

Faithful to the Vincentian Identity Creative in Facing New Challenges*

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Introduction

The theme that I present refers to the Vincentian spirituality which identifies us as a Congregation, and how to live out our identity in the mission entrusted to us in the Church. It deals, once again, with the double fidelity recommended by the Council: a return to the sources and attention to the signs of the times.¹

A theme as broad as this one could be focused on from different angles. First, I will attempt to present what is meant by a return to the sources, that is, to the intuition and original inspiration of Vincent de Paul, to his spiritual experience, to his particular way of discovering and following Christ, to the heart of Vincentian spirituality and the spirit which should animate the members of the Congregation. Second, I will focus on the signs of the times, understanding this to mean the challenges with which the present culture confronts us. I will point out some possible responses to which these challenges call us, from the perspective of our identity and mission in the Church.

I. The Root of our Vincentian Identity and Mission

1. The centrality of Christ in the spiritual experience of Vincent de Paul

When we speak of Vincentian spirituality, we refer, above all, to the way of discovering Christ that the Holy Spirit inspired in Vincent de Paul. The origin of the different currents of spirituality which have surfaced in the Church, is due to the diverse ways of discovering and following Christ that have been lived out by Christians. Benedictine, Franciscan and Ignatian spiritualities respond to the different ways of following Christ and incarnating the Gospel that were lived by St. Benedict, St. Francis of Assisi, and St. Ignatius. Vincent de Paul discovers and follows a Christ who is the evangelizer and servant of the poor.

These different ways of discovering and following Christ were also influenced by these Christians' particular manner of reading the signs of their

* This article is a synthesis of two conferences given by the author to the confreres of the Province of Paris in a day of reflection.

¹ Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2.

times when it came to interpreting them as indicators of what God was asking of them. The discovery of the religious ignorance and the poverty of the country people was a reality that Vincent de Paul read as the call that God gave him to continue the mission of Christ the evangelizer of the poor country folk. Let us briefly review the spiritual experience of our founder.

Between 1605 and 1616, Vincent de Paul was a young priest who traveled frequently, moved by the desire to obtain benefices that would allow him and his family to live comfortably. The accusation of theft and the temptations against the faith that he suffered during three or four years plunged him into a state of restlessness and anxiety. This was his dark night. He emerged from this state, according to Abelly when *“he thought of taking a firm and unbreakable resolve to honor Jesus Christ and to imitate him more perfectly than ever before by committing his entire life to the service of the poor.”*² From then on, *“his soul was immersed in a sweet freedom.”*³ The searcher of personal benefices became the manager of the affairs of God.

“To honor Our Lord Jesus Christ and to imitate him more perfectly than ever before,” this is the key that explains Vincent’s change. Without this spiritual experience, without this discovery of Christ and without the resolution to continue his mission of evangelizing the poor country people, neither Vincent’s life nor the institutions he founded can be understood. And so we agree with Brémond when, referring to St. Vincent, he affirms: *“It is not love for humanity which led him to holiness; rather it is holiness which truly and efficaciously changed him into a man of charity; it is not the poor who brought him to God, rather it is God who returned him to the poor. Whoever sees him as more of a philanthropist than a mystic, whoever does not see him above all as a mystic, is imagining a Vincent de Paul who never existed.”*⁴

Another well-known text confirms for us the centrality of Christ in St. Vincent’s spiritual experience. The influence of Bérulle and the Christocentrism of the French School resonate in the letter sent to Fr. Portail: *“Remember, Father, we live in Jesus Christ through the death of Jesus Christ, and we must die in Jesus Christ through the life of Jesus Christ, and our life must be hidden in Jesus Christ and filled with Jesus Christ, and in order to die as Jesus Christ, we must live as Jesus Christ.”*⁵ The text, much more than a play on words, expresses St. Vincent’s profound identification with Jesus Christ; and in his words resonate the experience and convictions of St. Paul: *“My life is Christ; I live not I, it is Christ who lives in me”*; *“in life and in death we belong to Jesus Christ.”*

² L. Abelly, *La vie du Vénérable Serviteur de Dieu Vincent de Paul*, I. Paris 1664, p. 219

³ Ibid. III, p. 119

⁴ Brémond, *Histoire de la littérature française*. III, 1^{ère} partie, p. 219

⁵ SV I, 293, letter n° 197 to Fr. Portail, 1 May 1635.

