



Mission Ad Gentes and Decolonization: A theological, pluralistic and liberating approach to the Church's action in today's world

Missão Ad Gentes e Decolonização: Uma abordagem teológica, pluralista e libertadora para ação da Igreja no mundo atual

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Resumo

Missão Ad gentes e decolonização é uma demanda e um desafio para reflexão teológica. Com base no pensquisas de estudiosos que investigam e escreve sobre o assunto. O artigo analisa a missão da Igreja no mundo contemporâneo apoiada teologicamente numa visão pluralista e libertadora com foco na enculturação, exculturação, interculturalidade. A discussão aporta à evangelização a partir da realidade do continente africano e a questão da urgência de considerar o paradigma da teologia da decolonização que reflete em um novo modo de ver e atuar na missão no contexto hodierno. Aborda a desafiadora tarefa de descolonizar a ideia de missão como implantação de Igreja para focar no diálogo com as culturas, tradições e a Inculturação do Evangelho. Conclui-se que decolonizar é urgente e necessário, uma vez que continuam presente atitudes e mentalidades colonialistas que seleciona, descarta, descrimina e exclui as pessoas de viver sua plena dignidade humana.

Palavras-chave: Decolonização. Missão. África. Incuturação. Pluralidade.

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Abstract

Mission Ad gentes and decolonization is a demand and a challenge for theological reflection. Based on research by scholars who investigate and write on the subject. The article analyses the mission of the Church in the contemporary world, theologically supported by a pluralist and liberating vision with a focus on inculturation, exculturation, and interculturality. The discussion addresses evangelization from the reality of the African continent and the issue of the urgency of considering the paradigm of the theology of decolonization that reflects a new way of seeing and acting in the mission in the modern context. It addresses the challenging task of decolonizing the idea of mission as the implantation of the Church to focus on dialogue with cultures, traditions, and the Inculturation of the Gospel. It is concluded that decolonization is urgent and necessary since colonialist attitudes and mentalities that select, discard, discriminate, and exclude people from living their full human dignity continue to be present.

Keywords: Decolonization. Mission. Africa. Inculturation. Plurality.

Introduction

This article aims to analyse the challenge of decolonisation from a theological-missionary, pluralist and liberating perspective. It aims to reflect on the proposal of inculturation and interculturality in the Church's missionary action in the contemporary world. The objectives proposed include, firstly, defining the concepts and foundations of a new paradigm of decolonisation, which are still under construction. Secondly, it looks at the reverse side of mission as the deployment of the Church, to inculturate the Gospel and share the values of the Kingdom of God. Thirdly, it focuses on the question of inculturation and interculturality, and finally, it deals with Evangelisation and exculturation from the reality of the African continent.

The research aims to contribute to the missionary action of a Church that is open and divorced from the colonialism of imposition, oppression, discrimination and trivialisation of cultures by some groups that felt they were better, and owners of truth, practising barbarity towards other groups. It presents the proposal of the new paradigm of decolonisation through a theology that proposes decolonising the old model of bourgeois theology whose aim was to exploit, dominate and impose the European model; towards a theology inspiring humanity and banishing forever the systems that dehumanise, oppress and discriminate.

The proposal is the mission *ad gentes* and the challenge of decolonising the structures that remain in the sense of implanting the Church for the incarnation of the Kingdom and of the Gospel through inculturation, that is, intercultural dialogue where there is a parity of values to be shared and enriched by both parties. It also faces the challenge of exculturing the Gospel, which has arrived in an exogenous form, produced by external, implanted factors, and considers the challenge of exculturing.

The African continent, presents the three phases of the evangelisation process, as presented in the Church's encíclica *Ecclesia in Africa*. This document brings a proposal regarding the challenge of exculturation, and recalls to evangelical, fraternal and respectful dialogue between cultures and tradition. It also invites us to a commitment to the integral development of the human person compatible with social justice.

The research points to the importance of refining motivations and intensifying the preparation of missionary agents so as not to repeat the mistakes already made in Christendom. It also points out the need to abandon the old mission model and focus on the new paradigm of decolonising mission, which has as its centrality the Kingdom of God and its values.

