

## FAITHFUL TO THE LETTER AND THE SPIRIT OF THE CONSTITUTIONS

*By Miguel Pérez Flores, C.M.  
Province of Salamanca*

1. The Constitutions were published on June 29<sup>th</sup>, the feast of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, in 1984. The then Superior General, Fr. Richard McCullen, wrote a short presentation of them in which he affirmed that he was sending them out with a joyful spirit. He made the following observation: *the degree that we are faithful to the letter and spirit of the Constitutions will determine to a great extent the degree of our dedication to the local church in which the Congregation is inserted.* In the next section he added: *The identity of the Congregation within the Church is spelled out in the pages of this book. But let us not allow that identity to be found only within it. We should, then, imprint the text of the Constitutions in the deepest part of our heart and express it in our daily living to achieve our vocation of evangelizing the poor.* The conclusion that the Superior General took was evident and corresponds to the title of these reflections: reading and praying the Constitutions, reading them frequently and accompanying this reading with an assiduous prayer. His observation ended with the desire that the Constitutions become efficacious means so that, according to the prayer to St. Vincent, *we might easily love what St. Vincent loved and happily practice what he taught.*

### **A Book for Life or for the Library?**

2. Sixteen years have passed and again the theme of *reading and praying the Constitutions* comes up. It's possible that in some missionaries the first fervor of those sixteen years, in which the entire Congregation enthusiastically lived the constitutional project, has grown cold. Many years have passed since the approval (1984) until now, the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, burdened with the the bewildering changes of the times. The Congregation in many provinces is different; there have been many congregational events, such as the lack of vocations, much pastoral work and the need for action and the slight attraction of reading juridical-spiritual books. These may have been some of the reasons or the occasion for putting off the reading of the Constitutions. Moreover, the Constitutions tend toward stability and are by their very nature written at a certain moment. All of this has lead, and continues to lead, to the Constitutions and Statutes being a book for the shelf and for domestic discussions, that is, a book for the library or for the drawer, and not a book for life.

### **Two Anecdotes**

3. I was once invited to explain the first part of the Constitutions, which treats the Vocation of the Congregation of the Mission. That's where the core of the Vincentian identity is found: the ends, the spirit, the marks of the proper Vincentian work, the canonical-spiritual characteristics of the Congregation, the spirit and its expressions, that is, the characteristic virtues of the Vincentian missionary.

4. It seems that my presentation showed a certain enthusiasm for the content of the constitutional texts and for the way in which they are expressed. Suddenly I was interrupted by the voice of a young missionary who, humbly and sincerely, said in front of the whole group that he admired my enthusiasm. He was given the book of Constitutions. No one told him anything. No one explained them to him. He gratefully took the book and buried it in the deepest part of his desk drawer. He took it from there to come to the course because he did not want to be a soldier who went off to war without the right weapon. But he didn't know how to use it. Now, in this course, he was learning the what and the why of the Constitutions.

5. Another objection that has been put to me on more than one occasion has been that of the deeds. According to these objectors, the Constitutions paralyze creativity. What interests them are deeds, works in favor of the poor, works that are significantly Vincentian. In fact, they ask, how much have individuals and the provinces changed since the formulation of the new Constitutions? My response in these cases has not been silence. It has been to read word for word article 2 of the Constitutions, for me one of the most open and applicable and, up to a point, the criteria by which a new generation of missionaries can judge an older one. *-With this purpose in view, the Congregation of the Mission, faithful to the gospel, and always attentive to the signs of the times and the more urgent calls of the Church, should take care to open up new ways and use new means adapted to the circumstances of time and place. Moreover, it should strive to evaluate and plan its works and ministries, and in this way remain in a continual state of renewal.*

6. Much creativity inspires the said article 2 and few are the restrictions contained in it, other than what pertains to the end of the Congregation: to follow Christ, evangelizer of the poor in the light of St. Vincent's inspiration. The reason why they did not see significantly Vincentian deeds and works has to be placed somewhere else, not in the Constitutions which calls for doing what is not being done and denouncing what is not done in a Vincentian way.

