

## ***SIXTEEN YEARS AGO....***

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1. The celebration of the feasts of Sts. Peter and Paul during this year of the great Jubilee marks the 16<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the approbation of our Constitutions and Statutes. Almost as many years had been devoted to their preparation by the Congregation in a process of reflection, prayer, and discussion that took place in Domestic, Provincial and General Assemblies over that period of time. The length of time in itself is an indication of how seriously the Congregation took up the task that was given to each Order, Congregation and Institute in the Church by the Holy See after the Second Vatican Council; namely, to express anew the particular charism which the Spirit of God had given to it through its Founder. Our Congregation, as others also, faced the task of adapting the expression of that charism to the changed circumstances in which we find ourselves today — different in so many respects from those of 17<sup>th</sup> century France.
2. It must have been about 16 years ago too since I listened to Cardinal Lustiger address a meeting of Visitatrixes in the rue du Bac on their particular mission in the Church. Many people, remarked the Cardinal, ask the question "What would St. Vincent do today if he were with us?" The Cardinal somewhat startled his audience by saying that the question was a rather inane one. Conditions of life, structures in society, modern thinking were all markedly different from those current in 17<sup>th</sup> century France, thus making it impossible to say with certainty what St. Vincent would do today. Undoubtedly he would direct his gaze — and ours — to the poor of today. "Seek out the poor in your society, serve them, proclaim the good news of our crucified and risen Christ to them, for have we not the word of our Saviour that the poor will always be with us," might be as much as he would say. By going beyond that and descending to specifics, and claiming with certainty that St. Vincent would adopt this or that apostolate, we might simply be projecting our own ideas on the saint, which he might not necessarily endorse. Cardinal Lustiger went on to point out to the sisters that their recently approved Constitutions were not only an encapsulation of the spirit with which St. Vincent and St. Louise would wish them to serve the poor, but that the articles of the Constitutions and Statutes were sound direction finders to the particular forms of the apostolate they should take up at the present time.
3. The consecrated life is both an historical as well as a theological reality. Historical and cultural changes bring about evolution in the lived reality of

the consecrated life. What forms and direction the evolution takes will, of course, always be determined by the essential elements of the consecrated life — such as the call of God, mission, the evangelical counsels, community life, personal and community prayer. Without these the consecrated life loses its identity. The Constitutions and Statutes are at once the expression of the specific charism of a Congregation as well the guardians of its unity and of its particular identity in the Church.

4. The preservation of the unity of a Congregation in a world that accepts and respects diversity of cultures is a particularly delicate and formidable challenge. The unity in question will be conditioned by the mind of Christ and by those particular evangelical values that St. Vincent saw as essential and perennial for the achieving of the end of his Congregation — the evangelization of the poor. It is a unity that is rooted in and inherent in the ideals and demands of the four vows which condition and colour the Congregation's approach to its mission of evangelizing the poor. It is a unity that transcends human powers, a fact that was recognised by St. Vincent, when in 1646 he remarked, *"Be united and God will bless you, but let it be through the charity of Jesus Christ, because any other union that is not cemented by the blood of this divine Saviour cannot last. It is, then, in Jesus Christ, through Jesus Christ and for Jesus Christ that you must be united one with the other."*<sup>1</sup>
5. The body of our Constitutions and Statutes set out the broad but essential conditions for the preservation of that unity without which the Congregation would cease to be an effective force at a local and international level. To quote St. Vincent's homely simile: *"Acting otherwise you would be like horses yoked to a plough, one pulls in one direction, another in another, and so everything is spoiled and ruined."*<sup>2</sup> The promotion and development of the international missions in recent years have been facilitated by the unity existing in the Congregation and which our present Constitutions and Statutes have contributed to preserving and fostering.
6. Our Constitutions and Statutes of 1984 are designed to shape and preserve our identity in the Church of today. The Congregation is a great deal more than a merely juridical entity or personality. It is a creation of the Spirit of God and it lives in the Church with an amalgam of special qualities and charisms which, when faithfully expressed, build up the body of Christ in the local Church. Karl Barth used to emphasize the importance for all preachers of "putting themselves under the word" before preaching. Analogously it can be said that it is all-important that the Congregation put itself under the word of the Constitutions and Statutes not only in the selection and acceptance of

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<sup>1</sup> Dodin, *Entretiens* 93-94.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

apostolates in the local Church, but also in accordance with the particular way in which such apostolates are to be approached and carried out. The Constitutions and Statutes can be seen as a template to guide choices at all levels in the Community, the polestar of reference in the charting of the Congregation's voyage through time. By frequent reference to our present Constitutions as a criterion of choices that are to be made, the features of the Congregation will be preserved in clear outline. Otherwise those features will become blurred, and the contribution of the Community to the pastoral plan of the local Church will lack tone and colour. It is not that good work will not be done, but the delicate filigree work of the Spirit of God (who is the *digitus dexterae Dei*), for which the Congregation was created, would remain unaccomplished or even impeded. The good at times can be the enemy of the best.