Concepts, foundations and theological significance

The proclamation of the Kingdom has nothing to do with missionary activities "married" to colonialism of imposition, oppression, discrimination, and the trivialisation of cultures to implant a European model as a pattern of perfection and salvation for peoples. Wa Said (1971, p. 501) points out that in history some human groups have been victimised by other groups who have felt dominant, better, and the owners of truth and perfection, and have practised barbarity and inhumanity towards other groups. The author analyses his own experience of being oppressed by other so-called "white" racial groups.

Wa Said speaks about "political colonisation" that "demands political decolonisation", which is often the cause of conflict and violence when the oppressor refuses to give in to freedom the oppressed who reacts with same violent means to achieve their liberation. Thus, "in this political dialectic they would do anything to achieve their liberation". To this process, Wa Said calls this process "Decolonisation". This is "a historical process in which a new humanity is welcomed into human society". And quoting Frantz Fanon (1968, p. 36-37, *apud*, Wa Said, 1971, p. 503), he says that decolonisation "brings a natural rhythm into existence, introduced by the new man, and with it a new language and a new humanity". Therefore, 'decolonisation is the true creation of a new man and a new woman. Wa Said (1971), quoting Fanon (1968), describes the process of decolonisation in the words of Jesus

Christ, saying: 'the last shall be first and the first last' (Mt 20:16). And adds that "Jesus came into the world to decolonise those who were under the yoke of political and spiritual colonialisation" (Wa Said, 1971, p. 503).

Therefore, Wa Said (1971) describes the historical context in which the process of decolonisation and the religious discourse of Decolonisation Theology could be understood. According to the author, "the theology of decolonisation is an antithesis to the thesis of bourgeois theology, or white theology". A theology that decolonises bourgeois theology, which Wa Said describes as an atheistic, anti-Christ, inhuman, racist theology, with a colonial ideology, whose aim was to save white people by exploiting and dominating non-white people, socially, politically and spiritually (Wa Said, 2004, 504). For the author, decolonisation is understood in the sense of liberation from all kinds of oppression. He gives the example of colonising oppression, which perpetuates all kinds of discrimination, oppression and exclusion in mentality and attitudes.

According to Wa Said (1971), the word "decolonisation" can only be understood with its presupposition called colonialism. Colonialism is linked to "foreigners who invade territories with power to get profit from their economy" and is a "violent and inhuman act of the stronger against the weaker". It is linked to disrespect, invasion, imposition, violence, torture, massacres and the destruction of cultures, customs and the trivialisation of peoples' traditional religions. The superiority of the "European colonisers seems to linger in the unconscious that comes to the surface" without realising it or wanting it (Wa Said, 1971, p. 502). Post-modern society in general values power and pleasure, rather than people. These attitudes can be seen, for example, in the way people treat the rich and the poor, the educated and the illiterate, whites and blacks, a religious person and a layperson, a man and a woman, a businessman and an ordinary worker, in short, the indigenous, the prostitute, the beggar, the slum dweller, the foreigner from Europe, North America, Haitian, Paraguayan or African. There is an endless list of discrimination and exclusion of one human being from another. The same attitude is present in the Church, in religious houses, schools, colleges, and in society. It is a form of hidden or explicit colonialist attitude present in people's attitudes, institutions, and politics towards others, especially the poor, which needs to be decolonised (Wa Said, 1971, p. 502-503).

Moreover, how the Gospel was used to gain land and conquer peoples has nothing to do with the Good News of Jesus Christ or spirituality. However, this was the way used to conquer lands and massacre and oppress peoples during the era of colonialism. Therefore, it is the struggle of the massacred and enslaved people trying to free themselves that gives rise to decolonisation; in other words, the creation of a new person.

According to Almeida (2015, p. 44), Vatican II presents the role of the Church in a way that completely changes its mission. Its task is to be "a sign of unity, a sacrament of salvation and communion of human beings among themselves and with God", being salt and light to the world. The Church moves from the conquest and imposition of faith to service and dialogue, from the imposition of belief to the inculturation of the Gospel, from the establishment of the Church to the incarnation of the Kingdom of God.

