

# Vincentian Parishes and the New Evangelization

Pablo Domínguez, C.M.

*Province of Zaragoza*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Allow me to begin this presentation by remembering Father Brian Moore, for whom I offer a prayer of thanksgiving and a prayer of hope for us. Fr. Moore had confidence in me, and it was he who insisted I accept this task. Therefore, I dedicate to him what I share with you.

Perhaps Father Brian focused more on me as a person rather than on my experience in parish ministry. I have been involved in parish ministry for a short period of time, although my contact and my knowledge of parish life is ample because most of my pastoral and ministerial life has involved me in popular missions, that is, evangelizing parishes and attempting to make the evangelized parishes evangelizers of others. I have spent almost thirty years encouraging men and women and parish communities in the extraordinary ministry of the popular mission. The mission reveals the life of the parish and enables one to discover “the lights” and “the shadows” of a particular parish. There have been small parishes, including village parishes and also large parishes and parishes in cities and towns... vital parishes and dying parishes.

In this missionary endeavor, I have had contact with more than thirty Vincentian parishes (I went to these parishes with a certain idea, believing in those places there were confreres involved in a missionary endeavor). During these years, I have seen sociological and religious changes in parishes. I have participated in their efforts at evangelization, and I have shared in their discouragement. I have seen priests and lay people struggle to find ways of evangelizing and reaching out to persons who make up the parish community, including those involved in the parish and persons alienated from the church; those who are committed, and persons who on some occasion might recognize the church. I have experienced young men and women and adolescents gradually abandon the church, and even children, once they have received their First Communion. I have seen parishes “age” as well as parishes that want to open new paths but do not know how or with whom to do this.

I do not pretend for my presentation to be an academic essay or some magisterial lesson. I simply want to tell a story, a story that has as its starting point our evangelizing history. As a story it may be found lacking in critical analysis, but the story is driven by what I have lived and heard and read, driven by “memories” that are part of our history, which should be seen more as narrated memories of a people rather than a historiography. You will have to rely on the word of the narrator and compare these words with your own experience and reflection and pastoral background. The story, as you can imagine, will be partial in light of the fact that I speak from the place that I know best, that is, the parishes in Spain, but I have confidence that the story can be applied to other parts of the world.

## 2. AN EVANGELIZING PARISH?

One might think that the parish structures choke the missionary dimension of the parish because they are institutions that accommodate people who are already evangelized or, at the very least, Christianized. Thus, for these individuals, the parish has become the normal means by which they develop their Christian life.

The parish, in my experience and in my reading of Church law, appears as an institution that received its structure during “the Christian era”. Pope John XXIII referred to the parish as “the fountain of the village”, and in this sense the church building became the center of social life. As the fountain of the village everyone went to the Church: people went there to participate in the Mass, to be baptized, to be married, to be buried, to celebrate the patron feast and to celebrate other social events. The parish church had no catechetical center or office for Caritas or rooms for adult groups to meet because the religious awakening and formation occurred in the family where Christian values were transmitted. Charity was carried out by the neighbors and pious men and women. The parish office was the pastor’s house. But we moved from this Christian era to one of secularization, where there is no village fountain because now the village is global and the ‘fountains’ have multiplied: from ornamental fountains to systems that water our gardens to systems that irrigate acres and acres of arid land. Today bottled water is sold in supermarkets and water flows into our homes, and as in the time of the prophets there are also “broken cisterns” and “contamination tanks”, and with all of this, people are satisfied. Thus, traditional parish structures do not respond to the needs of the global village. We still see people going to Church, to Mass, to catechetical formation, to ask for papers or request the sacraments (with more or less faith), to approach the offices of Caritas, or go to the thrift shop. We can see in all of this that the church, the parish community, must reach out and not only

receive people in a benevolent way, but must go out to comfort those who have fallen by the wayside on the road to Jericho.

In its Pastoral Plan 2002-2005, #48, the Episcopal Conference in Spain referred to the parish in the following manner:

*"The parish is a privileged place for the transmission and the celebration of the faith and the experience of communion. It constitutes the basic framework for the life of each church where the faithful can find natural channels of ecclesial participation. This institution, born during the early years of the church, is called to continue to exert its beneficial influence in this new century... to be a community of communities and a house that is open to everyone. Thus the renewal that is taking place as a result of Diocesan Synods and Diocesan Pastoral Plans is moving in this direction because we are attentive to the new situations of social mobility, urban concentration and rural depopulation".*

During recent years many Pastoral Plans and Diocesan Synods have emphasized the missionary and evangelizing dimension of the parish. Let me refer here to the Diocesan Plan of the neighboring diocese of Tenerife which speaks about the parish as a missionary community:

*The parish not only has to open its doors to everyone but, like Christ and the Church, the parish must reach out to those individuals on the crossroads of life. Christ sends forth the Church as his missionary: "Go out to the whole world"... these words are like a watchword for every parish community.*

*An authentic parish community therefore is not a mere social conglomeration of individuals who have been baptized nor is it an ecclesial institution with purely legal-administrative functions nor is it some "religious service station". The parish, above all else, has to be a community of groups of people who come together to listen to the Word of God in order to allow themselves to be questioned by this Word, in order to understand the demands of the Word and in order to commit themselves as faithful witnesses of this Word in the midst of the world in which they live<sup>1</sup>.*

In Spain, during the decade of the 1980's, two National Congresses were held: one on evangelization and the other on the evangelizing parish<sup>2</sup>. During this latter gathering it was stated that only a small,

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<sup>1</sup> Diocese of Tenerife, DIOCESAN PASTORAL PLAN, "Haz memoria de Jesucristo Resucitado" ("Remember the Risen Christ"), Cuatrienio 2007-2011, La Parroquia, #4.

<sup>2</sup> Congreso Parroquia evangelizadora (The evangelizing parish) Madrid, Edice, 1989.

insignificant percentage of parishes in Spain could be considered missionary parishes. Nevertheless, in other Congresses it was agreed that the parish provides a base for evangelizing society. This opinion is shared by some outstanding individuals in the field of pastoral theology. Among them is Miguel Payá<sup>3</sup> who stated that, in light of a society that is moving along the path of de-Christianization, we need a missionary response with lines of action that reflect a missionary pastoral approach. The author maintains that the parish cannot remain closed in upon itself because its very reason for existence is evangelization. It has to open itself to the world in which it is rooted, to the world where people struggle and rejoice and suffer.

