

The Advisor and the Apostolic Mission of Lay Vincentians

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At the start of this 21st century, thousands of local groups of the different branches of the Vincentian Family, hundreds of national and diocesan movements as well as international institutions have an Advisor, a man or a woman, each called by a different title according to the various languages and places. Almost all Advisors are named by someone who has authority over them. There are, however, numerous instances where an Advisor arises from within the group itself by election to the office of president or leader. Yet, there is a general tendency to look for an Advisor outside of one's own institution.

Among the Advisors of the different branches of the Vincentian Family we find: members of the CM, Daughters of Charity, diocesan priests and even bishops, men and women religious and laity, who are usually members of the same institution. In our work and discussions scheduled for today concerning the role of the Advisor in the area of the apostolic mission of Vincentian lay institutions, we are not going to go into the manner of being named to this charge (outside nomination or internal election), nor its canonical designation (secular priest, religious or laity). We are only going to try to describe what is expected of the Advisor in the apostolic animation of the group.

Know the Vincentian Spirit

In order to be an Advisor of a Vincentian Family lay group there is no requirement (as we will see) to belong to one of the other branches of the Vincentian Family. But it is necessary or rather vital to know what we call the "Vincentian spirit" as it is this spirit that is lived out in all of the branches. One could assume that this spirit already exists within or is a part of an Advisor coming from a Vincentian institution (missionaries of the CM, Daughters of Charity, members of the different lay branches of the Family). It is assumed that they already have this spirit but it must be assured. Legal membership in a Vincentian institution does not guarantee, in and of itself, that the Advisor has a clearly Vincentian awareness. The Advisor must work to possess this awareness and if he/she already has it, the Advisor must continuously cultivate it in order to be a good Advisor.

If an Advisor is from a non-Vincentian setting (diocesan priest, religious), it is possible that there may be some difficulties in the beginning, as diocesan

priests and religious have, in turn, other spiritualities to which they must be faithful. In other words, given the spiritual and pastoral demands of their own lives, neither diocesan priests nor any member of another religious congregation are obligated to incorporate the Vincentian dimension into their spiritual outlook.

Nevertheless, this fact should not be an insurmountable difficulty, for any one of them can be a good Advisor of a Vincentian group as what they have in common with the group is more important and more numerous than the things that separate them: the same Lord, the same faith, the same baptism, belonging to the same Church, the sacraments and the new commandment of love. And today there is another element that must be added, obligatory for all members of the Church and which is not, in any way, exclusive to Vincentian institutions: the (preferential) option for the poor, an element which, when taken seriously, makes the relationship of the Advisor easier with no matter what Vincentian group.

Therefore, Advisors coming from a non-Vincentian institutions should be careful not to introduce spiritual aspects or their own ministries into the group's spirituality or apostolic activity that would be foreign to the group's spirit. An example of the spiritual aspect would be trying to change the Vincentian group into a type of Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament Confraternity or other pious devotion. In the ministerial aspect, it would be changing a local group of the Miraculous Medal Association, for example, into a team of ladies officially charged with cleaning the church and sacristy.

It is not enough to avoid introducing aspects that belong to the proper spirituality of the Advisor and others within the spiritual vision and pastoral activity of the Vincentian group. An Advisor coming from the "outside," so to speak, as well as one coming from "within" the Vincentian Family must know the Vincentian spirit as much as possible, since this person was named an Advisor in order to cultivate this spirit and not for any other reason. In this vital aspect of knowing well the Vincentian spirit, the members of the group themselves can help the Advisor progress in understanding the Vincentian spirit (through books, dialogues, occasional appropriate comments, etc.).

Forming the Vincentian Spirit

The ideal would be that a Vincentian group would be able to form itself. In fact, numerous groups in all of the institutions are presently accomplishing this in various areas, especially in co-leadership of apostolic activities. Yet, the fact of wanting and asking for an Advisor shows that the group expects a certain level of formation and animation from him/her that most or all of the members feel they themselves do not possess in any great degree. That is why there is an expectation that the Advisor contribute to the spiritual and apostolic progress of the group given his/her greater knowledge and total consecration to the apostolic

work. That is the situation for most Advisors. By vocation and by profession they have a greater understanding and a deeper consecration to the universal apostolic mission of the Church.

