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Led by the Spirit for Mission: the Pope's Message for the 54th World Day of Prayer for Vocations

"Led by the Spirit for Mission" is the title of Pope Francis' message for the 54th World Day of Prayer for Vocations, to be held on Sunday 7 May 2017, in which after having addressed in the past years the theme of the invitation to come out of oneself to listen to the voice of God and the importance of the ecclesial community as a privileged place for the manifestation of the Lord's call, the Holy Father reflects on another aspect of the Christian vocation: its missionary dimension.

The following is the full text of the message:

In the last few years, we have considered two aspects of the Christian vocation: the summons to "go out from ourselves" to hear the Lord's voice, and the importance of the ecclesial community as the privileged place where God's call is born, nourished and expressed.

Now, on this 54th World Day of Prayer for Vocations, I would like to reflect on the missionary dimension of our Christian calling. Those who drawn by God's voice and determined to follow Jesus soon discover within themselves an irrepressible desire to bring the Good News to their brothers and sisters through proclamation and the service of charity. All Christians are called to be missionaries of the Gospel! As disciples, we do not receive the gift of God's love for our personal consolation, nor are we called to promote ourselves, or a business concern. We are simply men and women touched and transformed by the joy of God's love, who cannot keep this experience just to ourselves. For "the Gospel joy which enlivens the community of disciples is a missionary joy (Evangelii Gaudium, 21).

Commitment to mission is not something added on to the Christian life as a kind of decoration, but is instead an essential element of faith itself. A relationship with the Lord entails being sent out into the world as prophets of His word and witnesses of His love.

Even if at times we are conscious of our weaknesses and tempted to discouragement, we need to turn with God with confidence. We must overcome a sense of our own inadequacy and not yield to pessimism, which merely turns us into passive spectators of a dreary and monotonous life. There is no room for fear! God himself comes to cleanse our "unclean lips" and equip us for the mission: "Your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I, send me'" (Is 6:6-8).

In the depths of their heart, all missionary disciples hear this divine voice bidding them to "go about", as Jesus did, "doing good and healing all" (cf. Acts 10:38). I have mentioned that, by virtue of baptism, every Christian is a "Christopher", a bearer of Christ, to his brothers and sisters (cf. Catechesis, 30 January 2016). This is particularly the case with those called to a life of special consecration and with priests, who have generously responded, "Here I am, Lord, send me!" With renewed missionary enthusiasm, priests are called to go forth from the sacred precincts of the temple and to let God's tender love overflow for the sake of humanity (cf. Homily at the Chrism Mass, 24 March 2016). The Church needs such priests: serenely confident because they have discovered the true treasure, anxious to go out and joyfully to make it known to all (cf. Mt 13:44).

Certainly many questions arise when we speak of the Christian mission. What does it mean to be a missionary of the Gospel? Who gives us the strength and courage to preach? What is the evangelical basis and inspiration of mission? We can respond to these questions by meditating on three scenes from the Gospels: the inauguration of Jesus' mission in the synagogue at Nazareth (cf. Lk 4:16-30); the journey that, after His resurrection, He makes in the company of the disciples of Emmaus (cf. Lk 24:13-35) and, finally, the parable of the sower and the seed (cf. Mt 4:26-27).

Jesus is anointed by the Spirit and sent. To be a missionary disciple means to share actively in the mission of Christ. Jesus Himself described that mission in the synagogue of Nazareth in these words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Lk 4:18-19). This is also our mission: to be anointed by the Spirit, and to go out to our brothers and sisters in order to proclaim the word and to be for them a means of salvation.

Jesus is at our side every step of the way. The questions lurking in human hearts and the real challenges of life can make us feel bewildered, inadequate and hopeless. The Christian mission might appear to be mere utopian illusion or at least something beyond our reach. Yet if we contemplate the risen Jesus walking alongside the disciples of Emmaus (cf. Lk 24:13-15), we can be filled with new confidence. In that Gospel scene, we have a true "liturgy of the street", preceding that of the word and the breaking of the bread. We see that, at every step of the way, Jesus is at our side! The two disciples, overwhelmed by the scandal of the cross, return home on the path of defeat. Their hearts are broken, their hopes dashed and their dreams shattered. The joy of the Gospel has yielded to sadness. What does Jesus do? He does not judge them, but walks with them. Instead of raising a wall, He opens a breach. Gradually He transforms their discouragement. He makes their hearts burn within them, and He opens their eyes by proclaiming the word and breaking the bread. In the same way, a Christian does not bear the burden of mission alone, but realises, even amid weariness and misunderstanding, that "Jesus walks with him, speaks to him, breathes with him, works with him. He senses Jesus alive with him in the midst of the missionary enterprise" (Evangelii Gaudium, 266).

Jesus makes the seed grow. Finally, it is important to let the Gospel teach us the way of proclamation. At times, even with the best intentions, we can indulge in a certain hunger for power, proselytism or intolerant fanaticism. Yet the Gospel tells us to reject the idolatry of power and success, undue concern for structures, and a kind of anxiety that has more to do with the spirit of conquest than that of service. The seed of the Kingdom, however tiny, unseen and at times insignificant, silently continues to grow, thanks to God's tireless activity. "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, and should sleep or rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how" (Mk 4:26-27). This is our first reason for confidence: God surpasses all our expectations and constantly surprises us by His generosity. He makes our efforts bear fruit beyond all human calculation.

With this confidence born of the Gospel, we become open to the silent working of the Spirit, which is the basis of mission. There can be no promotion of vocations or Christian mission apart from constant contemplative prayer. The Christian life needs to be nourished by attentive listening to God's word and, above all, by the cultivation of a personal relationship with the Lord in Eucharistic adoration, the privileged "place" for our encounter with God.

I wish heartily to encourage this kind of profound friendship with the Lord, above all for the sake of imploring from on high new vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life. The People of God need to be guided by pastors whose lives are spent in service to the Gospel. I ask parish communities, associations and the many prayer groups present in the Church, not to yield to discouragement but to continue praying that the Lord will send workers to his harvest. May He give us priests enamoured of the Gospel, close to all their brothers and sisters, living signs of God's merciful love.

Dear brothers and sisters, today too, we can regain fervour in preaching the Gospel and we can encourage young people in particular to take up the path of Christian discipleship. Despite a widespread sense that the faith is listless or reduced to mere "duties to discharge", our young people desire to discover the perennial attraction of Jesus, to be challenged by His words and actions, and to cherish the ideal that He holds out of a life that is fully human, happy to spend itself in love.

Mary Most Holy, the Mother of our Saviour, had the courage to embrace this ideal, placing her youth and her enthusiasm in God's hands. Through her intercession, may we be granted that same openness of heart, that same readiness to respond, "Here I am", to the Lord's call, and that same joy in setting out (cf. Lk 1:39), like her, to proclaim Him to the whole world.
