

The Vincentian Character of Our Apostolate in the Tanzanian Mission

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The International Mission in Tanzania was started in response to the call of the General Assembly of 1992 to open up new missions of the Congregation. Today it is eight and a half years since Frs. Richard Kehoe and Chacko Panathara, the two-member team of pioneers landed on this Tanzanian soil. African soil has accepted the Vincentian seed from the time of its founder and since then this sapling has thrived in many parts of this continent starting from Madagascar. But Tanzania somehow remained elusive to the Little Company until 22 September 1993. With the latest development of an understanding between the Curia and the Province of Southern India, this mission is entering its second phase of growth. As one of the pioneers of the mission, I would like to look back in general on its Vincentian characteristics manifested in the different areas of its growth up until today.

1. Discernment of the Mission

According to St.Vincent, our Founder, there are four elements involved in the discernment of a mission or an apostolate: the needs, events, obedience and prayer.¹ St. Vincent summed up all these in the imitation of Jesus, by doing the Will of God, as he puts it in the Common Rules.²

In the case of this International Mission, I would see the reflection of these four elements in this way:

Needs: There was a call for the Little Company to Tanzania from the year 1980, from the Sisters of Mercy of St.Vincent de Paul founded in Untermarchtal, Germany, and established in Tanzania, in the Diocese of Mbanga.

Events: The General Assembly of 1992 with its Theme “ New Evangelization, New Men and New Communities” was an event that opened up new vistas of evangelization for the Congregation.

Obedience: The “Missions *Ad Gentes*” of the Congregation was in obedience and response to the Call of our missionary Pope to “Evangelization 2000.”

¹Slawson, Douglas, C.M., “Vincent’s Discernment of His Own Vocation and of the Congregation.”

²Common Rules II, 3; see also the conference “On Conformity to the Will of God” of 15 October 1655.

Prayer: The Congregation as one family, united in prayer in the General Assembly, made this decision for the new missions *ad gentes*.³

This Apostolate is an expression of the Congregation's *preferential option for the poor*⁴ which was reiterated in the General Assembly of 1992, and that too in "evangelizing the poor, especially the most abandoned."⁵

Mpepai was an out station from the time of the German missionaries and had still remained an out station and not a parish since there was no priest to go to that area for a permanent stay, an area and people forlorn and abandoned, remote and difficult.⁶ Now in tune with our charism and characteristics, Mpepai has become the first parish of the Vincentians in Tanzania. This option is a challenge and calls for inculturation and conversion to the lifestyle of the poor for a better witnessing to Jesus, Evangelizer of the Poor.

*This mission is missionary in character,*⁷ reflecting clearly the characteristics outlined by Fr. Robert Maloney, C.M in his presentation.

International: This mission, being a response to the call to the missions *ad gentes* of the worldwide Congregation, will maintain its international characteristic by keeping open its doors to Vincentian confreres and Vincentian laity from any part of the world to work together in following Jesus, the Evangelizer of the Poor.

A Mobile Evangelizer: The Tanzanian mission has given a boost to the Vincentian presence in East Africa. And with much more of a conscious effort of collaboration among the Vincentian families present in these areas, this mission can take up the lead role of a mobile evangelizer "with fire in the heart to spread the Good News."⁸

Learning Languages: The late Julius Compage Nyrere, Father of the Nation, has brought the warring tribes under the shade of a single culture, a culture based on one language, that is, Swahili. Learning the language and culture of the people is given priority in the preparation of the missionaries for this mission.

³Robert P. Maloney, "My Hopes for the Congregation for the Next Five Years" 1993.

⁴Constitution 12, 1°.

⁵Constitution 1, 2°.

⁶Robert P. Maloney, Mission Appeal Letter 1 October 1994.

⁷Robert P. Maloney presentation to the participants of CIF "On Being A Missionary Today" on 22 October 1994.

⁸*Ibid.*

Inculturation: The land of Tanzania and its people are quite rich in their culture and customs. However the Catholic religion brought by westerners almost hundred years ago still remains western stuff. Perhaps the call to inculturation in their liturgy, lifestyle, and learning could be a challenge before us to put our efforts and energy toward a meaningful ministry in this mission.

