

The Congregation of the Mission and the Vincentian Congregation in India

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The landing of a group of four Spanish Vincentian Missionaries in Orissa, India on January 10, 1922, was something of a miracle. The group consisted of Frs. Jose Maria Fernandez, Ramon Ferrer, Valerian Gumes and Rey Coello. Due to the previous efforts of other French missionaries present there from 1845-1922, the confreres found a Christian presence in the area, but a weak one, and rapidly deteriorating. Armed only with their goodwill for the kingdom of God, the Vincentians began their work in a land foreign to them. With wisdom and great zeal, they saw an immediate need to harness their energies and resources to rekindle the fading light of faith in order to rebuild the Christian Church and its communities. They understood that without a catechist, a missionary could do little to effect conversion among the people; whereas a well-trained catechist, even if left alone, could do a great deal for the spread of the Gospel. Their first task was to identify helpers for the important role of Lay Catechist. This was the start of the successful story of the Vincentian Orissa Mission.

The first part of the missionary enterprise was to orient the preaching of the Word of God to those yearning for God, to plant the Church where it had not taken root. For the second stage, the missionaries were given more time and resources for pastoral care of those who embraced Christianity, which made it possible to establish parishes. Faith formation programmes were successfully launched to strengthen the faith of those in the Christian faith and proclaim the Word of God to thousands eager to accept Jesus as Lord and Master.

As a next step to strengthen the faith of the baptized, volunteers were selected and trained to teach the basic truths of the faith to adults and children. However, the formation of the laity was a great concern of the missionaries. While the various parish ministries had been developed, lay formation had been neglected. Finding a place where the lay faithful could come together was still a distant dream. It was hoped that a training and resource center for lay catechists would be established so that the ministry of forming the faithful could be done in an on-going way. This dream became a reality with the establishment of the *Nava Jeevan Dhyana Kendra Centre* on November 21, 1999.

What makes *Nava Jeevan Dhyana Kendra Centre* so effective is the selfless service, sacrifice, prayers, and fasting of our confreres,

Fr. George Pareman, Fr. Francis Kannampuzha, Fr. Joseph Palayoor, and Fr. Ramesh Bishoi who work together with a group of lay volunteers. In addition to these, other confreres have taken on retreat ministries for priests, religious, and lay people. There are also attempts to revive the '*Popular Mission*', which has not been a focus of the Province for a quite long time. Indeed, there is still much to be done with regard to the process of evangelization in India, and the hope is that new evangelization methods will result in the desired fruits.

THE VINCENTIAN CONGREGATION OF SYRO-MALABAR RITE (VC)

Founder, History & Presence in India and Abroad

The Vincentian Congregation had a very humble beginning, founded on November 20, 1904 at Thottakom by Fr. Varkey Kattarath together with three diocesan priests (Frs. Joseph Karapurayidam, Mani Paramkulangara and Kusumos Kaattezhath), and with the approval of Louis Pazheparampil (1896-1919), first Vicar Apostolic of Ernakulam. This new community was modelled after the Congregation of the Mission. Therefore, the community members accepted and followed the Common Rules of the CM. From 1938 onward, it was officially known as the **Vincentian Congregation**. Presently, it has three provinces, three dependent regions and two missions comprised of 2 bishops, 486 priests, 1 brother and 170 professed seminarians.

Ministries of the Vincentian Congregation

The mission of this Congregation is accomplished by the preaching of the Word of God, missionary works among non-Christians, and the educational, social and charitable apostolates that support the poor in their integral development. In places where the Gospel has not yet been preached or where the Church is not yet well established, the Vincentians share the missionary responsibility of preaching the message of Christ and of planting the seeds of faith. As St. Vincent dedicated himself to serve the poor materially and spiritually, we too shall regard the poor as our pre-eminent lot in the work of evangelization so that we may proclaim to them the mystery of salvation and help them in their needs. All three provinces of the Congregation are engaged in mission work in the different states in India as well as in Africa.

