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At The Dawn Of The Third Millennium

Some Challenges for the Congregation of the Mission in Europe

*by Christian Sens
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“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring Good News to the poor, to announce deliverance to captives, and return of sight to the blind, to give liberty to the oppressed, and to proclaim a year of grace of the Lord” (Lk 4:18-19).

In this year of Jubilee and at the dawn of the Third Millennium, the prophecy of Isaiah, proclaimed by Jesus in the Synagogue of Nazareth, continues to inscribe in history, the hope of an era of grace for the human race. “Today this quotation from Scripture is being **accomplished** in your hearing” (Lk 4:21). It is the “today” of the year 2000, at the dawn of the 21st Century and of the Third Millennium. It is always the messenger of hope; it is also the basis of challenges for humanity, for the Church and for the Congregation. The General Assembly of 1998 has, besides, itself clearly identified the challenges to be faced by the Vincentian Family.

In this attempt to assess the challenges which the Congregation is required to face in Europe, I am acutely conscious of the limits of my perspective and analysis. Europe is a **continent** which is too complex, from the viewpoint of language, cultures and religious traditions to warrant a portrayal that does not take account of diverse nuances and instead aim at a single expose. In Europe, the Congregation of the Mission itself presents a portrait full of diversity which indeed, constitutes its richness, but does not always permit of the realisation of united approach to planning. It is equally true that at the very time when Europe - the political and economic entity - is trying to come to terms with itself, not without some difficulties, that the CM in Europe owes it to itself to confront the challenge of a tighter unity, a stronger solidarity of conjoint cooperation. The meeting of the Visitors of Europe and of the Province of the Middle East, in Lebanon in 1999, has proved, even beyond the question of better mutual understanding, the desire for a greater degree of collaboration.

The challenges facing the CM in Europe are many, and in fact differ from country to country, region to region. Here I shall confine myself to 4 points - the challenge of the evangelisation of the poor; the confrontation of poverty and misery in their various forms; the question of interreligious dialogue, and the problem of vocations.

1. The Challenge of Evangelisation of the Poor

This problem confronts the whole Church, and Pope John Paul II has frequently

put before the “Old Church of Europe” the need to remind itself of its Christian roots, with its two-fold tradition, Western and Eastern. For him, the Church and Europe are intimately united from the beginning, both in their being and in their destiny. All the same, I believe that we must sound the death-knell of a new European Christianity, dreaming of a Church which would re-create itself as a Christian entity, as at the times of its first evangelisation. However one goal still remains unchanging for the Church, that of the mission to evangelise. “The Church exists in order to evangelise,” wrote Pope Paul VI in 1975, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. The Church, in fact, cannot consider itself in any other role than that of being open to all and turned towards all, because she takes her origin in a “Good News” which she believes to be the “Good News” for all humanity. It is thus that she proves her Catholic nature. This openness to all its identified by the Congregation as openness to the poor.

The theme of mission and evangelisation is sufficiently well developed in publications and revues so that it is not necessary to repeat such reflections and commentaries here; I wish merely, in the light of the challenge of evangelisation of the poor, to mention certain objectives for us, here in Europe.

a) Dialogue with society and with the poor

The problem of evangelisation in Europe – and equally on all the continents – necessarily impels the Church to enter into a dialogue with society. We involve ourselves in this dialogue, but because of the end of our Congregation, which is to follow Christ, the Evangelizer of the Poor, it is also a dialogue with the world of the poor, that imposes itself on us. The Gospel cannot possibly be preached without, on our part, a listening attitude, an apprenticeship to their culture, a real attention to their wants, aspirations, the values which they hold, the questions which concern them, but also their anti-values, their negative experiences, everything which in this day continues to disfigure the human person, to unman him, oppress him, or to render fragile or break up thoroughly his social bonding. Such an attitude involves basically a choice which is in the spiritual realm, namely that of loving this world of ours, this “world which God has loved so much as to deliver up for it his only Son.” (Jn3:16).

