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A Parish in Mission a Missionary Experience of the Province of Cuba

1994-1997 - Three Years in Mission

P. Jesús María Lusarreta, C.M.

Presentation

The experience which we here recount took place completely within two C.M. parishes of Cuba: Miraculous Medal and Our Lady of Mercy (Medalla Milagrosa and La Merced); and partially in two parishes of the diocese of Santiago de Cuba where the same method was used.

This experience has also been adapted as a model by "Evangelization 2000" a project of the Archdiocese of Havana, which chose our method because a "Parish in Mission" is constantly changing.

Why this Mission Project?

Our popular missions have short, medium, and long projects. But none, it seems to us, puts a parish in a permanent state of Mission. And that is what we sought.

To place a parish in Mission, in constant and progressive change, means:

- Choosing a missionary pastoral rather than a pastoral of Christianity.
- Creating a permanent atmosphere of evangelization.
- Animating the community so that every evangelized person becomes an evangelizer.
 - Encouraging growth and maturity in the Faith of every parishioner, in an integral way, as much in prayer and liturgy as in knowledge of the Message and commitment to the poor.
 - Since we are Vincentians, seeing that our charism impregnates all structures of our Pastoral.

Methodological Elements

Since our small community lived its Faith quietly, in timidity and fear, in a Christian pastoral that avoided giving witness, it needed:

- to live the Faith in small communities, returning to the style of Acts, in order to experience the Faith and be able to evangelize.

- to abandon self and move towards witness, and so discover that around every believer a little group gathers, grows and encourages one another.
- to discover that the *home* is the natural venue where God is spoken of with the family and with neighbors, and to overcome the fear of doing it.

These three elements: *The evangelizer, the Home, and the Vincentian Christian Community*, are the three essential elements of our Mission.

We began by forming the first Community, which would become a "reference point." We called a meeting, and were surprised when 60 showed up. With these we began the 12 catecheses of the Kerygma. After that we did the scrutinies, presented the Word, and started the life of the Community. Contrary to expectations, it persevered, discovered the true sense of Faith, and opened the way for forming the second Community.

With two Communities and a growing awareness of evangelization and service, we were ready to begin our new Mission.

Mission Structure

In its relationship to the community, the Mission operates on three levels:

1. *Organization and planning:*
Including: Study of existing reality.
Division of the parish into sectors.
Naming those responsible for action.
2. *Announcement:*
 - Within the communities.
 - Constantly growing.
 - Reaching each person, house to house, respecting their level of growing in the Faith.
3. *Follow-up:*
 - The mission does not end with the campaigns.
 - It continues in new communities, which necessitates drawing up a Directory of Communities.

The Three Projected Parts of the Experiment

- A. Objectives of the Mission;** of the different ministries.
- B. Progressive Message of the Mission** in nine phases, three per year for three years.
- C. Mission Methodology.**
 - A. *Main objective:*
Towards a parish in mission,

- "in a community of communities."
- which reaches every parishioner.
- delivering a progressive Message.
 - awakening in them the need to live their Faith in community. (To be developed in different degrees according to Ministries.)

B. The Message.

To those who do not attend church we must take the experience of community, since the Gospel says: "Go. And announce..." But one visit is nothing and could be a deception. So the mission is planned to make nine visits to each home over three years, with nine Kerygma messages offered to each home, to each person, in order that the Mission be "concrete and personalized."

- Times for the big mission:
- A week in Lent
 - A week in Advent
 - A week in the summer

Each phase, besides the message, has a concrete objective.

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|------------|--|---|
| 1st phase: | Message: <i>God loves us; and He loved us first.</i> Objective: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Visit each home to announce the Message. - Impose hands on the sick, pray for them, invite the others to form a Christian community. - Leave a folder explaining the theme. (This is done with every phase) |
| 2nd phase: | Message: <i>Jesus Christ is our Savior.</i> Objective: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Same as in phase 1, repeating the urging to form a Christian community. - Discovering the neediest and informing Caritas. |
| 3rd phase: | Message: <i>Jesus gave his life for us.</i> Objective: | Same as in 1 and 2. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Seeking the youth - We can also seek children. |
| 4th phase: | Message: Jesus command: " <i>Love one another.</i> " Objective: | Repeat invitation to form community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Set up the first Mission-Homes. - Ten homes are selected, with 8 to 14 members each (two meetings this week). |
| 5th phase: | Message: <i>Sin.</i> Objective: | Repeat call to community, and to youth and children |

- Get the youths to visit homes and invite other youths.
 - Invite kids to catechism.
 - Try to establish more Mission-Homes, which should be now 18, with two days in the mission.
- 6th phase: Message: *God is rich in Mercy.*
Objective: Same urging to form communities.
- A Mission-Home on every block. Should be 28 of them by now, with permanent missionaries.
- 7th phase: Message: *The Church: God's family.*
Objective: Same invitation. More Mission-Homes set up. More permanent missionaries.
- 8th phase: Message: *Come to the Community. Jesus awaits you.*
Objective: Same invitations. More Mission-Homes. More permanent missionaries.
- 9th phase: Message: *Virgin Mary, Servant of the poor.*
Objective: Same invitations.
- Reinforcing of communities.
 - Every block with a Mission-Home and permanent missionaries
 - The Message is long. Those who read must be invited to read the Gospel.

In this final phase of the Mission we desire that every person who has shown interest read the Gospel of Mark.

Missionary Methodology Which Has Been Used

A. The Mission is developed on three levels.

1. Spiritual-apostolic level of the missionaries.

Continual preparation of evangelizers is indispensable.

