

REFLECTIONS ON MISSIONS “AD GENTES” IN THE LIGHT OF ST. VINCENT

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Ever since the announcement of the coming canonization of John Gabriel Perboyre, a renewed concern for the missions “ad gentes” has stirred the hearts of many missionaries. About these missions the Constitutions of the C.M., echoing the thought of St. Vincent, say, “... they occupy an eminent place among the apostolic works of the Congregation” (CC.16). The exhortations of our Founder on this theme have rushed into my memory as I re-read the letters of Fr. Robert Maloney, C.M., Superior General, in which he reported on his visits to China and Africa, and at the same time issued a call to all the members of the Congregation to respond generously by volunteering to participate in the international missions supported by the Congregation. Is it because in the present circumstances the whole Congregation will have to give clearer proofs, or make greater sacrifices in personnel and resources to show that, in fact, the missions do occupy an “eminent place” among its works? Should there not also be a reactivating of the missionary spirit through a more generalized self-giving to the missions in those countries in which exists poverty at once most shameful and needful of help? Today and always the real dedication to the missions revitalizes the spirit of a Congregation which was born precisely to bring the gospel to any part of the world.

Already in St. Vincent’s time the missionaries grew in their vocations in the face of the need to go to “far off” countries in which the gospel had not yet been preached or the church not yet established. The call to the missions was a vocational “wake up call” which the Founder used in his oral and written communications.¹ The same can be said of the missions taken on by other Superiors General, the successors of St. Vincent, which generated and reaffirmed very valuable vocations to the Congregation of the Mission. The example of John Gabriel Perboyre confirms this. His dedication to preaching the gospel message, first in the seminaries of San Floro and in the novitiate in Paris, and later in China, a dedication marked by a love for Christ and the church, has produced incalculable benefits in the whole Christian world and above all in that small part which is the Vincentian family.

The passion for following Jesus, the Evangelizer of the poor

¹ The theme of the missions “ad gentes” in relation to St. Vincent has been amply treated by different authors. Here we give a brief extract of their writings, cf. Redondo, J., *Misionología de San Vicente*, Mexico 1960; Van Winsen, *Saint Vincent et les missions étrangères*, Vincentiana (1978), pp.158-182; Esparza, C., *San Vicente de Paúl y la misión “ad gentes”*, Caminos de Misión (1992), no. 50, pp. 21-26; no 51, pp. 23-25; Orcajo, A., *La visión misionera de San Vicente*, San Vicente y la misión “ad gentes”, CEME, Salamanca 1995, pp.169-199.

The devotion to the missions springs from a passionate love for Jesus, sent by the Father to evangelize the poor, according to the Vincentian experience. Jesus is the first and most excellent model for all missionaries. Incarnated in our nature and anointed by the Spirit to announce the good news of salvation, Jesus of Nazareth teaches in the synagogues, cures the sick, pardons sinners and calls everyone to conversion. In his person the Scriptural texts about the Messiah are fulfilled (cf. Luke 4:21), that he went about doing good in the towns and villages of Palestine, and that he would have gone beyond their borders *“if his eternal wisdom had deemed it necessary to go and preach conversion to the poor nations. For that he sent his apostles and he sends us, like them, to carry his flame everywhere.”* (SVP, XI, 387)². Here indeed is the missionary to the poor, full of compassionate love and mercy who gives rise to the vocation of Vincent de Paul and the Mission he put in motion, starting in 1617, on the occasion of the mission in Gannes-Folleville.

Vincent’s references to Jesus as missionary are constant in any place in which he makes known his spiritual, community and apostolic teachings. One witness assures us that *“when Vincent speaks deeply...about compassion for the afflicted, taking care of the poor, zeal for the salvation of souls...he does so in deed and word.”* (SVP, XI,835-836). We can affirm with complete assurance that the contagion Vincent communicated to his companions was due to his professed love for Jesus, the Savior of the world. As a result, all were impressed by his conduct and his words and were willing, in general, to go to the ends of the earth to *“make God known to the poor, announce Jesus Christ to them, tell them the reign of God is near, and that that kingdom is for the poor.”* (SVP, XI, 387). Many times he was heard to say his greatest ideal on this earth was to serve the Gospel to every creature, no matter how far away, and that he envied the luck of the missionaries *“sent to the four corners of the world”* (cf.SVP, III, 260; XI, 28). In conclusion we may say the desire to imitate Jesus, evangelizer of the poor was not overridden, in any way, by exclusively sociological motives.

