



On Mission Societies

Sancta Dei Civitas

Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII promulgated on December 3, 1880.

To all the Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, and Bishops of the Catholic World, in the Grace and Communion of the Apostolic See.

Venerable Brethren, Health and the Apostolic Benediction.

The Holy City of God, which is the Church, not being contained within the limits of any State, has from its Founder this infused power that every day it enlarges more and more "the place of its tent," and "stretches out the skins of its tabernacles." [1] But this growth of Christian nations, although it is chiefly caused by the interior breathing and help of the Holy Spirit, is nevertheless brought about externally by the action of men and in a human manner; for the wisdom of God demands that all things should be ordered and brought to their completion in that manner which is fitting to the nature of each. But there is not one only kind of men or of office, by which is brought about the accession of new citizens to this terrestrial Sion. For the first place is that of those who preach the Word of God; Christ taught this by His example and His precepts; the Apostle Paul urged this in these words: "How shall they believe Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? Faith then cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ." [2] But this office belongs to those who have been duly admitted to minister in sacred things. To them, moreover, those who are wont either to supply help in external matters or to bring down heavenly graces by prayers poured forth to God afford no little help and support. Wherefore the women in the Gospel are praised, who when Christ was preaching the kingdom of God, "ministered unto Him of their substance" [3], and Paul testifies that to those who preach the Gospel has been granted, by the will of God, that they should live of the Gospel. [4] In like manner we know that Christ so commanded His followers and hearers: "Pray ye the Lord of the harvest that he send forth laborers into His harvest," [5] and that His first disciples, following the Apostles, were accustomed in this manner to address God

in prayer: "Grant unto Thy servants that with all confidence they may speak Thy word."[6]

2. These two offices which consist in giving and in praying are both very useful in extending wider the borders of the Kingdom of heaven, and also have this property, that they can easily be fulfilled by men of all ranks. For who is there of such slender fortune that he is hindered from giving at one time or other a small alms, or occupied by so many things that he cannot pray to God for the messengers of the Holy Gospel? Apostolic men have ever been accustomed to use helps of this kind, particularly the Roman Pontiffs, on whom especially devolves the care of propagating the Christian Faith; although the method of collecting these supplies has not always been the same, but varied and diverse, according to the variety of places and the diversity of times.

3. When, in Our time, people desire to attempt difficult enterprises with the united counsel and strength of several persons, we have seen societies everywhere established, of which some have been formed for this very purpose, viz., to serve for the propagating of religion in certain countries. Amongst others shines forth the pious association founded about sixty years ago at Lyons, in France, which has taken the name of the Propagation of the Faith. Its first object was to carry assistance to certain missions in America: soon, like the grain of mustard seed, it grew to a large tree, whose umbrageous branches spread far and wide, so that it affords effectual help to all missions all over the earth. This grand institution was promptly approved by the Pastors of the Church, and has been honored by abundant laudatory testimonials. The Roman Pontiffs Pius VII., Leo XII., Pius VIII., Our Predecessors, both strongly commended it and enriched it with the gifts of Indulgences. And Gregory XVI still more warmly favored it and embraced it in the fullness of his paternal charity, since he, in his Encyclical Letters dated the 15th day of August, in the 40th year of this century, spoke of the same in these terms.: "We judge to be most worthy of the admiration and love of all good men this truly great and most holy work, which by modest offerings and daily prayers addressed by each associate to God is sustained, increased and grows strong, and which is occupied in maintaining Apostolic laborers and in exercising works of Christian charity towards neophytes, as well as in delivering the faithful from the attack of persecutions. Nor must we think that it is without a peculiar design of Divine Providence that an institution of so much advantage and utility to the Church has in these latter times been vouchsafed to her. For whilst all kinds of machinations of the infernal enemy harass the beloved spouse of Christ, nothing could have happened more opportunely for her than that the faithful, influenced by a desire of propagating Catholic truth, should with united zeal and collected strength endeavor to gain all men to Christ." With this preface he exhorted the Bishops to apply themselves with diligence, each in his own diocese, so that so salutary an institution might daily grow and increase. Nor did Pius IX., of glorious memory, depart from the footsteps of his Predecessor, seeing that he allowed no opportunity to pass by of assisting this most deserving society, and of promoting its prosperity. Indeed, by his authority more ample privileges of Pontifical

Indulgence were granted to the associates, the piety of Christians was excited to the sustaining of its work, and the most eminent among the associates, whose special merits were manifest, were decorated with various insignia of honor; finally certain external aids which accrued to this institution were by the same Pontiff honored with praise and approval.

