

The european provinces of the C.M. And the mission “Ad Gentes”

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This issue of *Vincentiana* attempts to offer our readers a few broad brush strokes about the European provinces of the Congregation. The committee responsible for the magazine asked me to write an article about the mission “ad gentes,” carried on in the past and in the present by the provinces of the old continent. It is not my intention to refer extensively and in detail to the mission “ad gentes” carried out in the past by the aforementioned provinces. The Congregation has scholars more capable than I to write that history in good time.

The missionary character of the C.M.

The Congregation of the Mission was born in the heart of Europe. An important feature St. Vincent gave it was its missionary character. His frequent teachings and concrete facts confirm this; even taking into account the scarce personnel of the new-born Congregation, Vincent took on missions “ad gentes” of great importance. Within a few years, the Congregation made its presence known in different countries inside and outside Europe.

Our present Constitutions, for their part, gather together diverse orientations about the missionary character of the C.M.: “In the works of evangelization the Congregation plans to do, we should bear in mind this characteristic...”, the “...availability to go anywhere in the world following the example of the first missionaries of the Congregation” (C 12). “...among the apostolic works of the Congregation the missions “ad gentes” or to countries that find themselves in a similar state of evangelization, have an outstanding place” (C 16).

“That heart which makes us go anywhere” (SV XI, 291)

Born in Europe, the C.M., as was said above, continued to extend itself in concentric circles throughout the length and breadth of the world. The European provinces have behind them a long and fruitful missionary history. In successive periods they announced the gospel and established the C.M. in other continents: Africa, Asia, America, the Pacific Islands and the Middle East. All the European provinces, to a greater or lesser degree, felt the call to mission as a fundamental duty, inherent to the Vincentian vocation itself. Especially in the 19th and 20th centuries entire ordination classes set forth from the European provinces and countries as missionaries to those places where today the C.M. is firmly established. On some

occasions a particular province began a new mission in a particular place in the world; other times, missionaries from various provinces worked together in a single mission.

In broad strokes, we can point to the missionary expansion in the different areas of the African continent: the Italian and Dutch area in Abyssinia, the Portuguese area in Mozambique, the Belgian area—together with Polish and Dutch missionaries—in the Congo, the French area in North Africa, Madagascar and Cameroon, the Irish area in Nigeria. Today various European provinces are engaged in missionary activities, and we can cite as examples Madagascar where missionaries from France, Poland, Italy, Slovenia and Spain are working together, the latter in the Androy mission. Almost all the African provinces, today, count on the presence of European confreres in the actual working of their missions. They also continue to receive economic aid from the European provinces, especially for the promotion of the poor and the formation of native vocations.

The presence of the Congregation and its work in Asia and the Pacific islands is due to a great degree to the missionary thrust of the European provinces, especially in the past. Spain, for example, carried the mission to the Philippines and India. As a result of this tenacious missionary activity, the Congregation today finds itself in both countries firmly rooted and expanding. The Dutch confreres, supported by missionaries from Italy, carried out mission work in Indonesia where the Congregation today shows clear signs of vitality. The Congregation owes its presence in Vietnam to the French and Dutch confreres. And the great mission in mainland China and Taiwan was begun by missionaries from various backgrounds: Italian, Portuguese, French, Dutch, Polish, Hungarian and Irish. The Irish missionaries also brought the Congregation to Australia.

The French confreres missioned in the Middle East and established the Congregation in that part of the world, although our presence today is very uneven depending on the country: Lebanon, Syria, Israel, Egypt and Iran.

The missionary activity in America followed the same path as in Africa and Asia. The European provinces worked diligently to collaborate in the evangelization of the new continent and establish the presence of the Congregation. In general terms it can be said that the majority of the European provinces sent confreres to do mission work in those places where the Congregation finds itself today. It was the French who, at the request of the Superiors General, were the first to carry out the mission and establish the Congregation in Latin America: Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Ecuador, Columbia and Central America. Later on missionaries from different provinces carried on the work initiated by the French. Brazil received missionary aid from the Portuguese, Polish and Dutch confreres. The former Pacific province was consolidated thanks to missionaries from very different parts of Europe, among others the province of Barcelona. Central America got missionaries from Holland, while Costa Rica got them from Germany. The Spanish provinces missioned and established the Congregation in a huge area of Latin America: Cuba, Puerto Rico, Peru and Venezuela, not to mention their collaboration in other territories of the new continent.

The provinces of Barcelona and Saragossa currently attend to sizeable missions in Honduras. At this moment, 170 Spanish missionaries contribute to the work of evangelization in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

The mission and the establishment of the Congregation in the United States is due to the combined efforts of missionaries from various European countries: Italians, Spaniards, and later Polish; the latter locating themselves in what is today the New England Province. French and Slovenian confreres attend to the mission in Canada.

At the threshold of the third Millennium

Last summer I spent a week in Belgium, enjoying the hospitality of the confreres. I also went to the house in Panningen in Holland. One fact stands out significantly: every day, during the brief community get-togethers, the confreres' conversation always returned, in one way or another, to the mission in the Congo. The majority of these confreres had missioned there and discovered there the true meaning of the Vincentian vocation. Now, either for reasons of health or age, they have had to return to their homelands. But the remarkable thing is that these elderly Belgian and Dutch missionaries, despite the distances, closely follow everything that goes on in their beloved missions. They analyze and talk about the political and social evolution, the war and the peace in those areas. They maintain interest in the Christian communities they founded, and have a special interest in the provinces: communities, ministries, vocations, etc. The exchange of news with their respective areas of mission is fairly frequent thanks to modern means of communication, as well as through missionaries who return to Europe for health reasons, or to take a few days rest, or begin a well-earned retreat in their home province. In a word, from their place in the rear guard, these confreres who once went forth to mission lands, now returned home, still feel like missionaries, truly involved by means of their prayer and dearly held memories, through their correspondence and economic help, in the missions that gave such meaning to their lives.

