Our starting point here is a fundamental fact of biblical ecclesiology: the Church is called to be the community of witnesses of Jesus Christ and that means a lot more than “witnessing” about him -- it means being and living like him. The mission of the Church is inseparable from the mission of Jesus Christ not only because he founded the Church, but also because her vocation is that the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us continue to show its presence in society through her today.

Of all the descriptions of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, none communicates so strongly the nature of his mission as the description of him as a ‘servant’ or a ‘slave’ (doulos). According to Mark 10:45, the Lord said of himself that he had not come to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many. His words are an echo of the songs of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah -- he was a Servant of the Lord.

The questions we want to address here are: How did Jesus exercise his role as servant, and how will the Church continue fulfilling the same role in the world today? A brief study of Matthew 9:35-38 will help us reflect on the mission of Jesus as the Suffering Servant of the Lord, the mission that the Church is called to prolong in her life and ministry.

The mission of Jesus

Two things stand out about Jesus’ ministry in v. 35: its geographical location (towns and villages in the province of Galilee) and its various aspects (preaching the message of the Kingdom, teaching and healing).

Jesus’ Galilean option

No deep study of the Gospels is necessary in order to conclude that Jesus focused his mission in the province of Galilee, the peripheral sector of the Jewish nation of his time. If Galilee occupies a prominent place in the Synoptic Gospels, then it is clear that this region of Palestine received special attention in Jesus’ ministry.

Nathaniel’s question in John 1:46 reflects the view that the Jews of Judea, especially the priests and Pharisees, generally had of the Galileans: ‘How can anything good come from Nazareth?’ The same contempt is behind the words of the Pharisees, addressed to Nicodemus, later in the same Gospel: ‘¿Are you from Galilee too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophets does not come out of Galilee’ (John 7:52). This attitude no doubt had much to do with the prejudice of the Jews from the south toward that province where the racial mixture of Jews and Gentiles had given rise to its name: Galilee: literally, ‘the circle’, with the connotation of a ‘circle of pagans’.

It is no accident, however, that Jesus came out of this despised region to be baptized by John in the wilderness of Judea (cf. Mk 1:9), and returned afterward during the arrest of John the Baptist by Herod (cf. Mk 1:14) to fulfill his ministry. Nor is it accidental that there he started the core of the Messianic community of disciples with whom he would
then return to Jerusalem -- the center of cultural, socioeconomic, political and religious power of Israel -- to be publicly recognized as the Messiah and then crucified. The eternal Son of God identified himself with the ‘non-persons’ from Galilee and, starting with them, he laid the foundations for a new humanity. Jesus’ Galilean option has a profound theological meaning closely related to the Apostle Paul explicitly states in his first letter to the Corinthians: ‘Consider your own call, brothers and sisters, not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.’ (1:26-29 NRSV).

Jesus’ Galilean option was not a circumstantial matter. It reflected his vision of the Messiah, which sprang from the Old Testament, according to which the God of Israel is ‘the LORD your God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing’ (Deut 10:17-18); he is the God who ‘executes justice for the oppressed ... gives food to the hungry ... sets the prisoners free ... opens the eyes of the blind ... lifts up those who are bowed down ... loves the righteous ... watches over the strangers ... upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin’ (Ps 146:7-9 NRSV). He is the God who sends his anointed one to establish a kingdom of peace and justice.

Integral mission
Verse 35 summarizes the ministry of Jesus Christ in terms which also appear in 4:23. According to the evangelist, Jesus went through Galilee ‘teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness.’ If anything is clear on the basis of this text, it is that the mission of Jesus was an integral mission -- a mission aimed at satisfying needs of whole human beings. He recognized that the spiritual life is inseparable from the physical and psychological life. Accordingly, he combined the proclamation of the good news of the kingdom (the task of the herald) with the teaching of ethics (the task of the teacher-prophet) and healing (the task of the restorer of physical health).

The Kingdom of God was the central theme of his message to such an extent that Mark summarizes the domimical proclamation at the very beginning of his Gospel in these terms: ‘The time is fulfilled, and he kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news’ (Mk 1:15). Our text in Matthew describes the preaching of Jesus simply as proclamation of the ‘the good news of the kingdom.’ There is no time now to explore in detail the meaning of this expression; suffice it to say that the proclamation of the kingdom was the announcement that, in anticipation of the end of the present age, the new order of justice and peace characteristic of the new (messianic) age had already been inserted into the history in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This does not deny, of course, the future dimension of the Kingdom: it simply emphasizes that from the perspective of the New Testament the eschatological Kingdom of hope had arrived through Jesus Christ in fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament, which provided a basis for a call to repentance and faith because ‘the kingdom of God is near.’

