

The Role and Function of the Continental Reflection Groups

1) Introduction

I would like to start from sometime back, precisely from Vatican II, because we cannot understand the reasons for the continental reflection groups without understanding the shift in the missionary paradigm of our Institute as a result of the decisions of the Second Vatican Council.

An Italian theologian said that “the most innovative aspect of the conciliar event was the attention to history”, in the sense that, in the mind of Pope John XXIII, the Council would have had to give an answer to the epochal change taking place in the Church and in the world through a *reinterpretation* of the substance of the Gospel. To do this, it was necessary to be challenged by the problems that troubled humanity, scrutinize and question them. That’s why the term ‘signs of the times’ was adopted by the Council, becoming one of the most frequently used words in the post-conciliar time. ‘Signs of the times’ takes on a theological value – as history becomes a theological place, a place of revelation of God’s presence – so ‘to scrutinize them’ and ‘to interpret them’ is an essential need of the Church’s praxis. The Council speaks of the ‘signs of the times’ only on four occasions. The most complete formulation is contained in *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 4, where it says that “*the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics.*” So, ‘to understand’, ‘to scrutinize’, ‘to interpret’ are essential modes to face the historical phenomena so that we may be able to respond *in an appropriate manner* to mankind’s questions.

2) The shift in the missionary paradigm as a result of the Council

Vatican II, as well as the situation in Africa (political independence, new cultural movements, but also a certain uneasiness on the part of the missionaries for a mission structure and method of evangelisation which no longer met the requirements of the time), forced us to change. To define the General Chapters of 1969 and 1975 as ‘epochal’ is not an exaggeration. In addition to the discovery of Comboni as the founding figure of the Institute, ‘*mission ad gentes*’ focused on the poorest and most abandoned, became the aim of our commitment. The importance of reading the ‘signs of the times’, underlined by the Council as a method to be practiced, is acknowledged by the Chapter of 1969 and becomes *the criterion prior to any missionary activity*. The Chapter speaks, therefore, of “changed historical situations [...] that forced us to rethink ‘mission ad gentes’ with regard to its motives and style in which it is to be carried out” (CA ’69, Part Two - II,7). It insists that “the purpose and methodology of the mission should be re-examined and rethought” in the light of the signs of the times, “as well as the different phases of missionary activity must be open to revision” (II,6). The Chapter recognizes that the choice of fields of work may change over the years and, therefore, acknowledges that “[the geographic and legal criteria] although they had the advantage of making clear-cut distinction between the mission and the non-mission territories, today are no longer valid” (II,56). In fact, the new perspective “takes into account first of all the different peoples and the different cultural groups” (II,57b). It is, therefore, justified the appeal that “each Chapter re-examines our fields of work which must be determined by the strictly missionary purpose of the Institute and by Comboni’s criteria of choice.” (II,55). The charism is interpreted from a missionary perspective, freed from strictly geographical boundaries. The reading of the signs of the times becomes the way to identify, as Chapter 1975 says, “the frontier peoples, that is, tribes, ethnic or social minorities and other minority groups that have not yet been evangelized and have even remained at the margins of the evolution the world” (CA ’75, Chapter I,7). The Rule of Life does not speak of geographical areas but of ‘missionary situations’, while the General Chapter of 1997 speaks of ‘Nigritia situations’.

What I intend to emphasize is how the areas and the method of missionary commitment are no longer to be assumed *a priori* or to be established at the start. Before Vatican II one knew who “the pagan people” were and the geographical areas in which they lived; one knew of the missionary method set by the manual of Fr. Antonio Vignato, in which he had established the missionary methodology for the “young missionary” (as the subtitle says). Since Vatican II and the Chapter of 1969, however, this is no longer so. The Comboni missionaries must now continually be tuning in to the signs of the times to identify the mission and the Nigritia situations in which to commit themselves. At present, in a historical moment much more complex than that of the Chapter of 1969, this task becomes even more demanding. While today mission becomes global, time is ‘compressed’ and the changes are taking place at a faster pace, reflection and discernment are not an *option* but a vital necessity in doing mission. Let me give an example of the speed of change and how communications have shortened time and space. When I arrived in Uganda in 1979, I needed to spend a whole day to make a phone call from Kampala to Italy. In the mission stations was absolutely impossible to do so: the only means of communicating among us was the *radio call* from eight to nine in the evening. Now I just need a mobile phone or a computer and even from the mission of Amakuriat I can talk around the world at any time.