Given the reality of de-Christianization, the mission of the parish cannot be reduced to maintaining the faith of those already practicing their faith, but it must take on a form of evangelization that is truly missionary. This means:

- we must accompany and support believers who are weak and/or disoriented;
- we must help those who are alienated to re-engage on a path of conversion that leads them once again to a Christian experience;
- we must dialogue with non-believers and listen to their criticisms, their values and their concerns. In short we must open to them a path that helps them in some initial acceptance of the gospel;
- we must make an effort to make the values of the kingdom operative and present in the midst of society.

The same author proposes some lines of action of a missionary pastoral approach:

### **1. *Awaken and nourish an awareness of mission.***

We have to recover an awareness that we are sent by God into the midst of society for the purpose of evangelization. This is both a gift and a task... therefore...

### **2. *We must make a concerted effort to shift directions.***

Instead of focusing almost exclusively on internal problems, the parish must make an effort to look outward, and thus become attentive to how people live and think and rejoice and suffer.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf., MIGUEL PAYÁ, *La parroquia, comunidad evangelizadora* (The parish, an evangelizing community), Madrid, PPC, 1989.

### **3. Develop a more diversified pastoral approach.**

We have to promote a more diversified pastoral approach that better responds to the various levels of faith found among the people.

### **4. Develop a missionary catechesis.**

We need to discover and put in motion procedures and methods to initiate people into the faith and also to help that achieve a more personalized faith.

### **5. Celebrate the liturgy in a missionary style.**

These are the desires of the Diocesan Plan, of the various Congresses and of pastoral experts but in the reality in which we live we find at least three types of parishes<sup>4</sup>:

- 1. The pre-conciliar parish, with a pastoral approach of Christianization:** In this model, administration of the sacraments predominates; there is no pastoral plan; emphasis on pre-sacramental catechesis and preparation for First Communion. There is no distribution of tasks; the priest does everything, and the laity are passive. The parish is closed off from the outside, and there is little or no sensitivity to social issues; there are no parish groups, no pastoral council but there are some traditional pious associations. What was done before is repeated over and over again.
- 2. The conciliar parish, with a pastoral approach of maintenance:** In this model, catechesis of children and adolescents predominates (Communion and Confirmation); there is an attempt to evangelize through various liturgical celebrations; the concern for those who are alienated is basically religious. A group of lay people collaborate with clergy in the administration of the parish; the rest of the laity are spectators; campaigns are organized to encourage the participation of the laity in different parish activities. There is sensitivity to the issue of human rights and assisting the poor (but not an emphasis on the poor as protagonists of their history). There is also sensitivity to the relationship between faith and culture, and parish "projects" are encouraged. There are different groups and a certain degree of community is formed among the more active parishioners. There is a pastoral plan and a pastoral council.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf., DIOCESAN PASTORAL PLAN (Tenerife), *op. cit.*, *Parroquia*, #6. I remind the reader that #5 of this document is entitled: *La parroquia llamada a una nueva renovación evangelizadora* (The parish is called to a renewed evangelization).

- 3. The post-conciliar parish, with a missionary and liberating pastoral approach:** In this model, missionary evangelization is a priority and adult catechesis has a more prominent role than that of children and adolescents. The celebration of the Eucharist is participative; pastoral responsibilities are shared, and good services are provided in the areas of welcoming, assistance and guidance. Sensitivity to the problems of the neighborhood and area is encouraged and promoted: unemployment, marginalization, drugs, aging, etc. There is a clear option for the poor and concern for evangelization. Injustice is denounced and human rights are upheld. The parish identifies itself with a community or with a network of communities and lives in ecclesial communion.

Today, as in 1988 when the Congress on the evangelizing parish was convoked, it can be stated that very few parishes minister from a missionary-liberating approach. There are, however, many more parishes that have adapted a maintenance approach and in my experience we could include here many of the parishes that are administered by Vincentians. Nevertheless, by nature and as a result of our charism, we are the ones who ought to promote, not only in theory but in practice parishes that are administered from a missionary approach. In this area of parish structures, we ought to be “specialists” in the mission.

As suggested before, the question can be asked, on both a theoretical and practical level, whether the parish, which was a response to the needs of a Christian society, can continue to be relevant in the midst of a secularized and de-Christianized society. I have given much thought to this question, and would like to share something with you I recently read: *Without a mission there is no future for the Church. Therefore, this present era calls for a missionary renewal of the community. The present official functioning style of the Church, still in vogue, has come to its end*<sup>5</sup>.

### 3. VINCENTIAN PARISH

#### 3.1. “This is my experience”

Some years ago, and I imagine that this will continue, the Vincentians administered more parishes in Spain than any other religious Congregation or Society of Apostolic Life (although at one point the

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<sup>5</sup> WALTER KASPER, in GEORGE AUGUSTIN (ed.), *El desafío de la nueva evangelización. Impulsos para la revitalización de la fe*, Santander, Sal Tarrae (Presencia Teológica, 184), 2012, p. 34.

Franciscans did administer more parishes than the Vincentians). Some significant information: a Congregation such as ours that is theoretically supposed to be very mobile has become involved in the ordinary process of evangelization in parish ministry. Perhaps this is a happy departure from the post-conciliar ecclesial and congregational context: the large college seminaries and novitiates and theologates have disappeared (institutions in which many confreres labored); the same has happened to our apostolic schools; popular missions experienced a time of crisis; the formation of our candidates could not be distinguished from the formation that others received. In short, there was a lack of identity. All of this led the Vincentians to seek out a more secure form of evangelization: the parish. Perhaps it is better to say that the parish appeared to be the best option during that time of crisis and seeking.

