

OF CURRENT INTEREST

The Company Will Cease to Exist Unless...

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.

Founders, as they get older, often anguish over the communities they have begotten. Like parents, they fret about their children's growth and education, their friends, and their future stability. Often, after a less-structured, charismatic beginning, they or others begin to formulate rules to guide the lives of the members and to establish a framework for the choice of apostolates in the future.¹ They frequently also suggest who their successor might be, knowing that the period immediately after their own death will be a crucial time of transition. In the case of the Daughters of Charity, one might almost chuckle in that regard.

Though St. Vincent had established that the successors of Louise de Marillac would be elected, he decided to name the first one himself! While he was less than two weeks from his own death when Marguerite Chétif was installed as Mother General on September 15, 1660, he must still have been very alert. He told Jean Dehorgny that, when the announcement was made, he should keep an eye on the faces of the obvious candidates to see their reactions. Vincent felt that some of them wanted the job too much!²

Vincent was also very concerned about providing for the future financial stability of the congregations, which he and Louise de Marillac had begun, and was very astute in doing so. He and Louise consistently set up foundations to support the houses and works of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity. In fact, both

¹ Vincent did not complete the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission until 1658. "Here at long last are the Rules or Common Constitutions of our Congregation...", he wrote in the introductory letter to the Rules. "It has been about thirty-three years since our Congregation was founded..." He never completed the Rules of the Daughters of Charity. They were not finally approved until 1672, when René Almérás was Superior General and Mathurine Guérin was Mother General. Mathurine Guérin had an enormous influence on the spirit, life and works of the Company. Her seven terms as Mother General, which were spread out over more than three decades, totaled 21 years.

² SV XIII, 181. Cf. MATTHIEU BREJON DE LAVERGNÉE, *Histoire des Filles de la Charité* (Fayard: Paris, 2011) 261.

congregations were remarkably stable institutions by the time of the deaths of the two founders.

However, future leadership and financial stability were not Vincent's principal preoccupations. He worried most of all about the spiritual depth of the members. Throughout his life, he worked hard at the ongoing formation of the members of his communities, giving conferences week after week to both the Vincentians and the Daughters of Charity.³ In the conferences of his later years, some of Vincent's concerns are very evident. Would the members of the Congregation be deeply spiritual? Would they be faithful to the service of the poor that Vincent and Louise had so emphasized?

One of the most striking expressions of Vincent's anxiety occurred during a Repetition of Prayer on August 30, 1657. He described his fear about what might happen to the mission in Madagascar after his death. Almost all those whom Vincent had sent there had died. He loved the mission deeply, but he knew that the Congregation would be tempted to abandon it as soon as he was no longer in charge. He spoke with great forcefulness:

Someone in the Company may say perhaps that Madagascar should be abandoned; flesh and blood will use that language and say that no more people should be sent there, but I'm certain that the Spirit says otherwise. What, my brothers? Shall we leave our good M. Bourdaise all alone there? The death of those priests will, I'm sure, astonish some. But God led 600,000 men out of Egypt, not counting women and children, with the intention of bringing them into the Promised Land; yet, of all that great host, only two entered it – not even Moses, the leader of them all. God has called our confreres into that country, and yet some died on the way, and others shortly after arriving there. At this, we must bow our heads, Messieurs, and adore the wonderful, incomprehensible ways of Our Lord.

O, my dear confreres! After knowing that, could we possibly be so base and unmanly as to abandon this vineyard of the Lord to which His Divine Majesty has called us, merely because four, five, or six men have died? Tell me what a fine army it would be if, because it lost two or three, four, or five thousand men – as they say happened at the latest siege of Normandy – it would abandon everything! What a nice sight an army of runaways and poltroons like that would be! Let's say the same of the Mission; it would be a fine Company of the Mission if, because five or six had died, it were to abandon the Lord's work! What a cowardly Company, attached to flesh and blood!⁴

³ He also gave frequent conferences to the Visitation nuns, whom Francis de Sales had entrusted to his care. Unfortunately, none of these survive.

⁴ SV XI, 420-422.

St. Vincent had read the thoughts of his confreres accurately! In spite of this urgent plea, his successor closed the mission! The Congregation did not return to Madagascar until 1896!

