

Reflection 8

EVANGELIZATION OF THE POOR

Already in the conference to the missionaries on the purpose of the Congregation of the Mission, December 6, 1658, Saint Vincent clearly stated that the evangelization of the poor involves both material and spiritual assistance:

“Was not that what Our Lord and many great saints did, and they not only recommended poor persons to others, but they themselves consoled, comforted, and healed them? Are not those who are poor the afflicted members of Our Lord? Are not they our brothers and sisters?... So then, if there are any among us who think they are... to evangelize poor people but not to alleviate their sufferings, to take care of their spiritual needs but not their temporal ones, I reply that we have to help them and have them assisted in every way, by us and by others.... To do that is to preach the Gospel by words and by works, and that is the most perfect way; it is also what Our Lord did, and what those should do who represent Him on earth” (CCD, XII, 77-78).

Behold the purpose of our existence. We exist to continue the work of the Son of God (cf. *CED*, XI, 108). The poor who are our Lords and Masters are our reason for existence (cf. *CED*, IX, 125, 211 and 214). We all form part of a large family, the Christian family and more specifically the Vincentian Family. We see from the beginning that someone guides our vocation: Jesus Christ is the rule of the Mission of Saint Vincent de Paul (cf. *CED*, XII, 130) and of his sons and daughters.

Not long ago the Church called us to celebrate the Pauline Year. The Vincentian Family had the occasion to take the words of this great Apostle as a model: *“I have become all things to all, so that I might save some”* (I Cor 9:22). We follow the example of Christ who in his humility did not hold on to his divine condition but became one of us so that he might raise us up to God (cf. Eph 2:6-9).

It is important that we not lose sight of the fact that we are continuators of the mission of Jesus Christ. The mission of evangelization is proper to the Son of God (cf. Luke 4:18) and to all his disciples (cf. Mt 15:16). We must know Christ well in order to be able to announce him, because our mission is not to announce ourselves, but to announce his person and his message. Whoever proceeds in this manner will be able to rejoice in repeating: *“I have to*

announce the Good News of the Kingdom of God in other towns, because this is why I have been sent" (Luke 4:43). To be faithful to the mandate of the Son of God is to be faithful to the spirit of Saint Vincent de Paul.

The new situations of poverty invite the Vincentian Family to take effective action in its pastoral ministries. The past serves as a lesson for the present and a stimulus for the future.

TO EVANGELIZE WITH WORDS AND WORKS

Yesterday

The evangelization of the poor is not a *discovery* but an *event* that has to be interpreted in the light of the Scriptures, the Tradition and the lives of the saints. What did Vincent have in mind shortly after his ordination to the priesthood? He was thinking of money and his family's wellbeing as well as his own. But the events of Folleville and Chatillon-les-Dombes interpreted in the light of the Gospel changed his life and set him on the road to holiness. Little by little with the help of the Holy Spirit, he became a saint.

Evangelization of the poor knows no limits or boundaries in the same way charity is inventive to infinity (cf. *CED* XI, 142-148). The Vincentian Family is spread around the world in cities, towns and villages where people often do not have a profound knowledge of Christ. Saint Vincent said to his confreres, "*How happy is the Missionary who has no limit in this world on where he can go to preach the Gospel. Why then do we hesitate and set limits, since God has given us the whole world to satisfy our zeal?*" (Abelly, II, 84). It is our ongoing task. We also have to hand it on faithfully to future missionaries in the same way Christ did in forming his twelve missionaries, the Apostles, through Word, life and works (Abelly, II, 191).

Saint Vincent sent his missionaries not only to preach missions but also to help the poor in their spiritual and material needs. At the funeral oration preached in the church of Saint Germain d'Auxerrois on 23 November 1660, Bishop Henry de Maupas said that the assistance given by Saint Vincent consisted precisely in giving spiritual and material help to the poor at no cost to them. The hand of God chose Saint Vincent to take the "tablets of the law" to his people, and with admirable zeal he sanctified thousands of souls by means of the missions. He procured spiritual help for the provinces completely ruined by the disaster of war. He saved thousands from the jaws of death and liberated unfortunate souls from final shipwreck.

The key idea of Saint Vincent was to build all his works on the foundation of the example of Jesus Christ.

