Fr. E Mulcahy Recollection Mission 50 years on

What we owe to Vatican Two’s Ad Gentes and Pope Paul’s Evangelii Nuntiandi

In today’s world of fragile commitments, a Golden Jubilee anniversary is a significant milestone in any couple’s married life. Anniversaries are always good opportunities to look at dimensions of our lives we are in danger of taking for granted. They are wonderful occasions to celebrate the growth that has taken place in the past whilst also looking forward towards the future and planning the way ahead. The same is true in the life of the Church. On 11th October 2012 we already celebrated 50 years since Vatican Two was opened by Pope, now Saint, John XXIII. Next year on 8th December 2015 we will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the closing of Vatican Two by Pope Paul VI.

Next year on December 7th 2015, the Church will also celebrate the 50th anniversary of the promulgation of one of the three last documents to emerge from the Second Vatican Council – the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, known as Ad Gentes: a text significantly which received the highest number of votes of any of the decrees of Vatican II. Then next day on December 8th 2005, the Church will celebrate the 40th anniversary of Pope Paul VI’s Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelisation in the Modern World, known as Evangelii Nuntiandi. Taken together, these two documents have had a profound impact on the way all of us involved in mission, either at home or abroad, have carried out our ministry in recent decades. They ushered in a new age of mission and initiated a sea-change in how we see and speak of ourselves as missionaries. The deep transformation they set in motion continues to resound throughout the Church at every level. Of course, we have also had other major missionary documents during Pope John Paul’s pontificate, such as Redemptoris Missio, Dialogue and Mission and Dialogue and Proclamation. But these significant anniversaries of the two documents signed by Pope Paul VI invite us to take a closer look at their legacy and heritage.

Maybe the best way to assess the contribution Ad Gentes and Evangelii Nuntiandi have made to our lives and work is by contrasting the way we used to view mission before the Second Vatican Council with the way we perceive it today.

The way we were

Put crudely, up to the 1960s, mission in the Catholic Church meant men and women from Europe and North America being sent to non-Christian lands to convert their inhabitants to Roman Catholicism. Without caricaturing the past, the pre-1965 understanding of mission was very much a “saving souls” approach – it was coloured by a view of mission greatly influenced by an earlier ecclesiology where the Church’s main preoccupation was the fate of those who died without being baptised. Since it was genuinely and even passionately believed that the unbaptised would end up in hell, (extra ecclesiam nulla salus) the Church had to do her utmost to baptise as many as possible in order to save them from eternal damnation. This was particularly urgent in the so-called “pagan lands” of Africa and Asia where teeming millions of people had never heard of Jesus Christ and the Gospel message. St Francis Xavier was a good patron for this model of mission.

Moreover, this missionary outreach of the Church to save souls in pagan territories was considered to be a unique domain reserved almost exclusively to a specialised élite group of pastoral
agents, particularly priests, religious brothers and sisters known as foreign missionaries belonging specifically to “mission ad extra” congregations, institutes and societies.

This view was what we could call “the crusader model” of mission, with missioners portrayed as “commandos”, or “storm-troopers”, winning souls for Christ on the frontiers of the Church’s expansion\(^1\). Missionaries were often, of necessity, working as “lone rangers”, because of their relatively few numbers entrusted with such vast tracts of territory to convert. Sadly too, there were often traces of attitudes of cultural superiority among some missionaries who believed they were also going to bring “civilisation” to the so-called “uncivilised” non-Christian peoples around the world.

Mission in those days was deeply ecclesio-centric. It was a question of setting up the structures of the Church in a new geographical area. The conception of the Church’s missionary work understandably flowed from the ecclesiology in vogue at the time – a very hierarchical institutional pre-Vatican II Church steeped in triumphalism, clericalism and juridicism, seeing itself as a “perfect society” [St Robert Bellarmine SJ] – intent on geographical and juridical expansion. The driving force behind mission was either the “salvation of souls”, or the planting of the Catholic Church in new terrain. The guiding vision was of a Church understood as an oasis of grace in the desert of a sinful world; the goal being to convert the outsiders and bring them in one by one, if necessary\(^2\).

