

**PRIESTHOOD IN A CHURCH
WITH A MISSION**

The Word of God is present in the world
calling all peoples to union with God

Jesus wished his disciples to proclaim to everyone what he had revealed to them: ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation’(Mark 16:15). ‘The whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now’, writes Paul (Romans 8:22). In Jesus creation gave birth to the perfect human expression of God’s Word, and, in his heart, creation was able to respond to God in perfect love. Now, ‘creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God’(Romans 8:19). This is because ‘in him all things hold together’(Colossians 1:17). Jesus is ‘the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation’(Colossians 1:15), and ‘if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation’(2Corinthians 5:17). The longing of creation is that everyone will welcome the love offered to them by God in the heart of Jesus and that everyone will listen to God’s Word revealed in him and share Jesus’ Spirit, and so be drawn into perfect communion of love – the communion that is God’s own being. Then, finally, ‘God will be all in all’(1Corinthians 15:28).

John opens the Prologue to his Gospel with the first words of the Book of Genesis: ‘In the beginning’. However, before focusing on creation, he gazes outside the dimensions of time and space, and speaks of something that already ‘was’; namely, God (the one Jesus calls ‘Father’) and God’s Word (the one who is made flesh in Jesus).

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with (‘towards’) God, and the Word was God. The Word was in the beginning with (‘towards’) God.

– John 1:1-2

John had learned that God is love and so, outside any consideration of creation, God does what love must do – God gives expression to God and pours the divine Being out in love. The One who is the object of this love and who exists with God, facing God and drawn into perfect communion in love, is the Divine Word.

The implications of this for our understanding of creation are immense and so it is in this context of love that John begins to speak of creation:

All things came into being through the Word, and without the Word not one thing came into being. What has come into being in the Word was life, and the life was the light of all people.

– John 1:1-4

Notice John’s stress on the fact that ‘all things’ came into being through the Word. The world is not created out of nothing. It is created out of love, and outside this love ‘not one thing came into being’. John is looking at the whole of creation through the eyes and with the heart of Jesus. The purer our inner gaze and the more intimate our inner communion the more we will recognise God’s presence in the world as well as God’s Word (God’s self-communication) coming to us in and through every creature, every event and every encounter.

Constantly aided by God's Word, especially by the Word-made-flesh, we focus on God's Spirit and so on our life in the Spirit, for it is the Spirit who tunes our being ever more sensitively to God's Word. When, through our communion with God's Spirit, we experience an echo of God's Word, we are vibrating to the divine harmony. We are giving ourselves over to the gravity of grace drawing us to the heart of God. We also know that if we do not recognise in everyone we meet an expression of the divine Word and if we fail to experience in them the sacredness of the divine Spirit, we have failed to appreciate the revelation that is at the basis of Christianity. The Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, picks up something of this in his poem *God's Grandeur* (1887):

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and ah! bright wings.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin is another who often gives expression to the sacredness of our encounter with creation:

By means of all created things the divine assails us, penetrates us and moulds us. We imagined it as distant and inaccessible, whereas we live steeped in its burning layers. 'In God we live'. As Jacob said, awakening from his dream, the world, this palpable world which we were wont to treat with the boredom and disrespect with which we habitually regard places with no sacred association for us, is in truth a holy place and we did not know it.

– The Divine Milieu, 1926, page 89

It is of the utmost importance that anyone called to the privilege of ministering to another realises that it is not we who bring God to anyone. God is already holding everyone in existence and sustaining them in love. There really is 'the dearest freshness deep down things'. It is true that we do not always recognise the presence of God in our lives. We need each other's love to help us do this and God uses our love to draw people close to the mystery of love that is being enacted in everyone's life.

