

# **The Changing Landscape of Religious Missionary Life**

— with reference to the demographic change in religious congregations

## **I. Introduction (5 minutes)**

- Presentation of the theme
- Importance of missionary religious life in the contemporary world
- Objectives of the intervention

## **II. Missionary religious life in the past (10 minutes)**

1. Brief historical review of missionary religious life
2. The main characteristics of missionary religious life in the past
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## **III. The changing landscape in missionary religious life (15 minutes)**

1. The factors that have led to the changes in missionary religious life
2. The evolution of the mission: from the “ad gentes” mission to the “in situ” mission
3. The changing relationship between the local Church and Missionary Religious Institutions
4. The demographic decrease in religious congregations and the consequences for missionary activity

## **IV. The challenges to missionary religious life in the contemporary world (10 minutes)**

1. The challenge of secularization and religious pluralism
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3. The challenge of inculturation and interreligious dialogue
4. The response of missionary religious life to these challenges, also in relation to the demographic decrease in religious congregations

## **V. Conclusion (5 minutes)**

- Summary of topics covered
- Lastly, reflection on the importance of missionary religious life in the contemporary world, despite the demographic decrease in religious congregations
- Call for greater awareness of, and commitment to, missionary religious life, particularly in the light of the current situation.

## **I. Introduction**

### **• Presentation of the theme**

The theme we are going to explore today concerns the changing landscape in missionary religious life. In particular, we shall focus on the factors that have led to this change, the evolution of mission from “ad gentes” missions to “in situ” missions, the relationship between the local Church and religious missionary institutions, and the demographic decline in religious congregations and its consequent effect on missionary activity. Together we shall explore the challenges religious missionary institutions are having to face today: secularization, religious pluralism, globalization, inculturation and interreligious dialogue, in light of the demographic decrease in religious congregations. Finally, we shall ask, “what importance does missionary religious life have in the contemporary world? How can we all contribute to raise awareness and greater commitment to support this important mission?”.

### **• Importance of missionary religious life in the contemporary world**

Missionary religious life in the Catholic Church is of crucial importance in the contemporary world. In an era where globalization and modernity drive many people to seek personal success and well-being, missionary life represents a call to charity, humility and dedication to others.

The Christian mission is based on love of God and neighbour, and on the sharing of faith through personal witness and evangelization. This witness requires great personal commitment and sacrifice, but it is also a source of great joy and satisfaction, because mission is a way Christians can discover the beauty of cultural diversity and learn to respect and esteem others.

The Catholic Church, through its numerous mission-sending congregations, works in many countries worldwide to promote peace, social justice, education and integral human development. Mission work includes caring for the sick, assisting the poor, defending human rights, helping victims of conflict and natural disasters, and many other forms of community service.

In a world that often seems divided and in conflict, missionary religious life offers a unique opportunity to promote peace, justice and solidarity. Missionaries, that live among and mix with the local people and share their times of joy and sorrow, are committed to serving them in practical ways. This humble and supportive approach is a true example of God’s love for all human beings, without distinction of race, culture or religion.

Furthermore, missionary religious life is a practical response to Jesus’ call: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:16). Missionaries spread the Christian faith in places where the presence of the Church is scarce or even absent, as they share the beauty and truth of the Gospel with others. Missionary religious life contributes to the growth of the global Christian community as it builds bridges of solidarity and friendship between the different cultures and traditions.

Besides this, missionary religious life offers an opportunity to grow in holiness for those who embrace it. Missionaries are called to live the Gospel in a radical way, to expend themselves for others, and to bear witness to God’s presence in the world. This lifestyle requires deep spirituality, strong faith and a great ability to adapt to different situations and cultures. But at

the same time, it brings joy and satisfaction at seeing the success of one's work in service to others, as well as being part of a big global family.

To sum up, missionary religious life represents a practical response to Jesus' call to: "love your neighbour as yourself" (Mt 22:39); to spread the word of God and to build bridges of solidarity and friendship between the different cultures and traditions. In today's world, marked by division and conflict, missionary religious life offers an opportunity to promote peace, justice and love. It bears witness to God's presence in the world by its radical example of holiness of life.

