

# Preface

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I am glad to share these spontaneous ideas on the occasion of the commemoration of the first Murang'a Conference. For us Consolatras, the Murang'a Conferences were very important, and they lead us through a memory lane which reminds us of the importance of a methodology required in a missionary activity, a work carried out in communion, thus guaranteeing apostolic success; all of this points to the need to stop a moment and to reflect together in order to be able to evangelize as a team, as we give witness to that love that transforms the world.

## 1. Looking at the Past with Gratitude

“You who foresees the future of human beings, don't let me be detached from my past;” (says the old protagonist in the novel by Elie Wiesel: *The Forgotten* – translated by Stephen Becker, Summit, 1992). Memory is the thin interior thread that keeps us connected to our past: that includes the personal memory, ancestral memory as well as the institutional one. Obviously, it is not easy to live in continuous relationship with our past because we always run into the risk of two opposite circumstances: on the one hand, we tend to remain prisoners of our past while on the other hand we are tempted to break every link to our past. The past and the future intertwine with each other, especially because of the fact that those who know how to value their past become wiser than their age would otherwise allow, because it is enriched by the experiences of the past generations. This is the very intuition that Father Bernard of Chiaravalle, in 1100, expressed in a very effective image: “we are dwarfs walking on the shoulders of giants.” We are the ones with the responsibility to awaken this memory, so that our identity may be alive in such a way that we remain meaningfully focused and thus the Institute won't lose its purpose and mission. Memory and identity feed each other. For this reason, to forget implies to kill the past one more time, and this means eliminating the future as well! We are aware of the fact that every re-

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vitalization or conversion, be it personal or communitarian, consists in the process of creatively recovering the past memory in order to move with confidence towards the future.

## 2. The Value of Recovering Our Past Memories

Recovering historical memory is fundamental for building the future. Without the past memory, there is no future. A people who lose the past memory is a people without a future. An Institute that loses its past memory builds its future on sand. Saint John Paul II once wrote concerning cultural heritage: "Through the encounter that the modern man has with cultural heritage, they should be able to read once again Church history and that of the Kingdom and to recognize the mysterious charm of the salvific design of God."<sup>1</sup>

Past memory is not only made of the cultural heritage that we have accumulated over, but also of the ability not to forget the witnesses, including those Consolata Missionaries who have characterized different past epochs and still influence our present history. Past memory is that which is narrated through the experiences as lived in the mission.

In our tradition, there have been a variety of instruments that characterized our history, but for some reasons, with the passing of time, we have abandoned them, without adequate replacements. We could think of the Missionary Diaries and the amount of material in those texts which we conserve in our General Archives with sacred attention. We all know that our Founder depended on those diaries as a means to keep in touch with his missionaries, in order to advice, basing himself on known reality and in order to accompany the missionaries in the path of the mission. In addition, within several regions and delegations, we have small or big museums where we have collections of historical evidence and cultural heritage which are again a sign of our presence among peoples with whom we have shared the culture and livelihood. We cannot afford to abandon these "cultural schools;" we have the duty to keep them alive so that other people may know about them, understand them and carry them forward. Finally, there are discoveries, researches, writings, and works of many missionaries who, due to their competence and ability have been able to create art and culture. It is our responsibility to conserve all this material, to make it known, to study it in a way that we can form ourselves, based on the history of yesterday in order to write the story of tomorrow. In any case, we cannot afford

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<sup>1</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Message* during the II Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church, 25<sup>th</sup> September 1997, 2.

not to tell everyone that the most precious gift we have is our very missionaries, their good example, their witness, whose memory, when kept alive, becomes seeds for tomorrow.

This challenge, this responsibility and this acknowledgment that we need to have in any case, remain open to all of us, and I invite everybody to put yourselves in motion:

- a. Let us go back to the practice of writing the MISSION DIARY and that of the MISSIONARY, the only fountain by means of which we can drink from our own well.
- b. Let us narrate and put into writing the testimonies by our past missionaries, paying special attention to the communities and to the mission which we have brought into being.
- c. Let us collect and conserve any material produced by our missionaries, especially work of art, designs, projects, photos and others.
- d. Let us establish "memorial places:" museums and/or cultural centres, expression of the life of our institute, of the participation of the people, of the contributions of the communities and the peoples with whom we have journeyed.
- e. Let us care for, update and keep in order our regional archives: this is a sign of respect, solidarity, and communion with every missionary person who belongs to the Consolata family.

Let us try to recover those cultural items that characterize our history, but especially good examples, witness of those who came before us, so that we do not forget but rather continue our mission with zeal and passion.

### 3. The Value of a Missionary Method

It goes without saying that the age of the mission is not yet over. But we need to wean ourselves from the old methods if we want to avoid the crisis and constant frustrations. We need to change.

The future of the mission is under serious scrutiny in our days. We are not sure how things will be, but of one thing we are sure, that is, the theological dimension of the mission will never change. In other words, the salvific plan of God for humanity has to remain relevant up to the end of time. On the other hand, though, this mission has been entrusted to man and so tragically tied to human condition, history and events. The missionary models that we have at hand reflect their historical characteristics. There are many models as historical epochs. Initially, the primitive Church privileged the method of community witnessing of life and holiness. Successively the idea of planting the Church became dominant. This later methodology involved the sending of missionaries to foreign land to preach and to convert others to the Christian Faith. This method became known as mission *ad gentes*. This

is the method that has been in practice for well over five hundred years and the one which most of our missionaries are conversant with. Unfortunately, this missionary method is at the moment in deep crisis. This is evident from the fact that this model of mission no longer appeals to new vocations. In addition, it is evident that more and more missionaries *ad gentes* feel less and less at home within the already well established local Churches. This kind of crisis is inviting us to look for a new method of doing mission!

#### 4. The Effort to Change

Both the Vatican Council and the successive Church authorities have invited the main actors in the area of mission *ad gentes* to embark on the path of change so that a new method of doing mission could be found. These directives are definitely seeking for a renewal and completion of mission *ad gentes*. We do point out nevertheless a strong, even if at time unconscious, resistance to abandon the old type of mission, the one we would call traditional or romantic.

Missionaries have conducted the mission *ad gentes* differently depending on their times and cultural origins. They have lived it without any particular motive, and many of them, without being aware of it, due to the influence and collusion with colonialism, western superiority complexes or economic arrogance which blinded the action of God and His grace. In which case the mission has been polluted by elements foreign to her.

For this reason, reflection on the future of the missions requires a review of the models of mission. We have to admit that this is a delicate topic because it involves passing judgement on persons, on past decisions and on what has been done – often with great personal and community sacrifices. Even if it sounds superfluous, we still feel the need to declare that we have no intention to judge the intentions, and even less still to doubt the holiness and dedication of our predecessors.

Our discourse is an attempt to identify the direction towards which the mission will probably head in the future facing us at the beginning of a new epoch, characterized by post-modern mentality, a new global culture, globalization, new religious fundamentalism, and serious forms of structured injustices. It appears to us that in such a context, the mission should be characterized by a strong personal and community witness of faith and Christian life; by a geographical catholicity, but also with anthropological dimension for the advancement of local cultures through the process of inculturation of the Gospel message; by an attitude of dialogue at three hundred and sixty degrees; and by an advancement of sharing, of solidarity and of a communion lived in the small Christian communities.

Thank you. Take courage and move on in the Lord!