

Inculturating the vincentian charism: vocation and formation

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Vincentian Charism

A basic question may arise when one meditates on the Vincentian charism: what is the distinctive character that makes one a Vincentian? Does concerning oneself with the poor and serving them make one immediately a Vincentian? Is one a Vincentian when he tries his best to model himself after Christ who is present in the poor? Is it the continuous discernment of and the obedience to the will of God, or perhaps the acquisition of humility, simplicity, meekness, zeal for souls and mortification, that make one a Vincentian? Or maybe it is enough to enter a congregation inspired by or under the patronage of St. Vincent in order to be a Vincentian. Perhaps all of these characteristics taken together form a Vincentian?

Our Constitution (art. 6) indicates the charism we have inherited from St. Vincent de Paul: "The spirit of the Congregation comprises those intimate personal attitudes of Christ which our Founder recommended to the members from the beginning: love and reverence towards the Father, compassionate and effective love for the poor, and docility to divine providence." (cf. John P. Wilkinson, "CM and DC, the same charism?", **Vincentiana** no. 1/1986, pp. 68-77).

The Process of discovering the Vincentian Charism

Is it possible for persons originating from different cultural, social, economic, political and educational backgrounds to acquire the characteristics of St. Vincent? St. Vincent was convinced that what he taught and handed down (the charism) could be severed from his personal experience (physical, psychological, social, intellectual, spiritual). The Vincentian charism is the form of practical knowledge. St. Vincent was convinced of the necessity of developing a Christlike disposition and this conviction arose from his experiences. Likewise, if he was convinced that his vocation was to serve and preach the Gospel to the poor, and to be imbued with the five virtues. This conviction too, must have been derived through personal experience. Is it possible then, for persons of different times and cultures to have these experiences?

ST. VINCENT'S PROCESS OF EXPERIENCE

Humbling experiences	He failed to get a rich parish; he was accused of stealing; he was heavily in debt; he was captured by pirates
An interior event which horrified and challenged him (it was a private revelation which directed the vision and orientation of his life and gave meaning to it)	A very deep concern (an interior shock) that the poor were abandoned and that no one was willing to care for and help them
Reflecting on his vocation	Moved strongly to dedicate himself to the poor
His reflection on his personal vision of Christ.	Incarnated in the poor, Christ showed concern for and paid attention to the poor, called to preach the good news to the poor, because he was obedient to His Father's will
A strong will to realize his interior disposition through the apostolate	Popular mission, fraternities of charity, formation of clergy and lay people to serve the poor, etc.
A strong will to develop and effectively sustain his spirituality	Learning from experiences with the poor (the vows: stability, celibacy, obedience and poverty; the virtues: the five virtues)
A strong will to on-going self-formation in order to effectively serve Christ in the poor	Creation, innovation, manifestation of new forms and ways of serving the poor according to the needs and signs of the times

Thus, the Vincentian charism evolved through various struggles to serve the poor (physical, psychological, intellectual, social and spiritual). Different experiences emphasized different facets of the charism. In this perspective, following St. Vincent means *to have the courage to enter into the experience of struggle as St. Vincent did*. There is no shortcut. One becomes Vincentian because one has the same basic experience, the same basic concern, and the same basic perception of Christ, and because one has the same will to express the common foundation in Christ, the same will to keep or guarantee the perseverance of the common spirit through the vows and the virtues, and the same will to belong to a group which embodies the Vincentian spirit. Inheriting charism means "to appropriate that charism" in oneself.

Inculturating the Vincentian charism

Inculturating the Vincentian charism means regenerating into the local cultures the experience of St. Vincent's struggle, so that, through the genius of the local cultures, the same basic concern, perception and will of St. Vincent may be expressed in new ways suited to the local cultures. The process of inculturation comes through, and must be safeguarded by, personal as well as communal reflection. "To have the eye of Christ" and "departing from the experience of being involved with the poor" are the two principal gates to inculturation.

It is quite possible that similar experiences may generate similar values. But, it is also possible that the same value is generated from different experiences. The question is which experiences, in a different context of time and culture, will generate the values that were held by St. Vincent? In the Asian context, the Bishops give a witness to the experiences and values which are very similar to those of St. Vincent.

For the spirituality of the new way of being Church is the spirituality of those who place their complete trust in the Lord. It is the spirituality of the powerless, of the anawim. Renunciation and simplicity, compassion for and solidarity with all, and especially with the poor, meekness and humility (*cf. the five virtues: mortification, simplicity, zeal for souls, meekness, and humility*) _ virtues promoted by active non-violence _ are some of the significant values of the spirituality we need, and these Gospel values resonate deeply with the cultures of Asia. It is a spirituality of harmony. It expresses our intimate communion with God, our docility to His Spirit (*cf. the Vincentian discernment of the will of God*), our following of Jesus, as we challenge the disharmonies of our Asian world. It moves us away from images of exterior organization, power, and mere secular effectiveness to images of simplicity, humble presence and service (FABC V, 1990, n. 9.5. FAPA, pp. 288-289).

