

7-1997

## Opening Reflection: What Type of Mission?

Luis M. Martínez San Juan C.M.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), [Liturgy and Worship Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Martínez San Juan, Luis M. C.M. (1997) "Opening Reflection: What Type of Mission?," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 41 : No. 4 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol41/iss4/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Vincentian Journals and Publications at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vincentiana by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact [digitalservices@depaul.edu](mailto:digitalservices@depaul.edu).

# What type of mission?

Luis M. Martínez San Juan, C.M.

## Presuppositions:

The title gives you an idea of the content of this presentation. Actually, because of both the many different starting points and theologies that underlie our idea of Mission, and the varied concrete situations of you who listen to this talk, the task of *special evangelization* that we refer to with the classical word "mission" has to adapt itself to various styles. The very language that we use indicates this to us. We speak of preaching missions, organizing missions, doing missions, or simply missioning.

We have come here for this month because we want *to seek and find* our place within the Church and our societies. In my own experience, I have seen that if we live out certain presuppositions clearly, we will get the desired results. What are they?

1. The first and most basic presupposition consists in *evangelizing "from within" and "by" the community*. The community *is and ought to be* that which evangelizes (i.e., the community is the missionary). We offer some assistance. We are not the goal, but only the instruments, the means.

Saint Vincent insists on this very clearly, and just so we don't consider ourselves so important, he calls us "simple servants" to serve grand masters... And although today, the theological and pastoral atmosphere has changed, and we can not apply this term literally, it is good to recall a warning from Saint Vincent. He counsels us:

*Give great honor and respect to the pastors and vicars of the places where we go. Don't do anything against their good pleasure, not even by saying just a few words, especially about important affairs. (XI,103/XI,30)*

2. The second presupposition is that we have to treasure the real world in which we find ourselves and start from there. There is no value to a system that, however good it might be, we would apply indiscriminately to all the different places we go. Saint Vincent said that the missionary has to *adapt to the specific circumstances, persons, place and times. (I,227/274)*

3. However, some *lines of action* and *clear goals* have to be set. And to help present them, I am going to speak about a new "model" of doing missions.

## Observations:

The model that I propose has been tried out and adapts well to communities that have been "Christianized." Therefore, knowing that you can adapt it in various ways to all situations, it can be positive and useful for *any community*.

The time that I have at my disposal now does not allow me to develop all the steps that have been carefully thought out so they have a certain sense, a certain logic... Nevertheless, materials exist where this process is explained and developed.

And, if I am not able to spend enough time on aspects that you might find interesting, there is always the possibility of dialogue at some other time.

## **A style - a form**

### **1. Time of preparation**

#### **1. First Dialogue**

The process of this kind of Mission normally begins with a *first meeting* with the responsible pastoral workers of the place or region where we intend to give a mission (pastoral team, pastor(s) . . . , and some of the members of our Mission Team).

Some interesting points can be dealt with in this first "dialogue," principally:

1. Exchange ideas about the theme of the Mission. List together all the concerns of the community and the missionaries:
  - *Why* are they asking for a Mission? What are their hopes for the mission?
  - *What* are we able to offer them? *How* do we understand each other?
2. Reaching an agreement on a basic Ecclesiology. It is important to see the agreements and differences in this theological-pastoral area clearly.
3. See the real possibilities for a joint plan.

#### **2. Presentation**

In the first encounter with the parish that is about to have a mission, it is important to offer a clear preview, including some basic ideas as to what the process of the mission will be like.

It is good to make very clear that the process of the mission that we are presenting (and logically, the preparation) has to *adapt itself to the concrete reality* of the place of the mission and to the conditions of the people (clergy and laity) who are going to promote this *process*.

#### **3. To evangelize from the standpoint of the reality**

Our mission has to be an "Evangelization that has its roots in the real world." We know that God is a *God of life* and that the suffering of humanity is not foreign to Him: *I have seen the oppression of my people...I have heard their cries...I have fixed my eyes on their sufferings.* (Exodus 3,7). With these words, God initiates the History of our Salvation.

