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The Vision of Bishop Melchior De Marion Brésillac On Mission and Its Implementations in the Third Millennium

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Mgr Melchior De Marion Brésillac

I hereby declare that the material used
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All sources have been cited in full.

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Acknowledgements

This paper titled **“Vision of Bishop Melchior De Marion Brésillac on Mission and Its Implementations in the Third Millennium”** is a vision of a better future for the Indian and African Missions. Mission is always “Frontier” in the sending message of Jesus Christ, “As the Father sent me, so I send you” [Jn.20.21]. “Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” [Matt.28.29].

I dedicate this essay to the Founder of the Society of African Missions, Melchior de Marion Brésillac, and to all missionaries, who are struggling to implement the vision of their Founders, in the establishment of the Universal Church.

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Table of Contents

	Page
Declaration	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Introduction	01
Chapter I. The Vision of Melchior De Marion Brésillac	03
1.1. Primary Evangelization	03
1.2. Local Clergy	05
1.3. Local Communities	07
Chapter II. Challenges to Its Implementation in India	10
2.1. Problem with Caste System	10
2.2. Problem with Missionaries	13
2.3. Problem with Rome	16
Chapter III. Melchior De Marion Brésillac's Vision for Africa and Its Implementation	19
3.1. First Missionary Journey	22
3.2. Death Strikes	23
3.3. The Vision Lives On	25
3.4. From West to North, South and East	25
Chapter IV. The Importance of the Validity of De Brésillac Vision On the SMA	29
4.1. <i>Missio Ad Gentes</i> is Our Ministry	29
4.2. Concern for the Development of Local Ministers	31
4.3. The Great Vision Is Being Progress	35
General Conclusion	39
Bibliography	42

Introduction

I like telling stories. So, I begin with a story. The leader of a certain Indian tribe encamped at the base of a mountain was dying. The chief summoned his three sons and said, “I am dying and one of you must succeed me as head of the tribe. I want each of you to climb our holy mountain and bring back something beautiful. The one whose gift is the most outstanding will succeed me”.

After several days the sons returned. The first brought his father a flower which grew near the summit and was extremely rare and beautiful. The second brought his father a stone which was colourful, smooth and round, having been polished by the rain and sandy winds. The third son’s hands were empty.

He said: “Father, I have brought nothing back to show you. As I stood on top of the holy mountain, I saw that on the other side was a beautiful land filled with green pastures and a crystal lake. And I have a vision of where our tribe could go for a better life. I was so over whelmed by what I saw and by what I was thinking that I could not bring anything back”.

The father replied: “You shall be our tribe’s new leader, for you have brought back the most important gift of all - the gift of a vision for a better future”.

A vision of a better future for humanity is what ‘*Mission ad Gentes*’ is all about. It was Melchior de Marion Brésillac’s vision of a better future for the Indian Mission and its people which caused him so much frustration. He could not over come the challenges that he met during his time in India. For, “He was preaching a Gospel which championed the equality of everyone before God”. Eventually, he found that he could no longer carry out his missionary vision. So, he resigned and came back to Rome. I will explore further these issues in chapters first and two.

Even then, he did not give up his vision, “to proclaim the Gospel to the most abandoned”. This vision of a better future for Africa and its people was to led to the foundation of the Society of African Missions in the middle of the 19th century. Though it cost him, his own life as well as that of his companions, his vision lived on and spread all across the vast continent of Africa. That’s what my third chapter is all about. My fourth chapter is about the validity of de Brésillac vision on the Society and how the SMA is faithful to his own vision of mission.

‘*Mission ad Gentes*’, is at the core of SMA activity. It is a vital step in our effort to be true and faithful to the missionary calling and charism of the Society, in the view of our founder. It is always present in different contexts, in villages, in cities, in people of various social conditions. Mission is always “Frontier”. Through our missionary presence, we are bearers of the Good News wherever we are.

I link this concept of ‘*Mission ad Gentes*’ with Bishop de Brésillac’s desire to go to “most abandoned”.

Chapter I

The Vision of Melchior de Marion Brésillac

“I was happy, really happy. For the greatest grace you bestowed on me Lord, was not to allow me to lose sight of the mission. After a retreat with the Jesuits to discern the will of God, he finally made up his mind to become a missionary, ‘to be a missionary from the bottom of my heart’, ‘to neglect nothing that might advance the work of God’, ‘to seize every opportunity to preach the Gospel’, ‘finally, and it is for this above all that I implore your blessings to use every available means, all my strength, all my mind, towards the training of a local clergy’¹.

These words were to be the guiding principle of de Brésillac’s vision of mission and his efforts to make them a reality which remain the great contribution of de Brésillac to the development of the church in India and in Africa.

1.1. Primary Evangelization

A history of Evangelization has its roots in the message of Jesus, and is based on the words of the prophet Isaiah: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” [Lk.4.18-19]. Everyone who preaches the Gospel will refer to this sending of Christ in which the sending of the messengers has its roots: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” [Jn.20.21]. Then there is a final scene in the gospel of Matthew with a clearly universalistic sense, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” [Matt.28.29]. Primary Evangelisation is described as the meeting of non-Christians cultures with the Christian faith. The proclamation of

¹. Bob Hales [Trans.], *Souvenirs*, [Vol.1], Rome: SMA Publications, 1998, P. 76.

Jesus Christ is to where he is not known [or little known] and in places where the Gospel is not known.

In de Brésillac desire, to bring the light of Christ to the most abandoned people and those to whom the Gospel had not yet been preached. To proclaim the word of God first and foremost where the Gospel has not been preached at all or just insufficiently. “We have a special concern for those who are not yet evangelised. We are particularly sensitive to the cause of the most abandoned, the poor, the oppressed”². “To reveal Jesus Christ and his gospel to those who do not know them has been, ever since the morning of Pentecost, the fundamental programme which the church, has taken on as received from her Founder”³.

Primary Evangelization is an effort to ‘reach out’ to those who are not Christians and a call to on-going conversion. Evangelization is a process which goes from presence or witnessing the proclamation of Jesus, the way, the truth and the life. It is true, that missionaries are oriented towards primary evangelization by their vocation and training for crossing borders. Primary Evangelization involves going into those structures, situations and fields where Christ is unknown or where his influence has not yet been felt. It should go to the boundaries of human existence, to the poorest of the poor and the most abandoned and marginalised.

“Mission activity is proper, namely the ‘*Mission ad Gentes*’, is directed ‘to peoples or groups who do not yet believe in Christ’, ‘who are far from Christ’, in whom the Church ‘has not yet taken root’ and whose culture has not yet been influenced by the Gospel. It is distinct from other ecclesial activities in as much as it is addressed to groups and settings which are non-Christians because the preaching of the Gospel and the presence of the church are either

². Society of African Missions [SMA], Constitution and Laws, Article No. 9, Rome: SMA Publications, 1990, P. 27.

³. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, No. 51.

absent or insufficient. It can thus be characterised as the work of proclaiming Christ and his Gospel, building up the local church and promoting the values of the Kingdom. The specific nature of this '*Mission ad Gentes*' consists in its being addressed to 'non-Christians' ⁴.

Undoubtedly, the universal mission of Jesus' disciple is spelt out in the missionary mandate of the Risen Christ. The whole creation is to be evangelized, and therefore individuals, societies, environments as part of the whole creation, need to be put under the evangelizing activity of the church.

In this way, the universal missionary mandate of Christ, becomes the source of inspiration and strength to carry out the '*Mission ad Gentes*' proclaiming the values of the Kingdom of God.

