

The Advisor and the Spiritual Life

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Very simply, I would like to thank you for this invitation that we, the laity, have received to clarify, from our point of view, this important topic of spirituality, and to allow us to share the beautiful topic with you. If we truly believe that God's will is made manifest through peoples, events in our lives and the signs of the times, then we must recognize and know these signs in order to read God's will in today's world.

As a young person belonging to a Marian and Vincentian Association (JMV), I believe that the best contribution I can make, from my humble experience of spirituality, is to **draw close to the reality of young people in today's world**, a world that is very different than the one that I myself have lived in, given the rapid changes experienced in our "*technological age*."

I also want to admit that I was hesitant to speak about Vincentian spirituality as you have experts to speak about that topic. Therefore, I thought perhaps it would be more normal for me and more useful for you if, together, we try to look at what is most lacking in young people's lives today and what should be our contribution coming from within Vincentian spirituality. It is true that there are many who propose opportunities to work in favor of others, but there are very few in the Church who offer a contribution such as a spirituality that supports this work of dedication.

I am aware that my analysis is going to be influenced by the reality to which I belong; that is to say, my way of looking at it is always determined by my perception of young Europeans. I am equally aware that the reality we live in is more and more uniform and global. That is why I believe I can echo some of the common characteristics of the world of young people.

One of the main priorities of the JMV Association is that young people be evangelizers of young people. In order to do this I feel that it is very important to look at the current world and the world in which the future generations will live so as to be able to adapt, as much as possible, the essence of the spirituality that we claim to offer them as a gift of the Spirit.

If lay Vincentian spirituality must be characterized by our being inserted into the world, with the poor — but in the exercise of secular tasks — allow me to take

a look at this world the young live in today, even though it obviously seems that I am referring to areas that have nothing to do with spirituality.

1. Characteristics of young people in the digital age or society of knowledge

In looking at the current and future realities I would like to point out:

- Some years ago knowledge and learning came to us from within the family environment or school. Today, knowledge and learning is more and more within the grasp of young people through other technological means (television, mobile phones, videos, music, video games, the Internet...). But this overload of information also gives rise to confusion. We used to say that in prior decades we worked to eradicate illiteracy. At present, “excessive information” also produces ignorance, for, in the final analysis, so much information is a hindrance and is unproductive. Therefore, it is important to **organize the essentials of the message** that we want to transmit to young people and give them **values criteria** that will help them discern from a spiritual point of view as well.
- In the past, we did not speak a great deal about extreme busyness, agitation and stress. Does spirituality, as it is, have anything to bring to today’s lifestyle where we foster values like productivity and efficiency to the detriment of personal and social interaction?
- Perhaps it would be worthwhile to reflect upon the importance we are going to attach to the structure of the message we want to transmit in Vincentian code to the theoretical content, and that of experience, in order to permit the young people to feel within themselves that which we want them to discover. Facing today’s risk of information overload, should we not try to be more creative and experiential in presenting the contents of the message that we are trying to make known?
- Today’s young person is bombarded with stimulation from a capitalist society that vigorously tries to demonstrate that happiness resides in having more than in being. If, by chance, someone might doubt that the Vincentian charism has Good News to share, are we still able to offer a liberating message from the gospel today?
- Today, we also witness changes in family structure, rooted in the fact that, more and more, both parents work. In addition, the average number of children per family is decreasing: in Europe, for example, there are 1.8 births per family. Many children are growing up alone, without brothers or sisters, and with difficulties for socializing. From our experience of family and community, can we offer these future generations something new to be

discovered, something that can enrich their personal and spiritual maturation?

- In a society that holds on to individualism and competitiveness, where inequalities between countries continue to grow more and more, will our Vincentian spirituality have something to give in inviting us to remain close to the sufferings of others? Through these lines I will try to show that this is possible.
- In the society in which our young people live, where one seeks to standardize everything, even culture, is it worth trying, as Christians, to make the wealth and richness of charisms known through which the Spirit is manifested in the Church over time, so that our young men and women experience the joy of the richness proper to the Vincentian charism?
- In a culture where television offers poor educational quality, characterized by “trashy” programs, where violence and a lack of values become the norm, is it worthwhile for us to be courageous in communicating altruistic messages to young people, newsworthy altruism incarnated in men and women like Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac?

