
“PUT OUT INTO DEEP WATER” (LUKE 5:4) MEANINGS AND METHODS OF CATHOLIC MISSION FROM POPE BENEDICT XV TO POPE FRANCIS

“划到深处去”（路 5:4）¹：从本笃十五世到 教宗方济各，天主教传教的意义与方法

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ABSTRACT

Issued one year after the end of World War I, the apostolic letter of Pope Benedict XV *Maximum Illud* attempted to renew the Catholic church's commitment to its mission. Highlighting the universality of Christian mission and fostering a new attention to the richness of cultures, the letter places itself at the starting point of the concept of inculturation. This new theological understanding deals with the awareness that the Spirit of God operates in the heart of men and cultures even before the arrival of the Gospel. It has found an astonishing fulfilment, one hundred years later, in the signing of a *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb that demonstrates a new approach not only toward interreligious dialogue, but also toward a new frontier of shared truths that, beyond religious differences, affirm our common commitment to human dignity, peace and mutual respect, reciprocity and care. The study suggests that this theological shift has been partially developed thanks to the spiritual experience of some of the protagonists of the Chinese “missionary laboratory” in the first decades of XX century, i.e. the two Lazarist priests Cotta and Lebbe and, above all, Cardinal Celso Costantini.

A SPIRITUAL CRY IN FAVOUR OF PEACE

Issued on 30 November 1919, one year after the end of World War I, the apostolic letter of Pope Benedict XV *Maximum Illud*, “On the propagation of the faith throughout the world,” was an attempt to renew the Catholic church's mission after the devastating havoc of the war. From this perspective, *Maximum Illud* sought to foster the primacy of the Gospel inside the Church, in an awareness that a serious spiritual rebirth of Christians was urgently needed (Iheanacho, 2015). Benedict XV's message was also a denunciation of the odious contrasts that characterized the work of missionaries with a much too nationalistic understanding of their mission: “It would be tragic indeed if any of our missionaries forgot the dignity of their office so completely as to busy themselves with the interests of their terrestrial homeland instead of with those of their homeland in heaven” (Benedict XV, 1919, n. 19). Among the

various dangers deriving from such behaviour, Benedict XV points out the worst, i.e., the corruption of the true image of God:

Such a situation could easily give rise to the conviction that the Christian religion is the national religion of some foreign people and that anyone converted to it is abandoning his loyalty to his own people and submitting to the pretensions and domination of a foreign power (Benedict XV, 1919, n. 19).

It is useful to recall that *Maximum Illud's* warnings against a nationalistic interpretation of Christian religion were inspired by the Church's experiences in China. Scholars, in fact, have clearly pointed out that Benedict XV and his advisors in the *Propaganda Fide* were moved by a report by the Lazarist missionary,¹ Antonio Cotta (1872-1957) (Anderson, 1999, p. 154), who on 6 February 1917 wrote concerning the challenges he and another Lazarist priest, Vincent Lebbe, (1877-1940) (Anderson, 1999, pp. 388-389; Iheanacho, 2015, pp. 185ff), faced in the Chinese mission. Sent to Tientsin in 1906, where Lebbe had already been working since 1901, the two missionaries became staunch advocates of the Chinese and found themselves increasingly opposed to the elitist mentality prevailing in the missionary communities. They attempted to make the Chinese church more Chinese through a work of inculturation and training of the local clergy. This was an effort that really fostered a new understanding of the church not as a servant of the foreign nations, but as a mission deriving from the nature of Christian community (Gabrieli, 2015). In hindsight, China served as a "missionary experiment" that prompted a wide rethinking of the evangelization process of the Catholic church (Parolin, 2019).

LIGHTS AND SHADOWS

Benedict XV's letter has been rightly praised as the *magna charta* of Catholic missions in the twentieth century. One of its first aims is to renew a more broad-minded understanding of the openness of the Christian message to all cultures

¹ The Lazarists are the priests of the Congregation of the Mission founded in 1625 by Saint Vincent de Paul (1581-1660).

and civilizations: "The Catholic Church is not an intruder in any country; nor is she alien to any people" (Benedict XV, 1919, n. 16). Neither an intruder nor an alien: Benedict XV's affirmation is the modest starting point of a process that lasts until today:

It is only right that those who exercise her sacred ministry should come from every nation, so that their countrymen can look to them for instruction in the law of God and leadership on the way to salvation (Benedict XV, 1919, n. 16).

If, on the one hand, *Maximum Illud* stresses the need of establishing a local hierarchy and clergy, on the other, it considers local priests ready for their mission just when and if their preparation manages to move far beyond national belonging. The education of local priests - the document explains - "should be complete and finished, excellent in all its phases, the same kind of education for the priesthood that a European would receive" (Benedict XV, 1919, n. 15). In the mind of the Pope, such an indication intends to counter a way of considering local priests as a "subordinate priesthood," doomed - the letter states - "to perform the humbler duties of the ministry, acting as the assistants of foreign priests" (Benedict XV, 1919, n. 15). Local priests - the Pope continues - "must take up God's work as equals, so that someday they will be able to enter upon the spiritual leadership of their people" (Benedict XV, 1919, n. 15). Nevertheless, even this model of priestly formation continues to assume the subtle Eurocentric pretence that western education remains the point of reference for the whole church.