Mission was clearly one-way traffic: North to South; we had everything to give and nothing to receive; everything to teach, nothing to learn. The missionary agenda was unmistakable: unbelievers were to be converted; “lost souls” saved; the Catholic Church to be “planted” in “pagan lands”. The frontiers at that time were seen in mainly geographical, territorial terms – crossing the physical borders of far distant lands – fired by the crusading conception of mission which concentrated on “saving souls”, converting “pagans” and “implanting” the Church in well-defined territories of the globe outside of the North and the West. In a nutshell, that was how mission used to be understood in the days before the revolution unleashed by Vatican Two’s *Ad Gentes*.

The way we are now

While we sincerely thank God for what was achieved by the tremendous zeal, commitment, and endurance of our heroic missionary predecessors in the years before 1965 who, with much courage and many personal sacrifices, worked tirelessly in trekking from village to village, visiting vast numbers of isolated out-stations, mastering local languages, establishing schools, building chapels and clinics - *Ad Gentes* and *Evangelii Nuntiandi* have challenged us all to take their work even further by undergoing a profound *metanoia* or conversion in the way we perceive mission itself. Though the pre-1965 missionary endeavour was truly remarkable and indispensable, in the almost fifty years since the promulgation of *Ad Gentes* and the almost forty years since *Evangelii Nuntiandi* we missionaries have come vividly to realise that

- Instead of converting “pagans”, mission implies being sensitive to the traces of the Holy Spirit who is active outside the boundaries of the Church and *already* present in the peoples and cultures we are sent to long before we arrive

- Instead of “saving souls”, mission implies a wholistic concept of salvation which includes working for the integral liberation and development of the whole human person

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- Instead of “implanting” the Church, mission requires *inculturating* the Good News of the Gospel message of God’s inclusive love.

- Instead of “extending” Roman Catholicism, mission is about building up the Reign of God, for the Church is at the service of the Kingdom not *vice versa*.

- Instead of speaking of “missions” in the plural, the vocabulary has shifted to “mission” in the singular.

- Instead of concentrating on well-defined physical territories in Africa and Asia, mission is not so much about geography as about human space, opening us up to a vast area of new social situations and pastoral concerns wherever they arise in the world – the new frontiers of the urban sprawls of the mega-cities and of inner city poverty of megapolises, the youth, the new social medias, technology.

- Instead of one-way traffic North to South, it is clear that mission means more than a departure from Europe or North America to the Southern hemisphere: Mission is now omni-directional. The presence of so many young African and Asian priests and pastoral workers ministering in Britain today is an evident sign that there is such a reality as “mission in reverse”. Mission originates in all six continents. A once so-called Christian country like Britain is sorely in need of a new evangelisation. Archbishop Rowan Williams just a couple of weeks ago referred to the UK as *Post-Christian* Britain.

- Instead of being the jealous preserve of clerical “lone rangers”, mission can only be lived collaboratively, in team-ministry, working in communion with lay women and men.

- Instead of confrontational tones and militarist vocabulary of conquest, there has been a shift to the language of invitation, sharing and reciprocity.

- The primacy of Witness

- Instead of mission as *monologue*, mission is *dialogue*. Mission is a relational reality and dialogue is its key: dialogue with the poor, dialogue with other cultures, dialogue with other religions. Dialogue implies first listening deeply to the *other* and then searching together for the truth which transforms all participants in the dialogue.

- The Theology of the Holy Spirit

- Explosion of Liberation Theologies

- Advances in the Role of Women in the Church

- Promotion of Inter-Religious Dialogue

Because of all these above factors we have truly come a long way in the last fifty years in our understanding of mission. Many of these changes are thanks to the seminal insights found in the pages of *Ad Gentes* and, especially, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. All in all, the teaching of *Ad Gentes* has stood up remarkably well over the course of five decades, which in itself is no mean feat. Though *Ad Gentes* marked a turning point in the history of the Catholic perception of mission, the truth is that it was only a beginning; it was the catalyst that opened the flood-gates of much deeper missionary reflection in the years that followed the Council. Then *Evangelii Nuntiandi* took us much further ahead. By the
1980s it was commonplace in the Church to note that mission had expanded its meaning to embrace four constituent tasks: proclamation, dialogue, inculturation and the liberation of the poor\(^3\).

