

CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS: A Fundamental Missionary Identity

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The local Church in the Philippines is on a nine-year pilgrimage to the celebration in 2021 of the fifth centenary of the arrival of the Christian faith (1521-2021). Year 2018 is dedicated to the clergy and religious; they are pivotal for the promotion of integral evangelization in our country. Thus, this year [2018], in the vision of the Philippine Church, is dedicated to the “integral renewal of the values, mind-sets, behavior, and life-styles of the clergy and religious. The aim is to become servant-leaders in the manner of the Good Shepherd, live the spirit of the evangelical counsels, and be authentic prophets of the Good News of Jesus and the Kingdom. It will be a year, too, of revisiting ways of seminary and religious formation, of on-going formation, and of the collaboration of the laity in these crucial approaches to integral growth and development in view of mission and ministry.”

In the context of this “Year of Clergy and Religious,” one can fruitfully recall that, since the time of the Second Vatican Council, a renewed vision of priestly/religious ministry has been emerging. It is anchored in the awareness that “the pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature” (AG 2). This means, as asserted by Blessed Paul VI, that the Church exists in order to evangelize; it is the grace and vocation proper to her identity. “Evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church” (EN 14). Thus, for the Church and her ministers, to live is to evangelize!

If missionary evangelization is the specific task and imperative of the Church, then *all* her members should have a vivid awareness of their own responsibility for the spread of the Gospel. Stated succinctly in terms of priestly ordination and religious ministry, the Church perceives that

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there is inherently an *organic bonding between priesthood and mission, between being religious and engaging in mission*. To be formed for ministry in the Catholic Church today demands a missionary consciousness and dedication. A commitment to the Church’s mission of evangelization is not one function among many that priests and religious fulfill; mission is at the very core of their identity.

A New Vision. This presentation will explicitly focus on selected texts that illustrate the intimate connection between priestly ordination, ministry and mission; however, please note that what is said here of the ordained ministry *equally applies* to consecrated religious.

Vatican II’s document on the life and ministry of priests (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*) states: “The spiritual gift which priests received at their ordination prepares them not for any limited or narrow mission, but for the widest scope of the universal mission of salvation ‘even to the very ends of the earth’ (Acts 1:8). For every priestly [and religious] ministry shares in the universality of the

mission entrusted by Christ to his apostles” (PO 10). The Council’s mission document (*Ad Gentes*) notes: “Priests represent Christ, and are collaborators with the order of bishops in that threefold sacred task which by its very nature bears on the mission of the Church. Therefore, they should fully understand that their life has also been consecrated to the service of the missions” (AG 39). Vatican II has given the Church a vision of a *mission-intensive priesthood and religious life!*

In his first Letter to Priests for Holy Thursday (1979), Saint John Paul II noted: “the pastoral vocation of priests [and religious] is great, and the Council teaches that it is universal; it is directed to the whole Church and therefore, it is also a missionary vocation.” Likewise, in an April 1989 address to the members of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, the pope emphasized that “every priest, in a special way, is a *missionary for the world.*”

Saint John Paul II’s 1990 mission encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (RM) states: “All priests [and religious] must have the mind and heart of missionaries—open to the needs of the Church and the world, with concern for those farthest away, and especially for the non-Christian groups in their own area. They should have at heart, in their prayers and particularly at the Eucharistic Sacrifice, the concern of the whole Church for all of humanity. Especially in those areas where Christians are a minority [e.g. Asia, home to over 60% of humanity, is less than 3%

Christian], priests [also religious] must be filled with special missionary zeal and commitment” (RM 67).

Mission Emphasis. In his message for World Mission Sunday 1990, which bore the title: “Every Priest a Missionary,” the pope spoke about the role of the seminary in forming apostolic evangelizers. He wrote that all priests “must have a *solid missionary formation*, which the seminary above all must provide, during the years of the preparation of future priests [and religious]. It is important that in the program of theological studies missiology be given a prominent place.”

Saint John Paul II’s logic is clear; priests and religious who themselves possess a deep missionary consciousness “will be able to form the Christian communities to an authentic missionary involvement.... The priest should feel and act, wherever he is, like a pastor of the world, in service to the whole missionary Church. He is a born animator and the person primarily responsible for the awakening of missionary consciousness in the faithful.... [Priests and Religious] should arouse and maintain among the faithful a most active interest for the evangelization of the world” (*Ibid.*).