With the Second Vatican Council, we have made great steps, but still slowly in this attitude of missionary openness. There is still a long way to go in this direction of missionary openness, which involves approaching others with humility, accepting them with parity of esteem and mutually learning and sharing life with them. The truth is that colonialism still needs to be banished from the face of the earth. And the way to remove it is through the process of decolonisation. This means "freeing the prisoners", who today can be either the oppressed or the oppressor. A two-way movement, what Suess calls "diastole and systole". According to the author

[...] mission, with its two movements, the diastole of sending to the periphery of the world, and the systole that summons from that periphery to liberate the centre, is the heart of the Church. Under the banner of the Kingdom, it proposes a world without a periphery and centre (Suess, 2016, p. 4, our translation).

Wa Said (1971, p. 503) states that Jesus' "mission was one of decolonisation", and that he "showed this when he took the book of Isaiah and spoke to his audience about the nature of his mission in the world (cf. Lk 4:18-19)". A mission of liberation for the poor, persecuted, captives and oppressed of society, and "also to liberate the oppressors". He came to "decolonise those who were oppressed and prisoners of religious political structures", of the colonisers. As well as liberating the oppressors, he brought about a transformation in their lives, for example, the conversion of Zacchaeus (Lk 19:8-9).

Wa Said (1971, p. 518-523) points out that "to decolonise is to put order where the colonisers said they put order". It is the struggle of the oppressed for liberation from the clutches of the oppressor. In this sense, "theology of decolonisation is prepared to fight and destroy the whole system of evil in order to liberate both the oppressed and the oppressors". Because it helps the oppressors to see and accept their mistakes and free themselves from them, they recognise the other in their humanity and dignity. And it helps the oppressed to fight against inhuman powers, which is why its "centrality is Jesus Christ, the Liberator". It is Divine participation in the struggle of the oppressed for justice and liberation.

The same author points out that it is an active theology of the last and forgotten, the marginalised of society such as prostitutes, the proletariat, the rejected and involves "doing something for their good here in this world." It is a "street theology" that calls for radical changes to traditional theologies. It speaks of "God in the language of people's everyday lives", transmitting the "truth of Jesus Christ without any process of dehumanisation or depersonalisation". It is a theology that walks the streets and does something with the oppressed and not for them, helps them to produce, "does not create new needs for them to make them eternally dependent", but helps them to create new things, to be independent, mature and responsible. It is a "theology that wants to see more humanity in capitalism", communism, socialism and all the isms such as: neocolonialism, modernism, etc. It "wants to see inhuman systems destroyed forever" (WA SAID, 1971, p. 518-523). To this end, we have a long and challenging journey of transformation and decolonisation that is taking firm and broad steps.

From mission as Church implantation to dialogue and inculturation of the Gospel

Today, missionaries are called to humility and respect, and to insert themselves into cultures in order to inculturate the Gospel in and from them.

The theology of decolonisation is interested in the process of liberation that permeates all areas of peoples' lives who are oppressed, discriminated against, excluded, and marginalised in society. According to Boff (1991, p. 132), Africans suffered doubly from these invasions: in their own country and also when they were uprooted from their lands and brought like "animals" from Africa to America and enslaved to enrich their masters. The European imposition and implantation of religion in a European ecclesiastical system, the missionary mentality of conquest, and the imposition of faith in recipes that were ready to be applied in peoples went into decline with Vatican II. However, the process of transformation continues at a slow pace. Almost sixty years after the event, there is still no pluralist missiology in practice in the strict sense.

According to Brighenti (2004, p. 109 and 115), pluralism is a major challenge for the Church today, especially in Africa, with the challenge of inculturating the Gospel into local cultures and religions. Culture and religion are something deep and valuable in the lives of the people. It is their soul and the fact is that, "the reality of faith is transcultural, but its formulation and expression is always cultural". This gives legitimacy to theological pluralism. The path of mission today is different; the Church discourages any kind of imposition and coercion. It encourages dialogue, respect and appreciation of each culture and religion as part of the diversity, and plurality of Divine creation.