**A New Theology of Mission**

*Ad Gentes* gave the Catholic Church the best theologically grounded base for Christian mission that we had ever seen. It made us realise that mission has to be rooted not just in ecclesiology but in the Trinity itself – for God is a community, *koinonia*, of self-communicating Love. Perhaps surprisingly for some, *Ad Gentes* grounds the origin of mission not in the famous great mandate of Christ at the end of Matthew’s Gospel “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Mat 28:19), but in the very heart of the Tri-Une God which is an eternal *perichoresis* of self-giving Love.

*Ad Gentes* boldly broadened the concept of mission – it no longer means just the Church reaching out into geographical areas that were previously unchristian. Nor is it only the proclamation of a conceptual message that is assented to intellectually in faith. Faith has to express itself in concrete justice. Faith is not just a response of the mind to a list of truths but a commitment that calls for the integral liberation of the human being. Salvation is not merely for the “soul”, but for the whole human person, liberating us from everything that dehumanises us. And salvation does not only refer to a future destiny, it begins here and now in the reality of this world. One of the striking contributions of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* is the idea of “integral liberation” as an urgent missionary task that belongs to the very core of evangelisation itself.

Moreover, since the 1960s there has been a growing awareness of other world religions having a positive role in the divine plan of salvation. One of the great insights of post-Vatican II theology is that the Church is not the exclusive location of salvation in the world. In fact, inter-religious dialogue has subsequently become an integral dimension of all evangelisation, and the word “evangelisation” is now being used more and more in place of the word “mission”.

Mission is no longer considered only as the work of men and women who leave their own country and culture to proclaim the Gospel in “foreign” lands. Mission has its origin in *Missio Dei* - the inter-relational dynamics of God’s own being, the eternal self-giving of the Father who sends the Son and the Spirit. Mission has its source in the Trinity, with the Father sending the Son and the Spirit out into the world in the Incarnation and in Pentecost, respectively, the Son as Saviour, the Spirit as Sanctifier. We are simply the co-workers. Mission is what God is and does. The *whole Church*, as the servant of God’s plan, is *in mission*. The Church is in a mission situation everywhere in the world; mission is a reality in all six continents. We can no longer call some of the territories the “foreign missions”. Mission is no longer, and can no longer be, a one-way movement from the “older Churches” to the “younger Churches”.

The former mission countries have now become flourishing particular churches, local churches, sister churches; whilst the so-called Christian countries, because of the onslaught of secularisation, have themselves become *post*-Christian and stand in urgent need of a second evangelisation. *Ad Gentes* teaches us that mission everywhere is primarily the responsibility of the

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local church, of the local clergy and laity, not of imported “foreign” missionaries. The aim of missionary activity is not to convert unbelievers to Roman Catholicism, but to lead men and women into the trinitarian self-giving of God’s own life and love. This can only happen through the witness of Christians living authentically in integrity.

Indeed, one significant change that came with Ad Gentes and Evangelii Nuntiandi is the understanding of mission as “witness” rather as activity. For centuries people became missionaries with the idea of going out on mission in order to do things for people – build schools, dispensaries, leper colonies, churches, etc. But Evangelii Nuntiandi reminds us that mission is not so much about what we do as about who we are. In the beautiful famous words of Pope Paul VI: “the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life….. Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses”. (EN 41).

**The Church exists only to be Good News**

Evangelisation comes from the Greek word eu-aggelion which means “good news”. To evangelise means simply “to proclaim the Good news”. But we need to be crystal clear about what exactly is this good news. It is nothing other than God’s gratuitous, inclusive love that has appeared in Jesus Christ. For Christianity is not about morality and doctrine - it is about a person, Jesus of Nazareth and the Good News he proclaimed: God’s unconditional love for each one of us. That is why Jesus is sent. That is why now there is a shift even in vocabulary: from missions to mission and indeed from mission to evangelisation.

Evangelii Nuntiandi reminds us vividly that Jesus’ own mission is passed on to each of us. “As the Father has sent me, so am I sending you” (John 20:21). This also means that we cannot reserve the word “missionary” just for an élite group of men and women who leave their own land, language and culture and travel thousands of miles by plane or boat to go and spread the Good News to far off countries and peoples. Each of us has a baptismal commission. We are co-missioned. It can’t be body swerved, shelved or left to so-called “professionals” or “specialists” such as priests or religious sisters and brothers. No, each of us is on mission. From the moment we were baptised we were sent on mission. There are no exceptions and no exemptions. But what exactly is this mission? What was Jesus’ mission? There is absolutely no doubt that the centre of Jesus’ mission was the in-breaking of the Reign of God. He was obsessed with it, taken up with it totally. Jesus invested all his energy in making present God’s Reign. This was his centre of gravity. But what is the Reign of God? It is a new way of being human, a new way of being alive, a new way of being free, a new way of relating: God’s intentionality for creation. Our mission is thus nothing other than continuing Jesus’ dream of establishing a new humanity of radical equality and total inclusiveness, namely the Kingdom of God.