2. A Christ who is evangelizer and servant of the poor

The current that runs through all of Vincent de Paul's spirituality is the mystery of the Son of God sent and incarnate in order to be "*the missionary of the Father.*"⁶ "*The Son of God came to evangelize the poor; and we, have we not been sent to do the same thing? Yes, we missionaries have been sent to evangelize the poor. What happiness to do the same thing that our Savior did!*"⁷ This Christ incarnate in order to evangelize the poor is "*the Rule of the Mission.*"⁸ "*Our Lord Jesus Christ*" is "*the true model and the invisible portrait to which we must conform all of our actions.*"⁹

In this same key of the incarnation for the sake of evangelization, we should interpret the practice of our founder which he also taught to the missionaries: to ask what would Jesus Christ do or say now. "*What would our Lord think of this? How did he act in a similar situation? What did he say? It is necessary for me to conform my conduct to his maxims and examples.*"¹⁰ The Christ of Vincent de Paul is an incarnate Christ, a concrete example for us who experience situations in our mission that are similar to those which Christ experienced as evangelizer of the poor. St. Vincent de Paul's preferred image of Christ is that of the sower scattering the seed of the gospel throughout the villages. It is this Christ the evangelizer whom the missionaries must imitate. Our Superior General has written, "*...we who are Vincentians follow Christ as the Evangelizer of the Poor. Focus on, and commitment to, this Christ is the heart of Vincentian spirituality.*"¹¹

The life of the young priest Vincent de Paul was changed by the discovery of, the encounter with, and the following of this Christ, the evangelizer and servant of the poor, who fulfilled the will of the Father. Only in the light of this change can we understand his works and the purpose of the institutions he founded.

3. "New fervor" for the "new evangelization"

For quite some time, John Paul II has been insisting on the urgency and necessity of a new evangelization. The Congregation of the Mission, given its mission in the Church, should feel particularly summoned and motivated by this call. According to John Paul II, in order to carry out the new evangelization, what is needed are evangelizers animated with a "new fervor" and also "new

⁶ Cf. SV XI, 435, n° 176, repetition of prayer, 11 November 1657.

⁷ Cf. SV XI, 315, Conference n° 142, 15 October 1655; cf. XII, 73, Conference n° 195 6 December 1658.

⁸ SV XII, 130, Conference n° 198, 21 February 1659.

⁹ SV XI, 212, Conference of 1 August 1655.

¹⁰ SV XII, 178, Conference of 14 March 1659; Cf. XI, 343, Advice to Antoine Durand (1656).

¹¹ Robert P. Maloney, *He Hears the Cry of the Poor* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1995) 113.

methods” and “new expressions.” What do I understand by “new fervor”? Where and how to find it? I shall quote St. Vincent to support what I want to express.

“Let us look to the Son of God: What a charitable heart! What flame of love! ... Oh Savior, source of love humbled to our level and humbled to the infamous punishment! Who has loved his neighbor more than you? ... My brothers, if we only had a little of this love, would we remain here with our arms crossed? ... No, charity is unable to remain idle.”¹²

This text comes from a conference given to the missionaries “on charity.” Its central argument is that authentic love of God leads to the love of neighbor, “because it is not enough for me to love God if my neighbor does not love him.”¹³ Where shall we missionaries find this “new fervor”? In the love of Christ and in love for Christ. In this same conference St. Vincent speaks the following words: “*The Son of God came to light a fire on the earth, to inflame it with his love. What else should we desire other than that it burn and consume all? My dear brothers, let us reflect a little about it, if you will. It is certain that he was sent not only to love God, but also to make God loved ... Well then, if it is certain that we have been called to bring the love of God to our surrounding areas and throughout the world, if we are to inflame all the nations with it, if we have the vocation to light that divine fire throughout all the earth, if this is so, how then must I burn with that divine fire!*”¹⁴

Where shall we missionaries find this new fervor? By drawing nearer to Christ so that the fire of his love burns us. Then it will be true that “*the charity of Christ impels us.*”¹⁵ All of this reminds us also of St. Vincent’s words which refer to zeal: “*If the love of God is a fire, then zeal is the flame; if love is a sun, then zeal is its ray. Zeal is the most pure element in the love of God.*”¹⁶ This new fervor, as missionary zeal, will flow from the love of God that fills us, and from the acceptance and the response which we offer to this love of God.

Father Maloney has written: “The missionary today must be holy. Unless he is a man of God, he will not be genuinely effective, nor is he likely to persevere. It is not the loss of numbers that the Congregation must fear. It is not the loss of institutions. What we must really fear is the loss of fire in our hearts. What burns in the heart of the true missionary is a deep yearning, a longing to follow Christ as the Evangelizer of the Poor.”¹⁷

¹² SV XII, 264-265, Conference of 30 May 1659.