Pastoral Ministries – Popular Mission

In the seventeenth century, to alleviate the deplorable spiritual degradation of the faithful working on the estates of the feudal lords and villages in France, St. Vincent de Paul initiated a program of spiritual

renewal and the popular mission was most important and effective element of this program. Understanding the importance of the popular mission for the Church in Kerala (an area that was being influenced by Marxism in 1950s), the Vincentian Congregation took up the Popular Mission as one of its main works. The main thrust was threefold: individual renewal, family renewal, and parish renewal. Since 1950, the Vincentian Congregation had been conducting popular mission retreats in parishes in Kerala. The effect was overwhelming, as it brought about a dynamic spiritual transformation in the lives of the people. The first popular mission was conducted in 1952 at St. George Forane Church, Angamaly.

Distinctive features of Popular Mission

- The retreat is not preached in the parish church alone. The parish is divided into small units, and in each unit, the same program is conducted simultaneously.
- The preaching and other common services are done during early morning and evening hours, (this is done in order to maximize the participation of people who work and students in school.
- It is called a 'popular mission' because it is for the people. Their participation is not limited to just listening. They have an active and vital role during every stage of the mission.
- No fee is charged for conducting the popular Mission. The expense of the team members are covered by the Congregation.
- The teachings are based on the Scriptures and the teaching of the Church.
- Renewal of baptismal vows and Marriage vows, invitation to receive the Sacrament of reconciliation, and solemn celebration of the Holy Eucharist are intended to revitalize of the Sacramental and family life of the faithful.
- The retreat is concluded with a penitential procession. The participants holding wooden cross from the respective centres, come to the parish church for the concluding session, which comprise of singing hymns, a short preaching, and adoration.

So far, Popular Mission has proved to be the most effective form of Evangelization. The Popular Missions are highly appreciated and supported by the ecclesiastical authorities. There is a growing demand in India and especially in Kerala for Popular Missions. It really satisfies the call of the Church for 'New Evangelization'.

a) Residential Retreat Programmes at Potta and Muringoor

In 1977, a community at Potta was established as the centre to direct and to co-ordinate Popular Mission retreats. Full time preachers began to stay there in order to pray and prepare together. Large crowds began to flock to the centre – the sick, the broken hearted, and those seeking spiritual deliverance from vices including alcohol and drug addictions. God's compassionate love was poured out in abundance and many were healed many, as the Good News of salvation was preached to all. The facilities at Potta centre became inadequate for the large number of people converging for the weeklong residential retreats held in Malayalam. A sprawling residence was acquired at Muringoor, on the banks of Chalakudy River, six kilometres away from Potta – it was named Divine Retreat Centre. The mighty works of God spread far and wide, all over the world, and the pilgrims poured in. New sections were opened up and retreats began in six other languages – English, Konkani, Kannada, Telugu, Tamil and Hindi. Retreats are conducted in every week and for different groups. In each group hundreds of people attend and especially for Malayalam service, thousands of people attend.

This centre was entrusted to the care of the Mary Matha Province of the Vincentian Congregation. In the Provincial Assembly of the Mary Martha Province held in 1990, the activities of the Potta community and Divine Retreat Centre were discussed at length. This was the time when the Holy Father Pope John Paul II made an urgent plea for a new evangelization in the Church. "I see the dawning of a New Missionary Age. The urgency of the new evangelization demands... to stay in the very vanguard of preaching." Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Provincial Assembly decided that the Potta-Divine Retreat Ministry would be the response of the Vincentian Congregation to this call of the Church.

The Divine Retreats begin with the joyous proclamation of the forgiveness and salvation from the Heavenly Father, who "so loved the world that He gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn. 3:16). Salvation in Jesus is experienced through a radical turning away from sin and turning to God in repentance. This offer of salvation was also the first message preached by Jesus Christ as well. "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand" (Mt. 4:17).

