

# Our Vincentian Mission in Tunis, Tunisia

St. Augustine and St. Fidelis Parishes

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*Tunis, Tunisia*

Since 2011 the Superior General invited us as members of the Congregation to reflect on our commitment in parishes with an emphasis on our charism. An actual statement on our work in parishes is an undeniable result and reality. It is over two years that our community has been in charge of the parish of Saint Augustine and Saint Fidelis in Tunisia. In response to the request of Fr. John Maher, Editor of *Vincentiana*, I will discuss some relevant items that are noteworthy from our experience in this commitment to the parish.

## **1. *Our experience in Vincentian parish missionary***

Our presence as a Congregation serving the parish of Saint Augustine and Saint Fidelis in the eastern suburbs of Tunis began in August 2011. This is a parish which includes Catholics from more than thirty countries, a majority of sub-Saharan Africa, all of whom are English-speakers. Upon arrival, we found an organized community with a parish council, and a group of faithful engaged in the life of the parish by service through various committees.

In the first months, we quickly realized the need to continue work with those involved in the commissions in order to improve pastoral service. We started listening to our people, asking for concrete proposals on the model of parish they wanted us to build together, while respecting our cultural differences. We decided to place an emphasis on the "Church-Family", where all who come to the Eucharistic celebration feel welcomed like a family. On Sunday, the faithful do not just come to pray and then go home. For all, it is also an opportunity to meet, welcome new members and visiting tourists, and to deepen interpersonal relationships among the faithful, not all live in the same neighborhood, and some travel a dozen kilometers to come to church.

What makes our experience of our parish work Vincentian and missionary? In an October 2011 letter to confreres by the Superior General on parishes, we read: "A Vincentian missionary parish must be located preferably among the poor. It must be fundamentally oriented service to the poor, responding to new situations of poverty...".

First, the parish is located in an area where we easily meet the poor. We do not need to go further to experience the life style of our neighbors, who do not lack anything but; some still find difficulties in everyday life. The Tunisian revolution of 2011 has exacerbated the situation. Despite new construction of buildings, nothing hides the poverty that affects many families.

In our parishes, many of the faithful are not really poor, because through their work they have the means to enable them to live decently. With them, we strive to open ourselves to the associations which assist the poor and the elderly. We seek to mobilize the faithful to make them aware of the need to assist and serve the poor.

Now that the Bishop of Tunis has entrusted us with the coordination of the diocesan agency Caritas, our parishioners themselves participate in this mission. Some even volunteer. We coordinate our programs with a “solidarity” team, composed of lay volunteers and a Daughter of Charity, who assist families and poor people needing material and financial assistance. We prepared our parishioners to participate by collecting materials for the poor as organized by this team. The parish is always ready for any kind of charitable action.

## ***2. Commitments needed to make this a reality***

The announcement of the Good News is at the heart of the mission. This involves situations where it calls us to otherwise reorganize our missionary work.

The Church teaches that it must constantly change and adapt to new situations to remain faithful to the origin of its mission. Austrian Cardinal Christophe Schönborn, Archbishop of Vienna, at a conference on “The Parish and the New Evangelization” held in Rome exclaimed: “It takes a great deal to build a parish because it is the people of God with all its strengths and weaknesses... It is a community made up of young and old... several speed!”. We need a change of attitude to become more involved in parish life and parish activities. We also need to create a climate where every Christian who takes part in the community may feel the impulse to answer the call of Jesus. The Lord invites us to continue under the guidance of the Holy Spirit by announcing the Good News through our commitment to the mission of the Church.

Here we are all invited to a witness of communion and charity where every member of the parish community feels the need to contribute to building up the community. We are committed to fostering creativity and support all emerging groups to deepen the faith and commitment of the faithful. To this day, we are happy to accompany a group of ladies who pray the Rosary, and who meet weekly in the home of a family to pray, meditate on biblical texts and reflect on God’s presence

in their daily lives. Every last Thursday of the month these Ladies go to a residence of the elderly to pray and share a meal with them, so they will be lifted out of the monotony of their daily lives.

