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## **Revitalizing the Vincentian Identity in the Context of *Mission Ad Gentes***

**Anil Thomas Karackavayalil**

The CM Province of Southern India

anilthomascm@hotmail.com

Abstract:

Evangelization of the poor was the primary concern of Vincent de Paul and his companions. The Second Vatican Council recaptured the missionary spirit of the early Church and stated that the pilgrim Church is “missionary by its very nature”. The Church is born out of the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit sent by the Father. From the very beginning of the Congregation of the Mission, St. Vincent de Paul and his companions were simply called “Fathers of the Mission.” That means, as our Superior General Fr. Tomaž Mavrič pointed out, from the very beginning there was “a sense of dynamism, movement, going to the peripheries, not being caught in a state of stagnation” in our DNA. During the 43rd General Assembly, the members of the Congregation of the Mission committed themselves to support the *Mission ad Gentes* effort and reiterated the resolved to set apart at least one percent of confreres to this mission every year and strengthened their commitment to bring the Gospel to all people. Mission and evangelisation in this sense is one of the fundamental qualities of the Congregation of the Mission. Without recapturing this original spirit of “being sent to the nations,” we cannot attain a complete and meaningful revitalisation of our Vincentian identity.

L'évangélisation des pauvres était la préoccupation première de Vincent de Paul et de ses compagnons. Le Concile Vatican II a repris l'esprit missionnaire de l'Église primitive et a déclaré que l'Église en pèlerinage est "missionnaire par sa nature même". L'Église est née de la mission du Fils et du Saint-Esprit envoyés par le Père. Dès le début de la Congrégation de la Mission, Saint Vincent de Paul et ses compagnons ont été simplement appelés "Pères de la Mission". Cela signifie, comme l'a souligné notre supérieur général le père Tomaž Mavrič, qu'il y avait dès le début dans notre ADN "un sens du dynamisme, du mouvement, d'aller aux périphéries, de ne pas être pris dans un état de stagnation". Au cours de la 43<sup>e</sup> Assemblée générale, les membres de la Congrégation de la Mission se sont engagés à soutenir l'effort de la Mission ad Gentes et ont réitéré la résolution de mettre à part au moins un pour cent des confrères pour cette mission chaque année et ont renforcé leur engagement à apporter l'Évangile à tous les peuples. La mission et l'évangélisation dans ce sens sont l'une des qualités fondamentales de la Congrégation de la Mission. Si nous ne retrouvons pas cet esprit originel "d'envoi aux nations", nous ne pourrions pas parvenir à une revitalisation complète et significative de notre identité vincentienne.

La evangelización de los pobres fue la principal preocupación de Vicente de Paúl y sus compañeros. El Concilio Vaticano II recuperó el espíritu misionero de la Iglesia primitiva y afirmó que la Iglesia peregrina es "misionera por naturaleza". La Iglesia nace de la misión del Hijo y del Espíritu Santo enviados por el Padre. Desde los comienzos de la Congregación de la Misión, San Vicente de Paúl y sus compañeros fueron llamados simplemente "Padres de la Misión". Eso significa, como señaló nuestro Superior General, el P. Tomaž Mavrič, que desde el principio había en nuestro ADN "un sentido de dinamismo, de movimiento, de ir a las periferias, de no quedar atrapados en un estado de estancamiento". Durante la 43<sup>a</sup> Asamblea General, los miembros de la Congregación de la Misión se comprometieron a apoyar el esfuerzo de la Misión ad Gentes y reiteraron la resolución de destinar al menos el uno por ciento de los cohermanos a esta misión cada año y reforzaron su compromiso de llevar el Evangelio a todas las personas. La

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misión y la evangelización en este sentido es una de las cualidades fundamentales de la Congregación de la Misión. Sin recuperar este espíritu original de "ser enviados a las naciones", no podremos alcanzar una revitalización completa y significativa de nuestra identidad vicenciana.

