

The Missionary Shift of Christian Communities

Becoming an “outreach Church” after The Joy of the Gospel

In January 2016, the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Quebec published a document which was the fruit of the reflection of the bishops and their collaborators in the wake of the synod on "The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith" and the Apostolic Exhortation, "The Joy of the Gospel" (*Evangelii Gaudium* – EG). This document invited further reflection and aimed to support decision-making, both at the diocesan and parish community levels. The following is a summary.

INTRODUCTION

If we re-read the Pentecost story, the Word of God par excellence that invites us to the mission, do we feel touched by this call, just like the disciples were at the time when faced with the call of a Church that reaches out?, a missionary Church, a Church reinvigorated by its boldness and the risks it takes?

What can hinder the mission today? It is primarily our discouragement, often expressed in these words: "It is useless", "It is too difficult".

“...pessimism, fatalism, and mistrust. Some people do not commit themselves to mission because they think that nothing will change and that it is useless to make the effort. They think: ‘Why should I deny myself my comforts and pleasures if I won’t see any significant result?’ ” (EG 275).

But the mission is no more difficult than in the early days of the Church. Let us not hesitate to draw inspiration from those who sowed the seeds of the Gospel in America when the challenges they faced were immense and monumental: St. Francis de Laval, St. Marie de l’Incarnation, and St. Marguerite Bourgeoys.

In the “new world” in which we live today, we should repeat what they did, with the same audacity, the same desire for adventure, the same faith, in order **to become a Church that reaches out, a Church that rediscovers its missionary character.**

The miracle of Pentecost can be repeated. Once again, the Holy Spirit can animate the Churches of Québec and encourage us to once again go forth and reach out to others if we believe and in hope, call on Him.

In the paragraphs to come, we will attempt first of all to lay the foundations of the Church’s missionary outreach, before concretely identifying the deeds that need to be carried out in order to outline the image of a Church renewed by missionary conversion.

1. PUTTING THE CHURCH'S MISSIONARY NATURE BACK IN THE FOREGROUND

1.1 Renewing our missionary memory

At one time, feeling the confidence of being part of “Christendom”, the Churches in Québec believed themselves immune to questioning and criticism. Now, this time is over; and it is time to evolve and get moving. It is time to renew our missionary memory to begin a missionary conversion of the Church: its habits, customs, attitudes, and style.

Changing this mentality will be demanding, requiring not only time, but also a great deal of detachment and a great availability of spirit. **Let us welcome the current situation of our Church as a gift and a blessing.**

1.2 The foundations of missionary outreach

In the present state of affairs in Québec, it is crucial that we do not remain in the turmoil we currently find ourselves in, with a sense of failure, or with the sole purpose of restoring the situation of former times.

Mission is the Church’s very nature: to think of the church as missionary, to structure it as missionary, and to live as a missionary church, is not merely one choice among many. Our mission does not depend on a situation, it is not a strategic option, nor a matter of a new slogan or personal, exhortation. “It is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that the Church draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father”.

“Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize.” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation of Paul VI)

The purpose of the Church’s mission, according to the divine plan of God the Father, is none other than the life, **happiness and wellbeing of men, women, and children of today**. In other words, the goal sought cannot be some kind of recapturing or retrieving great numbers of Christians, but one where the Church consciously chooses to focus on others. In accordance with the action of God, she must be at the service of humanity, which it is actually called upon to serve.

Consequently, considering itself as sent to witness to the immense love of God for humanity, all members of the Church must ceaselessly convert their behaviour in order to make that love tangible. **That love becomes the criterion by which to evaluate all that the Church does** (organization, style, attitude, customs, behaviour, words, and speech).

2. THE MISSIONARY SHIFT IN OUR COMMUNITIES

Becoming an outreach Church means:

- Conversion of hearts and mindsets;
- Conversion of customs and ways of acting;
- Conversion of legal and organizational frameworks.

2.1 Conversion from “practices of Christendom” to “missionary practices”

We can, as a pastoral team, **rethink sacramental preparation**, transforming it into a catechumenal journey of Christian initiation, actively involving the whole community (especially adults and adolescents), and not just the children directly concerned, thereby lending greater support to parents.

We must transform our Church so that it is no longer simply a bureaucracy. Let us remind ourselves to

- Ask ourselves how we deal with requests and how people are welcomed;

“The Gospel constantly tells us to risk of a face-to-face encounter with others, with their physical presence that challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction.” ([EG 88](#))

- Review the administrative procedures regarding the requests for sacraments;
- Rethink our whole way of doing catechesis, so as to offer a program that focuses on evangelization and missionary conversion.

2.2 Missionary conversion of legal frameworks, church organization, and administrative practices

If we wish for the Church to be experienced and perceived as a “mother with an open heart” (EG 46-49), where “everyone can share in some way in the life of the Church”, we must go back to **the heart of the Gospel**. Let us carry out **a discernment** that will lead to a **rethinking** of our rules, structures, legal frameworks, administrative practices, and church organization.

