

*American Society of Missiology Series, No. 58*

## GO FORTH

*Toward a Community  
of Missionary Disciples*

POPE FRANCIS

*Selected with Commentary by*  
William P. Gregory

ORBIS  BOOKS  
Maryknoll, New York 10545

## Introduction

*I would like a more missionary church, one that is not so staid. This beautiful church that makes progress.*

—POPE FRANCIS,  
MEETING WITH  
SEMINARIANS AND NOVICES,  
JULY 6, 2013

In his first major teaching document, the 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*), Pope Francis set forth the program of his pontificate: *the missionary reform of the Catholic Church*. A reform is needed, the newly elected pope argued, because in far too many ways the church fails to live out its mission. The failures are not at all hard to spot. The church is the people of God, the sum total of all baptized Christians, and a great many Christians do not follow Jesus in mission to the extent that they should. We see the failure of those who turn aside from the needs of their neighbors and who look the other way in the face of injustice. We see the failure of unwelcoming congregations and of unconscionable abuse and coverup in the ranks of the ordained. We see the failure of Christians who foment division in society and who blindly accept the destruction wrought by consumer culture. There are failures of action and failures of omission, failures of heart and failures of mind.

The picture is not all bleak, of course. Countless Christians and church institutions do tremendous good every day in fidelity to Jesus. But the problems are real and cannot be discounted. In perhaps the greatest sign of failure today, younger generations of Catholics are abandoning the church en masse in many parts of the world to seek meaning and inspiration elsewhere. The church that is meant to be the light of the world struggles to shine. Its lamp in the lives of a great many of the baptized is hidden or dimmed.

It is in response to this situation that Pope Francis calls for the church's missionary transformation. The church, he states, needs to advance "along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things

as they presently are. ‘Mere administration’ can no longer be enough.”<sup>1</sup> All Christians everywhere must be inspired anew to go out into the world to serve their brothers and sisters in need of comfort, hope, and the light of faith. The whole ship of the church needs to be turned in this direction and all of its energies concentrated on this goal. The changes that are required are not few and superficial but many and profound, for in so many ways the church falls short of its calling. Church leaders and others need to “abandon the complacent attitude that says: ‘We have always done it this way’” and embark upon a new chapter of evangelization that “attempts to put all things in a missionary key.”<sup>2</sup> Administrative and structural reforms make up part of the needed changes, but they are actually secondary. The primary reform is to awaken spiritually in as many of the faithful as possible so that more and more of them acquire a missionary consciousness and identity. All Christians without exception need to discover—or rediscover—that being a Christian means none other than following Jesus in mission. “My friends,” Francis says, “the Lord needs you! Today too, he is calling each of you to follow him in his Church and to be missionaries. The Lord is calling you today! . . . Listen to what he is saying to you in your heart.”<sup>3</sup>

Sparking this missionary renewal in the hearts and minds of the faithful is Pope Francis’s foremost goal—his great project and dream for the church. Almost everything he has said and done since his election as pope has had missionary renewal as its ultimate objective. This fact has not always been clear in the minds of many Catholics, dependent as they are on selective or partial news sources. But in the hundreds of speeches, messages, homilies, and interviews the pope has given in the six years since his election, the missionary reform of the church emerges again and again as the great integrating theme of his papacy. His more well-known ideas on mercy, accompaniment, economic justice, and the environment, and his many actions and remarks that have garnered media attention, all fit into this larger story. To put it simply, Pope Francis is a missionary pope who is calling the church to follow its true missionary calling.

In issuing this call to renewal the pope shows that he understands his audience. He addresses the entire people of God, the overwhelming majority of whom are lay people, and he knows that a great many of them are not well formed in their missionary responsibilities and so need guidance and encouragement in taking them on. For the last six years he has provided this. His message, in many respects, may be characterized as an extended teaching on the nature of mission—a description of its different

---

<sup>1</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* 25.

<sup>2</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* 33, 34.

<sup>3</sup> Prayer Vigil with the Young People, July 27, 2013.

forms and of the absolutely central place it holds in the Christian faith. At the same time his message is also an extended act of encouragement. What he most wants everyone in the church to know is that mission is an essential and required part of Christian identity. It is not optional. But more than an obligation, it is the transcendent path of life, hope, and joy for our wounded and broken world. Mission is mercy, tenderness, compassion, peace, solidarity, and care for others in imitation of the infinite love of God. All Christians everywhere are called to take part in the church's mission, and all *can* take part in the church's mission in a way that is uniquely suited to their gifts, circumstances, and particular callings. Naturally, there are difficulties to be faced and crosses to be borne, but all Christians can follow Jesus in mission. That is Pope Francis's most important message to the church.

