

5 Theme: Mission and Charity in our Vincentian Charism

Mission and Charity in the Congregation of the Mission

By: Francisco Javier Álvarez, CM
Vicar General

The reflection I offer you is limited to the Congregation of the Mission. The sources I have used are, above all, personal experience and direct contact with many provinces and communities of the Congregation, as well as the data provided by our *Catalogue*.

In this work, I will analyze how our Congregation lives and works at mission and charity through the principal ministries that it develops today. To do this, I begin by presenting in a detailed manner the ministries it carries out in the present day, as well as the corresponding number of missionaries.

Parish Ministry.....	870
Missionary Parishes	263
Popular Missions.....	111
Sanctuaries and Pilgrimages	70
Seminaries, formation of our own and formation of the clergy..	303
Missions “Ad Gentes”.....	174
Daughters of Charity (Director, chaplain)	89
Teaching in schools and universities.....	186
Social Communications (publications, radio, television)	20
Special Studies.....	86
Chaplains (military, immigrants, hospitals, associations).....	120
Chaplains (Vincentian Lay Groups).....	78
Direct Service of the Poor.....	61

Manual Work.....	25
Administration	130
Retired, ill, convalescing.....	338
Other	159
Absent from the Congregation.....	186 ¹

Using the binomial “mission and charity,” we can group the aforementioned ministries into these three categories:

1. Ministries that incarnate Mission and Charity most directly. Missionary parishes, popular missions, and missions “ad gentes,” with a total of 17% of the missionaries, can go in this category.

It has never been in doubt that the Missions “ad gentes” are a particular ministry of the Congregation. We know that in the life of our Founder, missionaries of the Congregation began to write golden pages in the book of foreign missions. Vincent, referring to himself on 17 June 1657, three years before his death, pronounced these words: “*I myself, old and infirm as I am, must, nonetheless, have this disposition, even to go to the Indies.*”² Referring to the Congregation as a whole, he said: “*Let’s ask God to give the Company this spirit, this heart, this heart that causes us to go everywhere.*”³

¹ Cf. “2013 Annual Statistics of the Congregation of the Mission,” *Vincentiana*, April-June, 58 (2014) 126-129. These data are relative, but they serve to give a fairly close idea of the ministries of the Congregation. In these statistics, the ministry “missionary parishes” does not appear; nevertheless, it does appear in previous statistics. One can see, for example, G. Turati “2011 Annual Statistics of the Congregation of the Mission,” *Vincentiana*, January-March, 56 (2012) 95-98. I have opted to keep this ministry, adapting the percentages of the other ministries according to the statistical data of years prior to 2014.

² *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translated and edited by Jacqueline Kilar, DC; and Marie Poole, DC; et al; annotated by John W. Carven, CM; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014; volume XI, p. 357; future references to this work will be indicated using the initials CCD followed by the volume number, then the page number, for example, CCD:XI:357.

³ CCD:XI:264.

Our Constitutions concretely mention five ministries proper to the Congregation, among which appear the missions “ad gentes” (cf., C. 16). The 1992 General Assembly gave particular emphasis to this ministry, perhaps with the purpose of counteracting a certain tendency, in more than a few places, to enclose oneself in one’s own province and to take on fixed ministries, in detriment to openness to the very universal mission of the Church and the missions, including in one’s own country.⁴

How do our missions “ad gentes” and our missionary parishes concretize Mission and Charity? Bearing in mind that, in the missions “ad gentes,” Jesus Christ and the gospel are not known or very little known, the missionaries make use of simple catechesis and other elements to make known the kerygma. They carry out their celebrations with a great catechetical sense in order to facilitate the understanding of the Christian signs and symbols. At the same time, they try to establish Christian communities on the bases of evangelical fraternity and solidarity with the most needy.

Almost all our foreign missions are located in areas of great poverty where the urgent need of charity is evident. The missionaries concretize charity in assistance projects (small health centers, distribution of clothes and food) and also in development projects, especially those related to education. The “systemic way,” adopted officially by the 2010 General Assembly, responds to a concrete way of charity adapted to modern times. It seeks to tackle the causes of poverty, fleeing from mere assistance, which is incapable of breaking the vicious circle of poverty. This style of charity, very much in keeping with the spirit of Saint Vincent, is becoming more and more common among our missionaries.

⁴ Cf. J. I. Fernández Hermoso de Mendoza, “The Present Day Missionary Extension of Both Congregations: The Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity,” in Collection, *Saint Vincent and the Mission “ad gentes,”* XXI Week of Vincentian Studies, CEME, Salamanca 1995, 258-259.