Be creative, joyful and social: In order to serve the people better we need to know their needs. To know their needs we need to have constant contact with them. The confreres, in consultation with the community, develop programmes in their pastoral ministry, which will keep them in constant, meaningful and effective contact with the people. Thus we shall define our work with the people through a creative, joyful, social atmosphere, and means.

The Sponsorship Programme of Child Care International, now running in all our four stations of Mpepai, Mbinga, Mbangamao, and Bombambil, is helping almost 150 very poor and needy families in the education of their children and development of those individual families. Nursery schools conducted for the benefit of the poor little ones are just one of such defined ministries we are involved in through creative, joyful and social means of involvement with the people.

Evangelization is Liberation. It is liberation from all states of bondage and all clutches of poverty, be it economical, psychological or intellectual. To bring this about the confreres themselves are convinced that our people have the power and ability to do it and take all measures to convince them of this fact. The people of Bombambil, one of our Vincentian stations, collected almost seven million Tanzanian Shillings for making a belfry and a grotto of the Miraculous Medal within a period of one year, which would have been unthinkable and just a dream for them some years back. As Archbishop Norbert Mtega of Songea himself pointed out “This belfry and grotto are indeed spectacular, not only in their beautiful construction, but also in their being a sign of our people’s power and their ability to do it.”⁹ A sign of change from the naïve situation they were basking in for so long. This incident has been a challenge to the villages and parishes around to put their efforts together to help themselves and the Church.

Common Prayer: Called to be “Carthusians at home and apostles outside” confreres, although they are living alone in their respective areas of pastoral ministry due to lack of personnel, make it a point to meet once every three months to pray and reflect together and to get enriched from each other’s company, common prayer and fellowship.

⁹Talk of the Archbishop at the blessing of the Belfry and the Grotto on 9 December 2001.

In this way, I find the **missionary character** of this mission in line with the thoughts of Fr. Robert Maloney, our Superior General.¹⁰

2. Formation of the Clergy

“Formation of the clergy is the work of the Congregation from its very beginnings”¹¹ and the fact is again reiterated in the 38th General Assembly when it stated its commitment “to give a privileged place to the formation of priests”¹² and “the new missions that we are undertaking in the Solomon Islands and Tanzania, have possible links with further involvement in the formation programmes”¹³ as Fr. Maloney expressed in his hopes for the Congregation in the next five years. In Tanzania, this fact led the confreres to delve into vocation promotion and the formation of our own indigenous candidates for the mission from the very start. We realized the fact that the Church in Tanzania is no more a Church of missionaries, but is rather a Missionary Church, or rather a Church welling up to be a Missionary Church in the third millennium. And so, to have indigenous candidates with us in the community would be credible for us before the Church in Tanzania. Today we have five candidates: four for Priesthood, and one for Brotherhood.

3. Collaboration with Vincentian Family Members

The presence of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of St.Vincent de Paul, who maintain and cherish the spirit and charism of St.Vincent, is another Vincentian characteristic of the Tanzanian Mission. Our service to them is in consonance with our Constitutions¹⁴ primarily and it was all the more emphasized at the 39th General Assembly, when it said “On the threshold of the new millennium, the Congregation of the Mission, together with the Vincentian Family, wishes to fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy by making it a reality today, for it is our motto.”¹⁵ As part of the Vincentian Family, the Sisters of Mercy of St. Vincent de Paul based in Untermarchtal, Germany, and in Mbanga, Tanzania, have a right to our Vincentian assistance and to go along with us hand in hand to the realization of Isaiah’s prophecy, making it a reality in this part of the world. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul was started for the first time in the Diocese of Mbanga after the confreres came here, thanks to the initial efforts of Fr. Myles. It now has grown into a Particular Council.

¹⁰Robert P. Maloney, presentation to the CIF participants on “On Being a Missionary Today” of 22 October 1994.

¹¹Constitution 15, § 1.

¹²Letter to the Confreres, 25 July 1992, New Evangelization No. 3.

¹³Robert P. Maloney, “Some Hopes for the Congregation of the Mission,” No.3

¹⁴Constitutions 1, 3° on formation of the laity and 17on direction of the Daughters of Charity.

¹⁵Final Document of the 39th General Assembly July 1998, Introduction.

