

ON VINCENTIAN INVOLVEMENT IN PARISHES

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Vincent de Paul was not keen about the involvement of the Congregation of the Mission in parishes. His reluctance to accept them, while by no means an absolute refusal, is evident from the earliest days of the Company until the time of his death.

In this article I offer some reflections on the Congregation and parishes, in three steps.

- I. The attitude of St. Vincent
- II. Some significant changes that have taken place between the 17th and 20th centuries
- III. Some reflections on Vincentian involvement in parishes today

I. THE ATTITUDE OF ST. VINCENT

Vincent has often been described as the most balanced religious leader of his day. He blended theory and practice adeptly. While he had clear principles, he applied them with flexibility. His life and ministry give clear evidence of his adroitness in doing so. By his own account, for example, simplicity was the virtue he loved most, but he also knew very well how to remain silent when prudence demanded it. He believed firmly in the importance of fidelity to one's vocation and at times struggled mightily to keep members from leaving the Community. But he also knew that some members had a corrosive effect and he thanked God when they left, even hastening their way out at times.¹

Vincent's attitude toward parishes shows the same delicate interplay between theory and practice. In theory, he was reluctant to accept them since he regarded them as lying outside the scope of the Congregation of the Mission. In practice, occasionally he accepted them. Two kinds of reasons led him to soften his objections. First, at times he saw parishes as a positive way of achieving the goals of the Congregation. For example, he accepted parishes attached to seminaries so that the candidates might get experience in exercising ministry.² Secondly, at times pragmatic political considerations forced him to swallow his reluctance. For instance, when the queen or Cardinal Richelieu³ requested the presence of the missionaries in a parish, he found it

¹SV II, 381. "It would be so much better to have fewer men than to have a number of difficult individuals.... Ten good men will do more for God than a hundred of those people. Let us purge, Monsieur, let us purge the Company of worldly persons and those who are not pleasing in the eyes of God, and he will give it increase and bless it."

²Cf. SV II, 377.

³It is clear that St. Vincent negotiated a very "missionary" contract at Richelieu. The contract, besides entrusting the parish to the Congregation of the Mission, also provided for the giving of missions in the area, the preparation of those about to be ordained as priests, and the giving of spiritual exercises to priests. Richelieu also became a very active center for the work of the Daughters of Charity. Cf. SV I, 412-413.

almost impossible to refuse.⁴

But Vincent's hesitations about parishes are very clear. He writes to Bernard Codoing on January 30, 1643:

⁴For a very interesting treatment of the works founded by St. Vincent, cf. J. M. Román, "Las fundaciones de San Vicente," in *Vincentiana* XXVIII (1984), 457-486. Cf. also, Román, *San Vicente de Paúl. Biografía*, (Madrid, 1981) 294-312.

As to your second letter, concerning the parishes, we pray to God unceasingly about them, after having had four or five conferences on this subject without being able to come to an affirmative or a negative decision. I trust that we shall furnish more good priests for the Church through our seminaries than the Company itself (could ever give to a diocese), if after many prayers and discussions, the Company decides in favor of not accepting parishes. Be assured, Monsieur, that you could not put forth any reason, for or against, which has not been examined and considered by the Company in the long period of time it has been reflecting on this....⁵

Vincent had already written to Codoing in the previous year describing "the difficulty you know we have always had in accepting parishes, except for the one at Richelieu."⁶ In a similar vein he writes to Jean Bourdet in 1646 objecting to the latter's accepting a chapel in Plancoët, stating: "... I said that if we are occupied with attending to the devotions of that holy chapel, we are setting aside Our Lord's intention for us, which is to go to the rural areas to seek out the poor souls...."⁷ Seven years later he tells Emerand Bajoue: "... Parishes are not our business. We have very few of them, as you know, and the ones we have were given us against our wishes, either by our founders or by the bishops. We could not refuse them without breaking with them, and perhaps Brial is the last one we will ever accept because the further we advance, the more involved we get in such matters."⁸ In 1655 he admonishes Jacques Chiroye: "Well now, Monsieur, since you acknowledge that the best thing for the Company is not to have parishes and that it is against the custom for individual confreres to have them, why then do you not do what I have asked you so many times to do; namely, to hand over to the Bishop the one you have?"⁹ A month later he writes to Monsieur Thomas at Angoulême: "A second reason why we cannot accept the benefit you wish to confer on us, Monsieur, is that parishes tie us down too much. We have taken them only under pressure and have resolved not to accept any more. The two or three we do possess have served only to make us realize what a hindrance they are to our functions, and how advantageous it is for us all to be obliged to go from village to village for the instruction and salvation of the people, without our attaching ourselves to towns or certain parishes that cannot lack workers. It is to be feared that in the course of time our members might be satisfied with remaining in the parishes."¹⁰

