

Meditation Moment: Reflection by the General Curia on the Vow of Stability

The historical context

Our way of being faithful to our charism in the Church has a special feature in the vow of stability, which all members of the Congregation of the Mission profess in addition to the three “classic” vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. Why do we have this vow? What is its origin? What are the reasons why it was introduced? What is its spiritual and apostolic meaning? What is its relevance? We know that the vow of stability is not unique to our Congregation, nor was it invented by St. Vincent. It was already in practice in other communities, and in his writings, St. Vincent made reference to how this vow was understood and lived in those communities.

In particular, he referred to the vow of stability as lived by the Benedictines. The profession of Benedictine stability required making a commitment to live and die in the same monastery, because a monk was “born” in a monastery he entered and was thus committed to that monastery for life. With the emergence of the mendicant orders and the lifestyle that characterized them, the idea was born to “conventualize”, accentuating a focus to emphasize living together. In this context, stability in the community came from common life, not only the geographic locale of the monastery. In time, it was seen by some as too narrow, like the walls of the monastery, and lacking a deeper connection and more internal commitment to stability. It was not only a vow to live in a particular place, but within a given institution.

Then came the Society of Jesus, who in addition to the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, took a fourth vow: to persevere in the Company after completion of studies. In this way, the Jesuits bound their members to live and die in the Company for the “greater glory of God,” thus promoting stability and consecration to the vowed life.

It is possible that St. Vincent was aware of these variations on the vow of stability, as he once studied canon law. He likely took the idea and adapted it to the specific situation of the Congregation of the Mission. In particular, St. Vincent may have drafted this vow from that of the choice made by the Society of Jesus, placing it as a fourth vow in addition to the three required ones. In fact, many religious congregations founded in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries created a vow of stability or an oath of perseverance. The founders of these congrega-

tions were concerned about the legal weakness of their vows, which at that time were nothing more than “simple vows” and were easily dispensable, according to canon law.

For Saint Vincent, the vow of stability was not only a ‘legal response’ for the good of the community. In fact, the legal relationship was not justified by itself, but the fourth vow of stability was geared to promote fidelity to the charism of the Congregation. Fidelity to one’s vocation is more than just a legal term to bind and to keep one tethered to a community. The history of religious communities shows that not all those who enter will persevere, nor those who are legally members will be fully faithful to the commitments they have undertaken.

Like all founders, St. Vincent wanted those who entered the Congregation to remain, but it was inevitable that some would leave. How did St. Vincent react when this occurred? We know that in some cases he was glad to see some leave, and readily granted them a release, due to the difficult manner of those who left. Yet at other times, he seemed to feel one’s departure could do considerable harm to the Congregation, and clearly expressed this idea in his correspondence

We do not know the number of those who persevered while St. Vincent was still alive. From his correspondence, we see he was concerned about those who left the Congregation. He was quite convinced that perseverance was the best guarantee to achieve salvation and to preserve the Congregation. This concern materialized when in the introduction of a fourth vow of stability which reads as follows:

“I vow to dedicate myself to the salvation of the poor of the country all the time of my life in this Congregation” (cf. C. 58, formula c).

The idea of stability appeared early in the mind of St. Vincent before formal approval of the Congregation of the Mission from Rome. St. Vincent believed that if there is no explicit statement to persevere until death, then there is no true bond. From this, a question that easily arises is as follows: if the vows are perpetual, what sense does the vow of stability make? St. Vincent probably thought that our vows (private and simple) created a constraint that was legally a weak one, and he wanted to give greater force precisely through an explicit vow of stability.

On the other hand, none of the three “classic” vows (poverty, chastity, and obedience) have as their direct objective one’s perseverance for life in the Congregation. St. Vincent knew that the Congregation, founded not as a religious community, but as a ‘secular entity’ (now called a ‘Society of Apostolic Life’), sought a specific commitment, other than that derived from the three ‘classic’ vows required for religious life. The ‘fourth vow’ helped the Congregation to establish and express its uniqueness within the Church structure. In its history and import,

we can say that our fourth vow of stability is a special feature of a Society of Apostolic Life.

