

Report by the Assistant to the Missions For the General Assembly 1998

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Mission in the Congregation

The missions ad gentes are mentioned in our *Constitutions and Statutes, C. 16, S. 5, S. 6*. In fact, most of our provinces do have "missions ad gentes" outside their own country, but there are several of our provinces that have also domestic "missions ad gentes." I think here of Colombia, Fortaleza, Costa Rica, India, Indonesia, Eritrea.

Many of the provinces that do not have or no longer have "missions ad gentes," support those that have and in that way live up to the Constitutions and Statutes.

The missions I visited:

In the past 6 years I visited our confreres engaged in the "missio ad gentes" on three continents.

- In **Africa**: Cameroon, Congo/Zaire, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Tanzania
- In **America**: El Alto in Bolivia, Fortaleza in Brazil
- In **Asia** and in the **Pacific**: China, India, Indonesia, Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Taiwan

Each continent has its own characteristics, common problems and difficulties, and so does each province, vice-province and region.

Problems and difficulties

It is of course not possible to give an objective evaluation of the work being done by the confreres in the missions ad gentes. Which criteria should be used in judging the effectiveness of the methods used and how do we measure the results achieved by our confreres as evangelizers of the poor?

Generally speaking I can say that in these missions the confreres work with people suffering from great poverty, instability, insecurity, and difficult communications because of the social, political and economic situation in the country. On the whole our confreres

merit our admiration for their courage, zeal, mortification, sacrifices, and great generosity. Having been a missionary myself, I know what missionary life means.

In these missions our confreres have to live with many tensions because of the political, social and economical situations that are often far from favorable to spreading or deepening the faith; not to speak of the difficulties arising from the fact that one belongs to a group with a different cultural background.

In these missions we have quite a few candidates who would like to become members of our Congregation. On the other hand, the number of formators is small and many among the formators are not qualified as such. The greater number of the so-called formators are in fact teachers of ecclesiastical subjects. However, being a good teacher does not necessarily mean being a good formator.

It is remarkable that several of the **formation houses** I saw in the missions are well built with much land around the large buildings. I always feel ill² at ease seeing such buildings. Do they not contribute to the alienation of our candidates from the people, and especially from the poor? On the other hand, it is almost impossible today for a good formation not to have certain facilities at our disposal. In most formation houses the food is simple but good, better than what the average family in the country can afford. Not to speak about cars and comfort like electricity and running water from the tap. Could we do with less?

In most of the formation houses there are libraries with books and magazines, although according to first world standards, they do not fulfill conditions.

Another problem is that most of our provinces in Africa and Asia do not have **resources** or much patrimony within the country. They are able to survive until now because of aid from abroad. In a certain sense, they have to start from scratch. The benefactors in the third world are not very rich compared to those in the first world. There might be a great number of Catholics going to church, but the collection does not provide for the living costs of the missionaries. Most of missions are able to run on Mass intentions from abroad; and these intentions are drastically decreasing. Such a situation could be the reason why in consultations for a visitor many of the autochthonous confreres prefer an expatriate visitor, in the hope that in that way financial help will not dry up.

The older provinces have built up their resources through the years; the third world provinces are just starting. They do not have a first world economy of welfare to back them. In the first world attention for the so-called missions is decreasing due to the fact that there are no longer many missionaries from overseas. They get support from the homeland; for the benefactors in the homeland, it is not the people evangelized that are the main or direct object of that support.

But there is a still greater problem: the problem of **inculturation**. Especially on the continent of Africa, the autochthons are searching for their own identity. Do they get sufficient help from their expatriate brothers in this process? In this process of inculturation it is easy to be swept away by resentment and antipathies. I am aware that what I say could be considered as an accusation. It is not; it is just stating a fact. Furthermore, we should keep in mind that being a missionary after Vatican II means that we are invited by local churches to help them in their needs. In other words, we are guests, certainly non paying and non-paid guests, but very honored, considered as friends, but nevertheless we are guests and should never impose ourselves upon our hosts.

What should be done?

A great **generosity** is asked for, because help with personnel and with money are the most important means to help the missions:

The Congregation could help if **confreres** from other provinces who are well qualified as formators would be willing to learn a new language and come to help for a few years in the needy provinces.

One could staff a **formation** center, or form flying teams that go from province to province to give updates in Vincentian studies, hold seminars, etc. The formation of our candidates should get our full attention, but even more attention should be given to the formation of our formators. Since we cannot bring all of them together at the same time for a year or more, we should find other ways. It is possible to hold regular seminars for the formators of Africa, Latin America, and Asia, every year for a couple of weeks. It is also possible to form "flying teams" that would go from province to province to hold seminars.

It would be very good if we could enable our formators in the third world to come together each year and reflect on their work, in that way forming themselves and creating bonds of friendship.

It is really necessary to intensify the process of **inculturation** of the Vincentian spirituality. This is, of course very difficult, and needs much study and prayer. But the most important thing is to really start the not wait any longer with this; it is very urgent.

There should be more money available for the missions, not only for formation in the strict sense, but also for buildings that are necessary for formation.

Money also for parishes and schools, because it is from these that we get our vocations. If we do not upgrade our efforts of evangelizing the poor, we might lose many chances. In fact, there is a whole infrastructure to be changed.

Let us be thankful to the Lord that we get the opportunity to be agents of change, in a time of continuous and rapid developments.