

Preparation for the mission (Pre-mission)

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This paper will attempt to describe the "Pre-Mission" routine we have developed as a preliminary to an actual mission, which is usually directed to the Faithful of a parish with a large population of Spanish-speaking immigrants. There are two main sections: 1. Preparation of the team. 2. Preparation of each parish.

Preparation of the mission team

At the meeting of Vincentian Visitors in Bogota in January 1983, with its main theme, "Popular Missions," renewed interest in our primary function as Vincentians, the Evangelization of the poor, was very evident. The Philadelphia Province shortly afterwards responded by assigning a few confreres to a "Parish Renewal" team, which met with immediate success. Then, in 1985 the Provincial, Jerry Mahoney, decided that we should be into evangelizing one of the largest and neediest groups of Christians in the U.S., Hispanic immigrants. He asked Fathers John Kennedy and Art Kolinsky to begin this work, since both spoke Spanish.

To prepare ourselves for this apostolate we first visited the Catholic Committee for Hispanics in its three regional headquarters that correspond to the geographical limits of our Province:

- New York - Northeast
- Miami - Southeast
- South Bend - Midwest

These visits proved very productive. First of all, the directors in each area were pleased to see that the Vincentians were anxious to participate in the Spanish-speaking apostolate. And secondly, we were given a lot of helpful advice as well as names of Bishops they knew would welcome us to their dioceses.

Our next step was to visit the dioceses recommended to us: Brooklyn, Rockville Center, New York, Allentown, Miami, Venice, Tampa, Kalamazoo, in all of which we subsequently gave missions. Besides these, as the word spread about this newest Vincentian activity, and answering calls from Vincentian confreres in other Provinces, during the next few years we had missions in the dioceses of Brownsville, Midland-Odessa, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Latin American invitations also reached us, resulting in a six-year commitment (three months each year) to Panama, where our own Tom Sendlein was National Director of "La Mision Nacional," which reached every corner of the country and involved priests, religious and thousands of laity, between 1988 and 1993. And in 1994 and 1995 we directed missions to outlying areas of the Dominican Republic.

So, having targeted areas for our missions, we learned techniques from observing how our English Renewal Team (Tom Krafinski's) performed, and getting reports from Spanish-speaking provinces, mainly Colombia, we decided our own preparation was adequate to begin working. So we began.

Preparation for the mission

To prepare a parish for a Mission we try to visit it several months ahead of time. This is not always possible, especially where the parish is far away, like in California, while we are busy with Missions in New York! But we usually manage to make a preliminary visit, often only one of us, in order to get the remote preparations underway.

The first and basic preparation is always directed at the priests of the parish. And since we almost always go to parishes recommended to us by Diocesan Hispanic Directors, we have found clergy happy to see us, willing to listen to our plan, and ready to roll up their sleeves and take active part in the Mission itself. (How different from past days, when a pastor would take advantage of the Missioner's presence to get away for a little vacation!)

Once sure of the cooperation of the parish priests, and with their cooperation, we outline the plan of the Mission, accentuating the role of the laity, and ask for a meeting with the members of the parish. We explain to them that it is their mission not ours, and they, not us will make it or break it. If we have the good fortune to make this first visit over a weekend, we go to all the Sunday Masses, announce the Mission, give them the dates, and make a general call for volunteers. Knowing that not all parishioners will want to be active Mission workers, we give them an option: We pass out cards, ask them to sign them with name and address, and indicate their choice: they can opt to be Missioners who go out to the streets and visit homes with us - or be "Mission Prayers," promising to pray every day of the Mission for their friends and neighbors who are out visiting homes, as, in Jesus' words, "Fishers of Men."

Catholics in the U.S. are accustomed to having their doorbells rung by Evangelicals, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses. But not by other Catholics. So a few good sessions of instruction and animation, are necessary at this point. We urge them to bone up on their basic Catholic doctrine, in case they run across serious inquirers, but not to enter into any polemics. They are told that the main purpose of our door to door campaigning is to invite people to the Mission, not to proselytize. They visit as friends and neighbors. And these preliminary meetings are calculated to impress them with this conviction.

Since we usually cannot be in a parish at this time of preparation we ask the pastor if he can arrange for some good lay person, or a religious, or even himself!, to do the job. We have never met with a refusal, and almost always, on arrival at the parish for the Mission, find an enthusiastic corps of Missioners awaiting our arrival. Most places have from forty to sixty volunteers ready to "hit the streets." We have had places where upwards of eighty have helped out.

Final preparation

We always try to get to a parish a few days before the Mission begins, when we meet every evening with the team for the last preparatory sessions. Since our team aims at parishes where Hispanics are numerous, often the majority, the mission volunteers usually reflect by their numbers the ethnic make-up of the parish. And the Mission itself must take such statistics into account. We instruct the missioners to be ready to meet both Spanish and English speaking families, and to tell them that there will be something for everybody during the days of the Mission.

These final preps often get to be like college "pep rallies"! We even have some dynamics prepared to use, like little skits to illustrate how they should act when visiting homes. Some of the volunteers are asked to play the part of different types of families: good Catholics, indifferent Catholics, nominal Christians, Protestants, single parent homes, drunks, lazies, Catholic haters, etc. Others play the visiting Mission team, knocking on imaginary doors, greeting the dwellers, and taking it from there! This has proved to be an effective and enjoyable way to prepare people who are essentially very timid about broaching the subject of religion to strangers.

The climax of our preparation phase of a Mission takes place on the Sunday the Mission begins. This is the "Commissioning" ceremony. At each of the Sunday Masses we announce who the volunteer Lay Missioners are. After Communion we ask these to come forward, so the parishioners present may see who they are. It is better to do this at each Mass, rather than have all the Missioners together for only one ceremony. In this way everybody in the parish is made aware that something special and extraordinary is about to take place in their parish. Each Missioner is presented a wooden Mission cross to wear suspended from the neck. It is always a proud moment for all, and very often more volunteers come forward asking to join the team!

Even though this paper is limited to the Preparation phase of our Missions, we must allude sketchily to the Mission itself, since to prepare our volunteers they must be aware of exactly to what they are inviting people.

The parish is divided into sectors, each of a few square blocks. The volunteers are formed into teams of three, each group having both English and Spanish speakers. They are given file cards on all the known Catholics in the area they will visit. These visits take place from 6:00 to 9:00 p.m., when folks are usually home from work. On entering a home they present themselves as representatives of the local Catholic Church and invite their hosts to come to the Mission. "And what is the Mission?"

The Missioner answers: "Tomorrow evening at 7:00 there will be a Mass celebrated by Father So-and-so right down the street, in front of the Rodriguez' house. Can you come?"

Such a novel event usually attracts very fine crowds. It is something different. Loudspeakers enable our message to reach many ears. Police often accompany us to control traffic, or even blocking off a street for us so cars will not disturb our Mass!

So our Missioners are told exactly what the Mission will consist in: Visits to homes on Monday night. Street Masses on Tuesday. More visits, on different streets, on Wednesday. More street Masses on Thursday. Friday night a meeting of Missioners to discuss the week's activity.

This plan of action continues for three weeks, plus Saturdays dedicated to youth activities. And then one final week, in the Church, with Liturgy, Reconciliation, Sermons, always a Marian procession, and a closing with a party - music, dancing, tamales, etc., etc., etc.!