Although the Rule of Life is outdated in some of its parts (I dare say so quite freely because the RL, as it is, no longer responds to the changes taking place in the Institute, in the Church and in the world) it states that “*The rapid changes taking place in the world and in the Church demand constant attention and readiness as well as individual and community discernment on the part of all the missionaries. To be effective, such attention and discernment may require the utilisation of the human sciences.*” (RL, n. 16.1).

3) An unforgivable shortcoming: Reflection

It is not a recent discovery and not so original but it’s worth repeating: we have a certain impatience with study and reflection. The secretary general of evangelization, at the Intercapitular of Mexico in 2006, touched on a soft spot when he stated that “*it is becoming increasingly clear that one of the reasons for our superficiality, our impulsive decisions in the choice of fields of work in keeping with our charism and our little attention to the signs of the times must undoubtedly be linked to the lack of thorough and systematic reflection within our Institute.*” The secretary stressed the importance of reflection groups – already advocated by the General Chapter of 2003 – in order to elaborate a systematic theology of mission and re-examine the originality of our charism. But, in my opinion, the reflection groups are not enough, more so because they run the risk of becoming elitist groups totally irrelevant with regard to missionary practice. “The reflection groups – remarks the Ratio Missionis – [...] if really active, have no practical implications in missionary life.” The Ratio adds that the reason is “*probably caused by a discontinuation between the leadership and the reflection groups so that the indications of the groups are not implemented and contextualized to become qualified choices and decisions of practical methods or missionary contents.*” In other words, reflection as such does not change anything if it is not followed by decisions leading to strong resolutions. Reflection and leadership skills must go hand in hand.

The continental reflection groups, however, are not the only way and settings for reflection. I wonder whether the confreres in the jurisdictions are called to reflect when planning the Provincial directories and/or the Six-year plans; I wonder whether, in the mission, we have the courage to stop for a week and, together with all the apostolic community, reflect and draw up a pastoral plan identifying the challenges and priorities, the activities that have changed and by now become obsolete, altering modes of interventions that have long past their time. I also wonder if personal study is a priority and if the weekly day of rest, encoded by the Rule of Life (which speaks, however, of ‘half-day’ each week – n. 39.4), is truly spent as such.

4) Continental reflection groups: role and function

In the documents of the Institute reflection is considered an exercise prior to any activity and aspect of our life, like the planning of mission work as well as determining our lifestyle, the way one uses the goods, the planning of formation, the finding of new ways of inter-religious dialogue and the type of commitment to justice and peace.

The formation of the continental reflection groups have been recognized and supported by the Chapter of 2003. I deliberately use the term ‘recognized’ because reflection groups were already in existence. For example, to limit ourselves to Anglophone Africa, the leaflets of ‘Missionary Reflections’ were started in 1994, while the reflection group in the Pokot area in the early eighties. The Chapter deliberated that “*a reflection group [at continental level] on mission, evangelization, charism and its inculturation*” was to be formed. The Chapter also decided that it was the continental assembly of provincials to promote such reflection groups. The decision to form groups of continental reflection was reiterated by the General Chapter of 2009 with a request that they collaborated with the committees of Ongoing formation at general and provincial levels and with the Evangelization Secretariats. In this Chapters reflections groups are spoken of in the sections about identity and spirituality. In the one dedicated to spirituality it is said that these groups would have the task of offering “to the Circumscriptions tools for the analysis of the social, political, economic, religious, ecclesial and Comboni reality in order to help communities and individuals to read the signs of the times, to recognise the values of the Kingdom and the presence of God, and be guided by the Spirit in our discernment and choices” (CA ’09 n. 29.1). These are general statements that would need further clarification.