#### • **Objectives of the intervention**

1. Provide a historical overview of missionary religious life to explain its important mission of spreading Christianity in the world.
2. Realistic analysis of the factors that have led to the change in missionary religious life and the subsequent evolution of missionary work.
3. Examine the challenges that confront missionary religious life in the contemporary world, particularly in relation to secularization, religious pluralism, globalization, human mobility, inculturation and interreligious dialogue.
4. Evaluate possible solutions to the demographic decrease in religious congregations and the challenges facing mission in contemporary society.

To sum up, the main objective of the intervention is to analyse how missionary religious life has evolved over time and how it is trying to respond to the challenges of contemporary society, in order to continue spreading the Christian Message and the Gospel all over the world.

## **II. MISSIONARY RELIGIOUS LIFE IN THE PAST**

### **II. 1. BRIEF HISTORICAL REVIEW OF MISSIONARY RELIGIOUS LIFE**

The Catholic Church has a long history of spreading the Gospel Message throughout the world, dating back to the time of the Apostles:

- **Apostolic era:** the Apostles, after Pentecost, committed themselves to spread the Gospel throughout the world. The Apostle Paul in particular, played a leading role in the spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire, through his missionary journeys and his *Letters* to the different Christian communities.
- **Medieval Ages:** during the High Middle Ages, the Christian mission was carried out mainly by monks and bishops. Among the best known medieval missionaries we can mention St. Boniface, who spread Christianity among the Germanic population, and St. Cyril and St. Methodius who brought the Christian message to Eastern Europe, and invented the Cyrillic alphabet.
- **Modern Age:** in modern times, many religious congregations have dedicated themselves to the mission *ad gentes*. In particular, the Jesuits played a leading role in the spread of Christianity in Asia and Latin America. In modern times, many Catholic missionaries have

dedicated their lives to the evangelization of the peoples of India, China and Japan. Below are some of the best known missionaries in these three countries:

- **In India:** St. Francis Xavier, SJ, a founding member of the Company of Jesus, is the best known Catholic missionary to India where he spent many years spreading Christianity besides founding numerous Christian communities. He was the first missionary to go to Japan. He is considered the Patron Saint of Catholic Missions.
- **In China:** St. Matteo Ricci, an Italian Jesuit, was one of the first Catholic missionaries to enter China in 1582. He learned Chinese and the Chinese culture and tried to draw Christianity and Chinese philosophy closer together. He also made an Atlas in Chinese, with which he was able to spread geographical knowledge of the Western world in China.
- **In Japan:** St. Francis Xavier, SJ, in addition to being a well-known missionary in India, was the first missionary to go to Japan, in 1549, where he spread Christianity. He inaugurated numerous Christian communities and converted many people to the Faith.
- **St. John Baptist Scalabrini**, Italian missionary, was one of the Founders of the Order of the Scalabrini Missionaries. He spent many years in Japan where he spread Christianity among the Japanese. He also founded numerous schools and hospitals to help the local population.
- **In general, the Catholic missionaries to India, China and Japan** had much difficulty in spreading the Christian Message, due to the local peoples' cultural and religious diversity. However, thanks to their dedication and their knowledge of the local languages and culture, they succeeded in creating numerous Christian communities and converting many people to the Faith.
- **Contemporary Age:** today, the Catholic Church continues to spread the Gospel Message throughout the world. Different methods are employed, such as the mission *ad gentes*, interreligious dialogue, and work to help the poor and needy. Furthermore, many consecrated Religious engage in work to spread the Gospel through the means of mass communication, such as the Radio, Television and Internet.

In general, the Catholic Church has always considered the dissemination of the Gospel Message essential and **therefore developed** ways to spread the Gospel among all the peoples of the earth through mission.

