

POPULAR MISSIONS

I. EVANGELIZATION TODAY

1. THE REALITY OF OUR PARISHES

It would be hard for us to deny that we are anchored in a pastoral of conservation. Maybe, at a theoretical level, we can admit that the days of Christendom have come to an end. In practice, however, we move in a way, and with inherited methods which, in fact, make us focus, almost exclusively, on worship and the administration of sacraments. And we do not reach those who are alienated from the church.

In every parish there is a small minority of faithful followers, who live out their faith with an ecclesiastical sense and with a degree of apostolic commitment. Among them, those who are more or less committed to intraecclesiastical acts tend to stand out. There follows a bigger circle, although reduced in relation to the parish group, a circle of churchgoers: those who attend Sunday Mass. Then, we find a third sector, which can be called the sector of those who are "passively alienated": the sporadic churchgoers, who go to church for the baptism of their children, a wedding or the death of a relative. And we also find those who are "actively alienated": people who never got to believe, who walked away for different reasons, who consider themselves opposed to the faith, who campaign against the church...

Every day, the number of indifferent, alienated, young people and even children, who do not rely on God or on the church increases. The Gospel reaches just a small group of people, the same group as always. And so our church, the church of God, does not move forward, instead, it falls asleep, and becomes stagnant. Does our pastoral go beyond the twenty percent of the population of our parishes?

There is no denying that our pastoral of Christendom has not adapted to the reality of Christendom in which we live.

2. TODAY'S NEED FOR EVANGELIZATION

At this point, nobody should doubt it: *it is urgent to evangelize our people*, who received baptism, but do not know the Christian message, and live like pagans, or who have walked away from church, and progressive dechristianization, with its new social and cultural situations, is asking them to produce a new synthesis between faith and life.

Back in 1977, Pablo VI dared diagnose, with harsh and radical words: "Our age has the need to restart the construction of the Church, almost psychologically and pastorally, as if it was beginning again, from scratch, so to speak, to regenerate" (General Audience, 4 August).

It is urgent for us to think about *evangelization*: to present the "first proclamation" of the Gospel, the powerful freshness of the Good News that causes conversion and the decision of faith in Jesus Christ.

This is an urgent pastoral action in our Church. We need to win back the priests and the faithful in our Christian communities, the missionary nature as something essential and unavoidable. We cannot remain in the sheer inertia of a pastoral of conservation; instead we should bring into play the dynamics going from the "communion" to the "mission", just as John Paul II pointed out in the *Christifideles Laici*. Therefore, *"it is not about forgetting the daily pastoral, but about regaining the missionary spirit and nature."*

Isn't evangelization the constant task of the Church, demanded by its own nature, in the sense indicated by Paul VI: *"This means that the church has a constant need of being evangelized, if she wishes to retain freshness, vigor and strength in order to proclaim the Gospel"* (EN, 15)? Isn't it the *most repeated invitation* of the Church's Teaching, from the Council decree *"Apostolicam Actuositatem"* to the *"Tertio millenio adveniente"*, through Paul VI's *"Evangelii nuntiandi"*, and John Paul II's *Christifideles Laici*?

Are we not missing the right time for new evangelization, which started the exact moment when new social and cultural models surfaced?

3. A NEW STYLE OF MISSION

A new Mission style was certainly necessary. The Second Vatican Council and the pastoral orientations in the post-council, the profound political, social and cultural changes demanded a different kind of mission for people. The phenomenon of the alienated, the increasing lack of belief, a vast majority of people walking away from the faith, the drop in Sunday mass attendance, the increase in the number of non-churchgoers, the loss of ethical values have made it clear that we are in a world that needs, now more than ever, a new Gospel proclamation.

In view of this new situation, the pastoral responses had to favor the EVANGELIZATION Line.

From that moment on, the Popular Mission has undergone a process of revision and updating in approaches, strategies, and methods, which starts from the following assumptions:

- The Popular Mission is an extraordinary pastoral action, which helps the ordinary pastoral.
- It is the Parochial Community that turns into a mission state. It plays a leading role in all the actions. We missionaries are specialized collaborators of the community.

- The Popular Mission is not just a precise, isolated, and extraordinary act of the evangelizing pastoral, but a project conceived as a process composed of three well-defined stages: pre-mission, mission, and post-mission, which will take several years of missionary work.

