

OF CURRENT INTEREST

Good Purposes, Bons Propos

A Developing Practice in our Vincentian Tradition

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Preliminary Remarks

Vincent de Paul initiated the tradition of pronouncing Good Purposes in the Congregation of the Mission in the 1640's, almost twenty years after its foundation. Centuries later, the practice continues. This essay will examine the history of Good Purposes and the development of this unique Vincentian tradition. Today, Good Purposes functions very differently in our process of formation, as a richer and more vital part of one's journey to commitment in the Little Company.

Out the outset, a few presuppositions need to be stated. The practice of pronouncing Good Purposes is known to everyone who has undergone Vincentian formation since the time of St. Vincent. However, the expression itself and their intent have little or no recognition outside the confines of the Congregation. Even those who know us well (such as the Daughters of Charity), have little understanding or awareness of our practice of making Good Purposes.

Furthermore, the experience and understanding of the role of Good Purposes has significantly changed over the last few decades. The practice has developed significantly, but not devolved into a different reality. However, no one consciously initiated the development, and most members of the Congregation are unaware of the transformation that has occurred.

Finally, though the focus of this essay on Good Purposes, there is an inseparable link between Good Purposes and Vincentian vows. Since Good Purposes are a stepping-stone or pathway to vows, the nature and distinctiveness of the vows must be examined.

Vincent de Paul's Insight

The main reference to Good Purposes in Vincent's writings is found in a letter to Fr. Louis Lebreton of November 14, 1640. "He was sent to Rome at the beginning of 1639 to further the affairs of the Company at the Roman Court, especially the question of vows" (CCD, Vol. II, 1, p. 17). Vincent tells him:

“Work patiently with your shepherds: what you told me about them thrilled me with pleasure because you can say with good reason *pauperes evangelizantur*. In the midst of that, labor at our other little affairs as we are doing here on our little Rules, which we are adapting as much as we can, to the ones mentioned to me. I think we shall decide to make the Good Purposes of living and dying in the Mission, the first year in the seminary...” (CCD, Vol. II, #496, p. 155).

Additionally, an unpublished document in French published in 1652 entitled “Rules of the Director of the Internal Seminary” alludes to the practice of taking Good Purposes:

“At the end of the first year, he will have them make a **firm commitment** to observe poverty, chastity, obedience and stability at the end of their retreat that he will have them make. His primary concern is to raise the seminarists in the spirit of humility, obedience, simplicity, mortification, cordiality, and devotion, and will show them the example of these as much as he can.”

For centuries, novices in the Congregation pronounced Good Purposes on the completion of the first of the two-year Internal Seminary program. It was a formal declaration of intent at midpoint of one’s Internal Seminary. Our present Constitutions articulate this practice: “One year after admission into the Congregation a member, according to our tradition, manifests by means of Good Purposes his intention of dedicating himself to the salvation of the poor for his entire life in the Congregation according to our Constitutions and Statutes” (C. 54 §2, p. 249).

From the time of St. Vincent, candidates were admitted into a two-year Internal Seminary. As his letter to Fr. Lebreton proposes, the custom of pronouncing Good Purposes happened on the completion of the first year. This cycle of expressing Good Purposes followed pronouncing perpetual vows one year later was the practice in the Congregation until the 1954 Constitutions (161, §4) were promulgated. From that time on, Good Purposes were still taken at the end of one’s first year in the Internal Seminary. However, on completion of the second year of the Internal Seminary, three-year temporary vows were introduced as a universal congregational practice for the first time. Unlike the changes that occurred with the vows, the taking of Good Purposes remained unaffected and was pronounced at midpoint in the Internal Seminary.

Interestingly, the taking of temporary vows had already been initiated in some provinces before the constitutional change of 1954 due to the obligation of military service by seminarians. The Congregation in France, as well as other European countries that fell under similar military obligations introduced the previously unknown tem-

porary vows, which became a standard practice in those provinces (See: RYBOLT, *General History V*, p. 80).

Another reason why pronouncing perpetual vows after the second year of the Internal Seminary was discontinued was because many seminarists were not 21 years of age at the conclusion of their Internal Seminary, as required by Canon Law.

