

Vincentian Congregation of the Syro-Malabar Church in Kerala (India)

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The Popular Mission of the Vincentian Congregation

The Popular Mission is one of the distinctive and specific works of the Vincentian Congregation. The Vincentian Congregation of the Syro-Malabar Church in Kerala was founded in 1904, exactly on the model of the Congregation of the Mission and it adopted the same Common Rules and activities of the Congregation of the Mission as its own. Therefore the popular mission too was its specific work. St. Vincent de Paul founded the Congregation of the Mission with the exclusive purpose of preaching the Word of God to the poor especially the village people and therefore he chose "to preach the Gospel to the poor" as the motto of the Congregation.

Of course in the early existence of the Vincentian Congregation, as the members were very few, this program could not be effectively carried out. As the members grew, individual priests took up preaching the Word as one of their main works of apostolate. Archbishop Mar Augustine Kandathil, the then Archbishop of Ernakulam, encouraged the members to conduct the parish mission. He wanted to raise a fund for conducting the parish missions free of cost, and he himself contributed 1000 Rupees towards the fund.

As the number of members increased, they began to take up parish missions in large scale; and it was in 1952 that a parish mission was conducted under the title of Popular Mission. Fr. Fernando Ibilcieta C.M. (a Spanish missionary from the Cuttack Mission) was the Master of Novices of the Vincentian Congregation at that time. The superiors were very eager to learn from him how a popular mission could be conducted. He obliged and a big popular mission was conducted at Angamaly under his expert direction. The novices were engaged in the groundwork; they visited each and every house and made the people aware of the advent of the mission. Under their leadership, the children held rallies throughout the streets, proclaiming the coming of the mission, impressing the people that a

great event was about to occur in the parish and that no one should miss it. The priests and the deacons, who were to preach, were given training in conducting the mission. The first mission was very successful. How enthusiastic the people there were to participate in all the programs of the popular mission. It was a memorable event in the history of the Angamaly Forane Church as well as in the history of the Vincentian Congregation.

For some years they could not conduct the popular mission in large numbers, though individuals conducted retreats singly. From 1961 onwards more popular missions were conducted, yet it was only one or two in a year until 1978. The year 1978 was the Episcopal jubilee year of His Eminence Joseph Cardinal Parecattil, the then Archbishop of Ernakulam. He had a great appreciation of the popular mission and he wanted it to be conducted in as many parishes as possible during the jubilee year. Hence all the parish priests took interest.

Though the Vincentians could not do much, they had 22 missions, mainly in very large parishes. Not only that, some of the parish priests also joined in preaching the missions. From then onwards there were more missions every year. The popular missions were conducted in alternate weeks. In 1990 the Congregation was divided into provinces; and though they take up the missions every other week, since there are three provinces the mission preaching has increased almost threefold. Thanks be to God.

It is worth mentioning that each province conducts more or less twenty popular missions a year. During the rainy season it is not convenient to have the popular mission. Now they are able to conduct popular missions in various parts of India. The St. Thomas province conducts the mission successfully in Madhya Pradesh. Those missionaries working in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra and also those who work in the African countries of Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda, conduct this mission in parishes fruitfully. Thus in short, this way of preaching the Word, the popular mission, is very much appreciated by the people, the priests and the bishops, as it is very effective in making real, lasting conversion and renewal.

Wherever the Vincentians preached, the whole Catholic community took part in the mission. Since everybody in the parish — children, youth and elderly, men and women — all took part in it, the renewal was total. So many disputes and rivalries are solved during the mission. Forgiveness and reconciliation are effected. Peace and harmony among the people are the visible effects. One thing to be specially remarked here is that not only Catholics but also the non-Catholics and non-Christians attend the programs, if not in the center then from their own homes, as the centers are very near

and microphones are used. A Muslim stated: "Father, you are preaching good things that are useful to every one irrespective of caste and creed."