b) As witnesses to the faith

Our societies, and especially without doubt the secularised society, challenge us to show forth the vitality of our faith at the very heart of history. Faith does not merely stem from the private domain or from individual consciences because the Gospel is not a stranger to the development of humanity and that of the poor. The Church has an original message to give to people of today. The Congregation has a message, an original one for the poor and in union with them. Europe has need of witnesses to the faith, witnesses to hope. Words or statements claiming to impose the truth in a kind of definitive manner are rejected by a majority of our contemporaries. Back in 1975 in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* Pope Paul VI wrote “Our contemporaries are more likely to listen to witnesses than to teachers, or if they do listen to teachers it is because they see them as witnesses also.” This statement is undoubtedly always pertinent. For us, the Congregation of the Mission, the privileged

focal point from which to witness to the faith, is that of the deprived, the wounded, the sufferers, the excluded. A more vigorous presence in their milieu, supporting them, is certainly a challenge which we can take on with courage and boldness, in solidarity with the whole Vincentian Family. Without turning our back on our traditional forms of mission, as, for example “popular” missions which have been recently updated, or about to be re-envisaged, we should undoubtedly, in collaboration with the poor, work out new forms of evangelisation, new ways of being present with them, of mingling with them. We have already commenced some of the new methods; others remain to be opened up. However there are undoubtedly pressures at the level of the Congregation in Europe, which demand collaboration, if the appropriate answers are to arise. In the above, I have no intention of pointing out either new forms of evangelisation or new ways of proceeding. This has already been underlined during the meeting of European Visitors in Lebanon, in connection with the question of Vincentian formation. A decision was arrived at, for all the Vincentians of European provinces involved in formation to meet in the year 2000. That, of course, is not the only aspect of Vincentian activity in which it would be possible or appropriate to collaborate. Similar cooperation might be envisaged for mission work or for contact with refugees or asylum seekers. That is, perhaps, a challenge for the CM in Europe!

c) Updating the language of the faith

The word inculturation has come into the Church’s language in the past few decades, but the reality of such an operation is a constant task of the Church, always and everywhere in its contact with various peoples, in order that the Gospel can speak to all in different languages and cultures. This work is permanent and obviously vitally relevant at present. Humanity has become the meeting place, in Jesus Christ, of God and man; and so the paths travelled by mankind and by the poor are God’s routes also. We realise that our meeting place with the poor cannot be assured in an authentic manner without an updating of the language of faith and Christian activities. The stakes are high, because it concerns the possibility of their making the Gospel their own. It is not enough to declare certain questions definitively decided thus assuring that they will not be raised again. Cardinal Martini stressed this during the Second Synod of Bishops in Rome, calling for a greater increase in collegiality, “which would allow the undoing of certain knots in matters of discipline and doctrine, which reappear from time to time, like danger signals on the road of the Churches of Europe and indeed non-European Churches as well.” He recalls the deepening and development of the ecclesial communion of Vatican II, the lack, dramatic in certain areas, of ordained ministers, the place of the women in society and in the Church, the place of the laity in certain ministerial functions, the question of sexuality, the discipline of marriage, the practice of penance, contacts with other Churches involved in Orthodox Faith, the need to rekindle hope in the ecumenical dialogue, contact between democracy and positive values, between the civil and moral law.

d) The need for ongoing formation.

These “disciplinary and doctrinal problems (knots) (mentioned above) as well as new questions which raise their heads nowadays in the realm of ethics or involving so many forms of poverty and misery, make ever more obvious for us the need for ongoing formation. The need for such formation is proclaimed already in the explanation by St. Vincent of the Rules of the Daughters of Charity. “The time you have at your disposal after your service to the poor, must be well employed; never be wholly idle, learn to read and write not for your own use, but so as to be ready to be sent where you can teach; do you know what Divine Providence wishes to do with you? Always keep yourself ready to ‘go’ wherever holy obedience sends you.” I think we can regard as a challenge this need to learn reading. Is it not necessary to study social problems in their complexity, the questions of modernity, the phenomena of poverty and exclusion and their causes, so that we may have a better understanding of them? Is it not a fact that we should study the Vincentian charism so as to deepen our knowledge of it and thereby live it? Do we not need to ‘learn’ the life of the poor, so as to ‘turn the medal’ and so recognize in the faces of the poor, the face of Jesus? Do we not need to learn to read the Gospel so as to be able to announce it through the passage of time. The poor have a right to demand our competence, and if humility leads us to take the lowest place – that is the condition of one who serves – we undoubtedly need the competence to fulfil that role as perfectly as possible.

e) Getting involved in the formation of lay people

Vincent de Paul became involved in the formation of the clergy and the setting up of seminaries because he understood that the continuity of the missionaries’ work demanded there and then the presence of a trained and zealous body of clergy. Would he not also have noticed in this same mission perspective the need to get involved in the formation of the laity? In the context of this formation, if there is a challenge for us it must surely be the challenge of opening up communities and Christians to the poor and a recognition of their dignity. There is in this a decisive issue for the Church of Christ. She cannot content herself with merely turning towards the poor and working on their behalf through her charitable organisations. She proves herself the Church of Christ by building herself up with the poor. This also implies that formation be planned in such a manner that the most impoverished can find their place and make the faith their own in their own language and culture.