### ***3. What we do to create a sense of community***

We can and must convey to others what we have and that which moves us forward in our mission: to witness to the love of God in a world where individualism and selfishness tend to take over. We are invited to be creative, and this must be the experience of our community. We must love the community and create an atmosphere that allows each member to engage in and contribute to the building up of the fellowship. The community is and should be a place of dialogue, listening, and mutual trust. Therefore, we must try to overcome and eliminate divisions and bad relations between members. All this must be done in a spirit of sacrifice supported by a regular prayer life.

In the pastoral work entrusted to the community, it is essential to have an evaluation time that allows us to see where we are and take a confident look into the future. This evaluation with our people and parish staff is done twice a year.

Our community life depends on how we want to live together in simplicity and charity. This implies acceptance of our differences, along with a desire to live the missionary experience as a testament to our commitment to Gospel values. We remain open and attentive to our parishioners who choose to stay apart from religious celebrations and times of community in the parish. We invite them to see these times as opportunities to meet and create fraternal bonds.

### ***4. Challenges in this parish ministry***

In a parish, it is important to create an atmosphere that allows the faithful to feel welcome and to actively participate in the life of the parish. Since our time of having assumed the responsibility for this parish, we invited the faithful to be active and not to be spectators. We have done everything to encourage the cultural and ethnic diversity that characterizes our parish. We promote a team effort where the contribution of each member is encouraged and appreciated by the entire community.

We have authentic signs that show the existence of a warm, friendly atmosphere, resulting from the efforts of all to build a true parish community. Active participation in the preparation of the Sunday liturgy and retreats, along with time of preparing children and adults for the sacraments is an undeniable proof of the personal and communal commitment of our parishes.

Despite our personal and community commitment, there are still ways in which we can improve our efforts. We need to ask ourselves a reflective question: how can we help the faithful to translate this parish experience in their daily life, their environment and work? If we are a model parish in our organization and hospitality, what about our relationships outside the walls of the church? There must be a true solidarity with the poor, and it also includes one who asks me for assistance. This includes co-workers and people outside my parish and my faith. We often have issues that fall within the scope of service and we invite our faithful to review and reflect upon our teaching on the love of God and neighbor and resist the human tendency toward selfishness and indifference.

These questions are often raised in personal meetings with the faithful. With thirty nationalities belonging to the parish (even the majority are African) we still need to be attentive. As the only English-speaking Catholic parish in Tunis, our parishioners like this feature. To serve them better, we must understand and accept them.

It is also important to emphasize that we are in a parish with many members who are civil servants who work all types of hours during the week, sometimes making it difficult for them to come to Mass on Sunday. Having a stable growing community is a great support for our mission. However, missions like ours may not be as attractive to our confreres. This reality, along with the crisis of vocations, may make it difficult to open new missions, or to keep our community with a stable missionary presence.

### ***5. The future of our parish in the next five years***

The picture is not at all clear when we consider our future in Tunis. What seems to be emerging on the horizon is that there will be a significant reduction in the number of the faithful. A majority of our parishioners are employed by the African Development Bank (ADB), which transferred its headquarters to Tunisia due to the socio-political instability in the Ivory Coast.

In late 2012, it was decided that the headquarters of the bank would return to the Ivory Coast. It is expected that by the end of 2014, those who are living in Tunis will have to return to the Ivory Coast in order to keep their jobs with the ADB. Although bank officials have spoken about decentralization, with bank representative in various nations, we must prepare for a drop in attendance in our parishes.

This should not discourage us, because this mission in North Africa is not only a mission focused on pastoral activities in parishes. There are other places where we can insert our charism to exercise a ministry that fits well with our Vincentian vocation.

In addition, our commitment to the poor includes continuing with the Caritas diocesan ministry, where we welcome migrants and refugees from countries in sub-Saharan Africa and border countries that experienced revolutions such as Egypt, Libya, and Syria. We also play a role in prison ministry where the authorities of the country accept our presence and pastoral care in the prisons in Tunis.

Although the current type of pastoral activity in the parish will decrease, we will always be useful and can search out ways to provide other types of direct service to the poor. Thus, in five years, our pastoral landscape may be completely different from what it is today. However, it is key is no matter that changes occur; we insure that our lords and masters, the poor, are served.