

STUDY

The Vincentian Mission of Tomorrow

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Introduction

As a servant it is a privilege to share with you, dear readers, some reflections on the Vincentian mission of tomorrow. I write these words as a Vincentian missionary who has lived the wonderful experience of preaching popular missions in the land of my birth.

This article has three parts. The first part refers to the relevancy of the teaching about the mission that for a long time has been at the center of the Church's magisterium, especially during the last half century. As we examine this teaching we become aware of the fact that the Church's missionary theology and action has flourished during the second half of the 20th Century.

The second part of the article refers to the present missionary challenges as viewed from two dimensions: first, the state of missiology as a science or discipline and the implications that this has as it becomes part of the theological curriculum; second, more recent developments of the concept of the missions which missiology ought to focus on. These two dimensions should be considered together if we want to present an adequate vision of the missions not only to the Church but also to seminary educators.

The third and final part will present a reflection on the missions based on the activities of Saint Vincent and viewed as an action of love. I will end with a brief conclusion.

Before entering into the theme of this article I want to warn the reader about the scope of this work. Because of the breadth and complexity of the subject matter this article is restricted to the study of the newness of the Vincentian mission from the perspective of the teachings and practices of Saint Vincent about the missions. These teachings and practices are the result of his love and are directed

toward the loving proclamation of salvation to the poor. Before coming to this point I propose that we examine the history of missionary activity and missiology in as much as it reflects a history of people filled with missionary love.

1. Mission and missiology

1.1. The Catholic missionary and the Reform Churches

The Church is born with an awareness of being sent forth and a sense of dedication to the mission (Mark 15:15-16; Luke 24:47; Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:38). Therefore in the Acts of the Apostles, the letters of Saint Paul and the patristic writings we find many references to the missionary activity of the most diverse actors. In the first half of the Middle Ages we meet some great evangelizers: Saint Martin of Tours in Galicia, Saint Patrick in Ireland, Saint Augustine in England, Saint Boniface in Germany. These individuals established Christianity in the known areas of this time and it was thought that the Church's missionary activity was concluded. The Spanish and Portuguese discovery of new land rekindled in the Church a new missionary spirit and the movement of the great religious orders to America as well as some parts of the coast of Asia and Africa. At the beginning of this movement there appeared the emblematic person of Saint Francis Xavier (1506-1552) who was greatly admired by Saint Vincent.¹ In Latin America another great missionary figure came on the scene, Saint Torbio de Mogrovejo.² The 19th century was the era of the African missions and new missionary Institutes were established such as the White Fathers and the Combonians. As previously stated in this brief historical review, the Catholic Church, with no doubt or hesitation, understood all of this activity as proper to herself and therefore saw no need to elaborate a systematic missiology but, as we will see later, the Church never lacked missiology elements.

The missiology of the Reformed Churches was initiated with force during the 17th Century with the decline of the dominance of the Spanish and Portuguese and the emergence of new powers, such as Holland and England. At the same time that these emerging powers established themselves in new colonies, Protestant missionaries made their presence felt. It has to be stated that besides

¹ Cf. ANTONIO TEXEIRA, *Tras los pasos de Francisco Javier*, in *Misioneros Tercer Milenio*, October, 2006, 28-3; IGNACIO FERNANDEZ MENDOZA, *San Francisco de Javier comentado por San Vicente de Paul y los primeros misioneros de la CM*, in *Anales* 6 (2004), 555-562.

² Cf. "IV Centenario de la muerte de santo Torbio de Mogrovejo," *L'Osservatore Roma* (Spanish edition) April 18 - May 4, 2006.

the influx of this new element there was also arising, little by little, an outcry because of the lack of missionary activity among the Protestant Churches. This demand originated in the first place as a rejection of Lutheran and Calvin dogmatism and was further encouraged by the visible missionary activity of the Catholic Church that included the establishment of *Propaganda Fide* in 1622. Some voices of the reform demanded a similar organization that would promote Protestant missionary activity.

Parallel to the emergence of the missionary conscience, there appeared in the heart of the Reformed Churches the first outlines of a missiology that justified and encouraged missionary activity. Nevertheless, modern Protestant missiology was born two and a half centuries after the Reform. Two questions arise: Why did missiology arise in the Reformed Churches and not in the Catholic Church that had a long missionary tradition? Why did this missiology arise two and half centuries after the event of the Reform?

With regard to the first question, we have already pointed out that the Catholic Church felt no need to justify her missionary activity and since there were no serious obstacles to her activity there was also no need to systematize missiology. Regarding the second question, the first response that arose within the Reform pointed out various impediments: Protestantism arose in order to purify Christianity and to restore it to its primitive roots. It is said that this internal confrontation made it inconceivable to reach out to non-believers. Also it was more important for Protestants to defend themselves from the on-going attacks of the Papacy. The fact that the areas where non-believers lived, in the East and the West, were under the rule of the Spanish and Portuguese, clearly impeded the entrance of Protestant missionaries. Thus when the power of Spain and Portugal declined during the 17th Century, the way was opened for new future powers that were largely Protestant and it became possible for the missionary action of the Reform to spread.³

With regard to these supposed obstacles, Angel Santos writes: "The loyalty and honesty of many other Protestant authors did not allow them to accept such sophisms. The missiology of Gustav Warneck — whom we will speak about later on — stated that such hypothetical obstacles could very easily have been overcome if there had been a true missionary awareness among the Reformers of the sixteenth century. In reality what happened was completely different: the harsh dogmatism of Lutheranism that was even more rigid in Calvinism, led many people in the Protestant churches to become

³ Cf. ANGEL SANTOS, *La misionología como ciencia. Sus orígenes*, 37-38, in OBRAS MISIONERAS PONTIFICIAS DE ESPAÑA, *La Misionología hoy*, Verbo Divino, 1987.

disgusted and as a result they attempted to minimize some previous theologians and were inclined to embrace the principles of Catholicism. Thus a doctrinal reform was introduced into the concepts of predestination, grace and the destiny of universal redemption. This awakened among Protestants a missionary ideology that was accepted by their teachers and founders.⁴

Angel Santos continues to affirm: “The new missionary movement was not begun by rectors and those responsible for the different Protestant churches. It was a movement that began to impose itself from the bottom up. The need to justify this very Christian activity and attitude is what prompted the development of a systematic missiology that had not been done previously by the Catholic Church because it was not struggling with the same difficulties. In fact, many Protestant ecclesiastics were opposed to the idea of missionary activity and this concept was also rejected by many outstanding theologians. In any case in the formation of modern missiology we can see a mutual interdependence: Catholics were under pressure to systematize their missiology and were pushed to do this by Protestants. At the same time Protestants outlined a missiology that was supported by doctrinal principles of catholic authors.”⁵

1.2. Protestant missiology

The first sketches of a missiology and the response to the demand for missionary activity appear at the beginning of the 17th Century among Lutherans as well as Calvinists and Anglicans. For the scope of this work it is enough to pause and consider the work of Gustav Warneck whom we referred to earlier and who is viewed as the father of modern missiology. He was born in Germany in 1834 and dedicated twenty-two years of his life to pastoral ministry and the rest of his life to teaching. Before beginning his pastoral ministry he explained missiology concerns in Barmen. Then from 1896-1902 (two years before his death) he dedicated his time to teaching missiology in Halle. His vision of missiology is expressed primarily in his great work entitled *Evangelische Missionslehre*. This work represents an evolution and, even more, an ordered and scientific structuring of modern missiology which in some ways would inspire later Protestant theologians and the first Catholic missiologists, such as Rev. Dr. Josef Schmidlin.

