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Our Mission *Ad Gentes* to Europe and the Americas.

The decision of the 2010 General Chapter

Our 27th General Chapter (2010) affirmed the validity of the mission “outside of Africa” while maintaining that, “...Africa remains for all Missionaries of Africa the preferential place for their vocation to take root” (p. 39).

With this in mind, the orientations of the Chapter wished to take into account the African world that extends beyond the African continent. We also wanted to collaborate with the local Churches outside Africa who welcome us to live our charism with them (CL 8). This charism is expressed by our commitment to JPIC and Encounter and Dialogue.

The decision of the 2010 Chapter that resulted in these orientations were:

- Evaluate all our missionary activities in all the Provinces
- Internationalise the communities
- All missionary vocation promotion will be integrated into the local Church in accordance with our charism
- Confreres will be appointed according to their capacities. They will have had a positive experience of the apostolate in Africa. They will receive an adequate linguistic, cultural, and ecclesiastical preparation.

If these orientations are to come about, the collaboration of the Provincial Superiors and the confreres from both North and South will be required over and above the commitment of the General Council. We are still working on these proposals and we remember them each time we have a meeting with Provincial Superiors in view of promoting the mission in the countries and Churches of the North. Most of our young confreres are African and we often talk about sending Africans there but we should not forget the young confreres from other continents.

2. The Plenary Council (2013)

During the Plenary Council of 2013, we heard the cry of the European Province that found an echo with our brothers from the Americas. During our discussions we reflected on the way that globalisation has also affected the notion and practice of the mission. Mission is not confined to a territory. There is no longer any need to travel long distances to be a missionary. Very often, the other, the one who is a stranger, is now my neighbour! We talked about undoing the link between territory and mission. Are we ready? Our Sisters in MSOLA are ahead of us in this domain, possibly because they are less linked to mission parishes.

During the Plenary Council, there was an awareness that the “*the Mission in Europe, in the Americas and in Asia is the responsibility of the whole Society and not just of those from there. It is an opportunity to promote and preserve an intercultural Society.*”(p 12)

If we judge the mission in Africa as valid, we should also consider opening our hearts and minds and accept that others dream of other types of missionary presence in Europe and the

Americas that are not dictated by our charism but by the needs of the local Church. If we dream by ourselves, it will remain only a dream but if we dream together, we can achieve something. The time has come to dream together. I am considering only one point (very sensitive for some): a Parish in Europe or the Americas!

I hear some confreres say that we need to take parishes in Europe and the Americas, but others disagree, saying that we would become merely distributors of sacraments! Agreed! What do other congregations with parish responsibilities do? Are we better than they are? Is their vision of the mission so different from ours? If we recognise their missionary identity as valid, are we ready to transfer one Parish per Province in order to free up personnel for parishes in Europe and the Americas? How would we witness to our commitment to JPIC and Encounter and Dialogue in these parishes? I was in a Parish run by confreres and the people told me, "Your confreres are close to us, they come to visit us"! Pope Francis would say that these confreres "smell of their sheep." I think these confreres acquired such a pastoral attitude during their training in the Society and in the course of their years of mission in Africa by their respectful contact with people of different religions. If they are not looking to convert people in the sense of proselytising, our confreres are trying to live according to the Gospel and by their lives to witness to Jesus. They are close to the people.

If we do not take this question seriously at Society level, a commitment outside of Africa will be seen only as a personal project on the part of a particular person with a contract with a Diocese or Institution that will cease when they leave. Some of our commitments fall into this category.

3. Recent developments

The direction of the General Chapter has not changed. We have appointed young confreres to Europe and the Americas. Two firsts! A stagiaire is doing his apostolic training in Brazil and we are exploring other possibilities! We have taken some steps but it is true to say that, the dialogue has not been easy and often very long. These appointments reinforce the existing official projects (Plenary Council p12). However, for the moment, we are dealing with exclusively missionary projects that we are sometimes funding ourselves but this is not what we have in mind. Over and above these commitments, are we ready to think about projects that would be self-financing?