**The Church is missionary by definition**

Ad Gentes brought the concept of mission as a marginal activity undertaken by a few clerical specialists right into the centre of the Church, making it constitutive of the Church’s identity and the responsibility of all. Not just an optional extra but an element that is intrinsic to the very definition of
the Church. The Church's mission is not additional to its being. Mission belongs to the core of what the Church is about. We realise today that the Church does not have missions but that the Church is mission! Mission happens wherever the Church is - it is how the Church exists.

We have moved from the conception of the Church as a community that has a mission to one that understands itself as existing by mission as a fire exists by burning. The Church does not create a reality called “mission”. Mission creates the Church! The Church only exists because of mission! In fact, it is now very commonplace to say, the Church does not have a mission but the Mission has a Church! This has been popularised by the Missiologists of CTU in Chicago, Stephen Bevans SVD, Roger Schroeder SVD, and Anthony Gittins CSSp.

In this respect, the most important single contribution of Ad Gentes is surely the insight that “the pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature. For it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she takes her origin” (AG 2). This is a message we need constantly to be reminded of. It is the whole People of God who are missionary not just some special groups within the Church. It is the task of us all, not simply the duty of a few “professional” missionaries. Each one of us carries personal responsibility for spreading the Good News of God’s love. The missionary call of every Christian is inescapable because of our baptism. It is in our DNA. Mission is not simply stretching the frontiers of the Church geographically on earth, it is participating in the inner life of the self-giving Trinity which itself is missionary.

However, it is impossible to understand Ad Gentes without Lumen Gentium, for it is Lumen Gentium that supplies the ecclesiology behind Ad Gentes’ mission theology. Ad Gentes did not create a revolution in mission theology all on its own. It needed other key documents of Vatican II, especially the two fundamental Constitutions on the Church (Lumen Gentium and Gaudium et Spes), plus the Declaration on Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate), and the Decrees on Religious Liberty (Dignitatis Humanae) and on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio). But the Constitutions on the Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium) and on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum) also played their part in re-thinking mission. All of this cluster of documents hangs tightly together and needs to be always read in the light of each other. It is the cumulative impact of about 8 of the 16 documents of Vatican Two which have slowly but surely changed the face of mission over the last 50 years.

Because of Vatican Two, mission is clearly no longer territorial or geographical. Mission is any situation anywhere which needs the proclamation of the Gospel. Mission is not just in the so called “Third World” or Southern Hemisphere or “developing countries”. Mission has a universal dimension, is everywhere, on all six continents and each of us, through baptism, is a missionary. This is not just pious platitude or cliché. The Church’s essence is mission. The conviction needs strengthening that mission is at the very heart of the Christian Community. Each of us without exception carries the responsibility of reaching out to others with the Good News of God’s unconditional acceptance and love. This could never be the task of just a select few, of a specialised force within the Church, be they cleric or lay - it is the task of all of us.

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Mission begins with me, here, now

Though mission isn’t geographical, it still has everything to do with crossing borders and boundaries and frontiers as Jesus himself was always doing. Even personally - just think of the people we will meet this week on the street, in the shops, at work, in school, at home, wherever. They will be of different ages, different backgrounds, different temperaments, different races, and different creeds. Each of them represents a challenge. Each one of them presents us with a boundary, a border, a frontier. In every encounter with another human being I only have two options: I can either play it safe and secure remaining cocooned and entrenched on my side of the line where everything is cosy and familiar, safe and secure, or I can dare to cross over the boundary and embrace the other in their “otherness”, cancelling out the difference, the distance between us. That’s the challenge of mission - the risk of crossing human frontiers and communicating to others that they are loved unconditionally by God.