Having assumed some parishes, Vincent mentions on a number of other occasions his reluctance to get involved any further with them.¹¹ He confesses to having second thoughts even about those parishes that were attached to seminaries, such as at Cahors and Agde.¹² In his later

⁵SV II, 359.

⁶SV II, 251.

⁷SV II, 601.

⁸SV IV, 617.

⁹SV V, 401.

¹⁰SV V, 430.

¹¹SV VI, 334.

¹²SV VI, 625.

years he states that he does not want to accept any further parishes¹³ and that he would be happy to get rid of those which the Congregation already has.¹⁴

Missionary mobility was the key factor in his reluctant attitude.¹⁵ When negotiating the purchase of a house in Rome, Vincent, as well as the confreres whom he consulted, decided to turn down the offer of a house at San Giovanni Mercatelli because it had a parish attached to it and thus might impede the missionaries from going to work among the country people, something which "would be a great pity and would tend to pervert the spirit Our Lord has bestowed on the Company."¹⁶

Even when parishes were attached to the Congregation of the Mission, Vincent wanted to be sure that the Congregation had its own freedom in appointing and removing pastors¹⁷ and that it not be obliged to render an account to the bishops regarding the finances of the Congregation.¹⁸

The final two years of Vincent's life exhibit the same ambivalent attitude that earlier years had seen. In spite of Vincent's frequent objection to accepting parishes and his concern about the difficulties that they had caused the Company, even when they were attached to seminaries, he recommends taking one on in Rome just two years before his death: "Experience has made us recognize that where there is a seminary it is good that we have a parish so that seminarians can get experience there. They learn pastoral functions better by carrying them out in practice rather than by merely knowing the theory."¹⁹ But in January 1659 he refuses to take on a chapel, a center for pilgrimages, which had been offered to the Congregation. He states: "It would be difficult for our priests, who gave themselves to God to go from village to village to evangelize the poor, to renounce the missions in order to be attached to a single church...."²⁰ Yet even as he was dying, he accepted a parish. The journal of Jean Gicquel, recording the final days of Vincent's life, notes that on September 16, 1660, Vincent was asked about establishing a seminary to which the Parish of Notre Dame La Maiour would be attached. Vincent replied: "We can receive the parish with the seminary even though that would be a bit beyond the practice of our Institute...."²¹

¹³SV VII, 174.

¹⁴SV VII, 358.

¹⁵SV V, 233-234.

¹⁶SV V, 459.

¹⁷SV II, 195; V, 201.

¹⁸SV XIII, 182.

¹⁹SV VII, 253-254.

²⁰SV VII, 443-444.

²¹SV XIII, 181.

II. SOME SIGNIFICANT CHANGES THAT HAVE TAKEN PLACE BETWEEN THE 17TH AND 20TH CENTURIES

Over the centuries three changes have had great impact on the Congregation's relationship to parishes. The first occurred in the 17th century itself; the other two are of much more recent origin.

1. *Involvement in the royal parishes.* Shortly after the death of St. Vincent the Congregation became involved, reluctantly, in the French royal parishes. At the request of Anne of Austria, Fr. Alméras, Vincent's successor, accepted the parish at Fontainebleau. The Congregation took possession of it on November 27, 1661. Alméras named Antoine Durand as the first superior; he was accompanied by nine other confreres.