These are the reflections that I had to consider before thinking about the aspects of spirituality that must be stressed today so that these aspects can become meaningful for the young people we will frequently see and meet in the coming years. Now I would like to cite certain elements that, in my opinion, can foster our communication of a spiritual heritage that is so rich, our Vincentian Spirituality.

2. “Preparing the soil in times of drought”: a challenge for today’s Advisor

I am going to specifically allude to the metaphor of thirst that frequently appears in the bible to remind us continually of today’s young people’s thirst for altruistic values, a hidden thirst, often under the signs of apathy.

In speaking of spirituality, we must agree in noting that today’s society does not facilitate understanding these dimensions as the rhythm of life is of no help and religion is an area that is hardly cultivated in most families. The number of families that educate their children in their faith is becoming more and more reduced. That is why our responsibility of accompanying young people in this process is becoming greater and greater.

From this perspective, we know there are attitudes that make understanding these dimensions difficult: distortions, excessive noise, busyness, activism, materialism, and pleasure-seeking. And yet there are other dimensions such as **a**

thirst for depth that helps young people to open themselves to other dimensions where they can find the will of God in their lives.

From the outset, when trying to help young men and women understand the subtle language through which God is manifest,¹ our challenge consists in helping them to be aware that we have obvious realities that are not found on the Internet but that the dissatisfaction and worry they feel does have an answer. Otherwise stated, it is up to us to “**arouse the thirst**” before giving them to drink. Now, we are going to look at how we can awaken the thirst that is spoken of in the gospel.²

a. Developing the ability to be silent and to listen

Why am I giving so much importance to this aspect? As a teacher I am noticing, year after year, the difficulties students are having concentrating and listening. How can we lend an ear to the subtlest personal levels, for example, when we speak about listening to the “will of God”?

I will begin by speaking of this aspect given that most young people today were born during an era of great activism and find great difficulty in discovering dimensions such as silence because, from the outset, they have the sensation of wasting time. They live in a world where over-stimulation is well developed at some levels and very disorienting at others. More and more, we must teach them to center their attention on the interior person. A few years ago this would have been interpreted as self-centeredness, but today it becomes very necessary.

Many young people need to find out that they need to do fewer things and have more calm and tranquility in order to discover the treasures that we all carry within ourselves. If not, how can they share these treasures with others? Previous generations had more contact with nature. Today things are more and more artificial, even food. We should not consider all knowledge as being totally acquired. Of course, creative solitude and silence have nothing to do with escaping from the world, imposed silence, isolation, or lack of communication as there are many kinds of silence. Here we are talking about those who can cultivate, within others, the desire to actively change and “build” themselves if we want our young people to make lasting and quality decisions.

If we want to have a quality ministry, we must remember that working with people on this level requires that we know how to quiet other stronger voices — tensions, pressing demands and intense activities — in such a way that attention is not dissipated but turned towards the inner person.

¹ Cf., 1 Kgs 19:9a, 11-16.

² Jn 4:11-15.

Exterior silence is necessary but it is not enough. It is a precondition for prayer from which all desire for service flows: “*Whenever you pray, go to your room, close your door, and pray to your Father in private.*”³ Interior silence is much more difficult to attain. The ability to concentrate and focus must be able to overcome anxiety, the affective need of young people and excessive activism. From this comes the need to remove oneself from our usual places to participate in what we call encounters, retreats or days of reflection. Do not think that young people will find these truths themselves if we do not show them to them, for these truths are not a part of the everyday advertisements and commercials present in their lives.

Please God that our young people find the opportunity to discover, alongside us, that silence is not only the absence of words, but also that silence has its own integrity and obvious fruits. Then the seed of Vincentian charism will fall on good ground and give abundant fruit in due time. May they also discover that in order to be able to come close to others and meet their needs, we must find a place for them in our hearts. In order for **listening** to be authentic, young men and women must experience, together with us, that we are open to discovering other realities, that we have an ongoing ability to learn and generate alternatives. We also have to make spaces available so that people can meet, communicate on a deeper level and together look at the realities within which they live with a Vincentian spirit of justice and conversion.

b. Developing discernment and the ability to savor things

More and more, today’s generation is finding it difficult to stop to think and “savor things,” in the sense of focusing attention on the interior person and not on exterior stimulation.

