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Accompanying the Post Mission

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THE FOLLOW-UP

IMPORTANCE OF THE CONTINUITY

Jésús Arzate, C.M.
From the Mexico Province

A priest asked his friend in whose parish a mission had just finished; "What did the mission leave behind?"

"And what happens after the Mission?" is also the question asked of us. It may seem to us a relative question, but there is no doubt that the future of the Popular Missions depends to a great degree on what the priests and pastoral staff perceive to be the effects of the mission.

Popular Missions that have been well organized and terminate with satisfactory results for the places and people that have requested the mission, are the best promotion for new requests and the only goal that we can hope for. The Popular Missions are a service to the church. The popular mission does not exist just to be a popular mission: it responds to the objective of evangelization, and it is realized within a much wider pastoral context.

For this reason, the continuity is fundamental for the mission and we cannot leave it out in our serious planning of this ministry.

The questions that we ask ourselves and to which we try to respond¹ in this brief presentation are:

- + In the time after a mission, what is the level of responsibility that the missionaries continue having in the evangelical animation of the community?
- + What are the methods, materials, dynamics, that ought to be followed in the continuity?
- + Should the missionary team return? How often?
- + With so many various pastoral styles and concepts, Is it possible to offer answers to the real needs of today's church
- + Finally, how to do an effective continuity?

¹We follow here the experiences of the Provinces of Spain and Portugal that were presented in Valencia at the Interprovincial Meeting on Popular Missions Teams in 1994.

BIBLICAL AND VINCENTIAN TRADITION

Just as God does not abandon his people, so the pastors accompany their people along the road of faith. The very apostle Paul maintained a fluid contact with those communities that he had evangelized: he was always aware of what was happening in those communities, he wrote to them and sent them his collaborators. ..

Vincent de Paul and the first missionaries not only left the *Charities* established in the missioned communities, but they organized their continuity. Let us remember that even Louise de Marillac began her collaboration with Saint Vincent as a visitor with the Charity Confraternity.

From 1940 until 1965, in Spain and other countries, there existed a period of enthusiasm for the Popular Missions. Many parishes in accordance with Canon Law at the time, were systematically missioned every 10 years. In a certain way, this regularity of missions constituted a very continuity of the mission. In many places, as for example in our parishes, it would not be a bad idea to recover this custom.

DEFINITION

In a group like this, with so many varieties of experiences and processes, we have to clarify what we are referring to when we speak of *continuity*, (*follow up, post mission of the Popular Mission*). For ourselves, we are referring to the time right after the days when the Mission Team acted directly (during a few weeks).

More concretely, we are concerned here about the continuity of the mission to the degree in which the missionaries are able to influence it: that is to say, previously in its planning stage or more in a more advanced way with its accompaniment and animation.. This is to say that today, the continuity is part of the very mission and for that reason, the missionary feels some responsibility in that part of the mission. This becomes actualized and realized in conjunction with the ordinary responsible pastoral agents of the community

We must not confuse *continuity of the mission* with renewal of the mission, or simply that some groups begun during the mission continue persevering. The idea of continuity makes reference to some objectives of the mission (missionary dynamics, style, message, group, lay ministries, services...) for which the Mission worked. Therefore, it will be a great help to the mission if from the preparation period of the Popular Mission, that there be some wide objectives that take into account the continuity.

In some way, the Popular Mission in itself, is a continuity of the ordinary pastoral. The continuity is inserted into the pastoral, and tries to energize and support in its ends, the ultimate end of the ordinary pastoral. During the continuity of the mission, the faithful of the community must definitely assume the conscience of its protagonist missionary. As a consequence, this is the time in which the parish confirms itself as permanently missionary in all its actions and structures.

With simple words, we can say that if the Popular Mission signifies *evangelization, communion, reconciliation, proclamation, illusion, commitment with the poor...then:*

The continuity of the mission has to consist of perseverance and development of these very elements (*evangelization, union...*) actively assumed by the missioned Christian community.

Finally, continuing to try to define concepts, let us remain clear as to what we think the continuity of the mission should not be:

- * it should not be cosmetics left in the parish to cover over deficiencies.
- * it should not be -necessarily- a direct increase in participation in the sacraments.
- * it should not be a permanent help so that the pastor works less.
- * it should not be only a nice remembrance which has had no effect in the hearts of the faithful and the ordinary pastoral activity.

EXPERIENCES. PROOFS. OPINIONS.