A richer and more encouraging perspective towards a deeper connection of Catholic mission with peoples and cultures is *Maximum Illud's* insistence on languages.

Among the attainments necessary for the life of a missionary, a place of paramount importance must obviously be granted to the language of the people to whose salvation he will devote himself. He should not be content with a smattering of the language but should be able to speak it readily and competently (Benedict XV,

1919, n. 24).

Indeed, the attention to languages and their more serious study and understanding should launch a progressively richer contact with various cultures and promote a “science of missiology” that the letter hopes will develop as “a branch of study that from now on is to be included in the curriculum” of missionaries (Benedict XV, 1919, n. 23).

“CHINA BELONGS TO THE CHINESE
PEOPLE”:
THE LEGACY OF CELSO COSTANTINI

Beyond the exhortations just acknowledged, the movement started by *Maximum Illud* led to a significant renewal of the missionary action of the church, shaping it for the greater part of the twentieth century (Iheanacho, 2015, pp. 229ff). The main protagonist of the implementation of the letter in the Far East lands was surely Cardinal Celso Benigno Luigi Costantini (1876-1958), the first apostolic Delegate to China (Gabrieli, 2015; Rampazzo, 2012).

“It is only right that those who exercise her sacred ministry should come from every nation, so that their countrymen can look to them for instruction in the law of God and leadership on the way to salvation.” (Benedict XV, 1919, *Maximum Illud*)

Having arrived in China in late 1922, Costantini’s work from the beginning moved in the direction indicated by *Maximum Illud*: promoting a strong evangelization and helping the local church to become fully indigenous. In his recollection of the eleven years he spent in China, published in 1946, Costantini summarized his goals with these clear words:

The Apostolic Delegate’s mission has an exclusively religious and missionary dimension: it has not to have any bond or political aim. ... I depend only from the Pope and just represent the Pope. The Holy See ... has no imperialistic goal in China. ... China belongs to the Chinese people (Costantini, 1946, p. 4).

Missions must serve China and not take advantage of it.

When the time comes to institute somewhere the church with its local hierarchy, then foreign missionaries have achieved their goal and have to leave and go elsewhere to prepare and promote the institution of other local churches (Costantini, 1946, p. 4).

Costantini’s slogan “China to the Chinese” was, indeed, a clear reaction against the colonial perspective that associated the experience of converting to Christianity with the loss of Chinese identity. On the contrary, love for homeland, its culture and traditions is deeply rooted in the Christian experience. In a spiritual reflection written in Beijing in 1927, Costantini clearly points out that charity has to be the exclusive foundation of Christian mission.

The bedrock of Christian preaching is charity and also the means of preaching must show the characters of charity, mildness and humility: ‘learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart’ (Matthew 11:19) (Pighin, 2019, p. 50).

The more the church develops its spiritual identity in the direction of the mystery of the Incarnation, the more it experiences a fruitful openness to every culture and tradition.

Costantini’s main achievements in China are known: he called the first episcopal conference in Shanghai in 1924 – discussing how to foster local clergy and equality between foreign and native priests, made new constitutions for the missions in China, helped the founding of the Fu Jen Catholic University in Beijing, identified six indigenous Chinese candidates for episcopal ordination and established several regional major seminaries. Of particular interest, is the foundation in 1927 of the religious congregation

of the Disciples of the Lord, which sought to promote a better Chinese training for the local clergy and also to overcome Chinese skepticism about Catholicism as a foreign religion, thus fulfilling the deep aims of *Maximum Illud* (Tai Fai, 2015, pp. 13-15).

up for us, who is living and who offers us his salvation and his friendship” (Francis I, 2013, n. 128). Furthermore, the message has to be given not as an imperious truth, but it has to be “shared humbly as a testimony on the part of one who is always willing to learn.” In other words, our listeners must first of all “have an experience of

“In the name of God, in order to safeguard peace, we need to enter together as one family into an ark which can sail the stormy seas of the world: *the ark of fraternity*.” (Francis I, 2019)