7. I could also cite another article, just as open and inspirational for creativity, article 18:

*Following St. Vincent, who, like the Good Samaritan of the gospel parable (Lk 10:30-37), gave effective help to the abandoned, provinces and members should earnestly strive to serve those rejected by society and those who are victims of disasters and injustices of every kind. We should also assist those who suffer from forms of moral poverty which are peculiar to our own times. Working for all of these and with them, members should endeavor to implement the demands of social justice and evangelical charity.*

### **Reasons for Reading the Constitutions**

8. I don't know if the two cases are isolated or frequent incidents. In any case, we have to insist on reading and praying the Constitutions. In them, despite their limitations, are preserved the updating of the founder's spiritual and apostolic experience; the theological and ecclesial identity of the missionary, the expression of God's salvific plan; the way to personal sanctification, apostolic effectiveness and testimony of life for persons given to God and the service of others in the Congregation of the Mission; and prayer in its triple expression: liturgical, community and mental.

### **The New Formulation of the Constitutions**

9. Many founders have had difficulties in passing on their spiritual experience or intuition to an institution, that is, describing and creating the institutions most suitable to the demands of their intuition or charism so that it can be made visible and efficacious. They have had problems giving it the wheels needed to move through history. By means of special aid from the Spirit they were able to do it. The Congregation itself has considered the time dedicated to the formulation of the Constitutions as a *special time of grace*, and affirms *having experienced the action of the Holy Spirit which passed over it and inspired it to renew itself and to follow the footsteps of St. Vincent*. The presence of the Spirit was felt in the midst of the *fervet opus* of everyone. One of the assiduous agents and a faithful witness of the work of the assembly was Carlo Braga who wrote: *Let no one say that the Company was indifferent to a problem so vital as the revision of the Constitutions*. Moreover, the ecclesiastical approval is a guaranty, if not the best than a good and safe one, in everything that refers to our vocation as sons of St. Vincent.

### **The Cordial and Constant Acceptance of the Constitutions**

10. If the principal value in reading the Constitutions is that they are the written expression of the charism, the spirit, the apostolate, common fraternal life, the life of prayer, the orientations for governing and for administering common goods and, in general, what has spiritual apostolic, ecclesial and

Vincentian value for the insertion of the Congregation in the Church, their *cordial and constant acceptance* is the first step toward them that every missionary should take if he wants be faithful to his vocation as an authentic Vincentian.

11. The acceptance to which I am referring is *cordial* not juridical. The latter is imposed. The former is accepted from the heart. For love of one's vocation and for the Congregation that supports it, the values of the Constitutions are interiorized and put into practice. The present Constitutions are a congregational act and, therefore, the acceptance is a dynamic process of the whole body of the Congregation and not just a few people with responsibility. Cordial acceptance is required so that they can work and create an environment of appreciation and congregational action just as universal canon law should be accepted as an ecclesial act and not only as an event which is valid for the history of ecclesial law.

12. Acceptance should lead, not only to a superficial reading, but to a deeper study of the Constitutions, above all of the articles with a more theological than juridical nature, such as, for example, article 5, which affirms that the spirit of the Congregation is a participation in the spirit of Christ, which makes Christ the Rule of the Mission, the center of its life and activity.

13. The sixth article is no less demanding when it is known and studied more deeply. It places us in the soul of Christ and points out three marks of a Vincentian christology: love and reverence for the Father, compassionate and effective charity for the poor and docility to Divine Providence. Much has been written and will continue to be written about the christology lived and transmitted by St. Vincent. The Constitutions do us the favor of promoting the desire to know his christological experience. According to the document **Mutuas Relaciones** of May 14, 1978, the true and faithful followers of a charism which they have inherited not only preserve it, but promote and update it.

