

1965

Decree

Ad Gentes

*On the Mission Activity of the Church
Vatican Council II
(Excerpts)*

7 December 1965

4. To accomplish this, Christ sent from the Father His Holy Spirit, who was to carry [245] on inwardly His saving work and prompt the Church to spread out. Doubtless, the Holy Spirit was already at work in the world before Christ was glorified.⁵ Yet on the day of Pentecost, He came down upon the disciples to remain with them forever (cf. John 14:16). The Church was publicly displayed to the multitude, the Gospel began to spread among the nations by means of preaching, and there was presaged that union of all peoples in the catholicity of the faith by means of the Church of the New Covenant, a Church which speaks all tongues, understands and accepts all tongues in her love, and so supersedes the divisiveness of Babel.⁶ For it was from Pentecost that the Acts of the Apostles took again, just as Christ was - conceived when the Holy Spirit came upon the Virgin Mary, and just as Christ was impelled to the work of His ministry by the same Holy Spirit descending upon Him while He prayed.

Now, the Lord Jesus, before freely giving His life for the world, did so arrange the [246] Apostles' ministry and promise to send the Holy Spirit that both they and the Spirit might be associated in effecting the work of salvation always and everywhere.⁸ Throughout all ages, the Holy Spirit makes the entire Church one in communion and in ministering; He equips her with various gifts of a hierarchical and charismatic nature, a giving life, soul - like, to ecclesiastical institutions¹⁰ and instilling into the hearts of the faithful the same mission spirit which impelled Christ Himself. etimes He even visibly anticipates the Apostles' acting,¹¹ just as He unceasingly accompanies and directs it in different ways.¹²

9. And so the time for missionary activity extends between the first coming of the [247] Lord and the second, in which latter the Church will be gathered from the four winds like a harvest into the kingdom of God.²³ For the Gospel must be preached to all nations before the Lord shall come (cf. Mark 13:10).

Missionary activity is nothing else and nothing less than an epiphany, or a [248] manifesting of God's decree, and its fulfillment in the world and in world history, in the course of which God, by means of mission, manifestly works out the history of salvation. By the preaching of the word and by the celebration of the sacraments, the center and summit of which is the most holy Eucharist, He brings about the presence of Christ, the author of salvation. But whatever truth and grace are to be found among the nations, as a sort of secret presence of God, He frees from all taint of evil and restores to Christ its maker, who overthrows the devil's domain and

wards off the manifold malice of vice. And so, whatever good is found to be sown in the hearts and minds of men, or in the rites and cultures peculiar to various peoples, not only is not lost, but is healed, uplifted, and perfected for the glory of God, the shame of the demon, and the bliss of men.²⁴ Thus, missionary activity tends toward eschatological fullness.²⁵ For by it the people of God is increased to that measure and time which the Father has fixed in His power(cf. Acts 1:7). To this people it was said in prophecy: Enlarge the space for your tent, and spread out your tent cloths unsparingly (Is. 54:2).²⁶ By missionary activity, the mystical body grows to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ (cf. Eph. 4:13); and the spiritual temple, where God is adored in spirit and in truth (cf. John 4:23), grows and is built up upon the foundation of the Apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the supreme corner stone (Eph.2:20).

11. The Church must be present in these groups through her children, who dwell [249] among them or who are sent to them. For all Christians, wherever they live, are bound to show forth, by the example of their lives and by the witness of the word, that new man put on at baptism and that power of the Holy Spirit by which they have been strengthened at Confirmation. Thus other men, observing their good works, can glorify the Father (cf. Matt. ES:16) and can perceive more fully the real meaning of human life and the universal bond of the community of mankind.

