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PRE-MISSION FORMATION OF LAY-MISSIONERS

Joaquin González, C.M.

INTRODUCTION

St. Vincent discovered true religion in the poor: "It is among them, among the poor, where true religion is preserved, true Faith, simple belief" (XI, 200-201; XI, 120).

Led by the spirit we explain the Gospel to simple people, with the desire to "evangelize" with the poor:

In our efforts to prepare Lay Missioners-Animators, we cannot forget this perspective.

It is clear that the Parish Mission, right from its beginning, the Pre-Mission, must include the laity in its projected evangelization: In fact, the planning of the mission cannot be undertaken without including the active participation of the laity: They must be given more authority: They do not know theology, but their lay condition opens doors to both youth and adults with much more facility than the revered Missionary.

On the other hand, the Vincentian mission seeks to make the evangelized at the same time evangelizers, for which it is necessary:

To use existing lay missioners.

To seek new ones.

To make the effort from the very start or preparation, expending both time and energy, in the formation and maturation, Christian and human, of the lay missioner.

Recruiting and preparing of laity to cooperate in the missionary process is a fundamental element of the mission: Such selection and preparation of the lay missioner (visitors, heads of families, group animators) is essential to the success of the mission. It is not easy to find a group of persons with the required human and spiritual qualities, but the effort must be made to make the layman aware of the circumstances.

PORTRAIT OF A LAY MISSIONER

Let us talk about the qualities a lay missioner at this time of evangelization in which the Church finds itself today: Since the lay missioner must, in a greater or less degree, take part in this evangelization, we note some of these qualities:

1. A person united to Christ, by reflection, action, & prayer.
2. Deeply ecclesial: he loves the Church & his parish.
3. Empathetic: He knows and makes his own the problems or the people.
4. Open: knows how to listen, to dialog, to be evangelized.
5. Ready to serve: an attitude or service and interest for all.
6. Instrument of reconciliation: to create unity.
7. Servant and guide: he is not the Center of the Christian community.

8. Animator & mover: Group educator.

CRITERIA TO KEEP IN MIND FOR FORMING LAY MISSIONERS

The laity must be active and integral to the Mission. It is not enough to be just a good person who can do everything.

The ideal is that the Pre-Mission and the Mission utilize missionaries of the same parish, who will also continue with the post-mission.

So they may collaborate in the entire mission they must be offered means of formation.

The layman must know well the objectives of the Mission; as well as the programming or its different phases.

Preparing lay missionaries is a delicate process, so it should be undertaken by the Mission Team; but always with the support and collaboration of the Parish Priest.

At the end of the Mission it is a good idea to set up a team to take responsibility for its continuance.

Reviewing these criteria, we logically ask: How are we preparing visitors, heads of families, and group animators? What dynamics are we using to assure their adequate formation?

FUNDAMENTAL REQUIREMENTS FOR FORMING LAY MISSIONERS

The requirements we should be aware of in forming lay missionaries must be the same as those for the formation of catechists; adapting them, however, to a concrete situation and taking into account the human element and time available: And "catechetical formation centers fundamentally on developing the aptitude and capacity for communicating the gospel message." (DCG, 111).

The formation of catechists involves:

Placing the catechist in the evangelizing mission of the Church, and enabling him to undertake totally the life of a Christian today:

With the original pedagogy of the Gospel.

All within an atmosphere of community and dialog.

Which leads him to maturity as a person, a believer, and educator of the faith.

Summing all this: preparing lay missionaries involves:

1. Achieving a basic formation of lay missionaries in the fundamental themes of a parish mission. It is difficult to evangelize and transform them into a missionary community if they have not discovered the nature and objectives of the new missionary perspective.

2. Lay Missioners must be offered the criteria of pastoral pedagogy; especially those treating of communication and personal encounter, since these are the techniques of a pastoral missionary.
3. To aid them who are to be messengers of the Christian message to discover the true biblical and pastoral sense of the Kerigma.
4. Begin the dynamics and animation of the groups which will direct the communities resulting from the experience of the Mission.
5. Create a spirit of adhesion among the Missioners so that their labors will be parish activities and not those of an individual or small group.

STEPS TO BE TAKEN DURING PREPARATION

A task should not be entrusted to Lay Missioners without helping them to make sense out of what they are going to undertake.

