

On Uniting Action And Contemplation

– A Key to Understanding Vincent de Paul –

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There are many keys in a large house. On the key ring you may find those to the front and back doors, to the cellar, perhaps to a seldom used den, or even to a money box or a liquor cabinet. Each gives us some entree to the owner's living space and to his person. So it is with the lives of great men and women. Historians often suggest various keys to their personality or their vision and, from that point of view, attempt to interpret their life and works.

Vincent de Paul is no exception. Abelly, his first biographer,¹ focused on the imitation of Christ as the key element in Vincent's spiritual journey.² Collet followed suit as did most other biographers until the 20th century.³ In this century, after the appearance of Pierre Coste's definitive edition of Vincent's works, some highlighted Vincent's sense of being priest⁴ or spiritual director⁵ as the key. Others studied the influence of spiritual masters upon Vincent, finding the key in gifts he received from Benedict of Canfield, Pierre de Bérulle, Francis de Sales, and André Duval.⁶ For André Dodin the key was Vincent's spiritual experience, his faith, and his practical wisdom.⁷

Some have maintained that doing the will of God⁸ or abandonment to providence⁹ are the keys to understanding Vincent. He listened for God's will mediated through events and persons and responded to what he heard. He followed providence step by step in his life, never trampling on its heels.¹⁰

¹For an account of Vincent's many biographers, cf. Luigi Mezzadri, *La sete e la sorgente* (Rome: CLV Edizioni Vincenziane, 1992) I, 103ff.

²Cf. Louis Abelly, *Vie de Vincent de Paul*, (Florentin Lambert, Paris: 1664) Book I, 78. Later, in a 1667 edition, Abelly identified two keys to understanding Vincent: the imitation of Christ and conformity to God's will.

³Pierre Collet, *La Vie de Saint Vincent de Paul* (Nancy: Chez A. Leseure, 1748) 95, 138-139.

⁴Cf. Joseph Leonard, *St. Vincent de Paul, A Guide for Priests* (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1932); also, Jacques Delarue *L'Idéal Missionnaire du Prêtre d'après Saint Vincent de Paul* (Paris: Librairie Vincentienne et Missionnaire, 1946); Jozef Parafiniuk *L'Insegnamento di S. Vincenzo De' Paoli sul Sacerdozio alla Luce del Vaticano II* (Rome: Angelicum, 1990).

⁵Cf. Abbé Arnaud d'Henel, *Saint Vincent de Paul, "Directeur de Conscience"* (Paris: Pierre Téqui, 1925).

⁶Mezzadri, *ibid.*, 35ff.

⁷Cf. André Dodin, *St Vincent de Paul et la charité* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1960) 64ff.

⁸Cf. Józef Kapuściak, *Il Compimento della Volontà di Dio Come Principio Unificatore Fra Azione e Preghiera in San Vincenzo de' Paoli* (Roma: Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, 1982).

⁹Cf. Victoriano C. Torres, *Devotion to Divine Providence and Sensitivity to the Spirit in Vincentian Apostolic Spirituality* (Rome: Teresianum, 1987).

¹⁰SV I, 68-69.

A common sense approach sees the poor as the key.¹¹ Vincent is famous precisely because of dedicating his whole life to the service of the most abandoned. It was the poor who drew him out of himself. It was in them that he found God and discovered the path on which he would walk for the rest of his life.¹²

The attentive reader might himself find other very useful, sometimes even neglected, keys. Vincent emphasizes simplicity as the "virtue I love the most."¹³ He calls it "my gospel."¹⁴ Could we not reasonably say that this is one of the most revelatory keys?

All these keys help open up our understanding of Vincent de Paul. Some, naturally, are more useful than others. But each offers insight. Each reveals a facet of his rich personality.

Today I suggest another key which I find very helpful: Vincent's capacity to unite action and contemplation. This key seems to me particularly useful today when we speak so much about apostolic spirituality. Even as I suggest it, I am conscious of a number of limitations:

1. Like all the other keys, it provides only *one* way of analyzing Vincent. It must be used in complementarity with other keys.
2. It is not a key that one finds in a first reading of Vincent (in contrast, for example, with the poor or simplicity); it is discovered only on a second level of reflection.
3. By no means is this a newly discovered key. Others have noticed it before,¹⁵ even if today one might find a bit of rust on this key.

Granted all this, let me offer a few reflections on this very useful and perhaps somewhat neglected key for understanding Vincent's spirituality.

¹¹Cf. José María Ibáñez, *San Vicente de Paúl y los Pobres de su Tiempo* (Salamanca, 1977) 271; John Prager, "The Poor as the Starting Point for Vincentian Studies: A Liberation Hermeneutic" in *Vincentiana* 2 (1991), 140-145.

