

## **SAINT MICHAEL GARICOITS' MISSIONARY DIMENSION FROM THE LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE**

My report will try to meet the following objectives:

1. To underline, in our Founder, the profound motivations which make him a true and avant-garde missionary, in full harmony with the Church of his times and generously open to the needs of mankind of his times.
2. To analyse some operative orientations of today's Church, specifically in Latin America, in order to stress the topicality of our charisma and perhaps to get us to assume with greater radicalism St. Michael's impulses, making them ours, as they are the same impulses of the Heart of Christ and of our mother Church who attempts to respond to today's world with a more inculturated Evangelisation.

Often, our actions, our works and even our crucial decisions do not correspond to the profound motivations of our spirit; rather, they respond to external pressure or selfish interests.

We act out of convenience, letting ourselves be carried by life and its events. Or else, we act out of fear or under the great pressure of lack of confidence. Due to this, there is no clear path in our actions, in our decisions. We resemble "a reed shaken by the wind" mentioned by Jesus (Lk. 7,24).

Great personalities and great Saints, like St. Michael Garicoits, however, reveal very strong motivations, rooted in the depths of their being, which make up the driving force of all their actions, their works, their decisions, their writings, etc.

Today, within the celebrations of the bicentennial, it is not only interesting but of vital importance, to emphasise the profound motivations which made St Michael Garicoits a true missionary, even if he never left his native country, nor, according to the historians, did he participate in any parochial "mission", apart from his routine sacerdotal ministry.<sup>1</sup>

Over the recent years, particularly after the Vatican Council II, the Congregation is trying to rediscover and redefine with greater clarity its original Charisma to make it become in us and for us the serious motivation orienting our actions and enabling us to make our works topical remaining faithful to the signs of the times and to the history of our Congregation.

### **Saint Michael Garicoits' missionary charisma**

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Seminar on St Michael Garicoits' Spirituality, Book 4, p. 11 (Paraguay 1982)

We say that Saint Michael never participated to “Missions”, nor did he cross the ocean like “missionaries” do. Witnesses of his time affirm that our Saint had no great talent as a preacher. An old woman said: “I heard him talking, but I didn’t like him. He had a peculiar style which did not meet the taste of this region; his way of preaching was not appreciated, as if he was a man of little talent...”. Fr. Etchecopar witnesses: “Father Garicoits, by nature, was not gifted for preaching of high stature, the poor knowledge of dialect hindered him; yet, I know and I state that he never tried to escape his duty to preach to an assembly of the faithful when he had to”.

Nevertheless, Saint Michael will form an excellent group of missionaries, because he had a missionary spirit. Mgr. D’Astros, already in 1828, had manifested to Fr. Lassalle the project of founding a society of diocesan missionaries. He wrote: “I reflected at length on what I could do with the house of Betharram after the transfer of the seminary, and I believe that the best thing to do would be to use it as a house for the missionaries. The missionaries will increase devotion to this holy place, the great sinners coming from far will always find a charitable minister to throw them into the pool. The stations of the Cross will be preached with zeal by these missionaries. They will be able to preach retreats for worldly men who will breath here, absorbed in prayer, an atmosphere of faith and mercy”.

This project could not be realised. Mgr. D’Astros was appointed bishop of Toulouse and Fr. Lassalle died shortly after.

Already in 1834, Fr. Garicoits, superior of the seminary of Betharram, or better, as he used to say, “superior of the four walls of a huge building”, thought that the time had come to start a project longed for in his missionary heart. Encouraged by the Superior General and Founder of the Daughters of the Cross, St. Jeanne Elisabeth Bichier des Ages, he asked the bishop, Mgr. d’Arbou, for the authorisation to found in Betharram a society of auxiliary priests, for the missions, for the spiritual exercises and for the youth education.

At this point, it seems important to me to try to interpret the profound motivations which brought St Michael to launch himself in this challenge and why he wanted to give a missionary nature to the new community.

