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The Peripheries Ask for Mercy

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This time of preparation for the General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the implementation of our missionary vocation in light of the many questions concerning our fidelity to the chosen path. The inspiration to seek for some answers can be found in the words of the homilies and discourses of Pope Francis... words that have been addressed to the clergy and that underline the need to move beyond the walls of our Churches in order to go out into the streets and seek out those who have been abandoned and who live on the peripheries of our society. Accepting this problem as a matter for an examination of conscience, we ought to ask the following questions: why should the peripheries be constituted as this specific place for our “being”? What categories can be used to define this situation with regard to our mission that is constituted by the peripheries?

The driving force behind our attempts to justify our Vincentian call is unquestionably the fundamental option of Christ: *It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you* (John 15:16; cf. John 15:19). Thus, we have the beginning of the history of our calling, or perhaps it is better to say, we have the beginning of God’s call in our life, for in that way we are able to avoid a mistaken understanding of *going out* to the poor (cf. Romans 14:17-19). Saint Vincent de Paul emphasized the uniqueness of our missionary calling and pointed out the need for a motivation based on faith with regard to those matters related to talents, abilities and the soundness of human activity (cf. CCD: XI: 25-26). Following this path which enables us to search in the light of faith, I suggest that we attempt to understand the peripheries by reading the account of the healing of the blind man, Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52).

1. ...*Bartimaeus, a blind man, the son of Timaeus, sat by the roadside begging (Mark 10:46)*

The place, by the roadside, on the peripheries, was a place that society had set aside for a group of people like Bartimaeus. The road, however, was intended for strong, healthy, productive individuals. The peripheries were the place for those who did not “fit into” those categories of the strong and healthy. Frequently such situations, such categorization of people, was/is justified by faith (cf. John 9:1-2).

It should be pointed out that from the perspective of those who live on the peripheries, this place, that is, the periphery, is viewed as their destiny until the time of their death. Thus it should be! The only activity of those abandoned on the peripheries is to beg – their form of survival.

How many times in my missionary experience have I encountered this uncritical acceptance of situations that should remain as they are and therefore, there is no way of changing such situations? How many times have I been cast aside without any attempt at change! *We should like to hear you on this some other time* (Acts 17:32). When I attempt to save some one on the Mission (Yumbi) from being classified as a person who brings bad luck or disease (in the Lingala language, *nodoki*), I ask for the assistance of persons who are committed to the life of the Church and seek for human concern in the midst of unfortunate situations, but I find myself before an unmovable wall. No argument is satisfactory and thus no argument is able to change the established manner of thinking.

The situation is repeated when I ask for assistance from state institutions in order to save the life of an alcoholic/addict in Greenpoint, New York (USA)... I am sent away with nothing because the infirm individual does not meet the required conditions. On another occasion I was ridiculed by a perspective candidate for the Congregation in Haiti who told me that “as a white man” I did not understand the motivations that were derived from the Haitian tradition, motivations that were entirely opposed to the gospel. Today, from the perspective of twenty-seven years of priesthood, I ask myself about the number of times that I have experienced that phenomena of rejection... only God knows the answer!

The atrocity of the peripheries is found in the fact that what is considered to be abnormal becomes a model for action, a model that finds acceptance by those who are “on the road” because such a situation is convenient and frees them from having to look at “a problem”. What is even worse, however, is that this situation is also accepted by those “on the roadside” and they are unable to imagine another form of life for themselves. How many times in the history of humankind have we found this phenomena of “the ghetto”? Fortunately, the story of Bartimaeus does not end here.

2. On hearing that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, “Jesus, son of David, have pity on me!” (Mark 10:47)

Here we are witnesses to an incredible situation. A person who had been specifically defined and classified according to extent social norms, was unexpectedly presented with an opportunity to view himself from a different perspective. There is something noteworthy about this situ-

ation. Bartimaeus must have heard someone speak about Jesus of Nazareth... someone must have spoken to him about Jesus' extraordinary activity. Bartimaeus' reaction was instantaneous! He heard that it was Jesus and he began to cry out to him. His words expressed a profound spiritual understanding of the person of Jesus: *son of David!* Bartimaeus was aware of the meaning of his appeal since his desperation was now being revealed to Jesus. How many individuals, listening to similar pleas, have left Bartimaeus alone on the side of the road... doctors, quacks, rich persons, philanthropists... those individuals did not touch the other in such a way that they were made to cry out. Bartimaeus humbly asked for alms, he begged for compassion... and in the presence of Jesus, the principle, "now or never", worked.

It does not seem strange to us Saint Vincent saw great value in committing oneself to the proclamation of the gospel: *how fortunate are those who use every moment of their life in the service of God* (CCD: XI: 329). Evangelization does not mean presenting or recommending **a chosen** way of life. Evangelization is not some competition to choose from among a multitude of goods that one might find on the shelves of a shop or to choose from among various services that are offered by an agency that promises to better the life of individuals. Vincent left no doubts about that matter. In one of his conferences he stated: *The Son of God came to evangelize the poor... Oh, what a happiness to do on earth the same thing Our Lord did there, which is to teach poor persons the way to heaven* (CCD: XI: 283-284).

The poor on the peripheries are condemned to such acceptance of their situation when they are motivated "by the world". When they are given the opportunity to look at their situation from the perspective of the gospel, they cry out and ask for help.

