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Popular Mission Online
Cyberspacing the Vincentian Charism

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*If the poor remain without access to information technology, they will
be further marginalized and locked into a cycle of poverty.*

(General Assembly 1998 - Congregation of the Mission)

Introduction

The dawn of the third millennium is fast brightening the horizon with a vision of a new age. The last decade has been the melting pot of a totally new and strange phenomenon, which is rapidly changing our traditional ways of doing things. As a matter of fact, the new information revolution is creating global links on a scale unparalleled in human history, tearing down petty, parochial interests, building and forging a common planetary culture.¹

Indeed, the computer world is the arena to which this age is headed to. This is seen very concretely in the way it has penetrated our society. People buy from the net and transact business online. Students enroll, ask questions and pass in their assignments on electronic data sheets, and even get their ratings online anywhere and anytime. Offices where tables and chairs abound, filing cabinets and folders spread all over, and employees with their private rooms almost occupying whole buildings, are being replaced with simple table and desktop computers all networked to fit into one single room. The home office is fast becoming a business reality. Indeed, much talk is about electronic commerce, electronic mail, electronic offices and electronic conferencing. Their coming into reality, however, far exceeds what we have ever thought of them. They come rushing forth replacing the traditional ways of doing things.

*The scale and uptake of this new information exchange took the
computer community completely by surprise – the development
provided a lesson in the difficulty of predicting what will and what*

¹ Charles Jonscher, *The Evolution of Wired Life, From the Alphabet to the Soul-Catcher Chip — How Information Technologies Change our World* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1999), p.246.

*will not catch among the many applications to which digital technology can be applied.*²

Having seen all this rush of new, highly technological changes in our midst, I cannot but ask the question: How does the Church respond to these changing phenomena? Or, to say it more bluntly, has she taken a move to go a step ahead and use this medium for her mission in the world?

This paper attempts to open an arena amidst the vast marketplace of the question at hand. In its desire to trod a path, it may bring out more confusion than solutions. To avoid this fear, the paper starts by looking into specific methods of evangelization now being used. Then, it visualizes possibilities on how to enrich the present method and, hopefully, offers suggestions on how these projections might enrich both the evangelized and the evangelizer, and also the medium at hand. For this purpose therefore, I have chosen the Popular Mission as the jump-off point of our quest.

In our attempt to create a future-based strategy for the EP Missions, we will start by discussing briefly the nature and practices of how the present Popular Mission is being conducted. Then, we shall see whether the new forms of communication, especially the World Wide Web, fit into this ministry. And, if it does, how do we use it?

I. The Present Reality

The Way of St. Vincent

*The name missionaries, or Priests of the Mission, which has not been assumed by us but has been given us, under Divine Providence, by the common voice of the people, clearly shows that the giving of missions is to be the first and principal of all our works for the neighbor.*³

St. Vincent de Paul

The traditional way of doing the mission is the preferred framework that this paper follows. First, it discusses the three different stages of the apostolate:

² *Ibid.*, pp. 156-157. It is further said in the book that even Bill Gates, who had brilliantly bet that the information technology phenomenon of the 1980's failed to see it coming. It was only in late 1995, that his firm's future direction was geared toward the Internet. See also Margaret Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet* (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), pp. 223-226.

³ *Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission*, XI, no.5.

the Pre-Mission, the Mission Proper and the Post-Mission strategies. From there, it will move on to future projections.

A. Pre-Mission

1. At present, and even during the time of St. Vincent de Paul, the Pre-Mission is a very important activity in the preparation of the missions. Usually, the preparation takes a month to a year. People are notified to prepare by prayer and fasting for the success of the Popular Mission. Then, as a remote preparation, someone from the team goes to the parish ahead of time in order to get relevant data to be incorporated into the talks or homilies. At times, missionaries even conduct a community-based census for a wider understanding about the mission area.

