

CONSTITUTIONS: FOUNT OF THE MISSIONARY'S SPIRITUAL LIFE

*A Rereading After Twenty Years of Articles 28-50 of
The Constitutions Of The Congregation Of The Mission*

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The Constitutions establish the boundaries within which the Vincentian missionary is urged to live his spiritual life. In rereading them twenty years after they were written, one gets the impression of a painter who continues to retrace his brush strokes in order to refine the figure that he is painting. The painting sketched by the Constitutions is the image of the Vincentian Missionary.

The continuing work of refinement is necessary from the material itself. The spiritual life, because it is “life”, cannot be adequately confined inside of norms, because the protagonist that guides every spiritual life is the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit that breathes where it wills and how it wills. Nonetheless the “norms” understood as the boundaries within which the life is lived, constitute the safety net that sustain it. In this sense the re-reading of these norms from a distance of twenty years, has as its purpose, bringing to the surface an even deeper spiritual sense, so that looked at in their entirety the full meaning of the Constitutions may not be missed by a hasty reading.

If the constitutional principles cannot say it all, they can tell us much. In fact, if correctly understood, it fills two valuable functions. First, it points out the way in which the charism touches a specific person and leads one to the maturation of one's identity, to the end of preparing him for the mission towards which the vocation directs him. In that sense, the rule prevents personal freedom from drawing one away from the charism. Secondly, it tends to build up a uniform community. The rule, embraced in wisdom and in love, becomes the standard that sustains a community and maintains its fidelity to the charism.

The Spiritual Orientation of the Missionary According to the Constitutions

The orientation at the heart of the Constitutions in the part that deals with the spiritual life of missionary is guided by two coordinates: the consecration of Christ by the practice of the evangelical maxims (Ch 3, arts 28-39), and by a prayer life (Ch 4, arts 40-50). These two guidelines show up in the Constitutions as the capstones of the missionary's interior life. Consecration and prayer, however, are not shown to be as just any kind of spirituality, but are shown to be in concert with the vocation, and are understood to be the very reason for the mission. In fact the spiritual life of the missionary who is called to continue the

mission of Christ in proclaiming and bearing witness to the gospel to the poor (C 28), is energized by the consciousness of “missionary power.” From consciousness of the missionary vocation springs both the personal involvement in “the following of Christ,” as well as a life of prayer.

From this aspect the practice of the evangelical counsels mould the missionary into the humanity of Christ: a likeness which by itself can make him an authentic witness of Christ among the poor. But since “likeness” signifies the interiorization of the spiritual dynamics proper to the Master, it follows that power for the mission arises from an enduring and affective union with Christ, and hence a life reinforced by prayer. Just as prayer and unity with the Father formed the interior environment which generated Jesus mission, the same would be true for the missionary:

Christ the Lord – we read in the Constitutions – lived in an ongoing and intimate union with the Father, seeking His will in prayer. It was the supreme rule of His life, of His mission, and of His self-giving for the salvation of the world. We also, sanctified in Christ and sent into the world, strive to find through prayer, the signs of God’s will, and how to imitate the disponibility of Christ, judging everything according to His spirit. “In this way our life becomes transformed by the Holy Spirit as a spiritual offering, thereby becoming more suited to participate in His mission.” (C 40)

We could say that the logic behind the dictates of the constitutions in laying out the spiritual life of the missionary, is summed up in the formula: “To be of Christ in order to be like Christ.” This means that the missionary, in order to imitate Jesus the Missionary must be in spiritual oneness with Him.

Consecration and Mission: Missionary Spirituality

In this sense, according to the Vincentian charism, no more can consecration be separated from mission than there can be mission without consecration. The consecration-mission connection is not simply imposed one on the other, nor is it a simple coupling one with the other. It is the very act of belonging to Christ, which places the Vincentian in the missionary state. In the same way in which Christ, sent by the Father, was also consecrated by the Father and did nothing on His own “*If it were not given Him to do by the Father.*” (Gv 5,19; 1Tm 6,16) And so the Vincentian missionary derives his strength from an ever-deepening union with Christ. In fact since there cannot be mission without an enabling bond with Christ through whom He is proclaimed, the mission in our charism includes the consecration to Christ as its proper foundation. Consecration and mission are not joined in a merely extrinsic way. The reason rests in the fact that one cannot proclaim Christ if he is not a part of Christ. And so we avoid a possible

estrangement between consecration and mission, as well as the risk of the subordination of one to the other.