One thing is clear: they all feel deeply the undeniable fact that the advanced age of the majority of the confreres and the lack of vocations, in their own countries and in Europe in general, will doubtlessly rein in the flow of European missionaries to their beloved Congo mission, as well as to other far flung places in need of missionary aid.

“Our vocation consists in going throughout the World” (SV XII, 262)

What has been said about the Belgian and Dutch confreres reflects, *salvatis salvandi*, the current situation in the majority of the European provinces. To a greater or lesser degree, they all recognize we are living a time of transition. Gone are the days when large numbers of missionaries left Europe for one mission or another. Because of the advance of secularization, and as a consequence of it, the decrease in vocations, the

missionary activity “ad gentes” of the Congregation, set in motion from Europe, will change; and, on account of this, the baton will pass to other hands. From the early days of the Congregation until the end of the 20th century, the burden of the mission “ad gentes” and the establishment of the Congregation in numerous countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America, had fallen, above all, on the European provinces. Nevertheless, unless the predictions fail, at the beginning of the third millenium the European provinces will continue to participate in the mission “ad gentes” with great generosity, but with less direct involvement.

By necessity, Europe will move without haste and without pause towards greater interprovincial collaboration, perhaps towards the unification of some provinces; and doubtlessly a drastic reform of the apostolic works will be set in motion. With this as a given, the European provinces, in keeping with their history, will continue to carry on the mission “ad gentes” taking into account some particular conditions. A particular province, Poland for example, has enough personnel to carry out the mission “ad gentes,” above all, given the urgent need, in Eastern Europe and Russia. Other provinces will continue to support existing missionary projects, and perhaps may have sufficient human and economic resources to engage in missions “ad gentes” on a lesser scale. It will be possible for the European provinces to participate in interprovincial or international missions in collaboration with confreres from other continents and provinces. The majority of the new international missions created by the Superior General and, in some cases by particular provinces, count on the collaboration of European missionaries. This is the case in Albania, Kharkov, Ukrania, Nizhni Tagil (Russia), Tanzania and El Alto (Bolivia). European missionaries also help out in the provinces of Cuba and China, as well as in the vice-province of Mozambique, all brought about by the successive appeals of the Superior General. Finally, the European provinces, bearing in mind that the Congregation is one body, will have the possibility of providing economic support for the missions “ad gentes” initiated by confreres from other geographical areas lacking in economic means. A new and interesting phenomenon is the participation of Vincentian lay people in the missions “ad gentes.” The European provinces should appreciate and take into account the possibilities in this area offered by the integration of Vincentian laity into this ministry traditionally performed by clerics and religious. This is a new state of affairs capable of generating new hopes.

Looking towards the future

Within the Congregation the most notable change relative to the mission “ad gentes” will be the gradual ending of direct missionary involvement maintained for so long in the hands of the European provinces. In the short and medium term, the most notable missionary initiatives will be started by, we suppose, confreres from other geographic areas. The African, Asian and Latin American provinces that received help in the past, especially from Europe, will move on to offer missionary help to other countries, and also have a greater role when the time comes to begin and maintain new missons “ad gentes.” Historical cycles inevitably change. At the present time,

according to statistics, Catholicism is migrating from the northern to the southern hemisphere. This reality will have bearing on those who have more active roles in the near future of the Congregation's missions "ad gentes." In this decade the different provinces of Asia, America and Africa, up to now recipients of foreign personnel, have begun to offer missionaries and take responsibility for new mission projects.

In any case, despite the decline in Vincentian vocations in Europe, we must avoid falling into a possible temptation: that of closing ourselves off, looking out primarily for our own security, in detriment to being open to the universal mission. The missions "ad gentes" bring fresh air into the lungs of the Congregation and the provinces; they are an irreplaceable reference point for present and future candidates to the missionary life of the Congregation.

In keeping with the present

The very concept and the methodology of missions "ad gentes" have evolved after the First World War, and especially after Vatican II. I had the opportunity to get to know how the missionaries going to different mission territories interpreted the mission "ad gentes" in the years before Vatican II. I have also become very familiar with the mentality of our missionaries and their way of responding to the mission "ad gentes" during the last three decades. Today the pastoral and theological reflection about foreign missions employs with utter naturalness a series of concepts that denote a new vision about mission. Now we speak and write of insertion into the social space of peoples, of appreciating native religious and cultural values, of inculturating the gospel, of announcing the word and human promotion, of fostering native vocations, of more authentic liturgical expression, of dialogue with other faiths.

The magisterium of the Church has made its own and even fostered these changes. Suffice it to cite the decree "Ad Gentes" approved by Vatican II, the Apostolic Exhortation "Evangelii Nuntiandi" and the encyclical "Redemptoris Missio." In these documents numerous missionary guidelines are pointed out, some having permanent validity and others of a more circumstantial nature.

The European provinces and missionaries, after a serious analysis of the missionary methods of the past, have firmly made their own the conceptual and practical changes demanded by the new ecclesiology, and especially by present day missiology. From this point of departure the European missionaries of the Congregation will continue at the beginning of the third millennium to make their contribution in the area of missions "ad gentes."

(JOSEPH V. CUMMINS, C.M., translator)