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A DECREE WENT OUT FROM CAESAR AUGUSTUS THAT THE WHOLE WORLD SHOULD BE ENROLLED». THE ORIGINS OF THE ORBIS CHRISTIANUS.

The foundations of a new geography. – «[...] Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις ἐξῆλθεν δόγμα παρὰ Καίσαρος Αὐγούστου ἀπογραφῆσθαι πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην»¹: these words open the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Luke's reference to a general census throughout the Roman Empire may seem incidental in the economy of this sacred text; instead, it contains in essence a more than relevant reference to a state of affairs that is at the basis of our age, as well as of the birth of the *Orbis Christianus*. This would considerably develop for the centuries to come to coincide, indeed, with an increasingly larger *οἰκουμένη*, which would involve to a greater or lesser extent the whole Earth².

Apart from the equivalent excerpt from the Gospel of Matthew, the sacred text is the only approximately coeval source³ to report the birth story of Jesus Christ⁴ explicitly and to refer to an effective space-time context: Judea at the time of Augustus. This dangerous peripheral region of the Empire had, somewhat unfortunately, been part of the Roman world orbit for little more than half a century (Lupieri, 1997, pp. 20-30) and would steadily be under its dominion from 6 AD.

The salient facts regarding Christ's earthly life as well as the consequent creation and development of the very first Christian communities, as they are reported by ancient sources⁵, apparently have to be

¹ Lc 2, 1. *Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth.*

² As new lands and continents were discovered, in fact, the Gospel message was at the same time spread through missionary activity, which has been a constant characteristic of Christianity since its origin. In this regard, see the *Atlas Hierarchicus*, especially its historical introduction and illustrative maps.

³ For some scholars, the Gospel of Luke was written between the years 50-70 AD. Others think the date was about twenty years later. As for the Gospel of Matthew, the belief of scholars is even less clear: some think that this Gospel was written between 40 and 70 AD, while others date its writing between 70 and the end of the I century.

⁴ Numerous, instead, are the sources testifying to the historical reality in which Jesus Christ lived: from Flavius Josephus, the Jewish historian who mentions Him in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, or Pliny the Younger and his letter addressed to Emperor Trajan; or Tacitus, in his tale of the Great Fire of Rome, and Suetonius, in his *Life of Claudius*, to another important text of Jewish tradition, the so-called *Babylonian Talmud*, etc.

⁵ First of all, the Epistles of St. Paul, the Catholic Epistles, the canonical Gospels and especially the Acts of the Apostles, but also authors as Tacitus (with his *Annales*), the above-mentioned Suetonius, with his *Life of Claudius*, and Flavius Josephus, with his *Antiquities of the Jews*, etc.

chronologically placed a few decades later, when Augustus was dead and had been succeeded in the principality by Tiberius. Nevertheless, the emergence of Christianity and its spread beyond the narrow borders within which the new religion had risen must necessarily be traced to a reality of a space-time nature. This reality is somewhat shaped not only by a significantly established State – i.e. the Roman Empire – which had expanded its dominion (to varying degrees) over all the lands bordering and beyond the Mediterranean, but, above all, by the shape which Augustus himself, as prince, had given to that entity through the implementation of a policy geared towards stabilizing Roman domination, as it was between 1st century BC and 1st century AD (Jacques and Scheid, 2014, p. 207 and ff).

A universal perspective. – Returning to the Gospel text where the census issued by Emperor Augustus is mentioned, it is necessary to underline that by carefully reading and contextualizing the episodes narrated, one can discover details that may shed new light on the story, particularly on Luke's attitude to providing theological and geographical, rather than chronological, indications (Guthrie, 1990, p. 107). Although the exact date of Jesus Christ's birth has been much disputed and apparent discrepancies in Luke's evangelic narration (such as, above all, the episode of the census, which regarded «πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην»⁶ but was issued «ἠγεμονεῦοντος τῆς Συρίας Κυρηνίου»⁷) have been detected, the Gospel text has to be seen through different eyes. To overcome the historical perspective (as we are used to doing nowadays) in order to reach an eschatological and geographical dimension is the way forward⁸. The birth of Jesus of Nazareth, namely that event read by Christian theology as the moment when God manifests himself in time and history as the incarnation of the Word and its revelation not only to the people of the Covenant, but to humanity in its entirety⁹, takes place at the same time as another moment of particular importance: the Ecumenist census¹⁰ ordered as part of a universal government represented by the Roman Empire. The Empire's propaganda is in fact underlined by certain interventions in the fields of art, architecture, urban planning (particularly in the capital city) and more broadly in culture – the production of monumental works desired or favoured by Augustus, such as the Roman Forum bearing his name, the *orbis pictus* of Agrippa, the Ara Pacis, the mausoleum of the Emperor on which the text of *Res Gestae* will be attached, etc., falls within this overall context – and displays more and more an incisive vision of the Roman People's global hegemony (Cresci