In this regard one must be more careful in the use of language. In saying that “consecration is a function of mission”, seems to subordinate consecration to mission, reducing it to the level of means, instead of recognizing it as an integrating part of the whole. Likewise placing subordination on the level of foundation results in an imprecise and defective meaning, and is in practice harmful and misleading.

The correlation between consecration and mission assumes a particular importance at the present time in which people no longer embrace Christianity by way of tradition, or by a theoretical explanation of its content. Tradition, at most, develops devotion.

Theory alone is not convincing. What still can have the power of persuasion today, is evangelization, is witness. The “old and new” thought of St. Vincent shows itself with renewed vigor, according to which the efficacy of evangelization springs from an intimate, stable union with Jesus Christ, that is, from holiness.

“Neither philosophy, nor theology, nor discourses” he writes to the young superior Antoine Durard – “succeed in working in souls. It is necessary that Jesus Christ be incorporated in us, and we in Him; that we act in Him and He in us; that we speak as He does and in His spirit, as He lived in union with the Father, and proclaimed the teaching which He received from Him. It is necessary, then, that one strips off self, in order to be revested in Christ. He knows that ordinary causes produce effects according to their proper nature: a sheep generates a sheep, and likewise a man another man, and so on. In the same way, if one has authority over others, who, leads them, speaks to them and is moved by only a human spirit, in those who see him, hear him and seek to imitate him, a merely human spirit will take form in that person, and in whatever he says or does, there will be in him an only apparent virtue, devoid of substance, like a wild growing plant, on to which is grafted a good branch. So we, miserable creatures that we are, made of flesh, grass and thorns, if our Lord impresses His character on us, giving us, so to speak, the seed of His spirit and of His grace, keeping us joined to Him like shoots on a vine, we can do what He Himself did on this earth. I wish to state that even we, once filled with spirit, can perform divine acts and generate, as St. Paul says, new children for our Lord.” (Coste, SV XII, 343-344)

To undertake a relationship with the humanity of Christ, indeed the personal road to sanctity in St. Vincent’s thought, is the high road of evangelization. In the person of the missionary, transformed by oneness with Christ, the poor can meet the mercy of Christ. Assimilation to Christ is the vital principle which,

interiorized by the grace of the Holy Spirit, make effective his acts of evangelization. (C28, RC II, 18) Truth is affirmed in practice. What in fact, does a poor person understand? He understands a humane, merciful and charitable stance in his behalf. And when this attitude does not come from just human compassion, but is nurtured by the living gospel, the poor person is then touched by the saving act, which is seen in the good attitude of the one who reaches out to him.

“There can be no mission, without human involvement.” Hence arises the urgent need for a missionary’s spiritual life: the life that is in intimate union with Christ, effectively encountered and, critically embraced, in the patient continuous work of a spiritual journey without pause, which has as its base the spirit of prayer:

“An important matter to which one must apply oneself, is an intimate union with our Lord in prayer: this is a reservoir from which to draw the knowledge necessary for the new office assigned to you” – again writes St. Vincent in the same letter to Antoine Durard – “Having recourse to God in prayer will keep your soul in the fear of God and in His love, so that-woe is me- I must tell you this and you must know it, that in trying to save others, some end up losing themselves”. (Coste SV XI 334).

Consecration to Christ in the missionary tension, animated by prayer, constitute thereby the characteristic elements of the missionary’s spiritual life.

In the Evangelical Counsels, the predisposition of Missionary Proclamation

The first characteristic element of the missionary’s spiritual life, is consecration through the evangelical counsels. But what is their function in the structure of the life of the missionary? According to St. Vincent’s basic thinking, the evangelical counsels are to mould the missionary’s humanness according to the logic of the gospels. More than with religious profession, in so far as it seeks perfection in itself according to the spiritual and religious culture of the time, St. Vincent looked at the manner of renunciation professed by the religious vows aimed at freeing the missionary *“to bring the mission to reality and to labor for the conversion of souls.”* (Coste SV, XII, 370) He therefore, in keeping with his practical bent, aimed for the substance of things: *“It is not enough to be in the state of perfection and then not incline oneself to the work of attaining it.”* (Coste SV, XII, 371) He wanted to escape formalism, holding to the “interior form” of religious life. Rather than the “exterior form.” For this purpose according to his vision, consecration to the mission by way of the evangelical counsels is intended to lead to a life lived in the *“following of Christ”* sought by renouncing all that *“controls the world: the desire for material possessions, for self-affirmation, for*

pleasures, for seeking out honors which would lead one to boast that I have such and such, that I am entitled to this pleasure, that I have this dignity". (Coste SV, XII, 370)

