

## CARDINAL VINCENT NICHOLS

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**The question before us today is straightforward: ‘How is the Church measuring up to the Master’s command: Go, therefore to all nations. Baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you (Mt 28.19)?’**

How are we measuring up?

This question was posed in December 1962 as a plan for the entire Second Vatican Council under Pope John XXIII.

It was followed by this remark: ‘In order to respond to the Saviour’s command the whole Church must be put on a missionary footing!’

So here we are, in 2015, inspired by Pope Francis, determined that this shall be so. It’s never too late!

‘Go therefore to all nations.’ Why is this the central command of the Lord, the one he saves to the last, to those crucial moments in which he gives us our marching orders? It is central because it is the central purpose of his Incarnation, of his life, of his death, of his resurrection, of his return to the Father.

Listen to what he says to us so that we can understand how central this is to all that we are and to all that we want to do. This is his final prayer, addressed to his heavenly Father: ‘As you have sent me into the world, so I am sending them into the world’ (John 17.18).

This is our mandate, our mission and we have to understand how central it is to our identity.

By baptism we are made one with Christ. What is his is to be ours. His mission is ours. His ‘being sent by the Father’ so that the world ‘may have life and have it to the full’ is handed on to us.

This mission, given to Jesus by the Father, flows through all eternity, for he is the eternal Word, through whom that gift of life is first given. And he becomes the Incarnate Word, so that the gift of life may reach its fulfilment. This is the mission of the Father’s heart – the outflow of his creative love, now flowing to us, in our need, as the eternal mercy of the Father.

And this is the work of the Holy Spirit, the energy of the Father and Son, their love, their fire, their creativity, moving and moulding us. Jesus, in his final prayer, refers

everything to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit will teach and guide us; the Spirit will come only if he goes; through the Holy Spirit will mercy spring into the action of the forgiveness of our sins.

To understand our mission then we have to go to the heart of God, the very mystery of the Holy Trinity, the inner life of God. This is spoken of as the Divine 'communio' – the sharing within the mystery of the persons of God of divine life, love, truth, goodness and beauty. Only from within that inner heart of God does our mission arise. Only from that inner heart of God does our mission find its shape, its purpose, its energy. We are to do something beautiful; something that is of God; something that is for God.

So, our mission always starts in our prayer, flows from prayer, from our daily openness to the great mystery of the life of God. It cannot start anywhere else.

In recent years, since the Second Vatican Council, we have talked of the Church as a 'communio' – a communion or even as a community.

This talk of the Church, or the parish, as a community, has little depth unless the word 'communio' refers first of all the life of God. The Church is a 'communio' in and through the communion of life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Only because we have been drawn, together, into that life are we a community. We are not a group of like-minded people who agree a programme of action. We are participants together in the mystery of God.

Everything about our Church flows from there. Everything about our parish flows from there – at least everything worth having!

Parishes are not really communities unless they are rooted in the 'communio' of the life of God. Nothing else will hold us together. Our striving after that sharing of life, of love, of truth, of goodness, of beauty which flows from God is the only thing that makes sense of parish life. That is why the celebration of Mass is our central act; why we say that the Eucharist makes the Church. This is why our life of prayer is essential; why our pondering of the Scriptures is crucial; why our gazing on Our Lord present in the Blessed Sacrament is our silent centre.

The 'communio' of the parish flows from the 'communio' of God. The mission of the parish flows from the mission of God - the sending forth of the Son, by the Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit. This 'mystery of our salvation' gives shape to our life, to our prayer and to all of our work. 'As you, Father, have sent me into the world, so I am sending them into the world.'

How is it that we are members of the Church, here today? Because Jesus has called us, in a thousand different ways. And we can go back one step further. It is the Father's will that Jesus calls each one of us. Each of us is a gift given by the Father to his Son to be his companions, to share in his mission. We are here because it is the will of the Father to send us into the world!

Think of the calling of the first twelve disciples, the apostles. No one forced them to follow. They were invited. They were called to be with Jesus. That was the first step: called into a communion of life with him – into a 'divine communio'.

They were so different. Just think of this. Matthew was a tax collector, hated by most people as a traitor, a collaborator with the oppressive Roman authorities. Simon was a Zealot, committed to the liberation of his people. They were called together by Jesus. In any other circumstance, Simon would have knifed Matthew, killing him on the spot. In the 'communio' of Jesus something else is at work, something which is far greater than human commitment, a human cause.