The words St. Vincent used in presenting the vow of stability are very clear: *“To live and die in the Congregation of the Mission to evangelize the poor.”* But as our history shows, the issue was not resolved once and for all. We know that some General Assemblies have had to discuss and debate the merits of certain works undertaken by provinces, such as parishes and colleges.

The present Constitutions have tackled this problem in two ways: calling for a revision of the works, and offering criteria to judge if works are in accord with the goals of the Congregation. Yet the issue has not been definitively resolved. Indeed, some believe that the lack of a clear awareness of our specificity as a Congregation is still a major concern. A sad example of how this affects the Congregation can be seen in the number of confreres who leave and ask to be incardinated in a diocese.

Some fundamental texts: The Instruction on Vows

Perhaps to assist in clarifying our identity, the 1992 General Assembly asked the Superior General and Council to provide an “Instruction on the Vows”, with particular attention given to the vow of stability. This “Instruction on the Vows” was written and then published in Vincentiana in the January-February, 1996 edition.

A novelty of this “Instruction on the Vows” is that the vow of stability is mentioned first, thus placed ahead of the other three. This relocation indicates a change in sensitivity: it is not just a matter of importance, but the specificity of this vow to the other three. This specificity is clearly expressed in the introduction to the chapter devoted to this vow. Introduction The same goes for two other interesting statements: first, there was a time when St. Vincent thought that the only vow essential for the preservation of the Congregation was the vow of stability. Secondly, it is the same title that St. Vincent gives as its name. Obviously, the vow of stability is a fundamental question in our history in the founding of our Congregation, and not just a recent innovation. In fact, the location of this vow before the other three suggests that in some ways, the vow of stability strengthens us in living out the other vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

The Vows (Instruction, Ch. 2, § 3)

In the third paragraph of the chapter two, it expressly states that the three constituent elements of the vow of stability are clearly expressed in articles 28 and 39 of the Constitutions. The three elements are the “what, where, and why” of our commitment: loyalty and perseverance for life (‘what’); in the Congregation of the Mission (‘where’), to follow

Christ evangelizing the poor ('why'). It goes on to say that, in practice, this vow obliges us to realize the end of the Congregation, which is, "carrying out the activities prescribed by the superiors according to the Constitutions and Statutes" (C 39).

Then there is an important annotation: "*The latter clarification requires that all the members are responsible for ensuring the Vincentian character of our work*", although obviously there is a particular obligation for local superiors and major superiors, because they have the mandate to make decisions on the works and ministries confreres undertake.

The Virtues (Instruction, Ch. 2, § 4)

Then, in paragraph four of chapter two, the Instruction discusses the "virtues" associated with stability. It begins with an interesting statement: what our tradition has indicated with the word "stability" could be better expressed today in the word "fidelity": fidelity for life to Vincentian charism in the Congregation of the Mission. The text clearly says that this 'fidelity,'

- commits us to go beyond minimum requirements to embrace ministries entrusted to us;
- cannot be reduced to simple obedience;
- calls us to a life consistent with all dimensions of the Vincentian charism.

In other words, today the vow of stability, and more so the virtue of loyalty, requires we do the work of discerning ministries. It is in fact, a double discernment: personal and communal. This presumes a personal response, which means accepting the call to follow Jesus, Evangelizer of the poor. But this discernment must also involve the community, because our Founder sent the first missionaries out in a "common mission".

How to cultivate the virtue of fidelity (Instruction, Ch. 2, § 5)

Paragraph five of chapter two in the Instruction is titled "Living Stability" and proposes six concrete suggestions to observe the vow of stability and, more importantly, to cultivate the virtue of loyalty. Of these, three appear particularly topical today.

First is the deep conviction that the Lord loves us as members of the Congregation of the Mission. This provides us with a profound certainty that will sustain us in times of crisis which sooner or later, we all encounter in living our vocation. Then, in preserving and enhancing the Vincentian character of our ministries, we find that "*apostolic works, after careful examination, that are no longer responsive to the*

vocation of the Congregation, are gradually abandoned" (S. 1). This is true especially today, when a lack of specificity in many of our ministries can be a reason why confreres request dispensation from vows and seek incardination in a diocese.

