

Collaboration for Mission: a Tanzania Experience

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Introduction

On 12 October 2016, during the Provincial Assembly Convocation of the South India Province, Father Mathew Kallammakal, Assistant General, formally announced the elevation of the Tanzania Mission to the status of a Region in the Congregation of the Mission. It was a joyful movement for the Congregation of the Mission in general and in particular for those of us who have worked and are still working in Tanzania. It was a declaration of the growth of the mission and a sign that the mission is fitting itself into the scheme of things in the Congregation of the Mission. As the Tanzania Mission attains this canonical status in the Congregation, it is also time to remember the contributions of our confreres from different parts of the world and the collaboration of different provinces for the beginning and development of the mission. This article aims to shed light on the Tanzania Mission, its history, current status, and areas of collaboration with the South India Province, as well as various agencies and groups with whom we are engaged in our efforts to make Christ's message clear to the people of God.

1. A Short History of the Tanzania Mission

Sister Gabriella Winter, the Superior of the Sisters of Mercy of Saint Vincent De Paul, working in the Diocese of Mbinga, Tanzania, had requested, through Bishop Leo Dobbelaar, CM (+), a Vincentian Priest to be their Spiritual Director in Tanzania. But the immediate beginning of the Tanzania Mission could be traced back to the General Resolution of the 1992 General Assembly to open up more Vincentian missions in the world for the purpose of effective evangelization of the poor. As a result, two missionaries, one from the Eastern USA Province and the other from the Indian Province arrived in the southern part of Tanzania in September 1993, to work in the Diocese of Mbinga. Father Richard Kehoe was assigned to be the Spiritual

Director of the Sisters of Mercy of Saint Vincent De Paul, Mbinga, Tanzania. Father Chacko Panathara was asked to form a community. Within a year of their stay in Mbinga, they encountered difficulties that prompted the Superior General to make a decision to close the mission. But the plan of God prevailed and after prayerful reflection it was decided to continue with the missionary activities in Tanzania. In 1994, the Tanzania Mission had its first parish in Mpepai, a remote village in the southern part of Tanzania, near the Mozambique boarder. During the initial years, the Tanzania Mission was blessed with the presence of confreres from Ireland, USA, Spain, Puerto Rico, and India. In 2001, the Tanzania Mission was entrusted to the administration of the South India Province. Father Jose Aikara, who was Visitor of the South India Province at that time, took up the mission and sent more missionaries to work in the mission. Father Mathew Onatt was appointed the second superior of the Tanzania Mission. It was during that time that the mission took up initiatives to strengthen, systematize, and stabilize vocation promotion and formation programs, as well as to find means and construct structures for financial security. All the superiors who succeeded him did their best to strengthen the mission with the support and effective coordination of provincial superiors who assumed office subsequently.

2. The Present Status of the Mission

Vincentians are present in six dioceses in Tanzania. Among the 21 confreres working in Tanzania, one is from Kenya, 11 are from Tanzania, and nine from India. The Tanzania Mission has, at the moment, ten communities grouped in three canonical houses. The ministries currently undertaken are parish ministry, schools, hostels, and direct help to the poor children and their families. The mission has seven parishes in five dioceses, two primary schools, three secondary schools, two kindergarten schools, a daycare center, and five hostels for school children. There is also a social work organization for helping the poor. The mission provides direct help to 1600 children, especially in areas of education and medical care with the help of a Canadian NGO called Chalice. The mission administration consists of the mission superior and four councilors. For all major decisions, we seek the approval of the Visitor of the South India Province. The mission's administrative office is located in Songea, in the region of Ruvuma.

3. The Mission Context

Tanzania is an East African country with an estimated population of 50 million. Though there are approximately 125 dialects spoken the official language is Kiswahili, which is also spoken in other East African countries like Kenya, Congo, Uganda, and Burundi. Christianity and Islam are two major religions in Tanzania and they live in unity and peace. Tanzania has a democratically elected government and follows a strict constitutional framework regarding the election and terms of office of the president, prime minister, and ministers. People are welcoming and happy to receive the services of missionaries. The majority of our centers are in the southern part of Tanzania, divided among three dioceses. At this time, we have better connectivity with good roads at least between district headquarters, but the scenario was different and difficult a few years ago. But some of our centers are still in the remotest areas, the farthest being 1152 kilometers away from the nearest international airport and difficult to access, especially in the rainy season.

