

The Future of the Missions of the Congregation of the Mission in the Church

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The mission in the early years of the Church

After Pentecost the first Christians announced Jesus Christ with admirable perseverance. Their missionary project is seen in various passages of the New Testament. Shortly before ascending to the heavens, Jesus sent his apostles forth with these words: *“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you”* (Mt 28:19-20). Saint Luke in Acts of the Apostles tells us of the missionary route taken at the beginning of the life of the Church: *“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”* (Acts 1:8b).

Other New Testament passages reflect the missionary awareness of the first Christian communities. In the depths of their being, they felt the unavoidable necessity to announce Jesus Christ: *“It is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard”* (Acts 4:20). Saint Luke manifests his way of thinking when he writes: *“You are well aware that from early days God made his choice among you that through my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the Gospel and believe”* (Acts 15:7). And Saint Paul, referring to himself, writes to the Corinthians: *“If I preach the gospel, this is no reason for me to boast, for an obligation has been imposed on me, and woe to me if I do not preach it!”* (1 Cor 9:16).

From the passages cited, three conclusions can be deduced: the missionary awareness of the first Christians, manifested in their assuming responsibility for evangelizing beyond borders and frontiers; the conviction that a little yeast can cause the whole dough to rise; and the courageous openness to different peoples and cultures. There is another characteristic of the mission of these first Christians that we cannot fail to admire: the participation of families and of individuals. In the origins of the Church, the full weight of the

mission rested on the shoulders of many persons: apostles, disciples, presbyters, deacons, individual families, and a large number of everyday Christians. Saint Paul, in chapter 16 of his letter to the Romans, lists the names of some thirty active collaborators.

Let us say then, to conclude this first section, that the mission carried out by Jesus Christ, in person, and from Pentecost on, by the first Christians, has served as the example for the mission undertaken by the Church for twenty centuries.

Saint Vincent greatly valued the mission begun by Jesus Christ, the apostles, and the first communities. The Saint would often say: "We must follow in all things our Lord Jesus Christ, the apostles and the first Christians. We continue the mission of Jesus Christ."

The paths of the Congregation of the Mission

"The purpose of the Congregation of the Mission is to follow Jesus Christ evangelizing the poor" (C 1). Saint Vincent wanted the Congregation of the Mission to evangelize the poor, above all, but not exclusively, by certain ministries.

First: the popular missions. The proper function of the missionaries *"is to travel around through towns and villages, as Christ himself and his disciples did, breaking the bread of the divine word for the neglected, by preaching and catechizing"* (CR I, 2). *"They act contrary to the Rule, those who do not want to go on mission, or those who, having suffered somewhat on mission, do not want to return"* (SV XII, 82; ES XI, 389). *"Well then, what is most important in our vocation is to work today for the salvation of the poor country people, and all the rest is incidental; we would never have taken up the work with ordinands, nor with the clerics in the seminaries, if we had not judged it necessary to maintain the people and to preserve the fruits of the missions when there are good clerics"* (SV XI, 133; ES XI, 55). *"It is a worthy thing for a missionary to have and to preserve this desire to go on the missions, to promote this obligation to assist the poor people in the way that our Lord would assist them"* (SV XII, 82-83; ES XI, 389).

Second: the formation of the clergy. The Congregation of the Mission commits itself to *"help seminarians and priests to grow in knowledge and virtue, so that they can by effective in their ministry"* (CR I, 1). God *"called us to contribute to the formation of good priests, to give good pastors to the parishes and to teach them what they have to know and do"* (SV XII, 84; ES XI, 390). This work demands: *"A serious, humble, devout and constant dedication, as is required by the excellence of the work"* (SV XII, 84; ES XI, 390).

Third: the mission *"ad gentes."* Some *"will say that it is too ambitious to send missionaries to foreign lands, to the Indies, to Barbary."*

But my Lord and God, did you not send Saint Thomas to India and the other apostles throughout the earth?" (SV XII, 90; ES XI, 395). "Our vocation is to go, not to a parish, nor only to a diocese, but rather throughout the earth" (SV XII, 262; ES XI, 553). "We have been called to take the love of God to our surroundings and throughout the world" (SV XII, 263; ES XI, 554).

Throughout three centuries

The missionaries of the Congregation of the Mission for three centuries evangelized the poor, above all by means of three ministries: popular missions, the formation of the clergy, and missions "*ad gentes*." What has happened since Vatican II? In order to respond, it is enough to read the annual statistics, or to consult the General Catalog of the Congregation of the Mission, or better yet, to visit the Provinces of the Congregation to notice that some of these ministries, for whatever reason, are not valued or supported by the missionaries. Let us consider, for example, the popular missions. For centuries we have been recognized in the Church as close collaborators with the pastors by means of the missions offered to the people of God. Frequently we have heard these or similar commentaries, offered by priests and laity with satisfaction and gratitude: the Vincentians gave a mission in our parish on such and such a date.