Apostolic Shepherds. In the 1992 apostolic exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (PDV) [*I Will Give You Shepherds*], Saint John Paul II emphasizes that “the ministry of the priest is entirely on behalf of the Church; ... it is ordered not only to the particular Church but also to the universal

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Church; ... [it] is incorporated in the apostolic structure of the Church. In this way priests, like the apostles, act as ambassadors of Christ (cf. II Cor 5:20). This is the basis of the missionary character of every priest" (PDV 16). "It thus follows that the spiritual life of the priest [and religious] should be profoundly marked by a missionary zeal and dynamism. In the exercise of their ministry and the witness of their lives, priests have the duty to form the community entrusted to them as a truly missionary community" (PDV 32). They are also expected to reach out beyond their own parish or Catholic community; as authentic shepherds, they need to heed Jesus' words: "There are other sheep I have that are not part of this fold, and these I have to lead as well" (Jn 10:16). Yes, in the words of this "saint-pope," "All priests [and religious] must have the mind and heart of missionaries" (RM 67).

Vision of the Philippine Church. The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (1991) issued a mandate that "the Church in the Philippines ... shall put itself in a more active state of mission (PCP-II

Decrees, Art. 1, #1). This "active state of mission" was to be concretized, promoted and implemented through a five-to-ten-year National Pastoral Plan. This plan, issued in 1993, bore the title: *In the State of Mission: Towards a Renewed Integral Evangelization*.

On July 5, 2000 the Philippine bishops issued a beautiful pastoral letter on mission and evangelization within the local Church. It bore the title: *"Missions" and the Church in the Philippines: A Pastoral Letter on the Church's Mission in the New Millennium*. The letter is an inspiring overview of both the theological and pastoral agenda for enabling the local Church to achieve "a more active state of mission."

The Philippine bishops chose to make mission and evangelization central to the entire Jubilee Year experience through a National Mission Congress, held in Cebu in 2000. Approximately 2,300 delegates assembled for this event; the "Message of the First National Mission Congress"



expressed the commitment of the participants to become a “Church-in-Mission.”

When the Philippine Church held the National Pastoral Consultation on Church Renewal (NPCCR) in 2001 to evaluate the implementation of PCP-II, the assembly offered nine important guidelines to promote a “renewed integral evangelization.” The ninth guideline, centered on *Animation and Formation for Mission ad gentes*, notes: “We shall respond to the Holy Father’s challenge that Filipinos become ‘the foremost missionaries for all of Asia’ in the third millennium. For this purpose we shall insure that mission animation and formation will be integral to religious formation in the family, schools and other institutes of formation.”

Vision of Priestly and Religious Formation.

The current document that guides formation for priests in the Philippines is *The Updated Philippine Program of Priestly Formation* (UPPPF); it was issued in 2006 by the Episcopal Commission on Seminaries of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP). According to the

document, a unified vision of theology necessarily includes seven essential theological disciplines. In addition to areas such as scripture, dogma, and moral, *missiology* is identified as integral to a comprehensive vision of theology. The following paragraph (UPPPF 131) links mission studies into a holistic program of priestly formation.

“PCP-II highlights the role of the Philippine Church to be the foremost missionary in Asia. NPCCR echoes the same urgent call by making *Mission ad gentes* as one of its pastoral priorities. Rolled into one, it is a call for the Philippine Church to become a Church-in-Mission. But for this to happen, missionary formation of the future priests [and religious] is indispensable. This requires that Missiology should be an integral part of the theological formation of future priests. As such, all major seminaries and school of theologies (sic) should offer courses on Missiology.”

Pope Francis’ Vision of “Missionary Disciples.” In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis proposes a profound missionary renewal of the entire Church; certainly the clergy and religious

are central to this renewal. Francis asserts that we need an “evangelizing Church that comes out of herself,” not a Church that is “self-referential” and “lives within herself, of herself, for herself.” “I dream of a ‘missionary option,’ that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation.... All renewal in the Church must have mission as its goal if it is not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion” (EG 27).

“Missionary outreach is *paradigmatic for all the Church’s activity*.... We need to move ‘from a pastoral ministry of mere conservation to a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry’” (EG 15). “I want to emphasize that what I am trying to express here has programmatic significance and important consequences.... Throughout the world, let us be ‘permanently in a state of mission’” (EG 25).

A pivotal insight of Pope Francis is that “we are all missionary disciples” (EG 119); through

baptism, “all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples” (EG 120). All Christians (priests, religious, and laity) are to be “agents of evangelization.” “The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized.... Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are ‘disciples’ and ‘missionaries,’ but rather that we are always ‘missionary disciples’” (EG 120). “May the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the good news not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ (EG 10; cf. EN 75).

