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John P. Cawley C.M.

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Renewed Parish Mission Model in a North American Context

*John P. Cawley, C.M.
Southern Province USA*

I DEVELOPING A TRADITION OF THE RENEWED POPULAR MISSION:

In order to understand the present renewed popular mission model which we are promoting in my province we need to study some of the history of the Community in North America. The first members of the Congregation of the Mission were invited to the United States in 1816 to establish a major seminary for the training of native diocesan priests. Until recent years, a high percentage of our confreres were expected to receive advanced degrees in various theological and secular areas of study. These confreres were then assigned to serve as professors in the many diocesan seminaries staffed by the Congregation and as faculty members of three Vincentian Catholic Universities in New York City, Chicago and near Buffalo, New York. (1) From the beginning of the establishment of the Congregation in the United States there were always some confreres in each province assigned by their Provincial to preach the traditional one week parish mission, especially during Advent and Lent. However, the Redemptorists, Passionists, Dominicans, Franciscans and Jesuits were more widely known than Vincentians for their popular missions in the United States except along the East Coast. With the implementation of the decrees of the Second Vatican Council in our country the practice of preaching one week parish missions almost disappeared. Many of you belong to provinces where the tradition preaching popular missions has always been a major ministry.

Since the Vatican Council each of the five American provinces has experimented with a variety of models of popular missions or "parish missions" based on the special conditions in their region. The Southern Province to which I belong is a small missionary province located in the states of Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Arkansas. This area in square kilometers is larger than the total area in square kilometers of France, Spain, and Germany! Aside from the large urban dioceses of New Orleans, Dallas, Houston, San Antonio and Santa Fe, almost all the dioceses in this region are small, rural, and missionary. In many counties (districts) the Catholics compose five percent (5%) to perhaps twenty percent (20%) of the total population.

Over the past twenty years the members of my province, most of whom were seminary professors, have made a decision to work more directly in the evangelization of the poor, especially the more abandoned. This has not been an easy decision for our confreres, especially those advanced in age. We have voluntarily withdrawn from teaching in diocesan seminaries. We have turned over middle class parishes to the diocesan clergy. Despite our small number of confreres we have initiated new evangelizing ministries among the indigenous Native Americans living in Arizona. In the northern part of Arkansas we have established a Multi Cultural Ministry Team to work with the recently arrived Spanish speaking immigrants from Latin

America. Because a large number of the poor in our whole region are immigrant families who speak Spanish it has become necessary for the members of our province to learn Spanish. The confreres of the provinces of Mexico, Central America, Puerto Rico, Panama and Cuba have been most helpful in providing our members with opportunities to learn the Spanish language and to work in their apostolates. The basic model we use in our province flows from the study weeks and publications provided for by the Conference of Latin American Visitors (CLAPVI) as well as the manuals for preaching popular missions published by individual provinces of Latin America.

II BASIC STRUCTURE OF THE RENEWED POPULAR MISSION:

In general, our model of the popular mission consists in six to eight weeks of intensive planning and preparation called the PRE-MISSION. The second stage is a one week intensive celebration of mission preaching along with the communal celebrations of the Sacrament of Penance and the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. The MISSION PREACHING WEEK begins with the Sunday celebrations of the Eucharist on one weekend and closes the following weekend at all the Sunday masses. Then follows a very important six to eight week stage called the POST MISSION. During the final stage of the Post Mission great emphasis is placed on the implementation of permanent changes in the structure of the parish in the areas of liturgy, religious education, small basic communities and family life education. In our country the territorial parish structure is well developed.

Most pastoral services and ministries are carried on through the local neighborhood parish community. Therefore, in order to assure that the major goals of renewal and reform called for by the Second Vatican Council are implemented on the local level a major concern is the spiritual and pastoral renewal of the local diocesan priests, permanent deacons, and all the key pastoral agents of the parish. Members of the Parish Pastoral Council, Parish Finance Council, Worship Commission, Education Commission are expected to participate in the pastoral activities of the Pre-Mission and the Post Mission.

