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AN EXPERIENCE OF THE VINCENTIAN SPIRIT

IN THE PANAMANIAN NATIONAL MISSION

(1987-1993)

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INTRODUCTION

On February 1, 1987, the National Episcopal Conference of Panama asked two Vincentians to organize a national mission as part of the preparation of the Commemoration of the 500 years of evangelization in the Americas. This article is a brief sharing of that experience from the perspective of the Vincentian spirit. It is presented only as one of many experiences that are being developed in many of our provinces throughout the world. My hope is that this may serve in showing the lasting importance of the Vincentian spirit in the missions, but creatively adapted to the different and changing realities in which we live.

The article gives a little historical background of the Vincentian Missionary Team (Equipo Misionero Vicentino - "EMIVI"), the development of the national mission in its three phases (Pre-Mission, the Mission Proper, and the Post-Mission), the Vincentian spirit within the National Mission (especially in respect to the poor, the formation, reconciliation and the methodology) and a general conclusion.

I. HISTORY OF THE VINCENTIAN INTERPROVINCIAL MISSION TEAM:

In 1983 the Conference of Latin American Vincentian Provinces (CLAPVI) organized a seminar on Popular Missions in Santiago, Chile. Father Francisco Javier Barcenas, C.M. from the Central American Province and I, Father Thomas Sendlein, C.M. from the Panamanian Mission of the Eastern Province of the United States were among the participants. Through the sharing of the Vincentian spirit, of our pastoral experiences in Latin America, and of our organizational ideas, the group managed to put together a first draft of guidelines for a Latin American Vincentian Popular Mission Directory. During this encounter, Fr. Barcenas and I shared some of our missionary hopes for the future. Through this encounter, we were animated towards the future and received some practical guidelines on the popular missions. We then returned to our regular assignments in Panama.

In 1986 Fr. Barcenas and I, through our respective provincials, organized a Vincentian interprovincial missionary team (EMIVI). The team consisted not only of the two of us, but also of the members of Fr. Barcenas's lay youth group (Centro Juvenil Vicentino - "CEJUVI") and some members of other Vincentian lay groups and, for about one year, some Daughters of Charity. Later in 1988, Sister Silvia Lopez and Sister Gumecinda Fajardo of the Panamanian Missionary Catechist Community, which was co-founded by our deceased confrere, Bishop Francis Beckman, joined the team as full-time members. From February, 1986 to August, 1987, the missionary team received the benefit of 14 different experiences of mission from the rural zones to the marginal areas of the city in the country of Panama. Since it was an interprovincial team, we also received the opportunity to mission with the Indians in Guatemala and the peasants in El Salvador. Both of these latter experiences were done with the help of the Vincentian seminarians from the Central American Province.

These missions gave us various experiences on how to work as a missionary team of priests, sisters, seminarians and laity, on how to be creative in adapting to different realities, and on how to develop teaching material with the help of the missionaries themselves in order to have dialogue with the people who were actively attending the missions.

II. THE BEGINNINGS OF THE NATIONAL MISSION IN PANAMA

Having had these experiences and in order to offer this experience of mission to the different parishes in the various dioceses of Panama, we requested an intervention at the meeting of the National Episcopal Conference in the beginning of 1987. Our hope was to open a few doors in some of the parishes to the possibility of popular missions. During our presentation and to our surprise, the bishops informed us that Fr. Barcenas and myself were already chosen to organize the National Mission as part of the Commemoration of the 500 years of evangelization in Panama under Bishop Oscar Mario Brown as President of this Commission. Instead of a few doors opening, all of a sudden the whole country was opened!

To begin such an undertaking, we organized the National Commission for Missionary Animation (Comision Nacional de Animacion Misionera - "Co.N.A.M."). We invited persons from all the ecclesiastical areas of Panama and some persons with special expertise. From February 1 until September 1, we finished our specific EMIVI commitments and started to integrate the spirit and experience of EMIVI into the National Mission as a base and starting point.

III. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NATIONAL MISSION IN PANAMA

According to the first draft of the guidelines for the popular missions, there are three moments in the missions, namely, the pre-mission (a time to prepare everything for the mission), the mission proper (a time for the missionaries to accompany and evangelize with the people) and the post-mission (a time for the fruit of the mission to grow). Without the pre-mission, the mission itself becomes very difficult and the fruit of the mission becomes very limited. Without a post-mission, the fruit of the mission barely survives or even disappears.