II. POPULAR MISSION

The Popular Mission is a strong period of extraordinary evangelization during which the community, helped by the missionaries, evangelizes itself, strengthening its Christian experience, promoting the creation of catechism groups for adults, helping to establish new paths to bring the alienated closer, and thus promoting the pastoral project of the community.

Therefore, the general objectives of this missionary action are:

- To encourage churchgoers. To arouse parish community members to have a stronger connection with other Christians and with the Word of God which will strengthen and renew their lives in faith.
- To discover new collaborators. To help each one of the members discover their position of responsibility and service in the community and in the neighborhood.
- To bring the alienated closer. The parochial community meets those who have walked away from the faith or from religious practice, in order to start a conversation according to the Gospel.
- To begin faith formation groups. It is the great gap for most Christians, which we try to fill by starting up family meetings, and subsequently through catechism for adults.

Each parish church should add particular objectives established in its pastoral project to these general objectives.

The mission process is composed of three stages:

- PRE-MISSION
- MISSION
- POST-MISSION

1. THE PRE-MISSION

It has the explicit sense of preparing the mission, but it can also be understood as a mission to those who are close, with the aim of turning them into evangelization agents. The formation of agents plays an important role for this purpose.

Pre-mission OBJECTIVES:

1. To adequately form evangelization agents among those who are close, at all levels, with a view to the actions to be carried out in the pre-mission, mission, and post-mission. They will play a leading role in the missionary action.

2. To call "all the people". They will be the main recipients of the missionary action: Announcement of the mission, home visits, advertising, announcement of the mission acts, etc.
3. To prepare the stronger period of the mission: Studying the reality in which the mission will take place, offering enough houses to celebrate family meetings, meeting entertainers, list of sick people to be visited, logistics, etc.

During the pre-mission period these ACTIONS or steps are usually followed:

1. Approval of the Mission: Priests and Council.
2. Information to the Pastoral "driving forces".
3. Announcement to the whole parish.
4. MISSION PREPARATION:
 - 4.1 Training of Pastoral Agents for the mission.
Adults.
YPAs (Youth Pastoral Agents).
Married couples.
 - 4.2 Home Visits:
Preparation of Family visitors.
Carrying out of visits
Assessment
 - 4.3 Reality analysis
 - 4.4 Planning of the Advertising campaign
 - 4.5 Planning of the particular Parish Mission project.
 - 4.6 Offer of "homes" for the Christian Family Meetings
 - 4.7 Offer of "organizers" for the Christian Family Meetings.
 - 4.8 List of sick people to be visited
 - 4.9 Completion of details

- THE REASONS for these actions:

Approval of the mission process by the priests team and the council. This kind of mission cannot be carried out without the consent and commitment of the laity.

Announcement of the mission to the "driving forces", or already formed groups, out of which a significant number of pastoral agents have to emerge.

Announcement of the mission to the Christians: generally to the regulars and those who attend Sunday Mass, with two aims: first, for them to be well-informed about what is going to be done; second, to increase the number of possible pastoral agents or contributors to the missionary process.

Training of adult pastoral agents, and whenever possible, of young people and married couples. These agents, along with the priests team and the missionaries, are the ones who will later carry out diverse actions needed in the pre-mission: to visit the homes of parish members, to conduct the study of reality, to offer themselves as entertainers, hosts, to communicate with married couples, children, preadolescents, people and groups of elderly people, sick people, etc, for the mission. They will ensure the continuity of results in the post-mission. But before that, they will have to study

several topics that will help them understand faith better, and their missionary commitment. It is clear that for the parish community to evangelize itself, missionaries within that community are needed, and first we will train them as such, with the advice of missionaries coming from other places. In small towns such training needs to be done at the archpriesthood level.

A prayer campaign for the results of the mission, acknowledging that the main agent is the Spirit of the Lord, and that everything will be His work.

Home visits: This is important in order to reach, in a more personal way, as many people as possible, the non-churchgoers, the alienated, and the indifferent. It is a good way of announcing the mission to those who do not frequent the sacraments and of breaking the vicious circle of feeling good in the temple or parochial premises, forgetting that we also have to preach in the streets, where people live, work, have fun... There is where we bring our missionary-evangelizing challenge into play. Before the visits, there is a lot of fear, and prejudices regarding privacy and human respect, and about what people might say, etc., which should be eliminated. We know from our experience that visits make us mature, and help us overcome the fear of expressing our faith in non-religious environments. It is useful to have "liaisons" that might make our work easier. Two visits are usually paid before the Mission:

One visit to announce the mission and to invite people to participate in it.

