

Second Pastoral Letter
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**“GO INTO ALL THE WORLD AND
PREACH THE GOSPEL TO EVERY CREATURE”**

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To the communities that comprise the Renewed Catholic Ecumenical Church around the world, together with its presbyters, deacons, seminarians, and religious congregations: May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ shed his grace and peace on you!

0. The Church’s Mission—Our Mission

“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.” (Mark 16:15) This commandment, which sums up the mission that Christ gave his apostles, also expresses clearly the meaning and scope of the mission that the Lord has given us.

There are, however, some issues regarding the concrete form of this mission, what it implies for the life of our communities, and the path that we should follow so that every one of the members of our church and the church as a whole will be fully involved in this endeavor.

In order to deal with these issues we must first delineate, even if briefly, our vision of the mission that the Father gave to Jesus Christ as well as the identity of the church and how the church carries Jesus's mission forward time and space.

Feeling the urgent call to direct all our and our communities' energies toward the faithful and enthusiastic fulfillment of the mission entrusted to us, we shall in this letter reflect first on some of the characteristics of Jesus's mission. Then we shall lay out the mission that the Lord gave his apostles, which resulted in the development of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. Finally, we shall delineate some of the attitudes and commitments that we are to accept and take on in carrying out the mission for which the Lord has chosen us.

1. The Mission of Jesus Christ

One of the questions that has often arisen during the course of the history of Christianity is exactly what was the mission entrusted to Jesus and the relation between his preaching and the birth of the historical church.

With Catholics, both Orthodox and Roman, the tendency has been to consider that there is a strict continuity between Jesus's ministry, the mission he assigned to the apostles and the birth of the church and its basic shape.

There are many people, however, who have affirmed that the mission of Jesus was basically the proclamation of the Kingdom of God and that it was the apostles who organized the church. This interpretation implies that between the ministry of Jesus and the birth of the church there was only a chronological succession but not a direct or inner connection, especially with regard to its nature and identity.

Many strands of Christianity that go back to the time of the Reformation or nineteenth-century liberal thinking exemplify this interpretation. The results are models of the church focused more on the individual congregation than on the whole church, and models of the church have gained ascendancy whose structure and operating methods have reflected the organizational forms and mentality of the social world in which they developed.

For us it is very important to provide a response to this interpretation because it has a decisive bearing on many aspects of the mission given to us.

First, we have to admit that it would be impossible to find in Jesus's preaching and ministry an explicit reference to a determinate model of ecclesiastical organization. Even texts appealed to, somewhat naively, to justify structures that have developed over the course of history, as for example, Peter's confession and the mention of the founding of the church (Matthew 16:18), have an exegetical and spiritual meaning quite different

from the interpretation that is generally given to them and that we are expected to believe without thinking much about it.

Nevertheless, in Jesus's preaching we can find a series of essential aims that could never have been actualized had the church not been born.

The heart of Jesus's mission and message, everyone agrees, is proclaiming and bringing in the Kingdom of God.

John the Baptist began his ministry proclaiming that the Kingdom was near (Matthew 3:2). But at the same time he announced that another would come after him who was more important than he because he was before him (John 1:30), and that this one would *"baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire"* (Luke 3:16). When he met Jesus he announced that he was the one to whom he was referring because the Spirit was in him and thus it was he who would baptize with the Holy Spirit (John 1:30-33). That implies that the Kingdom of God has arrived in our midst.

The beginning of Jesus's ministry was, according to the New Testament, similar to John's. Like John, he began by preaching the nearness of the Kingdom (Matthew 4:17). Nevertheless, very soon his preaching and actions showed that in him the presence of the Kingdom has arrived. His proclamation in the Nazareth synagogue shows us clearly that in him all that had been promised was being fulfilled: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has ordained me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to proclaim freedom to the captive and sight to the blind; to put the oppressed at liberty; to announce the year of the Lord's favor." Then Jesus closed the book, gave it to the attendant at the synagogue and sat down. All those who were there fixed their eyes on him. Then he spoke, and said, 'Today the Scriptures have been fulfilled in your hearing'* (Luke 4:18, 21).

In the Gospel according to Matthew, when the Jews accuse Jesus of working with the power of Beelzebub, he argues, *"If I cast out demons by means of the Spirit of God, that means that the Kingdom of Heaven has come upon you"* (Matthew 12:28).

The Kingdom that Jesus proclaims is a Kingdom of life: *"I am come so that you may have life and have it abundantly"* (John 10:10). The Holy Spirit is who comes to give life and to make the proclamation a reality.

If Jesus's preaching is directed to the Kingdom and his works show that it is already present, the coming of the Holy Spirit is the proof that the Kingdom of God has arrived and is in our midst, thanks to Christ's death and resurrection (John 16).

2. The Mission Entrusted to the Apostles

We are told in the Gospels that the apostles' mission is to continue the mission of Christ.

In the Gospel of John several aspects of the apostolic mission are brought forward in defining its essence. *"The disciples had gathered behind closed doors for fear of the Jewish authorities. Jesus entered and stood in the midst of the disciples, and greeted them, saying, 'Peace be unto you! As the Father sent me, so send I you.' And he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you pardon, they are*

pardoned; and those whose sins you do not pardon shall remain unpardoned.” (John 20:19-22).

Jesus’s mission was to bring in the Kingdom of God by means of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The result was the end of the kingdom of death and sin. In short, the three phases of Jesus’s mission are the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the forgiving of sins and the establishing of the Kingdom of God. The continuation of this mission from the Father is the apostles’ mission.

In Matthew’s Gospel, though the emphasis is different from John’s, the essence of the apostolic mission is the same, *“Jesus drew near to the apostles and said to them, ‘God has given me all authority in heaven and on earth. Go therefore to all peoples and make them my disciples; baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and teach them to observe all that I have commanded you. For my part, I shall be with you always, even to the end of the world’”* (Matthew 28:28-20). Christ presents himself as the One who already rules heaven and earth. The apostolic mission is to continue making this kingdom manifest throughout all creation. So that the Kingdom may be seen, it is necessary for these men to become disciples, that is, to take on the attitude of Jesus and participate in his life. This happens through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. By baptism the forgiveness of sins and entrance into the Kingdom take place (Matthew 16:18; 18:18). The new life, received in the confession of faith (Matthew 16:16), which is the fruit of the Spirit’s action (Matthew 16:17) leads to being included in the community of the Kingdom, that is, the assembly of those who are called. This assembly is the Church, where the power of Christ is manifest in its totality (Matthew 28:19). In this church, Christ is the only “good shepherd” (John 10:11) and the Spirit is the only teacher (1 John 2:27).

The direct result of the proclamation of the Kingdom by the apostles is the birth of the church as the community of believers, sustained and given life by the action of the Holy Spirit.

