

Editorial: An encyclical and the obstacle of innumeracy

On January 22, 1991 a very important document in the history of frontier missions was made public by the Vatican. The text of *Redemptoris Missio*, Pope John Paul II's eighth encyclical, in process for several years, highlights mission *ad gentes*—mission to peoples currently beyond the reach of the gospel.

Here we present to you the entire text of the encyclical so the reader can carefully consider its implications for world evangelization. Throughout the encyclical a decidedly frontier missions emphasis emerges.

Closure theology

The encyclical opens with the sentence "The mission of Christ the redeemer, which is entrusted to the church, is still very far from completion." This implies that something that Christ intended the church to do can be completed but for some reason has not yet been accomplished. Much of the encyclical outlines a blueprint for finishing this mission.

A unique opportunity

John Paul II recognizes the opportunity the church now has to "commit all of [its] energies" to finishing the task of world evangelization. He admonishes "peoples everywhere" to open their hearts to Christ. The church has more than adequate resources to bring his message of freedom from sin to all peoples in the near future.

Only Jesus saves

The encyclical further assures us that Jesus Christ "is the one savior of all, the only one able to reveal God and lead to God." This salvation is to be offered to all so it "must be made concretely available to all." But the pope recognizes that not all have this opportunity either because they were brought up in other religious traditions or because social and cultural barriers stand in the way. The only solution to this problem is for the church to systematically extend the good news to every people so that literally no one remains beyond the reach of the gospel. This is the essentially a rationale for taking frontier missions as seriously and deliberately as it deserves.

The kingdom of God

John Paul II then takes up the kingdom of God motif as a model for understanding mission. "The kingdom of God is meant for all mankind, and all people are called to become members of it." Thus, in the sovereignty of God, no one is left outside of the boundary of His love. The kingdom transforms those societies and human relationships where the blessing has been passed on. It also moves those societies to pass the blessing on to those who have not yet experienced it. John Paul II points out that the true liberating power of the gospel is not primarily anthropocentric but transcendent, transforming humanity holistically from the spirit to the body.

How can this be accomplished?

Only with the power and leading of the Holy Spirit can the church expect to be fully successful in reaching unreached peoples. The Spirit of God directs mission to those peoples furthest from the gospel because the Spirit works out the plan of God to bless all peoples. The church is responsible to listen to and obey the Spirit's leading. The Spirit then transforms the whole church into an outward-looking community "which in its way of life and its activity bears witness to the Lord and converts the gentiles." The Spirit is responsible for the innumerable opportunities the church has had for extending the gospel throughout history, including the present situation.

Mission ad gentes

Once the plan of God is better understood we can differentiate between mission to peoples already blessed and mission to peoples still unblessed. This is effectively communicated in the heart of the encyclical. Mission *ad intra* is mission to peoples within the scope of the Christian tradition. If these Christians are in need of renewal then new evangelization should be promoted. Mission *ad gentes* is mission to those peoples currently beyond the reach of the gospel. John Paul II admonishes us not to get these two confused. That single admonition may be all that stands between the present situation (12,000 peoples in 3-4,000 clusters

without a viable indigenous church movement) and a world where all peoples have an opportunity to know Christ. Religious pluralism only underlines the need for a special kind of mission to extend the gospel. Again and again, he emphasizes that the recipients of mission *ad gentes* are to be non-Christians, not people already in the Christian tradition.

Comments on the encyclical

We asked several people to comment on the encyclical and we include their reflections following the full text. Here is a diverse spread of opinion but all seem to agree that it will have a significant impact on the mission world. It is plain that the frontier missions focus of this document will only serve to galvanize attention on the plight of the unreached peoples.

But are we able to count?

Even with the airtight theology and philosophy of *Redemptoris Missio*, difficulties are encountered as soon as statistics are mentioned. Vatican theologians, and perhaps many Christians around the world, seem to believe that most of humanity is beyond the reach of the gospel and that the situation is getting worse by the minute. David Barrett examines this misconception and illustrates how mission *ad gentes* can be viewed through the use of data on world evangelization now being compiled.

As it turns out the truth is that though there is tremendous population growth among non-Christian peoples nonetheless the gospel is relentlessly moving forward and it is conceivable that in a short time, all peoples could be penetrated with the gospel.

The paradox is found in that most mission agencies are reporting tremendous progress while at the same time saying that more and more people are lost. It seems that we feel bound to give the Christian public these conflicting perspectives in order to keep the funds coming in. Things have to look bad enough to evoke sympathy and good enough to make people believe in their investment.

What is missing from this operation is reality. What about measuring

progress as it actually occurs? Certainly this is not a simple process but it is possible. But innumeracy, the inability to deal with numbers and statistics in daily life, stands in the way. Let us examine how this influences us in world evangelization.

