

Vincentian Missionary Parishes in the Province of Argentina

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Without any doubt, the Second Vatican Council clarified and strengthened the identity and the mission of the universal Church¹. The whole Church moved from a state of initial enthusiasm to one of arduous work in order to overcome the problematic situations of those years, a state that enabled it to hear the soft, reflective and solemn voice of the Council. Then came acceptance and the application of the Council Documents². In accord with this Spirit the whole Congregation, as it deepened its fidelity to the institutional charism, looked for ways to respond to the various challenges.

The Province of Argentina did not find itself on the fringes of this movement, but rather, beginning in 1968, engaged in a form of ministry that was different from previous years, a ministry that was focused on an experience that we would call missionary parishes. This marked the beginning of a new era in which we did not establish works, but rather prioritized a method of evangelization³. From that time to the present in the three countries that make up the province (Uruguay, Paraguay and Argentina) we have been continually engaged in these experiences of missionary parishes. While these experiences occurred in diverse situations, nevertheless they were guided by some common criteria. These experiences took place in the following parishes:

1. Parish of San Carlos Mina (Córdoba - Argentina) 1968-1973.
2. Parish of Ntra. Señora de Sumampa (Santiago del Estero - Argentina) 1970-1977.
3. Parish of Ntra. Señora del Valle (Santiago del Estero - Argentina) 1977-1984.
4. Parish of San Francisco de Paula (Buenos Aires - Argentina) 1971-1982.
5. Mission Zone of Los Berros (San Juan - Argentina) 1995-1997.

¹ CELAM, Global Plan 2003-2007, Toward a Church that is the home and the school of communion and solidarity in a globalized world, # 11.

² *Ibidem*.

³ FERNANDO GUZMÁN, *150 años de Misión and Servicio Vicentino (1859-2009)* [250 Years of Vincentian mission and service (1859-2009)], p. 391.

6. Mission Zone of Tamberías (San Juan - Argentina) 1996-1999.
7. Parish of San Francisco del Chañar (Córdoba - Argentina) 1994-1999.
8. Parishes in Yabebry, Laureles and Cerrito (Paraguay) 1998-2002.
9. Parishes of San Francisco de Asís and San Rafael Arcángel (Arroyos and Esteros and Juan de Mena - Paraguay) 2002-2008.
10. Parish of Ntra. Señora de Itatí (Goya, Corrientes - Argentina) 2002-2005.
11. Parishes and Shrine in Santa Lucia (Corrientes - Argentina) 2006-2009
12. Parish of Ntra. Señora de los Remedios (Rocha - Uruguay) 2009-2012.
13. Parishes of Caballero, Sapucay and Ybytymi (Carapegua - Paraguay) 2010-2014.

In each one of these places we have attempted to respect the spirit of our Constitutions (especially, # 12) and our Statutes (in particular, # 5) which point out certain criteria with regard to the various works of evangelization, and more specifically, to parishes that the Congregation agrees to staff and provide pastoral care. If we were to engage in an historical investigation of the thirteen works mentioned above, we would be able to deduce certain constants with regard to the criteria that guided us and the tasks that had to be developed.

In recent years the concern for the poor has been a recurring theme in the Church. The Aparecida (Brazil) document of 2007 affirms that *the preferential option for the poor is implicit in the Christological faith in the God who became poor for us, so as to enrich us with his poverty* (# 392). Vincent de Paul stated: *But, Monsieur, we aren't the only ones who instruct poor people; do pastors do anything else? What about preachers in towns and villages? What do they do in Advent and Lent? They preach to the poor, and they do it better than we do. True, but there isn't a single Company in the Church of God that has for its portion persons who are poor, devoting itself totally to the poor and never preaching in large towns. That's what Missioners profess to do; it's their special characteristic to be, like Jesus Christ, committed to the poor. So, our vocation is a continuation of his, or, at least, it's similar to it in its circumstances. Oh, what happiness, brothers, but what an obligation we have to be attached to it* (CCD XI: 71).

