

## **THE CHARISM AND MISSION AD GENTES WHAT SPECIFICITY AND IMPLICATIONS?**

Visits to the Provinces offer the opportunity to meet and share with the confreres who are engaged in the mission. Sometimes it is an opportunity to participate in meetings where confreres evaluate our commitments and develop new missionary projects. Such occasions are very important because they are about orienting the mission by setting new priorities and making choices that are sometimes daring and painful. These, in fact, can be indicators of our missionary dynamism, our fidelity to our vocation, our loyalty to our Congregation, the vision of a community or its lack of vision, in short, its spiritual health.

### **Between routine and creativity**

We can rejoice in the fact that, here and there, some dare new missionary initiatives to respond to new needs that challenge us and await our commitment. It is true, however, that there is still, perhaps in good part, an attachment to what is familiar to us. We cling to what has always been, we invest ourselves in the maintenance of what we have always done, we sink into routine, we avoid all questioning, we no longer dare to be itinerants and we settle down.

Such attachment numbs us and hinders our generosity and our missionary drive. It can be the fact of a given confrere just as it can characterize a whole entity. The reasons that can explain it are, among others, lack of courage or fear of approaching the unknown or a new situation, uncertainty linked to financial precariousness, attachment to comfort or to too much security, lack of faith in divine providence, lack of vision, etc.

### **Missionary project!**

I once attended a meeting where everyone vehemently defended the missionary character of his commitment, which was a way of saying something like this: *"do not count on me for a new missionary project"*. The result was a missionary project that was nothing more than the perfect description of the commitments of each one and of always!

Sometimes we still speak of a project when there are neither precise objectives to pursue, nor determined means to mobilize to achieve them, and even less, deadlines set to evaluate everything and make opportune adjustments if necessary. One may wonder what a project really is when all that is missing!

These are the kinds of situations, very real, that the following lines address. Ultimately, they force us to ask ourselves what is the *raison d'être* of our Congregation, the specificity of its mission and the implications that flow from it. They also force us to ask ourselves why we chose to become "CICM missionaries" rather than join another congregation or the diocesan clergy.

### **The *raison d'être* of our Congregation or its ultimate purpose**

In August 2018, 43 Superiors General and General Councillors of 8 missionary congregations "ad gentes", of religious men and women that originated in Italy, had spent a week together in Nepi (Viterbo) to reflect on this "ad gentes" which is their common and essential characteristic. It is ours as well. I had been invited one afternoon to give them a talk on what is specific to "ad gentes", its relevance and its problems today.

It was an opportunity for me to go deeper into the question: is the mission "ad gentes" a general one that embraces everything indiscriminately without having any specificity of

its own? When one strives to justify everything in order to hold on to everything and not respond to new calls, the ultimate question that should be asked should consist of knowing what CICM was founded for, that is, its *raison d'être* or its ultimate purpose. Indeed, it is important to make sure that this very *raison d'être* is not hijacked or taken hostage by anyone or for any reason.

### **Charism and Mission on the move**

The *raison d'être* of a congregation is not better determined by anything other than its charism, a gift of the Spirit, discerned and authenticated by the Church. It is better expressed in its commitments in the field than in its literary statements. If, however, the charism and mission of a congregation are very clear and visible at its origins, the evolution of a congregation leads it to embrace many other activities over time.

While not necessary in keeping with the founding charism of a congregation, these activities embraced over time may have been made necessary by the need for adaptation, organization, financing or survival, and this is relatively acceptable. Unfortunately, they can also be a matter of complacency which consists in allowing everything and letting everyone do what he wants; they can still be explained as the assurance of a comfort that is dear to one's heart or as the sign of a glorious image that one does not want to get rid of, ... and this is precisely questionable, a fortiori when missionary dynamism is seriously hampered. It is precisely questionable since the mission loses its prophecy, the charism becomes less meaningful, the identity becomes very fluid because it can now integrate everything and, as a result, it loses its visibility. From the missionaries "ad gentes" that we are called to be, we would become just any kind of missionaries.

In such situations, we must dare to reconnect with the *raison d'être* of CICM and the reason why we are supposed to have chosen CICM rather than any other group of missionaries or the diocesan clergy. And when that *raison d'être* is no longer in a given commitment, serious consideration should be given to the possibility of handing it over to others.

### **But what specificity after all?**

As we have all learned and know, CICM was founded for mission "ad gentes". In its Decree of May 31, 1988 approving our Constitutions, the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples identifies us as "*consecrated to God for missionary service "ad gentes"*" (*Constitutions and Common Directory*, p. 7).