## **II. 2. Main characteristics of missionary religious life in the past**

In the past, missionary religious life in the Catholic sphere was characterized by the following:

1. **Dedication to spreading the Christian Message:** Catholic missionaries were committed to spreading the Gospel and converting non-Christian peoples, both in distant lands and in European countries.
2. **Community life observed strict rules:** the missionaries lived in community, often in isolated places that were difficult to reach, and followed a strict rule of life, which included prayer, fasting and manual work.

3. Learning the local language/s and culture/s: in order to be able to spread the Christian Message, the missionaries had to know the language/s and culture/s of the peoples they met. This usually meant learning foreign languages and getting to know the customs and traditions of the local people.

4. Creation of social and religious institutions. The Catholic missionaries did not only spread the Christian Message; they set up social and religious structures, such as schools, hospitals, orphanages and seminaries for the training of new priests and missionaries.

5. Personal Sacrifice: The Catholic missionaries often embarked on perilous and difficult journeys, leaving their relatives and homeland to devote themselves to mission. In some cases, this even involved the sacrifice of their own lives.

To sum up, in the past missionary religious life in the Catholic sphere was characterized by: strong dedication to spreading the Christian Message, strict life in community, learning the local language/s and culture/s, the establishment of social and religious structures, and personal sacrifice.

## **II. 3. The importance of missionary religious life in spreading Christianity in the world**

Missionary religious life has played a vital role in the spread of Christianity throughout the world. Thanks to the commitment and dedication of missionaries, the Christian Message has been taken to distant lands, enabling many people to come to know and accept the Christian Faith.

Without the outreach of missionary religious life, the spread of Christianity would have been very limited, especially in countries that had no direct contact with the Christian Tradition. Without the missionaries' work, many cultures and peoples would never have known the Christian Faith, and the Christian communities would have stayed in the regions where they started.

Furthermore, missionary religious life has contributed to the establishment of social and religious structures, such as schools, hospitals and orphanages, which have had a positive impact on the lives of those who benefited from them.

In summary, missionary religious life has played a fundamental role in spreading Christianity throughout the world, by carrying the Christian Message to distant lands and contributing to the establishment of social and religious institutions that have improved people's lives. Without active missionary religious life, Christianity would have remained confined to the regions where it started, and many people would never have had the opportunity to learn about the Christian Faith.

## **III. THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE IN RELIGIOUS MISSIONARY LIFE**

### **III. 1. The factors that have led to the changes in Missionary Religious Life**

Missionary religious life has been profoundly influenced by a number of factors which have led to significant changes over the last few decades, and been instrumental in the growth and transformation of the religious mission, both individually and collectively.

One of the main factors that influenced missionary religious life was the change in social and cultural standards/values. Over the past few decades, society has paid increasing attention to

cultural diversity and become more tolerant of other religious beliefs. This change, which prompted missionaries to develop a better understanding of, and respect for, local cultures and traditions has led to greater cooperation and partnership between local communities and religious organizations.

Technological development is another factor that has strongly influenced missionary religious life. The advent of the Internet and the Social Media has enabled missionaries to address a wider audience and fulfil their mission more effectively. Furthermore, the use of advanced technologies has helped missionaries to develop new ways of spreading the Gospel and the Faith.

A third factor leading to the changes in missionary religious life has been the heightened awareness of the environment and the need for its sustainability. As the missionaries began to understand the importance of safeguarding the environment through respect for nature, they initiated new environmental programmes. This then enabled them not only to be active in spreading the Faith, but to promote the well-being of society and the environment.

Lastly, a key factor that led to the changes in missionary religious life was the missionaries' heightened awareness of the issue of human rights. As they began to understand the importance of promoting human rights and of fighting injustice and oppression, they inaugurated programmes and projects in support of human rights and equality between people of different cultures and religions.

In summary, missionary religious life has undergone considerable changes in recent decades, due to a number of factors such as, changing social and cultural values, technological developments, heightened environmental and human rights awareness. Nevertheless, despite these changes, religious mission is still an important means of promoting peace and justice, solidarity and harmony among the peoples of the world.

