

# **RATIO MISSIONUM**

## **Congregatio Missionis**

*Let us ask God to give the Company this spirit, this heart, this heart which will make us go everywhere, this heart of the Son of God, the heart of Our Lord, the heart of Our Lord, the heart of Our Lord which will dispose us to go as he went and as he would have gone if his eternal wisdom had judged it fitting to labor for the conversion of those poor nations (SV XI, 291).*

### **Introduction**

The following of Christ, the Evangelizer of the Poor (C 1) is the driving force behind our Vincentian missionary vocation. Encounters with the most abandoned in places like Folleville and Châtillon changed St. Vincent's understanding of the gospels and led him to an ever deepening relationship with Christ the Missionary of the Father. With the aid of figures like Pierre de Bérulle, Francis de Sales and André Duval, he gradually discerned where the Spirit was leading him in life, and little by little he recognized his vocation was to participate in Jesus' mission to evangelize and serve the poor.

The first members of the Congregation shared Vincent's insight into the gospel. Inspired by his example and sensing how deeply his charism resonated in their own lives, they gathered around our founder to live out the vocation of following Jesus as evangelizers of the poor. Vincent told them: *In this vocation we live in conformity with Our Lord Jesus Christ who, it seems, when he came to this world, chose as his principal task that of assisting and caring for the poor (SV XI, 108).*

While the basic charism of the Congregation of the Mission was clear from the first days of its foundation, the structures and ministries which flowed from Vincent's original inspiration developed only slowly. Events, urgent needs and pressing requests constantly challenged the first Vincentians to broaden their understanding of how to live their vocation. The pioneer group of missionaries expressed the charism by preaching popular missions in the countryside. Within a few years they had assumed the work of forming the clergy. Gradually, missionaries went out beyond the borders of France to support the local Churches in Italy, Ireland, Scotland and Poland, as well as to small groups of enslaved Christians in North Africa. In 1648 Vincent, recognizing that the missions *ad*

*gentes*<sup>1</sup> were another, very important way to live our missionary vocation, sent the first of six groups to Madagascar.

Vincent frequently reflected on these developments in his conferences and letters, where we can note a growing appreciation for the place of foreign missions in the life of the Company. *How happy the situation of a missionary whose only limit for his mission is the inhabitable world. Why restrict ourselves to one place and impose limits on ourselves in one parish if our vocation is the whole circumference of the globe?*<sup>2</sup> On another occasion he remarks: *What does the word missionary mean? It means one who is sent, sent by God. God has said to you: Go out to the whole world to preach the Gospel to every creature* (SV XII, 27). To a group of missionaries being sent to Madagascar, he states:

*According to the rules of our institute, we are obliged to attend to the salvation of souls anywhere that God calls us, above all, in places where there is a greater need and where workers for the Gospel are lacking and, knowing that in the Indies, especially in the islands of Madagascar ... there is a great lack of workers and the harvest is great ...we destine and send you to these people on the said islands and other parts of the Indies so that, according to the function of our Institute, you can devote yourselves to the salvation of souls with all your strength and with the help of God's grace* (SV XIII, 314).

In a moment of enthusiasm, Vincent expressed to Charles Nacquart his profound appreciation for the foreign missions: *There is nothing on earth I would like better, if it were allowed me, than to go as your companion in place of Fr. Gondrée* (SV III, 285). Towards the end of his life, in December 1658, he made a passionate plea to maintain the ministries that had developed in the Congregation, especially the foreign missions. He defended them by pointing out that they responded to our basic call to evangelize the poor. He warned against those who would seek to curtail or abandon difficult missions because of distance, lack of personnel, or loss of missionary spirit. *There will be men who coddle themselves, men who have a narrow outlook, who confine their views and designs to a limited sphere within which they shut themselves up as in a tiny circle and are unwilling to leave it* (SV XII, 92).

Over the centuries the Congregation of the Mission has sought to be faithful to the legacy that St. Vincent has left us in the foreign missions. Responding to requests from local Churches and the Congregation for the

---

<sup>1</sup>Strictly speaking, the missions *ad gentes* are missions in areas where the Gospel has never been preached. There is, however, a tendency to talk about all missions in foreign countries as *ad gentes*. This second, less technical meaning will often be used in this document.

<sup>2</sup>This citation, not found in Coste's French Edition of the works of St. Vincent, can be found in the Spanish Edition (SVP XI, 828-829).

Propagation of the Faith, missionaries went out to Asia, Oceania, Africa and the Americas. Inspired by the Vincentian charism, famous confreres, like Sts. Justin de Jacobis, John Gabriel Perboyre and Francis Regis Clet, and many other lesser known missionaries gave their lives to preaching the Gospel in new cultures. The same Vincentian missionary charism lives on in the members of the Congregation of the Mission at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This Ratio Missionum seeks to offer guidelines for those serving in our foreign missions in light of the many changes that have occurred in the Church and the world in recent years.

# **I. The Present Situation: a New and diverse World**

A new world is being born. It has yet to take definitive shape as it struggles to emerge from the remnants of a former age. Like every human society, this new world has positive and negative elements, values and disvalues. It is the milieu in which today's missionaries are called to evangelize. A few aspects of the emerging future are these:

## **1.1 The Reality of Poverty and the Aspiration for Justice**

A new economic situation is developing because of technological advances, rapid communications, new means of production, trade agreements, and other factors. Globalization of the economy affects every society and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. These changes have created unprecedented wealth for some few countries and for small groups in many nations.