Furthermore, the 1918 Revised Code of Canon Law sought standardization of vow processes of all religious communities. The Congregation acceded and introduced the practice of having seminarists pronounce three-year temporary vows before taking perpetual vows. Braga noted, "The text is presented in a very juridical form and spirit and in it a schema of 'religious life' prevails in which the Congregation is seen compelled by the mentality of the Roman organisms, which tend toward an often unwarranted standardization" (BRAGA, p. 14).

Yet again in the 20th century, the taking of vows has undergone considerable transitions and even upheaval. However, pronouncing Good Purposes remained unaffected because the juncture at which they are taken has never changed. However, certain ambiguities about Good Purposes, especially now, necessitate interpretation of their meaning. Our experience and understanding of their significance has undergone some important developments.

The Development of Good Purposes

As noted, for centuries, seminarists in the Congregation pronounced Good Purposes on the completion of the first of a two-year Internal Seminary. It was a formal declaration of intention at the midpoint. The seminarist expressed his intention through a formula similar to this:

"Lord, my God, I, NN. declare my intention of faithfully dedicating myself in the Congregation of the Mission, for the whole time of my life, to the evangelization of the poor, after the example of Christ evangelizing. Therefore, I propose to observe, with the help of your grace, chastity, poverty, and obedience, according to the Constitutions and Statutes of our Institute" (Statute 21, §1).

Today the practice and understanding of Good Purposes have developed in a number of ways:

- Good Purposes are no longer pronounced at the midpoint of a two-year Internal Seminary program.
- The Internal Seminary is now one year. On being received into the Internal Seminary, one becomes an admitted member of the Congregation of the Mission. Good Purposes are now taken at the completion of the Internal Seminary year.
- Because of formational and structural changes within the Congregation introduced by the 1984 Constitutions and Statutes,

Good Purposes now take on a different perspective and experience in one's life in the Congregation of the Mission.

On completion of the Internal Seminary, admitted members in most provinces begin their formal theological training to prepare for diaconate and priestly ordinations. Brother candidates often are asked to start specialized training for work in the mission. For the next few years, they live out their proclaimed intention of faithfully dedicating themselves to the salvation of the poor for their entire life in the Congregation of the Mission.

Currently, admitted students live for several years with Good Purposes, and not for a year as they did in the past. Good Purposes has shifted into a time of maturation of their lives in the Congregation and of discerning and preparing for incorporation and vows.

To further describe this reality and our understanding of the meaning of Good Purposes, a comparison can be made to what the admitted man's peers in the world are going through. There is a custom in society that parallels the experience of Good Purposes namely, it is similar to the engagement experience of couples preparing for marriage. The period of engagement is about fidelity to a relationship, exclusivity, furthering one's knowledge, deepening the commitment, realigning values, furthering an identity. It is when inner commitments are reshaped in the light of a relationship. This parallels what the time of Good Purposes is meant to be for the seminarist.

Good Purposes: A Declaration of Intent

Good Purposes are a declaration of intent, but they are not vows. The formula is faithful to the centuries old tradition of taking Good Purposes in the Congregation. The first sentence describes a desire to perpetually dedicate one's life in the Congregation in fulfillment of following Christ, the evangelizer of the poor. The words describe the content and meaning of the vow of stability. The second sentence articulates intention of the admitted member to observe chastity, poverty and obedience *as these vows are described and understood in our Constitutions* (Italics added).

The formula of Good Purposes first addresses stability. Why stability? One of the troubling realities of the Congregation of the Mission in its initial years was the retention of membership. Many men zealously labored in the Congregation for a number of years, but when difficulties arose, they became overwhelmed and drifted away. Others had parish obligations from their bishops that they had to attend to (although they were free enough to give occasional missions). These constraints kept them from leaving their dioceses. An additional number were, apparently, less interested in community life. Vincent intuitively perceived that some construct to stabilize and perpetuate a

commitment to follow Christ the evangelizer of the poor for the whole of one's life was lacking. In time, he was able to put a name to that dynamism, the vow of stability.

It is thought-provoking to browse the literature written today on institutional planning and development and see the term "institutional stabilization" used as a hallmark of a successful organization. Vincent saw this challenge and need almost 400 years ago. How could the drifting away of members be reversed? Vincent believed that vows would be the means to bring about institutional stabilization, but not religious vows. As our Constitutions state: "In order to accomplish in a more effective and enduring manner the purpose of the Congregation of the Mission, the members of the Congregation takes vows of stability, chastity, poverty and obedience according to the Constitutions and Statutes" (C. 3.3).