¹³ *Ibid.* 262.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 262.

¹⁵ 2Cor 5:14.

¹⁶ SV XII, 307-308, Conference of 22 August 1659.

¹⁷ Maloney, *op. cit.*, 125.

St. Vincent is a man of action. For him, seeking the Reign of God demands both concern and action. But he immediately adds: “*The interior life is necessary, we must cultivate it, because if we lack it, we lack everything.*”¹⁸ This is how St. Vincent expressed himself during the conference “On Seeking the Reign of God.”¹⁹ Over and over again Vincent stresses to the missionaries the need to be “interior men,” men of faith, of trust, of love and of prayer. If the Congregation of the Mission were to occupy itself only with seeking external affairs, neglecting the interior and divine affairs, it would not be the Congregation of the Mission. All of this long conference deals with the missionaries’ contribution in the building up of the Reign of God. This will only be possible if they have a depth of life, if they seek in the depths of themselves the God who dwells within. “*Let us take care, my brothers, to be sure that Christ reigns in us.*”²⁰ Here is one of the expressions of the interior man.

The new evangelization requires, more than an organizational or strategic effort, a configuration to Christ and a docility to the Spirit. The contribution of the Congregation to the new evangelization will begin with the testimony of lives that are rooted firmly in Christ, the evangelizer of the poor, convinced that the mission is carried out, in the first place, by means of personal testimony before using new methods and new expressions.

4. Renewal of Vocational Choice

The exhortation “*Vita Consecrata*” describes the temptations that can assault those who are consecrated in our vocational path: crises of faith or of identity, settling down in stagnation, individualism... The Superior General has written that, for one reason or another, “*experience says that most, at one time or another, find themselves confused, wandering, uncertain where to turn.*”²¹ “*Vita Consecrata*” also points out some means to respond to these temptations, among others, to review in the light of the gospel and of the charismatic inspiration, the original choice made one day.²²

Let us remember the spiritual experience that we lived in the first years or in other significant moments in our vocational journey. Surely we felt our vocation as a gift from God which we welcomed with joy. Without a doubt we were moved by a generous desire to be holy missionaries, to spend our life evangelizing the poor, to live community as a true fraternity. Our life was filled with enthusiasm for responding to all that our vocation implies. What has happened since then? Have we not had the same experience as the disciples of

¹⁸ SV XII, 131, Conference of 21 February 1659.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 129-131.

²⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, 131.

²¹ *Echoes of the Company*, May 1996, p. 218.

²² Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, n°. 70.

Emmaus, losing our enthusiasm for following Christ? Have we been disappointed in not finding our expectations fulfilled?

John Paul II speaks of a possible “interior weariness” that can overcome priests.²³ The scarce fruits of our apostolic endeavors, the adverse social and cultural environment, expectations which have not been met, the dimension of the cross that goes along with the following of Christ, our advanced age... produce this “spiritual weariness” in our vocational path.

The author of the book of Revelation, in the messages which he sends to those who are responsible for the different Churches, invites them to reflect on the spiritual state in which they find themselves: “*hold fast to what you have*”; “*be strong in the face of suffering*”; “*strengthen what remains before it dies*”; “*you have lost your first love.*”²⁴

The years that have passed in our vocational journey have been able to offer us a time of growth and progressive coherence with the project of Vincentian missionary life. But time has also been able to destroy our hopes, cool our relationship to Christ, undermine our convictions, and install us in mediocrity. What should we do in this case? We must “*return to our first love.*”

In certain moments of our vocational journey, we have experienced a sincere desire to be holy and to live our missionary vocation with generosity. The strength of the Spirit moved us to overcome the obstacles that were opposed to our following of Christ, and filled us with zeal for the Kingdom. This experience then is part of our personal history; it remains in the deepest part of us and needs the breath of the Spirit to revive it. Returning to our first love means first of all to revive our vocational choice, to connect with and to remember the most authentic experiences that motivated us in another time. These have renewing power.

This exercise of remembering involves not only returning to our feelings, but above all to our convictions. We have to reaffirm our deepest convictions and ask ourselves why they have faded and how we can recover their original freshness. We are called constantly to conversion; that is, to a greater adherence, a more radical and enthusiastic following of Christ: that Christ with his unconditional love might draw to himself our heart, our understanding and our will.²⁵

Our founder explained what affective and effective love of God means. Effective love verifies the authenticity of affective love, but both are necessary.