1.2. Local Clergy

The idea of a local clergy and local church have been in the mind of religious movements since the beginning of Christianity. We read in Phil.1.1, which suggests how to be effective in doing the mission of the church with the sons and daughters of its own soil. It says, "Paul and Timothy servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the Bishops and Deacons", and in Rom. 16:1-2 and in Tim.3.1-7, Paul speaks highly of empowering the local ministers of the church.

De Brésillac did not get the idea of a local clergy all of sudden from above. He followed the master [Jesus Christ], who in his public life attached disciples to himself and trained them both by word and deed for the ministry which they would exercise later on. Jesus Christ spoke to them directly and taught them everything so that they would transmit the message to His church when their time would come. As formation of his disciple seemed one of his primary occupation's same like, Brésillac vision for local clergy, for the development of the church in

⁴. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, No. 34.

India, to be self-supportive, self-management and self-personal. In his total commitment to the formation of a local clergy, as well as his understanding of the relationship between the Gospel and culture, de Brésillac was a man ahead of his time.

He wanted to strengthen the conviction that all the missions need to be sending as well as receiving. Thus, churches are missionaries. De Brésillac raised this challenge long before the urgency of information and empowering of local clergy became common trends. “It is a people gathered to be sent, and sent to be gathered”⁵.

Missionaries should be convinced that the indigenous ministers could do a better job of inculturation than expatriates. Local clergy is closely connected with local people, through its origins, its feelings, aspirations and a out look. They are able to open the hearts of the people to the faith. In this situation the role of the missionaries is to encourage local clergy to develop their own living expression of the Gospel.

During the time of de Brésillac the missionaries wanted or felt that they should do everything for the people. But de Brésillac realized, that this was not appropriate. People should not always depend on the foreign missionaries. So, he decided to work for the formation of the local clergy. His vision was that the establishment of a well-trained local clergy with their own hierarchy has to be one of the main pillars of any successful missionary apostolate.

This is also the charism of the Society, “We keep as one of our priorities in churches where we work the promotion and support of priestly, missionary and religious vocations and the formation of clergy and lay leaders”⁶. To make priests, to make bishops, to plant real churches- this then, is the true mission of the Apostles. To make the planted tree grow

⁵. William Jenkinson and Helene O’Sullivan, [Editors], Trends On Mission, New York: Orbis Books, 1991, P. 407.

⁶. Constitution and Laws, Op.Cit., No.10, P. 27.

and extend, this tree of life planted by the envoy of the Lord: to make it bear fruit every year, sweeter and more abundant; gradually to root out the weeds that prevent its full growth- that is our mission.

“De Brésillac vision was supported by Bishop Bonnard on his arrival to the mission stations in India, ‘let me tell you, dear confrere, that many a time you will have to curb your carcassonian impetuosity. In Asia nothing is ever done in a hurry. I greatly fear that you will not find what you are hoping for, that you will soon be discouraged... under the Indian sun. It is always so easy to be deceived by theories, and I fear that if you ever meet with difficulties, you will not be able to ‘make the machine go’ and it will break in your hands. However, you are a prudent man, you will not undertake anything without orders from on high, wait for them and try to carry them out, whatever they may be. But believe me. You will have become a great saint and in possession of heaven, while everything concerned with a local Christian priesthood will be almost as you found it”⁷.

1.3. Local Communities

God calls all believers to participate in the Evangelistic task, men and woman, clergy and laity, young and old- all are one in Christ, one in the spirit [Gal.3.28; 1Cor.12.13], all are proclaimers, in word and act, of the Good News they share together. The primary and immediate task is to establish and develop the local communities and to use every Christian. Evangelical possibility, is the responsibility of the local community. It calls them be present and active in the affairs of the world, without the interfere of the clergy.

The mission is to build up truly Christian communities, “ people set apart; God’s own people, that in faith, hope and love will serve and follow Christ. We strived to build up these communities of Christ’s disciples, endowed with the cultural riches of their own soil and served

⁷. Patrick Gantly, For this Cause, Rome: SMA Publications, 1992, P. 71.

by their own ministers”. Faithful to the teaching of the Apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers, they take part in the communion of the universal church and constantly grow in missionary consciousness and commitment.

Local communities should realize that in their temporal order they can work more effectively than a local clergy. Local communities have to make the church present and fruitful in their places work as well as in their daily circumstances of life. Each community should be a witness and living instrument of the mission of the church itself.

The priest as animator of the local community, must have a clear vision of the church as community, as a communion of faith, hope and love, a people called together for common service in the Risen Christ. In training parish leaders, we give practical expression to the Church as ‘communion’ as well as model the shared responsibility of priest and people.

“Lay people should co-operate in the churches work of evangelization and share in its saving mission, both as witnesses and living instruments”. This is also the charism of Society of African Missions, “Living as apostolic communities we come together to share our faith and love. Through this community life we help each other to live and preach the gospel after the example of Christ and the disciples gathered around him”⁸.

Local communities, as a place of evangelisation and as a hope for the universal church, to be hearers of the gospel and become its proclaimers.

“These communities are a sign of vitality within the church, and an instrument of formation and evangelisation and a solid starting point of a new society based on a ‘civilisation of love’. These communities become a means of evangelisation and of the initial proclamation of the Gospel and a source of new ministries. At the same time, by being imbued with Christ love, they also show how divisions, tribalism and racism can be overcome. They are a true expression

⁸. Constitutions and Laws, *Op.Cit.*, No. 24, P. 37.

of communion and a means for the construction of a more profound communication. They are thus cause for great hope in the life of the church”⁹.

Whatever the approach to missions at home or abroad, the mission needs to be in Christ’s way. Wholeness of mission demands a will to break down barriers at every level, and involves the whole people of God in sharing, serving and renewal in a spirit of love and respect. Always we need to remember the original understanding of mission, which is preaching, teaching, and healing, it is best done together, and should never divide, alienate or oppress.

The word of Mahatma Gandhi should challenge us to live as true disciples of Jesus in the Church: “You want to convert our people. But if Christ has not been able to change the life of Christians, how can we believe that by becoming Christians, the life of our people will be any better?”¹⁰ The Christian community must first be evangelized, converted to the way of Jesus, before it can become an evangelizing community. Christians need to come to understand the complex nature of evangelization.

⁹. *Redemptoris Missio*, No. 51.

¹⁰. John Brennan, Christian Mission, Middle Green: St. Paul’s Publications, 1990, P.121.

Chapter II

Challenges to Its Implementation in India

In this chapter, I will explain how de Brésillac faced the problems in implementing his vision of mission, especially against caste system, against missionaries and against Rome.

2.1. Problem with Caste System

The caste system is a part and parcel of Indian society and is rigidly enforced. It originated in India many centuries ago and consolidated itself with the passing of time. These divisions were launched by a small section of people to retain power for themselves over other sections of society and gradually it has spread its roots everywhere. When caste was introduced, the privileged class did everything to spread and strengthen their particular caste. Thus, the caste system became very rigid during the middle ages.

Slowly divisions increased and it became a well-established system. Castes multiplied and many new castes, sub-castes and their further sub-divisions came into being from the 6th to the 12th century AD. But caste divisions became more numerous and rigid only around the 15th century. From then on, caste-based rights, duties and privileges became the social order of Indian society. Corresponding to the multiplication of castes and the intensification of the inequality of rights and opportunities during the British reign, progress too retarded in Indian society.

“The term “*Dalit*” is derived from the Sanskrit root “*Dal*”, which means down trodden, scattered, crushed or destroyed”¹¹. The Dalit people are those, who, on the basis of caste distinctions, have been considered “Outcasts” because the architects of the system did not see fit to include them in the graded four fold caste structure of Indian society. On the basis of this status

¹¹. James Massey, Down Trodden, The struggle of India's Dalits for Identity, Solidarity and Liberation, Geneva: Risk Book Service, WCC Publications, 1997, P. 2.

they have been made to bear extreme forms of disadvantage and oppression for centuries, a continuous assault on their humanity which virtually reduced them to a state of being “no-people”.

