

The New Constitutions: Tradition and Renewal

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The history of the present Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission begins with the General Assembly of 1968-1969. This was an extraordinary Assembly, whose purpose was to concretize the renewal that Vatican II had requested of the Institutes of Religious Life, to be conducted on the basis of very precise principles (*PC* 2-3). These are: 1) clear definition of the charism as the ideal for following Christ, the supreme rule of consecration and the modalities for its realization; 2) faithful interpretation and observance of the spirit and of the proper purposes of the founders, of the healthy traditions and the spiritual heritage of the Institute; 3) participation in the life and the concerns of the Church; and 4) profound spiritual renewal of the communities. The reason behind this was clear: “The constitutions, the directories, the books of customs, and of prayers . . . are to be reviewed as is appropriate, and are to be modified on the basis of the documents that have come forth from this sacred Council, once the prescriptions that are no longer current have been suppressed.” These principles were further explained and made precise by Paul VI in the *Motu Proprio Ecclesiae Sanctae* of August 6, 1966 (*II*, 12-14, 17: *EV I*, 852-854, 857).

The work was not easy, and in the Assembly was long and, especially in 1968-69, tiring. Often, under a single heading, ideals and ideas very diverse rubbed up against each other. There were strong differences in defining the end of the Congregation, and there was the danger of creating a certain opposition among evangelization of the poor, service to the clergy, and other activities. In the definition of fraternal life one could have given greater importance or put in conflict with each other community life and respect for the person. Compromises had to be sought, at times at a heavy cost. I think about the declaration, approved in 1969, which emptied of significance the prioritizing choice of evangelization and the human promotion of the poor. It actually affirmed that this was not the sole end of the Company ³/₄ that it was a sufficient criterion, but not the only one, and not necessary in choosing works. These are affirmations that make one think and give thanks for the journey of “conversion” that the Company has lived. But they make evident the disparity of views on the term “tradition,” on the ideas that came from it and the difficulty in reconciling these ideas.

The pause for reflection brought by the Assembly of 1974 was a healthy one. It remanded the presentation of a text of the Constitutions to the Holy See for six years, and asked the Company to reflect on the journey discovered and lived over time by St. Vincent, so that it would be our own in the situations of a world different from his. Even a certain turnover among the members of the Assembly facilitated the editing of a

series of “Declarations” that helped the peaceful maturing of many ideas during the succeeding years.

The General Assembly of 1980, with another turnover of members, and thus of ideas, with the reflections and the experience of the six preceding years, even with notable difficulties (think of Article 1, which defines the end of the Congregation — it was the last thing to be approved), was able to arrive at a more peaceful setting down of the norms of life for the Congregation.

The mind of the Assembly concerning the concretization of the renewal requested by the Council that we find expressed in the “Introduction,” which precedes the actual and proper text of the Constitutions, came into being as a presentation of a historical nature of the maturation of the thought of St. Vincent concerning the end of the Congregation. The Assembly amplified it, including in it all the personal experience of St. Vincent in the founding of the Community, and in the delineation of its specific identity. Recognizing the particular moment of grace that the Company was living through, it affirmed: “The same Congregation, desiring to maintain and express in the Church its place and its end, believes it necessary to return to its origins, to the spiritual experience and teachings of St. Vincent, so that it can not only deepen and faithfully protect its original character and the spirit of its Founder, but also draw from the same fountains a more stimulating inspiration to respond to its vocation, always attentive to the will of God that, just as in St. Vincent, it be revealed to her in a particular way in the conditions of the needs of the poor in contemporary society.” Fidelity to the authentic tradition of the Founder is expressed in the full acceptance of No. 1 of the Common Rules, in which St. Vincent indicates the means with which the Company “wants to imitate Christ the Lord,” to “imitate his virtues, as well as what he did for the salvation of others.” The openness to adaptation appears in the concluding phrase of the Introduction: “In these words, St. Vincent entrusted to the confreres of the Congregation, his followers in the Lord, a unique vocation, a new kind of community life, and an exacting purpose that, with wisdom, should be continually adapted to each new age.”