### **III. 2. The evolution of the mission: from the mission “ad gentes” to the mission “in situ”**

Religious mission has evolved significantly over the last few decades, moving from the mission “ad gentes” to the mission “in situ”. This change has had a profound impact on the way religious mission is exercised and on the way religious organizations operate around the world.

The mission “ad gentes” was a model of religious mission that focused on spreading the faith among populations that had not yet been reached by the Church. This form of mission was widespread in the past, especially during the colonial era, when European missionaries travelled around the world to spread Christianity among Indigenous peoples.

However, in recent decades, the religious mission has undergone a profound transformation. Instead of only focusing on spreading the faith among unreached populations, religious organizations have begun to focus on promoting the faith in local communities, through the “in situ” mission.

The “in situ” mission focuses on spreading the faith by living among and mixing with the local communities, promoting interaction and dialogue between people of different religions and cultures. This model of religious mission is based on building relationships between people and promoting mutual respect.

One of the benefits of the “in situ” mission is that it promotes greater understanding and respect for local cultures and traditions, thus fostering cooperation and partnership between local communities and religious organizations. Furthermore, in the “in situ” missions the missionaries become an integral part of the respective local community in order to understand its needs and requirements, and find the best way to improve the people’s quality of life.

To sum up, the evolution of religious mission from the “ad gentes” mission to the “in situ” mission has resulted in a greater understanding of, and respect for, local cultures and traditions, fostered cooperation and partnership between local communities and religious organizations. This new model of religious mission enables missionaries to become an integral part of a local community. Once they understand the people’s needs and requirements, they start viable projects to improve their lives.

### **III. 3. The change in the relationship between the local Church and the Missionary Religious Institutions**

The relationship between the local Church and missionary religious institutions has changed significantly over the last few decades. In the past, missionary religious institutions were often seen as the only qualified body to spread the faith in remote and underdeveloped regions, and thus they enjoyed great authority over the local Church.

However, in recent years, the relationship between the local Church and missionary religious institutions has changed considerably. The local Church has become increasingly independent and has taken on a more active role in spreading the faith in its own communities, without having to rely on the missionary religious institutions.

In particular, this change has benefitted from the more dialogical and cooperative approach between religious missionary institutions and the local Church. They have begun to work in partnership with the local Churches, providing support and resources for spreading the faith in local communities, rather than trying to control the whole process themselves.

This change has led the local communities to be more involved in spreading the faith, as well as the local Church being more responsible for the management of its religious schedule. Furthermore, it has enabled religious missionary institutions to gain a better understanding of the local culture/s and traditions, thus fostering greater mutual respect and deeper interreligious dialogue.

Actually, the change in the relationship between the local Church and the missionary religious institutions has had a strong impact on the missionary religious institutions’ role and approach, so that now besides spreading the faith in remote regions, they focus on promoting the faith through training, education, and assistance to local communities. This new approach has enabled missionary religious institutions to play a more active role in promoting justice and equality in society.

To sum up, the change in the relationship between the local Church and missionary religious institutions has favoured a more dialogical and cooperative approach in spreading the faith. Now, the local communities’ are more deeply involved as the local Churches assume greater responsibility in the organisation of their religious activities. The religious missionary institutions’ new approach enables them to play a more effective role in promoting social

justice and equality, through training, education and assistance to the respective local communities.

The following are some examples of the changing relationship between the local Church and the Missionary Religious Institutions:

1. **Cooperation.** The local Church and the missionary religious institutions cooperate in promoting education. In many developing countries, missionary religious institutions have worked, and work, in partnership with the local Churches to improve the standard of education in local communities by providing resources and financial support for building schools and organizing educational curricula.

2. **Training** local leaders. In partnership with the local Churches religious missionary institutions train local leaders to qualify them to play a more active role in spreading the faith and organizing religious programmes. Thus, the local communities assume more responsibility in managing their religious affairs and are less dependent on the missionary religious institutions.