Systematically, the first colonizers took away the basic human rights of the first people of India and managed to convince them that their resulting status had been ordained by God himself. For example, according to the famous Purusasuko hymn in the Rig Veda, the four castes were created by God from the four parts of his own body: “The Brahmin [Priestly Class] was his mouth, both his arms were the Kshatriyas [Warriors], his thighs became the Vaishyas [Traders], from his feet the Shudras [Serving Caste] was produced”¹².

On the basis of this hymn, orthodox Hindus believe that the fourfold division of Indian society exists from the earliest times. All those human beings who did not fit into this fourfold structure were outcasts -outside the “Divine Body”. The upper castes enjoyed superior powers and many special privileges. All the other ranks enjoyed powers and privileges in the descending order. The people of the lower castes had no right even to use the public roads and wells. They had to live a sub-human life and confine themselves to their own quarters.

The lower caste did not have the opportunity to increase knowledge nor did they get any opportunity to acquire skills in different professions; they were restricted only to manual work. All had to attend to the traditional profession and had no right to live as they choose. Thus, caste-based privileges, compulsions and restrictions prevented the people from thinking in terms of a larger society. Every citizen thought only in terms of his/her own caste and remained indifferent to other’s interests.

From the beginning, the question of caste was a major concern for de Brésillac, preaching a Gospel which championed the equality of everyone before God. He saw, there were really two main problems, the first, sprang from the Hindu philosophy of caste; i.e, humankind is divided into

¹². Ibidem, P. 12.

four principle, 'Brahmins are educated and religious leaders', 'Kshatriyas are warriors', 'Vaishyas are merchants', 'Shudras are servants', springing respectively from the mouth, shoulders, thighs and feet of the God, Brahma. And the second, from its practical application in the caste rites that means. every caste or sub-caste attended to its allocated duties and did nothing other than that.

The whole matter of caste could so easily have been regarded as something unreal, absurd, something that flourished in the darkness and evil of heathenism and such would be swept away in the glorious sun-light of the Catholic church. But Bresillac was shocked and angered to see in the church, "There was a low wall, separating one part of the church from another so that higher caste members would not have to come into contact with lower caste members as they attended Mass together"¹³. For the first time, he realised that even Christianity, in its most holy places, had not succeeded in bringing down the gap between caste and untouchable.

During his years in India, the impressions remained always in the fore-front of de Brésillac's mind, that the whole caste-system was something most repugnant and disgraceful. It involved such questions as: should Christians be allowed to retain membership of their caste? Hence, the practical question: should a convert, as a condition for baptism, be required to renounce his caste? And the practical pastoral problem: How could priests, minister to Christians of caste, and to those of no caste, since contact without caste brought defilement? The whole of Indian society was separated clearly and unalterably into layers of castes. Everyone from the highest Brahmin to the most abject outcaste sweeper knows his position in that society, and there could be no misunderstanding over contact between one caste and another. But the coming of Christianity had upset those clear distinctions. "The most terrible thing for an Indian was to lose his caste; if he did so, he becomes a no-man, fallen into a void, without ties of family and friends.

¹³. Patrick Gantly, Op.Cit., P. 52.

Therefore, even if he becomes a Christian, he wished at all costs, to retain his castes, and it was here that he found it so difficult”¹⁴.

De Brésillac, the young missionary with his vision of mission, ended up in a triumph of failure. His attempts to question the system met with bitter opposition.

2.2. Problem with Missionaries

De Brésillac encountered a large measure of indifference and even resistance, both from the religious orders and from his own fellow-missionaries, to his advocacy of a local clergy. Among the fundamental causes for this resistance was the prevalence of the caste mentality among the converts to Catholicism. But, there was also, on the part of the European missionaries, an element of racial prejudice and conservatism based on fear and selfishness. Courageously confronting such attitudes de Brésillac made the education and formation of an Indian clergy his missionary priority. They said that the establishment of a local clergy was both impractical and inopportune.

It was beginning to dawn on to de Brésillac, that the heaviest weight laid upon his shoulders was that of differing violently from members of his own society on that most vital and central core of his belief, the necessity of training a local clergy.

The dominant concern of de Brésillac’s entire missionary life was the establishment of a truly indigenous church with its own priests and hierarchy. It was neither well understood nor actively promoted by most of the foreign missionaries of his time. During his twelve years in India, de Brésillac had first-hand experience of the strong resistance of many of his own confreres in the MEP [The Parish Foreign Missionary Society] to the idea of a local clergy. The policy of the Jesuits had been to train catechists rather than to ordain priests to administer the sacraments,

¹⁴. Alphonsus M Kelly, *A Man of Faith, Hope and Love*, [Melchior de Brésillac, Founder of the SMA], Ibadan: SMA Publications, 1996, P. 18.

and to preserve the faith. They thought that Indians were not clever enough to study for priesthood and also they kept their western superiority. It was de Brésillac who expounded the necessity of forming a local clergy. At the heart of this resistance, de Brésillac recognised racial prejudice and a conservatism based on fear and selfishness.

Through his colleagues did not always agree with him, his ability was widely recognized. Nonetheless there was opposition from some of his fellow missionaries. They questioned him, “Are you going to teach French, Arithmetic, Geography and Physics, a European education? You will make them conceited and it will be impossible to deal with them afterwards, especially with Indian priests who have received such an education”¹⁵.

Supported by a few of his friends in the MEP, de Brésillac argued persistently, even stridently at times, for the transfer of church leadership from missionary to local hands, firmly rejecting the commonly accepted view that such a move would be impractical and inopportune, and that the missionaries were going to be there forever. Without such a transfer, the church would never be properly founded in India, he insisted. European missionaries might convert hundreds of individuals to Catholicism, but the conversion of peoples would only be accomplished by a native clergy. As superior of the seminary in *Pondicherry*¹⁶ and later as the Bishop of *Coimbatore*¹⁷, he sought to prove, with considerable success, that Indians could, in fact, make excellent priests.

For seven years de Brésillac pushed his ideas for a well-educated local clergy and his opposition to the caste system. But he met regular opposition from some of the people. For

¹⁵. Patrick Gantly, *Op.Cit.*, P. 85.

¹⁶. *Pondicherry* - is one of the Arch-dioceses in the state of Tamil Nadu in South India.

¹⁷. *Coimbatore* - the diocese in which Melchior De Marion Brésillac was the first Vicar Apostolic in 1845-1853.

example when he pleaded with a 'break-away' group of caste-Christians to be reconciled to the church, they would not listen and threatened schism.

He found that many of his fellow missionaries were even less co-operative, "Missionaries were much more difficult to deal with than the Christians"¹⁸. When he corrected some of them for their wrong treatment of the people, they refused to obey him. Those priests claimed that he had no authority over them.

As the years went on relations with his missionaries disimproved. "Most incredible! Not only do the young missionaries wish to be judges in the final court of appeal in every sort of case: civil, religious, domestic, but they also want to be legislators. Supreme legislators, universal reformers. They impose arbitrary laws on the Christians but espouse liberty for themselves. They ignore local rules of decency and etiquette and it is the most imperfect ones who preach the necessity of obeying the Gospel perfectly. Where are we, O my God?"¹⁹.