During the pre-Mission, then, we:

- Offer an elemental orientation so they may adequately do their job.
- Awaken and direct their vocation as evangelizers and missioners.
- Encourage a desire for deeper Christian formation.

If one of the objectives and priorities of the Mission is to discover and create Missioners, it is well to pay special attention to this aspect. So:

1. We begin by discussing it with the pastor and the laity who come to the preparation. We see to it that they address the theme right from the beginning of the preparation. Later on, during the serious phase of the Mission, we personally engage in seeking Missioners.
2. Once the group is formed we aid them in overcoming any fears they may have about undertaking a service previously unknown to them, and sometimes of doubtful value in their particular area.
3. We see to it that they take into account the reality of their situation, the objectives of the mission, the basic content of Faith, the techniques for animating groups.
4. They must awaken a conscience of their role as "animators" and "evangelizers," for which we help them develop qualities of openness, acceptance, understanding, simplicity, and a living Faith. We try to make them conscious of the challenges facing evangelization today and the need to join faithfulness to God and to man today.
5. The Pope has asked for a new evangelization that must be really new, and not a mere accommodation or renewal. For evangelization to be new, as John Paul II says, it must be new in its ardor, in its methods, and in its expression; but also in its answers to the questions of today's people, and in its renewed fidelity to its content.

6. As missionaries whose charism is service to the poor, we must keep before us that fidelity which our Mission Project asks of us: "To aid in the formation of the clergy and laity and enable them to participate in the evangelization of the poor" (Cons. 1, 3_).

This objective _ a sign also of authenticity for the whole Church _ must be for us the first objective for our Missions.

OTHER POSSIBILITIES FOR THE FORMATION OF LAY MISSIONERS

Formation can be undertaken in different ways:

1. A monthly workshop on formation in the parish: The missionary team is responsible. A continual process, always open to matters that could be treated in future sessions.
2. Short intensive courses of one or two weeks.
3. Week-end gatherings for formation and conscience-raising.
4. A more complete formation course: A possibility exists for offering A **COURSE OF FORMATION FOR EVANGELIZATION**, which would include a treatment of the fundamentals of our Christian Faith:
 - Introduction to the Bible.
 - Jesus of Nazareth, the Lord.
 - Belief in God at times of disbelief.
 - The Church; community of the disciples of Jesus.
 - Christian spirituality.

The methodology of the course consists of the following steps:

1st: **PRESENTATION OF THE THEME:** Given by a team member, if possible. If not by one of the priests of the parish.

2nd: **PERSONAL STUDY OF THE THEME:** Each participant studies, reflects, and prays on the week's theme, especially the parts touching on the Word of God.

3rd: **WEEKLY GROUP MEETING:** Sharing study; reflection, and personal prayer. Meets for one hour. Five to ten members. Coordinated by a lay person or a parish priest.

4th: **CELEBRATION OF THE THEME STUDIED:** It is a good idea to have each new theme lead to a celebration, and that the Missionary lead the celebration. If he cannot, the parish priest can do it.

Who are invited to take the course? We do not overwork those who are already overworked (catechumens, those already in formation with other groups). Those

invited should be persons who want to revitalize their Faith and evangelization commitment.

Any of the foregone possibilities could serve to prepare missionaries. But there is another possibility: To promote the participation in DIOCESAN FORMATION COURSES FOR THE FORMATION OF LAY MISSIONERS by those key members of the parish who will be active in the post-Mission and different parish activities (Caritas, pastoral of the sick, liturgy committees, catechetics). In such courses they receive basic formation for their tasks within the parish.

ROLE OF THE PRIESTS

Group coordinators meet monthly to evaluate previous meetings, prepare the following, and to animate the progress of the Mission.

They will attend all group meetings, to resolve difficulties, help to develop the current theme, and encourage the continued enthusiasm for the Mission.

When the coordinator of a group does not do a good job, the priest should take a more active voice in the proceedings to make up for the deficiencies.

As a means of realizing "co-responsibility" a CENTRAL COMMITTEE can be set up. This committee, presided over by the pastor and composed of laity, coordinates the missionary process in the parish. Different sub-commissions may function (secretary, communication, finances, formation).