As counterparts to a society of abundance, Vincentians have the joy of having discovered the values of “humility,” “simplicity” and “austerity” that are in contrast with the illusions that a market society tries to inculcate.

I sense that we must put the accent not so much on the exterior moral sense, that always seems a bit imposed, as much as on one’s own convictions and experience when referring to the realities we have discovered, giving them the value they contain, according to us, without being afraid of speaking about them. We must also have the courage to speak about our own experiences, the times of confusion and confrontation we have had to journey through so that young people find the resources needed when confronted by the numerous crises that may come up during their lives in relationship to their various choices.

In the measure that we inculcate a critical spirit within young men and women and we provide possible experiences, helping them discover, themselves, the

³ Mt 6:6.

importance of the world's values and the gospel values, they will be able to understand the value and richness of the spirituality we are trying to transmit to them. Often, we feel that the fact of speaking of these realities will give them the impression that we are far from them, yet in reality, in order to appear "close to them," many times we do not show what is most authentic within us, and in the end, "they are disappointed."

If we want the truths that we are trying to communicate to them to be not only beautiful ideas or simple ideology, we will have to interiorly savor these truths, for young people are very open to the affective world and in the measure that their hearts are touched, they put their hands to work. In the same way in which we learn to enjoy the presence of a friend, we must strive in such a way so that young people's relationship with God touches every fiber of their being. We want God to be truly present in all aspects of their secular life. I am only pointing out here the need observed to live in greater depth, taking into account the societal characteristics of our time.

c. Being in close contact with the suffering of others

We must have the courage to show young people the data of hard reality so they can open their eyes and understand that there are still more things to do. And in order for them to remain faithful to certain values, they will need to be firmly grounded by a strong interior life.

We, Vincentians, have the opportunity to live in relationship within a world that is also thirsting for solidarity. It is a message that young people with an open heart know how to grasp well. We all have this healthy preoccupation of helping young men and women open themselves up to the realities of others; but I do not know if we always have the words and actions to put this invitation into practice, for sometimes — and I am saying only sometimes — we criticize them for not doing more, even before the young person, coming from his/her own free choice, has chosen to give this service. In my understanding, St. Vincent had total trust in providence. Perhaps it is a value we need to bring back during these times when we are only waiting to receive it.⁴

Youth is a fundamental stage in the psychological development of a person. It is the age where self "identity" must be established. But this activity will remain incomplete if we forget that we are interdependent. This age is a special time when the young person perceives the possibility of this precious relationship with others and the fact that we are responsible for each other. In this way the young person is

⁴ St. Vincent said: "... *the missionary shall not be too solicitous about temporal goods, but shall cast his care upon the Providence of the Lord; holding, for certain, that as long as he shall be deep-rooted in this charity, and grounded on this hope, he shall ever dwell under the protection of God, and no evil shall approach him nor shall any good be wanting to him...*" (Coste, *Conferences to the CMs*, Conference 198, p. 482).

in a relationship that offers a rewarding opportunity of paying attention to a person in need.

Therefore, besides the need to discover one's identity, youth is an age where one wants to have deep relationships with others and community experiences with other people. Jesus said that whatever a person does for another, whether it is welcoming, clothing, helping or caring for them ... it is done to him.⁵ When we are able to distinguish the same spirit in ourselves and others, we become more flexible and a "we" experience begins to naturally take place. We have many gifts to offer young people, for example, experiencing reciprocity. Is there anything more Vincentian than this?

