

## ***Maximum Illud* Centennial**

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The flowering of the Church's vision of her mission of evangelization in the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) is preceded by decades of continuous mission experience and reflection. This cumulative "wisdom" coalesces into the Church's vision on a particular subject; thus, for the Church's "mission perspectives" in the first half of the twentieth century one can look to five papal encyclicals: *Maximum Illud* (1919), *Rerum Ecclesiae* (1926), *Evangelii Praecones* (1951), *Fidei Donum* (1957), and *Princeps Pastorum* (1959). Following Vatican II and *Ad Gentes* (1965), one must explore *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), *Redemptoris Missio* (2000), and *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013).

The Church has continued to reflect on her missionary identity ever since Jesus told his disciples: "As the Father has sent me, so am I sending you" (John 20:21). The Papal mission documents, important sources of mission reflection, are papal circulars dealing with missionary themes, whatever their exact title may be. Another source of mission reflection in the first half of the twentieth century would necessarily include a treatment of major schools of mission thought (Belgian, French, Spanish), as well as important theologians such as: Robert Streit, Joseph Schmidlin, Pierre Charles, Andre Glorieux, Henri de Lubac, and Thomas Ohm.

Papal mission writings often reflect the particular period of history in which they appeared—both in their theology and current world events. This very short overview presentation seeks only to present some pivotal insights of *Maximum Illud*, as its centenary is recalled—particularly by the Extraordinary Missionary Month proclaimed by Pope Francis for October 2019.

**Pivotal Encyclical.** The first great missionary document of modern times, *Maximum Illud* ("Spreading the Catholic Faith"), was issued by Pope Benedict XV on November 30, 1919. This document broke a forty-year silence from the papacy in regard to a missionary encyclical. It has been called the *magna carta* of modern missions, and its directives have had far-reaching ramifications. The importance of this encyclical is shown by the fact that all subsequent missionary encyclicals quote *Maximum Illud*.

The context in which the document was written is significant. The First World War (1914-1918) had just ended; it had brought great destruction on several levels—including the Church's missionary endeavors. The encyclical sought to revive missionary initiatives affected by the catastrophe of the war. In addition, the post-war period saw significant development in the world of social communications.

Benedict XV stated two purposes for his letter: encourage missionary leadership and recommend mission methods. Speaking to those directly involved in mission, the pope noted that heads of missions must act with "prudence and charity," always seeking to expand mission efforts. They should be open to accept the help of various apostles, even those who do not belong to their religious order. The work of religious women needs recognition and promotion.

Missionaries are encouraged to grow in "sanctity of life," following "the example of Christ our Lord and of the Apostles." They should frequently recall "the lofty and splendid character" of their vocation. The pope recognizes "the stupendous hardships our missionaries have undergone in extending the Faith." He also has strong words that direct the missionary to avoid "serving the interests of his homeland"; "the true missionary is always aware that he is not

working as an agent of his country, but as an ambassador of Christ.” Missionaries must have careful and profound training, especially in “the science of missiology”; they “should not be content with a smattering of the language, but should be able to speak it readily and competently.”

**Special Emphasis.** A pivotal emphasis of *Maximum Illud* is the development of the indigenous clergy; there must be “special concern to secure and train local candidates for the sacred ministry.” Benedict XV asserts: “In this policy lies the greatest hope of the new churches.” Why? “For the local priest, one with his people by birth, by nature, by his sympathies and his aspirations, is remarkably effective in appealing to their mentality and thus attracting them to the Faith.”

The local clergy are to be “well trained and well prepared.” They are “not to be trained merely to perform the humbler duties of the ministry, acting as the assistants of foreign priests.” Every effort must be taken to avoid having “a local clergy that is of inferior quality.” Mission superiors should have the founding of seminaries as a main concern.

The encyclical invites the entire Church to assist the missions through prayer, personnel, and finances. The diverse works of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith deserve support and cooperation. The pope’s “mission theology” would reflect that of the times; his vision would be based on the traditional conviction *extra ecclesia, nulla salus*. Benedict XV also commends the Church’s missionary efforts to “the great Mother of God, the Queen of Apostles.”

**Prominent Themes.** This final section is but a modest presentation of selected pivotal topics arising from an appreciation of the pre-Vatican II papal mission teaching. A list of the ten most notable themes can be presented; they are arranged according to the prominence they receive. Papal emphasis is given to the following items: (1) the missionary nature of the Church; (2) the purpose of the missions; (3) the person of the missionary; (4) local Churches and local clergy; (5) role of the pope and bishops; (6) the role of mission superiors; (7) types of mission work; (8) missionary virtues; (9) the pontifical mission aid societies; and, (10) laity in mission.

Viewed from an evolutionary viewpoint, one could assert that the decree of Vatican II on the Church’s missionary activity, *Ad Gentes*, is in many respects a logical consequence of earlier missionary documents. Some few examples, found both in the pre-Vatican II papal mission teaching as well as in *Ad Gentes*, can illustrate this point. The goal of establishing the Church is a primary task of mission (AG 5) and this is often expressed in terms of “planting of the Church” (AG 6, 19). The obligations of the missionary are outlined, especially the call to holiness (AG 23-27). Missionary cooperation is essential for a fruitful outcome of diverse mission endeavors (AG 35-41). Lay participation in mission is promoted (AG 41).

The Church today continues to struggle to integrate both the papal mission wisdom of early encyclicals like *Maximum Illud*, the insights of Vatican II, and important post-conciliar documents such as *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of Paul VI (1975), *Redemptoris Missio* of John Paul II (2000), and *Evangelii Gaudium* of Pope Francis (2013). The Church fervently prays: *Veni, Sancte Spiritus!*

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