

Challenges of Missionary Conversion to the C.M.

- Bp. Rolando C. Santos, CM,
Diocese of Alotau, Papua New Guinea

Evangelii Gaudium is the first apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis after his elevation to the papacy. It contains the dream of his pontificate for the entire Church. As he says, "I dream of a 'missionary option, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation" (EG 27).

As we prepare for the 2022 General Assembly and the four hundredth anniversary of the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission, we will do well to adopt this particular document as a veritable companion and tool for revitalizing our identity as Vincentian missionaries. It will help us not only to be faithful to the spirit of our Founder but also to Christ who has commissioned us and the entire Church to go and evangelize. In his Mission Appeal Letter 2018, the Superior General, Fr. Tomaz Mavric, said: "St. Vincent had a deep conviction of the mission Jesus entrusted to him and to all who belong to the Little Company. We see this in the very beginning of the Common Rules, as our blessed Founder says: "Now the little Congregation of the Mission wants, with God's grace, to imitate Christ, the Lord, to imitate his virtues as well as what he did for the salvation of others." To do this the Congregation is to act in the same sort of way: *to have a genuine commitment to grow in holiness; to preach the good news of salvation to poor people, especially in rural areas; and to help seminarians and priests to grow in knowledge and virtue, so that they can be effective in their ministry.* (CR 1)

The call to evangelization demands in turn a missionary conversion on the part of all. As St. Paul says, "Woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!" (I Cor9:16). And, in his letter to Timothy: "Hence I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands. Do not be ashamed of testifying to our Lord, but take your share of suffering for the gospel in the power of God (1 Tim 1:6-8). In a similar tone, Pope Francis makes an urgent appeal to all of us for evangelization and missionary conversion: "I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion (EG 21). "We need to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in our respective parishes and communities" (EG 33).

In chapter II of *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis poses 7 challenges to missionary conversion. Let us address these to ourselves so as to revitalize our missionary identity as we approach the 400th anniversary of the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission.

1. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary enthusiasm! (#80)

Much of the world is still in great need of evangelization. After 20 centuries of existence, the Church is just at the threshold of fulfilling the Lord's mandate. Pope Francis speaks of the need for boldness and passion for the mission. They are the equivalent of our fifth Vincentian

missionary virtue, zeal for the mission or love on fire. As Pope Francis says: *“Anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love”* (EG 120).

Unfortunately not enough confreres are volunteering for the *Missio ad Gentes*. Provinces are also reluctant to sacrifice their confreres for the missions. It is essential that we send missionaries to proclaim Christ and his Gospel. *“How will they believe in him unless they have heard of him, and hear of him unless they get a preacher, and have a preacher unless one is sent* (Rm 10:9, 14b.).

The moment the Congregation loses its missionary enthusiasm, we lose our reason for being in the Church. In the midst of so much materialism, secularism and individualism in our world today, as well as poverty, violence and lack of respect for life and the dignity of persons, we cannot lose our missionary enthusiasm to evangelize. We need to renew our faith in Jesus and our conviction that the world needs Jesus. As Pope Francis says, *“I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ”* (EG 3). Without this *“openness to a constant self-renewal born of fidelity to Jesus Christ”* (26), there can be no real enthusiasm for the mission.

2. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the joy of evangelisation! (#83).

We, missionaries, can only become effective in the work of evangelization if we radiate Gospel joy. As Pope Francis says, *“May the world of our time- which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope- be enabled to receive the Good News not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ”*. (EG 10).

Unfortunately, there are missionaries who lack faith in Jesus and does not love him enough. They fail to encounter Christ in a personal way and consequently are unable to speak of Christ in a joyful way. They look more *“like someone who has just come back from a funeral”*. Pope Francis speaks of a *“tomb psychology”* which *“transforms Christians into mummies in a museum”*.

What is depriving us of faith and the joy of evangelization? Are we among those who are disillusioned with reality and lacking in hope? Do we undertake our activity badly, without adequate motivation, or without a spirituality which would permeate it and make it pleasurable? There are people who *“throw themselves into unrealistic projects and are not satisfied simply to do what they reasonably can. Some lack the patience to allow processes to mature. Others are attached to a few projects or vain dreams of success, or have lost real contact with people and so depersonalize their work. Still others cannot tolerate anything that smacks of disagreement, possible failure, criticism, or the cross.”* (EG 82)

Unless we radiate joy, there is no way we can attract people to Christ and the Gospel. Saints are the most joyful of all people because they have within themselves the Spirit who alone

gives true joy. If our Vincentian missionaries are to attract people to Christ, they must be saints radiating joy from within.