When everything is ready, the immediate preparation begins. Someone from the team preaches about the Popular Mission during the Masses, in order for the people to have a deeper understanding of the missions. Advertisements and a schedule of activities are also posted during this time in order to enable the people to incorporate the mission schedules into their own personal plans.

2. As done in some Popular Missions, like the Philippines, the members of the mission team are housed in the homes of the parishioners, and stay with them for the whole missionary period. The strategic allocation of missionary personnel from among the people helps a lot in bringing these families to attend the missions. As a matter of fact, while the missionary stays in their homes, they are encouraged to bring the whole household, as well as those around their house to the mission talks and activities.

3. During this period, the missionaries are introduced not only to the parish priest but also the civil authorities of the place. This is done in order to facilitate the use of any public facility while the missions are being conducted. At the same time, it prevents any untoward incident between the missionaries and the civil leaders of the place. Giving due respect to these leaders is tantamount to giving this respect to the people who voted for them.

4. Also in the preparation of the Mission Proper, leaders who can help during the mission activity are chosen and trained as mission auxiliaries. Then, together with the rest of the missionaries, they join the group in house-to-house visitations. This is done in order to invite people to listen to the preached mission.

B Mission Proper

1. This is the main activity of the Popular Mission. It is a time when the preaching in public squares or in the churches is done. It is the moment when people gather together and listen to the different topics concerning our life with the Trinity and our vocation and mission in the world.

2. The celebration of the sacraments also happens during this stage. Baptisms, confirmations, weddings and anointing of the sick, as well as General Confessions which are usually done every night, are also conducted during this period.

C. The Post Mission

1. The final phase of the mission is geared towards the preservation of the fruits of the mission. During the time of St. Vincent de Paul, one of the concrete ways he used to preserve these fruits was through the formation of good clerics who will continue taking care of the faithful after the missionaries leave the place. Another way to preserve the fruits of the mission is by building Christian communities.

2. Some other ways to preserve these fruits would be to leave behind popular religious practices, such as weekly rosaries, bible meetings, and occasional processions to shrines or grottos which people frequent in order to commemorate the mission. The missionaries for their part, can also take time visiting the mission site every now and then in order to invigorate the leaders as well as the Christian community. Other than these, the follow-up structure of the mission depends on the consistency of the Christian community and their pastor to persevere in nurturing the seeds sown during the missions.

Having seen the present methodology of the Popular Missions, let us now envision how the World Wide Web phenomenon could be incorporated into it. The suggestions that are written in this paper are not mere wishy-washy ideas from Cloud 9, but are realities already verifiable in other fields. My intention through this paper is to lay a “tweening” foundation between the web and the Popular Mission.

II. The Electronic Popular Missions

Evangelizing through Vincent's Way

I encourage those using the new technology to increase the church's presence on the Internet as a means of proclaiming the Good News in what we call the “Information Age.”

*John Paul II*⁴

I always believe that the Popular Mission is as relevant today as it was during the time of St. Vincent de Paul. The dilemma, however, lies in how to carry out the apostolate in a way that suits the present realities. Hence, the challenge for the missionary activity is how to read the Signs of the Times and be creative enough to compliment the traditional methodology with the present tools at hand. It is true that the option for the neediest means that we should not overlook the most abandoned and isolated human groups, but it is also true that individual and small groups cannot be evangelized if we neglect the centers where a new humanity, so to speak, is emerging, and where new modes of development are taking shape.⁵

I can understand, that to do this is scary and at times, incomprehensible, due to the rapid changes happening around us. Nevertheless, we either adapt to these changes, or our apostolate is cast into oblivion. If we do not adapt, we become irrelevant, being controlled by the passing conventions of time. If we are reactive and let change overwhelm us or pass us by, we will perceive change negatively. If we are proactive, seek to understand the future now, and embrace change, the idea of the unexpected can be positive and uplifting.⁶

As society becomes more highly technological and computer literacy becomes the language of the Year 2010, a need to take a look on how to use this medium for the apostolate so dear to St. Vincent de Paul is indeed necessary. This paper undertakes the task of investigating that possibility and takes a lead in reinventing that charism in the dawning of the new era towards a path less traveled.