A Missionary Church

For this to happen, however, we must be aware of the sacred ground on which we are walking whenever we enter another person's life. If we experience this religious respect; if we listen humbly and sensitively to others, we may be granted the grace to see and hear the movement of the Spirit of Jesus there where others fail to recognise it. We may be able, in love, to reflect back to each other the wonderful mystery that is happening in our lives and so assist each other to respond in love. Let us listen, once more, to Teilhard:

Some day, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of Love. And then, for the second time in the history of the world, we shall have discovered fire.

– The Evolution of Chastity, 1934, page 86

After speaking of the presence of God's Word in creation, John goes on to speak of God's self-revelation through God's Word, to 'everyone' (1:9). Once said, this is obviously true, for, as Paul assures us, 'God our Saviour desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Timothy 2:4).

Since God is present in everything that we experience, the depth and intimacy of our communion with God depends on the depth and intimacy of our communion with the world to which we belong. Of special importance is our communion in love with those who have given themselves over to the attraction of grace and allowed God to permeate their being.

It is not for us to limit the ways in which God chooses to be revealed. Since God is transcendent, the revelation remains mysterious. To 're-veal' is to remove a veil. The veil hiding God is not over God. It is over us. When we receive the mediated revelation of God, the veil is partly lifted, and we experience, however partially, in the people and world around us, and in the movements of our own mind and heart, some satisfaction of our longing to know and to be in love. Then God, the source and goal of our being, the one from whom we come, in whom we exist, and for whom we long, is imperfectly, but really, revealed to us.

The history of revelation is the history of human response to the mystery of God's Word and God's Spirit. It is the coming together of the free divine initiative (grace), and the human insight into and response to this initiative. Revelation occurs when we realise and embrace the graced reality of nature, when we recognise that 'the earth is filled with the glory of God' (Isaiah 6:3). From the beginning of human history and all over the world, God has been holding in love all whom God has made and has been inspiring them to respond to this love. From Alaska to Tierra del Fuego, from Iceland to the Cape of Good Hope people have been experiencing God's love.

John's over-all picture of human response sounds a tragic note: 'the world did not recognise God's Word' (1:10), but he goes on to qualify this, for there have always been those who welcomed God's offer of love and who responded. These were empowered by grace to become 'children of God' (1:12). Every mother who loves her child is responding to God's love. Every person who gives himself or herself generously to another is 'born of God' (1:13).

John includes his own people, the people of Israel in his criticism (see 1:11), but here, too, there were always those who listened to God's word and were faithful to the covenant.

In the history of humankind, people have always looked towards those whose lives have been particularly free from the distractions that lead to sin and whose religious sensitivity led them to an attractive wisdom. Every people has its saints, its wise men and women who have been especially sensitive in listening to God's Word and in responding to the inspiration of God's Spirit. In every culture and in every age there have been those who have responded creatively and often heroically to this inspiration, living lives that have mediated God in a wonderful way to others. They have been a 'word of God' to their contemporaries, connecting them in a remarkable way with life, and so to God. If we see people with Jesus' eyes and with Jesus' heart, we will see how sacred is the intimate presence of God to all creatures and we will be respectful before the varied ways in which human beings conceive of the truth and respond to love.

However, as disciples of Jesus we will also have something immensely precious to offer them. John's prologue reaches its climax when he announces that 'the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth ... From his fullness we have all received'(1:14,16).

When we examine the various religious movements in the world, we come up against obvious distortions and projections. We observe human needs being projected and human pathology attempting to find an escape. However, for all these imperfections, at the heart of religion there is this constant attempt to respond to the attraction of the divine. This was recognised by Justin, an early Christian writer in his second open letter to the Roman emperor in defence of Christianity.

Whatever lawyers or philosophers uttered well,
 they elaborated by finding and contemplating some part of the Word.
 But since they did not know the whole of the Word, which is Christ,
 they often contradicted themselves.
 Whatever things were rightly said among people are the property of us Christians.
 For next to God we worship and love the Word
 who is from the unbegotten and ineffable God.
 The Word became human for our sakes,
 so that, sharing in our sufferings, he might also bring us healing.
 For all the writers were able to see realities in an obscure way
 through the sowing of the Word implanted in them.
 But the seed and the imitation imparted according to capacity is one thing,
 and quite another is the thing itself of which there is the participation and imitation
 according to the grace which is from him.