3. **Promotion** of social justice. Religious missionary institutions have begun to focus on promoting social justice and equality, through: training, education and assistance to local communities. For example, many missionary religious institutions have promoted the construction of health-care centres and provided medical care to local communities in conjunction with the local Churches.

4. **Interreligious dialogue.** Religious missionary institutions have worked in partnership with local Churches to promote interreligious dialogue and mutual understanding between the different religions and cultures in the local communities. This has fostered greater mutual understanding and respect, and has enabled missionary religious institutions to understand and respond to the needs and aspirations of the local communities better.

Overall, these examples show how cooperation between the local Church and missionary religious institutions can lead to positive results such as, the promotion of the faith and social justice. The new, more dialogical, cooperative approach has enabled religious missionary institutions to gain a better understanding of the local culture/s and traditions, thus fostering greater mutual respect and deeper interreligious dialogue.

### **III. 4. The demographic decrease in religious congregations and the consequences for missionary activity**

The demographic decline in religious congregations affects missionary work. Traditionally religious congregations played a crucial role in spreading the faith and organizing missionary activities around the world. However in recent decades, many of these congregations have seen the number of their members decline, and this has had a negative effect on their missionary work and outreach.

One of the most obvious consequences of the demographic decline in religious congregations is the reduced number of missionaries available to carry out mission work around the world. Inevitably, with fewer missionaries available, missionary activities have diminished which has had a negative impact on the spread of the faith, the promotion of social activities and development in local communities.



Furthermore, the demographic decrease in religious congregations has led to a decrease in the funds available for missionary work. Traditionally many religious congregations provided funding for the construction of schools, hospitals, orphanages and other civil projects in local communities. However, as the number of members decreases, there are less financial resources to support these projects.

The demographic decline in religious congregations has also affected the training of missionaries. In the past many religious congregations conducted schools and training programmes for their members who were interested in becoming missionaries. With fewer members, these training programmes have become increasingly limited, with a negative impact on the number and quality of the missionaries trained.

Despite these challenges, many religious congregations are adapting to the situation. Many are working to recruit new members, offering training programmes and support to young people interested in becoming missionaries. Others are looking for new ways to fund missionary work such as, cooperation with Non-Governmental Organizations and other civil partners. Furthermore, some congregations are exploring new ways to evangelize, for example through the digital means of communication.

To sum up, the demographic decline in religious congregations presents a real challenge to mission work. However, many congregations with the willingness to adapt and innovate are trying to overcome these challenges to continue to play a crucial role in spreading the faith and promoting the common good in local communities around the world.

Here are some examples of how the demographic decrease in religious congregations has influenced missionary work:

1. **Reduced number** of missionaries: religious congregations with fewer members, means that there are fewer missionaries to send around the world. For example, The Society of Foreign Missions of Paris, (M.E.P.), one of the oldest Catholic missionary organizations in the world (1658), has seen the number of its missionaries drop by 40 percent over the past 20 years.

2. **Reduced Financial Resources:** In the past, many religious congregations provided funding to support the missions, such as the construction of schools, hospitals, and orphanages. However, as the number of members decreases, less financial resources are available to support these projects. For example, the Sisters of Charity of St. Charles Borromeo, a Catholic missionary congregation, has had to close some of its schools in Africa due to reduced financial resources.

3. **Reduction of Training Programmes:** In the past, many religious congregations conducted schools and training programmes for their members interested in becoming missionaries. With fewer members, these training programmes have become increasingly limited, with a negative impact on the number and qualification of those trained. For example, the Congregation of the Missionaries of Faith (25.12.1982), a Catholic missionary organization, has seen its membership decline by 60% over the past 20 years, which has made the Congregation unable to train new missionaries.

4. **New ways** of spreading the Gospel: many religious congregations are looking for new ways to spread the Gospel to overcome the demographic decrease of their members. For

example, some missionary organizations are using digital means of communication, such as the social media, to reach a wider audience. Other organizations are cooperating with Non-Governmental Organizations and other civil partners to support their missionary outreach. For example, the Italian Missione Cattolica in Zurich-Oerlikon/(English-Speaking Catholic Mission) cooperates with a number of NGOs to support relief and development work in Africa and Asia.