De Brésillac discussed this matter with Bishop Bonnand [Bishop of Pondicherry]. The Bishop replied to him, "I am in complete agreement with you, "and he added", but I say again and again, 'be patient'. Your opinions will carry little weight until you have been two or three years on the missions. That time at least, you will be able to overcome the prejudice here in India. There is always in India, youngsters coming with their new-fanged ideas from Europe"²⁰.

Eventually, he found that he could no longer carry out his missionary ideas amidst such hostility and indecisiveness. His honesty and zeal would not let him be satisfied with half-doing his work as a missionary. With a character like de Brésillac the chosen work had to be done with total dedication or not at all.

¹⁸. Michael O'shea, Mission or Martyrdom?, Ibadan: John Mof Printers, 1989, P. 44.

¹⁹. Ibidem, P. 44.

²⁰. Patrick Gantly, Op.Cit., P. 71.

2.3. Problem with Rome

Rome's attitude towards the issues of caste and formation of local clergy, he believed, was out-dated, ill-informed and totally unworkable. It was causing much pain and conflict within the Christian community, to the extent that many fellow missionary priests had decided to ignore the existing ruling and their conscience. They were unable and even unwilling to tackle this thorny problem and preferred to let matters continue as they were.

So in 1848, 1849 and again in 1852 he requested Pope Pius XI to allow him to resign as Vicar Apostolic of Coimbatore. "I believe that I would be acting against my conscience by exercising a ministry which seems to me so clearly disastrous".²¹

A man of de Brésillac's character would not lightly withdraw from a commitment so close to his heart. It was only done after years of prayer and when repeated attempts to solve the fundamental differences with others had failed. He saw his decision to resign as the only honourable choice open to him. "It was impossible for me to give up my convictions, but it was possible for me to give up my post".²² At first the Pope refused to accept his resignation. Thus his firm loyalty, built on a deep faith, brought de Brésillac great sorrow. His resignation was "a sacrifice against all his personal interests and against the claims of his heart. He cried in prayer, O my God! Why must I leave a mission I love so much"?²³

Later he feared that his resignation might not be properly understood. "I must make it clear that the principal and compelling reason why I finally left my Vicariate was the quandary in

²¹. Alphonsus M. Kelly, Op.Cit., P. 21.

²². Ibidem, P. 21.

²³. Ibidem, P. 21.

which the caste-system placed me and my reluctance to exercise the sacred ministry in the confused state of affairs caused by it”²⁴.

Eventually, on the 9th June 1855, the Pope did agree to accept his resignation.

Over several years de Brésillac tried to have done his vision and it was only when he failed that he came to Rome to make his case in person and, in accordance with his conscience, to offer his resignation if there was no movement on the issue. In Rome he had audiences with Pope Pius IX, and long discussions with the Secretary of the Congregation for the Missions. They listened attentively to what he had to say but in the end wanted to leave things as they were rather than stir up a hornet’s nest. De Brésillac asked to be allowed to resign as Bishop and returned to France to await a reply. He placed on record his reasons for taking this action: “It seems to me everybody ought to have seconded my efforts, not indeed to make my particular views on the subject prevail, but to obtain from the Holy See a clear and practical ruling, after effective means were taken to inform the Sacred Congregation for the Missions on the true state of affairs in our mission. To such a directive, clearly expressed, I would have submitted in all sincerity. But the Sacred Congregation thought it prudent not to issue such a directive”²⁵.

That was a painful time for him. Right through his life the one thing he wanted above all else was to do the will of God. It did not come faxed down from heaven or from Rome but had to be wrestled with and worked out in the big and small choice made in the daily experience of life. One of the prayers he made at that time reads: “Yours is the future, Lord. I am not sure on what shore the wind now blowing will cast me. Whatever happens to me Lord, may your will be

²⁴. Ibidem, P. 21.

²⁵. Timothy Cullinane, Melchior de Marion Brésillac [1813-1859], Founder of the Society of African Missions, Cork: A Publication of the SMA Archives, 1998, P. 5.

the only motive force of my actions, the only aim of my enterprises, the only object of my desires".²⁶

Even after all the struggle and prayer, he still could not be sure: "Have I been exact in listening to your voice, O God? Have I been faithful in obeying you? Is it in obedience to you that, after long years spent in India, I am now furling my sails or have I listened to myself?"²⁷

²⁶. Ibidem, P. 5.

²⁷. Ibidem, P. 5.

Chapter III

Melchior De Brésillac's Vision for Africa and Its Implementation

Despite of his disappointments in India, the vision for mission was still in the mind of de Brésillac. Though his conscience had forced him to discontinue his work in India, his interest on Mission had not waned. On May 26th 1855 less than two months after his resignation, he wrote to Rome, to the Secretary of the Congregation for the Missions, Msgr. Barnabo asking that he might become a missionary again. He wrote, "God has never ceased to inspire me with an ardent love of the missions. There is no hope of my returning to the Indian missions, which were so dear to me. But is there no other place on earth where I can be a missionary? I am still young. Can it be God's will for me to remain idle? I cannot believe it"²⁸. He was ready to go as a missionary to any part of the world. He asked, is not there other places where missionaries have not yet set foot, for example, a mission in the interior of Africa.

His proposal was examined and approved in principle, but Msgr. Barnabo, Secretary General of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith [SCPF] frowned on the idea of de Brésillac, going on the missions alone or with one or two companion to an undefined part of Africa, with no provision for back up or continuity. He wanted the work to continue after the death of de Brésillac. So the Cardinal asked him to found a society of men to join him in the work of the missions in Africa. Clearly, he appreciated Bishop de Brésillac's approach to missionary work. De Brésillac agreed to answers the Cardinal's request.

De Brésillac, the former Superior of the seminary in Pondicherry now became the Founder of his own seminary in Lyon, France. He appointed Fr Augustin Planque as its first Superior. Then he spent three tiresome years crisscrossing France, diocese by diocese, preaching about the

²⁸. *Ibidem*, P. 6.

new society, seeking funds and vocations. In his own words, “Frankly, I am tired of roaming the roads. But nothing can be achieved without suffering”²⁹.

About this time de Brésillac wrote “the Fundamental Articles” for his new Society. There were his guidelines for forming the new Society of missionaries according to his matured missionary ideas. These centred the Society firmly on these fundamental principles:

- a. Primary Evangelization of the ‘most abandoned people’;
- b. The establishment of a ‘Local Clergy’;
- c. Inculturation of local customs into the Church.

Clearly he wanted for his Society a blend of the original spirit of the Paris Foreign Missions and the fruit of prayerful reflection on his own missionary experience in India.

Following Msgr. Barnabo’s strong recommendation, de Brésillac made a formal request to Rome for authority to found a Society of Missionaries to work among the most abandoned people in Africa. On February 29th 1856, Rome gave him the permission he sought, but stressed that the road ahead would not be easy. The first seeds of the Society of African Missions had been sown. On the 8th of December 1856, on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, de Brésillac consecrated the Society to Our Lady and together with Frs Planque and Reymond, the small group solemnly dedicated themselves to the work of the African Mission, saying: “I take a solemn promise to work all my life for the mission in the Society of African Missions. Here and now, I offer my life to God, accepting in advance and with joy, for his greater glory and the advancement of the Church, for the salvation of my soul and souls of these confided to me, the pain and privations, the hardships of the climate, the suffering of persecution and even martyrdom, should God deem me worthy to bear witness to the faith by my death”³⁰.

²⁹. Alphonsus M. Kelly, Op.Cit., P. 25.

³⁰. Timothy Cullinane, Op.Cit., P.10.

Ever since, the Society has celebrated the feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 8th, as its Foundation Day. The purpose of the Society would be the evangelisation of the countries of Africa where the light of faith had not yet penetrated and which were most in need of missionaries. The Society was committed to building up the local Churches and once they were well established to be, always ready to move to other places to do the same. The Society would also do everything in its power to form a local clergy.