In some countries, we notice that our friends and benefactors continue to associate themselves with us in the mission and help us financially. Some leave us legacies. This supposes that other people have worked hard at maintaining these relationships whose fruit we are harvesting today. What will our young confreres harvest in the future if we are not present and remain silent in the Northern Provinces? With each contact nourished with a friend, we sow a seed that that we will not necessarily harvest ourselves but it is a way by which God assures us that the Mission does not stop with us.

4. A bit of a push from Pope Francis

Pope Francis is continually challenging us. His reminder that all the Church is missionary because of Baptism comes at an opportune time. Because numbers are going down in the northern areas and the growth of vocations in the young Churches, some people think that the missionary era is finished. We are on an everlasting mission. The Church is invited to go out on mission and not to be content with staying inside the sacristy waiting for people to come to

us. There is no shortage of opportunities! Let us live fully and joyously our consecration to God. It is in the joy of the Risen One that we will attract others to God.

Pope Francis strongly reminds us of this in his letter to all consecrated people:

*I also expect from you what I have asked all the members of the Church: **to come out of yourselves and go forth to the existential peripheries.** “Go into all the world”; These were the last words which Jesus spoke to his followers and which he continues to address to us (cf. Mk: 16, 15). A whole world awaits us: men and women who have lost all hope, families in difficulty, abandoned children, young people without a future, the elderly, sick and abandoned, those who are rich in the world’s goods but impoverished within, men and women looking for a purpose in life, thirsting for the divine..*

***Don’t be closed in on yourselves, don’t be stifled by petty family squabbles, don’t remain a hostage to your own problems.** This will be resolved if you go forth and help others resolve their own problems and proclaim the Good News. You will find life by giving life, hope by giving hope. Love by giving love.*

I ask you to work concretely in welcoming refugees, drawing near to the poor, finding creating ways to catechize, to proclaim the Gospel and teach others how to pray.(II, 4).

Like the disciples, we go out from the Church in the name of Him who goes before us and who send us to “wake up the world” by our prophetic commitments! We are not the masters of the Mission. God is. All the General Chapters since Vatican II remind us of this. The mission has its source at the heart of the Trinity! We are the disciples of Jesus, learning at his school to discern the presence and action of God in our world. We are, as Pope Francis likes to say, missionary disciples

In this year of consecrated life, we hear the call to be **artisans and even experts on communion**, between ourselves, in fraternal communities and with other religious communities (and I add, with other religions, and with those without any religion). In our communities, the Pope insists that:

*Criticisms, gossip, envy, jealousy, hostility, are ways of acting which have no place in our houses. This being the case, the path of charity open before us is almost infinite, since it entails mutual acceptance and concern, practising a community of goods both material and spiritual, fraternal correction, and respect for those who are weak...**it is the mystique of living together** which makes our life “a sacred pilgrimage.” (II, 3)*

Our witnessing communities still have work to do, but we are working on it. Francis refers us to the “Spirituality of communion” of St. John Paul II. Let us remind ourselves that Benedict XVI also quoted it in *Africae Munus* (35). Let us look again at the conditions that he pointed out:

Here I would like to mention the conditions for a spirituality of communion which Pope John Paul II proposed to the whole Church: the ability to perceive the light of the mystery of the Trinity shining on the faces of brothers and sisters around us, to be attentive to “our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body, and therefore as ‘those who are a part of me’, in order to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship”; the ability as well to recognize all that is positive in the other so as to welcome it and prize it as a gift that God gives me through that person, in a way that transcends by far the individual concerned, who

thus becomes a channel of divine graces; and finally, the ability “to ‘make room’ for our brothers and sisters, bearing ‘each other’s burdens’ (Gal 6:2) and resisting the selfish temptations which constantly beset us and provoke competition, careerism, distrust and jealousy.”