3. "Plowing the good earth": a bold task for the Advisor

The principle task of the youth Advisor consists in fostering the growth of spirituality, in all its depth, flowing from the Vincentian spirit. This is a great challenge for lay Vincentians. This proposition takes on a particular nuance within Marian Associations, established through the specific desire of the Blessed Virgin. That is the case with the Vincentian Marian Youth where Mary invites us to imitate her virtues (modesty, humility, silence, transparency, etc.) and her concern for the poor as found in the Canticle of the Magnificat, her visit to her cousin Elizabeth and the Wedding Feast at Cana.

Within the catechumenal process that is **at the heart of the Vincentian Marian Youth**, we place special value on the following tasks:

a. Offering personal accompaniment and discernment

More than ever there must be face-to-face interaction with the person who can advise and assist in order to accomplish the personal work that leads to mature choices. This task can be done in dialogue on an individual level or in accompanying groups, by allowing discussions to develop.

A young person today can find this kind of person in an Advisor who has experience, time for dialogue and solid criteria to help him/her grow within his/her process of maturing in the faith. Young people are looking for objective, selfless people without prejudice, who can accompany and guide them without making decisions for them.

It is best to set aside time to "review." Within JMV we concretize this by developing and revising a "**young person's life plan**," for we feel that *interior growth* is not connected to the amount of subject matter received or developed but to its depth and assimilation. It is as bad to forget the need to look at oneself as to

⁵ Cf., Mt 25:40.

fall into excessive introspection, where the follow-through of the Advisor, who, like Zen teachers “tapping the shoulder,” reminds them that the time has come to move from action to commitment.

When faced with the excessive propositions and teachings that future generations receive, it is necessary to teach them to “reflect” for it is only with this deep attitude that they be able to have a better understanding of themselves, make decisions and build their own lives.

b. Prayer and life must be in accord

For Vincentians, “contemplative work” and “active work,” far from being in contrast, are complementary. They are two inseparable aspects, like the two sides of a coin. The young committed person needs both aspects so that his/her relationship with God, with others and with the world is harmonious and efficacious on the spiritual and apostolic levels and believable on the ecclesial and social levels. Consequently, we must help them understand that “when we speak of active spirituality or spirituality of action, this means that the inspirational sources, the goals to attain and the most convincing motivations to take on have their point of reference in action.”⁶

Life conversion can only come from God (there is no mistake about that), experiencing the Spirit and the opening of our deepest self to God-within-us. This also presupposes abandoning the superficial and old self that is in each of us. So, from water and the Spirit⁷ is born a new person enlivened by the Spirit of God. How can we teach young men and women this interior conversion if the Spirit is not in them teaching them how to pray? St. Vincent refers to this in the well-known phrase: “*Give me a person of prayer and this one will be capable of everything.*”⁸

I share with you too the words of Karl Rahner for I believe that the laity should take these questions seriously or run the greater risk of being taken in by the world’s mentality. Karl Rahner states:

We already stated that the future Christian will be a mystic or he/she will not be Christian. This phrase is incorrect and the weight of its truth will be clearer in the spirituality of the future when we understand through transcendence, not by parapsychological phenomenon, but by an authentic experience of God that flows from the center of existence. Possessing the Spirit is not an occasion that

⁶ Pérez Flores, Miguel. “Introducción a la espiritualidad vicenciana laical” in *Avivar la caridad*, No. 1, CEME, Salamanca, 1997, p. 77.

⁷ Jn 3:5.

⁸ Coste, Conferences to the CMs, Conference 51, p. 77.

*will only be taught from the outside, in a didactic way, like an event that is beyond our existential awareness ... but it will be experienced from within.*⁹

In order for our young people to achieve this level of spirituality, they need to progressively begin developing skills for prayer, integrating prayer as a normal element in their daily lives. “*Prayer is time spent before God, listening to God.*” Young people must personally discover this at the same time that they are developing solid practices in prayer with their groups.

Concerning prayer, Mother Teresa of Calcutta states: “*The more we receive in silent prayer, the more we have to give in our actions. We need silence to delve into the soul.*”

As you can see I am quoting from other people, non-Vincentian sources, for another characteristic of young people is that they greatly value this openness, the fact of being open to learning all that will help us to understand the gospel.