Another visit to look for and select enough houses to hold Family Meetings. This is very important, and some criteria should be taken into account to ensure attendance and continuity.

In each of the visits we have to explain people what the visits mean, their objectives, how they are made, what materials should be carried, what role they play in the Meetings, what are the commitments for those offering their home, etc. It is advisable that these visits start after receiving some training. By doing so, visitors are better prepared and motivated.

A study of the reality should be made by the agents, visitors, and priests team, with the advice of the missionaries. They have the biggest interest in improving things and responding evangelically to the challenges met through the missionary work. This study will be of use, among other things, to produce and adapt the mission project to the parochial reality.

Finally, to prepare and make other details: Advertising (posters, pamphlets, invitations...), homilies urging joint responsibility in evangelization, and encouraging the parishioners to participate in the mission, lists of sick people to be visited during the mission, lists of houses offered to hold the Meetings, lists of entertainers...

The pre-mission usually lasts from several months to a year, depending on the situation in every parish, and on whether the mission is taking place in a rural area or in the city. The pre-mission is so important that the missionaries usually say: "A well prepared mission is a mission well-done." Regarding the preparation time, a fair equilibrium needs to be maintained: neither too long because it tires the agents, nor too short because the event of the mission needs to be adequately prepared. The basic criterion is that the parish must be well prepared; otherwise it is advisable to extend the pre-mission.

Note: In the process of the mission there is a permanent advice from the mission teams. They, as specialists or technicians, will lead us adequately, especially when we take a new step. They will consult us when faced with a problem or when adapting the method to the concrete reality. All we need to do is trust them. The process of the mission is a well-articulated and serious project that is carried out little by little, step by step.

2. THE MISSION

It is the "strong period of evangelization". In the cities, it usually lasts two or three weeks, with three days of preparation, and one week or ten days in rural parishes of less than 600 inhabitants.

In the case of the two-day mission, the following plan is usually followed:

IMMEDIATE PREPARATION (the three first days):

- Arrival of the missionaries
- Preparation of the "Hosts"
- Preparation of the "Entertainers"
- Call to groups of:
 - Children
 - Young people (close or YPAs)
 - Elderly people
- Completion of details

FAMILY MEETINGS WEEK

- School of prayer.
- Missionary Eucharist.
- Visits to sick people.
- Missionary action with children
- Missionary action with people of the Third Age
- Home meetings: CHRISTIAN FAMILY MEETINGS
- Preparation of the Entertainers

WORD WEEK (Kerygma): missionary Proclamations

- School of prayer.
- Missionary Eucharist.
- Visits to sick people.
- Confessions and consultation.
- Missionary action with preadolescents.
- Missionary celebration with the WHOLE Christian community.
- Missionary action with young people.
- Missionary action with married couples.

CONTINUITY COMMITMENTS

Note: In rural populations of less than 600 inhabitants we can take, besides the three days for preparation, three days for Meetings, and three days for proclamations; or five days for Meetings, and five days for proclamations.

OBJECTIVES of the firsts three days:

1. Coming into contact with reality on the part of missionaries from other places. Therefore, they need to check what is ready and what needs to be done. They have to start from what is done and try to correct, as far as possible, together with the priests team and the pastoral agents, the deficiencies found when beginning the mission.
2. Ensuring, as far as it is humanly possible, the proper functioning of the Family Meetings: preparing the agents involved, entertainers as well as hosts, and inviting the Christians to take part in them.
3. Calling the groups that should receive special mission actions in the following week.

OBJECTIVES of the Family Meetings Week:

1. Having the experience of meditating, discussing, and understanding human reality in the light of the Word of God in small groups. These groups make up the Family Meetings, are celebrated in the homes, are present in the neighborhoods and streets of the parish, and are led by laypersons who have been previously prepared to perform their duties with dignity. It is the missionary presence of the parish that has left the temple and the parish premises in order to reach the houses and neighborhoods to proclaim the Word of God.