⁶ Lc 2,1. The general censuses taken under the reign of Augustus were carried out, as reported in *Res Gestae*, in 28 b.C., in 8 b.C and in 14 AD (R.G., 8).

⁷ Lc 2,2. *While Quirinius was governor of Syria*, i.e. in 6 AD.

⁸ Yet, the ancient commentaries tend to underline this detail, as Origen does, for instance, in his *In Lucam Homiliae* 12, PG 13, 1828, or Gregory Magnus in *Homiliarum in Evangelia*, lib. I, 8, PL 76, 1103.

⁹ In this respect, it should be noted that the episode of the three Magi coming from the East is told in the synoptic Gospel of Matthew (Mt 2,1-12) to stress the universal value of the Revelation.

¹⁰ In Jewish culture, censuses represented a prerogative of God; to issue a census not ordered by Him was perceived as sinful.

Marrone, 1993; Id., 1998), as reiterated by the Prince himself at the beginning of his *Res Gestae*: «*Rerum gestarum divi Augusti, quibus orbem terra[rum] imperio populi Romani subiecit (...)*»¹¹.

According to the Evangelist, the combination of the birth of Jesus Christ and the issue of a universal census implies that the revelation of the Word is not circumscribed and limited to a precise here and now, i.e. to Judea of that time, but instead takes on a value which overcomes the limits of a peripheral region of the Empire, to embrace the entire world. This is, therefore, the first step towards an *Orbis christianus*: being aware that the announcement of the Gospel is not destined only to the “House of Israel”, namely to an ethnically bound and well-marked out section of humanity, but instead is directed to everybody¹². In fact, the statements used by the Evangelist at the beginning of his Gospel emphasize that the proposal of the Christian message is intended for all humanity.

The Census mentioned in the sacred text, therefore, must be seen not only in a strictly historicist perspective, but from a dual point of view: on the one hand, the theological-eschatological outlook (earlier envisaged) that shows a universal relevance; consequently, the census cited by Luke foreshadows an action on a global scale, namely the intended use of the Gospel message. On the other hand, there is the historical point of view, which transcends from a punctual truth to assume a more general meaning: the census cited there is not valued just as an activity created by some powerful body at any given time, but has an absolute value in itself.

To strengthen this idea even more, from a historical perspective a census is generally an action, a “tool” in the hands of the power governing a territory and, above all, the population living there. Indeed, the census institution in the Roman world was to be one of the main means of ruling such a large portion of the known world, or, adopting the Roman viewpoint at that time, the whole world. It is no coincidence that Augustus himself revived it after a period of neglect related to the political upheaval that brought an end to the Republic. It was precisely one of the first activities concretely implemented by the Romans after any annexation, as the census was the principal means of gathering statistical knowledge of areas, annexed in different ways, becoming thus an expedient to determine the amount of population subjugated and, above all, of the goods possessed. It is no coincidence that the census institution and geographical knowledge have always received special attention from central power and have been instrumental and complementary in the governing of territories. Even Augustus is no exception: not only does he entertain and strongly reaffirm the census institute (which was both

¹¹ The achievements of the Divine Augustus, through which he brought the world under the empire of the Roman people.