This new economic situation has not translated into positive gains for large sectors of the world. National economies have been crippled by unpayable debts. Whole countries have been left behind in the rush to globalize because they lack raw materials or desirable agricultural and manufacturing products demanded by international markets. In practice, the so-called free market economy is dominated by wealthy nations which control access to the market, as well as the capital and technology needed to participate.

Two-thirds of the world still lives in poverty. Twenty-eight thousand people die everyday from hunger, not to mention the millions who are chronically undernourished. Incredible percentages of the populations of some countries have been infected by AIDS, malaria, and other lethal diseases. Most of the world still has either no access to adequate medical attention, education and potable water or has substandard possibilities for meeting these and other basic human needs. Underlying this necessarily very general description are real individuals and families that suffer.

There are signs of hope in the midst of this rather bleak picture. There is a growing awareness, at least in theory, of the value of the human person. Fostering respect for the value of each person has been one of the important struggles of our time. In almost every country, groups have been formed to promote and protect human rights, civil liberties and political participation. Individuals, small groups and whole peoples endeavor to create just economic and political structures which permit the development of the human person. These are all signs of a new world struggling to emerge.

## **1.2 Reaffirmation of Cultural Diversity**

Anthropology and sociology have pointed out the importance of culture in the life of individuals and communities. Culture provides the context within which human beings understand and relate to the world. It is a system of inherited patterns of meanings and behaviors that orient a group or a society. It involves symbols, myths, beliefs and norms of conduct that are formally and informally transmitted in a society. Culture defines the way one learns, lives and acts in relationship to others.

One of the beneficial results of the passing of the old colonial system is that recently liberated peoples have demanded respect for their cultures. This has brought to the fore a recognition of the diversity of cultures and the meaning of that diversity. The right of a people to develop its own culture has only recently begun to enter mainstream consciousness. This creates the possibility for relationships of respect and sensitivity between peoples of different cultures.

Affirmation of cultural diversity has not emerged without difficulties and setbacks. Cultures interact as peoples from different societies come together. Diversity of meaning and interests often causes misunderstanding and conflict between individuals and peoples. Not everyone recognizes the right of others to develop their own culture. This has led to the marginalization of some cultures and the dominance of others.

## **1.3 Religious Revival**

In many parts of the world, a postmodern culture is coming to birth or already exists, often as a reaction to today's unfulfilled promises of progress, equality, and inclusion. This new culture questions the assumptions of contemporary society and its reliance on the rational. It highlights the individual. It is uneasy with established structures. It distrusts the promises of authority, both civil and religious. This often results in disinterest in traditional social, political, and religious processes.

But, although postmodernism, secularism and individualism have had an impact on the religiosity of many peoples in the world, it is also evident that in many countries a religious awakening has taken place. The rich liturgies of Africa, the focus on inter-religious dialogue and contemplative prayer in Asia, Basic Ecclesial Communities and movements to promote the liberation of the poor in Latin America, the birth of new religious communities in Europe, and the increasingly active ministerial role of lay persons in North America are evidence of this in the Catholic Church. The rapid growth in the number of Evangelical Christians is an indication of a thirst for religious expression. The resurgence of Islam, the expansion of Buddhism and renewed interest in Hinduism are also

signs of a new religious interest. Frequently, religious revival has taken the form of fundamentalism, but nonetheless, this too points to a search for meaning and a desire for deeper union with the Divine.

This religious revival has had a profound impact on missionaries. In some instances it has provoked tensions and divisions. But it has also been an opportunity for reflection and growth. It has made possible deeper reflection on the values present in other religions, and it has highlighted the increased need for inter-religious dialogue. It has also given rise to questions about the nature of evangelization and the role of missionaries.

## **1.4 Different Regional Realities**

### **1.4.1 The Southern Hemisphere (Africa and Latin America)**

The countries of the Southern Hemisphere in Africa and Latin America share some characteristics and have frequently been categorized as belonging to the Third World. Both continents have well-known colonial pasts. Both experience the poverty of large sectors of the population because of social, economic and political factors which often are a result of unjust structures. In both continents governments have often been unstable and corrupt.

Latin America is a continent whose culture has been strongly influenced by the Catholic Church, although in recent decades Evangelical Christians have made their presence felt significantly. The Catholic Church has made notable efforts to address the disparity between rich and poor, not without conflicts. It has sought to articulate and concretize the Church's fundamental option for the poor.

In Africa the Church is vibrant and strong, but at the same time challenged by fundamentalist sects and the growth of Islam. In some countries large portions of the population belong to traditional religions. Violent internal and regional conflicts, the spread of AIDS, and malaria and tremendous levels of poverty continue to afflict the continent.

### **1.4.2 Asia and Oceania**

Asia is sometimes included with the countries of the South because some nations have the same economic and political difficulties as Africa and Latin America. Nevertheless, in many ways, the situation of Asia and Oceania is unique. The great ancient religions of Asia dominate the social and cultural horizon. Catholics are a small minority, except in a few places like the Philippines, Lebanon, Kerala, Timor, and the Tamils. Faced with being a minority in a world of various cultures and religions and of multifaceted poverty,

the Church is challenged to promote the dignity of the human person as the foundation for the common well-being of the people. The Asian Church is intent on building an inclusive human community encompassing persons of all religions, ethnic groups and socio-economic levels. In some places, like Vietnam and China, a vital Church exists, despite restrictions in its freedom.