As recent reports suggest that the Church is moving from the Northern Hemisphere to the South, Tanzania is a place where the Vincentian charism and culture can find its best expression. It is a suitable context to experience the joy of evangelizing the poor. The Catholic faith is in a flourishing state in this part of the world. For the members of our Congregation, it is an apt situation for putting our hands together for a cause.

4. Our Mission Strategy

Committed to our call as evangelizers of the poor, the missionaries of the Tanzania Mission have followed a clear strategy for strengthening this call. They try to share the common life of the people, but, at the same time, help them to uplift themselves from their spiritual and material miseries. Most of our centers have a parish for pastoral and spiritual care, an organized social-work program for the children with provision for educational, medical, and economic welfare measures. The mission has started/will start a school in each of the centers for the education of the young ones and also as means for financial support for the community and the Congregation in the long run. So the mission has a threefold strategy for the development of each of its centers, that is: a parish, a school, and a social-work

organization for an integral and holistic development of the area and mission. In this context it may be appropriate to recall the words of Saint Vincent:

If there are any among us who think they're in the Mission to evangelize poor people but not to alleviate their sufferings, to take care of their spiritual needs but not their temporal ones, I reply that we have to help them and have them assisted in every way, by us and by others ... To do that is to preach the Gospel by words and by works (CCD:XII:77-78).

People need not only words of comfort, but also deeds of comfort. To this end, the mission has tried to establish a network of programs in our centers and to collaborate with various groups, agencies, and likeminded people in the mission. It is our awareness that there are many other factors and agencies working together for the same cause as ours that brings in the idea of collaboration.

5. The Idea of Collaboration

The very idea of collaboration for mission has its origin in Christ himself. Jesus called the 12 as collaborators for the preaching of the Good News. Jesus' ministry was and continues to be a collaborative one. Jesus called his disciples from different walks of life and we find Jesus calling many of them while they were at their work. The disciples were called to collaborate with Jesus in his ministry. Jesus was the uniting factor for all of them at all times. As we carry on the mission of Christ, our role is clearly defined as collaborators. We are called to work together as one community for forming a bigger community of the people of God.

Saint Vincent knew that effective evangelization and service to the poor require organization. He established various lay groups and religious groups so that the members can collaborate within the group and also with other groups. We learn from our history that Saint Vincent sent missionaries to Rome (1642), to Madagascar (1646), to Poland (1651) in his lifetime. It was definitely a collaborative effort. These events in history reveal the mind of Saint Vincent and our presence in any of these countries and others is due to such initiatives by the Founder himself. So this adventure into new territories where our services are most needed is clearly a priority for the CM. If we

work, today, in different parts of the world, that is because, at some time in history, there was a collaborative attempt to venture into a new territory and live out the purpose of the CM.

Many of our provinces and missions exist because of the sacrifices and hard work of other provinces and their missionaries. Before our resources (human and material) diminish, we should more emphatically foster the spirit for new missions, for the poor and more abandoned. As we step into the threshold of a great year, it is a fitting time to rekindle the missionary spirit and give it a practical articulation as we did in the 90s.

a. The Collaborators

The beginning of the works of Charity and the CM is connected with Saint Vincent's Châtillon experience, where he collaborated with the people of God and made them collaborate with each other in providing service to the poor-sick family. The real collaborators for us are the 'poor' and the people for whom we are at work. The 1980 General Assembly, when it was stating this purpose, in view of the signs of the times and the realities of our day, did not repeat what Saint Vincent said in the Common Rules: "To preach the good news of salvation to poor people, especially in rural areas," but rather chose the words: "Work at evangelizing the poor, especially the more abandoned." So the real or the primary collaborators always are the people for whom we are working. It can be the 'poor,' the 'more abandoned,' or the marginalized. We are called to implant our mission in a new territory and not import it as ready-made thing. For this end, there is a need to share, in some way or another, the ordinary lives of the people. The confreres working in the Tanzania Mission are successful to a great extent in sharing the lives of the people. We grow sharing the struggles and difficulties of the people. A common aspect of Christ's living, preaching, and teaching was that it was basically human, meaning that it shared in some way or another the language and style of the people. Jesus wanted his disciples to follow this pattern. We may call it 'inculturation,' or contextualization. This is an experience of 'incarnation' – the descent of God – to be one among us, an experience which Jesus wanted the disciples to have at the time of sending them on mission. This experience helps us in our program of vocational promotion and in the area of formation in the mission. One of the signs of the fructification of this collaboration with people of