This does not seem to be an experience that is limited to those in Spain. In the gathering of confrere from Europe and the Middle East engaged in parish ministry held in Naples in 2009, it was stated that on a worldwide level about 70% of our ministries are basically with parishes. In this same meeting, and given the characteristics of the pastoral activity in parishes, the participants were called together under the words: *the parish, an opportunity or an impediment to live the Vincentian charism?* The statement indicates a certain suspicion about the ability to live the missionary and Vincentian charism in an institution such as the parish, which is basically dedicated to a pastoral of maintenance and the administration of sacraments. Nevertheless, in the opinion of those who participated in this meeting and those who presented the various themes, the response to this question was that *the parish is an opportunity to live the charism* but only when it overcomes two deviations which threaten present-day parish ministry: the tendency to make the parish “a community nest” or a point of self-reference and the tendency to consider the parish as “a center for services”<sup>6</sup>.

There was an attempt to put a missionary ministry in place in the parishes, but this has not been easy and is not always possible. There were experiences in rural parishes where the confreres wanted to minister with a missionary approach and create autonomous communities, but ultimately these teams of rural priests became absorbed into the parish structure. There were, and still are, parishes in marginalized neighborhoods, but they have not succeeded in the process of evangelization because the parish, despite the effort to be with the poor, has continued to function as a “service center”. Even though there was a desire to minister and evangelize the poor, yet we did not know how

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<sup>6</sup> This text relies on the notes of a Missionary who participated in this meeting.

to do this or else we could not do this. We could say the same thing about the parishes in the city and we could even say that some Vincentian pastors felt they were more diocesan than Vincentian (“parochial assimilation”)<sup>7</sup>. Thus, there was no sense of belonging to the Congregation of the Mission. The advantage of parishes with a maintenance approach is that such parishes can be better provided for by a community than by one priest. There was an attempt to be faithful to the charism, but in general, the structures did not change. Yes, we have been able to give witness to that which is uniquely Vincentian in our dealing with people, in carrying out certain tasks, in manifesting our concern for the poor and our concern for Christian formation, but I believe our parishes have to be converted to a missionary approach.

### 3.2. Theory and plans for a Vincentian parish

I invite you now to embark upon a virtual excursion through a Vincentian library and there you will discover that, despite the reality that we have just described, there are very enriching reflections and studies on Vincentian parish ministry; studies that point out the characteristics of our ministry in parishes. Here I will highlight some of these significant publications and pause to examine some of the more recent studies.

#### a) *Specific elements for a pastoral plan for parishes administered by the Congregation*<sup>8</sup>

This document presents *CRITERIA*, some *LINES OF ACTION*, and *ATTITUDES* of the Vincentian Missionary who is sent to engage in this ministry. I present here the general criteria with some of the lines of action that accompany them.

##### 1. We insert ourselves in the local church

2. **On-going mission:** *Our evangelizing presence in the parish is only justified from the perspective of on-going missionary activity, such as corresponds to our charism. The situation of unbelief in present day society and the ineffectiveness of traditional pastoral approaches*

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<sup>7</sup> Cf., ROBERT P. MALONEY, *On Vincentian Involvement in Parishes*, in *Vincentiana* (1997), Volume 47: 2, p. 109.

<sup>8</sup> This is a small photocopied pamphlet that is the fruit of much dialogue and consultation and the sharing of many different experiences. It was published in 1990 by an Interprovincial Commission that was formed by the Visitors of the Spanish Provinces of the Congregation of the Mission.



- call us to a new evangelization.* [Lines of action]: to become present in the world of those who are alienated and to do this through our witness; to be concerned about social problems; to enter into dialogue with the culture; in the various catechetical situations to make an effort to educate people in their faith, thus dedicating in a preferential manner our resources and personnel in favor of the adult catechumenate; to give a missionary character to all parish ministry; to take advantage of the popular mission as an extraordinary pastoral activity; to promote groups dedicated to missionary pastoral ministry.
- 3. Where the poor are found:** *In light of our charism we only accept those parishes in places where it is possible to dedicate ourselves wholly to those who are poor and marginalized.* [Lines of action]: the residence and the lifestyle of the confrere should reflect that of the poor so that in this way we avoid placing obstacles in the way of the process of evangelization.
  - 4. To evangelize according to our proper charism:** like St. Vincent, *we are called to give a response to the new forms of poverty that are created by society.* [Lines of action] This begins with a knowledge and an analysis of the reality; all our pastoral activity has to be planned on behalf of those who are poor; to help the laity transform unjust situations and satisfy the aspirations of the poor; to organize charitable social action (effective services and expressions of Christian love of the parish community); and to work on behalf of the poor with other organizations by providing information to the community, so the parish can be the voice of the voiceless, as it confronts those situations of injustice which claim the poor as its victims.
  - 5. To build up the Christian community:** *As one of our objectives we must have a vision of the parish as a communion of communities.* [Lines of action] To offer an adult catechumenate that has a "Vincentian spirit"; to create a network of small communities and diverse groups able to become a conduit for community outreach; to promote ecclesial communion among the groups and associations; to carefully prepare the various liturgical celebrations; and to promote a vocation ministry to provides encouragement and discernment as people look for possible ways to serve the Church and the world.
  - 6. Co-responsible:** [Lines of action] To promote various means of formation, participation and co-responsibility of the laity in the *work of evangelization which is the fundamental task of the People of God (Ad Gentes, #35)*; to have a pastoral council and a finance committee; to form the laity so there is a continuity in

pastoral planning; promotion of lay Vincentian groups; and parish assemblies.

**7. As members of the Vincentian apostolic community we accept all these criteria and lines of action.**

Among the various attitudes of confreres that should accompany these criteria and lines of action, it is worthy to note that we must to always act according to the maxims of Christ, and to clothe ourselves with the following attitudes, namely, on-going conversion, detachment, mobility, collaboration, team ministry, a sensitivity with regard to the way one interacts with others, affability, humility (which allows us to learn from others), compassion and mercy, sensitivity to injustice and poverty, sharing with others (especially those who are poor). Through the practice of the five characteristic virtues of simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification and zeal these attitudes ought to be enlivened by the Spirit proper to the Congregation. Priority should be given to the missionary project rather than the administration of services.