It is for this reason that in the Acts of the Apostles the apostolic preaching leads directly into its hearers being incorporated into the church: *“those who heeded the message were baptized; and on that day the number of believers was about three thousand”* (Acts 2:41).

The New Testament scriptures affirm for us that the efficacy of Christ’s sacrifice, the authenticity of the apostolic witness and the reality of the Kingdom of God are all openly manifest in the existence of the community of believers.

Thus in these Scriptures we find explicitly and clearly that and how the church was born: it was born from the apostles’ ministry, which was guaranteed and made fertile by the work of the Holy Spirit.

3. The Church Born from the Apostolic Mission

3.1. The Church in the Lucan Scriptures

Several paragraphs in the Acts of the Apostles describe the characteristics of the church born from the apostolic ministry. Perhaps the best-known text is Acts 2:42. It lists four characteristics of the community of believers: They were faithful to the teaching of the apostles, they shared what they had with one another, they met to break bread together,

and they prayed together. These characteristics must be understood in their full meaning.

Undoubtedly, fidelity to the apostles' teaching did not mean adhering to a doctrinal code or institutional structure. The apostolic teaching had two dimensions: one was its way of bringing the church into reality, including its way of understanding this event, and the other was the witness given through preaching. The witness is summarized as the fundamental kerygma: Jesus Christ, *"after he was taken by God to heaven and received the Holy Spirit from the Father, as promised, gave it to us"* (Acts 2:33). The goal of proclaiming the kerygma is to call people to be converted: *"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus the Messiah for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit"* (Acts 2:38). And the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on them through baptism was not a ritual but an experience that transformed the believer totally and filled him or her with the gifts of the Spirit. With respect to the approach of the apostles toward the new church, we have reliable witnesses that they did not exercise authority over or make decisions for the community, but made proposals so that the community, illumined by the Holy Spirit, might make the decisions (Acts 1:15-26; 6:1-5). For that reason, in the exercise of their ministry and in their decision-making they were totally subordinate to the work of the Holy Spirit. A clear demonstration is the narrative of the baptism of Cornelius and his family. Peter returned to the community after baptizing them, and the Judaisers interrogated him. His response became the community's standard: *"If God gives also to them what he has given us who have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who am I to oppose God?"* (Acts 11:17). They were clearly mindful that their standards and attitudes were subordinate to the action of the Spirit in the midst of the people.

The second characteristic of the community is "sharing what they had." Often this has been understood in a predominantly material sense. However, the enduring sense is much deeper: the true and only richness that believers have is their faith and their life in the Spirit. Therefore, to share what they had implied above all an attitude of solidarity with the community and a missionary commitment toward the whole of humanity.

The third characteristic is "meeting to break bread." We know that this expression refers to the celebration that today we call the Eucharist. And, understood in the broadest sense, we can interpret it as referring to all the sacramental celebrations that the church carries out. This characteristic constituted one of the specific elements of the identity of the Christian church in distinction from the Jewish religious traditions. This is evident in the story of the disciples at Emmaus. In the first part of the narrative, referring to the explication of the Scriptures (Luke 24:25-28), the disciples' mindset was like that of Old Testament times, which revolved around the word contained in the Holy Scripture. Within the dynamic and reality of the New Testament, this dimension is revalued. The Holy Scriptures, even when explicated by the same Jesus, as in this narrative, prepares but is not capable of bringing one to realize the living presence of Jesus in the midst of the believers. This is evident in the exclamation of the disciples: *"Did not our hearts burn in us when he was speaking along the road and explained the scriptures to us?"* (Luke 24:32) By contrast, when *"Jesus came in to stay with them, he took bread and said the blessing; he broke the bread, and offered it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight"* (Luke 24:29b-31). The living sacrament, celebrated by the community, is where the living presence of the risen Lord, who accompanies his church continuously throughout history, is experienced. It is a real and transforming presence that reveals itself as the dynamism of life and cannot be

locked away nor adapted to our wishes, but immediately turns into a missionary witness: *“Without waiting any longer the disciples set out for Jerusalem, where they met the eleven apostles and their companions, who said to them, ‘Truly the Lord is risen and has appeared to Simon’”* (Luke 24:33). The breaking of bread and the sacramental experience perhaps constitute what best identifies the newness and the distinctiveness of the gospel and the Christian church over against Judaism.

Finally, the fourth element, referring to perseverance in prayer, we must also understand in a broad and holistic way. Prayer is above all a mode of living. It is the experience of constant communion with Jesus through the Spirit. That is what is meant in the decision of the apostles to dedicate themselves *“to pray continuously”* (Acts 6:4). And that is also what enables the community to be certain, when it makes a decision, that it truly comes from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The formulation of the letter sent to the Antioch Christians after the Council of Jerusalem unequivocally expresses this certainty: *“It seemed good to the Holy spirit and to us”* (Acts 15:28).

3.2 The Church in the Gospel according to St. Matthew

Although the emphasis in Matthew’s gospel is on questions more related to the Jewish mentality, the essential elements of its conception of the church fully agrees with those of St. Luke.

It is interesting to remember the elements that Matthew stresses. The first is the recognition that the church is founded on the rock of the confession of faith that Jesus Christ is *“the Messiah, the Son of the Living God”* (Matthew 16:16). And it is recognized that this faith is not the result of human power but of a divine grace: *“Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonas, for you do not know that by human power, but only because my Father, who is in heaven, revealed it to you”* (Matthew 16:17). In this way, it is manifest that the church is built on Jesus Christ and is sustained by the direct action of the living God.

The church is organized in a way that is the exact opposite of the hierarchical structures characterizing worldly powers: *“Jesus called them and said, As you know, among the heathen the rulers govern their subjects tyrannically, and the great make their authority over them felt. But it must not be so with you. On the contrary, anyone among you who wishes to be great must serve the others; and he who wishes to be first must be their servant. For in the same way the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”* (Matthew 20:25-28). Clearly the church of Jesus cannot be hierarchical, but necessarily has to be ministerial. Dominion, power and authority are the opposite to what Jesus wishes for his disciples and for his church.

Chapter twenty-three of this gospel states the convictions regarding church organization that are to be shared and the attitudes that are to be adopted by those who exercise coordinating ministries within the community: *“You may not allow people to call you master, for you are all brothers and have only one Master. And do not call anyone on earth father, for you have only one Father, who is in heaven. And do not allow them to call you teacher, for Christ is the only Teacher. The greatest among you must serve the others”* (Matthew 23:8-11). God the Father is the only Father; Jesus Christ is the only Lord, Guide and Pastor; and the Holy Spirit is the Master who is coming to reveal the truth and to empower us to live it.

The church from that time forward, and forever, is organized and lives in the certainty that Jesus is alive and present in her midst, to direct and guide her. The words that end the gospel express unequivocally this conviction: *“And I will be with you forever, to the end of the world”* (Matthew 28:20).

