

# Living the Vincentian Mission in a Mission “ad gentes”

International Mission, El Alto, Bolivia

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*El Alto, Bolivia*

It probably strikes you as strange to be asking what makes the International Vincentian Mission on the Bolivian Altiplano a missionary parish. Actually, we are two parishes, San Miguel de Italaque and San Pedro de Mocomoco, served by three Vincentian priests, two lay women and two corps of catechists (called delegates of the Word in other settings). The territory is about 550 km<sup>2</sup>, ranging from 3000-4800 meters in altitude. The lives of our people, about 8500 persons who are almost all indigenous Aymara, are given over to small agriculture and herding. They live in two small towns and 80 smaller villages. Many supplement their incomes by working in various activities in our area and in the urban center of El Alto/La Paz.

A missionary parish is more a style and a set of commitments than a place or a structure. Working from a community plan that sketches out a single framework consisting of lines of action for the two parishes, Cyrille de Nanteuil, Diego Plá and I, along with our associates Violeta Rodriguez and Flora Silva and over fifty lay leaders try to live the mission. Recently, Fr. Gregory Gay, C.M., the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, in collaboration with his curia and the provinces of the world, arrived at some helpful statements to answer this question. I'd like to concentrate on style.

Among many things, we are told that a Vincentian missionary parish should:

- be done as a community project; in accord with the five Vincentian missionary virtues and in harmony with the local Church;
- have a commitment to serve set by contract with the local bishop for a limited time;
- be done as part of our work with the laity and the Vincentian Family;
- develop Vincentian ministries and pastoral outreach that conform to our spirit: an integral evangelization: service of the Word and the practice of charity; formation & participation of laity in pastoral action; develops prophetic ministries, with a special attention to new forms of poverty, especially to those on the margins;

- promote study and application of systemic change & Social Doctrine of the Church;
- enable support of missions and implementation of popular missions;
- have a parish pastoral plan to be implemented and evaluated;
- encourage popular devotion and piety to help the growth of their faith while also affirming the cultural realities of the people;
- support and collaborate with Vincentian Family groups and movements;
- promote collaboration with diocesan clergy, especially as a parish;
- promote development of a community spirit, collaboration, and the support of the social ministries and popular movements;
- cultivate an attitude of listening, welcoming people to the sacrament of reconciliation, and also in providing counsel;
- create community and ‘small communities’ in the parish by interpersonal evangelization, through home visits;
- be a model of fair and just treatment to all people, especially the poor.

Explaining how all of this is becoming a reality in our mission would be book-length, not an essay, so I will concentrate on the last four aspects of this description, and then speak about the short and long-term future.

### ***1. Promoting development of a community spirit, collaboration, and the support of the social ministries and popular movements***

Both inside and outside of the country, this is a priority for us. The Aymara culture has a strong sense of community, often under attack by disintegrating effects of current poverty, and the lingering effects of historical colonization, racism and political and economic exploitation. We work locally to restore the strength of community, rebuild self-esteem, and undo years of destructive systemic damage. Through development work, alternative education, preaching, catechesis, accompaniment of the young, and a basic personal and cultural respect, we are making inroads. There are direct assistance programs for nutrition and health, education and human formation from infancy through adult years, and the stimulation of local, sustainable economic initiatives to promote independence and family stability. You can see much of what we are doing at my YouTube channel (<http://youtube.com/fatherratgmail>) and our websites (<http://vocesvicentinas.org/donate> and <http://saytasim.org> ). On the global scene, we’ve reached out to connect with donors and supporters in the United States, Spain and France. We welcome donors and supporters as visitors and are in

regular contact with donors to connect them with the mission, and to raise awareness of the justice issues involved in addressing current needs in their historical perspective.

## ***2. Cultivating an attitude of listening, welcoming people to the sacrament of reconciliation, and also in providing counsel***

The hardest lesson to learn as a missionary is the lesson of humility. Coming from cultures that value competence, I have found it difficult to listen to the voice of the Spirit that is woven into the conversations that we have with people who are poor. Regular meetings with catechists, reflections with the priests and lay leaders who serve in parishes adjacent to ours, conversations with ordinary folks during pastoral visits, and privileged moments in spiritual conversation or the Sacrament of Reconciliation are key. Day by day, learning the local language and cultural patterns is revealed to be a more important element of the missionary pastoral. Folks here speak Spanish on a rudimentary level, but they think, pray, suffer, and dream in Aymara.

