



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE FOURTH NATIONAL MISSIONARY CONFERENCE
SPONSORED BY THE ITALIAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE**

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Saturday, 22 November 2014*

[Multimedia]

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning,

You got up early today. What time? At 4:00! A bit excessive! My compliments to the choir: fantastic! Thank you!

I am happy to welcome you on the occasion of the National Missionary Conference of the Church in Italy and I thank Bishop Ambrosio Spreafico for the words he addressed to me. I said to him: “Be careful that you are not eaten by the whale”. He replied: “For Christ, the whale is money, it is the god of money”. It is true, the Lord says: “One cannot serve two masters”. It’s true. The Bishop is wise!

The programme of our meeting begins with what the Lord says to the prophet Jonah: “go to Nineveh, that great city”. At first, however, Jonah flees. He goes the opposite way, toward the West. He is afraid to go to that great city, more concerned about being judged than with the mission entrusted to him. But then he goes and, in Nineveh, everything changes: God shows his mercy and the city repents. Mercy changes the history of individuals and even of the disciples. As the Apostle James says: “mercy always triumphs over justice” (cf. Jas 2:13). The invitation made to Jonah, today you hear made to you. This is important. Every generation is called to be missionary. To bring what we have inside, what the Lord has given us, and do this from the start! Let us recall when Andrew and John met the Lord, and then spoke with Him that afternoon and evening. They went out, excited. The first thing Andrew and John did was to be missionaries. They went to their brothers and friends: “We have found the Lord, we have found the Messiah!”. This happens straight away, after the meeting with the Lord: this happens immediately.

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, I spoke of a “Church which goes forth”. A missionary Church cannot help but “go forth”, without fear to meet, to discover the novel, to speak of the joy of the Gospel. To all, without distinction. Not to proselytize, but to say what we have and want to share without pressuring anyone, without distinction. The different realities that you represent in the Church of Italy, indicate that the spirit of *missio ad gentes* must become the spirit of the mission of the Church in the world: to go forth, hear the cry of the poor and those who have fallen away, meet everyone and proclaim the joy of the Gospel. The particular Churches in Italy have done so much. Every morning at the Mass at Santa Marta, I find one, two, three who come from afar: “I have worked in Amazonia for so many years, I have worked in Africa, I have worked...”. So many priests, so many sisters, so many lay *fidei donum*. You have this in your blood! It is a grace of God. You must cherish it, cultivate it and hand it down to the new generations of Christians. Once an elderly priest came, it could be seen that — poor man — he was very old and somewhat ill: “How are you?” — “I have been in Amazonia for 60 years, even before being ordained”. This is great: to leave everything. I shall repeat something that a Brazilian Cardinal told me: “When I go to Amazonia” — for he had the responsibility of visiting the dioceses of Amazonia — “I go to the cemetery and I see the tombs of the missionaries. There are so many. And I think: ‘They could be canonized now!’”. This is the Church; they are the Churches of Italy. Thank you! Thank you very much!”.

I thank you for what you do in different ways: as part of the offices of the Italian Bishops’ Conference, as directors of the diocesan offices, consecrated and lay people together. I ask you to commit yourselves with passion to keeping this spirit alive. I see with joy so many lay people in conjunction with bishops and priests. Mission work is the task of all Christians, not only a few. It is also the task of children! In pontifical missionary works, the small gestures of children instruct the mission. Our Christian mission calls us to be bearers of this missionary spirit in order to bring about a true “missionary conversion” of all the Church, as I expressed in the *Evangelii Gaudium*.

The Church in Italy — I repeat — has given numerous priests and lay *fidei donum*, who choose to spend their life building the Church in the peripheries of the world, among the poor and those who have fallen away. This is a gift for the universal Church and for the people. I urge you not to allow yourselves to be robbed of hope and the dream of changing the world with the Gospel, with the leaven of the Gospel, starting from the human and existential peripheries. To go forth means to overcome the temptation to talk amongst ourselves, forgetting the many who await from us a word of mercy, of comfort, of hope. The Gospel of Jesus is fulfilled in history. Jesus himself was a man from the periphery, from that Galilee far from the power centres of the Roman Empire and Jerusalem. He met the poor, the sick, the demon possessed, sinners, prostitutes, gathering around Himself a small number of disciples and a few women who listened to Him and served Him. Yet his word was the beginning of a turning point in history, the start of a spiritual and human revolution, the Good News of a Lord who died and rose for us. And we want to share this treasure.

Dear brothers and sisters, I encourage you to intensify the missionary spirit and the enthusiasm of

the mission and to keep the spirit of the *Evangelii Gaudium* aloft in your commitment in the Dioceses, in the Missionary Institutes, in the Communities, in the Movements, and in the Associations, without becoming discouraged by difficulties, which are never lacking. And allow me to highlight one thing: start with children. In the catecheses, the children must receive a missionary catechesis. Sometimes, in the Church too, we are taken by pessimism, which threatens to deprive so many men and women of the Gospel message. Let us go forth with hope! The many missionary martyrs of the faith and of charity show us that there is victory only in love and in a life spent for the Lord and neighbour, starting with the poor. The poor are the companions on the journey of a Church which goes forth, because they are the first ones whom she meets. The poor are also your evangelizers, for they point out where the Gospel still needs to be proclaimed and lived. To go forth is not being indifferent to poverty, to war, to the violence in our cities, to the neglect of the elderly, to the anonymity of so many needy people and away from the little ones. To go forth is not tolerating that in our Christian cities there are so many children who do not know how to make the sign of the cross. This is to go forth. To go forth is to be makers of peace, of that “peace” that the Lord gives us every day and of which the world has so much need. Missionaries never renounce the dream of peace, even when they experience difficulties and persecution, which today are back with a vengeance. In recent days I have met with the Bishops of the Middle East and two priests of the cities hardest hit by war in the Middle East: they were joyful in their service to these people. They grieve over what has happened, but they have had the joy of the Gospel.

May the Lord make the passion for the mission grow within you and may he make you witnesses everywhere to his love and his mercy. May the Blessed Virgin, Star of the New Evangelization, protect you and make you strong in the task entrusted to you. I too must be a missionary and I ask you, please, to pray for me and, from my heart, I bless you.