

THEME:

*The Vincentian Parish:
Today and Tomorrow*

Can there be a
Vincentian Missionary Parish?

An Essay on the Current Dialogue
Regarding Vincentian Parishes

Antonio Ruiz Garcia, C.M.
Province of Madrid

In October, 2011 the Superior General asked the members of the Congregation of the Mission to *engage in a broad process of reflection on the distinct levels of the Congregation* and, more specifically, he invited *the Visitors with their Council to promote in their provinces a serious study of the Vincentian parish ministry. This should be done with a sincere and courageous evaluation of the ministries of the Province* and should also be carried out from the perspective of the criteria that identify a parish as *a missionary parish*.

This reflection and study and the formulation of proposals was done during our domestic assemblies (Province of Madrid) and continued in our Provincial Assembly (Santa Marta de Tormes, Salamanca, June 25, 2012).

In order that this presentation and reflection might be as effective as possible (I want to avoid being insensitive, but we do want to make people think) I publish this modest contribution that has as a starting point a particular *theological analysis of the reality and the possibilities for a parish* at this specific time in history.

We begin with a fundamental premise: the Church is more important than the parish. The objective of our pastoral activity is not primarily

to make people members of a parish as an institution but rather to give life to the Church and to minister in such a way that every believer is *integrated in a vital manner into the Church*. The parish has significance only *within* the broader perspective of Church and only in as much as it is oriented toward the Church. This starting point provides a perspective for further reflections concerning “the missionary parish”.

Therefore it would be good in some way: 1) *to define the place of the parish* within the Church; 2) *to concretize its unique mission* within the mission of the Church; 3) *to grasp its possibilities* within the context of the ecclesial missionary activity.

We are aware of the fact that today the parish has many detractors. In relation to previous eras this is something new. The criticisms that are presented in light of sociological data appear to be justified: the parish does not reflect the diverse and immigrant community of the present world; the parish is too closely bound up with *geographical patterns* of an era when *human* spaces were often confused by territorial dimensions; the parish is unable to fully understand the present life of believers and non-believers alike.

These are serious criticisms especially at this time when more than ever before there is a demand for the Church to be a missionary church. One might want to view these judgments of sociology as no longer valid because they were formed in the context of a specific time and place. But nevertheless, deep within us there is this conviction: the parish, by its very nature and not simply as a result of its activity, has to move out beyond itself... it can never feel that it is self-sufficient... and it was a mistake for the parish to believe this about itself.

When we speak about the Church no one should be mistaken: we are referring to the universal Church which encompasses every era and every place because “the divine intervention from which it derives its origin” is *so unique* and so universal in its scope as to embrace the whole of creation. Therefore the mission entrusted to the Apostles was not one of establishing communities (*means not ends!*) but was to give a broader existence to the Church, to give growth to the Church (in the proper sense of the expression “catholic church”). Therefore today, as on the day after Pentecost, the Word of God invites all people to enter through *the door of faith* and *through baptism* to enter into the only Church which is the People of God, the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit. Evangelization, if it is authentic, seeks to augment the universal Church and therefore baptism enables people to enter the Church as men and women of the new and the eternal covenant.

One might object: doesn't Saint Paul speak, for example, about *the Church of Corinth*? He certainly does; but there is an important distinction. In the greeting at the beginning of this letter he refers to *the Church of God that is in Corinth*. He does not view the church as

being constituted by the local churches that are established here and there. Rather he expresses his belief that it is the Church of God that ought to be established here, there, and everywhere. Precedence is given to the universal church over the various cells of the ecclesial body. Thus from the perspective of Pentecost, the church in Jerusalem was the universal Church. When other local churches were established outside Jerusalem they were not branches of the church in Jerusalem, but rather an expansion of the universal church that was single celled in its beginning.

What are we saying here? The clearest expression of all of this is the diocese (*the local church*). In order to be called a local church a community must possess all those elements that are integral to the Church's mission... beginning with the presence of a successor of the Apostles. The bishop is the only person who, in the midst of a community of believers and a given human community, can guarantee ecclesial fullness as people are gathered together in the same apostolic faith, in the same evangelical life, and in the same sacramental mystery... this is the local church and not a particular church; this is a consolidated church not an independent (*autocephalous*) church; this is the whole church and not a church closed in upon itself.

