

THE MISSION

- Opening Conference at Salamanca -

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I am very happy to be with you here today, my brothers. We gather together from East and West, from North and South. As Visitors in the Congregation you exercise a special responsibility in regard to the life and mission of the confreres. In these days we will focus together on two themes especially: 1) the role of the Visitor as leader and as administrator, 2) the inculturation of the Vincentian charism. In these opening remarks I offer you a few reflections on the mission of the Congregation itself. I do so because the Visitor, as animator, must articulate our mission clearly and hold it up again and again before the eyes of the confreres. I do so also because it is crucial that we inculturate our mission today in new and varied settings throughout the world.

So, let me begin.

"Congregation of the Mission" is our name. Popular usage, "reflecting Divine Providence," gave it to us, St. Vincent tell us.¹ The name makes our vocation clear: we are missionaries.

It is important to note from the start that our name is not "Congregation of the Missions." In other words, "the mission" is not to be identified with "the popular missions." St. Vincent, while always emphasizing the place of the popular missions,² makes it very clear that "the mission" can be carried out in a variety of other ways.³

This morning, I want to focus on our *mission itself today*. I will proceed in two steps: 1) new factors in influencing "the mission," 2) some contemporary ways of actualizing it.

I. NEW FACTORS IN INFLUENCING "THE MISSION"

Changing circumstances in society make it necessary for Congregations to adjust their life and mission continually. Recent popes, particularly Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and John Paul II in *Redemptoris Missio*, and now in *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* and in *Vita Consecrata*, have reminded us of the new challenges that face those engaged in an evangelizing mission. They speak of:

¹*Common Rules* XI, 10 (henceforth, CR): "The name Missioners, or Priests of the Mission, clearly indicates that the work of the missions is the primary and most important of all ministries to people."

²*Ibid.*

³SV XI, 135; XII, 85ff.

- the "new areopagi";⁴ that is, new sectors in which the gospel must be proclaimed _ such as the world of communication, science, and international relations _ particularly as the Church seeks to promote peace, human development, and the liberation of peoples.⁵
- new forms of poverty, different from those of other eras, which challenge missionaries as they attempt to give flesh to the Church's preferential option for the poor.⁶
- a new evangelization: new in its ardor, its methods, and its expression.⁷
- new means of communication which are available to the evangelizer in catechizing, preaching, and teaching, but which also form part of a new "information culture" which is itself badly in need of evangelization.⁸

All of these new factors challenge us. They influence our life and mission whether we are alert to them or not. It is crucial that we allow them to shape the forms that our ministries take.

II. ACTUALIZING THE MISSION TODAY

The mission of every group must be "actualized" in every era;⁹ otherwise, the group remains static, and eventually it withers and dies.¹⁰

St. Vincent himself provides us with the key for actualizing our own mission. In fact, he repeats it again and again: *he sent me to preach the good news to the poor.*¹¹ Our Constitutions state the same foundational principle with utter clarity: "The purpose of the Congregation is to follow Christ, the Evangelizer of the Poor."¹² Whatever we do must be done in this light. All actualizations, directly or indirectly, should be expressions of that basic statement.

⁴*Vita Consecrata*, 96f; *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 57.

⁵*Redemptoris Missio*, 37.

⁶*Vita Consecrata*, 73, 82, 89; *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 51; *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 42.

⁷John Paul II, Discourse at the 19th ordinary assembly of CELAM, Haiti, March 9, 1983: discourse given in Santo Domingo, October 12, 1984; cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 63; *Centesimus Annus*, 5; *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 45; *Vita Consecrata*, 81.

⁸*Vita Consecrata*, 99; *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 45; *Redemptoris Missio*, 47.

⁹For an interesting reflection on this matter, cf. A. Sylvestre, "Priest of the Mission for what purpose?" *Vincentiana* XXXIV (# 6; November- December 1995) 363-73.

¹⁰A number of business corporations are learning this lesson the hard way. Even some which were once thriving concerns are now experiencing death pangs because they did not adjust to rapidly changing economic circumstances.

¹¹Lk 4:18.

¹²Constitutions 1 (henceforth, C).

Let me reflect briefly upon some of the principal contemporary ways of actualizing the mission.

