

Announcing the good news of salvation in the steps of Saint Vincent

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As missionaries, one of our first responsibilities consists in building up the faith of people who are often disorientated, weak in their beliefs, tempted by the sects, or at times non-believers who are seeking faith. So what is required is an announcing of the good news of Jesus Christ who died and rose again to save us. In other words the kerygma proclaimed by the Church since the day of Pentecost. And from that base to give a widely comprehensive presentation of the faith in order to help people of our day to achieve a better grasp of their faith and to live it in a coherent fashion. This announcement of the faith through parish missions (1)---- beginning as we do at the heart of the matter, namely Christ's death and resurrection for our salvation---- will be the theme for today. Tomorrow we shall approach another aspect: moral behaviour and conversion of life.

The reflexion which I am proposing to you will start from the experience of St Vincent. For him this aspect was absolutely central in his missionary ministry. My wish is that the experience and the teaching of our founder might help us to reflect today on a dimension of the popular mission which is not always evident, but which in my opinion ought always to be seen as fundamental. And then the Irish mission team will offer us some reflexions on proclaiming the faith in the cultural context of their own country.

1. A Situation of religious ignorance

St Vincent, as we saw on a previous day, was struck by the profound ignorance of the faith among poor country folk who were abandoned by the Church. So much so that in his opinion their eternal salvation was at risk. *The ignorance of the poor people is almost unbelievable* (XI,81), he said to his missionaries. *They don't know how many gods there are, how many persons in God* (XII,305), he wrote. Mission reports provide abundant descriptions of this profound ignorance. *Asking them if there is a God*, wrote Etienne Blatiron from Corsica, *or if there are several, and which of the three divine persons became man for us was like speaking Arabic!*. Examples could be multiplied since mission reports are so full of descriptions of the deplorable situation of the country people who were baptised into the Catholic Church but were failing to understand and to live the faith. And so, in certain regions, many of them were passing over to Protestantism, *as a result of not hearing mention of God, so they say, from the Catholic Church!* Such is the lament of St Vincent (I, 514).

(1) "Popular Missions" is not a phrase which is used in Great Britain and Ireland; so, in order to translate "Mission Populaire", I have written "Parish Mission", the current expression in those countries.

Translator.

Why is this religious ignorance so serious? Saint Vincent gives the following reply to his missionaries: *How can a soul who doesn't know God, and doesn't know what God has done for love of him, how can such a soul believe, hope and love?* And how will this soul be saved without faith, without hope, without love? (XII, 81). Hence the need to announce Christ the saviour.

2. Announcing the good news of salvation

St Vincent's means for remedying this sad situation is parish missions. *Now, God, says St Vincent to his confrères.... wished in his great mercy to bring a remedy to that (situation) through the missionaries, having sent them in order to enable these poor people to be saved.* And a little further on he continues

O, Saviour!you raise up a Company for that purpose; you have sent it to the poor and you wish it to make you known to them as the one true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent into the world so that by this means they might have eternal life (XII, 81). It is through knowledge of the one true God and of his Son Jesus Christ the saviour that salvation comes to us. It is this core of the faith that is at the centre of missionary catechesis so that, through believing it and living it, those who welcome it are given new life, eternal life.

We know for a fact that, in the Common Rules, St Vincent established for the missionaries the objective of *going, after the example of Our Lord and his disciples, through the villages and hamlets, in order to break the bread of the word of God for the little ones* (C.R. 2). Listed first was preaching which tended to take up themes of a moral order in an effort to remedy numerous disorders in the personal, family and social life of people who were often far removed from the gospel ideal.

Catechetics, for its part, has as its objective the transmission of the faith. It is this latter which interests us here and anyway it is the most important in the eyes of St Vincent who wrote in 1638: *The fruit yielded by the missions comes from the catechism classes* (I,429), because that is where the faith of the people is strengthened and built up.