### **1.4.3 Northern Hemisphere (Europe and North America)**

The countries of the North Atlantic, often called the First World, dominate the world economy with their wealth, technological advances, and military resources. Despite increasing prosperity, the gap between rich and poor in these countries continues to grow as well. While freedom and human dignity are highly prized, individualism, depersonalization, consumerism, and secularization are all also present.

Europe is a vast region, stretching from the Atlantic to the Urals. Besides the highly developed countries of the West, it also includes the former Soviet Block countries of Eastern Europe. These nations have their own social, political and economic difficulties partly inherited from the days of the Communist past and partly created by new interaction with a free-market economy.

Europe sent missionaries throughout the world for centuries. Today such missionaries are much fewer and the continent that was for centuries the heart of Christendom is now considered to be in need of a new evangelization.

Over the last century North America also sent numerous missionaries abroad. But today the North American Church is at a different stage of development and, though religious practice remains strong, the Church there is beginning to experience difficulties similar to those of Europe.

The Churches of the Northern Hemisphere face the challenge of preaching the Gospel in the midst of wealth and global influence. Part of the challenge is to find ways to direct wealth, power, and technology to the service of a just society.

## II. A New Missionary Paradigm

The Second Vatican Council has had a profound effect on the way the Church perceives its mission in the world. The fathers of the Council, especially in the documents *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes* and *Ad Gentes*, pointed the Church in new directions and created an impetus for the development of a new model for mission. The new paradigm for mission, which is still being refined and developed, envisions the Church as a communion of local Churches in union with Rome, each in service of the other. The missionary endeavor, in this perspective, becomes multidirectional. The new paradigm does not just envision established Churches sending personnel to the so-called young Churches; rather, it contemplates multiple contexts for evangelization. It sees evangelization as beginning whenever a missionary leaves his or her own culture and crosses a human frontier (geographical or social) to announce the Gospel in a new culture. The missionary not only proclaims the mystery of Christ, but is evangelized too as he or she accompanies others in the process of discovering the Spirit of the Lord already acting in a local Church or culture.

Among the elements present in the new missionary paradigm, four can be highlighted:

### 2.1 Evangelization

*Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN 27) describes the content of evangelization in this way: “Evangelization will always contain – as the foundation, center and at the same time summit of its dynamism – a clear proclamation that, in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made Man, who died and rose from the dead, salvation is offered to all as a gift of God’s grace and mercy ... a salvation which indeed has its beginning in this life but which is fulfilled in eternity.” *Redemptoris Missio* (RM 11) adds: “We know that Jesus came to bring integral salvation, one which embraces the whole person and all humankind, and opens up the wondrous prospect of divine filiation.” The same document, focusing on the Church’s missionary activity, states (RM 44): “Proclamation is the permanent priority of mission.... All forms of missionary activity are directed to this proclamation, which reveals and gives access to the mystery hidden for ages and made known in Christ (cf. Eph 3:3-9; Col 1:25-29), the mystery which lies at the heart of the Church’s mission and life as the hinge on which all evangelization turns.”

Jesus announced the advent of the kingdom of God. *He has sent me to preach Good News to the poor, to proclaim liberation to captives and sight to the blind, to give freedom to the oppressed and announce a year of God’s favor* (Lk 4:18-19). The Good News he preached was the presence of this Kingdom in his person and his ministry, touching the human person at every level so that we can become a new creation. Paul VI wrote in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN 9): *As the*



*kernel and center of his Good News, Christ proclaims salvation, this great gift of God, which is liberation from everything that oppresses man but which is above all liberation from sin and the Evil One.* This Kingdom, God's reign in our lives, transforms the world through truth, freedom, love, justice and forgiveness, and it points to a future not yet fulfilled.

The Church, the community of Jesus' disciples, continues his evangelizing mission. The Church is not identical with the kingdom, but cannot be separated from it. *The Church is ... at the service of the kingdom (RM 20).* It proclaims the Good News of the Kingdom through word and work, just as Jesus did. The goal of its proclamation is that people encounter Christ. Through this encounter they come to fullness of life.

The proclamation of the Kingdom involves communication. The Good News can be communicated in many different ways, as Paul VI noted in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. A frequent means is verbal communication – preaching, catechizing, works of education, sharing the scriptures, theological reflection. Modern media provide a variety of instruments – radio, television, Internet, books, newspapers, magazines.

But proclamation also occurs in nonverbal ways. The sacraments and sacramentals play an essential role. The arts (painting, sculpture, music, dance, film, theater, and architecture) are other ways to communicate the message of Jesus.

*People today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers, experience than in teaching, and in life and action than in theories (RM 42).* Evangelization, a process which begins with proclamation, inaugurates a way of life in which the values of the Gospel are *practiced*. The message that is preached becomes a message that is lived, a way of life that gives witness to the Good News. The ways that the Gospel can be translated into Christian action are without limit. Works of charity, the struggle for justice, the promotion of human rights, community building, and projects for human development are only some of the possibilities.