¹²But contrary to this approach, Henri Bremond, in his classical work *Histoire Littéraire du sentiment religieux en France depuis la fin des guerres de religion jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris, Bloud et Gay (1921-1933), Vol III, Chapter 4), writes: "Let us be on our guard, however, against taking the cause for the effect. It is not the love of his fellow-men which led him to sanctity; it is rather sanctity which rendered him really and efficaciously charitable; it is not the poor who gave him to God, but God, on the contrary, who gave him to the poor." Bremond's chapter can be found in *Letters of St. Vincent de Paul*, translated and edited by Joseph Leonard (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd, 1937) 1-30; cf., for the quotation cited here, 20-21.

¹³SV I, 284.

¹⁴SV IX, 606.

¹⁵Cf. José María López Maside, *Unión con Dios y Servicio de los Pobres — Experiencia y Doctrina en los Escritos de San Vicente de Paúl* (Rome: 1984); Carlo Braga, "La vita spirituale della 'Missione'" in *Vincentiana* 4 (1981) 293-305; John Prager, "Reflections on the Renewal of Vincentian Spirituality" in *Vincentiana* 5/6 (1981) 366-383; Józef Kapuściak, "Unità fra azione e preghiera e S. Vincenzo de' Paoli" in *Vincentiana* 1 (1983) 68-73.

Vincent as a Man of Action

A. *His Activities*

Few saints have been as active as Vincent de Paul. Even if one highlights only his principal accomplishments, the list is impressive.

In 1617, struck by the need to organize practical works of charity in Châtillon, he founded "the Charities" (later known as the Ladies of Charity and now called AIC). These spread rapidly throughout France and afterwards throughout the world, counting today more than 260,000 members. During his lifetime he wrote the statutes for numerous "Charities" that sprang into existence throughout France.

In 1625, he founded the Congregation of the Mission. By the time of his death, the Congregation had spread to Poland, Italy, Algeria, Madagascar, Ireland, Scotland, the Hebrides, and the Orkneys. During his lifetime the house at St. Lazare alone gave more than a thousand missions. He acted as Superior General of the Congregation until his death, holding regular council meetings, writing its rules, conducting general assemblies, and resolving a host of foundational questions like obtaining the approval of the Congregation by the Holy See, deciding whether the confreres should make vows, determining which ones should be pronounced and what should be their content.

In 1633, along with Louise de Marillac, he founded the Daughters of Charity. With Louise at his side, he acted as Superior General, guiding the frequent councils, drafting a rule, and working out the rather revolutionary juridical base that would make the Company such a powerful apostolic force in the years to come. In his lifetime, more than 60 houses sprang up in both France and Poland. The Company later became one of the largest congregations the Church had ever seen.

In the process of guiding the groups that he founded, Vincent carried on an enormous correspondence, writing more than 30,000 letters, of which only about 10% have been preserved. He gave frequent conferences to both the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters. Only a small number of these are extant, and even these are merely copiers' accounts of what he said. He also gave conferences to the Visitation nuns who had been entrusted to his care by Francis de Sales in 1622; none of these has been passed down to us.

From 1628 on he became more and more involved in the reform of the clergy, organizing retreats for ordinands, the Tuesday conferences, and retreats for priests. Abelly tells us that more than 12,000 ordinands made their retreat at St. Lazare. In the last 25 years of this life he took up the founding of seminaries for diocesan priests, a work he sometimes described as "almost equal"¹⁶ and at other times as "equal" to that of the missions.¹⁷ He established 20!

¹⁶CR XI, 12.

¹⁷SV V, 489; VII, 561.

In 1638, he took up the work of the foundlings, more than 300 of whom were abandoned each year on the streets of Paris. Eventually he assigned a number of Daughters of Charity to the work and had 13 houses built to receive the children. When this work was endangered in 1647, he saved it by making an eloquent appeal to the Ladies of Charity to regard the foundlings as their children.¹⁸

Beginning in 1639 Vincent began organizing campaigns for the relief of those suffering from war, plague, and famine. One of Vincent's assistants, Br. Mathieu Regnard, made 53 trips, crossing enemy lines in disguise, carrying money from Vincent for the relief of those in war zones.¹⁹

From 1643 to 1652 he served on the Council of Conscience, an elite administrative body that advised the king in regard to the selection of bishops. At the same time he was the friend and often the counsellor of many of the great spiritual leaders of the day.

In 1652, as poverty enveloped Paris, Vincent, at the age of 72, organized massive relief programs, providing soup twice a day for thousands of poor people at St. Lazare and feeding thousands of others at the houses of the Daughters of Charity. He organized collections, gathering each week 5-6 thousand pounds of meat, 2-3 thousand eggs, and provisions of clothing and utensils.²⁰

So striking were Vincent's activities that the preacher at his funeral, Henri de Maupas du Tour, stated: "He just about transformed the face of the Church."²¹

B. Principles Grounding Those Activities

Many principles guided Vincent's activities, but two especially lay at their ground.²²

1. He listened to God's voice in events and people.

Many have pointed out the importance of events for Vincent. In fact, it is commonplace to talk about the "experience of Gannes-Folleville" and the "experience of Châtillon." His conversion is not narrated in terms of a dramatic experience of

¹⁸SV XIII, 801.