Today the Congregation is guided by the new Constitutions, which constitute the juridical code of its life. This code has been prepared in such a way that the Constitutions not only be a dry gathering of laws, but that they be an instrument that helps us to live authentically the spirit and the ideal of the Founder, reproducing faithfully his doctrine and his expectations. For us, the doctrine and the ideal of St. Vincent is found above all in the Common Rules, and in the Conferences with which he himself explained the value and the significance of each of the Rules. Not the words, but the substance has passed into the text of the Constitutions, it pervades it, and interprets the text for the new situations in which we find ourselves living. We must, therefore, read and observe the Constitutions we have with constant referral to the Common Rules. The literary genre and the juridical import of each are different in

the life of the Congregation; but the inspiration that stimulates our spirituality and sustains our relationship to the ideal to which we have dedicated ourselves is the same.

Making a complete and systematic list, a parallel, if you would, of the elements from the founding and authentic tradition of the Congregation that are preserved in the new Constitutions, as well as an accounting of the changes introduced in view of the documents of the Council, does not seem useful to me. It would amount to an academic exercise. I think that it is more to the point to underline some essential themes that show the faithfulness to and the development in the purposes and the nature of the Company. I now list a few.

The End of the Company

One of the first elements to be clear about is certainly the end of the Company. A rereading of the events that brought us to the text we have is useful.

St. Vincent, in the Common Rules, indicates as “end” three concrete elements: working on one’s own perfection, evangelizing the country poor, and helping ecclesiastics in their formation: three concrete “things” that he, using the language of his time, defined as the “end.” He keeps the same way of speaking in his conference of December 6, 1658: after a rapid accent on the need to imitate Christ in what he did and taught, especially in the virtues and in his interior attachments, he spends some time on the three concrete aspects of the end indicated in the Rules. The Company has continued to express itself as its Founder had.

In the revision of the Constitutions of 1953, there was a felt need for renewal. New social situations had brought us new experiences, especially in the field of education, to whose attention the Church gave encouragement. Some Provinces had seriously committed themselves to this field. While maintaining the expression of our tradition, a distinction arose between general end, consisting of “seeking the glory of God and the proper perfection of each member,” and the special end, which, to the evangelization of the poor and the service of the clergy was added that of “taking care of works of charity and education.”

In 1968, under the push of the conciliar intuitions, there was a desire to place highly the aspect of evangelization and human promotion of the poor as characteristic of the Vincentian vocation. The text of the proposed new Constitutions repeated, in a renewed form, the three “ends” listed in the Common Rules and, omitting the addition of 1953, affirmed: “Therefore, the evangelization of the poor and their human and Christian promotion will always be for her a sign that will keep united all the members of the Community and urge us on to the apostolate (n. 5).” The affirmation sounded for many as a renunciation of the works created with great sacrifices; it seemed to concentrate everything on the missions, placing the works of education in second place, including the seminaries. No one was discounting the importance of the

missions, but some feared that other works would be considered as second-rate, and that the young, already inclined toward activities of direct apostolate, would be estranged from her works of formation, including the seminaries. One thus understands the declaration that, as a compromise, was voted in the session of 1969.

The Declarations of 1974 maintained the affirmation of the evangelization of the poor and opened the Congregation up to a further reflection for deepening our appreciation of the thought of St. Vincent, and they indicated a path for that deepening.

In 1980, to maintain the same affirmation, two things said in the Common Rules were stressed. The first, in the Introduction, said that the Company and its members are “called to continue the same mission of Christ, which consists above all in the evangelization of the poor.” The second, in n.1, confirms that “the little Congregation of the Mission wants, with God’s grace, to imitate Christ, the Lord, in so far as possible in view of its limitations. It seeks to imitate his virtues as well as what he did for the salvation of others.” It is evident that St. Vincent links up the three elements that he calls the “end” in an ideal picture. It is that of the imitation of Christ, who evangelizes the poor, and in such a way gives them a specific significance. It is that which the new Constitutions express in the article which defines the end of the Congregation. (n. 1). The picture is complete and clear as we read in context the conclusion of the Introduction and Articles 1, 2, and 18 of the Constitutions. The end appears as an ideal capable of filling and transforming a life. Central is the link between the figure of Christ the evangelizer and the figure of the poor. These have the power to give life to the community and to each member for finding one’s own perfection through “putting on the spirit of Christ” (*RC I*, 3); of committing them to the evangelization of the poor, “especially the most abandoned,” of forming and guiding clerics and lay persons “to participate in a more committed way, in the evangelization of the poor.” It is what Christ did with his disciples. This end, unchangeable as an ideal, will require a continual renewal in the forms of achieving it. The Congregation, attentive to the Gospel, to the appeals of the Church, and to the signs of the times, “should take care to open up new ways and use new means adapted to the circumstances . . . to evaluate and plan its works and ministries” (n. 2). It will be, as was St. Vincent, the Good Samaritan who, with efficacious means, will meet the most abandoned to help them to be the authors of their own reinsertion in society (n. 18).