4. At the same time pious emulation caused the coalition of two other societies one called "of the Holy Infancy of Jesus Christ," and the other "of the Schools of the East." The first undertook to rescue and bring up in Christian habits the unhappy children whom their parents, pressed by idleness or want, exposed inhumanly, especially in China, where this barbarous custom is most frequent. These children the charity of the Confraternity embraces tenderly, sometimes redeems them by payment of a sum of money and takes care that they are washed in the laver of regeneration, so that they may, with the help of God, be brought up as the hope of the Church, or at least may, in case of their death, be endowed with the means of acquiring everlasting happiness. The other association which we have mentioned is occupied with those who are growing up, and strives by every means to imbue them with sound doctrine, and at the same time is watchful to ward off from them the dangers of false science to which they are very frequently exposed through careless eagerness for the acquisition of knowledge.

5. But both of these societies yield support to that older one entitled the Society of the Propagation of the Faith, and, united with it in a friendly alliance, aim at the same end, relying on the alms and prayers of the Christian nations: for all have the same purpose in view, namely, by the diffusion of the Gospel light to bring the largest possible number of those outside the Church to the knowledge and worship of God and Jesus Christ Whom He has sent. Hence Our predecessor Pius IX., as We have intimated, has in Apostolic letters commended these two institutions and liberally enriched them with sacred Indulgences.

6. These three associations, therefore, having flourished with such marked favor of the Sovereign Pontiffs and having never ceased to pursue each one its work without rivalry, have produced abundant fruits of salvation, have powerfully assisted Our Congregation of the Propaganda in discharging the onerous duties of its missions, and have prospered to such a degree as to give for the future the joyful hope of a richer harvest. But the numerous and violent storms which have been let loose against the Church in the countries long illuminated by the light of the Gospel have brought injury on the works designed to civilize barbarous nations. Many causes, indeed, have combined to diminish the number and generosity of the associates. And, indeed, when so many perverse opinions are scattered abroad among the masses, sharpening their appetites for earthly happiness and banishing the hope of heavenly goods, what can be expected of those who use their minds to invent pleasures and their bodies to realize them? Do men like these pour forth their prayers to God that in His mercy he may bring to the Divine light of the Gospel by His victorious grace the people sitting in the darkness? Do they contribute subsidies to the priests who labor and do combat for the faith? The

misfortunes of the time also have helped to diminish the generous impulses of pious persons themselves, partly because through the abounding of iniquity the love of many has waxed cold, and partly because political disturbances (without counting the fear of still worse times) have rendered the majority of them more bent on economy and less liberal in giving of their substance.

7. On the other hand many and grave necessities weigh upon and oppress the Apostolic missions, since the number of sacred laborers decreases every day, nor do We find that as many or as zealous missionaries replace those whom death has carried off, whom age has enfeebled, or whom work has broken down. For We see Religious communities, whence a large number of missionaries came forth, dissolved by iniquitous laws, the clergy torn away from the altar and obliged to undergo military service, and the goods of both orders of clergy almost everywhere put up to sale and proscribed.

8. In the meanwhile new routes have been opened, in consequence of more complete exploration of places and populations, towards countries hitherto accounted impracticable; numerous expeditions of the soldiers of Christ have been formed, and new stations have been established; and thus many laborers are now wanted to devote themselves to these missions, and contribute seasonable help. We pass over in silence the difficulties and obstacles arising from contradictions. For it often occurs that deceivers, sowing error, simulate the Apostles of Christ, and, being abundantly furnished with human resources, interfere with the ministry of Catholic priests, or creep in after their departure, or raise pulpit against pulpit, thinking it sufficient to render the way of salvation doubtful to the persons who hear the word of God interpreted in different ways. Would that their artifices had no success! This is certainly to be regretted, that even those who are disgusted with such teachers, or have never met with them, and who desire the pure light of truth, should often have no man at hand to instruct them in wholesome doctrine and to bring them into the bosom of the Church.

9. Truly the little ones ask for bread, and there is none to break it to them; the regions are white for the harvest, and the harvest is plenteous, but the laborers are few and will soon, perhaps, be fewer still.