Who does not hear in these words the resonance they produced in former generations? There is no one among us who does not know, at least in theory, that the vocation to follow Jesus the evangelizer of the poor bears within itself a profound disposition to go to any part of the world. If there exists any clue for discerning the missionary vocation it has to be feeling, like St. Paul, the urgency of the charity of Christ to bring to everyone the knowledge of God and his messenger Jesus Christ. (John 17:3). If such is not the case, one has made a mistake in entering a Company *“brought up with such a disposition that, leaving everything, when His Holiness chooses to send it, it would go happily”* (SVP, II, 214). This is what our Founder wrote to B. Codoing on May 25, 1642 expressing to him the great consolation he felt when Mons. Ingoli, first

² We are citing San Vicente de Paúl, Obras Completas, in the Spanish Sígueme edition., in italic print followed by the volume and page number.

secretary of the Propagation of the Faith, asked him on various occasions to take charge of some missions. Such a feeling was not due to any fleeting emotion, but rather to the deepest conviction of faith and love for Jesus Christ as is shown by any number of communications previous to this date. He was convinced it was in the mission countries where the greatest poverty and the fewest laborers prevailed, and the harvest was most abundant (cf, SVP X, 379). Despite the three centuries that have passed, this situation remains the same; there is no sadder desolation in the world than that seen in underdeveloped countries, as innumerable witnesses attest, not only members of the hierarchy and superiors of missionary congregations, but also any observer attentive to the evolution of peoples.

Proven Love for the Church

Jesus' mission to the world and his sending of the apostles with the mandate to preach the gospel to all peoples invigorate St. Vincent's catechesis to his disciples. After many explanations about the missionary vocation, he concludes with great understanding of the etymological and conceptual sense of the term "missionary" as being equivalent to "apostle": "What does "missionary" mean? It means 'sent, sent by God'. The Lord has said to you: 'Go out to the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature.' " (SVP, XI, 342). Indeed, the Twelve, obedient to the Lord's command, disperse throughout the world giving testimony by word and work about the life of Jesus incarnated, put to death and risen for the salvation/ liberation of all mankind. As proof of their love for Jesus, they faced persecutions, imprisonment, threats and death itself; and nothing and no one could detain their steps or silence their voice. Above all the apostle Paul, the vessel of election, is the indefatigable model of labor and love for the Christian communities which spring up in one or another place, according to the impulse of the Holy Spirit who leads Paul along different paths.

The Founder of the Congregation cannot read the Acts of the Apostles without feeling aroused by the same Spirit which impelled Paul of Tarsus to announce to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ. After reading, Vincent transmitted to his companions the fire which consumed him interiorly. The hardships of evangelization did not terrify him, as they did not the Apostles, not even the deaths within the Company as a result of the missions. On the contrary, he would say, "Let not the difficulties make cowards of you. This is a matter of the glory of the Father and the efficacy of the word and of the passion of his Son. The salvation of the nations and our own salvation are such a great good they merit any effort, whatever price they may cost. It does not matter if we die first as long as we die with our arms in our hands...For every missionary who gives his life for love, God will raise up many others who will accomplish the good the first (missionary) may have left undone." (SVP, XI, 290).

History has confirmed this prophecy which had already been made by Tertulian in his Apologetic: “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christians.” Can there be any doubt that the blood of our martyrs, like John Gabriel Perboyre and Francis Regis Clet, to cite just two examples, have been the seed of abundant missionary vocations? The work of the domestic and foreign missions admits no comparison with the other ministries of the Congregation. They possess an educative force the other ministries do not offer. They are the admirable models of self-giving to the evangelization of the faith which have forged authentic vocations to the Congregation and have given most saints to the community. If this is the case, and there can be doubt of it, should the missionary charism be weakened, the company would be undermined in its essential vocation and would have little to offer to those who presented themselves to be continuers of the principal work of Jesus, who came from heaven to earth to fulfill the mission given to him by the Father.