The mission entrusted to the apostles is not for them to serve as a substitute for him, nor to function as his representative, but rather simply to give witness so that he may be directly manifest and present.

3.3 The Church in the Johannine Books

John’s writings, which put great importance on the fact that we are living in the last days, emphasize the organizational elements of the church somewhat less. However, they make completely clear that the life and organization of the church have to be fully identified with Jesus’s ministry.

For John, *“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that those who believe on him should not die, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save it through him. He who believes in the Son of God is not condemned”* (John 3:16).

The church is the community of those who have already passed from death to life: *“I promise that those who heed what I say and believe in him who sent me shall have eternal life; and they will not be condemned, for they have already passed from death to life”* (John 5:24).

Within the community, the Spirit of Christ is the one who serves as teacher and master: *“Christ, the Holy One, has consecrated you with the Spirit, and you all have knowledge. I write you then, not because you do not know the truth but because you do know it. You have the Holy Spirit with which Jesus Christ has consecrated you, and you do not need anyone to teach you, for the Spirit whom he has given to you instructs you in all matters and his instructions are true and do not lie. Remain united with Christ; conform to all that the Spirit has taught you”* (1 John 2:20-21, 27).

That presence of Christ, real and efficacious through the Spirit, is what makes it possible to experience joy and to live in love. Joy and love characterize those who have believed in him: *“I have spoken to you in such a way that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. My commandment is this: that you love one another as I have loved you. The greatest love that one can have is to give his life for his friends”* (John 15:11-13).

The Lord leaves a ministry in the community to strengthen the brothers in their faith (John 21:15-19). This, however, has to be exercised in deepest humility, following the example that he himself gave: *“After washing their feet, Jesus put on his robe again, sat at the table and said to them, Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me Master and Lord, and with reason, for that I am. For if I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you must also wash one another’s feet. I have given you an example, so that you may do the same that I have done for you. I assure you that no servant is greater than his master and that one who is sent is not greater than the one who sends him. If you understand these things and put them into practice, you will be blessed”*

(John 13:12-17). For he, and no one else, is "*the good shepherd ... who gives his life for the sheep*" (John 10:11).

3.4 The Church in the Pauline Writings

Paul develops in greater breadth the questions that have to do with the identity and organization of the church.

For Paul, the birth of the church is the goal and the fruit of the redemptive sacrifice of Christ: "*Christ loved the church and gave his life for her. He did that to sanctify her, purifying her with water and the word*" (Ephesians 5:25-26).

In the church "*no one can lay another foundation beside the one that is already laid, which is Jesus Christ*" (1 Corinthians 3:11). He is the cornerstone and all believers, by the work of the Holy Spirit, are living stones incorporated into this building. Therefore he reminds the Ephesian Christians that "*you are a building raised on the foundations that consist of the apostles, the prophets and Jesus Christ himself is the chief stone*" (Ephesians 2:20).

The church is the body of Christ, "*And we are members of that body*" (Ephesians 5:30). This body embraces the totality of creation because God "*put everything in subjection beneath the feet of Christ, and to Christ himself he gave the church as the head of all. For the church is the body of Christ, from whom she receives her fullness, for Christ carries all things to their fullness*" (Ephesians 1:22-23). A believer is united into the body by the work of the Spirit who fills the believer with gifts and charismas for the building-up of the church.

Paul's concept of the church as the body is a ministerial concept, and the work of the Holy Spirit is the basis of every ministry and of every standard in the practice of a ministry: "*You are the body of Christ, and each of you is a member with a special role. God has desired that there be in the church, first of all, apostles, second, prophets, third, teachers, then miracle-workers, those who can effect cures or who help, or lead, or speak in tongues. Not all are apostles, or prophets. Not all are teachers, nor miracle-workers, not all have the power to heal the sick. Nor speak in tongues, nor can all interpret what is said in tongues*" (1 Corinthians 12:21-30).

However, the diversity of gifts does not create inequalities within the community, because "*God designed the body in such a way that the least esteemed members receive the most honor, so that there may be no disunity in the body, and so that each member may be concerned for all the others*" (1 Corinthians 12:24-25). For that very reason, the greatest gift of all is love (1 Corinthians 13:1ff).

Flowing from that reality, the life of the Christian and of the church have to be characterized by the experience and exercise of freedom: "*The heavenly Jerusalem is free, and we are its sons*" (Galatians 4:26).

The church is a reality, "*glorious, without stain or any kind of blemish, but holy and perfect*" (Ephesians 5:27). That does not imply, however, it is a reality already consummated. It is a reality that is in process and in growth: "*In him the whole building is*

bonded together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you too are being built with all the rest into a spiritual dwelling for God” (Ephesians 2:21-22). Therefore Paul is mindful of his responsibility as an apostle to play a pro-active and energetic role in the building-up and growth of the church: “I am glad that I may suffer for you because in this way I am helping to complete, in my own body, what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the church, which is his body” (Colossians 1:24).

4. Challenges Raised by History

In spite of the differences in the various ecclesiological perspectives found in the New Testament, it is certain that there is a complete agreement on the essential elements that constitute the church and the way in which it ought to be organized and its various ministries exercised. Here are three aspects seen in the same way from all the perspectives.

First is mindfulness that the shepherd, the Lord, the guide or the head of the Church is the same Christ who continues to exercise this role, without intermediaries or representatives delegated to exercise it for him. The historical concretion of this leadership he makes real by giving a diversity of gifts and ministries to believers for the building up of the church.

The second is the conviction that the direct action and power of the Holy Spirit guarantee the real presence of Christ as well as the life and the growth of the church. The Spirit is the one who makes real the saving mystery of Christ in the church and empowers believers to live this reality.

The third element is the recognition that by the work of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit there exists a basic equality among all the members of the People of God. Each believer has the worth of a son and enjoys the liberty of an heir; in addition, what is done in the church must have its basis and sustenance in the present and efficacious work of the same Spirit, recognized through the community's process of discernment.

Living in our time, we must decide between two alternatives with regard to the perspectives offered by the Holy Scriptures and by the history of the first centuries of Christianity concerning the life and organization of the church. One alternative is to affirm that these perspectives are still practicable in their original and vital sense. The other option is to say that it is necessary to take them only as normative standards which, in order to be effective, have to be configured and actualized around the structures of power that may give them ideological and organizational solidity, guaranteeing in this way the church's stability and doctrinal and institutional unity.

The greater part of ecclesiastical organizations throughout the centuries of the church's history have tended to understand their identity and mission along the lines of the second alternative. This has led many people have to feel that the forms of social organization and cultural perspectives as well as the ethical norms of a certain transitory period of history are an integral and inseparable part of the Christian message. The result is that ecclesiastical systems have developed that are closed, authoritarian,

intimidating and punitive and that in practice substitute themselves for the real and direct action of the Spirit.