Within his family, he had learnt to love the Church and to fight for her: his father Arnaud and his mother Gratianne used to welcome and hide in their farm the refractory priests during the French Revolution, and to accompany them, at night, through forests and mountains to the Spanish border.

We know his sufferings when he had to postpone his first communion because of Fr. Barbaste. He was so sad that he could hardly sleep. And this experience will make of him an untiring defender and an apostle of early communion. An honest and deep love for Jesus Christ had matured in his spirit.

His priestly vocation was fortified by the witness of venerable shepherds, like the parish-priest of Saint-Palais, from whom Michael learnt his first Latin lessons, like Fr. Dargagnaratz, who was in charge of the young seminarist while at the service of the bishop of Bayonne and, later on, at the small seminary at Aire, run by Fr. Lalanne, where he became friends with Fr. Guimon, who will be one of his first companions and who will stand out for his apostolic and missionary spirit.

The short, yet intense pastoral experience as vicar at Cambo, where he helped and practically replaced the old, paralysed parish priest, brought him in immediate contact with the people; he could touch the profound faith of some, next to the coldness of others, the desire for a sound doctrine, next to the mistakes of a bourgeoisie, heir of Voltaire and the

Revolution. A generous, solid apostolic spirit matured in Saint Michael. With no great talent as preacher and despite a certain linguistic difficulty, he succeeds however in convincing and converting.

Father Rossigneux, professor at the University, later a Betharramite and director of the college in Oloron, left this witness: "I saw many preachers, I heard the most perfect in this field, but I have to recognise that I have never met anyone able to penetrate in the heart the way Fr. Garicoits does. The others surprise us, shock us; he touches our raw spot and obliges us to reflect."

The main feature of a missionary is not to leave his family or his native country, rather to adhere to the person of Christ to such an extent as assume his mission with the same spirit of Christ. Without the love for Christ, detachment from such natural, legitimate affections would have no meaning. "I will make you fishers of men" (Mt. 4,19), "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation" (Mk. 16,15), "I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice" (Jn. 10,16), "He saw a great throng, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mk. 6,34).

St Michael's missionary charisma comes from the contemplation of the missionary heart of Christ: "Sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired, but a body hast thou prepared for me... Then I said, I have come to do thy will, O God" (Heb. 10,5-7). "At the sight of this marvellous spectacle, the priests of Betharram felt drawn to dedicate themselves to imitating Jesus, humble and obedient, and to working whole-heartedly to bring the same happiness to others, under the protection of Mary; she was always disposed to do what God wanted and was always submissive to what God did" (Preface to the Constitutions of 1838).

His sincere love for Christ brings him necessarily to the engagement with the brothers sharing the mission of the Saviour. "Why is our society named Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus? To be particularly united to this divine Heart that says to his Father: Here I am!, to be his co-operators for the salvation of souls" (D.S. 43-44).

Here I am means for St Michael to devote himself heart and soul to the pastoral ministry at the parish of Cambo, to assume with competence the teaching of philosophy at the seminary of Betharram; it is also to do God's will as superior of four walls, or to consecrate oneself with fatherly and motherly love to the accompaniment and formation of the first Betharramite community; while all the others were leaving for the missions, he remained faithful to the duty of his condition, as a reference-point for pilgrims, priests and even bishops coming to him for spiritual direction or reconciliation.

His faithful obedience to God's Will, in the accomplishment of the duty in his state, will form in our Founding Saint a heart willing to take on the vast mission beyond the ocean in Latin America.

## The Mission in America

“After all the members had taken seats, we sang the hymn to the Holy Spirit followed by prayer; then the Superior explained, in a religious silence, the main reason for calling the assembly. **Was the Society willing to accept the mission which had been offered to go and accomplish the functions of the sacred ministry in the diocese of Buenos Aires?** This is the serious question the Society is called to pronounce itself upon.

The Superior and then all the members present express successively and by order of age the reasons for accepting the offered mission, and the reasons for refusing it. After detailed analysis of the matter, we went to secret ballot. **The first counting resulted in 20 positive votes out of 21 voters.** Therefore, the Superior states that the mission in the diocese of Buenos Aires has been accepted by our Society”.