Angel Santos speaks about the proposal of our missiology and writes: “He came to define the missions as a group of Christian

⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

activities that are directed toward the establishment of the Church among non-believers and thus involves an expansion of Western Christianity. He was not satisfied to see missiology as a branch of theology but wanted it to be studied in the university as an autonomous field of investigation.”⁶

In 1892 Warneck published the first Protestant manual for the mission “in which he offered what according to him was the content of the mission. There were two great divisions: historical and doctrinal or theoretical. The last part developed missionary doctrine contained in Scriptural exegesis, dogma, historical theology and apologetics. This section of his work also developed ethics or moral theology and its relationship with other missionary organizations as well as pastoral theology in relation to its objectives and methods.”⁷ Warneck placed emphasis on the conversion of non-believers and thus the missions were not involved in any form of proselytism with other denominations.

It would be interesting to follow the work of the followers of Warneck but this is not necessary in order to achieve the objectives of this presentation. It is sufficient to recognize that this author was able to systematize a missionary doctrine and thus, within the university program, reclaimed for missiology the status of an autonomous science. Another task that was pursued by these authors was to offer a manual of missionary theory and practice — a manual that could be used to teach future pastors and missionaries.

1.3. Catholic missiology

The great theologian Warneck made the mistake of criticizing the Catholic Church because of her *poverty* in missiology. In reality he was unaware of the missionary milestones and the innumerable missionary elements of this theology that had been developed over the course of 19 centuries. As we have already pointed out, the truth of the matter is that the Catholic missionaries had not felt the urgency to structure a theological justification for their missionary work. Their missionary activity was evident and the missionary characteristics of their activity were based on the gospel, the Acts of the Apostles, the writings of the Fathers of the Church and on many other authors who dealt with diverse theological, canonical and pastoral themes of the Catholic missions. Nevertheless, Catholic missionaries and theologians understood the need to systematize their missionary principles and dedicated themselves to this task.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

Here, the outlines of this theology actually go back to previous centuries but we will focus our attention on modern Catholic missiology as seen at the beginning of the 20th Century and that was initiated by Catholic German theologians. This theology was developed by various schools of thought and here we list these schools and point out their primary point of view.

- a) **The School of Munster.** A priest, Dr. Josef Schmidlin (1876-1944) and Fr. Robert Streit (1875-1930), an oblate of Mary Immaculate, are considered the initiators and founders of modern Catholic missiology. According to this school of thought the task of the Catholic missionary endeavor was to call the unfaithful to faith and conversion in order to achieve salvation. In 1910 the chair of missiology was established in the University of Munster, a position that became permanent in 1914. In 1930 the Gregoriana and Urbaniana in Rome also established chairs of missiology.
- b) **The Belgian School.** This school was represented by Father Charles who proposed the establishment of the Church as the fundamental principle of the missions.
- c) **The French School.** This school was represented by Father Glorieux and took the position that the objective of the missions was to lead converts to a full supernatural life.
- d) **The Spanish School.** This school was represented by Father J. Zameza and proposed that the objective of the missions was the expansion and growth of the Mystical Body of Christ.⁸

These different schools would come closer together over the course of time until, as Juan Esqueda Biffet points out in his book, a coherent missiology was achieved. Nevertheless, as a theological science, it will always be inexhaustible and open to different points of view. In this regard John Paul II affirmed that one of the objectives of the mission “is entrusted to priests and their associates, to educators and teachers, and to theologians, particularly those who teach in seminaries and centers for the laity. Theological training cannot and should not ignore the Church’s universal mission, ecumenism, the study of the great religions and missiology.” He then added: “I recommend that such studies be undertaken especially in seminaries and in houses of formation for men and women religious, ensuring that some priests or other students specialize in the different fields of missiology” (*Redemptoris Missio*, 83).

⁸ Cf. JUAN ESQUEDA BIFFET, *Teología de la evangelización. Curso de misionología*, 36-37.

1.4. The mission and missiology of Vatican II

During the first half of the 20th Century the missions had been extended to all the corners of the world and enjoyed an enthusiastic acceptance. It is sufficient to recall the missions in China and the Asian nations, the missions in Africa, the mission in India that were very much linked to the Vincentian missionaries from the Province of Madrid. Pius XI was called *the Pope of the Missions* and as we shall later see, Pius XII opened the missionary endeavor to diocesan priests.

With regard to the theology of the missions, the Second Vatican Council gathered together and was nourished by a previous thorough investigation that involved diverse areas of study: Patristics, biblical investigation, the liturgical movement. In the area of theology, the *new theology* that was promoted by Le Saulchoir, the new theological center of the Dominican Community (near the Belgian city of Tournai but close to the border of France). This center played a significant role and some of the noted theologians associated with this center were: Gardeil, Marie-Dominique Chenu, Yves Congar. It should be stated here that after the First World War the Jesuits opened the theological school of Lyon-Fourvière which produced some outstanding theologians: H. de Lubac, Jean Danielou, Hugo Rahner. We cannot forget other Catholic theologians such as Karl Rahner, Hans urs von Baltasar and numerous Protestant theologians and scripture scholars.⁹ Another element that cannot be ignored is the numerous biblical scholars who influenced the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* published by Pope Pius XII.¹⁰ Many base groups, such as L'Abbe Pierre, the Trappists of Emaus, the priests-workers, the Mission of Paris, etc., had struggled to open the gospel in those situations that today are referred to as situations on the frontier or the margins. All of these groups opened new paths for the Church's mission and expressed their discontent with the *status quo* of the Church, especially in light of the profound changes that had taken place in the world and continued to change the world after the two great wars.

The metaphor of Blessed John XXIII when he convoked the Council is very significant. According to John XXIII it was necessary "to open the windows of the Church so that fresh air could enter." The new air was stirring in the streets of the Christian world and even moving in the midst of humanity as a whole. The programmatic encyclical of Pope Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*,¹¹ is a wonderful

⁹ Cf., ROSINO GIBELINI, *Teologia del siglo XX*, Sal Terrae, 1988, 177-270.

¹⁰ PIUS XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, September 30, 1943.

¹¹ PAUL VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, August 6, 1969.

meditation on the Church and its relation to the world. The Pope wanted the Church and human society *to meet together, and get to know and love one another (Ecclesiam Suam, 3)* so that all of humanity might be saved. In the prologue of the encyclical the Pope speaks about the paths of the Church and reflects on these paths and says: “All such policies must be derived first of all from an earnest consideration of divine doctrine, for even Christ Himself, we must remember, said: ‘My doctrine is not mine, but his who sent me’ (John 7:16). Then they must be shown to measure up to the present state of the Church, a state in which the Church’s interior life is still vigorous, having stood the test of long experience, and its exterior energies are powerfully directed toward the work of the apostolate. And finally we must bear in mind the actual situation in which human society today finds itself” (*Ecclesiam Suam, 5*). From this perspective the Pope divides his reflection into three parts: the conscience of the Church, the renewal of the Church, dialogue. It is clear that the Council traveled a wider and more enriching path than that which is expressed in this programmatic encyclical, but we have here a seed and an insight into the spirit of the Council.

Before examining the missiology of the Council I will briefly review the missionary encyclicals that preceded it. Biffet states that these encyclicals “on the mission or the missions confine themselves to the first moment of evangelization, leaving us to understand a homogenous and harmonious evolution with regard to other themes that are gradually deepened as a greater balance is sought: the missionary command of Christ, the call to conversion and faith, the establishment of the Church, responsibility among sister Churches, etc. Many themes of the Vatican Council are outlined in these pre-Conciliar documents.”¹² I now list those documents.

*Maximum Illud*¹³ was the first document of the 20th Century, was written by Benedict XV and has been classified as the *Magna Carta* of the missions. Among other things we highlight the fact that this document outlines certain elements that missiology must consider: history, theology, pastoral, law, cooperation, missionary works, and spirituality. It emphasizes the importance of preparation and on-going formation for missionaries, cooperation among different institutions, formation of a native clergy, importance of the local culture and the need for women to participate in missionary activity.

