

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS FOR WORLD MISSION DAY 2024



Go and invite everyone to the banquet
(cf. Mt 22:9)

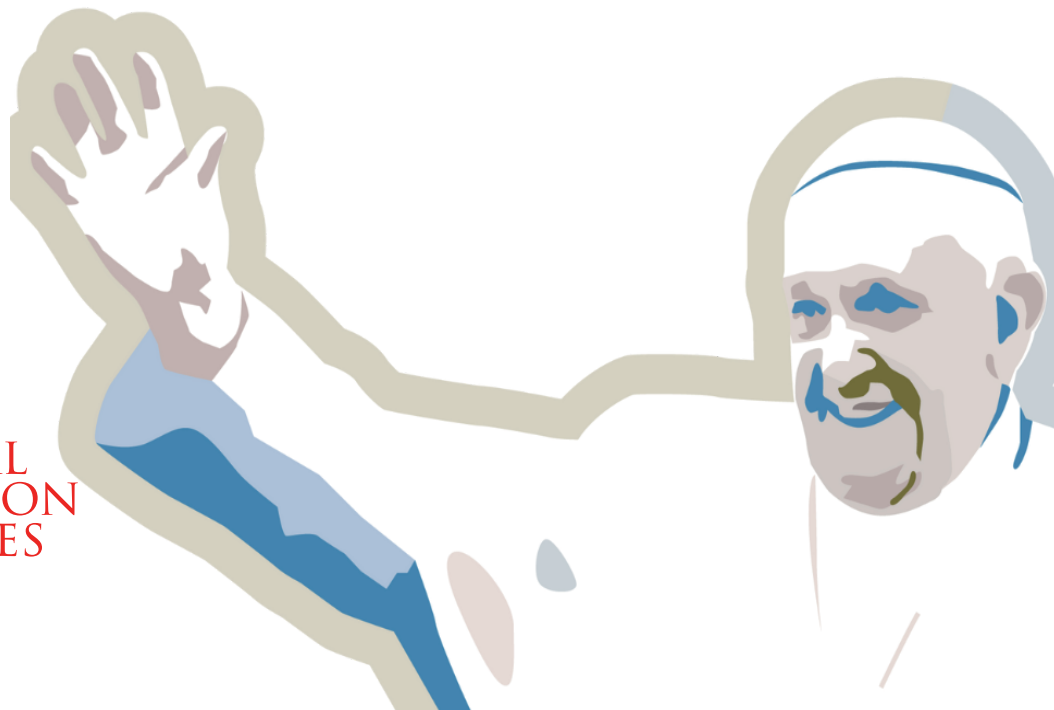
Dear brothers and sisters!

The theme I have chosen for this year's World Mission Day is taken from the Gospel parable of the wedding banquet (cf. Mt 22:1-14). After the guests refused his invitation, the king, the main character in the story, tells his servants: "Go therefore to the thoroughfares, and invite to the marriage feast as many as you find" (v. 9). Reflecting on this key passage in the context of the parable

and of Jesus' own life, we can discern several important aspects of evangelization. These appear particularly timely for all of us, as missionary disciples of Christ, during this final stage of the synodal journey that, in the words of its motto, "Communion, Participation, Mission", seeks to refocus the Church on her primary task, which is the preaching of the Gospel in today's world.



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“Go and invite”

Mission as a tireless going out to invite others to the Lord’s banquet.

In the king’s command to his servants we find two words that express the heart of the mission: the verbs “to go out” and “to invite”.

As for the first, we need to remember that the servants had previously been sent to deliver the king’s invitation to the guests (cf. vv. 3-4). Mission, we see, is a tireless going out to all men and women, in order to invite them to encounter God and enter into communion with him. Tireless! God, great in love and rich in mercy, constantly sets out to encounter all men and women, and to call them to the happiness of his kingdom, even in the face of their indifference or refusal. Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd and messenger of the Father, went out in search of the lost sheep of the people of Israel and desired to go even further, in order to reach even the most distant sheep (cf. Jn 10:16). Both before and after his resurrection, he told his disciples, “Go!”, thus involving them in his own mission (cf. Lk 10:3; Mk 16:15). The Church, for her part, in fidelity to the mission she has received from the Lord, will continue to go to the ends of the earth, to set out over and over again, without ever growing weary or losing heart in the face of difficulties and obstacles.

