

The Role of the Sister in the Mission Team

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Experience and Reflexion on the Mission

In the history of the church, missionary thrust has always been a sign of vitality. Faith is strengthened when it is passed on.

Together, priest, sister and laity are sent out among our brothers and sisters in order to meet them in their search for meaning in life, in their discovering of God, in order to serve them with intelligence, and love them with passion. In a mission team each member has his/her place and role. As a Daughter of Charity I'm sharing with you my little experience as member of a mission team, pointing out the role of the sister within this mission team.

I speak of a lived experience during a mission in the summer of 1996. A two-week mission in two neighbouring villages in northern Lebanon, Bazoun and Bkerkacha. The group comprised 27 young girls and boys, 2 Vincentian priests and 6 Daughters of Charity. Our base was the village's old school. Materially poor, but rich in people's welcome and their presence.

A mission camp: witnessing to one's faith through one's life, one's joy, one's words and actions. Living a period of heightened spirituality in the communitarian climate of a team filled with gospel ideals.

Myself and two girls occupied ourselves with a group of 15- to 18-year old young people from the village. Several topics were discussed: fashions, television and its influence, (religious) sects, the sacraments of marriage and reconciliation, the difficulties which they meet in life. Time was also spent preparing the singing for mass and the vigils. An outing was organised by the group. Friendship was lived out in joy and simplicity.

What the sister can bring to a mission team and the mission

My role as Daughter of Charity, servant of God and the poor, is to be present to those who need some encouragement, a helping hand or a gesture. The sister links the members of the group, the villagers and the priests. Through her meeting with and accompanying the young people, many of them ask to see the priest in order to get advice or receive the sacrament of reconciliation.

Within the group the sister is often appealed to for material or spiritual assistance: the girls especially, faced with a difficulty, approach the sister with confidence, happy to feel a welcome.

* Following the example of Mary at Cana, her role is to follow Jesus and to lead others to him through continually paying attention to their needs.

Her feminine nature, her sensitivity, her gentleness, her prudence, her attentiveness; these all facilitate her entering into relationship with others in a simple and authentic way.

Several of the young folk, especially the members of the mission group, showed their need to speak to the sister. They wanted to mention a difficulty, ask precise questions about "choice in life, in marriage, problems with parents, in society, search for meaning in life. Various anxieties and worries were talked about and shared".

I was careful to organise my time in such a way as to be listening to these young people. This discreet presence close to them enabled me to discover the importance of these moments of sharing and meeting during the mission.

* The presence of the sister is helpful especially for visits to the villagers. She smooths the entry of the priest and of the members of the mission group.

Visits to families created human contacts. They enabled me to discover their aspirations and their needs. In these missions the people say to us; "Stay with us. Educate our children. Make us know our religion. Everything you say to us does us good". What a longing to discover Christ better!

At the moment of parting, a certain amount of tears bear witness to the bonds which have been created and the joy of Christ present in the midst of his people all through the mission.

* The attitude of the sister is at the same time that "of Mary and of Martha". A life of prayer which is expressed through service and practical charity. She remains attentive to the group and helps it to bring about that atmosphere which shows itself at prayer in common and through rendering humble service, getting down to practical assistance.

* The sister's presence is a witness to the joy of a consecrated life, of a belonging to the Church, to the Company, to the poor, to a commitment to a life of giving and of service, of a "Response of love and a call of love" (C 2.6).

Her life of service poses questions for those around her.

During the mission several questions were asked about the meaning of vocation. I met young people who dared to talk of their seeking to live out a firm commitment. They also expressed their uneasiness faced with the demands of a consecrated life.

The sister's presence was for them the opportunity to share their aspirations and their anxieties as well as the christian hope which urges them, in spite of everything, to create the "civilisation of love" as Pope John-Paul II likes to repeat!

The problems encountered

The difficulties encountered did not arise from my being a Daughter of Charity or from anything connected with this, but from what was felt and lived through by the mission group as such. Namely:

Difficulty coming from the local Parish Priest

Although they had agreed to accept the mission in their village some of the priests raised obstacles when they perceived the impact of the group on their parishioners. This sometimes became seen as a power struggle: they saw themselves losing their position or their authority.

Difficulty within the group

Sometimes certain members of the group were not sufficiently observant of their missionary commitment. They risked being the cause of disunion or indifference, and that had a bad influence on the life of the group and was regrettable for the mission. Happily this was all settled up through thoughtful reflexion in common.

Difficulty arising from the people to whom the mission was being addressed

Some young people showed disinterest in questions concerning faith in Christ. Others kept their distance and refused the invitation to come and join us. We did however try to enter into personal contact with them, in order to encourage them to come and take part in our meetings, while however respecting their freedom of choice.

An authentic life, an attractive witnessing to a life of sharing and joy: these are very necessary for the people who surround us today and especially for those who leave the Church.

Evangelisation is not primarily a programme or a lecture; it is presence, involvement, openness to Christ.

Thank you Lord! Living those enriching days of mission amongst our most needy brothers and sisters was a grace. I have understood better that each and every person has the responsibility to spread the Kingdom in the world of today. Together let us continue the journey, full of confidence. And as Saint Vincent says: "Always do more".

Stanislaus Brindley CM, Translator