#### **IV. CHALLENGES TO MISSIONARY RELIGIOUS LIFE IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD:**

##### **IV. 1. The challenge of secularization and religious pluralism**

Secularization and religious pluralism present two serious challenges to missionary religious life in the contemporary world. *Secularization* refers to the tendency whereby religion is losing its prominent role in public and private life, while *religious pluralism* refers to the presence of many different religions in the same society. These two challenges have seriously affected missionary religious life, and a fresh approach is needed to reach out and interact with people around the world.

In the past, missionary religious life focused mainly on spreading the faith and converting new members to it. However, secularization and religious pluralism have made this traditional approach difficult. Now people are less and less interested in religion, and the fact that there are different religions in the same society can lead to conflict among religious groups, demanding increased tolerance and inclusion.

To address these challenges, missionary religious life must adopt a new approach that enhances interreligious dialogue and cooperation with other religions. This means that missionary organizations must focus not only on conversion but also on promoting mutual understanding and respect between the religions. To achieve this they must work to promote social justice and peace, as well as assist the most vulnerable communities.

Missionary religious life must adapt to the new demands of modern society, such as poverty, inequality, violence and injustice. Missionary organizations can play an important role in promoting social justice and peace, and in supporting the most vulnerable communities.

Furthermore, missionary religious life must work to overcome the prejudices and stereotypes that are commonly associated with different religions. Missionary organizations must educate their members about religious diversity and encourage them to respect the beliefs of others. In this way, missionary organizations can become a positive model of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect between religions.

Finally, missionary religious life must use the modern means of communication to reach a wider audience and promote interreligious dialogue. The internet and social media offer a great opportunity for missionary organizations to address a global audience and to promote mutual understanding and respect for other religions.

In summary, secularization and religious pluralism present a serious challenge to missionary religious life in the world today. Nevertheless, these challenges offer opportunities for a new approach that promotes interreligious dialogue, cooperation, social justice and peace. Missionary organizations must adapt to the new demands of modern society, use the modern means of communication to reach a wider audience and further interreligious dialogue.

## **IV. 2. The challenge of globalization and human mobility**

Globalization and human mobility pose a significant challenge to missionary religious life in the contemporary world. Globalization has made the world more interconnected but it has brought new challenges for missionary organizations seeking to spread the faith in a global context. Furthermore, human mobility has led to the creation of multi-ethnic and multi-religious communities, and this requires a more inclusive and sensitive approach.

Globalization has led to the creation of a global society in which people and ideas cross national borders more and more easily. However, this situation also represents a challenge to the missionary organizations seeking to spread the faith in a global context. In fact, globalization has led to an increasingly pluralistic society, in which people are exposed to many different cultures and religions. This has made it more difficult for missionary organizations to reach new members and spread the Faith.

Furthermore, human mobility has led to the creation of multi-ethnic and multi-religious communities which missionary organizations need to approach in a more inclusive and sensitive way. Missionary organizations must be ready to adapt to the different culture/s and religious traditions in a community and work to promote interreligious dialogue and mutual understanding, (cf. *GS*, n. 44).

In fact with human mobility, migrant communities have formed that often live in a precarious situation. Mission-sending organizations must work to help these communities overcome the challenges they face besides promoting social justice and solidarity in that context.

To meet the challenge of globalization and human mobility, missionary religious life must adopt a new approach based on inclusion, cultural sensitivity and the promotion of interreligious dialogue. Missionary organizations must work to understand the different culture/s and religious tradition/s present in a community and adapt to them.

Furthermore, missionary organizations must work to promote social justice and solidarity among communities, especially the most vulnerable. They must also use the modern means of communication to address the global audience and enhance mutual understanding between different cultures and religious traditions.