In these years of commitment to the ministry of missionary parishes, the Province of Argentina has been very clear with regard to those principles just articulated. In each area that has its unique characteristics, we have attempted to provide for people in poor and/or neglected communities. The majority of these parishes, though not all of them, are located in rural areas where the bishops lack the necessary person-

nel to provide for the pastoral needs of the people. The evangelizing activity of the Vincentians was developed in light of the fact that priests have not ministered in those areas for an extended period of time. The spiritual abandonment of some communities, that is, the inability of the local clergy to assume the ministry in those areas... that is the reality that has motivated the Province to accept this ministry.

Attention to the realities of present-day society: in a public manner St. Vincent de Paul denounced those in positions of power who abused the rights of the poor; he attempted to involve the rich in assisting the poor and thus establish bonds of solidarity between them. It has been very gratifying to examine the documents and the letters of the confreres who ministered in many different places. Fr. Pellerín wrote: *"We incarnate the social dimension through our integration into the community and there in the midst of the community we seek the solutions to the distinct problems. We bring here missionary teams of Sisters and lay people and as they become aware of the true needs of the people they attempt to resolve these situations (providing medicine for three hospital, school supplies, clothing and shoes)"*⁴. Fr. Ventura Sarasola wrote: *"In Sumampa Viejo: the installation of a water tank, a motor, a main pipe with four faucets that distributes water to people over a distance of four meters, organizing people to take turns in tending the water pump, installation of a generator to provide light to the whole neighborhood"*⁵. I have reviewed the correspondence, the provincial bulletins, and the notes from house visitations, and I can say that the ordinary method of evangelization on the part of the confreres involved in this ministry always involved a social dimension that is in accord with our Constitutions which indicate the style of ministry that should be carried on in these missions.

Some sharing in the condition of the poor: *"The Church, indeed, is not alone responsible for justice in the world; however, she has a proper and specific responsibility which is identified with her mission of giving witness before the world of the need for love and justice contained in the Gospel message, a witness to be carried out in Church institutions themselves and in the lives of Christians"* (Justice in the World, # 36). The economic aspect of different parishes is a distinct theme. To meet their expenses, the Vincentians are dependent on a fixed allotment provided by the diocese (generally a poor diocese) and the Congregation. It is not uncommon for the Congregation to intervene in covering some of the expenses incurred for evangelizing these parishes. This precarious financial situation of the confreres is closely aligned to

⁴ DIDIMO PELLERIN, "Trabajo realizado in la Parroquia de San Carlos Mina" [Work accomplished in the parish of San Carlos Mina], in *Vincentiana*, 1971, # 4-5, p. 145.

⁵ V. SARASOLA, "Sumampa", in *Vincentiana*, 1971, # 6, pp. 179-180.

the realities that the poor continually encounter in their work and as they try to provide for their family. The living situation of the missionary community is austere and frugal; most often the confreres themselves maintain and make the necessary repairs in their living quarters. We understand that *“the Church is bound to give witness to justice; she recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes”* (Justice in the World, # 40).

A genuine community spirit in our apostolic ministry: We are guided by the idea that *“the Vincentian community came into existence for the mission, and therefore, the mission defines its community lifestyle”*⁶. The majority of these experiences have been legally entered into as *coetus ad instar domus*, functioning with a responsible individual but dependent on a canonical house with which they maintain contact for planned periods of prayer, formation, evaluation and recreation. Many of these works have been historically viewed as “privileged places” and so the seminarians participate in these experiences during their pastoral year. At the same time these communities are taken into consideration when the Visitor is scheduling house visitations. We also point out the support that is received by the missionary groups of the Vincentian Family in the zones or the parishes that the Congregation evangelizes.

Readiness to go to any part of the world: our Founder tells us that: *our vocation is to go, not just to one parish, not just to one diocese, but all over the world* (CCD XII: 215). Therefore, the timeframe of the contracts is most important. Over the years our experience has varied in this matter, but recently, and in accord with our Provincial Norms⁷, we have entered into contracts for four years with the possibility of extending it another two years. Historically, the lack of local clergy has contributed to extending the time of the contracts. Because we want to preserve our mobility and our missionary freedom, this aspect has become a central focus of our dialogue with the Ordinary prior to signing a contract. In other words we have to cultivate the availability of the confreres (“indifference” according to Saint Vincent).