– *II Apologia*, c.160AD

A Missionary Church

We find a similar understanding in Irenaeus, a contemporary of Justin:

He who is truly spiritual, knowing always the same God,
and always acknowledging the same Word of God
(although the Word has but now been manifested to us)
and acknowledging also at all times the same Spirit of God
(although the Spirit has been poured out upon us
after a new fashion in these last times)
will know that the Son of God descends
even from the creation of the world to its end
upon the human race simply as such,
from whom those who believe God and follow God's Word
receive that salvation which flows from him.

– *Against Heresies* [c.180AD] IV,33.15

This same Irenaeus has a wonderfully positive image for the various ways in which human beings give expression to the divine. He writes: 'God put the human race together in many ways to effect a symphony of salvation'(AH IV,14,2).

To leap immediately over to modern times, let us listen to Pope Paul VI:

The Church respects and esteems these non-Christian religions because they are the living expression of the soul of vast groups of people. They carry within them the echo of thousands of years of searching for God, a quest which is incomplete but often made with great sincerity and righteousness of heart. They possess an impressive patrimony of deeply religious texts. They have taught generations of people how to pray. They are all impregnated with innumerable seeds of the Word and can constitute a true preparation for the Gospel.

– *Evangelisation in the Modern World*, 1975, n. 53

John-Paul II has a similar message in his *Mission of the Redeemer*(1990):

The first stages of the Kingdom of God can also be found beyond the confines of the Church among peoples everywhere, to the extent that they live 'Gospel values' and are open to the working of the Spirit who breathes when and where he wills.(n.20)

The Second Vatican Council recalls that the Spirit is at work in the heart of every person, through the 'seeds of the Word', to be found in human initiatives - including religious ones - and in the human effort to attain truth, goodness and God himself. (n.28)

It is the Spirit who sows the 'seeds of the Word' present in various customs and cultures, preparing them for full maturity in Christ. (n.28)

We must have respect for human beings in their quest for answers to the deepest questions of life, and respect for the action of the Holy Spirit in people. (n.29)

Every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit who is mysteriously present in every human heart. (n.29)

The Church addresses people with full respect for their freedom. This mission does not restrict freedom but rather promotes it. The Church proposes; it imposes

nothing. The Church respects individuals and cultures and honours the sanctuary of conscience. (n.39)

God calls all peoples. God is present in many ways, not only in individuals but in peoples through spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main expression, even when they contain gaps, insufficiencies and errors. (n.55)

Dialogue with those of other religions is demanded by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit. (n.56)

This wide range of religious experience is affirmed by the sacred Scriptures of all the major religions of the world in whatever way they conceive the ultimately Real to be: by the Vedas and the Upanishads, the sayings of K'ung-fu-tzu (Confucius) and Lao Tzu and of Gautama the Buddha, the oracles of the Hebrew prophets, the New Testament and the Qu'ran. It is of this that the mystics of all cultures speak, as do the poets, artists and lovers of our world.

All major religious movements must have achieved a degree of harmony to have appealed for so long to so many people. But some religions concentrate on the revelation of the transcendent God that is mediated through nature and history. This is the numinous dimension of religious experience. Such religions have high regard for the prophetic for they treasure the words received from those who are judged to have been especially sensitive to the divine presence. They are religions of the Word, religions of a Book. Obedience and submission to God's will are of central importance. Notable examples of such religions are Judaism which looks especially to Moses and the Torah, and Islam which looks especially to Mohammed and the Qu'ran. Other religions concentrate on the revelation of the transcendent God that is mediated through the movements of a person's mind and heart. This is the mystical dimension of religious experience, and inner enlightenment and transformation are given a high priority. We see this in Hinduism and Buddhism.

