

Introduction

The conviction that the mission is the heart of Revelation is finding ever-greater acceptance and support today. The mission is not just one of the subjects the Scriptures talk about, but it is the ultimate criterion and predominant perspective. This is not a completely new fact; for example, already at the beginning of the 20th century, Martin Kähler pointed with surprising foresight to mission as “the mother of theology”.¹

Similar observations were reiterated continuously for about a hundred years. In 1961, Rudolf Schnackenburg argued that the mission is one of the four basic characteristics of the Church.² The Churches of Jerusalem, Antioch, and Corinth bear specific characteristics that differentiate them. However, they share the unique mystery of the Church along with its fundamental qualities, of which the mission is one of them. In more recent times, Martin Hengel condensed his research on the Hebrew-Christian Scriptures into one concise conclusion: “The history and the theology of early Christendom are ‘the history and theology of the mission’”. A Church, he therefore concludes, that neglects her apostolic duty in serving this history and theology of salvation would be detaching “herself from her vital center and, as a consequence, also from herself”.³ Similar convictions were upheld by Ferdinand Hahn, who acknowledged, albeit ruefully, that “if at some time the Church’s missionary service seemed natural, it was only in the first fifty years”.⁴

¹ M. KÄHLER, *Schriften zur Christologie und Mission* [1908], Ch. Kaiser, München 1971, 190.

² Cf. R. SCHNACKENBURG, *The Church in the New Testament* [1961], Seabury Press, New York 1965.

³ M. HENGEL, “Die Ursprünge der christlichen Mission”, *New Testament Studies*, vol. 18, n. 1, 1971, 38.

⁴ “The early Christianity was a missionary Church. Her proclamation, her doctrine and her practice had a missionary dimension. In reality, in the New Testament, there is no reference to the notion of ‘mission’, but this absence does not change the fact that the first Christianity, in all its existence and in all its activity,

Although several authors claim that the missionary activity of Jesus is not intended to form a new Church but to renew Israel,⁵ they all share the certainty that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, by its eschatological character, definitively determines the ultimate meaning of human history, with the mission having the task of bearing witness to them. The result is a multiform presentation of Jesus' mission, which is the inauguration of His Kingdom. The biblical texts recall the formation of the disciples, "fishers of men", but also focus on them being with Jesus, sharing His journey, adhering to His word, and to a supranational openness. This multiplicity has not been missed by the New Testament evangelists, whose work features a variety of facets and teachings. Matthew, in particular, puts forward a vision of the mission whereby the fidelity to the Gospel is not similar to the fidelity to a doctrine, but to Jesus Himself who, even though ascended to heaven, always remains with us. For Luke's Acts, the mission is an "ecclesial" commitment, guided by the Spirit and organized around the testimony of the Apostles, often in a context of adversity and suffering.

Among the theologians and the scholars of the New Testament,⁶ Hahn observes that the coming of Christ establishes the mission as the service of the Church, opening the way to the eschatological event of salvation,⁷ while according to David Bosch "the New Testament has to be understood as a missionary document".⁸ Therefore,

was determined by this reality. If at some time the Church's missionary service seemed natural, it was only in the first fifty years" (F. HAHN, *Mission in the New Testament* [1965], SCM Press, London 1981). See also K. KERTELGE (ed.), *Mission im Neuen Testament*, Herder, Freiburg-Basel-Wien 1982.

⁵ Cf. R. PESCH, "Voraussetzungen und Anfänge der urchristlichen Mission", in K. KERTELGE (ed.), *Mission im Neuen Testament*, 26.

⁶ Another scholar who deserves to be mentioned in this context is Eckhard J. Schnabel, the author of the two volume-work *Early Christian Mission*, focused on *Jesus and the Twelve*, and *Jesus, Paul and the Early Church*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove 2004. In the first volume, Schnabel distinguishes Jesus's mission to Israel (209-262) from the mission of the twelve Apostles (263-380). Moreover, as far as the life of the Church is concerned, he distinguishes a Church's mission limited to the Jewish world as ultimate horizon (381-542), from a Church that expands its mission to the ends of the world (543-ss). The latter is the kind of Church advocated for by the author. See also E.J. SCHNABEL, *Urchristliche Mission*, Brockhaus, Wuppertal 2002.