WHAT DO THE PASTORS MISSIONED HAVE TO SAY ABOUT THE MISSION:

In a questionnaire done three years ago in parishes that had received the Popular Mission, we find the distinct values that the pastors give to the post-mission. They do not consider it an absolute essential in the face of all that is taken into account in the total picture. The dominant idea is that the postmission is as important as every other phase of the mission

When asked about the repercussions of the mission in the parish life, no one said that the results were nothing or very little, even though some said it was superficial. The majority of the pastors gave high marks to the mission as very **significant**, that is to say, the influence of the mission was left behind in various ways.

Of all the realities more or less concrete that were left as results of the mission, **the pastors** valued most the creation of new groups in the parish (elderly, married couples, adult education...)

Frequently, the *family communities, encounter groups, parish assemblies* begun during the mission continue to meet. There has been proportionally more continuity in the urban parishes than in the very small villages, where it is difficult to find *prepared personnel* to take on the roles of moderators or animators. In some cases, the priest himself has to be giving directly the Family Catechistic in the homes. In some other places, the difficulty of meeting in the houses, was overcome during the mission, but afterwards, the same problem surfaced and impeded the dynamic of the small groups.

In certain determined parishes, the very pastors testify that the active participation of the lay people increased and in general, that an increase in the interest in evangelization in the very parish was noted.

While in some parishes there was a notable increase in the number of people participating in the parish devotions, yet in others, there was not much variation.

In the continuity, the Family Communities, for their particular dynamic, need some material prepared especially for them. Some times, they use materials offered by the missionaries, other times, they use materials that they themselves have elaborated following their specific style, or sometimes they utilize the adult education programs of the Diocese.

Consulting with the pastors about the aptitude of a new presence of missionaries (Renewal of the Mission) the answers are varied, we imagine in consistency with the experiences. There are some who see it as not necessary, and there are those who ask for it the first or second year. The majority see it as adequate when the pastor solicits the mission. They do not want to close the doors, but neither do they want to implicate themselves in excess. On the part of the pastors, it is observed that if they really desire the help (need it), before all, they prefer to maintain their anonymity without more external interference than they themselves ask for.

Some propose the repetition of the mission (every ten years as in other times). There are some that suggest posterior visits of the missionaries not only as friends, but as evangelizers.

From the local churches, there is a great hope in the Popular Mission for the renovation of the parish, especially a return of those who have fallen away from the church. The continuity, just as the entire popular mission ought to be integrated into the proper parish and diocesan guidelines.

WHAT DO OUR MISSIONARIES THINK:²

It is recognized that the postmission or continuity is still the weak part of the mission. It ought to exist, but, it is opinioned that as part of the ordinary pastoral, this corresponds in the first place to the initiative of the pastor who has to coordinate all the activity that takes place after the mission. Let it never be seen that we pretend to substitute for him in this role.

In some missions, after a few years, the Family Communities formed not only have persevered, but New Communities have grown out of them. But the most frequent experience is that there is a progressive decrease, even to the point of dissolving three or four years later.

In other places, the key to the continuity of the mission has rested in the young married group which was formed during the Popular Mission.

You have to try to see ahead of time how the diverse groups, which remain after the mission, incorporate themselves into the parish pastoral and enrich it. Especially, the persons who have encountered the Lord for the first time during the Mission, or those

²Gathering the experiences of the Teams of the Provinces of Spain and Portugal.

who have returned to the Lord, they need a place where they can adequately nourish themselves with the new awareness.

In general, it has been seen that the perseverance depends so much on the preparation and enthusiasm of the moderators of the Family Communities. The missionaries testify that the postmission is conditioned by the first steps of the preparation period.

The continuity is easier where there is a clear community project. Where this does not exist, there is nothing that can sustain the continuity. There will always be a need for certain persons in the parish who dedicate themselves specifically for this ministry.

Among the faithful, a greater awareness of "being part of the parish" is often evident after the mission. There are always some that incorporate themselves to collaborate more actively in the parish. During the continuity period, the team work gets strengthened.

Also, the priests themselves often have experienced a great renovation in their spirit and pastoral dreams.

SOME DIFFICULTIES

DIFFICULTIES EXPRESSED BY THE PASTORS

Among the principle difficulties that are found in the parishes in the moment of the continuity we can single out **the loss of enthusiasm**. The enthusiasm that functioned so well during the mission but later lasted just a short time. Some of the *returned "fallen aways go back to being "fallen aways"*. Those who were very involved *go back to their regular duties and can't do any more*, the pastor goes back to feeling alone and without the support of the missionaries. With the expression *"it lacks force"* he pastors indicate the sensation that the mission did not achieve its purpose, that it did not have sufficient personnel to continue the missions. There is a clear need and priority for the formation of pastoral agents

The lack of adequate material was also expressed, although some provinces are very advanced in this regard. They asked that the suggestions that the missionaries make be more concrete.