Thirteen years later, there is little to add here when speaking about evangelization. The ideas are very clear, and so are the desires of the Congregation... but what about the reality?

**b) Statute on Vincentian Parishes<sup>9</sup>**

The Statute begins by recognizing that the “parish is a privileged place from which the Church is able to present herself before the world as the sacrament of salvation that has a mission, namely, to live, to announce and to establish the Kingdom of God among all people”. The document then refers to a general objective: *in its uniqueness the Vincentian parish with a certain sensitivity has to engage in evangelizing activity that leads to charitable action and a commitment on behalf of those who are abandoned and marginalized (cf., Constitutions, #5, 6, 7, 12)”*.

The Statute also refers to the appropriate location for Vincentian parishes, and states that by means of a clear contract, the administration of any parish should have time limitations. The Statute also highlights the following realities: the centrality of charitable action; formation in the area of the Church’s social doctrine; the formation of adults utilizing the process of the catechumenate; participation of the Vincentian Family in the process of evangelization; life and witness

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<sup>9</sup> This document was published in 2007 by the Province of Salamanca. It is the fruit of a lengthy reflection and a rich experience. It can be found on the web page of the Province of Salamanca.

imbued with the characteristic virtues, especially simplicity and humility; and a team ministry approach.

The Statute gives a brief description of various parish activities (missionary, catechetical, pastoral, charitable, team ministry, parish council and finance committee) and highlights certain lines of action so that these parishes might be truly missionary parishes.

Finally, the Statute sets form a model plan for a Vincentian parish that has the following general objectives,

- including pastoral care for the family;
- encouraging fellowship and parish co-responsibility;
- coordinating charitable and social action;
- structure a process for catechesis;
- establishing pastoral council and finance committee;
- and twinning with a mission "ad gentes".

Any plan must naturally include specific objectives which concretize the general objectives.

Such a parish should aim to create a "community of communities" focusing its pastoral activity inward; yet not neglecting the need to give witness and to organize social and charitable activity that moves outward.

The intention here is laudable, and the reflections interesting and encouraging, but in the end, we seem to have a parish that looks inward and its missionary understanding is limited to twinning with some mission "ad gentes". This is a wonderful attempt to create a significant community with what might be its missionary character, but it is nonetheless insufficient.

### c) *Provincial Norms and Lines of Action, Province of Zaragoza (2006)*<sup>10</sup>

There was a meeting of confreres from the Province of Zaragoza to reflect on the provincial norms for Vincentian parishes. In the Provincial Norms, the heading for this ministry is: *Parishes-Mission*. In some ways this could suggest a certain guilt complex or justification for a ministry which involves the majority of the confreres, but is not very clearly identified with the mission. In this case certain criteria and

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<sup>10</sup> The XIII Provincial Assembly did not modify the Provincial Norm or the Lines of Action.

objectives are proposed, including: minister in order to become a missionary church; be open to those who are alienated and/or non-believing; promote the evangelizing dimension in all pastoral activity; systematic catechesis oriented toward forming communities sensitive to the poor and the marginalized, and forming communities where the laity have responsibility and autonomy. The lines of action concretize these criteria and objectives: formulate a Pastoral Plan that promotes continuity; minister to create a parish missionary community that accepts, lives, celebrates and proclaims the Good News of Jesus Christ; promote charitable-social action (systemic change) through concrete projects; promote the associations of the Vincentian Family. The primary task of the parish should be adult formation that is done through the process of an adult catechumenate to leads people to a mature faith, to full participation and co-responsibility in the parish and to a social-political commitment. We should establish in our parishes an evangelization group that promotes the missionary dimension (such a group has not been formed in any of our parishes).

The normative is very clear and is the fruit of various Provincial Assemblies. I am sure that attempts to give life to these norms are very present in our Province; in fact, it seems that we are closer to the reality I referred to as "conciliar parishes", a community of communities than to the "post-conciliar parishes, with a missionary-liberating approach".

**d) *Meeting of Missionaries from Europe and Middle East engaged in parish ministry*<sup>11</sup>**

I will refer to some notes taken by a pastor who participated in this meeting. In light of the presentations and the shared experience, here is a general framework for a Vincentian parish. The following ideas were expressed:

- The parish has to have a missionary character, a clear evangelizing identity latent in its ordinary pastoral activity;
- It is necessary for the parish to recover its proper identity, that which defines the parish as the house of God in the midst of the house(s) of humankind;
- It is necessary to view the parish not as some fixed, stable place, but rather as a community walking in the midst of the people and

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<sup>11</sup> As stated previously here we are referring to some notes that were taken by a Missionary from the Province of Zaragoza (Father Ander Arregui) who participated in this meeting.

its pastors have to be pilgrims, nomads who share the hopes and the concerns of the people;

- The parish is a place of humanization and socialization where one is able to breathe in the beauty of life and the beauty of humanity and the beauty of community.

*With regard to characteristics relevant to our charism as it refers to parish ministry, it was said:*

- Mission and charity, which characterize our charism, ought to be present in every parish that wishes to evangelize, as it is the distinctive feature of a Vincentian parish;
- The organizational structure of the parish is the same for all parishes in a given diocese. Yet, a Vincentian parish should have a distinct style; namely, it should be characterized by the five virtues, especially simplicity and zeal;
- There is a need to develop a "pastoral of the heart" with a "pastoral of the head"; it is a need to reach out to specific groups of people and affirm them in a positive manner;
- We are called to create a renewed parish, a parish with a new face; therefore, we need to be specialists in the Christian initiation of adults;
- The Vincentian parish takes special care in formation of the laity for the mission. The laity are not mere collaborators but are co-responsible for the mission;
- Vincentian parishes should pay special attention to forming their members in the social doctrine of the church;
- We must understand that this is not the time for "masses of people" in our parishes, but rather small groups formed by families to live a credible life of faith;
- We must strengthen the family and Christian community to transmit the faith;
- At the present time the parish is responsible for "the first proclamation" and we, as Vincentians, should be experts in the missionary proclamation;
- There is a need for the parish to live in a twofold manner: on the one hand, attention must be given to the small groups in which people are formed to live the faith in a profound and committed manner; and on the other hand, attention must be given to those who request the sacraments (an opportunity for the first proclamation).