Making this thought relevant to ourselves, we can say that the evangelical counsels have the function of moving the missionary out of self-love in order to spur him on into a union outside of the self, into a relationship with Another. In his consecration the missionary says: Another deserves my consideration; in this Other I place my trust, this Other becomes the "norm" of my existence, in the same condition that He chose for Himself, to the end that the transcendence of the Kingdom and its mysterious saving presence in this world is affirmed.

The evangelical counsels express a substantial affinity with Christ. They look to Him; they bear witness to Him. Without Him they would be unattainable. The anthropological results of this connection is that, living in union with Him, raises the consciousness of the self in relation to the Other. Consequently experiencing the evangelical counsels tends to introduce in the missionary "*the principle of communion*" as the norm for existence. From this renewed consciousness there also arises the missionary's manner of acting, which looks to another, who in the first place is the OTHER by excellence: Christ, the Samaritan, the stranger, then the other who is "sacrament", the brother and the poor.

The experience of the love of charity drawn and learned from nearness to Christ and followed in the evangelical counsels is at the heart of the missionary's spirituality. The practice of the evangelical counsels lived in the Vincentian way, lead the missionary to a detachment from self, so that he can be a clear vessel of the presence of Christ among the poor.

A Missionary who in virginity witnesses to the Sovereignty of Christ

The humanness of the missionary, flowing out from the experience of Christ, because of a virginal life, undergoes an opening of the heart embracing everyone and everything in his availability to all, and his free giving of himself to all in love.

Virginity is correctly defined in the Constitutions as a "gift". It is truly a grace; an intuition and an impulse from the Spirit which fulfills a person in the direction away from the biological need for sexual expression. It then brings about human fulfillment because of the gratuity of the gift of self. (C 30)

"Since we wish to imitate Christ in His love for all, we embrace by vow, perfect chastity in celibacy for the kingdom of heaven. We accept it as a gift that is bestowed on us by the personal and infinite goodness of God. In this way we open our hearts to the neighbor with greater generosity, and our

whole manner of acting becomes a joyful expression of love between Christ and the Church which will be fully revealed in the next world.” (C 29)

The transcendental beauty which consecrated virginity introduces into the world, is the absolutely freely given overture to an other. It is something split off from The Trinitarian world stored within our fragile humanity: it shows therefore that overture to the human proper to the Trinity which is pleased to undertake a loving relationship with its creature, bringing into our human world the reciprocal love given absolutely gratuitously which constitutes the Trinitarian substance. In a world dominated by utility and efficiency, virginity shows the fruitfulness of virginal love, which in its apparent pointlessness is evidence to the love of charity. The virginity of the consecrated person is a gift for all: it is a reminder of the shallowness of life driven by the obsessiveness of egotism that lowers one to an object of one's own pleasure, or an instrument dominated by self. Virginity introduces a new way of looking at reality, because it dismisses the illusion that man can build himself up by dominating someone else. The strength of virginal celibacy for us missionaries, rests in the fact that it refines our sensibility, opening it up to the poor in that tenderness that fosters closeness and respect.

The Constitutional dictate then touches on the tools necessary to bring about the virginal gift in one's existence by these four points:

“The intimate union with Christ, true fraternal communion, a full dedication to the apostolate, initiatives approved by the experience of the Church. All these work together to invigorate our chastity.” (C30)

The state of virginity bears witness to the missionary, first of all, because it bonds him continually to the fundamental love of existence. It constitutes the unceasing return to the source of one's being, because without the Lord as his companion existentially active in one's being, virginity could not be lived as an integrating element in human life. Virginity more than nourishing itself by the initiatives that it guards, is never a flight from the world. It can become so however, and when it does become so, it becomes resignation or a poorly performed duty. It also begets a sourness that alienates people. For this reason virginity is protected by fraternal communion. When fraternity is fully lived, then virginity brings to the world the radical diversity of the gospel, adding to its beauty. Even a world of poverty and suffering, enlightened by virginal tenderness, becomes humanly more beautiful.

