

As friends who love one another deeply
_ reflections on community living yesterday and today _

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General

The two communities founded by St. Vincent have experienced enormous change since Vatican II. They have completely rewritten their constitutions and statutes, making their processes of decision-making much more participative. Nearly every province has engaged in a serious re-evaluation and restructuring of its works. Meanwhile, Vincentian studies have boomed. New translations of Vincent's and Louise's works have appeared in a variety of modern languages. New biographies of both have been written. A renewed interest in their spirituality has blossomed. Both Companies have produced new instructions on their vows. The virtues that Vincent proposed to both groups have been studied anew in depth. Both communities have organized numerous ongoing formation workshops and longer study programs, on provincial, interprovincial, and international levels.

Significant changes have also occurred in community living during this time. Life has become less formal, authority less imposing, scheduling less rigid. Many sense that relationships are much less stereotyped and much more personal. Still, even while acknowledging these very notable changes, a number of priests, brothers, and sisters express some uneasiness about community living. In this period of rapid transition, they ask, have we found the right formula for life together? Does community provide the faith-support, the encouragement, the understanding, the solidarity in action, the home that so many today _ especially the young _ seek?

Quite aware that I have no definitive answer to these questions, I offer this essay as a point of departure for further discussion of this important question. Using a methodology I have often employed, the essay will examine:

- I. Community living in the Vincentian tradition,
- II. Horizon shifts between the 17th and 20th centuries,
- III. Community living today _ some models,
- IV. Loving one another deeply.

I. Community living in the vincentian tradition

Vincent and Louise did not write about community living in a systematic way. An examination of the standard indices to their works yields meager results on this subject. But the rules of both Companies, in various chapters, touch on most of the key issues and problems involved in common life. Both founders, moreover, often treated life together in a wide variety of other contexts. Perhaps because the material in the sources is rather scattered, surprisingly little has been written over the years about community life in the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity.¹

As one examines what the founders hoped to create, several themes emerge:

a. a new form of life together, for a mission

While it is clear that Vincent, in founding both Companies, envisioned a new form of community, what he created was by no means completely new. Rather, he gleaned from the Church's experience key elements that suited his purpose. As André Dodin noted,² Vincent profited from the richness that tradition offered him, fashioning a form of community that combined the stability of the monasteries, the prophetic ministry of the mendicants, and the active contemplation of the Jesuits. Both his Companies were to be apostolic

¹This is by no means to say that what has been written is without value. On the contrary, there have been a number of very informative essays on community living. Cf. A. Dodin, "El nacer de una familia vicenciana: Las Hijas de la Caridad" in *Lecciones sobre Vicencianismo* (Salamanca: CEME, 1978) 139-160; A. Dodin, "Evolución de la Vida comunitaria y sus exigencias" in *Vicente de Paúl, Inspirador de la Vida Comunitaria* (Salamanca: CEME, 1975) 13-35; A. Dodin, "La organización y el espíritu de la Vida Común según San Vicente de Paúl" in *ibid.* 139-160; J. Corera, "Las Reglas o Constituciones de la C.M." in *Vicente de Paúl, la Inspiración Permanente* (Salamanca: CEME, 1982) 187-216; R. Chalumeau, "La Vie Commune dans la Compagnie après Saint Vincent" in *Bulletin des Lazaristes de France* (N_ 34, mai 1972) 7-9; J. Corera, "La Comunidad en las Reglas Comunes" in *Diez Estudios Vicencianos* (Salamanca: CEME, 1983) 89-106; J. Corera, "Ideas de San Vicente de Paúl sobre la Autoridad" in *ibid.* 107-128; J. Corera, "Bases Económicas de la Comunidad Vicenciana" in *ibid.* 129-157; J. Corera, "Las Hijas de la Caridad no son Religiosas" in *ibid.* 158-184; J. Corera, "Entregadas a Dios para los Pobres" in *ibid.* 185-199; M. Lloret, "La comunidad vicenciana, realidad viva de fe" in *Identidad Vicenciana en un mundo de increencia* (Salamanca: CEME, 1990) 161-180; J. Morin, "Saint Vincent de Paul et la Communauté" in *Bulletin des Lazaristes de France* (N_ 41, octubre 1973) 46-65; P. Pardiñas, "De los Reglamentos a las Constituciones de las Hijas de la Caridad" in *Vicente de Paúl, la Inspiración Permanente, op. cit.* 277-314; J. Suescun, "Vida Fraternal para la Misión" in *Don total para el Servicio* (Salamanca: CEME, 1982) 153-179; J. Suescun, "La Identidad de las Hijas de la Caridad y los dinanismos comunitarios" in *Identidad de las Hijas de la Caridad en las Constituciones y Estatutos de 1983* (Salamanca: CEME, 1984) 115-160; J. Rybolt, "'As Good Friends' Reflections on the Development of the Concept of Fraternal Life in the Congregation of the Mission" in *Vincentiana XXXVII* (1993): 475-488; M. Pérez Flores, "Identidad de la Comunidad Vicenciana" in *Correo Vicentino _ Comunidad para la Misión* (Setiembre/Octubre 1997) 13-18.

