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Statement
on the

MISSIONS

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National Conference
of
Catholic Bishops

STATEMENT ON THE MISSIONS

VATICAN II reminds us that "the pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature."¹ It recalls that all bishops "are consecrated not just for some one diocese, but for the salvation of the entire world."² To accomplish this we, the Catholic Bishops of the United States, need the help of everyone in this country who shares with us the life and mission of the Church.

Like her divine Founder, the Church must continually share "the good news" of salvation with all men of every race and nation, even in the most remote corner of the earth.³ Jesus came to save all men without exception. This He did by His suffering, death and resurrection.

This "good news" He wants proclaimed to all creation. He promises salvation to all who hear, believe and live the message of this Gospel.⁴ We continue His mission by our lives within the community served by His Church.

Salvation for some today means meeting people's needs in the temporal order. For others it cannot be found this side of eternity. The meeting of these two points of view constitutes the alleged conflict as to which is primary in the missionary effort, the development or the evangelization of people.

Some who emphasize the development of people in the temporal order disagree as to the proper means to this end. There are those who feel violence must be done to existing social structures in order to free people from the tyranny of the past. Others would stop short of violence. Still others see liberation as a peaceful evolution under the guidance of the Gospel.

For those who carefully follow the social teachings of Pope Paul and his beloved predecessor, Pope John, the resolution of these questions should be clear. "There is no true humanism, but that which is open to the Absolute, and is conscious of a vocation which gives human life its true meaning."⁵

There can be little spiritual growth for people unless temporal needs are first satisfied. There can be no lasting spiritual growth for them unless sights are fixed firmly on God and an eventual union with Him. Missionaries generally were and are aware of these priorities.⁶

Unfortunately, modern man too often forgets this necessary balance. It is imperative in the missionary effort "to keep modern man . . . from becoming a stranger to things divine."⁷ This is an urgent need for the "developed" as well as the "underdeveloped" peoples. Too many in both worlds look to science and technology as the only avenues to liberation.

We clearly hear the anguished cry of people everywhere for a life of dignity, firmly based on this missionary preaching. We sense urgency in the Council's stress upon "reverence for man"⁸ and upon the universal human desire to be recognized individually as a human person. We understand this desire to share justly in the good things of the earth, so essential to this life of dignity.

We affirm the right of every individual to this sharing, regardless of race, color, national origin or religious convictions. This is a right born of the inalienable demands of justice, for things produced are for "the service of man."⁹ Its realization is assured only in a society which honestly recognizes a mutual and unselfish love among all people. It is the message of the missionary that it is realistically attained only in a society built on this sort of trust, understanding and love.

Every Christian, every Christian community, and indeed the entire Christian Church must by their very nature retain this missionary sense. As true disciples of Christ, we have the obligation to teach constantly this concept of man and his destiny with God both in time and in eternity.¹⁰ There is no other way to true happiness.

We must prepare the way for the faith, and proclaim the Gospel message which is informed by a living faith. We must pray, make continuing sacrifices, and become personally involved in ministering to the needs of our less fortunate neighbors, wherever in this world they may live, whatever might be their need. In what other way can wars, racism, exaggerated nationalism, violence and injustice, as well as the hunger,

disease, ignorance and misery they engender, be conquered?

This missionary obligation of preaching the Gospel message is shared by every member of this pilgrim Church.¹¹ This obligation naturally differs according to our respective roles in the Church. Whether bishops, priests, religious or lay people, however, we must constantly recognize our common obligation to those who neither know nor feel the impact of Christ and His love and peace in their lives.

Conscious of this shared responsibility, we remind all the faithful of the need to support the missionary effort of the Church. We urge a renewed awareness of the missions and missionary activity in every Catholic parish and institution in our country. We rejoice in our people's constant concern for the continuing needs of poor missionary churches on every horizon of the world at home and abroad. This concern is a ray of hope to suffering millions floundering in a world without God.

In a very special way we wish to encourage every legitimate effort to stir this sense of mission in all our priests, religious and laity. In particular we reaffirm our commitment to promote in every diocese and parish in this country the Society for the Propagation of the Faith and the Association of the Holy Childhood, as urged by Vatican II.¹² We are especially grateful for the support given the national and diocesan directors of these societies, whose effort helps us meet our grave responsibility to the churches which need our special help.

Both of these societies, approved by the Holy See, involved the laity in their origin. They were concerned about providing concrete help for early missionary evangelization in America, among other places in the world. From the very outset their approach was first of all *spiritual*, emphasizing prayer and personal sacrifice as indispensable in helping the missions. In addition it was *universal*, sharing sacrifices with *all* the missionaries of the world.