On the one hand, Christianity is like Judaism and Islam in that it recognises that God is present in the world and its history, speaking his word to us through nature and through the events of our life. To encounter God we must listen humbly and at depth to God's Word speaking to us from the heart of creation. Christianity sees Jesus as God's focal word. Listening to him we are able to avoid distraction and get to the heart of God's self-communication, for in him God's Word is made flesh. On the other hand, Christianity is like Hinduism and Buddhism in that its focus is on the heart. Jesus is the one who has the Spirit of God without reserve (John 3:34), a Spirit which he shares with his disciples, enabling us to experience in our hearts the enlightenment and transformation that is the fruit of divine communion. As Paul writes to the Romans: 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5).

In Jesus the numinous and the mystical come together. Authentic Christianity does not neglect or consider as illusory either the inner spirit or the outer word. For Christians, God remains transcendent, so we need to be attentive to the way in which God is revealed to us in the world, and especially in Jesus (God's Word). As in Judaism and Islam, obedience is basic. The Christian, however, is also invited to enjoy the wonderful indwelling of God revealed in Jesus and experienced as we are drawn by grace to share in Jesus'

A Missionary Church

intimate communion with God.

As in Hinduism and Buddhism, enlightenment, inner transformation and communion are essential dimension of religious living. We find both these elements in the opening words of John's First Letter:

Something which has existed since the beginning,
that we have heard and have seen with our own eyes;
that we have watched and touched with our hands:
the word who is life - this is our subject.
That life was made visible:
we saw it and we are giving our testimony,
telling you of the eternal life which was with the Father
and has been seen by us.
What we have seen and heard we are telling you
so that you too may be in union with us,
as we are in union with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.
We are writing this to you to make our own joy complete.

– 1John 1:1-4

These reflections are to remind us that we can learn about God from every good man and woman and from all that is noble, beautiful and true in all the cultures of our world (see Philippians 4:8). As we enter into loving dialogue – and this is especially important when we are ministering to the sick and vulnerable – let us pray that we are sacrament to each other of the Word made flesh, for it is he who promised: 'When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself' (John 12:32). It is he, we believe, who will bring to its full flowering all that is true in our unique, personal responses to God.

Jesus is God's perfect, focal Word

The Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin gives expression to sentiments that would be shared by many holy women and men from any number of the religious traditions that enrich our human family by contributing to what Justin Martyr calls 'a symphony of salvation.'

Those with a passionate sense of the divine cannot bear to find things about them obscure, tepid and empty, when they should be full and vibrant with God. They are astonished by the number of people linked in the unity of the same world, who are not yet fully kindled by the flame of the divine presence. There was a time when they thought that they had only to stretch out their hands in order to touch God to the measure of their desires. Now they see that the only embrace capable of enfolding the divine is that of all humankind opening its arms to call down and welcome the fire. The only subject capable ultimately of mystical transformation is the whole family of humankind forming a single body and a single soul in love.

– The Divine Milieu, 1926, page 144

A genuine religious sentiment cannot be sectarian. There is only one God. Everything and everybody is interconnected. We all belong, for we are all expressions of the one Source of all.

Every genuinely religious person recognises that love gives us our key insight into the sacred. While recognising God's self-communication throughout the whole of the created universe and the value of the response found in the various religions of the world, it is the conviction of Christianity that God's self-communication and the response to it reached its perfect human form in Jesus of Nazareth. Every created thing is an expression of God's Word, but Jesus is, as it were, God's focal Word, revealing without distortion, in his person and in his teaching, who God really is: a God of love. He also showed us how to respond to God in love. This conviction is expressed again and again throughout the documents of the New Testament:

In Christ the whole fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

– Colossians 1:14

Christ is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, who sustains all things by his powerful word.

