

TOWARD THE THIRD MILLENNIUM
The History of the Congregation of The Mission:
An Event For Which To Ask Forgiveness?

By Luigi Mezzadri, C.M.
Province of Roma

The congregation of the Mission at the dawn of the year 2000 will be 375 years old. Nearly 400 years. Notwithstanding its age, the Congregation is to be found on all continents, holds many positions of honor, continues to attract young people, and does not seem to have betrayed the intentions of its origins.

We think it time nonetheless to balance matters. It is clear that attempting to balance is a subjective exercise. Every judgement can be one sided. It can indulge in self-glorification, or give rise to corrosive criticism. It can be sentimental or self-absorbing, or self-degenerating. It could evoke a “Magnificat”, or a “Miserere.”

We will avoid all this by a sober historical reading of our past. I do not pretend that it will be exhaustive. I will limit myself to considering the first century and a half of our history (1625-1789), this being the period that I know best.

I state in advance that I will not be searching for excuses. It is clear, as we shall see that we have made many mistakes. The question that I ask myself, however, is this: Is it fair to look for excuses for past deeds which we neither committed, for which we were not responsible, and for decisions made in a context different from our own? It has been proved that some of ours held slaves. Certainly not in Paris or Rome, but, yes, in the islands of Madagascar. Should we ask Father General to issue a public condemnation of some confreres, who obviously are no longer under his jurisdiction, but under that of the Almighty, to be held accountable for having held slaves in their houses, who perhaps considered themselves fortunate for being in the service of the missionaries?

I do not intend to arrive at a gratifying “apologia”, as if our past was a smooth road, a kind of golden age for our missionaries, all deemed to be models, all observant of the rules, all examples for the apostolate.

My task will be that of trying to “understand.” If we examine this period we will be able to identify the following points:

1. Fidelity to the charism;
2. The perfect fitting into the state and into the Church;
3. The On-going progress of the mission.

1. Regarding the FIDELITY TO THE CHARISM, we must consider that this was the major preoccupation of our superiors general. In 1668 the general assembly

approved the means of preserving the primitive spirit, understood in the sense of “loving what he (Vincent) loved”, and performing the works that he taught us “amare quod amavit, et opere exercere quod docuit.”

For Rene Almeras this fidelity meant a spirit of prayer, fidelity to the rules, vigilance on the part of the superior to avoid the relaxation of the same in their houses. What Jean Bonnet admired most in St. Vincent, was “The perfect separation from the world.”

Reading Jacquier’s circular of 1771, it would be interesting to see how Almeras and Jacquier differed. The fidelity desired by these superiors was a static thing. According to them, St. Vincent founded a perfect community, well organized, which could not be legitimately changed. Apart from the “Constitutiones Selectae”, the congregation could touch nothing of what was left it as a heritage from the founder.

We had however a very characteristic model for a missionary: an interior man, taciturn, gifted with a “good spirit” humble, culturally not very sparkling, calm, cordial, and loving of regularity. Preaching methods were gradually devised, what prayers to say, what is permitted or forbidden. There was no room for improvising, or for local initiative. Missionaries had the same order of day in Paris as in Rome or Warsaw; they dressed in the same style, and had the same practices. The guiding virtue was uniformity.

It was to this that Superior General Jacquier referred when the Italian brothers complained that the habit that they wore left them open to derision as urchins. In the circular letter of September 1, 1774 the Superior General wrote: “The diversity in the way we dress gives rise to different modes of thinking among us and others, and these various opinions little by little destroy our unity of feelings.”

The long hoped for change happened the following year, not however through the efforts of the superiors, as it should have been, but through the intervention of the new Pope, Pius VI. The Superior General thereupon, Father Jacquier, issued a circular letter: “The Supreme Pontiff having made us understand through the Nuncio the reason that led him to wish for a change in the religious habit of our brothers, we offered our humble objections in order, if possible, to prevent this change ...

