

The Popular Missions: A New Missionary Effort

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The year 2014 was marked by many events, including one that greatly pleased the Church: the canonization of Popes John XXIII and John-Paul II. For my part, I went to this unforgettable celebration more for John-Paul II. The saintly “Polish Pope” was for my generation (I was born in 1975) the only one that we experienced since our childhood over two and a half decades... in other words, he was not only a Pope but also a father in faith. One of his initiatives I found most beneficial was World Youth Day. (WYD) I had been to Czestochowa (1991), Denver (1993), and Paris (1997). I was able to discover how important a WYD gathering of just ten days could be in strengthening my faith and love of the Church, a community of many nations, faces and cultures. The WYD helped me to live my baptismal promises within a French society in full de-Christianization; even more, it was instrumental in my vocation as one consecrated to the Lord. As I enter my fortieth year of baptism, I have a conviction that important moments are necessary to allow the baptized to remain faithful to the promises of their baptism, and to create in others the desire for baptism! I believe that the time of pastoral preparation for the sacrament remains relevant, particularly in societies increasingly marked by secularism. However, many people are unable to take advantage of these sacraments and participating in a large gathering such as WYD is often problematic especially those with limited financial resources motivation. Yet, there is still a need to help people live their baptismal promises in a fuller manner.

An Important time at home

How can we help bridge this gap? Why not organize an important faith event at home? This is what St. Vincent de Paul did while working with teams of confreres in villages where parish missions were preached and these missions continued for several weeks. Today, this reawakened missionary approach in reviving the parish mission is an important development. It brings the mission of Jesus and the Church to people from all walks of life, making it relevant, particularly within societies without spiritual depth, and where the Christian community struggles to survive. John Paul II understood this well when he said:

*"I wish to point out in particular the importance and effectiveness of the old-style popular missions for the purposes of such catechesis. If adapted to the specific needs of the present time, such missions can be, today as yesterday, a useful instrument of religious education also regarding penance and reconciliation."*¹ On another occasion, the Holy Father said with determination: *"Then there are the traditional missions, often too hastily dropped but irreplaceable for the periodic and vigorous renewal of Christian life – they should be revived and brought up to date."*²

How can we Vincentians meet this challenge in the era of the New Evangelization? Pope Francis knows how this missionary revival can be achieved: by the renewal of parishes! As he said in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*:

"In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach. We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented"³.

As priests of the Mission, we cannot remain indifferent to this call and desire of Pope Francis which consist in completely redirecting parishes towards mission! In our countries and respective cultures, we have different and varied experiences with regard to the administration of a parish. We know that it is not an easy task to direct a parish toward being mission-oriented. That is why outside help can assist an anxious Christian community to renew and carry out its missionary vocation. However, those outside helpers must prepare and animate the mission with the local people of the parish.

This idea was already present in the missions preached by Saint Vincent, particularly during the establishment of the Confraternities of Charity. The Ladies of Charity were a lay group organized to support the work of the Vincentians after founding a Confraternity of Charity in a given parish. St. Vincent had the genius to generate good will on site to meet local needs. Some parishioners, fresh from the parish mission, became ready to support their own parish after its conclusion. Thus, the Vincentians systematically sought to establish Confraternities of Charity wherever they preached missions, and this became an important network of charity throughout the French Kingdom.

¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Réconciliation et Paenitentia*, n° 26.

² JOHN PAUL II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, n° 47.

³ POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n° 28.

In our time, we know the Church seeks to develop co-responsibility and teamwork between priests and the laity. It is obvious this additional dimension exists in parishes where a mission may be needed. Therefore, it is natural that missionaries will integrate the laity of the parish in achieving the parish mission while leaving the responsibility of coordination to the pastor. The role of the pastor is essential before, during, and especially after the mission; I think it would be dangerous to undertake a mission where the pastor and other parish priest(s) would not be involved, or in a diocese where the bishop would not be supportive of such activity.

A way of doing a parish mission

In this essay, I will outline a way of doing parish missions in a French context four centuries after St. Vincent and our first confreres began to “walk in this way.” Obviously, many things have changed, even if the message of salvation remains the same and the pursuit of goodness and God’s grace still lives in the heart of humanity. As Vincentians, in addition to the Gospels and fascinating stories of the first missionary endeavors in the Acts of the Apostles, we have a great source of inspiration in a proven tradition of parish missions that has existed for centuries. In the past several years, I have taken the time to go back to this source through numerous readings, an approach that has recently led to my authoring a 190-page Compendium: “*Parish Missions According to Saint Vincent de Paul*.” In this fascinating study, I tried to locate a specific fundamental model of the Vincentian Parish Mission, one that could be updated for contemporary French society.

