

Missionary pastoral as the paradigm of all ecclesial pastoral practice

Abstract

Maria Soave Buscemi's contribution, based on the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, offers a detailed reflection on the need for a pastoral paradigm shift: from the model of conservation to that of mission. The author emphasises that this shift is not merely a strategic or organisational issue, but a true conversion of the ecclesial identity, called to overcome the logic of self-referentiality and embrace that of "going forth."

The analysis unfolds through four fundamental movements, anchored in the figure of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: the *wayfarer* who inhabits the streets and homes; the *sower* who generates life beyond the confines of the temple; the *Master of the Beatitudes* who stands with the excluded; the *contemplative* who descends from the mountain to inhabit the wounds of history. These evangelical traits become the foundation for a pilgrim, vulnerable Church, one that does not wait but goes forth, that does not guard but shares, that does not protect but reveals itself.

From this perspective, missionary pastoral care is seen as a transversal style that engages every ecclesial practice: from liturgy to catechesis, from preaching to charity, from synodality to community life. The author proposes operational criteria for pastoral care that begins by listening to reality, valorises the charisms of all, accepts risk and incompleteness, and allows itself to be evangelised by the poor. Recalling the icon of Emmaus, the text concludes that the Church discovers the Risen One not within its confines, but along the road, as He walks with humanity and breaks bread. Mission, therefore, is not a sector of pastoral care, but its beating heart: a movement of fruitfulness, hope, and joy that regenerates the Church from within and makes her credible to the world.

Missionary pastoral as the paradigm of all ecclesial pastoral practice

Maria Soave Buscemi

Dear brothers and sisters,

Today I would like to reflect with you on one of the most powerful and urgent insights that Pope Francis gave us in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*: the vital need for a transition, which can no longer be postponed, from a pastoral ministry of simple conservation to a truly missionary ministry.

This is not simply a change of strategy, an updating of techniques. No. It is much more: it is a **conversion of the heart, feet, and mind** of the entire Church. It is a paradigm shift that affects our very identity as baptised persons.

Often, perhaps without even realising it, we are tempted to operate with a mentality that the Pope defines, bluntly, as a "**pastoral ministry of conservation**." What is it? It is a Church that, concerned with protecting its heritage, ends up turning in on itself. It is a Church whose energy is primarily absorbed by the **maintenance of its structures**, the functioning of its offices, and caring for those who are already there, perhaps with the secret hope that tradition alone will draw people through our doors.

Pope Francis offers a merciless but necessary diagnosis of this pastoral care. He calls it "**sterile ordinary pastoral care**," which is not a leaven of evangelisation, but merely "preventative treatment." It is a Church that, he says, "is reduced to an organisation born for self-preservation, concerned above all with functioning smoothly, where the logic of 'it has always been done this way' prevails" (EG

33). It is a Church "imprisoned in a web of obsessions and procedures" (EG 49), which ultimately generates more sadness and weariness than joy.

But this is not the Church that the Gospel dreams of, and neither is it that which Pope Francis dreams of. To the pastoral care of conservation, *Evangelii Gaudium* forcefully contrasts **missionary pastoral care**.

What is the heart of this proposal? It is the image of a **Church that "goes forth."** A Church that doesn't wait, but goes forth. A Church that isn't afraid to get its hands dirty in the dust of the streets and existential peripheries. The Pope is very clear: small adjustments aren't enough. What is needed is a **pastoral and missionary conversion**, which cannot leave things as they are (EG 25). His appeal is a relaunch of an evangelising and outgoing Church, because the joyful newness of the Gospel cannot remain closed off or suffocated by obsolete structures and patterns.

An "outgoing" Church: missionary pastoral ministry as the paradigm of all ecclesial activity

The outgoing Church is a Church that accepts losing its central position, no longer being the exclusive point of reference, to become humanity's travelling companion. This style profoundly challenges Christian communities: it's not a matter of organising activities better, but of asking where they originate and for whom. It is a pilgrim Church, a Church of poverty, capable of going beyond clerical and patriarchal paradigms, to inhabit the geographical and existential peripheries.

From a missionary perspective, the very introduction of the theme poses a crucial question: are our communities places that generate a journey or spaces that hold us back? Missionary pastoral ministry is born when the Church accepts that it does not coincide with its own boundaries and recognises that the Spirit is already at work beyond it.

1. Jesus the wayfarer: the Biblical roots of the outgoing Church

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is described as a travelling companion. He does not build a religious centre as an alternative to the temple, but rather walks the streets, enters homes, shares meals, and allows himself to be interrupted. His ministry is marked by the movement from Galilee to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51), then returning to Galilee, to the space of encounter, of the unexpected, of the people, of all those excluded.

When Jesus says to Peter, "Put out into the deep" (Luke 5:4), he is not only suggesting a fishing strategy, but he is also proposing a change in practice and therefore also in mentality. Going into deep waters means relinquishing control, accepting uncertainty, trusting Jesus' word, his testimony, rather than in accumulated experience. This passage proposes overcoming the logic of purity and separation: Jesus does not fear contact with people considered impure, because he knows that it is precisely there that life can be reborn.

