

“Mission in the heart of the Order”
Reflection about our missionary vocation
“Missio ad gentes”

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The Capuchin reform was inspired by the desire for contemplation and itinerant preaching. This latter moved Capuchins very early to preach the gospel not only outside Italy but also to non-Christians. Also today many brothers go beyond their own borders to new cultures. At the beginning of 2012 the Order was present in 106 countries: Fruit of a mission thrust in history and in the present.

Christ is the model of all mission. He was sent by the Father to proclaim good news to the poor and he himself sent his disciples – in the power of the Holy Spirit - to proclaim the Gospel.

Pope Paul VI stresses in his Apostolic Letter [*Evangelii nuntiandi*](#): “... the presentation of the Gospel message is not an optional contribution for the Church. It is the duty incumbent on her by the command of the Lord Jesus, so that people can believe and be saved” (EN 5). Mission is the “Church’s deepest identity” (EN 14). The Pope explicitly highlights the qualitative dimension of evangelization: “For the Church it is a question not only of preaching the Gospel in ever wider geographic areas or to ever greater numbers of people, but also of affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, ... models of life, which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation” (EN 19). Because it is also a matter of serving the coming reign of God (EN 8), an essential part of the gospel proclamation is justice and peace (Paul VI, [*Iustitiam et Pacem*](#), 6 January 1967; Const. 174, 3). It is clear that evangelization must continue, even after a local Church has been established (EN 51, 54, 56).

The understanding of mission in the Church has seen many developments over the last fifty years. In his missionary encyclical [*Redemptoris Missio: On the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate*](#) (1990), Pope John Paul II distinguishes three missionary situations: The mission *ad gentes* – i.e. the first proclamation; Normal pastoral activity in established structures; The new evangelization – i.e. where baptized Christians have distanced themselves from the faith and from the Church (RM 36).

While all activity of the Church should be outreaching (*missionary*), we usually use the term “Mission” for the service of the kingdom of God that includes going beyond the boundaries of nation, language and culture. This trans-national or cross-cultural experience is much more characteristic of the missionary today than the place where he works (which can be the north or the south, the Amazon rain forest, or a megalopolis such as New York City) or the actual activity he engages in.

This “Mission” manifests the Church’s universality, makes the power of Christianity to transcend frontiers palpable, and reminds people that the message of Jesus is for everyone. It means going where no one else goes¹, taking upon oneself the discomforts, the long journeys and poor communications, accepting adversities and sub-standard living conditions, as well as enduring the poverty or even the coldness of faith in supposedly highly-developed regions of the world.

Missionaries embark on their task out of passion for God and humanity.

¹ Cf. Mauro Jöhri, “*Mission at the heart of the Order*”, Circular Letter No. 5, 1.7.

In an increasingly globalized world, where a variety of religious expressions and worldviews meet and sometimes clash, an apostolic attitude requires great sensitivity and attention to dialogue.

Francis of Assisi was the first founder to incorporate missionary activity into a religious Rule. Even if, with the Church (*Ad Gentes, Nostra Aetate*), we recognize that other religions are also ways to salvation, we cannot fail to present Jesus Christ to people as the Way, the Truth and the Life. With Francis, we see the Gospel not as our own personal possession but as something that is offered to all. At the same time, from the missionary practice of the Poverello we learn respect for unfamiliar religions and cultures and a method for engaging in dialogue. Chapter XVI of the *Earlier Rule* makes it clear that personal life witness must come before any proclamation of the Word, and that mission is something that a Franciscan *is* first and foremost, not something that he or she does.

Just as Francis was on fire with love for Christ and his Gospel, passion for the Gospel is the foundation and support of our missionary vocation. Contemplation of the humility of God led Francis to give himself, and what seemed bitter to him at first was changed into sweetness. He did not organize foreign assistance or the provision of medicines for the lepers but served them himself by washing their wounds and kissing their sores. Franciscan Mission does not depend on structures and finances but on the self-giving of the brothers.

“After the Lord had given me brothers, he showed me what I had to do.” (*Testament*, 14) The fraternity is the place where we recognize God’s mandate and mission. Francis sends his brothers out into the world two by two, as in the gospel. As well as confirming the idea that the message needs to be confirmed by a witness, this also shows a clear commitment to dialogue, conversation, mutual correction and support etc. The missionary is in constant need of conversion if he is to be able to build community and thereby give the world an example of reconciliation.

Even if the theory is clear, our practices seem to be different. During the International Chapter of Mats in Assisi in 2009, Br. Raniero Cantalamessa OFMCap, the Papal preacher, said: “We Catholics, because of our past, are more ready to be “pastors” than “fishers of men”. I mean we are better placed to shepherd the people who have remained faithful to the Church, than to bring in new people, or to “fish back” those who have drifted away”².

Br. Mauro Jöhri reminds the Order: “Granted that not all the brothers are called to actually leave their own country to do mission work, as sons of Saint Francis we are all called to be missionaries (PCO III 10). The Capuchin lesser brother cannot opt out of this commitment. A missionary obedience is not fulfilled only by leaving the country, but also by supporting the brother who does leave, by accompanying him in prayer, by offering concrete help and co-operation, and by encouraging other friars or lay people to assume responsibility for mission.”³

To prepare for the reflection meeting read also the Circular Letter No. 5 from Br. Mauro Jöhri “*Mission at the heart of the Order*”:

<http://www.db.ofmcap.org/ofmcap/allegati/2316/circolare05-en.pdf>

² Raniero Cantalamessa, *Osserviamo la Regola che abbiamo promessa*, in *La maturità evangelica di Francesco* (a cura di Enzo Fortunato), Padova 2009, 116-117.

³ Cf. Mauro Jöhri, “*Mission at the heart of the Order*”, Circular Letter No. 5, 2.5.

These questions may help you to prepare for the reflection:

1. After reading this material: Where do you feel confirmed in your thinking about Mission? What are new insights?
2. Do you feel challenged? How?
3. Have you ever thought about Mission as part of your vocation as Christian and Capuchin?
4. Where and how have you been “missionary” until now, maybe even without noticing it?
5. How should Mission be lived today?
6. “Mission is something that a Franciscan *is* first and foremost, not something that he or she does.” What does this actually mean?
7. What are special elements of a Capuchin-Franciscan Mission?
8. What do you think about the connection between Mission and money?
9. What do you think about the connection between Mission and faith?
10. How could you prepare yourself during formation to live the Capuchin missionary charism?

**MISSION IS
TO GET STARTED**

Mission means to get started,
to get on the move,
to leave everything,
to come out of one’s shell,
to break the crust of egoism
which imprisons us in our Ego.

Mission means to stop
to rotate around ourselves
as if we were the centre
of the world and of life.

Mission means not to lock oneself into
the problem of the small world
to which we belong.
Humanity is much bigger.

Mission always means to get started
but not to guzzle kilometers.
Mission most particularly means
to open up for others as
if we were siblings,
to find them, and
to meet them.
And if it is necessary
to find and to love them,
we might cross oceans,
and fly through the air,
mission is to set off
to the ends of the earth.

*Dom Helder Camara, (1909 – 1999)
Archbishop of Recife-Olinda*