The Structure of the Popular Mission

The popular mission is conducted in one parish alone or in more than one, including the adjacent parish or parishes together. In any case, there will be several centers for preaching the mission. Each center may have 150 to 200 families. The centers are arranged in such a way that the people can reach the center within ten minutes from their homes. In every center invariably there will be two priests and one singer to conduct the mission.

Preparations

When an application for conducting a popular mission is received, the director sends a form to the parish priest requesting him to furnish the details of the parish: area, number of families, manner of living, their faith and morality and other relevant matters. After getting the details, the director arranges a meeting with the parish priest and the leaders of the parish and discusses the plan and method of conducting the mission in the parish. Together they make decisions about the number and location of the centers, and the volunteers and leaders who will be in charge of matters at the centers. The director personally goes, in company with the parish priest and leaders, to fix the location of the centers and gives further directions. In every center a platform with a canopy will be built and arrangements for the celebration of Holy Mass and other functions will be made.

The Mission begins on Sunday evening and ends on Friday evening. On Sunday, before the commencement of the mission, the director (and, if needed, the assistant director too) goes to the parish where the mission is arranged and announces during the Holy Mass (homily) the coming of the mission, explaining its importance and benefits. He exhorts everyone to take part in all parts of the mission, without exception. They should in no way evade it. He instructs the people to pray for the success of the mission. This announcement is made at every Mass and in every substation where there is Sunday Mass.

After that, the director, together with the parish priest and the leaders, visits each center and evaluates the preparations made and gives necessary directions. The leaders have to supply the notices regarding the mission as well as the prayer cards to each and every house. They fix the corners where the people should gather together to proceed to the center in procession singing, praying the rosary and

shouting slogans. There is a distinctive songbook which also includes the slogans to be used.

Papal Flags are hoisted in front of every house, as a sign of the coming of the popular mission. The youth and children are encouraged to write Bible quotations on placards or hardboard and exhibit them along the roads and streets. Those who have written and exhibited the maximum number of verses in each center will be awarded prizes, sponsored by generous people.

The people come to the center in the morning and evening only in jathas (processions), not singly. For each jatha, there will be a leader who will carry a big papal flag in the front. When the jatha reaches the center, the flag is kept in a prominent place and noting the number of the flags the director can ascertain whether all the groups have come or not. The jatha has a great influence in bringing the people to the center. Once a mission was conducted in a big parish. One man was away for a few days and he had no knowledge of the mission. The first day at about midnight he returned home and went to sleep. At about 4 a.m. he heard the sound of cannons and firecrackers, and knowing not what it meant and being curious, he got up and watched what was happening. He wanted to know where the people were going in procession and so he followed the jatha. Following them he reached the church and he found something special about the whole process, which led him to attend the mission in full; and he was very much thrilled with joy and peace. Afterwards he said that the jathas should be kept, at any cost, in the popular mission and should never be abandoned.



Popular Mission in Kerala

The Inaugural Session

Formerly the inaugural session was conducted in the main center (the parish church) alone; but now, for the sake of convenience, it is usually done in each center. If the inaugural session is in the main center, all people from every center come in jathas to that place. It is a big show and expression of faith and unity. The inauguration is done with a concelebrated Mass with all the preachers taking part in it. After the Holy Mass, the parish priest welcomes the preachers with a few words. Then the preachers kneel down before the parish priest and receive his blessing as a mark of obedience and submission. After that, the director or the person designated gives the inaugural sermon. Before the inaugural sermon there will be praise and worship for some time. If the inauguration is in the main center there is a huge crowd, because almost all the people of the parish gather there. Also, at the end of the inaugural session, there will be a prayer service and practice of songs. The leaders take care that the papal flags are taken back to be used in the centers. The programs and the timetable of the mission will be again announced and the people are reminded to take care to arrange their occupations in advance so that they may conveniently attend the mission.

Daily Routine

Every day, morning and evening, the people come to the centers in jathas singing songs, praying the rosary and shouting the slogans. At the beginning for a few minutes there will be song practice, especially in the evening.