Casinos and world evangelization

We start with a quotation from a very important recent book dealing with innumeracy. "There is a strong tendency to filter out the bad and the failed and to focus on the good and the successful. Casinos encourage this tendency by making sure that every quarter that is won in a slot machine causes lights to blink and makes its own little tinkle in the metal tray. Seeing all the lights and hearing all the tinkles, it is not hard to get the impression that everyone is winning. Losses or failures are silent" (*Innumeracy: mathematical illiteracy and its consequences*, John Allen Paulos, 1988). Similarly, mission agencies and churches are not anxious to report failures or even mundane reports. Instead, the fantastic and positive are highlighted, giving the impression that things are much better than they actually are.

A parallel situation is that international news is usually worse than national news which is worse than state news which is worse than local news. At the international level there is such a huge pool of events that abnormal or catastrophic events are usually highlighted.

If catastrophic events are highlighted in mission, the overall picture is obscured and distorted. What overall progress is being made is seldom apparent from selective reporting of either spectacular success or spectacular failure.

Is one to seven better than one to two?

An example is the often-quoted fact that the present ratio of true believers (or, Great Commission Christians) to non-Christians is 1 to 7 (500,000,000 to 3,500,000,000). This shows tremendous progress in world evangelization since the time of Christ but it is not an adequate frontier missions guide. Since 95% of all mission (and evangelism) is done among Christians who may not be true believers this ratio could increase to 1 to 2 (1.7 billion to 3.5 billion) before ever influencing "real" non-Christians.

The frontier missions task is beyond the scope of any increases in true believers unless the new true believers were previously not called Christians.

What is innumeracy exactly?

Innumeracy is an inability to deal comfortably with the fundamental notions of numbers and chance—which is a malady that often strikes otherwise knowledgeable people. Innumerate people characteristically have a strong tendency to personalize—to be misled by their own experiences, or by the media's focus on individuals and drama.

A prime example is in the area of coincidences. A tendency to drastically underestimate the frequency of coincidences is typical of innumerates. Consequently they attribute great importance to correspondences of all sorts that they come across without being interested in clear statistical evidence.

Many correspondences simply don't appeal to logic. For example, to be absolutely certain that at least two people have the same birthday you would need to gather 367 people (366 days if you count February 29 and one more person in case everyone gathered matches one day of the year each). What if you only wanted to be 50% certain of this fact? It would seem logical that 183 or half of 366 would be the answer. But the answer is 23. In other words, if you randomly gather 23 people, half the time two will share a birthday. This is perhaps obvious only to the numerate who work with probabilities.

People also confuse correspondence with causation. For example, it has been found that where people drink more milk the cancer rate is much higher. One might deduce that drinking milk causes cancer, but this is not so. As it turns out wealthier people with health-threatening lifestyles also drink more milk. The side effects of affluence cause the cancer.

Innumeracy is often the result of two misconceptions. First, the impression that mathematics is cold and abstract. This tends to be true in pure mathematics but is not generally true when one thinks of the myriad of daily experiences built around numbers and math (counting change, reading sports statistics, cooking with precise amounts

of ingredients, calculating how long it will take to get somewhere, etc).

Second is the feeling that numbers somehow depersonalize humans—diminishing their individuality. Quite to the contrary, if you think about it, identification numbers enhance individuality by their unique nature. There may be two John Smiths, or Muhammed Alis, or Wan Lees, but they all have unique ID numbers.

Others are concerned that statistics will somehow predetermine our future. But normally, rather than constraining, they empower—as tools to be used for anyone who knows how and has some application that requires them.

What to do?

How can we avoid the hazards of innumeracy? For one, those who use numbers every day in relation to mission strategy need to be much more careful in their use. Many of us need refresher courses in basic mathematics and probabilities. Others could benefit from advanced courses in statistics. The goal should be the proper handling of quantities necessary to describe world evangelization.

Second, the church at large has a responsibility to back up its mission with the most accurate assessment of progress being made. Scoffing at numbers one doesn't understand is not helpful or legitimate. Without some sort of enumeration we will continue to blindly set agendas and plans for world evangelization that are beyond evaluation. But if we are open to being monitored we will be able to see our way to the goals that God has led us to set. Then, some day, these will coordinate with Christians of other traditions so that no people remains beyond the reach of the Father's love.

As John Allen Paulos says, "In an increasingly complex world full of senseless coincidence, what's required in many situations is not more facts—we're inundated already—but a better command of known facts, and for this a course in probability is invaluable... Probability, like logic, is not just for mathematicians anymore. It permeates our lives."

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