This led to the formulation of a new way of doing mission (only after having participated in various field experiences during the course of several years). Indeed, as a son of St. Vincent, I think we must favor a pragmatic approach over a theoretical approach, although the two are complementary. What I present here is also summarized and illustrated on the website www.missionparoissiale.net. Indeed, when I present the “MP-3D” (the Parish Mission in 3 Dimensions) I have the image of the Miraculous Medal on the publicity papers because the symbols on the back of the medal are a summary of the major stages of this missionary journey! The term “missionary journey” seems more appropriate than the term Mission.

Indeed, when speaking about mission, we easily think of a short and isolated event, while the word journey refers to an experience that lives in time and moves forward in stages. This is the process employed by the MP 3D. Why 3D – three-dimensional? The answer is found in the words of the great missionary St. Paul of Tarsus when he wrote to the Ephesians: “You may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height, and to know the love of

Christ” (Eph. 3:18). Thus, the first stage of missionary path honors the height; then, a few weeks after, the depth is experienced through the 9 days of Mission; and finally, the length takes place in the days and months after the Mission. This involves animating the parishioners to persevere for the long term. How can the symbols of the Miraculous Medal reinforce and support these dimensions? Let us look at that issue now!

The Miraculous Medal, a symbol of Mission in 3 stages

On the Miraculous Medal we see the Immaculate Heart of Mary pierced by a sword. As we know, this reminds us of the prophecy uttered by the aged Simeon to Mary, a young mother who had borne her first child. It was in her arms that Jesus was physically closest to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Christ grew in relationship with this Heart in a mysterious and unfathomable manner. It is in the Heart of Mary that Christ’s love flowed most abundantly and it is the Heart of Mary who welcomed this love. Thus, the Heart of Mary seems to be the safest vehicle to be flooded with the love of God. In the Catholic Church, there is a practice that allows people to dedicate themselves to the Immaculate Heart of Mary so that through her intercession they might open themselves to God’s love. This practice is still relevant and was used by Pope Francis on May 13, 2013 when he consecrated the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. This consecration can also be experienced on a parish level.

This is what is proposed during the first stage of MP-3D: a weekend with Mary. The parish is invited to a new movement while being taken into the arms of Mary and being drawn closer to her Immaculate Heart. More concretely, it is a question of putting oneself at the service of others in the School of Mary. First of all, we ask to live like she did at the time of her Visitation. During the preparatory novena for the act of dedication, the missionaries, accompanied by the parish volunteers, spend time visiting the sick and shut-ins who have requested such a visit. Thus, the first people visited when the Mission begins are the sick and poor so dear to Our Lady. They will receive moral and spiritual help, because in France most people already have access to medical care. Generally, those who are visited ask for one or more sacraments and are happy to receive the Miraculous Medal. This week of visit can be the occasion for parishioners to discover and join this apostolate of charity, or to found a Conference of Saint Vincent de Paul.

Thus, the relationships created by these visits will continue until the arrival of those who will come to speak. It is important that all are kept informed of the Mission program so they can feel integrated into this missionary journey, especially interceding through their prayers and

sufferings which are offered for the many intentions that were entrusted to them. The Marian Weekend takes place after the week of Visitation. The goal is to start the mission with the Virgin Mary, as this is how Christ. Thus, the relationships created by these visits will continue until the arrival of those who will come to speak. It is important that all are kept informed of the Mission program so they can feel integrated into this missionary journey, especially interceding through their prayers and sufferings which are offered for the many intentions that were entrusted to them. The Marian Weekend takes place after the week of Visitation. The goal is to start the mission with the Virgin Mary, as this is how Christ wanted to start his earthly mission and did so through his Mother Mary. The mystery of the Incarnation, so dear to St. Vincent, is the focus of the next weekend. And as the Nativity concerns the Holy Family, the programs for this weekend will be inter-generational. First, every Saturday morning will be dedicated to the children who will be expected to participate in the "rosary" workshop. In France, the majority of children do not know what a rosary is, so this is a fun activity, during which they make a multicolored rosary, which allows them to discover a new way of praying while becoming familiar with the Word of God summarized in the various mysteries.