The following conclusion was reached: today there are no perfect recipes with regard to our pastoral activity. Therefore, it is necessary to experiment intelligently, responsibly and courageously. Then we must engage in an on-going process of evaluation, aware of the fact that the primary places to renew the faith are the family and the Christian community.

These are beautiful words and very powerful lines of action for our parishes. When speaking about the twofold manner of ministering in our parishes, however, one would hope that our ordinary pastoral activity would move in both an inward and outward direction, and that the second dimension would not be limited to caring for those who approach us for sacraments.

### e) *Letter of Father Gregory Gay, Superior General*

In October 2011, the Superior General wrote a letter to all confreres in the Congregation in which he spoke about the responses sent to him from the Provinces regarding their reflections on parish ministry and the possibility of publishing a *Practical Guide for Parishes*. Ten provinces responded to the questionnaire. Father G. Gregory Gay, C.M., and his council studied the material that was received and, taking on the role of a secretary, he communicated the reflections of the General Council on this matter to all the Missionaries.

The letter pointed out the great variety and richness of this ministry, but also highlighted the difficulties and differences, not the least of which is *the risk of justifying and legitimizing all our parishes so that ultimately our Vincentian identity is weakened and becomes devoid of meaning*. With regard to the variety of parishes, the letter highlighted some of the characteristics that should confirm our Vincentian identity, including: parishes should be among the poor and at the service of the poor (*People who are poor, with their need for a holistic evangelization, are at the geographical, social and pastoral center of every Vincentian missionary parish*); the parish is the “house of mission”; all parish pastoral activity ought to be imbued by the Vincentian spirit thus highlighting the five Vincentian missionary virtues; integral mission (word and charity); promotion of the laity; development of a prophetic pastoral approach and attention to the new forms of poverty; support and participate in popular missions; support and collaborate with other branches of the Vincentian Family; collaboration with the diocesan clergy; development of a community spirit; and finally, the parish should become a network of communities.

Any attempt to write a *Guide for Parishes* requires greater clarity and consensus with regard to the content. Therefore, Fr. Gay proposed a more extensive study from the Provinces, the Continental Conferences

of Visitors, and provincials and their councils. The purpose of this will be to speak with one voice on this issue of Vincentian parish ministry, and respond to the new evangelization which the Church has embarked upon. After having taken this virtual tour through the archives of a house library, we are left with the feeling that the norms and the theory, the desires and the hopes with regard to parish ministry give direction to a parish missionary pastoral approach. However, any attempt to achieve a utopian objective will be disappointing, as we are far from having made our parishes truly missionary parishes.

#### 4. NEW EVANGELIZATION IN THE VINCENTIAN PARISH

From the time of Pope Paul VI to Pope Benedict XVI, we have heard it said that: *the Church exists to evangelize and the identity of the church is mission*. What is said about the Church can definitely be applied to the parish: *the parish exists to evangelize and its identity is the mission*. This affects the heart of a Vincentian parish whose charism and identity is mission.

The new evangelization intends to recover the missionary awareness of the Church and consequently the missionary awareness of the parish. We read in the Lineamenta for the Synod of bishops that the *new evangelization is synonymous with mission*<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, the newness of this evangelization has the hint of a former vintage, like that of the new wine that acquires the taste of the "mother" and yet is now poured into new wineskins. I like to say that the new evangelization is like the old evangelization, the first evangelization. I also like to say that evangelization is always new because evangelization has always been the Christian response to each new historical, cultural and ecclesial situation.

##### 4.1. Contemplate "the missionary of the Father"

As St. Vincent liked to say, the first step for our Vincentian parishes is to contemplate *the first Missionary*, to clothe ourselves in his spirit and to do what he did. In the first place the new evangelization is an invitation to our Vincentian parishes to look at *the one sent by the Father* and to observe how he evangelized.

At "home" Jesus taught and the infirm came to him for healing. Some people even opened a hole in the roof to place a paralyzed man before Jesus. In turn, Jesus forgave the sins of this man and in doing so, he

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<sup>12</sup> Synod of Bishops, XIII Ordinary General Assembly, "The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith", Lineamenta, #10.

scandalized the Scribes. He then told the man to rise and take up his mat and go home. At "home" in Bethany he expressed his friendship to a woman who chose to be with the Lord, who chose *the better part* while others were concerned about the many things that had to be done in the parish. At "home" in the cenacle, the disciples listened to Jesus' farewell discourse and saw him kneel before them as he washed their feet. They were given a new commandment and broke bread together and shared the wine (the Body and the Blood of the Lord), and were exhorted to continue to celebrate in this manner as a commemoration of what had occurred.

This "home" has to be the parish. But in the gospels, we also see Jesus traveling to towns and villages where he approached a leper, one who had been excluded from participation in society. Jesus introduced this man back into society, while he himself remained on the fringes of society and allowed himself to *become contaminated*. We also see Jesus inviting himself to dine with Zacchaeus, who was viewed unfavorably by others. As Jesus entered his house so also did salvation. Jesus also healed the blind man on the side of the road that went to Jericho; he raised up the son (and the mother) of the widow of Nain; he traveled about in "suspect places" and there freed those who were possessed; moved by the words of the woman who stated, *Lord even the dogs under the table eat the children's scraps*, Jesus healed the daughter of the Syro-phenician woman.

He sat at table with a Pharisee and rescued from stoning the woman caught in adultery; one could go on and on. During his travels he spoke in parables about the Kingdom of God and God as Father. He also went up the mountain where he proclaimed the Beatitudes to the people and on the mountain he entered into a process of discernment to doing God's will as he prayed during the night. This is an image of evangelization, of the mission that was carried out by *the missionary of the Father*.