Keywords: *Mission ad Gentes, Vincentian Identity, Church, Missionary, Charism*

## **Introduction**

The Congregation of the Mission mirrored the many facets of St. Vincent himself. It shared his charisma and was destined to inherit and continue the multi-faceted personality of St. Vincent de Paul. Evangelization of the poor was the primary concern of Vincent de Paul and his companions. The Little Company was born out of this realization and vision. In course of time this one and single mission took many and different forms on the practical level. Therefore, the Congregation of the Mission was in action through parish missions, retreats, conferences, seminary formation, care of the victims of war, children, galley slaves, beggars, expanding its presence to different parts of Europe, mission to the captives and mission to the infidels. From the start, *Mission ad Gentes* was dear to the heart of the founder and emerged as an intrinsic aspect of the Vincentian identity and mission.

### **1. “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations”**

In his last words to the disciples the Lord Jesus Christ gave them a mission: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt 28:19-20). Christ’s instruction to the disciples was a great call to those who became his first disciples and the first missionaries of the Church. They were told to go *Ad Gentes*, that is, “to the nations,” to those who did not know the love of Christ and to proclaim the Gospel. It is only because the apostles and the early Christians were faithful and obedient to Christ’s command, that his Church has grown and flourished. The responsibility for fulfilling that mandate to go and preach the Gospel to all the nations passes on unchanged to all the disciples of Christ and especially to all those who are specially chosen to bear witness to the love of Christ today. God’s purpose for his Church is to be universal. He wants to extend his Church to the farthest corners of the earth and through the Church God desires to show his love and mercy to all people.

The four verbs in the mission command (going, baptizing, teaching and making disciples) describe in clear terms what it means to be a missionary. It means going, baptizing, teaching and making disciples of all nations. The thrust of the command is on the only finite verb “make disciples” of all nations (Larkin and Williams 2005, 131–33). Thus, for Mathew, to engage in mission is to strive to make disciples of the Risen Lord. Definitely it involves, going, teaching and baptizing. In other words, the universal mission “to disciple” is to be achieved by the disciples who “go” (who are sent), “teach” and “baptize”. It is a command to go forth. It is a command to teach and preach God’s love. It is a command to make disciples. And above all, it is a command to make disciples of ALL THE NATIONS. Having grasped this need and urgency of preaching the Gospel to all peoples, St. Paul exclaimed to the gentiles, “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel...” (1 Cor. 9:16). This universal character of the mission entrusted to the disciples was reemphasized by the Second Vatican Council.

## 2. The Church is Missionary by its very Nature

The Second Vatican Council Fathers recaptured the missionary spirit of the early Church and stated that the pilgrim Church is “missionary by its very nature”. The Church is born out of the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit sent by the Father (*Ad Gentes* 2). Jesus came as the first missionary, lived among us, teaching us and making us his disciples. He also sent his disciples with the same mission. Thus, to be a Christian is to be a missionary. The mission is intrinsic to the very nature of the Church and it is something without which the Church cannot exist. This vocation involves, going forth, teaching and preaching, and above all making disciples of all the nations. It is true that at various times in the past, the emphasis and thrust of the command fell away from “ALL THE NATIONS” to more practical and secondary elements of that command. Having understood this reality, the Second Vatican Council Fathers named the document on the Church’s Missionary Activity “Ad Gentes/ TO THE NATIONS.”

Continuing the same spirit of the Gospel and the Second Vatican Council, Pope John Paul II in his encyclical on the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate reiterated that the Church can never “withdraw from her permanent mission of bringing the Gospel to the multitudes, the millions and millions of men and women, who as yet do not know Christ the Redeemer of humanity” (*Redemptoris Missio* 31). Therefore, all Catholics, by reason of their incorporation into the Church at Baptism, should fully participate and cooperate in Christ’s ongoing mission “to the nations.” Pope Benedict XVI in his Message for World Mission Day on 18th October 2009 stated,

On this Sunday, dedicated to the missions, I turn first of all to you, my brothers in the episcopal and the priestly ministry, and then to you, my brothers and sisters, the whole People of God, to encourage in each one of you a deeper awareness of Christ’s missionary mandate to “make disciples of all peoples” (Mt 28:19), in the footsteps of Saint Paul, the Apostle of the nations. The goal of the Church’s mission is to illumine all peoples with the light of the Gospel ... We should have a longing and a passion to illumine all peoples with the light of Christ that shines on the face of the Church ... Christ calls, justifies, sanctifies and sends his disciples to proclaim the Kingdom of God, so that all nations may become the People of God ... Proclamation of the Gospel must be for us, as it was for the Apostle Paul, a primary and unavoidable duty (Pope Benedict XVI 2009).