1) PRE-MISSION

In order to begin this enormous project of a national mission, the Co.N.A.M. decided on the theme for the coming six years of evangelization: "New Persons in New Communities for a New Society!" A poster and a Mission song were developed with this theme. We decided on a tentative schedule for the mission in the different dioceses for the next 6 years, starting with the Diocese of Chitre, which was celebrating its 25th anniversary. With these decisions made, we started to get down to the basic work of the Pre-Mission.

We started to meet with the bishop, the pastors, the religious and the laity of the diocese in order to understand the socio-economic and religious realities of the different communities and to help them organize the various diocesan, parish, and rural community level committees that would be necessary for the mission.

Committees for liturgy, finance, living and eating accommodations, transportation, propaganda and visiting were organized. Each committee had its own part and responsibility in the preparation for the mission. Each committee tried to involve as many people as possible, for example, where the missionaries lived and had breakfast for the two week mission was not normally to be the place where they ate lunch and supper. They would eat with different families each day or for each meal so that more people would be able to take on the responsibility for the missionaries. Each parish or community made a census of all the families in their area and so everyone was visited even before the missionaries arrived and we received information about the reality of the area beforehand. From that information we were able to know how many communities and how many missionaries were needed for those areas.

In September, 1987 we started the recruitment and formation of the missionaries throughout the country of Panama. The team from EMIVI were the basic trainers in the formation of the missionaries. We went from diocese to diocese since the missionaries would come from the whole country in order to evangelize in the 14 mainly rural parishes of the Diocese of Chitre. Each year a group of missionaries even came from the neighboring country of Costa Rica. They were formed by us using the Vincentian "Colegio Seminario" facilities in San Jose, thereby making the National Mission have an international flavor from the beginning.

The teaching material that we used in the EMIVI missions served as a starter for the National Mission formation. However, the evaluations of each of the formations helped to develop further and improve both the content and the methodology. All the material was based on dialogue with and participation of the people and so it could respond to the various realities of the different groups of people. Religious sisters, seminarians and laity all participated in the formations.

Basically, every year we worked on the pre-mission from May to December as we went from diocese to diocese. In certain years, up to 3,000 persons participated in some formation to be missionaries. In 1988, we formed some missionaries to be trainers in the formation of other missionaries in the Diocese of Veraguas, thus multiplying the possibility of training more people. It is noteworthy that most of these trainers came from a Vincentian parish. After this successful experiment, in 1989 we started to do the same in each of the dioceses.

2) THE MISSION PROPER

Each year from January to April, during the dry summer months in Panama, we sent the missionaries in teams to the various rural communities, to the towns and to the mission centers of the city parishes for a two week commitment. When we arrived for the mission in Panama City in 1992, because of the number of big parishes and the reality of the city environment, we missioned half the parishes in the summer of 1992 and the other half in the summer of 1993. From May to December of 1992, we developed specialized missions to certain groups.

A) MISSIONS IN THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Since many of the missionaries were poor, the Co.N.A.M. made sure that the lack of money was not a hindrance to being a missionary. From the central point of departure in their respective diocese to their return, the transportation, board and lodging were cared for either directly by Co.N.A.M. or by the various diocesan and parish committees. Sometimes this involved the movement of 1,000 missionaries at the same time, from different parts of the country.

There was one more full day of formation and organization, which included the possibility of conversing with the pastor about the situations of the various communities to be missioned. During the Mass celebrated by the bishop of that diocese, the missionaries received the mission cross and were sent out to the communities. Some laity from those areas would be present to accompany them. Most of the time the community would be waiting to receive the missionaries. That same day the missionaries would begin to visit the homes and in the evening have the first dialogue with the people.

During the two weeks, the children would get together in the mornings, the youth in the afternoons and the adults in the evening. Each group had themes and material adapted to their level and using the little method of St. Vincent. The themes for the adults moved from the individual to the community to the society, thus developing the basic theme of "New Persons in New Communities for a New Society."

From 1988 to 1993, more than 3,000 communities were evangelized in Panama, which averaged out to about 200 mission centers or rural communities, each with its missionary team, during each two week mission. The missionaries worked in teams of 2 to 8, depending on the size of the mission center and there was a total of 9,399 two-week missionary commitments in order to realize this task. Despite the Latin American "machismo" mentality, namely, that church is for the women, there were more male missionaries than female. The missionaries were more or less equally split between youth and adults. 90 percent of the missionaries were lay. At first there was much skepticism about the laity being the main missionary agents, but after the first 2-week mission in January, 1988, those fears proved to be completely unjustified. However, in order to emphasize that the missionaries were being sent, none of them worked in their own communities as missionaries. (For more detailed information on numbers, please confer the page "Statistics of the National Mission in Panama.")