*Rerum Ecclesiae*¹⁴ was written by Pius XI who has been called the *Pope of the Missions*. The highlights of the teaching of this

¹² Cf. ESQUEDA BIFFET, *o.c.*, 62.

¹³ BENEDICT XV, *Maximum Illud*, November 1, 1919.

¹⁴ PIUS XI, *Rerum Ecclesiae*, February 28, 1926.

encyclical are the following: the importance of promoting native apostles (priests, religious, laity), responsibility of the local church in the task of universal evangelization, bishops are co-responsible for the missions together with the Pope, the urgency of proclaiming the gospel to all people is derived from Christian charity and gratitude for the gift of faith, the need to form catechists, and the importance of the presence of contemplative orders in the missions. "Missiology that was at its beginning stages, was inspired by this encyclical that attempted to balance the two most outstanding aspects with regard to missions ad gentes: promotion of the faith (the call to conversion) and the establishment of the church."¹⁵

With regard to Pius XII it is interesting to cite his two missionary encyclicals that are most important and well known. *Evangelii Praecones*¹⁶ was written to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Pius XI's *Rerum Ecclesiae*. In this document the Pope attempts to balance the most significant tendencies of missiology in his era: the call to faith and the establishment of the church in which a native hierarchy plays a primary role. This therefore supposes the formation of a native clergy and the urgent need to adapt to local culture and customs. *Fidei Domum*¹⁷ is an encyclical that calls attention to the missions in Africa and also calls the diocesan clergy to participate in the mission (today these members of the clergy are called priests fidei donum). Fifty years after the promulgation of this document its impact on the whole Christian community (especially the fact that this document opened the doors of the mission to diocesan priests without removing their status in their own diocese) has been highlighted. In this way, local churches occupied an important position in the mission of the universal Church.¹⁸

John XXIII commemorated the 40th anniversary of *Maximum Illud* of Pius XI with his encyclical letter *Princeps Pastorum*.¹⁹ Distinctive of the Pope who wrote *Mater et Magistra*²⁰ and *Pacem in Terris*,²¹ we highlight his doctrinal contribution to the relation between evangelization and human promotion. He insisted on two points that were dealt with by his predecessors: the careful and integral formation of missionaries which in turn will help to

¹⁵ ESQUEDA BIFFET, *o.c.*, 63.

¹⁶ PIUS XII, *Evangelii Praecones*, June 2, 1951.

¹⁷ PIUS XII, *Fidei Domum*, April 21, 1957.

¹⁸ Cf. MANUEL DE UNCITI, *Balance de una Encíclica innovadora*, in *Misioneros Tercer Milenio*, June, 2007, 14-17.

¹⁹ JOHN XXIII, *Princeps Pastorum*, November 28, 1959.

²⁰ JOHN XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, May 15, 1961.

²¹ JOHN XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, April 11, 1963.

integrate the mission into the cultural and social environment of the younger nations.²²

Let us now examine the event of the Second Vatican Council. It is interesting to note that the missionary document par excellence, the decree *Ad Gentes*²³ would pass through eight redactions before its final approval. This was perhaps due to the complexity of the missionary theme. Nevertheless, thanks to this delay the decree on the Church's missionary activity was able to be nurtured by the missionary principles and the contributions of the four dogmatic constitutions: *Lumen Gentium*,²⁴ *Dei Verbum*,²⁵ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*²⁶ and *Gaudium et Spes*.²⁷ "The primary idea," Biffet says, "that is common to these four documents is that of the Church as sacrament and in its missionary dimension *ad gentes* is presented as the Church of universal salvation."

From the Council there arises a theology that places the missions in the center of the Church and envisions the mission as the very presence of God in the world. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* and the decree on the Church's missionary activity, *Ad Gentes*, unify and enrich this theology that had been in process during previous years. The Church as the universal sacrament of salvation offers salvation to all people. In order to do this the Church must be missionary. She is missionary because above all else she recognizes her participation in the mission of the Son which consists of bringing light and truth to all people. In the second place the Church is missionary because she recognizes the fact that she has been called by the Holy Spirit to form the People of God. This teaching in *Lumen Gentium*, together with a renewed ecclesiology that describes the missions as the free exchange between local churches, establishes the foundation for the elaboration of the missionary activity of the Church in *Ad Gentes*.

1.4.1. *The decree Ad Gentes*

If it is true that all the documents of the Vatican Council or at least the great documents of the Council have a missionary theme, then the decree *Ad gentes* synthesized the theological contributions before Vatican II and captured the spirit of the Council. Forty-two

²² Cf. ESQUEDA BIFFET, *o.c.*, 63-66.

²³ VATICAN II, *Ad Gentes*, December 7, 1965.

²⁴ VATICAN II, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, November 21, 1964.

²⁵ VATICAN II, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, November 18, 1965.

²⁶ VATICAN II, Dogmatic Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, December 4, 1963.

²⁷ VATICAN II, Dogmatic Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, December 7, 1965.

years after its promulgation, its doctrine continues to prevail and it is a point of reference for missionary encouragement and reflection.²⁸

In the document *Ad Gentes*, 2 we read: "The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature... and God has called us to share his life and glory not simply as individuals but as a people." The mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit is revealed in God's act of creating the world, especially in the creation of human beings who are called to participate in God's life and glory. This calling is not given to us simply as individuals but we are called to form a people. The Church shares in the Trinitarian mission as a sacrament or a sign of salvation that God offers to the whole world through its activity but also through means of the Holy Spirit. In simple words: the Church does not have a mission but is mission. Her missionary activity does not consist of some secondary activity developed by a group of specialists. The Church in her very essence and in her participation in the action of the Son and the Holy Spirit in the world is considered missionary. This is expressed in *Ad Gentes*: "Missionary activity is nothing else and nothing less than an epiphany, or a manifesting of God's decree, and its fulfillment in the world and in world history, in the course of which God, by means of mission, manifestly works out the history of salvation" (9). The mission goes beyond the extension and the expansion of the Church and is the source of the Church's perfection. Again in the words of *Ad Gentes*: "Thus it is plain that missionary activity wells up from the Church's inner nature and spreads abroad her saving Faith. It perfects her Catholic unity by this expansion. It is sustained by her apostolicity. It exercises the collegial spirit of her hierarchy. It bears witness to her sanctity while spreading and promoting it" (6).

1.4.2. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*

*Evangelii Nuntiandi*²⁹ was published by Pope Paul VI as the fruit of the Synod on evangelization and also published in the context of the Holy Year 1974-1975 and ten years after the promulgation of the decree *Ad Gentes*. As we will see later, it is not directly a missionary document. It has, however, found great acceptance in the Church and has greatly influenced the evangelization movement. This document faithfully brings together the thinking of the participants in the Synod and it seems to me that in this document we see the wisdom of Pope Paul VI as a theologian, his facility as a writer, his

²⁸ Cf. *Informe. A 40 años del decreto Ad Gentes y 15 de Redemptoris missio. La vigencia de la mission, in Misioneros Tercer Milenio*, February, 2006, 28-33.

²⁹ PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, December 8, 1975.

character as a Pastor and his enormous sensitivity to the complex problems of the modern world and the problems of the Church. Moving beyond the mission, Paul VI was concerned about promoting the evangelization of the world, a world that had become more contradictory, a world that seemed to have lost its way and as a result was more separated from God and yet paradoxically a world that was in need of and hungry for God. Let us look at some of the characteristics of this document.

In *Evangelii Nuntiandi* Paul VI has helped us to understand in a significant way the meaning of evangelization. *Lumen Gentium* as well as *Ad Gentes* had elaborated a theology concerning the evangelizing vocation of the whole People of God in the world, a vocation that is fulfilled through the Son and the Holy Spirit. Paul VI has given a greater consistency to the implications of the Church's evangelizing work. He states: "The Church evangelizes when she seeks to convert, solely through the divine power of the message she proclaims, both the personal and collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete milieu which are theirs" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 19). The Pope also summarizes the joyful evangelizing vocation of the Church: "Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14).