If we are to be his missionaries, this is what we too must find. We have to enter deeply into the life of our Lord, as flowing from the Father, sustained and empowered by the Holy Spirit. This is what we bring to the world!

Pope Francis' favourite description for us is 'missionary disciples'. Disciples, because we are focussed on Christ. Missionary because we are sharing his mission. He is sending us into the world.

And for this he gives us his Holy Spirit.

There are two ways, I believe, in which we have to understand the action of the Holy Spirit as central to our mission.

The first is that the Holy Spirit precedes us wherever we may go, or be sent.

I remember going one evening to the Financial Standards Board in the City of London to take part in a dinner discussion about ethics in banking. Out of my depth! But I was consoled by the fact that the Holy Spirit was already there – in the goodness of the people I met; in their deep unease at what was happening in their profession; in their puzzling over what was to be done. Don't go into any situation believing it is Godless. A very experienced and well established defence Counsel said to me that among all the murderers, cheats, and villains he had defended he had never met a person who was all evil. The Holy Spirit is always there before us! If we miss that presence we will lose our way!

The second thing we have to remember in our mission is that the Holy Spirit will give us the gifts we need. The Holy Spirit will give us that discernment of what to do, of what to say, of how to bring faith to life in this particular moment. The Holy Spirit gives us this 'sensus fidei', this 'feel' for faith in action. (Cf International Theological Commission, 'Sensus fidei in the life of the Church', 2014, nn 49, 62). Jesus told his disciples not to be too bothered about preparing every detail of what they were going to say. Evangelisation is not about superior planning, greater efficiency and high-class management. It is about love, and trust and openness to the Holy Spirit.

Here's a splendid example of what I mean. There is a movement called 'Mother's Prayers'. It started quietly some years ago now, with just one anguished mother, and has spread to over 30, or is it 40, countries. It is what it says: the prayers of mothers for their children and for each other. It has spread entirely without deliberation, just by the power of example and providence. Here are some of their axioms:

'We must always let God be God – keep it simple, let God bless you and make you holy.'

'In Mother's Prayers we can take our masks off. God called us to be here. We've all said Yes. Nothing is too difficult for God.'

'Lord, I can't but you can', that's what Mothers Prayers is. Give each day to the Lord – and opportunities will come.'

'Always ask for gentleness and a loving approach'

I could go on. But just think, Mothers Prayers brings to the Lord mothers who live in the most difficult circumstances – a Russian mother who has had six abortions; a South American mother whose children are drug addicts and drug dealers; an African mother whose children are victims of human trafficking – they come together, they pray, they place their children before the Lord and they find his peace. And it has all been led simply by the Holy Spirit.

He sends us into the world. Where might that be? To whom are we being sent?

Can I suggest three 'C's

First, to our Colleagues who have lost their way. These can be fellow Catholics who are resting: all those who cross the threshold of the church just every now and then. They have heard of Jesus; they have some of the words; they have a familiarity, of sorts, with the Church.

Can we lead them, step by step, to know Jesus more clearly? It's a bit like the first proclamations of Peter. He wanted to move his hearers from a first familiarity, as Jews, with the person of Jesus and open for them a true knowledge and subsequent love for him.

There are countless opportunities to learn about: how the regular 300 in a parish can reach out to the 1,500 who cross the threshold in the course of a year, or who might do so if invited.

The second 'C' are the curious. A few years ago I overheard a conversation in a Spanish church. Two willowy, blond youngsters saying to their mother: 'Who's that naked man up there on a cross?' I was asked some time ago why all the cars were parked up every Sunday morning. 'Is it a car-boot sale?'

Curiosity, even if tinged with hostility, can be a marvellous opportunity if we are open ourselves and remember that within that curiosity may well lie the prompting of the Holy Spirit. If we forget that, then we are quickly on the defensive and the moment has gone!

Curiosity often arises out of a sense of wanting something more, a sense of emptiness. This is how some feel today, unsure about the deeper meaning of their lives, about what they stand for, beyond their loved ones or their possessions. Curiosity can actually save the cat!

We know that Jesus answers those deepest longings. He is the fullness of truth about who we truly are. The pathway of the beatitudes is the pathway of human fulfilment. There is an answer for the curious!