The desire to answer this call of God to serve the needs of humanity is the distinctive mark of the Mission, according to Saint Vincent: *"For this reason, all the world will think that this little company is from God -- because it is seen taking care of the most serious and forgotten needs."*(SV XI,90/XI, 396). Therefore, if we want to be faithful to Saint Vincent, we must make a mission plan that pays close attention to reality. The important thing is that it not be "our plan." It is important that it be God's plan, which we can discover by being attentive to the *Spirit* speaking to us through the signs of the times.

If we do not do this, our mission will be just indoctrination, imposition. . . . God asks us, as we are reminded in contemporary theology, to inculturate the faith. And to do this, we must make ourselves *very conscious of the real conditions*.

So this task of evangelizing "from the reality" brings us to recognize that the seed of the Gospel produces its fruits in the concrete history and events of humanity: "*The reign of God is upon us*" (Luke 11,20). It is necessary to discover and exploit the positive realities. There are events (signs of the Kingdom) that manifest them.

Contrary to the Vincentian spirit is the idea of *self sufficiency* by the person who believes that "to Evangelize is only to give and not to receive." Such an attitude would make our task unacceptable. But, mainly, it includes nothing of evangelization. As we recall from *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, in the mission we are going "to evangelize and be evangelized." And this has to happen. These words cannot be "empty words."

Permit me to remind you of two necessary activities or steps in this contact with the reality:

A) Be attentive to the Reality . . .

"To evangelize from within the real situation" demands that we give *careful attention* in order to be able to respond to *the concrete needs* of the mission community and of the people with whom we will come into contact;

B) . . . so we can Make the Effort to Transform the Reality.

To do this, you have to make a "Plan" for the future. It must be realistic, do-able, one that takes into account everything as it really is, and gradual enough that it doesn't present impossible tasks. And it has to be an ongoing plan. You can never say "It's done!"

So as not to prolong this part, I am not going to refer to the concrete actions that have to be carried out to investigate the true conditions in different meetings or interactions with the parish.

I want to make perfectly clear that the whole process searches for what is real and ends with a time of *discernment*:

With regard to the collection of data, it is worthwhile to use critical, diagnostic, judgment of the situation. For this work of discernment, you need an atmosphere that makes it easy to hear both the voice of God and the voices of the People. Be careful not to stifle the truth!

This work of discernment puts us in a position to deal with the key problems of the people and the parish community, the problems that will face us on the mission.

*The mission begins* with this study of the real situation. The Parish Community has placed itself in a "*state of mission*".

#### 4. Setting the Objectives

Concrete objectives need to be formulated. They are based on: A) an awareness of the real situation, B) on the one hand, the "principles of the Vincentian Mission" and on the other, the invitations and challenges that the concrete reality throws out at us, C) with an eye on the concrete needs, the human condition and the faith of the community.

#### 5. The Mission Program

Now we're ready to organize a *specific program* that, as I have said, has to be strong and clear in giving *real and concrete answers*. "The generic human being" does not exist; what we are dealing with are real people with real concerns, real needs and real problems.

## II. The Real Heart of the Mission

\*\*\* Continuing the theme, but taking some liberties with it, I am going to continue about the ideal form of the Main Part of the Mission, which would be this model of the "Vincentian Mission Plan" to which I have just referred. Let me warn you that I am going to make reference only to the *principles*, the pillars that sustain the structure of the mission, because the *concrete form* that the mission adopts *has to vary* according to the real situation that we encounter.

How are we going to work during a mission? In the same way Jesus did. For this reason, we are going to proceed step by step, reminding ourselves of the Gospel and looking for the necessary elements of this extraordinary evangelical action that we call by the classical name "mission."

#### 1. Encounter Days: the Visits.

When Jesus walked along the road, he did it with a certain style. Remember the dialogue with the Samaritan? (Jn 4). As you know, Jesus' discussion with this woman, who was not one of the "faithful" women, was a dialogue *full of respect for the person*.