It was fortunate and providential that the great awakening of interest in the missions was taking place from 1850's. Pope Gregory's work for the mission recognised an acute shortage of missionary personnel. The support he gave to every missionary initiative in Europe was extremely valuable. This was the historical period during which the Institutes, which would henceforth bear the main burden of missionary work, were to be founded.

From then on, there appeared in the Church, in quick succession, a number of societies which had the overseas mission, as their exclusive purpose. Two of the new societies were inspired by the 17th century 'Society of Foreign Missions of Paris'. They were the Foreign Missions of Milan, founded in 1850 by Mgr Ramazzotti and the Society of African Missions, founded in 1856 by Mgr Melchior de Marion Brésillac. Ten years later, two more Societies were begun: Daniele Comboni's Verona Fathers and Herbert Vaughan's Society of St. Joseph, Mill Hill. In Belgium, Theophile Verbist set up, the Scheut Missionaries in 1862. In 1868, France gave the Church another Society, the White Fathers, founded by Charles Lavigerie in Algiers. Germany made its contribution with the founding in 1875 of the Divine Word Missionaries by Arnold Janssen.

These societies -and many others indeed- shared a number of features. One has already been mentioned; first, their sole or principal purpose was to preach the Gospel in non-Christian lands. A second feature was their great struggle to become organised, to recruit members and to

find adequate resources. A third feature was the terrible hardship the members of these societies had to endure and the enormous loss of life that took place and often inadequately equipped missionaries went into the unknown, trackless lands of Africa.

3.1. First Missionary Journey

It was that sort of age. The first group of missionaries, Fr Reymond, Fr Bresson and Brother Eugene, sailed for Freetown the capital of the Sierra Leone on 4th of November 1858. De Brésillac wrote in his diary, "I accompanied them out into the open sea, and gave them by blessing"³¹. He came back only to tidy up his affairs and prepare for his own departure. A few days before he set out from Lyon, he wrote to Cardinal Barnabo, informing him that the three missionaries had already reached Freetown and were well received by the French Consuls as well as by the English Governor. He then let the cardinal know that he himself was about to leave for Freetown. In his own words, "I recognize that it would be very useful if I could stay on longer in Lyon, but it seems more useful to go to Freetown, to see things for myself and try to organize this new mission well"³².

De Brésillac and his two companions, Fr Riocreux and Brother Gratien set out to Freetown, on 8th of March 1859. On 14th of May 1859 de Brésillac and his companions caught the first sight of Freetown. He recorded the arrival in his diary: "As soon as we arose in the morning, we sighted the mountains of Sierra Leone". They were welcomed by their other companions Frs Reymond and Bresson and Brother Eugene.

Certainly, at the time de Brésillac and his companions arrived, Sierra Leone was a most afflicted country. A cloud of gloom hung over Freetown. The climate was extremely hot and humid and a plague was raging. Small pox was devastating the Africans and Yellow fever was

³¹. Ibidem, P.11.

³². Ibidem, P.12.

wiping out the Europeans. The cause of the outbreak, was thought to be the prolonged heat and excessive drought.

3.2. Death Strikes

The joy for de Brésillac of setting foot on African soil and of meeting his companions was short lived. The heat, the procession of death all around him and enormity of the task ahead weighed heavily on him. But the worse was to follow, Fr Riocreux became ill. Fr Reymond used whatever medicines he had taken with him from France, and when these failed, he had recourse to local remedies. All was in vain. On Ascension Thursday, 2nd of June 1859, less than three weeks after arriving in the country, Fr Riocreux was dead. “A terrible calamity”, commented de Brésillac, “What has God in mind for us?”. He had hardly time to recover, three days later, Fr Bresson followed. Bresson died suddenly and unexpectedly. “A thunderbolt” said de Brésillac, “leaving me broken hearted”³³. A postscript was added the day after Fr Bresson’s death: “The hand of God weighs still heavier on us, and seems to want to wipe out all our plans. And these, it seems to me, were all made solely for his greater glory... This awful double trial, should it discourage us? I think not. And while a breath is left in me, I still hope for the success of the African Missions. May I be able to say to the Sovereign judge when He calls me, that I have, on my part, done everything, everything, everything that was in my power to do”³⁴.

Another postscript was written twelve days later to Cardinal Barnabo, telling of Brother Gratien’s death and of the return to France of Brother Eugene: “A few days ago, we were six; now we are two: Father Reymond and myself. May the will of God be accomplished. And now, if God preserves my life, what ought to be done? I await your advice”³⁵.

³³. Ibidem, P. 13.

³⁴. Ibidem, P. 14.

³⁵. Ibidem, P. 14.

For almost a week, tortured by these thoughts, he hovered between life and death. And then it seems as though the crisis was over, and his spirit revived, consuming him with the desire to leave Sierra Leone and go to Dahomey. De Brésillac believed that the worst was over and so did Fr Reymond. There was every prospect that the rainy season would soon begin: “the thunder is rumbling in the distance, the air is a little fresher, and the epidemic seems to be abating”³⁶.

Within three days of writing this, de Brésillac was back in bed again, and Father Reymond, worn out from caring for the sick and burying the dead, had also caught the fever. It was now a question of which of the two would die first. Bremond wrote, “On the morning of 25th of June 1859, it must have been about 11.00 am and from that moment the fever made rapid progress... he became restless but remained perfectly lucid in mind until almost a half-hour before death, that moment, he raised his eyes to Heaven and said in a tone of voice that I will never forget: “Faith, Hope, Cha...”. “Charity”, I said, “Thank You”, he replied very feebly. At 1.20 pm, he passed away in profound peace, but after having had a terrible agony of half an hour”³⁷. Father Reymond was already dying. There was no priest to offer a funeral mass for de Brésillac and bless his grave. A protestant minister read some prayers over the grave. Two days later Father Reymond was buried. Everything was now silent, as silent as the palm trees motionless in the tropical sun. It seemed an appalling tragedy, the end of a misdirected vision of de Brésillac’s. De Brésillac was dead at the age of forty-six, less than six weeks after arriving in Africa. Five of his six companions were also dead and the sixth had left the country. Was this the end? It seemed so, but God’s ways are impenetrable as they were on Good Friday. The good that he was obliged to leave undone would be done by others. And that was what he had hoped for. But in Freetown he was left hoping against hope that his society of missions would not die with him. And it did not.

³⁶. *Ibidem*, P. 14.

³⁷. *Ibidem*, P. 15.

3.3. The Vision Lives On

When Pope Pius IX heard of this tragedy said at once, “God be Praised! The work will live. Yes, it will live”³⁸. From the vantage point of history we can see that the work has lived. It lives on in the vibrant Church that de Brésillac’s followers continue to establish in different parts of Africa; [Primary Evangelization] by proclamation of the Gospel, establishment of the local Church and clergy and in the life that this has brought to countless member; from France, Ireland, Great Britain, Holland, Italy, Spanish, Canada, Argentina, Poland, India, Philippines and Africans from sixteen countries of the African Continent. It lives on in the growing missionary nature of the African Church itself as more and more it offers its gifts of youthful vigour, community, joy and celebration to the Universal Church.

3.4. From West to North, South and East

De Brésillac and the missionaries’ aim or vision and motivation was not to go out and die, but to go out and evangelise.

