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The itinerant popular mission and inculturation

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Introduction

I will begin this talk telling a story which well illustrates our topic and introduces us to it. A well known town drunk walked across the village very unsteadily. With his confused speech, he announced: "I have seen a lion, an enormous lion, I have seen a lion, hiccup, very horrible..." Everyone who heard him laughed at him thinking about the effects of alcohol in terms of fantasy and they had a great time watching the drunk. Fifteen minutes later the first two inhabitants of the village fell victim to the claws of the lion.

We can ask ourselves: Why did such an important announcement have to be made by a person whose poor condition took away all value and credibility? The great distance between people of good judgement and people under the influence impeded that others capture the truth that he proclaimed.

Evangelization is also an announcement, and more important than that of the presence of a lion. Or if we wish, it is the announcement of the presence of the lion of Juda as on one occasion the Bible calls Jesus Christ (Cfr. Ap 5:5). The distance can be of different kinds: social, cultural, physical or religious.

Distance has been one of the great problems which people have had to resolve. The distance between one place and another, between one generation and another, between one culture and another, and it is with this last latter that we are concerned in this presentation.

- A. What do I hope for with these reflections? Not certainly to say everything about the topic, not even to respond to all of the questions which might be raised about it. Would that I accomplish the throwing of some light on the topic and the provoking of a reflection and an interchange among us, for mutual enrichment that leads us to seek ways to make our itinerant mission more effective in favor of our poor.
- B. Methodology: I will present some reflections and in another moment project on the screen some schema or text which will help us to retain better the idea I wish to share. I base myself above all on our limited Provincial experience in this field.

1. The itinerant popular mission in the vincentian tradition

We know that popular missions were from the moment of our foundation the first and principal ministry which St. Vincent practiced and wished that the Company would practice. He says this:

"The name of missionaries or priests of the mission, a name which we have not taken on ourselves inappropriately, but by the will of God, it has been imposed on us by vox populi, shows clearly that the work of missions ought to be for us the first and principal of our works with the neighbor" XI, 10.

We know how all other ministries for St. Vincent were subordinated to this one which is the first and principal of all.

Jumping to our Constitutions, we find there the following:

"Popular missions, so dear to the heart of our Founder, are to be earnestly promoted. Therefore we should undertake the work of the missions according to the circumstances of time and place, searching for all possible means to give this work new vitality, both to renew and to build up a true Christian community and to awaken faith in the hearts of unbelievers."

All of the elements in this number are important and wish to raise three tasks or challenges which we have today on the level of our Congregation and our provinces.

1.1. Adapt the missions to the circumstances of time and place

This first point certainly speaks us of taking into account the historical situation, ecclesiology, culture and other circumstances which surround those to be evangelized, with whom we wish to share the salvific message of Jesus Christ.

The challenge which is presented to us in this moment is that of maintaining the identity of our missions, including our own proper identity, through them. How to maintain that in the midst of a changing world? How to make them an attractive evangelization for our Church? The challenge is to discern what is valid in our Vincentian tradition and discover the new paths of the Church today. What elements ought to remain? What ought to change in our missions to respond to the needs of the Church and the actual world? Our task is to situate ourselves in the here and now and to do so as followers of St. Vincent.

1.2. To give them a new impulse

This indicates to us that we have been left behind or that on the part of the Company, province and persons, some interest in the missions has been lost.. If we place

ourselves in the context of the new evangelization to which the Pope has called us, we discover that what we need is a new ardor to take on evangelization by this ministry and the Vincentian tradition. Has not something of this missionary and mobile impulse that characterized Vincent and the first missionaries been lost in some of our provinces? This new impulse speaks of a real and profound passion for the poor and for evangelization of the poor. It speaks to us of a strong consciousness of being followers of Jesus Christ, the first Evangelizer of the Poor, and with whom we wish to configure our life.(1) And finally it speaks to us of a great love for the Church.

1.3. To Build community, to arouse faith

From our Constitutions, we see clearly the end of the Vincentian popular mission: to renew and give new impulse to the path of faith in a community, parish or diocese. The purpose could also be to arouse faith through a first announcing of the Good News.

The purpose of the Vincentian popular mission continues today to be valid because, what community does not need renewal? How many peoples have not received the first proclamation!