Jesus does not impose himself. He enters with simplicity into the world of this woman: He "offers to talk with her with his heart", always mindful of the dignity of the person. In the same way, Jesus deals with Zacheus. Only in the case of Zacheus, Jesus takes the initiative and invites himself: *Today, I want to eat at your house*.

The mission should begin in the same way. We dedicate some days (one week, two weeks,...) to visiting so we can *situate ourselves with all the people of the place of the mission*. We *greet them* in the name of the parish (of the catholic community). We *explain the program* of the mission to them so they get the information first hand. In this way, we *give them a direct personal invitation*. If the people visited want to engage in a dialogue, we spend some time with them. If not, we greet them, tell them the program, and move...

And all the time, we maintaining a great respect for them and follow the advice of Jesus: *In whatever house you enter, first give your peace to the people*. This is what we want to do-- "be messengers of life and peace".

In summary, all the settings of ordinary life in the town are *sacred places* of encounter: the house, the market place, the bars, the school, the doctor's waiting room...God enters these places and comes close to each person and to all persons.

\*\*\*We have to mention here that during this first part of the main time of the mission we take the opportunity to prepare *the pastoral staff of the place*. This is an indispensable part of every mission that sets up the basis for an effective continuation of the mission. The pastoral staff of the parish, as we will see in a future part of this presentation, will be our collaborators in the last stage of the mission.

## 2. Proclamation of the Saving Word

This is the way Jesus presented it, saying:

*The time has come and the Kingdom of God is near: repent and believe in the Good News.* (Jn. 1,15)

We, like Jesus, will also dedicate some days to this same task. During the days of the mission, we look to:

+ Bring the joy of the good news of God to a world full of bad news.

+ In a world full of evil and malice, make very clear that God has begun to rule and that united with Him, we will be able to do away with the injustice, the lies, the lack of honesty, the pain, the evil...

We work to achieve our plan, assuring that *the atmosphere* of the Good News permeates everyone. And not only by preaching, which is very important for one week, but through the personal announcing that we are doing continually among everyone in the place.

But, as I have just said, we realize this proclamation principally through the *preaching*: preaching in a variety of forms and with content adjusted to the hearer's age. There is a big difference between a session with adults, with elderly, with Youth, with Children, or with young married couples. We want the preaching to be alive and dynamic! And we present various themes to achieve this.

To do this, we divide the population according to age groups or types of people as we deem necessary in order that the message reach and touch the heart of each person.

The religious and the laity *collaborate* and *even coordinate* the preaching, in their distinct ways and according to their group.

This is the time for the call to conversion. There is a personal call to all to change the attitudes of the heart that are not life-giving. Because today, in a materialistic and selfish world, good people are needed more than ever: people *with clean hearts, that struggle for peace, and are concerned for justice...children of God*. The Pope even says that we need some experts in human living.

During the time dedicated precisely to the preaching (one week normally) we also invite the people to a series of *celebrations*; such as: the opening sermon, a Penitential Celebration, Children's Celebrations, Marian Celebrations, Celebration of the Sacrament of

the Sick, and other celebrations with the elderly, the whole Assembly of the People of God, Family Day, etc...

But, I want to warn you that if the celebration is not a constitutive element in the Vincentian tradition, and if we find ourselves with the problem of excessive sacramentalization in detriment to the process of evangelization, we will evaluate the need for these celebrations to see whether they are going to reach the people and provoke some impetus to conversion to the Gospel. If not, we would leave them out.

All these correspond as I said to the second section of the Main Part of the Mission. And it normally lasts for one week.

### **3. Group Gatherings**

The third section of the main part of the Mission, and the last section, we dedicate to calling together "small groups" of the whole community. These groups are called Encounter Groups, because they allow people *to meet with* others, with the roots of their own faith, and with God... These meetings take place *in the homes* of neighbors.

