

The Vincentian missionary spirit

– yesterday and today –

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I ask you today, my brothers and sisters, to join me in reflecting on our name. St. Vincent reminds us that people from the earliest times, spontaneously called us "the *missionaries*."¹ The Lord sends us out. Our vocation is not to remain fixed in a single place, to sink permanent roots. Jesus speaks to us as he did to his disciples at the end of Mark's gospel: "Go! Go into the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature."²

Mission is not merely an activity of the Church; it is its very being. Over the course of the Church's history mission has taken many forms: preaching, teaching, witnessing, crusading, dialoguing, counseling, accompanying, liberating, inculturating.

What, then, does it mean to be a Vincentian missionary? This is a crucial question for us, since it touches on our identity. There is no doubt about our calling: most of us here are members of the Congregation of the *Mission*; all of us are *missionaries*.

Some characteristics of the Vincentian missionary

Let me simply outline for you *some* characteristics of a Vincentian missionary. There are surely many others. I encourage you to supplement the list with your own reflections.

1. *The missionary is mobile, on fire to spread the good news.*

Hardly anything could be clearer in the New Testament. Jesus comes from the Father and returns to the Father,³ the source of all mission. He engages in an itinerant ministry. He gives his followers a mandate: "Go into the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature."⁴

St. Vincent is eloquent on the need for mobility: "Let us imagine that He says to us: 'Go forth, missionaries, go forth. What, are you still here? Look at the poor souls who are awaiting you, whose salvation perhaps depends upon your preaching and catechesis!'"⁵ He holds up before the eyes of the Company the great missionaries of other communities who

¹Cf. SV III, 356.

²Mk 16:15.

³Jn 16:28; cf. Jn 1:1, Jn 14:28.

⁴Mk 16:15.

⁵SV XI, 134.

had gone to the Indies, to Japan, to Canada "to complete the work which Jesus Christ began on earth and never abandoned from the moment he was called."⁶

The Church exists to evangelize, to proclaim that Jesus is Lord. So too do we. This means that we will be agile, quick to move when new needs arise. Our love will be expansive, like a fire. We will want to tell others the good news that Jesus is alive and present.

One of the principal signs that we are filled with a mobile missionary spirit will be the willingness to leave places where the Church is firmly established, and where others are already ministering, in order to be free for more pressing needs that others are unable to meet or to reach out to other groups that are at present neglected.

2. *He is an evangelizer.*

The core of our mission is evangelization, which, in the Catholic tradition, has always been a broad, inclusive concept.⁷ As Paul VI pointed out: "Evangelization is a complex process made up of varied elements: the renewal of humanity, witness, explicit proclamation...."⁸

St. Vincent tells us the evangelization involves "word and work." We must first do and then teach. Evangelization, for him, involves not just preaching but action too. He calls both the Vincentians and Daughters of Charity to serve the poor "spiritually and corporally."

In light of St. Vincent's teaching, our evangelization will be fully alive when we proclaim the good news:

- a. through the language of works:⁹ performing the works of justice and mercy which are a sign that the kingdom of God is really alive among us;
- b. through the language of words: announcing with deep conviction the Lord's presence, his love, his offer of forgiveness to all;
- c. through the language of relationships: being *with* the poor, working *with* them, forming a community that shows the Lord's love for all.

3. *The missionary has an international perspective, a global world view.*

This is very much the way St. Vincent envisioned his mission. In an era when travel was difficult and most people died within a few miles of their birthplace, he sent missionaries to Poland, Italy, Algeria, Madagascar, Ireland, Scotland, the Hebrides, and the Orkneys. He himself in his old age longed to set out for the Indies.¹⁰

Two signs, especially, will witness to global awareness on our part.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Cf. Avery Dulles, "Seven Essentials of Evangelization," in *Origins* 25 (# 23; November 23, 1995) 397-400.

⁸*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 24.

⁹Cf. SV II, 4.

¹⁰SV XI, 402.

A first, concrete sign of this awareness is the ability to respond to urgent needs throughout the world. We must never let provincial ties hold us back. When the needs of the Church are greater elsewhere, we should go with liberty.

A second sign of an international perspective is solidarity among our provinces. I urge you to cooperate with one another. This is already taking place through national and regional meetings, but I especially want to encourage you to cooperate in the giving of popular missions, in the formation of missionaries, and in assistance to poorer provinces. There are some things we can do much better together than we can do separately.

As Karl Rahner often pointed out, it is only in the 20th century that Catholicism has truly become a "world-Church".¹¹ Living in Rome I experience this dramatically. Especially with the opening of new missions in remote places like Tanzania, the Solomon Islands, Albania, the Altiplano of Bolivia, Mozambique, China, Kharkiv in the Ukraine, and Siberia, our own Congregation is becoming even more international.