²Cf. André Dodin, "La evolución de la vida comunitaria y sus exigencias" in *Vicente de Paúl, Inspirador de la vida comunitaria* (Salamanca: CEME, 1975) 15-35; "La organización y el espíritu de la vida común según san Vicente de Paúl," *ibid.* 141-160; cf., especially, 145-150.

societies. Both were to be communities *for* a mission: the Vincentians were to emphasize preaching the gospel to the poor, but were never to forget the active works of charity; the Daughters of Charity were to emphasize practical, everyday charity, but were never to forget the words of faith that would draw the hearts of the poor to God. The members of both were to be contemplatives in action and apostles in prayer. They were to engage in a prophetic ministry.

In the case of the Daughters of Charity, the new form of community Vincent set up was most striking. Vincent liberated into the world, almost for the first time in the Church's history, a large group of dedicated women not bound to the cloister but to God and the poor. The famous words he proclaimed on August 24, 1659, describe their call dramatically:

They shall keep in mind that they are not in a religious order, since that state is not compatible with the duties of their vocation. Nevertheless, because they are more exposed to the occasions of sin than religious bound to the cloister, having

- *for monastery only the houses of the sick and the place where the Superioress resides,*
- *for cell a rented room,*
- *for chapel the parish church,*
- *for cloister the streets of the city,*
- *for enclosure obedience, going only to the homes of the sick or places necessary for their service,*
- *for grill the fear of God,*
- *for veil holy modesty,*

and making no other profession to ensure their vocation than

- *their constant trust in Divine Providence and*
- *the offering they make to God of all that they are and*
- *of their service in the person of the poor;*

for all these reasons, they must have as much or more virtue than if they were professed in a religious order; therefore, they will strive to conduct themselves in all those places with at least as much reserve, recollection and edification as true religious in their convent.³

Vincent hoped for the best of both worlds. He strongly emphasized that the Vincentians and Daughters of Charity were not religious, but he wanted them

³SV X, 661.

to incorporate many elements of religious life into their own. In 1639 he wrote to Jane Frances de Chantal about the Congregation of the Mission:⁴

And because you wish to know what constitutes our humble way of life, I shall tell you then, most worthy Mother... that most of us have made the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience and a fourth to devote ourselves all our life to the assistance of the poor common people; ... and that we practice poverty and obedience, and try, by God's mercy, to live in a religious manner, even though we are not religious.

b. with deep theological roots

As the theological grounding for life together, Vincent offered his Companies three principal sources:

1. *The Trinity.* He often spoke of the mystery of the Trinity to the Vincentians and Daughters. During a meeting of the General Council of the Daughters on June 19, 1647, he told them that they should "be the image of the Most Holy Trinity, so as to have but one heart and one spirit even though they are many persons."⁵ He reminded the members of the Congregation of the Mission that the bull establishing the Company binds them "to honor in a special way the Most Holy Trinity."⁶ In a conference given on May 23, 1659, he urged his confreres: "Let us be well-grounded in this spirit if we wish to have in ourselves the image of the adorable Trinity, if we wish to have a holy relationship with the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit. What is it that produces unity and intimacy in God if not the equality and the distinctiveness of the three persons? And what produces their mutual love if not their perfect resemblance?"⁷
2. *The Mystical Body.* Vincent called the missionaries to be conscious that they are one body. As the parts of a body are bound tightly together, so also must union reign among the members of the Company.⁸ In a conference about a paragraph in the Common Rules concerning charity,⁹ he exclaimed: "What! To be a Christian and to see our brother afflicted without crying with him, without being sick with him! That is to be without charity. It is to be a mere caricature of a Christian, without

⁴SV I, 562-563.

⁵SV XIII, 633.

⁶CR X, 2.

⁷SV XII, 256-257.

⁸SV XI, 120.

⁹CR II, 12.

humanity, worse than a brute beast!"¹⁰ In the same paragraph of the Common Rules which he was commenting on, he offered a list of highly evangelical means for growing in the charity that would bind the members of the Company together as one body: 1) to try to treat others as we might reasonably expect to be treated by them; 2) to agree with others, and to accept everything in the Lord; 3) to put up with one another without grumbling; 4) to weep with those who weep; 5) to rejoice with those who rejoice; 6) to yield precedence to one another; 7) to be kind and helpful to one another in all sincerity; 8) finally, to be all things to all people so that we may win everyone for Christ.