Consequently, the work of Christ and the exercise of the abundance of gifts that the Spirit continues to give are generally confined to merely ascetic and spiritual circles, be it on the level of the individual or of groups. The possibility of expressing the presence of Christ and the gifts of the Spirit in the church is totally and unquestioningly subordinated to the parameters established by the ecclesiastical institution.

In such circumstances, the liturgy gradually ceases to be genuinely sacramental and participatory and is reduced to being merely ritualistic, at times with a juridical tint, at times with a traditionalist tint, or some other sort of shading. The ecclesiastical organizations are hierarchical and function through pyramidal juridical regulations that frequently are regarded as privileged—or even exclusive—channels of communicating grace and the work of the Spirit.

Developing these tendencies and giving them force has been encouraged by two factors. First, throughout church history, groups that have tried to use Christian origins as a model of ecclesiastical organization have been transitory and unstable. Second, practically all the initiatives that have managed to subsist have progressively evolved from their initial inspiration into organization systems that more or less explicitly reflect the mentality, structural standards and ethical perspectives of the social-cultural and historical context in which they developed.

5. The Core of Our Mission

Though mindful of the difficulties and questions that come up, we make two affirmations without any hesitation. First, the heart of our mission consists in rediscovering, accepting, implementing and promoting untiringly the church that is born from the proclamation of the first kerygma and from the experience and confession of faith in Jesus Christ. Second, this kerygma, experience and confession were developed in the first centuries of Christianity and have been maintained in their integrity through time in the living tradition and in the genuine sense of faith of the People of God.

To see the essence of our mission in this way is neither to have a utopian dream or an ingenuous illusion, nor is it to turn theology into an ideology. It is simply the expression of the sense of common faith of the hundreds of communities that the Lord has been gathering, through the years, to our ecclesiastical organization.

This sense is the ecclesiastical fruit of the extensive experience of faith in the communities. For they have encountered in the Holy Scriptures and Creeds of Faith not merely a doctrinal, authoritarian, mythologized narrative of what God supposedly did many centuries ago, but the living, active, stimulating expression of what the living God, through his Holy Spirit, is doing today in their everyday lives. These communities, in the liberty of the Spirit and with exemplary commitment, have maintained wholly the characteristics of a church that is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. They have weathered the shuddering winds that tried to destroy their ecclesiastical identity by separating them

from sacramental life. They have stood firm against the institutional tides that have done everything possible to drown their liberty and spiritual identity.

This sense of faith within the church has several hermeneutical implications for the relation between the communities' life of faith and Scripture, Creeds and the living tradition. Moreover, the theology explicating this faith and this relation is preeminently a practical theology. Born from the ecclesial experience of faith, this theology is developed and systematized from perspectives and standards that are illumined by the very same faith that makes decisions and commitments to grow in the faith.

The perspective that, through an attitude of systematic discernment, produces the ecclesial sense of faith in Scripture and Creeds also recognizes the resources for validating the communal experience of faith and enabling it to express itself. But, since Scripture, Creeds and Tradition exceeds what the experience has attained, contemplative reading always turns into more action, which then leads to growth, deepening and commitment on both the personal and ecclesial levels.

Within this hermeneutical dynamic merely theological considerations, which result from systematic reflection on doctrinal aspects, are replaced by attitudes of faith, hope and love (the theological virtues) that lead to conversion—understood here in its deepest sense as “change of mind”—and practice—understood as personal and ecclesial commitment. It is from the perspective of this faith, hope and love that the following paragraphs put forth our vision of each of the church's characteristics that we are called to live and promote.

6. The Commitment to Live the Unity of the Church

“Father, I ask that they may be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you; also that they may be in us so that the world may believe that you sent me. I have given them the same glory that you gave me so that they may be one, as you and I are you; I in them and you in me so that they may become perfectly one, and that the world may realize that you sent me and that you love them as you love me” (John 17:21-23). These words in the Gospel of John clearly state where the basis of the church's unity and its dynamism lies. Christian faith unanimously proclaims that for the Father to be in the Son and the Son in the Father is the work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore we have to understand the idea that Christ gives “the same glory” to believers—the glory that he received from the Father in order to become perfectly one—means that the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit has been poured into their hearts and thus is the basis of the church's unity.

Paul insists just as strongly that the unity of the church is based on the Spirit, who is the one who empowers unity within the community: *“Maintain the unity that proceeds from the Holy Spirit, by means of the peace that unites us all. There is only one body and one Spirit”* (Ephesians 4:3,4).

For Paul as well as John, however, unity implies a dynamic process: becoming “*perfectly one*” (Ephesians 2:21-22; John 17:23). The process of growth in unity is the fruit of the growth that continues to take place in the “life in the Spirit.”

To adopt unity and to continue growing in the unity that Christ wishes for the church implies the untiring commitment to grow and change so that the life of Christ, by means of the Spirit, may always be more and more the life of each member of our church and of each community. We commit ourselves to grow until we can affirm both personally and communally, with Paul, *“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives me. And the life that now I live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and was delivered over to death for me”* (Galatians 2:20).

As we go on growing in the life of the Spirit, not only are we uniting more deeply with Christ, the head of the church, but also we are identifying ourselves more deeply with each member of the body. We feel a solidarity both with those that we see because we see their activity in the church and also with those who, for whatever reason, are distant or even unaware of the church or deny its existence.

Thus our faith that the church is one carries with it the demand that each member and each community and each particular organization in the church promise to put all the resources within our reach to the goal of continuing to grow in the life of the Spirit. The result will be the experience of “becoming perfectly one.” And this growth in unity is not limited to our ecclesiastical organization. Instead, step by step we will come to experience a living communion and unity with all humanity and all creation.

7. Living the Holiness of the Church

“Christ loved the church and gave his life for her to sanctify her, purifying her with water and the word in order to present her to himself as a glorious church, without stain or wrinkle or anything of the sort, but holy and perfect” (Ephesians 5:25-27). In the face of such a categorical affirmation as this, we may well ask ourselves to what aspect of the church Paul may be referring.

There has often been a tendency to consider that there is a church triumphant, to which all belong who participate fully in the glory of Christ—and to which Paul’s text really refers—and another church—the historical one—that would be “holy” by the unflinching work of the Spirit, but at the same time would be “sinful” on account of the sinfulness and fragility of its members. In this dualistic interpretation of the holiness of the church are based many of the authoritarian and juridical structures of the church’s organizations. From this perspective and in view of the sinfulness of the human condition, with its darkening of the mind and weakness of the will, it is considered necessary to lay down canons that regulate the life of the churches and their members so that they may be able to act appropriately during this period of transition between the historical church and the triumphant church.

It seems to us that this way of understanding Paul is reductionist and weakens a series of elements that, according to Scripture, are part of the life and self-awareness of the first Christian communities.