Basic theological fundamentals:

- Without prayer, no mission - Action of the Holy Spirit.
- Without risk, no evangelization - Action of the Son.
- Without work, no fruit - Action of the Father.
- Like the first Missioner - Mary, Immaculate Virgin.

Following this scheme we form missionaries.

We note: Nothing can be achieved without spiritual direction.

2. Systematic presentation of the Announcement.

- Progressive preaching of the Kerygma from house to house. Plus leaving the message, on paper, in each home.

3. *Does this style of Mission relate to our reality?*

We believe it does, totally, taking into account the characteristics of our people. Our ecclesial reality is very poor, due to the ideology of the country at this time, and for the state in which the Church has had to exist. As is well known, religion is very polarized.

- The few who come to church do so to seek a service: Mass.
- Attention to the sick is minimal.
- Catechesis is very rare, and controlled.

To breach this barrier and create an incisive, pastoral catechesis was a great risk. But we perceived signs that God's hour had arrived. We do not know why, but all commented how attendance at church was on the rise, that more youth were coming, that ... the time had come. So, we launched our New Evangelization, with its new methods, new zeal, new forms.

The first home visit was hard ... but it was wonderful to see a return to the Church. What were they told? How were they chosen? Most of them answered, and very well ... we were told it was time the Catholic Church did something like this ... since before they had abandoned us.

Establishing the first Mission-Homes was a wonderful happening. How were we able to get people to meet together in a home, when visiting homes was forbidden? The Lord opened homes to pray and listen to His Word.

Gathering the youth together was a similar experience.

And so we have had the joy of seeing the rise of a new Community,...

- By overcoming so many difficulties.
- And testifying that the Miraculous Virgin has been the number one Missioner, since every block now has her statue, which moves from house to house wherever requested, visiting both the well and the infirm.
- Seeing how children also became great missionaries.

The Possibility of Following this Method in Other Places:

They used to tell me that this method worked in other places, but it was not for Cuba. Now I see no reason to doubt that it could work elsewhere.

Our parish families have all been visited nine times each for these three years. But we realize some poor hidden families have not been found and are left without a visit.

A parish ambiance has been created, and the needs of the poor discovered. Caritas has been set up under the aegis of the Mission.

Children's attendance at catechism has increased four times. And during this time different catechetical methods have arisen to facilitate taking the Word to our families.

The final objective of the Mission was not to get people to church, but that they listen to the message. That first of all they go to a Mission-Home, and from there to the parish

Assembly, remembering their cultural background of religious sincretism, which makes it a slow process. But the first steps have been taken towards knowledge of, sympathy with, and adhesion to the Church, at the same time learning of and admiring her service to the poor.

- Education in liturgy ... learning to celebrate.
- Responsible organizing of Caritas in a Vincentian style.
- A process for initiating a person into the Community.
- Formation of Lay Missioners through an experience of Faith.

The Evangelization Process

A. Every convert lives his Faith on a different level.

In evangelizing everything is important home visits, chance meeting with people, animating liturgical celebrations, helping the poor, publicly professing the Faith. Normally it follows the following process:

- Meeting an individual believer.
- Concrete and progressive Gospel announcement.
- Invitation to the Faith, and follow-up.
- Joining a community (or Mission-Home), and the companionship of the Evangelizer.
- Invitation to help in service to the poor.
- Invitation to receive the Sacraments.
- And always: Follow-up and encouragement to be a witness to what one has discovered and believes.

B. Times for the Mission:

1. Advent
2. Lent
3. Summer

C. Organization during the big Mission:

1. Calling in all the Communities. The more committed ones will respond immediately; others will simply sign up and wait.
2. Short course of preparation for the Missioners: following the Message and Objectives corresponding to this phase of the Mission.
3. Sending-out ceremony for the Missioners on the first Sunday.
4. Carrying out the Mission according to the planned objectives.

D. The effectiveness of the big Mission depends on the home visits: The Announcement, and finding the poor and abandoned.

- Daily Mass is celebrated, but only for the Missioners.
- Many of the Missioners, because of their jobs, can only give a half day to the Mission.
- Lunch together, followed by evaluation, and go out again.
- At day's end each responsible gives a report to the Mission Director.

Each missioner carries:

- the sign of a Christian, the cross

- the Bible
- a notebook
- handouts with mission information.

Growth in the Parish Community

- Number of Missioners: from 62 in the first phase to 212 in the ninth.
- Number of communities: from one to ten.
- Number of youths: from none to 40.
- Number of Mission-Homes: from none to 52, and 10 more starting.

Observations

Under the framework of the New Evangelization: "New methods - New audacities!"

- A. *All previous Mission styles are changed, because of the fact that we remain three years or more in a parish...*
- With daily homilies at Mass.
 - Constant insistence on creating Communities and Mission-homes.
 - Mission style catechesis of children.
 - Youth pastoral, in continual evolution.
 - Constant attention to the sick.
 - Courageous recruitment of Evangelizers.

B. *To carry out our style of Mission:*

Since our church is in a "State of Mission," according to our Bishops ...

This manner of Mission enables itinerant missionaries to begin and motivate each phase, as they have already done in three of our Missions.

Finally:

The experience has not finished. We now begin the second part, which will go until 2000.

We are celebrating the Golden Anniversary of the construction of the church of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, and we believe that with what has been accomplished by the Mission we are ready and able to begin constructing a *new Church of the Miraculous Medal*, this time of "*Living Stones!*"

Our Objective:

"The Commitment of 2000 believers to keep alive and functioning our Church-Community, with everyone occupied in some Lay Ministry.

- Continuing the formation of communities.
- Forming Vincentian Volunteers, groups which foster Vincentian spirituality and practice it daily.

We believe that what we have always called Popular Mission is beginning now, but in a country which is in a "State of Mission."