3. *The imitation of the apostles and the first Christians.* Vincent often recalled the common life and the community of goods that flourished among the first Christians.¹¹ Less than a year before his death he encouraged the Vincentians to praise and thank God for having placed them in the state of his Son, the apostles and the first Christians who held all things in common.¹²

c. and institutional reinforcement

On an institutional level, the common rules that Vincent composed for the priests and brothers used three mechanisms for creating tight cohesion in local communities: 1) the superior-subject relationship; 2) uniformity; 3) community of goods.¹³

1. Today, looking back, it is striking how important a role the local superior played in Vincent's time. In the rule for the Congregation of the Mission the superior-subject relationship appears in 63 out of 142 articles! The local superior intervenes directly in many aspects of daily life:¹⁴ in assigning work,¹⁵ in distributing economic goods,¹⁶ in regulating matters concerning members' spiritual life and even their conscience.¹⁷ But Vincent recognized that such interventions on the part of superiors would be effective only if accompanied by good human communication;

¹⁰SV XII, 271.

¹¹SV XI, 226; cf. CR VIII, 1.

¹²SV XII, 385; cf. CR III, 1, 3.

¹³For the treatment of the institutional aspects of community in the Common Rules, I am highly indebted to Jaime Corera, "La Congregación de la Misión: La comunidad en las Reglas Comunes" in *Diez Estudios Vicencianos* (Salamanca: CEME, 1983) 89-106.

¹⁴CR V, 11-14; VI, 4; VIII, 5; IX 5-7; 11-15.

¹⁵CR II, 10; V, 8-10; XI, 2-4; 8-11.

¹⁶CR III, 3-6, 9.

¹⁷CR II, 16-17; IV, 4; VIII, 8; X, 8, 11, 13, 15, 21; XII, 4, 9, 14.

otherwise, they could appear quite meddlesome. He tells the Council of the Daughters of Charity on June 20, 1647: "Oh my God! How necessary that is: great communication with one another. That embraces everything. There is nothing more necessary. That links hearts."¹⁸

2. A second institutional mechanism for creating cohesion within community was uniformity, which Vincent describes as "the safeguard of good order and of the holiness which comes from being together."¹⁹ Vincent calls for uniformity in how the members dress, what they eat, and what they have in their rooms, as well as in the manner of directing, teaching, and preaching, and performing their own spiritual exercises. To a modern reader,²⁰ some of these regulations seem extremely detailed, and even rigid, since today we stress unity much more than uniformity.
3. A third institutional mechanism for creating cohesion was community of goods. "All our belongings are common property and are given out by the superior to individual members, such as food, clothes, books, furniture, and so on, according to the needs of each."²¹ To safeguard community of goods, he determined that the superior would distribute to each confrere what he needs. Personal keys, to lock away one's own possessions, were forbidden.²² In all this, Vincent clearly felt the influence of Acts' description of the ideal Christian community, which "was of one mind and one heart, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common."²³ His description of the vow of poverty cites the example of this ideal community explicitly.

Even while noting the institutional mechanisms which Vincent used in the rules for solidifying community, it is important to recall the evangelical tone that he set, since it is the key to understanding his basic view of life together. He envisions a group of people living in community "as friends who love one another deeply."²⁴

II. Horizon shifts between the 17th and 20th centuries

¹⁸SV XIII, 641.

¹⁹CR II, 11.

²⁰Cf. CR X, 6; VIII, 7-8.

²¹CR III, 3.

²²CR III, 8.

²³Acts 4:32; cf. Acts 2:42-45 and 5:1-11.

²⁴CR VIII, 2.

On many other occasions I have written about the nature of horizon shifts and their importance. They profoundly influence the way we see life. The view of the world from the top of Mount Everest is remarkably different from the view on a subway platform deep underground in London. Whether we react favorably or unfavorably to a given horizon shift, it greatly affects us and how we see the world around us.²⁵ Such shifts usually take place gradually, even without our noticing that our way of looking at things is changing. Often, looking back over the years, we may find ourselves marveling at how our view of life has been altered. At times such changes in world-view take place in some persons, but not in others. But even for those whose outlook remains unchanged, horizon shifts have a significant impact since these persons live more and more in a world where those around them have come to see things from a perspective very different from theirs.

Three horizon shifts have had a great influence on the way we view community living.

1. A shift from a monarchical model of authority to a participative one.

Lumen Gentium, *Perfectae Caritatis*, *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, *Evangelica Testificatio* and many other documents made this shift a part of official Church thinking.²⁶ The revised constitutions of most communities quickly followed suit.

This new paradigm brings with it new expectations: dialogue, questioning, shared decision-making, shared responsibility. It emphasizes that authority serves the community and seeks to empower the group and individuals with it.