III RESPONDING TO CONCRETE NEEDS:

The celebration of a Popular Mission in a first world country provides great contrasts. On the positive side, the overwhelming majority of our citizens publicly admit that they believe in a personal god. Many also claim they pray regularly. We enjoy full freedom of religion and may actively evangelize without obstacles. Among our active Catholic members are some of the richest persons in our country and also some of the poorest persons in our country. The Catholic Church is the only major Christian denomination which includes members from every race, every language group, and every economic class. On the negative side, we serve people who are often times preoccupied with their own careers, their own greed, and their own comfort. Because we are now all part of a world wide economy there has been a loss of jobs in my country. The rich investors are becoming richer and the poor workers are becoming poorer. Well educated Catholics with their family origins in Europe form the best educated group of our citizens and have enormous secular influence in the areas of commerce, politics, the universities and the law. Nevertheless, the practice of religion as a Christian, including Catholic Christians, is a private, personal, family matter in our culture and is not to be a part of your professional

work or job. There is great pressure to keep the practice of our faith and our Catholic values private. At the other end of spectrum we also have thousands of poor recently arrived immigrants from Asia, Africa, Latin America, Caribbean and Eastern Europe. At times all these groups may live in the same area and are members of the same territorial parish. Therefore, in the selection of sites to preach popular missions we Vincentians in the United States serve a mixed audience. A major theme in our preaching is the call to build bridges between the economic classes and to be "catholic" with a small "c" as well as a capital "C".

IV OVERALL CONTENT AND THEMES:

In 1992 the Catholic Bishops' Conference issued a comprehensive national plan for evangelization entitled: "Go and Make Disciples". The first goal is to create in all North American Catholics an enthusiasm for their faith, a living faith in Jesus, and a desire to share this faith with other persons. The second goal calls Catholics to invite all persons of all classes and races to hear the message of Jesus Christ with the hope that they would hear the message of salvation and unite with us in the fullness of the Catholic Faith. The third and final goal is to promote the values of the Gospel in our society, promote the dignity of every human person, the importance of the family, and the common good of our society so our country might be transformed by the saving power of Jesus Christ. (2) All of the content of our mission preaching and all the specific activities planned in the three stages of the Vincentian Popular Mission flow from these three goals.

The Mission Preaching Week begins with a personal call to accept Jesus Christ as our Savior. As Catholic Christians we place emphasis on our call to a deeper conversion within the Christian Community, the mystical body of Christ. Our personal experience of forgiveness of sins takes place as our personal relationship with Jesus is strengthened. As we are healed by Christ the Divine Healer we are challenged to become an active part of an evangelizing and reconciling community. In my country, this reconciling community is found in the local parish Eucharistic Community.

V SPECIAL CHALLENGES TO THE NEW CATHOLIC EVANGELIZATION:

Now I would like to share with you some concerns which can have an application in your country and your particular culture. In North America a Vincentian promoter of the new Catholic evangelization is faced with serious challenges from the powerful influence of a secular popular culture and the missionary activities of Fundamentalist and Evangelical church groups. In my country our people, especially the young adults and children, are bombarded on a daily basis at home by the media. Violence is glorified. The gift of human sexuality is presented in a self-centered and pleasure seeking way. Greed and the accumulation of wealth are offered as the important goals in life. Happiness is found in instant gratification of all our desires. By means of satellites, cable television, videos, magazines, newspapers and popular modern music, the heroes of ruthless capitalism, sports, and entertainment are presented as models of success to be imitated and admired. Thanks to modern technology of communication these same messages will be having an impact on your people, especially your students and young workers.

In most English speaking industrialized countries the majority of baptized Christians are not Catholics! We have lived for centuries as a minority community with our neighbors of the

Protestant Reform Tradition. In recent decades the Fundamentalists and Evangelical church groups, along with the Jehovah Witnesses and Mormons, have developed well planned and well coordinated missionary activities. Many of these projects are directed to minimally educated local residents and the recently arrived immigrants from other countries.

In ever growing numbers Fundamentalist and Evangelical missionaries will begin visiting the homes of Catholic families in Europe, Latin America, Oceania, Asia and Africa. In our mission planning and carrying out activities we Vincentian evangelizers can learn many positive lessons from the secular popular culture and from Fundamentalists and Evangelical missionaries.

From the secular media we can learn that our message must be clear, simple, and presented in an attractive and positive way. People today are influenced by the images they see and the sounds they hear. The way the message of Jesus Christ is presented is crucial.

Our people, especially our students and young workers, have a well developed sense of what is interesting and what is boring from their contact with the media. Our publicity promoting the activities of the Popular Mission and all our materials, including videos, cassettes, posters, pamphlets, need to be of THE SAME TECHNICAL QUALITY as the materials broadcasted and distributed by the secular world of commerce, sports and entertainment.