A Missionary who in Poverty shares His goods in fraternal living

The characteristic element of a missionary's poverty rests on sincere dependence and submission to the law of love, knowing what to renounce, what

to keep for oneself, and how to share. Consecrated poverty does not nourish itself on poverty for its own sake. Missionaries by their activity work to relieve the misery of the poor. Jesus vigorously applied Himself to overcoming poverty by His evangelization. He lived after the manner of a poor person, even though He was not poor, having lived by means of dignified labor. Poverty then, is not good in itself. It can become so in the measure in which the affect of the heart pushes itself towards the true good. In the same way the possession of goods is not evil in itself, but can become so if one becomes led by greed, by the desire for more and more, making an idol of material possessions. The missionary's poverty stands opposed to *"that cupidity for riches, which sends so much of the world to perdition."* (RC III, 1)

So the missionaries in their following of Christ through poverty must keep themselves in front of the good, of the world respecting their value: material goods are for life; life is not for the material. Yes, they do possess goods, but the possession is ordered to that communion which is maintained by fraternity and thus the worth of those goods rests in their being an instrument for nourishing fraternal life.

"Every confrere knows that he is subject to the law of work ... and that the income from that work is held to be goods of the Congregation, realizing, based on the example of the first Christians, a true communion of goods and of fraternal help" (C32) *"The means necessary for the sustenance of the confreres and their perfection are found in the development of the works, resulting from everyone's involvement."* (C 33)

To effect communion through poverty means walking a narrow path leading to a *"simple and sober life"*, so that *"all ostentation is to be avoided in the exercise of the apostolate."* (C33) The law that directs our goods for the community, does not have to do only with individuals, but also with the community as a whole: There is a community poverty, which *"shuns" accumulation, and sets aside a part of its goods for the sake of the poor."* (C 33). The setting apart of goods, for the community stands in contrast with egotism, since it is protected and safeguarded by education. Dependence on the superior's permission is a means of education through a constant corrective of one's attachment to poverty. In the logic of the Constitutions, "permission" is not a simple authorization to administer one's goods, but a true act of communion which we exercise as a form of self-review through dialogue with the superior about the possession and use of goods: *"... the superior's permission alone is not enough, it is necessary that each one reflect carefully on what is suited for conformity to our life and our ministry according to the spirit of our Founder."* (C 34)

The spiritual good that the missionary is to gain through poverty depends on experiencing a detachment of the heart, which predisposes one *“to depend totally on God, so that the evangelization of the poor, is made more efficacious.”* (C 31)

A missionary who in obedience seeks the will of God

The path of detachment from self reaches its summit in the submission of one's will to the designs of God in one's own life. If one can easily agree with this in theoretical terms, it is more difficult to in the concrete, when one is asked to submit his will to the mediation of another. It is said that obedience to a superior, is never submission as such, but expresses the giving over of self to God, and this is how the spirituality of obedience derives its energy. It is also said that the superior's command does not necessarily coincide with God's will since it is a mere moment in time. Nonetheless it is certain that submission to the superior always places one within God's will, and it is precisely this that according to Vincentian spirituality, must be central in the missionary's life.

The Constitutions say that obedience is *“participation in the mystery of the obedient Christ”* (C 37). Jesus by obeying the Father and then Mary and Joseph introduced into history the intimate mystery of God, the substance of which is the communion of love. Obedience is therefore rooted in the logic of communion. For this reason it can be rightly observed that obedience comes to fruition in a climate of *“a communitarian search for the will of the Father, by the sharing of experiences, of a free and responsible dialogue by which the differences of age and mentalities can be confronted.”* (C 37,1). Responsible obedience is realized by walking a road that prepares for the decisional act which, however, properly rests on the responsibility of the one in authority.

