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# ROUND TABLE ON THE VARIOUS LISTENERS

## LISTENERS GROUPS

*Bruno Cogoni C.M.*

1) My first experience on "Listeners Groups" was in 1970 when, in the aftermath of Vatican II, the members of the Sassari (Sardinia, Italy) missionary "team" began asking themselves: "What could we do to offer to our people the possibility of expressing their difficulties?" Actually, the faithful coming to church were able to listen to our homilies, but were not offered the possibility to intervene. Usually, "dialogue" in church was practically reduced to a monologue between missionary (teacher) and missionary (disciple).

Why then not choose to have meetings in the Christian houses? So we did. We set about organizing family encounters, dividing the parish in sectors according to the extension of the territory and the number of the inhabitants, and in each sector, the evening, after dinner (at 8:30 p.m.), the missionary went to the family where the meeting was supposed to be held and the other families living in the sector were invited to join in.

Immediately the faithful appreciated this familiar style of catechizing, because they were offered the opportunity to intervene and to express their own experience and their difficulties on the matter which was proposed by the missionary for discussion. From this day on we never abandoned this method of spreading the Word and of catechizing.

In the 70s, we used to dedicate five days of the first week of the mission (usually the mission goes on during 15 days) to these "Listeners Groups" and four days of the second week to the community meetings in church. But from the year 80 on, we used also three days of the second week for the "Listeners Groups": because we had become aware that, to the community meetings in church, were coming only the customary fold, whereas in the "Listeners Groups" we had many more people.

In 1981, when the First National Meeting on the Missions to the People was held in Rome, where we tried to evaluate our 1980 Mission work, it became obvious that all the Religious Communities devoting their members to the popular missions were tending to adopt this new style of evangelization. They were encouraged by Pope John Paul II, who told the delegates: "Before, the Christian People were coming to you in order to listen to you; the time has come when YOU must go to the people!"

The meetings in private houses or "Listeners Groups" (this appellation was used after the 1981 Assembly) form the most interesting aspect of the new methodology; the meetings are held in a climate of familiarity and reciprocal esteem between the missionary and the participators. Very often the conversation becomes personalized to the extent of allowing an exchange of more intimate, human and religious, experiences.

In Sardinia, for the "Listeners Groups", we direct the parish team in charge of preparing the Mission to seek those families which are ready to receive at home the other

families of the sector. We provide the Organizing Group with a few practical criteria which will help them in choosing the families which will host the "Listeners Groups":

- a. favouring the families neglected as far as religious practice is concerned;
- b. being attentive that the family which will host the Group not be in disagreement with the other families in the parish;
- c. taking care that the room where the meeting is about to take place be large enough to accommodate every one;
- d. making sure that the host family accept to invite personally the families living in the sector;
- e. suggesting to avoid that sweets be offered during the meeting; this would only disturb the participators.

It is recommended to change the hosting family every evening in order to increase the interest of other families and to avoid the danger of limiting the participation to a few accustomed people. Moreover one should propose every evening to all the families of the sector who have already taken part in the former meetings to go on coming and sharing in the successive encounters. This is the way, during the mission, to be able to give a true and proper catechesis.

On the last days of the Mission one should organize also a Community Meeting, to which are invited all those who took part in the "Listeners Groups" in order to verify the success and encourage people to go on meeting after the Mission has ended.

Other religious communities dedicated to the popular missions prefer to adopt the system of having the persons to participate in one "Listeners Group" only, without a special theme being chosen; the themes are proposed freely by the participants. But in doing so they are not offered the possibility of taking part in various encounters and there is a risk of missing the opportunity of a deeper catechesis, which the Mission should offer.

2) What are the results obtained in these "Listeners Groups"?

- a. Preaching of the Good News becomes more familiar.
- b. Persons are offered the possibility of intervening to express their experiences and difficulties.
- c. It fosters communication between the families.
- d. It helps create in the parish \_ if it does not exist yet \_ a mentality in favor of continuing, even after the Mission, the "Listeners Groups" encounters, and of fostering adult catechesis.

3) What kind of problems have been met?

- a. Some apathy and individualism among the people.

- b. Diffidence, especially among men, while taking part in the encounters. The majority of participants are women.
- c. The religious ignorance of many people.
- d. The need to deepen one's knowledge of the Christian message.

4) During the Mission, the Listeners Groups bring together the neighbours and some people living a little farther (not many). The missionaries insist on a greater responsibility among neighbors, so that the parochial community may become more attentive, more sensible and hospitable for the people living farther.

5) There is no doubt that the institution of "Listeners Groups" offers to a parochial community the possibility of initiating a New Evangelization.

Presently in the parishes there is no longer a catechesis directed to adults. The "Listeners Groups" represent a form which can help revive this dimension. One of the objectives of the Popular Mission is that of creating a will to meet others, even after the Mission, in order to foster a continuity in deepening one's knowledge of the truths of faith.

The "Listeners Groups" are certainly one of the new forms the Vincentian Mission should adopt in order to help our people overcome this kind of religious ignorance, which St. Vincent discovered in the countryside at his time and which today is to be found especially in our towns. At the time of St. Vincent, the ignorance was due to the abandoning of poor people to their fate; today the situation is more complex, because of widely spread materialism, individualism and apathy.