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For the missions: a Vincentian team, comprising Priests of the Mission, Daughters of Charity and Laity

João Maria Barbosa Lemos, CM

1 Definition of the subject

Instead of long and profound considerations about the renewed Vincentian Popular Mission, we will try instead to share with you our experience in Portugal concerning a Vincentian missionary team composed of Vincentian priests, Daughters of Charity and Laity.

Having heard mention of "the laity's role in mission," we shall focus our modest contribution on "working together _ the play of relationships within the team." Because of that and not to follow the temptation to get away from the subject, we shall try as much as possible to remain faithful to the schema presented by Fr. Luis María Martínez San Juan who was a member of the preparatory commission for the Vincentian Month.

2.1 Who are we?

The team is comprised of: Fr João Maria Barbosa Lemos; Sister Maria do Carmo DC, a nurse; and two lay people, Maria Irène from Lousado-Porto, Maria Otilie from Faro-Algarve.

2.2 Reflection on our motivation

Here in resume is what led us, in one way or another, into the experience of mixed missionary teams:

2.2.1 "Finally, members should teach clerics and laity to work together and to support one another in the process of forming a Christian community" (CM Constitutions 15,3).

2.2.2 "In apostolic initiatives, provinces and individual houses should willingly work in fraternal cooperation with each other, with the diocesan clergy, with religious institutes and with the laity" (CM Statutes 3).

2.2.3 The Daughters of charity of the Province of Portugal felt themselves called by the spirit of collaboration, of participation in missionary activity in common. They took the first steps in this work in common with very good results..

2.2.4 The Laity opened themselves up more to the evangelising mission of the Church, aware that such and involvement is part of their baptismal vocation, since through baptism we are all missionary.

2.2.5 All this led the Priests, Sisters and Laity to involve themselves in a common evangelical activity which gives greater Church witness.

2.3 Lay participation in the missionary team

A good while ago in Portugal the Daughters of Charity began taking part in the popular missions along with the Priests of the Mission.

In 1988 there began, with good results, the experience of lay involvement. Today the team for the Renewed Vincentian Popular Mission generally comprises a Vincentian priest, a Daughter of Charity, and a lay man or woman. When for one reason or another no sister is available two lay women can team up with the priest. Likewise when no lay person is available two sisters can team up with the priest. But normally and ideally the team consists of a priest, a sister, a man or a woman. Thus composed the team is more ecclesial and has greater sign value: it gives better witness, it shows more clearly that the Church is missionary. In short it has a deeper impact regarding the specific dynamic of the mission. It shows in a fuller and better way that missionary activity is done by all, with all and aiming at all.

There have been numerous popular missions given as a team. They have generally been asked for by bishops and/or by the parish priests. They regard this activity as a high point in evangelisation.

2.4 Missionary activity carried out as a team

This is a very rich and positive experience. Why?

- In it one receives more than one gives: "It is in giving that one receives."
- It is a sharing of prayer, of lived faith, and of work in common.
- It gives a better chance to respond to the various challenges and appeals which arise from the reality of missioning.
- The varied composition of the team makes it easier to contact the people being evangelised, however complex the reality may be.
- It brings back to life the words of the gospel: "The Lord sent them out two by two."

The results from the team mission are in general very positive and most interesting. That does not mean that problems do not arise or difficulties inherent in life as a group or as a team. The contrary would be surprising. But in Jesus Christ, Evangeliser of the poor, it is possible to surmount difficulties, overcome eventual barriers and bring about union. In this perspective possible frictions and conflicts are easily resolved.

2.4 Attitudes to be cultivated during a mission

In order to avoid acting merely on the surface

- We are not content with a mere "external polishing up." It is necessary to revitalise the faith of people, so that their faith might throw light on their problems.
- We do not simply seek to resolve immediate practical problems, but rather an authentic conversion to the gospel.
- We wish to see the conversion of the agents of mission (laity, priests, missionaries).

2.5 Rules of life during mission

We are not:

- a) The "good," the saviours, the ones who know.
- b) "Salespersons" who seek at any price to sell their merchandise.
- c) "Curious journalists" who are searching for news.
- d) Our aim is not the preaching of sermons, for we wish to avoid constraint and intolerance.
- e) We do not wish to bring about in the people visited an allergy for the faith, the parish, the mission.

We are:

- a) Like Jesus, "friends who draw near in order to serve and not for some other reason, asking nothing in return.
- b) Like Jesus, we go out to meet people, to make them an offer, not to impose on them. It is only our life that can convince.
- c) Like Jesus, we are messengers of a Good News: "Peace to this house."
- d) Like the first disciples of Jesus, we are Christians who are missionary, convinced and joyous.
- e) We believe in a God who is good and who is a Father; we believe that the human heart is fundamentally good.
- f) In short, we seek to adopt an evangelical style of simplicity, humility, amiability, prudence.

3.1 The spirit of the team at the three stages of the mission

3.2 Preparation time: pre-mission

The missionary team, once constituted, seeks to:

- Cultivate team spirit even at a distance.
- Pray for the mission about to be given.
- To know the reality which has to be missioned, at least through research made by the parish priest and/or the local parish team.
- To make contact with the reality to be missioned, if not by all the members of the team at least by the coordinator or the members nearest to the locality.
- As much as possible, it is the team which announces and prepares the mission at its different stages.

