

Missionary Disciples and Mission to Africa in 2015

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Decades ago, hundreds of American men and women went to various parts of Africa on mission, alongside their European counterparts to bear witness to the Gospel. Their witness, especially through educational enterprise, laid the foundation for the liberation of Africans from colonial rule, the prevailing oppressive structures of the time. In 2015, about two thousand priests and sisters from Africa live and bear witness to the Gospel in the United States in a trend some refer to as reversed mission. Alongside are about three million African Diaspora groups, many of them Catholics. What does this mean to us in the context of mission? Does that mean the end of mission from the US to Africa? More specifically, is it the end of our being missionary disciples to Africans?

Quite the contrary. Mission is about witnessing to the Gospel – “You will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8), and the Church at its core is always a missionary Church, called to address the structures of injustice and oppression wherever they afflict Gods’ children far or near. How do we in 2015, as missionary disciples, witness to the Gospel of Jesus, the one who came to set us free (Luke 4:18-20) from oppressive structures so that we might have life in abundance (John 10:10)? How do we build bridges between the global North and the global South as missionary disciples and witnesses of the Gospel? In what ways can we form relationships and be in solidarity today with our African sisters and brothers without having to pack our bags to travel to Africa?

Although Africa has been largely liberated from state sponsored colonial structures, new and pervasive forms of colonialism, oppression and exploitations, aided by modern technology and global linkages of multinational corporations have emerged. Tackling these structures as missionary disciples does not necessarily require leaving our homes in the US to travel to Africa; they are in our backyard and among us. Our witness to Jesus’ mission compels us to confront these oppressive structures and systems of exploitation.

Confronting them requires a new paradigm of mission to Africa, since these new systems are masters of camouflage, promising a better life and future for the poor while all the time crafting a different agenda that leaves the exploited scrambling for the scraps that fall from the master’s table, and settling for tokens in the name of charity. Modern missionary disciples need to know that many wolves come in sheep clothing. As such, they need to be “as wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16) so as to uncover the real issues at stake, and what gets touted as charity. Today’s missionary disciple is invited to live in justice and truth, and challenged to address the root causes of oppression and exploitation with the aim of eradicating them and setting free our sisters and brothers created in the image of God. We never truly serve our brothers and sisters without truth and justice.

Mission is not all about money. It is about building bridges and forming relationships, working to promote the rights and dignity of our sisters and brothers, and is more important than charity. As Pope Benedict XVI puts it in his Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Africae Munus* (AM): “A charity that is unaccompanied by justice is false” (AM § 18).

The 2015 Congress invites us to rekindle a characteristic of a missionary disciple which is to motivate others to act justly in truth and charity, and bear witness to Christ’s presence in their daily engagements with others; to enable our communities see how our experience of life is well connected to that of others far and near, how their experience inform the way we do things here in our country, and how we can work to promote the rights and dignity of our sisters and brothers whether they are thousands of miles away or among us in communities.