In the ministry of Jesus, in close connection with the kerygma concerning the kingdom of God is the didache -- the ethical and prophetic teaching synthesized in several
passages of the Gospels, such as the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7). Such teaching is not a new law that abrogates in Old Testament; it is, rather, the elaboration of the practical dimensions of the good news of the Kingdom. Therefore, in the Gospels frequently appear metaphors, similes, and parables intended to illustrate the sense that faith in Jesus Christ has for daily life -- the life in relation to God, to neighbor, and to God’s creation.

The preaching and teaching are accompanied by healing, which exemplifies the action to eliminate ‘every disease and sickness’ for the purpose of restoring the health of the population. In this *diakonia* takes shape the love of God, and it becomes clear that God's redemptive purpose includes the material dimension of God's creation in general and of human life in particular.

The threefold ministry of Jesus is a resounding affirmation of the will of God to save the whole human being and to save him or her as a person in community. If the Church is to be faithful to the Spirit of Christ, her mission cannot be anything else than an integral mission.

The current challenge
Orlando E. Costas goes even further when in his valuable study entitled *Liberating News: A Theology of Contextual Evangelization* he argues that

If, as the various books of the New Testament teach, evangelization is addressed in the first place to the poor, the dispossessed, and the oppressed, and if they are the most able to understand the meaning of the gospel (cf. Matt. 11:25), then it follows that Galilee, as a symbol of the periphery, should be understood as a universal in relation to the theology of evangelization. Thus, the particularity of the periphery should inform all and each evangelizing context.¹

In concrete terms, this means that the mission modeled on Jesus’ ministry takes root in the peripheral sectors of the population, i.e. among the poor, the dispossessed, the dispossessed of the earth.

Costas is right when he warns that when evangelization starts in the popular sectors, it clearly demonstrates that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God to restore the whole of human life and opens up spaces of freedom, justice and peace. In contrast, says our author, when evangelization starts in the centers of power, then ‘its content usually ends up being a cheap and easy accommodation of the vested interests of the mighty and the wealthy.’²

The motivation for mission
According to v. 36 of our passage, ‘when he [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.’ As we explore the compassion of Jesus, we discern the motivation behind his mission, the driving life that constantly moved him to serve people.

The word *splagchnizais*, translated here as *compassion*, is the same as the word used in Luke 10:33 to refer to the attitude of the good Samaritan mentioned in Jesus’ parable

² Ibid., p. 62.
-- the Samaritan who, when he saw the man who had been assaulted by thieves on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, stopped to help him. When the priest saw the man, he took a detour and moved on; the Levite ignored the man as well. In contrast, when the Samaritan saw him, ‘he had compassion’ (‘he was moved with pity’, NRSV). The term, which literally means ‘bowels’, points to a deep unease, a real spiritual disturbance that moved the Samaritan in the inmost recess, the depths of his being, and encouraged him to act on behalf of the victim of the assault. The same word also appears in Luke 15:20, according to which, when the father in the parable of the prodigal son saw him returning home, he ‘was filled with compassion, he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.’ The study of the term in the Synoptic Gospels shows that, apart from a few times when it occurs in Jesus' parables, it is reserved to refer to one of Jesus' characteristics as the Messiah. His compassion is nothing but the compassion of the anointed of God in view of the pain of a widow whose son has died (Lk 7:13); in view of the sick (Mt 14:14), the blind (Mt 20:34), the lepers (Mk 1:41), the demon possessed (Mk 9:22); and in view of the hunger and exhaustion of the multitudes (Mt 15:32).

What sparked the compassion of Jesus in our Matthew 9 text was the sight of crowds ‘harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.’ This last phrase echoes Numbers 27:17, where Moses asks God to provide Israel with a leader to take his place, ‘so that the congregation of the LORD may not be like sheep without a shepherd.’ The meaning of metaphor is clear: a people without leaders to provide a sense of direction and to care for them is like a herd of sheep without a shepherd.