DIFFICULTIES THAT THE MISSIONARIES EXPERIENCE:

For the Missionaries, the **pre-mission** indicates how the continuity will be. During the mission, the thrust of the Missionary Team is capable of fixing up the deficiencies in the preparation, but after the mission, the errors of the pre-mission can reappear.

Another difficulty, in the practical order, is that the majority of the Provincial Mission Teams cannot give any continuity simply because they do not have enough time. The calendar fills us with the missions of this year and the corresponding pre missions. This part is very urgent and should be done, but the continuity is conditioned by the disposability of the missionaries to dedicate time to this part. There is a great need for missionaries especially dedicated to the continuity.

The very priests themselves are, in some cases, the impediment for a correct continuity. Having said this here, I believe, has not surprised anyone. Some times, because of passivity, the necessary steps have not been done for the organization and animation. Other times, the priests simply have not wanted to change anything of what they had before, and have preferred to continue exactly the same. In some cases or others, the mission can remain as an anecdote.

In many cases, there are not sufficient pastoral agents to assume the animation of new groups: a new group of youth without a youth director, married couples without advisors, Family Communities without a sufficient number of moderators, or without anyone to prepare them... Normally, the persons most disposed to do this, already are overburdened with many pastoral obligations even before the mission. Once again, we repeat, **the priority to identify and form pastoral agents!!!**

SOME OPTIONS FOR CONTINUITY:

1) The first option, that which can seem to be the simplest for us, **is not to have a post-mission**. As soon as the missionary team concludes the work, the team takes its leave and the ordinary pastoral agents assume the responsibility of giving continuity to the Popular Mission. Or said in another way, they resume their previous tasks - but with the quantity and quality that the mission added. This is done with the conviction that it is the same community that now corresponds to persevere in its own evangelization.

2) Other solutions, on the other hand, not only look forward to the continuity, but see the Popular Mission as conceived and developed in three phases that can be realized in the context of three years consecutively. This would be, let us say, like three missions one after another, with the a joint plan organized to continue for a long time.

3) Another more radical option is that of assuming before the bishop the responsibility of a parish for two or three years. During this time the parish is in a state of permanent mission. Terminating the contract, the parish is left. It is hoped that it has been left well renewed. However this would be another type of Popular Mission which has its own difficulties.

4) The renewal of the mission (Annex I) is the most frequent. The Missionary Team returns to the community that was missioned, generally the next year, in a short period of time -three days or a week - to revise, animate and renew what was the Popular Mission.

This pretends to include: evaluation meeting with the pastor and the moderators of the Family Communities: convocation (about three days) of the Family Communities that were functioning during the mission, also include those that have not persevered, prayer and daily Eucharist, visits to the sick in the homes, youth encounters, celebrations with the children, Mass in the Communities. Here, there exists different experiences and distinct objectives.

5. In "Massive Missions" there might be zones or parishes that were not affected by the mission. It would be good some time later to give a New Popular Mission in that place, perhaps trying to correct previous errors or concentrate on those aspects that remained weak in the first intent.

6. In other occasions, the bond that ties the missionaries to "**special moments**" to which they are called. These can coincide with important festivals of the parish or some special moments in the programming of activities. Try to recuperate something of that **spirit that was lived and felt during the mission**. There exists here in the community missioned, a type of personal friendship that the missionaries have left behind.

7.) There are those who right from the beginning of the mission , present a **detailed plan (Annex 2)** of the content and methodology of the continuity, that should be considered completely as part of the action that the parish and the Missionary Team have mutually committed themselves to follow. The missionaries return: in one month, for the evaluation of the mission and the planification of the post-mission: in six months to convoke a gathering of the Family Communities: and in one year to realize a renewal of the mission.

8) There are also other experiences like the missions of various months, but I do not know much about them. I await your input.

PROPOSALS

In order that the benefits of the Popular Mission extend for a long time, the most important thing is that all the members of the community become imbued with the importance of evangelization and that they direct all the diverse actions and groups of the parish to this end. And this should be done long after the missionaries have gone and include the explicit remembrance of the mission.