As a Missionary Society, which is a sign of communion between Churches, every pastoral insertion should take into account this “spirituality of communion.” Following on from the Plenary Council, we have decided that:

Different forms of Missionary presence that promote life should be considered: JPIC and ED commitments, especially our relations with Muslims, presence to migrants, pastoral insertions in parishes, etc. They should enable us to minister to the “wounded” of society and open up contact with new friends, relatives and benefactors (Plenary Council, 2013, p12).

What stage are we at now?

We have continued to look for ways to reinforce our commitments in certain projects. However, for the rest, we have stalled and we need to move up a gear!

Globalisation is bringing us closer physically. Social media allows us to communicate rapidly about what is happening elsewhere (sometimes too quickly and at volumes that can provoke either constipation or diarrhoea!). It is up to us to learn this new language in much the same way as we did when we were on mission so that we can be present with the Good News.

5. Accepting some challenges

I think there is a challenge at an institutional level that we have to face up to; to **change our mentality regarding our mission**. The mission in Africa retains all its value. It will continue to be the essential foundation for future generations of Missionaries of Africa. However, where we can live the mission in Europe, the Americas and Asia, we should take full advantage of this and be ready to pay the price. The true missionary is not only somebody living in the bush in Africa, but someone who responds, in line with our charism and our way of being missionary, to the appeal of the Bishop of the local Church as pastor of the People of God. Both contexts offer the possibility to live fully a missionary life. The question will be; how do I respond? How do I flourish there where God plants me without seeing myself as someone who is just biding my time while waiting for the real mission elsewhere?

Sometimes, we see ourselves in projects that are exclusively ours. At other times, the mission will be in the tasks that the local Church entrusts to us such as the celebration of the sacraments and looking after Christians. We are not any less missionary for that.

The Pope has expressed his hopes in these terms in his *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People*:

I expect that each form of consecrated life will question what it is that God and people today are asking of them. (II, 5)

He invites us **to be attentive to the needs of the world there where we are and heedful of the impulse of the Holy Spirit**.

I think that we can learn from other Missionary Institutes who have responded to appeals to send missionaries to Europe, Asia and the Americas. They have not lost their vocation! How do they do it? What are their joys and sorrows?

Another challenge that I see is to try to continue being missionary even when one has no longer the physical strength and one is ill. One tries to live the mission here with enthusiasm and to smooth the progress of the transition, including my own handing over, to others (confreres and laypeople). May the African fire, and people whom we have known and with whom we have journeyed, continue to live in us. The Spirit of God continues his work in us and prepares us for the last encounter. We have something to pass on to the new generation. Let us do it with joy and passion while accepting that they will not necessarily see things and not live things as we have lived them.

Our society is also challenged to live in a true solidarity that goes beyond words and money. Working with other Institutes in the Educational Consortia, I see how much difficulty there is for some entities to find the funds necessary for such fundamental things as Initial Formation not to mention Ongoing Formation and the day today expenses of pastoral work. We need to take solidarity seriously in the redistribution of personnel for the mission in the Provinces where we are present.

Conclusion

I have met missionaries who are happy in their vocation in Africa, Europe, and Asia. Young people are joining us (there were 491 in October 2014) and this is a witness to the fact that our mission *ad gentes* and to Lavignerie's ideals make sense to them. We are witnesses to it by our community and intercultural life. Let us give thanks to God.

We find ourselves at a critical moment in our history. It is critical, not because we are in a lot of trouble, but because we are invited to rethink our commitments, especially outside of Africa. How are going to be present in these Churches which gave birth to us and who have supported us? How are we going to respond to the invitation of other Churches who are inviting us to join them? Fifty years after the Chapter that took on board the reforms launched by Vatican II, we are again invited to leave our missionary comfort zone and to go out and meet the contemporary world as missionary disciples.

Let us listen to our founder in order to replenish our missionary zeal and make us once again "all to all". The Chapter of 2016 will help us, I believe, to make this revision and to discern with courage what the Spirit is telling us today.

May Mary be our support in this mission.

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