¹⁹Dodin, *op. cit.*, p. 45, states that Br. Mathieu carried 25 to 30 thousand *livres* a trip!

²⁰For many interesting details on St. Vincent's handling of money and his administration of charitable works, cf. René Wulfman *Charité Publique et Finances Privées : Monsieur Vincent, Gestionnaire et Saint* (Villeneuve d'Ascq, France: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1998).

²¹This text is cited by André Dodin in *St. Vincent de Paul et la charité*, *op. cit.*, 103: "Il a presque changé la face de l'Église." The text of de Maupas' funeral discourse is available on the CD-ROM, prepared by Claude Lautissier, containing various Vincentian writings.

²²Cf. Giuseppe L. Coluccia, *Spiritualità Vincenziana Spiritualità Dell'Azione* (Roma: M. Spada, 1978) 231-243; cf. also Antonio Gomes Pereira, "Espiritalidade da Ação" in *Semana de Estudos Vicentinos, CLAPVI* (Curitiba: Gráfica Vicentina Ltda., 1981) 215-233; John Ranasingh *St. Vincent de Paul and the Spirituality of Work* (Rome: Teresianum, 1983); J.-B. Boudignon *Saint Vincent de Paul, Model des Hommes d'Action et d'Oeuvres* (Paris, 1886); J. Herrera *Teología de la Acción y Mística de la Caridad* (Madrid, 1960).

grace occurring during prayer, but rather in terms of his realizing that God was speaking to him through tragic human situations: the miserable lot of the country poor, the abysmal education of the clergy, the abandoning of infants on the streets of Paris, the ravaging wars in the provinces.

Vincent also heard God's voice in persons. The peasant at Gannes, who made a startling deathbed confession to Vincent, became for him the voice of God calling him to found the Congregation of the Mission. The concerns expressed by the Bishop of Beauvais in 1628 were God's call to Vincent launching him on a lifetime of practical projects for the reform of the clergy.

2. *He followed providence step by step.*

"Grace has its moments" St. Vincent liked to say.²³ He was deeply convinced that God loves us, that he is father and mother²⁴ to us, and that he walks with us step by step.²⁵

There are few themes that Vincent talks about more frequently than providence. He tells Louise de Marillac in 1634: "Follow the order of providence. Oh! How good it is to let ourselves be guided by it!"²⁶ At times, speaking of following God's providence, he urges others to moderate their indiscreet zeal. He tells Philippe Le Vacher: "The good that God wishes to be done comes about almost by itself, without our thinking about it. That is the way the Congregation was born, that the missions and the retreats to ordinands began, that the Company of the Daughters of Charity came into being.... *Mon Dieu!* Monsieur, how I desire that you would moderate your ardor and weigh things maturely on the scale of the sanctuary before resolving them!"²⁷ But at other times, in the name of the same providence, he urges confreres to act. In 1655 he tells Etienne Blatiron, the superior in Rome: "Do not stop pursuing our business, with confidence that it is God's good pleasure... Success in matters like this is often due to the patience and vigilance that one exercises... The works of God have their moment. His providence does them then, and not sooner or later... Let us wait patiently, but let us act...."²⁸

St. Vincent sums up his esteem for God's providence in a lovely statement to Jean Barreau: "We cannot better assure our eternal happiness than by living and dying in the service of the poor, in the arms of providence, and with genuine renouncement of ourselves in order to follow Jesus Christ."²⁹

²³SV II, 453.

²⁴Cf., SV V, 534; VI, 444; VIII, 55, 256.

²⁵Cf., SV II, 226; VII, 216.

²⁶SV I, 241.

²⁷SV IV, 122-123.

²⁸SV V, 396.

²⁹SV III, 392.

Vincent as a contemplative

It is easy to forget that many of his contemporaries regarded Vincent as a contemplative. Abelly writes that "his spirit was continually attentive to the presence of God."³⁰ He adds that a priest who knew Vincent well recalled seeing him contemplating for hours on end a crucifix held in his hands. If one is tempted to doubt the objectivity of Abelly's account, it may be helpful to examine Vincent's own words which, especially in unguarded moments, give us a glimpse of his heart.

