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## The Follow-up to the Mission: The Church of Panama C.O.N.A.M. (National Commission of Missionary Animation)

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# **The church of panama**

## **National commission of missionary animation**

### **Conam**

## **The follow-up to the mission**

*Sister Sylvia Lopez Hernandez*

### **I. Introduction**

#### **1. The National Commission on Missionary Animation**

##### **a) Objectives**

The National Commission of Missionary Animation, was created by the Episcopal Conference of Panama (C.E.P.), in the context of the preparation for the Fifth Centenary of the First Evangelization of the Americas.

The C.E.P. gave a mandate to realize “a missionary program, diocese by diocese with the intention of bringing the mission program already designed to all of the Dioceses in the whole country”.<sup>1</sup>

The objective of this missionary animation was to “revitalize the missionary conscience of the church in each and every one of its members, especially the laity.”<sup>2</sup>

The Vincentian Missionary Team (EMIVI) was asked to take charge of the coordination of these missions. The commission consisted of Fr. Tom Sendlein, C.M. and Fr. Francisco Barcnas, C.M., who presented the missionary plan that they were doing in various parishes in Panama, Salvador and Guatemala. From this group arose what was known as the steering committee.

### **II. Description of the experience**

#### **A) Popular Mission**

The project of the National Mission taken up by the Vincentian Team has been one of the greatest challenges, historically speaking, that has taken place in the church of Panama.

Fr. Tom Sendlein, C.M. here present, said with regard to this proposal of the Bishops, “We (EMIVI) wanted that some doors be opened to us, suddenly, all of the country was open to us.”

As soon as it was organized, the CONAM began to work on the organization, the content and the methodology.

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<sup>1</sup> Message of the Episcopal Conference of Panama. 5. Feb.1, 1987. No. 8C

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., No.5

The Popular Mission, to whom was it directed?... Without a doubt and keeping in mind the Vincentian spirit that animated the mission, it was directed primarily to the most abandoned of the church, to the most poor, the marginalized, the indifferent, so much so that the proclamation of Jesus and his Kingdom would be the main line of thought for all the contents of the mission for the children, the youth and the adults. The mission would have the character of Evangelization and not Sacramentalization. The theme that accompanied this mission would be “*New people, in new communities, for a new society*”

The Bishops of each Diocese were visited, then the pastors, who were to organize their parishes, do a census, divide the parish into sectors, organize the various committees for food, transportation, lodging, etc. the most important part was the preparation of the mission centers. While this process was going on, the CONAM was dedicated to motivate and recruit the future missionaries who were given two intense formation weekends consisting of training in content, methodology, dynamics, songs, etc. The formations were given by the Steering Committee that were responsible for all the formation and organization with the help of some lay people. The missionaries began missioning Diocese by Diocese, parish by parish, so that no community was without its missionary team.. The enthusiasm and the hopes in the parishes was growing. In all the Dioceses, they were talking about and waiting for the mission. The many lay people, hearing of the missions, began arriving spontaneously looking for their missionary formation. In the past 6 years, thanks be to God, more than 9,000 lay missionaries arrived to work on the missions, most of them men and youth. We took the mission to more than 3,000 communities with the help of the Missionary Teams. Of the nine Dioceses, eight were missioned we covered around 150 parishes and around 250,000 persons participated in the missions.

The essential work of the missionary teams consists fundamentally in family visits, even to the families that are not Catholic. In the mornings, there is work with the children, in the afternoon with the youth and in the evening with the adults. Each group has assigned to it its themes, dynamics and special activities. The family gathering that brings together three or more of the communities were very important events to gather together hundreds of people from the same parish. The Eucharist was the most powerful moment of the gathering, with vocational testimonies concerning the married life, religious life, and dedicated lay life.

### **B) Specialized missions**

Our program for the V Centenary, realized between 1987-1993 were years of intense missionary work, we want to note that the capital city of Panama was the last stage of the missions and here, we not only had the parish missions, but we took on some new challenges which were given to us by John Paul II in the “Redemptoris Missio” to make us reach “new Aeriopogi”. Panama city is a cosmopolitan city due to the Panama Canal, with a concentration of more than 47% of the total population of the country, with a capitalist commercial conglomerate, the Free Zone of Colon, where millions of dollars in imports and exports flow through every year toward Latin America, the Caribbean, and Central America. A Banking Area with more than 140 National and Foreign Banks. With a population made up of various ethnic groups: indigenous, African-American, Asian, mestizo, and others. This mixture of races and cultures can not be left out of our evangelization process. And so, our Specialized Missions sprang up. Eleven groups of special missions were organized with their own contents, methodology, and activities, they are:

1. Labor Mission .....for the companies and factories.
2. Education Mission...for schools and high schools
3. Hospital Mission.....for the sick and the medical teams

4. Prison Mission.....for the prisons
5. Family Mission.....take place for one week with families in all the Dioceses
6. Afroantillana Mission. With the various groups of the black race
7. Mission for the Chinese Community.. With groups of Chinese catholics
8. University Mission....Realized in 5 universities
9. Large Companies Mission.. With meetings of business people from companies and the active participation of these business people in the meetings.
10. Mission for the Legislative Assembly..for the men and women who legislate the country
11. Mission for the Public Forces...With the participation of many groups of the national police.

These specialized missions have been a great success for CONAN because the mission was able to reach many persons who, being catholics, do not participate in the church.

Finally, we ended the Mission in the city with a large procession with all of the parishes of the Diocese to give a public manifestation of our Christian commitment.

