirms the content of the dogma "outside the Church there is no salvation" (LG 14; AG 7). The fact, however, that God wants everyone to be saved (1 Tim 2:4), and that he provides this salvation in ways known only to Him (AG 9), the need of the Church does not become so absolute. Thus, "whatever is true and gracious among the Gentiles as a secret presence of God," and whatever "is good in the hearts and minds of men, or in the rites and cultures proper to peoples, is not only not lost, but is purified, elevated, and consummated to the glory of God" (AG 9). These are affirmations of an unprecedented openness. *Lumen Gentium* had already rehearsed a relationship/distinction between the Kingdom of God and the Church (LG 3; 5). Later we will come to the mature conviction that the "Church is at the service of the Kingdom" and "the incipient reality of the Kingdom can also be found outside the confines of the Church" (RMi 20).

*c. Anthropological perspective:* The conciliar turn, which wanted a Church entirely dedicated to "serving man in all the circumstances of his life" (PAUL VI, 1965), also led to an overcoming of a Hamartio-centric vision of Augustinian matrix, centred on the original sin of humanity. In its return to the sources, Vatican II rescued: (1) the doctrine of the Greek Fathers of *creatio in Christo*, according to which creation is marked more by grace than by sin; (2) the principle of incarnation formulated by Irenaeus, *quod non assumptum non sanatum*, which invited us to take for ourselves all human reality; (3) the Justinian perspective of the *logos spermatikos* (AG 6, 11, 15, 22), signifying the active presence of God in the history and cultures of peoples. In this way, he offered a much more positive vision of history, more mystical-sacramental, more open and more willing to dialogue.

*d. Contextual perspective:* For the Council, the Church's mission has its own preferential geopolitics, directed "generally to certain territories" (AG 6). This indication could point today to the realities of borders or peripheries. If contexts have a profound theological

relevance, because it is there that the *missio Dei* subversively reveals itself – especially if these places are marginal, forgotten, denied and impoverished – then the expression "missions", that is, where the mission concretely needs to be situated, indicates privileged areas in which the presence and action of the Church needs to land.

*e. Pastoral perspective:* The fundamental posture of dialogue, masterfully treated by Paul VI in the Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964) as the new name of the mission (ES 37), will impulse Christ's disciples to talk and get to know people (AG 11), to proclaim the Gospel with the witness of life, dialogue, gratuitousness, to collaborate "with everyone to structure economic and social life with justice", and to seek to "improve living conditions and establish peace in the world". This is what evangelization consists of: "Christ's disciples, intimately united with men in life and work... they promote their dignity and fraternal union (...) gradually opening a fuller path to God" (AG 12).

*f. Apostolic perspective:* The "professional" missionaries, usually consecrated religious sent to the "mission lands", now give the place as protagonists to the local churches, in each territorial context. By conferring this fundamental dignity on all ecclesial communities (LG 26), the Council had the opportunity to put an end to the colonial distinction between "constituted church" and "missionary church": the former sent missionaries to found communities in its image and likeness; the second was "created" from the first, finding it difficult to emancipate herself to assume her own identity. Still hostage to this distinction, the AG nevertheless tends to consider the "missionary church" no longer as an initial stage of ecclesial development, but as a structuring dimension of the whole Church.

*g. Synodal perspective:* Even though it is not explicitly addressed, this dimension is present "at the heart of the work of renewal he promotes" (CTI, 2018, 6). AG illustrates mission as a synodal action among churches. The mission needs communion, participation and solidarity: it needs means and trained people, cooperation and exchange, so that all communities may help each other, and especially the poorest and most marginalized. In this way, and starting from the missionary protagonism of the local churches, the mission *ad gentes* can henceforth be called "inter-ecclesial missionary cooperation".

Around these lines of *missio Dei*, *Regnum Dei*, humanity, borders, dialogue, missionary church and synodal church, a reconfiguration of the concept of mission, its meaning, its relevance and its operationalization is woven, between tradition and the new post-colonial times. These perspectives will be guiding stakes that will serve for the evolution of the practice and theology of mission in the decades to come, from *Evangelii Nuntiandi* to the pontificate of Francis. It is not about answers to the questions posed by modernity/coloniality: it is much more about paths to be followed with humanity as pilgrims in search of truth, artisans of peace and sowers of hope.