¹² In this regard, back to Luke’s writings, the content of other excerpts from the Gospel or the Acts of the Apostles by the same Author should be noticed, like the opening verse of the Acts of the Apostles (At 1,8b) where the sacred Author makes Jesus say: «(...) ἔσεσθε μου μάρτυρες ἔν τε Ἱερουσαλὴμ καὶ ἐν πάσῃ τῇ Ἰουδαίᾳ καὶ Σαμαρείᾳ καὶ ἕως ἐσχάτου τῆς γῆς» «Ye shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth». These are the same limits depicted on the Lateran Tower in VIII century as ordered by Pope Zachary (see Bertolini, 1913), according to *Liber Pontificalis*. Perhaps, he wanted to emulate the homonymous work by Agrippa, which exalted the grandeur of Imperial Rome, yet through a Christian perspective.

censual, strictly speaking, and “cadastral”), but also promotes geographical knowledge. This knowledge (geographical as well as statistic) was geared mainly towards the government of the territory and the imposition of taxes, as a tangible sign of dependence on Rome¹³. Therefore, at the beginning of the second chapter of his Gospel, Luke informs us of a census ordered by Octavian: this indicates historically that the region, which would be the stage of the birth and the spreading of the first Christian community a few decades later, then became permanently swallowed into the orbit of the Roman Empire. Moreover, it was subject to changes ordered by Augustus, which were covering the political and territorial cohesion of the Empire itself. Thus, a fertile ground was paved for the sprouting of this new religion, which resulted from having its historical path reach «its fullest maturity»¹⁴ as well as for an easier propagation of the Word of God, necessary for the expansion of the religion itself beyond its origins thanks to the establishment of a “universal” empire.

From the periphery of the Empire to the City: a displacement of the eschatological-geographical centre of gravity. – In just a few years, the new faith detached itself from the eastern periphery of the Roman dominion and reached the very heart of that kingdom: Rome. In fact, it is well-known that the new religion was born neither in the capital of the empire (the central hub of power and ideally of the world) nor in any of the other big cities within the Roman *limes* – such as Alexandria in Egypt, Antioch or Athens etc., which were lively economic, cultural and social realities. As Marksches points out, it was born «in some small villages in Northern Palestine» (2003, p. 14) and soon Christianity reached that city, as nonetheless other oriental cults were doing at the same time. Yet, early Christianity, germinated from the same seed as Judaism, was apparently different: not only did it conceive itself as a monotheistic faith, excluding therefore any contamination with other religions, but it also felt itself to be closely bound to Jerusalem, particularly to its Temple¹⁵, seen as the only place to celebrate and worship. For this reason, and according to the most pious Jewish traditional thought, it was the centre of the world¹⁶.

¹³ As for the tribute paid by the Jews to the Romans, the matter is explicitly reposed in the emblematic episode reported in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 12, lines 13-17. This excerpt highlights the problematic political and theological issue raised by some sections of that Jewish social fabric, which is linked to the payment of the tribute to the Emperor (Filoramo, 1997, pp. 162-163).

¹⁴ This expression is used by the Apostle Paul in his *Letter to the Galatians* (Gal 4,4) to show a transformation in the human condition brought about by the coming of Jesus. This episode is somewhat a break between the old and the new.

¹⁵ Moria Mountain, i.e. where the Holy Temple of Jerusalem was located, stands as a particular place not only for its Jewish roots, but also for the other two religions cited in *The Book: Christianity and Islam*. Moria Mountain is the setting of one of the best-known Bible stories (the sacrifice of Isaac) through which the Covenant between God and Abraham was formed. Abraham is acknowledged as the father in the faiths of the three monotheistic religions.

¹⁶ In essence, it was one of the few symbolic cities, yet the most important one for the Judaeo-Christian tradition, where the experience of the transcendent was extremely solid. On the topics of existence and transcendence related to the city, see A. Vallega 2003, pp. 152-184.

As mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles and even by the successive tradition¹⁷, Jerusalem had continued to play a central role within the Judeo-Christian framework for a decade, until Rome emerged as the centre of Christianity as the seat of the Apostle Peter, the head of the Apostolic College. Only then, one of the most evident points of rupture between Judaism and Christianity was enshrined, thus producing a displacement of the Empire's centre of gravity and giving the capital a prominent role in relation to the new religion¹⁸ and its territorial organization¹⁹. Ancient sources show that since the Apostolic age and even before the Apostle Paul came to Rome, the Gospel message had reached the Capital²⁰ and other cities of the Empire, giving birth to early Christian communities in those contexts. These communities, rooted in the ground in a few decades, would turn those very cities into centres from which to irradiate the new faith towards the surrounding territories²¹. To understand why the emergent Christianity had expanded so suddenly and had penetrated widely into Roman social fabric²², it is important to focus on the new shape taken by Rome and the territories thereto submitted with the advent of the Principality.

¹⁷ In this respect, by way of example please consider the liturgical Eastern tradition and, more specifically, the "Liturgy of Jerusalem", known as the "Liturgy of Saint James". In it, Jerusalem is described as "the mother of all Churches".

¹⁸ However, one must consider that Jerusalem would have a vital significance in the idea of the centre of the world, no longer intended immanent but transcendent, since the last phase of Imperial Rome, in late antiquity and later, during the Middle Ages. As evidence of this, the mediumship of the Holy City already recognized in biblical texts and commentaries to the same texts (including the commentary on Ezekiel by Saint Jerome) takes on a different meaning: it becomes a symbol of the *Civitas Dei*, a town beyond this earth, a home and the ultimate goal of redeemed humanity. As a projection of this heavenly Jerusalem, therefore, the earthly one retrieves a particularly poignant metaphorical meaning, also because it is the setting of the most salient facts linked to the history of salvation (passion, crucifixion, death and resurrection of Christ). This vision is evidenced by early medieval cartography, which places Jerusalem at the centre of the Ecumene not only as a geographical element, i.e. as *«umbilicus terrae»* (to use a biblical expression that was particularly fortunate in late antiquity and in the Middle Ages), but also and above all as a place of Redemption. This conception, essential in Christian eschatology, and the need for Christianity to "reclaim" materially as well as conceptually the places connected with the earthly life of Jesus Christ (particularly those of his death and resurrection) and of the first Christian community, and in which, according to the Christian view, the Parousia will come, were the foundation of the first Crusader movements. For a discussion on issues relating to the centrality of Jerusalem and its relation to Rome, see A.D. Von Den Brincken 2001.

¹⁹ Here, territorial organization is not intended as the structure of the ecclesiastical administration referring to a hierarchical order and having implications on territory, an administration that namely founds local jurisdictions (dioceses, deaneries, parishes, etc.). Simply, it is meant as the foundation of a renewed polarity that combines the attraction for being the capital of the Empire with the status of being the centre of Christianity, which is to be seen in conjunction with other important Christianized cities, in particular Alexandria and Antioch.

²⁰ Although Eusebius of Caesarea is not sure about the precise date when Peter arrived in Rome, in his *Historia ecclesiastica* he reports the news about his arrival in the city in 41 AD; others, Lactantius in particular, place this date later. However, it is now established that both Peter and Paul lived in Rome under Nero. In the matter of the early Christian community in Rome, consider the narration of Paul's last journey to Rome, as reported in the Acts of the Apostles (At 28,11-16).

²¹ As previously highlighted, and as Marksches rightly points out, Jerusalem had taken on a central role in the dynamics of the new Christian community. After the drastic measures employed by the Roman authority against the capital of Judea, following the 70 AD and 132-135 AD revolts Jerusalem started to assign this primacy to other urban areas, in particular to Rome, which became the seat of the coryphaeus of the College of the Apostles.

²² In this respect and regarding the persecutions occurred under the Flavian dynasty, Guyon states that «(...) the other martyrs (...) belonged to aristocracy. This bears witness to Christian penetration in I-century Roman society, which was early and profound» (1993, p. 82).