But this shift in horizon has also at times brought with it crises related to authority in the Church as well as in civil society. Dissent from official Church teaching has become rather common; e.g., in regard to birth control and other aspects of sexual morality. Civil unrest has become the inevitable response to governments that deny people a voice in regard to decisions affecting their future, resulting, for example, in an amazingly rapid change in the political situation in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, plus some openness and some renewed oppression in China.

²⁵Cf. *The Way of Vincent de Paul* (New York: New City Press, 1992) 48-52, 90-96; also, *He Hears the Cry of the Poor* (New York: New City Press, 1995) 60-63, 83-85.

²⁶Cf. *Lumen Gentium* 18-28; *Perfectae Caritatis* 14; *Ecclesiae Sanctae* 18; *Evangelica Testificatio* 25.

Communities today are very conscious of biblical models of authority that emphasize its participative nature.²⁷ The servant model emphasizes that the leader comes from the community and exercises authority as one of its members, in order to unify it in pursuit of its goals. The servant-leader does not "lord it" over the members. Rather, he seeks to promote their gifts, animate their spiritual growth, and channel their energies toward their apostolic goals. The steward model affirms that the leader does not "possess" authority nor "own" the community's goods. Power, as well as responsibility for material things, are placed in his hands as a trust. He is responsible to God and to the community for using this trust well. The shepherd model emphasizes the leader's closeness to the group. He knows and loves its members, calling them by name. He cares deeply even for those who stray. He is willing to lay down his life for his friends.

2. A transition from universally legislated structures to structures covenanted by local communities.

For centuries, the basic structures of community living were legislated for the whole congregation. Forty years ago, for example, whether a visitor went to Rome or to Rio he would find that, even though Vincentians spoke different languages in those places, the basic forms of community life were quite similar. The community rose at 5 a.m., went to morning prayer and meditated for an hour. Then the priests probably celebrated private Masses, ate breakfast, and left for their apostolate. At midday all joined in a particular examen, followed by lunch. In the evening before supper, they prayed Vespers and perhaps anticipated Matins. Later they recited a common night prayer, after which the grand silence began.

Today, these and many other universally legislated structures have disappeared. Within the general framework of constitutions, statutes, and provincial norms, each local community is called to create the structures that will concretize the various values in its life: how will we carry out our specifically Vincentian mission in this house? how will we share daily life with one another? when and how will we pray together? how often will we meet for dialogue as part of our decision-making process? what meals and other "family" times will we commit ourselves to? In place of universally legislated structures, we are asked to forge *covenanted* structures. Questions like those above provide the framework for some of the decisions that form the covenant.

It is evident that covenanting, through local community plans, demands considerable creativity and responsibility from the members of the community.

²⁷Bernard Lee "Community" in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, edited by Michael Downey (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993) 183-192.

No longer do there exist detailed legislated structures that bind us from without; it is up to us to create structures that bind from within. Covenanting implies that, having created such structures, the community will abide by them. Fidelity to the covenant is crucial.

The Constitutions and Statutes propose the local community plan as the basic tool for covenanting. They list a number of items that should inevitably be included within the covenant,²⁸ as well as the need to evaluate it and revise it periodically.

Many local communities formulate covenants and live them out faithfully. Others, unfortunately, have less success, struggling with this new tool. Sometimes the covenant is little more than an order of day. Sometimes it is mainly the work of the local superior, with only perfunctory participation on the part of the confreres of the house. Sometimes it is copied year after year with little effort at evaluation and revision.

3. *A shift from an industrial to an information society.*

Few things have influenced community living more profoundly. In more and more countries television and other means of communication are omnipresent. In many of our community houses the TV looms large in the rec hall, riveting the attention of almost all. With increasing frequency, confreres have individual television sets in their rooms, but sometimes at the cost of their being sealed off from the rest of the community. Over the last decade, computers have also come to occupy an important place in our lives. They aid significantly in our apostolate but can also become a lure to isolation. In many houses the phone rings constantly. In some parts of the world portable phones accompany a number of confreres wherever they go. Confreres have answered portable phones even while conversing with me in my room at the General Curia or as I chatted with them at the dinner table during a visit in a province.

The rapid communication and interruptions of the "information society" contrast sharply with the atmosphere in community houses three or four decades ago, when silence, reading at table, and "early to bed, early to rise" were prominent factors in life.

²⁸C 27: "Each community should work at developing a community plan, according to the Constitutions, Statutes, and the provincial norms. We should use this plan as a means of directing our life and work, of fulfilling the recommendations we receive, and of examining periodically our life and activities." S 16: "The community plan which each community draws up for itself as far as possible at the beginning of the work year, should include all of the following: apostolic activity, prayer, the use of goods, Christian witness where we work, ongoing formation, times for group reflection, necessary time for relaxation and study, and an order of day. All these should be revised periodically."

In light of these horizon shifts, it may be useful to reflect anew on the three mechanisms St. Vincent used for creating tight cohesion in local communities.