Therefore, for the Gospel to be inculturated, the messenger must insert and inculturate himself or herself, that means, to know, love, respect, and see the wonders, words, and actions of God already present in that specific culture. It is a long process of presence, insertion into the culture of the people, learning, study, prayer, reflection, discernment and entails a lot of openness and humility. Patience and time are very important because taking what you know to plant a Church, taking ready-made ingredients and recipes is a temptation. In this sense, it takes effort, and attention when inserting, respecting, and valuing the culture and beliefs of the people, demonstrating that an inculturated intercultural mission *ad gentes* is necessary and possible. Moreover, in this process of inculturation, the ingredients are already there, because the Spirit of God is present and active in all cultures. And since the three persons of the Holy Trinity are one, they always act together.

Thus, the missionary is called to discover the action of the Triune God, alive and active in culture. This action, is already visible and clear in the work of creation and in everything that transmits life, peace, harmony, and justice. After all, God always remains a mystery, no matter how much we know Him, discover Him, or share Him. He always remains a mystery that is never exhausted, because God is always greater than our capacity for knowledge.

The inculturation of the Gospel respects the work of Divine creation present in local cultures and religions. Inculturation is a union, an encounter of love and of God's creatures sharing gifts, graces, knowledge, faith, and love in a mutual enrichment. All cultures, religions, and peoples have something to share and to know, to give and receive. Brighenti (2004, p. 122) states that "evangelizing means bearing witness to an attitude of respect and acceptance of cultures because of God and the work that He has done within cultures."

When the inculturation of the gospel into the culture and religion is done by the people themselves who know their culture in depth, then it becomes much more helpful and effective in comparison to the efforts of a foreigner to do so. There is less risk of excluding or exalting one side over the other. However, even today, missionaries are not always patient enough to let the locals take the lead and act freely. Foreigners in the mission generally still find themselves as leaders and "protagonists," in command and control, directing and guiding everything, because they think that they are the ones who "know". They have cried a kind of protectionism of conversion and superiority that must be decolonized from the minds and attitudes that generate today's discrimination, superiority, oppression, exclusion, and distrust.

On the other hand, the process of inculturation and interculturality facilitates and is a source of enrichment, involving the sharing of values, the gathering of knowledge, and interaction among people. Therefore, it is the real experience of the Gospel and the Kingdom among the people of God.

Inculturation is a process in the life and history of the Church that begins with revelation, which is a fact of divine incarnation. God speaks in human language and expressions. In Him, we find the highest example and model of inculturation. Panazzolo (2004, p. 22-27) makes several statements about the Divine incarnation and the inculturation of the Gospel in cultures. "The Divine Word, which became Sacred Scripture, enters the context of human cultures with their languages, ideas and traditions. [...] To reveal himself, God did not create a new language, but used existing human languages" (Panazzolo, 2004, p. 22-23). Jesus became a Jew in a culture and social class of the time. Therefore, the mystery of the incarnation is a fact of inculturation.

Therefore, the inculturation of the Gospel is a process of encountering the Christian message with human cultures. It is crucial to know the culture in order to enter into a dialogue of equality, respect, and openness, where there is appreciation, complementation, and purification. Because inculturation sweeps away selfishness, superiority, and all types of domination, oppression, and sin. It aims at a more just,

fraternal, and supportive society that begins here and now in the hope of the definitive Kingdom (Panazzolo, 2004). Hence, today's mission cannot be accomplished without inculturation.

Interculturality

The presence of God in cultures is a mystery that the missionary is called to discover how the Triune God acts and works in the world and different cultures with His plan of salvation. Andrade (2008, p. 202) affirms the necessity to approach cultures and peoples with contemplative eyes, that is, having "the ability to look, listen, learn, discern, respond, and collaborate" in *ad gentes* mission. According to Andrade (2018), this is how intercultural dialogue, reciprocity, and two-way sharing of learning and enrichment between cultures are achieved. In this regard, Lawrence (2012, p. 4) states that "we cannot doubt that each person, culture, and religion has something true to express and offer. Interculturality is an encounter between various cultures that relate to and interpenetrate each other." Appropriate relationship with other cultures leads to mutual enrichment.