The Figure of Christ

The Christological aspect is characteristic of Vincentian spirituality. St. Vincent lives Christ not as an abstract reality to contemplate, but as an ideal of life and as an inspiration for his evangelizing work. It is a Christ filled with the Spirit of the Lord, sent to the world to announce and put into motion the reign of God (Lk 4). It is a Christ united to the Father through a love and a devoted respect that leads him to seek out and to fulfill the will of God in a total abandonment to him. It is a Christ fully

inserted in the reality of the world, participant in the suffering and the hope of the poor he evangelizes.

It is Christ who he proposes to his Community in the committed dimension in which he himself lives: “He is the rule of the Mission” (SV XII, 130). For this reason his figure is always present to him, to inspire the practical norms of the Community. We read in the Introduction to the Common Rules: “I have tried to base all the Rules, where possible, on the spirit and the actions of Jesus Christ. My idea was that men who are called to continue Christ’s mission, which is mainly preaching the good news to the poor, should see things from his point of view, and want what he wanted.” The example and the teaching of Christ inspire every norm. Typical are the chapters on the evangelical maxims, on the evangelical counsels, on the practices of piety, on the ministries of the Company. In St. Vincent, there is no abandonment to sentimentalism or detached devotions. Teaching and practice are completely inspired only by the Gospel, the true rule of life.

The new Constitutions cannot distance themselves from the example of the Founder. Christ, the evangelizer of the poor (Lk 4:18), immediately appears in the first numbers to give light to the end of the Congregation. His love that feels compassion for the multitude (Mt 8:2) inspires and guides the apostolic activity. His call to the apostles to become evangelizers of the poor sustains fraternal life. The example leads to the practice of the evangelical counsels. The union to the Father and the seeking of his will in the fulfillment of the mission illumines prayer. The example of the Good Shepherd inspires the conduct of the one called to guide the confreres and the individual communities to the realization of their vocation.

These are only some indications that show the preoccupation of the drafters of the new Constitutions to maintain alive the Christological aspect of our vocation in the life and the activity of the Company. That will be more alive and efficacious, if the reading and the practice of the Constitutions are illuminated by a parallel and complementary reading of the Common Rules.

The Church

Next to Christ we spontaneously place the Church, in which Christ manifests himself and through which he continues to fulfill his mission. From St. Vincent, we cannot expect sensational affirmations: his ecclesiology was that of the Tridentine Council, rather limited. We can, however, gather from him a clear sense and a precise concern for ecclesial communion.

Above all, he has a sense of belonging to the Church. In n. 18 of the second chapter of the Common Rules he writes: “. . . the little Congregation of the Mission came *into existence in the Church* [emphasis added] to work for the salvation of people, especially the rural poor.” If we wish to read these words in modern language,

it is easy to note the conscience of belonging to the Church through a specific charism that allows a participation in the Church's mission.

From this prelude come some concrete applications. Communion with the Church should be expressed through a "faithful and sincere" obedience to the Pope (*RC V, I*). Communion with the local Church happens through a humble obedience "according to the specific nature of our institute" (*RC V, I*), that is, with respect for the particular exemption of the Company, but in full dependence on the bishop for the exercise of various ministries. For this reason St. Vincent underlines the necessity of getting faculties from the Bishop for confessions (*RC XI, 6*) and for the preaching of missions (*RC XI, 5*); and he desires that the missionaries ask the blessing of pastors at the beginning of the missions (*RC XI, 6*). He demands acts of obedience to ecclesiastical laws, but he also expresses his consciousness of ecclesial communion.