The Advisor must clearly know what the Vincentian group needs and what it is asking is a specific Vincentian formation and not a general Christian formation, nor a formation divided into areas such as understanding the Bible, liturgy, sacramental life, Catholic ethics, different apostolic activities (health, education) or other similar themes. Today, there are within and outside the Church many places where one can receive formation in these areas.

This does not mean that these should be excluded from the formation program of Vincentian groups, but if they are taken on, the Advisor and the group must take into account that all of this must be studied from a Vincentian perspective, for it is a distinctive characteristic of the group. It is as simple as that. For example, it is easy to direct New Testament Bible Studies and also the Old Testament from the point of view of God's preference for the poor and humble. One can say the same about the Eucharist or pastoral topics such as caring for the sick, teaching, or ethics, and particularly the social doctrine of the Church. All of these subjects and other similar ones can be suggested and directed by the Advisor in order to have a better apostolic formation in accord with the Vincentian characteristics of the group being accompanied.

Apostolic mission of the Laity

The laity themselves have an apostolic vocation that does not flow from the hierarchy of the Church but *"from their union with Christ the head"* of the Church, that is, from their baptism: *"...incorporated into Christ's Mystical Body through Baptism ... they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord himself"* (*Apostolicam actuositatem*, 3). In such a way that *"the member — of the Church — who fails to make proper contribution to the development of the Church must be said to be useful neither to the Church nor to him/herself"* (*Ibid.*, 2). *"On all Christians therefore is laid the pre-eminent responsibility of working to make the divine message of salvation known and accepted by all throughout the world"* (*Ibid.*, 3).

In order to carry out this apostolic mission specific to the lay person, there is no need to belong to an association consecrated to apostolic activities: *"...all lay persons (including those who have no opportunity or possibility for collaboration in associations) are called to this type of apostolate and are obliged to engage in it"* (*Ibid.*, 16). They must consecrate themselves to the practice of the apostolate *"strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit through Confirmation"* (*Ibid.*, 3), for their condition as baptized members of the Church requires it of them.

We said that this mission, rooted in baptism, does not come from the hierarchy of the Church, although it is carried out within the Church. The Church must consider the “*spiritual principles and support*” that come from the hierarchy for this has the function of “*directing the conduct of this apostolate to the common good of the Church,*” that is why the Church has the duty to “*attend to the preservation of doctrine and order*” (*Ibid.*, 24).

The distinctive feature of the lay apostolate is to evangelize what is called the “temporal order,” that is the world and its multiple activities, for “*the laity, in accordance with their state of life, live in the midst of the world and its concerns ... like leaven*” (*Ibid.*, 2).

In order to carry all this out, the layperson does not need a specific Advisor, except perhaps in the general sense, in which all of us, not only the laity, need the help of the other members of the Church to grow in dedication to the apostolate.

The apostolic mission of lay Vincentians

Being a Christian, thus being an apostle, is a general vocation common to all baptized persons. Being Vincentian is a specific vocation for those who feel called to it and who become a member of one of the various Vincentian institutions present in the Church. This is fundamental. It is not enough to love and work with and for the poor to be considered Vincentian, for all Christians, not only Vincentians, must do so by the mandate and teaching of Christ, and also today by the teaching of the Church.

Being Vincentian means living out the teaching and mandate of the Lord in relation to the poor. Not simply living it as one of the various practices that flow from faith in Christ and from baptism, but as the center and soul, the vital principle of the Christian life in following Jesus Christ who was sent by the Father to evangelize the poor (Lk 4:18). All of this is accomplished as a member of one of the institutions founded by St. Vincent de Paul or inspired by his spiritual, Christian and apostolic vision.