Lawrence (2012, p. 4) emphasizes the need to recognize, respect, and value cultures and cultural diversity to have a healthy intercultural relationship so that dialogue between cultures becomes a "sign of the universality of the Kingdom of God". For the author, it is certain that "a Church that promotes authentic interculturality internally and encourages intercultural dialogue externally, becomes a credible sign of the openness of the Kingdom of God to people of all cultures and nations". Thus, in this world driven by globalization and the neoliberal capitalist economy that marginalizes and excludes minority cultures, and wishes to "create a uniformity that eradicates differences, the Church that promotes multiculturalism becomes a sign that the kingdom announced by Christ includes everyone" and that in Christ there are no foreigners or strangers, but only brothers and sisters (Lawrence, 2012, p. 4).

Betancourt's proposes to take a further step to move from inculturation to interculturality, because he perceives inculturation as still linked to attitudes, habits, and practices typical of the dominant Western definition. "For the Christian faith lived in dialogue and coexistence with others, an inculturated Christianity is not enough". He believes that there is progress with inculturation, but that this paradigm must expand with interculturality (Betancourt, 1996, p. 3).

According to Andrade (2008, p. 204), interculturality occurs when coexistence between people is harmonious, integrative, and respectful; that is, when there is an acceptance and normalization of social and cultural differences and where there is awareness and an ethical attitude that all cultures deserve the same value and respect. Therefore, the richness of coexistence and sharing in the *ad gentes* mission.

Interculturality refers to a type of society in which ethnic communities and social groups recognize each other in their differences and seek mutual understanding and appreciation. The prefix "inter" would express a positive interaction that is concretely expressed in the search for the elimination of barriers between peoples, ethnic communities, and human groups (Damázio, 2008, p. 15, *apud* Astrain, 2003, p. 327).

It can be said that interculturality is the "result" of the first step taken with inculturation and that these go hand in hand. So the encounter of cultures creates a framework for coexistence in which no group feels discriminated, diminished, or marginalized. The differences are not reasons for inequality, but for enrichment and growth.

Thus, interculturality occurs when two or more cultures exchange and interact horizontally and synergistically. Where there is reverence, and mutual sharing in a sincere, open, trusting relationship and consideration for the values of each culture. It is a reciprocal discovery of the values and riches of the creative work present in each culture, which when in contact with the other causes growth and transformation of both. The starting point for evangelizing action must always be the other and their

culture. For that reason it is necessary to decolonize the sense of mission connected to the colonial model, which is totally against the Gospel.

Therefore, when reaching out to others, it is necessary to “decolonize minds”. In the process of inculturation of the Gospel, it is clear that evangelization is mutual and in interculturality there is equal treatment between cultures, where the parties mutually enrich each other.

Evangelization and exculturation based on the reality of the African continent

At the root of Christianity, we see the history of divine revelation marked by love and mercy, but which was distorted and marked by injustice and oppression for centuries. At this point, in general terms, we will look to Africa, on how its evangelization process was, and on the challenge of exculturation to later inculturate the message of the Gospel.

According to David Bosch (2002, p. 480 and 482), evangelization and work for justice should not be divorced. Evangelization and the social dimension must go hand in hand in the missionary activities of the Church. The spiritual part of the announcement of the Good News and salvation includes “work for human well-being and justice”. The promotion of life and evangelization goes hand in hand with social responsibility. Thus, “the mission of the Church includes both the proclamation of the Gospel and its demonstration. We must therefore evangelize, respond to immediate human needs, and press for social transformations” (Bosch, 2002, p. 487, *apud* Wheaton Declaration 83, paragraph 26).

Bosch (2002, p. 488) points out that “there is no dichotomy between evangelization and social action. The ‘spiritual Gospel’ and the ‘material Gospel’ represent in Jesus the same Gospel”. Thus, faith and love, word and action, proclamation and testimony, the vertical and horizontal dimensions must remain together and inseparable in any missionary action. These were actions that were inseparable from the life and actions of Jesus. According to Bosch, “words interpret actions, and actions validate words” (Bosch, 2002, p. 502). Therefore, evangelization involves time for learning, attention, sensitivity, patience, and respect. It always promotes fraternal and respectful dialogue with others. It adds and does not take away or exclude. It includes a commitment to the integral development of the human person, consistent with values of social justice.