The Constitutions, following upon the conciliar documents, are able to make use of a different and more precise language than that of the 17th century. Because of the communion we share in the mystery of the Trinity (*C 20*), the Company senses that it is Church, and it expresses itself in it through its particular charism (*C 3*). With good reason it applies to itself the affirmation of Paul VI for the Church (*Evangelii Nuntiandi 14*), believing that "in a very particular way, the mandate to evangelize is for her [the Church] grace and her proper vocation, the expression of her deepest identity" (*C 10*). From these affirmations of principle they derive precise practical commitments: attention to the more urgent needs of the Church (*C 2*), close collaboration with bishops and with diocesan clergy (*C 3 §2*), insertion of its apostolate in the pastoral plans of the local Church (*C 13*), the acceptance of the magisterium of the Church as the guide for its formation and its life (*C 78 §3*). A significant commitment that it assumes, responding to its tradition, is the care and formation of lay people. Beyond the spiritual assistance to lay groups that descend from St. Vincent (*S 7*), the Company commits itself to the formation of lay people according to its own charism and according to the spirit of the founder, and thus to educate them to a feeling for, a love for, and a committed serve of the poor, and to the promotion of social justice. A new element is the preparation of lay people to the lay ministries necessary for the Christian community, and to active collaboration with priests (*C 15*). The ecclesial spirit is evident, and is expanded outside the confines of its own internal life.

The sense of Church and love for her wishes to manifest itself above all in the traditional commitment to help the clergy in its formation, but now with a new element of preparing them for "a fuller participation in the evangelization of the poor" (*C 1, 3°*), making of the poor a prioritized choice for its ministry. The forms of service to the clergy are no longer those of the time of St. Vincent. But they remain a part of our activity, perhaps the most important and demanding, to study and set up according to totally new expressions, with a profound friendship and participation with priests as the starting point.

The Poor

Next to Jesus Christ, St. Vincent always placed the poor person as a magnet for his ideals and his life. His spiritual journey was illuminated by his discovery of the poor, by his participation in his suffering, from the disquiet of spirit of meeting so many miserable situations that Providence put in his paths. His journey was a progressive opening of himself to the movement of the Spirit, and a communicating of this growing experience as if it were a seed on a piece of land made fertile by grace. The poor country person of Gannes was only a starting point. After him were joined many other poor people who received care from St. Vincent, and who made the direction his Congregation was growing in more focused. These poor people made his mind stretch, made him mature, made him greater, and kept him in the present. In the conference on the end of the Company (December 6, 1658), St. Vincent adds many other categories to the poor country people in need of evangelization, for the number of people in need grew continually because of changing social conditions. These too became part of the family who experienced his charity.

It is not our place to attempt a synthesis of his thought and commitment. We know them. I would sum them up in those words taken from a letter to Fr. Almeras (December 8, 1649), reported by Collet in his biography of Vincent: “The poor, who do not know where to go, nor what to do; the poor who already suffer so much and are always becoming more numerous; these are my burden and my pain” (*Life of St. Vincent, vol. I, book V, ed. 1748, p. 479*). These are words full of reality, that still have the power to make one think and to make commitments given the globalization of poverty. I do not believe that St. Vincent would renounce these words today.

We ask ourselves: how does the Community respond; what are the commitments that the Constitutions propose to it?

During the Council, people spoke a lot about the “Church of the poor.” The phrase ran the risk of becoming fashionable. But the Congregation of the Mission could not help but be concerned, as it reread its spiritual heritage, to make this enter into its own programs, in its own tensions of renewal. A few accents will be sufficient to sum up and propose the lines that the Congregation took.

In the same way as the Church, the Congregation of there Mission proposes for itself, as the ideal that illuminates and concretizes its end, the evangelization of the poor following the example of Christ who evangelized them, and through the Congregation, continues today his mission (*C 1, 10, 12, 18*). Poor are not confined to a definite social category, except in that of the “most abandoned.” This program is affirmed and lived out by other religious communities, but it is particularly significant for the Congregation of the Mission: it is born from its very roots.

The evangelization that the Company wishes to do will be inspired by a “compassionate and effective” love (C 6). St. Vincent spoke of *affective* and *effective* love. Evangelization is about bringing the Gospel, the Good News of the coming of the Reign of God, but the commitment to make that love effective cannot be missing. One must love with works and in truth.