### **III. Follow-up of the mission**

The National Mission project, having been finished, the Episcopal Conference of Panama decided to continue the work realized by CONAN motivated in part by the petition of hundreds of missionaries asking for the continuity of this organization.

The Conference named me, Sister Sylvia Lopez Herrera, as Executive Directress. I belong to a Religious Congregation of the Missionary Catechists Sisters founded by a Vincentian, Bishop Francis Beckman, C.M., born in Holland, but arrived as a young man to Central America. In Panama, he had various assignments, among them, he came to be named Archbishop of Panama (1945-1963). As Pastor of this church, he felt the need to found a Missionary Congregation that would give answers to the lack of formation of so many poor and marginated people among the people of God. Our charism is definitely missionary and we feel that we are part of the Vincentian Family.

With this spirit, we assume the responsibility of carrying forth the task begun by Father Thomas Sendlein, C.M., here present, whom we want to thank in the name of all the missionaries of Panama, for the years he dedicated to missionary service, many of that time working for CONAN. Recently, on May 27th, he celebrated 25 years of missionary priesthood.

In our follow-up of the mission, we have been discovering how important this period or second phase of the mission, "The Follow-Up". One cannot think about organizing a Mission without thinking about the future projection of the objective of the mission. Our first concern about the follow up of the mission was: what can we offer so many parishes that, strongly animated by the Mission Teams feels the need of giving answers to the pastoral concerns of their communities. , children, adults were integrated. It was marvelous to see the enthusiasm principally of the people to continue this missionary tasks. We have insisted so much in the meeting with the groups that the mission does not end with the living of the missionaries, but that it continues in them, that now or to give them their support and present a new program of evangelization. In this time of post-mission more than 7.000 persons were left this post to work for their parishes, groups of different pastoral were organized, in which many youths We gave ourselves the task to re-organize our missionary work. It was necessary to revitalize the missionary conscience and continue maintaining all of our dynamic of animation, formation of the missionaries, and those hoping to be missionary,

continue offering program of missionary formation in the continuous and permanent manner. Our objective is to be able to offer to the parishes specific program for pastoral agents and empowering them to resume together with the pastor the evangelical tasks. We have organized itinerant missionary team that offer to the parishes, during all year, we also work in the creation of new didactic materials with specific objectives.

We can point out some concrete areas that CONAN, office to that parishes that ask for follow-up to the mission:

**1. Area of Formation:** This is the first that we offered to the pastor, this program have as objectives to initiate of process of formation with the persons that have been motivated by the participation in the mission. Our program are designed for systematic and progressive formation.

**2. Missionary Animation:** Within our specific objective is the commitment to maintain the Missionary Animation in the church of Panama, for this reason, during the year, we offer two or more formations on misallege and the concrete tasks of the mission. Another way to maintain the missionary animation is by means OF sharing what it means to be a missionary and what to do as a missionary, so we have: Afternoons of missionary animation, gatherings of missionaries from time to time, and missionary breakfasts/ dinners, these last activities, besides other objectives, help us economically.

**3. Parish missions:** We can say that this is the very heart of CONAN. All our work is focused on this end, to maintain and offer our missionary services to the parishes. Actually, we have some parishes that maintain their summer missionary program each year, other parishes ask for missions during the year at different times such as patron feasts, holy week, o some other special liturgical moment.

**4. Permanent formation of missionaries:** Many missionaries have remained as missionaries since the beginning of CONAN, we at this time have about 10 years at the service of Evangelization and many persons have dedicated all their time to missionary work. Some work full time, others part time, the majority during the summer months, during their vacations. For all of these missionaries and the missionaries that arrive each year, we offer missionary formation, these persons come from different parishes where we maintain close collaboration and communication.

All this process is part of the follow-up to the mission, in which we are helping and supporting the project of the National Mission with these concrete tasks. We maintain an attitude of disponability and openness to walk with and feel with the Universal Church and the local church. Actually, we are opening paths with our missionaries to respond to the most urgent Need, the Mission Ad Gente. We now have some young missionaries in Guatemala and there are others in the process of discernment.

REFLECTION:

Dear Vincentian Brothers:

In this short presentation, I have wanted to summarize 10 years of an intense missionary program. The National Committee of Missionary Animation, brings from its start, the Vincentian Spirit. It is a unique experience in Latin America in the context of the V Centenary, in the sense that it reached all the dioceses of the country with a mission geared to its own style and dynamic.

Perhaps now in preparation for the III Millennium other particular churches are working with this same plan.

The Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* of John Paul II indicates in Chapter I, #11 “The church can’t abandon the proclamation that Jesus, came to reveal the face of God and achieve the salvation of all people through the cross and resurrection. In the following lines comes the question, Why the mission? We respond with faith and hope in the Church: opening yourself to the love of God is true liberation. In Him and only in Him we are freed from all forms of alienation and oppression. Christ is truly our peace.

We can affirm that all missions that have the spirit of the founder Saint Vincent, has as its final objective to present Jesus Christ as the only road of Salvation and Liberation. From this encounter with the Lord, each person upon discovering the face of Christ, the face that is tender in the presence of a child, face that becomes brother with the poor, with the imprisoned, with the sick, with the elderly person, finally, the face that portrays love and freedom to all people that open themselves to the infinite grace of God.

These are sufficient motives to thank God for all the Vincentian works, for the presence and action of thousands of our brother and sister missionaries that today collaborate with the church to present the true face of God to all people, especially those in need of liberation. I think finally the organizing committee for inviting me to share our missionary experience.

Translation: Arthur Kolinsky, C.M.