I take this opportunity to thank all those missionaries who, in response to Christ’s call, have left everything behind to go far from their homeland and bring the Good News to places where people have not yet received it, or received it only recently. Dear friends, your generous dedication is a tangible expression of your commitment to the mission *ad gentes* that Jesus entrusted to his disciples: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). We continue to pray and we thank God for the new and numerous missionary vocations for the task of evangelization to the ends of the earth.

Let us not forget that every Christian is called to

take part in this universal mission by offering his or her own witness to the Gospel in every context, so that the whole Church can continually go forth with her Lord and Master to the “crossroads” of today’s world. “Today’s drama in the Church is that Jesus keeps knocking on the door, but from within, so that we will let him out! Often we end up being an ‘imprisoning’ Church which does not let the Lord out, which keeps him as ‘its own’, whereas the Lord came for mission and wants us to be missionaries” (Address to Participants in the Conference organized by the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life, 18 February 2023). May all of us, the baptized, be ready to set out anew, each according to our state in life, to inaugurate a new missionary movement, as at the dawn of Christianity!

To return to the king’s command in the parable, the servants are told not only to “go”, but also to “invite”: “Come to the wedding!” (Mt 22:4). Here we can see another, no less important, aspect of the mission entrusted by God. As we can imagine, the servants conveyed the king’s invitation with urgency but also with great respect and kindness. In the same way, the mission of bringing the Gospel to every creature must necessarily imitate the same “style” of the One who is being preached. In proclaiming to the world “the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 36), missionary disciples should do so with joy, magnanimity and benevolence that are the fruits of the Holy Spirit within them (cf. Gal 5:22). Not by pressuring, coercing or proselytizing, but with closeness, compassion and tenderness, and in this way reflecting God’s own way of being and acting.



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“To the marriage feast”

The eschatological and Eucharistic dimension
of the mission of Christ and the Church.

In the parable, the king asks the servants to bring the invitation to his son's wedding banquet. That banquet is a reflection of the eschatological banquet. It is an image of ultimate salvation in the Kingdom of God, fulfilled even now by the coming of Jesus, the Messiah and Son of God, who has given us life in abundance (cf. Jn 10:10), symbolized by the table set with succulent food and with fine wines, when God will destroy death forever (cf. Is 25:6-8).

Christ's mission has to do with the fullness of time, as he declared at the beginning of his preaching: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mk 1:15). Christ's disciples are called to continue this mission of their Lord and Master. Here we think of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the eschatological character of the Church's missionary outreach: “The time for missionary activity extends between the first coming of the Lord and the second..., for the Gospel must be preached to all nations before the Lord shall come (cf. Mk 13:10)” (Ad Gentes, 9).

We know that among the first Christians missionary zeal had a powerful eschatological dimension. They sensed the urgency of the preaching of the Gospel. Today too it is important to maintain this perspective, since it helps us to evangelize with the joy of those who know that “the Lord is near” and with the hope of those who are pressing forward towards the goal, when all of us will be with Christ at his wedding feast in the kingdom of God. While the world sets before us the various “banquets” of consumerism, selfish comfort, the accumulation of wealth and individualism, the Gospel calls everyone to the divine banquet, marked by joy, sharing, justice and fraternity in communion with God and with others.

This fullness of life, which is Christ's gift, is anticipated even now in the banquet of the Eucharist, which the Church celebrates at the Lord's command in memory of him. The invitation to the eschatological banquet that we bring to everyone in our mission of evangelization is intrinsically linked to the invitation to the Eucharistic table, where the Lord feeds us with his word and with his Body and Blood. As Benedict XVI taught: “Every Eucharistic celebration sacramentally accomplishes the eschatological gathering of the People of God. For us, the Eucharistic banquet is a real foretaste of the final banquet foretold by the prophets (cf. Is 25:6-9) and described by the New Testament as ‘the marriage-feast of the Lamb’ (Rev 19:9), to be celebrated in the joy of the communion of the saints” (Sacramentum Caritatis, 31).

