

BELOVED, CALLED, SENT OUT: A SENSE OF MISSION

The fifth chapter in the Acts of the Apostles contains a scene that has never lost any of its impact. After being imprisoned, the Apostles were miraculously set free by an angel. But instead of fleeing from the authorities, they returned to the Temple to preach. Once again they were arrested and taken before the chief priests. Surprised to see them again, the chief priests admonished them: *We strictly charged you not to teach in this name*. Undaunted, the Apostles replied: *We must obey God rather than men* (Acts 5:28-29).

The first Christians inherited this deep conviction. The book of Acts contains many examples, and the history of the first centuries of Christianity speaks for itself. Again and again we find the same need being candidly expressed: *We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard* (Acts 4:19). The first faithful are willing to risk being punished, and even being put to death, without losing their cheerfulness. Their hearts harbor a joy and fullness of Life that not even death can take from them, and that they cannot help sharing with others. For us, who have come to the Church many centuries later, a pressing question arises. Is all this just something that belongs to the past? Or should we too be living like that?

A call that continues to resound today

We might be tempted to think that a great gulf exists between us and the first Christians, since they possessed a degree of holiness to which we could never aspire. Their physical closeness to Christ – or at least to one of the Twelve – made them little less than impeccable and filled them with a fire that nothing and nobody could extinguish. But we only have to open the Gospels to realize that this wasn't the case.

The apostles often showed themselves to be people with weaknesses and failings, just as we are. For one thing, they had no special intellectual training. Jesus sent out the first seventy-two when they had spent only a few weeks with Him (cf. *Lk* 10:1-12). Nevertheless, the faithful in the early Church were very clear about one thing: that Our Lord Jesus Christ had died and risen for each of them, that He had given them the Gift of the Holy Spirit and that He was counting on them to bring his Salvation to the whole world. The apostolate is not a question of training, nor of possessing exceptional qualities; it is simply a matter of welcoming Christ's call, being open to his Gift, and responding with one's own life. Perhaps that is why Pope Francis reminded us, with Saint Paul's words, that "the Lord has chosen each one of us 'to be holy and blameless before Him in love' (*Eph* 1:4-5)."¹

¹ Pope Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 19 March 2018, no. 2.

In every age, the Church is aware of having received a call from Christ, and with it a task; moreover, she herself *is* that call and that task. “The Church on earth is by her very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, she has her origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit.”² This is not merely a beautiful desire or a human endeavor; rather her “mission continues and develops in the course of history the mission of Christ himself.”³ In other words, the Church – and within her, each of the faithful – is a continuation of the mission of Christ, who was sent into the world to make God’s Love for his creatures present and bring it to fulfillment. And this is made possible because Our Lord sent, and sends us, the Holy Spirit, who is the source of this Love.

Hence our life too is the response to a call, and a task in the world and for the world. Our spiritual life and how we view the apostolate change when we consider them from this perspective. Our Lord has sought us out and sent us into the world to share with everyone the Salvation we have received. “‘Go, preach the gospel ... I will be with you.’ Jesus has said this, and He has said it to you.”⁴ *To me*; and to each man and each woman. In God’s presence, we can each consider this reality: “I am a Christian because God has called me and has sent me forth...” And moved by the strength of his Spirit, from the depths of our heart we will answer with words of the psalm, *I desire to do you will, my God (Ps 40:8)*.

An “imperative command”

During the 1950s Saint Josemaría made trips to various countries in Europe to see the first faithful of the Work who had gone there to begin the Work’s apostolic activities. “The afternoon meditations he gave for those with him, often had as their theme the Lord’s words to the apostles, ‘I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit... *ut eatis*’ (*Jn 15:16*).”⁵ It was like a refrain to make Jesus’ words echo in the hearts of those around him. He wanted them to have a firm grasp of the truth that gave meaning to their lives, and to have a keen sense of the mission their life entailed. *You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last (Jn 15:16)*.

We have read and listened to many stories about the first people who followed Our Lord in Opus Dei: the first circle in the Porta Coeli shelter; the first Residence on Ferraz Street; the intense family life Saint Josemaría kept alive during the dramatic years of the Spanish Civil War; the first expansion in Spain; the arrival in Rome; the rapid spread throughout the world... Those young – and not so young – people followed the Founder in the awareness that they were answering a real call from God. Through the Work they had met Jesus and discovered a treasure it was worth giving their whole life for: Christ’s Love. Their mission was to bring this Love to the whole world, to set many hearts ablaze with this divine fire. They sensed the urgency to

² Vatican Council II, Decree *Ad Gentes*, 7 December 1965, no. 2.

³ *Ibid.*, no. 5.