And the third 'C', probably the most important of all: the cry of the human heart – the cry of confusion, pain, hunger, loneliness, need, anger.

When Jesus said the prayer about sending us out into the world, he was, at that moment, experiencing in his flesh the worst of the world – its intrigues, its betrayals and shortly, its capacity for inflicting pain even unto death. But he did not turn away. The cry of his prayer mingled with the cry of the world and redeemed it.

So too for us. Whatever action we take in response to the cry of the world around us must bring together the cry of prayer and the cry of pain. Only then can it be the mission of Jesus.

Of course our action should be effective. But even more so it should be prayerful, otherwise its effectiveness will not touch the deepest well of pain from which the cry is rising.

Listen to Pope Francis: 'The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. For those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness.'

A few days ago, Pope Francis added to these words encouragement that our mission is always about bringing back together all that is broken, working for the deepest unity. He said: 'It would be facile to think that division and hatred only concerns struggles between countries or groups in society. Rather, they are a manifestation of the 'widespread individualism' which divides us and sets us against one another (Ev G 99), that legacy of sin lurking in the heart of human beings which causes so much suffering in society and all of creation. But it is precisely this troubled world into which Jesus sends us. We must not respond with nonchalance, or complain we do not have the resources to do the job, or that the problems are too bit. Instead, we must respond by taking up the cry of Jesus and accepting the grace and challenge of being builders of unity.' (Quito, 7 July 2015).

During this Conference and soon afterwards, you will have so many suggestions and possibilities to take up, so much enthusiasm to pass on to others. You will be rich and, maybe, overburdened.

So tread carefully. Do not drop your gifts. And do not let them swamp you.

At this moment you need wisdom to know what to do next. You need a prayer, a prayer for wisdom so that you make good choices in the months ahead.

Here is one suggestion.

This Conference Proclaim '15 is a point in an important journey. It is not a short sprint. It is a long haul. Helping our parishes to become missionary parishes, communities of evangelisation, rooted in the mystery of God and sharing in the mission of Jesus himself, is a long process.

I hope this Gathering adds great momentum to the missionary life and spirit of our Church, adding to a stream of energy and enthusiasm in the life of our parishes for reaching outward with the joy of the Gospel.

But the next step, what might it be?

My suggestion. The Pope has asked for a Jubilee Year of Mercy, beginning in December. Let that guide our choice of what to do next. Let that theme guide us in the steps we decide to take.

The next year of this Proclaim process can be 'Proclaim Mercy'. We can look at all we are given and see which of these rich gifts helps us to proclaim the mercy of God, not least in response to the cry of the world.

Remember the Spiritual Works of Mercy - Admonish the sinner; instruct the ignorant; counsel the doubtful; comfort the sorrowful; bear wrongs patiently; forgive all injuries; pray for the living and the dead. These are the loving responses to the needs of the heart and soul deep within every human being!

Remember the Corporal Works of Mercy - Feed the hungry; give drink to the thirsty; clothe the naked; shelter the homeless; visit the sick; visit the imprisoned and bury the dead. These are the responses of loving faith to the physical needs which cause many to cry out. When given they are never forgotten and often lead a person on the pathway to Christ, to him who inspired that loving generosity in the first place.

These are but some aspects of mercy which we can proclaim in the year ahead in response to those who cry out.

Our colleagues, outside the threshold of the church – can we not invite them to enter with us through the Door of Mercy which will be set up in so many churches. Practicing Catholics, I suggest, should only go through the Door of Mercy when they are bringing another person who is making a fresh journey to the Lord, a return journey to their heavenly Father. The activities of this Year, the 'Pilgrimage of Mercy' to which Pope Francis is calling us must not be another devotion but a wonderful time for reaching out to those to whom we are being sent.

And the curious – they will be astonished at the offer of mercy and forgiveness, just as the world wondered at the generosity of heart of the Christians of Charlesville who forgave the murderer who entered their church with the sole intention of killing.

But my time is up!

Evangelising parishes; parishes with a mission team; parishes which are centred on the Lord, always in prayer, always seeking his face and always following his calling into the world.

'As the Father has sent me into the world, so I am sending you into the world.'

So let it be! So let it be! Amen. Alleluia!