

# FROM THE GENERAL CURIA

## Meditation Moment on the Constitutions

### Community Life: The Dream of Vincent for the Congregation of the Mission

We start with the quote reflection of two texts of the New Testament:

The first text is from the Gospel of John (1:35-42): “Jesus turned and said to them... ‘What do you want?’. They answered, ‘Rabbi (which means teacher), where do you live?’. He said to them, ‘Come and see’. They came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day; It was about four o’clock in the afternoon”. “It was about four in the afternoon”, says the Evangelist. The time was never to be forgotten, because it was the time of loving gaze of Jesus on their lives, their history, and their being. The disciples, awoken and challenged by the loving gaze of Jesus, left all to radically follow their Master. It was the hour of their transformation. And that is why they have kept the memory of it alive.

The second is from the Gospel of Mark (3:31-35). According to Mark’s narrative, “He was sitting around in a crowd” when, Jesus absorbed by the crowd was told, “Behold, your mother, your brothers and your sisters are outside asking for you”. At these words, Jesus said, “Who is my mother, who are my brothers and sisters? Looking around at those who sat about him, Jesus said, Behold, these are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God is brother and sister and mother to me”. Jesus announced the birth of a new family; one based solely on the experience of faith and not on blood ties. It is a new family devoted to listening to the Word of God and fulfilling the will of God, one where all can be brother, sister, and mother. Thanks to their faith in the person of Jesus and their radical decision to follow him, this new family became Christo-centric! The first mission of Christ-centered family, before anything else, is to be like the Lord! Learn from Christ, and then be sent to serve. As St. Paul noted (1 Cor. 7:25-40), this new identity of believers goes beyond the categories of consecrated life and the laity, because the first and most important aspect is to belong totally to the Lord! Nothing else matters! Both religious and laity are called to be fully consecrated to the Lord Jesus.

Why do we say these things? The answer is simple: like the disciples, in one way or another, we too have been conquered by the loving gaze of Jesus. We too have had this experience of the encounter with Jesus

in leaving our natural families from our youth. Our history and existence in God motivated us to give up much of what we knew as our own: family, friends, and familiar places to follow and live for Jesus in a new family, a Christ-centered community. Our former life, history, commitment and community life will have meaning and significance and bring us lasting happiness and deep joy as long as we keep alive the memory of meeting the person of Jesus. This is the community in which Divine Providence has placed us; but only if we can say as did St. Paul: "It is not I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

### **I. The communities created by SV: a special community for the "mission"**

"Because we want to know what is our humble way of life", St. Vincent wrote on July 14, 1639, "so here, my worthy mother, what I call our little company, was set up to go from village to village at its own expense, to preach, catechize, and to make a general confession of the poor people on their whole past life; to commit themselves to resolve existing disputes, and to do everything possible so that the poor sick are assisted bodily and spiritually".

In this letter, St. Vincent set out in a very simple language what he had in mind with his new community. The "Little Company" was just 14 years old when he wrote this letter. According to the founder, what is the nature, the spirit, charism, and mission of the young company? Who is this new congregation and what is its hallmark? It was the Congregation of the Mission:

It is called "*Imitatio Christi*", or the imitation of Christ. Its true essence, nature, identity, mission and *raison d'être*, is to imitate Christ, or, as our Constitutions state, "putting on the spirit of Christ". Some fear that the word imitation does not express the full extent of the identity and work of the Congregation of the Mission. The problem is not terminology. We must understand that the use of the word 'imitation' was common at the time of our founding. For St. Vincent, the newly-formed company was there to imitate, continue, and extend the missionary spirit of Jesus. Hence, it is a company that follows Jesus by doing the same things the Son of God did while on earth. According to our Founder, the imitation of Christ includes going from place to place at our own time and expense to preach and to form the clergy and the laity. All this is done in absolute obedience to the Church and its leaders, our Bishops.

According to our Holy Founder, the Congregation of the Mission continues the mission of Jesus in history. To do so, we must definitely put on the Spirit of Christ; otherwise we cannot continue His mission. In Vincentian thought, to live up to its mission, the Congregation has the duty to imitate the attitudes, intentions and purpose of Jesus.

We know that Christ was a contemplative in action. He was well-tuned to the life of prayer and the ministry; both the desert of loneliness, and the scream of the crowd. St. Vincent also dreamed for his newly-formed Little Company to be contemplative in action, a modern version of the holiness of religious in convents and monasteries, and the prophecy of the mendicant orders. In short, apostles in the country missions, and Carthusians at home! The Congregation of the Mission, in imitating the person of Jesus, is contemplative in action. This is what our Founder dreamed and planned.