St. Vincent's concern about the *spirituality* of the members of the Families that he had begun is equally touching. Thinking of the future, he often tells them that one aspect of their mission or one virtue is indispensable, and that his foundations will cease to exist if the members abandon these things.

We might be tempted to say that St. Vincent's language on these occasions was exaggerated and that he was using such forceful phrases merely for rhetorical emphasis. But rhetoric is revealing. It gives us insight into what the speaker regards as extremely important.

Of course, in a dispassionate moment, St. Vincent would probably have told his hearers – to use today's terminology – that there was a “hierarchy of truths” among the many matters that he described as indispensable. He would also have recognized that some of the concrete examples which he used (like the length of hair!) were much more historically and culturally conditioned than others. I will now name and reflect from this perspective, on six things that St. Vincent called indispensable. To cite his somber words: If we fail to do these things, *au revoir* to the Congregation of the Mission and *au revoir* to the Daughters of Charity! Basically, he felt that his foundations would cease if we are not...

1. Faithful to the Mission

Mission was central for St. Vincent. He saw it not just as an activity of the Church, but also as essential to its very being. He described Jesus as the Missionary of the Father, coming from God on a mission and returning to God to fulfill it. He called the members of the two Congregations he founded to share in that mission. Jesus was to be their rule. Mission was not an add-on in their lives; it was at the heart of what they were as members of the Congregation of the Mission or the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

So, from that perspective, it was natural that the ongoing fidelity of his followers to the mission he had entrusted to them stood at the top of Vincent's concerns in his old age. Not only did he want his followers to risk their lives to bring the gospel to distant countries like Madagascar; he was also eager that they continue to serve the marginalized at home. He addresses the matter with passion, sometimes using dramatic words and gestures. What he says to the Congregation of the Mission is so touching that I will quote him at length:⁵

⁵ SV XII, 89-93.

“I can’t go on much longer. I’ll be passing on soon. My age, my poor health, and the abominations of my life don’t permit that God will let me remain long on earth. So then, it could happen that, after my death, troublemakers and cowardly men may come along and say, ‘Why should we be weighed down with the care of these hospitals? How can we help so many people ruined by wars, and go to see them in their homes? What’s the use of taking on so many things and so many poor persons? Why guide these Sisters who nurse the sick, and why waste our time on persons who are mentally ill?’ There will be some who oppose those ministries – have no doubt about that – and others will say that it’s too much to attempt to send men to distant countries, to the Indies, or to Barbary. But, my God, but, my Lord, didn’t You send Saint Thomas to the Indies and the other Apostles throughout the world? Didn’t You make them responsible for the care and guidance of all peoples in general and many persons and families in particular? Yes, not matter what others may say, our vocation is: *Evangelizare pauperibus*.

(Some will say): ‘We’re willing to give a mission here in this country; there’s enough to do here without going any farther; I’m willing to do that, but don’t talk to me about the foundlings, the old folks at the Nom-de-Jesus, and those people who are locked up here!’ Someday we’ll see men like that, so perverse that they’ll disparage the good works God has led us to take on and maintain with His blessing; have no doubt about that...

But what sort of men will turn us away from those good works already begun? They’ll be undisciplined, undisciplined, undisciplined men who seek only to enjoy themselves and, provided they have enough to eat, don’t bother about anything else. And who else? They’ll be... I’d rather not say. They’ll be men who coddle themselves (*as he said this, he folded his arms, mimicking lazy men*), people who have only a narrow outlook, confining their perspective and plans to a certain circumference within which they shut themselves away, so to speak, in one spot; they don’t want to leave it, and if they’re shown something outside it and go near to have a look, they immediately go back to their center, like snails into their shells.”⁶

⁶ Speaking about giving retreats, he returns forcefully to the same theme, the centrality of mission. Cf. SV XI, 17: “If you say to a poor lax Missioner, ‘Monsieur, would you please guide this man during his retreat?’ that request will be a torture for him; and, if he doesn’t beg off, he’ll simply drag his feet, as they say; he’ll be so anxious to satisfy himself, and will find it so hard to give up a half hour or so of his recreation after dinner and as long after supper, that this time will be intolerable for him, even though it’s given for the salvation of a soul and will be the best spent hour of his entire day. Others will grumble about this ministry, under the pretext that it’s very burdensome and demands