## 3. St. Vincent and Mission *Ad Gentes*:

From the very beginning of our existence, St. Vincent de Paul and his companions were simply called “Fathers of the Mission.” That means, as our Superior General Fr. Tomaž Mavrič pointed out, from the very beginning there was “a sense of dynamism, movement, going to the peripheries, not being caught in a state of stagnation” (Mavrič 2022) in our DNA. Initially, of course, it was the missions to the villages and countryside that took precedence. Even in that mission, a sense of “being sent” was very evident. A constant desire to evangelise by personal example, deeds, and words to the farthest corners of the world dominated our mission (Mavrič 2022). St. Vincent was not satisfied that the company was just confined to missions in the estates, retreats, work in the seminaries, ordinands, Tuesday conferences, children, galley slaves, beggars, etc. First, he sent missionaries to Italy, Ireland, Poland, and then even to Tunis and Algeria with a special mission to the captives. Still Vincent de Paul was not fully content and he knew that the Little Company had something else to accomplish. It was in 1648 that the Congregation began this Mission *ad Gentes* in a formal way when St. Vincent sent his

first missionaries to Madagascar. “Vincent had a deep longing to work directly for the evangelisation of infidels” (Roman 1999, 431). His age, health and other responsibilities prevented him from doing this. Vincent’s love and passion for *Mission ad Gentes* will become clear when we look at the details with which he nurtured and encouraged the Madagascar mission of the Little Company.

Humanly speaking, the mission to Madagascar was an impossible one. There were many challenges and difficulties. “In spite of all these difficulties, St. Vincent never had any problems in finding personnel. Vincent sent as many as twenty or so missionaries in successive groups to Madagascar but out of these only eight arrived at the mission. None of the priests named showed any repugnance in going to that distant land and many of them volunteered to go” (Roman 1999, 435). For this difficult and perilous mission Vincent chose a succession of priests who were outstanding in their human and spiritual qualities. It is really amazing to see how in less than 25 years the Little Company, whose members were described by Vincent as lowly in virtue, knowledge, and social status, had sufficient men available for such varied and demanding tasks. The first two missionaries that St. Vincent chose for Madagascar mission were Fr. Charles Nacquart and Nicolas Gondree. In the appointment letter to Fr. Charles Nacquart St. Vincent wrote “...what more can I say to you ...that there is nothing on earth I would like more than to go with you (to Madagascar) and be your companion, if only I could, instead of Fr. Gondree” (Roman 1999, 278–85).

It is true that deep down in his heart St. Vincent saw himself a missionary in the person of his sons who were sent on *Mission ad Gentes*. Jose Maria Roman makes this point clear when he recollects about it:

Tragic destiny of the Madagascar mission was to prove a constant blood letting for Vincent. But it was a glorious destiny too, and it shows us in a way that none of his other enterprises could do, this man’s unconquerable zeal and his readiness always to begin again, even at the cost of his finest sons. No obstacles, no loss, could alter his determination to serve those poor people in unknown and distant lands through the Church’s *Mission ad Gentes* (Roman 1999, 439–40).

We find that, for St. Vincent, the Madagascar mission was the crowning of the company’s missionary labours. For this reason, he held on to it at all cost in spite of a long and sad list of men sacrificed. But other people began to complain about an enterprise which up to that moment had brought nothing but disaster. Vincent countered their objections in the following manner:

Can we be so cowardly of heart and so lacking in manliness that we would abandon the Lord’s vineyard that his divine Majesty has called us to, just because four, five, or even six men have died there? Tell me, would it be a good army that abandoned everything because it had lost two, three, or five thousand men? A fine thing that would be, to see such a cut and run army that thought only of its own comfort. Well, we would have to say that same thing about the Mission! It would be a fine company, this Mission, if it abandoned the works of God after five or six losses. A cowardly company, too attached to earthly things. No, I do not believe that there is a single man in the company who is so lacking in spirit that he is not prepared to go and take the place of those who have died (Roman 1999, 442; Coste ed. 1999, vols. XI, 422).