Consequently, all of us are called to experience more intensely every Eucharist, in all its dimensions, and particularly its eschatological and missionary dimensions. In this regard, I would reiterate that “we cannot approach the Eucharistic table without being drawn into the mission which, beginning in the very heart of God, is meant to reach all people” (ibid., 84). The Eucharistic renewal that many local Churches are laudably promoting in the post-Covid era will also be essential for reviving the missionary spirit in each member of the faithful. With how much greater faith and heartfelt enthusiasm should we recite at every Mass: “We proclaim your death, O Lord, and profess your resurrection, until you come again”!

In this year devoted to prayer in preparation for the Jubilee of 2025, I wish to encourage all to deepen their commitment above all to take part in the celebration of Mass and to pray for the Church's mission of evangelization. In obedience to the Saviour's command, she does not cease to pray, at every Eucharistic and liturgical celebration, the “Our Father”, with its petition, “Thy kingdom come”. In this way, daily prayer and the Eucharist in particular make us pilgrims and missionaries of hope, journeying towards everlasting life in God, towards the nuptial banquet that God has prepared for all his children.



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“Everyone”

The universal mission of Christ’s disciples in the fully synodal and missionary Church.

The third and last reflection concerns the recipients of the King’s invitation: “everyone”. As I emphasized, “This is the heart of mission: that ‘all’, excluding no one. Every mission of ours, then, is born from the heart of Christ in order that he may draw all to himself” (Address to the General Assembly of the Pontifical Mission Societies, 3 June 2023). Today, in a world torn apart by divisions and conflicts, Christ’s Gospel remains the gentle yet firm voice that calls individuals to encounter one another, to recognize that they are brothers and sisters, and to rejoice in harmony amid diversity. “God our Saviour desires everyone to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4). Let us never forget, then, that in our missionary activities we are asked to preach the Gospel to all: “Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, [we] should appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet” (Evangelii Gaudium, 14).

Christ’s missionary disciples have always had a heartfelt concern for all persons, whatever their social or even moral status. The parable of the banquet tells us that, at the king’s orders, the servants gathered “all whom they found, both good and bad” (Mt 22:10). What is more, “the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame” (Lk 14:21), in a word, the least of our brothers and sisters, those marginalized by society, are the special guests of the king. The wedding feast of his Son that God has prepared remains always open to all, since his love for each of us is immense and unconditional. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have life eternal” (Jn 3:16). Everyone, every man and every woman, is invited by God to partake of his grace, which transforms and saves. One need simply say “yes” to this gratuitous divine gift, accepting it and allowing oneself be transformed by it, putting it on like a “wedding robe” (cf. Mt 22:12).

The mission for all requires the commitment of all. We need to continue our journey towards a fully synodal and missionary Church in the service of the Gospel. Synodality is essentially missionary and, vice versa, mission is always synodal. Consequently, close missionary cooperation is today all the more urgent and necessary, both in the universal Church and in the particular Churches. In the footsteps of the Second Vatican Council and my Predecessors, I recommend to all dioceses throughout the world the service of the Pontifical Mission Societies. They represent the primary means “by which Catholics are imbued from infancy with a truly universal and missionary outlook and [are] also a means for instituting an effective collecting of funds for all the missions, each according to its needs” (Ad Gentes, 38). For this reason, the collections of World Mission Day in all the local Churches are entirely destined to the universal fund of solidarity that the Pontifical Society of the Propagation of the Faith then distributes in the Pope’s name for the needs of all the Church’s missions. Let us pray that the Lord may guide us and help us to be a more synodal and a more missionary Church (cf. Homily for the Concluding Mass of the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 29 October 2023).

Finally, let us lift our gaze to Mary, who asked Jesus to perform his first miracle precisely at a wedding feast, in Cana of Galilee (cf. Jn 2:1-12). The Lord offered to the newlyweds and all the guests an abundance of new wine, as a foreshadowing of the nuptial banquet that God is preparing for all at the end of time. Let us implore her maternal intercession for the evangelizing mission of Christ’s disciples in our own time. With the joy and loving concern of our Mother, with the strength born of tenderness and affection (cf. Evangelii Gaudium, 288), let us go forth to bring to everyone the invitation of the King, our Saviour. Holy Mary, Star of Evangelization, pray for us!

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 25 January 2024,
Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul.

Franciscus



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