2. The Challenge of the fight against poverty and misery

This challenge is of course no stranger to the subject of Evangelisation. It is even one of the privileged areas for the sowing of the seed of the proclamation of the Gospel. It calls out to the entire Congregation on all the continents; it calls out to it in Europe. Different forms of poverty change their appearance, new forms arise and the poor go on calling out and longing for justice, compassion and solidarity. I do not recognise myself as having the competence or sufficient knowledge of all facets of poverty in Europe as to allow me to present them here. The list of deprived, wounded, excluded, all those who find no longer any direction in their lives, in history or in the

future of humanity. I speak of a dramatic list of those without a roof over their heads, those with no fixed home, those with no documentation, the unemployed, the victims of AIDS, those dependant on drugs, asylum-seekers, victims of the Balkan or Chechnyan wars, refugees in the transit camps or strangers in foreign countries of Europe, victims of the earthquakes in Turkey. Will this Europe now under construction be merely an economic entity, abandoning on the roadside - in the name of a regrettable but necessary fate those it does not need to build a competitive economy? Will it be a Europe which has a social conscience and a generous spirit; or instead will selfishness or tit-for-tat responses, imperil generosity and solidarity? During their meeting in Lebanon, the visitors of Europe and the Middle East had to consider a question put to them by the Superior General. This had to do with the way in which the 'European Voice' of the CM could make itself heard in Brussels, at the heart of European Union. Since the AIC had already a permanent Secretariat in Brussels, it seemed better to contemplate and thus seek a collaboration which would involve the whole Vincentian Family. It will be a voice among others, in the dialogue for Europe. It will have as its objective to recall that the poor, the outcasts, the victims of all kinds of violence, the excluded, are ever present and cannot be ignored. Our Vincentian voice will take part - even though in a modest way - in the working out of a European project, which conveys a meaning. I borrow the comments of Jacques Delors, who was the President of the European Union for ten years: "The European construction cannot claim to solve the crisis of direction so long as this problem goes back to the destiny of humanity, to its accepted, refused, or ignored transcendence, to the reinvention of an active laity, bearing values which are recognised by all.... But there as elsewhere, we are dogged by routine, the atmosphere of our age is unfavourable, divisions threaten us. It is precisely in these moments that Europe -now more than ever- needs a soul, this spiritual power to reinforce and stimulate her."

The wounds which affect so many are clearly a challenge to the CM in Europe as it endeavours to fulfil its mission of Evangelisation of the poor in "word and deed." The Gospel cannot be 'Good News' for the poor without justice, without solidarity, without defending their dignity and without witnessing to the tenderness of God for them. At Chatillon, Vincent de Paul realized that the answer to the challenge of poverty cannot but be collective, communitarian. This conviction leads us to collaborate today with all who refuse the fate of poverty, with the entire Vincentian Family, with the poor themselves who are the chief actors in their own promotion and evangelisation. This conviction also calls us to reflect upon the possible forms of collaboration among our provinces in Europe. In fact this viewpoint was brought up by the Visitors in Lebanon in response to a question raised by the Superior General as to what the CM in Europe could contemplate doing in regard to the refugees of Kosovo. In their reflection on the above the Visitors also spoke on the subject of immigrants and migrants. In our provinces, some confreres are already thus engaged, but we surely need to emphasize the commitment of individuals and communities. We know that, unfortunately, the size of the problem arouses attitudes of fear, mistrust, rejection, and even xenophobia in some of our contemporaries. Helping towards a better understanding of the phenomenon of immigration, and working for an integration, is a challenge for us to take on. The large wave of immigrants and

refugees in Europe bids us to intensify a collaboration already in existence. To face the emergency situations in regard to refugees and migrants, or humanitarian emergencies, the arrival of confreres of other provinces - even for a limited period - would be desirable, even if it were only to help organize a response to the problem. It would also be, the milieu for a collaboration of the Vincentian Family.

This challenge to struggle against various forms of poverty and misery is of concern to the Church at the dawn of the Jubilee Year. It concerns the CM both in Europe and everywhere. God Himself issues an appeal to us through the cry of the poor. "A poor person cries, the Lord hears," we read in the Bible. And if occasionally we feel that God is not hearing us, perhaps it may be that we are deaf.