The act of obedience then, is considered to be a process that is not arrived at by a decision from on high, but one that matures through dialogue and community participation. From a spiritual standpoint, Christian obedience at its base, is an act of mutual charity through which the community lives and frees itself for its mission. Without charity it would be difficult both to command and to obey. But above all the mission dynamic would lose all its force, since the missionary proclamation could not exist if there would be no mandate, and thus without an obedience carried out *“with dispatch, joy and perseverance.”* (C37,2). If obedience would be limited to a mechanical act without the involvement of the heart, it would not be an act of love, but an act which would not be fully human, much less missionary. The missionary aspect of obedience is overlooked in this part of the constitutions, but is a fundamental point, which should be rethought.

This being said, the exercise of obedience depends on the commands of the superior which can be realized only as a virtue accepted in faith: *“In the light of*

faith the confreres should expend every effort to be in conformity with the decisions of the superiors, even when their personal opinion might seem to be a better one."

Practicing the counsel of obedience tends to animate the missionary's spirit in two ways. The first is that it leads him to form his spirit by seeking the will of God in his own life. The second on the other hand, leads him to locate himself within the missionary communion of the company, over against individuality of thought and action. In other words, obedience leads the missionary to understand his existence as determined by his relationship to Another, as a divestiture of self, which eliminates self-love and egotism, but which leads him to understand himself within the logic of dialogue to be a participant in missionary charity.

Obedience then is not reduced to mechanically creating "consensus" but is rather a spiritual act, situating one within the community by evangelical and missionary boundaries, guiding one's actions by fidelity to the love by which God guides history.

The vow of obedience is then amplified in the "*particular vow of stability*". (C 39), which tends to firm up the inconstancy of one's freedom, ensouling it in the fidelity of the Company in its mission.

"Give me a man of prayer and he will be capable of everything" (SV XI, 83)

The Other to whom the missionary wishes to liken himself through the evangelical counsels, is not an abstract principle, but a living countenance with whom he dialogues in that most intimate act which is prayer. Prayer, according to the plan of the Constitutions, and according to the mind of St. Vincent, is the hinge on which the missionary's life rests, and on which he keeps finding the basic vitality of the mission.

"According to the mind of St. Vincent, prayer is the source of the missionary's spiritual life: with it he clothes himself in Christ; he absorbs the teachings of the gospels, he judges things and events in the light of Christ's presence, and stays in His merciful love, and so the spirit of Christ renders all our words and deeds always efficacious." (C 41)

The dictates of the Constitutions harmonize the roles of prayer under three heads: a) As nourishment for the interior life of the missionary constructed on the "model" of Christ; b) As the factor building up his community life; c) As a unifying and life-giving element of his missionary activity. These three elements, however, are shown to be intrinsically bound together, since the text is intent on showing the intimate connection that: "*In prayer, fraternal love and*

apostolic zeal are continually renewed, and each of these become effective in action, in the love of God and neighbor.” (C 42)

In the first place, prayer is the missionary’s spiritual food as it was for Christ: *“For Christ the intimate union with the Father whose will he sought in prayer, was the supreme rule of His life and mission.” (C 40)* Through prayer the missionary’s freedom enters a fruitful dialogue with the Lord, recognizing Him as an inseparable partner in His own existence and activity. The schizophrenia between faith and activity is the worst ailment for a missionary, because it splits apart that interior unity which is the power behind the witness. Prayer as the memory of Christ is the way in which the spiritual unifies all that could become disconnected by activity. And so prayer is the interior healing for the dissipation of the spirit, because it continually mends the fragmentariness of existence, joins it to the Eternal, and heals its wounds.

The interior climate of this reconciling prayer which is proper to the missionary operates within the framework of the spirituality of the poor “in spirit”. It is a prayer which must nourish itself by the spirit of poverty. *“The missionary’s prayer must derive its inspiration from the spirit of sonship, of humility, of faith in providence, and in the love of God’s goodness.” (C 43).* Thus the interior climate of prayer must be fueled by the desire, by the expectation, by the asking, and finally by the recognition of the Lord’s presence, which burns away the evil, which accumulates in the depths of the heart.