### **Decolonial perspectives for mission today**

Vatican II will remain an open site of an unfinished work, sometimes forbidden by the authority of the shift, sometimes resumed with determination, strength and a spirit of

innovation. The conciliar event decreed, in a subtle but decisive way, the end of a Christianity segregated and closed in on itself, for the beginning of a profound spiritual and missionary renewal, marking the transition to a new era that was to include a radical ecclesial reform.

With the end of Christianity, it was also a model of mission *ad gentes* ordered in the geography of Christian countries, in the ecclesiocentrism of salvation, in the anthropology of the *massa damnata* and in the jurisdiction of Propaganda Fide. The mission was rediscovered by the Council as much more as the essence of Christian life than as a specific activity of the Church (AG 2). Vatican II repositioned the entire local church in a permanent state of mission, rescuing the fundamental missionary vocation of the entire people of God and of every baptized man and woman.

With the theme of the "*Church in exodus*", Pope Francis decisively takes up this conciliar option, as his predecessors had already done in some way. Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* affirmed that "evangelizing constitutes the deepest identity of the Church: she exists for the sake of evangelizing" (EN 14). John Paul II, in *Redemptoris Missio*, affirmed that the mission *ad gentes* takes place in a very wide range of situations, circumstances, conditions, in fact encompassing a multiplicity of scenarios (RMi 37). Benedict XVI maintained that "the field of mission *ad gentes* has expanded considerably and it is no longer possible to define it only in geographical or juridical considerations" (2006).

Pope Francis, for his part, drew attention to the profoundly changed postmodern socio-cultural reality:

At the time [...] it was simpler to distinguish between two very clear strands: on the one hand, a Christian world and, on the other, a world still in need of evangelization. Now, this situation no longer exists. [...] In the big cities, we need other "maps", other paradigms, that help us to relocate our ways of thinking and our attitudes: we are no longer in Christianity! (FRANCIS, 2019).

Noting the end of Christianity also confirms the end of a model of mission: it is now a matter of placing oneself in another reality, which requires on the part of all ecclesial circles "a pastoral and missionary conversion, which cannot leave things as they are" (EG 25).

We live in a time of total revision of paradigms, in which even the postmodern version of the missionary mandate (cf. Mt 28:19) is becoming more and more "liquid" (MENIN, 2023): mission concerns everything and everyone and can no longer be restricted to an action "carried out by qualified agents" leaving out the rest of the people of God (EG 120).

This operation, however, hides a risk: that of diluting the notion and practice of mission to something paradoxically generic that weakens its prophetic appeal, its fearless action, and its pioneering role. Paradoxically, the engagement of Christians in extreme situations of persecution, marginality, poverty and violence, would theoretically be on the same level as the life of any baptized person, a missionary disciple by the essence of his vocation, who leads an ordinary life without particular upheavals. However, it is not the same.

What we must maintain from the missionary tradition of the Church, so as not to liquidate once and for all the mission *ad gentes* in the global mission of the Church, is its impulse to



leave our comfort zone to go to the most remote, most forgotten and most challenging places.

In the first place, "mission" must always imply an exit, an "ad" complemented but not replaced by an "inter", which will have different nuances and gradations, between a more intersubjective dimension and a more transcultural one, between a closer level and a more remote reach. Leaving one's own world has never been easy for anyone and not as spontaneous as we may think: leaving is always an exercise that requires a radical detachment and a tremendous transcendence of oneself, of one's own world of relationships and of one's own worldview.

Secondly, this going out "does not mean running through the world without direction or meaning", but "going out towards others to reach the human peripheries", and always with the attention of "those who have fallen by the wayside" (EG 46). The word "mission" must always point boldly and fearlessly to an extreme, ultimate, frontier, marginalized situation that missionary disciples are called to reach. Mission is not done anywhere: mission requires a departure from one's own identity and socio-cultural spheres, towards other places and privileged interlocutors, "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8) including to the extreme boundaries of the humans.

These boundaries, in our post-modern globalized world, apparently without boundaries, take on three complementary characteristics: the boundary can be a margin of a territorial and social sphere, a periphery where people are far from the centre, but in some way are part of the same sociocultural context; the boundary can be a border, a threshold, a dividing line between two territories, two worlds, two cultures, which defines distinct identities/belongings; The boundary can be a horizon that opens up in front of us as something unknown, as a new path, as a vast and unexplored space.

