

The popular mission in the context of a young church: Madagascar

by Vincent de Paul TSANGANDAHY cm

To speak of a Popular Mission with regard to what is referred to as a Mission country@ seems a bit strange to us. The term Popular mission@ came into use in a context where christianity was already considered as a tradition.

In the case of Madagascar the Vincentian missionaries began this work only 50 years after they settled in the country. What is its aim? and how does the Province of Madagascar envisage this work with a view to the future?

Such is the purpose of this talk.

The aims of the popular mission in the context of Madagascar

The popular mission was undertaken in Madagascar with a two-fold aim:

On the one hand, conscious of their role as first evangelisers of the south of Madagascar, the Vincentians had always considered it important to adopt the Vincentian method of itinerant mission in order to found christian communities.

On the other hand, the Madagascar missionaries are convinced that the popular mission is an their pastoral activities in terms of the different levels of involvement of each christian. Faced with this second objective, the missionaries find that the popular mission can take the form of a permanent mission exercised by a permanent team in a fixed place.

We thus distinguish two forms of popular mission in operation in Madagascar: the itinerant mission and the permanent mission.

The itinerant mission in Madagascar

In the context of Madagascar the missionaries have always styled their manner of evangelising according to the image of the itinerant mission as it was processed by St Vincent de Paul and his original group.

This mission consisted in visiting the villages in the different places in the south of Madagascar. Naquart and his group discovered that the itinerant mission was the method best suited to evangelisation in the case of malgache society.

The social structure of Madagascar makes one readily think of popular mission as a method of evangelising . The villages are grouped together and it is easy to organise a meeting or a visit according to the original form of itinerant mission as St Vincent had conceived it.

The permanent mission : second form of popular mission in Madagascar

Parallel the itinerant mission, the permanent mission consists of presenting the popular mission as a long-term undertaking for a permanent team in a fixed place or area.

This form of mission enables us, on the one hand, to found ecclesial communities, and on the other hand to animate the overall pastoral project of the diocese in a framework of close collaboration with laity and with other institutions having the same aims in evangelisation as our province.

In the case of Madagascar these two forms of mission constitute the fundamental work of the popular mission.

What connexion is there between Popular Mission and Mission ad Gentes in the Madagascar context?

Madagascar is in fact a mission country. So it is appropriate to speak of mission ad Gentes with regard to the popular mission. It is obvious that the mission ad Gentes is characterised traditionally by missionary presence among unbelievers in the face of the popular mission which is in principle defined as the Christian tradition present in the country. (1)

It must be recognised that this definition was true at the time of the foundation of the Congregation of *propaganda fide* by Pope Gregory XV in 1622. We know for example that at that time Africa was considered as the object of evangelisation. At present, especially since Vatican II, we recognise that all these mission countries are becoming in their turn evangelising subjects.

Anyway if we refer to St Vincent de Paul's conception we observe that what counted for him was not a question of knowing the juridical form or the theological aspect of the mission. For him the only concern was to announce the good news to the poor. (2)

In fact, the aim of the mission is summed up for St Vincent in these three following points: union, Providence and availability.

Union: For St Vincent the first principle which animates his preaching is Union. In the missions which he preaches his objective is to unite a person with God through conversion (confessions); union or reconciliation of people between themselves and union within families in conflict. In short his always witnessing to the joy of living with God and among brothers. This principle of union is connected with the notion of the Trinity, a unity in the love of God, a devotion which is very strong with St Vincent.

Providence: Providence is then for St Vincent obedience to the will of God. Is mission

interior (to the country) or exterior? That is not his first question. What counts above all for him is accomplishing the will of God, whether that be in Madagascar or elsewhere.

Availability: Readiness to accomplish the will of God is so strong with St Vincent that he instituted his company on the basis of *availability*. Hence the sense of itinerant mission. To be an itinerant missionary means for St Vincent a way of putting oneself at the service of God and in detachment it is a way of giving oneself totally to God with the sole aim of evangelising the poor.

Coming back to Madagascar, we consider that the popular mission and the mission ad Gentes are two inseparable poles of evangelisation. The two are not contradictory but rather complement each other. The missionary's work is like that of the farmer: he has to return several times to his field after he has cleared it, in the hope of eventually gathering some crops. It is thus that we present the popular mission as a means of bringing about internally the mission ad Gentes.

