

Identity and a Sense of Vincentian Belonging

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The experiences of Folleville and Châtillon have been liminal experiences.¹ The two founding moments of the Vincentian Family opened the eyes of the saint to the need for word and bread for the people of his time in France and made him understand his mission and the identity of the Congregation of the Mission.

A question

Identity is the set of features that make Vincent unique and unmistakable. At one time, at least for missionaries, their dress also contributed. The circular letters from the 17th and 18th centuries are full of warnings on buttons, beards, and shoes. Uniformity was dogma. The schedule and the usages of Paris were the law everywhere in the world. Of course, it was not the habit that made the Lazarist. A habit full of nothing defines nobody. Identity is the daughter of the charism. Although it is clear that, as happens in life, children can betray the parents' legacy.

¹ J.-P. Renouard, *Saint Vincent de Paul maître de sagesse: Initiation à l'esprit vincentien* [Saint Vincent de Paul, Master of Wisdom: Initiation in the Vincentian Spirit], Paris 2010; L. Nuovo, *San Vincenzo de' Paoli. La carità credibile della Chiesa* [Saint Vincent de Paul. The Credible Charity of the Church], Jaca book, Centro liturgico vincenziano 2016; L. Mezzadri, *Ritorno alle sorgenti. S. Vincenzo de' Paoli a Folleville e Châtillon ieri ed oggi* [Return to the Sources. Saint Vincent de Paul at Folleville and Châtillon Yesterday and Today], Tau, Todi, 2017; *idem*, *S. Vincenzo e i suoi poveri* [Saint Vincent and His Poor], S. Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 2017; *idem*, *San Vincenzo de' Paoli e gli esclusi del Tempio e della Storia* [Saint Vincent de Paul and the Excluded of the Temple and History], Tau, Todi, 2017 (in preparation).

Identity can be compared to drupes (or stone fruits) like the apricot, peach, and cherry. The fruit consists of a hard core surrounded by the pulp. The core represents the institutional structure: name, government, vows, norms, traditions. If we look at the nut, we find that differences with other religious families are not great. In our rules, one can recognize expressions even dating to Pacomius, the founder of cenobitic monasticism, though borrowed from the rules of the Jesuits. There is nothing new under the sun. We are called back constantly to the rules. But what was that call? The rule as Saint Vincent wanted it was not a two-slot machine: it can or cannot be done, which contradicts the meaning. He did not want to lead the Missioners to live under a morality of law but under a morality of obedience to the Gospel.

Obedience to what? To do what? Vincent's answer is clear: "If Our Lord imprints His own character on us, and gives us, so to speak, the sap of His Spirit and grace, uniting us to Him like the vine branches to the vine stock, we do the same as He did on earth – I mean we carry out divine actions and, like Saint Paul, filled with this Spirit, beget children to Our Lord." (XI: 311, Conference 153).

All this to answer a question formulated thus by Saint Vincent himself: goal or target at which we are aiming. "If someone were to ask us, 'Why are you in the Mission?' we should acknowledge that God established it so that we can work: (1) at our own growth in holiness; (2) for the salvation of the poor; and (3) to be of service to the clergy, and say, 'That's why I'm in it.'" (XII: 68, Conference 195).

Christ and the poor

The answer seems obvious, especially for those who joined the community after the 80s of the last century. But this was not the common feeling of those who had joined the congregation earlier.

The key biblical text for the saint was the discourse in the synagogue of Nazareth:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me
to bring glad tidings to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.”*
*Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat
down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him.*
*He said to them, “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your
hearing.” (Luke 4:18-21).*

A concrete man, who wanted to see everything with his own eyes and touch everything with his own hand (IV, Letter 1539; VI, Letter 2316), Vincent did not allow himself to be guided by emotions or abstract ideas. “The charism is to be incarnate, born in a concrete place and then grow. But you must always look for where it was born” (Pope Francis). Vincent’s charism, he was sure, was born of the encounter with the missionary Christ sent by the Father to be the evangelizer of the poor. Therefore the missionaries’ purpose, as he repeated in his conferences, is to spend one’s life for the salvation of the poor “in imitation of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the one true redeemer. He fulfilled perfectly the meaning of his name Jesus, that is, savior.... While he lived on earth he thought of nothing but our salvation, and he continues this same work” (Abelly book III, chapter 8, section 1, 90). When Vincent had the happy intuition of defining Christ as “the rule of the Mission” (XII:110, Conference 198), he meant that the Mission is directed by Jesus Christ (“rule” comes from “to rule”); indeed, it is measured on Jesus Christ, so that the missionaries should have his “heart of charity” (XII:216, Conference 207) and open up to His abyss of gentleness (XII:95, Conference 196) to be chosen “as instruments of His immense, paternal charity, which is intended to be established and to expand in souls” (XII:214, Conference 207).

