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Annual Parish Mission

Parish of San José in San Pedro Sula (Honduras)

“Go to the other shore”

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Introduction

Part of my work as a parish priest has involved the organization of the “Annual Parish Mission.” I would like to present here my reflections on this work, which has been realized in an urban parish. I offer these reflections to the confreres of the Congregation with the hope that they might enrich the pastoral work of those laboring in many different situations.

As a young missionary, with less than ten years of priestly experience, my concern has centered on maintaining my Vincentian missionary vocation as a pastor in an urban parish. The problem was one of attitude and of understanding the Vincentian charism as it pertains to missionary practice. Really, I was not prepared to be a pastor but I was asked to serve as pastor and so, in obedience, I accepted this responsibility. Today, I now see that it is possible to be a missionary pastor, without converting the missionary parish into some kind of euphemism or a stereotype that then justifies parish work.

1. Respect for established pastoral practices of the parish

I arrived at a parish that had, over 40 years, acquired traditions, habits and customs. The fundamental pastoral lines of action had been established many years before my arrival. It was important to provide continuity to existing structures, especially if they were functioning well. Naturally there are always areas that need to be strengthened and bettered. Yet in all of this it is important that one not destroy the work that others have done for the ecclesial community. So I began the process of adapting myself, learning the reality of the people and integrating myself into the parish life of San José, located in San Pedro Sula (Honduras).

2. Importance of the parish laity in the mission

As one enters into missionary work in a parish, it is most important to continually cultivate the participation of the laity, especially the dedicated Vincentian lay men and women. Since the parish from which I write these reflections has been inspired from its foundation by the double Vincentian charism of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, an underlying Vincentian spirit has animated the pastoral work.

A case in point is the parish team of Catholic Charities, whose spirituality, set down by my predecessors, is characteristically Vincentian. The criteria that guide the charitable action of this team have been in place for more than 20 years. New members to this team are formed in these principles. The Vincentian Marian Youth Group, which has also been a presence in the parish for over 20 years, has created a Vincentian mentality in a great majority of the young people of the parish. Their pastoral activity is key to making contact with the youth and the four characteristics of this group are vibrant and alive. In the same way, the leaders of various groups and movements are indispensable for the realization of the parish mission (I will explain this later in my reflection here).

3. The parish with a Vincentian spirit

As you might suppose, there are no instant recipes that enable one to establish a missionary parish without losing the charism that is the heritage of St. Vincent de Paul. There are, however, some hints and insights that enable this process to move forward.

We use as a starting point, the pastoral reality of the parish in order to outline, theoretically, the concept of a missionary parish. I list the following elements that, in my judgment, enter into the formation of parish with a Vincentian spirit:

- a) A varied formation for the laity. By this I mean providing a faith formation for children, young people and adults. The means for accomplishing this is the establishment of a school of formation for the laity.
- b) Organize workshops for the animators of the mission. This time is used to fortify these leaders in the spirit of Jesus Christ, the evangelizer, and in the spirit of St. Vincent de Paul.
- c) Vincentian Week during which time the laity and the faithful in general are able to come to a deeper understanding of the charism of Vincent de Paul and the charism of the Vincentian Family.

- d) A Week of Charity, which affirms the Christian vocation of the whole ecclesial community and especially the charitable groups of the parish. Naturally the point of reference of this is the charitable action of Vincent de Paul as seen in light of the gospel.
- e) Creation of an evangelization team made up of different pastoral ministers. They are delegated functions and responsibilities. In all of this effort there is also a great respect for the principle of pastoral subsidiarity.
- f) The proclamation of an Evangelization Campaign or an "Annual Parish Mission" which gives continuity to the ongoing mission of the parish and creates a state of permanent evangelization in the parish. This is especially urgent given the fact that, frequently in the city, many new immigrants arrive.

4. The urban parish mission

To develop a parish mission it is necessary to involve the committed lay people: leaders of the various organizations and movements, leaders of the children's and youth pastoral, as well as other leaders of the different ministries in the parish. Traditionally we are accustomed to bring in missionaries from outside the parish. I see this as a positive dimension. Nevertheless, when dealing with a large, heavily populated parish with many complex problems, it is necessary to take into consideration and develop the leadership within the parish. In the parish, where I have been working for the past five years as pastor, there are about 80,000 inhabitants. I would say that not even 2% of the people are evangelized, even though the majority of these people have been baptized. For every ten couples that come forward for the sacrament of matrimony, at least three or four individuals have not been baptized, or have not received the other sacraments. There is a need then to develop a catechetical program.

5. Practical steps for the organization of a parish mission

- The first step is the creation of an "animation team" composed of persons whom the pastor considers mature in their pastoral approach and also dynamic. The pastor works side by side with this team, because it will be this team that will initiate the work of the mission. Together they will decide on the dates and length of the mission, as well as the objectives of the mission. It is good idea to sponsor one or two workshops for this group so that they might clearly understand what they are about.

- Next one convokes the “evangelization team” composed of all the different coordinators and leaders of the different pastoral ministries, leaders of the parish team and different commissions and movements within the parish. If there are other religious communities or institutes within the parish boundaries, they should also be invited to participate. The pastor is the primary leader of this team, but a layperson should serve as moderator. The pastor’s role is to assure a “missionary tone” to the team and to serve as an advisor to the team.

