

MISSION, A SPACE FOR VULNERABLE GROUPS

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Introduction

The twenty-first century has experienced the most dramatic and rapid changes in human history. Technological advances have changed what we understand by distance, time, and knowledge. What society had considered an absolute truth is now merely a temporary snapshot of a specific era.

The pace of life is accelerated; industrialized foods and the consumption of psychoactive substances, among other factors, have led to an increase in chronic-degenerative diseases. Moreover, an increasingly frequent phenomenon is on the rise: the increase in the birth of children with disabilities, behavioral disorders, and developmental impairments.

This implies that the ways of doing mission must be flexible, contextual, and coherent with the reality that is lived. The major question is how sound the church's evangelistic proposal is, and whether its approach constitutes an expression of incarnation, inculturation, or acculturation in its engagement with vulnerable groups.

The purpose of this article is to offer a topic for reflection to the reader, who approaches this text with the openness to engage in self-reflection, not only regarding their own missional practice but also regarding the Church of the Nazarene itself.

Development

The Church of the Nazarene arose as a response to God's call to bring the gospel to the vulnerable groups of a society that lived in axiological relativism, the rejection of the lower social classes and migrant groups. Its birth "did not seek to add another denomination to the already lengthy list existing on earth, but rather to organize a church that would distinctively represent the doctrine of holiness, and to foster a spiritual home for those who received this experience" (Vail 2002); it emerged as a theological response to rejection and discrimination.

Although contemporary society believes that our fast-paced, ever-changing life holds few constants or certainties, the Bible will always possess the immutable and enduring truth: the Word made flesh, out of love for the world, to save it from sin and redeem it. That truth has been, is, and will forever be the truth that changes the world. In this sense, "Love becomes incarnate and therefore becomes real, emerging from the ambiguity of mere sentiment into practical love for one's neighbor... love for God is the content, the very substance of what must be made incarnate; for in the Christian faith, the essence lies in entering into the circulation of God's Love" (Silvia G. 1981, 27).

When one thinks of mission and evangelism, some passages immediately come to mind, such as Matthew 28:18–20 and Acts 13:47. There are several ways to communicate the message: podcasts, videos, films, brochures, and evangelistic expressions such as "God loves you, and you have hope." Even more implicitly, one can come to assume that people will always be the same, with their problems. However, people have changed and will continue to change in an accelerated way: every day, there are more people with disabilities, and therefore, more and more families are involved. As an example, I present the figures in Mexico: by 2020,

there were 1,795,000 people with disabilities, according to the XII General Census of Population and Housing; by 2024, there were already 8.8 million people, and it is expected that, in 2035, according to CONEVAL, they could reach 22 million in this nation alone.

The 22 million people with disabilities have a family, siblings, a way of life, and a way of understanding the world that cannot be minimized or ignored. This population has had its own history of care and vulnerability, as diverse as disability is, and as vast as the planet is. Depending on the region of the world and the conception of humanity that is held, people with disabilities could be venerated, killed, sold, exploited, feared, or hidden, among many other options. Their trajectory in history has changed; today, they are subjects of laws, thanks to the efforts of their families, support from various institutions, social struggle, and organizations in defense of minorities.

Faced with this reality, how is the work of the church and its evangelizing mission inserted in the fulfillment of God's mission and his prophetic work? For years, the church focused its support on assistance, creating spaces where the disabled were locked up for being the object of family shame. Another option was spiritualized care, where difference was understood as a demonic power disturbing the image of God in them. Today, it is known that many of those extroverted expressions, uncontrolled screams, stereotyped movements, among many other expressions of being and living, are just another way of understanding the image of God: people with disabilities are God's creation, made in God's image and likeness, like every other human being. As Psalm 139:13-16 says:

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. (NIV)

Like everyone else, they have a fallen nature that requires Christ's justification and redemption. If this is the missional starting point, the question arises: how will the church convey the message of salvation, and how will mission be understood?

The integral mission poses the urgency of "rediscovering the transformative dynamism of the gospel, asking ourselves about the effect of missionary action from an integral vision of the human being and society" (Escobar 1999). Apparently, this exercise of rediscovering the object of study of integral mission is cyclical. What was a priority in the 1970s and 1980s is no longer so. Violeta Gisselle López, a researcher at the Institute of Cellular Physiology of the UNAM, mentions that, worldwide, in 2000, there was one child with autism out of 166; as of 2020, it intensified to one in 54 (Rivera Arteaga 2024).

Samuel Escobar, in the last century, declared the following: "It seems as if the growth of churches and denominations has concentrated attention on the ecclesiastical machinery itself, closing its eyes to the needs of the world, silencing compassion in a typical process of gentrification" (Escobar 1969, 16).

Fifty years later, we risk continuing to close our eyes to the world's needs. Today, we are no longer worried about the fall of the Berlin Wall or the end of the Cold War. Rather, we talk about a world without borders, citizens of the world, and also about autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit, and hyperactivity, among many other terms.

The Church of the Nazarene has the opportunity to formulate a comprehensive care strategy and properly define God's mission. The line separating an acultural intervention from an incultural one is very fine when it comes to disability. It requires clarity about how the church is conceived and about the intrinsic value ascribed to the person with a disability. To avoid falling into the aculturation of vulnerability, we must understand that there are no first- and second-class human beings, that there is no "normality" versus "abnormality," but rather a humanity enslaved to sin that needs Christ's salvation and his redemptive message. This is realized when God's mission is perceived as the very incarnation of the church within the context of disability. "The message of salvation also entails a message of judgment against every form of alienation, oppression, and discrimination; and we must not fear denouncing evil and injustice wherever they may exist" (Evangelical Council of Venezuela 2024).

In the disability sector, there is a significant lack of pastoral care. When a father or mother knows that they will live with a son or daughter with a disability, they experience a deep mourning for the lost imaginary child, which was built over nine months and never arrived. That grief can be resolved at best, but in most cases, it becomes an ever-open wound. In a constant coming and going from specialist to specialist, from one office to another to find the best treatments, the best therapy, but also from church to church, looking for someone who understands them, who allows them to congregate with the striking way of being of their family, the sounds that their children can generate, the unresolved pain of siblings with people with disabilities—what will be the best church, the best pastoral care, and the prophetic work?

We can, as a denomination, go one step further and spearhead God's mission for vulnerable groups with disabilities. Just as Christ, before closing his saving and redemptive work, looked upon the beloved disciple and commended him to his mother, as we read in John 19:26-27:

When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home. (NIV)

The church will one day be the beloved disciple in whom the father or mother of a person with a disability can before passing away, leave all his fear not to die, but to leave his offspring helpless, so that he can die knowing that the church of Christ accepts his child and will help him follow the path of life in a safe community of faith, loving and appropriate to their lifestyle, seeking that each member, with or without disabilities, be more like Jesus.

Conclusion

The Church of the Nazarene constantly poses challenges and generates reflections that maintain the relevance of its interventions under the Christocentric perspective that gave rise to it. Its worldwide emphasis has always been holiness and service, a commitment to God's mission of making disciples in all nations.

Responding to the contexts in which faith communities develop will always require a great commitment. If the number of people with disabilities grows in the proportion projected by international bodies, then a mission field is opened that is little studied, attended to, and not always with an inclusive intention, but with assistance. Proposing a theological position from the premise of the image of God in disability will lead to God's mission in vulnerability.

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