



# Franciscan Action Network

Transforming the World in the Spirit of St. Francis and St. Clare

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## **A MODERN UNDERSTANDING OF MISSION**

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Over the past few decades those who give serious attention to Mission in the Christian traditions have laid out five elements which describe this fundamental vocation of the Church today. One could add or perhaps subtract from these five; but basically this list is considered the principal dimensions of Jesus' command to "teach all nations".

In no particular order of priority, then, here are the five elements:

Witness – Dialogue with Other Traditions – Proclamation – Spirituality – Transformation of the World

Witness means the example and influence which serious persons of faith naturally exert on everyone and every circumstance they encounter.

Dialogue with other religious traditions implies a firm grasp of one's own faith and deep respect for God's Presence in that of others.

Proclamation signifies the willingness and capacity to articulate Christian beliefs, whenever the opportunity presents itself.

Spirituality in this context means acknowledging and articulating new ways of understanding the Divine and human life in God and through the experience of Mission.

Transformation of the World encompasses every effort to accomplish "God's dream for humanity" – life lived in freedom, dignity, unity, justice, peace and love for all; and reverence for creation.

As these elements have been articulated in Mission circles, a related area also has received attention: that Mission extends to all continents. No longer do we confine our understanding of Mission as directed solely toward those places where the Church does not exist or appears weak, nor to places where the Gospel has not as yet been heard. Mission is a global task – all nations and all peoples are both subjects of Mission and all Jesus' followers are themselves missionaries.

This consciousness sometimes goes by the name "reverse mission". In the last many years those people of faith who have left, say, the United States to work in what used to be called "mission lands" have come to the realization that their Church and country of origin also need further evangelizing. There has emerged an understanding that no place in the world exists where the five elements of Mission cited above are sufficiently articulated and lived. Mission is required on all six continents.

The growing understanding of North America, obviously including the United States, as mission territory presents new, humbling and quite practical insights. We can no longer think of ourselves as "the shining city on a hill", an example of goodness and God's favor for all other nations. Quite the contrary North Americans have to listen carefully to the warning of Pope John Paul II when he called many of the realities of our "developed world" examples of "a culture of death". We can and must learn from our brothers and sisters in the household of faith from other parts of the world what it means to accept and live the Gospel of Jesus. We need to receive laity, religious and priests from other churches as missionaries to us. Above all, we must view all the efforts to improve the quality of life in our society as true expressions of Mission – Jesus' Mission. "I have come that they may have life, life in abundance". (John 10:10)

The practical consequences of this entirely new way of viewing Mission are many. Particularly with regard to “reverse mission”, that is mission to the U.S./Industrialized World, we can and should view financial support destined for missionary activities as legitimately applicable to such efforts as the Franciscan Advocacy Network. Trying to reorient U.S. domestic and foreign policies toward humanizing the lives of marginalized and forgotten majorities comes squarely under the heading of “Transformation of the World”, Witness, and Proclamation – in other words of Mission.

Let me conclude with a personal anecdote. For the first fifteen years of my life after priestly ordination I served in Bolivia and Peru. I was considered a missionary in the traditional sense of the word – someone helping build the Church where it was non-existent or at best exceedingly weak. At the end of that period, my religious superiors invited me to return to the U.S. and bring the experiences of that decade and one-half to bear on the Church and society here. After a period of serious discernment I did return and have lived in this country ever since. However, even here I have never considered myself anything but a missionary – only the venue for my missionary activities changed, from South America to North America. The work of witness, dialogue, proclamation, spirituality and transformation of the world remained the same. I believe that with all others who strive to live these elements of Mission I have done a bit to exemplify the statement from Second Vatican Council “the pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature” (Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church #2).