2. The vincentian popular mission

2.1. With St. Vincent's words

To lead the poor to know God, to announce Christ to them, to tell them that the reign of God is near and that this reign is of them and for them (XI 387:EN 26). The gospel which we ought to take to the poor is knowledge of the Father, revealed in Christ, with the strength of the Holy Spirit.

2.2. In our day

How could we describe today the Vincentian popular mission? Let us say that "The Vincentian popular mission is an act of extraordinary pastoral, which is at the service of ordinary pastoral work through an abundant and intense preaching of the Word of God, because it is a special time of grace of the prophetic pastoral function of announcing and denouncing." [2] In other words, we could say that it seeks to accomplish conversion, instruction and a stronger Christian commitment. In practice they are the synthesis of spiritual exercises, of doctrinal and moral catchetics, of practices of prayer and penance directed at the whole population of a zone, seeking thereby a profound transformation from the Gospel.

2.3. The specific objective of the Vincentian popular mission

"To build in the community, parish, zone, etc., a family which animated by the Word of God, believes and follows Jesus Christ, to celebrate their faith together and to work for the building of the Kingdom of God.

This community can be built, as the Santo Domingo document tells us, by "small familiar communities" which are the basis and support of the whole community, parish and the Church herself.[3]

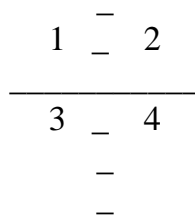
The mission also seeks to raise consciousness in the pastors of the community, as in the community itself, of their missionary commitment as baptized people in favor of the Church locally and universally so that they will be the first agents of the mission and of their life afterwards.

3. The itinerant popular mission and inculturation

3.1. About inculturation and evangelization

Let us say a word about inculturation itself: it is a process through which the Christian message is inserted progressively in a culture according to the presuppositions of that same culture. It is the sowing of an evangelical seed in a culture, so that the faith can develop there and express itself in its own way. [4]

An inculturated evangelization can be described as an action in which four elements must be considered which we could place in four positions.



In the first box we place all of the elements which constitute evangelization: to give living testimony to Jesus Christ; to announce and proclaim Christ in words, and to act in such a way that society is filled with Christ.

In the second box we can place the culture of the one communicating the message. It is very important that the one announcing the message be conscious of his own culture, of the elements that compose it, of values and anti-values which feed him, of the symbols and languages which express all of that. In this way he can distinguish between his

culture and the gospel message. In this way he can offer water to drink from, without drinking the glass itself.

In the third place, we need to place the culture of the one receiving the message. If the culture of the audience is not carefully taken into account, the one announcing will not really communicate the message and it will never be perceived as Good News, which is a response to the profound desires of the life of those listening.

A legend says that God once decided to visit the earth and sent an angel to inspect the situation before the visit. The angel returned saying they have no food... they have no work. And God said, "Then I will incarnate myself in the form of food for the hungry and as work for the unemployed."

Life is lived and is expressed in the context of one's own culture without being reduced to it. Culture reveals to us the nucleus of values, aspirations, of deep questions to which the Gospel, as light and leaven, responds by illuminating and enlivening. Many dialogues of the Gospel reveal to us this close contact between the existential questions of life and the responses of God revealed in Christ.

In the fourth area, we consider God's presence, the Spirit acting in the evangelized and his/her culture. Cultures are not empty places lacking authentic values. There are seeds of the Word present in them, which grow in contact with the Word of God which transforms and enlivens everything. It is not the presence of the one announcing that achieves the presence of the Lord there because he is already there. At most the presence of the one announcing helps that the presence of the Lord be seen, be discovered, be made more explicit.

3.2. Characteristics of the inculturated Vincentian popular mission

A. ECCLESIAL.

The mission which we offer ought to be solicited by the bishop or the pastor. They are the ones who give us faculties to accomplish missionary work in the territory entrusted to them.

Our missions attempt to respond to the needs of the Church and always seek to insert themselves within the pastoral plans of the diocese and of the parish to be missioned.

B. UNIVERSAL

The proclamation that we make of the Gospel of Jesus Christ aims to reach all people of good will.

C. PREFERENTIAL FOR THE POOR

As a consequence of our Vincentian charism, we opt for missions among the most poor and abandoned of our society: the margined of the great cities, rural and native peoples.

The gospel and preferential option for the poor is a fundamental element in a practice which responds to the demands of inculturation. To "see from the poor" is key for missionary work. It is expressed methodologically in assuming the point of view of the other, in allowing oneself to be questioned and even evangelized by them. It is to put on the skin of another, which implies an attitude of dialogue.