4. The need for a community for the mission

Vincent realized the need for a community after he started preaching the missions. Community came as a subsequent need for the mission. So also the need and call to strengthen the community in Tanzania came as a result of the pastoral need. The community began with Frs. Richard Kehoe from the United States and Chacko Panathara from India, who started the mission in 1993. The Indian Province was flexible in its readiness to the need and call of the Congregation by sending Frs. James Theikanath, Prakash Tirkey, and Johnson Nedungaden in subsequent years. The mission kept its international character of being open to the confreres from around the world and from different provinces, when it received in its embrace Frs. Myles Rearden from Ireland, Manuel Prado from Puerto Rico, Jose Manjaly from the Province of Northern India, Jacob Panthappallil, James Kuninpurayidam, and Jaimy Moonjely, all from Province of Southern India. Though some of these missionaries had to go back to their provinces, as the province needed them there, the rest are deeply involved in their mission in Tanzania. The recent understanding of the General Curia with the Province of Southern India has been a shot in the arm for the mission to strengthen this community with more personnel, making long-term plans for the growth of the mission in the coming years.

5. Guidance through the events

On 7 July 1994, during the visit of Fr. Maloney to Tanzania, he informed me that my superior and companion Dick would be going back to his province soon, and so he planned to close down this new international mission, since I would have to be alone until he found new companions for me on the mission. He gave me options to any other international missions. We sat in calmness, prayed and I made the decision to stay and said to Fr. Maloney “We should stay here in Tanzania. Fr. Dick and I have struggled a great deal in this first year, trying to learn the language, to adapt to the culture, to deal with loneliness. We cannot let all that labor and pain to go to waste. Now the people in the remote parish where I am working are responding with great enthusiasm. There are numerous candidates for priesthood in this area. We should build on this foundation.”¹⁶ Henceforth our discussions were on how to go about reviving the mission.

That sudden “Spirit-inspired decision,” as I would call it and as I do believe, was the zeal and fire of the spirit of St. Vincent inspiring us, as he did,¹⁷ when he was almost pressurized to close down the Madagascar mission. God thus guiding the mission through its events is a clear expression of its Vincentian characteristic.

¹⁶Robert P. Maloney, Mission Appeal Letter of 1 October 1994.

¹⁷Repetition of Prayer, N° 171 of 25 August 1657 and Repetition of Prayer, N° 172 of 30 August 1657.

6. We have no right to refuse what people give us out of love for God¹⁸

As the Congregation expanded, Vincent realized that the Community needs a solid financial basis in order to provide for the needs of its members, and also to ensure freedom of action in the apostolate. The capital sum donated at the foundation of the Company by the Gondis was invested in land.

The Tanzanian Mission has also not refused what people give us for the love of God so as to manage our day-to-day expenses from the income from its ministries. Its main sources of income are its ministry to the Sisters, Mass stipends, and sometimes the Mission Fund distribution from Rome, local contributions from our pastoral ministries in the dioceses. Besides it has laid its foundation by way of investment in land in strategic places in the country, like in Morogoro town, Songea, and Mbinga, which will help the mission to build and grow in the future.

7. Encounter with the Poor

After being 17 years a priest, a radical change came in the life of St.Vincent, as we see him in contact with the poor in 1617 in Gannes, Folleville, and in Châtillon-les-Dombes. This encounter with the poor paved the path for his great foundations in the Church, on the missions, and in works of charity.¹⁹

Perhaps it was a mere chance that I happened to be in Mpepai as its first resident priest before the visit of Fr. Maloney to Tanzania. In my lonely parish life in Mpepai, I was having the feelings of the Pastor of Clichy in 1612, who expressed to Cardinal de Retz “neither the Holy Father or you, Your Eminence, could be as happy as I am.”²⁰ The response of the people, as Fr. Maloney witnessed,²¹ and their response to the sacramental life and to their life of faith, indeed all these were important elements to encourage us to take a decision to live up to their response and enthusiasm. Today the change that is taking place in the life of the people of our parishes, spiritually and materially, has to be seen as a sign of the lively presence of the Vincentians in this part of the world, characterized by their Vincentian charism.

¹⁸José María Román, C.M., *St. Vincent de Paul, A Biography*, Chapter XVI.

¹⁹Constitutions, Introduction, p. 2.

²⁰Román, *op.cit.*, p 103.

²¹Robert P. Maloney, Mission Appeal Letter of 1 October 1994.