The new methodology caters to many peoples: those who always find themselves online; those who can not find time to go to church during the actual session because they have so many things to do; those who want to attend but cannot do so because they are everywhere doing everything; those young people who simply prefer to see how all these new inventions within their grasp are being used for more spiritual and religious purposes. To say it succinctly, this paper responds to the question: "How do we evangelize persons and structures

⁴ John Paul II to the Information Network of the Church of Latin America, March 3-6, 1998.

⁵ *Redemptoris Missio* no. 61.

⁶ Bill Gates, *Business and the Speed of Thought: Using a Digital Nervous System* (New York, Warner Books, 1999), p. 414.

online?”⁷ Or, to use the words of Vatican II, “the illumination of the new Areopagi with the light of the Gospel.”⁸

The paper in its presentation follows the traditional Popular Mission methodology.

A. Pre-Mission

1. Aside from what is traditionally being done to prepare a parish for the Popular Missions, the address of the Website (URL)⁹ is cited on the advertisements. It could also be announced to the people. Their initial encounter with the Internet information regarding the mission will give the parishioners the information that they need to know about the upcoming activity. Computerized forms, which gather data and relevant information regarding the parish, could also be done online to prepare the missionaries and the people for the great activity. This electronic information will help the missionaries to design their talks better and respond to the parochial needs more concretely. Likewise, volunteers who are willing to help could also fill in their applications through the net.

I deeply feel that any young person, who thinks that the Church has become irrelevant, once he sees this being used for the ministry, will find himself challenged by it. As everybody goes hi-tech, becoming an e-priest¹⁰ or e-brother makes sense, and is worth considering for that reason.

2. Indeed, the premier stage helps both the missionaries and the parishioners to have an initial encounter with each other. The exchange of information through the web gives the parishioners an idea of the nature of the Popular Mission, and also provides the missionaries with information on the present status, resources and personnel possibly available during the actual mission.

⁷ See the *Final Document of the 1998 General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission* (Roma: General Curia, 1998).

⁸ *Redemptoris Missio* no. 62.

⁹ **URL** is the acronym for Uniform Resource Locator. It is the unique address of the Web site on the Internet. It allows the Web browser to identify which file in which directory needs to be retrieved for the user. Prentice Hall, *Dictionary of Computing*, 3rd Edition.

¹⁰ **E-Priest/E-Brother** (Electronic Priest/Brother) is a term which this article would like to use for those clerics who invest themselves and their ministry in new technologies, and likewise, find ways and means to bridge the path towards technology and religion. “This task demands priests and brothers to be deeply and fully immersed in the mystery of Christ and capable of embodying a new style of pastoral life, always respecting and fostering roles, charisms and ministries present within the ecclesial community.” *Pastores Dabo Vobis* no. 38.

3. Prayers to prepare the community for the actual Popular Mission are also available online. People will be encouraged to recite them in their homes together with their families, or by themselves while at home, or at work. Bulletin boards for prayers, petitions and sacrifices offered for the intentions of the missionary activity could also be set up.

4. Sponsors in form of advertisements, or voluntary donations and pledges in support of the mission, could also be available online.

5. Links to other mission sites or online Vincentian communities where the EP Mission had also been conducted could be made available.

B. Mission Proper

Aside from the traditional mission being conducted in the parish, the online mission will now provide the following complimentary services for the parishioners.

1. Live net conferencing or streaming videos, or simply audio materials will be made available through the site. The live net conferencing could be a direct link to the place where the mission is being held. This gives the user a feeling of the real event that is happening in his or her community wherever the person might be for as long as he or she can hook up to the Internet. These clips remain on the mission website for the whole stretch of the mission so that anybody who would like to watch, or simply listen to them, can get hold of the materials. This gives the user complete accessibility to the information, the luxury to save it, or simply to play it according to his or her own needs.