Roman observes that in no enterprise did Vincent display so much tenacity and put so much labour and effort into the work as he has done in the case of *Mission ad Gentes*. St. Vincent also foretold about such discouragements that could emerge in the future regarding *Mission ad Gentes* and cautioned his followers.

On 30th August 1658 while speaking on the “Availability for any ministry” Vincent speaks about the excellence of “volunteering for foreign lands in order to work there for the salvation of souls or to be in a continual disposition to go there” (Coste ed. 1999, vols. XII, 46). In the same conference, later on, he became more emphatic when he says, “Oh Messieurs, how happy are those who feel this disposition in themselves and to whom God has given the grace of being ready and willing to go far off countries to spend their lives there for Jesus Christ” (Coste ed. 1999, vols. XII, 46). In this famous conference St. Vincent speaks ardently of opting to go for *Mission ad Gentes*, for the glory of God and to win souls for Jesus Christ. Understanding very well the difficulties confreres may face in learning new languages, St. Vincent said,

The Company has to take pains to ask God to give it the gift of tongues. He gave it to the Apostles, after choosing them to be His Apostles, with the result that they understood all who spoke to them, even though they were from different regions and nations...Let us ask God, my dear confreres, to give us at least the desire to learn languages; each individual should have some skill in that and should ask God for it (Coste ed. 1999, vols. XII, 60).

St. Vincent, pointed out the good example of the Jesuit fathers in this regard who devotes assiduously to this. “And one of the first thing done by those sent to a country where they do not know the language is to apply themselves to learning it. And this is what members of the company who will be destined for foreign lands should do, when God calls them there” (Coste ed. 1999, vols. XII, 60).

St. Vincent was so happy, in the same conference, to cite the example of Fr. Charles Nacquart whom he had sent to Madagascar and how “by the end of four months, he understood it (local language) and was able to begin to teach the catechism ... So then I would like the company to be devoted to acting in this way when the occasion arises, and when members are sent to a place where they don’t understand the language. Let us ask God to give us this facility in learning the language, since He has been pleased to call us to the same ministries as His Apostles” (Coste ed. 1999, vols. XII, 60). St. Vincent was also prophetically aware that in the future some confreres may not appreciate the idea of foreign missions citing the example of a lot of work to be done at home and locally. While explaining the purpose of the Congregation of the Mission St. Vincent said,

Those who are unwilling to go on missions are acting contrary to the Rule, or who having gone on them encountered some difficulty, don’t want to go back, or who having a taste for seminary work, refuse to give it up, or prefer some other ministry and are reluctant to leave it for the work of missions, which is so necessary...surely it is worthy of a Missioner to have and preserve this desire to go on missions (Coste ed. 1999, vols. XII, 73).

St. Vincent ardently desired that the Little Company will keep alive all the different ministries and enjoy the happiness of being able to carry out all of them. Therefore, while explaining the Rules St. Vincent warns the confreres of this danger of

giving up some of the ministries that the company is doing. In that too, foreign mission remains a primary concern of St. Vincent. Prophetically he says,

There will be some who oppose these ministries-have no doubt about that-and others will say that it is too much to attempt to send men to distant countries, to the Indies, or to Barbary. But, my God, but my Lord, didn't You send Saint Thomas to the Indies and the other Apostles throughout the world (Coste ed. 1999, vols. XII, 79)?

Towards the end of that conference given on 6th December 1658, we find St. Vincent becoming very emotional when he says and predicts,

I really don't want to say all that but only that, if at some future time, some in the Company might suggest doing away with this practice, giving up that hospital, recalling the men ministering in Barbary, remaining here, not going there, giving up this ministry, and not hastening to respond to needs in far-off places, those false confreres should be told fearlessly, 'Messieurs, let us keep the laws of our fathers in our present state; God has put us there and wants us to stay in it. Stand firm in that (Coste ed. 1999, vols. XII, 81).

Of course, he is speaking of various ministries, however, his love and desire to continue *Mission ad Gentes* and to going to work in faraway places is very palpable and hard to miss. Our attempt to revitalisation will be authentic and complete when we recapture this same love and desire of St. Vincent for *Mission ad Gentes*.