The Society for the Propagation of the Faith and the Association of the Holy Childhood retain this universal view. The Society for the Propagation of the Faith, for example, provides basic support for more than 819 Catholic missions in Asia, Africa, Oceania and every other quarter of the world. Over 135,000 missionary

priests, brothers and sisters, and associates from the laity, look to the Society to sustain and develop their mission of mercy to the underprivileged of the world. With special joy we note in this blessed company some 8,373 native Americans among our world missionaries. This number includes 3,490 priests, 666 brothers, 90 scholastics, 3,824 sisters and 303 members of the laity.¹³

We salute in a very special way the men and women religious who constitute the bulk of this heroic missionary army overseas. We recognize with gratitude the substantial help they have received in recent years from the involvement of diocesan priests and the laity in their work. Over the years, however, it was the prayer, the sweat and the toil of these religious, committed to the missions by their religious profession and their loyalty to the Holy Father, which made unmistakably clear the sensitivity of the American Church to the problems which plague millions everywhere.¹⁴

Symbolic and truly representative of these sterling men and women religious is our venerable brother, Bishop James Edward Walsh. We salute his admirable example of Christian patience and fortitude in the face of trials which missionaries are often called to bear. In him are personified the missionaries who make themselves one with their people in every joy and sorrow which comprise the daily human experience. We thank him and all who give witness by their lives and work that the Church in America, like the Church in other lands, does seriously accept its missionary responsibility to the world.

Urgently we ask young Americans to recognize the missionary vocation as their own. Signs of their commendable concern for relieving the needs of people, particularly the deprived whether young or old, are visible daily. In praising their efforts to find positive solutions to the problems of war, poverty and prejudice, we also express the hope that many more of these young people will personally close ranks with missionaries by seeking solutions to such problems in preaching, by word and example, the Gospel message of salvation.

We are proud of our part in establishing the United States Catholic Mission Council. Together with the priests, religious and laity with whom we worked, we hope it will achieve

its clear purpose. This Council is intended to "provide a forum and organ for the evaluation, co-ordination and fostering, in the United States, of the worldwide missionary effort of the Catholic Church."¹⁵

The recent statement of the Catholic Mission Council, "The Whole Missionary Church," succinctly reviews the teaching of Vatican II on the missions and urges ways to implement that teaching. The plans embodied there hold great hope for the growth of mission awareness among all American Catholics.

Of particular interest and importance are the mission committees at the diocesan level. These committees can be instruments for uniting priests, religious and laity in the service of the missions. They already exist in a number of dioceses; and in every diocese the appointed director of the papal mission-aid societies is already guiding many of the undertakings proposed for the committee. To avoid duplication of structures it is desirable that the diocesan committees develop in close collaboration with the diocesan director.

We bishops are grateful for the support our people have given the missions in the past. We see this support as another evidence of their generous response to people in need anywhere and everywhere in the world. This help must continue, so that together we can meet our collegial responsibility to the whole missionary Church. Through this response we trust we will in fact be neighbors, as Jesus says, "to the least of these brothers of mine."¹⁶

Notes

¹ *Ad Gentes*, 2

"The conditions of this age lend special urgency to the Church's task of bringing all men to full union with Christ, since mankind today is joined together more closely than ever before by social, technical, and cultural bonds." *Lumen Gentium*, 1

² *Ad Gentes*, 38

³ *Revelation*, 14:6

⁴ *Mark*, 16

⁵ *Populorum Progressio*, 42

- ⁶ *Idem*, 12
- ⁷ *Ad Gentes*, 11
- ⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, 27
- ⁹ "The fundamental purpose of this productivity must not be the mere multiplication of products. It must not be profit or domination. Rather, it must be the service of man, and indeed of the whole man, viewed in terms of his material needs and the demands of his intellectual, moral, spiritual, and religious life. And when we say men, we mean every man whatsoever and every group of men, of whatever race and from whatever part of the world." *Idem*, 64
- ¹⁰ Matthew, 28:19-20
- ¹¹ *Ad Gentes*, 36
- ¹² *Idem*, 38
- ¹³ Statistics provided by the Society for the Propagation of the Faith
- ¹⁴ *Ad Gentes*, 27
- ¹⁵ Preamble to the By-Laws of the United States Catholic Mission Council
- ¹⁶ Luke, 10:29-31; Matthew, 25:31-46

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