7. St. Vincent was fond of using the metaphor of a ship for the Congregation. There may be many ships on the ocean. We have been placed by Divine Providence in one particular ship. Our vocation is to remain in it and work faithfully as one of its crewmembers. In so doing we will be brought safely to the port of heaven. The Rules or Common Constitutions chart the course – and hence the importance *"of basing your lives firmly on these rules... which in the long term will lead you safely to the goal you long for, happiness in heaven."*<sup>3</sup>
8. When from time to time I read over the first 50 articles of our Constitutions, I invariably close the book with two reflections uppermost in my mind. Firstly, the wealth of spirituality that has been condensed and encapsulated into these articles which treat of the essential elements of our Vincentian vocation, of our apostolates, and our life in community. It has often been noted that the second chapter of our Common Rules, which St. Vincent entitled *The Evangelical Maxims*, is the resumé of his own vision and ideals for the Congregation and its apostolates. Something analogously could be said of the first 50 articles of our Constitutions. The unpacking of the content of these articles requires repeated and prayerful reflection if they are to yield up the gold that is in them.
9. Secondly, in reading these articles I am convinced that there is much yet to be mined and unpacked from them. Talking with confreres as well as with members of other Communities and listening to the observations they sometimes make about their revised Constitutions, I have on a number of occasions been left with the impression that, while members can be very familiar with certain articles of purely juridical content, — such as the duration of superiors' offices, the requirements for admission to vows, norms for the administration of property and so forth — the more inspirational

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<sup>3</sup> *Common Rules*, Introduction.

articles treating of the vocation, spirit, vows and community life are less often talked about and made the subject of community review and reflection. Invariably it will be agreed that the revised Constitutions of Communities are beautiful expressions of the spirit and ideals of the particular institute. But the question can be asked do these fine formulations enjoy a too peaceful existence within the covers of the volume of revised Constitutions and Statutes? Have our Constitutions and Statutes been fully claimed and owned by our Community? Or do we give them (to use Cardinal Newman's phrase) "*notional rather than real assent*"?

10. Those of us of an older generation in the Congregation will recall how week after week paragraphs of St. Vincent's *Common Rules* were systematically made the subject of community reflection and conference. Certain phrases of St. Vincent's text thus became consecrated, so to speak, and could be cited with facility and applied as norms of action. The unfolding of the riches of some of the paragraphs of the *Common Rules* over the centuries undoubtedly inspired and energized many confrères in their varied missions throughout the world.
11. Among the articles of our present Constitutions there are many very succinct and excellently crafted articles that capture the mission, the spirit, and ideals of the Congregation. Precisely because they are succinct they call for much prayerful reflection if they are to yield up their energizing power. Let me instance three among many fine articles that contain much spiritual pabulum, but which, if they are to release their full power, need to be reflected and prayed on phrase by phrase.

*... The spirit of the Congregation comprises those intimate personal attitudes of Christ which our Founder recommended to the members from the beginning: love and reverence towards the Father, compassionate and effective love for the poor, and docility to divine Providence.*<sup>4</sup>

*Apostolic involvement with the world, community life, and the experience of God in prayer complement one another and make an organic unity in the life of a missionary. For, when we pray, faith, fraternal love, and apostolic zeal are constantly renewed; and in action, the love of God and neighbor is effectively manifested. Through the intimate union of prayer and apostolate a missionary becomes a contemplative in action and an apostle in prayer.*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> C. 6.

<sup>5</sup> C. 42.

The ideal of evangelical and chaste celibacy is magnificently expressed in Article 29:

*Imitating Christ in his limitless love for all, we embrace by vow perfect chastity in the form of celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. We accept it as a gift given us by the personal and infinite goodness of God.*

*In this way we open our hearts more widely to God and neighbor, and our whole way of acting becomes a joyous expression of the love between Christ and the Church which will be fully manifested in the age to come.*

And for practical means to be adopted to live this ideal it would be difficult to improve on Article 30:

*Intimate union with Christ, true fraternal communion, zeal in the apostolate, and asceticism supported by the experience of the Church, will enable our chastity to grow strong. Through a continual and mature response to the Lord's call, it is living source of spiritual fecundity in the world; it also contributes greatly to the attainment of human maturity.*

12. The bishops assembled at the first Vatican Council pleaded for a simplification or codification of the large, unwieldy body of ecclesiastical law current at the time. Their cry was, *Obruimur legibus: We are smothered with laws*. When one surveys the numerous documents — and most of them very rich in theological content — that have emanated from authorities at all levels in the Church over the past 35 years, one might feel tempted to exclaim: *Obruimur documentis: We are smothered with documents*. Given the dizzy rapidity of change in the modern world, it would seem to be almost inevitable that it be so. In a world of change frequent adaptations and ongoing direction by authority of our energies are necessary, if we are to meet the emerging challenges of the apostolate today; hence, the multitude of documents, mission statements, reports. In a sea that today is stormy and choppy we may feel at times like the apostles in the boat — that it is dark and that there is a headwind against us. In such moments Archbishop Romero's reminder is pertinent:

*We are workers. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. We cannot do everything, and there is liberation in realising that. This enables us to do something, and to do it well. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.*

Yes, we are workers. And workers work according to a basic master plan and consult it often. Such a basic plan is our Constitutions and Statutes. It is well that we return often to the master plan. It is well that we put ourselves often under its word.