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Message of the Holy Father Francis for World Missionary Day

The following is the Holy Father Francis' Message for the 97th World Missionary Day, to be held on Sunday 22 October 2023 on the theme: "Hearts on fire, feet on the move" (cf. *Lk* 24:13-35):

Message of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters!

For this year's World Mission Sunday, I have chosen a theme inspired by the story of the disciples on the way to Emmaus, in the Gospel of Luke (cf. 24:13-35): "Hearts on fire, feet on the move". Those two disciples were confused and dismayed, but their encounter with Christ in the word and in the breaking of the bread sparked in them the enthusiastic desire to set out again towards Jerusalem and proclaim that the Lord had truly risen. In the Gospel account, we perceive this change in the disciples through a few revealing images: *their hearts burned within them* as they heard the Scriptures explained by Jesus, *their eyes were opened* as they recognized him and, ultimately, *their feet set out* on the way. By meditating on these three images, which reflect the journey of all missionary disciples, we can renew our zeal for evangelization in today's world.

1. *Our hearts burned within us "when he explained the Scriptures to us". In missionary activity, the word of God illumines and transforms hearts.*

On the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, the hearts of the two disciples were downcast, as shown by their dejected faces, because of the death of Jesus, in whom they had believed (cf. v. 17). Faced with the failure of the crucified Master, their hopes that he was the Messiah collapsed (cf. v. 21).

Then, "as they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and walked with them" (v. 15). As when he first called the disciples, so now, amid their bewilderment, the Lord takes the initiative; he approaches them and walks alongside them. So too, in his great mercy, he never tires of being with us, despite all our failings, doubts, weaknesses, and the dismay and pessimism that make us become "foolish and slow of heart"

(v. 25), men and women of little faith.

Today, as then, the Risen Lord remains close to his missionary disciples and walks beside them, particularly when they feel disoriented, discouraged, fearful of the mystery of iniquity that surrounds them and seeks to overwhelm them. So, “let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of hope!” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 86). The Lord is greater than all our problems, above all if we encounter them in our mission of proclaiming the Gospel to the world. For in the end, this mission is his and we are nothing more than his humble co-workers, “useless servants” (cf. *Lk 17:10*).

I desire to express my closeness in Christ to all the men and women missionaries in the world, especially to those enduring any kind of hardship. Dear friends, the Risen Lord is always with you. He sees your generosity and the sacrifices you are making for the mission of evangelization in distant lands. Not every day of our lives is serene and unclouded, but let us never forget the words of the Lord Jesus to his friends before his Passion: “In the world you will have tribulations, but be courageous: I have conquered the world!” (*Jn 16:33*).

After listening to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, the risen Jesus, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (*Lk 24:27*). The hearts of the disciples thrilled, as they later confided to each other: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us on the way and opened the Scriptures to us?” (v. 32). Jesus is himself the living Word, who alone can make our hearts burn within us, as he enlightens and transforms them.

In this way, we can better understand Saint Jerome’s dictum that “ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ” (*Commentary on Isaiah*, Prologue). “Without the Lord to introduce us, it is impossible to understand sacred Scripture in depth; yet the opposite is equally true: without sacred Scripture, the events of Jesus’ mission and of his Church in the world remain indecipherable” (*Aperuit Illis*, 1). It follows that knowledge of Scripture is important for the Christian life, and even more so for the preaching of Christ and his Gospel. Otherwise, what are you passing on to others if not your own ideas and projects? A cold heart can never make other hearts burn!

So let us always be willing to let ourselves be accompanied by the Risen Lord as he explains to us the meaning of the Scriptures. May he make our hearts burn within us; may he enlighten and transform us, so that we can proclaim his mystery of salvation to the world with the power and wisdom that come from his Spirit.

2. Our eyes were “opened and recognized him” in the breaking of the bread. Jesus in the Eucharist is the source and summit of the mission.

The fact that their hearts burned for the word of God prompted the disciples of Emmaus to ask the mysterious Wayfarer to stay with them as evening drew near. When they gathered around the table, their eyes were opened and they recognized him when he broke the bread. The decisive element that opened the eyes of the disciples was the sequence of actions performed by Jesus: he took the bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them. Those were the usual gestures of the head of a Jewish household, but, performed by Jesus Christ with the grace of the Holy Spirit, they renewed for his two table companions the sign of the multiplication of the loaves and above all that of the Eucharist, the sacrament of the sacrifice of the cross. Yet at the very moment when they recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread, “he vanished from their sight” (*Lk 24:31*). Here we can recognize an essential reality of our faith: Christ, who breaks the bread, now becomes the bread broken, shared with the disciples and consumed by them. He is seen no longer, for now he has entered the hearts of the disciples, to make them burn all the more, and this prompts them to set out immediately to share with everyone their unique experience of meeting the Risen Lord. The risen Christ, then, is both the one who breaks the bread and, at the same time, the bread itself, broken for us. It follows that every missionary disciple is called to become, like Jesus and in him, through the working of the Holy Spirit, one who breaks the bread and one who is broken bread for the world.