*Redemptoris Missio* envisions three situations for carrying out the Church's evangelizing mission. The first is that of missions *ad gentes*. Strictly speaking, missions *ad gentes* are those in which the Gospel is preached to people who have never heard it. This is sometimes called primary evangelization. The second situation is evangelization in areas where the Christian community is already established, but needs nurturing. The final situation is that of peoples who have a long Christian tradition, but where many have never effectively been confronted by the Good News. In this third context, Pope John Paul II talks about the need for a new evangelization: new in its ardor, new in its methods, new in its

expression. *Redemptoris Missio*, while describing these three different situations, also notes that, in practice, it is often difficult to maintain such clear distinctions.

## 2.2 Inculturation

Sensibility to culture and to inculturating the Gospel is an important priority for the Church. Pope Paul VI states in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN 20): *The split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time, just as it was of other times.* Culture is the context through which people understand the world. It includes a whole spectrum of ideas, beliefs, symbols and values that are shared by a people. Everything learned, including the message of the Gospel, is affected by it. People cannot be truly evangelized unless they are addressed within the context of their culture.

The modern world has become more aware of cultural diversity. Cultures are not static, isolated entities. They change and develop. All cultures have values and disvalues. Cultures constantly come into contact with each other. These encounters can be mutually enriching, but can also be confrontational.

The reality of cultural pluralism has influenced the new missionary paradigm. The Second Vatican Council stated that:

*The Church, sent to all peoples of every time and place, is not bound exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation, any particular way of life or any customary way of life recent or ancient. Faithful to her own tradition and at the same time conscious of her universal mission, she can enter into communion with the various civilizations, to their enrichment and the enrichment of the Church herself* (Gaudium et Spes, 58).

The difficulty for missionaries is that, although the Gospel is not identified with any particular culture, it is always communicated through the medium of culture. Missionary evangelization, therefore, always implies the meeting of cultures. At times missionaries have confused the Good News of Jesus with the way their culture has embodied Jesus' message. They imposed their culture along with the Gospel.

Today's missionary paradigm highlights the importance of communicating the Gospel in terms of the local culture. Pope Paul VI put it this way: *What matters is to evangelize human culture and cultures (not in a purely decorative way as it were by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to their very roots), in the wide and rich sense which these terms have in Gaudium et Spes, always taking the person as one's starting-point and always coming back to relationships of people among themselves and with God* (EN 20).

In this way the Gospel permeates the culture and becomes incarnate in it. This creates a dynamism which enables God's Word to transform the culture by promoting values already present in it, while also questioning what is not of God within a culture and what violates the human person.

The missionary crosses not only geographical but also cultural boundaries to announce the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Inculturation of the Gospel is not merely the translating of theological propositions into a different language, as if the Good News was a set of ideas to be learned. It is communicating the message of the Kingdom by word and work in such a way that people can encounter the person of Christ and become disciples.

Missionaries, while being faithful to the message of the Gospel, must also seek to discover the seeds of the Word in the local culture. Inculturation is a long and difficult process. It requires study and reflection. It calls for dialogue, respect and humility. It involves a conscious awareness of one's own cultural values, meanings and prejudices as well as an understanding of the local context. The encounter between cultures which always accompanies evangelization can be mutually enriching, but only if a dialogue of cultures takes place in an atmosphere of respect, openness and sensitivity.

### **2.3 A Polycentric Church**

A logical consequence of inculturating the Gospel is recognition that there are many ways to live faith in Jesus. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* points this out:

*The universal Church is in practice incarnate in the individual Churches made up of such or such an actual part of mankind, speaking such and such a language, heirs of a cultural patrimony, of a vision of the world, of an historical past, of a particular human substratum. Receptivity to the wealth of the individual Church corresponds to a special sensitivity of modern man (EN 62).*

The alternative, an approach focused on Western culture or any other single culture, in the long run will render the universal Church's evangelizing mission impossible.

The new missionary paradigm places much responsibility for evangelization on the local Churches. Much of the initiative and creativity for devising ways to inculturate the Gospel and the practice of faith must come from local Christian communities. The paradigm envisions a communion of local Churches which support each other as equals by sharing concerns and by responding to each others' needs. The flow of missionaries, then, is not only from North to South, but multidirectional.

The polycentric Church lives in worldwide communion through its faith in the person of Jesus, the bonds of charity that draw its members together, and a unifying ecclesial structure – the college of bishops, in union with Peter, that continues Jesus’ ministry of teaching, governing, and sanctifying. The Catholic Church is both one and universal. It is a sign of unity within diversity. Pope Paul VI noted in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*:

*Let us be very careful not to conceive of the universal Church as the sum, or, if one can say so, the more or less anomalous federation of essentially different individual Churches. In the mind of the Lord the Church is universal by vocation and mission, but when she puts down her roots in a variety of cultural, social and human terrains, she takes on different external expressions and appearances in each part of the world (EN 62).*

The role of the college of bishops, in union with the Bishop of Rome, is to promote the unity of the Church, but a unity in diversity. The concretization of how this diversity takes shape in liturgy, law and practice requires much dialogue between the local Churches and the Holy See. This is a perennial challenge for the Catholic Church as a missionary Church.

## **2.4 Respect for Other Religions and Ecumenism**

In every country the Catholic Church encounters people who are members of different ecclesial communions or religions. *Inter-religious dialogue is a part of the Church’s evangelizing mission (RM 55)*. Because the Church itself is called to continual conversion it welcomes dialogue with men and women of other faiths. *Dialogue does not originate from tactical concerns or self-interest (RM 56)*. It is a consequence of the Church’s respect for human freedom. Sharing with people of other faiths can be mutually enriching. It can provide both parties with insight into God’s action in the world and create new sensitivity to different experiences of life.