The Vincentian parish ought to visit those "suspect places", travel along the highways and the byways, visit the towns and villages; it must "dirty" itself and contaminate itself as it reaches out to those who are excluded; it ought to go up the mountain of the Beatitudes and proclaim the newness of the Gospel and the newness of the Kingdom of God to those who do not frequent the temple; it ought to go to "Jacob's well" where many Samaritans sought to satisfy their thirst for love and happiness. The parish should offer these individuals the water that wells up to eternal life; it ought to feed the five thousand with five bread and two fish; it ought to enter into contemplation on Tabor and prepare to suffer and hand over its life.

St. Vincent understood this method of evangelization, and taught it to all with whom he came in contact, regardless of a person's ministry



or rank (Lady of Charity, Brother, Daughter of Charity, missionary, bishop, priest, men or women of the Confraternities of Charity). He himself began to experiment with this method of evangelization as pastor in Clichy and Châtillon. He taught this approach to his confreres: evangelize with word and service, and imitate Jesus Christ. Therefore, the new evangelization is to do what Jesus Christ did, and for us, as Vincentians, it means to do what Vincent did "accommodating ourselves to the time, the place and the person".

#### **4.2. Evangelize from the perspective of our charism**

"Parochial assimilation" should not swallow up the charism, or the characteristics that the Congregation of the Mission utilizes in the process of evangelization. From the perspective of the parish, the new evangelization challenges us to place the missionary capabilities of the Congregation, of each local community, and individual confreres at the service of the Gospel. Vincentian parishes evangelize with their own proper style, and this includes both the sending forth to evangelize the poor and also the manner in which the poor are evangelized. In the words of St. Louise de Marillac the Vincentian parish ought to have the odor of simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification, and zeal (passion) for the salvation of humanity.

The framework and horizon of the new evangelization as applied to Vincentian parishes should be derived from criteria that lies within our Constitutions, in particular, Article 12 and Statute 10. These are identification marks that respond today to the demands of the new evangelization. Article 12 of our Constitutions highlights those criteria or characteristics that should be present in any process of evangelization. I refer here to the criteria for Vincentian parishes: a clear and expressed preference for an apostolate among the poor; attention to the realities of present-day society so as to better carry out our prophetic task of evangelization; some sharing in the condition of the poor; genuine community spirit in our apostolic activity; readiness to go to any part of the world; and to live in a state of continuous conversion.

When Fr. Robert Maloney commented on Statute 10, he outlined some goals for the evangelizing process in our Vincentian parishes: our parishes should be among those who are really poor; the diocesan clergy lack the resources to staff it; our commitment to the parish is temporally limited (hopefully by a clear contract); we have definite missionary goals to be realized within that time frame, and among these is preparation for ongoing pastoral care in the future, particularly for training leaders in various ministries; our commitment to the missionary parish is communal; organized works of practical charity are functioning to serve the needy; Vincentian lay groups are formed (VMY,

AIC, Miraculous Medal Association, Vincent de Paul Society, etc.); systemic instruction on the social teaching of the Church is offered; the style of ministry is simple and humble, and it is an evangelizing parish with strong emphasis on the Word of God<sup>13</sup>.

### 4.3. In harmony with the new evangelization

As we have previously seen, there are authoritative voices that speak about "*a definitive end of Christianity as it came to be during the ear of Constantine and an end to a form of Christianity as designated by the existence of official Churches*"<sup>14</sup>. Thus, the new evangelization is not only demanded by those outside the Church but also by those who are presently members of the Church. The style of the present parish has to begin from "zero". It has to be something new, and here, the Vincentian charism can open some new paths. Like any beginning, and this is especially true here as it will be said that we do not begin from zero, there will be anxieties and difficulties and suffering, but there will also be joy and hope. But this has always been the case from the time of Jesus of Nazareth, the early Christian communities, and the first Apostles to the time of ecclesial renewal movements, the Councils, and any other form of renewal.

Allow me to highlight some aspects of the new evangelization in Vincentian parishes. Here I will utilize an outline that was presented to me when preparing myself for youth ministry and religious formation. It is as though I am listening anew to Professor Emilio Alberich. The Church has the task of evangelization, indeed, the Church exists to evangelize and the Church has been sent forth to evangelize. The church evangelizes from the perspective of four ecclesial dimensions or as professor Alberich said, *four essential articulations of the ecclesial praxis...* dimensions or articulations that can be applied to the parish.

#### a) *The Church, through DIAKONIA, brings about the Kingdom of God*

The Vincentian parish evangelizes and brings about the Kingdom by serving the poor. Beside the proclamation of the word, the Vincentian parish has to be characterized and known by society and the diocese

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<sup>13</sup> Cf., ROBERT P. MALONEY, *Our Vincentian Involvement in Parishes*, in *Vincentiana* (1997), Volume 47: 2, pp. 111-116.

<sup>14</sup> KURT KOCH, *¿Misión o des-misión de la iglesia?*, in GEORGE AUGUSTIN (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 42.

for its service on behalf of the poor. Such service on behalf of the poor effects every other dimension of parish life and is a dynamic force for each of these dimensions. The Vincentian parish revolves around this axis and therefore must not only welcome the poor who arrive at its front door but must also go out to those places where the "excluded" members of society, the "foreigner" and the "lepers" are found and there she must exercise the healing ministry of Jesus Christ, a mission that has been entrusted to the disciples. Sensitivity and action: the charitable and social outreach of the parish should be focused on those who are poor; the ministry of Caritas should be more than administering an office; the work of the AIC should be more than distributing food baskets; all the various parish groups should be encouraged to commit themselves to this task of serving the poor; and people must also be formed to participate in this ministry. The parish should actively cooperate with other social movements to defend the rights of those who are poor. It would be wonderful if the Vincentian parish were a church for the poor, but not only for those poor persons who come to the office or the front door, but also for those who are outside and yet feel invited to participate in the Kingdom of God. The Vincentian parish cannot be content with welcoming and serving those who are poor, but rather in accord with our Vincentian experience, we must make an effort to give them the Word and the Bread. The poor need the Word and the parish will have to make a great effort in order to respond to this need.