In 1672, Alméras informed the confreres that the king had asked the Congregation to take on the parish in Versailles. He also told them that he had reluctantly accepted the king's request. On October 6, 1674, Edme Jolly, Alméras' successor, signed the official contract. Nicolas Thibault went there as superior, accompanied by six priests, three brothers, and one cleric.²²

There can be little doubt that the huge investment of personnel in these two royal parishes cost the Congregation of the Mission considerably in terms of missionary mobility. It also identified the Congregation with the *ancien régime*. The Vincentians would pay a dear price for this at the time of the French Revolution.

2. *"Parochial assimilation."* Our current statistics note that 1074 confreres are engaged in parish ministry, a very high percentage (31%) of our total membership. In comparison, the number of Vincentians involved in such foundational works of the Community as popular missions and seminaries is small.

This huge insertion of personnel into parishes is a relatively recent phenomenon in the Congregation. The closing of many seminaries and other institutions during the last 40 years apparently caught the Congregation, as well as many other Communities, rather unprepared. Not having formulated clear criteria as to where to redistribute their personnel, many provinces somewhat easily acceded to the request of bishops (and, often enough, of the confreres themselves) to work in parishes.

A recent study in the United States makes this observation:

²²Luigi Mezzadri and José María Román, *Storia della Congregazione della Missione*, I (Rome: CLV-Edizione Vincenziane, 1992) 171-193.

*The increasingly widespread insertion of members of religious orders into diocesan and parochial positions, to the point where such commitments take precedence over involvements in the lives of their Congregations, is a growing phenomenon in the United States. This trend, which is known as parochial assimilation, has had a dramatic effect on most religious orders.... It easily can lead to a compromise of the prophetic role of members of religious life.*²³

This phenomenon of "parochial assimilation" is not restricted to the United States but has also shown itself in many countries in Europe. It affects not just Vincentians, but many other communities too.²⁴

3. *Conditioned acceptance of missionary parishes.* The Vincentian Constitutions and Statutes, approved by the Holy See in 1984, recognize the place of genuinely missionary parishes within the framework of the ministries of the Congregation. Nonetheless, Statute 10 lays down four conditions for verifying whether a parish really manifests our mission:

- a. that the apostolate which we exercise there is in accord with the purpose and nature of our Institute,
- b. that the small number of pastors in the area requires our presence,
- c. that the parish consists, for the most part, of the really poor, or,
- d. that it is attached to a seminary where the confreres give pastoral formation.

While there is no doubt that there exist, within the Congregation, genuinely missionary parishes, which are an actualization of "the mission," one must surely ask whether it is healthy for the Congregation of the Mission to be so heavily engaged in parish ministry and whether or not a significant number of our parishes actually do meet the criteria set out in Statute 10.

Visibility is extremely important for the vitality of any congregation's charism. It should be *clear* that we are "missionary" — for the service of the poor and clergy, for our own well-being, and for vocational promotion. If a given parish, or any other work, does not clearly embody our charism, then Statute 1 reminds us: "We are gradually to withdraw from those apostolic works which, after due reflection, no longer seem to correspond to the vocation of the Congregation at the present time."

III. SOME REFLECTIONS ON VINCENTIAN INVOLVEMENT IN PARISHES TODAY

²³D. Nygren and M. Ukeritis, *The Future of Religious Orders in the United States* (Connecticut: Praeger Press, 1993) 250.

²⁴The problem of "parochial assimilation" was clearly recognized in the "Instrumentum Laboris" for the Synod of 1994 on Consecrated Life. Cf. para. 77.

The impact of the changes mentioned above on the Congregation, and particularly the last two (parochial assimilation and conditioned acceptance of missionary parishes) has been profound. Reflecting on the concerns of St. Vincent, the history of the Congregation, the conditions described in Statute 10, and the future that lies before us, I regard it as crucial that we examine the place which parish ministry will hold in the future. Gathering together various elements from our tradition, past and present, let me suggest the following characteristics as the basis for evaluating whether a parish is truly "Vincentian" and "missionary":

- a. *It is among the really poor.*

Of course, this is what the Congregation is all about. The poor are our lot. St. Vincent is eloquent on the subject:

Our inheritance, gentlemen and my brothers, is the poor, the poor; pauperibus evangelizare misit me. What happiness, gentlemen, what happiness! To do what our Lord came from heaven to earth to do, and by means of which we too shall go from earth to heaven, to continue the work of God...²⁵

- b. *The diocesan clergy lack the resources to staff it.*

Statute 10 states this criterion explicitly: "Parishes are included among the apostolic works of the Congregation... provided that the small number of pastors requires it." This is a very useful criterion, especially in growing dioceses and in missionary territories. When the number of diocesan priests is sufficient, then we should, as missionaries, move on.