That requires preparation: to learn to be aware of the causes of poverty and the way to combat them; to get to know, to love, and to accept the poor; to make of the service of the poor the *motivation* of consecration (C 28-29) and of fraternal life as preparation and sustenance for mission (C 19, 25, 2°); to carry the poor in prayer and to transform service into prayer, making a foundation for unity between prayer and apostolic work (C 42-44); to live “some participation in the condition of the poor” (C 12, 3°). The program is the object and fruit both of formation in all its cycles, including ongoing (C 78, 85), and of progressive and effective contact with the reality of the poor: it is to evangelize the poor by allowing oneself to be evangelized.

The service of the poor must not be only comfort, or assistance for the small-change necessities of life. It carries with it a serious commitment, together with specific associations, in the defense of human rights and in the promotion of social justice (C 18, 78).

It is understandable why the Congregation must not be content with the communal and personal commitment of its members. It must extend to all those who come near them in its ministry, priests and lay people, a knowledge and a love for the poor, and a desire to serve them (C 1, 2°, 3°; 15 *etc.*). The fire needs to spread and grow, because love is diffusive, and is infinitely creative.

I wish to underline one other fact. Service must also be formation for those who receive it: the poor. The words of n. 18 of the Constitutions are significant, for they invite everyone to work “for them and with them.” Charity must reign, but must also form the person to be the author of his own promotion.

These are only accents. But they gather faithfully the more felt and urgent moments of the teaching of the Council (e.g. in *Gaudium et Spes*) and by the later magisterium. Here comes together an ample and renewed field in which our tradition opens itself. Its cultivation will seek preparation, creativity, and courage.

Fraternal Life and Prayer

Common fraternal life has always been a characteristic of the institutes of consecrated life, very esteemed by the founders. Charity, sharing, example and mutual building up exchanged among the members were destined to sustain the common effort to live consecration and prayer, and to witness to the fruitfulness of the Gospel.

St. Vincent wished for his Congregation, from the beginning, a fraternal life in community as an expression of charity, but above all as a preparation and as a means of sustenance for apostolic work. The members of the Congregation, as “dear friends,” were to live, pray, work, and share all the realities of life together. That became visible above all in the work of the missions: the key of the house left to a neighbor is a proverbial example of this. Over time the tensions that are born from the needs of a common life at home and a continual apostolic life were not lacking. The Congregation of the Mission also felt the necessity of revising and making more precise the relationship between the two.

Vatican II, in *Perfectae Caritatis* (C 15), has rather generic affirmations concerning common life, that take their starting point from the traditional texts of the Acts to exalt charity. Only the last sentence accents the value of fraternal life as it relates to the apostolate.

The Congregation of the Mission, reviewing its Constitutions, wished to recuperate the principles and the values that St. Vincent had left to his spiritual family. In the eighth chapter of the Common Rules, concerning the relationships among ourselves, we find no great doctrinal principles concerning charity, communion, and collaboration. The Conferences are much richer in them. The General Assembly, working attentively, brought them back together and proposed them again for our consideration. I go through them briefly.

The fundamental statement is that which opens the chapter (C 19): “St. Vincent brought confreres together with Church approval so that, living a new form of community life, they might undertake the evangelization of the poor. The Vincentian community is, therefore, organized to *prepare* its apostolic activity and to *encourage* and *help it continually* [emphasis added].” And so, members, individually and collectively, should strive to fulfill their common mission through a wholehearted spirit of renewal in fraternal union.” The same ideas return in n. 21. What is new in the Vincentian tradition is fraternity, not only of life, but also of apostolate.

Fundamental to this community is the Trinitarian communion in its missionary dimension (C 20), according to an image that is decidedly Vincentian. Animation is given by charity, concretized in the practice of the five virtues, which leads to joy in fraternal assistance, to co-responsibility in collaboration, to respect of persons and other opinions, right up to fraternal correction and reconciliation, to the creation of a human and spiritual environment that our life needs (C 24).

To make this ideal happen the Constitutions ask for the total gift of ourselves and all we have — a gift which the community must value and make grow through attention and growth of attitudes and personal initiatives, doing everything it can to keep alive communion and apostolic work.

