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María Asunción Gascón Aranda

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Laity on the mission team

María Asunción Gascón Aranda

1. Introduction

To begin this paper I make an initial observation. I have been a member of the Zaragoza Province Mission Team for more than 13 years. For this ministry we have our own methodology, different in many details from other methodologies. I address the subject of Laity on the Missions from this perspective.

I realize that the Laity collaborate on the Missions in different ways. For this reason, I repeat, I write of my own experiences and concerns, which could be enriched when seen from other points of view.

2. A little theology

As you know, according to many commentators, the missionary labors of lay persons are based on Jesus' own actions, when he sent out, *to announce the kingdom of God*, both the Twelve Apostles and a good number of disciples of every kind, as well as Laity of both sexes (Lk 8:1-3; 10:1-6).

The Apostle Paul, in Romans 16 affirms the importance of lay missionary service, particularly that of the married couple Prisca and Aquila. As a famous theologian remarks: "Their fidelity and spirit of sacrifice must have been an extraordinary help to the Pauline mission, so much so that Paul says that *all* Christian communities converted from paganism should be grateful to them" (Rom 16:4). Paul says the husband and wife, Andronica and Junia, are "outstanding among the Apostles" (Rom 16:7).

The Council, faithful to this tradition, says: "Christ, great prophet, who by the witness of his life and by virtue of his word proclaimed the kingdom of God, fulfills his prophetic mission ... not only by means of the Hierarchy, which teaches in his name and with his power, but also by means of the Laity, whom he constitutes as witnesses and enlightens with a *sense of Faith* and the grace of *the Word* (Act 2:17-18; Ap 19:10) in order that the power of the Gospel shine forth in daily family and social life" (LG, 35).

And in *Ad Gentes*: "For this reason the Laity are of greatest importance... to proclaim Christ by word and example" (AG, 15).

These texts are clear and oblige us to agree that the Laity occupy a position which surpasses the needs of the particular churches to which they belong at the present moment.

Also, did not St. Vincent want "lay" Daughters of Charity, and began lay institutes like the Ladies of Charity? And would he not favor a renewal of missions today counting in great measure on the Laity?

We Laity realize that participating in missions demands an effort to renew our mentality as well as customary practices of mission teams. But such a renewal, though not easy, is necessary and worthwhile.

3. Lay participation in practice

Our Mission Team, from its beginning, has been made up of Vincentian Missioners, Daughters of Charity, and "Laity connected with the Mission." Among these lay people are marrieds, singles, men and women. So a "diversity of members and duties" of the Body of Christ, the Church, is evident. This ecclesial character of participation and co-responsibility is something which attracts and *evangelizes* in the parishes to which we are called.

In the actual carrying out of our Missions, attempting to recapture the practice of St. Vincent, who based his missions on the needs of the people, we divide the work of the mission into three stages:

1. Preparation
2. The actual Mission
3. Follow-up

In each of these three stages there is some kind of lay participation. Although our participation in the Mission itself is continuous, our presence in the other two phases, though less evident, is nonetheless of importance.

3.1 Preparation for the mission

During Preparation time, the laymen connected with the Mission have an important role as witnessing to a *committed Faith* and *co-responsibility*. Our witness is *testimony* as much for the clergy as for the laity of the parish where we are missioning. Seeing lay participation makes both clergy and laity realize that the Mission belongs to everybody.

We have different tasks during preparation, coordinating with the Mission director and with the Vincentian priests. But of special importance is just our presence in presenting the Mission to the whole parish.

3.2 Participation in the actual mission

The Mission itself consists of three parts: Meeting with the People, Proclamation of the message, formation of groups. We take part in all three in different degrees.

Basically our participation must be a witness to the role of the layman in the church. We recall the previously quoted words of the Council: "It is of greatest importance that the lay person announces Christ both by word and example" (AG 15). There are different ways of doing this:

- By "person to person evangelization" (EN 46): visits to families and group meetings, listening to problems, doing small favors, addressing problems with their priests, discovering poverty situations, finding the sick, etc. This contribution of ours can be very important.
- Attend meetings of youth, children, marriages.
- Going to family groups in their home meetings, a task we enjoy very much and understand.

- We often have been able to act as "Moderators/Animators" in meetings where Lay Missioners are formed, a task we undertake during the beginning days of the actual Mission.
- I think it important to remark here that sometimes we lay members of the team, in parishes where they are without a priest for a short period, have taken over the role of President of a Liturgical Service. Why? To show the local Laity that it is a job they also can do.

I want to note that these activities are undertaken by a C.M. from a certain perspective, by a priest in another way, by a Sister through her own charisms, and by us lay people, in our simplicity and the reality of life we share with the people, in a natural and spontaneous way. This awakens the curiosity of the people, giving rise to questions by children, youth, and adults, and opening the way for *person to person dialog* (EN 46) and a simple *witness-service* (EN 21). Their conclusion: *They are like us and are enthusiastic over the Gospel!*

It is not the same thing to bring about a reform "by decree," as by "living witness." On the mission we must not forget the Vincentian principle: *accommodation to local circumstances, time, and people* (SV I, 227). Normally this is easier for us laity.

In everything else, in our countries, so blessed with a clerical presence, it is not very easy to move towards lay participation.