Back at home, they are proud to show off their handmade rosary, and explain what it means and how they made it. As a result, some children succeed in creating a time for praying the rosary with the family, which is a great innovation in homes where often all forms of family prayer are absent. On Saturday afternoon, the children and youth are invited to be part of a sound and light show on the mystery of the Incarnation, which takes place during an evening Marian prayer service. At 8 pm, a Marian evening prayer service is held. Young and old are invited to pray together and to prepare for the next day.

On Sunday, during Mass, the parish will be consecrated to the Immaculate Heart, after which a commemorative plaque is put in place and a bouquet of flowers is presented at the Marian shrine of the diocese. At the conclusion of this Marian Weekend, the parishioners become aware of the fact that they have begun a missionary journey with Mary Immaculate as their guide. During the weeks of waiting for the second stage of the MP-3D, a statue of the Virgin with the globe under her feet will circulate from home to home so that families can pray for their neighbors who will be visited later by the missionaries.

The second step of the Mission starts with an afternoon in a monastery of the diocese with the pilot team, composed of a dozen parishioners who took responsibility in preparing the mission. These include people who have expertise in logistics, media, youth ministry, pastoral care for the sick, music ministry, and home visitation ministry. The goal is to have a final team meeting and to give the monastic com-

munity the statue of the Virgin and the globe. The monastic community is asked to pray for the success of the Mission. This spiritual sponsorship is a powerful Church experience, not only for the parish, but also for the monastery which renews its missionary impetus in the tradition of St. Therese of Lisieux, the Patroness of the Missions. Then begins the “Nine days for God.” The meaning of this phrase is that it includes two weekends during which people are most available. Also, “nine days” refers to the experience in the Upper Room.

Indeed, before going on a mission, the apostles took the time to prepare and to receive the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Two millennia later, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, said “*We must first evangelize the evangelizers.*” This is consonant with what St. Vincent believed and also spoke about as well:

“Well, if it is true that we are called to bring far and near the love of God, if we must inflame the nations with it, if our vocation is to go spreading this divine fire in all the world, if it is so, I say, if it is so brethren, how much I should be kindled myself with this divine fire.”⁴

Thus, these nine days are an opportunity to deepen the faith, to use one of the dimensions St. Paul referred to his letter to the Ephesians. Parishioners are able to live at home and yet live as if they were on a retreat in which they would seek to be renewed in the gifts of the Holy Spirit so they can give witness to their faith. To do this, morning prayers – Lauds and Eucharistic adoration – have a special importance.

Returning from school, children and young people can go to the Church to prepare for the Evening Mission, which starts at 8 pm. During these nine days, seven evening presentations will be given at the Church where different themes will be developed (e.g., “Where is God in my time of distress?”, “Should we always forgive?” “How to find inner peace?” and “Joy or fear of testifying to his faith?”). These themes should be based on the result of a questionnaire that is filled out during the time of the parish mission. After the evening session, hot chocolate is offered, which can attract people who do not usually come to the Church.

Indeed, this kind of evening gathering can touch some non-practicing Catholics or even non-believers because the language used is accessible and the beauty of the sound and light is magnificent. You notice the important place given to children and young people during our evening gatherings as they act out the drama of the Word of God. These biblical sound and light shows are like a new “Little Method” to use the language of Saint Vincent de Paul who said,

⁴ S.V. Conferences for CM’s, Conference 207, p. 583; COSTE XII, pp. 262-263 (French).

“That is why I say that our method is a virtue because virtue we have to do, and this method also has us for good because by observing, we preach usefully for everyone and we adjust the capacity and scope of our audience. Our method is still a virtue, because she is daughter of charity, who is the Queen of virtues. Charity makes us accommodate everyone, to become useful to everyone, and the method, which takes this lesson of charity... does the same thing...”⁵

In this same spirit, the light and sound shows are not only beneficial for those who are viewing them, but are also beneficial for the young people who participate in them. Indeed, from ages 7 to 20, children and young people can find a role that is appropriate for their age (and there is no text that has to be memorized since the voice and the music were pre-recorded at a professional studio). Their performance is akin to a mime show in fancy dress. The result is impressive because young people are looking to excel, and some prove to be good actors, while at school they have difficulties in learning and/or find difficulties mixing in a social situation.

