

Journeying Together: An Indigenous Vincentian Parish in Panama

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"One flea is enough for the whole family", said Mechi, an elderly woman sitting on the roots of a mango tree outside the small wooden chapel in the tropical mountains. There was a long silence after the statement as everyone took in her assessment. We were gathered for the mission's agricultural program – organizing for the planting season and evaluating the local resources we had to produce enough organic fertilizer for the various family plots. The proverb spoken by Mechi has its base in one of the many indigenous Ngäbe stories and myths...

"Once a great hunger came to the people. The rain stopped falling, the land no longer produced, the animals died. A man of great faith and confidence in God came upon a flea, but he did not eat it. He instead gave it to the smallest child in the household who took a small bite of the flea and passed it on to his older sister. She in turn took a small bite and pasted it up the line of the many children of the household until it came to the mother, who took a small bite and past it back to her husband who finished it. The family thanked God for sending the flea, survived the great hunger and continued to grow...".

This story invoked by Mechi in a moment of doubt invites us to trust that God will provide if we are open to sharing and working together. I think of this bit of Ngäbe wisdom as I reflect on what it means for us to be a parish that is missionary, indigenous and Vincentian...

The Beginnings of the Vincentian Mission amongst the Ngäbe

The Ngäbe are the largest of the seven indigenous peoples in Panama, numbering about 250,000. The majority of the Ngäbe live by subsistence farming in the rough mountain terrain of the Comarca, similar to a reservation, in the western part of the country near Costa Rica. The Ngäbe predominantly use their native language, *ngäbere*; Spanish is the second language here. Native dress is worn and traditional song, dance, rituals, myths and customs are still in tack, although under constant threat from the outside culture.

In the late 1970's, Father Charles Schuster, C.M. began visiting these mountains for several consecutive dry seasons (January-March), even-

tually establishing a permanent mission house. For many years, with the support of lay missionaries, he visited the villages, catechizing and celebrating the sacraments. In response to the extreme poverty in which the Ngäbe live, he built a health center, began an agricultural project and initiated several assistance programs in response to the health and education needs here. Charlie continued to serve in the mission until his passing in 2011 at 84 years of age.

Transition into an Indigenous Vincentian Parish

In 2012 the mission was erected by the bishop as the Saint Vincent de Paul Parish, the first parish of the Dioceses of David situated within the territory of the Ngäbe Comarca. Two confreres and three Sisters of Mercy currently serve the parish in collaboration with a growing number of committed Ngäbe laity. Defining our identity as an indigenous Vincentian parish has been the focus of the past two years. The pastoral plan these first years has focuses specifically on *a*) the active participation and commitment of the laity in the various villages, *b*) inculcation of the way we worship, work and organize as an indigenous Ngäbe parish, and *c*) building a sense of parish community between the various villages where active faith communities exist.

A sense of community at the level of the villages is natural, as most villages are comprised of several large extended families. One of the ways we have addressed the challenge of gaining a sense of parish community between the various villages was to begin monthly gatherings with representative from the various villages to organize, discuss needs and opportunities – in a very open style in line with traditional Ngäbe congresses. These gatherings evolved into the current lay formation program that offers both specific formation (catechists, youth leaders, missionaries, etc), as well as several larger gatherings throughout the year when all the committed laity gathers for combined formation as well as evaluation and organization.

Another important practice has been the interchange between villages – youth gatherings, celebrations of feast days, popular missions, etc. Several large gatherings take place throughout the year at the large palm-roofed hut at the mission center, which serves as a multi-use gathering space for formation, conventions and Eucharist, as the small chapel at the mission center cannot hold the crowds that attend such gatherings. The feast of Saint Vincent is celebrated here beginning with a vigil where the sacred cacao drink is accompanied by traditional stories, song and dance. The celebration continues on the feast day with Eucharist, traditional food and more cultural celebrations.

***In Search of Life in Abundance* (Jn 10:10)**

In the midst of extreme poverty, malnutrition and lack of basic necessities such as clean water, programs and projects to confront these realities with the people is an ongoing task. The parish has a special relationship in assisting patients at the health center that Charlie Schuster built, as the people who come from the far villages have no source of nourishment while here (some hike from villages as far as 12 hours by foot). Integral and sustainable developments projects are also a fundamental part of the Congregation's work, such as the *Semillas de Esperanza* agricultural program (which also builds latrines, rainwater capture systems, animal husbandry projects, fish ponds and eco-stoves) and a new collaborative project between the Congregation and local Ngäbe artisan cooperatives to develop fair trade mechanisms for their products. The project focuses on increasing local economic income while fostering local identity as well as promoting environmental protection.