⁷ Cf. F. HAHN, *Mission in the New Testament*.

⁸ D.J. BOSCH, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Orbis Books, New York – Maryknoll 1991, 54. The entire first chapter (15-55) of

it remains to be understood when, why, and how the mission lost its centrality. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza explains the reason for the marginalization of the mission in theological studies as follows: “Many exegetes do not presently perceive the history of early primitive Christianity as the story of a propagandistic-missionary endeavor. Instead they consider the New Testament writings primarily as documents of an inner-Christian doctrinal struggle and they understand early Christian history mainly as a ‘confessional’ history, as a struggle between different Christian parties and theologians.”⁹

In a few dense pages, Hendrikus Berkhof believes that the ultimate cause of this approach is found in the ecclesial style.¹⁰ By identifying the Church with the historical form it adopted in a given era and in a given society, spreading the Gospel to the whole world was certainly considered a duty of the Church, but what pertained to the history and life of the peoples to be evangelized were of no cultural and religious interest.

The geographical discoveries of the 16th century brought along a remarkable missionary effort also in the theoretical field. Notwithstanding this progress, it failed to fill the already existing abyss between mission and ecclesiastical theology. In addition, no real change occurred not even when missionary groups were set up to create a ‘science of the mission’ in the first-half of the 20th century. Centered on the role of the missionary, that attempt had an approach more justificatory and practical, rather than theoretical. It was only after World War II, with the establishment of the World Council of Churches and the Second Vatican Council, that a really new phase began.

Mission cannot be understood as a practical tool for something else: the salvation of souls, the *plantatio ecclesiae* or the Christianization of the world. As a fundamental act of God, the mission is a value in itself. It is in fact so central that the Church itself, and its

Bosch’s work – titled purposely “Reflections on the New Testament as a Missionary Document” – is dedicated to support this conclusion.

⁹ E. SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA (ed.), *Aspects of Religious Propaganda in Judaism and Early Christianity*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN 1976, 1.

¹⁰ H. BERKHOF, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit: The Annie Kinkead Warfield Lectures, 1963-1964*, John Knox Press, Richmond, VA 1964 (Italian edition: *Lo Spirito Santo e la Chiesa: la dottrina dello Spirito Santo*, Jaca Book, Milano 1971, 38-40).

life, “would never be known as mighty acts of God without this last one: the movement of the missionary Spirit. [...] Of its ongoing accomplishment we are witnesses”.¹¹ Berkhof, therefore, draws the conclusion that it is not the mission that is an instrument of the Church, but the Church that is an instrument of the mission initiated by Christ and that continues through the work of His Spirit. With regard to what is usually referred to as ecclesiocentrism, Walter Kasper affirmed that an ecclesiology built from pneumatology views the Church primarily “as an event, in which the truth, freedom and justice which entered the world with Christ remain alive in history and are constantly given new life. The Church is then where the reality of Jesus, through the Spirit, is made present”.¹² Without the mission, the Church ends-up folding herself up into sterile introversion.

In this work, I will try to develop this discourse in four chapters. The first, will have a strong historical focus and analyze the development of western mission, which is characteristic of modernity, and illustrate its limits; the second, will address theological issues, furthering the elaboration of a different theology of mission and explaining its salient features; the third, will try to translate these theses into the life of the Church, so as to shed light on its pastoral commitment, while the fourth will examine Pope Francis’ *Evangelii Gaudium* as the main expression of this journey.

¹¹ Ibid., 35 (Italian edition).

¹² W. KASPER, *An Introduction to Christian Faith*, Matthias-Grünewald Verlag, Mainz 1972, 139 (Italian edition: *Introduzione alla fede*, Queriniana, Brescia 1972, 147). All texts, sentences, and expressions in languages other than English were translated by PMU and reviewed by Urbaniana University Press, both from original and non-original sources.