2. Faithful to daily prayer and to rising early to engage in it

Most members of the Vincentian Family are very familiar with a statement St. Vincent made about prayer: “Give me someone who prays! That person will be capable of everything!”⁷

But there is more to the quotation. Vincent adds: “The Congregation will last as long as it faithfully carries out the practice of prayer, which is like an impregnable rampart, shielding the missionaries from all manner of attack.”⁸ In other words, the Congregation will cease to exist if it ceases to pray. The emphasis here was on meditative prayer (*l'oraison*). Vincent asked the members of his communities to set aside an hour a day for it.⁹

He attached great importance to the practice of rising early in the morning in order to pray. He says to the Daughters of Charity: “Strive to be very exact in that, Sisters. Nothing is more important than rising at the proper time, because the rest of the day depends on it.”¹⁰

In a letter written to the superiors of the houses of the Congregation of the Mission on January 15, 1650, he offers a whole series of human and religious considerations to reinforce the importance of rising in the morning. In that context, he writes: “A merchant rises early to become rich; every minute is precious to him. Thieves do the same and spend the night waiting to take passers-by by surprise... Mon Dieu! how shameful if laziness causes us to lose the time assigned for conversing with the Lord of Lords, our support and our all!”¹¹

Then, he clinches the argument by adding: “Carelessness has caused many to leave: not being able to coddle themselves at whim, they could

a lot of energy. So, the Priests of the Mission, who formerly would have given life to the dead, will no longer have anything but the name and appearance of what they once were. They'll be only corpses and not true Missioners; they'll be the carcasses of Saint Lazarus, not the resurrected Lazarus, and, even less, men who bring others back to life. This Mission, which is now like a beneficial pool, where so many come to bathe, will be nothing but a cistern contaminated by the laxity and idleness of the men who live in it.”

⁷ SV XI, 83.

⁸ SV XI, 83.

⁹ The members of the Tuesday Conferences were to engage in mental prayer for at least a half hour a day; cf. SV XIII, 130. Likewise, the Ladies of Charity at the Court (a group consisting of the Queen and a small number of women chosen by her) were to engage in at least a half hour of mental prayer daily; cf. SV XIII, 821-822. The same thing was stipulated for the Ladies of the Hôtel-Dieu; cf. SV XIII, 827. In general, the Rules for the various Confraternities of Charity speak about saying various “prayers” and assisting at Mass, rather than about engaging in mental prayer.

¹⁰ SV X, 95.

¹¹ SV III, 538.

not grow in love for their state. How can we go gladly to prayer if we rise only grudgingly? How can we meditate profitably if we are only half in church, and then merely out of propriety? On the contrary, those who are zealous in rising usually persevere, hardly ever grow lax, and make good progress. The grace of vocation depends on prayer, and the grace of prayer depends on rising.”

He warns against naming anyone a superior or a seminary director if he does not rise early: “Those who are not exact in this, particularly in rising in the morning and making their meditation in the place and at the time the others do it, even though they might otherwise be very talented and gifted for leadership, are not, however, suitable to be local Superiors or Seminary Directors.”¹²

He was also concerned about the quality of the members’ vocal prayer, particularly the Divine Office, which was to be prayed *digne, attente, et devote*. In a memorable conference given on September 26, 1659, he tells his confreres in the Congregation of the Mission, quoting St. John Chrysostom, that God prefers the barking of dogs to the prayer of someone who is merely reciting words. “Yes, the man who is negligent in his efforts to pray the Office should consider himself a dog, since, being endowed with reason, he performs such a holy action in a way that’s worse than animal-like.”¹³

3. Humble, simple and charitable

These three virtues were to characterize every Daughter of Charity. They were also to play an essential role in the life of the members of the Congregation of the Mission.

Is there any virtue about which St. Vincent speaks more eloquently than humility? It would be hard to assign it a higher place than he does in the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission. “It is the foundation of all evangelical perfection, the core of the whole spiritual life.”¹⁴ He emphasizes its importance repeatedly in letters and in conferences. Vincent states forcefully that we cannot persevere individually or corporately without humility.¹⁵ His words to both the Daughters and the Vincentians are memorable:

- “This little company, which is the last of all, ought to be founded only upon humility as its characteristic virtue; otherwise we will never do anything that will last...”¹⁶

¹² SV XI, 83.