What the local church is to the universal church is *not what the parish is to the local church*. Since the parish does not possess autonomy in its apostolic origins, it ought therefore to be wholly dependent on the episcopal church. In accord with time and opportunity, the parish ought to carry out (more or less) the mission of the mother-church and ought to participate in the mission (more or less) as church. The parish will never be similar in nature to the local church.

The pastoral demands of the last few centuries have seen the need to entrust much to the parish. This situation has been affirmed in the Code of Canon Law. But we must remember that Canon Law does not define the faith... it affirms certain existing situation (*de facto*) until the time that other situations have to be affirmed. For example, the powers, powers similar to those of the bishop, that have been given to priests as the result of certain circumstances (*we are not referring to honors or dignity*) would never, in the dogmatic sense of the word, make those priests the head of the church.

To situate the parish and its proper role within the context of the local church it is useful to consider two primordial dimensions with regard to the diverse aspects of the mission of the Church: *the Eucharistic (or eschatological) dimension and the missionary dimension*. These might appear to be divergent dimensions; but in reality they are dialectical dimensions which means they must be held in tension so that nothing of the mystery behind these realities is lost.

On the one hand the Church is oriented toward God. This orientation is the result of the fact some people have not yet recognized their vocation to participate in the paschal salvation of Jesus Christ. The church offers this gift of salvation that has been received and lived although the time of its ultimate fulfillment has not arrived (*the eschatological tension*). The reality of a priestly people represents the ultimate state of the divine vocation of humanity: this expresses the "eschatological" end. Therefore the fundamental activity of the Church (*priestly activity par excellence*) is the action of paschal grace... this action of grace encompasses eternal life and is expressed in an explicit manner in the celebration of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is not (*as many priests think*) simply a ritual moment for the Church but rather it supposes a celebration of the whole ecclesial body united to its Head, the Lord of the Passover (*the mystical body*).

On the other hand the Church reaches out to men and women and to the whole world which has not recognized its unique vocation in Christ. The Church is in dialogue with the world and envisions universal salvation. The Church recognizes that even though she is in the process of fully realizing herself, she must nevertheless also be a missionary church... and must be missionary until the end of time.

We are not attempting to choose in some exclusive manner one dimension over the other... rather they must be maintained together at one and the same time. This does not mean, however, that, as we have just done, we cannot distinguish these dimensions one from another in a dialectical and pedagogical manner.

It is possible for the parish not to exist. This was the situation during the first centuries of the Christian era. It is possible for the parish to be a small minor entity of the diocesan church and in fact this was the situation before the Middle Ages. Then the parish became the most important entity in the diocesan church. While the diocesan church had to maintain the two dimensions (Eucharistic and missionary), nevertheless the parish was entrusted primarily with the Eucharistic dimension. "Primarily" is not the same as "exclusively" and therefore the parish is not excluded from maintaining the missionary dimension.

In other words, without making the parish *a type of monastery*, it appears the proper mission of the parish is to make visible the community of those who have been sanctified. Indeed this expresses what the Church is: in the world but not of the world. In her liturgy and her profession of faith, the Church engages in acts of adoration and thanksgiving; she reveals the fraternal bond that unites believers; she proclaims the hope of a people who believe in eternal life; successive generations of men and women are integrated into the life of Christian grace; the joy of the believing community shines forth "in the city of humanity" where she inserts herself.

There exist three *missionary tasks of the Church, tasks that result from a dialogue about the parish's activities.*