A new territorial outlook and the spread of Christianity. – *Res Gestae*, which clearly show this new facet of Roman rule, report the actions and undertakings implemented and carried out by the first Roman emperor and give an account of a «geographical and social space, already concluded, thus becoming a last step in that movement which had provided Rome with the conquest and domination of the Ecumene» (Nicolet, 1989, p. 4). Under Augustus' command and during the late Republican era, civil wars were the order of the day and risked dismantling Roman power and dissolving what Rome had hitherto built. Yet, on the other hand, the establishment of the Principality caused a threefold return: the re-establishment of internal order and relative peace; as its consequence, a newfound unity; finally, spatial expansion through its conquests, whether by military force or by diplomacy, of the whole Mediterranean basin, which had ultimately become the *Mare Nostrum* for the Romans²³. At this point, Rome and its *imperium* embraced almost the entire world, that same Ecumene to which early Christianity would turn once the typically Jewish cultural vision that eschatological salvation was reserved exclusively for the people of the first Covenant²⁴ would be overcome. This idea was still shared by the nascent Christian community (at least the one most rooted in Judaism). After this reluctance was overcome and the Gentiles were accepted²⁵, different causes contributed to spreading Christianity throughout the Roman Empire, starting from those cities with thriving Jewish communities. Indeed, within these communities, spread throughout the different regions of the Mediterranean basin and with a fertile ground in which certain activities were likely to take root, the Christian message tended to develop²⁶. Among other things, this testifies to the ease of movement within the Imperial boundaries, for various reasons and strongly supported by Imperial policy already implemented by Augustus as the culmination of a territorial organization that took root in Roman tradition. Demonstrations of this was extensive: from the infrastructure and links among the territories subject to Rome, to the consolidation of a cultural-linguistic *koinè* distinguishing the entire Mediterranean basin²⁷; from relative peace within Imperial borders, to the proliferation of numerous economic activities, notably businesses, with specific routes used not only by merchants, but also for the promotion of

²³ *Mare Nostrum*, an expression first used by the Romans to specify only the Tyrrhenian Sea, began to designate the entire Mediterranean basin from 30 B.C. onwards, as a result of Roman dominion over all lands bordering the current Mediterranean Sea.

²⁴ In reality, during the apostolic age that vision started to be overcome, as shown by some passages from the Acts of the Apostles and the Letters, as well as from Saint Paul's assiduous missionary activity "*ad gentes*".

²⁵ As mentioned in the previous footnote, the Apostle Paul played a leading role in this opening. Not surprisingly, he is called the Apostle of the Gentiles, even if we must bear in mind that even Peter had considerable influence in this too, as demonstrated in chapters 10 and 11 of the Acts of the Apostles, where the episode of Peter baptizing the first converted Pagans is narrated.

²⁶ Early Christianity, the one based on Judaism, was still closely linked in its form to the Jewish tradition. Therefore, the first preaching of the Christian message by Jewish "missionaries", at least at a very early stage, was easier and was best transposed into the Jewish communities, both at home and, later, in the diaspora.

²⁷ The Greek used by the *koinè* was one of the essential vectors for conveying the Gospel message. In fact, once it left its niche role, Aramaic's use for spreading the Good News became insufficient and inappropriate; thus, emerging Christianity had to use a more available language on a global scale to reach as many people as possible.

ideas and experiences. Therefore, Geography, and more specifically the spatial structuring of the Empire, played a central role in the spread of Christianity during the early centuries. In this regard, in fact, Di Berardino states that «Christianity (...) is closely connected to both physical and human geography. Any reports in the field of ecclesiastical history must take into account geography, especially the physical geography: of the roads, rivers, marine routes, possible journeys and communication between the various churches» (2014, p. 498). This statement indicates that the Imperial structure, which was in favour of steering a “global” perspective, was vital in spreading the new faith through missionary work undertaken *ad hoc*, as well as through a more immediate evangelization, linked to the movement of Christian community members within Imperial borders.

As mentioned before, in such a context a key role was played by cities that were essential crossroads in the territorial organization of the Empire. For this reason, they first became the main centres of the new message, soon becoming, in turn, starting points for the spread of the Word to neighbouring regions²⁸. These enjoyed an osmotic relationship with the cities themselves, especially regarding the production and use of goods and services according to a mutual exchange²⁹. The Imperial urban network as well as the interconnection between cities, particularly encouraged by Roman rule, were strictly functional to the spread of Christianity. As mentioned before, although born in «some small villages in Northern Palestine», actually in a strongly rural territory, Christianity was soon to be welcomed into several urban settings, which not only played a fruitful role as sounding boards for the Gospel message, but also became the main sites of Christian presence³⁰. As proof of this, we must take into consideration that when Christianity began to organize itself also spatially and the administrative division of the Roman Empire was taken as an example for the territorial subdivision of each Christian community, entrusted to the pastoral care of a bishop, the Episcopal See was usually placed in the main cities of each subdivision³¹. Thus, the Church’s organization was modelled on the territorial-administrative structure of the Roman State, with the foundation of the ecclesiastical Diocese, chaired by a Bishop, and the “religious” provinces (grouping many Dioceses)³² chaired by a Metropolitan