This leads us to consider another possible cause of leaving the Congregation: when there is no direct contact with the poor, we lack experience in what is the main purpose of our vocation. This weakens the sense of identity and belonging to the Congregation. The Instruction rightly notes that "*all members of the Congregation should have the opportunity to experience the joy of direct contact with the poor*" because they "*teach us many gospel values and encourage us to persevere in our vocation*" (C 12.3).

Current status of the vow of stability today

The vow of stability is not only important today as it was in the time of St. Vincent, but it takes on a special urgency in today's world. The culture we live in makes it seem particularly difficult to make definitive commitments, both in religious life and among the laity.

The last paragraph of chapter four refers to a "double prophetic function" of this vow today, explaining that, as Vincentians, we are called to offer to the society in which we live a double sign of contradiction: one sign in overcoming the instability of the current society; and another as a sign of solidarity with the weak and marginalized. It is a function of particular importance in today's secularized world, which may be typified by a double weakness: an obvious dislike for permanent commitment, and a disregard for the most vulnerable and marginalized of society.

This leads us to consider the relevance of our mission in today's world, beyond the obvious crisis of vocations and instability present among some confreres. Precisely for this reason, in their training (initial and ongoing) it is very important to insist on understanding and acceptance of the Mission, along with a sense of belonging to the Congregation, two essential elements in our Vincentian vocation. The failure to do so has resulted in a number of our members who, in recent years, left the Congregation to join the diocesan clergy, while desiring to remain deeply Vincentian in spirit and devote oneself to the service of the poor.

Given this reality, the Visitor has a serious responsibility to accompany the confreres in his province who manifest forms of instability and discomfort, and to work with them before they come to the decision to ask for a dispensation from vows. It is "*important that the Visitors deepen what may be the most common causes of difficulty or defection of the confreres.*" A valuable contribution on this matter may be found in *Vincentiana*, 2013, issue N. 3.

In any case, any exit of a confrere from the community should not only be seen as a loss or misfortune, but an opportunity for those who remain to reflect on their vocation and reassess their way of living in fidelity to this vow. A search for stability and the virtue of loyalty has a personal aspect, but together they can present conditions and constraints on community life.

Another timely aspect of stability, both as a vow and virtue, is that it can greatly assist in moving forward two issues of particular importance today: the international nature of the Congregation, and the movement toward reconfiguration of provinces. To the extent that this virtue strengthens an internal sense of belonging to the Congregation, it reduces provincialism, often prevalent among confreres, and promotes availability for international projects. One final thought worthy of consideration: we should not underestimate or minimize a link between instability of individual confreres and the choices their province makes. If there are no clearly Vincentian works in which to engage, a confrere can develop a “crisis” (i.e., starting to question) a sense of belonging to a Congregation that does not seem dedicated to specific activities or other forms of an apostolate. From that time on, other ways of life may appear more desirable.

In conclusion, the vow of stability, and as with the “other three vows” must be cultivated continuously, otherwise, it weakens and gradually loses consistency. It is ‘like a flower that must be cultivated daily so it does not decay. Many means are possible, but all are designed to promote a growing and full love for our charism and vocation. You cannot be faithful to what you do not love, and you cannot fully and finally love that to which you have not given your heart.

Just because he was aware of this, St. Vincent asked the Lord for the gift of fidelity, which is beyond the powers of humanity. This appears in prayer that he himself formed at the end of the conference to the Daughters of Charity of the September 22, 1647:

“We are weak, my God, and able to succumb to the first assault. You have called us out of your pure mercy. May your infinite goodness be pleased to keep us in this vocation. For our part, with the help of your holy grace, we will strive with all our strength to give to you the services and the truth that you expect from us. Give us, then, my God, the grace to persevere unto death: I ask it through the merits of Our Lord Jesus Christ, confident that He will grant this to me.”