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Shrines: Places of Mission

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It may seem astonishing to state that the Congregation of the Mission is engaged in the pastoral animation of numerous sanctuaries across the world, some shrines specifically linked with the Congregation or with the Daughters of Charity, but also numerous national or regional shrines directly associated with the local Church. This edition of *Vincentiana* bears witness to the considerable missionary work which is carried out in these places. In a time when “popular piety” is taking a notable and recognised hold again in the life of many Christian communities, it seems pertinent to reflect on certain aspects of the function of shrines in a Vincentian missionary pastoral perspective.

1. Shrines which gather a people together for the Lord

In these places where God visits his people...

Be they great or modest, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, to saints (of the Vincentian family or otherwise) shrines are places where God takes the initiative of coming to meet the men and women of our time, where the incarnate and resurrected Christ manifests himself, in a *tangible manner* one might almost say! Places of meeting between God and people, foci of a living presence of the Resurrected One who attracts a people in order to gather them, shrines require above all that the fundamental mysteries of the Christian faith be put in high relief and that Christians be committed to the awareness that they are sent into the world, following the Christ in order to be authentic witnesses.

These “meetings,” in the varied forms they take at the shrines, respond to the diverse calls of God, be they direct or through the intermediacy of the Virgin Mary or the saints. But the process of pilgrimage undertaken by those who respond to the invitation of the Virgin to come to these places, as by those who come to honour a saint in the place where she or he lived, or by those who gather at a shrine founded at the intuition of people motivated by the Spirit, always has, as its first aim, to give glory to God.

Believers follow each other from generation to generation...

Today, the undertaking of setting out for a shrine has regained its nobility. In Europe, for example, one is conscious of the considerable developments in the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, following the ancient routes. It is interesting to situate this undertaking of the pilgrim in the history of those places the pilgrim visits and, especially, in the continuity of spiritual experience which

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that expresses, often over many generations. Such shrines, from the most humble to the most popular, are witnesses to a tradition of prayer but also of conversion of heart, of healing for the soul, perhaps for the body, as well as thanksgiving for graces received. The pilgrims, either as individuals or in groups, position themselves in the heart of the unending procession of those who have gone before them. The pilgrims take their place in the long process of solidarity and openness, in an immense body of believers who have come to respond to a call, understood with greater or lesser clarity, which makes them open to the Word.

To receive a specific message which the Gospel translates...

Shrines are, firstly, therefore, places in the service of the faith, even though they are not objects of faith. The messages given there can only echo the Gospel of Christ, which is revealed to human beings in its myriad facets. In this way, the spiritual experience which is unfolded there has a universal character. But the origin of each sanctuary, with its own history and its own story of foundation ... ensures that it has a specific character which witnesses also to the way in which God joins with humanity in its life and its common history. The call of events which took place in the past must urge us to be attentive to the current signs of God, in order to give meaning to the present and to orientate us to the future. Shrines are, for many pilgrims, places for pause, for interior rest, which thus encourage a return to the source of life, in order to slake one's thirst, to renew oneself and to set out again refortified.

Places of welcome and freedom...

If shrines are, more than ever, places of mission, that is because, in very many countries, they are places where people, who do not usually go to Church, gather to spend a moment, alone, in families or in groups, tourists, spiritual seekers, those seeking hope and a reason to live, maybe even those seeking God. They know, in fact, that pilgrims or people of good will, all those who come there are expected. For these places are not like others, they are recognised as places of prayer, of welcome, of peace. Pilgrim or tourist, each may discover in his or her own way that the shrine is a place to which one comes on pilgrimage; in which one looks for something; where one undertakes the process of moving towards Someone! If, in the pilgrim there is the desire to meet God, one can only hope that the tourist may also one day find him- or herself in this process of faith. Are not shrines privileged places where the Spirit comes to speak to the human heart?

In order for that to happen, the quality of the places themselves is certainly an important factor, but still more important is the quality of the people who, in various capacities, do the welcoming. To know how to listen, to dialogue, to hear the deepest issues which sometimes are difficult to express, these are the skills which are indispensable for those who receive pilgrims and visitors. The shrine is a place where the Word of God is announced with faith, in an

atmosphere of listening, fraternal and convivial towards all, beginning with the poor, the sick, the little ones and the humble.