This mutual enrichment comes about through respect, understanding, and a common search for the truth. Missionaries must be aware that truth also resides beyond the confines of the Catholic Church. Other religions with deeper roots within a country often have more insight into local cultures than we do. From the wisdom of other religions we can learn much that will strengthen our own Christian faith and make us aware of God’s presence in ways we had never previously considered.

Inter-religious dialogue does not imply abandoning the Church’s mission to evangelize. Self-identity is an essential part of any sincere dialogue. While

calling for dialogue, the Holy Father cautions against relativizing Christ and his message. Christians cannot speak about God's action in history and the world without reference to Christ. Dialogue will discover areas of agreement and mutual concern. It will also uncover points of divergence and disagreement.

Missionaries in dialogue always need to recall that *the Church proposes, she imposes nothing* (RM 39). Faithfulness to Christ and the Gospel does not involve intransigence towards other faiths. On the contrary, Christian witness involves love, respect and freedom.

## **III. Our Present-Day Response as Sons of St. Vincent**

### **3.1 Missions Already Established by Provinces in Collaboration with the Local Church**

The new context for evangelization and the new missionary paradigm described above require a renewed response on our part as members of the Congregation of the Mission.

Throughout our history, many provinces of the Congregation have responded to the Church's call to send missionaries to areas where the Gospel had not yet been preached. Along with members of other missionary congregations, our confreres have helped establish the local Church in many parts of the globe. Some provinces have long histories of supporting already constituted local Churches by sending missionaries and material assistance.

Even though local Churches now exist in almost every part of the globe, many still have significant need of personnel, finances and professional expertise. The dialogue between provinces sponsoring missions and the local Churches about their needs and about our capacity to respond to them is an ongoing one.

Superiors General have often appealed to our provinces and confreres to respond to missionary appeals. Very many have done so generously.

### **3.2 New International Missions**

In order to respond to requests from various local hierarchies, in recent years the Superior General has established international missionary teams in Albania, Rwanda, Burundi, Ukraine, Russia, Bolivia, the Solomon Islands and Tanzania. Volunteers were also sent to established missionary provinces in China, Ethiopia, Mozambique and Cuba. Since at this time in our history individual provinces were unable to respond to these appeals, the establishment of international missionary teams was providential. Not only have they aided local Churches, but they have been a source of blessing for the Congregation itself. Through the new international missions we have experienced belonging to a worldwide community in a new and deeper way. In many provinces the international missions have enkindled a new interest in the foreign missions. The members of the international teams have given eloquent testimony to the universality of the Church and the possibility of building a fraternal community that crosses cultural boundaries.

Some of the confreres on the international mission teams have become full members of established provinces. Some belong to teams that depend directly on the General Curia or depend on a particular province. The missions in Ukraine,

Russia and Byelorussia have become a vice-province. The mission in Albania is now the responsibility of the Province of Naples, with help provided by the other provinces of Italy. The mission in Tanzania is now the responsibility of the Province of Southern India. The goal is that, as the international missions take root, they become part of a particular province. This does not, however, eliminate the need for international structures which will capitalize on the new energy unleashed by the new international missions.

### **3.3 Organization of our Missions**

Sound organization is required to make our missions effective. This demands hard work and the formulation of specific criteria. These criteria are not only necessary for new missions, but can also be helpful for older, established missions:

#### **3.3.1 Criteria for Accepting and Evaluating a Mission**

Local Churches have many, varied needs. As members of the Congregation of the Mission, we seek to respond to those needs in *fidelity to the Vincentian charism of evangelizing the poor*. This criterion is the principal one for accepting or refusing missions that are offered to us by bishops. Article 12 of our Constitutions spells out quite clearly some other criteria which need to be taken into account:

- clear preference for apostolates among the poor,
- attention to the realities of present-day society,
- sharing in the condition of the poor,
- a true sense of the communal nature of our apostolic work,
- a readiness to go anywhere in the world,
- ongoing conversion.

In accepting a mission dialogue with the local ordinary is indispensable since he is the leader of the local Church. From the beginning a written contract should be agreed upon and signed. The contract should spell out the expectations, rights, and responsibilities of all parties as concretely and specifically as possible. This will help avoid misunderstandings and will also provide clear guidelines for life and ministry in the mission.

#### **3.3.2 The Character of a Vincentian Mission**

While offering clear general criteria describing what a Vincentian mission should be like, our Constitutions leave ample space for creativity in developing specific ministries on our missions in the service of the poor. A typically Vincentian mission should be characterized by:

- **Evangelization by “Word and Work” (SV XII, 87):**
  - by word: catechizing, preaching, educating, building Basic Christian Communities, organizing Popular Missions;
  - by work: offering human promotion programs, standing with the poor in their struggle for human rights, organizing projects for combatting hunger, training the young in basic human skills, establishing health care facilities, initiating programs for promoting the dignity of women and the care of children.
- **Formation:**

Since the end of the Congregation of the Mission is realized not only by evangelizing the poor, but also by assisting the clergy and the laity in their formation in order that they too might evangelize the poor, our missions should have a special focus on the formation of leaders for the local Church: clergy, sisters, lay men and women.

Our missionaries should actively involve the people themselves in both the ministry of the word and the ministry of works so that they might be active agents in their own human and Christian promotion.