Paul repeatedly says that the concrete communities are made of believers who through faith are transformed into “saints,” by the work of the Holy Spirit (Cf. Romans 1:6-7; 1 Corinthians 1:2).

The first letter of Peter expresses the same concept with regard to the present and historical character of the holiness of the People of God: “*You are a chosen family, a priesthood in the service of the king, a holy nation, a People claimed by God* (1 Peter 2:9).

John explains that by faith in Jesus Christ one passes from sin to holiness and from death to life: “*He who believes in me, although he die, lives; and all who are still alive and believe in me will never die*” (John 11:25-26). By faith, the Christian is consecrated and has the life of God: “*Christ, who is Holy, has consecrated you with the Spirit, and you all have knowledge*”(1 John 2:20). And he who has knowledge “*remains one with him and does not continue in sin, because he who sins has not seen him or known him*” (1 John 3:6).

All this brings us to conclude that when the church is called holy and glorious it is a historical and real church of which is being spoken, although the process of incorporating believers into the holy church goes on—precisely in its historical form—progressing and growing.

To the extent that believers are being transformed by the work of the Spirit they are making historically real and actual the fact that they belong to and are being incorporated into the holy and glorious church. Writing to the Corinthians, Paul expresses this reality in a marvelous way: “*When a person turns to the Lord, the veil falls away. For the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. Therefore we all, our faces unveiled, are like a mirror that reflects the glory of the Lord, and we continue being transformed into his likeness, because we have more of his glory all the time, and that by the work of the Lord, who is the Spirit*” (2 Corinthians 3:16-18).

The theological anthropology of the Greek Church Fathers, wholly preserved in Orthodox Catholicism, expresses this reality with the term, “theosis”—“deification.” The believer, by the work of the Spirit, is being transfigured inwardly into a living likeness of God. Irenaeus of Lyon in the second century affirmed, “*Jesus Christ, from his superabundant love, was changed into what we are to make of us what he is*” (*Against Heresies*, Preface L.V). Along the same line, Athanasius of Alexandria said, Jesus Christ “*became man so that we might become God*” (*Treatise on the Incarnation of the Word*, 54:3).

From this we can conclude that there is only one glory and holiness of the church and it is of the church in its whole reality. However, its members, being saints inasmuch as they are incorporated into the church, are still always in process of sanctification, to the extent that they are being transformed by the work of the Spirit and are progressively being integrated into the holy and glorious church. The church is, then, holy and at the same time the agent of sanctification.

To carry out this work of sanctifying, the Lord provided the power of the sacraments. It is through them, living and celebrated by the church, as the work of the Spirit continues to make the process of deification present and real in the believers’ lives, that believers are incorporated more and more fully into the holy church, and their likeness to God grows.

The conviction that the church is saintly and sanctifying—holy and the locus of growth in holiness, leads us to take on specific commitments in our communities.

We have to strengthen our awareness of the ecclesial calling to celebrate the sacraments. The celebration has meaning, ecclesial validity and sacramental efficacy only to the extent to which it is, first, a means by which those who receive the sacraments are incorporated into and go on growing within the community, and, second, a means by which the celebration is each time more clearly the visible brightness and sacramental sign of the holy and glorious church of Christ.

When the sacramental celebrations lose their directly ecclesial meaning and are used to soothe individual worries—whether on the part of those who receive or those who administer the sacraments—they are reduced to a mere ritual. They lack specific sacramental meaning, even though they may use our ritualistic forms and produce states of emotion and are appreciated by those who receive them.

As all Catholic churches know in common, the sacrament is a “sensible sign of the transmission of grace,” which is received and recognized each time the sacrament is celebrated. That being the nature of the sacrament, the responsible persons in the community and the ordained minister are required to observe certain procedures with great care. First, a sacrament should never be celebrated with anyone who does not consider himself or herself to belong to our church or who through the celebration, becomes incorporated into our ecclesial organization. The administration of the sacraments can be used as a means of drawing people to the church but must always be the culminating moment of a process that begins with the proclamation of the kerygma and that then matures with instruction and spiritual deepening, and finally culminates with the celebration. Outside this context, sacramental celebrations, as mentioned above, fall into mere empty ritualism and lend themselves to mistakes that darken our credibility and instead of helping are an obstacle to fulfilling our basic mission. The kerygmatic proclamation is the point of departure in preparing the administration of the sacraments. It is directed to all humanity, and every member of our communities is to accept the commitment to participate in announcing it to everyone. Consequently, many feel themselves called to begin the process of joining or growing in our communities by participating in the sacraments. Then begins the phase of instruction and spiritual deepening. This phase must be conducted by those responsible for it in the community, properly prepared to fulfill this task. It is not a matter of merely filling a requirement while feeling no authentic growth in faith that leads to the sacramental celebration being really significant. In the culmination of the process, that is, in the celebration, one has to have special care to take on and live in all its richness that which is distinctive in our renewed catholic ritual. The attitude of the ordained ministry that presides over the celebration, the active participation of the People of God, the propriety and quality of the singing and above all the attitude of those to whom the sacraments are specifically administered are elements of paramount importance if our church is to live effectively as the “holy church” and fulfill mysteriously its mission of being the locus of sanctifying, the sacrament of salvation.

8. Rediscovering and Implementing Catholicity

“When they were seated at the table, he took bread in his hands and having given thanks to God, broke it and gave it to them. In that moment their eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus” (Luke 24:30-31). The moment of the breaking of the bread or

Eucharist is when the presence of the glorious Lord, who transforms hearts, is recognized in the midst of the local church. Spread through many parts of the world and illumined by the Word, the communities found in the sacramental celebration the means of realizing they were in communion with the total body of Christ, that is, with the universal—catholic—church, as well as the means of receiving the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, able to drive away doubts and deception (Luke 24:21), to leave their fears behind (Luke 24:29) and to become bold witnesses to the resurrection (Luke 24:33-35).

The Eucharistic celebration is where the presence of Christ becomes ecclesiastically efficacious and where the Spirit, likewise in communal form, continues to guide the church and provide abundant gifts. It is where catholicity becomes an ecclesial experience.

As the early Christian tradition developed, it progressively recognized that for the celebration of certain sacraments—specifically the Eucharist, Reconciliation, Extreme Unction and Confirmation—it was necessary for an ordained minister, priest or bishop to preside. The reason for this exigency—which remains unaltered in all Catholic churches up to the present—is the conviction that in order to celebrate these sacraments it is indispensable that in some way the totality of the church, the body of Christ, be present and sacramentally active. Through the sacrament of ordination the sacramental presence of the whole body is actual. By means of the sacrament of ordination, the ordained ministry—priest or bishop, whichever be the case—receives the capacity mysteriously to connect each local community that is celebrating the sacraments to the totality of the body of Christ, guaranteeing and actualizing its catholicity in this way. This also explains why, in the genuinely catholic tradition, the fully sacramental character of holy orders is to be recognized and how, on losing this sense of the ministry and seeing it as simply a pastoral function delegated by the local community, the sacramental sense of catholicity is also lost. This gift, bestowed on the bishop or priest, however, is not a personal privilege. Rather, it is a ministerial gift in and for the ecclesial community; exercised outside these bounds, it loses its sacramental meaning and its efficacy.