The Morning session usually begins at 5 a.m. and ends at 7 a.m. so that the workers may be able to go to their daily work. **In the evening** the program begins at about 6 p.m. so that the daily workers may be able to attend the program after their daily work. This session may last until about 9:30 or 10 p.m. This timetable is kept in all centers without any change. Because of this arrangement, all the workers, without missing their work, are able to attend the mission. In the morning there is Holy Mass, homily and one sermon. In the evening there are two sermons, and prayer service or adoration. In every session songs, in keeping with the theme, are sung. The singer leads it and the whole congregation joins him.

The preachers, after the morning session and after breakfast, go to visit the families of the parish and meet the family members there, talking with them. A guide will show the way. All the Catholic families are visited. If someone of another community requests a visit to his/her home, it is done, according to the circumstances. The preacher helps them get their problems or disputes settled. The

preacher will be very cautious and prudent in dealing with such matters. The preacher will spend a few minutes praying with the family members. The sick people are given more attention during these visits and the priests pray over them for healing. The preachers have their lunch after the house visits, often late, after which they take a little rest. Then they prepare for the evening session. All the missionaries take care to be faithful to their daily prayers, especially the canonical hours and, if convenient, to have them in common.

The themes for the sermons include: love of God, love of neighbor, sin, faith, forgiveness, repentance and penance, suffering, married life, parents and children, confession, Eucharist, Word of God, etc.

In the evenings, besides the sermons, there are special prayer services:

Monday: After the sermons, a general prayer of praise and worship is conducted for a short time.

Tuesday: Death experience, i.e., a suggestive meditation on death. The people are asked to sit in an easy and comfortable manner and close their eyes. The lights are put out. Suggestions start from the beginning of one's sickness, and spread all through one's ailments, hospitalization, treatments and reaches the death point. A description of the death and funeral service is given. After that he is led to the glory of the triumphant resurrection and the happiness of the eternal heaven.

Wednesday: This is a penitential day, a day of repentance and confession, a day of fasting and penance. This day everybody is exhorted to make a genuine general confession, to reconcile with those who have offended them or whom they have offended, to forget and forgive. The whole day the most Holy Sacrament is exposed for adoration and the people before and after confession will spend a few hours in the presence of our Eucharistic Lord. In the evening after the sermons, during the adoration, the renewal of the baptismal vows takes place. Then a prayer service for inner healing is conducted. It is followed by a ceremony of lighting the candles reminding the people that Christ is the light of the world and we too shall shine as his lamps remembering the words of Jesus "you are the light of the world." Usually the people carry the lighted candles to their homes.

Thursday: There will be, in the evening, adoration and prayer for the healing of physical ailments.

Friday: Today, in the morning, during the Holy Mass, at the time of the offertory, the people will offer edible things and

cash at the altar. After the celebration of the Holy Mass the renewal of the vows of marriage takes place. It is conducted in a special manner. The couples present are asked to line up in pairs and the celebrant gives them a short exhortation and asks them to review their married life and examine their behaviour towards each other. Then the wives are asked to kneel down before their husbands and beg pardon for their shortcomings. They do it very sincerely. Then the husbands laying their hands on the heads of their wives pray for them and pardon them. After that, the wives stand up and the husbands kneel down before their wives and in turn ask pardon for all their ill behaviors to them. The women in turn put their hands on the heads of their husbands and pray for them a while and pardon them. Then they renew the marriage vows using the same formula as in the celebration of the marriage with necessary changes. After this ceremony, the whole congregation congratulates the senior most and junior most couples of the group giving them bouquets. Then there is the agape of which all partake. Coffee is prepared by the youth; the breakfast items are the edible things presented at the altar during the Mass. Thus the morning program ends.

In the evening all gather at the center as usual. From there they proceed to the main center in procession. Everybody carries a small wooden cross. The concluding ceremonies take place in the main center. For this concluding session all the people of the parish and many from the neighbouring parishes gather together. There will be singing for an hour and then adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on everybody attending the ceremony. The person designated will give the concluding sermon. Usually the bishop of the place gives the sermon. The parish priest then says a word of thanks to the preachers, as well as to the volunteers and leaders and to the faithful for their wholehearted cooperation and earnest participation.