The passionate love for Jesus is lived conjointly with a love for the church, evangelizer of and evangelized by those very people to whom she consecrates her labor. This has been the testimony of all the servants of the gospel. The church as Kingdom of God, sheepfold and Body of Christ suggests to St. Vincent interesting missionary consequences, expressions of his baptismal and priestly experience. As the Kingdom of God the church shows, by means of the missions, that the Holy Spirit guides her (SVP, XI, 730). As sheepfold or flock the church needs zealous shepherds who pasture the sheep, search for those who are lost, bind the wounds and attract all to the one stable of salvation (cf. Luke 15: 4-7; Mat. 18:12 s-14). As the Body of Christ the church is composed of many members intimately linked among themselves; and the missionaries are the most solicitous and compassionate for the suffering members of that Body (SVP, XI, 560-561). In these and other images of the church, such as the harvest that requires workers (SVP, XI, 734), or the Spouse who needs to be purified (cf., SVP, II, 377), what stands out is the goodness of God who “*who has chosen the missionaries as instruments of his immense and fatherly love which seeks to reign and grow in souls.*” (SVP, XI, 533).

The fear that the church would disappear in Europe because of the wars of religion and the depravity of the customs spurred St. Vincent’s zeal. In 1647 he discovers the same concern in J. Dehorgny: “*I may tell you this is a sentiment which has been reproaching my soul for a long time...But, even though God did not have this plan, should we not then contribute to the extension of the church?*” (SVP, III, 143). The fact of the matter is Vincent spent his greatest efforts in the dedication to the missions and the formation of the clergy as a proof of his love for the church.

The fire of charity

Clearly the aforementioned images of the church may be applied to individual and collective persons, although not all may have received the same

charism of missionary charity. It was charity that moved the Son of God to become man like us and “*to establish among us, by his example and his word, charity towards the neighbor.*” (SVP, XI, 555). If we analyze carefully the origins of the Mission, we will see it was “zeal for the salvation of souls” that gave birth to it. Therefore, it labors always urged on by love and even remains “*in a state of charity*” (Cf. SVP, XI, 564).

The outstanding effect of charity is apostolic zeal, zeal for the glory of God on earth, zeal to carry the gospel to all nations. It is the missionary’s most characteristic virtue, and the one in which the Founder of the Mission most insisted under distinct aspects. We have all heard any number of times that reflection of his, inspired surely by a similar one in St. Francis de Sales on devotion: “*Zeal consists of a pure desire to become pleasing to God and useful to the neighbor. Zeal to extend the Reign of God, zeal to procure the salvation of the neighbor. Is there anything more perfect in the world? If love is a fire, zeal is its flame; if love is a sun, zeal is its ray. Zeal is the purest thing there is in love for God*” (SVP, XI, 590). Now one can better understand why the missionaries are models of charity: because they follow Jesus, “*who came to bring fire to the earth to inflame it with his love. What else must we do except let it burn and consume all?*”(SVP, XI, 555).

The missionary shows he is inflamed by theological charity if he feels the need to bear this same charity to needy peoples even though his weakness makes it impossible for him. In this case, the fervor of his interior charity will produce invisible but real effects in the whole Body of Christ. Many, as a consequence of the communion of saints, will feel without knowing how, that a force impels them to give their lives for their brothers. Popes Paul VI and John Paul II have placed this in relief in their encyclicals and missionary allocutions while referring to zeal, the product of charity, in the common endeavor of the evangelization of peoples. The absence of zeal, on the other hand, would translate into effects contrary to charity which is, by nature, outgoing and contagious: pusillanimity, cowardice, insensitivity, laziness and comfort seeking, vices which St. Vincent denounces severely as enemies of the Mission. It is enough to make one laugh to imagine the Founder of the Congregation ridiculing with heavy irony those who are lazy and lacking in evangelical zeal, while he arouses admiration and enthusiasm when he extols the valiant apostles of the Gospel. A similar enthusiasm broke out in him when he witnessed the interior life many missionaries cultivated, anxious to go to the missions despite their advanced age and sickness; but most of all when he gave witness to the fact that some companions gave their lives engaged in the principal work of the church and the Company.