During the same years, 1988 to 1993, CLAPVI offered two more Latin American encounters of the popular missions, one in Columbia and the other in Panama. During the latter, many of those attending the seminar participated in one of the two-week missions.

Although the National Mission had as its main thrust evangelization and not the sacraments, the Sacrament of Reconciliation was offered in most of the communities. Many persons were brought back to an active participation in the Church after years of separation. The sacraments of Baptism, First Communion, Confirmation and Marriage as such were not celebrated during the mission proper since they belong to the ordinary pastoral activity of the parish with their own specific preparation. The pastors and the pastoral agents had much to do in the post-mission since, in the course of the 6 years, we gave to the respective pastors

lists totaling 5,921 couples who wanted to get married and 13,214 youth who wanted to be confirmed.

During the two weeks, mass concentrations were held for the children, for the youth and for the whole community. At the end of the two weeks "a farewell Mass" was celebrated, not "a closing Mass". The reason is simple, but very important. Even though the missionaries leave, the mission continues in the post-mission. The agents of the post-mission are the people who participated in the mission. Their aim is to help the fruits of the mission grow in union with their pastors and pastoral agents and also to extend the spirit of the mission to all those who did not participate.

B) SPECIALIZED MISSIONS

Despite the difficulty in traveling and communication, we found out that it is easier to mission in the rural areas than in the big cities. As we came closer to populated areas, the percentage of persons who participated in the mission became less and less. There are probably many reasons for this phenomenon: more indifferentism, more diversions, a lack of the sense of community, etc. For this reason, we organized specialized missions. If many people in the cities would not come to the mission, we would go to them.

One of the specialized missions that reached many persons was the school mission. With the necessary permissions from the Ministry of Education, missionaries went to the majority of the grammar and high schools and the various universities in Panama City in order to share the word not only with the children and the youth, but also with the teachers and professors. Once again special teaching material was developed for each group.

Co.N.A.M. developed both missions to factory workers and missions to the owners of the factories, businessmen and professional persons. The themes for both were based on the social teachings of the Church.

In coordination with the prison chaplain, missionaries went into the various prisons in Panama City. Another group gave missions to the National Police, including the Security Police for the President of Panama. There were even short missions for those who worked in the Legislative Assembly and for those in civic groups.

In collaboration with the Archdiocesan Pastoral Committee for the Family, the Co.N.A.M. helped in developing the themes and the formation for a Family Mission Week throughout the country. Also other specialized missions were organized for the sick in the hospitals and to the Afro-Panamanian and the Chinese-Panamanian communities of Panama.

3) POST-MISSION

The mission does not end with the departure of the missionaries, but continues both through the normal pastoral activities and through the extension of the mission to other people and to other areas. Therefore the main agents are the

people themselves in union with their bishop, their pastor and the various pastoral agents.

As a help in the post-mission, the missionaries assembled a list of more than 7,000 persons who actively attended the mission and of whom the missionaries thought would be good pastoral agents. On the evening before the farewell Mass, during the celebration of the Word, the people had the opportunity to make individual and communal commitments to continue the mission in their communities. Over 1,000 groups or commissions were organized during the National Mission for this purpose.

Both the missionaries and the people who received the mission have come to realize the need for more formation in order to evangelize better. Many of those who participated in the mission in their own communities have become missionaries. Many groups of missionaries in union with their bishop and the pastor have continued to mission on diocesan and local levels.

Several pastoral programs either have been started or have been given new fervor in their role within the Church, for example, to the prisoners, to the Afro-Panamanian community, to the Chinese-Panamanian community.

The Co.N.A.M. has taken on the role of accompanying the various dioceses and parishes in the post-mission by the formation and organization of renewal missions, formation of pastoral agents, creating new missionary teaching material according to the need, giving support for the various pastoral programs, animating and maintaining a network of communication among the missionaries of the various dioceses, developing new specialized missions to specific groups and, at times, assisting the work of the Pontifical Mission Societies in their missionary thrust to share the gospel beyond the borders of Panama.

IV. THE VINCENTIAN SPIRIT IN THE NATIONAL MISSION IN PANAMA

When EMIVI became part of Co.N.A.M., two interactions happened:

- 1) EMIVI was able to offer the National Mission part of the Vincentian spirit, especially concern for the poor, for the formation of the clergy and the laity, and for the Sacrament of Reconciliation.
- 2) The National Mission widened the scope of EMIVI to include more than just the poor. The mission was directed to the whole Church and persons from many different and diverse movements participated as missionaries. Each offered their unique charism for the benefit of the whole Church.