Charity, of itself, is evangelizing. Vincent spoke very frequently of evangelizing “by word and work.” He frequently insisted that what the evangelizer does is ratified and reinforced by his words, and vice versa. This unity between evangelization and human promotion is one of the basic principles of the Social Doctrine of the Church since the 1971 Synod.⁵ Pope Francis is very much in this same line.

The popular missions have developed very different evangelizing actions: catechesis at all levels, talks, varied and pedagogic celebrations, dialogues with young people and adults, establishing communities, etc. Since popular missions are extraordinary evangelization actions, limited to a relatively short time, it is not possible to think about human promotion projects. Moreover, in the places and countries where popular missions are held, the poverty, generally speaking, is not as drastic as in the so-called “ad gentes” mission countries. However, one does seek, in the different evangelizing activities, to sensitize people so that they understand that charity is an essential part of the faith and that one cannot live the faith without solidarity with the neediest.

2. Ministries which connect Mission and Charity indirectly

(Formation, attention to the Daughters of Charity and the Vincentian Family, teaching in high schools and universities and administration)

About 30% of the missionaries work in these ministries with the common objective of forming or encouraging others so they might assimilate the Vincentian charism or work in the line of Mission and Charity. All these ministries are necessary for the proper functioning of the Congregation. For example, all the offices related to administration: Visitor, Provincial Treasurer, Secretary, etc.

Others, for example, teaching, are recognized by our Constitutions as proper ministries as long as they welcome the poor and are for their promotion, impart an education based on Christian values,

⁵ Cf. 1971 Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World*, AAS LXIII (1971), 924. See also, *Centesimus Annus*, 5.

and inculcate a sense of the poor and the spirit of the Founder (cf., S. 11, § 3). Furthermore, we are advised that this ministry should only be taken on “*where it is needed to achieve the purpose of the Congregation*” (S. 11, § 1) and it will be carried out “*not only in schools of various kinds, but also within the family circle, in places of work, and across the whole spectrum of society, wherever young people and adults spend their time*” (S. 11, § 2). These cautions are necessary in order that our educational centers for young people and adults do not deviate from the Vincentian line. In practice, we know it is not always easy to use these educational platforms to transmit the spirit of the Founder, and even to inculcate Christian and Vincentian values, given the educational dynamic itself, which tends to absorb the student totally in content, courses, and varied intramural and extramural activities.

Attention to the Daughters of Charity and the Vincentian Family are two typical ministries that relate Mission and Charity indirectly. The missionaries dedicated to this work should have a firm grasp of Vincentian spirituality. By means of formation and spiritual accompaniment, the missionaries seek to reinforce Vincentian convictions in the Daughters of Charity and the Vincentian laity, so that they may give themselves to the spiritual and/or material service of the poor. I wish to emphasize, as an especially important ministry, the work of the Directors of the Daughters of Charity, established in the time of our Founder. One could sustain, it seems to me, that were it not for this office, the Company of the Daughters of Charity would have been deprived of an important means for maintaining their charismatic identity in the Church.

With regard to the formation of diocesan clergy, we must say that this ministry comes from the time of our Founder in its varied forms: retreats for ordinands (about 14,000 during the life of Saint Vincent), direction of seminaries, etc. Throughout its history, the Congregation has written some wonderful chapters about this ministry which, according to our present Constitutions, forms a part of the end of the Congregation (cf., C. 1, 3°). In those dioceses where the Congregation was present, the missionaries very frequently were called to take charge of the seminary or direct retreats for priests.

Without fear of exaggeration, one can say that the Congregation has left its mark in not a few dioceses precisely for its dedication to this ministry so beloved of our Founder.

Today, this ministry is considerably diminished; in part, because the dioceses have obtained their own formators and professors, and also because the Congregation has fewer formators trained for this mission. Other forms of service to the clergy are being pursued; for example, the service of confession, spiritual accompaniment, welcome in our houses, retreats or spiritual exercises. Their only objective must be to help them to live their vocation and to carry out their ministry, without ever losing sight of the importance of evangelization and attention to the neediest, in consonance with the two great priorities of the Church.

3. Ministries which leave some questions relative to Mission and Charity

Here we are referring to non-missionary parochial ministry. Basically, it has to do with conventional parishes which tend to maintain the faith and attend to those who declare themselves practicing believers. About 27% of the missionaries work in this ministry.

