

# The Experience of the Missionary Parish of Our Lady of Mount Carmel

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One cannot speak of the Vincentian missionary parish without being reminded of the following words of St. Vincent: "Let us go, gentlemen, through all the earth bring his Gospel, and not let difficulties undermine us... the salvation of all people as well as our own are a good so great that it deserves to be won at any cost whatsoever". To speak of a missionary parish, we must first get caught up in the spirit of these words, as they define the context in which we are invited to reflect. It is nearly eight years since the Vincentian Fathers in Cameroon were given the Parish Our Lady of Mount Carmel Banengo in Bafoussam. Our experience in this parish these past years can be regarded as both missionary and Vincentian.

This experience is based on that of St. Vincent himself. Indeed, St. Vincent was not an apostle for the wealthy, although he knew they were able to influence society. But he reached out in love and care to the little ones, especially those in need who were unattended to by the leaders of their day. It was for them that Vincent sought to change their situation unhappiness into joy, and to transform their spiritual and material poverty to make them rich in the sight of God. They could never have known the true joy of realizing how fortunate they were to have the fixed and compassionate gaze of the grand saint of the Grand Siècle. Through Vincent, Jesus came into the lives of the poor of that era. Today, this mission continues in the world by the presence of his disciples among the poor. This is the case in Banengo Vincent said: "If there is a true religion, it is among the poor. They are the people who keep the true religion, a living faith" (XI, 200).

Our eyes will be open to Vincentian values if we can identify these concrete situations of poverty; those environments where faith needs to be awakened. The choice of the parish Our Lady of Mount Carmel is the result of this search. In 2004, a team of three confreres arrived in the diocese for a time of exploration. After one year, they had to choose between a parish which had almost all structures in place, and one where there was a small hut serving as a church. What motivated this choice? The answer to this concern is very simple: Vincentians should not settle for environments where action would be superfluous and repetitive of standard situations. It is truly Vincentian insofar as

we share the condition of the poor by being present in their midst. As such, our presence at Mount Carmel is a true missionary witness.

The parish of Our Lady of Mount Carmel was founded in 2005. Its debut was that of a single outpost that a few years later became part of a special sector, namely to be within the district of another parish (St. Boniface in Kyenengo). Currently there are seven BEC (Basic Ecclesial Communities) within our parish outpost. The parish of Our Lady of Mount Carmel is located in the city of Bafoussam, but up in the hills from the main road. It is framed by two large parishes where the access is easier. Most Catholics who live on the edge prefer to go to one or the other, not only because they are well built, but also because they can easily take a taxi to get there.

Access to our parish in the dry season and the rainy season is a challenge, due to the bad road conditions, varying on the weather conditions from mud, dust, and rain. On either side of the parish, those living furthest are about 1.5 km. The indigenous people in the parish territory are mostly animists. A small number of the population who adhere to the faith come from elsewhere. Recently, more people have found their way to the Church since with the arrival of our confreres in this parish. In this population, their main activity is subsistence farming. The already low agricultural product is sold for basic things needed for living. Added to this economic reality is that the people of this area practically live on trade. It assumed great importance, near the top of the scale of values of the people.

These activities occur both on Sundays as ordinary days regardless of the teaching of the Church on the Sabbath rest. Those in leadership in the Church rarely address this situation, if at all. This is the origin of the lack of commitment, passion, and inertia seen in parish life. Therefore the results of pastoral work are as of now insufficient to bring the parish to undertake new projects.

Added to this is the lack of an adequate infrastructure (in this case, a lack of housing for the confreres). For nearly eight years, the confreres are still seeking a more permanent residence, and it is the community that bears the burden. Also, a vehicle suitable for roads is needed, as the confreres share only one vehicle. All this slows the progression and development for the pastoral, material, and spiritual growth of the parish, making the effective deployment of pastoral activity more problematic.

However, my parish and Vincentian missionary experience here gives me the opportunity to be more creative and efficient in my field of apostolate. The Vincentian is a witness, a learner, an imitator of Christ, who is the One always inventing new methods and pointing us to new ways to better cope with difficulties occurring in the missionary parish. Recall St. Vincent's words that "love is inventive to infinity". To avoid discouragement in the mission we are invited to do more.