This was the experience that we encountered during missions in poor neighborhoods in Paris. The parents were so proud to see their children’s success affirmed in a public way! In this case, the little method is not only in the service of evangelization, but also in service of the education for the whole person, body and soul. The advantage of engaging the young is that it allows parents, grandparents, and friends (often without an actual spiritual motivation), to come and see their children in this setting. After having seen and heard the word of God spoken and acted out by their children, they return home, their minds and hearts touched by the experience of the goodness of the Lord.

In our missions, young people are the first to proclaim the Good News by Evangelical through mimes, while at the same time being prepared to take to the streets to give public witness of their faith. In fact, on the last Saturday evening, we organize a candlelight procession in the streets led by someone raising high the crucifix and followed by the statue of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal. Children and youth are dressed with albs, candle in their hands, followed by parishioners who give witness to their faith in public space through their song and prayers. Because we do not place ourselves in a such a situation in some triumphant manner, but rather we want to give witness to our joy and to the fact that we are a family. Those who see and watch these processions are most often pleasantly surprised. It is true that in many places of France, there has not been this type of process for over fifty years! That is why, prior to this event, the missionaries, accompanied

⁵ S.V. XI, p. 274.

by parishioners, knock on the doors of the residents to inform them about the procession. It is also an opportunity to meet people outside the Church context... and continue the process of evangelization. People will often invite us into their home for a time of deep sharing!

The nine-day Mission ends on Sunday with a Mass presided by the Bishop, during which the anointing of the sick is administered to those who have been able to come to the Church move (those residing in nursing homes received the sacrament during the visit of the Missionaries to said institution). At the conclusion of the Mass, the Bishop leaves the church to bless the Mission Cross, and we know that the cross of Christ is at the center of the Miraculous Medal with the letter "M" which can also stand for "mission" as well as "Mary". Thus, the second step of MP-3D is symbolically represented by the M and cross of the medal.

The 'Nine Days for God' Mission represents a large parish investment. That is why it is necessary to wait several months before returning to parish for the third and final stage of the MP-3D. In addition, it is important to give sufficient time to the pastor and the parishioners to assimilate the significance of this event in the life of the parish and in their own personal life. After several months, the desire to share what was received during the "Marian weekend" and the "Nine-day Mission" becomes more rooted in the heart of many parishioners. This means the time has arrived to give a more intense witness to one's faith. Thus, we come to the third dimension: the width, which refers not only to what wrote Saint Paul to the Ephesians but also to what Christ said to his Apostles: "Put out into deep water" (Lk. 5:4). During the "Marian Weekend" and the "Nine-Day Mission" many home visits were made, but in this new phase it is important to "do more" (*davantage*) to quote Saint Vincent de Paul.

The purpose of these meetings on the steps of some house, during a meal, in the market, or on the street, is to bring together as many people as possible. This is why the "Return of the Mission" will end with an act of consecration of the whole parish to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. During Sunday Mass, all those encountered during the home visits are entrusted to the mercy of God that flows from the Heart of Jesus. This third stage of the MP-3D is placed under the sign of Heart of Jesus, which is also engraved on the Miraculous Medal. During these nine-days of the Mission, we also distribute holy cards of the heart of Christ, the image of merciful Jesus (revealed to Saint Faustina) which uses the same symbolism as that of the Miraculous Medal, namely, showing forth its rays. The Medal and its image are excellent ways to evangelize during home visits.

Indeed, people are most often touched when we offer them some-symbolic gift. In France, 60% of the population have been baptized, so when we knock on a door, there is a high probability that the person

knows something about Jesus and Mary. The vast majority of those baptized are not practicing, but believers, and like “the lost sheep of Israel”, popular devotion often remains the last anchor of their childlike faith. The Mission can be an opportunity to move beyond the stage of devotions, to move to a deeper understanding of their faith.

That is why during all our home visits we invite people to a special gathering on the last Saturday evening for a Sound and Light show which is focused on the life of Christ as the “Prince of Peace.” It is a drama Performed by the youth of the parish and this drama is focused on four decisive nights in the life of Christ: the night in Bethlehem, the night of Holy Thursday, the three hours of darkness on the cross, nightfall as the disciples journeyed to Emmaus. This drama presents some of the key Christian moments of the “kerygma”... and does this by utilizing the small method of sound and lights.