Vincent never felt great enthusiasm for the Congregation's commitment to parishes. He considered that this ministry did not fit well with the project of the Congregation. In practice, he made some exceptions. For example, in the case of parishes attached to seminaries. These were justified in as much as they served to aid seminarians to acquire experience in priestly ministry. On other occasions, he was practically obliged to take on a parish at the request of the queen or Cardinal Richelieu. Outside these more or less exceptional cases, Vincent was opposed to parishes because they took away from the mobility of the missionaries.⁶

In the 80s and 90s, there were occasions to reflect and dialogue about how to make these parishes platforms for mission and charity.

⁶ CCD:II:656-657.

With this same purpose, a European meeting on the Vincentian parish was held in Naples in 2009, with the evocative title: *The Parish, an opportunity or an impediment to live the Vincentian charism?* The conclusion was: “*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.’*”⁷

Father Domínguez affirms that an effort has been made to exercise parish ministry from a missionary perspective, but not much has been achieved. Efforts have been made in rural parishes with the purpose of building self-sustaining, evangelizing communities; but, at least in Europe, this intent has ended up with teams of priests of the Congregation absorbed by the parish structure. A little more has been achieved in Latin America by means of trained catechists, capable of evangelizing wide rural areas. In parishes in the marginal areas of cities, the hoped for results have not been obtained either. Efforts have been made to be with the poor and to promote them, but we have not known how or have not been able to evangelize. In these places, the parish continues to be a “center for services.” The same can be said about the parishes in the city.

It is a shame that a *Guide for Parishes* has not been composed, as the General Assembly requested. The Superior General and his Council took the necessary steps for it in 2011, but the inadequate response from the provinces prevented drafting the document, which, without doubt, would have been very useful.

Starting from the reflections that 23 provinces made, the Superior General and his Council recalled the great variety and richness of this ministry, as well as the difficulties and deficiencies encountered. One of these was the “*risk of justifying and legitimizing all our parishes so that ultimately our Vincentian identity is weakened and becomes*

⁷ Cited by Pablo Domínguez, “Vincentian Parishes and the New Evangelization” in *Vincentiana*, January-March, 57 (2013) 105.

devoid of meaning.”⁸ Perhaps the most important point of the letter is 2b, which presents the characteristics parishes should have to be truly Vincentian, based on the responses of the 23 provinces. I present the most important:

- The Vincentian parish ought to be located among the poor and at their service.
- Vincentian parishes should be a “place of mission,” in the sense that they should go beyond the animation of the Christian faithful. They should be in a continual state of going out to the poorest and most abandoned.
- All the actions and pastoral activities should be inspired by the Vincentian spirit. This means that the pastoral work should be planned and carried out in community. Our five specific virtues should impregnate all the pastoral work.
- The missionary parish should prioritize Vincentian ministries and the pastoral proposals that are most in harmony with our spirit: holistic evangelization that involves service of the Word and the practice of charity, formation and participation of the laity, development of a prophetic ministry and attention to the new forms of poverty, as well as to excluded minorities.⁹

Certainly, all these requirements guarantee the charismatic identity of parish ministry and perfectly justify its existence. However, the reality is that there are many parishes far from what is pointed out here. Furthermore, given the parish structure, tending to the service of more-or-less practicing Christians, it becomes difficult, if not impossible that a non-missionary parish develop Mission and Charity in any marked way. We have many years of experience that back up this affirmation.

⁸ Gregory Gay, “Letter of the Superior General on Parishes” in *Vincentiana*, October-December, 55 (2011) 404. See also Various Authors, “The Vincentian Parish: Today and Tomorrow” in *Vincentiana*, January-March, 57 (2013). The whole issue is dedicated to the theme of the parish.

⁹ Cf., Gregory Gay, *ibid.*, 404-405.

CONCLUSION

In our Congregation, as in every institution, there will always be a percentage of missionaries who work in the service of administration, the retired, the sick, the absent, etc. There will also be another percentage of missionaries who work in indirect works, e.g., formation and attention to the Vincentian Family in its different branches.

Taking our ministries as a whole, our Congregation has approximately 17% of the missionaries who work, clearly and directly, in the specific pastoral line of Mission and Charity. This percentage is not very high, taking into account the median age of the Congregation, which is around 55.

This datum allows us to come to another conclusion. Given the mutual influence between *being* and *acting*, the ministries of a Congregation contribute to its identity or its dis-identity with the charism that should animate it. Everything depends on the charismatic quality and quantity of its ministries.

If we apply this reflection to the present-day reality of our ministries, we must conclude that their influence in the renovation of the Congregation today is not very strong, since the ministries that most genuinely incarnate the Vincentian charism are far from being the majority. We will have to intensify these “front-line” ministries of Mission and Charity in order for renovation to be more significant.

Translated by Joseph V. Cummins, CM