In a conference to the Daughters of Charity, he tells the sisters that while contemplation is a gift from God, it is the normal issue of the spiritual life. He states that we engage in mental prayer and affective prayer by our own choice, but that we engage in contemplation only when we are grasped by God. It is very clear from his conferences that he regarded some of the Daughters of Charity as contemplatives. He encouraged them to become other St. Teresa's.³¹ On July 24, 1660, when he spoke about the virtues of Louise de Marillac, he rejoiced at a sister's description of Louise: "As soon as she was alone, she was in a state of prayer."³²

The naturalness with which Vincent speaks about contemplation is an indication that he himself was at ease in this world. Sometimes the thoughts that he expresses spontaneously give the same indication. A tiny note, found in his own handwriting, states: "What then compares to the beauty of God, the source of all beauty and of the perfection of his creatures? Do not the flowers, the birds, the stars, the moon, and the sun borrow their attraction and their beauty from him?"³³ Once, having been in a room lined with mirrors and seeing the movement of a fly reflected everywhere, he commented: "If men have found a way to see everything that happens, even to the smallest movement of a tiny insect, how much more must we believe that we are always in the sight of the divine mirror of God's all-seeing vision."³⁴

Vincent is eloquent at times when he talks about how he sees God. In explaining the first chapter of the Common Rules to the members of the Congregation of the Mission on December 13, 1658, he muses: "Oh, if we had an eye sufficiently piercing to penetrate a little into the infinity of his excellence, O my God, O my brothers, what exalted sentiments of God should we not take away from it! We should say with St. Paul that eyes have not seen, nor ears heard, nor the mind of man conceived anything like it. God is an abyss of sweetness, sovereign and eternally glorious Being, an infinite Good embracing all that is good. Everything in him is incomprehensible."³⁵

³⁰Abelly, *op. cit.*, Book III, Chap. VI, 49.

³¹SV IX, 420-424.

³²SV X, 728.

³³SV XIII, 143.

³⁴SV XI, 409.

³⁵SV XII, 110.

In speaking to his community of priests and brothers just a year and a half before his death, Vincent states:

*The memory of the Divine Presence grows in the mind little by little and by his grace becomes habitual with us. We become, as it were, enlivened by this Divine Presence. My brothers, how many persons there are even in the world who almost never lose their sense of God's presence.*³⁶

A Contemporary Problem

In the period before Vatican II and the subsequent revision of our own Constitutions, many expressed a concern about the Congregation's becoming "religious" or "monastic." Today, our revised Constitutions make it very clear that, according to the oft-repeated teaching of St. Vincent, we are "secular"³⁷; our vows are "non-religious."³⁸ The recent *Instruction on Stability, Chastity, Poverty, and Obedience in the Congregation of the Mission* puts a similar emphasis on the secularity³⁹ of the Congregation and the non-religious nature of its vows.⁴⁰

In contrast to the past, the crucial problem at present is hardly a tendency toward monasticism. Now, more than three decades after Vatican II and the initial draft of our new Constitutions, a much more frequent temptation is hyperactivity and overwork. This problem was not unknown in St. Vincent's time. A Jesuit, who was working with the confreres, wrote to St. Vincent upon the death of Germain de Montevit: "Your men are flexible and docile about everything, except the advice they are given to take a little bit of rest. They believe that their bodies are not made of flesh, or that their life is supposed to last only a year."⁴¹

Two present-day factors aggravate the situation.

- In some parts of the world, particularly in Western Europe and the United States, the decline in vocations has resulted in fewer priests' trying to sustain long-existing works with the diminishing energies of advancing years. The seriousness of this situation led a North American bishop to state: "I cannot, and will not, ask our priests to do any more than they are presently doing in their

³⁶SV XII, 163-164.

³⁷C 3, § 2.

³⁸C 55 § 1.

³⁹Cf., Chapter I, III B.

⁴⁰Cf., Chapter VII, I.

⁴¹SV II, 24.

ministry. Most are terribly overworked and trying valiantly to serve impossible pastoral demands day after day."⁴²

- Not only in Western Europe and North America, but in many other areas of the world, society places great emphasis on immediate gratification. With rapid means of transportation and communication, the promise of instantaneous results continually entices us. In fact, we often get such results. Contemporary society moves along at a frenetic pace. Many business, many movements, many groups call out to us: "Don't miss the train – it is pulling out!" So we hurry to catch it. But we discover, often only by painful experience, that most of life's difficulties are not quickly resolved nor are its deepest values rapidly assimilated.

On Uniting Action and Contemplation as Vincentians

In spite of the problem described above, all of us have noted, with some joy, a renewed interest in spirituality today.⁴³ Some of its manifestations are wonderfully healthy. Others tend toward the bizarre.⁴⁴ But one thing is clear. There exists a hunger, "a profound and authentic desire of 20th century humanity for wholeness in the midst of fragmentation, for community in the face of isolation and loneliness, for liberating transcendence, for meaning in life, for values that endure."⁴⁵

Our members too yearn for wholeness, for meaning, for transcendence. The Congregation must try to satisfy this longing. I suggest that there is nothing more valuable that we can do for our candidates and our members than to hold up before their eyes (and our own!) a captivating vision; an ultimate concern that will help them to integrate life and give it away as a gift; a deep, vibrant, holistic, apostolic spirituality.