De Brésillac had left his small community at Lyons in the hands of Fr Augustine Planque who carried on his work with an extraordinary zeal and tenacity. He had but one desire in his heart: to respond to the trust de Brésillac had in him to maintain his work, and to give to God missionaries for Africa. Being left with two other priests, two brothers and six aspirants, he nevertheless asked Rome to continue the mission and to have its field of activity shifted to Dahomey. “So the Vicariate Apostolic of Dahomey was erected [1860] bordered by the rivers Volta and Niger and entrusted to Fr Planque as Pro-vicar [i.e. without being made bishop]”³⁹.

³⁸. *Ibidem*, P. 16.

³⁹. John Baur, *2000 years of Christianity in Africa*, An African History [1962-1992], Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1994, P. 142.

The further development of the SMA mission was distinguished by the fact that the home superior, Fr Planque, retained his office as missionary pro-vicar until 1891. Fr Planque, the embodiment of his society, did everything himself: directing the missions, recruiting personal and raising funds. A negative effect of the concentration of control in one person was the long delay in founding an Irish Province, which would have provided the badly needed English-speaking missionaries for Nigeria and Ghana. Planque only recruited Irish students for his seminary in Lyons and had little success. Lacking teachers as well as means to build higher school, the mission failed to educate a Catholic elite in Africa. An Irish Province was at last established in 1912 and soon came to flower.

The opening of the mission in Lagos gave to the SMA the first permanent foothold in Africa. Its popularity improved when the sisters of Our Lady of Apostles [Notre Dame Des Apostres] arrived in 1878. This congregation was founded by Fr Planque and in due course it assisted all SMA Missions. The SMA Fathers visited modern Togo [which was originally regarded as part of Dahomey] in 1886. Fr Jerry Moran and his companion opened a medical mission in Atakpame. Their success aroused the jealousy of the local medicine men and the two priests were poisoned. Fr. Jerry Moran died [1887] but his companion survived. Unfortunately, the same year World War I broke out and they had to leave the country. After the war, the SMA accepted to go back to the Togo mission field. SMA worked hard to re-establish the schools, in competition with government education.

At long last, Ghana, the Gold Coast, was revisited and the mission of Elmina reopened in 1880. However, the adjacent Ivory Coast was to remain a neglected area for many years. Some fifty years passed before the SMA sent Fr Mathew Ray to open a mission in this French colony [1893]. He was followed by sisters of Our Lady of Apostles [1898]. "By the year 1893, the society had been entrusted with the care of five separate jurisdictions: the vicariate apostolic of

Benin Coast, the prefecture apostolic of the Gold Coast, the prefecture apostolic of Dahomey, the prefecture apostolic of Upper Niger and the prefecture apostolic of Egypt⁴⁰.

Fr Carlo Zappa was one of the best known among the SMA missionaries; a great surveyor and cartographer, and first Prefect Apostolic of the Upper Niger from 1894 to his death in 1917. He said, "Schools were not the first but the last means of evangelization. He believed in the direct apostolate, and counted Christian families, not school-children"⁴¹.

At this time, in 1893, the society was 37 years in existence. For 34 of those years, Fr Planque had borne the burden, often almost single-handedly, of recruiting candidates, training them, maintaining the seminary, acquiring mission jurisdictions, staffing these and finding replacements for those who died or returned disheartened or ill. The mission, to date, had claimed the lives of 83 missionaries, the vast majority of them buried in graves along the West Coast of Africa, nearly all of them in their 20's or 30's. To recruit for missions which took such a heavy toll of young lives, was no easy matter. It is very doubtful if these young missionaries, moved by the Spirit to devote their lives to the missions, could have received the necessary encouragement and opportunity. On the eve of First General Assembly, in 1893, the prospects for the Society looked good. The number of members was on the increase, and the interior of West Africa, had become more accessible to the preachers of the Good News.

Slowly, it spread from West to North, South and East. Today, the SMA presence is in seventeen countries of the African continent. They are; Angola, Benin, Central Africa, Congo, Egypt, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Liberia, Morocco, Nigeria, Niger, Sierra Leon, South Arica, Tanzania, Togo, Zambia. The SMA carried out de Brésillac's vision in three layers, by the

⁴⁰. Patrick Gantly, Mission to West Africa, The story of the Society of African Missions, SMA [1856-1907], Rome: SMA Publications, Vol. 2, 1992, P. 30.

⁴¹. John Baur, Op Cit., P. 148.

proclamation of the Gospel, establishing the local Churches and encouraging the local ministers to become the Church as local.

Chapter IV

The Importance of the Validity of De Brésillac Vision on the SMA

It's not difficult to recall the road by which we SMA, like other institutes, have travelled to arrive where they are today. The "Fundamental Articles of 1856" states the purpose for which the SMA was founded. The purpose is "the evangelization of the countries of Africa who are most in need of it"⁴². The founder had a clear and precise understanding of the task he wanted to undertake and confide to the Society he founded. He wanted to bring the Gospel and to establish the Church in the regions of Africa where other missionary congregations had never penetrated and where Christ was not known. The SMA founded to go into "Frontier" situations, for the proclamation of the Gospel. Those are the situations where Jesus is not known, or his message is not lived.

A reflection on this purpose of the Society will certainly help us to remain faithful to the founding Charism: That the Gospel reaches those who are the most abandoned.

4.1. *Missio ad Gentes* is our Ministry

In spite of many trials, it became more and more evident that we had to undertake the specific work entrusted to us as a missionary Society - to go to the places, geographical or sociological, where Christ was not present. Now is the time for us to leave the places where we traditionally worked and move to the areas of primary evangelization- the places on the edges, whether they are rural villages, or shantytowns. We have to take the initiative in areas where poor attention is given, such as street children, prisoners, people contaminated with HIV/AIDS, prostitutes etc. In this way, we can reaffirm the willingness to serve the local church, but in work specific to SMA.

⁴². Society of African Mission, Primary Evangelization: A New Look at an Old Concept, Rome: SMA Publications, Bullentin No'99, December 1997, P. 22.

In addition we have to show them what that meant by defining more clearly that which makes us what we are, the character and the essence of life as a Society. The SMA is a Society of missionaries living and working in freedom and responsibility, deriving its vitality from “concord in perfect charity and obedience; it is ever ready to respond to the needs of the times, it affirms a special preference for the evangelization of the peoples of Africa among whom the Gospel has not yet been preached”⁴³.

We can say then, that ‘*Mission ad Gentes*’ directs Christian witness and proclamation towards new and non-Christian contexts. It involves a great effort in a spirit of faith, hope and love, to make known to everyone the wonderful depths of God’s love revealed in Jesus Christ. Distinct from pastoral activity which is carried on within the boundaries, of established Christian communities, and according to ‘*Redemptoris Missio*’, different from ‘re-evangelization’ or ‘new evangelization’ which is necessary among communities of lapsed Catholics, ‘*Mission ad Gentes*’ operates in situations where Christian communities have not yet been sufficiently established. It is mission at the frontiers of Christian faith.

In other places, “these communities are so small as not to be a clear sign of a Christian presence; or they lack the dynamism to evangelize their societies, or belong to a minority population not integrated into the dominant culture of the nations”⁴⁴.

Nevertheless, the criterion of geography by itself can no longer be considered adequate in identifying the focus on ‘*Mission ad Gentes*’. It is “imprecise and provisional”⁴⁵. Furthermore, the changed socio-cultural circumstances of our time have created new sociological and cultural loci for missionary activity.

⁴³. Constitution and Laws, Op.Cit., P. 23.

⁴⁴. *Redemptoris Missio*, No. 37a.

⁴⁵. Ibidem, No. 37b.