As you already know Fundamentalist and Evangelical missionaries place great importance on personal contact with the individual person. They are eager to offer a personal invitation to come to know and to love Jesus Christ. In my country Evangelical Christians address me and also their companions with the title of "brother" or "sister" along with their baptismal name. Their Sunday celebrations are well attended. These communities are famous for their good hospitality, their good homilies and their good hymns.

There are still pastoral leaders in my country who believe that Catholics who have left the Catholic Church, especially among our Spanish speaking, to join the Evangelicals, Fundamentalists and the Mormons are still really "Catholic" and one day will return to the Catholic Church. Our experience in my province is that after one generation of good biblical preaching, good religious education, and good community spirit as an Evangelical, these former Catholics and their children will not return to the Catholic Church. In fact, they become effective evangelizers among their Catholic family members.

VI THE IMPORTANCE OF A WELL CELEBRATED STAGE OF PRE-MISSION:

In our province our preachers are convinced that a well planned and well coordinated period of six to eight weeks of Pre-Mission activity is the single most important ingredient to assure the success of a Popular Mission. The Vincentian missionaries and the local evangelizers will encounter much resistance to change and a fear to try new pastoral strategies. In our province we make our initial contact with diocesan officials or the pastors of a region from twelve to eighteen months in advance. In some areas the decision may be made as much as two years in advance. You know well the importance of having the clear, public, and enthusiastic support of the local bishop and local pastors of the region for the three stages of the Popular Mission.

As Vincentian missionaries we run the risk of always preaching to members of the parish choir! The Parish Mission Team will be challenged to invite new persons to be part of the Pre-

Mission activities. We can no longer be content with the familiar faces at Sunday and weekday masses. The most difficult task we face in the months of preparation in the Pre-Mission is to mobilize the energy and time of the core of active Catholic parishioners to become evangelizers to their neighbors. The Vincentian missionary who serves as an advisor to the parish priests and the members of the parish mission planning team must insist that the Vincentian missionaries are here to "accompany" and assist the local pastoral agents. The local parishioners, especially the lay leaders, move from being receivers of the Word of God to sharers of the Word of God.

VII SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS FOR PRE-MISSION:

The following suggestions are offered to stimulate your imagination and to promote greater creativity among the members of the Popular Mission Team in your province. In some areas of your province there may not be an abundance of technical equipment for broadcasting on television and radio and for printing materials. However, there are other local artistic, musical and literary resources which your team can use. Obviously, there will need to be adjustments made due to the unique, cultural, economic, political and religious conditions of your homeland.

*Well disciplined planning team: The local pastors and representatives of the pastoral agents and key lay leaders form part of the planning team. They begin their work about four months before the opening of the Mission Preaching Week. Special attention is given to members from among the young adults, youth, and any particular language groups.

* Emphasis on Holy Scripture: Missionaries of other Christian groups may portray the Catholic Church as a church against the Holy Scriptures! The simple response is to make much use of the Holy Scripture in our preaching and in our printed materials during the Pre-Mission. Simple inexpensive selections or portions of the Scriptures, especially the New Testament, can be distributed as part of the home visits.

* Creative use of the calendar: The actual dates of the Pre-Mission are developed in a full calendar of events leading up to the Special Mission Preaching Week. Where possible the penitential seasons of Advent and Lent and the feasts of Christmas and Easter can provide a clear structure for the popular mission. The use of the liturgical year calendar works well in the countries of the northern hemisphere. At the same time the rhythm of the educational, agricultural and holiday calendar of your country needs to be considered. In some cases, the last weeks of the school holidays work well for home visiting and social activities during the Pre-Mission.

* Messengers of the Lord: One of the most effective ways to assure wide participation by the local parishioners in the Pre-Mission is to develop a group of adults and young adults to serve as home visitors and street ministers. Working in groups of two persons these Messengers of the Lord visit homes, chat with young people at sports fields, and other locations in the community where adults and young people gather to recreate.

After several sessions of training on how to make a home visit, offer a personal invitation to participate, the Messengers are commissioned at Sunday mass after the homily. Each messenger

receives his or her own distinctive missionary cross or other simple symbol to wear on his or her clothing.

* Provisional Basic Community Groups: At the beginning of the Pre-Mission the Messengers of the Lord and other active adult and young adult Catholics are invited to join a small basic community. The groups will meet once a week for eight sessions. Members may form a group in the same geographical area or a group based on similar interests or ages. The reading of the Gospel for the next Sunday as well as some simple questions for reflection and discussion are offered. Family members and friends who have no particular affiliation with any church are invited to attend one time. If they like the experience they are welcome to return.