In the Sacrament of Confession, the retreatants are convicted of their sin by the Holy Spirit (Jn. 16:8). They experience that their sins are forgiven by the Holy Spirit (Jn. 16:8). They believed in the power of the same Holy Spirit through the ministry of the Church (Jn. 20:22-23). They experience joy as they are given a share in the victory of Jesus over sin (Jn. 16:11).

From the resulting radical conversion, people are led to a total self-surrender, that results in an intimate union with Jesus in the Holy

Spirit, as experienced in the Eucharist. "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him" (Jn. 6:56). In this intimacy, the love of God is "poured into their hearts through the Holy Spirit" (Rom 5:5). The heart melting under this overwhelming outpouring of love opens up in turn to love and forgive everyone.

This intense experience of love heals all wounds and soothes all the strains in family relationships. The bond of marriage is renewed as the Sacrament of Grace is incorporated into the spousal relationship between Christ and His Church.

The charism of healing is exercised through the Sacrament of the Anointing of the sick. Healing is understood not in the narrow sense of bodily well-being, but as the love of God flowing into the brokenness of individuals to make them whole. The leadership given by the priests in preaching and the exercise of the sacraments reveals the importance of the Sacrament of Holy Orders. All the Charisms of the lay leaders such as in counselling, preaching, service and so on, are harmoniously blended and channelized through the Sacramental authority of the priests.

The retreat ends with the renewal of the Sacramental vows of baptism and a fresh anointing of the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament of Confirmation. This all-transforming experience of the baptism of the Holy Spirit is the fulfilment of the promise of Jesus. "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses... to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). This empowering of the Holy Spirit is accepted as a special grace, to withstand the temptations of the evil one and to defend and spread the faith by word and action confessing Jesus Christ as the only saviour of humankind.

The grace of these seven sacraments instituted by Christ as signs of salvation and entrusted to the Church, is experienced afresh by the power of the Holy Spirit and by the renewal of one's Christian commitment. Today, Divine Retreat Centre is the largest Catholic retreat centre in the world. Since 1990, over 10 million pilgrims from all over the world have attended retreats here. Weekly retreats in seven languages are held non-stop every week of the year. It is truly an achievement made possible only by the grace of God.

b) *Evangelization through Media*

In response to the Second Vatican Council's degree on 'Inter Mirifica' (Communication Media), the Vincentian Congregation uses all possible communication media for evangelization of the poor. Understanding that audio, video and modern electronic media are effective means of evangelization VC uses Media properly and effectively. Some of programmes conducted through the Media are the following:

Publications

Many books and booklets are published for deepening faith. In addition to this, there are also a few magazines. One among the most widely read a magazine is '**Vachanaolsavam**'. '**Divine Voice**' is the monthly magazine published by the Divine Retreat Centre. Its aim is to carry God's Words of forgiveness, love and healing to families worldwide.

Video Programmes: Divine TV Ministry

Jesus commissioned His Disciples to, "Go to the entire world and preach the gospel to all creation" (Mark 16:15). This vision – of bringing the light of the gospel and the comfort of Christ to the whole world – was entrusted to the Church. With the coming of the electronic media, this mission of the Church gains a whole new dimension – to reach every person and every home across the globe through television. This prophetic call has animated the Divine Retreat Centre to commit itself wholeheartedly to the proclamation of the gospel with **Divine TV** – the television wing of Divine Vision Network (DVN). It has programmes in three languages – Malayalam, English and Hindi.

Divine TV first went on air in the UK, Europe and the Middle East on December 24, 2008. This was quickly followed by the launch of **Divine Vision Network** in USA and Canada on May 25, 2009.