In the concrete, teaching catechism has as its objective the announcing of the principal mysteries of the faith (the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Eucharist), as well as the commandments of God, the creed and the Our Father. Missioners ought to explain them in the simplest possible manner by adapting themselves to the capacity of these very simple people who lack intellectual formation. Unfortunately we possess only one single text of the catechism teachings given by St Vincent. It is a teaching about the Trinity, given on a mission to the poor of the Name of Jesus (hospice), during the summer of 1631 (XIII, 156 - 163). It is wonderful. In it we find reproduced the patient dialogues of St Vincent with all the simple, eloquent images which he chose in order to put across his message.

A superficial reading of St Vincent could let us believe that, through catechism teaching, he and the missionaries contented themselves with providing religious indoctrination, imposing, come what may, a learning by heart of the great abstract truths on people who were incapable of thereby welcoming any message about salvation. It is not impossible that some missionaries might have shown such a tendency, or that they might have over-stressed fear and threats of hell if the people didn't submit, since this exaggeration was current at the time.

However, St Vincent's most deeply felt aim, and very probably also his practice, was quite different. For him it is good news which has to be announced, in line with what he put as the motto on the seal of the Congregation: *He sent me to bring the good news to the poor*. This means new life, and a love coming from Christ which liberates us, and which we are called to imitate in regard to God and our neighbour. This is the fire of the love of God and of the neighbour which comes directly from Jesus and which must be communicated. We are to inflame the world with it, he says to his missionaries:

Our vocation therefore is to go, not into one parish or into one diocese only, but throughout the entire earth. For what purpose? To inflame the hearts of men, to do what the Son of God has done; he who came to cast fire on the earth and spread over it the flames of his love; what have we to desire unless that his love should burn and consume all? Let us reflect on this. It is true then that I have been sent not only to love God but to make him loved. It is not enough that I love God if my neighbour does not also love him. I ought to love my neighbour as being the image of God and the object of his love and reciprocally cause men to love their most lovable Creator, who knows them and recognises them as brothers and has so loved them as to deliver his own Son to death for them...(XII, 262 - 263) That is the whole purpose of the mission. It begins with the proclamation of the good news of the love of God in Jesus Christ.

3. The Evangelizer ought himself to have had an experience of being saved in Jesus Christ

In reality, how could I be a carrier of this divine fire if it is not burning within myself as a missionary? It's impossible. That would be the blind leading the blind. So that's why St Vincent declares: *Now if it be true that we are called to bear the love of God into all parts, if we are obliged to set the hearts of men on fire with it, ought not our own souls to burn with this divine fire!How shall we communicate it to others if we do not possess it ourselves?* (XII, 263).

Now, St Vincent knows what he is talking about when he is announcing the good news of being saved in Jesus Christ, when he's speaking of his love and of the charity which comes from God and spreads out to the neighbour. We know that, in the midst of a situation of personal crisis and spiritual distress, Vincent experienced the salvation which is brought about by Jesus Christ. At a certain moment his life was transformed and was opened up to God and to the neighbour through a total self-giving. That was what could

be called his conversion. We have a general grasp of the what took place. Let us just recall that for several years his life had been centred on himself. He had been seeking material possessions and social success, running after ecclesiastical benefices and personal advantages which he would achieve by keeping up contact with influential people. But this brought him only emptiness and disillusion. So much so that to escape from it he sought a spiritual director, M de Bã´rulle. This period was brought to its conclusion through a long and painful spiritual crisis during which he experienced doubts about the very foundations of his faith. It was a dark night which lasted about four years while he was in the de Gondi household. All the acts of mortification and charity which he could make failed to drive away his doubts. Abelly tells us that *he wrote out the creed on a paper which he placed next to his heart specifically as a remedy against the evil he was experiencing; and, uttering a general disavowal of all thoughts against faith, he made a pact with our Lord that each time he would put his hand on his heart and on this paper he willed to renounce the temptation even though he did not pronounce a single word* (Abelly 1, 167). A short time before the Folleville event, so it seems, St Vincent made the vow to consecrate all his life to the love of the Lord in the service of the poor. That is when, again Abelly tells us, *that all the suggestions of the evil spirit were dissipated and passed away. His heart which had been under oppression for so long found itself brought back into a gentle freedom, and his soul was filled with such abundant light that he declared on several occasions that he seemed to see the truths of the faith with a very special clarity* (Abelly 1,167).