POPE FRANCIS’ “PERSON TO PERSON” APPROACH

It is difficult to overstate the significance of such a renewal of missionary practice and its role in laying the groundwork for the Second Vatican Council’s general method of “scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (Second Vatican Council, 1965b, n. 4). Once more, China reveals itself as an incredibly fruitful laboratory for the future of Christianity. In particular, we can notice the deep correspondence between Costantini’s vision and the missionary method described by Pope Francis as the “person to person” approach (Francis, 2013, nn. 127-129). This becomes the sole way through which we can experience a real and profound missionary renewal: a kind of informal preaching that can take place everywhere and out of any institutionalized context. “Being a disciple - Francis observes - means being constantly ready to bring the love of Jesus to others, and this can happen unexpectedly and in any place: on the street, in a city square, during work, on a journey” (Francis I, 2013, n. 127). A preaching that must always be respectful and gentle, grounded on personal dialogue and permeated by a profound and loving listening to the other person who “speaks and shares his or her joys, hopes and concerns for loved ones, or so many other heartfelt needs” (Francis I, 2013, n. 128). Only then, Francis continues, it is possible to bring up God’s word, “but always keeping in mind the fundamental message: the personal love of God who became man, who gave himself

being listened to and understood” (n. 128).

This “person to person” approach is based on a deep theological truth embodied in the process of inculturation, which we’ve already seen communicated in the efforts of Benedict XV and Costantini: the message of the Gospel has its own ways through which it reaches the hearts of people. Somehow, we simply have to realize that God’s word is already there when we start our evangelization: the mission that will be more a realization of what is already present in those we serve, promising an experience in which missionaries receive more than they give, listen more than they speak and, above all, discover that a new and original synthesis between the Gospel and the cultures of our recipients has already started (Second Vatican Council, 1965a, n. 1; Theobald, 2009, pp. 56ff).

ONE PEOPLE WITH MANY FACES

The challenge of inculturation is the contemporary frontier of Christian mission and any attempt at evangelization. The firm point of departure is the realization that “grace supposes culture, and God’s gift becomes flesh in the culture of those who receive it” (Francis, 2013, n. 115). The history of the Church shows countless examples of a fruitful Christian life experienced and shaped according to the various cultures of the world. This is a process that does not harm the unity of the church and can even better express her genuine catholicity and enrich the experience itself of being Christian.

Through inculturation, the Church

introduces peoples, together with their cultures, into her own community, for every culture offers positive values and forms which can enrich the way the Gospel is preached, understood and lived (Francis, 2013, n. 115).

Francis' insight does justice to the logic of the incarnation, by fostering the transcultural content of the Gospel: "In the evangelization of new cultures ..., it is not essential to impose a specific cultural form, no matter how beautiful or ancient it may be, together with the Gospel" (Francis, 2013, n. 117). Since Christ's incarnation, God's grace has reached every human being: fully realizing this truth, we must dare to transform our basic awareness of human existence. Each person is not simply the recipient of external laws and prescriptions but is intimately and originally gifted and transformed by divine grace. In other words, human life holds from its very beginning the task of contributing to the enrichment and beautification of the world and its history (Francis, 2016, n. 77).

"PUT OUT INTO DEEP WATER"

A promising indication of this new Christian understanding is the recent signing of the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* by His Holiness Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, in Abu Dhabi, 4 February 2019. In it, in fact, we can easily discover the two perspectives we have discussed: on the one hand, the importance of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel; on the other, the claim to look to cultures and religions as expressions of the one mystery of the divine.

In the speech he gave before signing the document, Francis sets himself in the footsteps of St. Francis of Assisi meeting the Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil in Damietta, in September 1219, during the fifth Crusade: "I came here" - he says - "as a believer thirsting for peace, as a brother seeking peace with the brethren. We are here to desire peace, to promote peace, to be instruments of peace" (Francis, 2019).

Pope Francis proves to have a profound and clear awareness of the moment in which our whole humanity lives. The world is approaching a devastating flood, he claims, and, because of this, as Noah did, we too need to enter into a new ark: "In the name of God, in order to safeguard peace, we need to enter together as one family into an ark which can sail the stormy seas of the world: *the ark of fraternity*" (Francis, 2019). The sooner we agree and submit ourselves to mutual scrutiny, the faster we can be ready to listen to the appeal of God for us in this very moment and enter in the new ark of fraternity.

This ark will surely move us in the direction of that "deep water" Jesus recommended for his disciples' nets (Luke 5:4): moving us toward a full awareness that "God is at the origin of the one human family" and "wants us to live as brothers and sisters, dwelling in the common home of creation which he has given us," because "all persons have equal dignity and that no one can be a master or slave of others" (Francis, 2019). Human fraternity is indeed the deepest revelation of God's grace in the world and the strongest means for building a possible future for all of us. In a word, our sole possibility, as Francis claims:

There is no alternative: we will either build the future together or there will not be a future. Religions, in particular, cannot renounce the urgent task of building bridges between peoples and cultures. The time has come when religions should more actively exert themselves, with courage and audacity, and without pretence, to help the human family deepen the capacity for reconciliation, the vision of hope and the concrete paths of peace (Francis, 2019).

There is no clearer indication of the direction of Christian missionary work today than this claim for world fraternity: an urgent, demanding and widespread task for our present and future.



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