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Theme: Sense of Belonging and the Vincentian Charism

Identity and Sense of Belonging: Our Journey to the Heart of Humanity and the Earth

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“The Word became FLESH and made his dwelling among us.”
(John 1:14)

“A human being is a part of the whole, called by us, “universe,” a part limited in time and space. [S/He] experiences [herself/himself], [her/his] thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of [her/his] consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely but striving for such achievement is, in itself, a part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security.” A. Einstein

With the papacy of Francis, the Church has reached a moment of history and ecclesial awareness in which we see the urgency of putting life, humanity, and earth, at the center of our priorities (theological, moral, and pastoral). In the teachings of the Pope, expressed above all in the encyclical *Laudato Si'*, the earth and humanity form a single reality. Both share a common destiny and that is why life-threatening problems have a single root. The earth is alive, as it is Mother Earth (*pacha mama*) that “self-regulates in such a way that it is always conducive to life” (L. Boff). From this land have arisen all known forms of life, a true community of

unique life. Within this community of life, when everything was propitious, emerged the conscious/rational/intelligent dimension of life: humanity. Humanity is at the heart of the plural life that flowed from the earth and this is why it is inseparable from both the land, from which it was born, and from life as a whole, since it is there that it develops, following the rhythm of evolution. We believe that the creative hand of God has been present in this unfathomable mystery of evolution and is still present today holding, transforming, and renewing everything created. As time passes, we understand better that God uses us, humanity, to preserve and protect life and this action in turn generates a communion that advances humanity and the whole of creation to its fullness. According to Teilhard de Chardin, this fullness will be consummated, in due time, in God himself.

I see with deep concern that, in response to the theological, spiritual, and pastoral invitations of Pope Francis, the most reactionary sectors within the Church accuse him of what they call theological, pastoral, and liturgical “ignorance”: “he does not know!” We are witnessing a clear intellectual and pragmatic resistance to the prophetic papacy of a man who brings from his own experience a new theological and pastoral language, coming from the south of the earth, from the very peripheries of history. What is our own attitude toward the exhortations of the Pope? How is the teaching of the Pope affecting our way of being and our way of being charismatic, ecclesial, and human?

I write these lines as an invitation to rethink our identity and our sense of belonging beyond ourselves, expanding our congregational and ecclesial sense in such a way as to widen our tent (cf. Isaiah 54:1-5) and to experience what the Pope has called the “ecological conversion” (*Laudato Si'*, Chapter IV). This conversion to which the Pope has called the Church and humanity will only be possible if we rethink our collective identity and our sense of belonging in the total and true acceptance of the essential unity and diversity of this unique human family. I feel in everything that is happening a call

of the Spirit, as in Ezekiel, forcing us to walk among the dry bones and through unpleasant odors to see how God recreates life again and again in the face of our own perplexity and inertia; helping us understand that God continues to create, in the desert, green spaces where life blossoms (see Ezekiel 47:6-12 and 37).

We all belong to the earth and to humanity; this belonging defines our identity in its fundamental features. Neither the earth nor humanity belongs to us; both belong to no one. The possession, use, and abuse of the land and of humanity are causes/matrixes that generate inequality in the access to the goods of the land. This, in turn, causes the loss of the balance that is necessary for life. According to many experts, this is an unquestionable root of hunger, misery, violence, and all the evils of humanity! The earth generated us. We come from it and we return to it, according to the very tradition of the Church that we repeat, sometimes unconsciously, in the rite of Ash Wednesday. “This feeling of belonging is strengthened when we live in care for her, respect for her immense biodiversity, kinship with all living beings, gratitude and responsibility for everything she gives us,” and when we believe in Him, who is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end of all created things (Revelation 22:13).

Our identity and our sense of belonging in times of planetary crisis

It is impossible to deny, as some claim, the innumerable environmental, economic, financial, political, social, cultural, ethical, and spiritual challenges of today and their irrefutable interconnection. Systemic thinking and vision have helped us to understand that the evils of humanity and the earth interact and relate intrinsically. Solutions to these evils must take into account their nature and therefore must be inclusive, systemic, structural, and capable of regenerating broken tissue in humanity and the environment. After so many years insisting on the issue of systemic change, I wonder if this process has generated a systemic vision and thinking of the reality and the challenges of our personal and community life in our Vincentian way of being and acting.