– Hebrews 1:3

Such a claim is in no way disrespectful to the many human responses to God that find expression in other religions. Those of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries who became his disciples, saw him, not as abolishing Judaism, but as bringing it to its perfection (see Matthew 5:17). People from other religious traditions who have become disciples of Jesus could say the same about their religious heritage. God's self-communication is mediated to us and so subject to all kinds of distortions. Furthermore, we human beings don't always pick things up properly or respond appropriately. All this is, of course, true for those of us who wish to be disciples of Jesus. Heaven forbid that we should claim to be better than anyone else. The Christian claim is about Jesus, not about how others have presented him to us or how we are responding.

We have stressed the need for constant correction and purification of our concept of God. Christian tradition does this by focusing on the person and the life of Jesus, drawing on the experience of those of his contemporaries who found in him a perfect human expression of God. Their experience has been re-affirmed by the countless millions since who have looked to him, and committed themselves to live as his disciples. While sharing in God's own respect for the genuine response to God of every person and of all cultures, Christians enjoy the immense privilege of knowing Jesus. Reflection on the life and significance of Jesus has been for Christians the richest source for their reflections on the meaning of God, and so for their reflections on the meaning of human experience.

The goal of our lives is communion in love with God. Christians have discovered that the way to the communion of love for which we are created is through Jesus. They have found in Jesus the way to connect with their deepest yearnings, and the way to connect them with God. Jesus lives this communion. He reveals the life-giving truth of God's love and, through the gift of his own life, he enables us to share this divine communion. Addressing the Jewish Council, Peter speaks of Jesus and says: 'There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12).

A Missionary Church

In the Gospel of John Jesus says to Thomas: 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6). One hears texts such as these being used in an attempt to prove that only those who are explicitly and consciously Christian can be saved. Such an interpretation is contrary to the teaching of the whole New Testament. God alone can save. How can we be saved if we reject God's self-revelation and redeeming action in Jesus? This is the point of Peter's assertion. The Jesus who is speaking in John's Gospel is the Divine Word. John is stating that we cannot achieve communion with God in any other way than in response to God's self-giving, God's Word, of whom Jesus is the perfect human expression. John-Paul II writes:

Christ the Redeemer fully reveals to us who we are as human beings ... If you wish to understand yourself thoroughly you must draw near to Christ ... The Redemption that took place through the Cross has definitively restored to human beings their dignity and given back meaning to our life in the world.

– *The Redeemer of Humankind*, n. 10

The Church's fundamental function in every age, and particularly in ours, is to direct the gaze of human beings, to point the awareness and experience of the whole of humanity, towards the mystery of Christ. (n. 275)

In this definitive Word of his revelation, God has made himself known in the fullest possible way. God has revealed to humankind who he is. This definitive self-revelation of God is the fundamental reason why the Church is missionary by her very nature. The Church cannot do otherwise than proclaim the Gospel, that is, the fullness of the truth which God has enabled us to know about himself.

– *Mission of the Redeemer*, n.5

Let us ask, firstly, who are called to come to God? The answer to this question is clearly 'Everyone'. Paul writes: 'God our Saviour desires *everyone* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Timothy 2:4). He also writes: 'The grace of God has appeared for the salvation of *all*' (Titus 2:11). 'As one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's righteous living leads to acquittal and life for *all*' (Romans 5:18). 'God has assigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon *all*' (Romans 11:32).

This conviction is at the heart of Paul's belief that the gospel is to be preached to 'every creature under heaven' (Colossians 1:23), for 'all things have been created through him [Jesus] and for him' (Colossians 1:16). Jesus is the human expression of God's divine Word and 'there is only one God' (Romans 3:29), and 'from God and through God and to God are *all* things' (Romans 11:36). Paul is simply echoing the words of Jesus when he said: 'When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw *all* people to myself' (John 12:32). The essence of the Gospel is that God is indeed the Creator of every person conceived into this world, and that God's love for each is unconditional and complete. It is obvious from everything Jesus did and said that God intends to draw everyone into divine communion.