2. Chat rooms and Popular Mission communities online to further deepen the talks will also be created during the whole span of the mission proper. The hope of this virtual discussion group is not only to remain at the level of chatters, but also to have a real encounter and experience of each person. Of utmost importance is that these online communities, after their virtual experience¹¹, be given an opportunity to see the actual persons they chat with online. It is well to remember that the person being replaced is not data-manipulated information. The substitution of the digital can never be complete because the former involves

¹¹ In computing, the term 'virtual reality' refers to a computer program, coupled with other tools and devices, that enable a person to perform tasks virtually with all the function and effectiveness of a real situation, but not within a real situation. Prentice Hall, *Dictionary of Computing*, 3rd Edition.

communicating with other living beings, while the latter concerns only machines and their information.¹²

Later, however, the online community can become a group who will not only meet each other for socialization purposes, but also meet in order to see the pastoral challenges and implications to society of the World Wide Web and how they can be of help to form their fellow parishioners in the responsible use of this instrument.¹³ Understanding this technology is an essential component of a global citizenship.¹⁴ It is essentially being “*Catholic*.”¹⁵

3. Spiritual Direction and marriage counseling can also be made available through the mission website. Net conferencing with a missionary who appears on the screen, speaking and interacting as if in a face-to-face encounter could also be a special feature of the online missions. This will provide the sick and the elderly with access to the missionaries for prayers and encouragement. Likewise, the private chat room could also be a venue for bringing enemies together. Through the help of a missionary who facilitates the encounter, the chatting on the web can be an initial step towards reconciliation. Again, web users are always encouraged to get out of the virtual missions and participate in the real missions so as to have a community-based experience of what it is to be church. The computer cannot yet deal with us on a level to which we as an ecclesial community should relate.

4. Furthermore, one of the many desires of the Popular Mission online could be to capture those who are using the net as their primary medium of communication and way of living. The ministry could hope to give an evangelizing dimension within their solitary virtual world. The desire of the online ministry would not only be to keep the interaction on the virtual and digital level but, more so, to the real encounter of persons as well as of communities as members of the mystical body of Christ. John Paul II in his 1998 Message on World Mission Sunday stated:

Man is not content with himself. It is now the widespread opinion that man is not content to dominate nature and the cosmos, the most

¹² Charles Jonscher, pp. 250-251. See also, Douglas Rushkoff in the January 1998 issue of *International Herald Tribune*.

¹³ For the Church, evangelizing does not only mean personally being converted, but after conversion to also bring the Good News into all strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* no. 18.

¹⁴ David Shenk, *The End of Patience*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 144.

¹⁵ *Catholic* means universal. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), nos. 830-835.

*advanced science and technology do not satisfy man, because they are unable to reveal the ultimate meaning of reality: they are merely instruments, but not ends for the life of man and the journey of humanity.*¹⁶

5. News items, announcements or schedules could be given not only in print but also in e-mail forms. While knowing the physical addresses of those living in the parish, the mission online can be an occasion for the parish priest to know the e-mail addresses of his parishioners. With all this information, the parish office can start setting up a data base e-mail list of all the parishioners for news, mailing and announcement purposes. This is a very effective way of reaching the unchurched.

Finally, after all these experiences of the online community become a reality, what happens next? This brings our discussion to the next stage, which is the Post-Mission.

C. Post-Mission

1. One concrete way, to foster communication and interaction among the members of the community is through a web site.¹⁷ A desire of the mission activity could be for parishes to have their own homepage. This site could then become the arena where people interact and communicate using the new technology. They could share their experience by e-mailing the site to others, or simply share through e-mail the effects of the online mission to their life. This is a concrete way of doing their share as missionaries on the web. It is like setting a seal of the new medium for evangelization.¹⁸

2. It is wise to gather all the e-mail addresses or websites of those who have participated in the online Popular Mission so that the parish office may have a record of them. This will be used to send e-mail or news or any announcement to the members of the parish. With e-mail, it does not matter whether the parishioner is home or abroad.¹⁹ The e-mail makes him or her at home and abroad very much aware of everything that is happening in the parish.