### **Inhabiting the peripheries**

In the first place, the mission takes place in the territorial, environmental and existential peripheries that are on the margins of a socio-cultural context. The peripheries are places far from the centre, places of struggle for life, places of exclusion, marginalization, violence, but also places of wisdom, religious and multicultural mixtures, new subjectivities, new relationships, new worldviews, such as Galilee where Jesus lived, and where live today the victims and survivors of "a social and economic system unjust at its root" (EG 59). The mission, yesterday as today, needs to be situated in these contexts, so that the Church experiences a fundamental shift in its perception of the world<sup>5</sup>, assuming

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<sup>5</sup> In this regard, Pope Francis said in an interview with Antonio Spadaro: "I am convinced of one thing: the great changes of history have happened when reality has been seen not from the centre, but from the periphery. It is a hermeneutical question: reality is understood only if we look at it from the periphery, and not if our gaze is placed at a centre equidistant from everything. To truly understand reality, we must move from the central position of calm and tranquillity and move towards a peripheral area. Being on the periphery helps us to look at and understand better, to make a more correct analysis of reality, distancing ourselves from centralism and ideological approaches. Therefore, it is not useful to be the centre of a sphere. To understand we must 'displace', look at reality from different points of view" (SPADARO, 2013, p. 474).

an evangelical commitment to the poor and an engagement in the construction of a more just, fraternal and solidary world. It is an ethical option, which implies, in turn, a perspective, a fundamental detachment in terms of perceiving and questioning reality from the point of view of the victims and of the crucified of today.

Every evangelizing action of the Church, extended to all nations to the ends of the earth, necessarily ends up landing on an ultimate, concrete, extreme, forgotten, excluded and marginalized reality. In it, the Church, before wanting to become a "house of the poor" (Dap 8; 524), is called to enter the house of the poor, as a pilgrim, learning to be a poor Church as Medellín desired: "the poverty of the Church and of its members must be a sign and commitment: a sign of the inestimable value of the poor in the eyes of God; a commitment of solidarity with those who suffer" (DM XIV, 7).

This necessarily implies a process of rapprochement that leads to inhabiting the peripheries, weaving bonds of friendship with people (cf. DAp 398), feeling from the ground of the marginalized, sensing with their hearts, sharing their worldview, living intensely their daily lives. In other words, to let the periphery inhabit us.

"To inhabit" means to belong, to immerse, to touch with the disenchantment, divisions, conflicts and lacerations produced by the border diaspora, rooted in the history, in the body and in the daily life of those who live in the flesh the colonial violence. The peripheries are not an easy place to live, because in these human confines, the envoys of Jesus are humbly called to take off their shoes and disappear, living and learning to become close to conditions of oblivion, injustice and invisibility.

This exodus does not only require great generosity and tremendous boldness. Above all, it impels us to adopt a profound humility made up of listening, attention, acceptance, respect, recognition and service, so that the silenced voice of the invisible, the disposable and the excluded, their yearnings and their desires to become subjects of their own history, can emerge, and with this "awaken hope in the midst of the most difficult situations, for if there is no hope for the poor, there will be no hope for anyone" (PG 67; DAp 395).

The Christian mission must promote more than ever a profound and radical "culture of shared life" (LS 213), committing itself to unmasking every ideology and theology of domination, developing tools that help identify hegemonic positions, including its own, proposing patient paths of decolonization, placing itself at the service of the causes of liberation of subaltern peoples as a reliable ally.

Moving from domination to encounter presupposes respect, recognition, dialogue, hospitality, friendship: it means passing from the anxiety of "salvationism" to the calm of harmonious living and sharing; from the heroic voluntarism of the candidate for martyrdom to the human simplicity of the guest and the pilgrim; from the triumphant thirst for conquest to the unarmed proximity of those who must ask permission to be able to present their proposals (cf. QAm 26); from the presumption of those who want to teach to the wisdom and willingness of those who want to learn.

## Crossing borders

Unlike the peripheries that belong to a sociocultural context as a marginalized reality, borders constitute the dividing line between two worlds. If the periphery is the place of (dis)encounter with the poor, the border is the place of (dis)encounter with the other, without this other ceasing, in most cases, to be poor. However, as the Jesuit anthropologist Xavier Albó said, the problem of poverty "is something very different from the struggle of the other to be recognized as other" (TEIXEIRA, 1991, p. 104).