The transcription of this brief Act of the third general Congregation of the Fathers of the Sacred Heart, dated September 16th 1854, written by Fr. Miéyaa (cf. NEF 405), is a faithful witness of the spirit characterising the first Community faced with a mission that was not so simply to take on.

God’s will manifests itself through the authority of the Superiors, but also through the social and ecclesial situation. The migration of the Basque people towards the mouth of the Rio de la Plata had taken alarming proportions at that time.

*“After the fall of Rosas (1852), Argentina decided to promote immigration to benefit the country: “to govern is to repopulate”. One of the first initiatives taken by Urquiza was the creation of agricultural colonies. With this in view, he created the Department for Immigration and offered benefits to the families willing to settle in this country, by granting the respect for their beliefs, accommodation on arrival in Buenos Aires, interest-free loan, government land for rent, animals and tools, appropriate seeds and vast protection for implantation. This is how Argentina succeeded in creating one of the most considerable migratory streams in the world”.*<sup>2</sup>

The entire clergy of the Basque Countries, as well as the clergy of the villages near Béarn, in Landes and Bigorre regions, was seriously preoccupied by this movement which was pushing the most brilliant and strong youth called by the mirage of richness towards Argentina. Some figures reveal the seriousness of the problem: from 1845 to 1855, the parish of Saint-Pé-sur-Nivelle sees the departure of 1578 believers out of 2097 and in the parish of Mendiondo 320 out of 1240. It is calculated that the sailing boats of Bayonne were transporting 2000 people per year towards Rio de la Plata (cf. NEF, Supplement n. 2).

Actually, the Basque community flourished very rapidly in South America.

*“Around Buenos Aires, between Flores and Lujan, the Basque people exploited a vast network of sheds and were, for many decades, the traditional suppliers of milk for the growing towns. The Basque milkman, sprightly and early-rising, with his inseparable hat, became a popular personality, challenging rains and marshes, to serve punctually the clients of the harbour-town (Buenos Aires)...*

*Together with the milk he also brought fresh butter, wrapped in a white cloth; he was paid at the end of the month, after keeping the amount in mind”.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>B. Sarthou, Historia centenaria del Colegio San José de Buenos Aires

<sup>3</sup>B. Sarthou, Historia centenaria

What will happen to the souls of those brothers, far away from their native country, in search for material welfare, practically with no spiritual accompaniment? The missionaries of St Michael shared in this deep anguish with the bishops and the clergy of the region. The Basque parish priests finally took the decision to gather, on a Sunday, to try, from the height of the pulpit, to discourage this huge exodus which was jeopardising family and social stability. The message was clear and strong: “One soul is worth more than all the treasures of America; the road to Buenos Aires leads to perdition”.

At the same time, the voice of the Bishop of Buenos Aires, Mgr. Escalada, arrives from America with greater and greater insistence: “We need Basque priests willing to cross the ocean to accompany and fortify the faith of many immigrants and to preach the Gospel in their mother-tongue”. The request is addressed directly to the Bishop of Bayonne.

The worries arising everywhere in the ecclesial communities of the Basque Countries and Béarn region, reinforced by the appeal to caution of their shepherds; the pressing request of the Bishop of Buenos Aires from the far-away lands of America; the religious community of Betharram itself, where some members, especially Fr. Guimon, insist that the Bishop, Mgr. Lacroix, send missionaries to that country; and, finally, the official request by the Bishop to the Founder, after the negative reply given by the missionaries of Hasparren, limited in number...; in the convergence of all these events, God’s will is clearly revealed. Saint Michael himself wants to be a volunteer despite his delicate health and his responsibilities in managing the Society. Already, he had expressed his desire to entrust to younger hands the running of the Society and to leave in order “*to evangelise our Basque brothers*” to the Daughters of the Cross.