It can be fatal to a missionary Congregation, St. Vincent warned,²⁶ if its members and its candidates begin to perceive themselves as little different from the diocesan clergy.

- c. *Our commitment to a parish is temporally limited (hopefully, by a clear contract).*

Contracts are very helpful. Unfortunately they have not yet found acceptance in many parts of the Church, even though Canon 681, § 2 very clearly mandates that bishops and communities which staff parishes in their dioceses should formulate them.²⁷

When a contract sets a time limit, it has the distinct advantage of reminding us that we are missionaries and that we hope eventually to go elsewhere. It reminds bishops of this same aspect of our vocation. We are not diocesan priests. Naturally, many bishops, focusing on the needs of their own dioceses, have the tendency to "domesticate" missionaries, hoping that they can always count on them to staff some of the works of their dioceses. Contracts can be a stimulant to such

²⁵SV XII, 4.

²⁶SV V, 430.

²⁷Canon 681, § 2: "In these cases a written agreement is to be made between the diocesan Bishop and the competent Superior of the institute. This agreement must expressly and accurately define, among other things, the work to be done, the members to be assigned to it and the financial arrangements." Cf. also, *Mutuae Relationes*, May 14, 1978 (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis LXX*) 473-506, # 57b; cf. *Ecclesiae Sanctae* I, 30, § 1.

bishops to seek out candidates for the diocesan clergy and provide good formation for them and for other pastoral agents.

- d. *We have definite missionary goals to be realized within that time frame. Among these is preparation for ongoing pastoral care in the future, particularly for training leaders in various ministries.*

We should be clear not only about *how long* we will be in a particular parish, but about what *we hope to do there* within that time frame. Only when we have formulated clear, specific goals can we evaluate whether we have reached them and have therefore accomplished our mission. When, as missionaries, we have laid a firm foundation, then we can hand over a parish or other works to the residential clergy with much more peace.

In some ways, preparation of future ministers is the principal missionary goal. We seek not only to provide pastoral care, but also *ongoing* care. Today it is evident that this means helping to prepare various pastoral agents: priests, deacons, sisters, brothers, catechists, teachers, Eucharistic ministers, readers, music ministers, youth ministers, etc. Preparation of others, clergy and laity, for a fuller participation in the evangelization of the poor is one of the principal ways of actualizing the purpose of the Congregation of the Mission.²⁸

- e. *Our commitment to the missionary parish is communal.*

Article 12, 4^o describes this characteristic of Vincentian ministry: "... a genuine sense of community in all our apostolic works, so that we may be supported by one another in our common vocation." As is evident, this applies to all our works, but it is especially relevant in regard to parishes since the phenomenon of "parochial assimilation," described above, often led to the dispersion of confreres in parishes where they served alone. Accustomed as some might be today to accepting the reality of isolated placements, it is important to note that St. Vincent was quite firm about living and working in community,²⁹ as are our present Constitutions.³⁰ In circumstances such as mission countries, where laboring alone sometimes seems necessary, then the local community plan must creatively address the problems created by isolated ministries so that confreres really do have a sense that they are members of a community on mission.

In any event, in all Vincentian missionary parishes, wherever they may be, the confreres should work closely together as a team and support one another in a rich common life.

- f. *Organized works of practical charity are functioning in the parish in the service of the needy.*

At the heart of St. Vincent's spirit lies practical, effective charity. He is best known for this characteristic. Wherever he went he organized "the Charities." It should be hard to imagine

²⁸C 1, 3E.

²⁹Cf. CR VIII, 2; SV I, 115; XIII, 144, 200, 206-207, 226, 232, 281.

³⁰Cf. C 21 ^o 1.

a *Vincentian* parish in which organized works of charity do not find a prominent place. This leads to the next characteristic.