Hence, it is important to emphasize that

In Africa is not only misery and suffering. Above all, it is a cultural and spiritual reserve of profound values. There is no room for pessimism among its people. It is a source of vitality and hope. It is a mosaic of peoples, cultures, and religious traditions. Of true anonymous and recognized heroes, ethical references, such as Nelson Mandela [...] whose decades of imprisonment, instead of hardening his heart, forged a humble and peaceful activist; Desmond Tutu, like sandalwood, only exudes the scent of the blows he suffered. Without harboring even a drop of hatred for whites, he is a smiling black man, with a heart of all colors, inhabited by the virtue of humor; an expression of God's happiness (Brighenti, 2007, p. 255, our translation).

Oborji (2013, p. 11), affirms that “the history of Christianity in Africa is as old as Christianity itself.” He states that evangelization in Africa can be divided into five phases.

The first phase began with the founding of the Church in North Africa; the second phase covers the 15th and 16th-century Christian expansion in sub-Saharan Africa, while the third phase is the period of the great missions, from the 19th century to the Second Vatican Council. The fourth phase is from the Second Vatican Council to the celebration of the First Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for Africa (1994); and the fifth phase is post-synodal Africa, leading to the second Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for Africa (2009) (Oborji, 2013, p. 11).

In presenting a vast and varied history of these phases of Evangelization in Africa, Oborji presents only an outline of the phases, focusing particularly on the last three phases.

The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation: *Ecclesia in Africa*, 1995 (*Eaf*), on the Church in Africa and its evangelizing mission, states that evangelization in Africa took place in several phases and highlights the first three. The first phase dates back to apostolic times, from the second to the fourth century, when “Christian life in the northern regions of Africa was very intense and was at the forefront, both in theological study and in literary expressions” (*Eaf*, 1995, ns. 30-31). Evangelization in Egypt in the first centuries of Christianity, from which great saints, doctors, and writers¹ emerged, who are a heritage of the Church, fruits of the first phase of its evangelization, which the Synod for Africa recalls with pride, glory, and satisfaction.

The second phase of evangelization in Africa took place in the 15th and 16th centuries, with the exploration of the Portuguese colonizers in the region south of the Sahara, in the regions of Benin, São Tomé, Angola, Mozambique, and Madagascar. At that time, evangelization was accompanied by suffering and oppression from an imposed and forced religion, in favor of increasing the wealth of the colonies at the expense of the spiritual “good” of the African people. However, this phase ended in the 18th century with the extinction of almost all the missions located in south of Sahara (cf. *Eaf*, 1995, n. 32).

The third phase of evangelization in Africa began in the 19th century, promoted “by great apostles and animators of the African mission”. Statistics show a period of rapid growth. The document treats this phase as “a period of glory and splendor of evangelization in the contemporary period”, in particular, citing the canonization of the 23 martyrs of Uganda in 1964.²

They inspire us with the courage to walk alongside the people of God and remain faithful to faith and values of the Gospel. Although the Synod Fathers emphasize that “there is no room for human triumphalism,” we must celebrate the wonders, worked by God for the liberation and salvation of Africa” (*Eaf*, 1995, n. 34).

Today, Africa is raising its voice, and it wants to decolonize Africa from all types of imposition and exclusion. They value interculturality because they know that it has much to offer the Church and the contemporary world. The challenge is to exculturate the Gospel, already inculturated by a foreign culture, to inculturate the message in one’s own culture, in a African way. After all, Africa is the birthplace of the Christian faith and Africans are religious by nature. “Africans have a profound religious sense, a sense of the sacred, a sense of the existence of God the Creator and a spiritual world” (*Eaf*, 1995, n. 42). Africa has a Church open to welcoming and giving. There are “courageously initiatives undertaken by the young Churches of Africa, to take the Gospel ‘to the ends of the earth’ (Acts 1:8)” (*Eaf*, 1995, n. 38). There are African diocesan priests available for periods to help other dioceses lacking personnel, in their own country or abroad. Vocations are flourishing in Africa. As the Church places itself at the service of the African peoples, “it is willing to enter into an exchange of gifts with other particular Churches within the wider