Mgr. Lacroix will introduce the missionaries of Betharram with words of praise in his letter to the Bishop of Buenos Aires: “*I have the pleasure of offering you some priests, picked among the best of the diocese, to be engaged under your jurisdiction and authority in the spiritual tasks required by the situation of these Basque and Béarn people. These priests, Monsignor are reliable not only for their moral integrity, but also for their great mercy, their ability and skill for all functions of the sacred ministry with zeal and prudence. They offered themselves, with total abnegation, to the service of their brothers living in the regions of Buenos Aires and Montevideo*”.<sup>4</sup>

The rest of the story is known and underlines the great availability of Saint Michael and of his first community to reply to God’s will which manifests itself through his Church.

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<sup>4</sup>Seminario sobre la espiritualidad de San Miguel Garicoits, Book 4, p. 17

## Saint Michael Garicoits in today's Latin America.

The Latin American continent is known for its great contradictions and its great hopes. A huge natural richness badly distributed and exploited generates deep, dangerous social unbalances. The vast impoverished masses coexist with excessively rich, totally insensitive élite; worse yet, strongly linked to organised Mafia groups and to political-military powers. Political and social freedom, obtained through many battles over the last centuries, left a great desire for independence, frequently stifled by the neo-colonialism produced by the present market economy where the interests of powerful multinationals dictate the rules and the monetary policy, leaving most of the population in a state of servilism and impossibility to take decisions, which are maybe even more painful than those of the times of slavery. "To find in the suffering face of the poor the face of the Lord is a challenge to all Christians towards a profound personal and ecclesial conversion. In faith we encounter faces disfigured by hunger, the result of inflation, of foreign debt and of social injustices" (S. Domingo, 178).

The beautiful and rich popular religiosity, strongly Marian, fails to christianise daily life and family life and has little influence on the social culture; nor can it defend itself from the paganism of consumerism, nor against the invasion of all sorts of sects and pseudo-religious movements.

On the other hand, the encouraging situation of the Basic Ecclesial Communities, the creative, young dynamism of many parishes, dioceses and apostolic movements which are trying to gather multitudes of joyful, enthusiastic believers, the growing participation of the laity who, by number and quality of training, contribute a practical, realistic dimension to the pastoral. The entirety resembles a huge workshop where, through trial and error, the future of a people on the move, certainly accompanied by the Spirit of God, is being built.

For those of us who feel like missionaries, it is undoubtedly an enriching experience. It no longer consists in evangelising some pagans, but to insert and try to inculturate ourselves in a young, dynamic, creative Church, strongly committed to the reality of the people, by walking, the way the Bishops of Paraguay used to say some years ago, among "God's consolations and mankind's persecutions". Five hundred years of evangelisation are at the same time a short and a long period: it is no longer a matter of founding, nor of creating new churches, not even of daring to implant imported pastoral methods which would be like another colonisation, but to follow the path of an adult Church, even if still very dependent on the solidarity of other Churches.

Betharram is well placed in this continent, the Beau Rameau is now a leafy tree: in 140 years in Argentina, 135 years in Uruguay, 92 years in Paraguay, 60 years in Brazil; a significant presence in big colleges and parishes which marked and continue to mark the history and culture of the respective countries.

We might wonder: **to what extent and how is St Michael's missionary charisma conserved and experienced?** Undoubtedly, it is possible to give a more evangelical meaning and content to the Here I am, as it was for Saint Michael.

**To be present is not enough, it is necessary to launch ourselves.** You did not want sacrifices and offerings (symbols of a static, installed religion), but you have prepared a body for me (symbol of vitality and dynamism). Then I said, Here I am; and he became man (crossing the immense gap between Creator and creature). Saint Michael's Here I am was strongly missionary, continuously motivated by the search for God's will and obedience to Him, manifested through human mediations (Church, Superiors, people, social reality, etc.). Faithful to the Here I am, he opened and shut down houses, according to the challenges present at that time and in reply to the appeals of the Church, always helped, we must not forget, by sincere community discernment and by his great spirit of faith.