The love of Christ urges us to seek and to respond to the more urgent needs of places marked by poverty and which most need the presence of the missionary and the preaching of the Gospel to transform their reality.

D. PROPHEPIC

At the same time our mission preserves the joy of preaching the Gospel and the sense of the hope of a better world. We are conscious of forming part of a pilgrim people, always on the road to perfection and open to the hope of the definitive triumph of the Kingdom. In every mission there is the joyful announcing of the Good News of Jesus Christ and denouncing of all those realities of sin which are opposed to the Kingdom.

E. PARTICIPATIVE

The mission is accomplished by the same community which seeks it, because an evangelized community ought also to be an evangelizing community. The missionaries who come from outside are only a help, certainly a very important one, but only that. Given the present moment of our Church, the incorporation of these in the evangelizing process is indispensable.

F. SITUATED

We ought to begin with the local reality, taking into account popular religiosity, the customs and the socio-political situation and the local pastoral directives.

G. INCARNATED

Inserted among the people, adapting to their lifestyle, to make visible the Christian life of the community.

H. COMMUNAL

To do the work of the mission with a team including the ordinary agents of evangelization of that place, the pastor, assistants, ministers, celebrants, groups, associations, community animators, etc.

I. ITINERANT AND PERMANENT

The missionaries go from town to town, and the possibility is always there, if sought by bishops and pastors, of going back to the missioned place to refine the work done in these known communities, and above all with the lay animators who have committed themselves to work for the evangelization of their community.

J. MARIAN

Our mission ought to be Marian for two reasons, the first because it is part of our Vincentian tradition, the second because the piety of the people carries very much within it a love and undeniable devotion to Mary, and therefore the religiosity of the people is strongly impregnated with this devotion to our Mother.

4. The means of inculturation in the mission

4.1 Knowledge of the reality

It is necessary to know the community beforehand, its economic, social, political and religious situation. There are two points which ought to be very much taken into account for preaching: the message itself and the desire of life, when the two are connected, the message penetrates life and transforms it. Let us look at two ways of preaching to rural people.

A. Dear brothers of the countryside: the time we live is characterized by the rapid passage of time in which we feel victims of planning and of computers, of television and the clock, in which we run agitated from one meeting to another, we are becoming deaf to the voice of God.

B. Dear brothers of the countryside: when we see that the plants we have sown are turning yellow, we hope that rain comes, our crops could be lost without rain. Rain is necessary for life. For this reason Jesus himself did not hesitate to present himself as living water so that the one who drinks it have eternal life. Without this water our Christian life will become yellow, decayed and weak.

To know reality it is necessary to know the system of meanings of a people, to discover their true needs and not those the missionary with goodwill believes important, to analyze the behaviors, the intention and the meaning that they have.

4.2. Incorporation of the laity in the process of the mission

It is important that in the mission the committed laity themselves or those about to commit themselves to the community, know the process and dynamic of the mission, so that they can play a role in the different activities of the mission. Better than the missionary who comes from afar, they know their own culture and they can lay out in the name of the people the better decisions to make and the methods which ought to be used.

4.3. Follow-up to the mission

From our experience we have seen something positive in follow-up to the principal part of the missions, above all to animate local agents committed to evangelization. It is also an opportunity to nourish them with new material which will facilitate them in their task and projecting of their faith from their own cultural reality. This work is seen to be useful and appropriate for up to two years after the realization of the mission. It is worth mentioning that in this task of follow up there ought to be interest and commitment on the part of the pastor and of the priests who day-by-day walk with the people.

4.4. The dynamic of the mission through "family communities"

If the parish is the church found among the homes of people, she lives and works therefore deeply inserted in human society and in intimate solidarity with its aspirations and difficulties. She has the mission of evangelizing and of deepening the inculturation of the faith in families, because of which our missionary and evangelization work ought also to occur with those activities and reflections on the Word of God which flow from small nuclei of family members, and which joined to others constitute the great community of the parish. To accomplish missionary work in this way, we seek that the Gospel penetrate the most concrete realities of the family, so that from there can spring change, conversion, and Christian commitment which clearly build the Kingdom of God. These communities are the living cells of the parish which ought to be characterized by a decidedly broad missionary projection towards the center of a local community and outwards towards other communities in need.