Lastly, missionary religious life must adapt to the new demands of a global society, and develop new policies to reach new members so as to spread the faith in the global context. This means that missionary organizations must use modern technologies and the social network to address a wider audience in order to promote understanding between the different cultures and religious traditions.

To conclude, globalization and human mobility represent a great challenge to missionary religious life in the contemporary world. Religious Orders and Missionary Institutions are called to revise their way of working and thinking, adapt to the changes in the world in order to respond to the new needs of populations. Thus, it is essential to develop a culture of encounter and acceptance which appreciates diverse cultural and religious values, promotes interreligious dialogue and cooperation between the different faiths. Only in this way will it be possible to respond to the challenges of globalization and human mobility, offer an authentic witness of love, service and solidarity to the people and communities encountered along the path of mission.

### **IV. 3. The challenge of inculturation and interreligious dialogue**

Inculturation and interreligious dialogue are major challenges that confront missionary religious life in the contemporary world. Growing globalization and the spread of religious pluralism require religious communities to adapt to new cultural situations and to develop an attitude of openness and dialogue.

Inculturation means enabling the Gospel to dialogue with the local culture/s and traditions. This implies adopting a flexible and respectful approach to other cultures and traditions, seeking to enhance them rather than suppress them. Therefore, it is necessary to train missionaries who can appreciate the local context, respect the differences and promote inclusion.

Interreligious dialogue by contrast is a process of exchange and comparison between the different religious traditions which furthers mutual knowledge in order to overcome differences. Once again, it is important to develop a mentality of openness and mutual listening, avoiding syncretism and confusion between the different faiths.

However, to meet the challenges of inculturation and interreligious dialogue time, effort and dedication are required. It requires the formation of missionaries able to understand and respect different cultures, to dialogue with different faiths and to be authentic witnesses of love, peace and solidarity. Only through this approach of dialogue and openness will it be possible to build a more just, peaceful and fraternal world, where cultural and religious diversity is no longer seen as a threat, but as an asset and an opportunity for growth.

Many positive experiences of inculturation and interreligious dialogue have already taken place in different parts of the world.

For example, in parts of Africa, Christian and Muslim communities have developed a strong sense of partnership and solidarity. In many regions of the continent these communities are working together to build schools, hospitals and other civil structures, for the benefit of the entire local population.

Also in Asia, interreligious dialogue is taking place, especially between Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims. Religious communities have formed interfaith groups to promote peace, respect and mutual understanding in some cities.

In addition, many religious congregations have adopted an inculturation approach in their missionary endeavour. For example, Catholic missionaries in Latin America are seeking to join local communities to learn about their cultural traditions, while offering a message of hope and faith.

To sum up, there are many practical examples of how the challenge of inculturation and interreligious dialogue can be successfully addressed, thanks to the dedication and commitment of missionaries and religious communities around the world.

### **IV. 4. The reaction of missionary religious life to these challenges, also with regard to the demographic decrease in religious congregations**

Missionary religious life has sought to give a creative response to the challenges of secularization, religious pluralism, globalization, inculturation and interreligious dialogue, as well as to the decline in numbers.

To answer the challenge of secularization, missionary religious life has sought to reappraise and adapt its work to address the new needs of society. Many congregations have started formation and education programmes to help young people develop a mature and aware faith, in order to meet the challenges of contemporary life.

Regarding the challenge of religious pluralism, missionary religious life has sought to promote dialogue and cooperation between the different religions. Many congregations have started interreligious education and training programmes to help Christians and members of other religions to understand each other's beliefs and traditions better.

In response to the challenge of globalization and human mobility, missionary religious life has chosen to work in areas where there is a greater need for spiritual and material assistance. Many congregations have opened missions in distant places where the populace is exposed to serious social, economic and political difficulties.

Regarding the challenge of inculturation and interreligious dialogue, missionary religious life has sought to join local communities in order to understand their cultural traditions. Many congregations have sought to adopt an inculturation approach in their missionary outreach, which should be in tune with "the particular nation's own way of thinking and acting", and enhance those elements in the traditions and religion of the local culture that are similar to the Christian faith (cf. *Ad Gentes*, n. 16).