¹³ SV XII, 328-329.

¹⁴ CR II, 7.

¹⁵ SV I, 528; X, 528; XII, 304.

¹⁶ SV XI, 57.

- “Grant that humility may be the characteristic virtue of the Mission! O holy virtue, how beautiful you are! O little Company, how loveable you will be if God grants you this grace!”¹⁷
- “Humility! Let it be our password.”¹⁸
- “Yes... we can say that His great pleasure is to reveal himself to the humble. What beautiful words of Jesus Christ, which show clearly that it’s not in palaces, like the Louvre, nor in the residences of Princes that God takes His delight! He says so in Scripture, ‘O Father, I praise and thank you that you have hidden your mysteries from the great ones of the world and revealed them to the humble.’”¹⁹

It is clear that Vincent sees humility, simplicity and charity as indispensable for the ongoing existence of the communities he founded. He tells the Daughters of Charity: “The spirit of your company consists in three things: loving Our Lord and serving him in a spirit of humility and simplicity. As long as charity, humility and simplicity are among you, people will be able to say: ‘The Company of Charity is still alive.’ But when these virtues are no longer there, then people will say, ‘The poor Company of Charity is dead.’ A Daughter of Charity who no longer has humility and charity is dead, for she no longer has its spirit. She’s like the person to whom the angel says in the Scriptures: ‘You’re dead, for you do not have charity, which is the life of the soul.’ Just as the soul is the life of the body, the day when charity, humility and simplicity will no longer exist in the Company, the poor Company of Charity will be dead. Yes, she will be dead.”²⁰

Vincent warns particularly against envy. Contrasting it with humility, he states that it is a deadly enemy of community life. The humble person, seeing everything as gift, avoids envious comparisons. He or she receives life with gratitude, leaving judgment to the Lord, as the gospels frequently exhort us to do.²¹ The proud person loves comparisons and remains restless as long as anyone else seems to get more attention. Vincent speaks of this theme eloquently:

“Be careful, then, to make yourselves worthy of the name you bear so that it may not be said of you what was said to the person in the Apocalypse, ‘You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead; you have the name of charity and you are someone who has no charity.’ In the same way, as Daughters of Charity; you bear

¹⁷ SV XI, 400.

¹⁸ SV XII, 206.

¹⁹ SV IX, 400.

²⁰ SV IX, 594-595.

²¹ Cf. Matt. 7:1-5.

this beautiful name and yet you have some hatred for your Sisters! You bear it in vain, for charity tolerates no hatred. Now, you'll note that the lack of charity sometimes stems from envy, as the Rule states, and envy proceeds from pride...²²

"I don't think I've ever seen disorder arise in any religious Order except through envy or jealousy. Now, if envy is to be feared anywhere, it's among you, all the more so since it's like the corruption of the Company. When fruit is spoiled and rotten, it's no longer good for anything; in the same way, if envy takes hold among you, your Company will soon go to rack and ruin. Ah, Sisters! could a greater misfortune befall the Daughters of Charity than jealousy, since it's the cause of disunion? What good is there where there's division? Rest assured, then, that as soon as there is envy in your Company, it's finished...²³

"And how is that? Because you're Daughters of Charity, daughters of the love of God and of your neighbor; and the opposite of charity is envy. A Sister who has this spirit, instead of being the daughter of God that she was, becomes a daughter of the demon, a daughter of perdition. What a misfortune to become the daughter of the devil! You see, the executioner of the Daughters of Charity is envy, which causes us to be angry when we see our Sister better cared for during her illness, or sought after in a parish because she does so much good, or better dressed than we are. For that's what envy does. As soon as a Sister reaches that point, say, 'She's no longer a Daughter of Charity; she's divested of the interior habit, which is the love of God and of the neighbor.' Ah! but we have our attire! Poor Sister, it's not the habit you wear that makes you a Daughter of Charity; it's the interior habit of the soul."

4. Practicing the vow and virtue of poverty

Today, when in a number of places we are well off economically, it is sobering to hear Vincent's words about the importance of the virtue and vow of poverty. In the Common Rules for the Congregation of the Mission, he writes: "We must all realize that it (poverty) is the unreachably rampart by which the Congregation, with the help of God's grace, will be defended."²⁴ He explains:

Poverty is what ought to maintain us. What will the Company become if attachment to the goods of the world seeps into it? What will it become? The saints say that poverty is the core of reli-

²² SV X, 465.