Redemptoris Missio mentions explicitly six of these new loci of *Mission ad Gentes*:

- * the Youth “who in many countries comprise more than half the population” and who cannot be evangelized “by the ordinary means of pastoral work”.
- * migrants and refugees;
- * those living in situations of poverty;
- * the new culture created by the mass media of communication;
- * the areas of activity such as the “commitment to peace, development and the liberation of peoples, the rights of individuals and peoples, especially those of minorities, the advancement of women and children, safeguarding the created world”⁴⁶.

While the above list is fairly comprehensive, it is not exhaustive. “The socio-cultural contours of our world are changing rapidly, creating ever wider horizons”⁴⁷ for ‘*Mission ad Gentes*’. The Society may some day succeed in establishing a presence in every part of the African globe, but, the ‘*Mission ad Gentes*’ will not come to an end, for the foci towards which it is directed are never finally fixed once for all time, and new criteria for the establishing of these foci keep on emerging every ten years or less.

4.2. Concern for the Development of Local Ministers

“We SMA, keep as one of our priorities in churches where we work the promotion and support of priestly, missionary and religious vocations and the formation of clergy and lay leaders”⁴⁸.

⁴⁶. Ibidem, No. 37c.

⁴⁷. Ibidem, No. 35.

⁴⁸. Constitution and Laws, Op.Cit., No.10, P. 27.

Closely related to de Brésillac's concern for the establishing of a local hierarchy was very clear and precise identification of the SMA. But we might ask, did de Brésillac carry over this concern with establishing a truly indigenous hierarchy into the African phase of his missionary life? Obviously, he could not envisage the formation of a native clergy immediately in a situation where they were as yet no Christians. Nevertheless, it is clear that he wanted the Society he founded for the African Mission to be committed to this objective which was dearest to his missionary heart. The first draft of his constitutions for the society included the following paragraph: "The Society shall make every possible effort to raise up a local clergy in the countries whose evangelisation is confided to it"⁴⁹.

It is clear that one of the main concerns of Propaganda Fide from its foundation, and especially from the 19th to the second half of the 20th centuries, was the formation of an indigenous clergy. Several Popes returned to the subject time to time and again. Speaking to the heads of mission Pope Pius XI said, "firstly and above all, we must draw your attention to the extreme importance of the admission of locals to the priesthood. You must work for that with all your energy. Otherwise we would have to judge that there is something lacking in your apostolate and that you are hindering or slowing down the establishment and organisation of the church in the territory for which you are responsible. We are far from making adequate progress in this area"⁵⁰.

Pope Benedict XV also insists that, "there is one point to which the heads of mission should pay particular attention and that is the recruitment and formation of an indigenous clergy. It is only when in every region that the indigenous clergy is sufficient in number and properly formed in the greatness of their vocation, that it can really be said that the aim of missionary work

⁴⁹. Michael Mc Cabe, The Role of the Society of African Missions in the Mission for our Time, Mission Ad Gentes, [An SMA Vision of Mission for our Time], Rome: SMA Publications, Part I, Bullentin No '89, March 1993, P. 50.

⁵⁰. Pius XI, Rerum Ecclesiae, No. 35.

has been achieved, because then a church is happy founded"⁵¹. The local Bishops and local clergy are main the agents of inculturation.

Following in the footsteps of these Papal appeals, and indeed even before them an enormous amount of work was done in creating seminaries and in the establishment of native clergy. However, what did not happen following the Papal appeal was the opening of the Society to vocations from mission territories.

And that's the way it was, until 1929, during Pius XI's Pontificate. He was not very much in favour of native clergies for the missionary priesthood. At the General Chapter of the Society of St. Columban on 23rd August 1970, Archbishop Pignedoli, then Secretary of Propaganda, said to them: "In the past for a long time, the Congregation of Propaganda was not in favour of the recruitment of local vocations into missionary institutes... but the situation has changed. A lot of work has gone into the development of diocesan clergy. It would seem that the time has arrived for the missionary institutes and religious institutes in general, to open their doors to local vocations. It is in the interest of the local Churches to encourage these vocations"⁵².

From then on it was going to be difficult to avoid reflection on this theme and inevitability, we were drawn into it. As already stated, it was seen as a question of being faithful to the Founder. "To ordain priests and bishops, to establish true churches, that is the real mission of the Apostles"⁵³ - here we have one of the texts of the Founder that was regarded as being essential for his sons.

⁵¹. Benedict XV, *Maximum Illud*, No. 7.

⁵². Fides English edition 2nd September 1970, No 2280, P. 352.

⁵³. Bob Hales, [Trans.] Marion Brésillac, Founder of the Society of African Mission: Mission and Foundation Documents, Paris: SMA Publications, 1986, P. 117.

It should be noted however that the question of recruitment in Africa was raised at the 1958 General Assembly and this is what it said: "Even though the question doesn't seem urgent, the assembly declares that the Society is open in principle to taking Africans as members"⁵⁴. The 1975 Plenary Council at its meeting in London discussed whether the question should be put on the agenda for the 1978 General Assembly. But the 1978 General Assembly did not follow the advice of the 1975 Plenary Council and decided to examine the possibility. It invited the General and Plenary Councils to look into the question of opening up the Society to African members. And the 1982 Plenary Council decided to encourage "an active search for missionary vocations among Africans with the aim of full membership of the SMA"⁵⁵. In the following assembly in 1983, after long discussion, they voted by a majority for the following proposal: "This assembly confirms the decision of the 1982 Plenary Council to open the SMA to candidates from the local Churches in Africa"⁵⁶.

So from that moment a new page of history was turned and we are now living in that period. A lot of work was done by the Society to conscientize the members to the changes that were happening rapidly. The opening of the Society to Africans raised another question - if we accept Africans, why not others? And that seems to have been the rationale which carried us forward to the 1989 General Assembly. During these six years we started recruitment in Poland, as well as developing our presence in Argentina and began recruitment in India and the Philippines.

⁵⁴. Jean-Marie Guillaume, *'Mission ad Gentes' in the Third Millennium*, Rome: SMA Publications, Bullentin No'109, July 2000, P. 20.

⁵⁵. *Ibidem*, P. 21.

⁵⁶. *Ibidem*, P. 21.

And so we arrived at the General Assembly, on 12th May 1989, the four Foundations - Africa, Argentina, Asia and Poland were officially erected; the new constitutions were adopted and to the traditional SMA structures [Provinces, Districts, Districts-in-Formation] we added "Foundations". And so on the eve of the 2001 General Assembly, the Society finds itself with a new face.

4.3. The Great Vision is being Progress

Where the Spirit is, where the Gospel is, where the Eucharist is, where the Apostolic tradition is, there is the Church. This, of course, is not really a new idea at all. It has its roots in the New Testament which speaks of the Church of Corinth, the Church of Jerusalem, the Church of Ephesus.

It is present in 'legitimate local congregations... themselves called Churches'⁵⁷. As Louis Bouyer points out: 'The Church does not exist all at once as a vast, universal system; on the contrary, it proceeds from essentially local communities and, strictly speaking, has no real existence outside these'⁵⁸.

Hence, each particular Church must 'mirror to perfection the universal church in the concrete environment; and it is necessary for it to become a sign, able to reveal Christ to all those with whom it comes in contact'⁵⁹. This statement has very important implications for the understanding of the Churches 'Mission ad Extra'. It means that each particular Church must be an agent of Mission.

⁵⁷. *Lumen Gentium*, 21 November 1964, No. 26, P. 347.

⁵⁸. Michael Mc Cabe, The Relationship of Missionaries to the Receiving Churches, 'Mission ad Gentes', [An SMA Vision of Mission for our Time], Rome: SMA Publications, Part IV, Bullentin No'93, March 1994, P. 7.