1) THE POOR

The Poor as receivers of the missions:

The poor in the distant rural areas, the poor both on the outskirts and in the slums of the cities, the prisoners, the sick and the workers all were attended by the National Mission. There are communities that receive a visit from the parish priest only once a year, and yet they were served by a team of missionaries for two weeks. The missionaries traveled by bus, truck, boat, horseback and on foot

in order to insure that all the communities received their missionaries. On a few occasions we even had to fly them to the communities in small planes and helicopters. Since the National Mission was for the whole country, no community was rejected because of lack of funds. As was mentioned before, the people in the poor rural areas are the ones who responded most to the mission.

The Poor as missionaries:

Excluding the Archdiocese of Panama, which has half the population of the country, one of the poorest and smallest provinces of Panama constantly had the largest number of missionaries. In order to participate in the formations, some had to travel some 14 hours on foot and then two hours by bus. One young person who had lost one leg from a snake bite when he was small constantly would travel by horseback from his community in order to come to the formations and then get around on crutches. When the time came to assign him to a community, he was open to any place despite his impediment. The spirit of sacrifice (mortification), the humility, the simplicity and the meekness in dealing with others are only surpassed by their tremendous zeal in wanting to learn more of the gospel so that they could share the Good News with others.

The Situation of the Poor as subject matter:

In Latin America, the gap between the rich and the poor has constantly increased. In Panama, because of the political situation and the economic sanctions early in the National Mission, unemployment became a tremendous problem. Although some economic indicators showed that there was some recovery in 1991, the fact was that the poor were not benefiting from it. With this in mind, we organized a specialized mission for professionals and businessmen in 1992. Economic experts presented the concrete actual situation of the poor in Panama, a priest applied the social teachings of the Church to the situation and then the participants broke into small discussion groups in order to take concrete steps to respond to the situation.

The Poor as experienced personally:

It is so easy to talk about the poor in general, but not experience what it means to be poor or to know any poor firsthand. Many missionaries who came from the affluent society worked hand in hand with the poor missionaries on the team. They also had the opportunity to live among the poor and learn from them. Those experiences have left a profound and lasting effect on the missionaries.

2) FORMATION

Formation of the clergy:

Besides our Vincentian seminarians, every year seminarians both from the diocesan seminaries and from different religious communities participated in the formation and in the missions. Some of their formation was done by our lay trainers. During the mission they became one of the members of the team which included the laity from different parts of the country. They worked with the poor in rural areas and now many are pastors in rural communities. In January, 1995,

for example, six priests were ordained from one of the dioceses - and all had participated in the missions.

Formation of religious:

Many different communities of sisters were represented and presented their charism of the religious life to people who rarely would have the opportunity of getting to know a sister. Their fervor, sincerity and creativity helped a great deal to maintain the continuity of the mission.

Formation of the laity:

The laity of the Church is like a sleeping giant within the Catholic Church. Given the opportunity, they can be a tremendous factor in evangelization. Through the formation we were able to communicate a missionary spirit to them and help them look beyond the narrow confines of their small parochial world in order to see the needs and life-styles of others especially the poor. They are anxious to participate more actively within the Church and the mission opened up that possibility. Furthermore, many of the young missionaries are seeking a deeper commitment within the Church.

3) RECONCILIATION

One of the most important elements in the traditional Vincentian mission is the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This sacrament has not lost its role within today's mission. During every mission, because of the number of communities and the distance between them, the large number of persons who wanted to confess and the scarcity of priests, we were always hard pressed to try to respond to this need. Many people after years of not approaching confession were reconciled with God and with the community. Unfortunately, sometimes it was just impossible to reach all the areas.

As in St. Vincent's day, the mission was a chance to be reconciled also with family members and with one's neighbors. In one rural community, where over a hundred and fifty persons sat on make-shift bamboo benches under a huge thatched roof, members of the same family were attending the mission, some on one side and the others on the far side. Half way through the mission, the daughter-in-law started to talk to the mother-in-law - the first time in 5 years. Later on in the same mission center, two neighbors shook hands and started to arrive at an agreement. The one had put up a fence on the land that the other claimed for himself.

4) METHODOLOGY

The methodology was based on dynamic dialogue whereby the missionary becomes a facilitator and a guide in the discussion thereby making the people participate in the mission and be active agents.

The major themes for discussion were developed by St. Vincent's little method: nature, motive and means. What is the theme, especially in our reality; why

should we do it or avoid it; how can we put the theme into practice in our reality. These questions were developed through readings from Scripture and the documents of the Church, certain songs and socio-dramas, analysis of prayers and Panamanian sayings, drawings and photographs, panel discussions and testimonies, etc. Depending on the question, the people were divided into groups of 2 or 3, 4 to 5, or 7 to 10. Sometimes secretaries were used to give the summaries of the discussion to the whole group. Each answer was respected, but sometimes clarified by the missionary and little by little even the shy adult who never had the opportunity to go to school would start to share.