“Pastoral ministry, as far as its mission is concerned, seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: ‘We have always done it this way’.” ([EG 33](#))

What steps can we envision so that the laity might take on pastoral responsibilities, and not just administrative tasks? How can our parishes become not just worshipping communities, but true communities of prayer, handing on the faith, and bearing witness to charity? Do our structures and administrative practices express the heart of the Gospel, the welcoming of every person, and missionary outreach?

“Nowadays certain customs with deep historical roots are no longer properly understood and the messages they convey are not always received in the way they should be. Some of these customs may be beautiful, but they no longer serve as a means of communicating the Gospel. We should not be afraid to re-examine them.” ([EG 43](#))

It is not a question of dismantling all structures or breaking free from all rules, but rather of returning to the cardinal principle that must be the basis for every law and its application: **“the salvation of souls, which in the Church must always be the supreme law”**.

2.2.1 The Parish Community

The parish community is not an outdated institution; quite the opposite! It is at the heart of the mission. Each parish must ensure:

- To be truly present to the people entrusted to them;
- To be in touch with them;
- To be close to them and their concerns
- To love them.

Once again, the parish must not see itself as a distant and aloof administration. In the process of reshaping parishes, let us keep in mind those three criteria.

“An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelizers thus take on the ‘smell of the sheep’ ” (EG 24).

2.3 Labourers sent out to the harvest

2.3.1 Every member of the People of God is a missionary disciple

Evangelization is everyone’s responsibility. The Church’s missionary shift requires that each member of the People of God think and act as a truly active participant in the life of the Church:

“Every Christian is challenged to be actively engaged in evangelization, so that no one renounces his or her commitment for evangelization (...). Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are ‘disciples’ and ‘missionaries’, but rather that we are always ‘missionary disciples’ ”. (EG 120)

2.3.2 The formation

« The Christian who has really experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim it. He or she cannot wait to have received extensive training or instructions”. (EG 120)

The reform is not only institutional but also truly spiritual. Reading *The Joy of the Gospel* leads us chiefly to two formative experiences:

- **Regular contact with God’s Word:** here again we reach the heart and centre of the Gospel, with the necessary formation of groups to pray and share on the Word, and various forms of Bible study. Indeed, the Word of God is the basic nourishment for all training;
- **Proximity to the poor:** “They have much to teach us. Not only do they share in the *sensus fidei* (sense of the faith), but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them.”

Being called to blaze new trails in pastoral formation, we must prioritize:

- Formation related to missionary outreach and experience;
- Formation that lays emphasis on accompaniment;
- Formation that will not ignore intentional and committed spiritual accompaniment.

Consequently, it is necessary to rethink our models of training pastoral leaders, including the training of ordained ministers: deacons, priests, and bishops.

2.3.3 Resisting an inward-looking attitude

In a context of rapid dwindling of human resources, there is a strong temptation to allocate remaining resources solely to maintain the network of parishes as it was done during the era of Christendom. However a true missionary option must guide the reassignment of pastoral leaders and church employees. This involvement must be reflected in “a greater penetration of Christian values in the social, political and economic sectors”, and not be limited to internal and administrative tasks.

2.4 Conversion of real estate holdings, means of financing, and investments

The assessment of which buildings are necessary must not rest on financial considerations alone (without, of course, neglecting them), but must consider the people and the needs of the mission. We need a “Church whose doors are open.” (EG 46-47) where people feel welcome and at ease. **The lack of welcoming spaces and friendly people can be a cause for breaking away from Christian life.** (EG 70).

3. IMPLEMENTING A PROCESS OF ECCLESIAL DISCERNMENT

The purpose of this text is not to formulate a series of propositions that are to be put into practice. In order to bring about missionary conversion, it is crucial that each diocesan Church, each parish, and all the faithful **discern together the way of the Gospel**, taking into account the particular issues which arise in their context. Then, we will know which paths to follow.

“To make this missionary impulse ever more focused, generous and fruitful, I encourage each particular Church to undertake a resolute process of discernment, purification and reform.” (EG 30).

It is important to listen to young people and the elderly. This means that we may frequently have to listen to people outside our usual circles.

“Both represent a source of hope for every people. The elderly bring with them memory and the wisdom of experience, which warns us not to foolishly repeat our past mistakes. Young people call us to renewed and expansive hope, for they represent new directions for humanity and open us up to the future, lest we cling to a nostalgia for structures and customs which are no longer life-giving in today’s world.” (EG 108)

Following this discernment on the current situation, and on the most suitable means to reach a new way of proposing the Gospel, courageous decisions must be made in order to achieve the Church's missionary transformation.

CONCLUSION

This missionary renewal of our communities and diocesan Churches may seem like too great a challenge, indeed, almost insurmountable. Pope Francis reminds us that "this task continues to be a source of immense joy for the Church" (*EG* 15). This renewal will thus be stirring, exciting and joyful, especially **if it is lived with the spiritual depth to which it invites us.**

We may find, during this process, that it "does not bring the satisfaction we seek, results are few and changes are slow", and we may be "tempted to grow weary" (*EG* 277). **But at such times we must recall that 'mere administration' is not what we need" (*EG* 25), but that we are contributing to building up the Church, the People of God on the move.**