⁴ Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 904.

⁵ Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol. 3, p. 236.

spread the blaze, without needing anyone to remind them. As Pope Francis wrote: “Goodness always tends to spread. Every authentic experience of truth and beauty seeks by its very nature to spread to others.”⁶

Some were young and enthusiastic, others maybe quieter and more thoughtful; but they were all convinced that behind that young priest and the work he had in hand was an explicit desire of God. And so they were ready to say Yes to Our Lord’s invitation to leave everything and follow Him. They had experienced what Saint Josemaría often told them: “Don’t forget, my sons, that we are not just souls who have joined with other souls to do a good thing. That is a lot... and yet it is little. We are apostles who are fulfilling an imperative command of Christ.”⁷ And since they followed Jesus with complete freedom, that command was not burdensome, but just the opposite. As Saint Josemaría also said: “this supernatural conviction of the divine nature of the enterprise will give you such intense enthusiasm and love for the Work that you will feel overjoyed to sacrifice yourselves to bring it to fulfillment.”⁸ They did not need anyone to explain the meaning of these words: they lived it in their own lives.

We don’t do apostolate, we are apostles!

These stories about the first people in the Work are moving to recall. Many centuries have gone by since the preaching of the Apostles. Not even a hundred years have gone by since the founding of the Work. The whole history of the Church shows us that Our Lord’s call continues to resound down through the centuries in the heart of each believer – and in our own. Christ, with his Love, has entered our life (cf. *Phil* 3:12). Each of us is called to embrace his Love and allow Him to transform our lives. The more our life is centered on Christ, the more the “sense of mission that our vocation entails will be strengthened, along with our complete and joyful self-giving.”⁹

Like the first Christians, the first people in the Work found Christ, and wholeheartedly embraced his Love and the mission it entailed. And they saw how their lives were marvelously transformed. We see fulfilled in them what the Father reminded us of shortly after his election: “We are free in order to love God who calls, God who is love and puts love into us so that we can love Him and love others. This charity makes us fully aware of our mission, which is ‘not an apostolate exercised sporadically or occasionally, but habitually and by vocation, adopted as the ideal of our whole life.’”¹⁰

⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, no. 9.

⁷ Saint Josemaría, *Instruction*, 19 March 1934, no. 27. The text is taken from the *Historical-Critical Edition of The Way*, commentary on point 942.

⁸ Saint Josemaría, *Instruction*, 19 March 1934, no. 49. Quoted in Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol. 1, p. 444.

⁹ The Father, *Pastoral Letter*, 14 February 2017, no. 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 9.

The apostolic mission that fills our entire life is not a task that someone has imposed on us, nor a job we have to add to our other daily duties. It is the exact expression of our very identity, as revealed to us by our vocation: “We do not ‘do apostolate,’ we are apostles!”¹¹ At the same time, by living out this mission, we strengthen our identity as apostles. Here the life of Saint Paul is always a source of inspiration. When we read the story of his journeys, it is striking how often his mission does not achieve the expected result. On his first journey, for example, he is rejected by the Jews in Pisidian Antioch, and afterwards thrown out of the city; he has to flee from Iconium under threat of death... (cf. *Acts* 13 and 14).

Nevertheless, the apostle to the Gentiles never loses sight of the call Jesus had addressed to him on the way to Damascus, and later confirmed in that city. Hence he never tires of repeating, *the love of Christ urges us on* (2 *Cor* 5:14). Even when writing to people he has not yet met, he does not fear to introduce himself as *Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God* (*Rom* 1:1). That is who he is: “called to be an apostle,” an apostle by vocation. And he addresses that community of faithful as people *called to belong to Jesus Christ ... God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints* (*Rom* 1:6-7). Paul knows that he has been called by God, but he is equally aware that so have all the faithful.¹² His sense of mission leads him to live a fraternity that goes beyond earthly ties.

Similarly, to the question “Who am I?” we can each reply, “I am someone loved by God, saved by Jesus Christ, chosen to be an apostle, called to bring the love I’ve received to many people. So apostolate isn’t a job that I have, it’s a necessity for me.” When we truly find Christ, we realize that we are meant to be salt and light, and therefore need to give savor and provide illumination wherever we may be. This is a discovery that “revolutionizes” our spiritual life and that no one can make for me.