²³ Cf. *Pastores dabo vobis*, n°s. 75-77.

²⁴ Cf. Rv 2 and 3.

²⁵ Cf. Jn 21:15-17.

“Our Lord is our father, our mother, and our all,” he wrote to Fr. Etienne,²⁶ *“the greatest gift that your can offer (to God) is your heart; he asks of you nothing more.”*²⁷

If we do not connect with and repeat the spiritual experience of St. Vincent, all of our other efforts at renewal will be ineffective. Renewal will not come by means of assemblies, documents, formation plans or pastoral programs. All these can be valid instruments, if the necessary interior renewal occurs.

We live in a time of multiple offers, of great changes. Confronted with this panorama, it is all the more necessary to center ourselves in what is essential and to find a unifying center. And we will only find that in Christ. Only He is the firm rock of our existence. Any other foundation would be building on sand. The first mission of consecrated life is the radical following of Christ and dedication to his mission. *“Taking into account this primacy, nothing must come before the personal love of Christ, and for the poor in whom he lives.”*²⁸

Vincent de Paul found the meaning of his life when he decided to love Jesus Christ more, and to imitate him and follow him more closely as evangelizer of the poor. The spiritual experience of Vincent de Paul can be summed up in a passionate love for Christ and for the poor, established in the following of Christ the evangelizer and servant of the poor. Only by repeating a similar experience ourselves, will we be able to speak of bringing the Vincentian spirituality up to date. And if this happens, then it will make sense to speak also of ways to incarnate it and express it today. Before the “how” is the “what” and the “for whom.” What justifies our existence is not so much a task as a life choice for Christ the evangelizer of the poor.

II. Cultural Challenges to Our Identity and Mission. Some Responses

We members of the Congregation of the Mission are called to incarnate the heart of St. Vincent de Paul’s spiritual experience: the discovery of the poverty of the country people and of Christ the evangelizer and servant of the poor. The faithfulness to our Vincentian identity depends on this. And from this will come also the “new fervor” that the new evangelization demands of us.

But this is about a creative faithfulness; that is to say, how to express our identity today as a response to the signs of our times. I will attempt to bring together, from the perspective of our Vincentian identity, the other two

²⁶ SV V, 354, letter of 30 January 1656.

²⁷ SV XI, 147, to a dying brother, 1645.

²⁸ *Vita Consecrata*, 84 a.

dimensions that the new evangelization calls for: “new methods” and “new expressions.”

1. Inculturation of the charism

One of the signs of our time is the growing respect for diverse cultures. In all of these cultures the life project that Christ offers us can be incarnated. The Good News that Christ brought us has a universal scope and is not necessarily tied to a specific culture. The gospel has to assume the values found in different cultures and, like the leaven in the dough, transform the false values that are found in them. The same can be said for the distinct charisms that exist in the Church.

The Vincentian charism emerged and was incarnated in the social and religious context of 17th century France. That context does not exist today, or it is fundamentally different. And so, when we speak of the necessity of inculturating the charism, we must refer not only to those countries where the missionaries took, along with the gospel, a culture that was foreign to the people whom they were going to evangelize. We also must refer to the changes which took place in the cultures where the charism originated. If we look closely at the world of today, we can see that the profound and rapid changes have brought about new ways of understanding and situating ourselves with regard to God, with regard to nature, with regard to ourselves, and with regard to others. It is a totally new culture in which the charism must be incarnated.

The new evangelization is called for, as much by the necessity to respect and appreciate the different cultures where this has not happened, as by the profound changes which have occurred in the cultures where the gospel and the charism have been incarnated in times past. If the penetration of the gospel in different cultures does not happen, then the evangelization remains superficial. It does not go to the roots; it will seem strange to the people, and will be ineffective in enriching the values and transforming the false values that characterize the cultures. Paul VI and John Paul II have recognized that the drama of our times is the separation between faith and culture.

Is it possible to separate the gospel and the different charisms from the culture in which they originally emerged and were incarnated? The example of St. Paul, who liberated the message of Jesus from the Judaizing tendencies and incarnated it in Greek and Roman culture, proves to us that it is possible.