⁵⁹. Austin Flannery, [Congregation for the Clergy] in Vat II: More Post-Conciliar Documents, Vat II, Bombay: St. Paul's Publications, Vol. 2, 1982, P. 369.

Since the Church is missionary by its very nature and since each particular church is required to mirror the Universal Church to perfection, then it follows that each and particular Church must be missionary both in outlook and practice. The participation of particular Churches in the Universal Mission of the Church is not a matter of choice, but a fundamental law of its life. A particular Church is compelled by its nature as Church to expand and go out of itself or die. The history of the expansion of the Church is a history of dynamic out going communities. The expansion was fundamentally a movement from community to community. In the early Church it was more clearly evident than it is today that the larger Church was a network of communities linked together by faith and Eucharist.

The purpose of mission *ad extra* in the early Church was seen as the establishment of new Churches in communion with the old. The story of the first Christian community in the Acts of the Apostles is the story of a particular Church striving slowly and painfully to discover its universal calling. This story must become the story of each particular Church today. Each particular Church has to confront the fact that -in order to be faithful to its very nature as Church, it has to combine maintenance with a universal openness and outreach.

Rooted in their own particular Churches, missionaries are then freed to go forth and proclaim the Gospel so that new Christian communities can be formed. Thus missionaries emerge from and are sent by specific Christian communities with the mission of establishing other such communities that are in communion with it. In this way missionaries give visible expression to the communion which exists between the Churches and, through their presence and activity, the bonds of communion are strengthened. It is in this context that missionary institutes and their role in the Church's '*Mission ad Gentes*' must be situated.

The splendid growth and achievements of the Church in Africa are due largely to the heroic and selfless dedication of generations of missionaries. This fact is acknowledged by

everyone who attended the Synod of Africa. The hallowed soil of Africa is truly sown with the tombs of courageous heralds of the Gospel.

In his address to the Inaugural Assembly of SECAM [Symposium of Episcopal Conference of Africa and Madagascar] at Kampala, on 31st July 1969, Pope Paul VI spoke about this debt of gratitude: "By now, you African are missionaries to yourselves. The Church of Christ is well and truly planted in this blessed soil [cf. *Mission ad Gentes*, 6]. One duty, however, remains to be fulfilled: We must remember those, who, before you, and even today with you, have preached the Gospel in Africa. That is a history which we must not forget; it confers on the Local Church the mark of its authenticity and nobility, its mark as 'apostolic'. That history is a drama of charity, heroism and sacrifice which makes the African Church great and holy from its very origins. That is why we, the happy inheritors of this marvellous adventure, joyfully pay our debt of thanks to God and to all Missionaries on this solemn occasion"⁶⁰.

The task of evangelizing Africa is essential to the mission of the Church because its target is to bring Africans close to their Saviour, Jesus Christ. The proclamation of Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life, helps the Church to offer a message that is so much needed today in a continent confronted by many conflicting values such as misery, wars and despair, instead of hope, peace, joy, harmony, love and unity, the essential values of evangelization. The task of meeting these challenges calls for a collaboration and common witness of the Churches in Africa.

What was true in the past will be even truer in the future: there will be a multitude of ways in which to live out the vision of the Founder. I believe that what Cardinal Newman said of the Church, we, like other institutes can apply to ourselves. "The Catholic Church never loses what is once possessed... in passing from one phase of life to another, it carries with it, its youthfulness

⁶⁰. Paul VI, Address to the Symposium of Episcopal Conference of Africa and Madagascar, Kampala: 31 July -1969.

and maturity into its old age. It hasn't changed its possessions but has accumulated them and as the expression goes, it draws from its treasure both old and new. Dominic didn't lose what Benedict had, and what both possessed gave birth to Ignatius"⁶¹.

⁶¹. Quoted from Yves Congar, Vraie et fausse reforme dans L'Eglise, Paris: Cerf, 1950, Pg. 176-177.

General Conclusion

Our Founder's Vision of Mission is still valid on the two thousand anniversary of Jesus' birth and at the beginning of the third millennium, and the strive for implementing his vision is still on the way in Africa. To be as an adult African Church, in the 3rd Millennium, these conditions are to be fulfilled, that it is self-supporting, self-ministering and self-propagating. The Church is able to do things and make decisions by itself, able to serve its own people through ministries grown from within itself, able to raise among its faithful enough money to continue its work, and ready to open up to the rest of the world in a true missionary spirit. At the same time as we enter the 21st century, we are aware, it is not yet completed and everyone will have to add to it.

The evangelisation is far from being completed on this earth. The proclamation of the Good News to the people during this 21st century is still challenging. Several societies and areas have been left out, for one reason or another. Many societies have resisted the Good News, mainly because it was not relevant, if not dangerous to people's way of life. All too often, evangelisation has been timid in confronting the many social injustices, which still oppress the vulnerable sections of society. These partial failures call us for a change for a new emphasis, for a new courage. The vision, we are to shape for the 21st century, must pay heed to such a call, "A Church for every people and the Gospel for every person"⁶².

And we should be able to study the "signs of the time" in the light of the Gospel and can explain the meaning of it in the new modern contextual way as a challenge to the history of people in culture and religion so that as perfectly trained we could save all human beings and sum up all things. This special missionary activity is the evangelization and the implanting of the Church.

⁶². Gary Corwin [Editor], Evangelical Missions Quarterly, Evangelism and Missions Information Service [EMQ], Wheaton, IL: Vol. 35, No. 3. July-1999, P. 319.

among people or groups in which it has not yet taken roots. The missionary is called to act in every event in the most human way possible, as Founder did.

As the saying goes, "A police report is not the same as a sermon, and a private letter is not the same as a legal document", so as, "the mission is God's mission not ours". Mission is God's own activity before it is the task of the Church. As Emil Brunner says, "the Church exists by mission as fire exist by burning"⁶³.

As Jesus explains the five-fold vision of mission is, namely, in silence, in action, in dialogue, in teaching and in prayer that we learn what the mission is. All of my hopes are subsidiary to this grand vision that at some point during this third Millennium every person born anywhere in the world has an opportunity:

1. To hear, understand and respond to the Gospel message,
2. To be incorporated into a local congregation and experience intimacy with the Father,
3. To be empowered to exhibit his or her spirit fruitfulness in salt and light witness as well as exercise spirit giftedness in significant ministry.

Thus, the goal of mission is to create access for the human person to the Gospel.

Perhaps, we can best leave the last words on mission to Mother Theresa, who was criticized for her lack of success after so many years of dedicated service in Calcutta, she admitted the facts, but insisted that the task of the missionaries, is not so much to be successful, but to be faithful. Here, I would like to quote the following words of the famous Mary knoll Bishop J. Walsh:

⁶³. Emil Brunner, A Call to live Mission, African Ecclesial Review [AFER], Vol. 32, No. 5, October -1990, P. 264.

“The task of a Missionary
 is to go a place where
 he is not wanted,
 to sell a pearl whose value
 although of great price
 is not recognized,
 to people who are determined
 not to accept it
 even as a gift”⁶⁴.

Once again, before the third millennium, in his prayer for the year of Jesus Christ [1997], Pope John Paul II, invites us to pray with broad missionary horizons: “May you, Word of the living God, renew missionary ardour in the Church, so that all people may come to know you”.

A renewed missionary ardour, the sending of a greater number of missionary groups *ad Gentes*: would this not be a wonderful gift from the Local Churches for the 2000th birthday of the one Saviour of the world?

Surely Jesus would be very pleased with such a gift!

⁶⁴. Sean P. Kearly, Is Jesus the Future for Mission?, African Ecclesial Review, [AFER], Vol. 32, No. 5, October -1990, P. 289.

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37. Mission Theology.

38. Mission Activity and Methods.