- g. *Vincentian lay groups are being formed (Vincentian Marian Youth Groups, Society of St. Vincent de Paul, AIC, the Miraculous Medal Association, etc.).*

In recent years we have become quite conscious of ourselves as a *family*, living in the spirit of St. Vincent. It would be important that a *Vincentian* parish would reflect this.

Today there are numerous *Vincentian* groups. Their membership is growing rapidly. There are more than 900,000 members of the Vincent de Paul Society, 260,000 members of the AIC, and 200,000 members of the various *Vincentian* youth groups. Beyond this one finds countless members in the Miraculous Medal Association. Statute 7 encourages us to have a special concern for such groups.³¹

St. Vincent was very attentive to offering formation to the groups he founded. He always provided them with a rule of life. Similarly our parishes should be centers of rich guidance and formation for the members of our extended family.

- h. *Systematic instruction on the social teaching of the Church is offered.*

Among the essential characteristics that Statute 12 describes for our evangelization work is "attention to the realities of present-day society, especially to the factors that cause an unequal distribution of the world's goods, so that we can better carry out our prophetic task of evangelization." In this light our "Program for *Vincentian* Formation in the Major Seminary of the Congregation of the Mission"³² states:

*The study of the contemporary socio-economic-political situation and of the social teaching of the Church will prepare them [the seminarians] for pastoral activity, for knowing the forms of poverty, and for searching for its causes and for ways of responding to it within the context of our vocation.*³³

Pope John Paul II writes very forcefully in *Centesimus Annus*: "The 'new evangelization,' which the modern world urgently needs and which I have emphasized many times, must include among its essential elements *a proclamation of the Church's social doctrine.*"³⁴

³¹Naturally, as Statute 7 indicates, this demands that some confreres receive special preparation for this work: "Although all members should be willing to undertake this work, it is necessary for some to be more skilled in it."

³²Program, 37.

³³Cf. John Paul II, "Discourse of the Holy Father to the members of the Assembly," *Vincentiana* 1986, # 5-6, 417: "Dear Fathers and Brothers, search out, more than ever, with boldness, humility and skill, the causes of poverty and encourage short and long term solutions; adaptable and effective concrete solutions. By doing so, you will work for the credibility of the Gospel and of the Church."

³⁴*Centesimus Annus*, 5.

Vincentian parishes should provide clear instruction in this aspect of the Church's teaching which is so vital to the future well-being of the poor.

- i. *The "style" of ministry is simple and humble.*

Simplicity and humility are the first two "characteristic virtues" of the Company. If that is the style that St. Vincent asks of us, then it should surely characterize our parishes. Enemies of simplicity and humility are complicated language, hidden agendas, clericalism and authoritarianism. Our style, on the contrary, should be direct, clear, and deeply respectful of persons. A listening, inclusive environment should reign in our parishes.

- j. *It is an evangelizing parish, with strong emphasis on the word of God.*

The heart of our Vincentian vocation is to follow Christ as the Evangelizer of the Poor. Our evangelization, in St. Vincent's spirit, should take place "in word and work," serving others "spiritually and corporally." Naturally, the word of God will play a central role in all centers of evangelization.

Concretely, this means that homilies will be well-prepared and will focus on God's word. It may also mean, in many places, that the parish will form small groups (*Comunidades de Base*) for reflecting on the word of God, praying over it, and working out its implications in building a Christian community. Of course, for those who preach and teach in Vincentian parishes, the word of God will be, as the author of Hebrews tells us (4:12), a two-edged sword, so that as we preach it to others it will cut into us too, calling us to ongoing conversion.

These reflections on our involvement in parishes flow from an analysis of Vincent's attitudes and actions and an examination of some significant changes that the Congregation has seen from the 17th century up to today. I hope that the ten characteristics listed above will serve as a help in evaluating, and also perhaps renewing, Vincentian parishes. Undoubtedly, many of the characteristics would be important in any parish, but they are especially so for us. If we are to serve in parishes, then they must be truly "Vincentian" and "missionary." Otherwise, we should not be there. How do our parishes measure up to these criteria?