- Certainly the superior-subject relationship has changed greatly over the last several decades. Actually, change in this relationship is not a new phenomenon. There have been various models of authority in the course of the history of the Church. The key issue, whatever may be the *modus agendi* in a particular era, is surrender to the mystery of God's presence as mediated through others. The Church as a whole, and each community within it, has decision-making processes that are ways of discerning what God is asking of us at a given time. Such processes have been remarkably varied over the centuries. Sometimes they are quite democratic, as in the election of the Pope or the selection of an abbot. Sometimes they have been quite monarchical, as when prince-bishops ruled over their local dioceses in the same way that they ruled over their kingdoms. Sometimes they have been broadly participative, but with the final decision resting in the hands of a single person. We use a much more dialogic model of authority today than in St. Vincent's time.
- The place of "uniformity" has changed significantly with the transition from universally legislated structures to structures covenanted by local communities. We speak much more today of "unity in diversity."²⁹ Communities manifest a growing consciousness that in all relationships one must have a profound respect for "the irreducible other." The persons in a group cannot be fused into a mass in which their individual identities are indistinguishable; nor must any individual seek to absorb or dominate the personality of another. As we commit ourselves to a common future in the Lord, the evangelical means suggested by St. Vincent in *CR II*, 12 (listed above) are essential. At the heart of these means is a genuine love for one's brother or sister in community "as for oneself." In other words, we recognize them as fully equal companions on the journey toward the Lord.
- St. Vincent's third mechanism for creating tight cohesion, "community of goods," remains very important, even as we view it from within the changed horizon of an information society. Material inequalities in community continue to create tensions. The problem arises somewhat painfully at times in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Confreres born in those countries sometimes observe that the missionaries who live and work side by side with them in community have far greater financial resources than they themselves do. This problem, which is not easily

²⁹Cf. C 22.

resolved, inevitably creates some distancing. Today, in addition to speaking about community of "goods" in a material sense, we emphasize the importance of other forms of communion: sharing our journey, our personal story, our spiritual and apostolic experiences.³⁰ Sharing information is also vital if all are to feel included in the life and decisions of the Congregation. E-mail, which is rapid and relatively inexpensive, is already playing a significant role in this regard.

III. Community living today -some models-

In almost all cases, we could surely not now return to the structures that gave shape to community living in an earlier era. Most of these served their purpose in their own time, but gradually became over-formalized, inflexible, and out-dated. Still, they often aimed at values that have abiding validity: unity with one another, common vision and energy in the apostolate, prayer, penance and conversion.

With the passing of former forms, we have not yet, in my judgment, come up with sufficient contemporary means for creating local communities that are fully alive and attractive to the young.

In a recent book³¹ I treated at some length the various levels on which community is built, highlighting the need for common experience, common understanding, common judgment, and common action. I also described five key moments in community living: meals, prayer, fun, meetings, and apostolate.

Given the complexity of human relationships, we should not be surprised that community is often imperfect. If community really is something we must work toward, then it can never be captured once for all. We must always be striving to create it. Sometimes there will be high points, sometimes lows. We will have better community in one house than in another, and, even within the same house, we will "jell" in some matters better than in others.

When one considers the great cultural differences and the variety of living situations in the worldwide Congregation, it is clear that no single model of community can be applied universally. Considerable variety is possible, and even necessary.

³⁰C 46.

³¹Robert P. Maloney, *Seasons in Spirituality* (Hyde Park, NY, 1998) 143-150. Cf. also, Bernard Lonergan, *A Third Collection* (Mahwah, NJ, 1985) 5-6.

The local community plans mandated by our Constitutions and Statutes³² allow for much diversity and creativity. In fact, many varied shades emerge as local communities seek to concretize the Constitutions and Statutes in daily life within different cultures. Below, I offer several models, recognizing that no one of them exists in pure form. Like the colors on the spectrum, they merge into one another. Many other possible models surely exist in between. In order to describe the models more concretely, I have given them the names used below, conscious of the limitations of such nomenclature. The communities mentioned are fictitious, though, as will be obvious to the reader, similar communities exist.

1. *A Modified Traditional Model*

St. John Gabriel's, like many provincial houses, is a large local community. In addition to the members of the provincial administration, many other confreres reside there, including a small mission team, 15 elderly priests and brothers who continue to serve generously according to their capacity, and eight sick members of the province who need ongoing care.

The order of day in the house is a rather traditional one, adapted to the times. Morning prayer begins at 6:30, followed by a half hour of meditation in common and a concelebrated Eucharist. One confrere is assigned each week to animate morning and evening prayer; he selects hymns and various ways of praying the psalms, following the "General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours."³³ Another confrere animates the daily concelebrated Eucharist.

Breakfast is at 7:45. After that, most confreres scatter to perform their various duties.