Finally, in relation to the demographic decrease in religious congregations, missionary religious life has tried to make the best of the resources available, even though often limited. Many congregations have tried to create networks of cooperation and sharing with other congregations, in order to be able to continue their work of evangelization and assistance to people in difficulty.

In summary, missionary religious life has sought to respond to the challenges of secularization, religious pluralism, globalization, inculturation and interreligious dialogue, as well as to the demographic decline, by seeking to renovate itself and adapt to society's new needs, while maintaining its proper identity and mission.

## **V. Conclusion**

### **• Summary of topics covered**

The theme dealt with reviews missionary religious life, its development in history, its main characteristics in the past, as well as the importance of its mission in spreading Christianity in the world today. Subsequently, the factors that led to the changes in missionary religious life were examined, including the evolution of the mission, the changing relationship between the local Church and missionary religious institutions, and the demographic decline in religious congregations. Lastly, the current challenges facing missionary religious life were examined, namely, secularization, religious pluralism, globalization, inculturation and interreligious dialogue, as well as its reaction to these challenges.

### **• Final reflection on the importance of missionary religious life in the contemporary world, despite the present demographic decrease**

Despite the demographic decline in religious congregations, missionary religious life continues to be of fundamental importance in the world today. Its work is essential for the

promotion of peace, justice and solidarity, as well as for the spread of the Christian faith. Throughout its history, mission has been a form of human and spiritual service which has seen missionaries engaged in spreading the Gospel Message, providing aid to local communities and the defence of human rights. This work is still important today, but its approach must be through inculturation and interreligious dialogue.

The main challenge to missionary religious life is to find new relevant forms of work that correspond to the needs of the peoples of the contemporary world. This requires in-depth study of the people's needs and the issues concerning social justice, the environment, peace and human dignity. Missionary religious life must also cooperate with the local Churches and civil organizations to find an approach that can make a lasting impact on society.

Another challenge is to attract new vocations and to train missionaries suited to the needs of the contemporary world. Training programmes should be more practical, with particular attention to the cultural and intercultural aspects. Missionary religious life should also consider cooperating with Universities and Teacher Training Colleges, as well as Youth Movements and Organizations to attract new vocations.

Ultimately, missionary religious life continues to render the Church and the world an essential service, despite the demographic decline in the religious congregations. There are many challenges ahead but with the help of the Holy Spirit, the coordination of the work of the religious congregations, local Churches and civil society organizations, mission can continue to be a practical response to the needs of today's world.

**• Need for greater awareness of, and commitment to, missionary religious life, especially in the light of the current situation.**

Missionary religious life is of great importance for the spread of the Gospel Message in the world. Despite the challenges it has had to face over the years, its presence is still needed today to bring the Word of God to different peoples and cultures.

However, as we have seen, the demographic decline in religious congregations presents a serious challenge to missionary religious life. A renewed commitment is therefore needed to support and promote missionary religious life, both through prayer and practical support for mission work.

In particular, greater awareness calls for a better understanding and acceptance of religious and cultural pluralism in the contemporary world. Missionary religious life must be ready to dialogue with other religions and cultures, without denying its own Christian identity, but rather benefitting from the others' diversity.

Furthermore, it is important to provide on-going formation to train missionaries to face the challenges of the contemporary world, such as globalisation, human mobility, secularisation and inculturation. In general, Formation should include interreligious dialogue and knowledge of other cultures.

Lastly, the invitation to have greater commitment concerns all Christians, because the mission is not only the task of religious institutions, but of the whole Church. Everyone is called to take Christ's Message to the people who seek him, in their own communities and throughout the world.

To conclude, although missionary religious life continues to be of paramount importance to the Church and to the world, it faces many challenges. Missionary religious life requires renewed commitment to support and further its mission through greater awareness, on-going formation and the greater involvement of all Christians.