Let us listen to St. Paul:

*Greetings to Priscilla and Aquila, my collaborators in the work of Jesus Christ, who gave themselves for me that I might be saved; not only am I grateful to them, but all the pagan church as well. Greetings to the community that **meets in your house.*** (Rom. 16, 3-5).

As you know, that primitive church that began to *actualize itself* in the midst of an unbelieving world came together in small groups to vitalize themselves, and to live together in faith and charity. They did this in a simple way, in their usual places of gathering, in their homes...

Something like this is what we are accustomed to have during the "5 days" of the mission. This, *at first*, seems complicated and difficult. But, in the end, it is what works best and is enjoyed most. In a small group, it is much easier to be personal and to delve more deeply into one's faith. It is the most catechetical aspect of the entire mission. Let us not forget that Saint Vincent wanted the mission to be a short "catechesis". This catechesis in family groups, as we will see farther ahead, normally continues through the heart of the mission.

From the very beginning of the Time of Preparation, we are motivating the members of the parish community to offer themselves for these tasks:

- 1) Place their houses on the list for small groups.
- 2) Animate a Gathering Group

We work to make them see that these tasks are not difficult. We assure them that the missionary team that comes in from outside will help them to prepare and will "accompany" them.

Throughout all this, it is not easy to organize the group of "pastoral agents of the place" (Animators) until we encourage them and motivate them to do this during the first part of the main mission.

### III The Time of Continuity

You have probably noticed that the traditional terminology that the Vincentian Mission has been using from the time of Bogota, has been changed a little here. Instead of talking about the *pre-mission, the mission, and the postmission*, we have been talking about *the preparation, the heart of the mission, and continuity*.

This way of speaking is not due to an intellectual quirk. It comes out of pastoral reflections and observations. We want to avoid saying at the end of the mission "*finally, the mission is completed*". No! The dynamic missionary or evangelizer never ought to be absent from the Christian Community. For this reason, and from our point of view, the mission is a process that 1) is prepared, 2) has a most intense period (Heart of the Mission), 3) and later has a continuity or follow up...

An important question is, when does the follow up begin? According to the dynamic that I have been proposing, it begins in the intense moment of the mission. However, there is a special point in our work plan where we can put the foundation of this continuity. This is what we call PEOPLE OF GOD ASSEMBLIES OR PARISH ASSEMBLIES.

One day before finishing the intense period of the mission, we gather the whole parish community, and in small groups, the opportunity is given to express themselves. This Parish Assembly is a *celebration of the faith in the Spirit that blows where it wills*.

As an Italian Bishop said,

*we priests talk too much and do not listen enough to the people.*

In the Parish Assembly, the opposite is true -- the people have the opportunity to speak out. But, as believers, we know that the Spirit manifests itself through the people. At the end of the Assembly, it is good to be able to affirm: "*the Spirit of the Lord and ourselves say to you. . .*". This is a good way to reach the conclusion of the mission and to encourage some commitments. And this is the best way to organize the follow up of the mission.

+ Having said this, let me remind you, now that we are in family, that the great Vincentian institutions came about *for the mission*.

Our little Company is of the mission and for the mission; The lay institutions, like the Ladies of Charity, arose during the mission, and are there to develop the works of charity throughout the mission; that special group of lay persons that are the Daughters of Charity, have their meaning in the intention of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise to make the fruit of the mission grow in its double gifts of catechesis and service. The seminaries were a solution Saint Vincent instituted because of his concern for the continuity of the mission.

Saint Vincent observed that the fruit of the mission will never last without some good priests.

*The most important aspect of our vocation is to labor for the salvation of the poor country people, and everything else is secondary; we would never have worked with ordinands nor in ecclesiastical seminaries if we had not judged that good ecclesiastics were necessary to serve the people and conserve the fruits of the missions, imitating in this way the great conquerors, who leave a small garrison in the plazas that they*



*occupy, fearful to lose that which they have concurred with so much effort. (XI,133/XI, 55).*

What do we try to do during this time of continuity? I will attempt to summarize these distinct tasks in 6 categories:

1. ***Offer information.*** For this, we have to be prepared to present some accessible guides so that the community, on its own, can continue to realize its plan of continuity. To do this, we must take seriously "study" for the mission and a certain level of specialization. This task is similar to what Saint Vincent realized with the priests: help, orientation, counsel...