His Holiness not wishing to agree to our humble objections stated in his letter that the style of the habit is to be changed. Nothing remains but to show our docility and our respectful submission to his wishes, following through on what he wants, which is what we have agreed to in a letter written to the Nuncio. Now act so that this is implemented with as little noise and publicity as possible.”

Another example may illustrate the point. On June 10, 1734 Bonnet sent out a circular letter in which he expressed disapproval concerning “the abuse of bathing.” In themselves, baths were considered harmless, healthy and convenient, both “for minor as well as for major ills.” Even when they were used “for pleasure”, for cleanliness, for the natural refreshment of the body. There is nothing objectionable, so long as “the rules of reserve, of modesty, and of shyness are observed.” But “it so often happens” Bonnet noted, “that it goes too far in many ways.” He therefore prohibited the members of the congregation from bathing in public places, either “for cleanliness or for pleasure.” At the same time he urged the superiors to see to it that the prohibition is respected. He was obviously unaware that there were cleaner people around, who washed more often. A fact experienced in Asia, for example, where our missionaries presented themselves with a body odor, which was not the “odor of sanctity.”

The signature ministries of the mission were preserved. Through the 17th and 18th centuries, the sons of St. Vincent were held in high regard because of their zeal for the missions. They were different from the Jesuits with their “mission centers”. Our missions were longer. Ours also differed from “penitential” missions in the Neapolitan and Franciscan traditions. With our missionaries working the towns for a lengthy period of time, it is clear that they could work with good effect. The better-evangelized towns were those that could better withstand the onslaught of secularization.

Then came the seminaries. In France they became the first work of the congregation in so far as the bishops of that country entrusted more than half of their seminaries to the sons of St. Vincent. The same was true about Poland. Our seminaries were esteemed not so much because of the quality of studies, which were generally modest, but for the good spiritual and pastoral formation, which they provided. It was said that by the end of the seventeen hundreds, the Sulpecians formed the bishops, and the missionaries formed the pastors.

From this standpoint the missionaries held onto the ministries favored by the Saint. The hospitals were abandoned. The two terms mission and charity which for Vincent were inseparable and which left his heart always open to the demands of spiritual and material poverty, was reduced only to spiritual charity.

Pier Fancesco Giordanini, a great missionary who died in 1720, cites the evangelical mandate to cure the sick and to cleanse lepers, and concludes “that only spiritual healing is being done.

If we consider the relations between the congregation with the state and the church, two points must be taken into account: After St. Vincent’s death, the congregation emphasized its French character. This resulted in serious tensions with the Holy See. It came to the point where Louis XIV imposed on a general assembly,

that of 1697, a French Father General (Pierron), and there resulted a division within the congregation. This state of tension with the Holy See was to linger.

Meantime while the hospitals disappeared and Madagascar was abandoned (even the French colonials did the same), the congregation took charge of “royal parishes” ... After Fontainebleau the missionaries assumed control of two more symbols of the monarchy, like Les Invalides, Versailles (the two parishes), and the chapel of the royal court, St. Cloud, the royal college of St. Cyr, and also in London.

Up to the time of the revolution we know that the procession which opened the Estates General took place between our parishes of Notre Dame and St. Louis. Furthermore the first attacks on the symbols of power were the sacking of St. Lazare and Les Invalides (July 13, 1789), even before the attacks on the Bastille. But we were the ones at St. Lazare and at Les Invalides.

This led to choosing a Gallican theology in France, and an ultramontane theology in Italy, but above all there was a strong adherence to the seat of power.

At the time when the oath of the oath of “Civil Constitution of the Clergy”, was in effect, many of our confreres subscribed to the oath. The congregation gave two bishops to the “constitutional clergy.” Jean Baptiste Guillaume Gratien, (or Graziani), superior of the seminary of Chartres, and Nicholas Philbert, pastor of Sedan, named bishop of the Ardennes. This latter justified taking the oath by claiming that he was always taught to obey the legal authority. It is noteworthy that after the revolution these happenings were kept quiet. There was talk of “martyrs”, but nothing was said about “traitors.” By this I do not wish to pass judgement on those who under stress made difficult and risk-laden decisions. One thinks of Adrien Lamourette. He had already left the congregation when he was made bishop of Lyons, after the legitimate bishop fled the country. So while the real shepherd from abroad kept urging his priests not to flee as he, the “evil shepherd” had done the interloper Lamourette stayed at his post until his death. While not recognized as a martyr, his behavior was truly heroic.