All genuine spirituality, both Christian and non-Christian, has a transcendent thrust. A contemporary theologian describes spirituality as "the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption, but in self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives."⁴⁶ Almost all theologians agree on the main characteristics included in this definition: progressive, consciously pursued, personal integration, through self-transcendence, within and

⁴²Cardinal Roger Mahony, "Ways of Responding to the Priesthood Shortage" in *Origins* 28 (October 29, 1998; # 20) 360. There has been much recent writing on the need to provide priests with the opportunity to "retire with dignity." Cf. *America*, May 16, 1998 and September 26, 1998.

⁴³Cf. *Final Document*, General Assembly of 1998, I, 2.

⁴⁴Cf. Meredith B. McGuire, "Mapping Contemporary American Spirituality: A Sociological Perspective" in *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* (Vol. 5, No. 1; Spring 1997) 1-8; cf. also, John A. Coleman, S.J., "Exploding Spiritualities: Their Social Causes, Social Location and Social Divide" in *ibid.* 9-15.

⁴⁵Cf. Sandra Schneiders, "Spirituality in the Academy," in *Theological Studies* 50 (1989) 696.

⁴⁶Sandra Schneiders, "Spirituality in the Academy," in *Theological Studies* 50 (1989) 684; cf. also, 676-697; cf. also, by the same author, "Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners?" in *Horizons* 13 (1986) 266; cf. also, Michael Downey, "Christian Spirituality: Changing Currents, Perspectives, Challenges" in *America* (Vol. 172; April 2, 1994) 8-12.

toward a horizon of ultimate concern. In the Christian context, of course, *the* driving force, *the* horizon of ultimate concern is God's love revealed in the person of Jesus.

Below I offer five foundation stones for a Vincentian apostolic spirituality that unites action and contemplation.

1. *Our Vincentian spirituality is deeply incarnational, rooted in the enfleshed humanity of Jesus.*

This seems so obvious, but there is nothing more important that can be said. One might surely ask: does not all Christian spirituality focus on the person of Jesus? It should. But it is very clear historically that apostolic societies have had a special role in calling and re-calling the Church to make the humanity of Jesus, his *enfleshedness*, the center.

Christocentrism was at the core of the spiritual renewal initiated by the founders of the original, revolutionary Societies of Apostolic Life, especially in the 17th century. Bérulle is famous for his abstract, mystical Christology, focusing on the states of the incarnation of Jesus, his adoration of the Father, his self-emptying.⁴⁷ Much more concretely, Vincent rallies priests, sisters, brothers, lay men and women to follow Christ the missionary, the servant, the evangelizer of the poor. John Eudes focuses on the heart of Jesus, brimming over with pastoral love. All of them captured the deepest sense of the gospels, which ring with this conviction: Jesus is the absolute center. "I am the way, the truth, and the life," Jesus says. "No one comes to the Father except through me."⁴⁸ "I am the vine."⁴⁹ "I am the gate."⁵⁰ "I am the shepherd."⁵¹ "I am the light."⁵² "I am the true bread come down from heaven. The one who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood will live forever."⁵³ ⁵⁴

In a letter written on May 1, 1635 to his close companion Antoine Portail, Vincent expresses his focus clearly:

⁴⁷Raymond Deville, *L'École Française de Spiritualité* (Paris: Desclee, 1987) esp. 105ff.; *Bérulle and the French School*, edited with an introduction by William M. Thompson (New York: Paulist Press, 1989) esp. 35ff.; cf. also, Michel Dupuy, "Le Christ de Bérulle" in *Vincentiana* XXX (1986, No. 3-4) 240-252; Benito Martínez, "El Cristo de Santa Luisa" in *ibid.*, 280-309; Luigi Mezzadri, "Jésus-Christ, figure du Prêtre-Missionnaire, dans l'oeuvre de Monsieur Vincent" in *ibid.*, 323-356; Giuseppe Toscani, "Il Cristo di S. Vincenzo" in *ibid.*, 357-405; Yves Krumenacker, *L'École française de Spiritualité* (Paris: Cerf, 1998).

⁴⁸Jn 14:6.

⁴⁹Jn 15:6.

⁵⁰Jn 10:9.

⁵¹Jn 10:11.

⁵²Jn 8:12.

⁵³Jn 6:51.

⁵⁴As a prayer crystallizing this kind of spirituality, I have often been struck by the wonderful words attributed to the missionary, St. Patrick:

*Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.*

*Remember, Monsieur, we live in Jesus Christ through the death of Jesus Christ, and we must die in Jesus Christ through the life of Jesus Christ, and our life must be hidden in Jesus Christ and filled with Jesus Christ, and in order to die like Jesus Christ, we must live like Jesus Christ.*⁵⁵

Different apostolic societies may focus on various aspects of Jesus' humanity – Christ the teacher, Christ the preacher, Christ the healer – but Jesus himself, fully enfleshed, is always the absolute center.