The main result is that they evangelize themselves through life testimonies, and sharing ideas, opinions, expectations, faith, hope, charity, understanding, reception, conversations, etc. Depending on whether we want to advise the alienated, the churchgoers, or both groups at the same time, there are different topics prepared for the Meetings. These are the most common ones: Life worries, dignity of the human being, family, religion sense of the person (God), Jesus Christ, the Church, and the Virgin. If the reality of the parish asked for a specific topic, it would have to be taken into account and prepared in advance. Out of these topics only five topics are chosen.

These meetings are held during five days, in the afternoon, at a time that suits the participants, generally from 5 o'clock. It is the main event of the week. It lasts one hour. In the meeting we want to emphasize the fact that the "family home is Church", a place where you can meet God and the community like in the first days of the Church.

It would be good to consider the chance of holding special Meetings for young people. Our experience tells us that although the organization of the Meetings takes a lot of hard work, it is the most beautiful experience of the mission. It is the part people like best and want to continue.

2. Evangelizing and feeling evangelized through other acts for everyone who can attend, since the timetable may coincide with the work of others: In the morning, prayer and Eucharist. These celebrations invite us to meet with God, with His word, and to communicate with our brothers and sisters.

3. Starting these missionary acts with people and groups: sick people, children, and elderly people, who receive the fundamentals of the faith adapted to their age and situation. That is what we call mission by sectors. Some activities with young people are also carried out to guarantee their attendance to the mission acts specifically prepared for them the following week.

OBJECTIVES of the missionary Proclamations Week:

1. Celebrating and proclaiming the synthesis of faith that helps us to be converted to the Lord, personally and communally. This is done by means of well-prepared, attractive and participatory celebrations, focused on the Kerygma. This is the main act of this week. They are celebrated in the afternoon at the most suitable time. Sometimes two or more celebrations are held, depending on the size of the temple and on the expected number of attendees. In this kind of celebrations we want to emphasize that "the Church is our home".
2. Evangelizing through prayers and through the missionary Eucharist, just as in the previous week.
3. Continuing the mission acts with groups: Sick people, preadolescents, young people, and married couples.
4. Ensuring the continuity in the post-mission. In order to do so a number of cards are distributed for the participants of the mission to enroll in the groups which are to function in the post-mission. The aim of this action is to integrate those who have been apart from the parish into the life and activity of the parish. Meetings are held with these groups, especially with the entertainers and hosts of the Family Meetings.

3. THE POST-MISSION:

The main sense of the post-mission is to strengthen the result obtained in the mission, and especially to consolidate the missionary dimension that was first promoted in the pre-mission: worry about the alienated, the indifferent, the non-churchgoers, etc.

OBJECTIVES of the POST-MISSION:

1. On the part of the missionaries, accompanying the parish in which the mission has taken place for a year, to ensure the results of the mission, in particular the missionary dimension of the community.
2. Consolidating the functioning of the remaining groups, particularly those of the Christian Family Meetings as an evangelization platform.
3. Trying to reach more people than those reached by the mission. The alienated remain as the main challenge for the Christian community.
4. Revising the parochial project in order to integrate in it the concrete objectives, action lines, and activities considered advisable during the Mission.

The Post-mission should be carried out by the ordinary pastoral, but it is advisable for the missionaries to monitor the parish in which the mission has taken place during the first year of the Post-mission. Otherwise, the event of the mission could be just empty words. A lot of noise, a lot of movement, and when it comes down to it nothing remains and everything is lost. That is why it is advisable that the time of the post-mission, which is indefinite in principle, i.e. until the next mission, has a limit

in the monitoring on the part of the missionaries. In this way, the parishes keep their independence regarding the missionaries, and the missionaries do not mortgage their work against other parishes that may ask for their services. In the monitoring year what has been extraordinary during the period of mission becomes ordinary in the parochial pastoral.

ACTIONS

For the proper development of the post-mission, it is necessary to plan a series of actions from the pastoral council, and with the help of the missionaries.

1.- Evaluation and set-up of the post-mission.

It takes place a month after the celebration of the mission, and its purpose is to revise the carrying out of the mission project, the fulfillment of its objectives, the way in which people acted, the achievements, the gaps or lacunae, suggestions...