*Promotion of the Mission/Publicity Committee: The missionaries invite a variety of local pastoral agents, active laity, and even non-Catholics to join the committee. Representatives of the local newspapers, radio, television, and companies who print materials may be invited to donate technical assistance. In countries which have been overwhelmingly Roman Catholic by culture and tradition there may be objections to the need to publicize our activities as do the Evangelicals and Mormons. If the potential audience you wish to contact among the middle class, the workers, the university students and farm workers are not regularly attending Sunday mass in the parish church, then the Pre-Mission team members and Messengers of the Lord need to go and visit them where they live, study, work and recreate. This is not easy to do for many missionaries and lay colleagues.

* Concern for non-active baptized Catholics: These residents already have the grace of Baptism to assist them in a new adult decision to accept Jesus Christ. Home visits and invitation to join in parish social and athletic activities during the Pre-Mission are important points of personal contact with the local Faith Community.

* Non-baptized / non affiliated residents: A variety of recreational, athletic, social events sponsored by the parish community during the Pre-Mission can stimulate the curiosity of these non-baptized persons. An invitation to a well celebrated Liturgy of the Word with small group interaction allows new contact and exposure with Catholics outside the formal setting of the Sunday Eucharist. A popular event is the "Curious about Catholics" program. Participants can ask questions in written form and a missionary responds to these questions and difficulties with the Catholic Faith in a positive and non inditing manner.

VIII THE RENEWED POPULAR MISSION AS A STIMULUS TO THE NEW CATHOLIC EVANGELIZATION:

Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical letter on the missionary mandate of Christ, offers us a structure for own missionary activity in the revitalization of local churches and regional churches in which we serve. The Christian witness of individual Catholics and local Catholic Communities is a key ingredient. (3) A renewed model of the Popular Mission can serve as a stimulus in the promotion of the new Catholic evangelization on the parish and regional level. When individual Catholics and parishes communities of faith are revitalized there are also

renewed possibilities to reach out to those persons living in our midst who do not yet know Jesus Christ.

Following the reform of the Liturgy called for by the Second Vatican Council, the Holy See promulgated a new Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults in 1972. Various National Conferences of Bishops around the world have made local cultural adaptations to the rite and approved the revised rite for their respective nations. (4)

This past Holy Saturday at the Easter Vigil more than 30,000 adults were received into the Catholic Church in my country. Many of them had spent two years of study, prayer, and apostolic service before receiving the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. Thousands of other baptized, but non catechized, adult Catholics also completed their personal journey to full membership in the Church. Based on the interviews of these new Catholics, the great majority were attracted to the Catholic Church by the good example of family members, friends and fellow students and workers. They found the support they needed to join the Catholic Church in their local parishes where there were vibrant celebrations of the liturgy and the promotion of a sense of community.

The structure, the steps of conversion, and the individual rites and prayers found in the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) are a rich resource for personal prayer, reflection and planning a popular mission program. The three stages of the North American model of the Popular Mission deliberately incorporate the key themes and prayers from the revised Rite of Christian Initiation (RCIA) as approved by our Bishops' Conference. The first stage of the Pre-Mission includes an emphasis on basic evangelization and an inquiry about the beliefs of the Catholic Church. During the time of intensive missionary preaching and study the participants are invited to journey in the spirit of a catechumen and to study our beliefs as part of a call to conversion. At this time there is a fresh invitation to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance and once again share in the sacrament of the Eucharist with the parish assembly. In the third stage of Post Mission the revitalized Catholic makes a fresh commitment to share in the ministries of liturgy, catechesis, and apostolic service along with the newly baptized and confirmed Neophytes in the tradition of the period of Mystagogy.

For non baptized persons or baptized Christians of other communities, there is a warm welcome to join the parish community for Sunday Eucharist as they begin their own journey to the Easter Vigil at the end of Lent of the following year.

As fellow missionaries in the Vincentian Family throughout the world may we all be enriched by our sharing of models and missionary experiences during these days. Thank you.

- (1) The American Vincentians. A Popular History of the Congregation of the Mission 1815-1987. Editorial Staff Vincentian Studies Institute, Los Angeles, 1988.
- (2) "Go Make Disciples", National Plan of Evangelization, USA National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C., 1992.
- (3) Redemptoris Missio, Pope John Paul II, Vatican City, 1990.
- (4) "Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA)," USA National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C., 1988.