It is worth mentioning that the people who have once participated in the popular mission carry the memories of it even after many years.

The expenses of the arrangements in each center will be met by the generous offerings at the Mass of the last day and by the contribution of generous people. If there is any deficit the parish meets it. Only food and lodging are received by the preachers and no remuneration in cash or kind or by way of presents is accepted. The province concerned meets the travelling expenses and personal expenses of the preachers and the team. The remuneration for the preachers is the satisfaction of seeing that the efforts of so many

priests and people have produced good effects and that the people of the parish are renewed to a great extent, enjoying reconciliation with God and men and peace of mind and health of body.

Further Developments

From many sources there were requests that for the popular mission results to be lasting there should be some kind of ongoing follow-up or renewal programs. We conducted renewal programs in some places but then there was thought of beginning a center for them and in 1980 the **Popular Mission Center at Potta** began. Here those who wished to spend a few days in prayer and meditation were given the opportunity and once in a while a three-day program of enrichment and renewal was arranged. People came in large numbers. Then the popular mission director began a program of preaching the Word of God and of praying for healing. Some miracles of cure occurred and people began to rush to the place. The daily preaching of the Word took the form of a systematic retreat. After some time arrangements were made for closed retreats and about 500 people make the retreats every other week, living in the **Popular Mission Center** there. Still the daily preaching of the Word of God is being continued under a director specifically appointed for that and people from far off places and of all denominations come for it. Mention must be made that *in the whole world, only in Potta Vincentian Ashram, is there a full-day preaching of the Word of God, throughout the year.* It has become an internationally known retreat center. Every year a National Bible Convention is held in Potta and a great number of people flock there to hear the Word of God, and many miraculous healings take place on such occasions.

After a few years, the venue of Potta became insufficient in space to hold the increasing number of resident retreatants. So in 1990 **Muringoor Divine Retreat Center** was established. With gratitude, mention is made here of the support and encouragement given to the Divine Retreat Center by the Bishops in Kerala. Since the beginning of this retreat center, every week thousands of people make a five-day long retreat there. Some weeks there were more than ten thousand people. On some occasions, especially during holidays, the number may be even more. People from all over India, speaking different languages, began to flock there. At first they were given translations of the speeches. As a further development, different halls for language groups were arranged. Retreat is now given in five languages: Malayalam, English, Tamil, Telugu, and Hindi. The preaching of the Word of God is done not only by the priests, but also by laypersons. The lay ministry fostered by the Divine Retreat Center is praiseworthy. The program of the retreat includes, besides the preaching of the Word, daily adoration of the Blessed Sacrament,

healing services, and prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Tuesdays are confession days and people are sent, group-by-group, to the confession hall. For hearing confessions sufficient numbers of priests are brought from even far off places. Counselling also is given to those who want it, mainly on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Priests, sisters and laymen give the counselling. There is always a big crowd before the rooms of the famous preachers endowed with the gifts of wisdom, prophesy, vision and healing. The success of the retreats is attributed to the continuous intercessory prayer that is going on at all times in various sections of the Divine Center. Every Saturday there is the night vigil for which people come in special private buses from far off places.

There are many charitable services in connection with the Divine Retreat Center, such as the children's home, for poor and orphan children, boys and girls; home for the HIV patients, men and women; DePaul Care Centre for the mentally sick, men and women. Rehabilitation of these people also is provided and they are employed in various jobs in the kitchen or bakery or press and are given remuneration too, according to their work.

About 2000 men and women are at the service of the Divine Retreat Center. They are like "deacons." They are there not for any monetary gain, though they are given a sum monthly as pocket money. Their service there is a thanksgiving to God for his blessings, which they have received in the retreats they have made. They are grouped under leaders who direct them. The leaders have to take care of their spiritual and other needs. They have, at intervals, special gatherings, retreats and other spiritual helps. They attend Mass daily and receive Holy Communion. As there are several Holy Masses for different groups at different times, they can attend Holy Mass conveniently without any disturbance to their duties.