Justice issues and the struggle for indigenous rights is also an ever present reality in our lives. The Ngäbe have shown an incredible capacity to unite and work together to confront threats to what they consider is God's desire for a life in harmony as community and with creation. This was evident in their struggle against open-pit mineral mines in their territory over the past several years. After much protest that brought the loss of several Ngäbe lives, the Panamanian government was forced to sign a new law that prohibits mining on Ngäbe lands. This is an achievement gained by very few indigenous peoples. The Catholic presence alongside the people in these struggles is prominent at all levels, including the Catholic Ngäbe themselves, missionaries (Vincentian, Jesuit, Augustinian) and bishops - and this Church presence does not escape the criticism of those who wish to exploit Ngäbe lands for profit and reduce the Ngäbe to "obstacles to progress".

Permanent State of Mission

During a recent gathering to evaluate our pastoral plan and focus on the most pertinent objectives – the committed lay leaders prioritized *a) evangelization, b) inculturation, and c) youth*. It was a joy to see the new plan placing mission and evangelization as our first priority. The well established faith communities are now starting to act as "missionary communities", visiting other villages as lay missionaries and inviting villages to celebrations. Ngäbe youth train as missionaries, visit other villages throughout the year (dry season popular missions, Holy Week, etc.), have become one of the major strength of the parish's mission thrust and have served as examples, encouraging others to assume commitments within their local communities.

Confronting Challenges with Hope

Although there is much excitement of growth as a new parish and the expanding commitment of the laity, the difficulties and challenges we face are ever-present. A major challenge of the parish is distance, as some villages are 10 or 12 hours by foot or horse from the mission center. Few communities can be reached by truck. We currently have a presence in 50 villages, half of these having chapels with organized Catholic communities – regular sacramental life, catechetic, youth ministry, etc. Other communities are in various stages of evangelization, with sacraments or popular missions taking place in government school classrooms or celebrated in the open air. Involving the people as committed laity in the most distant communities has proven difficult as our presence is more sporadic.

Temporary and permanent migration outside the Ngäbe lands for work or education is another challenge, leaving many villages largely abandoned during the dry season when it's easiest to visit. "Losing" formed laity due to migration to another part of the country can also affect our ability to develop solid faith communities in the villages.

True inculcation of the gospel also stands as a great challenge, although the commitment of the mission teams has been a serious one in recent years. Articulating the faith from the Ngäbe worldview and organizing pastoral ministry from this vision has been a slow, yet fruitful process that continues.

***"Guaire ni ja etebare"* (together as family)**

In the final document from the most recent conference of Latin American Bishop in Aparecida, Brazil, the encounter of the society and Church with indigenous peoples is spoken of as a *kairós*, a sacred moment and potential for a "new ecclesial Pentecost" (DA 91). A deep faith in God's providence, the importance of community, working together and a profound respect for creation and all life are examples of values that indigenous people attest to from their own lived experience. Here in Soloy, we have experienced and been witness to what is possible when a people, who by statistical standards are the "poorest of the poor" in Panama, work together to live life as they understand God intends. We are convinced the gospel lived from the indigenous worldview offers something of great value to the wider society and the universal Church.

As we journey forward as a new parish, deepening our indigenous and Vincentian identity, it is with much hope. There is no magic formula for moving forward as an indigenous Vincentian parish, but with a deep faith in God's presence in our journey, and openness to sharing and working together, we believe God will continue to bless us.

Leaving the mission center property, walking a short distance along the Fonseca river, you come to a small cemetery of several Ngäbe families. Small wooden crosses are sporadically placed among the otoe plants, which in Ngäbe tradition keep the deceased safe from danger. One of those simple crosses says "Rev. Carlos Schuster, CM". Charlie's only wish in his later years was to be buried among the people he loved and served for so many years. May the seeds of faith he planted here keep growing and give us the strength to continue sharing the Good News with joy! Ngöbö reba mäben (God be with you).