It is also the time to set the remaining groups in motion, with new vitality, new prospects, new projects, planning with them periods of training, prayer, and action. In particular, the family meetings are organized: how many, where, when, people entertaining them, training of those people, material to be used...

2.- Celebration of the Christian family meetings

It is the new platform of self-evangelization set into motion during the mission. The meetings are present in the neighborhoods, and there is where they should continue being formed and projecting their missionary action. It is a good platform to continue calling and getting in touch with those who have walked away from church.

These meetings direct their formation towards a catechumenal process. Generally, ten or twelve catechyses are given throughout this first year of post-mission. Material for the first and subsequent years is already prepared for these groups.

Meetings are usually held once a month and, if possible, they should be well-distributed so that the priest and the people responsible for the meetings can visit them. The monitors have previously met to prepare the respective topic.

After every group of meetings (three or four) it is advisable that a meeting of meetings is held, so that all the people involved have the opportunity to meet, and so that those who are more alienated from church start familiarizing with it.

3.- Monitoring of other post-mission groups.

During the post-mission period, we missionaries offer our presence in order to make the meeting between the different groups of the parishes easier.

The experience has been broad and very positive over the last years. We have organized residential weekends with young people from different towns to encourage

them in their commitment as a group and as members of the parish. These encounters have facilitated the formation of area coordinating committees. We have also organized Missionary Easters, with young people from other places to strengthen the work done throughout the mission. These young people have been present in other areas in which the mission is celebrated to offer their testimony.

Residential weekends with the monitors have also been organized to make their training easier and to encourage them in their work. However, this does not make up for the need of a monitors' school in the parish or in the archpriesthood, which we strongly encourage.

A challenge we are trying to respond to is the encounter of the priests who have celebrated the mission, in order to answer the questions raised by the post-mission and to encourage each other when faced with the difficulties of the duty.

4.- Parochial Meeting

Six months after the celebration of the mission we offer the presence of the missionaries to hold a Meeting of Meetings with the parish members, with the aim of assessing the work being done, and encouraging the faithful to carry on with the work.

5.- Mission Renewal

About a year after the celebration of the mission, once the missionary catecheses on the Christian identity have been studied and assimilated, the missionaries go back to the parish.

This new intervention of shorter duration tries to:

- revitalize the groups and family meetings functioning since the mission, and to set in motion new groups and groups that had stopped gathering.
- cause the movement from family meetings to catechism groups for adults.
- have another strong period of evangelization to grow stronger in the faith and the search for Jesus at a personal and communal level.
- call everybody again, but especially the alienated, the indifferent, the non-churchgoers.
- finish the extraordinary period of the mission officially.

6. Beginning of the Catechesis for Adults

After the Mission renewal the Catechesis for Adults begins. It is a process that lasts at least three years during which the participants in the groups gain experience in the study of the Word of God. This experience prepares them to understand their faith better, to celebrate it with a new sense, and to give testimony of it in the world.

The process follows the commonly accepted program of the Catechesis for Adults: the God of the Old Testament, Jesus Christ and His message, the Church and its Sacraments. At the completion of each stage there is a Week of transition, to study and celebrate the saying of the Lord's Prayer, the Beatitudes, and the Creed.

During this process, the monitoring on the part of the Missionary Team and the appropriate material is offered.

III. RESULTS OF THE POPULAR MISSION

The Popular Mission, extraordinary period of evangelization, is always a rewarding and enriching experience for those who have participated in it.

For the priests because

- they acquire a better knowledge of the parish or area in which the mission is taking place.
- it strengthens the spirit and the hope in their pastoral life.
- They meet a group of faithful people willing to help more closely in the activity of the parochial life.

For the laypersons because they

- experience the richness of the communication and of the encounter with neighbors.
- live their faith in a festive and participatory way in the celebrations, together with the other Christians of the parish.
- discover that they can also be responsible for the functioning of the parish.

For the Parish because

- it strengthens the joint pastoral at the parochial level as well as at the archpriest level.
- new dialogue and reflection groups, which move on to catechism groups for adults emerge.
- it appears as missionary church that leaves the temple to meet its people
- it meets new Christians that come to it, and those most willing to shoulder the responsibility to cheer it up.
- groups of young people, married couples, prayer emerge.

Because of all this, it is worth celebrating the Mission.