With the strength of the Holy Spirit

When we discover Our Lord in our life, when we realize that we are loved, called, chosen, and we decide to follow Him, “it is as though a new light is lit within us; it is a mysterious impulse that spurs a person to dedicate their noblest energies to an activity that, over time, becomes a way of life.”¹³

The apostolic mission means, in first place, that “a new light has been lit within us.” The darkness, the uncertainty about the meaning of life, vanishes. The invitation Christ addresses to us enables us to understand our past and offers us a clear route for the future. Jesus himself lived his life on earth like that. Although people begged Him to stay in a particular place, He knew that

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² This is in fact the origin of the Greek word *ekklesia*, (in Latin *ecclesia*), meaning “Church”, which literally means “those called together,” that is, “all of us who have been baptised and believe in God, called by Our Lord” (*Compendium of the Catechism*, no. 121). See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 751, for the parallel derivation of the English word “Church.”

¹³ Saint Josemaría, *Letter*, 9 January 1932, no. 9.

He had to continue on his journey, *for I was sent for this purpose (Lk 4:43)*. Even when facing his Passion He remains serene and confident, and before Pilate He declares: *For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth (Jn 18:37)*.

To live with a “sense of mission” means knowing at every moment that we have been sent by Our Lord to bring his Love to those around us: that is what we were created for. And it means deciding what to do at each turn based on this mission that gives a clear purpose to our journey through life. Difficulties, obstacles and setbacks may arise, moments of darkness; but the Pole Star always continues to shine in the sky. My life has a purpose; I have a light to guide me.

The light of this mission is at the same time an “impulse” impelling us on. But it is not a human force. Of course there will be times when we feel enthusiastic, when we feel a burning desire to enkindle those around us with Christ’s fire. But everyone who has been following Our Lord for any length of time has experienced that the human impulse comes and goes. This is part of being human, as the saints too have experienced. The life of Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, to go no further, reminds us of this reality. As we know, soon after joining the Work he had to write to the Founder telling him that his enthusiasm had disappeared.¹⁴

So we should never lose sight of the fact that our true strength, the dynamism that spurs us get out of ourselves to serve others, “is not a strategy, but the actual strength of the Holy Spirit, uncreated Charity.”¹⁵ Indeed, no motivation “will be enough, unless the fire of the Holy Spirit burns in our hearts;” therefore “keeping our missionary fervor alive calls for firm trust in the Holy Spirit, for it is He who ‘helps us in our weakness’ (*Rom 8:26*). But this generous trust has to be nourished, and so we need to invoke the Spirit constantly.”¹⁶ The faithful of the Work invoke Him daily in the Holy Mass, and in vocal prayers such as the Rosary and the *Preces* of the Work.

Sometimes we may find it helpful to address Him with some special prayer, for example the Pentecost Sequence *Veni Sancte Spiritus* (“Holy Spirit, Lord of Light”), the hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus* (“Come Holy Spirit, Creator, Come”), or one of the many other prayers to Him that have been composed down through the centuries. In all of them we ask Him to come, to transform us, to fill us with the Love and strength that imbued Our Lord’s actions. We ask Him: “Spirit of love, Creator and Sanctifier of souls, your first work in us is to transform us so that we resemble Jesus. Help me, Spirit of Love, to adapt myself to the pattern of Jesus, to think like Jesus, to speak like Jesus, to suffer like Jesus, to behave like Jesus.”¹⁷

Thus the transforming impulse of the Holy Spirit will give us a heart on fire like Jesus’ Heart, and the apostolic mission will be the very blood pumped by our heart. It will take shape in

¹⁴ See *Historical-Critical Edition of The Way*, commentary on no. 994.

¹⁵ The Father, *Pastoral Letter*, 14 February 2017, no. 9.

¹⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, nos. 261 and 280. In the same document he suggests: “Let us call upon Him today, firmly rooted in prayer, for without prayer all our activity risks being fruitless and our message empty” (no. 259).

¹⁷ Alexis Riaud, *The Holy Spirit Acting in Our Souls*, Sinag-Tala, Manila, 1992, p. 34.

us little by little in “an activity that, over time, becomes a way of life.”¹⁸ If we let ourselves be led by God’s Love, if we stay attentive to his inspirations and take notice of his small suggestions, the apostolate will become “a way of life” that configures our own identity. We will not need to “resolve to do it,” nor will we need to be in a particular place or setting to act as apostles. Just as someone *is* a doctor (and does not just practise medicine) wherever and in whatever circumstance they happen to be (if someone is taken ill on the bus, during a holiday, on the weekend, etc.), we *are* apostles in every place and circumstance. In the end, it is simply being what we are: *all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God (Rom 8:14)*. What matters is to stay open to the Paraclete’s action, attentive to “how we can better accomplish the mission entrusted to us at our baptism,”¹⁹ the mission that is the fulfillment of our whole life.

¹⁸ Saint Josemaría, *Letter*, 9 January 1937.

¹⁹ Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 19 March 2018, no. 174.