After a brief time of prayer adapted to non-practitioners, those present can meet over a hot drink and enjoy the presence of one another. In general, participation varies between 250-500 people of all ages, which in France, for a local church event, corresponds to a modest participation rate. When visiting the homes there is the hope that these individuals will in turn invite others from their immediate area (such as neighbors, colleagues at work, friends, etc.). During the mission, the deceased members of the parish are not forgotten. Indeed, on the morning of last Saturday, a celebration in honor of the deceased takes place in the Church. Illuminated by tea light candles on this occasion, the beauty of the celebration helps the participants become more open to Christian belief in the hope and promise of eternal life.

A missionary gives a clear and simple instruction on the meaning of life after death, something rarely done today. The issue of salvation is explicitly addressed as did St. Vincent in his time, but here the focus is on the communion of saints. During home visits, the people are invited to write the names of their deceased in a book and we promise to pray for those individuals during the celebration to which they are invited. Sometimes, this leads to a discussion of the meaning of life after death, a subject about which our contemporaries have little understanding! At the end of the discussion, it is also possible to invite them to the show “Prince of Peace” where the question of the resurrection of the dead is explored! During the time of the mission, some begin to participate in the Eucharist where the risen Christ brings people together every Sunday.

Perspectives

Thus ends the presentation of the Parish Mission in 3 dimensions, the MP-3D, which is based on this passage from the Letter to the Ephesians. These three dimensions of height, depth and breadth have

only one goal: to better know the love of Christ which in turn enables people to better live, serve, and give witness. St. Paul spoke of a fourth dimension: length. The three stages occur in the course of a year, so that there is strong impact on the life of the parish. It is possible to return later to the parish in order to assess the status of the three foundations established during a mission.

What are they? First, concerning the sick and homebound: it is to establish a conference of St. Vincent de Paul – if it does not exist in the parish in order to continue this apostolate of reaching out to the poor of the parish. The second foundation is to establish a group of young actors to continue to provide the “Sounds and Lights”, particularly on Christmas and Palm Sunday, to reach out to “occasional parishioners”. The third foundation would be to establish a formation program for adults. Such a program should be open to all those who want to rediscover the fundamentals of their faith.

With these three foundations, it is easy to see the three groups of people that become a priority for the process of evangelization during the Mission: the sick, young people, and non-practitioners. Therefore, we can summarize the three-fold purpose of the Mission as exposure to three realities: to provide the possibility for a personal encounter with the merciful Jesus, to help the Christian community live a strong spiritual life and to help to transform a parish into a missionary parish. In order to achieve this triple objective, we take as our model the three Novenas summarized artistically in the symbols of the Miraculous Medal.

At the beginning, I did experience the traditional mission with the Lazarist team from Bondue of three continuous weeks especially in rural areas. Then I took part in Mission weekends in the region of Paris with youth from the Chapel of the rue du Bac. From these experiences came the idea of “nine day missions” as a campaign with several confreres. Finally, a missionary journey developed as the result of numerous discussions with priests and laity after the missions. It is true that the French context is difficult because of the indifference toward the Church and a growing marginalization. During a Mission to the island of Réunion (a French Department in the Indian Ocean), it was easy to fill the church every day for more than one week. But in France, it is necessary to be infinitely inventive to achieve even modest results. A former confrere, who had known full churches in the 1950s and who, after the 1970s, had the courage to continue the popular missions in France said that Christianity is on the decline (and today less than 3% of the Catholics are practicing their faith). Then he said, “In the past, missionaries were fishing with nets, now they fishing with rods, but the important thing is that we to continue to fish!”

He then ended by quoting the words of St. Paul, “*I have become all things to all in order to save some at any price.*” It is true that one of

the great joys of the missionary experiences is found in the discretion of a confessional where a person engages in a profound act of conversion. Unfortunately, today, people rarely participate in the sacrament of Reconciliation. This is true in France – but I believe it is also the case in other countries. That is why during the mission we focus on this beautiful sacrament of mercy so dear to St. Vincent de Paul. So as we continue to move forward with these new popular missions, we can then heard resounding in our midst the powerful words of Jesus, *“There is joy among the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”*