But today there are other voices which affirm that, among the charisms and the culture in which they were incarnated in their origins, there has been such a symbiosis that, in attempting to separate them, both culture and charism are reduced to bits. The new wine was poured into the proper wineskins, and if one

attempts to change the wineskin, the wine is spilled. From this perspective they defend the temporary nature of the charisms. To insist on perpetuating that which emerged as a response to specific times and necessities would be a useless task, and would be more indicative of a struggle for subsistence, rather than a docility to the creative Spirit who leads the Church and who calls forth in the Church that which is needed in each age.

If we speak of new methods and expressions it is because, leaving aside the opinion expressed above, we still accept the validity of the gospel-Vincentian project, as we also accept the need to express it and incarnate it nowadays in a different way. It is about, then, a creative faithfulness with regard to what is essential, as well as a diversity in the ways of expressing it.

2. Refounding the Vincentian charism?

Consecrated life is going through a crisis. When we speak of renewal, resituating, re-creation, including refoundation, in order to move out of the crisis, we are expressing a certain lack of satisfaction, or discontent, with the situation in which we find ourselves. The renewal of the Constitutions, the following assemblies and their respective documents, the formation plans... have not been sufficient to overcome the crisis. The uneasiness continues.

Whatever words we use, all of them point towards a dynamic fidelity to the charism. We recognize the validity and the necessity of Vincent's original project for the Congregation, but we are convinced that we need an authentic renewal. This renewal or refoundation will come about if we are able to reproduce in ourselves the spiritual experience of our founder and if we are able to incarnate it in new methods and expressions, within our communities as well as in the mission entrusted to us.

Fidelity to the charism requires a return to the sources to try to discover the essential values that make up the Vincentian charism. It means that we have to do a rereading of St. Vincent, trying to discern and distinguish what is the heart of the charism from what are the structures and trappings proper to his times. That which is essential must remain in order to speak of fidelity. The cultural elements (works, structures, customs) can and should change when they are no longer supportive or adequate expressions that serve the spirit and end of the Congregation. Only in this way can we speak of creativity.

This is not easy, but it necessary. It is an exercise that allows us to distinguish the essential from the nonessential. What is essential for the Congregation is the following of Christ as evangelizer and servant of the poor, living in community for the mission, practicing the specific virtues that make up our "spirit" and our particular way of assuming the three evangelical counsels. In

the Church we are a society of apostolic life and all of these are its constitutive elements. The different works or ministries, the structures that incarnate and express in each age the spirit and the end, the style of life... can or should change. In order to renew, recreate, and refound the charism, we need to concentrate not so much on what St. Vincent said or did, but rather on what he intuited and loved. The charism goes beyond the historical circumstances of the founder, and indeed, goes beyond the works in which the charism was expressed in its origins and in later times. We are not jealous guardians of Vincentian archives and museums. Instead, we are Christians who want to follow Christ, animated by the spirit of Vincent de Paul, and as such, to continue collaborating in the mission entrusted by Christ to his Church.

3. Spirit, end and works

These are the three elements that configure the identity of each congregation. For us, the spirit is nothing else but the action of the Holy Spirit at work in Vincent de Paul inspiring in him a new way of following Christ. That same Spirit has called us to follow the same path. For our founder the five specific virtues, that in a special way he recommended that we practice, are also integrating elements of the “spirit” of the Congregation of the Mission. The “end” is to continue the mission of Christ as evangelizer of the poor. The “works” or ministries are means by which the spirit can be incarnated and the end can be attained. The spirit and the end are permanent; the works are subject to changes, according to the needs of the world, the Church and the poor.

Vincent de Paul perceived the spiritual and material poverty of the country people. To remedy their poverty he found no better ministry than the missions. But poverty is a reality that can be displaced from one social sector or place to another. The Congregation arose to continue the mission of Christ, the evangelizer and servant of the poor. If nowadays the country people were not poor, the Congregation of the Mission should not hesitate to move and to take on works or ministries appropriate for the poor of today. This is only one possible example. In its origins, our Congregation took up ministries with country people, prisoners, mentally ill, children, seminaries... Today it can take up others. What is important is to continue incarnating the “spirit” and attaining the “end” in “works” or ministries that truly are at the service of the poor.