The greatest challenge for the Congregation of the Mission is probably that of forming missionaries to holiness. As Pope John Paul II said: *“The renewed impulse to the mission ad gentes demands holy missionaries. It is not enough to update pastoral techniques, organize and coordinate ecclesial resources, or delve more deeply into the biblical and theological foundations of faith. What is needed is the encouragement of a new “ardor for holiness” (RM, 90).*

Unless we are in union with Christ, we cannot bear fruits of holiness, joy and zeal in the mission. Christ is the rule of the mission. Personal relationship with Christ and the five missionary virtues help us to be effective missionaries. *“Give me a man of prayer and he will be ready for anything” (SV, XI, 83).* Let us recover our missionary zeal and that delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing which flows from intimacy with Christ and a life of prayer.

3. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of hope! (#86).

In our post-modern globalized world, missionaries encounter many challenges in the work of evangelization. Materialism, relativism and the process of secularization reduce the faith of our people and make evangelization difficult. There is also within the Church a lack of a sense of belonging due to certain structures, the unwelcoming atmosphere of some of our parishes and communities, and the bureaucratic way of dealing with things. Many times our approach to people is more administrative than pastoral. Sexual abuse by the clergy and cover-up in the Church have also weakened much the faith of our people.

These challenges can lead to a certain defeatism which can turn us into disillusioned pessimists or *“sourpusses”* (#85). However, there can be no excuses for diminishing our commitment. Challenges can help us to mature as missionaries. We must keep in mind the words of St Paul: *‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’ (2 Cor 12:9).* (#85)

Do we trust in Divine Providence? In the face of great challenges, we must learn like St. Vincent to trust in God and ask for greater faith, perseverance, patience and meekness. In his apostolic exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Pope Francis says that the first great sign of holiness is *“solid grounding in the God who loves and sustains us. This source of inner strength enables us to persevere amid life’s ups and downs, but also to endure hostility, betrayal and failings on the part of others”* (GE 112). Let us not be robbed of hope, but trust in God’s love.

4. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of community! (#92).

Pope Francis says that our faith is not in a disembodied Jesus but in Jesus who cannot be separated from community. *“The Son of God, by becoming flesh, summoned us to the revolution of tenderness”* (#88).

Missions have failed because of failure to be men of communion who build community. Pope Francis speaks of those who “*hide or keep apart from others. They quietly flit from one place or task to another, without creating deep and stable bonds*” (GE 91).

Do we value community living? Do we prepare our men to be men of communion? Do we find Jesus in the faces of others? As Pope Francis reminds us in *Gaudete et Exsultate*, “*Each community is called to create a ‘God-enlightened space in which to experience the hidden presence of the risen Lord’.* *Sharing the word and celebrating the Eucharist together fosters fraternity and makes us a holy and missionary community*” (GE 142). Let us be men of prayer and men who build community. Unless we grow in the spirit of communion and the spirit of humility, patience, gentleness and forgiveness, we cannot be true missionaries.

The Church is a mystery of communion. The aim of evangelization is to create communion with the Father through Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit, and communion with the whole Church under the headship of the Holy Father and the Bishops (EO 18). The goal of communion makes synodality the way for the Church. Synodality entails reciprocal listening, where each has something to learn. It also involves listening to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth (Jn 14:17). Synodality is “the walking together of the Flock of God on the paths of history toward Christ the Lord”. It is the way for missionaries who are called to walk together like pilgrims as they proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom of God.

5. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the Gospel! (#97)|.

Pope Francis addresses another serious temptation for missionaries: spiritual worldliness. “*It hides behind the appearance of piety and even love for the Church, and consists in seeking not the Lord’s glory but human glory and personal well-being*” (EG 93) Instead of relying on the wisdom that comes from the Gospel, a missionary can indulge in a worldly-kind of Gnosticism and neopelagianism which arrogantly relies more on one’s wisdom and power and not in God. “*Instead of evangelizing, the worldly person analyses and classifies others, and instead of opening the door to grace, one exhausts his or her energies in inspecting and verifying. In neither case is one really concerned about Jesus Christ or others*” (EG 94). Spiritual worldliness can translate into “*a social life full of appearances, meetings, dinners, receptions. It can lead to a business mentality, caught up with management, statistics, plans and evaluations*” (EG 95). At the end it ends up serving not God nor the Gospel but institutions and one’s own well-being.