At 12:30, lunch is served, preceded by examen. A period of about a half hour of common recreation follows lunch. Then some confreres rest; others engage in various apostolates.

At 6:40 in the evening, the community prays Vespers, followed by a brief examen. Most are there for supper at 7:00. The mission team, of course, is frequently on the road.

Once a month, the local superior organizes a house meeting, publishing an agenda the day before after having sought input from the confreres. During the meeting they discuss the principal matters affecting the life and apostolates of the

³²C 27; S 16.

³³"General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours" in *Documents on the Liturgy. 1963-1979: Conciliar, Papal, and Curial Texts* (Collegeville, 1982) 426 nos. 3431-3714.

house. Four times a year, on a Saturday morning, the confreres take part in a half-day of recollection. Annually, all engage in a five-day retreat, inviting a confrere of the province to come to the house to give it.

In a large house like St. John Gabriel's, the local superior must make many decisions. He does this with the aid of a small council, named by the Provincial.³⁴ He interviews each of the confreres of the house (a "communication") at least once a year.

Provincials have discovered that they need a rather good administrator to make this house run smoothly. Experience has taught that when things do not get done, the confreres get pretty upset. On the other hand, the confreres of the house have long experience of life together and have adjusted reasonably well to many changes over the years.

2. A "Bubbling-Up from the Bottom" Model

Eight confreres live in the local community at Frederick Ozanam High School, located in a very poor neighborhood. A single apostolate unifies their focus though, naturally, individuals engage in some other ministries as their time allows. Because all the confreres work in the school, they spend a great deal of time together. Fr. John, who is the school principal but not the local superior, holds a weekly meeting to discuss the main concerns of the apostolate. Besides the confreres, ten lay teachers take part in this meeting too. Fr. George, the superior, works closely with Fr. John. He is convinced that, if the local community is to be truly united, all must take responsibility for its life. He gathers everyone for a bi-weekly house meeting in which the major concerns (and some minor ones too!) are discussed and a decision is formulated. All the confreres, gathered at these meetings, constitute the "house council."³⁵ All feel free to contribute to the agenda, which George puts together and hands out the day before.

The confreres celebrate morning prayer together at 7:00, followed by mental prayer. One of them is responsible each day for preparing this time of prayer well, with music, symbols, variety in the method of praying the psalms, and a careful choice of readings, which are sometimes "Vincentian" ones. Twice a week during meditation, there is an opportunity for spontaneous faith-sharing.

After breakfast, all go to teach or carry out their administrative responsibilities in the school. Fr. John, at Fr. George's suggestion, has so

³⁴Cf. C 134 § 2.

³⁵Cf. § 79.

arranged the schedule in the school that most confreres are free at noon to concelebrate the Eucharist. A number of students take part freely in this celebration, which is always well-prepared by a small liturgical team from the school.

Lunch is quick and informal, since everyone needs to be back in the classroom or in his office by 1:15 p.m. There is no cook at midday.

School ends at 3:20, but extra-curricular activities keep most of the confreres there until at least 5. At 6, they gather for Vespers, which they take turns preparing. A brief examen follows, with some variation in form, and then supper. Since lunch is so rapid and informal, the confreres, in their house plan, have agreed to try to be consistently present at supper. Since this is not always possible, they made a firm commitment to two "inviolable" evenings.

After supper, there are more school activities, but everyone gathers for a time of recreation together around 9:30 p.m. Once a week they view a movie on videocassette together, discussing it afterwards over some refreshments. One of the members of the community organizes this, sounding out the others on the choice of film.

The confreres make an annual retreat of five days together, usually going away to the local seminary or to a retreat house for it. Twice a semester they have a Saturday morning of recollection in which there is ample time for meditation and faith-sharing.

They have agreed that four times a year all of them will read and discuss the same book on a Thursday evening as an aid to their own ongoing formation. They select the book at a house meeting, obtain copies, and take turns organizing the discussion.

Fr. George meets with each confrere twice a year in an informal communication in order to see how each is doing.

3. *A Small Community Model*

Three confreres live at St. Justin's Parish. Since the morning Masses are at 8 and 9 in the morning and at 6 in the evening, they have agreed to join in Lauds and meditation at 7:00. On Monday mornings, at meditation, they read and meditate on the readings for the following Sunday. Then they share their reflections with each other. They find that this helps them begin preparation for the Sunday homily.

Each celebrates one of the parish Masses. Breakfast is very informal, since they are engaged early with the Masses and with the parishioners. Since each is free one day a week, according to the house plan, they often substitute for one another at the Masses.

They have lunch, which is their principal meal, together at 12:30. All three are almost always present. The mornings and afternoons are filled with a wide variety of activities: visiting parishioners, counseling, teaching occasional classes in the parish grammar school, joining with different prayer groups, organizing and accompanying parish associations that reach out to the poor.

