

POPE FRANCIS

Without Jesus
We Can Do
Nothing

Being a Missionary in the World Today

A Conversation with Gianni Valente

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Introduction

Not with Words of Human Wisdom, but with the Power of God

“The joy of evangelizing always arises from grateful remembrance: it is a grace which we constantly need to implore.”¹ It is almost seven o’clock in the evening at Pope Francis’s Vatican residence, Casa Santa Marta. The busy day is not over yet. The Pope speaks in a low voice. He searches for words, unhurried. He has a peaceful heart. Yet it is easy to imagine how many thoughts must be crowding his mind.

In 2013, after the first months of his pontificate, the Successor of Peter from Buenos Aires offered his first, programmatic apostolic letter, *Evangelii Gaudium*, “On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World,” to remind everyone that “the joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus” (EG 1). Almost six years later, he proclaimed October 2019 to be an “extraordinary missionary month,” and convened in Rome the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the

1 Pope Francis, Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World (November 24, 2013), n. 13. Hereafter cited as EG within the text.

Pan-Amazon Region to consider new ways of proclaiming the Gospel in that “mission land.”

Many things happened in between, in the church and in the world. Pope Francis developed his magisterium with constant references to the nature of the church’s mission and the action it demands. He insistently repeated that the agent of that mission is the Holy Spirit; he said a thousand times that proclaiming the Gospel is different than “proselytism”; he suggested in many different ways that the church grows “by attraction” and by witness. In all, he provided a sort of vocabulary of mission to explain this period in the life of the church, a constellation of words aimed at teaching us the source and the nature of all apostolic work—not one more task that must be taken up in addition to all the other burdens life offers, but purely an expression of gratitude, an overflow of thanksgiving for the joy of having met Christ and of having been embraced by him.

Thus the mission of proclaiming the Gospel, Pope Francis has suggested in many ways and on many occasions, is not something to be carried out only by “experts” and people specially chosen by the church, because its movements draw on the very heart of the mystery of salvation, and its paths make up the adventure of faith and of the church in the life of the world.

Meanwhile, at Casa Santa Marta this evening, the Pope has been sharing his memories, his ideas, his images. And his words call to mind those of Saint Ignatius of Antioch, written in the early second century while he was being transported to Rome as a public spectacle and finally to receive his martyrdom: “Our God Jesus Christ, now that he has returned to the Father, is manifest all the more. Before the persecutions of the world, Christianity is not supported with words of human wisdom, but with the strength of God.”²

2 Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans*, chapter 3.

“A Failed Missionary?”

Young Bergoglio’s Japanese dream

Holy Father, you have said that as a young man, you wanted to go to Japan as a missionary. Then things took another path. But in your initial vocation, there was the call and the impetus to “cross the sea.” Can we say that the Pope is a failed missionary?

I don’t know. I joined the Jesuits because I was captivated by their missionary vocation, their always going to the frontiers. Then I couldn’t go to Japan. But I have always insisted that proclaiming Jesus and his Gospel always involves a certain going out, a setting out. When I was provincial of the Jesuits in Argentina, I supported the spread of small “mission stations” throughout the country.

Did you send the priests out? And where did they go?

Wherever there was a need. From north to south. Especially in areas where there were no priests.

When I became a bishop, I also saw priests in crisis whose priesthoods were saved when they went to exercise it far away, in places of mission. Others went because they felt the call of

the Lord. They perhaps thought they would go to those places to bring Christ, but instead it was they who were recaptured and healed by Christ in those places. Day after day they discovered the wonders, the small and great miracles that God works in his faithful people—the people who were poor, people wounded and healed, forgiven sinners.

Do you remember any stories of these Argentine priests?

I remember that one of them, Juan Ignacio Liébana, gathered into a book his experiences and his encounters at a mission in the north of the country, near Santiago del Estero. He called it *Bautizado por el monte* [Baptized by the mountain]. “I arrived here,” Father Juan Ignacio wrote in the first pages, “intending to build a house for God, wishing to go out and visit homes and communities to proclaim his word, to be his heroic and generous missionary who brings his message. And instead I see that things are going differently. It is God who is building me my home, which is his; I will not be the one who will go out to visit, but God will visit me. God will be the one who will bring his message of salvation to me.”

Christ Always Precedes Us

The “Church that Goes Forth” Never Goes Forth on Its Own

You often make reference to the “Chiesa in uscita”—the church that goes forth. The expression is repeated by many others, and sometimes it seems to have become an abused slogan, used by those, always more numerous, who spend time giving lessons to the church on how it should or should not be.

“A church that goes forth” is not a fashionable expression that I invented. It is the command of Jesus, who in Mark’s Gospel commands his followers to go into the whole world and preach the Gospel “to the whole creation” [16:15]. Either the church is going forth, or it is not the church. It is either proclaiming its message, or it is not the church. If the church does not go forth, it becomes corrupt and distorted. It becomes something else.

What happens to a church that does not proclaim and does not go forth?

It becomes a spiritual association. A multinational organization that has ethical-religious initiatives and messages. There's nothing wrong with that kind of thing, but that's not the church. This is a risk of any static organization within the church. We end up taming Christ. You no longer bear witness to what Christ does, but you speak on behalf of a certain idea of Christ, an idea owned and tamed by you. You organize things, you become the little manager of ecclesial life, where everything happens according to the established program, that is, only to be followed according to the instructions. But you never rekindle your encounter with Christ. You don't rekindle the encounter that touched your heart at the beginning.

Is the mission itself an antidote to all this? Is the will and effort to "go forth" on mission enough to avoid these distortions?

The mission, the "church that goes forth," is not a program, a goal to be accomplished by force of will. It is Christ who brings the church out of itself. In the mission of proclaiming the Gospel, you act because the Holy Spirit prompts you and moves you. And when you arrive, you realize that the Spirit has arrived before you and is waiting for you. The Spirit of the Lord came first. The Spirit precedes you and also prepares you for the journey and is already at work.