In order that they may be able to bear more fruitful witness to Christ, let them be [250] joined to those men by esteem and love; let them acknowledge themselves to be members of the group of men among whom they live; let them share in cultural and social life by the various. undertakings and enterprises of human living; let them be familiar with their national and religious traditions; let them gladly and reverently lay bare the seeds of the Word which lie hidden among their fellows. At the same time, however, let them look to the: profound changes which are taking place among nations, and let them exert themselves to keep modern man, intent as he is on the science and technology of today's world from becoming a stranger to things divine; rather, let them awaken in him a yearning for that truth and:charity which God has revealed. Even as Christ Himself searched the hearts of men, and led them to divine light, so also His disciples, profoundly penetrated by the Spirit of Christ, should show the people among whom they live, and should converse with them, that they themselves may learn by sincere and patient dialogue what treasures a generous God has distributed among the nations of the earth. But at the same time, let them try to furbish these treasures, set them free, and bring them under the dominion of God their Savior.

12. The presence of the Christian faithful in these human groups should be inspired [251] by that charity with which God has loved us, and with which He wills that we should love one another (cf. 1 John 4:11). Christian charity truly extends to all, without distinction of race, creed, or social condition: it looks for neither gain nor gratitude. For as God loved us with an unselfish love, so also the faithful should in their charity care for the human person himself, loving him with the same affection with which God sought out man. Just as Christ, then, went about all the towns and villages, curing every kind of disease and infirmity as a sign that the kingdom of God had come (cf. Matt. 9:35ff; Acts 10:38), so also the Church, through her children, is one with men of every condition, but especially with the poor and the afflicted. For them, she gladly spends and is spent (cf. 2 Cor. 12:15), sharing in

their joys and sorrows, knowing of their longings and problems, suffering with them in death's anxieties. To those in quest of peace, she wishes to answer in fraternal dialogue, bearing them the peace and the light of the Gospel.

15.[...]The Christian faithful gathered together out of all nations into the Church [252] are not marked off from the rest of men by their government, nor by their language, nor by their political institutions,¹⁵ and so they should live for God and Christ in a respectable way of their own national life. As good citizens, they should be true and effective patriots, all together avoiding racial prejudice and hypernationalism, and should foster a universal love for man.

20. Since the particular church is bound to represent the universal Church as [253] perfectly as possible, let it realize that it has been sent to those also who are living in the same territory with it, and who do not yet believe in Christ. By the life witness of each one of the faithful and of the whole community, let the particular church be a sign which points out Christ to others.

Furthermore, there is need of the ministry of the word, so that the Gospel may reach [254] all. The bishop should be first and foremost a herald of the Faith, who leads new disciples to Christ.³ In order that he may properly fulfill this noble task, let him thoroughly study both the conditions of his flock, and the private opinions of his countrymen concerning God, taking careful note also of those changes which urbanization, migrations, and religious indifferentism have introduced.

The local priests in the young churches should zealously address themselves to the [255] work of spreading the Gospel, and join forces with the foreign missionaries who form with them one college of priests, united under the authority of the bishop. They should do this, not only with a view to the feeding the faithful flock, and to the celebrating of divine worship, but also to the preaching of the Gospel to those outside, let them show themselves ready, and when the occasion presents itself, let them with a willing heart offer the bishop their services for missionary work in distant and forsaken areas of their own diocese or of other dioceses.

Let religious men and women, and the laity too, show the same fervent zeal toward [256] their countrymen, especially toward the poor.

38.[...] It also pertains to the episcopal conferences to found and promote works for [257] the brotherly reception and due pastoral care of those who immigrate from mission lands for the sake of studying or finding work. For through them, far - away peoples are sometimes made near; and an excellent opportunity is offered to communities which have long been Christian to converse with nations which have not yet heard the Gospel, and to show them in their own dutiful love and aid, the genuine face of Christ.⁶

Chapter I

⁵ It is the Spirit who has spoken through the Prophets; Creed of Constantinople (Denzinger-Shoenmetzer, 150); St. Leo the Great, Sermon 76 (PL 54, 405-406). "When on the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit filled the disciples of the Lord, it was not so much the beginning of a gift as it was the completion of one already bountifully possessed: because the patriarchs, the prophets, the priests

and all the holy men who preceded them were already quickened by the life of the same Spirit. . . although they did not possess his gifts to the same degree.” Also Sermon 77, 1, (PL 54 412)- Leo XIII, encyclical, “Divinum Illud” (AAS 1897, 650-651). Also St. John Chrysostom, where he insists on the newness of the Holy Spirit’s mission on Pentecost; “On Eph.” c. 4, Homily 10, 1 (PG 62, 75).