The confreres try to eat their evening meal together around 7 p.m. It is somewhat quick and informal (there is no cook in the evening) since afterwards there are many parish meetings, and at times home visitation. All make the effort to be back by about 10 p.m. for a time of relaxation, usually with a snack. They pray night prayer together at 10:45.

Each of the confreres makes his annual retreat at a different time, usually with the members of other houses of the province or sometimes with the diocesan priests of the same city. They all also engage with other parish priests in some of the ongoing education programs that the diocese offers. In addition to that, they have agreed with the Franciscans in a neighboring parish to spend an evening together once a month in ongoing formation. On that occasion, they discuss a pastoral/theological theme, with someone preparing reading material ahead of time and organizing the discussion.

Fr. Jack is the local superior and pastor. Though this small community is often together, he arranges for a formal weekly meeting at which he and Frs. Jim and Fred discuss the main issues in their life and ministry and arrive at decisions.

4. *A Dispersed Community Model*

The community of Blessed Francis Regis Clet is situated in an extensive mission area entrusted to the Congregation of the Mission. Eleven confreres make up the community but actually they reside in seven different villages. In four of the villages two confreres live together; in the other three a confrere is by himself. Some live fairly close to the central house, where the superior resides, but others are more than 50 kilometers away over rough, unpaved mountain roads that in the rainy season are hardly passable. In the local community plan they have made a firm commitment to come together every Monday. It is rare today that anyone misses. In the past, the tendency to overwork has kept some confreres away, but the community itself has been firm in insisting on fidelity to the common commitment to be present.

The order of day on Mondays varies somewhat, but in general the confreres pray together in the morning and share their faith with one another either after meditation or during the concelebrated Eucharist. Usually they then participate in a meeting whose focus is at times on apostolic planning, at times on ongoing education, at times on drawing up or evaluating the local community plan, at times on dealing with provincial matters, consultations, preparations for Assemblies, etc.

The confreres eat together at noon and spend the rest of the day relaxing and recreating with one another. They attest that, after a busy week, they look forward to the chance to rest and to enjoy each other's company. Their recreation varies. Sometimes a group engages in sports. Sometimes they watch a film. Sometimes they swim in the ocean, which is not far away. Some walk. Some play cards. Some experiment with computers.

Fr. Ed, the local superior, interviews each confrere four times a year, sometimes in the villages or sometimes at the central house. Since the confreres are so dispersed, he finds it important to sit down with them face to face rather often and to discuss what is transpiring in their life and work.

Once a year the confreres gather for five days to make their annual retreat together, inviting a confrere from outside the mission to give it. This retreat usually takes place in the mountains at the edge of the mission territory, where there is a Trappist monastery.

Though they live in various places, the confreres attempt to support one another in daily prayer. Recognizing the danger of isolation, they have worked out together a rhythm of prayer which all try to follow, whether living alone or with others, though naturally at times it must be adjusted to varying circumstances, like apostolic demands and Mass schedules. The confreres attest that, by and large, they are able to keep to this schedule which involves the praying of Lauds plus a half hour of meditation beginning at 6:30 in the morning and the praying of Vespers in the evening before supper, which they usually eat back at home in their villages. Much of the rest of the day is spent going to the various mission stations, celebrating Mass there, visiting the people, and training lay leaders. There are almost 300 villages in this extensive mission area.

Those are four models. I encourage the reader to create others. There are surely many possibilities.

IV. Loving one another deeply

The challenge in every model is, of course, to be "friends who love one another deeply."³⁶ That is an essential part of the covenant we pledge to each other and to the Lord when we enter St. Vincent's community. Here I offer just a few suggestions in that regard. Much else could be written. In this article I am merely "staking out the territory." I encourage others to develop it.

It is a mistake to juxtapose community and mission. It is clear that in an apostolic society our holiness is intrinsically bound up with our apostolic mission. But it is clear too that our growth in God's life and in the mission we receive also flows from the bounds of deep charity forged with one another in community.

In recent years the centerpiece of the lovely tryptic painted by Kurt Welther for the Chapel of Mercy at St. Vincent's Parish in Graz has become very popular. We used it as the cover for the final document of the 39th General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission. It appeared on our web site all during the Assembly and also graced the front page of many of our Vincentian publications afterwards. In the painting, Vincent is sitting among the poor as one of them. A face, shining from the center of the table, reflects Christ's presence. The setting recalls to us the Last Supper, the sacramental meal of God's love for his people.

