

The international missions

- Final Document, Commitment n_ 4 -

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To begin this essay I cite from the Final Document of the General Assembly 1998 in *Vincentiana* July-October 1998, p. 395-396:

"Today, as never before, the Church has the opportunity of bringing the Gospel, by witness and word, to all people and nations. I see the dawning of a new missionary age, which will become a radiant day bearing an abundant harvest, if all Christians and the missionaries and the young churches in particular, respond with generosity and holiness to the calls and challenges of our time.¹ All of us are invited to contribute to the preparation of the new Christian springtime by being docile to the action of the Holy Spirit.²

Since the Holy Spirit has already opened the way to new forms of collaboration in some of our international missions and in other already established ones, we commit ourselves to:

- a) encourage broad participation of the members of groups within the Vincentian Family, as well as of individual Vincentian collaborators, in both the established missions *ad gentes* founded by the provinces and in those under the direction of the Superior General;
- b) establish a commission to develop a "*ratio missionum*" (guidelines for our missions), concerning: inculturation and north-south collaboration, criteria for accepting new missions, the process for selecting missionaries and for admitting candidates to the congregation, relationship to the Vincentian Family, international support for already existing missions in individual provinces, procedures for regular evaluations, and funding;
- c) recommend that the superior general study the possibility of establishing a secretariat for the new international missions for reasons such as: facilitating the relationships among the provinces, the branches of the Vincentian Family, other mission organizations, and himself; coordinating the gathering of information; searching out funds and other resources."

1 *Redemptoris Missio*, 92.

2 *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 18.

I give here just a few thoughts with regard to a) encourage broad participation, etc. The points b) and c) are still in study by the commission to develop a "ratio missionum."

In that context, we may ask: where are our international missions? To what degree can they be called international? Which provinces have a mission *ad gentes*? How many confreres work in the missions *ad gentes*? What is the future of our missions *ad gentes*? Still many other questions could be put forward.

It is clear that from the beginning of our Congregation, confreres were sent out of the home country, France. But not all of them were missionaries *ad gentes*; think of Poland, Italy, etc. There were confreres sent to Algiers, Tunis; were they missionaries *ad gentes*?

It is clear that those sent to Madagascar were certainly missionaries *ad gentes*, as we can see from the letters Vincent wrote to them. But what about the confreres sent to Ethiopia or Abyssinia as it was called in former days.

However, let us have a look at the challenges nowadays. In a short article like this it is not possible to mention all, nor to analyze them in depth. I see many challenges. So, I mention here just a few at random.

We live in a *time of change*: there are so many issues that formerly would be accepted without questioning. Today we are not always certain. The border between truth and untruth is not always clear. There are difficult questions with regard to salvation and creation. Many answers are partial. How should a missionary act with such a background?

Science develops; what we learned during our seminary years may no longer be up-to-date. Are we conscious that ongoing formation is a must?

We are to *encourage broad participation*. This means that many missionaries have to shed a clerical attitude and be able to consider others as their partners, who might be better trained and more able of approaching people directly (in a non-liturgical way). Women (laywomen and sisters) are often considered as inferior. Being men, it is only natural that we bring a "manly" culture, forgetting that it is through women that faith grows in ordinary life. In many missions *ad gentes* we miss a chance because of such a mentality and attitude.

The situation of many "*gentes*" in the old sense has changed. They are driven away to remote areas and their governments consider them often as a shame to the country. They are oppressed, not considered as equal citizens with the same rights and obligations. Or they are allowed to exist in a kind of museum: reservations, where they are obliged to maintain their culture and folklore as an attraction for tourists, bringing money into the country. Are we prepared to live with them and

bring the good news by helping them to develop themselves in order that they become full-fledged, equal citizens?

Our missionary spirit must become more and more humble: we may be proud of being sent to bring the *good news to other peoples who do not know about this yet*, but it is possible that they, conscious of their own rich spiritual tradition and culture, reject that which we would like to bring them and do not consider our message as a good message for them. They may consider accepting our good message as bringing disaster to them. Are we prepared to accept this fact and in spite of that continue bringing the good news?

Often we are tempted to stress the **material progress and welfare** of the peoples, forgetting that they do not share our point of view. What is most needed is a spirit of respect for other people, for the human person whatever his color, culture, church, or belief, seeking and finding the good in him or her and bringing it to development.

There is the temptation of *giving*, whereby one feels oneself superior to the other, considered as inferior. Of course, it is difficult to give as an equal, because then one runs the risk of not being accepted, of being unwanted. And it is certainly better to help people develop themselves so they do not need aid. Instead, we should provoke them to contribute to Christianity and to Christian culture.

It is often very difficult to understand other people: we may study a *language*, a culture, but we can never speak like that person or live the culture of that person. Our efforts are often more important than the results. The language of our heart should be clear and loud.

One of the great challenges in many parts of the world is to be missionaries who bring love and make people love each other. It is tragic that situations of *hatred*, discrimination and even massacre can arise, where missionaries brought the good news. We should learn from the mistakes made in the past. Why did things go wrong? Even for Jesus it was not easy to overcome the feelings between Jews and Samaritans, but he succeeded in making people understand that we have one Father and that we are all brothers and sisters of the same family.

Many injustices have been committed in the *past*. The consequence of all that is often hatred and indifference regarding the message we bring. Have we seriously tried to study such a situation, trying to find a way out, opening hearts for the good news?

It appears that provinces start working together more and more. *Working together* is a new challenge in our missions, even more so in a wider range with other members of the Vincentian Family. It is much easier and more satisfying to work alone, and in that way become "popular" and known. However, collaboration produces more and better fruit.

It is often said that the provinces that have no vocations have no future. This is certainly not true. Many of the "old" and aging provinces were formerly the provinces with the greatest number of missionaries "ad gentes" all over the world. They are often thought of as provinces only good to help with money. However they possess such a large, rich, missionary experience. Do we ask them to share that *experience* with the members of the younger provinces, to help them develop their missionary spirit?

Several of the answers the commission on the "ratio missionum" received bear witness of that great missionary spirit.

It is only fitting to be grateful to our missionaries from the past and the present. So, let us show that gratitude in our deeds by facing the challenges of our times as opportunities for renewal and growth!