These he considered happy and blessed. St. Paul, St. Vincent Ferrer and St. Francis Xaver--these he saw as authentic witnesses of Jesus for having carried the Reign of God to the nations. For this reason St. Vincent encouraged the desire for the missions, which “*is the highest, most useful and sanctifying work*

there is in the Church...The apostles and the greatest saints have considered themselves happy to be consumed by this” (SVP, IV, 348). On one occasion while speaking of the missionary vocation he pointed out the reason for so much happiness: “How happy the condition of the missionary who has no other limits in his missions except the habitable world itself! Why then restrict ourselves to one point and limit ourselves to one parish if the whole circumference of the circle is ours?” (SVP, XI, 828-829).

Enviably Disponability

Zeal or inflamed charity demands an attitude of disponability without which the great work of the missions is impossible. In the time of the Founder, disponability was the requisite and proof of a vocation to the Mission. In fact *“our vocation consists in going, not to one parish or just one diocese, but rather to the whole earth.”* (SVP, XI, 533). The contrary would be equivalent to denying the designs of God for this Company which must make itself present wherever there is the greatest need for evangelical workers. There will be no missions if disponible missionaries are lacking, free from every enslaving tie: places, ministries, idolatrous inclinations. Disponability knows no limits of language, color, culture or customs. The hardships which the missions present are of no importance to the missionary freed from himself and of the goods the Evil One promises. What counts for him is the following of Jesus, who had no fixed place to lay his head.

Is the disponability of the old communities of the Congregation in crisis today? Do they not tend to close in on themselves as the snail in its shell? Are they not more concerned about their own subsistence than for wider universal horizons? Judging from the aforementioned letters of the present Superior General signs of missionary enthusiasm are noted everywhere. Nevertheless, he insists in issuing new calls to the disponability of all the members of the Congregation. Although the numerical decrease in vocations in the West and the aging of the personnel in the older provinces are irrefutable facts, they do not seem to be evidence of a lack of spirit for the missions “ad gentes”. While it may be true that the total number of defections and deaths is greater today than the number of priestly ordinations, it is evident, on the other hand, that the missionary ardor remains incandescent in many confreres who work in the young churches with great vocational futures. While a certain individualism may be detected in the carrying out of some functions, made clear in the documents of recent Assemblies, at the same time we can count on international collaboration in missionary projects. Arguments for and against color the (supposed) disponible behavior of today’s missionaries, which probably demonstrate “selective memory” about the (supposed) generalized conduct of the missionaries of the past with regard to the calls for aid received from Major Superiors.

Some old communities still have great openness to the ministry of “popular missions”. If, as John Paul II teaches, “the home mission is a credible sign and stimulus for the foreign mission, and viceversa”, disponability for the first helps to verify the universal spirit required for the second, and viceversa; active participation - the more the better - in foreign missions reinforces the ideal of home missions. This affirmation is also verified by the history of the Church and that of our own community. In the Congregation of the Mission, the missions “ad gentes” sprang from the impulse of the missions to the communities of old Christianity. Thus St. Vincent understood and explained it: “*We must maintain fervently here the possessions of the Church and the interests of Jesus Christ, and meanwhile work unceasingly to effect new conquests and bring it about that the most distant peoples come to know Him*” (SVP, XI, 245). And he said this, in the language of his time, while counting on reduced numbers and foreseen and unforeseen adversities.

Conclusion

Nothing and no one can impede that the missionary spirit, open to any disposition of Providence, live with hope for the future. Every missionary, even the sick and the old, is called, each in his own way, to seek and to establish the Reign of God. The physically incapable help to sustain the missionary fervor of those who work in the midst of strong opposition. With regard to this it is helpful to recall St. Vincent’s phrase: “*Jesus Christ and the saints did more by suffering than by laboring*” (SVP, II, 9). With their eyes fixed on Jesus crucified, who died for the salvation of all peoples in obedience to the Father and for love of mankind, the missionaries reduced to silence and suffering complete the redemptive passion of Christ by uniting themselves sincerely to the suffering and evangelizing body of the Church.

(Joseph V. Cummins, C.M., Translator)