Scientists, visionaries, thinkers in many areas of human knowledge believe that the threats that weigh on the earth and on humanity can lead to the eventual disappearance of our human species and cause dangerous damage to the planet. The earth has already survived five or six major catastrophes. However, not all species survived these catastrophes – just remember the extinction of the dinosaurs. The question we are asking today is whether humanity will survive this eventual catastrophe and whether it is avoidable, considering our passivity and indifference. Humanity still has time to choose its future if, as a whole, we assume the ethical obligation to forge a future where life is sustainable in all its forms and where the binomial humanity/land is always and especially respected and protected! We, the CM, can contribute with all our strength and passion in the decisions of the political and social order at local, national, and global levels, always in favor of life, where it cries! The work we do every day at the side of the poor has a global reach that we cannot ignore.

According to the Brundtland¹ Commission, the two major challenges of our time are:

- resolving the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs and
- sustainability, that is, economic and social well-being within ecological limits.

The sustainability of life is also the fruit of solidarity between generations. This sustainability can be achieved only through the humanization of our humanity. When I speak of the humanization of humanity, I am referring specifically to the reconstruction of our

¹ The United Nations established the Brundtland Commission (Worldwide Commission for the Environment and Development - WCED) in 1983. Its main function is to research the accelerated deterioration of the human environment and natural resources and the economic and social consequences of this deterioration.

basic sense of belonging and identity, to the healing of the ecology and human fabric. This “common home” (earth/humanity) of which we now speak on a daily basis is our responsibility and should be the priority in our local, provincial, and congregational agendas so that we truly follow the rhythm and direction of the Spirit. That the Pope has decided to take this step, to express this through an encyclical that is so clear, reveals the potential to impel transformation in the thinking and way of acting of the Church (its identity) in deep communion/solidarity with the needs of all humanity, as the Council wished.

Alliances, solidarity, collaboration at all levels

The Congregation of the Mission is a Society of Apostolic Life. The determinant of our identity and our sense of belonging is framed in the action (prophecy) that has its source in contemplation (mysticism). The prophetic act of today necessarily passes through common action with others and in favor of the common good, an action decided in favor of the majority that has threatened its existence.

“The dispossessed, the hungry, those who suffer the most from inclement and climatic disasters, are people.”² For this reason, dialogue, solidarity, collaboration, and common strategic action is the methodology and the path that *Laudato Si'* traces to achieve: the ecological conversion and the care of the common home. The Pope has insisted that it is essential to put the human person at the center of all action aimed at the protection and care of the planet and the promotion of sustainable development for humanity. As we have already said, the goods of the earth have a common destiny: they are for all. We must collaborate in what benefits everyone as a means to abandon petty and biased interests. Will the Vincentians of today be able to embrace the common good as their own good and play the whole for its own sake? Or will we remain in limited thought

² Pope Francis' speech to the UN in September 2015.

and action, inspired by myopic identity and a sense of belonging, incapable of contributing to the collective action of a humanity, which is trying to preserve life and safeguard the planet?

It is necessary that we develop criteria of action that address the various issues in a global and integral way, without forgetting that the care of humanity/land is the responsibility of all – of all nations, cultures, races, religions – of humanity – and that will be possible through coordinated, intentional and strategic joint action! In this sense, it is important to follow the pedagogy of small gestures; this logic of small gestures so rich in the teachings of Jesus in the gospel. If we want to make gestures capable of transforming reality, we should assume those in which international politics and everyday local actions interact. These gestures have the potential to transform social, religious, and political culture in such a way that it is always in favor of life. Can we Vincentians today incorporate into our common identity the gestures of dialogue, collaboration, solidarity, and coordinated action among ourselves and with others outside our circle?