Some of the priests and laymen at the Divine Retreat Center are engaged also in out-reach ministry; i.e., in preaching the Word of God in parishes or at conventions. They go in teams with a choir. Bible conventions are held regularly in big parishes in big cities in which thousands of people take part. In all the conventions conducted by the Vincentian priests and from Potta Ashram or Muringoor Divine Retreat Center, the number of participants is very large. The people want the Potta team or Muringoor team to lead or conduct these conventions. They are very enthusiastic to publicize the program and make arrangements for carrying it out. The Vincentian Fathers from the Divine Retreat Center go abroad, often to Europe, Sri Lanka, China, Singapore, Australia and America, to spread the message of salvation. There are plans and preparations under way to establish prayer or retreat centers in Europe and America.

In the propagation of the Word of God, all possible communication media are used. Since 1980 there has been a popular mission magazine, now known as the *Vachanolsavam*. It is published in several languages, mainly Malayalam, English, Hindi, Tamil, Kannada, and Telugu. It has more than two hundred fifty thousand subscribers and is published from Potta by the Vincentian Generalate. Another magazine, *The Divine Voice*, is published from the Divine Retreat Center. The Divine Press and The Divine Publications at Muringoor publish the Holy Bible and other religious books, which are made available inexpensively to those who come there for retreat. Also, the process has begun for a Divine Television Channel to diffuse the Word of God and thus bring the Good News to everyone and to every place. Until then, there is a program "Divine Vision" in the Jeevan T.V. channel every day, early morning and at noon.

Besides the Potta Popular Mission Center and the Divine Retreat Center, there are several other retreat centers. The main ones are the Parithrana Retreat Center at Adichira near Kottayam, Logos Retreat Center in Bangalore, Arulayam Retreat Center and Divine Mercy Retreat Center in Madras, Tabore Divine Retreat Ashram in Kamba in Kalyan Diocese (Bombay), Divine Retreat Ashram in Faridabad near Delhi, Sinai Divine Dyanashram, Premagiri in Andhra Pradesh and Kovai Divine Dhyana Illam in Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu, Jubilee Retreat Center in Puthuppady in Calicut and the Vincentian Prayer House in Nairobi in Africa.

Mention should be made that in every province and region of the Vincentian Congregation, popular mission directors are appointed and under their leadership a few priests are set apart as popular mission teams, so that this program may be carried on regularly and without fail.

The Preparation of the Future Preachers

The Vincentian seminarians studying theology are given special coaching to equip themselves for the preaching of the word. First of all they are given guidelines for preparing sermons; then they are asked to write sermons. They have to preach the same in the presence of veteran preachers, who will give them the necessary corrections and directions. Once they are found fit, they will be given chances to go with the expert preachers and attend the sermons in the popular mission. Once a year the students of theology will conduct a "De Paul Mission," very similar to the popular mission. One priest in each center will guide them. Further, the theology students conduct Jesus Mission (children's retreat) during the midsummer vacations, which too is a remote preparation for the popular mission.

Evaluation and Enrichment

After the missions, the preachers gather together and evaluate the performance and find out ways and means to overcome the shortcomings that might have occurred. Also they discuss how to better the performance in the future. Every year the Superior General arranges a seminar of the team members wherein there are open discussions for improving the Mission. Some updating programs, with the help of experts in fields of theology, social problems, psychology and counselling, etc., are also arranged for the preachers occasionally.

Note:

In the Vincentian Congregation there are 2 Bishops; 373 Priests; 3 Brothers; 186 Major Seminarians; 42 Novices; 203 Minor Seminarians. They have 92 houses, in 3 provinces and 2 regions. There are centers for formation of their own candidates, centers for Popular Missions, Retreat Centres, Prayer Centres; Colleges and Schools (24); Homes for the Sick and the Aged (2); Care Centres for the Sick (2), Orphanages (13), Rehabilitation & Vocational Training Centres (10), Vincentian Social Welfare Societies (11), Vincentian Publishing Societies (2), Printing Press (2), Public Library and Reading Room (2), Book Stalls (11).