We find here the dimensions of an integral evangelization that involves not only the individual conscience but also the collective conscience of the community. This involves not only people's hearts but also their lives and culture. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* speaks about the important developments of the mission during the last part of the century, developments that Vatican II could not wholly foresee. The rapid increase in the number of local churches, a concern to elaborate more clearly the relationship between faith and culture, a new and more profound solidarity in relation to the poor — all of these elements have stimulated the missionary project of the Church.

1.4.3. *Redemptoris Missio*

John Paul II has left an image engraved in the imagination of Christian people and even on the imagination of humanity, namely, the image of a missionary Pope. This image is the result of his missionary journeys and of having left us the first encyclical that is truly missionary and that was written after the Second Vatican Council. Some people classify *Redemptoris Missio*³⁰ as the *manual* of modern evangelization. Shortly after the death of John Paul II on

³⁰ JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*, December 7, 1990.

April 2, 2005, an editorial in the magazine *Misioneros Tercer Milenio* expressed the idea in the following way: "John Paul clearly understood that he had to launch out with renewed resolve in the direction of the missionary adventure because the evangelization of the world is now at its beginning and constitutes the primary reason for the being and the existence of the Church. The Pope did not want his missionary teaching to be reduced to some mere theological reflection but rather wanted to preach with example and so he became the 'first missionary!' Thus he did not hesitate to carry his knapsack on his shoulder nor conserve his energy during infinite journeys, especially his journeys to the nations of the Third World."³¹

Basing himself on *Lumen Gentium* and *Ad Gentes*, Pope John Paul II reaffirmed the missionary command of the Church as basic for the Church and not merely as one of its numerous obligations. He wanted to clarify some points that had remained obscure in the search for new meanings of the mission in order to respond to daily challenges. His encyclical moves along the lines of the motto of his Pontificate: "Open the door to Christ!" Understanding the importance of dialogue and other forms of witness, he did not want the direct proclamation of the good news to be minimized. The Church has confidence in her message, in the fact that Jesus is Lord and thus this message ought to be proclaimed clearly to a world that frequently wavers in uncertainty. Second, the Pope reaffirms the mission *ad gentes* toward "peoples, groups, and socio-cultural contexts in which Christ and his Gospel are not known, or which lack Christian communities sufficiently mature to be able to incarnate the faith in their own environment and proclaim it to other groups. This is mission *ad gentes* in the proper sense of the term" (*Redemptoris Missio*, 33). The accusations that the Church was involved in a profane covenant between evangelization and colonialism had struck a blow to the very essence of the missionary endeavor. The Pope is aware of this past that at times was evangelically ambiguous, but it should not now be a determining factor in continuing the process of a clear proclamation of the gospel.

Third, the Pope during his later years insistently asked for a *new evangelization*, a theme dealt with in *Redemptoris Missio*. Such an evangelization is not only a new effort to preach the gospel in places where it had never been preached before; the Church also seeks to proclaim anew the gospel in those regions where the message has been weakened as a result of cultural movements that are directed against the gospel and where people have distanced themselves from faith in Jesus Christ. Then, this new evangelization impels us beyond re-evangelization toward a new apologetic between those who have

³¹ Editorial in *Misioneros de Tercer Milenio*, April, 2005.

rejected the gospel individually and collectively. Thus the new evangelization is not seen as simply a return to the discipline of the gospel for a people substantially faithful but not docile. In such a case we are talking about undertaking the task of proclaiming once again the message of salvation.

Fourth and last, placing the focus on the relation between faith and culture is seen as a primary characteristic of the Pontificate of John Paul II. As a philosopher and a writer, the Pope was deeply aware of the means by which culture forms the human subject. He was the first Pontiff to introduce the concept of *inculturation* into official ecclesiastical usage. He established the Pontifical Council on Culture in 1982. Based on the discussion of culture in *Gaudium et Spes*, his numerous addresses on this theme during his pastoral visits throughout the world have produced a formidable teaching on faith and culture.

The understanding of the missions in the new millennium in which we find ourselves takes on a variety of extraordinary elements. It is profoundly Trinitarian and ecclesial in its theology. It is a theology situated at the center of the Church and from this center moves outward to propose an irresistible, universal and implied vision of God's action in history. In the second place, the understanding of the missions implies an understanding of evangelization as the work of God in which the Church is called to participate. Above all it drives the concept of the new evangelization and attempts to be attentive to different groups and contexts in which evangelization is necessary and foresees a clear way of proceeding with the evangelization process. Thus this understanding of the missions has grown in sensitivity and has become a phenomenon of culture especially in light of its emphasis on the particularity of culture and its emphasis on the sources of a true unity among people. Everything considered, the ecclesial theology of the missions establishes a solid base upon which missiology can continue to build. Keeping all of this in mind we can now move on to the second point of our reflection which demands our attention as we look at the present challenges.

1.4.4. *The XXXI Ordinary Assembly of CELAM in Aparecida, Brazil*³²

In this account of the missionary milestones of the Catholic Church it is impossible to ignore the Fifth Assembly of the Latin American Bishops that created so many expectations in Latin

³² CELAM, *V General Conference of the Bishops of Latin American and the Caribbean. Final Document*, May 13-31, 2007, Aparecida, Brazil.

America and the world. In an editorial of *Misioneros Tercer Milenio* dated June 2007 we read the following: "If there is one word that could sum up the content of the twenty days of work of the Fifth Assembly of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean held in the Brazilian shrine of Aparecida, then that word would be 'mission.' If we were to use one phrase, then we would use the words that the bishops wrote in their final message: 'We summon all our brothers and sisters so that united, with enthusiasm, we may carry out the Great Continental Mission.' Without a doubt the great challenge of the Church in Latin America involves commitment and a missionary spirit."

Among the intersecting themes of the Document of Aparecida we find that of the missions.³³ Among the many ideas in the Document special attention should be given to the following: the Church is in a permanent state of mission; this mission is not something that is exclusive of the Church but should have a world vision; poverty should be seen as a world of insignificance; a pastoral attitude that should guide our work in light of the phenomenon of the departure of Catholics from the Church; women as protagonists.³⁴

2. Present missionary challenges

After having examined the teachings about the missions that the Church has presented during the second half of the 20th Century and the beginning of the 21st Century we are now able to look toward the future. What challenges are presented to us and what are the challenges that must be confronted? I will present my observations in two sections. The first will deal with missiology as a science or discipline and the second will examine some of the gaps in the concrete challenges, gaps that missiology must deal with.

As we briefly saw in previous pages of this article, missiology is relatively new as a discipline and distinct science.

In the post-Conciliar era, the concept of mission underwent an examination. It was accused of being too indulgent toward imperialism and colonialism. Because of the ambivalent condition of

³³ The great intersecting themes of the Document of Aparecida are: life in abundance in a good world, even though it is a globalized and an exclusive world; the missionary disciples of Jesus Christ; the missionary disciples in the Church; the sacrament of the Kingdom; the Church animated by the Spirit is a community of small communities; the missionary disciples in the Church in the midst of the world; the proclamation of the gospel in a world that is predominately urban. Cf. AGENOR BRIGHENTI, *Criterios para la lectura del Documento de Aparecida (I)*, in *Adital*, September 24, 2007, www.adital.org.br/site/noticia.asp?lang=ES&cod=29230

³⁴ *Ibid.*

the missions the question was raised whether or not missiology ought to form part of the theological curriculum.