Links to other websites created by their parishioners could also be included on the site. Indeed, the parish site not only becomes a site created by

¹⁶ World Mission Sunday(1998).

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/documents/hf_jp_ii_mes_31051998_en.html.

¹⁷ A Web site on the World Wide Web is the name used to describe one or several Web pages linked together to form a single package or location.

¹⁸ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 28.

¹⁹ Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), pp. 193-195.

the parish priest, but a virtual parish where all information about the parish and its parishioners can be seen. Furthermore, it does not only become a source of passive information but, actually, an interactive virtual parish where the old, the young, and the children come to meet other people sharing their own interests and age.

3. Forms to be filled out for comments and suggestions regarding the missions, and later for the improvement of the parish itself will also be available on the net. The use of electronic forms by the parish also helps prepare parishioners to use both the print and the hypertext media.

4. Net bulletin boards for parishioners to read and post their messages will also be a good way of keeping fresh the fruits of the mission and then, later on, tracking the developments in the parish.

III. The Means

Cyberspacing the Vincentian Charism

“Oh my God, how necessary it is to have great communication with one another. To share everything. There is nothing more necessary. That is what binds our hearts together.

SV XIII, 641

I will divide the means to achieve the Popular Mission online ministry into three parts; at the same time, I will specifically address the challenges to the groups who will get involved in the process of reinventing the Vincentian Charism.

A. On the Part of the Vincentian Missionaries

1. After having enumerated the projections available in the ministry, let us discuss the ways and means on how to achieve the Popular Mission online. First and foremost, it is necessary to train missionaries to be knowledgeable about the Internet. This idea could be drawn out from the challenges presented by the Superior General, Fr. Robert Maloney, CM, to the recommendations of the General Assembly 1998 regarding the formation of formators.²⁰ At the minimum, formators should at least know the mechanics of the Internet. At the optimal, they are encouraged to have a background in computer technology, web design and better know-how of computer programming.

²⁰ Fr. Robert Maloney, CM, “The Challenge of Formation: On the Formation of Formators,” in *Vincentiana*, 44th Year No.2, March-April 2000, (Roma: General Curia, 2000) p.114.

This is important in the mechanics of the Electronic Popular Missions. If so much training is being placed in the “physical missions” likewise, because of the needs of the e-missions, missionaries have to be more prepared to tackle the challenges of this new methodology. Even if a missionary participating in this online mission should have assistants to do the technical works, he should also be knowledgeable of it in order to have a total command of the ministry. The missionary does not simply rely on assistants, though it is good and most advisable to have them during the mission. A lack of knowledge of the computer world can make the whole virtual undertaking a mess. Either he spoils the online services, or he is spoiled by it if something goes wrong.

2. Technical support to run the encoding and decoding of data, as well as the encryption of pledges is also needed to keep the secrecy of financial transactions. A Vincentian lay collaborator could very well manage this. In doing so, the whole Vincentian Family makes itself present, with all its diverse talents, in the apostolate so dear to St. Vincent de Paul.²¹ In a very spontaneous moment during a council meeting of the Daughters of Charity, St. Vincent once exclaimed: “O, my God, how necessary abundant communication with one another is.... There is nothing more necessary” (SV XIII, 641). And with this greater connectedness, the Vincentian Family can be more effective servants of the poor.²²

3. Computer notebooks with modem and portable printers, as well as other accessories like digital cameras and videos are needed to run the EP Mission. The computers should have a good amount of hard drive and memory too. Servers to load all this information should also be sufficiently large.