3.3 Follow-up activities

In our experience the problems encountered during the follow-up phase are quite varied. One task for married missioners is the forming of "Married Christian groups." Then there are the forming of other age groups, especially children and youth. Specialized tasks, but necessary, requiring specialized attention. But, I repeat, they are tasks, we laity are doing well.

In Spain, I cannot speak for other countries, material for this "simple" evangelization is scarce. Something must be prepared. And there are lay people doing it.

After a Mission the pastors have a big job. And they are lacking collaborators. They often solicit our sporadic help in getting formation and service groups started. We have collaborated often, even in Latin America.

If a Vincentian inspired catechumenate can get started, our participation can be helpful or necessary.

I think there is much to be done. We observe many communities where the people are *like sheep without a shepherd*. And often a pastor will ask us, *Now, what can I do?*

Why have I expressed this concern? Precisely because I am convinced that this job requires the collaboration of Vincentians, Daughters of Charity, and Vincentian Laity. It calls for vision, creativity, study, reflection, experimentation, joint labor... in a word, *fidelity to today's person / the experience of today's person*, and what St. Vincent keeps on telling us, *constant attention to the Spirit who blows where he wills*.

I am convinced also that Vincentian laity must strive to establish in the communities we evangelize:

- Charitable/social services.
- Some sort of solidarity with the third world.

I could recount many examples of experiences of these types that I have witnessed in missions in which I have participated.

4. Growth of lay teams

As I begin this theme I make bold to declare publicly that Vincentians need courage, humility, and work, that this theme of lay promotion, and especially of lay missionaries does not remain just talk.

Our Missions must work towards a double objective, to establish:

1. Vincentian Lay Missioners

I belong to this group. They are lay people integrated to the Mission Team, usually recruited during a Mission, either by asking to join, or being asked to join by the Mission Director or by a lay member of the team.

2 Lay Vincentian Parochial Missioners

These are parishioners who, in union with us, labor to maintain an evangelizing and missionary spirit. But it is necessary that these community groups, open to evangelization, in order to keep alive their concern for evangelization, be spiritually and materially prepared, and in continual formation. To this end they require the missionary encouragement of a Vincentian priest, and also the presence of a lay person connected to the Team.

In this double sense, the invitation by lay team members is very important. But it is also important that we lay Vincentians, aware that we need the children of St. Vincent (Vincentian priests and the D.C.'s) _ I say "children" because we are "grandchildren" _ so it is important for us to promote vocations to the D.C.'s and C.M.'s. And I want to tell you that we do it.

5. Formation for the mission

We laity need formation. Allow me to recall the words of our Project for Missions taken from the Constitutions of the C.M.: The members of the C.M. fulfill the end of the mission when they "help form clerics and laity and lead them to a fuller participation in the evangelization of the poor."

Lay Vincentian Missioners need, request, and deem unavoidable, an adequate formation in order to respond to the challenges of the missions. A formation embracing the following aspects:

- Ample theological-biblical formation
- Basic Vincentian formation

- Knowledge of different pastoral modalities
- Theoretical and practical knowledge of our concrete methods

To achieve these objectives we attend three Formation sessions a year, in addition to a formation period before each mission.

Furthermore we are developing a Catechumenate, Vincentian in character, because we want to feel that we are a "group," a community, and a community with a clear identity. This is necessary if we desire to develop a true Vincentian spirit.

_ Another aspect of Lay missionary formation _

The lay person in the communities we visit is both a receiver and an agent. In our missions there exists an important task: formation of the Laity. And towards what end?

To see their role in a New Church _ to *evangelize*

To lead them to a *fuller participation* in the life of their community

To *change structures* so that this participation is possible.

This a primary objective of our missions. And, as I have said above, we count on the collaboration of Lay people. Sometimes this task is confided to a priest and a lay man; at other times the priest begins it and the lay person continues. Often it is done by a lay person alone, which is a good step because the laity of the parish see it is a job they themselves can do.

A conclusion from all these observations is the realization that laity need good formation to be missionaries.

6. Final reflection

If we desire to be efficient in our missionary apostolate, we have to be realists and listen to the Spirit with humility. There is a lot of talk about the laity in the Church. But well-oriented work with them is not easy. There is a lot of resistance to their integration in parish and missionary pastoral.

The attitude must be overcome, that, whether the laity is used or not, it is impossible to collaborate with them, or that they be utilized only because of lack of clergy.

Also super-evaluation of the laity is to be avoided. We do not want to forget that the Church is hierarchical and needs the complementariness of the priesthood of the baptized with the ministerial priesthood.

We laity need support. A few things to be avoided:

- That we be left to our own means, without the necessary support to cope with the many difficulties of a mission.
- That we do not receive a good formation.
- That we be not corrected kindly when we make mistakes. Or that we not be listened to when we observe deficiencies.

Finally, we would add impatience. Some individuals cannot wait to see the fruits of a lay missionary's labor. Actually, it has only been very recently that we have been regarded as more than "mere receivers."

I hope that you will receive these observations as not only mine, but those of many members of our Team, and that they will be of help to you. What I have written is not just theory, but experiences we have been trying to live for several years, and which hopefully can be lived in other places and by other Teams.

Thank you!

NOTE: In compiling this paper I have made use of:

1. Mission material of the Zaragoza Province, especially *A Mission Project*.
2. A conference by our Coordinator on the role of Laity on the Missions, given to the Visitors of Europe.
3. Reflections of other laity on our Mission Team.