Each person is unique for his qualities and his mission. We can say the same thing for local communities: each one is “a living part of the whole Congregation” and contributes, in its individuality, to the good of the whole Congregation. Thus, the life of individual communities and their formation will be individual, within the necessary unity of all, so that they live out more authentically the values of the end, of the apostolate, of prayer, and of common life.

The concern for fraternal life in community and the way it affects the whole life of the Congregation asks for an accent on the life of prayer. I do it as I recall, without comment, n. 42 of the Constitutions. It links very well the various aspects of the life of the Community: “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.”

The chapters of the Constitution on fraternal life and prayer go far beyond the schematic conciliar indications, and, I would say, even of the Common Rules. They enter into the living charism of the spirit and the doctrine of St. Vincent, and they offer a picture of rich colors and shapes that illuminate the whole life of the Company.

Organization

The thread that has guided our journey up to now has lead us to reread the chapters of the Constitutions that contain above all principles and doctrinal orientations. These, however, are elements to be lived, and are applied in the organization of the community, in a picture of necessary renewal of structure and form. The Council had already given this challenge to the Church, by opening reflection on inculturation and adaptation. This means to express in the unity of immutable and essential elements riches hidden in various cultures and in the growth of the human spirit. The challenge, through the Church, arrives at religious communities, and to us.

I wish to direct attention to three aspects, of principle and practices, that can have notable effect on the life and the structure of the community: participation and co-responsibility; adaptation; and decentralization.

The fulfillment of participation and co-responsibility contain the right, the duty, and the possibility for all to cooperate in the good of the apostolic community and to participate in its government in an active and responsible manner (*C 96* and *98*). We can see the practical applications of this, for example, in the designation of provincial superiors (*C 124*), of local superiors (*C 130*), in General (*C 139*) and Provincial (*C 146*) Assemblies, or through the elected participation or the presence of the whole community in Domestic Assemblies (*C 27*) in the various Councils (*S 74*),

and in the formulation of the local projects (*C 27*). All must feel themselves involved in the decisions that regard everyone through a personal and responsible commitment.

Adaptation tends to overcome the monolithic and at times mortifying uniformity of living and productive potentialities. Already St. Vincent was insisting on a concept of uniformity, but more as a coming together of sentiments than as an equality of uses and rules. We are seeing the practical applications of adaptation in the life of the Church, if only in the field of liturgy.

In the Constitutions the indicated points are significant. The way to observe evangelical poverty, given the different exigencies of various places, must be studied by the Provincial Assemblies (*S 18*). Fraternal life in community and forms of prayer are necessarily subject to the research and the needs of each community, so that they be constructive and efficacious. The same formation, even though respecting our essential unity, must respond to the culture of each place, and to the situations and the needs of those being formed. The Directories of general character, and the decisions of Assemblies, will always be subject to adaptation on the local level so that they will be effective.

Decentralization tends to recognize the decisive power of groups on the periphery in the area of co-responsibility. We see it in the Church with the setting up of the national and regional Episcopal conferences, and the passing to local bishops of powers that were once held by the central government.

The most obvious expression of this in the Congregation is the power of the Provincial Assemblies to establish norms for the common good of the Province (*C 143*); there is also the right of provinces to judge which forms of apostolate they should take up, given their place in the local Church (*C 13*), etc.

These are all expressions of change that have entered in practice, and of which we do not perceive more evidently the significance of their newness. They would be rethought in a more lively way to make them more incisive in the life of our communities.

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St. Vincent loved to say that the Common Rules came from the Spirit of God, were inspired by Jesus Christ, and that they contained nothing that was contrary to the doctrine of the Gospel. Their observance, therefore, would bring ever-new graces on the Company.

As the Common Rules, so the new Constitutions are the fruit of waiting, of prayer, of suffering, and of hope. In these as well there is the presence of the

evangelical spirit, of the person of Jesus, of the love for the Church, for the Community, for the poor. Three General Assemblies and the whole community worked on them. So, everyone as perceived the passing through of the Spirit that brought new life to the Company, guiding her in the rediscovery of her original and fertile values. Twenty years later, we need to reanimate our hope again, and acquire the capacity to look a long way in the light of God.

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