3.3 During the core of the mission itself

We try to:

- Live in a team spirit, each one accepting his or her situation and bringing out the best of his or her particular giftedness: "One for all and all for one."
- Pray as a team or with other teams if there are several.

- Plan and evaluate the work of each day.
- Take meals as a team, in general and preferably with families.'

3.4 Activities during the core of the mission

First Stage: Meeting. The missionary, coming from outside, makes contact with all. He visits the families for a friendly chat. The preparation continues with the formation of animators.

Second Stage: The Word. We announce the Message, the Good News, in a very simple way, taking account of age and other differences.

Third Stage: Group Meetings. Neighbours and friends meet in houses. Normally it is one person of the group who animates the dialogue in his own house. Christ makes himself present. We do not forget to get the sick to participate in so far as it is possible.

Final Stage: Assembly of the People of God. All feel responsible and united in the aim of reviving the awareness of being the People of God on the march.

NB Normally the exchanges last two or three weeks.

3.5 Post-Mission; present situation

This lasts one year.

We try to direct attention to the church as being missionary, preoccupied with the poor and social justice.

About half-way through there is a meeting with animators. This deals principally with the theme of "Christian pedagogy" or something else if judged more appropriate.

At the end of the year there takes place a meeting of two or three days in the mission location with all the team if possible.

4.1 Importance of the theme for the renewed mission

4.2 Ecclesial

The team witnesses to the varied charisms within the Church: priest, religious, laity. It witnesses to a greater willingness for sharing, communion, unity. It constitutes a challenge: Priests, Sisters, Laity: all of us are called to the evangelising mission of the Church.

4.3 Pastoral

It is easier to reach the different levels of the people to be missionized, whoever they may be.

We seek to reach everyone by means of:

- person to person encounters
- small group encounters
- proclamation through preaching and dialogue
- celebrations, prayers, sacramental liturgies
- visits to the poor and needy.

4.4 Vincentian

It is through this joyous proclamation of Jesus Christ, the unique Saviour, sent by the Father who gave us the Holy Spirit.

4.5 Possible orientations for the Vincentian missions

- It is a rich experience to be developed and to be made bear fruit.
- Care must be taken to give a particularised preparation to the different participants so that each one can assume his particular role.
- Care must also be taken with regard to learning the dynamics of team spirit so that the mission becomes more and more a witness-sign: "see how they love one another." "They have one heart and one soul".

4.6 How does this approach respond to the problems of the indifferent?

The feed-back and the preliminary survey give an idea of the concrete reality, including the indifferent, which will never be lost sight of. We continue to be sensitive to the real situation:

- by witnessing to our insertion, our active solidarity, our joy in remaining close to people;
- by interceding through our life of prayer which speaks for itself;
- by remaining in contact with all sorts of less favoured people: sick, aged, poor, drug-affected
- by generally taking our meals with families: that de-freezes, breaks down barriers and prejudices, resolves conflicts;
- by giving personal testimony of joy, simplicity and solidarity with all;
- by going out to meet people whatever be their concrete situation, race or colour.
- by urging the practising to invite those estranged from the Church to "try out" the mission.

5.1 How is the theme understood?

Missionaries. There are missionaries who no longer understand any other way of giving missions apart from in a mixed team. Others prefer to remain faithful to their individualism. In other words: some see team-work, participation and collaboration as an enrichment. Others perhaps see it as an obstacle since they prefer to continue to work alone.

Priests and laity whom we are directing. They have in general a very positive idea of us. They see in us a sign of the Church, an ecclesial group which gives better witness, a synthesis of charisms in the service of evangelisation. Some find themselves challenged: "Will this woman come because she does not know what to do? Well then why does she come?"

The Poor. They perceive very well the significance of our presence and the words of the Gospel: "whoever welcomes you, welcomes me;" "whoever receives you, receives me." From that, there springs their gestures of sharing, of friendship, of gratitude, in spite of their poverty.

Dioceses and those bearing pastoral responsibility. We are certainly understood and accepted by the bishops and the pastors who request our missions. There are parish priests who ask for us after simply informing their bishop.

6.1 Possible conclusions to draw

6.2 For a new evangelisation in the 21st century

Working as a missionary team will facilitate the new evangelisation not only of individual persons but of entire groups of people in their diverse situations and cultures. They will be led to form adult ecclesial communities which will grow in the faith and realise the full original meaning of adhering to the person of Christ and his gospel.

It will be easier to bring the gospel to non-believers and to the indifferent by leading them into a way of initiation and encounter in the certainty that God loves each one of them and that Jesus Christ is Saviour of all.

There will be formed a lively and active laity ready to participate and become missionary.

There will take place an education in justice and solidarity, taking in the conditions of poverty and inequality, by trying to respond to these through actions of individuals and groups.

6.3 For keeping our style of mission up to date

- Remaining attentive to the realities of society.
- Forming a laity which is aware and committed to mission.
- Making the "Vincentian Mission" more dynamic: new ardour, new methods, new experiences.

7.1 Conclusion:

We are trying to share with you a little of what is lived out in the Renewed Vincentian Popular Mission according to the perspective expected of us: "working together, and the relationships within the team." We have not tried to exhaust the subject. Perhaps that does not correspond to what you were expecting. Certainly there remain many questions to ask and responses to seek. That is what we can do now, after barely beginning to communicate and share our experiences. Forgive me if I have not corresponded with your expectations.

Translator: Stanislaus Brindley CM