To evaluate the works or ministries of the Congregation, and to suggest which could be left and which could be taken on, depends on different factors today. Let us recognize that the advanced age of the missionaries – with all that this implies in terms of loss of energy and a tendency to settling in – conditions the evaluation of works. But an institution like ours, which has opted for the poor, recognizing that poverty is ever changing, should always be willing to evaluate its works and ministries with this criterion: that the works facilitate the

incarnation of the charism and the attainment of the end of the Congregation. I believe that this is also the criterion that our Constitutions propose: *“The Congregation of the Mission, faithful to the gospel, and always attentive to the signs of the times and the more urgent calls of the Church, should take care to open up new ways and use new means adapted to the circumstances of time and place. Moreover, it should strive to evaluate and plan its works and ministries, and in this way remain in a continual state of renewal.”*²⁹

4. Present challenges to the Congregation of the Mission

Neither the world, nor the Church, nor the poor, nor the institutions, nor the order of values or false values of today are the same as in the time of Vincent de Paul. Because of this it is fundamental that we connect with the heart of his spiritual experience in order then to make it meaningful in the reality of today. If we do not accomplish both at the same time, our return to the founder will be archeology, and our works will be a simple means of subsistence or of making ourselves feel useful.

The challenges presented by the present age to the world, the Church, and to consecrated life are signs of this time, some positive, others negative, by means of which God desires to tell us something and which call for appropriate responses from us. *“The Holy Spirit calls consecrated men and women to present new answers to the new problems of today's world.”*³⁰

In light of these challenges, we members of the Congregation are not at risk for unemployment. Effectively three of the principal challenges of the present culture directly impact our nature as missionaries of the poor.

a) The eclipse of God

The process of secularization, without a doubt justifiable, has led to a generalized secularism. The increasing hiddenness of the face of God, unbelief, agnosticism and religious indifference are some of its present cultural expressions.

This panorama should be the first challenge that we members of the Congregation of the Mission recognize. Our mission in the Church is to be evangelizers of the poor. The response can be none other than to renew our missionary courage and our fidelity to the end of the Congregation. *“If our Lord asks us to evangelize the poor, it is because that is what he did, and what he wishes to continue doing through us.”*³¹ The widespread climate of unbelief

²⁹ C. 2.

³⁰ *Vita Consecrata* 73b.

³¹ SV XII, 79, Conference of 6 December 1658.

must call into question our methods and pastoral programs. Are we reaching those who are unchurched? Or are we satisfied with those who are close to the Church? The Congregation's response to the challenge of the eclipse of God will not be limited to renewing methods and expressions. Rather it demands that we who evangelize, also be evangelized; that we be witnesses of the living God who transmit what we have experienced.

This is the response that the Church expects of those who are consecrated in light of the challenge of the "eclipse of God": *"In our world, where it often seems that the signs of God's presence have been lost from sight, a convincing prophetic witness on the part of consecrated persons is increasingly necessary. In the first place this should entail the affirmation of the primacy of God."*³² Taking into account that we are evangelizers in the Church, we should feel ourselves included in the affirmation of Paul VI: *"Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."*³³ *"The world is calling for evangelizers to speak to it of a God whom the evangelizers themselves should know and be familiar with as if they could see the invisible."*³⁴

b) Economic neoliberalism

The result of the escalating globalization of the economy is accentuating the distance between rich and poor countries. The rich are growing richer, and the poor are growing poorer. Even in the most developed countries the index of poverty and the groups of marginalized persons are increasing. In contrast, alongside the growing poverty, there is waste and consumerism which manifests a lack of solidarity.

The Congregation of the Mission's response to this challenge of the neoliberal capitalist system can only be a clear option for the poor. This response, inherent in the mission of the whole Church, is doubly urgent for us who exist for the poor. *"There does not exist in the Church of God another Company who has the poor as its lot and is dedicated completely to them. To this end the missionaries make their profession; their distinctive mission is to dedicate themselves, as Jesus Christ did, to the poor."* *"We exist for the poor; they are our presence, our principal end; all the rest is incidental."*³⁵

The best way of expressing the Congregation's option for the poor will be to dedicate the greatest number of its members to their service. These members must receive a proper formation, especially in the area of the social doctrine of

³² *Vita Consecrata*, 85a.

³³ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, N^o. 41.

³⁴ *Ibid.* N^o. 76.

³⁵ SV Cf. II 199; XI, 314-315, 327-330, 367; XII, 4-5.

the Church, so that they can, as St. Vincent said, “make the gospel effective.” The Congregation’s option for the poor calls us to insertion and to be both physically and effectively near the poor in their world. We are not bureaucratic officials in the service of the poor. Rather, we are companions on the journey, brothers and disciples of those who are “our lords and masters.” This will lead us to a lifestyle closer to those we will be evangelizing.

c) Individualism

We are sons of an age that we call postconciliar. The slogans of 30 years ago were “commitment,” “freedom,” “pluralism,” “personal fulfillment.” We cannot deny these values, but neither can we deny some negative consequences: growing individualism in our communities, the priority of personal projects above the common mission, the conflicts between freedom and obedience, the lack of availability and willingness... Fraternal life in community has diminished in quality; and what is even worse, there is discouragement about the possibility of recovering it. Perhaps because of this, a community life based on tolerance is being upheld and defended, a peaceful coexistence, or at most, as an apostolic team or a group of “friends who love one another well” (this expression of St. Vincent has always seemed to me attractive, but insufficient).