This dialogue methodology was incorporated into all the missionary teaching material for the children, the youth, the adults and the various specialized missions.

On the second Sunday of the mission, we brought together the neighboring mission centers for a "convivencia" - a sharing of the Christian faith in the Eucharist, a panel discussion on Christian vocations, food, and fun and games for the whole family. The panel discussion was organized in the following way: the missionary-coordinator or priest dialogues with the people about the reading of Ephesians on marriage and the Gospel according to Matthew about the Apostles being "fishers of men," then he gives each panelist 2 minutes to explain or give a testimony about his or her vocation. There were usually 6 on the panel: a priest, a religious sister, a missionary, a married couple and a catechist or lay minister of the Sunday service. After this, anyone from the assembly could ask anyone of the panelists a question about his or her vocation.

CONCLUSION

The spirit of the Vincentian Popular Missions is still very valid in today's evangelization, however, a process is needed to adapt this spirit to the different realities of the world. The CLAPVI encounters on popular missions helped to reinforce the validity and adaptability of this spirit to a Latin American reality. We who are called to be "Evangelizers of the poor" should strive to help the "Poor become Evangelizers" not only in their own immediate surroundings but also in other parts of their country and of the world.

The challenge that the CLAPVI seminar presented to us in Panama found its expression in EMIVI. Could it be providence that offered EMIVI a way of sharing the Vincentian concerns for the poor and the formation of future clergy and of the pastoral agents with the whole Panamanian Church through the National Mission?

The expansion from the missionary experience of EMIVI (missioning 20 communities in one parish at the same time) to the national missionary experience of Co.N.A.M. (missioning 200 communities in one diocese at the same time) was made possible through much prayer and through the creative endeavor of the whole Panamanian church. It called for the delegating of the different tasks and specialized missions to many people and groups who all responded joyfully and generously to the occasion.

As I mentioned in the beginning, this missionary experience is "only one of many experiences that are being developed in many of our provinces throughout the world." As we have learnt from the experiences of the other parts of Latin American, hopefully the missionary experience of EMIVI/Co.N.A.M. can serve to stimulate this process of adaptation to other realities. Furthermore, I hope that other experiences of the creativity of implementing this spirit of Vincentian missions in other parts of the world can be shared.

As I close, I ask for your prayers for the preservation and growth of the fruits of this mission in Panama during its post-mission phase.

STATISTICS OF THE NATIONAL MISSION IN PANAM

YEAR OF THE MISSION	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	TOTAL
No. OF 2 WEEK-MISSIONS ¹	1	3	3	4	3	2	16
NUMBER OF PARISHES	7	20	23	25	47	35	157
NUMBER OF MISSIONARY COMMITMENTS ²	300	1,655	2,241	2184	2,183	836	9,399
COMMUNITIES (CENTERS OF MISSION) ³	121	667	755	669	575	261	3,048
NUMBER OF HOMES VISITED	14,500	35,000	48,572	42,927	73,851	32,880	247,730
AVERAGE DAILY ATTENDANCE	11,500	67,500	74,831	38,724	48,013	16,572	257,140
COUPLES WANTING TO BE MARRIED ⁴	300	2,200	1,540	1,058	722	101	5,921
YOUTH WANTING TO BE CONFIRMED ⁴			5,760	4,107	2,764	583	13,214
POSSIBLE FUTURE PASTORAL AGENTS ⁵	450	1,700	1,878	1,596	1,150	390	7,164
COMMISSIONS FORMED FOR THE POST-MISSION ⁵			816	193	186	43	1,238

NOTES:

- 1) Number of Two-Week Missions: Each Mission consisted of two weeks in which a team of missionaries lived within the community or mission center in order to visit, to meet with the children, with the youth and with the adults, and to celebrate concentrations and a community get-together.
- 2) Number of Missionary Commitments of two-weeks: Some missionaries worked on more than one 2-week mission a year.
- 3) Communities or Mission Centers: Each rural community and each mission center in the cities had its own mission team for two weeks.
- 4) Since the National Mission had more an evangelizing thrust than a sacramental one, we gave the lists of those interested in Confirmation and Marriage to the pastor, so that he could give a good sacramental preparation according to the pastoral norms of the diocese.
- 5) We also gave the pastor the lists of possible future pastoral agents and the commissions that were formed, so that they all could work together during the post-mission.