In the second place, a heart purified and enlightened by prayer, opens wide the way to fraternal unity. Personal and community prayer build up the community and *“fraternal love is renewed” (C 42).* Liturgical prayer in particular, and especially the Eucharist, *“is the fount of our activity and of fraternal communion”.* (C 45) By praying together the missionaries, by *“the daily hour of meditation” (C 47),* the *“participation in the word of God”,* and the *“mutual sharing of the fruits of spiritual and apostolic experience”* possess *“an optimal means of animating and reinvigorating life.” (C 46)* Fidelity to genuine prayer slowly transforms one’s self-knowledge, helping to elevate itself to a gratifying relationship with The Other, with the mystery, with Christ and through its superabundance, with the brothers. Prayer consequently frees one from being closed up within the self, which is a barrier to fraternal life.

Finally the missionary’s prayer is closely bound up with his missionary activity. Prayer and activity are the same act for the evangelizer, since mission and prayer must sustain each other in turn if both are to be authentic. Evangelization without piety is more like a propaganda campaign. Piety without mission degenerates into sterile devotionism. For this reason the Constitutions rightly underscore that the missionary must make his mission a prayer through the formula used today, but which in the original formula of 1980 it was stated:

“The missionary becomes a contemplative in action, and an apostle through prayer.” (C 42) A similar correlation made fruitful by mission and prayer according to the Constitutions, is not only a principle, but also a way of life.

It is necessary that we evaluate the particular possibilities for prayer that the ministry of the word, of the Sacraments and of charity and the events of life offer us. When we proclaim the gospel to the poor, we must find and contemplate Christ Himself in them; when we exercise our ministry to the people to whom we have been sent, we must not only pray for them, but also with them, and we must almost spontaneously share in their faith and devotion. (cf. C 44)

The missionary's prayer must thus be woven into his ministry, and the assimilation of this principle is the very reason for the foundation of the Vincentian missionary's spiritual character. Everything within him: the spirit of vocation, the practice of the evangelical counsels, personal and community prayer, all must come together to transform his personality in order to be “in” Christ, so he can be like Him “for” his poorest brothers.

The Spiritual Life of the Missionary is a Life “Humanized” by the Gospel

The expression “spiritual life” used up to now, because it is used freely and easily, can have its true meaning lost in so much verbiage. When the words “: spiritual life” are taken for granted, the mission soon suffers, because the proclamation of Christ to the poor without a true spiritual life is hampered by the personal feelings, or by some type of religious ideology. The mission comes to life not by the power of an idea, not by something of material worth, not by a sense of duty. The mission comes to life only by a lived experience. For this reason it can be stated that “the mission” as such does not exist, but it is the person who renders it missionary or not. For the poor there can be no liberation if they do not encounter men liberated by the Gospel.

It is the encounter with people who are overcome by the wondrous presence of Christ who continue to live in that consciousness, and are thereby able to cast out a net of persuasive proclamation. It would be simply ridiculous to relegate to the impersonal internet the idea of Christian proclamation: It is for the fact that the Christ event touches life itself, and is not merely a message of self-promotion. It is a means of empowerment, so that the living missionary spirit results in the betterment of the person. Only the one who experiences his own humanity lived in Christ is instinctively a missionary. This becomes assured by a humble and generous following, and by a prayer life which firms up one's attachment to Christ. All this does not move along a smooth road, as is sometimes written. The following of Christ bears with it practical problems because of the tension involved. A missionary who aims to be faithful to his

vocation of making Christ present by means of his own words and actions, cannot help but undergo certain difficulties in his relationship to Christ. Not in the sense of an emotional uncertainty, but in the sense of being able to understand the closeness of the Lord to one's heart, the close proximity of Him without qualification, by one who is yearning for true humanness, this tension cannot be comforting. The relationship of truth to Christ is always disquieting because it moves in opposite directions from the world's logic.

It is precisely this contrariness that St. Vincent takes care to point out in the rules as the premise to every spiritual journey:

“In the first place, everyone should seek to ground himself firmly in the truth”. That the teaching of Christ can never deceive while the teaching of the world is always false, from the moment when Jesus Christ Himself said that the latter is like a house built on sand, while His house can be compared to one built on solid rock. For this reason the Congregation always professes to comport itself according to the maxims of Christ, and never according to those of the world.” (RC II, 1)

This observation is undeniable. It sketches the picture of a man formed by the Gospel. It is the humanness of the missionary who is transformed evangelically, to become the meeting place of the missionary and his poorest brothers. It reveals itself as a new reality which is amazing and draws together into a human relationship all who have need of humanness.

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