This leads to a second question: How does God intend to draw everyone to God? It is the Spirit of God that fills all things. Now that Jesus has been raised to fullness of life by God, it is the Spirit of God in Jesus – the Spirit which binds him in love to the Father – that fills all things, giving life to all who open their hearts to this Spirit.

It is the belief of Christians that when we respond to God’s invitation to live in divine communion, we are drawn to share the life, the prayer-communion of Jesus himself. It is God who transforms us by drawing us into ever more intimate communion. Transforming union happens as we allow ourselves to be drawn into divine communion by Jesus’ own Spirit of Love. Paul writes: ‘God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us’(Romans 5:5).

To the Samaritan woman Jesus promised: ‘The water that I will give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life’(John 4:14). On a later occasion Jesus promised that rivers of life-giving water would flow from the heart of those who believed in him. John adds the following comment: ‘Jesus was speaking of the Spirit which those who believe in him were to receive’(John 7:38-39). At the last supper we hear Jesus say:

Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.

– John 14:23

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us ... so that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and I in them.

– John 17:21,26

The sacrament of the Spirit of Jesus’ love, the place where Jesus’ Spirit is powerfully effective, is the community of the Church, an extension in the world of Jesus’ body. It is in a special way in and through the church that God speaks God’s Word and communicates himself to the world. Paul writes: ‘God has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of God’s will, according to God’s good pleasure which God set forth in Christ as God’s providential design for the fullness of time, to put *all* things under Christ as head ... God has made him head over *all* things for the Church which is his body, the fullness of him who fills *all* things completely, everywhere’ (Ephesians 1:9-10, 22-23).

Those who shared Jesus’ Spirit shared his commitment to all people. From the beginning, the church was called ‘catholic’ for the very reason that it was committed to universality. The church’s mission is to carry on the mission of Jesus from whose love no one is excluded, and, as Ignatius of Antioch wrote in the first years of the second century: ‘Where Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church’(Epistle to Smyrna 8.2).

Living by Jesus’ Spirit is not simply a matter of words, or externals. It is a matter of faith, hope and love. As Jesus said: ‘It is not anyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord”, who will enter the kingdom of Heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father’(Matthew 7:21). Faith, in the whole biblical tradition, is a matter of listening to God’s word, taking it seriously, and acting accordingly. The only kind of faith which Paul sought to inspire in people was ‘faith working through love’(Galatians 5:6). We are to ‘do the truth in love’(Ephesians 4:15).

A Missionary Church

We can conclude that if we wish to be saved, each of us, from where we now stand, must draw closer to full communion with the ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic church’ (Creed of Nicene-Constantinople, 381AD), and be committed to a life of deeper faith, more trusting hope, and more perfect love. It follows that to reject, positively and explicitly, belief in Jesus as the revelation of God is to reject God’s Word, and to refuse to welcome God’s offer of life: ‘Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved; whoever rejects belief will be condemned’ (Mark 16:16). This is not because the exalted Jesus is not drawing everyone to himself and so to the Father, but because such a person refuses to receive the offer so lovingly made.

What, then, of those who have never heard of Jesus? What of people who think they are rejecting Jesus, but are rejecting only the false Jesus which has been presented to them? If God really intends everyone to be saved, is God limited by geography or by our sinful failure to preach the Gospel in an authentic way? Must those who through no fault of their own have never had an opportunity explicitly to come to know and love Jesus miss out on the opportunity to respond to the Spirit of the risen Jesus and be drawn to the Father?