²⁸ The city’s role in spreading a Christian view of the world is also testified by the values the city itself championed. Consider, in this regard, not only how much urban landscape changed after Christian communities had settled in the various urban centres of the Empire, but also what new meanings were offered to the urban as well as geographical fabric, when some spaces, which were the setting of the first events related to those Christian communities, were sacralised.

²⁹ Cities offered goods and services to both urban and surrounding rural populations, and in turn they received rural products from the surrounding countryside, including food necessary for the urban population’s needs.

³⁰ Only later was the countryside significantly affected by the message of the Gospel and of Christianity taking root, remaining a real stronghold for traditional religions for a long time.

³¹ However, it is worth stressing that the ancient ecclesiastical organization of territory also underwent the establishment of chorbishoprics, i.e. episcopal seats present in small towns and rural areas of the Eastern part of the Empire.

³² Particular importance, from the Ecumenical Council of Nicea (325) and its canon n. 6, was paid to Roman, Alexandrian and Antiochian churches, and greater authority was accorded to their respective bishops. From 381, the headquarters of Constantinople (which ranked second after Rome) and the canon n. 3 of the I Ecumenical Council of Constantinople was added to these prestigious venues.

Bishop, who ruled the chief city of the “civil” provinces. The subdivisions of the Empire and those of the Church were so interwoven that the administrative reforms carried out by Augustus’ successors (starting from Diocletian) reshaped even the judicial allocation of Christian communities by incorporating and dismembering their members according to the changes in “civil” repartitions. Such a division, therefore, obviously depended on the prevalence of Christian members in each territory of the Empire.

Since its foundation and for a long time afterwards, only a small percentage of subjects³³ of the Empire would practise Christianity. However, from the very first centuries a significant process of new territorialization was beginning, focused mainly (but not only) on the cities, thus paving the way for much more complex processes which, as explained above, affected both on an urban and regional (and supra-regional) level. At first these new ways of territorialization were not implemented through an apparent transformation of the urban city fabric and, therefore, of the urban landscape. This would happen only from the 4th century AD, when Constantine’s accession to the Imperial throne initiated an intensive program aimed at building facilities related to Christianity and the practice of the cult. “Socio-demographic” transformations and especially the organization of special communities imprinted such a territorialization. The gradual increase in the number of members in some local Christian communities, in fact, had brought progressively over time to a further sharing of roles within the communities themselves: the ministries previously assigned to bishops were shared with the priests and deacons of the same community. The latter, therefore, who had been close collaborators with the bishop since the third century, were then called to cooperate with their own pastors to administer the sacraments and steer the community. For instance, in larger cities such as Rome or Alexandria this division of tasks was matched by a proliferation of religious places entrusted to the care of the local clergy on behalf of the bishop, who, nonetheless, continued to be the figurehead of the community and to play a leading role in it.

When Christianity started, then, to catch up materially even in rural areas and a permanent presence of presbyteries and deacons outside the cities was necessary, since many Christians used to live in the

³³ The number of Christians during the early centuries is difficult to establish, since reliable and incontrovertible data are not available. Many hypotheses have been put forward; however, it seems reasonable to agree with Angelo Di Berardino (2013), according to whom «the number of Christians at the end of the first century is unknown. According to some statistics, there were only a few thousand. Nevertheless, a credible number for the beginning of the fourth century is not available either (...)». He continues to state that «Rome is the ancient city about which more information and better tools for calculating its inhabitants are available (...). Yet scholars continue to offer widely divergent figures». Still, regarding calculating the number of Christians, he writes later that «those who want to offer numbers have developed models of computation, particularly in the US, and especially Rodney Stark. (...) Stark has recently offered a progressive scale based on projections: for example, he calculates that in the year 150 there were about 39,000 Christians; in the year 250, there were about 1,120,000 of them; in the year 312, there would be approximately 9 million Christians, equal to 15% of the population. (...) I do not know how reliable these data by Stark are, also because the calculation of the Roman Empire’s inhabitants is still today very approximate».

countryside surrounding them, parishes were set up, thus becoming a more articulated and branched administrative-territorial distribution of the Christian communities³⁴.