A change in perspective

At present, having barely entered the third millennium, the Congregation, in the same way as certain Religious Institutes, finds itself affected by an ecclesial phenomenon characteristic of the postconciliar period: assimilation. The large multinational corporations zealously guard the logo that identifies them and the brand of the products that they sell. This way they keep their own identity in view of the public upon whom they depend. It is a question of life or death. Consumers buy the brands they want in the supermarket. If they do not find them there, they will take their business elsewhere. Generally they buy quality products which are easily identified.

How has the Congregation of the Mission been affected by assimilation? It is quite simple. The bishops, the clergy, and even the laity do not recognize our name. They consider us exactly like the members of many other Institutes, and therefore, neither identify us, nor find us. On the other hand, seen from within the Vincentian community, it is difficult for us to get people to understand what we are and what product we are selling. We look so much like all the

rest, that in reality, we offer identical or similar messages and methods.

What is the cause of this situation? Perhaps, looking back, the changes after the Council that shook the foundations of Europe and the rest of the world. Perhaps, the enormous social and ecclesial changes after Vatican II that greatly affected the Congregation. Rough waves have brought us to these shores where we now find ourselves. In these circumstances the Congregation of the Mission correctly set out for itself in the new Constitutions all that is related to its own purpose and end. But as it took steps in achieving its stated purpose, it rather timidly took up the ministry of popular missions, and at times even forgot about them. Without a doubt, this has been a great loss. For centuries popular missions were a hallmark of the Congregation, a sign of our own identity. Because of assimilation to other ecclesial entities, especially the diocesan clergy, the Congregation's own identity lost consistency, and the result was somewhat diluted, lacking color of its own. Nevertheless, in a society which is indifferent, and at times unchristian, the extraordinary evangelization offered by popular missions is all the more necessary.

The tendency to become sedentary

In past times, a high percentage of missionaries of the Congregation were involved in itinerant ministries. The house was a point of departure for numerous Fathers and Brothers who animated the popular missions. The radius of their missionary activity was not limited to a specific area. The missionary was at the service of the parishes and places in need of evangelization. Today, on the contrary, the Congregation of the Mission dedicates a large number of its members to fixed ministries, above all due to the phenomenon of "parochialization." The Congregation has become sedentary; it has pitched its tents in fixed places, in parishes that are often small and stable. This option for parishes, shared by many provinces, has had positive consequences as far as personal equilibrium and evangelization. Many missionaries have found a worthy occupation and, on the other hand, have evangelized the poor by means of ministry in the parish. This is the truth. But the negative side also is obvious. The Congregation, above all because of the tendency toward parish ministries, has suffered two consequences: a growing sense of being sedentary, and of course, a strong sense of assimilation. We carry out our ministries along the same parameters as the diocesan clergy, and as a consequence, our particular foundational charisms have been diluted. It has been said, and written, that the evangelization of the poor, that is, the proper mission of the community, is one and only; that it can be carried out in diverse

ways and methods or ministries. We are in agreement with those who think this way. But it continues to be true that the ministries undertaken, especially the foundational ministries, shape the Provinces and the members who are engaged in them. The pastor is involved with his flock and spends his time and energy at the service of a small portion. He is concerned about the part of the faithful for whom he is responsible. His interest is in maintaining their faith and helping them to deepen it. The Vincentian missionary, on the other hand, remains available and open to respond to pastoral needs without being limited to a specific place: "We go where we are called," Saint Vincent would repeat. The missionary's presence in different places is pastorally aggressive; he tries to give a strong, new momentum to a specific Christian community.

The effects have a cause

Why does the Congregation experience the effects of assimilation? Why have we become sedentary? Why is there a significant drop in the number of popular missions, one of our foundational ministries? Vatican II gave momentum to diocesan and parish renewal. The diocesan priests led the way and took charge of their own process of renewal. Here we see one of the difficulties that has affected the missions. It was not easy for the popular missions to fit into the plans for parish and diocesan renewal. Often diocesan priests no longer felt the need to call on the missionaries to help give new momentum to parish life by means of the missions, which are an extraordinary and temporary ministry. On the other hand, this situation led many Provinces to decide that the ministry of popular missions had no place in diocesan or parish pastoral ministry. As a consequence, it was preferable to abandon one of our foundational ministries. Also, the Congregation of the Mission did not open itself to the necessary "aggiornamento" or adaptation of the dynamic and content of the missions.