This book offers a detailed overview of that message. It seeks to provide a clear and systematic account of the pope's ideas in order to advance the missionary renewal the church desperately needs. It does this by weaving together several hundred of Francis's own statements into a series of chapters, each of which develops a major topic in his thought. Summaries of chapters and of subsections within chapters are provided throughout to enhance readability and to help the reader keep the big picture in view. In terms of sources, the most important one is *Evangelii Gaudium*, and this book reproduces approximately 45 percent of that document, covering all its major themes. But three-quarters of this book is composed of other sources drawn from Francis's speeches, messages, general audiences, and other major teaching documents from 2013 to 2016, with a few additional texts from 2017 and 2018. The result is a fuller picture of the pope's views on mission than appears in *Evangelii Gaudium* alone. Francis's other major teaching documents—*Laudato Si'* (2015), *Amoris Laetitia* (2016), and *Gaudete et Exsultate* (2018)—also touch on important themes of mission: environmental stewardship, pastoral accompaniment, and personal holiness. Readers will find here direct links to all of these topics.

Some readers will notice from the footnotes the huge variety of audiences the pope addresses and perhaps wonder, Is Pope Francis speaking *to me* when he talks to presidents, migrants, prisoners, diplomats, bishops, priests, religious, humanitarian organizations, interreligious gatherings, and all manner of other groups? The answer is yes. No matter his audience, the pope tends to return to the same core ideas in a great majority of his addresses, and these ideas all pertain to the church as a whole because the tasks of mission all belong to the church as a whole. So whether one is lay or ordained, young or old, well educated in the faith or not, all Christians can find in the passages included in this book a message from Francis that is directly and personally applicable. Chapters 7 and 11 do contain a few

more narrowly focused messages—to relatively wealthy Christians and to those engaged in more pastoral ministries—but these are the exception. On the whole the substance of every chapter is pertinent to the life of every Christian. Again, this follows from the fact that mission is the duty of all the baptized and not just of a few. All are equally capable of mission and, at the same time, all are equally fallible. Just because one is a lay person or a person relatively uneducated in the faith does not mean one cannot make a tremendous contribution to the church's mission, and just because a person is ordained or one is well educated does not mean one cannot prove quite mediocre or unfaithful. It all depends upon one's personal response in faith: to follow Jesus in mission or not.

So what is Pope Francis's overall message on mission? And in what way are any of his views unique in the recent history of the church's teaching? Let me address each of these questions in turn and, because the chapter summaries provided throughout the book already encapsulate the central features of his thought, I will reply just briefly to the first question and more at length to the second.

As I noted at the outset, Pope Francis's goal is the missionary transformation of the church, and so his teaching on mission is directed very practically toward this end. He observes three main obstacles that stand in the way of the church's greater missionary engagement, and he addresses each of them in order to effect positive change. The first obstacle he addresses is lack of understanding; one reason Catholics do not engage in mission to the extent that they should is that they often do not know well enough what it is they are supposed to do. Francis, consequently, takes upon himself the task of explanation, and he is a good teacher. He presents a general idea of mission with the concepts of witness and closeness (Chapters 1 and 2) and then shows the many possible variations of this general idea in the life of a Christian. Thus, mission, in general involves drawing close to others to witness and communicate God's love. But this can be carried out through activities as diverse as charitable works, preaching and evangelism, the promotion of justice, the defense of the vulnerable, ecumenical cooperation, interreligious dialogue, the witness of personal holiness, peacebuilding, and care of the environment, among many other activities. A look at the table of contents shows that Francis teaches at greater length about a number of missionary tasks that he believes are particularly urgent at the present time, including performing the works of mercy (Chapter 3), living in solidarity with the poor and vulnerable (Chapter 7), and promoting peace in society (Chapter 8). But the general nature of mission and its wide variety of possible forms leave open innumerable doors for Christians to walk through. Mission is not a

one-size-fits-all endeavor. In this way he clarifies for the whole church the nature of its missionary vocation.