In any case this close relationship with civil power, especially in the missions, had immediate advantages in so far as our people were protected by France. But it afforded those struggling against colonialism a pretext for considering the missionaries of being spies or allies of the colonial powers something that only a prejudiced and petty mind could allege.

Regarding the Missions Ad Gentes, we know that during the age of discovery and beyond (from about 1492), the missionaries’ imperative was “salvation of souls.” Whenever the missionaries departed, they knew how difficult it would be to return. In one of the regulations issued to the missionaries destined for

Madagascar, we read: “When embarking on a sea voyage, the missionaries must be ready for heaven.”

If we remember the brothers Perboyre, we can see how this would be true. However, when the missionaries left they were told to be zealous, brave, not involved in material things, grounded only on their faith in God, and on the weapons of the Europeans. “Propaganda Fide” offered these timely points to missionaries in a famous instruction of 1659. Missionaries in Madagascar, however, were evidently not able to derive any benefit from that instruction, although successive missionary expeditions were able to profit therefrom.

During that era two missionary methods were in conflict: One, that valued the local culture and the other that did not. The question is: How did ours, be it in China or on Madagascar, deal with the problem?

In China during the first missionary expedition ours aligned themselves decisively against the Jesuits, who upheld the “civil” character of certain actions, such as insensations and prostration’s before shrines of their deceased and before domestic altars. These actions were called “Chinese rites.” Our first missionaries (Appiani, Pedrini and Mullener) had learned the language, but had maintained a European outlook which the congregation was not in a position to change, because apart from exhortations to zeal there was not a careful cultural formation for the missions.

In Madagascar our missionaries promoted the policy of a mass Christianization of the slaves that had been brought there by the India Company.

In the eighteen hundreds a significant change took place. Especially in China the missionaries exhibited a serious interest in the local culture. They had noted Sinologists, experts in the local cultural environment. Peking was a noted cultural center.

In Madagascar as well, we had important figures such as Albert Caulier (1723-1795), who composed “An Abridged Catechism in the Language of Madagascar.”

CONCLUSIONS

While clocks throughout the world count down the hours that separate us from the new millennium, we think it useful to propose these avenues for reflection:

We often compare ourselves with the community of the past. But is the comparison a fair one, or are we comparing diverse realities? Are we trying to match up the technical successes of our time, with the limits of the past? I believe consequently that we must avoid the pointless criticisms of the way of life of the old missionaries ways that perhaps are strange to us, but were suitable for the times.

The missionaries of the past perhaps stressed certain values like interiority, uniformity and regularity but they were highly esteemed and sought after. Our houses had prestige.

In the past we were protected by the state. (In Europe we were the wards of the governments, while in the countries then called “mission lands”, we came under the protection of the colonial powers). The question to ask is, are we today in a position to risk refusing that protective net? Freedom has a price, but also a dignity. An Irish Columban wrote: “If you take away dignity, you take away liberty.”

There is much talk of “inculturation.” There is a question of seeing if the appeal for the missions launched in 1992, and given impetus by the present superior general, finds us ready and in tune with the mission of the church. We might ascertain this by seeing how they are specifically prepared with appropriate courses directed to the missions, and if pastoral practices in foreign lands bear a western stamp, or rather seek to be influenced in the culture to be evangelized.

A question, which reflects past situations, could be the following: Do we have the sense of Church? Are we accustomed to “feel with the Church?” It is probably difficult to draw this out from all the documents, which would be wrong to ignore. There is a line leading us to the formation of the concept of church, of evangelization and promotion of the faith, of social doctrine, of mission, which forms an important route which draws us near to the threshold of hope as we are to enter the new millennium.

(Translator: Stephen J. India, C.M.)