The problem for missiology is twofold. First of all, the object of its study — the missions — has undergone a rapid change during the course of the 20th Century. When Kaiser Wilhelm established a Protestant chair of missiology in Halle and a Catholic chair in Munster, he envisioned missiology as a means to help in the administration of the religious dimension of colonial life. In this way the missions seemed to be — at least in his judgment — the religious aspect of colonization. At the same time many missionaries became associated with and involved in independence movements which had destroyed colonialism in many parts of the world, especially during the decade of the 1960's. The petition for a moratorium on the missions during the 1960's, a moratorium that was especially strong from the continent of Africa, weakened the missionary project. During the 1980's the nations that at one time were considered the object of the mission were now sending missionaries to other places. This development challenged the territorial meaning of mission *ad gentes* which had prevailed for many centuries.

The emergence of Protestant missionaries who were fundamentalists and Pentecostal, especially in Latin America, gave birth to a series of problems when those persons who had been baptized with sacraments became the object of a primary evangelization. With this rapid change it has been difficult to maintain the focus on what the missions were and how these missions should be carried out. What should missiology study and how should it be studied? Because of the changes that have occurred in less than a century, it is not surprising that missiology has had to struggle to maintain itself as a branch of theological study that is clearly defined.

The second problem for missiology revolves around the question of whether it should be understood as a autonomous science or discipline. Should it be considered a discipline in its own right with its own methods, criteria and procedures? Or should missiology be seen as a field of study in which different disciplines — Scripture, theology, history and the social sciences — come together to examine from different perspectives the missions of the Church? The on-going differentiation of the traditional disciplines that has resulted from the explosion of knowledge and the pressures of the post-modern era clearly place before us the question of whether missiology is a distinct discipline. Seldom has it been able to occupy a central place in the theology curriculum and it has had to be content with occupying a place on the margins of theology. The loss of interest with regard to the missions has led some universities to abandon the chair of missiology (e.g., in the Catholic faculty of Wurzburg) perhaps believing that the days of missiology have come and gone. This has resulted in the fact that some schools, especially in the

universities of Northern Europe, have attempted to develop missiology as a theological science and thus deserves a rightful position in the university, believing that without such an articulation of missiology as a science it will totally disappear from the university.

On the other hand missiology has been seen as an area of study in which the different disciplines are applied to the phenomenon of the missions. The missions can be examined at the theological, historical and sociological level. This other understanding considers missiology as if it had its own particular method. Thus this enables the methods of many disciplines to make a contribution to the complex phenomenon of the missions in today's world. At the same time this understanding of missiology places the integration of the missions and missionary activity in a wider perspective of the Church. Missiology becomes a collaborative effort among schools of different disciplines. Frequently the missions are classified as "the world Church" or "world Christianity" and this is done as a way of distancing itself from the criticism of the colonial era.

The decision that missiology should be more or less a distinct discipline depends on the missionaries themselves. It is important to clearly state the problem: should missiology be regarded as a distinct science and what should its place be within the theological curriculum? In the case of missiology as a distinct science, one might wish to demand that it take its rightful place with the other disciplines that are part of the theological curriculum. In this case people will have to struggle in order to find space for this within a curriculum that is already overburdened. If missiology is defined as the object of study because of its methodology, then it ought to take a different path as it attempts to find a place within the university curriculum.³⁵ Within the theological curriculum of missiology there are three aspects that have been developed since Vatican II and here I refer to inter-religious dialogue, inculturation and the work on behalf of justice as a constitutive element in the preaching of the gospel.

Inter-religious dialogue has been affirmed and promoted by the Council in *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate*.³⁶ The Council certainly envisioned and hoped that what was then a new movement would grow and develop, as in fact it did. Yet at the beginning of the new

³⁵ Concerning these changes of direction in post-conciliar missiology cf. KARL MÜLLER, *Misionología: una introducción*, in SEBASTIÁN KAROTEMPREL, "Seguir a Cristo en la misión. Manual de misionología," 15-16. Besides analyzing questions concerning the missions and missiology, it examines *Redemptoris Missio* as a clarifying response to erroneous and mistaken positions.

³⁶ VATICAN II, *Nostra Aetate*, a declaration concerning the relations of the Church with non-Christian religions, October 28, 1965.

century we are still trying to understand more deeply the path of dialogue and especially its implications for a theology of religions. The problem of the theology of religions is one of the most sensitive aspects that Catholic missiology must confront, that is, how can we come to an understanding of the meaning of other religions in relation to Catholicism? What is the role of God's plan for human salvation? As the world becomes smaller and the interaction between religions results in conflict, how are we to evaluate the encounter with other religions? The Council and later teachings of the Pope have partially framed the problem: in a way unknown to us, God acts in these different traditions even though they are not formally part of divine revelation. Development of the inter-religious relation is still to be worked through. Certainly there are doctrinal questions but a greater obstacle has arisen with the new outbreak of so many different forms of fundamentalism.³⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, in harmony with his predecessor John Paul II, is making a great effort, in word and deed, to move this dialogue forward, this dialogue that is most urgent in light of the situation of the world today.

Inculturation, as we have said, is based on a vision of culture that is developed in *Gaudium et Spes*. While this may not be as sensitive an issue as the theology of religions, yet the relation between faith and culture draws us closer to the problems that the theology of religion must deal with, namely, the expression of the identity of Christian faith and, equally important, the method of evaluating and critiquing different cultural incarnations of Christianity. Furthermore, we still have need of a theology of culture compatible with the modern vision of culture that is the basis for discussions about inculturation.³⁸ In the third place, to work for justice or the transformation of society in light of the Kingdom of God is not properly a practical way of serving people. This is rather an integrating part of the missionary project. In the true sense of the word, to commit oneself to the world has implied a secularization of the mission. The presence of social works and services without an explicit reference to Jesus Christ or without gathering together believers in the Body of Christ has frequently destroyed missionary motivation and denied the public nature of the faith that the Church proclaims.³⁹ It seems that missiology must confront these problems in

³⁷ Cf. JOSÉ MARÍA SÁNCHEZ MAYO, "El Fundamentalismo," in *Nuevos paradigmas y vicencianismo. XXXI Semana de estudios vicencianos*, CEME, 2006, pp. 373-389.

³⁸ Cf. LUIS GONZALEZ-SANTABARBARA, "Inculturación y fe cristiana," in *Nuevos paradigmas y vicencianismo. XXXI Semana de estudios vicencianos*, CEME, 2006, pp. 43-66.

³⁹ Cf. KARL MÜLLER, *o.c.*, 9-20.

a direct and immediate way. For these reasons missiology is at the center of theological exploration of some of the most critical theological problems that we confront today.

A final problem that has arisen during the later part of the 20th Century is the meaning of direct proclamation. As we have seen, John Paul II confronted this question in *Redemptoris Missio*. But the problem persists in some areas of the Church. This concern is heightened by an increased awareness of the difficulties in inter-cultural communication especially in the way in which the process of acceptance of faith and culture is embraced. This is a communication problem rather than a theological problem, that is to say, this does not lead us to the heart of the debate concerning missiology as do the other three previously discussed situations. But it must be kept in mind that Catholic missionaries confront serious problems in this area in those places where proselytism is prohibited because of established state religions (such as occurs in several Muslim countries). This theme is very much present in the discussion and ought to be considered as one of the elements that missiology must confront today.

Present day missiology, as it is presented at the end of the twentieth century, is filled with methodological challenges that refer to its status as a discipline and these are not simply material challenges that confront the elaboration of the implications of inter-religious dialogue, inculturation, and the proclamation of the good news.⁴⁰

3. The Vincentian mission: an action of love

From the perspective of the encyclical letter of Pope Benedict XVI⁴¹ and the practices and teaching of Saint Vincent⁴² we now come to the primary objective of this work.

Before entering into the theme I want to highlight the surprising and joyful acceptance that the document of Benedict XVI has received in all areas. As a recognized theologian and with precision and clarity the Pope has deepened the concept of love in the heart of all Christians. "It is not Christian to profess an ideology except

⁴⁰ With regard to the burning challenges that missionaries confront today, their statements are very significant and appear in *Informe. A los 40 años del decreto Ad Gentes y 15 de la Redemptoris mission. La vigencia de la mission*, in *Misioneros Tercer Milenio*, February 2006, 28-33.