“There is one body and one Spirit, as God has called you to one hope. There is one Lord, one faith, and one baptism; there is one God and Father of all, who is above all, through all and in all. But each of us has received the gifts that Christ has wanted to give. Thus he equipped God’s People for building up the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:4-7,12). We cannot reduce the meaning of this text to apply only to those who already recognize themselves as an active part of the body of Christ, for it embraces the totality of creation. The body of Christ in a mysterious way includes all of humanity and, through the Holy Spirit, works through all. This is another implication of the affirmation that the church is catholic. For the catholicity of the church, established by the death and resurrection of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, is to be expressed throughout the world. Thus, in the second part of the mentioned text, it is affirmed that the Lord is preparing the members of his holy body by giving them gifts to be used in building up the body of Christ.

This has practical consequences that are relevant to our internal relations and our ecclesiastical organization. An authentically catholic community necessarily has to constitute itself as the “space” in which each of its members is recognized with his or her specific characteristics and identity and in which opportunities are opened so that each one may discover, develop and exercise the specific gifts that are received from the Lord

for building up the community. This requires that we examine ourselves concerning the many cultural and religious prejudices that tend to marginalize—or even exclude—minorities of whatever type. A genuinely catholic community has to be open to accept the participation and expression of each person and each kind of person, especially those who for whatever reason are most vulnerable, marginalized and excluded. Women, young people, special groups: the possibility of creatively involving all of these in the building up of the community must be recognized. For a genuinely catholic attitude, diversity and pluralism not only are not a source of disorder or division but a resource for expressing and firming up authentic unity.

Finally, the attitude of genuine catholicity means being mindful that one is sent as a witness of the Kingdom to every person and circumstance. Going without preconceived ideas and without the pretension of having the truth and taking it to those who do not yet have it, the genuinely catholic attitude and ability is that of recognizing that the “God and Father of us all is above all, through all and in all,” for the mission consists above all in recognizing and venerating with fascination and humility the presence of God in every person and every situation. This attitude and appreciation and respect is the means by which those who still have not discovered that they already have the living presence of God within them become open to faith and to the witness of the Spirit of Christ in their lives. This attitude of catholicity is expressed in the vision of happiness, “*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God*” (Matthew 5:8).

9. Apostolicity as Continuity with the Life and Witness of the Apostles

All believers “*were faithful to the teaching of the apostles*”(Acts 2:42). And the teaching was basically to pray and to witness: “*We pray and proclaim the message of God without ceasing*” (Acts 6:4).

Contrary to what people often tend to think, the apostolicity of the church cannot be reduced to a supposed agreement with doctrine and a supposed historical-ritualistic continuity with the apostles. Without being unmindful of these elements, one can say that apostolicity consists above all in continuity with the lifestyle of the apostles, which involves “*praying without ceasing,*” and with the witness that they gave, which means the proclamation of the Good News that the Kingdom has come to us.

Prayer in the apostolic context is not to be regarded as an activity but as an attitude. It is not a matter of “*prayers*” that can be made more or less frequently or of greater or less length. It refers to constant and uninterrupted “*communion with the risen Lord, through the Holy Spirit.*”

The witness is a consequence of the experience of prayer. The gospel is not a doctrine, and the Kingdom of God that is proclaimed is not a utopia. The witness to the good news is the witness that, by the work of the Spirit, the risen Lord really lives in the midst of his People, whom he shepherds and sustains in the midst of everyday troubles. The witness that the Kingdom of God is come is based on the shared experience of having “*received the Spirit that makes us sons of God; and by this Spirit we are directed to God, saying, ‘Abba, Father!’ and this same Spirit joins our spirit in order to give witness that we are already sons of God; and since we are sons, we also take part in the inheritance that*

God has promised" (Romans 8:14-17). As result of experiencing the arrival of the Kingdom, one is mindful that "*none of us lives from himself nor dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord; if we die, we die to the Lord. In life or in death, we are the Lord's*" (Romans 14:7-8). When apostolic witness has the efficacy that it has in the New Testament, it is because it does not consist in preaching about events or doctrinal systems, but rather in proclaiming something that is real, accessible and experienceable for all those who come to faith. Therefore our mindfulness that our church is "apostolic" must lead us to a personal and communal life and a style of missionary ministry that accords with that of the apostles. Just as the tree that is tallest and most visible from afar is the one that has the deepest roots, so also fidelity to apostolicity requires that the greater the responsibility that we receive, the deeper we have to take root in communion with the risen Lord and with his body, through the work of the Spirit. The apostolic witness has to express the personal and ecclesial experience of the reality of the gospel and of the efficacious presence of the Kingdom among us.

Given continuity in life and witness with the teachings of the apostles, we cannot forget the importance of assuming dynamically and integrally the elements that the tradition has believed to be common identifiers of permanence in apostolicity: wholly accepting of the Ecumenical Creeds of Faith as the expression of the common faith that we profess; and keeping our historical connection with the origins, through what is commonly recognized as the uninterrupted Apostolic Succession through the ministry of bishop and presbyters.

10. The Meaning of our Ecumenical Commitment

Being mindful of the depth and breadth of our ecumenical calling means knowing that our mission is to rediscover, take on, implement and untiringly promote the church as it is testified in the scriptures and has been maintained in the living tradition through the centuries.

This conviction necessarily opens us to work toward unity among all believers and all humankind. On the one hand, this conviction also gives us a focus and sets for us conditions and standards with regard to the path that we should follow to reach this unity.

Far from us are irenic and minimalist attitudes that see the goal of the ecumenical commitment in merely sharing transitory moments of spirituality, and taking common initiatives of protest and social action, or in the search of doctrinal agreements, while authoritarian, excluding attitudes and banalized concepts of the gospel and the church's identity and mission persist.

On the other hand, this conviction obliges us to maintain an attitude of openness, respect and dialogue toward other religious organizations and toward the concerns, perspectives and global visions of various groups and cultures in the world. From our catholic faith, it would be a lack of faith and a kind of crypto-heresy to have a pessimistic vision that is eager to confront and condemn the contemporary world, for that would mean to negate in practice the efficacy of the Incarnation and Redemption, the Resurrection and the victory attained by Jesus Christ over the forces of evil. Pessimism

would reveal our inability to see that the Kingdom of God is effectively present among us already through the real and efficacious work of the Holy Spirit. In addition, it would be contrary to what, based on the Scriptures, the sense of faith of the People of God and the genuine tradition of the church have unanimously professed throughout the centuries.