The “calling together” of this evangelization team is fundamental and most important if the people are to accept responsibility and ownership of the mission. If from the outset one is able to communicate enthusiasm to this team, then half the work is already done.

As this team comes together it is important to solicit suggestions and ideas for a theme, music, topics for preaching, etc. In this way one avoids creating the impression that all of this is being imposed. In other words, this creates ownership.

From the beginning it is necessary to delegate functions and responsibilities. For example, if there is someone who is familiar with the songs that the people can sing, then this person should be put in charge of selecting the music that will compliment the theme of the mission and/or the slogan or “catch phrase” that is used in the mission literature. Thus if the theme of the mission is “Church, your life is mission” and the slogan is “Go to the other shore,” then songs should be chosen accordingly. If there is a parish liturgy committee, then these persons or committee should put together the penitential rites and the prayers of the faithful, as well as organize the opening and closing Mass and/or rituals.

The “animation team” should meet as often as necessary. Here much time will be needed. The length of the meeting is not important as long as the preparatory work is being dealt with. On the other hand, the “evangelization team” should meet only when it is absolutely necessary since these persons are often involved in many other activities within the area of their respective ministries, and therefore they should not be given tasks that will overburden them.

It is important to delegate the area of communication to those persons who are involved in the pastoral life of the parish and who are formed pastorally and have an understanding of the Church. These persons should be placed in charge of contacting the mass media, that is, the religious and secular radio, television and press. The frequent use of sound equipment is certainly in line with the popular character of the mission. The placement of posters and banners reinforces the idea that this is the time of mission. If there is the possibility of obtaining sponsors or organizing other activities to

support the mission, then these responsibilities should also be delegated to a committee.

Our last two parish missions have become well known because of the utilization of the diocesan radio station and the Church's national television station. We were also able to acquire space on some secular radio stations and transmit our parish celebrations through telephonic means. Before the actual mission took place, we were able to produce theatrical presentations dealing with evangelization and the local television station, in turn, transmitted these dramatizations. It is very probable that the first mission will not obtain all the desired results one hopes for, but this is a first step that creates a certain vision for the next year. In fact, each year one sees new possibilities that strengthen the parish's missionary work.

6. Youth and children in the context of the parish mission

The person in charge of youth ministry, as well as the catechists working with the youth and the children should be invited to participate in the "animation team." They should be involved in this effort from the beginning of the planning for the mission. It is important to support the initiatives and proposals of the young people. In other words, the youth deserve out total pastoral support. If they propose theatre, then a theatre group should be organized; if they propose a concert, then a concert should be organized; if they propose a walk or a march, then it should be organized, etc. in all of this, it is important to spell out the limits of the mission theme and to be faithful to the general criteria of the mission.

The young people can also be invited to produce a drawing that will be used as a symbol throughout the mission. It should be remembered that the youth of the parish have many talents and these talents should be utilized in the mission. If many groups participate and present several drawings then the "animation team" should select the drawing that seems to best represent the theme of the mission. This drawing is then used on all the literature during the mission. In this way one continually promotes the values of the young people and affirms their contributions and service to the Church.

On another level, the same is done in coordination with the children's catechetical program. The mission themes are presented to them but in a way that is adapted to their age and understanding. We have seen some very positive results from this work. In our visits to the families we have found that the children play a key role in providing us with entrance into their homes. At the same time the catechist promotes a missionary sense in these children by going with them to visit other children in the neighborhood and extending an invitation to them to participate in the mission.

7. Themes for the mission and the post-mission

In my diocese, we use the themes for Lent and Advent. On other occasions we have used themes that were prepared for specific celebrations (for example, The Centennial Celebration of the First Eucharistic Congress in Honduras, the Week of the Bible, the Missionary Holy Year, etc.). We have also considered material produced by some of the missionary groups that are present in the diocese. These themes are then presented to the small communities where they are then developed. This is a conscious act on our part and, in my opinion, one that is also very Vincentian, since the Vincentian mission cannot be realized outside the parameters of the evangelizing activity of the diocese. From the different possible themes, we select those that seem to be most timely; that is, those themes that will challenge and/or strengthen certain areas of the parish life that are in need of this missionary touch. We follow the same process for the preaching that is done in the church during the week of mission there. This preaching is done by either a priest or a committed layperson, who is known for his/her integrity and example.

In the post mission we continue to develop the same themes (at times there will be as many as 40 themes for reflection). The lay missionaries gather together family groups each week and reflect on these themes and apply the theme to their daily life. As part of our follow-up and also to continue to encourage the missionary spirit, we have "open air" meetings in different sectors of the parish. For these meetings it is necessary to do some preparatory work: a family is chosen to host this gathering (preferably a family that is not very active in the parish), the choir is asked to animate this gathering through song, a layperson or priest is selected to lead the group in reflecting on the theme, at times a statue of a saint that this family is especially devoted to is given a place of prominence, as well as a crucifix and some flowers.

This missionary experience has the possibility of enriching all involved. It requires, however, time, patience, and commitment. Like anything that is important, one has to invest in the mission. Thus in order for the evangelization to reach the greatest number of persons, the economic resources of the parish have to be set aside for this purpose.

As I conclude my reflections I would like to say that the annual parish mission is a sign of hope that renews the life and the faith of the parish. If one is willing to put in the effort, God will definitely reward this effort with the presence of the Spirit. As the missionaries "go to the other shore," they are in turn then missioned.

(CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M., translator)