In such a context, one can see how the “five Vincentian virtues” are remarkably missionary and particularly suited to the welcoming of those who are open to the Word which will be announced to them and shared with them. They create the conditions for an even greater respect for the liberty of people and groups, not only in the organisation of their visits to these places, but especially in the interior liberty which allows one to be open to what the Spirit says to the heart of each individual. More and more people describe themselves as non-believers or weak believers, and there are those who are members of other religions, who come to the shrines in search of the “Unknown God” or waiting for an answer to their spiritual questioning!

To announce the Gospel and to educate in the faith

Here we come to the heart of the mission of the shrines. Setting forth and deepening faith, learning the art of prayer ... what pastoral undertakings can become possible in such places! The pilgrim is one who is open and receptive. He or she can take the time to begin to understand the message of the place and, in this way, discover or rediscover the Christian faith.

All missionaries who have been involved in the work of the shrines know that these are privileged places for the announcing of the Good News and for sacramental life, particularly for the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist. Thus, in these places, we see that the liturgy itself is at the heart of evangelisation.

Moreover, the shrines are also privileged places for the opening of minds and hearts, for broadening the horizons of one’s world to encompass the whole world, the universal Church and its mission. Finally, one cannot forget the fact that shrines are suitable places for experiencing the call to follow Christ, especially in the sacerdotal ministry or in consecrated life.

2. Shrines and popular piety

Shrines have often been derided on the basis that they are locations for the practices of popular piety. Certainly, some need to be purified and “Christianised.” One should remember however that St. Vincent recommended prayer to the Virgin by means of popular piety: the Angelus, the rosary, litanies...

The *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*,** published in 2002 by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, has opportunely recalled the place of popular piety in the life of the Church. The document particularly underlined that it is a rich expression of faith and that it has been, and remains, a means of spiritual nourishment for Christians throughout the ages:

Popular piety is a treasure of the Church

Could one imagine, the *Directory* asks, what would have been the result for Christian spirituality in the West if we had not had, for example, the rosary or the Stations of the Cross which throughout the centuries have nourished the spiritual life of so many generations of Christians? Could one imagine what the Christian life of many regions of the world would have been like without the shrines to which people went on pilgrimage: Jerusalem, Rome, Compostela and so many innumerable others across the globe towards which, through the ages, Christian people have made their way to entrust their lives to God, through the intercession of the Virgin Mary or the saints? The social life of many a village or region is centred on these shrines, chapels, places of worship which are scattered over so many regions of the world.

It is true that, in the course of the centuries, many superstitions have become associated with certain forms of popular piety and that gives us pause for thought on the relationship between the practice of popular piety and the liturgy of the Church. Certainly, in the decree on the Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Nos. 10, 12, 13), Vatican II affirmed strongly that the Liturgy is “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows.” Yet, a little further on in No. 12, the conciliar text continues: “The spiritual life, however, is not limited solely to participation in the liturgy.” In fact, what we call “pious exercises” or the expressions of piety of the Christian people, once they are in conformity with the laws and norms of the Church, are important for nourishing the spiritual life. All the same, adds the Council, in conformity with its initial statement “these devotions should be so drawn up that they harmonize with the liturgical seasons, accord with the sacred liturgy, are in some fashion derived from it, and lead the people to it, since, in fact, the liturgy by its very nature far surpasses any of them” (No. 13).

After the Council, the Magisterium of the Church remained interested in this question, desiring a renewal in popular piety. Thus, in December 1998, John Paul II, in his apostolic letter on this topic *Vicesimus quintus annus*, affirms: “This popular devotion should not be ignored or treated with indifference or contempt, since it is rich in values, and per se gives expression to the religious attitude towards God. But it needs to be continually evangelized, so that the faith

** Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. *Directoire sur la piété populaire et la liturgie. Principes et orientations*. Pierre Téqui publisher, Paris, 2002.

which it expresses may become an ever more mature and authentic act. Both the pious exercises of the Christian people and also other forms of devotion are welcomed and encouraged provided that they do not replace or intrude into liturgical celebrations. An authentic pastoral promotion of the Liturgy will build upon the riches of popular piety, purifying and directing them towards the Liturgy as the offering of the peoples” (No. 18).