2. Continue with the ***formation of pastoral agents***, always and whenever they ask us to do this, providing 2 or 3 days of formational gatherings. Of all the ways possible to do this, it seems like the best is to go back to the community where we gave a mission. But always with the permission of the pastor. Without permission, we should avoid going back.

3. It is normal that the ***groups continue***. And as usually happens, if there is a lack of simple materials for the people, we ought to continue supplying materials adapted to the groups that vary according to circumstances and ages.

A special and important group is Young Married Couples that have children (sometimes many) who are energized to evangelize. (That the Dynamic Evangelizer Continue developing).

This task cannot be realized outside of the power of the pastor. And this we do only if the pastor asks us to organize the *Continuity Plan* together with himself.

4. ***Pastoral Action with the youth and children*** tends to fill the gaps that are developed by the ordinary parochial catechist.

5. The tasks of ***planning and revising*** at the end and beginning of the course.

6. Very cautiously, and when it is permitted, we help to ***set in place some charitable and social services***. Here I think, the Vincentian family has some untouched ground that ought to be cultivated with zeal, always respecting the autonomy of the Diocese and looking for the "coordination".

Sometimes, in different ways, the pastors call us to come back and reanimate the communities. In some provinces of Spain, this service is called a "Renewal Mission." To do this task, laity and Sisters ought to be specially chosen.

#### IV Other alternatives

Perhaps you have observed that this plan could be included in a category that in pastoral catechetics would be called "inductive", or "ascending" or "anthropological." However, pastoral wisdom makes us think that in some places and circumstances, it is more convenient to utilize a different plan of a "more kerygmatic kind" or "descending kind". There is no doubt that this second plan could be more effective in some environments. Nevertheless, we want to affirm that, according to our modest experience, these results are not viable in other environments.

If we actualize a plan that is of the kerygmatic style, I judge, nevertheless, that the three key movements of which I have spoken become necessary. That is to say, you ought not prescind from some time dedicated to "person to person encounters," nor of group time nor of the Proclamation/Preaching time.

How to organize these three moments of a mission? How much time should be given to each one of them? I repeat, it will depend on the time that we have at our disposal, of the general environment, and of the human/christian situation that discovers for us the persons that we are going to mission.

In some Provinces, to develop the theological-pastoral plan, they have decided to organize the mission with a week of small group work. This would be a dynamic that begins in the small Christian Community, and then flows out into the large community. These are called "communities of charity" or "family assemblies"...these are put in the first place followed by preaching in the second place...

Well, as a mathematician says, the order of the addition does not alter the answer. If we see that a more "kerygmatic" plan is necessary, it can be varied so that the message to be proclaimed as well as the order of each one of the three moments that I have just described can be achieved. The important thing is to give to the people the nutrition that can be directed and presented in a form that grabs their attention and reaches the people.

In other words, we ought to get away from "absolutizing" or what is worse, *absolutizing ourselves*. The only absolutes in the missions are God, Christ and his Gospel. And in another more human vein, the Church and the human person.

And so, in conclusion with regard to the organization of the mission:

1. It is necessary to maintain the Vincentian principle of *adaptation*. We have to maintain a "loose" spirit so we can *adapt ourselves to the circumstances of place, time, and persons*.

2. We must organize the work of the Mission in conformity with the principle of Salvation History: Jesus *emptying himself* in the Incarnation so that we *have the same sentiments of Jesus who left his Godhead, emptied himself, descended and passed for one among so many Phil. 2,5s*). There's a way for us to do it:

- + Meet and dialogue with the people. (visits, closeness)
- + Preach simply and appropriately.
- + Promote meeting people in small groups.
- + Listen to the Spirit present in the people.

Translation: Arthur Kolinsky, C.M.