

The Impact of the African Synod on the Vincentians in Africa.

by Jean-Baptiste NSAMBI e MBULA, C.M.

The famous call by Pope Paul VI at Kampala, Uganda, in 1967; "Africans, you can, and must, have your own Christianity", contained the seed of both a new evangelical impetus and a hope for the African church. The Special Assembly on Africa held by the Synod of Bishops in Rome, the very heart of catholicism, illustrates this under two headings. Firstly, through the recognition of the existence of a true church in Africa. Secondly, through the acknowledgement that this does not exist, in principle, as a peripheral church, since all the local churches make up, in equal part, the one Church of Jesus Christ.

The Congregation of the Mission, whose sense of belonging to the Church is part of the heritage which it has received from its founder, feels called on by this synod. It wants to discern what it can do in its work in Africa and also to concretise its 'insertion' with regard to what is at stake on this continent.

The celebration of the African Synod will have been the occasion, if there is still need of one, to do away with the idea of a "Missionary Christianity" (in Africa) and the start of an African Christianity, or, according to the expression used by Cardinal Tumi at the closure of the proceedings of the Synod, the gradual transition "from the status of a mission-Church to that of a Church on Mission."

It is in the light of this new understanding, which is also the logic of the incarnation, that the work of the Vincentians in Africa is best understood.

THE AFRICAN SYNOD AND THE VOCATION OF THE CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION IN AFRICA

The task of evangelising is, for the C.M., its gift, its proper vocation and the expression of its deepest identity. Article 13 of our Constitutions gives a response, in principle, to what the Vincentians in general and the C.M. in particular, could expect of the African Synod;

Faithful to the spirit and example of St. Vincent, the Provinces will decide for themselves the forms of apostolate that they must adopt in order to ensure the insertion of their apostolic activity in the pastoral action of the Church, according to the directives and teachings of the Holy See, the Episcopal Conferences and the diocesan Bishops".

The African Synod encourages congregations working in Africa to rediscover the gospel dynamic appropriate to this continent and to situate themselves in it as communities living out their own particular charism. The C.M., for its part, is called to work in Africa under two headings; firstly, in conformity with its specific vocation and, secondly, in collaboration with the local churches .

The transition from a Mission-Church to a Church on Mission implies, on the part of religious congregations, a redefinition of their charism, or, at least, a reorientation of their presence in the Church in Africa.

The courage of missionaries, a courage the synod recognised, has been vital in order that the African Church might reach its present maturity. This same initial courage will be vital to us as missionaries in order that we might rediscover our place in this Church on Mission.

In this way of thinking, the C.M. has a sure future in Africa. For it will not mean that we redefine our vocation but, rather, that we recover it, since our proper vocation fits marvellously into a Church on Mission . Following on from the Synod, and even examining what the Church in Africa already is, the change which must be undertaken by the C.M. in Africa is by way of being a rediscovery of its own identity; the evangelisation of the poor which echoes in Africa today with such a relevance that it is astonishing that, in this most poverty-stricken continent in the world, the C.M. is not there as a matter of priority. Perhaps this way of seeing things is a bit naive, but it does serve to underline the wonderful part which the C.M. could play in the evangelising mission of the Church in Africa. It is also urgent that, taking this very same nature of its vocation as a starting point, the C.M. in Africa take up certain challenges.

1.1 The challenge to inculturate the Vincentian vocation

A congregation is not called on to transplant the life of the Church from which it originates into another context. It seeks to live out its (gospel) spirit which is the vocation that the Church entrusts to it. Success is not measured by reference to its realisation in other continents or places, but, rather, by reference to the realisation of its own particular end. The African Synod has renewed the commitment to inculturation. The C.M. must, in the same way, inculturate itself from within Africa. This is what allows it to take up the challenge of apostolic activity and to succeed in its insertion of itself as a community in a particular church. And if, for the African Synod, following the teaching of the council and the popes, this work is not firstly a work either for or with the Africans, but a work of the Africans in a direct link with all the other churches in the world as a sign of communion, then it must be the same also for the C.M. in Africa. The time is now long gone when one could say that it was necessary to "take account" of the Africans who are in our communities. This is not the understanding of the synod, of the incarnation or of inculturation. And it's not simply a matter of personnel (which, all the same, should not be neglected) but it is a matter of our spirit.

The Vincentian community is the first locus of the inculturation of the Vincentian charism. The Vincentian charism being essentially one of mission, it is therefore with this prior consideration that the C.M. must confront its mission at the heart of the African Church.

1.2 . The Challenge of Apostolic Activity

In terms of our particular law, it is our vocation, that's to say the end, the nature and the spirit of the C.M., which must direct the life of the congregation. Since the Vincentian charism is essentially one of mission, the C.M. can, and even must, take advantage of its own works which express its particular vocation which fits so wonderfully with the Mission of the church in Africa as perceived by the African Synod. The sense of Article 13 which we have already quoted, allows us to understand the characteristics of apostolic activity in the C.M. defined by article 12. The different points set out in this article have an internal complementarity which is fractured each time one is exclusively adopted, with the wilful omission of the others. The same complementarity extends to the conditions for applicability described in the articles of the Statutes referring to apostolic activity. (Ss 1-12) The place for the clarification of these apostolic choices is the community, and provincial, projects.