It is, therefore, commendable to recognise the value of popular piety, to guard the true essence of it, to purify it as necessary, to illumine it in light of Scripture and to orient it towards the Liturgy, without setting the two in opposition. One can see here the urgency of forming the faithful so that popular piety might avoid those things which cultivate a focus on seeking “the extraordinary,” pseudo-religious experiences or manifestations of vague or deviant religiosity.

Popular piety is an expression of faith.

One has to recognise that the many forms of authentic popular piety are the witness to the faith of simple-hearted people, expressed in a direct way. They underline one or other aspect of the faith, without claiming to encompass everything. The tactile, bodily, visual elements which characterise popular piety are the sign of an interior desire of the faithful to express their belonging to Christ, their love for the Virgin Mary; and it is also their means of invoking the saints: to touch an image of the crucifix or of Our Lady of Sorrows, is a way of expressing that one has something in common with this sorrow. To go on foot on pilgrimage, facing tiredness and lack of money, is a way of manifesting the desire one has to come closer to the mystery which is made visible in some way at one or other shrine. To wear a medal is an expression of confidence in the intercession of Mary or the saints.

The liturgy does not do away with other legitimate forms of expression of faith in Christ the Saviour. In one way or another, authentic manifestations of popular piety always have their roots in the mysteries of Christian faith, even if they sometimes have elements whose origins may be outside of that. If, with the passage of time, changing mindsets have sometimes focussed more on exteriority to the detriment of interiority, or encouraged practices which were more or less “deviant,” it is important to help the faithful to rediscover, in the manifestations of popular piety, the vital link with the act of believing and living in Christ.

As always, while it is essential that, in the formularies of prayers as much as in the acts of devotion undertaken by Christians, Christian faith is recognisable and that one can see in these practices the necessary link with Christian revelation, still one cannot demand that every single act of faith express the entire fullness of Revelation. Popular piety is not the “thing” itself; its function

is to prepare the heart and predispose the spirit to receive divine grace in a fuller way in the liturgical celebration of the mystery of Christ!

Conclusion: Shrines, places for mission

In the sanctuaries where they work, Vincentians are the guardians of the grace associated with these places and with their message. And it is their task to allow themselves to be filled with this grace and spread it. But, there is also the possibility of developing in these places a pastoral strategy which expresses the Vincentian missionary spirit.

This offers them, at one and the same time, an opportunity and a challenge. It is an opportunity, because a shrine gathers pilgrims from all corners, because it spreads the gospel message widely and because it spreads out in waves from a spiritual centre, and finally because it welcomes those who are, to various degrees, separated from the Church, or who wish to be reunited (with the Church) without drawing too much attention.

But it is also a challenge for Vincentians, because it is possible for them to witness more deeply to the spirit of Monsieur Vincent there, especially in the way in which they welcome individuals and groups, the way in which they are present to them and the way in which they announce the gospel of hope to them. Shrines are usually frequented by the poor, the sick, those “wounded by life,” all those to whom Vincent de Paul sent his sons and daughters. They are also frequented by those who need to be made more aware of solidarity with, sharing with and attention to those who suffer. The originality of these places is that the people come on their own and are ready to listen; they have an interior openness. What a grace this offers to the missionary!

Since, in many areas of the world, pilgrimages and gatherings at sanctuaries and shrines are regaining interest, Vincentians must seize the opportunity which Providence offers them to announce the Gospel to the poor and to create links of solidarity and fraternity between men and women who come from ever more varied backgrounds. It is, in fact, another field of mission, but one which opportunely reminds us of the “spiritual” thirst, and often also the “physical” thirst of a people whose frontiers far outstrip those of the institutional Church.

(EUGENE CURRAN, C.M., translator)