Therefore, inculturating Vincentian charism means to be available to being evangelized by the poor. In the Asia context, the cultural values and religious practice of the poor may be a rich source to regenerate the Vincentian charism. "Once we resonate with the poor in their spirituality and discern its values and elements, they can be appreciated and announced as genuine Gospel values _ simplicity of life, genuine openness and generous sharing, community consciousness and familial loyalty" (BISA VII, no. 11, FAPA, p. 232).

How do we proceed towards such an experience? Have we the courage to enter deeper into the same conditions as intensive as those being experienced by the poor and Vincent?

This challenge presupposes an openness and a dialogue with the local culture of the poor, that is, a cultural dialogue. A real cultural dialogue takes place in the struggles of serving the poor, and its interiorization in every person. It entails a continuous challenge to deal with the daily struggle of values and self-reflection. Do we have the courage to explore further the local values related to fidelity, celibacy, obedience, poverty, humility, meekness, simplicity, mortification, zeal for souls, following the will of God, lived out in various forms? Do we have the courage to let the cultural conditions enter further into our houses? Which cultural conditions?

An intensive experience of encountering the culture of the local poor, and to be integrated with it, could only be possible by living among the poor themselves. It means a radical challenge to break down the wall that separates us from the poor, whatever kind of "wall" it would be. As such, various uncertainties will creep in. Are we courageous enough to go further into the uncertainty of principles, as an unseparated part of the culture of the poor, and lean only on the Divine Providence? What concrete things could we do in our houses, precisely in order to avoid creating a deep gap between us and the culture of the poor in our place?

The Goal of Inculturating the Vincentian Charism in the Areas of Vocation and Formation

The goal of inculturating Vincentian charism in the areas of vocation and formation _ starting from the initial formation up to the end of one's life _ is to be a truly Vincentian. It is a continuous process, which must be supported by conducive situations and principal means of formation, on the personal level as well as on the communal level.

It also means a continuous confrontation of a Vincentian's life with "the spirituality of the anawim", which entails a continuous purification and enrichment.

THE PROCESS OF VINCENTIAN VOCATION AND FORMATION

The promotion of vocation: the aspiration and willingness to enter into the service to the poor	An exposure program in the CM works that directly serve the poor, e.g. popular mission, live-in in a village parish, etc.
To provide an environment conducive to having a basic experience (experience of the poor). To achieve this, we can collaborate with other parties in accordance with the goal of "initial formation" (Pre-Internal Seminary Period, which serves also as an initial selection)	Experience of being a factory laborer, a construction worker, newsboy, etc. (e.g. for 6 months). This is not merely entering into the situation of the poor, but also into their culture (physical, psychological, social, intellectual and spiritual)
	Experience of working in social institute as a volunteer, taking care of the poor, the marginalized, handicapped, (e.g. for 6 months)
Guidance in processing the experience of life as lived in the midst of the poor (Internal Seminary Period)	To show the presence of motivation and strong drive to serve Christ in the poor as a way to live meaningfully
Realizing the concern of the situation of the poor in the spirit of study, especially in Christology and social sciences (Theology and Philosophy Study Period)	To show an increasingly stronger interest and deeper reflection on Christ as the Evangelizer of the poor, and to show the root causes of the situation of poverty
Realizing the concern and commitment to the service to the poor in the pastoral field (Pastoral year)	To show interest in the choice of apostolates which are directly or indirectly related to the service to the poor
Realizing the concern to serve the poor by terms of taking the vows and living out the five virtues. Developing creativity in finding new forms and ways to serve the poor (Post-graduate and Diaconate Period)	To create the necessary conditions for having these experiences and reflecting on the necessity and the values of the vows and virtues of CM
	To discover and manifest forms and ways capable of relating to the local cultures

	Meanwhile, real situations and conditions must be created which allow integration into the culture of the poor
Assigning a confrere in a work by considering his ongoing formation, supported by the condition of the community life and other facilities of formation (courses, formal study, retreat, etc.) at every level.	Affirmation of idealism: to assign the young confrere to a work which is directly in touch with the poor and the reality of poverty (e.g. work with laborers, remote parish, popular mission)
	Innovation and creation: to expose the young confrere to a more complex work and heterogeneous variety of people, in order to find new forms of service directed to the poor (a parish work in big city, mission ad gentes)
	Inheriting the spirit: to assign the confrere to a work that is characterized by the transmission of the spirit (e.g. the school apostolate, giving retreat, seminary formators)
	and witnessing of experience at the later age: prayer, virtues, and fidelity as Vincentian

THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY IN FORMATION

Each member is responsible for his own formation as a Vincentian. However, the community also has an determining role to play.

1. To always encourage, give a chance, to find forms of collaboration which enable other members to be in contact and to get involved in the "life of the poor".
2. To provide an opportunity for apostolic sharing (the experience of getting involved with the poor).
3. To help with processing the experience (discernment), to articulate the values found in it, by confronting them with the values of the Gospel, and with the experiences of St. Vincent.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Share your experience of the province in inculturating Vincentian charism in formation.
2. What have you done as a Visitor in inculturating Vincentian charism?