Here it should be remembered that breaking our material bread with the hungry in the name of Christ is already a work of Christian mission. How much more so is the breaking of the Eucharistic bread, which is Christ himself, a work of mission *par excellence*, since the Eucharist is the source and summit of the life and mission of the

Church.

As Pope Benedict XVI pointed out: “We cannot keep to ourselves the love we celebrate in the Sacrament [of the Eucharist]. By its very nature, it asks to be communicated to everyone. What the world needs is the love of God, to encounter Christ and believe in him. For this reason the Eucharist is not only the source and summit of the life of the Church; it is also the source and summit of her mission: ‘An authentically Eucharistic Church is a missionary Church’” (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, 84).

In order to bear fruit we must remain united to Jesus (cf. *Jn* 15:4-9). This union is achieved through daily prayer, particularly in Eucharistic adoration, as we remain in silence in the presence of the Lord, who remains with us in the Blessed Sacrament. By lovingly cultivating this communion with Christ, the missionary disciple can become a mystic in action. May our hearts always yearn for the company of Jesus, echoing the ardent plea of the two disciples of Emmaus, especially in the evening hours: “Stay with us, Lord!” (cf. *Lk* 24:29).

3. *Our feet set out on the way, with the joy of telling others about the Risen Christ. The eternal youth of a Church that is always going forth.*

After their eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus “in the breaking of the bread”, the disciples “set out without delay and returned to Jerusalem” (cf. *Lk* 24:33). This setting out in haste, to share with others the joy of meeting the Lord, demonstrates that “the joy of the Gospel fills the heart and the whole life of those who meet Jesus. Those who allow themselves to be saved by him are freed from sin, from sadness, from inner emptiness, from isolation. With Jesus Christ, joy is always born and reborn” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 1). One cannot truly encounter the risen Jesus without being set on fire with enthusiasm to tell everyone about him. Therefore, the primary and principal resource of the mission are those persons who have come to know the risen Christ in the Scriptures and in the Eucharist, who carry his fire in their heart and his light in their gaze. They can bear witness to the life that never dies, even in the most difficult of situations and in the darkest of moments.

The image of “feet setting out” reminds us once more of the perennial validity of the *missio ad gentes*, the mission entrusted to the Church by the risen Lord to evangelize all individuals and peoples, even to the ends of the earth. Today more than ever, our human family, wounded by so many situations of injustice, so many divisions and wars, is in need of the Good News of peace and salvation in Christ. I take this opportunity to reiterate that “everyone has the right to receive the Gospel. Christians have the duty to announce it without excluding anyone, not as one who imposes a new obligation, but as one who shares a joy, signals a beautiful horizon, offers a desirable banquet” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 14). Missionary conversion remains the principal goal that we must set for ourselves as individuals and as a community, because “missionary outreach is *paradigmatic for all the Church’s activity*” (ibid., 15).

As the Apostle Paul confirms, the love of Christ captivates and impels us (cf. *2 Cor* 5:14). This love is two-fold: the love of Christ for us, which calls forth, inspires and arouses our love for him. A love that makes the Church, in constantly setting out anew, ever young. For all her members are entrusted with the mission of proclaiming the Gospel of Christ, in the conviction that “he died for all, so that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised again” (v. 15). All of us can contribute to this missionary movement: with our prayers and activities, with material offerings and the offering of our sufferings, and with our personal witness. *The Pontifical Mission Societies* are the privileged means of fostering this missionary cooperation on both the spiritual and material levels. For this reason, the collection taken on World Mission Sunday is devoted to the *Pontifical Society for the Propagation of the Faith*.

The urgency of the Church’s missionary activity naturally calls for an ever closer missionary cooperation on the part of all her members and at every level. This is an essential goal of the synodal journey that the Church has undertaken, guided by the key words: *communion, participation, mission*. This journey is certainly not a turning of the Church in upon herself; nor is it a referendum about what we ought to believe and practice, nor a matter of human preferences. Rather, it is a process of setting out on the way and, like the disciples of Emmaus, listening to the risen Lord. For he always comes among us to explain the meaning of the Scriptures and to break bread for us, so that we can, by the power of the Holy Spirit, carry out his mission in the world.

Just as the two disciples of Emmaus told the others what had taken place along the way (cf. *Lk 24:35*), so too our proclamation will be a joyful telling of Christ the Lord, his life, his passion, his death and resurrection, and the wonders that his love has accomplished in our lives.

So let us set out once more, illumined by our encounter with the risen Lord and prompted by his Spirit. Let us set out again with burning hearts, with our eyes open and our feet in motion. Let us set out to make other hearts burn with the word of God, to open the eyes of others to Jesus in the Eucharist, and to invite everyone to walk together on the path of peace and salvation that God, in Christ, has bestowed upon all humanity.

Our Lady of the Way, Mother of Christ's missionary disciples and Queen of Missions, pray for us!

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 6 January 2023, Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord.

FRANCIS