God is the local priest. The Tanzania Mission has 11 incorporated members and many more in formation. Hence, it could be appropriate to conclude that our collaboration with the people of God is successful to a great extent, but at the same time, with the full realization that there is much more to be done for establishing a strong bond with the people.

b. Tanzania Mission and South India Province

The Tanzania Mission was entrusted to the South India Province in 2001. But even before this formal entrustment of the Tanzania Mission to the South India Province, the undivided Indian Province cooperated generously with the General Curia by sending missionaries to the mission. At the time of taking over the Tanzania Mission, the South India Province, as a young province with just four years of existence, had only human resources with no financial backing. So the province relied on its strength and sent more missionaries to Tanzania. The missionaries had to witness the hardships of the people of God, which helped them find ways and means to strengthen the mission from the grassroots.

The growth of the Tanzania Mission and the South India Province was a parallel event as both were at their nascent stage. But the province was generous enough to help the mission financially, even when it was seeking partners for attaining its own financial stability. Even today, the major area of collaboration remains its human resources. The South India Province finds ways and means to help the mission in achieving its developmental goals. Different provincial administrations of the South India Province followed a similar strategy as mentioned earlier in the development of the mission. So it shows there was continuity in planning, even though there was no written document.

c. Collaboration with Other Religious

From the beginning, the mission has collaborated with other religious congregations. Our association with the Vincentian Sisters of Mercy, Mbinga, has played a pivotal role in the establishment and expansion of the mission. The mission realized that “the harvest is plentiful, but laborers are few” and hence we have invited other religious orders to come and collaborate with us in our institutions and have helped them to establish themselves to live their religious call

for the service of God and people. There are at least seven religious congregations who have come to Tanzania as a response to our invitation and have established themselves to share and live their charism for evangelizing the poor. Many are still collaborating with us in our various institutions and ministries.

d. Collaboration with Bishops and Diocesan Clergy

The Statutes of the Congregation of the Mission state “*members should be urged to share in the universal and local Church’s promotional work for the missions*” (S. 5, 4^o). The former Bishop of the diocese of Mbinga, Emmanuel Mapunda, generously facilitated the establishment of the Tanzania Mission. He requested Vincentians to open a center in his diocese and made available his own guesthouse in Mbinga for missionary activities. In turn, we continue to respond adequately to the needs of the local Church by taking up new stations where pastoral care is diminishing. Our service was made available to the diocesan major seminary for many years when we had qualified personnel. Formation of the local clergy continues as we offer our services in the philosophical and theological institutes. So our task to “*help the clergy and laity in their formation and lead them to a fuller participation in the evangelizing of the poor*” (Constitution 1, 3^o) is also performed to some extent.

e. The Challenges of Collaboration

As we have seen, our ministry is always a collaborative one. We share our ministry with various partners: with members of the community-province, with members of other provinces, with the people of God, with members of other religious congregations, with diocesan clergy, and with other agencies and benefactors. It is an expression of the collaborative dimension of our work. In this line, any missionary act is a collaborative act, and any challenge that we face is also a challenge to our ministry in its collaborative dimension. Acknowledging that there are many other challenges encountered by missionaries and priests in Tanzania, I intend to propose four challenges that are immediately related to our purpose as the CM and that are applicable to the Congregation in general and the Tanzania Mission in particular.

The Congregation has stated its purpose at the present time in the following way:

“The purpose of the Congregation of the Mission is to follow Christ evangelizing the poor. This purpose is achieved when, faithful to Saint Vincent, the members individually and collectively:

- 1° make every effort to put on the spirit of Christ himself (CR I, 3) in order to acquire a holiness appropriate to their vocation (CR XII, 13);*
- 2° work at evangelizing the poor, especially the more abandoned;*
- 3° help the clergy and laity in their formation and lead them to a fuller participation in the evangelizing of the poor” (Constitutions, Article 1).*

The challenges are:

1. The Challenge of Revitalizing Missionary Spirituality

Our Constitutions and Common Rules define our primary task as “evangelization of the poor/abandoned.” The first challenge is to inculcate the spirit of this instruction in our hearts (formation) individually and collectively so that our every effort and daily work will be directed to this goal. Sometimes, our vision is blurred and, at other times, we remain distracted and away from the real goal. The primary job of the missionaries of the Congregation the Mission is preaching the word of God to poor country people. It is to be noted that Saint Vincent forbade his men to occupy the pulpits of the principal churches or even to accept a ministry with the diocesan curia, so that they may not be tempted to act as a parish priest. He feared that his men might be tempted to frequent the company of persons who did not belong to the poor and socially inferior classes. That is the spirit of the mission that Vincent tried to inculcate. Our challenge, as members of CM, is to see if we are still with the poor and, for the Tanzania Mission, how we can organize effectively our works to achieve these goals. All our ministries should ultimately be focused on the poor, the abandoned. Hence, there is a need for revitalizing missionary spirituality.