In short, the focus of a Vincentian apostolic spirituality must be the humanity of Jesus the missionary of the Father, the Evangelizer of the Poor – in his union with his Father, in his personal integrity, in his zeal for the mission that he received, in his deep human love especially for the most abandoned, in his desire to form other evangelizers, in his passion for the truth, in his ability to bridge the poles of anger and gentleness, in his hunger and thirst for justice. Jesus comes from the Father and goes to the Father. He is fully immersed in the mission he receives from the Father. He is united with the Father in contemplation, spending whole nights in prayer. He is united with his brothers and sisters, whose human flesh he shares, giving himself to them even to death.

2. *Our holiness, our being grasped by God, is intrinsically bound up with our apostolic mission.*

Let me immediately make some precisions.

First, we share this trait with many apostolic societies and with a number of other groups as well. All apostolic societies have this characteristic as a key element in their spirituality. It is especially through the apostolic mission defined by our constitutions,⁵⁶ through our contact with the most abandoned, that we seek to love and serve the Lord. The 25th chapter of Matthew's gospel is a pillar in our spirituality: "When I was hungry you gave me to eat. When I was thirsty you gave me to drink." When I was ignorant you took me into your school. When I was sick you healed me in your hospital. When I was a prisoner you came to visit me in jail. Of course, as this text suggests, the apostolates of various apostolic societies differ significantly from one another. They focus on preaching, teaching, health-care, seminary education, foreign missions, retreat work, human promotion, advocacy for justice, and probably many other objectives. But it is precisely through seeing and loving Christ in the person of those served that the members of apostolic societies seek genuine union with the Lord. For us Vincentians those we serve are described principally in articles 1-18 of our Constitutions and 1-12 of our Statutes.

⁵⁵SV I, 295.

⁵⁶Cf. Canon 731, § 1.

Secondly, today in an era when the Church proclaims again and again her preferential option for the poor, those relegated to the margins of society stand more and more at the center of the mission of the Church as a whole. Contemporary ecclesiology and spirituality accent seeing Christ in the poor and the poor in Christ, as did St. Vincent. Consequently, our Vincentian spirituality immerses us more and more deeply in the mission of the Church today.

Thirdly, in an era where the rights and dignity of the human person have come to be increasingly emphasized, we are conscious that in giving our lives to the service of the poor, we must take into account their own desires, their own hopes, their own values, and their own real needs. They themselves must become agents of their own human and spiritual promotion. So a contemporary Vincentian spirituality demands that in our contact with the poor we "reap before we sow," that we listen more than we speak, that we accompany more than we take charge, that we allow ourselves to be evangelized by those we serve.⁵⁷

3. *Our Vincentian prayer has its own particular dynamic, flowing from and leading to action.*

We are called to be contemplatives in action and apostles in prayer.⁵⁸ Like St. Vincent, the founders of almost all apostolic societies were incredibly active men and women. But were there any among them who were not also known by their contemporaries as persons of deep prayer?

Prayer and action go hand in hand in a healthy Vincentian spirituality. Divorced from action, prayer can turn escapist. It can lose itself in fantasy. It can create illusions of holiness. Conversely, service divorced from prayer can become shallow. It can have a "driven" quality to it. It can become an addiction, an intoxicating lure. It can so dominate a person's psychology that his or her sense of worth depends on being busy.

An apostolic spirituality is at its best when it holds prayer and action in tension with one another. The person who loves God "with the sweat of his brow and the strength of his arms"⁵⁹ knows how to distinguish between beautiful theoretical thoughts about an abstract God and real personal contact with the living Lord contemplated and served in his suffering people.

In our own spiritual tradition mental prayer plays an extremely important role. Few things received more emphasis in St. Vincent's conferences and writings. Speaking about mental prayer⁶⁰ to the missionaries, he states:

⁵⁷C 12, 3°.

⁵⁸C 42.

⁵⁹SV XI, 40.

⁶⁰Vincent's word here is *oraison*; cf. my article "Mental Prayer, Yesterday and Today: The Vincentian Tradition" in *He Hears the Cry of the Poor* (New York: New City Press, 1995) 78-79.

*Give me a man of prayer and he will be capable of everything. He may say with the apostle, "I can do all things in him who strengthens me." The Congregation will last as long as it faithfully carries out the practice of prayer, which is like an impregnable rampart shielding the missionaries from all manner of attack.*⁶¹

To encourage his sons and daughters to meditate, Vincent used many of the similes commonly found in the spiritual writers of his day. He tells them that prayer is for the soul what food is for the body.⁶² It is a "fountain of youth" by which we are invigorated.⁶³ It is a mirror in which we see all our blotches and begin to adorn ourselves in order to be pleasing to God.⁶⁴ It is refreshment in the midst of difficult daily work in the service of the poor.⁶⁵ He tells the missionaries that it is a sermon that we preach to ourselves.⁶⁶ It is a resource book where the preacher can find the eternal truths that he shares with God's people.⁶⁷ It is a gentle dew that refreshes the soul every morning, he tells the Daughters of Charity.⁶⁸

Vincent also had a deep appreciation for symbols.⁶⁹ He encouraged others to focus on the crucifix in order to meditate on the passion.⁷⁰ He recommended the use of images. He suggested books to aid in prayer.⁷¹ Though he recommended a method, he was quite free about its use.