There is a great demand from the rest of the world to be able to watch Divine TV, the 24-hour commercial-free television channel of Divine Vision Network (DVN), which is part of Divine Retreat Centre ministry, the world's largest Catholic Retreat Centre. **DVN Online TV** was launched on October 4, 2009. Divine TV is now available on the internet in every country across the globe, at any time, every single day. **Divine Vision** reached Indian homes on November 20, 2011. **Divine Vision** programmes are being telecast through **Goodness TV**.

Divine Vision – as the Divine evangelization partner

The television media production wing of the Divine Retreat Centre – **Divine Vision** – has taken up the challenge to "Go and proclaim the Gospel to all Creation" (Mark 16:15). St. John Paul II, the late Holy Pope had said, "The electronic revolution opens up wonderful possibilities for spreading the gospel". Divine Vision was launched in 2002. It was his inspiration that urged us to take on the challenge to start a television ministry that has now blossomed into a 24-hour commercial free Catholic Gospel channel – **Divine Television**. The aim is to take the Word of God into the living rooms of all homes around the world. *As a non-profit Catholic television ministry, it is supported by free-will donations.*

Other Ministries

Upholding the charism of St. Vincent, the Congregation is organizing several programs and projects for the benefit of the most abandoned. The fundamental principle of our social and charitable activities is the social message of Jesus revealed in the Sacred Scriptures and imitated by our heavenly patron, St. Vincent de Paul. Such activities are not merely humanitarian, but are intended to bring people to the Kingdom of God. The Words of our Lord at the last judgment, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of my brethren you did it to me" (Mt. 25:40), inspires every Vincentian in this regard.

As part of our social and charitable activities we run Orphanages, Village Development Programs, Vocational Training Centres, Educational Institutions, Hospices for the old and sick and Welfare Institutions for the underprivileged. Specifically, two De Paul care centres are opened to accommodate the poor cancer patients: one centre (SSSMILE Village) is geared toward rehabilitation the '*akasaparavakal*' (*'birds of the air'*), and the other one, for the poor and chronically mentally ill, one for the Aids patients and several houses for the aged as well as poor children.

The educational institutions run by the Congregation maintain a Vincentian focus, making them affordable for the poor and ordinary people. Through this, we are fulfilling the duty of forming worthy children for the Church and responsible citizens for the state. Therefore, our educational institutions distinguish themselves by their spiritual, intellectual and cultural excellence. The Congregation is running many schools and educational institutions all over India, both in rural as well as urban areas, and one such institution in Africa. These institutions give a special focus on the character education dimension of the next generation.

Another important ministry that is derived from the Vincentian Charism is that of helping the diocesan clergy. This is actualized by conducting ongoing formation sessions for the diocesan clergy as well as by providing assistance in those parishes where there is shortage of priests. Some of our priests are rendering service in different parishes in India as well as in Europe, Africa, America and Australia. The Vincentian Congregation faithfully follows in the footsteps of St. Vincent de Paul by evangelizing the poor through mission and charity. The members try to remain faithful to the uniqueness of the Vincentian Charism. The leaders of the local church appreciate the Vincentian ministries because they contribute to the building up of the Church.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CM AND VC

Ever since the arrival of Spanish Vincentian Missionaries (CM) in India, the members of the Vincentian Congregation were seeking support and assistance from them. The Spanish Missionaries provided the initial formation. Even the first popular mission which was conducted in 1952 at Angamaly by the members of the Vincentian Congregation... that mission was done in collaboration with the Spanish Missionaries. Thereafter for years the collaboration between VC and CM was not strengthened sufficiently. Occasionally CM confreres were inviting retreat preachers from VC and vice versa. In fact, the VC Fathers continued to give new life to the Vincentian charism through popular missions and through retreat ministries.

Ever since Fr. Francis Puthenthayil CM began to coordinate various branches of Vincentian Family in India, the relationship between CM and VC has been strengthened. There are attempts to undertake common projects both for mission and for charity. Indeed, the members of VC and CM constitute in India a formidable army of champions serving the poor and the underprivileged. The potential good they can do for the benefit of the poor in India is simply enormous!