By now, the territorial structure of the Church was shaped on a possible model for the whole *Orbis Terrarum*, and the proposal for evangelizing the ultimate frontiers of the earth could focus on a geographical and administrative consolidation that was based on the city itself, but made itself functionally complex through the creation of networks organized hierarchically.

Final remarks. – In short, in the ancient world and for a long time afterwards, the geographical space within which the evangelizing mission of the Church was carried out coincided with the above-mentioned Ecumene. After the rise of Christianity (until the Middle Ages), it almost entirely corresponded to that vast portion of the earth subject to Rome; then, it reached the remote limits of the globe itself, after modern, contemporary and subsequent geographical explorations, thus expanding the ground of the mission *ad gentes* and, consequently, of evangelization.

Thus, the building of an *Orbis christianus* idea developed progressively, not only as regards geographical space, but also for the spiritual perception of the world, which has left concrete evidence in way of numerous artifacts and above all in sacred landscapes³⁵. Nevertheless, it seems safe to assume that such an idea, namely an *Orbis christianus* taking into account the distribution of worshippers on earth as well as the way they relate to the world, is founded in the history of the Roman Empire. Moreover, it later matured during the Middle Ages and spread beyond the space-time limits previously known, with the arrival of the Modern Era.

The setting out of the Roman State provided by Augustus through the institution of the Principality, the spatial organization derived from the administration of such a vast Empire, and further reforms implemented by his successors, were functional not only in spreading the Gospel message (in response to the same mandate of Christ to his disciples after his resurrection³⁶), but also in structuring the Catholic Church in its etymological sense. Taking as a model the territorial organization of the Roman world, it was able to build its own functional structuring of geographical space, for both the Government of the Church at its various levels (from local communities to the Ecclesia, understood in a universal sense), and its relation to the world, understood as the theatre of our earthly pilgrimage, in view of a future destination: the heavenly Jerusalem.

³⁴ With regard to the foundation and evolution of parishes, see the five volumes by Vincenzo Bo (1990-2004).

³⁵ On the relationship between human beings, land surface and transcendence, in his monumental work, *Géographie et religions*, Pierre Deffontaines writes that «the powerful actions of men were not only pursued by the accurate establishment of the human species on earth, but an often remarkable part of this effort was more or less directly undertaken to proclaim or magnify the existence of other supernatural or sacred powers» (1948, p. 8).

³⁶ See At 1,8 and Mc 16,15.

The new conception of the world drawn up by Christianity led to a radically new perception of how man and Creation are mutually linked, according to a double perspective. On the one hand, the immanent idea, deriving from the narrative of Genesis³⁷, saw man at the top of Creation itself, “administered” and transformed, but also preserved by him; on the other, the temporality of human life on Earth is prefigured as a step towards a final destination, the heavenly Jerusalem, uprooted from the categories of space and time.

This second perspective was prominent for a long time, but once an integration between the two ideas had been accepted, the idea of the *Orbis christianus* changed again. The relatively recent³⁸ re-establishment of that unity, indeed, has ensured that the modern Christian vision pushes the world to take on a new face requiring a universal commitment to conserving and to protecting Creation, thought holistically to be man and his environment.

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³⁷ Gen 1,27-29 and Gen 2,15.

³⁸ As far as the Catholic Church is concerned, the particular idea in the Magisterium can be traced back to the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* of the Second Vatican Council, which was followed by other important documents, such as Paul VI's Encyclical *Octogesima adveniens* and the Message delivered by the same Pope on the opening of the UN Conference on Development.

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