The second obstacle the pope addresses that stands in the way of greater missionary engagement is lack of motivation; sometimes Christians know what it is they are called to do but are just not spiritually motivated enough to do it. Various competing inclinations and dispositions win out, including fear of encountering difficulty (Chapter 2), indifference to the suffering of others (Chapter 3), pessimism about being able to make a difference (Chapter 4), and the pride or self-satisfaction that says, “I’m already good enough; I don’t need to change” (Chapter 5). Pope Francis understands these common human failings and so he challenges Christians to cultivate the missionary virtues of courage, mercy, hope, and humility (Chapters 2–5) as well as joy and a deep relationship with God in prayer (Chapter 6), without which it is impossible to witness attractively to others or to communicate effectively the life of faith (Chapter 10). Feeding these inner, motivational resistances to mission are a number of powerful social forces that conspire to keep Christians selfishly closed in on themselves and turned away from the world’s needs. Foremost among these are individualism, consumerism, worldliness, and lack of fraternity (see especially Chapters 3, 6, 7, and 8). For the church to increase its missionary activity, therefore, it needs both a deep renewal of spirituality and an accompanying elevation of critical social consciousness. Only by growing in these ways, Francis believes, will the church be able to build up the necessary reservoirs of spiritual commitment and energy that will enable it to “go forth.”

The third obstacle that the pope addresses centers more narrowly on a series of problematic ways the faith is sometimes communicated to others, especially verbally. The heart of the matter may be characterized as the church’s *Pharisee problem* (my term) in the sense that there are those in the church who often sound more like the scribes and Pharisees of the gospels than like Jesus. They stress strict adherence to rules and to complex theological doctrines when preaching or sharing the faith with others, and they view the tradition in ways that lead them to insist on the absolute necessity of certain cultural expressions of the faith, for example, the Latin mass. They also tend to condemn and demonize those who do not measure up to their standards of purity, whether they happen to be inside or outside the church. This brand of Catholicism will be familiar to many people, particularly in the United States, where it has been fueled for some time by several influential media outlets. Pope Francis’s problem with this kind of Catholicism is that it often misconstrues both the gospel and Catholic tradition and so leads to deeply flawed forms of witness and proclamation. Catholicism, he insists, is not a form of fundamentalism

but a living tradition with room within it for growth and development, a diversity of ideas, and a wide variety of cultural expressions (Chapter 9). Proclamation, in turn, is not about proposing to people a multitude of doctrines, but rather about communicating the fundamental message of God's saving love, and about doing so with a pastoral presence that is tender, humble, and deeply loving—and therefore attractive to others (Chapter 10). Triumphalistic pronouncements, messages that denounce and exclude, and any kind of severe or legalistic pastoral presence are, in most cases, a major put off. They send the wrong message about the faith and interfere with the genuine work of evangelization. What is required instead is a witness and proclamation that touches hearts, welcomes everyone without exception, helps people grow closer to God no matter their state in life, and never fails to express the tenderness of a loving mother (Chapter 11).

With this brief overview of Pope Francis's message in place, let me turn now to the second question posed above: In what way are any of his views unique in the recent history of the church's teaching? Put another way, in what sense is his teaching new in relation to the line of thinking on mission that emerged in the church following Vatican II? Popes in general build on the thought of their predecessors, developing it in new directions in basic continuity with what has come before. Francis is no exception in this regard. However, with his commitment to the missionary reform of the church, he has made particularly substantive contributions in this area in a relatively short amount of time. All told, one can identify five important ways he is developing the church's thinking on mission.

First, he is turning it in a decidedly more practical, historical, and evaluative direction. No pope in recent times has engaged the church in such an extended reflection upon its actual practice of mission, or lack thereof. He has taken stock of the church's many failures, measured these against its ideals, and reflected at length about how to improve the situation. We see this, for example, in his challenge to the "Pharisee" brand of Catholicism as well as in his analysis of the many factors that undercut missionary motivation. This not something Francis's predecessors did at any length. While they certainly shared his conviction that Christians should practice what they preach, they were to a large extent occupied with different problems. They faced the urgent task of reestablishing the theological foundations of mission following Vatican II and a number of other historical developments in the 1960s and 1970s that forced the church to renew its thinking on mission. They had to answer such questions as why mission is necessary if salvation is possible outside the church, what the different activities and objectives of mission are, how they are related to each other, and how the historical reality of the church relates to the coming of the kingdom of

God. By addressing these and other questions, Popes Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI gave mission the firm theological foundation it needed in order for Catholics to engage in mission with confidence. Francis, in almost every respect, accepts this theological foundation. His concern has been with a different problem: *How can the members of the church all be stimulated and awakened so as to engage effectively in mission?* In choosing to address this problem Francis's Jesuit training shows itself, for one of the pillars of Ignatian spirituality is the practice of spiritual discernment, which seeks to more faithfully follow God's will through prayerful discrimination of the good and evil in one's current experience.