²³ SV IX, 702.

²⁴ CR III, 1.

gious life. We are not religious..., but we can say that poverty is the core of communities, and above all, of our own, which has more need for it than others.²⁵

He tells confreres: “You ought to know, sirs, that this virtue of poverty is the foundation of this Congregation of the Mission.”²⁶ Then, in another conference, he adds in forceful language: “Woe, woe, my brothers, yes, woe to the missionary who would want to become attached to the perishable goods of this life!... Then we can say goodbye to all the works of the Mission and to the mission itself, for it will no longer exist. It is only necessary to read history and you’ll find an infinite number of examples which will demonstrate that riches and an abundance of temporal goods have caused the loss not only of many ecclesiastical persons, but also of communities and entire Orders for not having been faithful to their first spirit of poverty.”²⁷

Vincent’s ‘bottom line’ was that material goods are not “ours”, but entrusted to us “from the patrimony of Jesus Christ, from the sweat of the poor”.²⁸ It is remarkable how tough his words are: *Au revoir* to the Congregation of the Mission if we become attached to material goods!

5. Mortified as we carry out our mission.

Today, in an era when so many seek immediate gratification, people rarely speak about mortification. But St. Vincent took seriously the repeated New Testament imperative to deny oneself. He presents detailed instructions about mortification in his conferences, particularly to the Daughters of Charity. In the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission, he states quite directly:²⁹

Christ said: Anyone who wants to come after me must deny himself and take up his cross each day; and St. Paul added, in the same vein: If you live according to your unspiritual nature you shall die, but if, by the Spirit, you mortify it, you shall live. Each one, therefore, should be most conscientious in accepting the overruling of his personal wishes and opinion, and in disciplining the gratification of each of his senses.

Vincent saw self-denial as utterly necessary for those who serve the poor in difficult circumstances; he connected it with perseverance. He also stated that mortification and prayer were two sisters who walk

²⁵ SV XI, 223.

²⁶ SV XI, 78.

²⁷ SV XI, 79.

²⁸ SV XI, 201.

²⁹ CR II, 8.

hand in hand and are never found without each other. "Mortification goes first and prayer follows after, so that, my dear daughters, if you wish to become daughters of prayer, as you should, learn to mortify yourselves."³⁰

In four different contexts, he makes dramatic statements about what will happen if we fail to deny ourselves. Our lack of self-denial will be fatal! He warns about:

a) *Attachment*

From his experience, Vincent was convinced that attachment, in its various forms, robs priests, brothers and sisters of the freedom they need to be faithful servants of the poor. Those attached to their families or friends become immobile. Those attached to comfort or material things find service of the poor too difficult. Those attached to their own will are unable to live peacefully in community.

He tells the Daughters of Charity that attachment is lethal. "I think that Sisters who are attached in this way pretend to be content with the others and stay for a time, but can't remain in the Company, which won't tolerate spoiled, corrupted members."³¹

Taking the opposite tack in speaking with the members of the Congregation of the Mission, he states: "Let us make the intention today, and begin tomorrow, to combat our satisfactions and attachments, one after the other. Have no doubt, my very dear confreres, have no doubt that, if you're faithful, Our Lord will help you to succeed; thus, from being slaves to ourselves and to things that we like apart from God, we'll attain the freedom of His children, subject only to the Will of this Heavenly Father..."

"Persons open to God's Will are above every law; they're in a different category from others, and, like glorified bodies, they pass through everything and go everywhere. Nothing stops or delays them. *O my Savior!* how happy we'd be if we were as detached as beasts of burden, like You, Lord, who compared yourself to a beast of burden, in order to adapt yourself to the greatest flexibility imaginable! We entreat You, our Liberator, to grant us at least the grace of sharing in this disposition, confident that we'll never again lose our freedom or abandon the practice of holy openness to God's Will! We'll always have this openness in our understanding and will, where nothing will enter that may distract us from carrying out all that You ordain. In doing this, You'll be leading us by the hand, helping us to do Your Will, and, in the end, bringing us into glory. Amen."³²

³⁰ SV IX, 427.

³¹ SV X, 174.