### **3.3.3 Candidates for the Missions**

#### **3.3.3.1 Selection**

Individual provinces have their own missions and may invite confreres from other provinces to participate in them, following the procedures described in the Constitutions and Statutes. The Superior General also has the right and responsibility to invite and send, in dialogue with the provincials, confreres to international missions (cf. Statute 3 approved by the 38<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, 1992).

Candidates for the missions should possess a number of human, Christian and Vincentian qualities: psychological and relational maturity, good physical health, flexibility and the capacity to respect other cultures. Language skills are also essential. A spirit of self-sacrifice, service, humility, and simplicity are necessary, along with a sense of community and identity with the Church.

#### **3.3.3.2 Preparation and Entry into the Mission**



Entry into a new culture is difficult. Confreres sent to the missions need adequate preparation. Besides basic theological and Vincentian formation, their preparation should include anthropological and sociological study. An understanding of inculturation in general and study of the specific culture and language are essential.

Even the best prepared missionary finds the transition to a new culture a difficult enterprise. *New missionaries need to be accompanied.* A mentoring program or apprenticeship period should be designed to assist them in their entry into the mission. Experienced missionaries should set aside time to listen to the fears, difficulties, doubts and other feelings that inevitably arise in a new missionary when entering a foreign culture. Spiritual direction is a very valuable and, unfortunately, frequently untapped resource.

After a suitable period of apprenticeship, during which language training and an initial understanding of the culture are emphasized, the new missionary will assume his new assignment. Dialogue with the new missionary himself and with the other confreres will help the superior of the mission determine the best placement.

The relationship between the missionary, the new mission to which he is sent, and his province of origin ought to be clearly defined by a contract or letter of agreement. This contract should specify among other things: his apostolic assignment on the mission, its duration, where he enjoys active and passive voice, who bears economic responsibility for his life and work, health insurance, social security, and vacation periods.

### **3.3.4 Financial Plan**

Each mission must have sufficient economic resources to support its works of evangelization and formation and to provide for the well-being of the confreres. It should work toward the goal of moving beyond the stage of economic dependence and advancing toward financial independence and self-reliance. For that reason, it is important to find ways of capital development in each mission.

In the long run, the struggle against poverty and the quest for economic justice, at the national and international levels, are essential for overcoming economic dependence in mission countries. In the meantime, we must be creative in developing means for promoting relative economic autonomy for our missions, with a view toward a progressively more stable future.

On the local level, each mission should have a budget, taking into account the works, initial and ongoing formation, the care of aging missionaries, the needs of all the confreres, and the lifestyle of the local poor. Financial transparency

among the confreres on the mission is essential. The creation of sources for raising capital and making investments for the future should be planned. The Treasurer General, provincial treasurers and lay advisors can be of great assistance through their counsel in this regard.

At the level of the worldwide Congregation, financial collaboration is being more and more encouraged, flowing from the communitarian nature of our vow of poverty, which envisions solidarity with one another and with the poor. Our Constitutions explicitly state: *Provinces and houses should share their temporal goods with each other so that those who have more help those in need* (C 152, § 1). This is already being accomplished in a number of ways. Hopefully even more can be done. One means is the ***International Mission Fund***, which is used to provide money for specific projects in our missions and our poorer provinces. Provinces with greater economic resources are encouraged to include in their yearly budget money to be donated to this fund. Another means of financial collaboration is the direct response of provinces to projects and petitions presented by missions and poorer provinces. This not only promotes solidarity, but highlights the international nature of the Congregation.

Yet another means of collaboration and of promoting the economic independence of missions and poorer provinces is the setting up of ***patrimony funds***. These are funds established by a donor province or several provinces to help a missionary province with its formation needs, its works in the service of the poor, and its care of aging and infirm confreres. The donor province collaborates with the receiving province in helping prepare it to take over responsibility for the management of the fund. After a period of time, the fund is turned over completely to the receiving province.

### **3.3.5 Community for Mission**

*Community life has been a special characteristic of the Congregation and its usual way of living...* (C 21, § 1). Confreres called to the missions should be conscious that our mission is carried out in community. In fact, our community is a community *for* mission. A shared life characterized by fraternal love, cordiality, respect for differences and reconciliation creates a context within which evangelization of the poor can be more effectively accomplished. Our works should, as far as possible, be community works. The undertaking of purely personal works, in isolation from other confreres, is not in the spirit of our vocation.

Our community is not only a community for mission, but also a community of prayer in which we seek the Lord with one another faithfully, especially in the daily celebration of the Eucharist and in daily mental prayer.

Our houses should be a place where faith-sharing and mutual exchange about human, pastoral and spiritual experiences will foster the growth of the members. Much will depend on a spirit of trust among all our members.

Our Constitutions do not impose a single type of community structure. Various styles are possible. In some places all of the confreres of a house live under the same roof, are involved in the same ministry, and have the same schedule. In other places, the confreres live together, but work in different zones or villages. In still other places, they live in different localities because of the needs of the mission, but belong to one canonical house, striving to create community through regular gatherings for prayer, common pastoral reflection, and recreation. Each of these situations demands active interest in the well-being of other confreres and an effort to share life and ministry with each other. The development of a community plan is an important means for promoting communal bonds in these different settings.

It is important for the community to hold frequent meetings for evaluation of the various facets of our life and ministry. Evaluations must not become mere formalities. They should be carried out in a spirit of truth and charity, so that, with one another, we can assess the high points and the low points, the lights and the shadows of our life and ministry on the mission. The frequency of meetings is established in the local community plan. At times, our meetings might include co-workers, especially those serving with us in our pastoral ministries.