In the African context, the works of the African Synod have included orientations which may open new ways for the C.M. in Africa and maintain our communities in a constant state of renewal (C.2). These orientations are all directed at an evangelisation which, in terms of our constitutions (esp. C12 & 18), and in the light of the apostolic exhortation of Paul VI "Evangelii Nuntiandi", forms a whole with the work of human development (EN 31) as Vatican II has already affirmed; "the task of development is an integral part of the mission of the Church". (GS 14)

For the Vincentians in Africa, the impact of the synod will therefore consist in the deepening of these orientations and their application, according to the Vincentian spirit, in the context of both our life and work, along two basic axes; that of in-depth evangelisation and that of the care and promotion of integral human development, the whole being realised in a community for mission which is our distinctive quality (cf C . 21.1) . In a church which wishes to be the Church-Family of God, this, for the Vincentians of Africa, is no small asset. Here we find, perhaps, in present day terms, the traditional Vincentian duality; Mission and Charity.

The C.M. can no longer be content to have a poor environment as its apostolic field in Africa. The actual presence of poor people in our work environments should be no consolation to us. It is a constant call on us which must urge us to discern God's plan ceaselessly and to act in conformity with this saving plan. Hence the need to plan initiatives with a view to permanent action, because what constitutes a life-option to live out the work with and for the Poor cannot be reduced to simple acts of generosity, however praiseworthy these might be.

In this we see the importance of a work which is realised in the context of community. This indeed is a chance for the future of the C.M. in this Africa of many poverties. In Africa, community for mission represents a triple value for the Vincentian. In the first place, it is a choice which the founder expressly desired and which the congregation has always maintained as a patrimony which may not be altered without fundamentally changing the nature of our mission. In the second place, community is the life-giving soil of the African, a heartland which the Church ennobles by purifying it of all narrowness of vision; due less to the essence of African culture than to a problem of horizons. The Synod understood this well when

it put the focus on the idea of the "Church as family". In the third and last place, community for mission is an assurance of the continuation of the work of the C.M. in Africa, with African Vincentians who are themselves from poor backgrounds. This last point may need some clarification.

When works for the promotion of the Poor are over-identified as the work of individual confreres, they will last only as long as those confreres are involved, which entails the risk of "immovable confreres". If however these confreres should leave for, or are called to, other works, these excellent undertakings may vegetate before expiring at the hands of a poor successor, to the detriment of those who should have benefitted from them. And, to cap it all, the popular understanding will not grasp the fact that manna will no longer fall from nordic skies. People will then easily impute the entire responsibility for the collapse to the poor successor. If he should also be an African, himself poor by origin, it is an easy step to the conclusion that the Africans are still not ready to take on major responsibilities, even that they are incapable of doing so. In such a way, even in ecclesiastical circles, is the myth perpetuated, which portrays the African as an eternal infant, constantly in need of help.

The sense community spirit would avoid such disagreements for the poor confreres, especially if, as well as being seen in a community framework, these works were seen not merely as acts of assistance, but as self-managing development initiatives. Thus, community for mission allows us to develop the theories of development in the third world by moving from assistance to liberation. For the Vincentian, therefore, it is a clear follow-on that community is the place to expand our notion of mission while blockage in community (especially for reasons of personal preference) is the death of mission and the misfortune of the poor. In this last case, we are led to a flagrant negation of the identity and special quality of the Vincentian vocation. This spirit of community, so real in the African soul, must be protected, purified and expanded towards the larger horizon of the Gospel, right from the start of formation for mission.

2. Successful insertion in the local church

Part of the hope of St. Vincent de Paul, who always believed in the Church and considered his work as a work of the Church, was for the most effective participation in the pastoral activity of the whole of the local Church. We can therefore say that insertion in the local reality is, for the C.M., a true living out of its faithfulness to its specific vocation. The C.M. which, like many other congregations, has helped develop mission territories into local churches, which see themselves as adult and capable of taking charge of themselves, must now live out the experience of the unworthy servant of the Gospel as well as the spirituality of the Baptist; to allow the local church to increase, and to be a witness there of both the universality of the church and of a specific vocation which, while now shorn of all the responsibility of the ecclesial constitution, has greater ease in expressing itself, especially to the degree that it (the community) relates to the preoccupations of the people and the church of Africa.