¹ The great writers and saints of Africa are Origen, Saint Athanasius, and Saint Cyril, luminaries of the School of Alexandria, [...] Tertullian, Saint Cyprian, and Saint Augustine. [...] The saints of the desert, were Paul, Anthony, and Paconius, the first founders of monasticism. [...] Frumentius and the holy women Saint Felicitas and Perpetua, Saint Monica, and Saint Thecla, African popes Victor I, Melchiades and Gelasius I (*Eaf* 30,31).

² Pope Paul VI states: “These African martyrs add to the album of victors, called Martyrology, a page that is at once tragic and magnificent, truly worthy of being placed alongside the famous accounts of ancient Africa. [...] Africa, bathed in the blood of these martyrs, who are the first of this new era (and may God grant that they may be the last – so great and precious is their holocaust!), is reborn free and redeemed” (*Eaf* 1995, n. 33, *apud* Homily for the Canonization of Blessed Charles Lwanga, Martias Mulumba Kalenba and 20 Companions, Martyrs of Uganda [18 October 1964]; AAS 56 [1964], 905-906). Africa has a list of more recent saints such as Clementina Anwarite, virgin and martyr of Zaire, Victoria Rasoamnarivo of Madagascar and Josephine Bakita of Sudan, Isidore Bakanja, martyr of Zaire. The history of the martyrs presents their struggles for liberation, justice, and human dignity in favor of their people and their faith.

context of the People of God. All this shows the maturity achieved by the Church in Africa" (*EAF*, 1995, n. 38). However, according to Brighenti "alongside the vitality and courage of its people, the misery of a forgotten Africa is an open wound, aggressively exposed, although alleviated by the hope joy, kindness, and serenity of its people" (Brighenti, 2007, p. 248, our translation).

The bishops of the Synod emphasize that Africa is saturated with problems: poverty in public administration, few available resources, political instability, and social disorientation that result in desolation, war, and despair. Africa is compared (by the bishops of the synod), to that man who was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of thieves and robbers, that beat him, leaving him abandoned, half dead (Luke 10:30-37). So the people are like him lying on the side of the road, sick, wounded, defenseless, marginalized, and abandoned, and they are in need of Good Samaritans to help them. The Synod appeals to the Church in Africa is to be a Good Samaritan (*EAF*, 1995, n. 41).

Even though the colonialist regime has ended, it has left Africans weakened, wounded, and in need of "recovering all the resources of their humanity". They need respect and pastoral care that would help them regain their energy. This is happening because the positive values of African culture are an "inestimable wealth that can be offered to the Church and all humanity" (*EAF*, 1995, n. 41).

It is well known that solidarity, community life, and the value of the family play a fundamental role in African tradition. Children are received as gifts from God, and the elderly and parents have a place of honor within the family. Thus, the synodal's bishops emphasize that the model of the Church in Africa is that of the Church as the family of God (cf. *EAF*, 1995, ns. 94, 100, 105).

However, today, Africans are raising their voices for the recognition and promotion of their rights and human freedom. The Church in Africa "faithful to its liberating vocation, stands resolutely on the side of the oppressed, voiceless, poor and the marginalized" and it makes a preferential option for the poor, highlighted in the document *Ecclesia in Africa* (1995, n. 45) as "the poor of the Lord".

Acknowledge the proclamation of the Kingdom of God is full of concrete acts, liberating action for the oppressed and the oppressor. "A Assembleia Especial para a África exprimiui profunda gratidão a 'todos os cristãos e a todos os homens de boa vontade que trabalham, nos campos da assistência e da promoção, com a nossa Cáritas ou as nossas organizações de desenvolvimento'" for the assistance and human promotion of good samaritans that give to African victims of wars, catastrophes, refugees, and displaced people. Also acknowledge the role that the "Church in Africa has played in favor of peace and reconciliation, in numerous situations of conflict, political unrest or civil war" (*EAF* 1995, n. 45).