³² SV XII, 242-243.

b) *Excessive drinking*

In a conference focused on abuse of alcohol, Vincent tells the story of a confrere who had left the Congregation of the Mission: “A certain priest of the Company left and went off to see a [Bishop] and said to him, ‘I’m a Missioner.’ ‘Yes, replied this [Prelate], you’re a Missioner. Fine! I’m pleased about that. But we’ll begin by giving you a certain parish to administer; then, after that, depending on how you succeed, we’ll see about giving you something more important.’ “That man wasn’t more than three weeks in that place when he began to let himself slip into that vice of drunkenness, and then got involved with women; for it usually leads to that. And yet, here we have a Missioner – or at least he calls himself a Missioner; and on that title alone he’s given a ministry – and see how he ends up in that pitiful state I just mentioned to you.

“Another man comes to mind, who fell into that misfortune of becoming inebriated, but so much so that they had to hold him up by his arms because he kept falling from one side to the other. And since he was in the country, people said, ‘Who is that?’ ‘It’s one of the Missioners.’ The local Pastor was asked to be so kind as to take him into his residence. He did this with great sorrow at seeing what he was seeing. The next day, he came back here. In the end, he had to leave, for how can we allow such men to stay who are fit only to do harm and to give scandal; for, I ask you, what use is a man who lets himself become intoxicated? And how will he be able to help the poor country people rid themselves of this.”³³

c) *Wanting special treatment*

Vincent wanted the members of the two Companies he had founded to shun privileges and avoid seeking to be the exception from the norm. He felt that the norms of both Companies had been formulated after a long period of experimentation and consultation, that they served the common good of the members, and that they fostered their dedication to the Mission. For that reason, he wanted the Rules observed, unless common sense dictated otherwise.

He used strong language in speaking to the Daughters of Charity on this theme. He warns them against wanting to be treated “like Ladies” when they are ill.

“If a Daughter of Charity is a true Daughter of Charity when she’s in good health, she’ll be the same in sickness. Therefore, she’ll

³³ SV XII, 42-48. Coste, as he sometimes did with matters that he thought embarrassing, omitted the examples above that Vincent used. They can be found in the English translation of volume XII, on pp. 39-41.

be content to be treated like the sick poor. But you cease to be a Daughter of Charity if you want special treatment when you're ill. What do you give the poor persons whom you serve? Eggs and broth. When you're treated like that, you're the same as your masters, and that's all that can be given. When they get better, you give them meat and bread, and a Daughter of Charity would like to be treated to partridge, woodcock, and other fine food! That's not for you; it's fine for the Ladies, but Daughters of Charity must be treated like poor persons, your Company being as poor as it is. Really, Sisters, if we were in our own homes, would we be treated like that? Would we have those comforts? I call you to witness and am sure that you know this. However, because you're a Daughter of Charity, it sometimes happens that the Ladies want to treat you as if you were a Lady; they're as anxious to provide comforts for a sick Daughter of Charity in their parish as if she were one of the Ladies. But Sisters who allow them to do that are certainly far from their duty; they should say, 'Madame, that's not suitable for poor women like us; allow us to follow our own little customs.'" ³⁴

d) *Vanities, like having long hair!*

Abelly, Vincent's first biographer, notes the founder's emphasis on early rising as a means for praying faithfully and preserving one's vocation. But, immediately after that, he adds something that might raise eyebrows today.

On another occasion he (Vincent) said, "I have noticed that most of those who have lost their vocation have failed in two things. The first is the morning rising, which they have not faithfully observed, and the second is the appearance of their hair, which they allowed to grow too long, and seems to lead to other similar vanities." In this connection, he wanted all the priests of his Congregation to wear their hair short. When he encountered someone whose hair came down over his collar, he would reach for a strand, and pull it a bit, smiling all the while, but letting it be understood that he preferred it to be cut. ³⁵

As is evident to readers, matters like hair length and style are quite culturally conditioned. One need only view the numerous paintings of Jesus with long hair to recognize that within some cultures it was the norm. Time and place make a big difference. Interestingly, today a nephew of mine in a Catholic high school in New York must

³⁴ SV X, 340-341.

³⁵ ABELLY, 3.24.1.

observe a rule similar to Vincent's; his hair cannot go over his shirt collar. In contrast, when I was in a Catholic high school, also in New York, more than 55 years ago, we were forbidden to wear our hair too short!