Francis's second contribution to the church's thinking on mission takes us back to the issue of motivation, and it builds directly upon the theological foundation developed by his predecessors. Consistently, the Christian faithful have needed a clear and simple rationale for why the task of mission is both urgent and imperative. The scriptural warrants for mission are many and varied, but for practical purposes the faithful have needed a single compelling idea to animate them and to serve as the backbone of their missionary identity. The rationale provided by John Paul II and Benedict XVI was markedly mystical in character and may be summed up by the phrase *experiencing and sharing the gift of salvation with everyone*. The basic idea is that Christians have received the unparalleled gift of God's own life: unconditional divine Love itself. This gift is received in a wholly unique way through the sacraments and the church, and it inwardly compels the faithful in the power of the Spirit to perform every good deed (all the various activities of mission) and especially to proclaim the gospel to others so that they too may know and experience this gift. So why engage in mission? In short, the mysticism of authentic Christian faith compels one to it and especially to evangelism, for, in the words of John Paul II, "the ultimate purpose of mission is to enable people to share in the communion that exists between the Father and the Son."<sup>4</sup>

Francis firmly accepts this idea, as his strong insistence on the necessity of prayer and closeness to God in order to motivate mission attests (Chapter 6). However, he proposes to the faithful a different key rationale to help them understand why they need to be engaged in mission—one that is likely more immediately compelling and intelligible. His idea is taken from Jesus's teaching on the last judgment (Mt 25:31–46), and it may be summed up by the phrase *ministering to the wounded flesh of Christ in the world* (see Chapter 3). It is that Jesus himself suffers in all the wounds of the world, and his true followers are those who bring him solace and relief. He suffers in the sick, the imprisoned, the poor, the hungry, the

---

<sup>4</sup> *Redemptoris Missio* 23.



spiritually lost and forlorn, and in all those who bear burdens of anguish or affliction of any kind. The church, consequently, must go out in mission to aid its Lord. It must operate like a field hospital in all those places where his body lies bruised and bleeding. Needless to say, this rationale has resonated quite powerfully in the minds of many Christians since Francis first articulated it as pope. It easily stirs the imagination and does not require a familiarity with the mystical depths of Christian experience to appreciate. Therefore, it likely has provided a more accessible entrance into missionary commitment than the mystical rationale. Even a child can comprehend it, and that is a real advance.

The third contribution the pope makes to the church's thinking directly affects how it looks at the world in general and at the progress of human history. It involves an important recalibration and balancing of the two fundamental goals of mission. These two goals are, first, to pass on the faith to others, and second, to transform the world for the better.<sup>5</sup> The mystical framework prioritized the first goal over the second and consequently prioritized the missionary activities of preaching and evangelism over and above all other missionary activities—for example, promoting peace, feeding the hungry, defending the vulnerable, engaging in interreligious dialogue, and befriending the lonely. Thus, in one of the preparatory documents for the 2012 Synod on the New Evangelization, we read that “the duty to help others encounter Christ in faith [is] the primary goal of evangelization.”<sup>6</sup> All other missionary activities and objectives are viewed as secondary to this goal.<sup>7</sup>

Pope Francis disagrees with this view. He believes that the two goals, and all of the different activities that support each of them, stand on an equal footing. Both goals are clearly commanded as part of divine revelation and both, therefore, need to be pursued by Christians with equal fervor and commitment. Proclamation, defined as the communication of the gospel for the purpose of passing on the faith to others, he further clarifies, should not be thought of as taking place exclusively through preaching and evangelism, or in general only by means of words. Rather, it takes place just as powerfully through the witness of a good and holy life and through actions that benefit others and society. This means that the activities that support the second goal also support the first and should not be imagined as standing in competition with them. Thus, part of Francis's response to the failure of the church to pass on the faith to younger generations in the West is to call for the renewal of *all* forms of mission rather than just for

---

<sup>5</sup> Meeting with the Young People of Umbria, October 4, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> *Instrumentum Laboris* 34; cf. 18, 31.

<sup>7</sup> See *ibid.* 3, 34, 57, 71.

the renewal of preaching and evangelism, as Benedict XVI's program of the new evangelization envisioned. The result is a strong renewal of the church's message of hope for the world (Chapter 4) and a rehabilitation of the social dimensions of mission (Chapter 1, 3, 7, and 8) following a period in which both of these were somewhat downplayed. To clarify, the goal of passing on the faith to others certainly remains as central as ever for Pope Francis, for as he states, "the absence of Christ is the greatest poverty of all"<sup>8</sup> and lack of spiritual care is "the worst discrimination which the poor suffer"<sup>9</sup> (see especially Chapters 6, 10, and 11). But now the work of faith transmission is upheld together with equal emphasis with the work of world transformation. Christians who have pursued neither goal very strongly in their lives are thus doubly challenged, even as the rehabilitation of the social dimensions of mission broadens the options for Christians taking their first steps in mission.

