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Year 2000 is the bi-millennia celebration of the birth of Christianity. Next year, 1992, is the 500th-year fete for Columbus' discovery of the Americas - and the imposition of Catholicism on the Amerindians. By 1520, after the European colonial/Catholic powers landed, nine million native Americans had died by massacre, slavery and disease. Ironically, by the year 2000 the largest Christian culture on Earth will be in Latin America. Grand plans are afoot for these two celebrations of Christian want-to-be hegemony.

Currently, the Christian faithful are 32% of the world populace. But it is a declining percentage. Faced with defections from the Catholic Church, competition with Islam for converts, internal disenchantment with its core theology, a growing recognition among Catholic theologians that all religions are equally valid, and adoption of Asian meditative systems into churches and monastery cloisters. Pope John Paul II has written a papal document Grafted to ignite "waning" missionary zeal in the Catholic Church.

The 25-page document is called an encyclical, one of the strongest of papal pronouncements. This encyclical is titled Redemptoris Missio, "Mission of the Redeemer," and was made public by the Vatican on January 22. It is the first major statement on Catholic evangelizing in 25 years.

The Redeemer encyclical does not mention specific countries, but it does point directly to the South and East - Africa and Asia - as the most fertile grounds for Catholic conversion efforts. The entire document is built on the imperative that the religion of Jesus Christ (splintered into 20,000 sects) is the one true faith and mankind need be brought under its umbrage for salvation. Hence the spirit of mission, of conversion, is integral to the vitality of the church. A lessening of missionary drive "is a sign of a crisis of faith," writes the pope. The document is careful not to tarnish other religions "spiritual riches" and values while trumpeting

the single primacy of Catholicism, but does speak of alternative faiths' "gaps, insufficiencies and errors" without itemizing them, as did last year's Vatican document by Cardinal Ratzinger. That document, while trying to reestablish the purity of Christian prayer, maligned Hindu and Buddhist meditation practices that have wafted like incense into Catholicism via Catholic clerics and laity.

Pope John Paul II writes "The church proposes; she imposes nothing," yet the same section states, "The church is thus obliged to do everything possible to carry out her mission in the world and to reach all peoples."

For a copy of this encyclical, write CNS, 3211 4th St. NE, Washington DC 20017.

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