As a Congregation, if we value our charism by our witness, we are truly fortunate. We are not monks closed within the four walls to be left to our loneliness. Nor are we “free birds in the woods of the Church”. We have a community life that sustains us. All this, however, is a gift and a great responsibility that requires the right balance, which takes time and effort to get it right. Only if we manage to maintain a healthy balance between contemplation and action can we maintain a balance. As a community, we can best be successful when we can maintain a healthy balance between contemplation and action in fidelity to our charism.

## **II. Do the Constitutions (19-27) reflect the ideas and intentions of our Holy Founder on community life?**

Without doubt or hesitation, the answer is “yes”. What do they say about community life? How important are they to our life and ministry? And where is their importance? Here are some reflections based on these nine articles of the Constitutions to stimulate your Community life.

First of all, it is not left to our own arbitrary interpretation. It is a vocation, as Article 21 of our Constitutions tells us clearly: community life, from the beginning was the express will of St. Vincent, a feature of the Congregation and its ordinary form of life. Thus, for our Holy Founder, community life was not meant to be left to the whim of the individual. From our start, community life is, in the positive sense of the term, “mandatory” i.e., part of our essence of who we are in the Church. So, it is not fair to interpret it in terms of what I like or do not like or what I want or do not want. It is the vocation of the Congregation of the Mission, one recognized by the Church with traits implying practices by all of us in our daily lives. From the day that we took our vows in community, we have embraced this form of life with all its conditions to live in the community “as dear friends” (art. 25), and in close fellowship with others (art. 19).

Knowing that even among friends there are betrayals, disappointments and misunderstandings, the high road is the mutual forgiveness. If you wish to maintain the healthy relationships and fraternal col-

laboration in community, we must take St. Paul's practical advice: "Do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give place to the devil" (Eph. 4:26-27). As Pope Francis noted, 'God never tires of forgiving, we that we get tired of asking for his mercy'<sup>1</sup>. The fundamental attitude to preserve the unity, communion and to live by my friends in the community, then, is the forgiveness of one another: "By this all men will know you are my disciples, if you love one another" (Jn. 13:35).

Is our community life a function of ministerial success or that of our mission? While our community life cannot be an end in itself, at the same time, it is more than it is "just running" our mission as the *raison d'être* of our own calling. Jesus called us to be with him (Mk. 3:14). To be with him, be with the Lord, is the first and most important aspect of our calling and our identity as followers of Jesus. Before we preach, announce the Good News, or cast out demons we must be with him and learn from him then go forth. Because our community life is "a sign of the new life brought by the Gospel" (art. 24) for our ministries, this life must be characterized by the "brotherly love", and fueled by the "five Vincentian virtues" according to article 24. This means, according to the teachings of our Founder, our community life is not lived only by its mission, but by the experience of the Lord Jesus, lived and experienced in community. This enables us to "shine as lights in the world" (Phil. 2:15) when we go on a mission for ministry. This is the meaning of our calling as a community to be "contemplatives in action" and we must make a great effort to keep a healthy balance between ministerial activity and contemplating life.

Only this balance can feed our community life as a visible sign of the active presence of the Spirit of Jesus to become credible prophets in our ministry. One could say that ours is a missionary community that seeks to imitate Jesus, the missionary *par excellence*. In a conference cited above, St. Vincent clearly says that the Congregation wants to "meet him in his conduct, in his actions, in his purposes". Article 20 of our Constitutions encourages the confreres to live the icon of the Trinity as a model of life and ministry in community.

Being a "missionary community in the icon of the Trinity", according to article 20, must be lived in practice each day and in "local communities" which are "the living cells of the whole Society". This expression is exceptional for a couple of reasons. First, it reflects well the ecclesiology of the Church Fathers who believed that the Church exists in its entirety as a parish for the good of the world. ("The Church is universal in the particular and particular in its universality".) Second,

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<sup>1</sup> EG, 2013, 3.

because it recalls the concept of health of our body, doctors today remind us that cancer is caused by the malfunction of cells, which become tumors. To prevent “tumors and cancers in community”, confreres need to pay attention to things that destroy common life: distrust, criticism, senseless and devastating judgments, a lack of honesty and sincerity, or even worse, falsity and hypocrisy extended over time.