Pope Francis's fourth contribution specifically develops the church's teaching on verbal proclamation (Chapters 9–10). Far too often, especially in the context of pastoral ministry, Christians inadvertently send the wrong message with their words and thus wound and alienate others in the process. It is not enough, the pope insists, for the church simply to share its teaching with people as if the way it does so does not matter. Rather, it is necessary to communicate the faith in a manner that actually uplifts others and helps them grow closer to God. What is often lacking in this regard, however, is a sensitivity to the lives and struggles of others and an ability to communicate the faith in such a fashion that it is received by others as the good news that it actually is. Particularly when speaking to those who do not know much about the faith or whose lives stand at some distance from the Christian ideal, it is necessary to choose words that attractively highlight the central message of God's saving love and that prudently suit the hearer's particular stage of moral and religious development. If this is not done, then the hearer can easily be confused or perceive criticism and judgment in the absence of any assurance of God's unconditional love and acceptance. At the same time the tone and personal presence of the speaker matter tremendously. The communication of the gospel, Francis insists, must always be marked by tenderness, mercy, and a commitment to accompany people through all of their difficulties. Under no circumstances can the communication of God's love be obscured. These teachings mark a significant advance on the magisterial level of the church's thinking on the nature of proclamation and evangelism. At the same time, they also

---

<sup>8</sup> Address to the Bishops of South Africa on their Ad Limina Visit, April 25, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* 200.

form the heart of the pope's critique of the "Pharisee" tendencies in contemporary Catholicism.

Francis's fifth contribution to the church's thinking on mission is to raise an entirely new question for it to reflect upon: *How can the church be institutionally structured and governed so as to prioritize mission in its every action?* This question follows from reflection upon the fact that the church, at present, does not necessarily conduct itself in every respect "in a missionary key."<sup>10</sup> In some, if not in many, respects it tends to be rather self-preoccupied and turned away from the world. Or, when it does turn toward the world, it too often tends to be defensive and critical rather than joyful and attractive in its gestures and communications. The church needs to do better. Vatican II asserted that "the pilgrim church is missionary by its nature."<sup>11</sup> For too long this teaching has been interpreted to mean that it is the duty of all the baptized to engage in mission. This places the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of individuals. But the church is as much a communal reality as an individual one, and so the responsibility falls equally there as well. Pope Francis calls the church to attend to this fact. He asks, how can it be better run and organized in order to help all the faithful fulfill their missionary duties, and how can it institutionally witness to the gospel in a more authentic and attractive way? Raising this question brings up deeper problems of clericalism (Chapter 9), of culture-war Catholicism (Chapter 10), of corruption (Chapter 5), and of longstanding ecclesial customs and routines that consistently leave the faithful ill equipped to take up their missionary responsibilities in the world (Chapter 1). Francis challenges the church to come to terms with all of these problems and to recognize that there are aspects of its institutional culture that systematically frustrate its commitment to following Jesus in mission. To be faithful to its Lord, the church needs to think about its institutional missionary responsibility on a whole new level.

This brings us back to the great theme of *Evangelii Gaudium* and of Pope Francis's pontificate on the whole: the missionary reform of the church. On every page of this book one can see how the pope challenges the church to undergo conversion. The challenges can and should be read on two different levels: first, as a challenge to every individual Catholic and Christian; and second, as a challenge to every parish, community, and institutional church body. Every individual Christian, for example, needs to put aside fear, indifference, pessimism, and pride and take on the courage, mercy, hope, and humility that lead to mission—and so too does every church community. Every individual Christian needs to proclaim the

---

<sup>10</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* 34.

<sup>11</sup> *Ad Gentes* 2.

gospel with joy, accompany others, and practice peace and solidarity—and so too does every church community. In the work of communal and institutional reform, moreover, every member of the people of God has a part to play. No one should see himself or herself as too small or unable to make a contribution. Since every member of the church contributes to the life of the community, so too the work of reform belongs equally to everyone. Pope Francis encourages all of the baptized to help the church as a whole lift high the standard of mission in fidelity to the call of Jesus.