1. *Giving popular missions*

Even if, as pointed out above, it is important to avoid the mistake of identifying "the mission" with "the missions," nonetheless St. Vincent regarded the work of the missions as "the primary and most important of our ministries to people."¹³ Today, in some countries, popular missions have less appeal, and apparently less efficacy, than in former times. In much of the world, however, they are still an effective evangelizing tool. It is therefore important that this work be renewed in the Congregation. There have already been some very creative efforts in this regard within the worldwide Congregation.¹⁴ These renewed missions have several distinctive characteristics:

- a) a time of significant preparation (the pre-mission),
- b) the organization and training of a mission team, often involving a large number of priests, deacons, sisters, brothers, and lay men and women,
- c) an extended time period within the area of the mission (the time varies),
- d) catechesis and reflection on the word of God within small groups,
- e) involvement of the *local* clergy and laity in the mission itself,
- f) organization of works of charity within the mission area,
- g) follow-up.

2. *Formation of the clergy*

St. Vincent was utterly clear in seeing this as part of our mission. "At the beginning," he told the confreres on December 6, 1658, "the Company was occupied only with itself and the poor, but in the fullness of time he called us to contribute to the making of good priests..."¹⁵

In recent years, with changing circumstances and the diminishing number of vocations in Western Europe and the United States, this work has suffered considerably. Nonetheless, there are still many possibilities for taking part in it:

- a) ministering in diocesan seminaries in one's own country,
- b) forming "national" teams to staff diocesan seminaries in other countries,
- c) forming "international" teams to staff diocesan seminaries in other countries,
- d) providing spiritual directors and confessors for seminaries or for dioceses,
- e) giving retreats for seminarians and for priests,

¹³CR XI, 10.

¹⁴In recent times, mission teams with as many as 1000 members have been trained to focus on an entire diocese or even a country, with considerable success. Cf. T. Sendlein, "An experience of the Vincentian Spirit in the Panamanian National Mission," *Vincentiana* XXXIX (1995) 311-24.

¹⁵SV XII, 84.

- f) offering programs of ongoing formation for priests.
- g) offering hospitality

3. *Engaging in foreign missions*

There are few topics on which St. Vincent was more eloquent. He told the members of the Congregation of the Mission: "Let us ask God to give the Company this spirit, this heart, this heart which will make us go everywhere, this heart of the Son of God, the heart of Our Lord, the heart of Our Lord, the heart of Our Lord..."¹⁶

Today, within the Congregation, many provinces sponsor a foreign mission or share that responsibility with other provinces.¹⁷ There has also been a resurgence of interest in foreign missions, with many confreres volunteering to take part in the new international missions.

One of the major challenges in the missions *Ad Gentes* today is inculturation, which the Daughters of Charity have chosen as the theme of their next General Assembly and which we will soon be discussing at the Visitors' Meeting in Salamanca.

4. *Ministering to the Daughters of Charity*

St. Vincent was adamant that this was part of our mission:

Did not the Son of God come to preach the gospel to the poor, to ordain priests, etc.? Yes. Did he not consent to have women associated with him? Yes. Did he not guide them toward perfection and toward helping the poor? Yes. If then Our Lord, who did all things for our instruction, did that, shall we not think that we are doing what is right by following him?

The Congregation exercises this ministry especially by providing good Provincial Directors and spiritual directors¹⁸ for the Daughters of Charity. We are also frequently called upon to provide preachers for their retreats. Since the Daughters of Charity are a huge force in the service of the most abandoned, our ministry to them can bear significant fruit in the lives of the poor. Helping in the formation of the Daughters of Charity (and other groups that serve the most abandoned), while an indirect service of the poor, can be a very effective way of multiplying and enriching the energies of those who serve directly the spiritual and corporal needs of the poor.

¹⁶SV XI, 291.

¹⁷For a full listing of the foreign missions of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, cf. José Ignacio Fernández, "La extensión misionera actual de ambas congregaciones: Congregación de la Misión y Compañía de la Hijas de la Caridad" in *San Vicente Y La Misión Ad Gentes* (Salamanca: CEME, 1995) 253-287.

¹⁸C 17.

5. *Organizing groups, especially the young, to serve the poor.*

As mentioned above, St. Vincent had wonderful skills as an organizer. I urge the Congregation to organize as he did.