Borders are presented in their ambivalences between the protection of one's own identity/belonging and the openness to otherness/difference in its multiple nuances. Borders unify and at the same time distinguish, representing the limit within which we are determined, and the place of contact, transit, interaction, possibility, opportunity to create bonds.

In the post-modern globalized world, the word "border" takes on a polysemic and polyvalent meaning, whose linguistic, cultural, social, economic and ideological nuances are reproduced naturally and in an articulated way in all aspects of daily life, in the organization of societies, in international relations and even in the churches.

These borders often become real and cruel walls for millions of migrants and refugees, as well as insurmountable, symbolic, imaginary fences for millions of other excluded people, social classes, ideological segments, interest groups, cultures, races, genders, generations, religions and all kinds of differences.

These vertical walls, once broken down, can be transformed into bridges to provide places of encounter and reciprocity, of dialogue and participation, passage to come and go, building new bonds and new relationships. Mission, therefore, is called to cross borders and promote a "culture of encounter" (FT 30, 215; EG 220; QAm 22). Crossing does not only mean crossing, transposing, passing, but also weaving, intertwining, joining. For this it is necessary to inhabit the border line to connect a history with the other side of history, the emancipatory achievements of a civilization with the wounds of peoples who were crucified, impoverished, silenced, discarded and denied.

It is not a matter of falling into the dystopian proposal of a "world without borders", conceived one-way by neoliberal hegemony, but of proposing in the opposite direction a perspective of "open borders", which preserve identities and memories, and at the same time foster dialogues, exchanges, cooperation and integrations.

Crossing borders for our churches means a profound interior conversion, just as it was for the first Christian communities: to understand that the "others" – the poor considered sinners, the Samaritans considered "impure", the God-fearing are considered "hindered", the pagans considered "idolaters" – could also be worthy of God's promises to his people, without converting to Judaism (Acts 10:34, 44; 11:17). In the same way, our ecclesial communities, if they want to be allies of the *missio Dei*, need to go to the frontiers of their knowledge, their understandings, their pretensions, their certainties, and seek new ways of

evangelizing themselves and others, truly encountering others: "every time we meet a human being in love, we are able to discover something new about God" (EG 272).<sup>6</sup>

## Opening Paths

In short, the extreme limit of the "boundary" can point to the horizons of a movement of evolution, expansion, advancement, discovery that projects us towards the unexpected. The Church is at the service of a humanity that is always moving further, committed to the proclamation of a Kingdom that is to come, "which is the same as saying 'new world', a new state of things, a new way of being, of living, of being together with others, which the Gospel inaugurates" (EN 23). To which direction our world-society is moving today, to what purpose, towards which goal, to which horizon?

The postmodern globalized world seems to have lost sight of its horizon, reducing its expectations, shrinking its dreams and hopes, living on fragmentary short-term objectives: "history," says Pope Francis, "shows signs of regression" (FT 11) in the face of the global climate crisis (LD 5), the growing technocratic paradigm (LD 20), anthropocentric domination (LS 115), ethical decadence, The cultural and spiritual aspects of modernity (LS 119), the sense of uncertainty and fear for the future (FT 29), the increase in individualism (FT 105), the weakening of the sense of belonging (FT 30) with a consequent increase in aggressiveness, hatred, violence, wars and divisions (FT 44).

The rise of the populist extreme right wing, which finds in the most conservative and integralist Christianity a fanatic and militant ally, casts even bleak perspectives on the present and future of the world, in favour of the greed of an ever more devouring and limitless capitalism.

However, for the missionary disciples "nothing human can seem strange" (Dap 380). Pope Francis continually invites the Church to overcome the temptation to close herself off, to shrink and to deal reactively with the complex problems that arise in today's world. On the contrary, it is necessary to go out, to create proactive habits (FRANCIS, 2013), certainly to discern, but walking in hope and "opening oneself to the great ideals that make life more beautiful and dignified" (FT 55).

In the first place, it is necessary to bear witness to, seek and promote fundamental values that go beyond any consensus and any cultural transformation, "as values transcendent to our contexts and never negotiable" (FT 211), as is the case with the inalienable dignity of the human person and the common good. Our understanding of their meaning and importance may undoubtedly grow, but we can never give them up.