Therefore, evangelization must reach and transform society, and its corrupt, unjust, and oppressive structures. Prophecy is the proclamation of the Gospel accompanied by denunciation of injustice and oppression, and promotion of life and peace. To do this, it is imperative to insert oneself into the life and struggle of the people, to be one with them. To incarnate means to start from cultural values that are signs of the presence and action of the Spirit of God among peoples and to promote them based on the values of the Gospel (*EAF*, 1995, n. 59), "avoiding any syncretism" (*EAF*, 1995, n. 62), and working for integral human development (*EAF*, 1995, n. 68).

The three stages of evangelization in Africa each left their specific characteristics and profound marks on the continent, both positive and negative. Today, in many ways, we see a challenge for the Church in Africa to be a force in the process of decolonizing so many marks and attitudes that are still present, which still oppress and hinder the local people. Brighenti (2017, p. 2) affirms that "the missionary's version of Christianity, always conditioned by his or her own culture, is neither a model nor a starting point for the evangelizing mission." Today, it requires the renewal of new paths and methods. Since the reality and context of life is diferente in Africa, Latin America, Asia and other parts of the world, especific new pathes of renewal are required for each other.

The message of the Kingdom is the same and does not conflict with cultures and peoples. The path is a careful look at the model of the *Missio Dei*. God who cares about his people, who becomes one with them, “he was God and became flesh” (John 1:1;14). Jesus spoke their language, lived as one of them in a specific culture and time, liberated, saved, and proclaimed the presence of the Kingdom of God. In short, this is the proposal of a theology of decolonization for missionary activity of the Church in the world.

Final remarks

The topic is challenging, difficult, and even controversial. Even so, we understand that the debate is necessary from theological, ecclesiological, and sociological points of view. Presenting a proposal for a decolonial and decolonizing mission ad gentes is a great challenge in a secularized world full of doubts regarding the topics of mission and evangelization. However, faith and hope in a world where intercultural and interreligious dialogue exist facilitates a pluralistic, dialogical, proactive, decolonial, and liberating consciousness which it turns leads to a better understanding of mission as *Missio Dei* (Divine mission), which aims at incarnation in cultures and interculturality in the current reality.

In this sense, it was important to investigate the change in focus of mission since Vatican II, from an ecclesiological centre to centrality of the Kingdom of God and from a mission focused on a Church of domination, expansion, and conquest to a mission focused on the Kingdom of God. A decolonizing mission is committed to justice and peace, dialogue, respect, and dignity of life.

The work highlights the challenges of decolonization as a transformative part of an ancient journey marked by imposition and massacre of cultures, with the implantation of the Church for inculturation of the Gospel. Additionally, it deals with the issue of intercultural dialogue, not only of a dominant party, but recognizing that all parties have riches to share and to be purified. The issue of the exculturation of the Gospel that arrived in a form already inculturated in an external culture is considered with the need first to exculturate the Gospel and then inculturate the message in the local culture based on its own. Next the process of decolonization is highlighted along with the three phases of the evangelization process on the African continent described in the document *Ecclesia in Africa* and the challenge of exculturation is explored in general terms. It was emphasized that the presentation of the Gospel should always be a proposal and never an imposition and involve a fraternal and respectful dialogue that includes a commitment to the integral development of the human person and to social justice.

In conclusion, decolonial, decolonized, and decolonizing ad gentes mission in the contemporary world requires adequate preparation with a theological, pluralistic, and liberating approach, and calls for witnessing and sharing of the values of the Kingdom in a dialogical way, so that they are inculturated and all parties are enriched and valued. Therefore, the missionary challenge today is the proposal of the theological paradigm of decolonization as a transformative part of purifying a colonialist heritage that negatively marked in cultures. This means decolonizing the old structures, mentalities, and attitudes that are not in keeping with the message of the Gospel or with the values of the Kingdom but still exist in the hierarchy of the Church and the society.

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