**b) *The Church, through the KERIGMA announces the Kingdom of God***

This is another characteristic of a Vincentian parish that cannot be ignored. Perhaps this might be the most necessary element for the new evangelization. Therefore, Vincentians must be experts in this area. It is significant to note that Walter Kasper (now Cardinal Kasper) stated in 1960 that the pastoral activity of the Church ought to have as its starting point "the primacy of the Word over sacrament"<sup>15</sup>. In the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the importance of the Word in the life of the Church and in Christian life is revealed as vital. The post-conciliar Popes have continually instated on this reality.

Here we are dealing with speaking about God and Jesus Christ in a new way, in a passionate, appealing manner that moves people, touching their hearts and lives, transforming the world, and enabling the Church to become a home to those who question and search.

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<sup>15</sup> Cited by KURT KOCH, *art. cit.*, GEORGE AUGUSTIN (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 46.

Evangelization can only be carried out successfully by those persons who are enthusiastic about God, who give enthusiastic witness to God with their words and actions. People can only evangelize if they themselves have been evangelized and make an effort to renew themselves. The faith can only be transmitted by those persons who are grounded in the faith<sup>16</sup>.

The Vincentian parish places itself at the service of the new evangelization both by proclaiming the Word as a first priority and by its pastoral activity (as recommended by the *Lineamenta*)<sup>17</sup>. But we must go further, as these movements are internal, meaning they are for those who come to the parish. Therefore, we must move outside the "parish walls". Again using the words of Cardinal Kasper, a Vincentian ministry takes on great importance: "*Community renewal that is directed toward the active members of a community cannot replace the former popular missions. Besides renewing the faith and the life of the practicing members of the community, the popular mission had the twofold task of reaching out and bringing back to the fold those who were once members of the community but who distanced themselves from it, and winning over for the first time those who never had a relationship with the Church*"<sup>18</sup>.

More specifically: Vincentian parishes should foster processes that lead people to a mature faith. *The renewal of the catechumenate has become, for the historical churches, a vital necessity, something indispensable for their survival*<sup>19</sup>. If we were courageous and aware of the end of an era, we would have to renounce a catechetical program that was focused solely on sacramental preparation, a program that ends when individuals receive a sacrament (here we must be aware of the ecclesial difficulties and the social difficulties that would arise). Is there some Vincentian pastor who with the consent of the pastoral council would be courageous enough to put up a sign in the church entrance stating: *Here we do not provide catechetical preparation for First Communion, but we do provide catechesis for Christian initiation!* We could say the same thing here about catechesis for Confirmation and pre-sacramental preparation in general. We would have to put in place processes of Christian initiation beginning with a religious awakening and continuing to the stage of Christian commitment. The third chapter of the *Lineamenta* is entitled: *Initiation into the Christian experience*

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<sup>16</sup> Cf., WALTER KASPER, *La nueva evangelización: un desafío pastoral, teológico y espiritual*, in GEORGE AUGUSTIN (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 19-25.

<sup>17</sup> Cf., Synod of Bishops, XIII Ordinary General Assembly, "*The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*", *Lineaments*, #10.

<sup>18</sup> WALTER KASPER, *art. cit.*, in GEORGE AUGUSTIN (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 35-36.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

and presents Christian initiation as an evangelizing process<sup>20</sup>. Here one would have to opt for a greater concern for adult catechesis in the parish and in Vincentian catechumenates, in parish formation groups, or in groups that provide an experience of community. One has to take a risk to involve people in experiences already in place such as family catechesis or intergenerational catechesis.

In the Vincentian parish, this element of the Word should influence other parish dimensions and parish activity. Thus, care should be taken in the following areas: Sunday preaching, the formation of parish groups, the “first proclamation” to those who come forward for the first time or the new evangelization of those who have been alienated. The word is proclaimed and becomes life through **DIAKONIA**, **KOINONIA** and **LITURGY**... all of which are suffused by the odor of the Good News that is proclaimed.

### **c) *The Church, through KOINONIA, lives the Kingdom of God***

The new evangelization in the Vincentian parish must recover a sense of community proper to the disciples who were called “to be with the Lord” and were sent forth to the different communities. Here there are two fundamental words: communion and mission, both of which have consequences for the Vincentian charism. In the 1980’s it was said that we needed communities with a human face, with adult Christians living their faith. At the same time, we must continue the process of initiation and leading people to a mature faith. We need to continue to welcome people into the parish community where the values of the Kingdom are lived.

Being more specific once again: the Vincentian parish is a channel of new evangelization if it continues to live as a community of faith. Therefore, it is necessary that those who form this community experience themselves as active members of a community in which responsibilities are shared, and the evangelizing power of the laity is affirmed and valued. The laity must be affirmed and respected for their different competencies in finance and pastoral planning, as well as in areas of service to the poor, along with faith formation and liturgy. The Vincentian parish must cease being clerical and become communitarian and lay. Every form of gathering that nourishes the communion of life should be encouraged; this includes coming together for prayer as well as for other festive celebrations, coming together for fraternal correction in the celebration of the sacrament of Reconciliation and

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<sup>20</sup> Cf., Synod of Bishops, XIII Ordinary General Assembly, “*The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*”, *Linamenta*, #18.

coming together for the celebration of the Word and around the Eucharistic table.

The new evangelization cannot be satisfied with guiding people to community with Jesus Christ but must invite them to become members of the body of Christ, thus incorporating themselves into the community of faith which is the church. The new evangelization is not only accomplished through the proclamation of the Word, but is, above all else, a new form of life in the *communion* of the church<sup>21</sup>. This *communion* ought to open itself to *mission*. The Vincentian parish cannot lose the condition of being both a parish that is evangelized and an evangelizing parish; meaning, a missionary parish. The parish cannot be satisfied with "the warmth and the security of the nest" but, must go out to the edges of the frontier and be in the midst of the world.

#### **d) *The Church, through the LITURGY, celebrates the Kingdom of God***

The new evangelization has to promote a profound change in the liturgical dimension. Here too, the Vincentian parish must be valiant and courageous. In the *Lineamenta*, it is stated that the new evangelization is an attitude, a bold manner of being<sup>22</sup>. This boldness must also be applied to the liturgy. What Vincentian pastor is willing to take a stand with regard to routine sacramentalization and using the liturgy as a place for instruction and catechesis? Who is willing to deny matrimony or baptism to those who are not participating in the life of the Christian community and live in a manner that separates them from the Christian faith?