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<sup>6</sup> The document Dialogue and Proclamation (1991) states: "The fullness of the truth received in Jesus Christ does not give individual Christians the guarantee of having fully assimilated this truth. In the final analysis, truth is not something we possess, but a person by whom we must allow ourselves to be possessed. It is, therefore, a never-ending process. While keeping their identity intact, Christians must be ready to learn and receive from others and through them the positive values of their traditions" (DA 49, emphasis added). I believe that today this "individually" can be easily removed.

Secondly, it is necessary to open oneself to the universal horizons of peoples, cultures and knowledge, to everything and everyone, to the new, to the unknown, to the subversive, in the various spheres of life, in the advancement of science and technology, in the sphere of art, communication and cultural expressions, in the religious and spiritual field, in the political and economic sphere, in the emergence of new identities that claim recognition and citizenship. This implies having a "heart without borders, capable of overcoming the distances of origin, nationality, colour or religion" (FT 3), capable of freeing oneself from "every desire for domination over others" (FT 4).

It is not a question of promoting an abstract universalism, but of ceasing to take care of oneself alone, to think in terms of the human family (FT 141). The foundation is simply the human: "to realize how much a human being is worth, how much a person is worth, always and in every circumstance" (FT 106). A mission that breaks down walls and builds bridges, always seeks an insertion in the local in communion with the global (FT 142) and an interconnection between the personal, relational, social and cosmic dimensions (LS 91, 117, 138, 240). Inhabiting a frontier does not mean absolutizing a local identity cause, but fighting against all forms of domination, committing oneself to the greater causes, to the care of Mother Earth, to solidarity with other peoples, to peace and justice among all nations.

In this sense, the indigenous horizon of "well-being", contrary to the capitalist, competitive and anthropocentric perspective of "well-being", has much to teach us: a life in personal, communal, cosmic harmony, characterized by the profound interconnection between nature, human beings, spiritual beings and the supreme Being. The good-living points to a counter-hegemonic path to plenitude, in a simple and austere life, as well as to a "culture of care" for the environment between small gestures and grand strategies (LS 229, 231). "The indigenous peoples can help us discover what a happy sobriety is", as well as "the responsible care of nature that preserves resources for future generations" (QAm 71): in these matters we need to be catechized by them.

## **Conclusion**

Looking at the recent history of the West's conquest of the world, it may certainly seem bold – or naive – to think of a Christian mission from a de-colonial perspective.

However, Vatican II has opened ways to dispose our minds, bodies, practices, and institutions to implement processes that challenge the dominant ideas that serve as base for the logics of power. These processes will probably not be enough to neutralize all colonial differences, but they may contribute to weakening the relations of inequality that pervade global society and that are internalized in us.

The mission, on the other hand, is called to change profoundly, from a counter-hegemonic perspective, being situated more in the realm of relationships than of actions: the missionary disciples need to calm down, sit down, welcome, spend time with people, fraternize, take care of the life and wounds of the crucified. Despite all information and communication technology and its fascinating evolutions, "the communication network

of faith must be human so that the message reaches people's hearts", said Paul VI (1969). If there is one thing that concerns the *missio Dei*, it is that it will continue to need the warmth of the human being and the dedication of the missionary.

Well, there is a very simple way for people to encounter Jesus, which is through our people, our embrace, our witness, our listening, our silence and our words. Then, with the ecclesial journey, Jesus reveals himself more deeply in the community, in the Word, in the sacraments, in prayer, in devotion and everything else, but initially he is proclaimed by closeness, tenderness and encounter. In this there is no proselytism: this is pure heart and pure passion.

This mission that dwells in the peripheries, that breaks down walls and crosses borders, that opens paths to the ends of the earth, concerns the Church that we are and the Church that we want to be: a Church that walks, that evangelizes and is evangelized, that grows and matures to the extent that it is authentically open to dialogue with the poor and others. It is the mission that makes the Church and not the other way around: the mission always comes first. Therefore, in this adventure of the mission, the important thing will not be what we will be able to accomplish, but what Church we will be capable to be.

## Abbreviations and acronyms

AG	Ad Gentes
DA	Diálogo e anúncio
DAP	Documento de Aparecida
EG	Evangelii Gaudium
EN	Evangelii Nuntiandi
ES	Ecclesiam Suam
FT	Fratelli Tutti
LD	Laudate Deum
LG	Lumen Gentium
LS	Laudato Sí
PG	Pastores Gregis
QAm	Querida Amazonia
RMi	Redemptoris Missio

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