In this sense, the various proposals and suggestions are made at this time, and know that in one way or other, they have been applied, although separately, in various places:

*The continuity,(With its agents, means, time, dynamics, initiatives, places) should be planned before the end of the main part of the mission. In this sense, it behooves the missionaries and the priest to be in agreement, even before the main part of the mission. The detailed plan ought to take into account:

- the necessary steps to go through and the time needed.
- persons in charge of each new task.
- regularity of the meetings.
- materials to be used and other means.
- plan ahead to the next presence or not of the missionaries.
- who will be in charge to prepare the moderators.
- parish assemblies.
- who convokes and when the Family Communities
- celebrations during the main part of the mission with the Family

Communities

- evaluations of the mission and the continuity
- convoke the persons who have offered themselves to collaborate in the commitment of the missions.
- leave behind in existence, at the end of the mission, the *Permanent Evangelization Team* (Giving follow up to the Parish Mission Council which functioned during the preparation and actualization of the mission).

In each parish, there should have been created a Permanent Evangelization Team, which can be formed in part by the members of the Parish Mission Council.

This Evangelization Team is different than the Parish Council or any other group or movement in the parish- It has as its finality the following points:

- *be concerned that the parish be an evangelizing parish in all aspects.
- *that it be a **missionary parish**.
- *that it be the "missionary conscience" of the parish.
- *that it raise up new initiatives of evangelization.
- *that it be the pastoral outreach to the fallen away
- *that it be concerned for the perseverance of the Family Communities
- *That it maintain and develop those inputs of the Popular Mission that will enrich the parish.
- *that it care for the collaboration with the Foreign Missions.

+Although it has been mentioned before, we insist on the importance of an adequate formation of pastoral agents and preparation of materials.

+As in all realms of life, very important are those little "**human details**" such as: writing letters to the Family Communities (Christmas Time), visits to the priests, attend some of the parish festivals...

+In conjunction with other principle ends of the Congregation of the Mission, it would be very convenient to gather together all the priests that were involved in the missions every once in a while to have a retreat, or simply a gathering or an evaluation meeting.

+Empowering their new consciousness of mission, ask them to pray for new missions and to collaborate in new ministries.

APPENDIX 2

PLAN FOR CONTINUITY (A PROPOSAL)

The continuity should be planned for right from the preparation time for the mission. In the planning session, the pastor and his Pastoral Council (they will assume the realization of the continuity), and the missionaries (they will contribute with their experiences) .

1. The continuity of the Mission binds all the members of the parish. Together with the pastor, Mr. _____ will be responsible for:

- _____
- _____

2. As a result of the necessity for evangelization lived out during the Popular Mission, a Permanent Evangelization Team should be created, consisting of the following members:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

3. Finishing the mission, there should be an evaluation meeting with the Pastoral Council and the Missionary Team.

4. During the two weeks after the end of the mission, the Parish Pastoral Council should meet to:

- *evaluate the Popular Mission and inform the Mission Team of its conclusions.
- *Dissolve the Mission Council and create a Permanent Evangelization Team.
- *assume the initiatives suggested during the mission.
- *in a few days after, convoke the Family Assemblies.
- *apply to the regular pastoral activity (sacraments, catechetics, ministry to the sick, marriages...) the new ideas that the mission may have contributed in these areas.
- *study the new initiatives that might strengthen the evangelical dynamic of the parish.
- *determine who will be responsible for the preparation moderators of the Family Communities.

5. During the peak times of the liturgical year, Celebration Assemblies of the Family Communities should be convoked.

6. After a year, there should be a Renewal of the Mission.

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Cher Emeric,

Comment ca va? J'espere que vous ete bien. Je vais bien ici dans la parroise avec mes confreres et avec beaucoup travail pastoral. Je suis tres content pour l'experience del Mois Vincentien dans Paris. Je vous en remercie pour votre travail en l'organizacion du Mois. J'apprendais beaucoup sous Mision Populaire.

Je recevais votre lettre (e-mail) du 1 de Septembre, 1997. Vous me demandez pour la traduction anglaise du texte de Jesus Arzate "Acompagnando la Post Mision. J'ais une copie du texte y je le envoie a vous. par E-Mail.

I hope that it arrives okay. We don not have E-Mail here in the parish, but there is a local company, "Chiriqui Land Company", banana growers, that can send the document to you.

Merci pour tout votre atention pendant le Mois Vicentien. Mon bon souvenir a mes amis Pere Moloney et Pere Griffin e tout les confreres dans la Generalizia. Au revoir.

Bien fraternellement,
Pere Arthur Kolinsky, C.M.