Vincentian institutions were not established to accomplish a general activity like those that have come about from the fact of being baptized. All Vincentian institutions were established with the specific goal of working for the spiritual and corporal redemption of the poor. Vincentian laity can and must try to be gospel leaven in the family, in the world of culture, at work, in the economy, in politics, in sports, in leisure and entertainment, for they are also baptized persons who must seek to animate with an evangelical spirit the world in which they live. Even in the midst of everyday life, the layperson with a true

Vincentian spirit will work from the perspective of redeeming the poor and taking them into account in all he/she does. It goes without saying that this is even more so within apostolic activities specifically directed towards this end.

Advisor for the apostolic mission of lay Vincentians

We are not going to discuss the specific function of the Vincentian group Advisor in aspects such as the different forms of organization or formation. The focus of this work is to simply look at the Advisor's function in relation to the apostolic activity of the Vincentian institution.

In some countries the Advisor is also known as a 'spiritual director' or a similar expression according to different languages. I do not see any drawbacks in keeping this expression as long as it is clear that the function does not consist in directing but in animating and advising, especially in the area of apostolic activity. All Vincentian institutions and their respective groups have their organizations, governance and decision-making bodies, generally elected by the members of the group or institution. It is up to them to direct and make decisions within the areas of apostolic activity. This function does not fall within the responsibility of the Advisor. Certainly the Advisor may suggest, for example, a concrete activity, but the decision to take it on is not up to him/her; the decision is up to those responsible for the group or the institution. Undoubtedly, central to the Church's unity and charity, lay Vincentians must show themselves capable of directing themselves "*the apostolic undertakings which are established by the free choice of the laity and regulated by their prudent judgement*" (AA, 24). In this way, what is known today as "lay autonomy" is thus accomplished in Vincentian institutions.

1. Accompaniment in the evangelical spirit

The evangelical spirit must not only be the base and root of all baptized persons but also of all institutions within the Church, and Vincentian institutions as well. Generally, the Advisor, male or female, is named or chosen under the assumption that the person is skilled in the evangelical spirit. Consequently one hopes to receive his/her advice and opinion to know if an activity that the group is proposing to undertake has a true evangelical spirit or is it, for example, simply a mere social activity without any evangelical reference. The Advisor must attentively watch over this fundamental aspect, especially in our day and time, when there is a proliferation of volunteer organizations without any reference to evangelical values and who, at times, militate against these values. A Vincentian group cannot become a simple agent of social action.

2. Accompaniment in the Vincentian spirit

Living and acting with a Vincentian spirit, as we have come to say, is the characteristic and specific feature of Vincentian institutions and groups. It is their specific contribution to the wealth of the different charisms that exist within the Body of Christ, in the Church. A Vincentian group must assure that all its activities are animated by this Spirit. All the members — we will say this again — follow Jesus Christ for the redemption of the poor, and they are working for the redemption of the poor.

In this respect, the Advisor's function consists in keeping this idea alive in all of the activities taken up by the Vincentian group. It is not always easy. Given that the majority of those who belong to Vincentian institutions are faithful and practicing children of the Church, the different groups that make up these institutions often receive requests coming from the clergy, the local hierarchy or other Church forces, to participate in activities that certainly belong to the Church but that do not respond to the specific Vincentian call. Sometimes this request may come from the Advisor him/herself as perhaps he/she does not understand the true Vincentian spirit or because there is an opportunity to take advantage of the ecclesial availability of the group members.

This alluring temptation must be avoided, for it is precisely that — a temptation, so that the Vincentian group does not end up becoming a sort of pious confraternity or something similar. The Advisor, and all the members of the group, must be watchful that this does not happen. The Advisor is not an Advisor for general apostolic activities but for Vincentian apostolic activities that are appropriate to the group being accompanied. All of the activities must be oriented toward liberating the poor, directly or indirectly. They all must be done in a clear spirit of humility, simplicity and charity.