When the admitted member pronounces Good Purposes, at the close of his Internal Seminary year, he declares his intention to continue in the Congregation for the rest of his life, to seek permanent incorporation, and to pronounce vows in the Congregation of the Mission. The 1980 General Assembly also believed that a heightened awareness that the Vow of Stability is a commitment to the mission of proclaiming the Gospel to the poor (in word and deed). It is a missionary vow, a vow to embrace the end of the Congregation. The perspective is clear in the Constitutions, but definitely highlighted in the *Instruction on Stability, Chastity, Poverty and Obedience in the Congregation of the Mission* (p. 13).

The Distinctive Reality of Vincentian Vows

Through the years, a variety of different terms has been used to describe our vows. They were termed simple, reserved, not public, privileged, perpetual, and even private. The Constitutions and Statutes (1984) definitively state that the vows of the Congregation of the Mission are non-religious, perpetual, and reserved. When the Code of Canon Law deals with the topic and issue of vows, it states that there are two kinds of canonical vows, public vows and private vows. A vow is public if a legitimate superior accepts it in the name of the Church. Otherwise, it is private. Any legitimate authority, e.g., a pastor, can dispense private vows (CCL, 1196).

We describe our vows as non-religious because they are not accepted in the name of the Church, as are religious vows. Our vows are made directly to God, and are not mediated through the Community as are public vows. Our Constitutions simply state, "The taking of vows must be done in the presence of the superior or of a member appointed by him" (C. 58 1). This confrere is merely witnessing the taking of vows, and not receiving them. Our present Constitutions and any Vincentian

documents referring to vows never use the verb *profess* in reference to our vows.

Our members “take” vows, “embrace” vows, or “pronounce” vows. The words ‘profess’ or ‘profession’ are terms used exclusively for religious vows. Profession is an act by which a person publicly dedicates oneself by permanent commitment to religious life. In addition, these vows are formally received or acknowledged by the Church. The expressions “profess” or any of its derivatives are not used in our present Constitutions. However, in our 1954 Constitutions, in the chapter entitled “The Nature of the Vows,” those expressions were used nine times in five paragraphs. They incorrectly refer to us as professing vows, as professed, as making a three-year profession, etc. (1954 Const. 160-164). Our 1984 Constitutions eliminated all such expressions.

In Vincent’s time, the notion of a religious profession had two basic dimensions: “leaving the world” and “tending to perfection” (SCHNEIDERS, 1986, 99). Today, there is a new, transformed understanding of religious profession. Schneiders observes that, “religious attempt to structure their lives in such a way that they have the necessary liberty to relate prophetically to the world” (100). But in the 17th Century, religious vows meant a renunciation of the world, or even a flight or separation from society. In addition, for women religious life was presumed to be a cloistered existence. Vincent saw the purpose of the Congregation as not fleeing the world, nor to be in an adversarial relationship with society. He saw us as ‘secular;’ to be in the world, part of the world, with a readiness to go to any part of the world to evangelize the poor.

Another traditional notion saw religious profession as attending to one’s own sanctification. Even today, Canon Law continues to affirm that tending to perfection is what religious life is about: “Contemplation of divine things and assiduous union with God in prayer is to be the first and foremost duty of all religious” (CCL, 663.1). Establishing the Congregation of the Mission as an organization of professed religious did not harmonize with Vincent’s vision of our identity. Our non-religious Vincentian vows were meant to both embrace and enhance our end, namely, to follow Christ evangelizing the poor. We, too, are called to holiness. As our Common Rules and Constitutions state, we are to “make every effort to put on the spirit of Christ himself” (CR I, 1) “in order to acquire a holiness appropriate to their vocation” (C. 1.1). The holiness that we attain is not only for our own sanctification, but to enhance the Mission.

We describe our vows as perpetual. Historically, the only vows in the Congregation were and are now perpetual. However, from the 1954 Constitutions to the revised ones in 1984, an anomaly occurred, and the Congregation took on the practice of having men who completed

the Internal Seminary pronounce three-year temporary vows. The 1984 Constitutions have returned us to our original practice of only pronouncing perpetual vows in the Congregation.

The Code, in describing Societies of Apostolic Life, states that we are not religious, and as such, we do not profess religious vows. It notes, “among these there are societies in which the members embrace the evangelical counsels by some bond defined in the constitution” (CCL, 655). Our own proper law is the unique source for defining and explaining Vincentian vows. Our vows are exclusively perpetual.