One thing is very clear. Vincent felt that the vitality of the Congregation of the Mission depended on our fidelity to daily mental prayer. He minced no words about it: if we are unfaithful to it, he stated, the Company will disappear. It is my conviction that this is as true in our day as it was in St. Vincent's: faithful daily, meditative prayer is essential to the ongoing renewal of the Congregation.

⁶¹SV XI, 83.

⁶²SV IX, 416.

⁶³SV IX, 217.

⁶⁴SV IX, 417.

⁶⁵SV IX, 416.

⁶⁶SV XI, 84.

⁶⁷SV VII, 156.

⁶⁸SV IX, 402.

⁶⁹Vincent, of course, was also very concerned about liturgical prayer. He noted that priests often celebrated Mass badly and that they hardly knew how to hear confessions. As part of the retreats for ordinands, he prescribed that they receive instruction on celebrating the liturgy very well. But, within this positive context, he was still very much a man of his time. His emphasis, like that of his era, was on the exact observance of rubrics. There was little stress on liturgy as "communal celebration," with the active participation of all the faithful.

⁷⁰SV IX, 32, 217; X, 569; cf. also, IV, 139, 590; I, 134; cf. X, 569: "Is it not a good meditation to have the thought of the passion and death of Our Lord always in one's heart?"

⁷¹Among the latter, he was especially fond of the *Imitation of Christ*, Francis de Sales' *Introduction to a Devout Life* and *Treatise on the Love of God*, Busée's meditations, and Louis of Granada's *The Sinner's Guide*, *Memorial of the Christian Life*, and his *Catechism*, as well as Jean Souffrand's *L'Année Chrétienne*.

4. *Our growth in God's life also flows from the bonds of deep charity forged with our own brothers in the community.*

Here too, let me immediately make some precisions.

First, we are members of an apostolic *society*. Therefore, some form of common life is, by definition, an essential element in our identity.⁷² Though community life may take many different shapes in diverse cultures, an integral part of our basic spirituality is the commitment to build up a fellowship of faith and love *with* those who have pledged to pursue the same apostolic purpose. But if commitment to community is essential, then this must involve using clear, concrete means to foster it and sustain it. Especially important among these are healthy initial formation, well-structured ongoing formation, symbolic acts of initiation and incorporation, clearly defined times when the members pray together, share the Eucharist, eat together, relax in one another's company, and have fun together. Community life aims at forming deep bonds of charity among us. Few things are worse in community than a street angel who is a house devil. A genuine Vincentian spirituality involves each member's taking concrete steps toward building a supportive community that seeks to draw all toward the holiness of charity.

Secondly, our community life is *for the mission*. This is by no means to say that life together is unimportant. Not only is it important, it is essential. Moreover, one of the strongest lamentations that I hear today from young priests, brothers, and sisters is that they do not find the community support that they had been hoping for. Still, even as I emphasize the importance of community living and the need to create structures for sustaining it, let me add that, in apostolic societies, these structures should always preserve their flexibility. They should not be so flexible that they cave in, but they should be supple enough to allow us to respond to the urgent needs of those we serve. St. Vincent often used to express this concept to the Daughters of Charity by saying that they should be free to "leave God for God." If the poor arrive even during prayer, we should feel free to leave the conversation that we are having with the Lord in prayer in order to converse with the Lord in the person of the poor.

Thirdly, today we engage in participative community planning on a local level.⁷³ A key element in contemporary spirituality is fidelity to such plans. In the past, fidelity was often measured by observance of a universally legislated rule with an order of day that was much the same throughout the world. Today, fidelity can be measured by a member's observance of the covenant that he or she has made with the other members of the house. The covenant, of course, embraces not only our common commitment to an apostolic mission, but also our pledge to support one another in life together and in prayer.

⁷²*Constitutions* 3, 19-27; cf. also, Canons 731, § 1 and 740.

⁷³C 27; S 16.

5. *Our freedom to go wherever the Lord calls us demands from Vincentians simplicity of life, humility in listening, and detachment from whatever might hold us back.*

I will try to illustrate this in a number of ways.

Our Vincentian spirituality must involve availability and mobility.⁷⁴ Almost all apostolic societies had their origins in a need that cried out and that their founders heard. The societies were the advance troops going out to meet that need. With the obedience characteristic of the times, members went from place to place quickly, willingly, and joyfully. They often set out for far off countries with little hope of ever returning to their native lands. Jesus' call resounded in their ears: "Go into the whole world and preach the good news to every creature" (Mk 16:15). Today as the Church repeatedly calls us to a new evangelization – new in its ardor, new in its methods, new in its expression – availability and mobility are all the more important. This means that the Congregation must have the courage to relinquish works which others can carry on, even longstanding ones, in order to be free to meet more pressing needs. Individuals too must live simply, without multiplying personal "needs." Only then will they have the freedom to go wherever the Lord calls. The more attached one is to things, places, and particular persons, the harder it is to be mobile.