- 1) One task is directed toward *those who are separated from Christ and his Church*, those with whom there is no current dialogue or with whom this dialogue has been interrupted (*post-christian unbelief*). In this area the parish should not have any grand illusions: it is ill-equipped to reach out to those who are estranged from the Church. It is hoped however that the parish will not become an obstacle to this type of missionary endeavor by living the gospel in a tepid manner and/or by separating itself from the problems of the world so that it becomes a *countersign*. It is also hoped that the parish will maintain contact with missionary activity that is being done in its geographical area and thus will know what is being done, will be concerned about this activity, will pray for the successful outcome of this activity and will accommodate those involved in this outreach to persons who are alienated. Occasionally the parish could address a gospel message to unbelievers: thus proclaiming the gospel in a specific area (*"ecclesial marketing"* is important) and awakening minds and creating an interest and assisting the Church's permanent missionary activity (Vincentians presently involved in popular missions as *extraordinary moments of evangelization* need to be careful about this matter and this is stated without any acrimony).
- 2) The evangelization of *those sectors of unbelief that because of a certain bond with the Church* can work in harmony with the Church's message and also are attentive to her message... this process of evangelization is also a missionary task of the Church. Neighborly relations and various human contacts create bonds of unity with non-believers that the parish ought to know how to utilize. The parish cannot carry on this necessary objective alone, not even with the help of other parishes. Since the parish is unable to establish real contact with non-believers and unable to fully grasp their life, *missionary movements* ought to complete and fulfill this activity. Such missionary activity hopes that the parish will make visible those signs that create concern and interest and which with the greatest possible outreach lead to the initiation of dialogue. Such activity should form and sustain those elements which allow us to be "listeners" to those on the periphery of the parish and in those places where the parish cannot be present. The parish will fulfill this missionary dimension as she enables the Eucharistic assembly to hear those qualified witness and to pray for those who need to be evangelized.
- 3) It is also legitimate to label as missionary activity the promotion of genuine evangelical faith in those who are linked to the Chris-

tian community (even though this bond does not include a true conversion to Jesus Christ). For this reason the parish should be concerned about the adult catechumenate process which was reinstated by the Second Vatican Council (*forming people in the faith and not simply catechizing them*). The parish should also be concerned about the *catechumenate for neophytes* by welcoming and integrating them and *their families* into the Eucharistic community.

Therefore, as noted above, *pastoral* guidance is needed. With regard to *catechesis*: to awaken in Christians the need for a well grounded faith, a faith which, with all due respect, does not create saints but which transform the life and the attitudes of the individual person. In this same area we must *forget about "speaking to"* the non-believer and enter into dialogue so that we might understand the difficulties involved in a profession of faith. We must once again focus the Christian message on that which is essential and we must continually rediscover the God of Jesus Christ and *denounce every form of superstition and idolatry*. In a word we must share our faith rather than our religion.

With regard to *the celebration of the liturgical mysteries* we must take advantage of every opportunity to make it a validation of our faith and our life. Liturgy quickly degenerates into cult when it is not re-evangelized and reinterpreted in light of the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ and in light of the realities of Christian existence. This concern will lead to a liturgical life that is characterized by serenity and peace (perhaps during our celebrations we must always ask: *what would non-believers think if they were present?*). The liturgy should not become a mere tool of the missionary nor should we wait for non-believers to understand the sacramental signs which are only intelligible to the believer. But yes, it is necessary that the non-believer grasp that the liturgical assembly is for the believer a cornerstone, a conscious commitment for which they take responsibility and it also influences their *social, political and cultural life*.

With regard to *community life*: an effort must be made to promote evangelical customs (and not *ecclesiastical* customs), charity, poverty, reparation (*essentials of the Vincentian charism we have received*). We must hold forth the ideal of holiness rather than moral behavior, the call to follow Christ rather than the imitation of Christ. The Christian community, without moralistic sectarianism or religious fundamentalism or cryptic xenophobia (*unfortunately found in some parishioners and leaders*) should demand great mercy for those outside the Church.

Finally an *education or a re-education* of the "practitioners" based on Christian faith in the Son of God made flesh (with all its implications) is necessary. We say this because at times some "practitioners"

have taken control of the parish and formed it in their own image and likeness thus they become obstacles to the most important missionary tasks of the church and make "God die" long before *Good Friday*.

In conclusion, we present the *punctum pruriens* of this reflection: participation of the parish in the missionary activity of the Church has certain risks. There is the danger of believing that we are somehow better than others (we might even come to believe that we are perfect). There is the danger of becoming pharisaical and using this as the only criteria of the Gospel. There is also the danger of becoming a ghetto community that has severed all relationships with the world of the unbaptized. There is the danger of becoming static as the result of living in a community that is too stable; a danger of clericalism as the result of the arrogant attitude of some clerics with regard to worship. There is the danger of becoming a sham because we do not integrate healthy human diversity into our faith community. We are aware of these temptations of even the best parishes... and we also know the *remedy*, namely, to affirm the *Eucharistic dimension* without neglecting the *missionary dimension* so that the Vincentian identity becomes a reality.

Translated from Spanish by CHARLIE PLOCK, C.M.