4. Computer plug-ins and software should also be available from the server or from the missionaries themselves just in case parishioners need them.

B. On the Part of the Parishioners

²¹ First Commitment of the General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission in relation to the Vincentian lay collaborators. See *Final Document of the General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission*, Roma: General Curia, 1998. See also [Http://www.famvin.org/GeneralAssembly/finaldoc/final_document.htm](http://www.famvin.org/GeneralAssembly/finaldoc/final_document.htm).

²² Fr. Robert Maloney, CM, “To the members of the Vincentian Family throughout the world” in *Vincentiana*, 44th Year No.2, March-April 2000, (Roma: General Curia, 2000), p.97.

1. A user name and a password will be given to anybody who logs onto the mission site.²³ This practice will compile the background of those registering and the concrete identification of those who are joining the online ministry. Anyway, as members of the parish, they are supposed to have their records in the parish.

C. On the Part of the Parish Priest and His Assistants

1. The training of the parish priest and his assistants in all these matters and the starting of a parish data base system for their e-mail and website will be a very good way to preserve the fruits of the online mission. This is a very subtle way of introducing our clerics and parish workers to the new technology. I strongly believe that if clerics are empowered to make use of this new technology, Christendom will be amazed at how much creativity and initiative will blossom forth in the evangelizing activity of the Church. The future of the ministry belongs to those who participate in the new information age in its broadest sense.²⁴

2. The missionaries in-charge of the computer technology will also assure the parish of their willingness to help the parish work out their database system. This is a very good point for the person to follow up the fruits of the mission.

3. It is also advisable to encourage someone from the parish to be trained in the ways and methods of handling chat rooms or online religious communities. Doing this is empowering lay people. He can be the chat room administrator, who is directly responsible for the maintenance and support of these communities.²⁵ This will demand, however, a good amount of server running from the server of the missionaries.

Truly, to do all these is to re-tool the evangelizer. In a parallel word, we can say that:

The evangelizer, like the good farmer, must be in continuous contact with the soil as he ploughs and as he sows. The seeds may be a high variety, but that alone will not ensure a good harvest. The most important challenge the one concerned

²³ See Tim Berners-Lee, *Weaving the Web: The Original Design and Ultimate Destiny of the World Wide Web by Its Inventor* (New York: Harper Collins Books, 1999), pp. 143-155.

²⁴ Charles Jonscher, p. 266.

²⁵ The maintenance could very well be done by any of the members of the Vincentian Family. In this way, everyone in the Family of St. Vincent and St. Louise takes an active participation not only in the Mission Proper but more so, in the follow-up activity of the Electronic Popular Missions (EP Missions).

*with proclaiming Christ will face is to find fresh ways to ensure that the good seed is not cast about in a haphazard manner. The Good News we have inherited and are invited to proclaim is timeless and too precious to be left to itself. The most significant challenge, therefore, of the evangelizer of the 21st century is to continue the unending quest for discovering newer forms of expression for that timeless message.*²⁶

Conclusions

Having attempted to portray a vision of the apostolate so dear to St. Vincent de Paul for the dawn of the millennium and its capacity to intertwine itself with the digital and highly technological culture of today, the Vincentian is left with no choice but to be relevant. We have seen how frightening the path could be because it is still unknown but, at the same time, we can feel how important it is to take the first step and conquer this fear because, in the unknown where we thought there was no one, God has been present all the while.

Popular Mission Online requires twice as much time and effort for preparation, gathering of data and processing of information.²⁷ It is therefore the hope of this paper, to have added a pebble to walk on towards the path less traveled.

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²⁶ George Plathottam, SDB, *Christian Mission I the Third Millennium and the Information Superhighway: Challenges for Evangelization*, in <http://www.sedos.org/english/Plathottam.html/>, p.5.

²⁷ See Cristina Berdiskevsky, "Teaching in Cyberspace" in *Footnotes: A Publication of the American Association of University Professors*, Fall 1999.

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