This situation presents itself as a great challenge to the indigenous missionaries who are evangelising within their own country.

This challenge comes about through the fact that they have not only to pay attention to the social realities according to the recommendations of our Constitutions (C 12,2), but especially have they to meet the challenge of bringing it about that, on the one hand, the content of their preaching meets the present-day needs of the church in Madagascar, and on the other, in the specific context of their own culture, they are able to proclaim their faith in this *Unidiverse* God, that is to say the Unique One in his diversity and the Diverse One in his unity(3).

That is why the province of Madagascar wishes to undertake mission work by adapting to the present-day situations and circumstances of the country, by examining all the possibilities of displaying a new thrust, either to reanimate and constitute a thoroughly christian community, or to awaken faith in the soul of the non-christians@(C 14)

What are the methods adopted for providing a popular mission in Madagascar.

As regards the parish mission our method doesn't differ in general from what is used according to Vincentian tradition in our various provinces. It is a question of organizing the three phases of the popular mission:

- a) preparation time for the mission, which in principle lasts between six months and a year; always trying to be in harmony with the special liturgical times.
- b) carrying out, or the heart of the mission; preaching and celebration of the faith, which generally lasts two weeks.
- c) life after the mission which always remains the long-term fruit of the popular mission.

To know more in detail about this method, I invite you to refer to an article which I presented in *Vincentiana* of January -February 1995 p 34-37, about an experience I had particularly because I was Parish Priest of a parish which was preparing to welcome a popular mission.

However it is useful to point out that our present-day task, in so far as we are organizers of the popular mission in our Province, is to deepen the method(s) so that they be more adapted to the social reality of Madagascar. This requires on our part a theological competence to make our popular mission into an effective contribution to the pastoral programme of the diocese in which we are working. It is in fact the reason for our participation in this Vincentian month.

With regard to what we called the *Apermanent mission@*, our method represents a whole programme of evangelization. As our target accords with the christian communities and the *Anew communities@*, we have three phases:

a) the study of the milieu which consists in making a reconnaissance of the territory in order to note what are the lived realities in the particular society (social, cultural, economic...), this is also considered like the first contact of the missionaries with the population;

b) the settling in of the team;

c) the mission as such, which can have a duration of six months or five years according to the contract with the diocese concerned.

It is in this perspective that we are working hard to establish an ecclesial link which is based principally on the social link existing in our country.

We recognize that to speak of these two methods our experience is still at a very early stage in Madagascar. We are hoping that this Vincentian month may inspire us with ideas to improve what we have already realized.

Conclusion:

To conclude this presentation I should admit in all simplicity that in the context of Madagascar the popular mission is only beginning to have its true appearance. These few years of experience enable us to understand that a popular mission is a *Amoment of grace@* for a whole community.

We are convinced that our principal trump card is the art of working as a team in mutual respect for the worth of each preacher and in praying. Each christian community which has gone through this experience with us always tells us that the popular mission is above all an occasion for giving each family a taste for prayer, the joy of having celebrated the faith; the joy of re-establishing peace within itself and with God; the joy of conversion.

We are convinced that the popular mission is at the heart of Vincentian missionary work in Madagascar. It is the seed of other Vincentian works. It gives us the art of expressing to the simple the mysteries of the faith, and the art of knowing how to pass on the love of God to the neighbour.

We can affirm that in thus acting we are in line with the aims of evangelisation in Africa which is to support the African family by evangelising it, so that, in its own turn, it should become the first place for evangelisation. It is thus that each member of the Church-Family gives better witness to Jesus Christ, the Way the truth and the Life (Ecclesia in Africa, Chap IV).

We wish to constitute a permanent team, ready to do nothing but popular missions for the next few years. And we would be happy to see laity and Daughters of Charity collaborating with us in this work so dear to our founder.

Stanislaus Brindley, translator

NOTE

- 1 L. Mezzadri & Nuovo, *St. Vincent de Paul par lui même*, Roma 1981 p. 82.
- 2 Coste, P. XI, 423.
- 3 François de Salis, *Traité de l'Amour de Dieu* III, 2.