In that happening, St Vincent had a profound experience of the presence of Jesus Christ and of the salvation which he brings. This transformed his life and was to remain with him. He passed from darkness into light, from oppression into liberty, from the anguish of doubt into the joy and the brightness of faith. He passed from a life centred on himself to a life completely given over to God and the poor. From then on he knew through experience and no longer through mere teaching that Christ is the saviour and that he is present in daily life right through into eternity. Christ was now a loving and life-giving presence. He was able to proclaim this with force and with power.

It would be good if each one of us asked ourself this question: what is my personal experience of salvation through Jesus Christ that can be the basis for my proclaiming that he is alive and the source of life and of love? Is my proclamation based on hear-say or on experience?

4. Transmitting an understanding of the faith

Henceforth St Vincent is burning with this *divine fire* which drives him towards the poor. With it he can set hearts on fire. He can go about proclaiming Jesus Christ. In his simple talks with people he can find the right words to touch the hearts and inflame them with faith and love. We don't have a transcript of what Saint Vincent said about Christ in catechism lessons; but in speaking to his missionaries he finds himself opening his heart to stimulate their faith and their love of the Lord, as in the conference of 30 May 1659: *Let us turn our eyes to the Son of God. Oh, what a charitable heart! What flames of love! My Jesus, say to us, please, a little of what has drawn you from heaven that you*

should come and suffer the maledictions of the earth, with so much persecution and so many torments? O fountain of love, humbled to our level and even to the punishment of a slave! In all that, who has shown more love for the neighbour than yourself? O Saviour, you came to expose yourself to all our miseries, to take the form of a sinner, to lead a life of suffering and to endure an ignominious death for us! Could there be a love comparable to this? Who could love with such surpassing affection? Who but our Lord, enamoured as he was of creatures to such a degree, as to leave his Father's throne and come and take a body subject to infirmity? And for what reason? In order to establish amongst us, by his example and his words, charity towards the neighbour. This love it was that crucified him and produced the admirable work of our redemption (XII, 264, 265).

As a result of this personal experience of Jesus Christ he was able to develop a whole lively catechesis on God and on Christ the saviour as well as on other aspects of the faith, making these understandable through the use of familiar wording and simple discussion. Let us remember that in the catechism lessons the missionary used to explain the principal mysteries of the faith (the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Eucharist), as well as the commandments of God, the creed and the Our Father. The missionary thus gave an overall view of the fundamental aspects of the faith, presenting a vast synthesis to nourish people's spirits as well as to touch their hearts.. Missioners, St Vincent said, will do this all the better for always continuing to listen to God who will inspire their words. *They ought, in speaking to them, he said, lift up their minds to God to receive from him what they ought to say to them. Because God is an inexhaustible source of wisdom, light and love. It is from him we should draw forth what we say to others (XII, 15).*

This doctrinal teaching in the "catechism-lessons" was completed during the day by the "preaching" which treated mainly of moral matters. Every aspect of personal, family and social life was touched on so that conversion would affect all the concrete areas of life and not simply remain an affective love of God; because it would be very suspect if it neglected an effective love which would serve poor and sick brothers and sisters. *Let us love God, my brothers, let us love God! But let it be through the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows. For, very often so many acts of love of God, of devotion, of well-wishing and other similar affections and interior movements of a tender heart, although very good and desirable, are nevertheless very suspect when they fail to lead into the practice of effective love (XI, 40).* As for St Vincent himself, he cannot be suspected of taking refuge in an abstract spirituality. Why? Because he had such a feel for concrete involvement in the service of the neighbour, and such an ability to link together love of God and love of one's neighbour, proclamation of Jesus Christ and material service of the poor. He invites us to do the same.

So what about ourselves today? What proclamation are we making of Jesus Christ who died and rose and is our saviour? What understanding of faith for today's world are we putting forth? Do we feel at ease about proclaiming the kerygma, the centre of our faith, like the apostles on Pentecost Day? What difficulties do we experience with regard to the people we are evangelising? And what are the resistances which we can detect in ourselves?

We shall be continuing our reflexions shortly by listening to the Irish mission team who will talk to us about proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ in the cultural context of their country.

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