Identity is conformity to Christ: “The intention of the Company is to imitate Our Lord to the extent that poor, insignificant persons can do. What does that mean? It means that the Company aspires to take Him as a model in the way He acted, what He did, His ministries, and His aims.” (XII:67, Conference 195).

The centerpiece of the Vincentian identity is thus constituted by Jesus Christ and the poor.

Evolution and/or decline

The elements of this have been highlighted by the growth of its works. Vincent did in fact go in for a cascade of projects. He sought out the ways of the Lord (Psalm 24:4). He tried not to convey an aggressive style, typical of an industrialist. All his foundations were accepted only if the proposal came from others, which for him meant the will of God. The search for divine will was for Vincent the cornerstone of his vision of the founder of a community that had the mission of the evangelization of the poor. But it was still a matter of concrete needs, for a concrete mission, for men with their feet on the ground and their eyes on the heavens.

To make real the term “today” has been the diversifying element of Vincent and the tradition of his successors. Vincent felt guided by the Spirit, who is “the Creator,” as it creates “the resemblance to Christ, gentle and humble of heart,”² while for his successors the Rule was certainly something precious, but only to guard. Like a relic. They did not live for today. Like Lot’s wife, they looked back. They were men of yesterday. We have the example in the Madagascar mission. “Someone in the Company may say perhaps that Madagascar should be abandoned; flesh and blood will use that language and say that no more men should be sent there, but I’m certain that the Spirit says otherwise. *Quoi!* Messieurs, shall we leave our good M. Bourdaise

² The Constitutions and Statutes of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, Article 18, present this concept well.

all alone there?” (SV XI: 372, Conference 172). Bourdaise had had been dead for more than a year, and the Vincentian mission in the distant island died shortly after his death.

In fact, little by little, in the development of the Little Company, a veil of fog had risen, and, little by little, it had thickened.

The first warnings had already been experienced by the saint:

“‘But,’ someone will say to me, ‘why burden ourselves with a hospital? Look at the poor people in the Nom-de-Jésus who are diverting us from our ministry; we have to go to say Mass for them, to instruct them, to administer the Sacraments, and to supervise the overall care of their lives. Why go to the border towns to distribute alms, to run the risk of many dangers, and to be diverted from our ministries?’ Eh, Messieurs! Can we find fault with these good works without failing in our duty? If priests devote themselves to the care of the poor, wasn’t that what Our Lord and many great saints did, and they not only recommended poor persons to others, but they themselves consoled, comforted, and healed them? Aren’t those who are poor the afflicted members of Our Lord? Aren’t they our brothers and sisters? And if priests abandon them, who do you think is going to help them? So then, if there are any among us who think they’re in the Mission to evangelize poor people but not to alleviate their sufferings, to take care of their spiritual needs but not their temporal ones, I reply that we have to help them and have them assisted in every way, by us and by others, if we want to hear those pleasing words of the Sovereign Judge of the living and the dead, ‘Come, beloved of my Father; possess the kingdom that has been prepared for you, because I was hungry and you gave me to eat; I was naked and you clothed me; sick and you assisted me.’” (XII:77, Conference 195).

“Evangelize with words and deeds,” Saint Vincent said. It was for him “the most perfect thing.” In fact, after his death, evangelization

prevailed only in words. Shortly after the death of the saint, the royal parishes were taken on (1661 and following). Then was the turn of the College of St-Cyr (1692). The bishops in the meantime asked us to take part in the formation of the priests in the seminaries. Missions and seminaries, two classical ministries of the word, had the upper hand.

In fact, the conviction arose that evangelizing the poor belonged to the Missioners while assisting them was the competence of the Daughters of Charity.

The Constitutions of 1954 distinguished between a general purpose (the glory of God and the perfection of each member) and the special one, divided into three paragraphs: 1. to evangelize the poor, especially those of the countryside; 2. to help ecclesiastics; 3. to conduct works of charity and education.

These Constitutions did not stay in force for many years. These were the ones on which my generation was formed. And the lesson we received was to consider the identity of the Mission principally based on the ministry of the Word (missions and seminaries) and not on that of charity. So Folleville became separated from Châtillon. At the center was the man, invited to an ascetic, applying all his efforts to attain holiness. All the formation of the ordained given in the 60s was indebted to a spirituality in which the Holy Spirit was absent, while the verbs “to have to, to be able to, to will to” were predominant. But the poor were mostly absent.