Does not this painting say to us something about community life too? In fact, must not we ourselves be gathered around the table in deep communion with the Lord and deep communion with one another, just as we hope to gather with the poor? In Mark's gospel, Jesus selects the twelve both "that they might be with him" and "that he might send them forth to preach" (Mk 3:14-15). In the long run, communion is the goal of Jesus' mission, and harmonious communities are a living sign that this mission is being fulfilled. For that reason *Vita Consecrata* states that the Church urgently needs closely knit communities "which, by their very existence, contribute to the new evangelization, in as much as they disclose in a concrete way the fruitfulness of the `new commandment.'"³⁷ In that light, I suggest that there are two complementary truths in regard to community and mission.

"Community is for the mission" emphasizes that our own Vincentian Community, like other apostolic societies, came into existence in order to serve a particular urgent missionary purpose. All our basic decisions must be made in

³⁶CR VIII, 2.

³⁷*Vita Consecrata*, 45.

light of that purpose. Moreover, the structures of community life should always preserve their flexibility so that we might be able to respond to the urgent needs of those we serve.³⁸ But our community structures should not be so flexible that they cave in. Our Vincentian goal of deep communion with the poor will be best realized when we live in deep communion with one another in the Lord.

"Community is an integral part of the mission" highlights that community is not just a means to an end: it is a value in itself. Community reflects and nourishes our social nature as human persons and, in the Christian context, is the place for the in-breaking of the Word of God. A particular community concretizes in place and time a particular way of being the Church. It is one of the many living cells that make up the larger Christian community. Of course, such particular communities must always work at strengthening their bonds with the larger community; otherwise, they run the risk of turning inward and becoming self-absorbed.³⁹

In other words, like all true statements, the affirmation "community is for the mission" is part of a broader complex of truths. Only within that broader complex can it be adequately understood. It is surely true that St. Vincent founded the Congregation for the mission. But when this statement is overemphasized, we fall into the trap of using a work-model for understanding community. In that model, the local house readily degenerates into a hotel or becomes like a gas station where we fill-up for another day's journey or recharge our batteries for more work.

How can our communion with one another, or our living as "friends who love one another deeply," be fostered? To conclude this already long article, I suggest the following.

If a community is to be truly vital⁴⁰ then we must create:

1. a place of common experience, where all have shared in healthy initial formation, symbolic acts of initiation and incorporation, and well-structured ongoing formation;

³⁸St. Vincent used to express this concept especially to the Daughters of Charity, by saying that we should be free to "leave God for God."

³⁹Cf. *F.A.B.C. Papers*, # 83: "Communion and Solidarity: A New Way of Being Church in Asia, a Colloquium on the Church in Asia in the 21st Century" (F.A.B.C., 16 Caine Road, Hong Kong) 7. *F.A.B.C. Papers* is a project of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences.

⁴⁰One of the sociological reasons why people enter communities is the quest for the satisfaction of certain basic human needs that all persons have; e.g., sufficient life goods, personal identity, intimacy, solidarity and participation, generativity, achievement. Such needs cannot be fully satisfied by community life *alone*, but community should play a significant role in meeting them. For a very clear, interesting discussion of this question, cf. Sandra Schneiders, *New Wineskins* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986) 255-263.

2. a place of shared life, mutual concern, and forgiveness;
3. a place of shared goods, shared joys, shared sufferings, shared prayer, shared silence;
4. a place where the experience, the fruits, the hopes and fears of apostolic life are shared;
5. a place where we relax together, eat together, and enjoy one another's company;
6. a place of mutual help, both in the apostolate and in the many other daily matters that affect life together;
7. a place where we enjoy personal freedom and initiative, but at the same time are deeply committed to the common good of the confreres and our apostolic mission;
8. a place permeated by both affective and effective love for each other and for the Congregation as a whole;
9. a place where each of us can say with the Lord, as a Eucharistic community, "This is my body which is given up for you."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who experienced a martyr's death in a Nazi concentration camp at the very end of World War II, wrote this about community:

Between the death of Christ and the Last Day it is only by a gracious anticipation of the last things that Christians are privileged to live in visible fellowship with other Christians. It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world to share God's word and sacrament. Not all Christians receive this blessing. The imprisoned, the sick, the scattered lonely, the proclaimers of the gospel in heathen lands stand alone. They know that visible fellowship is a blessing. They remember, as the Psalmist did, how they went "with the multitude... to the house of God, singing with joy and praise" (Ps 42:4).⁴¹

⁴¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (London: SCM Press, 1954) 8.

Today we speak of the need to "covenant," to "build community,"⁴² to form "intentional" communities whose members say "yes" to the demands of membership while also helping formulate them. Building such a community requires time, energy, participation, and responsible carry-through. If in a previous era most community structures were legislated and the task was to fit into them, today we face the challenge of *creating* local community structures that will help us to live together "as friends who love one another deeply."

⁴²Cf. a very interesting article by John Rybolt "As Good Friends' Reflections on the Development of the Concept of Fraternal Life in the Congregation of the Mission" in *Vincentiana* XXXVII (1993): 475-488; esp. 481.