### **3.3.6 Vocational Promotion**

If the Vincentian charism is to be inculturated and the mission of the Congregation continued, local vocations need to be fostered. The example of joyful service to the poor in community is in itself attractive to young people. But we should also establish programs for vocational promotion. Young people should be invited into our houses to experience our community life and prayer and should be incorporated into our ministries so that they might experience for themselves the joy of serving the poor. Discernment houses and groups can also be an effective way to promote vocations.

Of course, only some young people are called to the Congregation. Vocational discernment should take into account other callings as well: lay ministries, diocesan priesthood, religious life. Promotion of all such vocations is a singular service to the local Church.

## **3.4 Collaboration between Provinces**

The new international missions, as well as our older established missions, are very positive instances of collaboration among the provinces of the

Congregation. The developing of bonds between the mission and the province that provides it with personnel and other resources should be fostered. The experience of the missionaries, their successes and failures, their breakthroughs and insights should be shared with the confreres in their home countries, so that the spark of the missions will enkindle a fire in the hearts of all. All members of the Congregation of the Mission should sense that the missions are a special way of living out our charism.

Belonging to the universal Church and to a truly international Congregation demands real solidarity among the members and communities of the Congregation of the Mission. One way that this solidarity might be expressed is by common reflection on the theological presuppositions and pastoral perspectives that flow from being a community for mission. Dialogue among the provinces can be mutually enriching. Some simple, practical steps for promoting interprovincial sharing might be: creating opportunities for the members of various provinces to meet one another, to listen to one another's needs and concerns, to share experiences of working with the poor, to develop common pastoral plans and to pray together. Information can also be communicated by exchanging provincial bulletins and by posting news on the Vincentian Family web site ([www.famvin.org](http://www.famvin.org)).

Solidarity must move beyond the level of reflection and become concretized in collaborative action. Sharing human resources is an important step in collaboration between provinces. An international vision of the Congregation and a sense of solidarity with other provinces pave the way for creative initiatives for mobilizing personnel. Missionaries are still needed in the Southern Hemisphere and in Asia. But missionaries from there might also be sent to participate in the New Evangelization of the North.

Mutual financial assistance among the provinces is indispensable. Our vow of poverty calls us to solidarity. Provinces should not only give of their surplus, but should also at times feel the sting of giving what seems very valuable to them, so that they might share the burden of the mission.

### **3.5 Collaboration with the Vincentian Family**

Collaboration within the Vincentian Family for the service of the poor has dramatically increased in recent years. Each branch of the Vincentian Family has its own identity and autonomy, which must always be respected by others. But we have much in common too. Our mutual cooperation will be much more effective to the degree that we have regular contact with one another at local, national and international levels. This will facilitate the channeling of our energies and resources toward the goal we all share: the service of the poor.

New ways of including lay Vincentians and young volunteers in our missionary teams should continue to be explored. Lay missionaries, like all missionaries, need preparation. The integration of lay missionaries into our foreign missions will require adjustments and sacrifices on our part and theirs. But the benefits for the poor, for the Vincentian laity and for us far outweigh the difficulties.

## IV. Formation for Mission

### 4.1 Urgency and Importance

The new situation of missions today requires us that we reexamine the formation of our missionaries. The vocation to the foreign missions is a special calling, which demands serious preparation and specific competence. Good will is not enough. Nor is it enough simply to have been ordained a priest or taken vows as a brother. Our Statutes point out the importance of a solid missionary formation:

*Those sent to the foreign missions should be carefully prepared to undertake the special works there by knowledge of the reality of the region where they will labor, so that the pastoral work which they take on may effectively meet the needs of the local Church (S 6).*

### 4.2 General Missionary Formation

At some point in the process of initial formation general courses in missiology should be offered. Pope John Paul II writes:

*Theological training cannot and should not ignore the Church's universal mission, ecumenism, the study of the great religions and missiology. I recommend that such studies be undertaken especially in seminaries and in houses of formation for men and women religious, ensuring that some priests or other students specialize in the different fields of missiology (RM 83 § 3).*

It is especially important that such courses be part of the formation of members of a Society of Apostolic Life which has many men working in missions *ad gentes* (Ratio Formationis for Theology, 38).

Courses offered during initial formation should also treat inculturation and should reflect on the human adjustments needed for entering other cultures. This is important not only for those who work in the missions *ad gentes*, but also for those who work among the poor in contexts. Courses should also explore the ways of doing theology in different cultures.

A knowledge of the social sciences (sociology, economics and politics) will be helpful in our accompanying the poor, and in analyzing the underlying causes of poverty, and in working to eradicate them.

Study, however, is not the only preparation necessary. Attitudes of flexibility and openness need to be developed, as well as a mobility that is not just geographical, but also cultural and social. The Constitutions speak of it in this way:

*These are the characteristics to be kept in mind in this work of evangelization which the Congregation proposes to carry out: ... readiness to go to any part of the world, according to the example of the first missionaries of the Congregation... (C 12 § 5).*

Solidarity with the poor, expressed in a simple lifestyle, is an essential element of the Gospel that needs to be fostered sooner rather than later. A real danger facing missionaries is the possibility of living a lifestyle far removed from the poverty of the people they evangelize. This becomes an obstacle to inculturation and evangelization because it isolates us from the poor.

