

# The Missionary Character of the Church



*A Short Study*

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## INTRODUCTION

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With the publication of his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (“The Joy of the Gospel”), Pope Francis has called us to renew our commitment to the evangelizing mission given to the Apostles: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” (Matthew 28:19) Far from the work of a few, *all* Catholics, by virtue of their baptism, are called to both witness to and proclaim their faith in Jesus Christ.

This short study, suitable for individuals or small faith groups, explores what it means to be a “missionary Church” in service to the Gospel through reflection questions based on documents and teachings from Vatican Council II, recent popes, and others.

May the Holy Spirit inspire your work and bless you in your journey of faith.

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## **Selections from the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church (*Ad Gentes*)**

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**No. 2:** The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father.

**No. 9:** Missionary activity is nothing else and nothing less than an epiphany, or a 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.

**No. 13:** The Church strictly forbids forcing anyone to embrace the Faith, or alluring or enticing people by worrisome wiles. By the same token, she also strongly insists on this right, that no one be frightened away from the Faith by unjust vexations on the part of others.

**No. 35:** Since the whole Church is missionary, and the work of evangelization is a basic duty of the People of God, this sacred synod invites all to a deep interior renewal; so that, having a vivid awareness of their own responsibility for spreading the Gospel, they may do their share in missionary work among the nations.

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## **Questions for Reflection**

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In *Ad Gentes* the bishops of the Church describe the Church as “missionary by her very nature.” In what way is the Church missionary? How is this shown in the work of the Church?

It is through evangelization that God works out the salvation of people. Do you know any converts to the Catholic faith? How were they evangelized?

The Council Fathers assert that the work of evangelization belongs to all the faithful. How has your life been a work of evangelization in deed or in word?

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**Selections from Pope Paul VI's  
Apostolic Exhortation on  
Evangelization in the Modern World  
(*Evangelii Nuntiandi*)**

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**No. 21:** Above all the Gospel must be proclaimed by witness. Take a Christian or a handful of Christians who, in the midst of their own community, show their capacity for understanding and acceptance, their sharing of life and destiny with other people, their solidarity with the efforts of all for whatever is noble and good. Let us suppose that, in addition, they radiate in an altogether simple and unaffected way their faith in values that go beyond current values, and their hope in something that is not seen and that one would not dare to imagine. Through this wordless witness these Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst? Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one.

**No. 27:** Evangelization will also always contain - as the foundation, center, and at the same time, summit of its dynamism - a clear proclamation that, in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, who died and rose from the dead, salvation is offered to all men, as a gift of God's grace and mercy. And not an immanent salvation, meeting material or even spiritual needs, restricted to the framework of temporal existence and completely identified with temporal desires, hopes, affairs and struggles, but a salvation which exceeds all these limits in order to reach fulfillment in a communion with the one and only divine Absolute.

**No. 79:** The work of evangelization presupposes in the evangelizer an ever increasing love for those whom he is evangelizing. That model evangelizer, the Apostle Paul, wrote these words to the Thessalonians, and they are a program for us all: "With such yearning love we chose to impart to you not only the gospel of God but our very selves, so dear had you become to us." What is this love? It is much more than that of a teacher; it is the love of a father; and again, it is the love of a mother. It is this love that the Lord expects from every preacher of the Gospel, from every builder of the Church. A sign of love will be the concern to give the truth and to bring people into unity. Another sign of love will be a devotion to the proclamation of Jesus Christ, without reservation or turning back.

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### **Questions for Reflection**

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A quote (falsely) attributed to St. Francis of Assisi says to "proclaim the Gospel always and if necessary use words." Do you think this quote accurately depicts the Catholic understanding of evangelization? Why or why not?

In today's modern culture evangelization is often taken as a "hostile action." How can we show love for others as we evangelize them?

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## **Selections from Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation “The Joy of the Gospel” (*Evangelii Gaudium*)**

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**No. 9:** Goodness always tends to spread. Every authentic experience of truth and goodness seeks by its very nature to grow within us, and any person who has experienced a profound liberation becomes more sensitive to the needs of others. As it expands, goodness takes root and develops. If we wish to lead a dignified and fulfilling life, we have to reach out to others and seek their good.

**No 24:** The Church which “goes forth” is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice. An evangelizing community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, he has loved us first (cf. 1 Jn 4:19), and therefore we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast. Such a community has an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father’s infinite mercy. Let us try a little harder to take the first step and to become involved.

**No. 34:** If we attempt to put all things in a missionary key, this will also affect the way we communicate the message. In today’s world of instant communication and occasionally biased media coverage, the message we preach runs a greater risk of being distorted or reduced to some of its secondary aspects. In this way certain issues which are part of the Church’s moral teaching are taken out of the context which gives them their meaning. The biggest problem is when the message we preach then seems identified with those

secondary aspects which, important as they are, do not in and of themselves convey the heart of Christ's message. We need to be realistic and not assume that our audience understands the full background to what we are saying, or is capable of relating what we say to the very heart of the Gospel which gives it meaning, beauty and attractiveness.

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### **Questions for Reflection**

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Pope Francis references the classic principal *bonum diffusivum sui*, or "The good is diffusive of itself." How have you seen goodness spread and multiply in your life?

How would you, in your own words, describe the heart of the Christian message?

In no. 24 of his exhortation Pope Francis describes seven characteristics of evangelizing communities:

1. Know that evangelization begins with God's initiative
2. Possess an endless desire to show mercy
3. Get involved in word and deed with other people
4. Take on "the smell of the sheep"
5. Patiently support and stand by people in their faith journey
6. Show concern for the fruits of their efforts
7. Express their faith joyfully

How would you rate your parish or faith community by these standards?

What examples can you give of the Church taking the "first step" and becoming involved?

What "secondary aspects" of the faith threaten to overshadow the foundational Christian message in your community?

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## Other Resources

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Barron, Fr. Robert. "Pope Francis and "The Joy of the Gospel." <http://bit.ly/BarronJoyOfGospel>

Barron, Fr. Robert. "Additional Commentary on Pope Francis and "The Joy of the Gospel""  
<http://bit.ly/BarronWhyJoy>

DiSiano, Frank P., CSP. *The Evangelizing Catholic: A Practical Handbook for Reaching Out* (Paulist Press, 1998)

Weddell, Sherry A. *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2012)

Weigel, George. *Evangelical Catholicism: Deep Reform in the 21st-Century Church* (Basic Books, 2013)

White, Michael and Tom Corcoran, *Rebuilt: Awakening the Faithful, Reaching the Lost, Making Church Matter* (Ave Maria Press, 2013)







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