Mission is thus a mind-set. It’s an attitude of openness and welcome. It has to do with outreach, taking the initiative, making the first move, taking the first step, not waiting to be asked. Mission is being dynamic not static, being active not passive, it means being a witness, not a mere spectator on the side-lines. Mission respects the “otherness of the other”. It is nourished by dialogue which implies the ability to really listen to what the other is saying and learn from the other. Mission is the responsibility of all of us in the community of the Church. No one can body-swerve it or pass the buck. Mission is where we are at! And these are only some of the insights to be gleaned from Ad Gentes and Evangelii Nuntiandi!

Usable Quotes from Pope Francis’ Evangelii Gaudium

3. I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them.

God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy.

6. There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter.

10. An evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral!

15. We would realize that missionary outreach is paradigmatic for all the Church’s activity. Along these lines the Latin American bishops stated that we “cannot passively and calmly wait in our church buildings”; we need to move “from a pastoral ministry of mere conservation to a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry”.

19. Evangelization takes place in obedience to the missionary mandate of Jesus: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. A Church which goes forth

20. The word of God constantly shows us how God challenges those who believe in him “to go forth”. Abraham received the call to set out for a new land. Moses heard God’s call: “Go, I send you” and led the people towards the promised land. To Jeremiah God says: “To all whom I send you, you shall go”. In our day Jesus’ command to “Go and make disciples” echoes in the changing scenarios and ever new challenges to the Church’s mission of evangelization, and all of us are called to take part in this new
missionary “going forth”. Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the “peripheries” in need of the light of the Gospel.

21. Yet the drive to go forth and give, to go out from ourselves, to keep pressing forward in our sowing of the good seed, remains ever present. The Lord says: “Let us go on to the next towns that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out”. Once the seed has been sown in one place, Jesus does not stay behind to explain things or to perform more signs; the Spirit moves him to go forth to other towns.

Taking the first step, being involved and supportive, bearing fruit and rejoicing

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 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.

Let us try a little harder to take the first step and to become involved. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. The Lord gets involved and he involves his own, as he kneels to wash their feet. He tells his disciples: “You will be blessed if you do this”. 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” and the sheep are willing to hear their voice.

25. I want to emphasize that what I am trying to express here has a programmatic significance and important consequences. I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are. “Mere administration” can no longer be enough. Throughout the world, let us be “permanently in a state of mission”.

27. I dream of a “missionary option”, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation.

30. Each particular Church is likewise called to missionary conversion. It is the primary subject of evangelization. Its joy in communicating Jesus Christ is expressed both by a concern to preach him to areas in greater need and in constantly going forth to the outskirts of its own territory or towards new sociocultural settings. Wherever the need for the light and the life of the Risen Christ is greatest, it will want to be there. 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.

32. Since I am called to put into practice what I ask of others, I too must think about a conversion of the papacy. It is my duty, as the Bishop of Rome, to be open to suggestions which can help make the exercise of my ministry more faithful to the meaning which Jesus Christ wished to give it and to the present needs of evangelization. Excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church’s life and her missionary outreach.
33. Pastoral ministry in a missionary key seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: “We have always done it this way”. I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities.

34. If we attempt to put all things in a missionary key, this will also affect the way we communicate the message.

35. Pastoral ministry in a missionary style is not obsessed with the disjointed transmission of a multitude of doctrines to be insistently imposed.

36. In this basic core, what shines forth is the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead. In this sense, the Second Vatican Council explained, “in Catholic doctrine there exists a ‘hierarchy’ of truths.

40. The Church is herself a missionary disciple; she needs to grow in her interpretation of the revealed word and in her understanding of truth.

41. At the same time, today’s vast and rapid cultural changes demand that we constantly seek ways of expressing unchanging truths in a language which brings out their abiding newness. As Pope John said: “The deposit of the faith is one thing... the way it is expressed is another”. Let us never forget that “the expression of truth can take different forms. The renewal of these forms of expression becomes necessary for the sake of transmitting to the people of today the Gospel message in its unchanging meaning”.

44. I want to remind priests that the confessional must not be a torture chamber but rather an encounter with the Lord’s mercy which spurs us on to do our best.

45. A missionary heart ... never closes itself off, never retreats into its own security, never opts for rigidity and defensiveness. It realizes that it has to grow in its own understanding of the Gospel and in discerning the paths of the Spirit, and so it always does what good it can, even if in the process its shoes get soiled by the mud of the street.