The challenge offered to the Congregation by the present individualistic culture asks of us a more theological and evangelical understanding of the community: gathered, as the apostles, to be with Jesus and for the mission. To be with Jesus means to stress the dimension of prayer and to share faith. Community for the mission means to sense that we come together for a common mission, for dialogue and discernment, openness to our surroundings and flexible structures that support the mission. The individualism that holds sway in the present culture is a challenge to the communal dimension of our Congregation.

5. The faculties of the soul of the Congregation of the Mission

As we look at how to live today faithful to our Vincentian identity, we cannot ignore the five virtues which “*are, as it were, the faculties of the soul of the whole Congregation and should inspire our actions.*”³⁶

Why are these virtues, and not others, the soul or the spirit of the Congregation? Two intimately related responses are possible. One is given us by the Constitutions: because these are the virtues that follow from the particular vision of Christ that Vincent had and that the Congregation has.³⁷ And the other: because these are the virtues that facilitate the attainment of the end that we have in the Church.

³⁶ SV XII, 298, Conference of 22 August 1659.

³⁷ Cf. C. 7.

The particular theology and spirituality of St. Vincent's time underlie the conferences that he gave to the missionaries about these virtues. The difference is in the motivation and the purpose. For the missionaries, the virtues, rather than being ascetical, are apostolic. That is to say, they are oriented toward better fulfilling the end of the Congregation. St. Vincent offers Christ as the model of each one of them, but Christ as the evangelizer of the poor. These five virtues of Christ the evangelizer are those that the Congregation needs if it wants to continue Christ's same mission. In order to do this, the Congregation must "clothe itself with the spirit of Christ" and "use the same arms which he used."

Over and above this missionary orientation, the five virtues are necessary for fraternal life in an apostolic community. This is another purpose on which St. Vincent insists.

These five virtues specific to the Congregation, interpreted according to the spirituality of St. Vincent's time, clash directly with some of the characteristics of the present culture. How can we speak of and practice simplicity and humility in a culture that prizes power and competition? Are mortification and zeal capable of being understood in a hedonistic culture?

These virtues, the spirit and soul of the body of the Congregation, in many respects prove to be countercultural. But not because of this should we consider them to be outmoded or appropriate for times past. They are expressions of gospel values, and these are always subject to rejection. These virtues have a prophetic function that we cannot deny, and they contain values that should be incorporated into the present culture as leaven in the dough. But in the present culture there also exist certain values that connect with some of the expressions of these virtues and that we can assume as coherent with them. With regard to this, Fr. Maloney has written: "*It is vitally important that each era reinterpret these signs in order that the spirit of St. Vincent might continue to live in a way that is relevant in each succeeding age.*"³⁸

The theological and evangelical value of these virtues remains. But the way of expressing these values today will have to change in order to connect with the values of the present culture or to counteract its false values. Thus simplicity would connect with two trends in the present culture: spontaneity and truthfulness. At the same time it would be an antidote against deceitfulness and lies. Humility could express the sense of interdependence, of the acceptance and valuing of persons that is perceived nowadays. It could also correct competitiveness and self-sufficiency. Meekness would place us in the

³⁸ Robert P. Maloney, *The Way of Vincent de Paul*, (New City Press: Brooklyn, NY, 1992) 69; Cf. Miguel Pérez Flores, *Revestirse del espíritu de Jesucristo*, (Salamanca 1996) themes 6-11. This section is inspired by both authors.

mainstream of the civilization of love and tolerance. It would be at the same time a prophetic sign against violence and harshness. Mortification would bring us into solidarity with the physical and moral suffering of the poor. At the same time it protests against hedonism and consumerism. Zeal would connect with the current preoccupation for competence and for things to be done well; at the same time it would serve as an antidote for apathy toward the great problems of the world, or discouragement in the face of difficulties.