However, we must ask ourselves whether the specificity of this mission "ad gentes" is, on the one hand, understood by all and, on the other hand, the concern of all? On the specificity which links the mission and the charism, it is written: "*Apostolic religious life is not an undifferentiated whole. It comprises a series of fundamental forms which are quite distinct from one another ... To each fundamental form of apostolic religious life corresponds a determined fundamental charism, very specific, distinct from the other fundamental charisms*". (Michel DORTEL-CLAUDOT, *Union, fusion, federation and networks of religious institutes. Première évaluation et nouvelles perspectives*, Paris, Médiasèvres, (Cahier de la vie religieuse, 134), 2006, p. 54. Translated by us).

The Church which discerns and authenticates charisms has defined the specificity of “ad gentes” as follows: *"Specific missionary activity, or mission ad gentes, ... is distinguished from other activities of the Church by the fact that it is addressed to non-Christian groups and milieus .... The particularity of this mission ad gentes comes from the fact that it is addressed to non-Christians"*. (John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter Redemptoris Missio*, # 34).

This is what contrasts with a certain idea that we would be missionaries to do anything and everything; what should be fundamental and primordial; what should distinguish us and be our specialty; what should be the most commonly shared concern and commitment; what should be our specific contribution to the mission of the Church ; what should most mobilize us; what we should devote most of our resources in personnel, finances and materials; why others should be attracted to dedicate their lives in CICM; what should guide our Initial Formation and should not be lacking in our ongoing formation, since we are "radically" missionaries “ad gentes”.

Let it be clear that the category *"non-Christians"* includes not only believers of other religions but also non-believers and the atheists who represent a considerable part of the world population. And the Church holds strongly to this specificity of “ad gentes” when she writes: *"It is necessary, therefore, to avoid that this 'more specifically missionary task which Jesus has entrusted and again entrusts daily to his Church' might be dissolved in the overall mission of the whole People of God and thus be neglected or forgotten"*. (John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter Redemptoris Missio*, # 34).

### **Some implications of ad gentes specificity**

The specificity of the “ad gentes” thus defined has certain implications. Among these we can list the following which are, in my opinion, the most important.

- **Sent to a certain periphery.** The charism and mission “ad gentes” places us not at the center of the Christian community but rather and essentially at its periphery, where we meet the non-Christians to whom we are primarily sent. The periphery is identified here with the contours of the community of Christ's disciples and not with any geographical limit.

- **Essentially ad extra.** The missionary “ad gentes” is essentially ad extra because he is directed or sent outside the community of believers. It is only in this perspective that ad extra can be understood and lived authentically. In fact, the ad extra of the missionary “ad gentes” is not guaranteed or exhausted by the mere fact of leaving one's country. Rather, it signifies that movement, first of all charismatic, mental and spiritual before being geographical, which carries us from the Christian community to its periphery and beyond. Without this, CICM could be reduced to an agency that provides personnel from outside the local churches, and we would be a category of diocesan priests otherwise (more or less) organized. Our ad extra finds its full meaning only when it is lived in the service of “ad gentes”. In any case, in the vast field of the Church's mission, with its many and surely worthwhile activities, the place of a missionary congregation “ad gentes” is not in the harvest but rather in the clearing and sowing of seeds.

- **Perpetual itinerancy and solid spirituality.** Fidelity to the founding charism “ad gentes” implies a great availability to reach out to non-Christians and meet them where they are, which puts us in a state of perpetual itinerancy. Above all, it requires a

particularly solid spirituality, to be (re)discovered and developed. Without it, one cannot sustain the mission “ad gentes” for long without diverting it towards other ends or without becoming corrupted himself or converted to something else. The need for this particularly solid spirituality is becoming more and more felt and we will come back to this next time.

### **Daring to go forward**

May a greater attention to the raison d'être of our Congregation renew our loyalty to it, guide our missionary projects and revitalizes our mission everywhere. In fact, *"Fidelity to the founding charism and to the spiritual patrimony subsequently constituted in each Institute is, along with the evangelical demands, the first criterion for evaluating the decisions and interventions that are carried out at whatever level, in that "the nature of the charism directs energies, sustains fidelity and guides the apostolic work of all for the one mission".* (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Guidelines for the Management of Goods in Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Circular Letter*, Città del Vaticano, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2014, p. 7).

You said: *"We have a good and beautiful mission"*? Good mission “ad gentes”, my dear confreres, ...

(translated from French)

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