Liturgical celebrations in the new evangelization must recover the sense of celebration in the style of the catechumenate, which will include giving importance to the *mistagogia*, initiation into life with the living God who in Jesus has revealed his true face. Thus liturgical celebrations ought to recover this sense of initiation into the believing community of faith who call upon God.

The Vincentian parish must be mindful of and willing to break with some "religious practices". The sacramental liturgy cannot be used at one's discretion to simulate ecclesial membership of those who barely participate in the sacraments and the life of the church. Since such

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<sup>21</sup> WALTER KASPER, *art. cit.*, in GEORGE AUGUSTIN (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>22</sup> Cf., Synod of Bishops, XIII Ordinary General Assembly, "The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith", *Linamenta*, #6.

people could be overwhelmed by sacramental liturgies, the new evangelization should develop alternative forms of celebration, thus distinguishing celebrations properly sacramental from other forms of celebration<sup>23</sup>. Here, there is a need for courageous attitudes and style, using words proper to Vincentians, there is a need to demonstrate a "creative fidelity for the mission".

More specifically, the new evangelization demands that our parishes broaden and differentiate, in a pronounced manner various forms of celebration so not all religious needs and expectations are satisfied immediately and exclusively by the celebration of a sacrament. Do we dare to create a celebration for blessing a new born child without administering the sacrament of baptism or create a marriage blessing without the sacrament of marriage? Perhaps the new evangelization has to recover the use of 'sacramentals' in light of a situation of disbelief and the indiscriminate celebration of sacraments. We have to dust off the 'post-conciliar para-liturgies' and follow the example of the "celebrations of the Word" in mission countries. This must be done to celebrate meaningful liturgies that are open to mystery, and to the transcendent.

Sacramental celebrations, especially in the sacraments of initiation, lead to evangelization. The Eucharist and mission form a unity because the Eucharist prolongs and preserves itself in everyday life (think disciples of Emmaus). The same could be said about the other sacraments.

### **e) *The Church, through MARTYRDOM, gives witness to the Kingdom of God***

Some time ago, a Director of the Sisters and one of my formators invited me to give a catechetical cursillo to a group of Daughters of Charity. When I explained these four dimensions by which the Church makes the Kingdom of God present in our midst, this confrere told me that it would be good to add a fifth dimension. It is with great pleasure that I have done so ever since<sup>24</sup>. Thus, I refer to martyrdom which every form of evangelization must take into consideration, just as it was endured by Jesus and the early Christians. The new evangelization cannot occur without conflict, just as the former (the first) evangelization could not avoid conflict. *Evangelization will always be carried out*

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<sup>23</sup> WALTER KASPER, *art. cit.*, in GEORGE AUGUSTIN (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 71.

<sup>24</sup> Years after my studies I saw that Professor Emilio Alberich included this dimension in his book, *La Catequesis en la Iglesia* (Catechesis in the Church), Madrid, Ed. CCS, 1991 (second edition).

under the sign of the cross, and only by passing through the cross is it possible to hope in the new life of Easter<sup>25</sup>. There will be internal conflicts to cause suffering. The task of Jeremiah was thankless, because he had to destroy and to uproot to build and to plant. From the perspective of a Vincentian parish, the new evangelization has to accept suffering and the cross. Only in this way does Christian witness become credible. The confreres who evangelize in parishes must clothe themselves in the virtue of mortification. This means that they must be willing to suffer to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ, and to the mission of evangelizing the poor.

In the *Lineamenta*, it is stated that the new evangelization must confront new situations where evangelization is needed, or lacking (such as secularism, immigration, media, economy, science, technology and politics)<sup>26</sup>. We cannot enclose ourselves in our communities and/or institutions and not embrace the challenge of entering into these new situations in which we can speak and offer the witness of our life. This is the form that Christian martyrdom takes on in today's world, which also includes an acceptance of the fact that we must confront the more recent forms of aggressive atheism and extreme secularization whose objective is to eclipse the question of God in the life of humankind<sup>27</sup>.

Specifically: the Vincentian parish, because of the various dimensions that are part of the process of evangelization, while knowing that it is on the road to Jerusalem, the place of the passion, it must also be certain that it is the place of the resurrection. There will be no shortage of criticism and scorn from the so called "good people", whose motto is "we have always done it this way!". There will be a need to pray as if in the Garden of Gethsemane and our prayer will have to be profoundly persistent. There will be no shortage of incomprehension and contempt for those who from the outside see their peace being disturbed. There is no doubt that evangelization in this type of parish will be carried on by people with great *parresia* (courage and boldness). True evangelization can only be successfully carried out by those excited by God and who, by word and action, give enthusiastic witness of God.

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<sup>25</sup> WALTER KASPER, *art. cit.*, in GEORGE AUGUSTIN (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Synod of Bishops, XIII Ordinary General Assembly, *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith, Lineamenta*, #6.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, #7.



## 5. CONCLUSION

We live at a crucial moment in the history of the Church, because we find ourselves at the end of a phase of Christianity. Yet we have not moved forward, and we are living out faith in the midst of a Christian society which is situated in the midst of a secularized, de-Christianized, and de-ecclesialized world. The new evangelization has to begin in the heart of the Church and within each Christian. If this is not done, the words and documents published will be carried away by the wind, and will have no real meaning. The Vincentians engaged in parish ministry have a great responsibility to contribute to this new paradigm, which is a call to conversion. Our confreres have the task of making our parishes centers of evangelization, lights in the midst of the shadows of this contemporary world. They must and can form evangelizing parishes and parishes that are evangelized. The new evangelization is going to test "the creative fidelity for the mission" of every confrere involved in parish ministry. We have the ever challenging task: to be missionaries, followers of Jesus Christ evangelizing the poor; to be missionaries in the midst of the conflicted, yet hopeful world and church. We have to do this with the strength of the Holy Spirit, because only with this strength is the Church and the Vincentian parish able to evangelize.

Translated from Spanish by: CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M.