So it is not enough to see the misery of the poor, but we must be personally involved. Feed my lambs, says Jesus. That is why before arriving in a parish, it is essential to ask these questions: how will we benefit people who live there?

What good will we do to proclaim Christ, even when it does not create a response? Will we be able to view the situation as a glass that is half-full or half empty? A parish that wants to be a Vincentian missionary one, and yet fails to have all the suitable structures of a regular parish is still worthy of the name. The only structure which Mount Carmel can boast today is the church which is still under construction. And to mark our Vincentian presence, we are now working to make it a home for the animation of women and youth.

The presence in our territory of places of worship such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Protestant and Pentecostal churches requires us to do ongoing pastoral work, such as sustained and intense evangelization, to prevent the loss of Catholics from our parishes. This is all the more critical, especially since many are not mature in the faith. Hence, the importance and need for popular missions, which we have experienced once, when the Vincentians were installed in the parish. Parish activities are following the Parish Pastoral Plan which is established at the beginning of the pastoral year. At the end of the year, a parish pastoral session is held. It is a forum where all components of the parish came together to reflect on aspects of parish life and to evaluate the programs held throughout the year. The existence of this pastoral practice saves us valuable time and energy, during the year as we promote pastoral dynamism and the awakening of faith. Even with these procedures, the parish priests often end up working alone, not always integrating laity, although they are our primary stakeholders and collaborators in the mission.

A yearly budget is established, but we still question if we have the means to use it effectively. Each year, we visit the Basic Ecclesial Communities twice. We are looking for more effective ways to help dissipate the inertia and disengagement of the faithful. For example, this year we started door to door blessing of families and homes. In addition, the homilies are translated into local "lingua franca", to help the vast majority of the faithful understand the essential message of the Word of God daily. But as the indigenous population is predominantly animist, and to a lesser extent Protestant, there are rarely Bafoussam nationals present among the faithful. The formation of Christians through catechesis deepens faith on specific topics for a better understanding of the Church, in order to make experienced Christians who can give convincing reasons for their commitment to follow Christ.

It is obvious that we are challenged to put our plans firmly to work. A few times during meetings of Parish Pastoral Council, we have heard comments such as "the Vincentians have never done anything for the

parish". Therefore, to be credible in the context of the people's mental and material poverty, we must take our share of misery and become the hope of the poor. The love of Christ urges us to show by concrete gestures of our desire to raise the poor out of the peculiar situation of poverty in which they find themselves. What a noble task! But the poor often remain so, when their practical problems are not resolved. It is therefore important to preach and teach both an idealistic Christ, but one who lives in a real world that they encounter.

This is also why we must attend to economic matters, such as the terms of the contract between the congregation and the diocese, especially as it regards housing apostolic workers in the diocese. However, this contract needs to be renewed. Aware of the scope of work, we are a team of four confreres willing to address these challenges. Success in the pastoral plan depends on the atmosphere that prevails in community. In community for the mission, our role is to bring together the mission entrusted to us, and to listen to the call of Christ to be missionaries, especially when our hearts do not agree. Our strength is our first consciousness of belonging to the Little Company. We are a joyful community with a sense of harmony, and we know the importance of promoting a climate of peace. This harmony arises from dialogue and sharing frank and sincere to our different times of meetings or when necessary.

In addition, we work to promote Vincentian groups within the parish, such as the International Association of Charity (AIC), the Association of the Miraculous Medal (AMM) and the Vincentian Marian Youth (JMY) to mention only a few. Each group reminds us of the responsibility to support one or the other of these branches. It is clear that while it is sometimes difficult to fully gauge the level of enthusiasm on the part of the faithful, yet, we are aware that the future is bright. Just talking about future expectations requires that the faithful be aware of their responsibilities. It is up to them to assume their proper duty as active laity in building up the Church.

It means that we encourage them to participate not primarily on a financial level, but with a physical presence in the activities that engage parish life. There must be an awakening of faith to allow everyone to rediscover the central place that God should hold in each one's life. It may well involve helping the laity to make a new scale of values. This work can lead to a birth of a true consciousness in the Christian identity of the faithful.

There is an unwritten rule in our diocese that says: "Better to do small things with great number of people to do great things with little people". If our hope is that our parish will be a truly missionary one, sent forth for service, it will only be possible if all laity are involved. This is our biggest challenge in accomplishing our mission today as we work to build a true Church Family of God.