For us it is clear that the foundation and the goal of the ecumenism that we are to promote is that the full, dynamic and creative implementation of that which, according to Holy Scripture and Apostolic Tradition, is an essential and constitutive part of the church. Accordingly, it behooves us to live in an attitude of constant purification so that, with the vision that generates “pureness of heart,” we may be able to see the real and efficacious work of the Holy Spirit in every person and religious organization and every initiative. Mindful of this, we shall succeed in establishing growing links of communion in order to move toward the full and perfect union.

□11. Requirements in the Life of Our Communities

To take on fully the mission the Lord has entrusted to us means that, mindful of the dimensions that characterize the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church and also mindful of the practical consequences that these dimensions have, we endeavor untiringly to put them into practice.

11.1. Moving toward Perfect Unity

To get to the bottom of the meaning of unity and promote it effectively, we have to renounce every attempt at uniformity or centralization and must encourage the growth of the life of the Spirit and accept diversity and pluralism so that the richness of spiritual gifts that the Lord gives to the members of the community may be expressed. Therefore, in the exercise of the ministries of coordination all forms of authoritarianism must be stripped away, and these ministries must exert themselves to the utmost to be the first to recognize the diversity of spiritual gifts and encourage the exercise of these gifts in the communities. The agreements arrived at by the discernment of the majority can never be absolute nor excluding, for that would imply being closed to the work of the Spirit. And, as the apostle John said, “*The wind blows where it will, and though you hear its sound, you do not know whence it comes nor where it goes. So are also all those who are born of the Spirit*” (John 3:8). And the apostle Paul says, “*Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty*” (2 Corinthians 3:17).

From an authentically spiritual perspective, even the difficulties and discrepancies that arise from time to time in the communities and that often lead to the creation of new groups, far from generating division become the dynamic of multiplication, for the lordship and power of Christ is manifest with greatest force in the midst of limitations and weaknesses (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

In this way, with an open attitude and being ever more in tune with Spirit, we are to work for the growth of the church’s unity, accepting with joy and gratitude the pluralism and diversity that arise from the manifestation and exercise of the multiple gifts of the members of our communities.

11.2 Living as the Holy and Sanctifying Church

To live the reality of being the holy and sanctifying church we have to make the Eucharist both the source and also the culmination of the life of our communities. When we speak of the Eucharist, we are referring to the sacramental celebration in which the community, presided over by the bishop or a presbyter, celebrates the efficacious actualization of the one sacrifice of Christ and renews continuously the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

The awareness that each community is, in a certain way, the living sacrament of the total body of Christ has to make us be ever more careful in preparing and celebrating all the sacraments. We must establish processes of serious instruction, not only for those who receive the sacraments but also for those who are charged to give it.

The goal is to assure that the intimate relation between spirituality and sacramental celebration is genuinely experienced, for this experience has to be one of the characteristics of a community that is authentically Renewed Catholic. We have to give great importance to the celebration of each of the sacraments. For example, we must avoid cramming the celebration of various sacraments into a single ceremony.

Likewise we must establish appropriate mechanisms whereby we can accompany, encourage and verify the process of interior growth—or deification—of the members of the community.

Knowing that each community is a sacrament of the whole church, we are also obliged to work to eradicate a series of prejudices and attitudes that are mistakenly identified as forms of holiness, when in reality they totally contradict what the Gospel teaches us (Luke 18:9-14). An example is the tendency to judge others, forgetting the explicit command of Jesus (Luke 6:37). Another example, which also contravenes the teachings of Scripture, is confusing the authentic gift of prophecy—which implies unconditional fidelity to God, to his word and to the testimony of Christ (cf. Revelation 12:17; 19:10)—with fantasies, false prophecy and fortune-telling. Other examples are denouncing the faults of others and pretending to speak in the name of God, when the only thing being sought is material, economic satisfaction, taking advantage of the good faith of those who, by their weakness, are misled, exploited, manipulated and oppressed (cf. Ezekiel 13:6, Jeremiah 29:8-9, Ecclesiasticus 34:5-8, 1 Timothy 1:1-7). There is a propensity to impose discipline and punishments, reflecting the fact that many people have merely human standards of thinking and behaving; and, “*so that people may speak well of them*” (Matthew 6:2), they forget what Jesus teaches us about unconditional mercy and pardon (cf. Luke 15; John 8:1-11).

One who has reached true holiness, who, that is, lives the life of God, has the same attitude as God: “*Be yourselves perfect, as your Father who is in heaven is perfect, for he makes the sun rise over the bad and the good, and commands the rain on the just and the unjust*” (Matthew 5:45, 48). There is no distinction among persons. “*You must humbly reckon others to be better than yourselves*” (Philippians 2:2). He who lives in authentic holiness lives in love, and from love the meaning of all the other spiritual gifts is derived. “*If I speak in the tongues of men and even of angels, but have not love, I am*

nothing but sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy and understand the secret designs of God and have all knowledge, and if I have faith sufficient to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. Love is patient; love is kind. It is not envious, nor boastful, nor conceited, nor rude; never selfish, nor quick to take offence, and does not hold grudges; it does not gloat over other men's sins, but delights in the truth. To love is to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things" (1 Corinthians 13:1-2, 4-7).

11.3 Radiating Catholicity

As part of our commitment to be communities that are authentically and wholly catholic we have to commit ourselves to be effective in opening spaces for each person and each kind of person or group to participate actively and in freedom in the life of the community. We have to renounce social, ethical and cultural prejudices that often are excluding and marginalizing so that we may continue to allow the Spirit to guide, and so that we may go on helping everyone to grow and purifying everyone. We must be respectful regarding the diverse gifts, even when they are different from what we have received, for neither the community nor the church is ours; rather we are Christ's, and he in his glory surpasses us infinitely. In Scripture we find abundant references that imply and promote this attitude (cf. Numbers 11:25-29; Mark 9:38-40; Luke 9:49-50). This openness, however, does not mean that we become indifferent or tolerant in a way that is destructive. For indifference and destructive tolerance run the risk that arbitrariness, fashion, whims, public opinion or other like elements, rather than the inspiration of the Spirit, would set the standard for community behavior. It is a matter of organizing the communities in such a way that pastoral plans and standards of behavior do not exclude the participation of anyone and do not refuse initiatives started under the guidance of the Spirit. Not only that, but also our plans and standards must encourage, welcome and support these initiatives. Doing so requires great capacity for openness and flexibility. And for that it is necessary that we maintain a constant attitude of discernment so that, as believers in Christ Jesus, we do *"not extinguish the fires of the Spirit, nor despise prophetic utterances, but bring them all to the test, and keep what is good in them"* (1 Thessalonians 5:18-21).