3. Advisor of a specific Vincentian institution

Even if there is a fundamental unity within the Vincentian spirit, the various Vincentian institutions have their specific characteristics that the Advisor must respect and help to maintain. In order to do this, the Advisor must know well the style proper to the institution of which he/she is the Advisor. I want to illustrate this with a specific example.

All Vincentian institutions have a great devotion to the Virgin Mary not only in the capacity as being members of the Church but because this devotion is also part of the Vincentian heritage from the beginning of St. Vincent de Paul's life. Among the Vincentian organizations, there are some that place this devotion at the heart and being of their activity (Miraculous Medal Association, Vincentian Marian Youth, Sons and Daughters of Mary, etc.). The Advisor of any one of these institutions must not lose sight of this fact in accompanying the respective group, so as to avoid two extremes.

One extreme would be to center all of the group's activities on Marian devotion (home visits, novenas, etc.), excluding apostolic activity bearing any resemblance to assisting the poor or considering it as a marginal activity. The Advisor must be watchful that the group does not fall into this extreme if it still wishes to be considered a Vincentian group.

Another extreme would be to diminish or withdraw Marian activities belonging to these institutions under the pretext that the only important thing today is to work in favor of the poor. We must do this but not to the neglect of the rest. In addition, all Marian activity should and must be animated according to the Vincentian spirit. This is possible if the Advisor and the group members are truly enlivened by this spirit. After all, was not the Virgin Mary the first in the New Testament to sing and celebrate exalting the lowly and hungry (Lk 1:52-53)? Vincentian Marian associations were created also to imitate Mary's characteristics. Helping the members do this within their apostolic activities is a function of the Advisor.

4. Accompaniment that broadens the horizons of Vincentian institutions

Thanks to sociological studies, we have known well, for a long time, that all human institutions, without exception, can easily allow themselves to be carried along by a trend, not only of seeing problems through their own eyes (which, in a certain measure is good and inevitable, as that is why diverse institutions were founded), but also of closing themselves within that vision and ending up existing only for themselves. The Church, which is divine by its foundation, is also human and is not free from this tendency, no more than its institutions. In principle, Vincentian institutions cannot escape it either.

The Advisor can play an excellent role in this area and must do so in order to avoid this tendency. Usually the Advisor is in a good position to do this for often the Advisor is a member of a different institution than the group being accompanied. This allows the Advisor to broaden the horizons of the Vincentian group. If the Advisor perceives obvious signs of the group withdrawing into itself, the Advisor is obligated to open the eyes and hearts of the members to other horizons. For example, collaborating with other Vincentian institutions. Often enough, the Advisor is also a member of another Vincentian institution. This should make it easy to open the group to apostolic collaboration with other branches of the Vincentian Family as they share the same fundamental spirit. The group could also collaborate in a charitable activity with other institutions of the Church, diocese, and/or parish. This would also be possible, especially when the Advisor is a member of the local clergy.

One must not close the horizon of Vincentian institutions to collaborating with other institutions outside of the Church, for the mission of Vincentian

institutions is not limited to ecclesiastical institutions but is open to the poor of the entire world, be they Christian or not. In this respect also, the Advisor can have a great deal of influence on the Vincentian group. Many among them have a universal mission as their own call and not only a local one.

Conclusion: Advisor accompaniment

The Advisor is a servant but is also a disciple. For this reason the Advisor must not place him/herself within the group as the supreme source of all wisdom. The Advisor has things to learn as well. First, as has already been stated, the Advisor must learn of what the Vincentian spirit consists and what are the characteristics specific to the Vincentian group being accompanied. This is just the beginning.

But the Advisor will often find, within all lay Vincentian institutions, many members who, by their example and often by their words, give the Advisor beautiful lessons on what it means to be Christian and have a Vincentian Spirit. The Advisor, who is servant and disciple, must be ready to learn from the group with true humility. All of us in the Vincentian Family, including Advisors, need the help of our brothers and sisters in faith in order to steadily progress in the Christian life and an authentic Vincentian vocation.

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