

Vincentians, True Christian Missionaries

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In the Sacred Scriptures we find countless passages in which Jesus tells us that the missionary character is essential and almost inseparable from the life of believers. Jesus Christ is the missionary model par excellence. As the Father has sent me, so I send you (John 20:21) ... those words ground the missionary vocation of the community of believers and of all those who call themselves Christian. We, as members of the Vincentian Family, when on mission, must follow that law of life, namely, we are sent to the poor and we have a responsibility (and at the same time, it is our privilege) to represent Jesus as we reach out and minister to those men and women who are poor, excluded and marginalized.

Jesus models the manner in which missionaries should put aside their own needs and desires in order to proclaim the Kingdom. God entrusted Jesus with the mission of establishing the definitive covenant between the Father and humankind. We see that reality expressed in Jesus' words in the synagogue in Nazareth: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor (Luke 4:18). What Jesus did in his time, is what we today call evangelization and human promotion, fundamental characteristics of the ministry of every missionary and Vincentian.

Another important characteristic of Jesus' mission was revealed on the night before he died ... at the time when he washed the feet of his disciples. That action was a concrete sign of the mission that Jesus came to proclaim and to fulfill ... was a sign and was intended to give an example to his followers: I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do (John 13:15). That gesture of Jesus represents the service that every missionary must provide. For us, as members of the worldwide Vincentian Family, we have to do the same: the service of charity is, in essence, a missionary service. Since the ones who are sent forth are identified as followers of Jesus, they must relate to people in the same way that Jesus related to those who were marginalized and most in need.

We must always be mindful of Jesus' missionary approach which was characterized by living in the midst of the people. Jesus' miracles and his instruction and teaching took place in the public sphere where people were able to see what he did and hear what he said ... able to assimilate his way of life. Our ministry should take on the same characteristics, that is, we should reach out to the peripheries of our communities and involve the poor in our ministry. We should empower people to confront and overcome their situation of misery and poverty and abandonment, their situation of loneliness and social indifference.

Furthermore, we know that that people were attracted by the manner in which Jesus spoke (his use of parables). People at that time were accustomed to more conservative preachers who read the Old Testament without contextualizing the message. Jesus, on the other hand, told stories and gave examples from everyday life so that people could more easily understand the word of God. So also we must be very mindful of the manner in which we speak and/or offer suggestions to others ... simple words will enable us to establish bonds of friendship with those who are poor.

Jesus' greatest desire revolved around the missionary dimension of his ministry: Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15). This command touches the heart of every Vincentian because they come to understand that their mission involves distributing food and other material goods (providing for their material needs) while at the same time teaching and catechizing (providing for their spiritual needs). Yes, we must minister in the same way that Jesus ministered.

Jesus' ministerial approach should be a model for the ministry of the Church, and therefore, a model for the members of the Vincentian Family ... everything should be focused on and revolve around Jesus, the model missionary. Jesus' life, his ministry in the midst of people, his passion and death, his resurrection and glorification ... all of these highlight an integral mission through means of which the Church prolongs the mission of Jesus.

In summary, Jesus has provided us with a legacy, with a manner in which we are to minister. Missionaries are to proclaim the gospel and give witness to Jesus Christ; they are to go out to others, to go out to the peripheries (even to hostile places). Missionaries, even though silent

and unknown, hand over their lives and all that they have. Their enthusiastic voice and activity gather together those persons who have been abandoned and/or excluded. Their face reflects the face of God who is loving, merciful and compassionate. They pray in the presence of God, but they also go out into the street to engage in the struggle for a more just society.

Therefore, if we want to be viewed as true Christians, we need to clothe ourselves in Jesus' missionary approach ... this Jesus who came to proclaim the kingdom of God, to free captives to heal the infirm and to save the humble. If we want to be viewed as true Vincentians, then we must also adopt the missionary approach of Vincent de Paul and our Founders as we serve and evangelize the poor.

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