Does not Paul say that Jesus ‘fills *all* things, completely, everywhere’ (Ephesians 1:23). Jesus is the Word of God made flesh (John 1:13). This Word spoke in the prophets for centuries before the Incarnation (Hebrews 1:1). This same self-communication of God has been operative ‘since the beginning’ (1John 1:1), ‘enlightening *everyone*’ (John 1:9). The risen Jesus is now drawing everyone to himself, drawing them in mysterious ways to ‘everything that is true, everything that is honourable, everything that is upright and pure, everything that we love and admire’ (Philippians 4:8). ‘For those who aimed for glory and honour and immortality by persevering in doing good, there will be eternal life ... glory and honour and peace will come to everyone who does good’ (Romans 2:7,10). Condemnation is only for those who sin ‘without excuse’ (Romans 1:20).

The Second Vatican Council has this to say:

The Christian partakes in the paschal mystery, becomes like Christ in his death and will encounter the resurrection fortified with hope. Nor does this hold only for those who believe in Christ: it holds for all people of good will in whose hearts grace works in an invisible fashion. Christ died for everybody, everybody’s ultimate vocation is the same, divine vocation; then we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers everybody the possibility of sharing in some way known to God in this paschal mystery.

– GS, n.22

This does not lessen the importance of preaching the Gospel to everyone by word and example, and of welcoming everyone into the church which is the ‘fullness of Christ’. God willed to reveal God’s heart in the heart of Jesus. God willed to reveal God’s face in the face of Christ. God willed to reveal God’s word in the words of Jesus. We who have had the privilege of seeing ‘the glory of God on the face of Jesus’ (2Corinthians 4:6) and hearing his words and experiencing the intimacy of his heart will surely want to respond to his mission to draw all to Jesus so that they will know who it is who is drawing them to the Father. Let us listen also to the following exhortation from Pope Paul VI:

It would be useful if every Christian and every evangeliser were to pray about the following thought: people can gain salvation also in other ways, by God's mercy, even though we do not preach the Gospel to them; but as for us, can we gain salvation if through negligence or fear or shame – what Saint Paul called 'blushing for the Gospel' (Romans 1:16) – or as a result of false ideas, we fail to preach it? For that would be to betray the call of God, who wishes the seed to bear fruit through the voice of the ministers of the Gospel; and it will depend on us whether this grows into trees and produces its full fruit.

Let us therefore preserve our fervour of spirit. Let us preserve the delightful and comforting joy of evangelising, even when it is in tears that we must sow. May it mean for us – as it did for John the Baptist, for Peter and Paul, for the other Apostles and for a multitude of splendid evangelisers all through the Church's history – an interior enthusiasm that nobody and nothing can quench.

May it be the great joy of our consecrated lives. And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the Good News not from evangelisers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervour, who have first received the joy of Christ, and who are willing to risk their lives so that the Kingdom may be proclaimed and the Church established in the midst of the world.

– Evangelisation in the Modern World, 1975, n. 80

The risen Jesus is already drawing every person to himself and so to his Father. People will be saved if they respond to his Spirit, even if they do not come to an explicit awareness of who it is who is drawing them. The task of the Christian Church is to be the instrument of Jesus for drawing everyone to the fullness of his life. Christians are to grow to be able to say: 'It is no longer I, but Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20). We are to be the face and the heart of Jesus in the world. We are to mediate his grace and draw everyone to the fullness of life in him and the assurance of salvation that comes with living his life. The Church is to be a 'seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race.'⁶

Let us then in our dealings with each other generously share what we have experienced of God's Word and Spirit through our communion with Jesus, knowing that God is already speaking his Word to everyone and pouring over them God's own Spirit of love. As we speak, let us listen, trusting that in this dialogue we will all come to know and love Jesus better and so enjoy an ever more profound communion in the divine life of love. Let us do so in the profound hope that where Jesus is presented in an authentic way, those whose hearts are open will come to recognise in him the fulfilment of any genuine religious experience. What is important is that we believe that this is happening, not that we receive evident signs.