It seems to me that the report of the Central Committee of Ongoing Formation at the General Chapter of 2009 offers proposals for a more comprehensible restructuring of the continental reflection groups. It reads:

a) Purpose

- ✓ To assist the central, provincial and continental government in the reflection
- ✓ To accompany the renewal of the mission by reflecting on evangelization, charism, inculturation ...
- ✓ To follow through the implementation of the decisions
- ✓ To encourage the reflection on the change of the institutions
- ✓ To provide to the Institute material for theological, spiritual, pastoral and biblical reflection to maintain the missionaries in an attitude of ongoing formation.

b) Range

- ✓ To analyse and contextualize the real situations for the continents and provinces by making use of local specialists
- ✓ To support the implementation of the decisions and orientations of the GC, PC and assemblies
- ✓ To reflect on the mission, spirituality, Comboni charism, meaningful presence, missionary methodology and institutional reorganization.

c) Method

- ✓ To have the authority, in special situations, to propose or suggest themes and fields of reflection
- ✓ To encourage people who reflect at provincial and continental level to do some studies
- ✓ To coordinate and circulate the reflections made by specialists at continental level in regard to the fields that affect our life and mission.

d) Coordination

- ✓ Continental coordination: Provincial coordinator, Coordinator of the Continental group.
- ✓ Central coordination: A member of the GC, the Secretariat of Evangelization, the Central Commission of Ongoing formation, a member of the reflection groups.

In brief, the Central Commission's proposal is that the **role** of the continental reflection groups is **to help** the central, provincial and continental government to reflect; **its function** is, precisely, **to reflect** on mission, spirituality, charism, meaningful missionary experiences, missionary methodology and structural reorganization of the Institute but also **to 'accompany' the implementation of the decisions**. It is not entirely clear to me what it means to 'accompany' the decisions and in which decisions the reflection group is to be involved. I can, however, attempt an answer through an example.

The Chapter has invited each Circumscription to consolidate insertions in frontier situations. Now, it seems to me that the reflection group should be asked to identify what are the terms so that any given situation in a particular context may be called 'a frontier one' and, then, what insertion means in that context – this reading of the situation must always take into account, of course, the charism of the Institute as a compass that directs our readings and decisions. In this way the reflection group assists the authorities to read the signs of the times and take consistent decisions. I am not aware of any reflection group (or any secretariat of evangelisation for that matter) in any Circumscription of the Institute that has been entrusted with this specific task. In general, indeed, and in the words of one of my predecessor reported earlier, there is a lot of superficiality, impulsive decisions and little attention given to the signs of the times in the choice of fields of work, while, I would add, there are also many ideological positions.

So the reflection group is much more than a group that organizes conferences, talks about theological or missionaries issues in the abstract or about socio-political situations of a country (also this, of course, is necessary). This group, in fact, has the task of identifying the pastoral priorities after careful examination of the reality and proposing practical solutions.

In a regional reflection group, this task may be more difficult because regional situations are more complex and articulated, but this does not take away the fact that there are common social phenomena that are emerging and which require special pastoral attention. Let me mention some examples, taking into consideration just our area, and I do it in the form of questions. In these times of social and cultural transition of pastoral peoples which are the new and emerging cultures that require a special pastoral attention? In an environment of endemic violence, what strategies should the missionaries develop as ministers of reconciliation? If, during a period of war, a mission is sacked by the people of the place, what should the missionaries to do? What should be their strategy for the future? What to do with the flow of financial aid that sometimes flood the missions, forcing us to invent projects? These are just some of the many questions and challenges but which underlie the need that reflection is not only a entitlement of some 'wise people' but a constant dimension of missionary methodology.

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