46. A Church which “goes forth” is a Church whose doors are open. Going out to others in order to reach the fringes of humanity

47. The Church is called to be the house of the Father, with doors always wide open. One concrete sign of such openness is that our church doors should always be open, so that if someone, moved by the Spirit, comes there looking for God, he or she will not find a closed door. There are other doors that should not be closed either.

49. Let us go forth, then, let us go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ. Here I repeat for the entire Church what I have often said to the priests and laity of Buenos Aires:

I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures.

If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than
by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: “Give them something to eat” (Mk 6:37).

50. What I would like to propose is something much more in the line of an evangelical discernment. It is the approach of a missionary disciple, an approach “nourished by the light and strength of the Holy Spirit”.[53]

51. It is not the task of the Pope to offer a detailed and complete analysis of contemporary reality, but I do exhort all the communities to an “ever watchful scrutiny of the signs of the times”.[54]

77. The homily is the touchstone for judging a pastor’s closeness and ability to communicate to his people. We know that the faithful attach great importance to it, and that both they and their ordained ministers suffer because of homilies: the laity from having to listen to them and the clergy from having to preach them! It is sad that this is the case.

78. Today we are seeing in many pastoral workers, including consecrated men and women, an inordinate concern for their personal freedom and relaxation, which leads them to see their work as a mere appendage to their life, as if it were not part of their very identity. At the same time, the spiritual life comes to be identified with a few religious exercises which can offer a certain comfort but which do not encourage encounter with others, engagement with the world or a passion for evangelization. As a result, one can observe in many agents of evangelization, even though they pray, a heightened individualism, a crisis of identity and a cooling of fervour. These are three evils which fuel one another.

80. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary enthusiasm!

No to selfishness and spiritual sloth

81. At a time when we most need a missionary dynamism which will bring salt and light to the world, many lay people fear that they may be asked to undertake some apostolic work and they seek to avoid any responsibility that may take away from their free time. For example, it has become very difficult today to find trained parish catechists willing to persevere in this work for some years. Something similar is also happening with priests who are obsessed with protecting their free time. This is frequently due to the fact that people feel an overbearing need to guard their personal freedom, as though the task of evangelization was a dangerous poison rather than a joyful response to God’s love which summons us to mission and makes us fulfilled and productive. Some resist giving themselves over completely to mission and thus end up in a state of paralysis and acedia.

83. And so the biggest threat of all gradually takes shape: “the gray pragmatism of the daily life of the Church, in which all appears to proceed normally, while in reality faith is wearing down and degenerating into small-mindedness”. [63 = Ratzinger]

A tomb psychology thus develops and slowly transforms Christians into mummies in a museum.
For all this, I repeat: Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the joy of evangelization!

No to a sterile pessimism
84. The joy of the Gospel is such that it cannot be taken away from us by anyone or anything (cf. Jn 16:22). The evils of our world – and those of the Church – must not be excuses for diminishing our commitment and our fervour. Let us look upon them as challenges which can help us to grow. With the eyes of faith, we can see the light which the Holy Spirit always radiates in the midst of darkness, never forgetting that “where sin increased, grace has abounded all the more” (Rom 5:20). Our faith is challenged to discern how wine can come from water and how wheat can grow in the midst of weeds. Fifty years after the Second Vatican Council, we are distressed by the troubles of our age and far from naive optimism; yet the fact that we are more realistic must not mean that we are any less trusting in the Spirit or less generous. In this sense, we can once again listen to the words of Blessed John XXIII on the memorable day of 11 October 1962: “At times we have to listen, much to our regret, to the voices of people who, though burning with zeal, lack a sense of discretion and measure. In this modern age they can see nothing but prevarication and ruin ... We feel that we must disagree with those prophets of doom who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world were at hand. In our times, divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relations which, by human effort and even beyond all expectations, are directed to the fulfilment of God’s superior and inscrutable designs, in which everything, even human setbacks, leads to the greater good of the Church”.[65]

85. One of the more serious temptations which stifles boldness and zeal is a defeatism which turns us into querulous and disillusioned pessimists, “sourpusses”. Nobody can go off to battle unless he is fully convinced of victory beforehand. If we start without confidence, we have already lost half the battle and we bury our talents.

Don’t become disillusioned pessimists and sourpusses