10. This being so, Venerable Brethren, We consider it Our duty to stimulate the pious efforts and charity of Christians, so that they may strive, whether by prayer or by donations, to help the sacred work of missions and to show favor to the propagation of the faith. The good which it is proposed to secure, and the fruits to be gathered, prove the importance of this holy enterprise. For this work tends directly to the glory of the Divine name and to the spread of the Kingdom of Christ upon earth. But it is incredibly beneficial to those who are called out of the filth of vice and the shadow of death; and who, being made partakers of eternal life, are also brought out of barbarism and a state of savage manners into the fullness of civilized life. Moreover, it is highly useful and advantageous to those who take any part in it, since it procures them spiritual riches, supplies them with an occasion of

merit, and renders, as it were, God himself their debtor.

11. We exhort you. therefore. Venerable Brethren, again and again, -- you who are called to share in Our solicitude -- that with one accord you sedulously and earnestly strive to aid the Apostolic missions, putting your trust in God, and not allowing yourselves to be deterred by any difficulty. The salvation of souls is at stake, for which Our Savior laid down His life, and appointed us bishops and priests to the work of the saints, for the perfecting of His body. Wherefore, while each one remains at the post where God has placed him, and guards the flock that God has entrusted to him, let us endeavor to the utmost that the holy missions may be furnished with those supports of which We have spoken as having been in use since the beginnings of the Church, namely, the preaching of the Gospel and the prayers and alms of pious men.

12. If, therefore, you know any zealous for the glory of God, and at the same time disposed and fit to go on these holy expeditions, encourage them, so that, the will of God being well known and clear, they may listen not to flesh and blood, but rather hasten to correspond to the call of the Holy Spirit. But from the remaining priests, from the Religious Orders of both sexes from all the faithful, in short, entrusted to your care, required with all urgency, that by their unremitting prayers they obtain the Divine assistance for those who sow the seed of the Word of God. And let them employ as intercessors the Virgin Mother of God, who has power to destroy all the monsters of error, and her most chaste Spouse, whom many missions have already taken as their patron and protector, and whom the Apostolic See has recently given as Patron to the Universal Church. Let them invoke the Princes of the Apostles and the whole of that company from whom the first preaching of the Gospel resounded throughout the whole world; and in short all the others eminent for sanctity, who have spent their strength in the same ministry and poured forth their life together with their blood. Let almsgiving be added to prayer, for its efficacy is such that it will render those who are widely separated in place and distracted with other cares coadjutors of Apostolic men, and will make them their companions both in labor and merit. The times, indeed, are such that many persons suffer from want at home; but let no one despond on that account, for the amount required for this purpose can scarcely be a heavy contribution for any one, although from many small sums added together tolerably large supplies can be raised. But when you, Venerable Brethren, are engaged in exhortation, let every one consider that his liberality will not be to him a loss, but a gain, because he that giveth to the poor lendeth to the Lord, and on that account the practice of almsgiving has been called the most profitable of all practices. Certainly if, according to the testimony of Jesus Christ, a cup of cold water given to one of these little ones will not lose its reward, the most ample reward will await him who shall have spent even a small sum of money upon sacred missions, and, adding also his prayers, exercises at the same time many and various offices of charity, and, doing that which the holy Fathers have said is the most divine of all divine works, becomes a helper of God Himself for the salvation of his neighbors.

13. We feel assured, Venerable Brethren, that all those who glory in the name of Catholic, meditating these considerations, and inflamed by your exhortations, will not fail in this work of piety which We have so much at heart. Nor will they allow their care for the enlargement of the kingdom of Jesus Christ to be surpassed by the alacrity and industry of those who strive to propagate the dominion of the prince of darkness. In the meanwhile, praying God to be propitious to the pious undertakings of Christian nations, We impart most lovingly in the Lord the Apostolic benediction, as a special pledge of Our good will, to you, Venerable Brethren, to the clergy, and the people committed to your watchful care.

Given at Rome, at St. Peter's, on the 3rd day of December, 1880, in the 3rd year of Our Pontificate.

Endnotes:

1. Is. liv., 2.
2. Rom. x., 14, 17.
3. Luke viii., 3.
4. I Cor. ix., 14.
5. Matt. iv., 38.
6. Act. iv., 29.