Francis asserts: “Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (EG 8; cf. Benedict XV). For Pope Francis, every Christian “ought to grow in awareness that he himself is continually in need of being evangelized” (EG



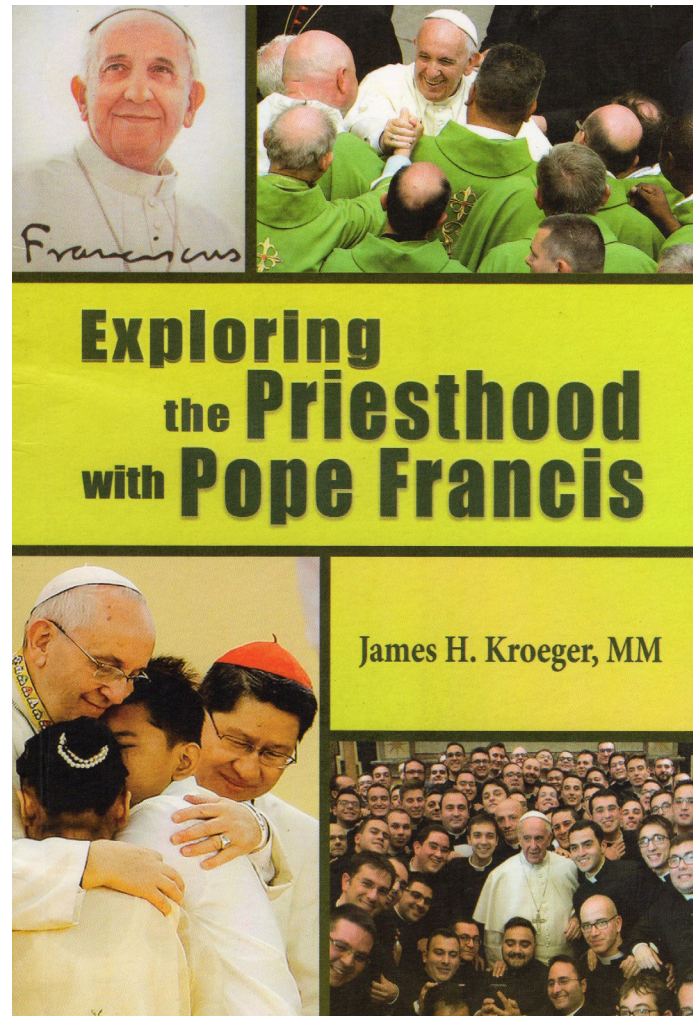
164). In Chapter Two (EG 50-109), Francis focuses on the challenges facing the proclamation of the Gospel today; the pope asserts: “Challenges exist to be overcome! Let us be realists, but without losing our joy, our boldness and our hope-filled commitment. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary vigor” (EG 109). Or again, “I repeat: Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the joy of evangelization” (EG 83).

Conclusion. Early in all four gospels, one reads of the call of the disciples (Mt 4:18-22; Mk 1:16-20; Lk 5:1-11; Jn 1:35-51). The disciples have questions; Jesus responds by giving a simple invitation: “Come and see,” “*Venite et videte*” (Jn 1:39). In similar fashion Philip invites his brother Nathanael to “Come and see,” “*Veni et vide*” (Jn 1:46). After the resurrection, the disciples proclaim their faith in Jesus in a variety of ways; they announce to doubting Thomas: “We have seen the Lord,” “*Vidimus Dominum*” (Jn 20:25); John says to Peter: “It is the Lord,” “*Dominus est*” (Jn 21:7).

In light of resurrection faith, all four gospels conclude with mission imperatives (Mt 28:16-20; Mk 16:15; Lk 24:48-49; Jn 20:21-23). Notice the dynamic expressed by each evangelist; Jesus’ disciples are called to respond in two parallel ways. First, they are to *Come and See*; then, they are to *Go and Proclaim*. In a particular way, priests and religious are to be intimate disciples-apostles of Jesus, who himself is “the missionary of the Father.”

This presentation, which cited documents of the universal and local Church, has tried to capture the Church’s vision of a *mission-intensive priesthood and religious life*. More than a simple chronicle of

Church documents, this reflection aimed to express how the Holy Spirit is moving us all to become a Church that, by God’s grace and the power of the Spirit, truly remains “in the state of mission.” It is the fervent prayer of this author that our mission societies, seminaries and schools of theology, religious houses of formation, are all actively committed to training ministers of the Gospel, who have “the mind and heart of missionaries.”



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