In the conference “*On the evangelical maxims*” opposed to those of the world,³⁹ St. Vincent enumerates these five virtues as an integral part of the spirit of the Congregation, as evangelical maxims, and as arms that Christ used in the fulfillment of his mission. In a letter to Fr. Codoing he writes: “*let the people think or say whatever they want (with regard to the simplicity and humility of the Congregation), but rest assured that the maxims of Jesus Christ and the examples of his life will never lead us to disaster, but will instead produce their fruit in due time ... Such is my faith and such is my experience.*”⁴⁰

The three evangelical counsels that we assume are also evangelical maxims. These can also acquire new expressions today in order to be “a spiritual therapy”⁴¹ for a world dominated by money, power and pleasure. Today more than ever, we would have to live radically these evangelical counsels to offer the world a prophetic witness of an alternative way of life: in the face of the unrestrained desire to consume, poverty is a sign of sharing with the poor and a protest against the unjust distribution of goods. In the face of hedonism there is selfless, universal love expressed by chastity lived out in celibacy. In the face of individualism, obedience becomes an openness to others, and together with others, to the plan of God.

The exhortation “*Vita Consecrata*” promotes collaboration with others and insists that all this be carried out respecting the particular charisms. Many congregations have a similar end and similar ministries. The difference will be in the spirit that animates each one. Our Congregation’s spirit is expressed in the five virtues. In the description of our identity there are elements in common with other congregations. The five virtues will give to ours a particular color. Perhaps we can only be distinguished by a shade of color; but we should not undervalue these differences. They are precisely what distinguishes the distinct charisms. There are certain current opinions that tend to reduce all the congregations to one common denominator in favor of the only common cause of the Kingdom. These lead to a weakening of, and a lack of identification with, the

³⁹ Cf. SV, XII, 114-129, Conference of 14 February 1659.

⁴⁰ SV II, 281-282, Letter to Bernard Codoing, 5 August 1642.

⁴¹ Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 87.

charisms. And they do not respect the dynamic of the Spirit, the author of the different charisms.⁴²

Conclusion

The Vincentian spirituality to which we are heirs is marked by St. Vincent's experience of Christ and of the poor. To speak of how to renew the charism of our Vincentian identity presupposes a connection with the same spiritual experience. In the heart of this experience we find the double discovery that Vincent made: on the one hand, the religious ignorance and the poverty of the country people, and on the other, the call of God to follow Christ the evangelizer of the poor.

We will be faithful to our Vincentian identity if we relive a similar experience, the centrality of Christ the evangelizer in our lives. From this experience will spring up the new fervor that the Church asks of us in order to collaborate in the new evangelization. Without this, it will be useless to speak of new methods and new expressions.

Renewing the charism of our Vincentian identity implies that we are converted to this experience: to live our lives more deeply rooted in Christ and with a greater energy to continue his mission among the poor, to renew our vocational choice, to actualize and relive what is most valid and authentic in our vocational journey, following Christ on the Vincentian path. From this will flow the new fervor.

Before we speak of how to express our Vincentian identity in the Church today, we have to return to drink deeply from the sources from which that identity springs. The first source was Vincent de Paul's passion for Christ and for his mission as evangelizer of the poor. To resonate with and to repeat ourselves the spiritual experience of our founder is the condition "sine qua non" for renewal.

"Vita Consecrata" affirms that the more one lives in Christ, the better one can serve him in others, going even to the furthest missionary outposts and facing the greatest dangers.⁴³ It also warns us that a congregation is weakened not so much by a decrease in numbers as by a failure to cling steadfastly to the Lord and to personal vocation and mission.⁴⁴ The Church expects that Societies of Apostolic Life will offer the greatest possible contribution to the proclamation of the gospel⁴⁵ and that the missionaries, even before committing themselves to the

⁴² Cf. *Fraternal Life in Common*, N°. 46.

⁴³ Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 76.

⁴⁴ Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 63 d.

⁴⁵ Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 78 b.

cause of evangelization, will allow themselves to be transformed by Christ, and conformed to the gospel.⁴⁶ Perhaps before speaking of new methods and new expressions for evangelization, the crisis of the evangelizers must be overcome.

If the present channels (structures, works, etc.) are not working, the new fervor will take care of demolishing them, and of finding new channels. New wineskins, yes, but because there is a new wine which the old wineskins cannot hold. If the wine is lacking (new fervor), then what will be the use of new wineskins (new methods and new expressions)? Shall we forget that the only one capable of making all things new is the power of the Spirit? Only the Spirit can free us from fear, boredom, and from comfortably settling in.

(GILBERT WALKER, C.M., translator)

⁴⁶ Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 105 b.