3. The Challenge of Interreligious Dialogue

It does not concern merely Europe, but we can well assess its importance on our continent. It is of obligation, it is in no way "take it or leave it." The statement of the Archbishop of Algiers, Henri Teissier, that on the success of the Islamic-Christian Dialogue depends the balance of many of our societies, can be verified here in Europe. Interreligious dialogue is not confined to our relationship with Islam, but it is certainly this relationship which appears the most delicately balanced at this time. The session on Islam, in Lebanon in July 1999, is in answer to this challenge and gives us some elements of understanding and response to which we can refer.

This dialogue is taking place between believers, but history teaches us that religion can become a standard raised in defiance against others, leading to contempt rejection or aggressive attitudes, even violent ones. Defending the "true" God might hide a longing for conquest and history is unfortunately punctuated with instances of intolerance in the name of religion. Christians themselves cannot forget their own history. There can be no authentic dialogue without a deep respect for the other and his faith, without a desire for a better understanding of his religious tradition. What a huge number of misunderstandings have been created due to a lack of knowledge or erroneous interpretations! Dialogue is only possible if the partners involved respect one another and refrain from imposing either themselves or their own version of 'the truth.' It involves the acceptance of queries or questioning, all of it on the level of reciprocity. It calls the participants to humility in order to place themselves in the role of 'seekers of God' with all the richness of their respective traditions, not as people already possessing God and the truth. Putting forward one's own religious experience as the only possible one for others could only finish in a sterile confrontation. The path of dialogue a sharing of the 'belief' experience, the experience of God and its implications in one's existence. That is the dialogue of believers in search of the Absolute different by paths. The adoration of God is the common point of believers, but people's concepts of God differ and by that fact, the vision of man, of society, of history and the relation of people with God. Dialogue, if it is to be authentic, cannot pass over in silence neither the adoration which we have in common, nor our differences. It demands an attitude of truthfulness - otherwise known as affirmation -

by the participants as to their identity as believers. It would not be respecting the other to keep silence about one's own experience on the pretext of being welcoming and benevolent.

Dialogue is, indeed, difficult; nevertheless, it is an obligation, if only in order to respond to the suspicion which exists today among some of our contemporaries, in face of religious fundamentalism. These believe that religion is a source of intolerance, even of violence. Interreligious dialogue has become nowadays inseparable from the proclamation of the Gospel. In this we have a huge challenge for the Church and for the CM in Europe.

4.The Challenge of Vocations

This is by no means the least of the challenges facing the CM in Europe, more particularly in the northern and western sectors. Statistics given during the General Assembly of 1998 have shown clearly the diminution and the ageing of our European Provinces. Jesus' invitation to beg the Lord of the harvest to send workers into his harvest, since that harvest is great but the labourers are few, rings out urgently in our countries. The prayer for vocations begging the Lord to raise up evangelical workers, according to the words of St. Vincent, is by no means a miracle solution. However, his prayer keeps us alert, preventing us from giving up too readily.

The mere fact of putting forward the report and noting the challenges does not evidently give miracle cures for solving the problem. The question concerns us all, both communities and confreres. Perhaps we do not always have the courage to call to propose to the young the question of a vocation as a possible life choice. Perhaps we should – much more than we do– invite young people to take part in activities with the poor, so that the young may hear the cries of the poor. Perhaps our communities must be more welcoming and more open to contact with youth. Perhaps our missionary commitments with the poor must be more characterised by the Vincentian charism. In the context of the problem of vocations for the CM in Europe the question is not so much that of the actuality of the Vincentian Charism and its future for Europe, as it is of the actualisation which we make of it, of the face of it that we present today through our institutions, commitments and our communities. Perhaps... but in all the above and in all the vocation work in our provinces, the most appealing witness will always be that of the happiness of risking one's life in following Christ, Evangeliser of the Poor.

From Europe, numerous of missionaries set out for LatinAmerica, Africa and China. Tomorrow perhaps – but this is already beginning in some provinces –from those lands which were mission lands for Europe, missionaries will come to participate with us in the evangelisation of the poor in our continent. Without becoming resigned to the decrease in vocations, welcoming them will be a new challenge for us.

There are many more challenges ahead of us, differing according to the countries or regions of Europe, because our societies present different outlooks politically, economically, socially and culturally. I have put forward four of these aspects which seem to me speak to the entire CM in Europe. We confront these challenges in varying ways, with the originality of history and the tradition of our various provinces. I believe that they call us to a greater degree of collaboration in Europe, at least by region. I have not forgotten either the collaboration of the Vincentian Family. That is surely a challenge to be taken up in the meeting of the year 2000 and, quite soon, of the third Millennium.

(ANDREW SPELMAN, C.M., translator)