The cultural dimension of evangelisation

The church is the body of Christ in the world. It is also to be his heart and his face, revealing to everyone the heart and the face of God:

A Missionary Church

All this could be expressed in the following words: what matters is to evangelise human culture and cultures (not in a purely decorative way as it were by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to their very roots), in the wide and rich sense which these terms have in *Gaudium et Spes* (cf n.53), always taking the person as one's starting point and always coming back to the relationships of people among themselves and with God ... The Gospel and evangelisation are capable of permeating all cultures without being subject to any one of them. The split between the Gospel and culture is without doubt the drama of our time, just as it was of other times. Therefore every effort must be made to ensure a full evangelisation of cultures. They have to be regenerated by an encounter with the Gospel. But this encounter will not take place if the Gospel is not proclaimed.

– EN, n.20

The Church believes she can contribute greatly towards making the family of mankind and its history more human.

– GS, n. 40

We are witnesses of the birth of a new humanism, one in which man and woman are defined first of all by their responsibility towards each other and towards history.

– GS, n. 55

Christians cannot yearn for anything more ardently than to serve the people of the modern world ever more generously and effectively.

– GS, n. 93

The attention of the Council has been diverted to the trend of modern culture, centred on humanity. We would say directed rather than diverted ... If we remember how in everyone we can and must recognise the countenance of Christ, especially when tears and sorrows make it plain to see, and if we can and must recognise in Christ's countenance the countenance of our heavenly Father, then our humanism becomes Christianity, our Christianity becomes centred on God.

– Paul VI, 7/12/65. *Catholic Mind*, April 1966, 62-63

Paul VI often spoke of our mission to build 'a civilisation of love'. The so-called *New Evangelisation* promoted by John-Paul II is directed to populations that were Christianised in the past but are now living in a secularised world that denies religion any value and simply tolerates a private religion or sometimes directly attacks even this or hinders it indirectly by policies and practices that marginalise believers and their communities. The world today needs to hear God's Word and to experience God's Spirit as much as in any period of history. As we continue the mission entrusted to us by Jesus let us listen to the words of Paul Tillich:

Only those who have experienced the shock of transitoriness, the anxiety in which they are aware of their finitude, the threat of non-being, can understand what the notion of God means. Only those who have experienced the tragic ambiguities of our historical existence and have totally questioned the meaning of existence can understand what the symbol of the kingdom of God means.

– Systematic Theology, Chicago 1951, I:61-62

The priest's privileged role in a local Christian community
that is called to be missionary

The following quotations from Pope John-Paul II, stress the missionary nature of the Christian community and the privileged role of the priest in the church's witness to the world.

The spiritual life of the priest should be profoundly marked by a missionary zeal and dynamism. In the exercise of their ministry and the witness of their lives, priests have the duty to form the community entrusted to them as a truly missionary community.

– PDV, n.32

Peoples everywhere, open the doors to Christ! His Gospel in no way detracts from human freedom, from the respect that is owed to every culture and to whatever is good in each religion.

– MRr, n.3

'Everyone is searching for the Good News, albeit at times in a confused way, and all have a right to know the value of this gift and to approach it freely.

– MR, n.11

Missionary activity to those who do not know Christ has only one purpose: to serve men and women by revealing to them the love of God shown forth in Jesus Christ..

– MR, n.2

Working for the Kingdom of God means acknowledging and promoting God's activity, which is present in human history and transforms it. Building the kingdom means working for liberation from evil in all its forms. The Kingdom of God is the manifestation and realisation of God's plan of salvation in all its fullness.

– MR, n.15

The ultimate purpose of mission is to enable people to share in the communion which exists between the Father and the Son.

– MR, n.23

Missionary dynamism is not born of the will of those who decide to become propagators of their faith. It is born of the Spirit and it progresses through faith in God's love.

– MR, n.44

Through the action of the Holy Spirit the Good News takes shape in human minds and hearts and extends through history. In all of this it is the Holy Spirit who gives life.

– Lord and Giver of Life, n. 42