⁴¹ BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas est*, December 25, 2005.

⁴² Cf. ANDRÉS MOTTO, *La práctica del amor y elo charisma vicentino*, in *Vincentiana* (2006), 42-59; GIUSEPPE GUERRA, *San Vicente y Santa Luisa en la Encíclica "Deus Caritas est,"* in *Vincentiana* (2006), 106-110.

because of its relationship to the person.” At the same time it is surprising that this Pope, who is considered a hard-line theologian and one who has a long bureaucratic history, in his first encyclical demonstrates an understanding of the profound emptiness of the modern person, an emptiness that is translated in a thousand different ways but that in substance amounts to an absence of love.

In a classical society, impoverished, weighed down by enormous fear and violence, Saint Vincent proposed the proclamation of the word through popular missions and the practice of love as an organized and free service. In this way he was able to confront the serious problems of European society with regard to the nomadic and permanent poor.⁴³

Since others have more thoroughly studied the encyclical of the Pope, I will now focus on the teachings of our founder.

The life of Vincentian missionaries is explained by their awareness of being called by Christ. Vincent prayed that the community would always keep alive this missionary desire: “Ah! Gentlemen, let us all ask God fervently for this sprit for the whole Company, this spirit which will carry us everywhere so that when men see one or two missionaries they can say: ‘Behold apostolic men on the point of leaving for different parts of the globe to bear the Word of God.’ Let us pray to God to grant us this heart. There are some of us who, by the grace of God, possess it and all such are servants of God. But to go there, O Savior! Not to allow oneself to be stopped, ah! that indeed is something! We should all have this heart, detached from all things so that we may have perfect confidence in the mercy of God without taking thought, without growing uneasy, without losing courage.”⁴⁴

It was not I who chose Christ, but Christ chose me. This is the basis of a strong vocation: to belong to God, to be a part of God through complete love and chastity, through freedom which comes from poverty, and through the total donation of self in obedience. This is the light that I want to reflect. He is the road to the Father, the love with which I want to love, the joy I want to share, and the peace that I want to cultivate. Jesus is everything for me. We have been chosen to bring the fire of God’s love to others. Saint Vincent reminds us of this: “Now, if it be true that we are called to spread God’s love in all directions, if we are bound to kindle it among the

⁴³ It is recommended that you read: IGNACIO BURGOS, *San Vicent y los pobres de us tiempo*, and PAUL CHRISTOPHE, *Para leer la historia de la pobreza*, 117-157.

⁴⁴ SV XI, 291-292; ES XI, 190; Conferences to the missionaries, Repetition of Prayer, August 22, 1655.

nations, if it is our vocation to spread this divine fire throughout the world, if this is so, my brothers, how should I myself not burn with the divine fire!"⁴⁵

The vocation of the missionary is fulfilled only through a communion of intense love with the person of Jesus, a communion that endures for all of one's life. Thus, if our life grows in this unity with the Lord Jesus, then our love for the poor and our service with them is continually renewed. The missionary vocation is most simple: this vocation depends on the love that we have for the Lord and this leads us to be willing to make the Lord known regardless of the sacrifice. "You see, gentlemen, we should be all for God and the service of the people and we should give ourselves to God to that end, and give our lives to that end. We must strip ourselves bare, so to speak, to put on the new man. At least we should be disposed to come and go according to the good pleasure of God... lastly, we should willingly devote ourselves to the service of our neighbor and to extend the empire of Jesus Christ in souls."⁴⁶

Let us ask ourselves, why there are few Vincentian missionary vocations in the world? We could give various and diverse responses. Possibly one of them is that we have lost the simplicity of the gospel. Young people today do not want to listen but want to see. When young people desire to become Vincentian missionaries it would be wonderful for them to be able to find in our communities a unity among the members, the newness of the gospel and service to the poor. They want to see a concrete plan for life and not simply listen to beautiful discourses. It would be sad if they could not see God in us. If Christ is not in us, we cannot make Christ known to other. If we do not live only for Jesus Christ, we cannot make Christ come alive in others. Saint Vincent insisted that his missionaries should continually clothe themselves anew in Christ.

Let us be willing to go to the most distant countries: missions "ad gentes." Vincent envisioned his missionaries working on the front lines in the missions. He wanted his missionaries to be generous, decisive, committed and free for the mission: "O gentlemen, how happy are those who feel this disposition, men to whom God has given the grace of being prepared and disposed to go to foreign lands to spend their lives there for Jesus Christ! History tells us of the many martyrs who have sacrificed themselves for God. And if we see that so many men in armies expose their lives for a

⁴⁵ SV XI, 263; ES XI, 554; Conferences to the Missionaries, *On Charity*, May 30, 1659.

⁴⁶ SV XI, 402; ES XI, 281; Conferences to the Missionaries, *Repetition of Prayer*, June 17, 1657.

little honor, or perhaps in the hopes of a little earthly recompense, with what far greater reason should not we expose our lives to carry the gospel of Jesus Christ to the most distant lands to which his providence calls us.”⁴⁷

It is necessary that we realistically present to our future missionaries the demands of our Vincentian vocation, our life in community and especially the demands of our missionary life.

3.1. A powerful proposal – A way of holiness

In the depths of the heart of every Christian is the desire to be holy. Saint Vincent was a saint because he discovered Christ in those who were poor. Vincentians are called to be holy. God wants us to be holy.⁴⁸ Is there any clearer statement of God’s will for our Congregation? It is certain that God wants each one of the members of the Congregation to be holy. Holiness does not mean piety but rather means that one is possessed by God. Men and women who are truly holy reflect the presence of God. People are able to perceive God in them and those who are poor are also able to discover God in them. They communicate strength and peace and love in their actions. Those who are holy see with different eyes because God has taken possession of their eyes. They love with a different love because God, who knows how to join justice and love, has taken possession of their heart. Holy people listen to the profound voices of society because God has given them a new ability to listen. Truly holy people evangelize those who are poor because they understand that the poor person is their sister and brother. Their heart beats with the heartbeat of the poor. In the genuinely holy person, the poor experience a respect for their dignity and recognize that they are the creators of their own destiny.

We are called to be holy. We are called to allow the fire of God to purify our lives, our hearts. Let us allow God to take possession of us

⁴⁷ SV XI, 51; ES XI, 362; Conferences to the Missionaries, On Indifference to Employments, August 30, 1658.

⁴⁸ Brothers and sisters, we earnestly ask and exhort you in the Lord Jesus that, as you received from us how you should conduct yourselves to please God — and as you are conducting yourselves — you do so even more.... This is the will of God, your holiness: that you refrain from immorality, that each of you know how to acquire a wife for himself in holiness and honor, not in lustful passion as do the Gentiles who do not know God; not to take advantage of or exploit a brother in this matter, for the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you before and solemnly affirmed. For God did not call us to impurity but to holiness. Therefore, whoever disregards this, disregards not a human being but God who also gives his holy Spirit to you (1 Thessalonians 4:1-8).

and then let us totally commit ourselves to God in the evangelization of those persons who are poor.