If concern for humanity/land becomes the driving force of our pastoral (*Evangelii Gaudium*) and ecological (*Laudato Si'*) conversation, we will also inexorably find a way to enter into an ecumenical, interreligious, and extra-religious dialogue capable of making us alive in the transformation of the world into a place of justice and freedom for all. “Everything we have said about the dignity of the human person, and about the human community and the profound meaning of human activity, lays the foundation for the relationship between the Church and the world, and provides the basis for dialogue between them.”³

Making alliances, collaborating, acting in solidarity, caring for one another, collectively caring for humanity and the land are the only ways to stop the real risk of destruction that threatens us. Our Vincentian charism is called to make many strategic alliances in

³ *Gaudium et Spes* 40.

order to be able to be responsible for the essential care of compassion with all those who suffer in humanity and in nature today. The commonalities of our identity and the heart of the charism are in solidarity with those left behind, whom Vincent called “the most abandoned.” Today, to that founding element, we must add the protection of the land in respect to all living beings and in the shared, sustainable, equitable, and peaceful use of goods and services in this land that is our mother. The good of humanity/earth is a value that should be made essential. This is an element of rereading and charismatic reinterpretation that can help us in our own Vincentian re-foundation in the face of this historical turn.

Conclusion

It is enough for us to be radically human to the gospel of the incarnation, the one Saint Vincent meditated without fatigue. In that radicalness, which unfailingly unites us to the earth, we find our identity and strengthen our sense of belonging. The evidence of this kind of essential identity and connection could be revealed in a total commitment of our human and economic resources and of all our structures in the protection of life in all its forms, in the preservation of the planet, and in a full awareness and commitment to the rights of the poor and to the construction of a more just society. This kind of dynamism would take us back to the heart of the gospel where the charism was born, or, better still, would bring back to the heart of our personal and community life a gospel capable of making everything new (Revelation 21:5).

I am convinced that the Spirit calls us to come back to our path – that path that Jesus traced with his own steps and that we have decided to continue in our historical existence. We must find a way out before it is too late: “When you cannot find an outlet for decadence, fear ends up imposing itself and opposing hope.”⁴

⁴ Commentary on “O Principio Esperança” [“The Beginning Hope”] of Ernest Bloch (Ed. Contraponto) in the magazine *Ultimato*, March-April 2006.

We have a great challenge ahead of us. This challenge could become the axis from which the formation in the Congregation is thought. I believe that we must generate formative processes that DO NOT separate the human from the Christian, but holistically integrate these elements. A formation that seeks above all to form people, authentic human beings, and that “the human presents it as presented by Jesus” so that the identity and sense of belonging in relation to humanity and the earth will never be distorted. The human identity is relational and for this reason every Christian vocation is relational, which implies the encounter of the other and is realized in love. This is the point of balance, integration, and realization in our life. Let us recover the love/passion for the earth and for humanity to return to the gospel, to return to Jesus, to walk towards God, to humanize our identity and our sense of belonging.

Our institutional failure as a Catholic Church, and of ourselves as a consecrated body within this Church, reveals yet another facet of the failure of institutional religion that the new generations today reject with more force (radical secularism). Recent studies reveal that young people of the trans-modern generation identify with many kinds of spirituality, but do not want to know anything about formal religions.⁵ This failure is due to the self-centrism of religion and, in our case, of Catholicism. It is evident that the great religions of the world, the so-called Abrahamic and monotheistic religions, are often incapable of entering into free dialogue with every human person and institution of good will to respond to the main challenges of our human co-existence. Francis’ prophesizing calls us to make anthropological/ecological concern the center of our theological pastoral debates and to invest all our human, economic, and structural resources in it.

⁵ I recommend the reading of a study conducted by Christian Smith and Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (2005). In this work, the authors describe a religious experience of North American teenagers with these words: Therapeutic Moralistic Deism.

I conclude with this quotation from Schillebeeckx that masterfully expresses the path of our identity and our sense of belonging: “The Kingdom of God is a new relationship of human beings with God that has a visible and tangible new type of liberating relationship between men and women in a reconciled and pacified society... The Kingdom of God is a new world of liberation from suffering; a world of men and women completely liberated and healed in a society where the relations of owner-servant, master-slave, no longer exist.”⁶ To update our identity and sense of belonging to the community there is only one way: conversion to the Kingdom.

⁶ Schillebeeckx, Edward, *Jesús en Nuestra Cultura* [*Jesus in Our Culture*], Ediciones Sígueme 1987, pp. 31-32.