Our Common Rules warn us: *“Each one should show a great eagerness in that sort of openness to God’s will, which Christ and the saints developed so carefully. This means that we should not have a disproportionate liking for any ministry, person, or place, especially our native land, or anything of that sort. We should even be ready and willing to leave all these things gladly if our Superior asks it, or even hints at it, and to put up, without complaint, with any disappointment or disruption this*

⁶ JULIO SÚESCUN, C.M., “Comunidad” [Community], in *Diccionario de Espiritualidad Vicenciana*, Editorial CEME, Salamanca 1995, p. 67.

⁷ Provincial Norms of Argentina, Apostolic Activity, 1.1.2.

causes, accepting that in all this the Superior has done well in the Lord" (Common Rules II: 10).

Striving to live in a state of continuous conversion both on the part of each individual member and on the part of the whole Congregation: This attitude or predisposition of conversion is fundamental and the efficacy of the apostolic ministry is subordinate to this reality. Thus, the apostolic work and the contact with the poor have led the confreres participating in this experience to a more authentic commitment to Gospel values. The preaching of the confreres has become a commitment to the people of that particular place. Prayer and Eucharist are an opportunity to mature in discerning God's will and preserves us from the temptation to become "saviors". Vincent said: "*You must have recourse to God through meditation in order to preserve your soul in his fear and love... many people are often lost while contributing to the salvation of others*" (CCD XI: 312).

Despite difficulties, the ministry in these parishes has led the confreres to become more humble so that they can proclaim a message that is not just their own message but one that God has placed in their heart: "*The missionary is convinced that, through the working of the Spirit, there already exists in individuals and peoples an expectation, even if an unconscious one, of knowing the truth about God, about man, and about how we are to be set free from sin and death. The missionary's enthusiasm in proclaiming Christ comes from the conviction that he is responding to that expectation*" (JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Mission*, # 45).

I have briefly described general characteristics of those experiences that have the approval and the support of the majority of the young confreres and their elders in the province. The young confreres continually express their desire to engage in this form of mission. At the same time, we have seen that the pastoral activity in this type of community is very beneficial to those who are taking their first steps as members of the Congregation. The diversity of tasks and various possibilities for the exercise of ministry point out how this privileged place can have a profound influence on the final stage of initial formation and the first years of ministry.

The confreres responsible for this work are aware that the role of formator is in their hands. Recent years have corroborated the reality that these communities have developed certain characteristics that I would label as fraternal, warm, joyful and committed. Perhaps it is this way of living together that has created so much interest in this ministry, especially among the younger confreres. In my opinion this ministry is by no means the "panacea" that will renew all the missionary initiatives of the Province. Nevertheless, it is has become one way to provide for the real and the concrete needs of the local church without losing our missionary identity.

Presently, our Province has a work of this type in the Diocese of Carapegua in Paraguay, an area covering three parishes. There are three confreres assigned to this mission, with one as “Pastor”, although they all act together as a team in solidarity with one another. At the end of 2014, they will conclude their ministry there, although we believe that the Ordinary will ask us to extend the contract for another two years. In Uruguay, we are involved in taking the first steps that will eventually lead us to a new ministry in this area. Here will be some slight differences that we have not seen in our other experiences. In Uruguay, we will attempt to extend the missionary endeavor from a work that has already been established by moving beyond the traditional structures, and renewing the missionary reality of a canonical house. We are attempting to reinforce and increase the number of confreres in a community in such a way that ultimately we can assign a confrere to work in the area of the mission, parish, chapel or community center that is at a distance from the house where he is living. Even though there are subtle differences, we believe that this missionary commitment can create a resurgence in missionary zeal in works where the structure had strangled such zeal.

Translated from Spanish by CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M.