Ministry to the young is extremely important today. They are the Church of the future. Several recent studies point out that young people seek:¹⁹

- explicit religious goals
- intense community life and solidarity
- explicit and worldwide service to the most needy.

I want to encourage members of the Congregation of the Mission throughout the world to gather young people together in order to share our Vincentian mission in the service of the poor. This can take the form of Vincentian Marian Youth groups, or other forms, depending on the local culture and its possibilities, but I urge all to make this one of the contemporary actualizations of the mission. Just as "the charities" spread throughout France in St. Vincent's time, let Vincentian youth groups of various kinds flourish where the members of the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity serve.

6. *Organizing basic christian communities among the poor*

St. Vincent recognized the importance of communities of faith. For the various groups that he founded, he was careful to provide a rule, a way of life that undergirded their works.

Today, as has been evident since the time of *Evangelii Nuntiandi*,²⁰ and even before,²¹ basic christian communities have a special place in the evangelizing activity of the Church. They are the beneficiaries of evangelization and, at the same time, evangelizers themselves. Such communities can be a primary locus for hearing and reflecting on the word of God as well as for organizing the means of practical charity that will be of help in confronting the real needs of the poor.

7. *Missionary parishes _ some questions*

I trust that you will forgive my folly in raising significant questions about a work in which so many confreres are engaged.

¹⁹Cf. Albert di Ianni, "Religious Vocations: New Signs of the Times," *Review for Religious* 52 (# 5; September-October 1993) 745-763. Also, D. Nygren and M. Ukeritis, *The Future of Religious Orders in the United States* (Connecticut: Praeger Press, 1993) 251.

²⁰*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 58.

²¹Medellin, "Conclusions," 6.13, 14; 13.33.

I have no doubt that there are, within the Congregation, genuinely missionary parishes, which are truly an actualization of "the mission." Nonetheless, Statute 10 lays down a number of conditions for verifying whether parishes are really a manifestation of our mission: a) that the apostolate which we exercise there is in accordance with the purpose and nature of our institute, b) that the small number of pastors in the area requires our presence, c) that the parish consists, for the most part, of the really poor, or, d) that it is attached to a seminary where the confreres give pastoral formation.

Our most recent statistics note that 1074 confreres are engaged in parish ministry, a very high percentage (31%) of our total membership. In comparison, the number of Vincentians involved in such foundational works of the community as popular missions and seminaries is small.

This leads me to ask whether it is legitimate for the Congregation of the Mission to be so heavily engaged in parish ministry and whether or not a significant number of our parishes actually do meet the criteria set out in Statute 10.

Let me suggest the following characteristics as a basis for evaluating whether a parish is truly "Vincentian" and "missionary:"

- a. it is among the really poor;
- b. the diocesan clergy lack the resources to staff it;
- c. our commitment there is temporally limited (hopefully, by a clear contract);
- d. we have definite missionary goals to be realized within that time frame;
- e. among these is the preparation of ongoing pastoral care in the future, particularly through training leaders in various ministries;
- f. organized works of practical charity are functioning in the parish in the service of the needy;
- g. Vincentian lay groups are being formed (Vincentian Marian Youth Groups, Society of St. Vincent de Paul, AIC, the Miraculous Medal Association, etc.);
- h. systematic instruction on the social teaching of the Church is offered;
- i. the "style" of ministry is simple and humble;
- j. it is an *evangelizing* parish, with strong emphasis on the word of God.

We fulfill our mission only if we follow Christ as the Evangelizer of the Poor and actualize his mission today. The great missionary is not so much a man whose

sermons are beautiful as a man whose life, words, and works mirror those of Christ the missionary.

The genuine missionary *presences* Christ's love. Others sense it in him. He could not hide it even if he wanted to.

The mission _ that is our calling. Breathe deeply, my brothers, of the missionary spirit that Saint Vincent inspired in the Congregation. Let it fill your minds and hearts. Hold it up clearly before the eyes of the confreres. Encourage them to adapt our mission fully to new cultures, to seek out the new poor, to use new means of communication to communicate the good news. Help them make our mission more global, more all-embracing. Say to them, as Jesus did: Go. "Go into the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mk. 16:15).