Today Vincentians are called to go to the poorest of the poor and to offer them integral promotion. We are sent to form groups of young people who are loving and filled with the Vincentian spirit. We are called to be saints!⁴⁹

3.2. Jesus in the poor – A mission of love

Here we draw near to our Vincentian identity. Vincent, with the power of his love of Christ and through his mission of love toward the poor knew how to stir up the hearts of thousands of people of his era and has continued to move the hearts of people today. For Vincent the poor were the abandoned children, the galley slaves, the infirm and those living in misery. For us the poor are: abandoned children lacking opportunity, and hungry young women and men who live on the streets, young mothers who need help in order not to abort their children, the elderly who live alone and are abandoned and feel as though they are not loved, refugees and those who live in the slums of the great cities. Vincent knew that people who are poor not only needed money but also needed respect. They need the hands of those who will serve them and they need the hearts of those who will love them. Today people who are poor not only hunger for bread but hunger to be seen as human persons. They hunger for dignity and want to be treated as persons. They hunger for love. Saint Vincent saw the poor as the sacrament of Christ. He spoke to the Ladies of Charity and said: “Jesus himself willed to be born poor, to welcome poor persons into His company, to serve those who were poor, to put Himself in their place, even going so far as to say that the good and the harm we do to those who are poor He will consider as done to His Divine Person.... What love can we have for Him if we don’t love what He loved! That being the case, Ladies, loving those who are poor is to love Him in that way; serving poor persons well is to serve Him well.”⁵⁰ In the same way he recommended that the missionaries turn over the medal so that they might see with the eyes of faith: “I should not judge poor peasants, men or women, by their exterior, nor by their apparent mental capacities. All the more is this so as very frequently they scarcely seem to have the appearance or mind of reasonable beings, so gross and earthly are they. But turn the medal and you will see by the light of faith that the Son of God, whose will it was to be poor, is represented to us by these creatures.... O my God, what a beautiful sight are the poor if we

⁴⁹ Cf. http://nuntia.cs.depaul.edu/china/spanish1_familiavincentina.htm

⁵⁰ Cf. SV XIII, 811-812; ES X, 954-955; CCD XIIIb, 433-434.

consider them in God and according to the esteem in which they were held by Jesus Christ.”⁵¹

Saint Vincent encourages us to bring the salvation of God to the poor. He said: “O Savior! O my Lord and my God! You have raised up a Company for this purpose; you have sent it to the poor and it is your will that it should make you known to them as the one, true God and Jesus Christ whom you did send into the world so that by this means they may have eternal life. Thus it is that we should prefer this occupation to all earthly conditions and employments and consider ourselves more happy therein. O my God! Who can comprehend it?”⁵²

To love the poor is to work for justice: “I praise God for the charity the city of Marseilles is showing to the poor in their present need and for the timely help you have procured for the convicts suffering from the cold weather and poverty. God will grant you the grace, Monsieur, of softening our hearts toward the wretched creatures and of realizing that in helping them we are doing an act of justice and not of mercy!”⁵³

3.2.1. Prayer: support for the mission

This mission of love is sustained only by the power and the strength of prayer. Only in this way are we able to understand why Saint Vincent insisted on the need for prayer. Looking at his own life he taught that prayer begins with silence, silence in which God speaks to us and we listen. We cannot be committed to love others if we ourselves do not have love. Saint Vincent provides us with a model of a life of prayer. He joined prayer and action, contemplation with action, prayer with his commitment to the poor: “Let us love God, my brothers, but let us love Him with all our strength and with the sweat of our brow. For very often many acts of love of God, of complacency, of benevolence, and such like interior affections and practices, although very good and very desirable, are yet to be suspected if they do not reach the practice of effective love. ‘In this,’ said our Lord, ‘is my Father glorified, that you bring forth much fruit’ (John 15:8). And this is what we ought to be on the lookout for because there are many who, if they have a recollected exterior, and

⁵¹ Cf. ANDRÉ DODIN, *Entretiens spirituels de Saint Vincent de Paul*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, p. 895; ES XI, 725; Conferences to the Missionaries, Extract from a conference on the spirit of faith.

⁵² DODIN, *op. cit.*, 497-498; ES XI, 388; Conferences to the Missionaries, On the End of the Congregation of the Mission, December 6, 1658.

⁵³ SV VII, 98; ES VII, 90; CCD VII, 115.

an interior filled with lofty feelings about God, rest there; but when it comes to deeds and there is need for action, they stop short. They flatter themselves by the warmth of their imagination; they rest content with the sweet discourses they have with God in prayer; they even speak to Him as though they were angels. But apart from this, should there be question of working for God, of suffering, of self-denial, of instructing the poor, of going out to seek the lost sheep, of loving to be in want, of accepting illness or disgrace, alas! they are no longer to be found and their courage fails them.”

“And this is so true that the holy Apostle tells us that only our deeds will accompany us into the next life. Let us therefore reflect upon this and with all the more reason because there are many in this age who seem virtuous, and in reality are so, who are nevertheless more inclined to a soft and easy life than to solid and hard-working devotion. The Church is compared to a great harvest field that needs laborers but the laborers are wanting. There is nothing more in keeping with the gospel than on the one hand to gather up light and strength for the soul in prayer, spiritual reading, and solitude and then to go forth and dispense this spiritual good to people. This is to do what our Lord, and his apostles after him, enjoined. This is to join the office of Martha and Mary. This is to imitate the dove, that half digests its food and then with its beak places the remainder in the mouths of its young to feed them. This is how we should act; that is how we should by our deeds bear witness to God and show that we love him.”⁵⁴

The life of the missionaries is one of lively prayer because they are in continual contact with the poor. This makes them contemplatives in the world. Prayer is their nourishment and support. To the missionaries who pray God grants them an incredible interior freedom to serve the most poor.

Prayer is fundamental in the Congregation because it sustains our mission and reminds us of the fact that we are instruments of God’s love: “Let us put much interest in the practice of prayer because all good things come to us through prayer. If we persevere in our vocation, it is because of prayer; if we are successful in our undertakings, it is because of prayer; if we do not fall into sin, it is because of prayer; if we continue to live a life of charity and if we are saved, all of this is because of God’s grace and prayer. Just as God denies nothing to those who pray so also God grants almost nothing without prayer. *Ragate Dominum messis*. No, God grants nothing without prayer, not even the continued proclamation of the gospel or

⁵⁴ DODIN, *op. cit.*, 905-906; ES XI, 733-734; Extract from a Conference to the Missionaries, On the Love of God, undated.

those things that would give him glory. *Rogate Dominum messis*. But Lord this matter concerns you and is something that is intimately bound up with you. This does not matter! *Rogate Dominum messis*. Therefore, with complete humility let us ask God to allow us to enter into this practice of prayer.”⁵⁵

In the conference of December 6, 1658 Saint Vincent explains the end of the Congregation of the Mission and insists on the cultivation of an interior life: “Let us remain within the limits of our vocation; let us labor to become interior men, to conceive great and holy affections for the service of God; let us do the good that presents itself to be done and let us do it in the way we have said. I do not say that it is necessary to proceed to infinity and to undertake all things without distinction, but those things which God lets us see he asks of us. We are His and not our own; if He increases our work, He will also increase our strength. O Savior! what happiness! O Savior! if there were several paradises to whom would you give them if not to a missionary who shall have reverently persevered in all the works you have marked out for him and who shall never fail to carry out all the duties of his state! This is what we hope for, my brothers, and that is what we ask of His divine majesty, and now let us all render Him infinite thanks for having called and chosen us for such holy functions, sanctified as they have been by our Lord himself who first exercised them. Oh! what graces have we not reason to hope for if we exercise them in His Spirit, for the glory of His Father and the salvation of souls. Amen.”⁵⁶

3.2.2. Our mission: to bring the love of God to the poor

Today more than ever before, the mission to the poor is urgent. The poor not only lack that which is fundamental but they also need God so that their lives can have meaning. It is most necessary to place the person of Jesus Christ, the only Savior of the world, in the center of the life of people who are poor. The Vincentian mission is to bring God, through the love of Jesus Christ, to the poor wherever they might be found. Where there is misery there is human suffering and hunger for God and hunger for the love of others. Where there is misery there is not only hunger for bread but also hunger for love and goodness and dignity.

⁵⁵ DODIN, *op. cit.*, 369-370; ES XI, 285-286; Repetition of Prayer, On Prayer, August 10, 1657 [Translator’s Note: this conference is not in the English edition of the Conference that was translated by Joseph Leonard, C.M. in 1963].