Secondly, like many Societies of Apostolic Life, the Congregation of the Mission is exempt from the jurisdiction of local ordinaries except in those matters expressly provided for in the law. This leaves room for great flexibility and creativity, particularly in regard to life together and government. It seems to me very important that we appropriate this liberty and use it creatively in pursuing our apostolic ends and in developing ways of deepening community life and prayer. Particularly in provinces which are in crisis or even appear to be dying, this liberty should move us to act with boldness, to experiment, to try new means for revivifying works that seem *in extremis*. But creativity comes not just from within. The "good ideas" we have are gifts from the Lord, usually mediated to us by those we serve, by our brothers and sisters in community, by the larger Church community, by contemporary society, by what we read, or by the Lord in prayer. It is crucial that we listen well to the many voices that surround us and that we be detached from our own favorite ideas.

Thirdly, in order to be truly free as Vincentians, we must embrace concrete forms of asceticism as an important element in our spirituality. A contemporary asceticism must be a "functional asceticism" to use Karl Rahner's phrase.⁷⁵ We live celibacy in order to be "free for the Lord," in order to go wherever in the world the Lord sends us as missionaries and in order to give ourselves single-mindedly to a life of union with the Lord in prayer and in the service of others, especially the poor. We use material goods in a new way, seeing them as an extension of our own persons. We share them with the poor and enter into solidarity with them by sharing their lot. We

⁷⁴C 12, 5°.

⁷⁵Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* VIII, 208.

are truly free if we do not always *have to be* working, but are able to rest peacefully in the presence of the Lord. We must be willing to renounce anything that holds us back from these goals.

Fourthly, as an apostolic society, the Congregation shares in the liberty of the charismatic element in the Church. We do not belong to the Church's hierarchical structure. In fact, we enjoy considerable autonomy not only because we are exempt but also because a large number of the canons regulating the life of religious institutes do not apply to us. Much is to be determined freely by our own proper law. St. Vincent's famous words, as he sent out the first Daughters of Charity, ring with liberty:

They shall keep in mind that they are not in a religious order, since that state is not compatible with the duties of their vocation. They have:

- *for monastery only the houses of the sick and the place where the Superioress resides,*
- *for cell a rented room,*
- *for chapel the parish church,*
- *for cloister the streets of the city,*
- *for enclosure obedience, going only to the homes of the sick or places necessary for their service,*
- *for grill the fear of God,*
- *for veil holy modesty.*⁷⁶

Fifth, our prayer too should be characterized by the same simplicity, humility, and detachment. Listening lies at the heart of prayer, as does availability. The missionary longs to know where the Lord wants to send him and to hear what the Lord wants him to say. Matthew's gospel⁷⁷ warns us not to multiply words as we pray. The challenge in missionary prayer is to stand before the Lord with great detachment, saying simply: "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening."⁷⁸

A final word. I am convinced that nothing is more important for the Congregation of the Mission as we face the future than a profound spirituality that unites action and contemplation. Of course, the heightening of such a spirituality depends on all of us. The task we face as missionaries is to promote life, principally the life of the Spirit. Our greatest challenge in the Third Millennium will be to breathe out the Lord's Spirit so that it excites others, enlivens them, and helps them see the world with a compelling vision and live in it with practical love. The great temptation for the members of Societies of Apostolic Life like our own is to be so caught up in our works that we lose contact with the energizing vision, the driving force that animates those works. Of course our works are extremely important. We must love

⁷⁶SV X, 661.

⁷⁷Mt 6:7.

⁷⁸1 Sm 3:10.

God "with the sweat of our brows and the strength of our arms."⁷⁹ But our works must flow from our "experience of God, of his Spirit, of his freedom, bursting out of the very heart of human existence and *really experienced*."⁸⁰ In other words, our spirituality must be fully alive. A deeply incarnational love of Christ must *impel* us, as Paul puts it to the Corinthians.⁸¹ If we are really to *live* in the Third Millennium, then a profound spirituality must root us, so that all those whom we serve see that God is entering their lives through our ministry. Do we presence God? When we are laboring in the midst of the poor, do the needy sense that God is touching them? Do they recognize us as God-people? If the life of the Spirit is fully alive in us as the Third Millennium dawns, then the Congregation of the Mission will surely be a striking sign in the world that the Kingdom of God is at hand.

⁷⁹SV XI, 40.

⁸⁰Karl Rahner, "The Spirituality of the Church of the Future" in *Theological Investigations* XX, 149; cf. also, Theodore Wiesner "Experiencing God in the Poor" in *Vincentiana* 3 (1988) 328-336.

⁸¹2 Cor 5:14.