There is, however, a question to be raised here: Did the crowds at that time lack leaders? The answer is that the leaders of Israel were concentrated in Jerusalem, enjoying the privileges derived from their social position, including the luxurious mansions they had built for themselves. In contrast, the Galilean and Judean peasants, heavily burdened by the imperial and the Temple taxes, were losing their ancestral lands and being transformed into tenants to their oppressors. The situation described in Ezekiel 34 was being reenacted:

The word of the L ORD came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy and say to them – to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them. (Ez 34:1-6)

As at Ezekiel’s time, the crowds at Jesus’ time lacked leaders. Therefore, they were ‘helpless’ as a corpse attacked by birds of prey, depleted by the powerful, and they were ‘scattered’, prostrate like a drunk or someone who has been mortally wounded. Jesus did not see the crowds as souls to be ‘spiritually saved’ and nothing more. He saw them as an oppressed people, left to their own devices, without leaders, unable to escape from their plight by themselves. And as he saw them, he had compassion on them.
Christian compassion

Without compassion there is no mission, let alone an integral mission that includes the full restoration of human beings in their relationship with God, neighbor and creation. There may be proselytizing and persuasion to change their religion or to join a cult, but not mission modeled in the mission of Jesus.

All over the world today, as in Palestine in the first century, the crowds need compassionate leaders willing to be their servant-leaders. Everywhere there is a notable absence of leaders of integrity willing to put the people's interests above their own. The ruling class, whether it is made up of military officers or politicians, business executives or opportunistic profiteers, it is generally a class entirely divorced from the needs of the large majority of people.

Under these circumstances, it is urgent that those of us who confess Jesus Christ as our Lord open our eyes to see the neglected and underprivileged masses ‘like sheep without a shepherd.’ Only as we see them through Jesus’ eyes will we see their true condition and compassion will encourage us to fill the gaps as servant-leaders like Jesus.

Jesus’ political project

If anything is clear in our passage, it is that Jesus’ compassion did not stay at the level of feelings, but moved him to act in response to the perceived need. Verses 37-38 point in that direction: ‘He said to his disciples: ‘The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few; therefore as the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.’

The politics of Jesus

The politics of Jesus is the politics of compassion. Inspired by it, he devoted himself entirely to an integral mission in the service of the Kingdom of God, the new order of justice and peace proclaimed by the Old Testament prophets. Our text, however, shows that he did not conceive his mission as a task that he would have to perform by himself alone, without the help of others. The crowds were to him sheep without a shepherd, but also a harvest to be collected, for which reapers were required.

Interestingly, the same figure of the harvest also appears later in the same Gospel (cf. 13:30, 39), but there it is used to refer to the final separation between ‘the children of the kingdom’ and ‘the children of the evil one’, while the reapers are angels. From this it follows that in our passage Jesus exhorts his disciples to pray that God will send labourers into his harvest who will do within history the same kind of work that the angels will do at the end of time. Our passage, therefore, suggests that the eschatological time has come, and in light of its coming, Jesus' project is now aimed at the formation of the community of the Kingdom starting in the periphery of Israel. To fulfill this purpose, Jesus exhorts his disciples to ask the Father to send labourers to collect the harvest. As William Barclay has put it: ‘When he and the orthodox religious leaders of his time saw the crowds of ordinary men and women, they saw them in two completely different ways: the Pharisees saw the mob as straw to be harvested and treasured.’

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3 Mateo (capítulos I al X), Buenos Aires: La Aurora, 1987, p. 373.
The passage that follows the one we have been examining shows that the prayers for workers to take care of the harvest is answered in terms of the election of the Twelve Apostles, to whom Jesus announces his project and sends as missionaries.

**The vocation of the Church**

There are several ways to look at the crowds: politicians see them as votes needed to be elected to a public office, traders see them as a potential market, religious leaders see them as potential parishioners in their mega-churches. The Church is faithful to Jesus Christ in the extent to which she sees the crowds with Jesus’ compassion of Jesus, and her pastors make themselves available to them as servant-leaders, not to be served by them, but to serve them with through a transforming mission.

The proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is at the heart of the mission of the Church. Our Christian commitment requires, however, that we do not separate this proclamation from a genuine solidarity with those around us – people of flesh and blood with all kinds of human needs. God has called us both to share our faith and to embody his compassion in a world where sin reigns in terms of oppression and violence, exploitation and injustice. In line with this, the *Quito Declaration*, that came out of the Third Latin American Congress on Evangelization held in Ecuador in 1992 points to our mission today:

> The proclamation of the whole Gospel commits us to a creative work in developing more and better participation in society. The certainty of the ultimate triumph of Jesus Christ, warranted by his resurrection, encourages us to make constructive contributions, even though they may not be definitive. Our commitment to Jesus Christ as the only mediator of the peace of God provides the basis for our conviction that his redemptive work is relevant to every human conflict and suffering.⁴

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