## ***3. Creating community and ‘small communities’ in the parish by inter-personal evangelization, through home visits***

The development of small, strong Catholic communities within village life is a constant challenge. With communities dispersed throughout the region, with difficult access – for example, some of the communities require that we drive for two or more hours and then walk two hours more – sustaining relationships is difficult. But if the goal of the missionary parish is invite persons into transforming personal relationships with Jesus Christ, there is no substitute for face-to-face encounters. To that end, [a] we form local leaders constantly, to be the presence of “Christ the leader and teacher” to their communities, and the means of communication between the people and their pastors; [2] we have identified key communities, in locations central to groups of smaller communities where we can gather more regularly, especially with the young; and [3] we allow enough time to form relationships with our people, rejecting to old style visit of just showing up to celebrate Mass and the sacraments.

## ***4. Being a model of fair and just treatment to all people, especially the poor***

An almost forgotten element, especially in an area with scarce local resources and a small income, is the need to be just to the people with whom we minister. Here we have made efforts to see that justice is done. Cyrille recently guided the incorporation of the social development projects of the parish of Italque so that employees can be enrolled

in the national social security program. Diego is guiding the same process in Mocomoco. Salaries are on the increase, to arrive at a reasonable wage (not just a minimum) for all our workers. Contracts are fairly arrived at completed faithfully. In our programs, we don't promise more than we can deliver (a sometime failure of unrestrained zeal that ends in injustice). To support all of this, we've mounted a fundraising effort that walks hand in hand with our pastoral plans.

### **The road before us and the road ahead**

There are continuing challenges to be faced. Governments are not always friendly. Prior years of well-intentioned pastoral practice and non-profit development styles have accustomed the people to be passive recipients of aid rather than active agents of their own transformation. The educational system is poorly funded and staffed, and lacks an ethical center. It is not uncommon for exploitative relationships between professors and minor students to end up in abuse and pregnancy. And then there is the poverty. Always the poverty.

A continuing social phenomenon here is internal migration from our rural sector to the coca-producing regions (for a "fast buck") and the urban centers looking for work. The small scale agricultural/husbandry model simply can't sustain the coming generations. The resulting problem is a complex of economic, social, familial and spiritual stressors, as people seek a better life. Cyrille and Violeta have begun some small and cooperative business ventures coupled with human and spiritual development that are bearing fruit in some of the communities of Italaque. In Mocomoco, intentional community-building with the young and formation for higher education, beginning locally and continuing through a program of accompaniment in La Paz guided by Flora and Diego seems to be showing good effects. But we have a long way to go.

Formation of catechists, often drawn away from their commitment as pastoral leaders by real and pressing family needs, is a continuing problem. Recently in Mocomoco, Flora pointed out to Diego and me that, in our urgency to communicate content and prepare catechists, we were losing a sense of community. We had noticed that catechists were absenting themselves from reunions and not completing some of their local tasks. She pointed out that we had abandoned, to a large degree, the necessary dialogue and listening that promotes true collaboration. We had to admit she was right. It was time to recover what we had lost, and so we've made plans to extend the time spent in each community when we visit, just so we have time to really listen to the lives of our people, and to use more dialogic methods in our reunions.

Solidifying external support, cultivating support within Bolivia, and expanding the depth and breadth of local participation is the long term agenda. Commitment to our donors to provide timely information on

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the impact of their support, and the invitation to personally participate in the mission will form the next steps in our external fundraising strategy. Involving Bolivian partners – families that have moved from Mocomoco, vendors, other non-profits that share similar goals and the local governments – will be high on the agenda. But most importantly, we will deepen our commitment to be partners with our people. Only in this type of relationship will people encounter themselves as powerful subjects of their own transformation, and understand themselves as worthy of a deep and personal encounter with Jesus. Living the mission is allowing the Christ that lives in me to meet the Christ present in the poor. It’s a meeting of equals, a meeting of sons and daughters of the same Father.