While we may speak of Africa under the heading of the "New Evangelisation", it seems clear that this should not be understood here as a "reevangelisation" but, rather, as a "depth evangelisation". In fact, even if the first proclamation remains a constant, we must recognise that "Christian Africa" has not lost its faith as such. It wishes to deepen it. The mission of the C.M. in Africa must be seen in such a light. In the Proclamation of the Good News, popular missions could be reviewed in terms of their methodologies in order to correspond to the needs and aspirations of the peoples of Africa, without, in any way, sacrificing the essence of the message (cf C.14). In the pastoral plan, the Synod has confirmed the option for vibrant ecclesial communities in the ChurchFamily of God. Wherever the C.M. works in parishes, may it contribute to the spread of these communities as the natural locus of the genesis of the faith and of the transformation of the Earthly City.

This pastoral framework is only possible if the agents of evangelisation are assured of an adequate formation. Helping both clergy and laity is set down in the very definition of the purpose of the Congregation (cf. C.1) There is in that an expectation which deserves to be further examined. Vatican II having pronounced on the preferential option for the poor, and the extraordinary synod, as the Church of Africa in Synod, having reaffirmed it, the Vincentians have a secular witness to bring to it. This witness continues with greater spirit if future priests are brought, right from the start of their formation, to take a greater part in this option.

From the laity's side, this same effort must be led by the Vincentian who, strong in the secular experience of the congregation in the frame-work of movements of Vincentian inspiration, is called on to open new ways of action. However, one point needs to be made; one cannot limit the Vincentian spirit only to those movements of Vincentian origin. The Vincentian spirit is part of the heritage of the Church, and it goes without saying that even those movements or commissions of the laity originating in Africa which have no umbilical ties with what we call the "Vincentian laity" still have need of the Vincentian spirit. It isn't necessary for us, under the pretext of developing the Vincentian mission in Africa, to create movements which, in fact, replicate or run concurrent with what the Church in Africa already has. Rather, the Vincentian spirit encourages us to offer our collaboration and experience in order to support these local initiatives.

The C.M. must also reinforce its insertion in the local church of Africa in the area of dialogue under all these headings; intra-ecclesial, theological, ecumenical, inter-religious and cultural. Our contribution in this area comes from the fact that, for us, dialogue is an effective means of sharing and deepening our common vocation.

The C.M. and the means, and culture, of communication(cf C.12). We often speak now of a new world economic order and, after the cold war, of a new world political order, based on the rule of law. A new world order of communication is no less important as a incontrovertible prelude to a new humanity. In this area, there would be quite a lot of things to do at the heart of the Church and the Congregation. When you open the information organs of the C.M. for example, you get the distinct impression that the Vincentians of Africa don't do too much. Which, of course, is not true. The information is simply not passed on. Could this be because oral culture is

still so strong in Africa? But even oral tradition needs support. Therefore, as well as participating in the pastoral activity of the church in this area, the C.M. in Africa must set up a communications structure, not primarily to make itself known (it's not the proper function of the humble C.M. to make noise or to blow its own trumpet) but to open up and share one another's experiences.

CONCLUSION

To speak of the impact of the African Synod on the Vincentians in Africa, is, in fact, to see the Vincentian charism faced with the social and ecclesial situation in Africa. In effect, the African Synod today synthesises the whole context of the evangelical mission of the Church of Africa. Rooting the Vincentian charism in Africa calls us to an enriching reciprocity. On the one hand, the Vincentian charism sets out to take African life by storm in order to root itself there and to become an african heritage as much at the level of expression as of physical presence. Theologians speak here of the dynamic of inculturation which necessarily implies a reinterpretation which will tend to take up again, in a new manner and a new context, the same evangelical message. In the Congregation we speak of the "Preservation of the Primitive Spirit" which is understood in terms of a "living tradition". Therefore, Africa can enrich the Vincentian charism. On the other hand, the Vincentian charism enriches Africa, in the sense that, through interaction, it sets out to offer to Africa a spirit capable of helping it to deepen its life in Christ. In this time of in-depth evangelisation, our reflection is most apposite.

The African challenges high-lighted by the African Synod and the situations which the Church in Africa is called on to face offer to the Vincentians in Africa both a vast panorama of the mission but also a reading of experience made in a typically Vincentian spirit. This is a real grace for the Congregation. We must seize it in order to offer Africa a "Vincentian therapy", which, since it is part of an African reading of events, is, in short, an African therapy. This seems to be the recurring theme of the Vincentian involvement in Africa.

Africa needs us, not simply because of the fact that we are there but because we have our place there and all that Africa experiences in its heart-break can be seen as replicating the Vincentian charism. Thus, may we not also be distracted by life-sapping hesitations, as much about the peoples of Africa as about the image of the family of St. Vincent de Paul.

It is said; "Who risks nothing, has nothing". What would be the risk for Vincentians with regard to our vocation? We have to run to suffering as we run to fire. Can a Vincentian take the risk of waiting until everything is going well before acting, without, by this very fact, denying his vocation?

We must remain men of hope. As the African Synod wished to be a synod of hope, the C.M. in Africa must be a community of hope. And hope doesn't cause us to cross our arms and wait; it makes us act. This phrase of St. Vincent de Paul must resound in our hearts; "Let us wait patiently, but let us act...."