Missionary implications for the Christian communities: A Church that recognises Jesus as the Wayfarer cannot be structured as a sedentary reality. Communities are called to question how much they are truly on the move: not only physically, but internally and in their welcoming relationships with others. Mission, from this perspective, does not consist in inviting people to "come" to ecclesial spaces, but in **walking with** them, listening to their life situations. This implies a style of proximity, listening, and sharing, which often requires stepping outside pre-defined agendas and allowing oneself to be guided by encounter. A missionary Church has its antennas pointed not toward the centre, but toward the peripheries; toward those who are distant, disillusioned, and wounded by life. "I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting, and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and comfortable" (EG 49). It is a Church that does not impose its truths, but which knows how to be close and accompany people on their journey.

2. From a Church that preserves to a Church that generates life

Pope Francis forcefully expresses his desire for profound transformation: "I dream of a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 27). This dream challenges a Church that, at times, risks focusing more on preserving structures than on generating new life.

In the Gospels, Jesus uses dynamic and vital images: the seed that grows in silence (Luke 8:4-15), the yeast that leavens the dough (Luke 13:20-21), the shepherd who searches for the lost sheep (Luke 15:4-7). In all these parables, what matters is not the security of possessions, but the risk of exposed love. This logic conflicts with a religious vision centred on law, control, and the distinction between pure and impure people.

Missionary implications for Christian communities: a missionary ministry requires evaluating choices that are not based on their internal usefulness, but on their ability to generate life, hope, and relationships. This also involves accepting failure and incompleteness. Generative communities are those that are not afraid to experiment, to revise established practices, to let go of what no longer speaks to people's hearts. Mission thus becomes a process of fruitfulness, rather than efficiency. Homilies and catechesis must also change. They must be moved by the joy of the Gospel; they must be able to speak to people's hearts, showing the merciful face of God rather than precepts.

3. The people of the Beatitudes: a Church that takes a stand

In the Sermon on the Mount, according to Luke (Lk 6:17-26), Jesus stands on the plain, among the crowd. He does not speak from above, but from the concrete conditions of people. "Blessed are you poor" is not a spiritualizing phrase, but a word that restores dignity and prominence to those who are excluded.

Pope Francis insists that the poor are not only recipients of pastoral care but active subjects of evangelisation (EG 198). This choice is a radical critique of the theology of retribution and every form of religious power that justifies exclusion. Clericalism and patriarchy, from this perspective, also appear as structures of symbolic wealth that betray the Gospel.

Missionary implications for Christian communities: an outgoing Church is inevitably a Church that takes a stand. This does not mean ideology, but evangelical fidelity. Communities are called to ask themselves who they truly walk with and how they interpret reality. Mission takes on the characteristics of justice, solidarity, and the defence of human dignity. The poor are not a "pastoral issue," but the theological locus where God continues to speak to the Church. The parish is not a refuge for the saved; it must become the driving force of mission in the local area, a place of encounter, of listening, of generous charity, with a new flexibility and creativity.

4. From the Mountain to the Valley: An Embodied Spirituality

Luke recounts that Jesus often withdraws to the mountain to pray (Luke 6:12), but immediately afterwards descends to the valley, where life is wounded. This movement reveals a profoundly embodied spirituality: prayer does not separate us from history, but rather enables us to inhabit it with greater compassion.

Pope Francis echoes this dynamic when he states that he prefers a Church "wounded and dirty from having been out on the streets" rather than one closed in its own self-absorption (EG 49). This is an invitation to descend into the "underground depths of history," places often invisible, yet where the Gospel takes flesh.

Missionary implications for Christian communities: authentic missionary ministry integrates contemplation and action. Communities are called to cultivate spaces of silence and listening to the Word,

which nourish concrete commitment. Mission does not arise from activism, but from a spirituality that recognises the face of Christ in the poor and excluded. In this sense, synodality also becomes a missionary exercise: walking together, listening especially to marginalised voices.

Conclusion – Qualifying missionary pastoral today

The outgoing Church accepts its pilgrimage, its incompleteness, and its vulnerability. Missionary pastoral care, as a paradigm for all ecclesial practice, is not an organisational strategy, but an evangelical style that permeates all community life.

In practical terms, missionary pastoral care is defined when:

- **It begins with listening** to situations and people, especially those on the margins;
- **Prioritises relationships rather than structures or roles;**
- **Values the charisms of all, overcoming clerical and patriarchal logic;**
- **Accepts risk and error as part of the evangelical journey;**
- **Lives out liturgy and prayer as a source of inspiration and sacrificial life, and not as a refuge;**
- **Allows itself to be evangelised by the poor, recognising them as active agents of mission.**

Like the disciples of Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), the Church discovers the Risen One along the way, as she walks, listens, and shares bread. It is in this fragile yet fruitful movement that the joy of the Gospel continues to flourish and generate hope for the world.

In conclusion, brothers and sisters, *Evangelii Gaudium* does not ask us to be a perfect and polished Church, but one that is alive, courageous, and in love. It asks us to move from the temptation of being a besieged fort to the joy of being a mission field. It asks us to abandon the reassuring, yet sterile, logic of conservatism, to embrace the joyful and sometimes challenging adventure of mission.

It is a return to the source. Because when we truly encounter Christ, the joy that flows from it is so great that it cannot be held back. It must be shared. With all men and women.