14. The need for deeper study grows when article 7 points out that to express the spirit of Christ through the Vincentian prism it is necessary to practice the virtues which, according to St. Vincent himself, characterize the missionary: simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification and zeal. The implications that each one of these virtues bears in the present world are great: Simplicity as the splendor of truth in a world wounded by political, propaganda and economic interests; humility as a preference for the other, when we live in a society in which selfishness has taken root; meekness to wipe away from human relations any sign or trace of violence; mortification when the world of abundance takes over; zeal for God's glory in times when ferocious secularism tries to destroy the name of God and everything related to him from the face of the earth.

## **Living the Constitutions**

15. The Constitutions, all together and well harmonized, should be lived. This begins by reading them with simplicity, like *lectio constitutionalis*, like *lectio divina*, keeping a distance. This continues, entering more deeply into them, by finally giving them life. If the Constitutions are not lived, we would fall into a malaise which would destroy the strength of the Congregation, its unity and vocation, creating disappointment in the members and the belief that the charism as received from St. Vincent will disappear. Living the Constitutions or not doing so is to put theological fidelity in play. For a community born of a spiritual experience, approved by the Church, with a message of personal and collective sanctification and born to bring the message of the Gospel to humanity, especially to the poor, to not appreciate its Constitutions would be to reject the voice of God and, therefore, be theologically unfaithful.

## **Prejudices against the Constitutions**

16. A consideration of reasons for reading the Constitutions brings us to consider the possible prejudices, some already mentioned: whether or not the Constitutions are more theoretical than practical, whether they are utopian and unliveable; the large difference between the real behavior of the missionaries and what the Constitutions demand. For some there exists an impassible abyss which cannot be bridged. Certainly the style of editing has changed. They no longer are a list of prescriptions or an enumeration of tabulated obligations. They are more theological, and therefore, more motivating. But they demand responsibility and, if possible, the risk of passing from the theoretical and utopian to real life. The Constitutions, as we have said, are the rule of life. They exist to help overcome the human inertia and laziness, the divided spirit, the desire of change for the sake of change, lack of commitment and indifference.

17. There are symptoms which hide in their breast a bigger illness: not belonging unconditionally to the Congregation, the failure to value one's vocation and the Vincentian institutions. There can be lacking what St. Vincent held as certain: that *we all have brought to the Company the resolution to live and die in it, we have brought all that we are, our body, soul, will, talents, weakness and everything else. Why? To do what Jesus did. To save the world. How? By means of this union that exists among us and the offering we have made to live and die in this community and give it all we are and all that we do.* (XI,402). It is evident that if there is no belonging to the Congregation, then there is no interest in it, neither in its projects nor its norms, which are the support for everything else.

## **A Linear Reading of the Constitutions**

18. Convinced of the value of reading the Constitutions and the importance which they have in our life and apostolate, a possible way of reading and understanding them sufficiently is to read them like a book which is interesting for our life, apostolate and our own sanctification. This is what I consider a linear reading, which seeks to understand the text, the ideas contained in it and its purpose. This reading should be meditative and, done in God's presence, does not eliminate feelings and resolutions, or even true contemplation, from arising. A linear reading of article 11 can lead one to contemplate the compassion of Christ for the crowd and how the origins of the signs that verify his word are found in his mercy.

## **Beginning a Guided Reading of the Constitutions**

19. The Constitutions are for all of the member of the Congregation. It is not necessary that everyone be a specialist in the themes that it covers. Nonetheless, the initial entry into them should be guided by a formator who is well prepared in the Constitutions, their history, their relation to St. Vincent's teaching, the history of the Company and ecclesial legislation. Every article has been the fruit of debates and differing opinions. Many of the articles are like small agreements, after having been put together from different points of view. In the **Ratio Formationis for the Internal Seminary** the study of the Constitutions is required in the context of the knowledge one should have of the Congregation.

20. This reading perhaps might not be enjoyable in the beginning, but can be profitable and pleasant in the measure that other historic, social, ecclesial and historic elements are added to the understanding of the constitutional text. In this sense what has been done in some provinces is worthy of praise. Groups of missionaries from different age groups and employed in different ministries have come together for a few days, despite the urgency of their ministries, to read and reflect on them together, either as a whole or on specific aspects of them. In this same direction, the initiative of the Superior General to maintain the CIF in Paris, where the principal study is the Constitutions, and opening it to a larger number of missionaries, is laudable.