2. *The Challenge of Mobility of the Missioners*

The youthful vigor of the Tanzania Mission has to find its expression in its willingness to go to new missions, at least for a limited period of time. The Tanzania Mission has grown, but it will be mature only when the young members, with passion and zeal for souls, express their willingness to go to new missions. It is also a question of our willingness to collaborate with other peoples and cultures.

In 1658, in an address to the Daughters of Charity (CCD:X:408-409) Vincent said:

“For that’s how the Church began. All the apostles were poor men, they knew nothing, went barefoot and didn’t wear linen. Nevertheless, what did they not do with the grace Our Lord gave them! They converted the whole world. What a grace, Sisters, that, in forming your Company God willed to use the same fabric He used to save the whole world! Hold yourselves in readiness to do whatever He wants you to do. But make no claims, either to be in this house, that parish, or in the country, and don’t be afraid to go wherever you’re sent. Remember that God will take care of you everywhere.”

3. *The Challenge of Collaboration with the Vincentian Family*

To realize his mission, Saint Vincent associated himself with many: rich and poor, young and old, men and women, priests and laity, kings and subjects. These binaries show the all-inclusiveness of his mission strategy. The Tanzania Mission may have to associate more enthusiastically with other members of the Vincentian Family and organize effectively Vincentian-Family groups for achieving our goals. Members of the Vincentian Family are those who share the charism and spirit of Saint Vincent and, therefore, they can easily and immediately associate with our works with the same conviction as ours. They have the holiness appropriate to their vocation as Vincentians and are oriented to help the poor and more abandoned and, thus, they can be better partners in our mission.

4. *The Challenge of “Suitability” to a Situation*

The situation is the mission context and “suitability” means making ourselves fit for the situation. In this fast developing world, where technology changes our situations and context now faster than

any time before, it is a necessity that we make ourselves fit to encounter these changing times. We should be equipped with adequate knowledge and better tools if we want to help the laity and clergy in their formation and lead them to fuller participation in evangelization of the poor. Perhaps, this may be the right place to recall the words of former Superior General Robert Maloney to the Visitors and delegates at the end of the 38th General Assembly:

“As leaders in your provinces, be sure that the service of the confreres is competent. If they need to learn a language to serve the poor, let them learn it well. If they need to learn the use of computers to do their work, let them learn it well. If they need to update theology, liturgy, or preaching, let them update them well. Do not hesitate to give confreres sufficient time for ongoing formation. It is worth it. A few months spent learning, training, assimilating new thoughts, or a new spirit, can produce years of labor by revitalized men. A seed sown now can produce a mighty oak tree later. Let the renewed formation of our confreres be a real priority. Help them be competent” (Vincentiana, Vol. 36, no. 4-5, 1992, p. 357).

Conclusion

The Tanzania Mission had its struggles and its struggles will continue, without them there is no growth. It could be moments of a great witnessing for the young missionaries working in Tanzania, because there is no growth unless the seed falls and loses itself. The losing of self is important. The disciples had to lose their securities and attain a sense of dependence on their Master and on one another. For us, this indicates the relevance and importance of community as a place where we can find the best collaborators for our mission, upon whom we can depend. Our identity is, as members of the Congregation of the Mission, a missionary identity. Our missionary identity should prevail over our racial, national, regional, and tribal identities, which are multiple. The history of the mission shows that it is the plan of God, otherwise, who else could have saved the mission from the brink of closing down in 1994. The task at hand is to cooperate with the plan of God and keep our missionary identity.

The year 2017 will be yet another memorable event for the Congregation of the Mission, as we celebrate 400 years from the birth of our charism. On 25 January 1617, Vincent preached what we call “the first sermon of the mission.” As we prepare to celebrate this event

once again, it would be the right time to recall the words of Saint Vincent: *“Let’s try to imagine that He’s saying to us, ‘Set out, you Missioners, set out! Quoi! You’re still here, and there are poor souls waiting for you, whose salvation depends perhaps on your preaching and catechizing!’”* (CCD:XI:121).