I observed with horror a human tragedy that was repeated in one area of our mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. At one particular time I was asked to pray for a person who had been paralyzed from his waist down. Of course, the motivation for such a request was always the same... a belief in the evil powers of the enemies of the family. I was asked to pray for this individual because I was a missionary who represented God. My prayers did not result in the miracle of a physical cure, but the people around me at that time began to trust me and I began to listen to "their cries for change". In that new environment of openness, I understood the cause of their affliction. Yes, an evil person was the cause of "this curse" which was experienced by the paralyzed man. That curse, however, was the result of the fact that a neighboring hospital had been abandoned because of the prolonged war. The only person who remained at the hospital was a male nurse who said he was able to operate on persons who were in need of surgery because they suffered from appendicitis or had a hernia.

In such procedures he administered anesthesia through a spinal injection... and that was the cause of this unfortunate situation. The ignorant nurse had paralyzed various individuals who were in need of surgery. The cries of those “unfortunate individuals” did not make us feel helpless but rather, we were inspired by those events to make wheelchairs for those who had been handicapped in that manner... and those wheelchairs proved to be invaluable. I have to admit here that other companions from another mission took on this work and perfected our idea... and we give thanks to God for that!

The “cry of Bartimaeus” made us aware of another truth, a truth that for us, as Missionaries, is essential if we want to avoid the temptation of healing from our own narrow perspective, if we want to avoid the trap of offering help on some official level. Notice that it was not Jesus who called Bartimaeus aside in order to help him. The person seeking help knew what was needed and decided on the appropriate time to seek relief through healing grace... the appropriate time... the dialogue with Jesus provided a common ground for understanding the problem and for resolving the problem. Let us listen...

3. *Jesus said in reply, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man replied to him, “Master, I want to see” (Mark 10:51)*

I was twenty-seven years old when I arrived at the mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Filled with enthusiasm and missionary zeal, I nevertheless lacked wisdom with regard to missionary service and experience. I would obtain experience with the passing of years. In my first international community, we became involved in many projects that provided social assistance. Because I was the youngest member of the team, I often had the responsibility of supervising these various projects. One of those projects involved the building of houses for the members of a poor Pigmy tribe (Batwa). At first sight, and after having seen the huts in which those people lived, the project seemed to be truly justified. As the project moved forward, I was discouraged to see that the people had no interest in this plan. Such a reaction created in me a negative attitude toward those people. During this time of discouragement, I realized something very important: I had never sat down with these people and asked them what they thought about the project? I do not know how many of the one hundred houses that were planned were ever completed but I do know that those that were completed were done so in accord with the desires and the motives of those who carried out the construction.

Jesus knew why Bartimaeus called out to him. What about the others: “*Many rebuked him, telling him to be silent*” (Mark 10:48). For these individuals, “the others”, Bartimaeus was an obstacle on the road. Still, in the words of the Evangelist: “*Jesus stopped*” (Mark 10:49). Jesus was

not indifferent to the situation of Bartimaeus. Jesus not only permitted but he also hoped that Bartimaeus would take advantage of this opportunity to move out from the periphery. When Bartimaeus heard Jesus' invitation, he reacted in an incredible manner: "*He threw aside his cloak, sprang up, and came to Jesus*" (Mark 10:50). It had to be very difficult for this handicapped man to break aside from all the barriers of his incapacity and his aversion to society. Yet it was certainly worthwhile for he was able to hear the following words: "*Go your way; your faith has saved you!*" (Mark 10:52). Jesus was not some magician who performed miracles, rather it was Jesus mercy that healed people from their visible as well as their invisible wounds. God's mercy implies that those who suffer must consciously accept the way of Jesus. "*Immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way*" (Mark 10:52). Liberation from the prisons of the periphery involves a process of growth, a process that takes place in light of the gospel and that enables people to make a courageous decision to break away from the model that tells them that things must remain as they are!

St. Vincent helps us to understand the subjectivity of those who live on the peripheries when he calls them "*lords and masters*" (CCD: X: 489). Those words are key in the formation of a new generation in the Vincentian Family. Those words encompass the whole teaching of the Church with regard to the human person and with regard to the dignity and the value of the human person which is derived from the act of creation, of being made in the image and likeness of God (cf. Genesis 1:27). According to St. Vincent, if we *turn the medal over* we can understand how the poor can break with the established social conventions and begin to value their worth as human beings. The light of faith enables us to see the truth regarding the human person.

Priests and monks accompanied the conquistadores to the Americas and they were entrusted with the task of extending the Catholic faith among the native population. Since the primary objective of the conquistadores was the accumulation of booty, the extension of the Catholic faith among the Indians took place through coercion – literally *through fire and the sword*. It is important to point out here that in 1573, Pope Paul III published a decree that stated the Indians were persons and able to accept the Catholic faith. Therefore, they should not be deprived of their freedom and possessions under pain of excommunication (although they were pagans)¹.

St. John Paul II, a missionary Pope, in his official visit to South America and during his visit to his native Poland (which was still under Communism) often placed himself in the role of a representative

¹ Cf. GRZEGORZ KUCHARCZYK, *Kościół i konkwistadorzy*, Milujcie się., 1/2002.

of the poor and he stated: *I make every effort to speak for you and to pray for you*².

St. Vincent was insistent on the fact that those involved in the process of evangelizing persons who are poor must also be merciful (CCD: XI: 308-310). People are not justified by charity or compassion but by a gracious God who has bestowed upon the Church its mission. Mercy, according to St. Vincent, ought to go hand in hand with every effort to understand those who poor, with every effort to accompany those who are poor.

There is no doubt that the poor on the peripheries need us. Pope Francis, in a meeting with the Italian volunteers who are members of the Confraternity of Mercy, highlighted the importance of courage in the struggle for the well-being of humankind. He wanted the charism of those Confraternities to reveal the proper understanding of mercy. The Pope explained that the word “mercy” is a Latin words and its literal means is “to give one’s heart to the poor.”

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Translated by CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M.

² John Paul II, homily in Gdansk, June 12, 1987.