In any event, Vincent's point is clearly *vanity*. Hair length is an instance of how vanity showed itself among some members of the Congregation of the Mission in France in the middle of the 17th century. How does vanity show itself among us now in various countries in the second decade of the 21st century?

6. Obedient, keeping the Rule

In contemporary spirituality, rules hold a much more modest place than they did in the time of Vincent and Louise, but it is important to note that both Louise and Vincent were utterly convinced that the Rules they wrote were essential for both the foundation and the future of the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

Louise and Vincent knew quite well that the Spirit was more important than the rule (the point which our contemporary ethos emphasizes), but they foresaw that the Rules (or what they sometimes called Constitutions) would transmit to future generations the essential truths upon which their lives should be based. Analogous to the way in which the scriptures communicate the revelation of the Lord, or a creed expresses the faith of the Christian community, the Rules that Vincent and Louise composed transmit what is at the heart of the charism, the spirit, the mission, the community life, and the spirituality of their Companies.

So, they stressed fidelity to the Rules or Constitutions. During a repetition of prayer, Vincent tells a Daughter of Charity: "Right you are, Sister. The Company is like the sea, which can't retain a dead body; it has to cast it up because it can't tolerate corruption. If, in a Company, someone wants to live her own life, that is, to follow her own will, she's dead and the Company can't tolerate her; God and the angel of the Company cast her out; that's the touchstone."³⁶

Vincent held a touching dialogue with the sisters on the matter in a conference on the "Preservation of the Company", given on May 25, 1654:³⁷

"And you, Sister, what could ruin the Company?"

"The Company, Father, would be ruined if the Sisters weren't faithful to keeping their Rules."

³⁶ SV IX, 648.

³⁷ SV IX, 691.

“That’s well said, Sister; especially since a lack of fidelity in keeping your Rules shows a contempt for holy things, for your Rules are holy and tend to what is holy; they help you either to serve poor persons well or to improve yourselves. So, when you neglect or despise them, people can say good-bye to the Company, and although it may not be completely destroyed, all that will be visible will be the bark of the tree, and nothing more; it will be like dead trees that have nothing underneath the green bark...”

On another occasion, he states: “One reason obliging you to obedience is that you can’t persevere in your vocation without it; for, Sisters, as soon as there’s no obedience among you, say good-bye to the poor Company of Charity; it’s dead.”³⁸

Au revoir to the Congregation of the Mission! *Au revoir* to the Daughters of Charity! It is clear how deeply the aging Vincent feared the demise of his two Companies. How intensely he wanted them to be faithful to their Mission. How forcefully he urged them to be faithful to daily prayer and to rise early to engage in it. How stirringly he exhorted them to be humble, simple and charitable and to live the vow and virtue of poverty. How eloquently he appealed to them to deny themselves for the sake of the Mission and to live in obedience, willing to go anywhere in the service of the poor while living joyfully the way of life outlined in their Constitutions.

On the one hand, we can rejoice today that, contrary to his fears, both Companies are still quite alive. On the other hand, Vincent’s forceful words remind us that renewed fidelity to the mission and the spirituality he handed on to us is crucial to both Companies’ future vitality.

³⁸ SV X, 78-79. To illustrate this point, Vincent returns to favorite themes like murmuring and attachment:

“But as long as this holy practice exists in the Company, it will get on well. And a sign to know that a Sister has the virtue of obedience is if she has no repugnance in doing what her Superiors order, if she’s ready to go anywhere and to return here when told to do so, and if she’s not attached to what she’s doing when she’s told to leave it. That’s a true sign. But to criticize what Superiors say, to murmur against their way of acting, or to say that something has been badly ordered – that’s a sign of disobedience.”

“Sister, what are some signs of the vice contrary to this virtue?”

“It seems to me, Father, that it’s attachment to our own will that hinders us from following the Will of God and of Superiors.”

“Well said, Sister. It’s attachment to our own will. I’m told to go here or there, and I’m so attached to my own will that I don’t want to do it; I’m forbidden to do a certain thing, and I want to do it because I think the prohibition is unfair. When people are in that state of mind, it’s the ruination of Communities.”

As Thomas Stearns Eliot puts it:³⁹

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

³⁹ "Little Gidding" V.