Whereas in the period immediately after Vatican II there was significant emphasis on *provincial* identity, government, and norms, today there is a revitalized awareness of our global missionary nature.

4. *He is eager to learn the language of those he is called to serve.*

St. Vincent felt strongly about the need to learn other languages. He told us¹²:

Now the diversity of languages is very great, not only in Europe, Africa and Asia, but also in Canada. For we see by the reports of the Jesuit Fathers that there are as many languages as there are tribes. The Hurons do not speak like the Iroquois, nor the latter like their neighbors. And a person who understands one group of Indians does not understand the others.

How then can Missionaries, bearing these differences of language in mind, go throughout the world announcing the Gospel if they know only their own language?

The 1992 General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission, in its third

¹¹Karl Rahner, "The Abiding Significance of the Second Vatican Council," in *Theological Investigations* XX, 90-102; cf. also "The Future of the Church and the Church of the Future," in *Theological Investigations* XX, 103-14.

¹²SV XII, 26-27.

commitment, speaks of dialogue with contemporary society. I have often appealed to all candidates for the Congregation, and as many members as possible, to become bilingual. Dialogue and mobility in contemporary society demand it. In the United States for example, almost 50% of the Catholics have a language other than English as their mother tongue. Spanish has become an essential tool for a missionary there. The situation is similar in many other countries.

5. *He is flexible.*

St. Vincent has often been described as the most balanced religious leader of his day. He blended theory and practice adeptly. While he had clear principles, he applied them with flexibility. His life and ministry give clear evidence of his adroitness in doing so. By this own account, for example, simplicity was the virtue he loved most, but he also knew very well how to remain silent when prudence demanded. He believed firmly in the importance of fidelity to one's own vocation and at times struggled mightily to keep members from abandoning their ministry. But he also knew that some members had a corrosive effect and he thanked God when they left, even hastening their way out at times.¹³

The contemporary missionary must have a supple mentality in regard to evangelization. In a time of rapid change, rigidity is an enemy and flexibility an ally. For example, one of the most significant changes that has taken place in the Church since Vatican II is in the role of the laity. Today we are conscious more than ever that lay people have an essential role in announcing the good news.¹⁴ It is for that reason that the Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission¹⁵ call the priests and brothers of the Congregation not only to evangelize the poor as missionaries, but to form others _ priests, brothers, sisters, lay men and women _ to participate more fully in the evangelization of the poor. Are we flexible in accepting the important roles of lay men and women in evangelizing? Do we have the suppleness to co-operate harmoniously with them?

6. *He is involved in organizing and forming others in the service of the poor.*

St. Vincent was adamant about this. Few saints are as concrete as Vincent de Paul. He realized that integral evangelization would require organization if the poor were to be served effectively. To accomplish this end, Vincent founded two communities and formed numerous lay groups. The missionaries and Daughters of Charity were to form Confraternities of Charity wherever they went.¹⁶

He brought the same organizational skills to the formation of the clergy, which St. Vincent depicted sometimes as "almost equal"¹⁷ and sometimes as "equal"¹⁸ to that of the mission. He organized retreats for ordinands and priests, as well as the Tuesday Conferences, besides founding 20 seminaries.

¹³SV II, 381.

¹⁴*Christifideles Laici*, 7.

¹⁵C 1.

¹⁶CR I, 2.

¹⁷CR XI, 12.

¹⁸SV V, 489; VII, 561.

Nor he did not stop there. He marshalled all of the resources he could find in the service of the poor: clergy and lay, young and old, men and women, the rich and the poor themselves. The seeds of his organizational gifts continued to spread even after his death.

A recent study¹⁹ points out that over 268 groups share in the Vincentian charism. At present there are 260,000 members of AIC (Ladies of Charity), 900,000 members of the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul, 200,000 members of various Vincentian Marian Youth groups, with 46,000 in Spain alone and 7,000 in Mexico.

7. *He is inculturated.*

There is always the danger that the ideas, the customs, even the building styles of one world will simply be transported to another. Our great missionaries, like Justin de Jacobis and John Gabriel Perboyre, recognized from the start that this is insufficient. The gospel must take root and blossom within the deepest values of each culture. At the same time, it must transform what is not of God within a culture and what violates the human person.