⁶ The Holy Fathers often speak of Babel and Pentecost; Origen, “On Genesis,” c. 1 (PG 12, 112); St. Gregory Naz., Oration 41, 16 (PG 36, 449); St. John Chrysostom, Homily 2 on Pentecost, 2 (PG 50, 467); “On the Acts of the Apostles” (PG, 44); St. Augustine, “Narration on Psalm 54,” 11 (PL 36, 636; CChr 39, 664 ff.); Sermon 271 (PL 38, 1245); St. Cyril of Alexandria, Glaphyra on Genesis II (PG 69, 79); St. Gregory the Great, “Homily on the Gospels,” Book 2, Homily 30, 4 (PL 76, 1222); St. Bede, “On Hexaemum,” Book 3 (PL 91, 125). See above all the images in St. Mark’s basilica in Venice. The Church speaks all languages, and thus gathers all in the catholicity of the faith: St. Augustine, Sermons 267, 268, 269 (PL 38, 1225, 1237)- Sermon 175, 3 (PL 38 946); St. John Chrysostom, “On the First Epistle to the Corinthians,” Homily 35 (PG 61, 296); St. Cyril of Alexandria, fragment on the Acts (PG 74, 758); St. Fulgentius, Sermon 8, 2-3 (PL 65, 743-744). Concerning Pentecost as the consecration of the Apostles to their mission, cf. J.A. Cramer, “Catena on the Acts of the Apostles,” Oxford, 1838, p.24 ff.

⁷ Cf. Luke 3:22; 4:1; Acts 10:38.

⁸ Cf. John c. 14-17; Paul VI, allocution during the council, Sept. 14, 1964 (AAS 1964, 807).

¹⁰ St. Augustine, Sermo 267, 4 (PL 38, 1231): “The Holy Spirit does in the whole Church what the soul does in all the members of one body.” Cf. Const. Dogm. *Lumen Gentium*, 7 (together with note 8).

¹¹ Cf. Acts 10:44-47; 11:15; 15:8.

¹² Cf. Acts 4:8; 5:32; 8:26, 29, 39; 9:31; 10; 11:24-28; 13:2, 4, 9; 16:6-7; 20:22-23; 21:11; etc.

²³ Cf. Matt. 24:31, Didache, 10, 5 (Funk I, p. 32).

²⁴ Dogmatic constitution, “*Lumen Gentium*,” 17. St. Augustine 7, “City of God,” 1917 (PL 41, 646). Instr. S.C.P.F. (Collectanea I, n. 35, p. 42).

²⁵ According to Origen, the Gospel must be preached before the end of this world: Homily on Luke XXI (GCS, Origen IX, 136, 21 ff.); “Comm. Ser. On Matthew” 39 (XI 75, 25 ff; 76, 4 ff.); Homily on Jeremiah III, 2 (VIII 308, 29 ff.), St. Thomas “Summa Theol.” Ia, IIae q. 106, a.4, ad 4.

²⁶ Hilary Pict. “On the Psalms” 14 (PL 9, 301); Eusebius of Caesarea, “On Isaiah” 54, 2-3 (PG 24, 462-463), Cyril of Alexandria, “On Isaiah V,” chapter 54 1-3 (PG 70, 1193).

Chapter II

¹⁵ Epistle to Diognetus, 5 (PG 2, 1173); Cf. Dogmatic constitution, “*Lumen Gentium*,” 38.

Chapter III

³ Cf. Dogmatic constitution, “*Lumen Gentium*,” 25.

Chapter VI

⁶ Cf. Pius XII, “Fidei Donum” (AAS 1957, 245) .

Source: Excerpts from the Decree "Ad Gentes Divinitus" (Vatican Council II).
Available from Vatican's website:
http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html.