1. *To be always conformed to Jesus Christ in thought and intention:*

“The intention of the Company is to imitate Our Lord to the extent that poor, insignificant persons can do. What does that mean? It means that the Company aspires to take Him as a model in the way He acted, what He did, His ministries, and His aims. How can one person represent another, if he does not have the same characteristics, features, manners, and looks? That cannot be. So, if we are determined to make ourselves like this divine model, and feel in our hearts this desire and holy affection, it is necessary, I repeat, it is necessary to strive to model our thoughts, works, and intentions on His... so that what we do or do not do is based on this principle (CCD, XII, 67-68).

2. *To be conformed to Jesus Christ Evangelizer of the poor by making the Gospel effective:*

“First, the Son of God could have been asked, ‘Why have You come? It is to evangelize the poor. That is My Father’s order...’ we can say that coming to evangelize the poor does not simply mean to teach them the mysteries necessary for their salvation, but also to do what was foretold and prefigured by the prophets to make the Gospel effective” (CCD, XII, 75).

To make the Gospel effective means to avoid every kind of ideology, every automatic repetition of the word of God, any dehumanization of the mystery of the Son. To evangelize means to put the Gospel into practice, that is, to believe in Jesus Christ, to live in Jesus Christ, to follow Jesus Christ. The Holy One said words do not suffice, works are necessary. In order to believe and live what we preach, it is necessary to act, to serve, to go forth to meet the neighbor in his or her needs.

3. *To evangelize means to assist the poor in every way, spiritual and material:*

“...if there are any among us who think they are in the Mission to evangelize poor people but not to alleviate their sufferings, to take care of their spiritual needs but not their temporal ones, I reply that we have to help them and have them assisted in every way, by us and by others, if we want to hear those pleasing words of the Sovereign Judge of the living and the dead, ‘Come, beloved of my Father; possess the kingdom that has been prepared for you, because I was hungry and you gave me to eat; I was naked and you clothed me; sick and you assisted me’” (Mt 25:34-36) (CCD, XII, 77).

The central idea is that the missionaries imitate and continue the mission of Jesus Christ who evangelized, announced the Gospel, proclaimed the Good News of salvation. To do this is to evangelize with the Word and with works; it is the most perfect; and it is what our Lord practiced and what all those who represent him on earth are held to practice (*CED*, XII, 73-94).

Consequently, we are able to affirm that the missionary way of Saint Vincent in evangelizing the poor was:

1. See. Be a good observer by seeing how society treats the poor and paying attention to the conditions of their lives. **Christ in the poor.**
2. Judge. Think how these conditions might change, asking ourselves why and what are possible projects. **Christ for the poor.**
3. Be compassionate. Have compassion for our brothers and sisters, uniting ourselves with them where they are. **Christ with the poor.**
4. Act. Put our hands to work, being Good Samaritans and healing the wounds of the people. **Christ loves the poor.**

Today

The evangelization of the poor today in a globalized world is an enormous challenge. The phenomenon of the “leftover masses” those who, according to some, are not needed in this world and who experience exclusion, discrimination and many other challenges of post-modernity, not to mention the harmful effects of the current financial and economic crisis, constitute the new call in the evangelization of the poor.

My experience of God, necessary for evangelization, came through the prism of my personal pastoral experience in Africa. My experience as military chaplain in Portugal and my seven years in Mozambique have been invaluable in helping me live and feel that the words of Saint Paul “*I became all things to all so that I might save at least some*” (I Cor 9:22) are necessary for achieving any success in the evangelization of the poor. The poor ask us to be men and women of God. They ask us to have a coherent lifestyle, to mediate the presence of God and to be faithful to Christ who is the rule of the mission.

1. *The experience of God — The “ministerial” Church in Africa/ Mozambique — The poor evangelizing the poor:*

The evangelization of the poor in order to be efficacious ought to be by the poor themselves. For our part, we ought to organize them, form them, and help them to establish small base or nuclear

communities, where everyone can know, help and love one another. We ought to draw them to Christ by means of the power of God's love that motivates us to serve them, and to support them with the Word of God, but also with micro-credit, with small income-producing projects, with opportunities to get out of their surrounding poverty by themselves.

