

Meditation Moment on the Constitutions

Apostolic Activity of the Congregation of the Mission Constitutions, Part II, Ch. 1, # 10-18

Pastoral ministry in a missionary seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: "We have always done it this way". I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities (Evangelii Gaudium, # 33).

The text of the Constitutions (# 10-18) relevant to the above topic, contains a reflection and an interpretation of the Vincentian tradition with regard to the apostolic activity of the Congregation. The entire text of the Constitutions is important, but this chapter has a special importance. It defines the activity as well as the place of the Congregation within the Church and gives meaning and specificity to the one true name of the Congregation: "The Congregation of the Mission". Fidelity to these characteristics allows the Congregation to be a significant presence in the Church. This chapter of the Constitutions provides a norm and a guide for the animation, the evaluation, the discernment and the development of the apostolic activity of each Missionary, of each community, of each province and of the whole Congregation.

Reading and reflecting on the text, one discovers anew the specificity, the richness and the relevance of the mission of the Congregation. Three pivotal or underlying themes define the understanding and the identity of the apostolic activity of the Congregation of the Mission:

a) The missionary and compassionate charity of Christ, evangelizer of the poor

The Congregation of the Mission is seen as an institution that has been called to evangelize the poor (Luke 4:43). The charity of Christ who is compassionate toward the multitudes (Matthew 8:2), Jesus words and actions and his vision of the new life of the Kingdom... all of these are the source of the Congregation's apostolic activity. Like the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) the Congregation ought to make every effort to provide effective relief to the poor in all its various situations, thus fulfilling the demands of social justice and of evangelical charity.

Missionary activity is the source and the center of the Vincentian apostolic activity. An encounter with Christ and his attitudes, and his historical and missionary commitments toward the poor led Saint Vincent to discover the priority of missionary charity and also led him to establish the Congregation of the Mission. He wanted the Missionaries to be *in a state of mission* (CCD XII: 224), to be available to go where they were needed and to live together in community for the mission. He exhorted the confreres to be willing to reach out and encounter the poor, to allow themselves to be evangelized by the poor and to be witnesses of unassuming and arduous service in those places where the missionary demands are most urgent.

The missionary charity of Christ is a constitutive element and is also a priority in the life and the ministry of the Missionaries and of the whole Congregation... it is the gift that the Spirit has given to the Church through Saint Vincent. Through the holiness of missionary charity, the Vincentian vocation participates in the holiness of the Church while at the same time offering its collaboration in the task of sanctifying the Church.

b) The option for the poor

Number twelve of the Constitutions characterizes the evangelizing activity of the Congregation and points out six criteria or characteristics that give authenticity, visibility, and Vincentian fidelity to the missionary “being” and “doing” of the Congregation. These criteria are founded on Vincent’s experience of faith. Vincent, in his encounter with those who were abandoned and hungry experienced the presence of the Incarnate Word, the Son of God who came *to evangelize the poor* (CCD XII: 71-72), who identified himself with the poor and therefore *our mission is to do what Christ did on earth* (CCD XII: 71-72). The poor were the privileged beneficiaries of Saint Vincent’s love... they were also the inspiration and the objective of his activity and of his various foundations.

The ecclesial nature of the Congregation is to be a sign and an instrument of Christ preferential love for the poor. This is to be done in union with the Church while at the same time the Congregation places herself at the service of the Church. *The poor are our inheritance; the poor evangelize us*; we encounter Jesus in the poor who reveal the true face of the Father, *the good God* of mercy and the defender of the poor. Vincent referred to the poor as *our lords and masters* (CCD XII: 4). Here then we encounter the original and specific nature of the apostolic activity of the Congregation. The poor have a preferential claim on the compassion and the charity of the Missionaries. The option for the poor is an essential part of the Vincentian heritage. This option ought to be the root, the foundation of our life, of all our pastoral decisions, both as individuals and as a Congregation.

c) Renewal from the perspective of the missionary calls of the reality of the poor and the reality of the Church

The provinces ought to make a decision with regard to the forms of the apostolate that they will assume. Nevertheless, these forms ought to be assumed and renewed in fidelity to the spirit and the example of Saint Vincent and in accord with the needs of the reality and the needs of the Church. Popular mission, the formation of the clergy and the laity, missions *ad gentes*, and collaboration with the Daughters of Charity are the privileged ministries of the Vincentian tradition and ought to be developed by the Congregation. As a response to the signs of the time the Statutes (# 2-12) propose other pastoral actions and orientations.

Just as Saint Vincent knew how to interpret the call of God revealed in the reality that surrounded him, so too the Congregation ought to consider and reflect upon and renew and develop in an on-going manner its apostolic activity. This task ought to be done from the perspective of the missionary option for the poor, and therefore we hold before our eyes the poor as our purpose and the mission as our primary ministry. The service of the Congregation ought to be prophetic and as such, should help the Church to be a community of charity which is a continuation of *the spirit of the perfect charity of Christ* (CCD XII: 193). This vision requires the Congregation to engage in a process of profound discernment and a sincere search for coherency in the development and the renewal of its traditional ministries and its new pastoral initiatives. The mission requires this process so that its apostolic activity does not become so diverse that any and every ministry is justified and as a result we lose both our prophetic sense and our Vincentian identity.

A tremendous on-going challenge for the Congregation and for each and every member of the Congregation is to etch the text of the Constitutions on our hearts and to express this text through our lifestyle. The internalization of the text with regard to the apostolic activity in the Congregation must take into consideration the new challenges and possibilities of the present social and ecclesial reality that is formed by three important factors: the present social-cultural environment of “epochal change”, the present increasing awareness of the Church as a missionary church and the call to a new evangelization with its resulting proposal of creative fidelity to the mission (a theme presented during the 2010 General Assembly).