#### **4. Vincentian Charism in the Beginning of the Fifth Century**

During the 43rd General Assembly, the members of the Congregation of the Mission committed themselves anew to support this *Mission ad Gentes* effort and reiterated the resolved to set apart at least one percent of confreres to this mission every year and strengthened their commitment to bring the Gospel to all people. Mission and evangelisation in this sense is one of the fundamental qualities of the Congregation of the Mission. Without recapturing this original spirit of "being sent to the nations," we cannot attain a complete and meaningful revitalisation of our Vincentian identity.

Moreover, this missionary aspect of our charism reaffirms the relationship between evangelisation and charity for the less fortunate. It is obvious that "Caritas Christi urget nos" was a phrase always in the heart and on the lips of St. Vincent de Paul. He believed that everything done in love of God and love of one's neighbour becomes a prayer. Service was the central theme that emerged when discussing "mission" in *Ad Gentes*. For St. Vincent de Paul, being at the service of people for the sake of the Kingdom of God summarises the primary motive of mission. Ultimately, mission is all about reaching out to others with the heart of a servant, a heart filled with the love of God and the love of neighbour. St. Vincent de Paul, like St. Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles, was fully convinced of the importance of charity in the life of missionaries. Missionaries are "sent by Christ to reveal and to communicate the love of God to all people and nations" and in the persons of the missionaries, the faith must be "animated by that charity with which God has loved us" (AG 12).

In this way, the command given by Jesus to "go into the whole world, and to preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mk 16:15) was undoubtedly a priority for St. Vincent de Paul. Above all, it is God's desire that all people be saved. St. Vincent's emphasis on the "zeal for souls," one of the five characteristic virtues of the Little Company, emerges from this great conviction that God desires the salvation of all and

therefore it is our duty to spread the faith and the saving love of Christ to all mankind. In fact, God's desire for the salvation of all people requires that we be missionaries.

Let us not forget that Christ is the necessary starting point for the missionary task at hand. This conviction alone will motivate us in the face of all the challenges that we might encounter. Mission work is for Christ, about Christ, and even by Christ. Concretely in mission, it means acknowledging that all people have been saved by Him, realising that all cultures have a share in Him, and then acting accordingly. So, missionaries do not get frightened of new situations, new cultures, new languages, and so on and so forth. They hear the call of Christ "You also go into my vineyard..." (Matt 20:4). Jesus reminds all his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest" (Matt 9:37-38).

A personal encounter with Christ, in and through our consecration and in the sacraments, compels us to greater participation in *Mission ad Gentes*. St. Vincent always had the heart of a missionary burning with zeal for bringing Christ's love, especially to those who are neglected. One thing is very clear there is an urgent need, demand as well as an invitation to make the *Mission ad Gentes* a pastoral priority for the next six years in the Congregation in general and in the provinces in particular.

## Conclusion

The 43rd General Assembly was seen as a New Pentecost for the Congregation of the Mission. The imagery feast of Pentecost paints a picture of the future Church. The apostles gathered with the Mother of God and received an anointing of fire from the Holy Spirit. Pentecost was the very first Mission Sunday. The Church is founded for the mission, enlivened by Christ present and acting sacramentally. The members of the Congregation of the Mission are invited to relive today this grace of Pentecost and say "Yes" to the mission of the Church. We are invited to rekindle in us that fervent desire for *Mission ad Gentes*/to the nations. Our Superior General ardently hopes and prays that in the next six years we will be able to reconnect with our roots and the origins of our spirituality and charism and this *Mission Ad Gentes* spirit will continue to grow and as a result, we will be able to open new missions in the countries where we are not yet present.

As we recommit ourselves anew to support the world mission effort, we also ask all the People of God who associate with us at different levels of our ministries, to join us in this venture. At the beginning of the fifth century of our Charism, the question that we must pose for ourselves is, "what is my part in fulfilling God's plan to reach the ends of the earth with Christ's love? How can we become part of this *Mission ad Gentes* that was so dear to the heart of St. Vincent de Paul? There are many ways to become part of this mission, like forming a network of concern and organising prayer for missions, inviting others to consider becoming missionaries, supporting and encouraging others to support missions with financial contributions etc. The revitalisation of Vincentian identity reminds us of our obligation to actively support and promote the *Mission ad Gentes*. There are people who have a right to encounter Christ face-to-face through his missionaries.

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