5. Attitudes of the missionary in the inculturated mission

"A man of the country went to an eye doctor to get reading glasses. The eye doctor put some glasses on him and placed him in front of the alphabet. The man could not read. The eye doctor looked for other more powerful glasses but he still could not read. Finally, he asked him 'but have you learned to read?' No, not yet, was the response, that's why I need glasses." Reading glasses are useless if we have not learned to read. It is equally useless to know all the theory about a new inculturated evangelization if beforehand we have not learned to be in our minds and hearts evangelizers inculturated in the deepest sense of the word.

5.1. To think and to love humankind

To have a heart with a universal dimension which seeks to love everyone. This is the "new man" about which St. Paul says: *"Here there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, between the circumcised or not. There is no more foreigner, barbarian, slave or free man, only Christ in all and in everyone"* (Col 3, 11). It is the new man clothed with the spirit and the sentiments of Christ: comprehension, goodness, humility, meekness, patience, mortification, pardon, peace, gratitude (cfr. Col 3:9-17).

Pope John Paul II has expressed it this way

"All of us are called to recognize this basic solidarity of the human family as a fundamental condition for our life on this earth" The attitudes of the inculturated missionary carry him very upwards but also very downwards to be in solidarity with those infrahuman conditions of humanity itself.

5.2. To be open to everything that is different

Our life is motivated by two forces; one which moves us to be with those most like us, social class, race, language, culture. The other moves us to be in solidarity with those who are different. The more different someone is from us, the more interesting, representing a fragment of humanity to be revealed to us. The greatest difference may not be geographical but at times only a lifestyle difference. This Jesus presents us in the Gospel. For the Jew, the different one was the Samaritan. Therefore, the insistence of Jesus in going to the Samaritan, as we see in the parable (cfr. Lk 10:25-37), in his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, or in giving relief to the cured Samaritan, the only grateful one of the ten lepers.

5.3. To be able to relativize one's self

On the road to creating a personal or a cultural identity, we run the risk of falling into absolutizing, in thinking ourselves self-sufficient, perfect, so that next to us others can seem very small, all in order to reinforce our own identity, and legends are even created which end in absolutization, and even more seriously, in the incapacity to open one's self to others. The missionary is one who relativizes everything and knows there is only one absolute: God. His attitude is built around this.

We are told that in the early Christian communities, when one of the members was to begin a long journey, a clay vessel was broken and he was given one of the fragments. Upon returning he would be recognized by this fragment which joined to the others would put back together the clay vessel. If our identity is only a piece of humanity, we ought to be open to join that fragment to the whole.

5.4. To assume risk in favor of another's life

This is a fundamental part of our missionary vocation, to give our life for the poor because there we find Jesus Christ. In life it is worth risking ourselves, but it is important to know for whom we risk our life. The missionary is one who deprives himself of securities to give his life in favor of the poor, of the injured, of the sick, of the needy, of all those on the road of life who are "condemned and dying of hunger." To gain this good contact with another culture in order to evangelize, it is necessary to be humble, simple, willing to sacrifice and very prayerful.

Conclusion:

We need to intensify our reflection and our search in order to make real what no. 14 of our Constitutions asks of us: to adapt the missions in such a way that they are not outdated and therefore unresponsive to the needs of the Church of today.

We need also to seek new methods, new strategies, and new theological content, especially christological, ecclesiological and pastoral, which respond better to the concrete realities of our countries and the directives of our universal Church, of our Episcopal Conferences and above all of the concrete reality to be missioned, be that diocese or parish.

Lastly, remembering the path of our Company in these last years, we feel the impulse above all to take very seriously the task of "new men", since every attempt to inculturate the Gospel from the ministry of the missions will be useless and inefficacious if not begun with those dispositions of the missionary himself who has taken seriously the Gospel, evangelization and the spirituality of St. Vincent de Paul.

(Translator: James E. Claffey, C.M.)
[nota1]Cfr. Const. 1.

[nota2]Directorio de misiones populares vicentinas, México 1995, p. 4.

[nota3]Cfr. DSD nos. 55-64

[nota4]José Manuel Madruga, I.E.M.E., "Teología de la inculturación", en, [toco]San Vicente y la Misión Ad gentes;[tondo] XXI Semana de Estudios Vicencianos, CEME, Salamanca 1995 pp. 75-98.