Karl Rahner points out that the *globalization* of theology is one of the greatest needs of the Church in the years ahead. He notes that up to the present there has been an unfortunate tendency to "canonize" what was really only a manifestation of the thought patterns of western culture.²⁰ Right now, many growing younger provinces, and particularly those responsible for formation within them, face the difficult challenge of teaching philosophy and theology (so often formulated in a European context), while searching for new categories in an African or Asian or South American setting. Similarly, they search for the appropriate forms of expressing poverty, chastity, obedience, and life-long commitment to the poor within cultures very different not only from St. Vincent's, but also from those of the writers of most of the philosophy, theology, and spiritual reading books written up until recent times. In preaching popular missions, do we know well the culture of young people today? Can we express the gospel in terms that meet their deepest longings?

Along these same lines, the place of women in society and the social mores in relating to them vary greatly from North to South, and, in both hemispheres, from continent to continent. To talk with a woman on the street may be as "natural" in Los Angeles as it is "scandalous" in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. The missionary must know the difference.

8. *He is continually being formed, creatively reshaping his preaching.*

St. Vincent tells us: "Love is inventive to the point of infinity."²¹ I want to encourage all our missionaries to be inventive. Pose the question individually and communally: What is the deepest need of the person listening to my homily? What is this poor person asking of me concretely? What is the refugee in a camp in Africa asking? What is the sick person in his or her home crying out for? What is the AIDS patient's acutest pain? Then be creative in addressing God's word to those needs.

¹⁹Betty Ann McNeil, *Monograph 1: The Vincentian Family Tree* (Chicago: Vincentian Studies Institute, 1996).

²⁰Cf. Citation in W. Bühlmann, *The Church of the Future* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986) 193.

²¹SV XI, 146

To that end, I urge you to find creative means for integral formation on both initial and ongoing levels. Such integral formation would have various aspects: human, spiritual, apostolic, Vincentian, biblical, theological, professional. On all levels, you yourself are the one primarily responsible for your own formation.

9. *He knows well the social teaching of the Church.*

Pope John Paul II writes very forcefully in *Centesimus Annus*²²: "The 'new evangelization,' which the modern world urgently needs and which I have emphasized many times, must include among its essential elements *a proclamation of the Church's social doctrine.*" The Church has been proclaiming this doctrine in a rather clear way now for more than 100 years. Are Catholics really well evangelized in this regard? Is this social doctrine part of their explicit consciousness? I ask all Vincentians to become "experts" in teaching this social doctrine. As followers of Christ, the Evangelizer of the Poor, we must proclaim this aspect of the reign of God, by our words and by our works. We must hold up before others the Church's rich teaching, its vision of a kingdom of justice, its denunciation of unjust social structures, its proclamation that the poor must, in every era, occupy a central place in the consciousness of Christians. In our formation work, with both clergy and laity, we must present this social teaching with both clarity and urgency.

Our mission will be truly prophetic today if we preach and teach the Church's social doctrine clearly. And like many prophets, we may perhaps suffer as we do so.

10. *He is a man of God.*

Witness speaks more eloquently than words. Our lives inevitably say much more than our sermons.

For Vincent de Paul, there is only one driving force: the person of Jesus Christ. "Jesus Christ is the rule of the Mission,"²³ he tells us, the center of your life and activity. "Remember, Father," he writes to Monsieur Portail, one of the original members of the Congregation, "that we live in Jesus Christ by the death of Jesus Christ and that we ought to die in Jesus Christ by the life of Jesus Christ and that our life ought to be hidden in Jesus Christ and full of Jesus Christ and that in order to die like Jesus Christ it is necessary to live like Jesus Christ."²⁴

We fulfill our mission only if we follow Christ as the Evangelizer of the Poor and put on his spirit,²⁵ only if we are holy.

Today, as in every era, the Church needs saints. It needs missionaries who are simple, humble, gentle, self-sacrificing, and filled with effective love. It needs preachers who radiate God's presence. The great missionary is not so much someone whose words are beautiful as someone whose life is striking.

²²*Centesimus Annus*, 5.

²³SV XII, 130; cf. also XI, 53: "Let us walk with assurance on the royal road on which Jesus Christ will be our guide and leader."

²⁴SV I, 295.

²⁵C 1.

Let me state it very clearly: the missionary today must be holy. Unless we are men and women of God, we will not be genuinely effective, nor are we likely to persevere.

It is not diminished numbers in the Church that we 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. The genuinely holy missionary *presences* Christ's love. Others sense it in him. He could not hide it even if he wanted to.

To be *missionaries* _ that is our calling. Breathe deeply, my brothers and sisters, of the missionary spirit that St. Vincent inspired in his followers. Let it fill your minds and hearts. Then, go. "Go into the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature."²⁶

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²⁶Mk 16:15.