### **4.3 Specific Missionary Formation**

General formation for the missions is important, but it is necessary that the future missionary receive a specific preparation that will prepare him to adjust to the realities of the region where he will live out his missionary vocation. The confreres already working in the region, who have first-hand experience, can be particularly helpful in devising a plan for this specific formation.

Learning the language is indispensable for communicating the Gospel and developing relationships in a new country. But language is only part of the way people communicate within a culture. Missionaries need to understand the customs, symbols, values and world-view of the people they serve. This involves not just an appreciation for folklore and the arts; rather, it is an insight into the ways that the local people express their deepest concerns and aspirations and structure their lives. It is advisable that new missionaries attend missiological programs, pastoral institutes and centers for cultural study which focus on direct preparation for living and working in the specific region. Such programs exist in almost every country, often sponsored by the local Church.

Formal study of a new culture is an essential, but not sufficient, preparation for entering that culture. Because outsiders never completely capture the essence of a culture, the process of inculturation is ongoing. Missionaries often need to suspend judgment about cultural expressions and approach new situations with humility and openness. There is much to be learned from the local people, and this can only occur where a spirit of respectful dialogue exists. Missionaries bring their own cultural experiences with them. The culture in which one was formed always influences the way one thinks and acts. The goal of the missionary is not to completely abandon his native culture. Rather, it is to understand how his own culture influences, facilitates or impedes his encounter with people of a different

culture. A crucial part of the missionary learning process is to understand how one reacts in a new cultural setting.

Missionaries seek to become facilitators of a process by which people can hear the message of the Gospel, encounter Jesus Christ, and become his followers. This is possible only when the Gospel is inculturated by those who receive the message and assimilate it in their lives as Good News. Missionaries need to learn how to discern the presence of the seeds of the Word and the action of the Spirit in the local culture, while respecting the integrity of the Gospel message. In a sense, they live with one ear towards the people and one ear towards the Gospel. They need to develop skills that will enable them to accompany a local people as it decides which elements of their culture are consistent with the Gospel and which are not.

#### **4.4 Vincentian Formation**

Confreres who go to the missions do so as sons of St. Vincent. Their lives must radiate the Vincentian charism. A solid Vincentian formation will help them do that. This task begins in the Internal Seminary (cf. *Ratio Formationis for the Internal Seminary*). But members of the Congregation of the Mission need to study and reflect continually on the charism of St. Vincent.

The Vincentian tradition contains a wealth of resources for missionaries. Certainly knowing the life and spirit of our founder is essential. The history of the foreign missions of the Congregation contains positive and negative elements that are worth reflecting on today. There is much to be learned from the lives of some of our outstanding missionary predecessors (cf. *Ratio Formationis for the Internal Seminary*, III, A).

Perhaps the greatest contribution of the Vincentian tradition is in the area of missionary spirituality. Vincentian spirituality is a spirituality for mission. Vincent de Paul was convinced that Christ is present in the poor (SV IX, 252; X, 332). He tried to prepare his missionaries to discover Christ among the poor and walk in Christ's footsteps in the mission. Much of his correspondence and most of his conferences were addressed to men and women engaged in or preparing to live a missionary vocation. He offered them a way to live the Gospel in the mission. Belonging to a Society of Apostolic Life like the Congregation of the Mission involves learning to come to holiness through relationships of charity and service.

It is in this context that the *Instruction on Stability, Chastity, Poverty, and Obedience in the Congregation of the Mission*<sup>3</sup> proposes that we see the evangelical counsels as means to be freer for mission. The same might be said of

---

<sup>3</sup> In *Vincentiana* 40 (1996) 1-68.



the five characteristic virtues. St. Vincent frequently spoke about them as virtues for mission, helping us to be better evangelizers of the poor. Missionaries should reflect constantly on the ways that growth in simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification and evangelical zeal can make us more capable of serving on the mission well.

Missionary spirituality involves allowing oneself to be evangelized by the poor. Called and sent to share the lives of a new people — their joys and sufferings, their sorrows and victories — a missionary also receives the gift of their culture. A new cultural context is a challenge to live the Gospel in new ways through new relationships. The missionary is evangelized in the measure that he responds to the call to conversion that comes from accompanying the poor.

#### **4.5 Continuing Education**

Education and learning are lifelong endeavors. It is especially important that the confreres on the foreign missions make time for ongoing formation. Individually and as communities, confreres need to identify areas of life — personal, spiritual, pastoral and theological — where more study and reflection are needed. Some missions and many provinces organize regular workshops and courses for confreres. Others take advantage of courses at local centers or send men to study outside the country. It would be prudent for missions and provinces to set aside time and money for continuing education.

#### **4.6 Returning Missionaries**

Many missionaries eventually return to their province of origin (cf. Statutes 29, 30, 32). Returning to one's native country or province is not just an administrative or juridical act. Missionaries who have been overseas, especially for long periods of time, need to readapt to their home culture and reestablish relationships with the members of their original province. They are coming back to a different world. Much attention has been paid to preparing missionaries to go out, but less has been given to receiving back those who return. Provinces should consider ways of easing the transition for returning missionaries. In some countries formal programs exist to aid in this task. But even where such programs exist, the provinces themselves should search for ways to help returning missionaries reconnect with their confreres and native country. Listening to the returning missionaries and dialoguing with them about their experience of coming home is surely a positive first step.