On the path toward repair

The Second Vatican Council arrived. *Perfectae Caritatis* defined religious life as a life in the Church, for the Church, and of the Church.³ Critique of the conception of religious life was evident

³ L. Mezzadri, *Fatevi mondo, fatevi Chiesa. Laici, seminaristi, presbiteri e religiosi* (Il Concilio Vaticano II) [*Make Yourself World, Make Yourself Church. Laity, Seminarists, Priests, and Religious* (The Second Vatican Council)], Tau, Todi 2014, 99-121.

as “escape from the world” (*fuga mundi*). There were some who questioned the traditional expression of the “Carthusian at home” for the Missioner. But there was no reason to do so as it referred to the interior life of the Missioner. Most important to us was the call for adaptation and renovation (*accommodata renovatio*) of the communities, pointing to five guiding principles:

- 1) Following Christ: it was the supreme rule, therefore the various institutes were called upon to overcome everything else (rules, customs, statutes) to refer mainly to the Gospel;
- 2) The second point was the return to the spirit and charism of the founder or foundress;
- 3) The third point was the request made to religious institutes for insertion into the life and mission of the Church;
- 4) The fourth was a call to adapt to the demands of the times, which involved a discernment of the values of the world;
- 5) The conclusion was an invitation to make an update that was chiefly spiritual.

Renewal should therefore have had good feet on the ground. It had to be founded on the return to the sources of Christian life and inspiration of the founders and to adapt to the conditions of the time; hence, neither archeology nor modernity. In other words, the Council was saying that religious should not be dictated in the agenda of renewal either by their past or by the world, but by Christ.

Consequently, the documents of the individual institutes had to be revised: “Therefore let constitutions, directories, custom books, books of prayers and ceremonies and such like be suitably re-edited and, obsolete laws being suppressed, be adapted to the decrees of this sacred synod” (*PC* 3).

The Congregation started a triple course. The most challenging was the Assemblies in 1968-69 and 1980, as well as that bridge in

1974.⁴ The second was the one of the studies, which flourished in various regions and resulted in conferences, studies,⁵ biographies, and magazines. The third was that of pilot experiences in the fields of evangelization and charity.

From the 1980 Assembly came another vision of the community, an “outgoing” community in the footsteps of Christ “proclaiming the Gospel to the Poor” (Constitutions, article 1). The Gospel is not our work; salvation is not the fruit of our efforts.

The first part of the Constitutions of 1980, the fundamental one, is titled “Vocation,” a title derived from a text by Saint Vincent: “That’s what Missioners profess to do, it’s their special characteristic to be, like Jesus Christ, committed to the poor” (XII:71, Conference 195).

At 400 years from the beginning, everything can begin again. The lymph is healthy, flows generously, and is called “Caritas Christi.” It is time to let it act to make us look again at the novelty of the days of Folleville and Châtillon, of those few who “went out of the house,”

⁴ M. Pérez Flores, “Desde las Constituciones de 1954 a las de 1980” [“From the Constitutions of 1954 to Those of 1980”] in *SIEV. Vincentien Month* (Paris 2-28 July 1984), in *Vincentiana* 28 (1984):751-784.

⁵ The General Curia became the promoter of initiatives of study (GIEV, SIEV, CIF) which focused on meetings (the important one was in 1981), which appeared in *Mois vincentiens* [Vincentian Months] and in the *Storia della Congregazione* [History of the Congregation], begun by J. M. Román and L. Mezzadri and finished by J. Rybolt. From France there were the publications of A. Dodin, R. Chalumeau, J.-P. Renouard, J. Morin, C. Lautissier, J.-Y. Ducourneau, and the *Fiches vincentiennes* [Vincentian Booklets]. From Spain: *Semanas de Salamanca* [Salamanca Weeks] and the publications of J. M. Román, J. M. Ibáñez, the *Diccionario vicenciano* [Vincentian Dictionary]. From Italy, there were the initiatives of the *Gruppo di animazione vincenziana* [Vincentian Animation Group] and the works of C. Riccardi, L. Mezzadri, L. Nuovo, E. Antonello. From the United States, *Vincentian Heritage* and the contributions to the history of the Congregation by J. Rybolt.

giving the key to the neighbors, and met to plan the shifts of charity. They were few but were not alone: Jesus Christ was with them; and also the poor.

Folleville and Châtillon were like the tiny fire of Moses' bush. They were the signal of a life that was beginning. We have known the Name and Mission and the Charism, which are words of the future, which has given us breath like the first Adam. Folleville and Châtillon have given us a style, which is like the dress of the Vincentian, which makes us recognizable, which allows us to tell who we are. It is a style composed of sobriety and modesty that loves to listen and welcome and prefer to celebrate well according to the Council.

Men die; a charism never dies. This makes us hope for a renewal, indeed for a rebirth, which will not be certified by statistics or numbers, but from the Church and the poor.

Translator's note: The citations are taken from the English translation of Coste, and refer to the volume, followed by the page number, and the number of the letter or conference.

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