11.4 Continuity with the Apostles

Finally, to be authentically apostolic communities, we have to live as the apostles did and give witness as they did.

Living as the apostles did means working to develop a deeper, more prayerful mindset. Often we tend to cultivate a prayer of many words, and are quite incapable of hearing the voice of the living God speaking to us.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus clearly distinguishes the Pharisees' and pagans' prayers, full of words and a certain arrogance, from the Christians' style of praying, which is to be simple, intimate and personal (cf. Matthew 6:5-8). For the Christian, to pray is to be able to hear the voice of God in the depths of the heart; it is to maintain an uninterrupted communion with him; it is to be aware that, being temples of the Holy Spirit, we are always in the presence of God. Only from the attitude of constant prayer,

able to contemplate the divine presence in every moment and in every situation can we cultivate and grow in the apostolic attitude and thereby remain faithful to one of the basic aspects of the apostolic teaching.

Giving witness as the apostles did means that, in the community that really lives apostolicity, not a single member can cease considering himself to be an apostle. This implies that, as it was with the apostles, everyone is mindful that he is called by Jesus to be his disciple and is empowered and sent to give witness of his living presence in the midst of all creation. To grow in the sense of being called, empowered and sent, it is necessary to make a systematic, conscientious missionary effort.

If any member of the church or community fails to continue to grow in the attitude of prayer, in the experience of being chosen in the life of discipline and the missionary commitment as witnesses of the Kingdom, our apostolicity will become a mere concept, reduced to some doctrinal or historical considerations. We shall not be continuing the life and witness of the apostles with authentic fidelity.

12. Our Missionary Project

As an epilogue to these reflections, we now move specifically to the missionary project to which we are called.

Although throughout this letter we have said again and again what the bases and scope of our missionary commitment are, there is room for reminding ourselves one more time.

Our mission is the same mission that the Father entrusted to Christ, and the power that he has given us to fulfill it is the same power that he gave to the apostles. The words of John's gospel must resonant in our ears and in our hearts with all the force and impact that they had on the first apostles: "*As the Father sent me, so send I you. And he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'*" (John 20:20-22). It is for the sake of our communities' sense of faith that the Lord has given us the Holy Spirit. That requires that we take on as our mission the mission that the Father gave to the Lord. And in what does this mission consist? We recall the words in Mark's gospel, "*Go into all the world and proclaim the good news*" (Mark 16:15).

It is a matter of going everywhere and proclaiming the gospel to everyone. The Good News is the arrival of the Kingdom of God in our midst, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Undoubtedly the wide extent of this mission raises questions. Will this not be a kind of proselytizing? Will it not lack respect for others and be an obstacle to ecumenism?

The witness that we are called to give is the exact opposite of proselytizing. Proselytizing is a sectarian attitude in which one's own convictions and organization are presented as the only path of salvation. Often the presentation is made attractive by offering favors that have nothing to do with the message and that promote feelings of guilt, anxiety and fears, which limit the ability to make a serene and free decision. Our witness, by contrast, is the proclamation of the kerygma, present and made real in our personal and ecclesial life. This witness is authentic when it comes from a heart that really has experienced what it proclaims and when it is put forward with all the simplicity and power of the Spirit. To the extent that it is authentic, the same thing will happen to those who

receive it as happened with those who heard the apostles (Acts 2-4). That is, the interior illumination and the power freely to make a discernment will be received. The goal of the witness is that those who hear us believe that *“Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, so that by believing they may have life through him”* (John 20:30). If that brings them to join one of our communities because they discover there a good space for living the faith, it will not be the result of pressure or of attractive conditions but the outcome of their own freedom, guided by the light of the Spirit.

The fact that our witness reaches out to everyone is consonant with, not opposed to, a genuine ecumenism. If those who hear us and receive our witness are already living the same living and transforming faith in their church communities as the one we proclaim to them, far from separating from their communities they feel impelled to commit themselves to them with even greater generosity. But if on hearing us they discover that what they were calling faith was simply beliefs that they held in slavery, darkness, fear and submission, it will not be us but the Holy Spirit who calls them away and gives them the grace to pass from slavery to freedom, from darkness to light, from fear to confidence, and from submission to creative participation. In this case, far from being an obstacle to ecumenism we are being instruments of what, by communion with the Holy Spirit, is being manifest and growing in the true unity of the church, the body of Christ and temple of the Spirit.

The realization of this task implies a clear challenge for each one of our communities and of the members who form them. The commitment has to be to involve everyone, for the Spirit has been given to all and therefore everyone has been chosen and empowered to fulfill the mission.

To be prepared for the mission and to prepare the ground in which mission work is to be done has to be one of the privileged aspects of what we, as ordained ministers, servants and members of the communities, are resolved to do. Preparation is required. Above all it requires a robust and unbreakable faith that continues to strengthen and mature through prayer and fasting, a faith that nothing and no one can resist. Then our initial fear, like that of Jeremiah when he said, *“Oh Lord, I am young and do not know how to speak!”* is transformed. For, like the prophet, we come to hear in our hearts the voice of the Lord who says to us, *“Do not say that you are young. You will go where I command you, and say what I tell you to say. Do not be afraid of anyone, for I will be with you to protect you. I, the Lord, give my word.”* Then the Lord reached out his hand, touched my lips and said to me, *‘I am putting my words onto your lips. Today I am giving you full authority above kings and nations to pull out and tear down, to destroy and demolish, and also to build and to plant’* (Jeremiah 1:6-10).

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, we are mindful of the mission that the Lord has entrusted to us. We know that it is his one, holy, catholic and apostolic church shining forth in our church, in each of our communities and in all creation, *“glorious, without stain or blemish of any sort, but holy and perfect”* (Ephesians 5:27). We know that *“he has empowered us to be servants of a new covenant, based not on law but on the work of the Spirit”* (2 Corinthians 3:6). Mindful of this mission, we have to renew our commitment and our devotion, not sparing any effort and using all the means that the Lord may put at our disposal.

May Saint Mary, who is full of grace (Luke 1:28), to whom Christ gave the creation for

her to be its mother (John 19:26), intercede for us so that, taking on an attitude like hers (Luke 1:38), we may respond to the Lord who has chosen us and fulfill with fidelity the mission that he has entrusted to us. In the name of the Lord, we conclude by repeating one more time, without hesitation, without ambiguities, without fear, knowing that *“the night is advanced and the day is near; let us put on our armor as soldiers of the light”* (Romans 13:12): *“Go forth to every part of the world and proclaim the Good News to the whole creation”* (Mark 16:15).

San Lucas Sacatepéquez, October 27, 2009, Feast of the Apostolic Succession, second anniversary of the birth of ICERGUA as a Local Church and of my ordination as bishop. With my pastoral blessing.

+ *Eduardo Cristián Aguirre Oestmann*, □ *Primate Bishop of ICERGUA*