All this, in principle, may cause “dark nights” in individuals and communities, damaging their hopes and diverting their dreams. It is unfortunate that there are many such situations in the Congregation of the Mission. Why does this occur, especially among our younger members? We must pay attention not just to the entire Congregation, but also in the local community, because everything starts there. If we want to prevent and cure the despair of young confreres from leaving the community, or stem the tide of those confreres who are absent from community, we must treat and prevent this devastating ‘cancer’.

What does it mean “a missionary community?”. And where is the missionary spirit of the Company? Are we missionaries in the way we do our work, or is it our works that make us true missionaries? It is an open question. We all must answer this question: what makes me a true missionary: the missions I do or the spirit and the way I carry out my missionary responsibilities? What do our Constitutions say about it? Very wisely, the first article speaks of the end of the Congregation, giving top priority to the Imitation of Christ by “putting on the Spirit of Christ (Cost. 1 § 1). The Congregation of the Mission, therefore, and its every member is called to put on the Spirit of Christ to continue the mission of Christ in history.

Indeed, article 5 of our Constitutions goes further: Jesus Christ is the rule of the Mission and the center of our life and ministry. If Jesus is the “rule of the Company” which has its mission to continue Christ’s work in history through the Congregation of the Mission, can we commit to having the same internal way of Christ. How? By imitating his love and respect of the Father, and his compassionate love for the poor and active docility to God’s Providence (as seen in art. 6). Our true missionary identity is the imitation of Christ. We are “missionaries” in name and in truth when we put on the Spirit of Christ, in evangelizing the poor, training of the clergy and laity. These are the actual and practical application of our missionary identity in the Church.

Now, what about the importance and challenges brought by the media today? Our Constitutions state, “...we will use the means of communication with prudence and discretion, and subject to the demands of the apostolate, we will reserve some part of the house to protect the privacy of the community” (art. 24 § 4). Today’s digital media: the internet, Facebook, Twitter, to name a few: they have created a new culture, a real revolution. The point is to use them with prudence and discretion, as we say in our Constitutions. Of course, much more could

be said e because our age is one of the massive interests in all kinds of electronic media. However, they run the risk distorting our view of relationship. It would be unfortunate if we used these digital means of communication to avoid human encounters or to substitute for interpersonal relationships.

### **III. The challenges of community life today, in general**

The main challenges today include individualism, relativism, indifference and globalization; a shallow spiritual life (i.e., lack of internalization); an unclear Vincentian identity; and a lack of commitment to the challenges of community life today. The psychological fragility that most often expresses itself in fear of risking one's life for a greater good, and the lack of the virtue of courage and perseverance (a fear of long-term commitment); these are visible everywhere today. Amid these difficulties, many people today do not seek God with patience, or in a spirit of sacrifice and mortification, but flee to small pleasures and momentary happiness. Unfortunately, this is the spiritual corruption of our time. Today in our communities, human relationships unfortunately can be given a greater primacy instead of the "call" of our vocation. This can result in the loss of a sense of sacrifice as seen in the virtue of mortification. For many today, it may seem that these virtues are becoming extinct.

What are the causes? Pope Francis said today that there is "an exaggerated concern for the personal spaces of autonomy and relaxation, taking them to live out their duties as a mere appendage of life, as if it were part of their identity". In other words, there is an "emphasis on individualism, an identity crisis, and a decline of fervor" said the Pope. Therefore, self-fulfillment and individualism are at the root of this mentality, dominated by individualism our ambition. It seems this spirit is in the air we breathe, resulting in a devastating secularization. Pope Francis prayed that the Lord would send to his Church priests and nuns "free from the idols of vanity, pride, power, and money". Moreover, it is true that the Church of Jesus Christ, as in our "Little Company" is not free from other forms of "idolatry": individualism, careerism, and self-affirmation at all costs. They are there to challenge the faith journey in each of us.

What is the remedy? It lies in our ability for "continuous renewal" as article 19 of our Constitutions suggests. They promote the meaning and significance of our true missionary identity to live in the love of Christ and to proclaim this love (art. 20 § 1). As a community, we are called to be united in ministry and fraternal communion with others. In short, we must emulate the unity for which Jesus prayed for His Church before he died: "That all may be one as we are one" (Jn. 17:11). This is a credible sign of the active presence of the Holy Spirit in our

personal and communal life. The five Vincentian virtues are a great help to us as we clothe ourselves in the spirit of Christ in our lives. Only the integration of these five virtues will help us build a truly authentic community life, avoiding duplicity, deceit, and hypocrisy in our lives and in our personal relationships in community. Thus, we will continue the mission of Jesus in history.

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