The ministerial church of small communities that are so alive in Mozambique is the fruit of the persecution that the church underwent, which led to the departure and death of many missionaries. As a result, the church had to seek new ways of evangelization by relying more and more on lay people. The war of independence of Mozambique (1964-1975) brought about independence from the former Portuguese colony in 1975 and with it the clerical church of colonial times "disappeared." With the departure of a large number of the missionaries, the Marxist-Leninist regime persecuted and controlled the few who remained along with the Mozambican diocesan clergy. Many of the private health and education facilities belonged to the Christian churches, principally to the Catholic Church. The nationalization of these along with the official socialist "antireligious" propaganda created a climate of hostility between the Christians and the state. Then there came the well-known "war of 16 years" or "the civil war" which was an armed conflict from 1976 to 1992. In this context, the church in 1977 and again in 1991 held National Pastoral Assemblies and out of necessity decided to create the *ministerial* church, a church of small communities and ministers, and began to build up the local church.

In this *ministerial* church, neighbors who seek to do good gather in nuclear or small communities, in which everyone has a ministry and a function that serves others. Everyone knows everyone else, they visit each other, they help each other, they feel they belong together and they celebrate their faith with vitality, rhythm and contagious joy. They are all one family. In this situation, the parish is the community of communities. It is the place where these nuclear communities come together and where they, at the same time, give life to (animate) their celebrations and live the sacraments. The way they have chosen to the future is through a return to the spirit of the first community in Jerusalem, where "...they devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers.... Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart..." (Acts 2:42.46). They had no one in need among them. This is only possible when everyone belongs to a small or nuclear community.

Ongoing evangelization has to enter into the hearts of the people so that they feel loved by God and experience themselves as agents of their own material and spiritual salvation. Then they will believe God is good, merciful and just. If our preaching of the Word of God touches only the surface of their lives, then, when the difficulties and afflictions of life arrive, they will have recourse to their gods, to the wizards, to the spirits... whom the Gospel will never have replaced in their heart of hearts.

2. *The experience of God — The evangelization of the poor happens through the incarnation and adaptation of the missionary:*

The evangelization of the poor happens through the incarnation and adaptation of the missionary to the reality and surroundings of the mission. This is the only way to touch the lives of many and convert some. At the end of 1999 when I was a military chaplain at the parachute school for the green berets in Portugal, I had an experience that taught me the meaning of this incarnation, enabling me to enter into the hearts of these children of God, the green berets.

After I received my brown beret, which is common and a person can get without a drop of sweat, I began to organize pastoral and religious activities. With the support of some of the officials, I organized celebrations and meetings in preparation for some of the sacraments... but the results were catastrophic. I asked myself why, but got nowhere. Then I began to notice that practically everyone else was wearing a green beret and that the few of us who wore brown berets received little respect. The commander used to urge me strongly to take the parachute-training course with the soldiers, in order to win them over, to become one of them, to understand them, to be accepted by them and to belong to their big family — to merit a green beret. I thought a thousand times about his invitation, as I tried to digest my pastoral frustration. Eventually, looking inside myself, longing to stay in that military unit and thinking about my Vincentian missionary vocation, I finally decided to begin training to prove myself to the troops. In two months, I was able to get into the course and upon graduation, I earned a green beret, for which I had suffered plenty. They gave me many chances to quit, but the power of apostolic zeal was more powerful than my inclination to quit. With the green beret on my head, the results of my pastoral ministry changed completely. I was one of them! I understood the message of Saint Paul, “*I became all things to all, so that I might save some*” (I Cor 9:22).

As Saint Vincent said to us, the great motive in our apostolate is the knowledge that the Son of God’s work from beginning to end was evangelization and that he uses us as his instruments to do the same.

We are confident that he sustains us, because he has called us, gathered us and sent us (Abelly, III, 10) and in his providence accompanies us (Abelly, III, 10). *“Give me a man of prayer and he will be able to do anything; he can say with the holy Apostle, ‘I can do all things in him who sustains and comforts me’”* {Phil 4:13} (CCD XI, 76; Abelly, III, Chapter 7).

1. What does “to evangelize the poor” mean to us in the Vincentian Family as we celebrate the 350th Anniversary of the deaths of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise?
2. What powerful experiences of evangelizing the poor do you have in your own situation, and how do these experiences help you understand and develop missionary activity that is contemporary, dynamic and faithful to the Vincentian charism?

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