⁵⁶ DODIN, *op. cit.*, 509-510; ES XI, 398, Conference to the Missionaries, *On the end of the Congregation of the Mission*, December 6, 1658.

Saint Vincent reminds the missionaries that they are the ones who continue the mission of Jesus Christ: "The state of a missionary is one of conformity with the Gospel maxims; it consists in leaving and abandoning all things, as the Apostles did, in order to follow Jesus Christ and, in imitation of him, to do all that is becoming."⁵⁷

The Vincentian missionary brings to others the esteem and love of God because to love another person is to desire that which is good for him/her. To love God is to desire that God's name be revealed, known, and honored throughout the world. Saint Vincent distinguishes between affective love, which as he says, is a certain movement of the lover toward the one who is loved, a certain complacency and kindness toward the one who is loved. Effective love consists in doing what the lover commands and desires. "The proof of this love, the mark or effect of this love, gentlemen, is that mentioned by our Lord, namely, that those who love Him will keep His word. Now the Word of God consists of His teaching and counsels. We shall furnish a proof of our love if we love His doctrine and teach it to others. According to this, the state of the mission is a state of love inasmuch as, in itself, it is concerned with the doctrine and counsels of Jesus Christ; and it professes to lead the world to esteem and love our Lord."⁵⁸

The Vincentian missionary has been called to bring the fire of God's love to others: "Now, if it be true that we are called to spread God's love in all directions, if we are bound to kindle it among the nations, if it is our vocation to spread this divine fire throughout the world, if that is so, my brothers, how should I myself not burn with the divine fire? How should I not be enkindled with the love of those with whom I dwell, how should I not edify my own brothers by the exercise of this love and lead my dear confreres to the practice of the acts that proceed from this love? At the hour of death we shall see the irreparable loss we have caused.... If not all of us, at least those who have not practiced this fraternal charity as we are bound to. How can we give it to others, if we have it not ourselves? Let us carefully consider if it is to be found among us, not in general but in each of us, and in the requisite degree; for if it is not enkindled among us, if we do not love one another as Jesus Christ loved us, if we do not produce acts like unto His, how may we hope to spread this love through the world? We cannot give what we do not possess.

⁵⁷ DODIN, *op. cit.*, 859; ES XI, 697; Extract from a conference to the Missionaries, *On the vocation of a Missionary*, undated.

⁵⁸ DODIN, *op. cit.*, 910; ES XI, 736; A rough draft of a conference to the Missionaries, *On the love of God*, undated.

How, then, can a Company that has not true charity itself inflame the hearts of others?"⁵⁹

Let us remember the uniqueness of our Congregation and the reasons why we are called to evangelize the poor: "There is not in the Church of God a single Company which has the poor for its portion and which gives itself so wholly to the poor as never to preach in large cities. This is what missionaries profess to do; it is their special characteristic to be, like Jesus Christ, devoted to the poor. Our vocation then is a continuation of His, or, at least, it is in harmony with His in its circumstances. Oh! what happiness, my brothers! but what obligations we are under to have an affection for it.

A great motive, then for us is the dignity of this employment. To make God known to the poor; to announce Jesus Christ to them; to tell them that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand and that it is for the poor. Oh, how great that is! But that we should be called to be associated with, and to share in, the words of the Son of God surpasses our understanding. What! to render ourselves — I do not dare to say it — so great, so sublime as to preach the gospel to the poor, for it is above all else the office of the Son of God, and we are applied to it as instruments by which the Son of God continues to do from heaven what He once did on earth. Great reason have we, my brothers, to praise God and to thank Him unceasingly for this grace!

Another motive for devoting ourselves entirely to this function is its necessity. You know, Gentlemen, how great that necessity is. You are aware of the ignorance of the poor people, which is almost incredible, and you also know that there is no salvation for those who are ignorant of the necessary Christian truths, truths that must be known, according to the opinion of Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas and others, who think that a person who does not know who the Father is, nor the Son, nor the Holy Spirit — who are ignorant of the Incarnation and of the other mysteries — cannot be saved. And indeed, how can a soul that knows not God, nor what God has done for love of it — how can that soul believe, hope and love? And how can it be saved without faith, hope, and love? Now God, seeing this necessity and the accidents that have occurred, in the lapse of time, through the negligence of pastors and the rise of heresies, which have caused such great losses to the Church, has willed, in His great mercy, to remedy this by missionaries, sending them to place those poor people in a state of salvation."⁶⁰

⁵⁹ DODIN, *op. cit.*, 682; ES XI, 554; Conference to the Missionaries, *On Charity*, May 30, 1659.

⁶⁰ DODIN, *op. cit.*, 497; ES XI, 387-388, Conference to the Missionaries, *On the end of the Congregation of the Mission*, December 6, 1658.

Conclusion

I want to draw this reflection to an end with three conclusions:

1. In the formation process we want to offer to the candidates a theoretical and practical knowledge of the missions. In other words, we want to introduce into the theological curriculum the study of this area that is most important for the future Vincentian missionary. Thus, in accord with the level of formation, we want to offer mission experiences (short term experiences and longer experiences be it on the national or inter-provincial level). This would enable us to recapture a value that in previous eras was insisted upon: on the international level we are a missionary Congregation.
2. In light of the new missionary challenges we want to be men of God who are open to the action of God and aware of our own limitations. The work of salvation and liberation belongs to God and not men/women. We ought to pray and reflect on these new challenges which for us are the “new signs of the times” through which the God of the poor speaks to us.
3. Let us be women and men who dedicate ourselves to live our missionary vocation without any complex or fear. Let us live our vocation as a continuation of the vocation of Jesus Christ. Our only strength is found in God; our energy is the light and fire that comes from God. Let us allow ourselves to be embraced by this fire and then in turn to transmit this fire, this love to others on behalf of those who are most poor in our time.

As Vincentians we have reason to be in the Church and in the world and our reason is the mission. It is the best service that we can offer. Our Holy Father, Benedict XVI, has stated in his message for Mission Sunday: “Therefore, as has often been said, missionary commitment remains the first service that the Church owes to humanity today to guide and evangelize the cultural, social and ethical transformations; to offer Christ’s salvation to the people of our time in so many parts of the world who are humiliated and oppressed by endemic poverty, violence and the systematic denial of human rights”; and since the missionary commitment is a sign of the maturity of the community: “Every Christian community is born missionary, and it is precisely on the basis of the courage to evangelize that the love of believers for their Lord is measured. Consequently, we could say that for the individual members of the faithful it is no longer merely a matter of collaborating in evangelizing work but of feeling that they themselves are protagonists and co-responsible. This co-responsibility entails the growth of communion between the communities and increases reciprocal help with regard to the personnel (priests, men and

women religious and lay volunteers) and the use of the means necessary for evangelization today.”⁶¹

Saint Vincent continues to encourage his missionaries to hand themselves over to this wonderful undertaking. In the repetition of prayer of June 17th, 1657 he says: “We should all be for God and the service of the people, and we should give ourselves to God to that end and wear ourselves out to that end and give our lives to that end. We must strip ourselves bare, so to speak, in order to put on the new man. At least we should desire to be so disposed, if we are not already. We should be disposed to come and go according to the good pleasure of God, either to the Indies or elsewhere; last, we should willingly devote ourselves to the service of our neighbor and to extend the empire of Jesus Christ in souls.”⁶²

The Congregation of the Mission is called to continue the mission of Jesus Christ to the poor. The Vincentian charism is concretized in every Vincentian missionary. We humbly ask that God might allow us to hand ourselves over to this holy intention with joy and fidelity: to be authentic Vincentians during these modern times.

(Translation: CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M.)

⁶¹ BENEDICT XVI, *Message for the 81st World Mission Sunday*, 2007.

⁶² DODIN, *op. cit.*, 364; ES XI, 281, Repetition of Prayer, June 17, 1657.