Worldliness can only be healed by breathing in the pure air of the Holy Spirit who frees us from self-centredness. The Church must constantly go out of herself, and focus more in Jesus and her commitment to the poor if she is to evangelize.

Are we so full of ourselves rather than full of the Gospel? Are we afraid to come out of ourselves so as to encounter the poor? The mission is in need of confreres who have a spirit of compassion and solidarity with those who are excluded and marginalized. The mission needs men who are simple, humble, gentle, mortified, and who can readily be assigned wherever the poor are present. Pope Francis said, “*I want a church which is poor and for the poor.*” As we evangelize and serve the poor, they also evangelize us. They help us discover Christ in them

and lend our voice to their causes, to be their friends, listen to them, speak for them and embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them.

6. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the ideal of fraternal love! (#101).

The lack of fraternal love is one of the great obstacles to the work of evangelization. Pope Francis laments the sad reality that our world is being torn apart by wars and violence. Tragically, many of these wars take place within the people of God, our own communities and among missionaries themselves. How many conflicts among missionaries are caused by envy and jealousy? Pope Francis reminds us that we are all in the same boat and headed to the same port! Instead of allowing ourselves to be torn apart by jealousy, we should rejoice in the gifts of each other.

Do we allow ourselves to be torn apart by enmity, division, calumny, defamation, vendetta, jealousy and the desire to impose certain ideas at all costs? At the last supper, Jesus gave us a new commandment: love one another, as I have loved you (Jn 15:12). Our Common Rules state that “Love, like that between brothers, should always be present among us, as well as the bond of holiness, and these should be safeguarded in every possible way’ (CR VIII,2). How can we help our missionaries to grow in love, and to be fully human and fully alive in Christ?

7. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary vigour! (#109).

In his recent document on holiness, Pope Francis says that “*Holiness is boldness, an impulse to evangelize and to leave a mark in the world ... ‘Do not be afraid’ (Mk 6:50). ‘I am with you always, to the end of the world’ (Mt 28:20). These words enable us to go forth and serve with the same courage that the Holy spirit stirred up in the Apostles, impelling them to proclaim Jesus Christ (with) boldness, enthusiasm, the freedom to speak out, and apostolic fervour*” (GE 129)

Pope Francis insists that the mission of evangelization can only attain new vigor through the active participation of all of God’s people. The Church is inclusive of the laity, youth and women. Pope Francis warns us of an excessive clericalism which does not form the laity nor give them room to speak and to act, or take on important responsibilities.

Evangelization is the work of the whole Church. St. Vincent knew how to involve the clergy, religious and laity, rich and poor alike in the work of the mission. In his apostolic exhortation, *Christus Vivit*, Pope Francis exhorts us to involve especially the youth in the work of evangelization, and accompany them in the discernment of their vocation. Young people are called to be witnesses of the gospel. Christ sends them to go forth and bring Christ into every area of life, to the fringes of society. “*Young friends, don’t wait until tomorrow to contribute your energy, your audacity and your creativity to changing our world. You are the now of God, and he wants you to bear fruit*” (CV 178).

Do we involve the youth and laity in the work of evangelization? How zealously are we promoting vocations? Do we walk with the youth to bring them into closer friendship with

Christ? Do we also challenge our confreres to do more for the mission? Are we willing to release confreres for the *Missio ad Gentes* even if we are small in numbers in our provinces or sub-provinces? According to Fr. Mavric, sending a missionary to the *missio ad Gentes* is a source of tremendous grace both for the mission and the province or vice-province which sends. It brings new energy, fire and motivation as we get directly or indirectly involved with the new mission. How have we responded to the challenge of the Superior General to send 1% of the Congregation's membership as new missionaries?

Pope Francis says that without Mary we can never truly understand the spirit of the new evangelization. She teaches us the way of holiness. She walks ever at our side as we proclaim the gospel to the poor. She does not allow us to remain fallen and discouraged, and even takes us into her arms without judging. She was there at the foot of the cross. With her let us pray for a new Pentecost for our Little Company so that the Holy Spirit may revitalize us in our missionary vocation as we enter the fifth century of our existence as a missionary congregation.