And so, with the drastic decline in requests by the diocesan clergy for popular missions, quite a few confreres began to assume parish responsibilities. Many European provinces, as well as those in other latitudes where the Congregation of the Mission is present, find themselves more or less in this situation. The number of priests assigned to parish ministries is far superior to the number assigned to the missions. In other Provinces this foundational ministry does not even appear in their pastoral plans. And worse yet, the desire to return to the ministry of popular missions has begun to disappear from the awareness of many missionaries. And so an incredibly valuable, distinctive ministry, which has formed part of our congregational identity, has become marginalized.

A new horizon

The universal and local Church, since Vatican II, has reflected deeply on evangelization. There are numerous publications by the popes and the bishops' conferences on the subject. The same can be said internally of the Congregation of the Mission. The last four General Assemblies have dealt with this issue. All the documents available are enriching.

On the other hand, both in Europe and in the rest of the world, we are witnessing a crisis in both its negative and positive sense. In a negative sense, because of the indifference and the lack of faith, the decline in religious practice, the distancing of the youth from the Church, the privatization of religion considered to be a personal issue subject only to an individual's decision, and a postmodern current of thinking that has withered the faith of more than a few, we find ourselves face to face with a society that has become paganized, similar in some ways to that which the apostles and first Christians faced, with the difference that their world was religious, while ours is not.

We also find positive factors both in Europe and in many other places: economic and cultural development, the idea of a Christendom of the state that has largely been overcome, and a better focus on the role of the Church in society.

Our response

We have been prolific in our documents and plans, but we have fallen short, in a certain sense, in carrying them out. What is needed today is to go out into this field which is wide open and to work with humility and perseverance.

The new situation in which many parishes find themselves, both in the cities and in large rural areas, is well known. The harvest is such that, given the cold religious climate, and in some cases, the high level of paganism, more and more pastors are seeking the collaboration of the missionaries. The Congregation of the Mission, because of the abrupt changes experienced in the Church except in certain places, was not able to, or did not know how to offer in the postconciliar years an appropriate means of evangelization, in accord with the foundational ministry, such as the popular missions. In the beginning years of the 21st Century we have been given a new opportunity. The Congregation of the Mission must not opt out. The popular missions have a future. A new reflection is called for, and of course, new decisions must be made. Let us remember the words of Saint Vincent: *"They act contrary to the Rule, those who do not want to go on mission, or those who, having suffered somewhat on mission, do not want to return"* (SV XII, 82; ES XI, 389).

Conclusion

There are three fundamental motives that call for the Congregation of the Mission to renew again the ministry of popular missions. In the first place, as Saint Vincent would say, the welfare of souls. Today we could affirm along with our Saint: the poor people are being lost, they are being condemned. The communities of Christian faithful need to strengthen their faith response. With greater reason, the parishes that are experiencing a critical de-christianization call for a response on our part. In the second place, there is the urgent need, experienced by many pastors, for extraordinary help in revitalizing the faith. Their task has been made more difficult because of growing religious indifference, and in some cases, the drop in the numbers of clergy, and the increasing number of parishes with only one priest. In the third place, because popular missions have been from the beginning, and are today as well, a sign of the identity of the Congregation of the Mission in the Church.

The Holy Spirit neither goes back on his word, nor does he revoke the charism given to communities in the Church. And he gives his grace for the living out of the charism. It is through the charism that this same Spirit, working in the Congregation of the Mission, saves and sanctifies the poor. The popular missions did not begin as the whim of an individual, but rather as the inspiration of the Spirit received by the Founder of the Mission.

For these holy intentions to be put into practice, it will be necessary to revive the zeal for the salvation of the human person, just as Saint Vincent understood it. In speaking to the missionaries about the five virtues, the Saint expressed himself in this way: *“Zeal... consists in the desire to make oneself pleasing to God and useful to the neighbor; zeal for the spread of the kingdom of God, zeal for procuring the salvation of one’s neighbor. Is there anything in the world more perfect than this?”* (SV XII, 307; ES XI, 590). With similar words he spoke to the missionaries on August 22, 1655: *“Let us ask God to give the Company this spirit, this heart... that will make us go wherever”* (SV XI, 291; ES XI, 190). To conclude, let us affirm that the popular missions in the Congregation of the Mission do have a future.

N.B. - The Scripture passages are from the New American Bible (1986). The quotes from Saint Vincent are translated from the Spanish edition of his writings and conferences.

(Translation: GILBERT ROLAND WALKER)