Finally, our vows are reserved. Following the constitutional assemblies of 1968-1969 and the General Assembly of 1974, the “transitional” Constitutions and other materials published (see Fr. Braga’s essay, “The New Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission: Historical Notes”), our vows are described as private vows. “The Community found itself before the need of questioning itself concerning some points, including fundamental ones, about its structure and its life, and to define itself in new juridical terms, as outlined by the new Code. For example, how should the nature of its ‘secularity,’ the nature of its simple vows, private but privileged, some structures of its organization be interpreted? Does its ‘secularity’ place it securely from being incorporated among the real religious institutes? Or does it allow it to be placed among the societies without vows?” (BRAGA, 2002, 16)

However, with the promulgation of the new Code of Canon Law in 1983, the Congregation was able to find its proper place within the appropriate section under the title of Societies of Apostolic Life. As mentioned, the new code now only recognizes two types of vows: “A vow is public if it is accepted in the name of the Church by a legitimate superior; otherwise it is private” (CCL, 1192, 1). Private vows can be dispensed or commuted by the local ordinary or a pastor. Vincentian vows are reserved, and only the Pope or Superior General can dispense them (C., 55.1.). The classification of reservation prevents us from calling our vows simply private.

When the admitted member takes Good Purposes, he declares that he intends to observe stability, chastity poverty and obedience *according to the Constitutions and Statutes of our Institute* (Italics added). And these vows are non-religious, perpetual, and reserved.

Conclusion

Good Purposes historically were a declaration of intent taken before beginning the second year of the Internal Seminary. The novice stated that he intended to dedicate his whole life to the evangelization of the poor, by following Jesus Christ, and observing chastity, poverty and obedience according to our Constitutions and statutes. Twelve months later the novice pronounced vows confirming his intention.

Good Purposes addressed one of the most difficult problems the nascent Congregation was facing. Confreres continued to withdraw from the community because of fatigue or other factors. Vincent saw the need for creating a bond in the form of vows to stabilize the Congregation. Good Purposes, which were pronounced by the youngest members of the Congregation after completing their first year of formation, made it emphatically clear that one intended to make a lifetime commitment to the Mission.

The practice of taking Good Purposes now in formation continued until the promulgation of the 1984 Constitutions. One of the structural changes the revised Constitutions implemented was the reduction of the Internal Seminary from two full years to one. This intended structural change was happily received, but it had an unintended or unanticipated outcome. Good Purposes were no longer a formula pronounced at the midpoint of one's Internal Seminary, but were expressed as the culminating event of one's spiritual year. The length of time that one would be living with Good Purposes could be two or three years or longer.

This development of Good Purposes and its change had little effect on the average confrere working in the provinces. However, the admitted member, those accompanying him in formation and the formation community to which he is attached are aware of the change. The admitted confrere has declared to the community and others his intention of faithfully dedicating the rest of his life to the evangelization of the poor and following Christ. In a few years, he will become an incorporated member of the Congregation and pronounce vows. In his dedication, behaviors and fidelity, he will live out what he has said when he pronounced Good Purposes. They guide and challenge his formational growth for the immediate future.

The analogy of engagement is applicable here. If one (or both of the engaged couples) is unfaithful to the relationship, doesn't see the engagement as a priority, refuses to deepen their mutual commitment, or are unwilling to change or reshape things in the light of this relationship, perpetual commitment is not possible.

If a formator is observing similar responses in an admitted student in post Internal Seminary years, the same is true. If the admitted member manifests a variety of behaviors including a lack of fidelity to community life, prayer, and to the service of the poor, or if his vocational life is marked by indifference, or he's ambiguous about his identity, and if there are questions about his honesty, or if he's become reluctant to commit, then perpetual commitment is not an option. The years in Good Purposes need to give concrete affirmation and attest to his declared intention to perpetually embrace stability and the evangelical counsels.

Good Purposes have undergone a significant change in our present formational process. The practice and the tradition has not merely been developed; it has been transformed. However, as can happen, one modification can have unintended or inadvertent impact on something affiliated with it. This is what happened to Good Purposes. Today they function very differently in our process of formation. They are now a richer and much more vital dimension of one's journey to commitment in the Congregation of the Mission.

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