It is true that St. Vincent himself spoke of “*leaving God for God,*” but it is obvious that this was concerning other situations at a time where it seemed unacceptable to leave prayer for acts of charity. From my experience, the young people of today need to “meet God to be able to serve.” They need to recover and discover meeting spaces with God so that their service is not simply activism.

Some young people say that they are doing fine in life, but in prayer they are not focused, they are bored and do not know what to do. Is it possible that a young person can be fine in life but not in prayer? We must ask this person if when he/she is reading, driving or working are they focused on what they are doing or if they are thinking of other things. It is probable that in the busyness of everyday life, this person is not aware of tensions, being pulled in different directions, distraught. But in reality the situation is the same when praying or working or serving others, for the person is the same. A superficial person lives and prays superficially. A person of depth fully lives and prays. I believe that Vincentians especially should include prayer as an essential part of our life.

c. Advisors: teachers of the interior life

In all honesty, we must recognize that many things that we have spoken about cannot be learned in a book. As in many things, we learn a discipline or a way of thinking through a school under the direction of teachers knowledgeable in that tradition. This is why, similar to some of the technological means that we have, nothing can diminish the need for Advisors who introduce us to the foundations of

⁹ K. Rahner, cited by W. Jager, *Encontrar a Dios hoy a través de la contemplación*, Narcea, Madrid 1991, 57-58.

spirituality and who explain and clarify ways of acting and doing so that young people are able to assimilate it.

In order to complete the two preceding points we could bring in many ideas and adapt them to the circumstances in which we would use them. But I am going to briefly enumerate other aspects to include in our programs as a guide for the function of Advisor:

- Create critical minds, fostering a mature a mature Christianity;
- Seek unity of life;
- Create clear challenges for living out Vincentian values that flow from the gospel and the Vincentian spirit;
- Live out the values as a result of a personal, discerned, critical, free choice and with a humanist point of view;
- Design creative liturgies free from obscure rituals for today's men and women and, at the same time, open to the diversity of cultures;
- Challenge more so as to understand the foundations of our Vincentian spirituality, update its contents adapted to today's men and women and give it specific form by putting it into practice.

Spiritually developed people rarely fall into "activism." Many things are happening around them but that is because they have succeeded in energizing the potential of others, guiding them towards the common good and social justice.

4. "Patiently awaiting the fruits": by way of a conclusion

To close, I want to recall one of the facts that we indicated for living life, even if we are witnesses to it and we do not come to understand the importance that it may have for us. I remember the gospel example of a quiet Daughter of Charity that I knew years ago in Cuba. She served the poor, like many others, in a psychiatric hospital in old Havana called "The Golden Age." In contemplating the conditions within which she worked and how she treated the sick, I understood the power of prayer and the gospel in her life. I was with her for only a short time and we hardly exchanged a word. There was no need, for everything she did was a witness. She was one with the poor. She would never know the importance, thanks to the Spirit, of what her fidelity to serving and the power of her gestures meant to me.

I am convinced that if people allow themselves to be filled with a sense of the spiritual and carry it within themselves as if it were "*second nature*," they would have no need to say a great deal in order to be understood.

As a closing, I invite you to reflect upon a quote from Miguel Pérez Flores, C.M. He states that Lay Vincentian Spirituality:

*is a spirituality of life and action, inspired by Christ, Evangelizer and Servant of the Poor, in harmony with the Church, centered on the practice of charity as the highest gospel value, with a preference for the poor; a current spirituality, that gives witness, is animated by the virtues of humility and zeal, is attentive to the signs of the times, to the calls of the Church and the cries of the poor.*¹⁰

St. Vincent had the gifts of creativity, adaptability and updating. I am sure that you also have inherited them. And the proof is that you are here today, coming from different situations, but united by the same apostolic zeal. During these days, let us ask the Spirit to enflame within our hearts the same fire that enflamed the heart of St. Vincent so that as Advisors of Vincentian Associations, we truly feel that “We have been chosen by God as instruments of his boundless and Fatherly love....”¹¹

(Translation: TRANSLATION CENTER – DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY, Paris)

¹⁰ Pérez Flores, Miguel, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

¹¹ Coste, Conferences to the CMs, Conference 207, p. 582.