This same **missionary spirit at the time of foundation** must be recovered in Latin America in a better way. Betharram is quite young as far as the average age of the religious is concerned, and even younger if we think of the thousands young men with whom we work in the colleges and parishes. Some traditional works and structures seem to be considered heavy by the young, a burden which may be an obstacle for the mission. It is difficult to start when the burden is heavy and when many are the goods from which one must detach oneself. What is sad and dangerous is when this burden paralyses us and blocks us in a lifestyle far from and indifferent to the surrounding reality. Many say that if we are present in this or that work, it is because the Church keeps on requesting it, or because reality requires it... finally, in obedience to the Here I am. All this is true, but when talking about a missionary spirit one must keep in mind those voices coming from farther away, from the Church who, with motherly love, cares for many children who can get lost in the outskirts of the large cities, or are abandoned in depopulated, impoverished countryside. These situations launch a challenge and are social problems on a vast scale urgently requiring the presence of the Church, before they become a huge pastoral vacuum, which will be occupied by others (not always of Christian spirit). Saint Michael used to incite his fellows to be a “mobile camp” ready to go anywhere they were called, even and above all to the most difficult ministries, unwanted by others. In the interprovincial meetings, in preparation for the bicentennial, the wish arises for a new foundation in a fifth Latin American country, to incite to keep the missionary flame of our institute burning.

A new foundation may not seem convenient, considering the situation of extreme dispersion of our religious communities, but it was the same situation in the Congregation when Saint Michael was asked to supply volunteers for America. It was the fact of opening to the mission that obliged the setting of priorities and, finally it was of great benefit for the institute, pushed in its growth and led to define better its charisma. This same experience has been lived by many congregations.

Another great challenge facing our Congregation in Latin America is **poverty**. We must give this word the same meaning given to it by the Bishops gathered in Puebla, when they said: “Most of our brothers continue to live in conditions of poverty and even misery which has become worse”. In the explanatory note they continued: “We remind that they lack in the most basic material goods, in contrast with the accumulation of riches in the hands of a minority, an accumulation often obtained on the poverty of the many. The poor do not lack only material goods, but also, on the level of human dignity, a full social and political participation. To this category belong first of all our natives, farmers, workers, urban marginalised and, above all, the women of these social classes, who are doubly oppressed and marginalised” (**Puebla, 1135**).

We must recognise, without any intention to generalise nor to be polemic, that as Betharramite religious we continue to form a quite rich élite, as far as material goods are concerned, that maybe we share in or we give, but without a real sense of solidarity with those who became poor. Nowadays, human dignity requires, especially by the consecrated, that we become poor, that we walk along with the poor, that we evangelise starting from the poor. This is the aim of spirituality and, even more, of the charisma of Incarnation which is proper to Betharram. Perhaps, the event of the bicentennial will help us to honestly face this challenge, overcoming sterile arguments and by using a brave, clear preferential option for the poor, in the Spirit of the Latin American Church, which must become ours, that of the sons of St Michael.

There are other important topics, or better, options assumed by the Church from Medellin to Santo Domingo, which require us to locate seriously on a congregational level

and that seem to me too often forgotten in our meetings and community assemblies: family, youth, New Evangelisation, inculturation and, in general, the pastoral guidelines of our diocesan or national Churches.

To go back to St Michael's Charisma means to live that deep, sincere love and that insertion in the local Church which characterised the first Betharramite communities, both in France and here in Latin America. To think and to feel with and like the Church: within her, God's will manifests itself.

St Michael's missionary spirit was generated by a great love for Christ and for his Church, it manifested itself in an attitude of solidarity with the social and religious situation of his time, and became concrete in the foundation of communities, "real mobile camps of picked soldiers".

The celebration of the Bicentennial of the birth of our founder is the occasion to rediscover the eternal youth of our Saint which is the same eternity of the Spirit of God. If we succeed in giving our lives and all our works a true missionary dimension, the Congregation will experience a new awakening of vocations, the way it did at the times of the foundations in America.

May the Virgin of Betharram, missionary of New Evangelisation, open our hearts and lead us to the encounter with all those who are running the risk to fade in a culture without love, without religion.

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