The Congregation of the Mission has as its purpose the service of charity and the mission; it wants to be with the poor and involved in the formation of the clergy and the laity. This is its theological and pastoral place in the Church. This is its identity that needs to be in an on-going state of construction and actualization through a process of

confrontation with the challenges and the opportunities of the present time. The words that Father Miguel Flores wrote in 1994 are still valid: "*The lack of identity in the various ministries is the seed of a certain opaqueness of the Congregation in the Church, a cloud that obscures the visibility of its charism. An institution that lacks identity is slowly dying*"¹. In order to keep the Vincentian identity alive and relevant in the ministries it is necessary to eliminate the gap between what is said and what is done and it is also necessary to eliminate everything that could prevent or disturb the creation, the recovery and the renewal of the ministries of the Congregation.

The text of the Constitutions, especially # 12, calls us to a process of continual revision and discernment. Looking at the ministries of the Congregation we have great concern: statistically, the great majority of its members minister in stable works and ministries, that is, in ministries focused on the preservation of the faith, while a minority of the members work in ministries that are more specifically missionary, in new and difficult situations where there is a greater urgency². A greatly diminished missionary activity on the "peripheries" of the province, an unwillingness to participate in the mission in those new and difficult situations, a lifestyle that is removed from the conditions of the poor, a certain historical inheritance of pastoral practices, pastoral works and structures that do not conform to the Vincentian spirit, individualism in pastoral ministry, an excessive pastoral presence in parishes, some self-serving interpretations of the Constitutions in order to justify certain ministries, all of these are obstacles that create a gap between the Congregation and the poor and that create a cloud that obscures our missionary identity. The internalization of the text of the Constitutions requires courage and decisiveness on the part of the local communities, superiors and the individual confreres in order to purify our apostolic activity and make it a visible, coherent and meaningful expression of our charism.

During the time of epochal change and the search for a new evangelization, the necessary charity of Christ convokes and guides the Congregation in developing an attitude of creativity and renewal. The text of the Constitutions points out the missionary activity of the Congregation, sheds light on it in order to purify this activity and lays out a path for fidelity. The proposals with regard to the new evangelization highlight new historical challenges and new opportunities to renew and reconfigure the mission with new vigor, new methods and new expressions. The text of our Constitutions and the challenges of

¹ Cf., MIGUEL FLORES, *Identidad de los Ministerios de la Congregación de la Misión*, in *Vincentiana*, year 38, # 4-5 (May-June 1994), pp. 123-143.

² Cf., CLAUDIO SANTANGELO, *Numbers and People*, in *Vincentiana*, year 54, # 3 (July-September 2010), pp. 252-253.

the new evangelization give a validity and a vitality to Vincentian missionary activity and also provide the possibility for the development of creative fidelity to the mission. This in turn leads to new commitments and attitudes so that the missionary charity of Christ, evangelizer of the poor, configures and renews the heart and the apostolic activity of Vincentian missionaries and of the whole Congregation.

The present proposal with regard to the new evangelization invites the Congregation to find its proper foundational roots. The Congregation was born from the innovative activity of Saint Vincent and the first missionaries who as a result of their missionary work with the poor contributed to the fact that the face of the Church during the XVII century was completely changed. Today, the new evangelization proposes “*a missionary transformation of the Church through a ‘Church which goes forth’ with a transformative missionary option and a pastoral approach of conversion*” (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, # 20-33). The internalization of the text with regard to the apostolate of the Congregation gives a dynamic meaning to its foundational purpose, to its ministries and structures. It also gives meaning to the call to live in a state of on-going missionary conversion and to do this from the perspective of openness to the Spirit, of reaching out to encounter the poor and of a willingness to shift direction and not be satisfied with the status quo. This also involves a willingness to engage in critical dialogue with modern culture and the courage to renew and to change and to allow ourselves to be led by the evangelizing potential of the poor... and all of this is done in order to engage in a process of searching for creative fidelity in order to purify, to invigorate and to expand the apostolic action of the Congregation and in order to make it more Vincentian, more creative, more relevant and more prophetic.

For reflection and dialogue

In *Evangelii Gaudium* we read: “*Indeed, today missionary activity still represents the greatest challenge for the Church and the missionary task must remain foremost. What would happen if we were to take these words seriously? We would realize that missionary outreach is paradigmatic for all the Church’s activity*” (# 15)... “*I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are. Mere administration can no longer be enough. Throughout the world, let us be ‘permanently in a state of mission’*” (# 25)... “*Challenges exist to be overcome! Let us be realists, but without our joy, our boldness and our hope-filled commitment. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary vigor!*” (# 105).

In light of the text of the Constitutions and in view of the new evangelization, what can we do in order to develop a Vincentian missionary presence in our apostolic activity?

“You, the Missionaries of the Congregation of the Mission, ought to be specialists in the mission, be careful then not to sin in those areas where you are called to be more virtuous” (Paulo Suess)³... “Congregation of the Mission, be what you are. Do not yield to mediocrity... work tirelessly to go beyond the boundaries of your mission” (General Assembly, 2004).

In light of the text of the Constitutions, do our ministries, missionary work and initiatives identify us in the church as true “Vincentian missionaries of the poor”, specialists in the mission?

What do we need to do to today for the apostolic activity of the Congregation to purify it, and make it a more lively and renewed expression of our charism... in order to go beyond the boundaries of our mission?

“Poor persons are our portion, the poor; pauperibus evangelizare misit me. What happiness, Messieurs, what happiness! To do what Our Lord came from heaven to earth to do, and by means of which we will go from earth to heaven” (CCD XII: 4).

Translated from Spanish by CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M.

³ Paulo Suess is a German missiologist who lives in Brazil and he addressed those words to a group of confreres who had gathered together in that country.