## **A Reading from the Perspective of Different Key Points**

21. Having made the initial guided reading, other readings can be made from the perspective of different key points, for example: What figure of Christ is offered to us? Are they in harmony with the various conciliar documents or in what special way do **Perfectae Caritatis**, or **Apostolicam Actuositatem** or the post-conciliar documents like **Evangelii Nuntiandi** or the **Apostolic Dimension in the Institutes of Apostolic Life** or **Fraternal Life in Common** have to do

with the Congregation. So, from the initial reading lead by a formator, one comes to a knowledge ever more deep, wide and efficacious. The reading of key points can be done by any missionary who has the basic theological, apostolic and Vincentian knowledge.

### **A Guide for and Examen of Missionary Activity**

22. The eighth article of the Constitutions, although it refers to the spirit, can apply, without doing violence to the constitutional text, to their reading and study: *All the members should continually strive for a deeper knowledge of this spirit, by returning to the gospel and to the example and teaching of St. Vincent, mindful that our spirit and our ministries ought to nourish one another.* In other words, we cannot separate the knowledge of the Constitutions from living them. Theoretical knowledge aids the experiential knowledge, just as experiential knowledge justifies the theoretical. The Constitutions should be read, in whole or in part, when community projects are drawn up or evaluated.

### **Using Criteria adapted from Interpretation**

23. Above I said that the reading of the Constitutions can be done from the perspective of different key points so that it is more reflective and have more satisfactory results. They need to be interpreted. All interpretation has rules and criteria. I hold to the opinion that these criteria are most important, from the point of view of understanding the Constitutions. These are based in a global concept of the Constitutions, their end, their motivations and their structure. These criteria are those which, in my opinion, create the spirit proper and conducive to the correct and enjoyable reading of the Constitutions and the framework for, if that is the case, studying them; they point out the spiritual and psychological attitude necessary to approach them. In the same way, one can take into account the rules which are the technical means for uncovering and discovering the content of the texts.

24. As an example of a criterion for reading the Constitutions one can apply the finality of the Congregation, that is, the following of Christ, evangelizer of the poor. If to interest the complex legislation of the church the *salvation of souls* is given as the chief criterion, in the same way it can be said that the whole constitutional framework of the Congregation is illuminated by its end: following Christ, the evangelizer of the poor. The Constitutions have not been formulated to replace the end of the Congregation, its grace or charism. The Constitutions have been approved by the Church to insure the spiritual patrimony of the Congregation, so that it can grow in an ordered way and promote in the Church its spirituality, apostolate and its institutions according to the rhythm of the Mystical Body of Christ which is the Church.

## Avoiding Indifference to the Constitutions

25. I do not believe that reading the Constitutions, or not reading them, is due to a lack of motives or means, but rather to something deeper, to the attitudes toward them. Understanding by attitude the interior stance, that of the heart, which we take to them. Joyfully and cordially accepted in principle, the impression one gets from some present writing and religious magazines is that constitutions in general have gone from being a key book, the Rule of Life, and are losing value and gaining in indifference, paralyzing, in a sense, the demand of remaining, in our case, in a permanent renewal as article 2, cited above, establishes. Other themes of the consecrated life, of great theological importance, are studied and reflected with strength, interest and enthusiasm, but placing on the margins the theme of the Constitutions renewed since Vatican II. This indifference is not only a bad sign, but above all is evil because it makes us lose our Vincentian identity.

## PRAYING THE CONSTITUTIONS

*26. Lord, you who have sent your Son, model par excellence of dedicating oneself to the salvation of humanity, especially the poor, grant us, through the intercession of St. Vincent and the other saints of the Vincentian Family, the grace to put on the feelings and attitudes of your Son, and even more, of filling ourselves with his spirit to acquire the perfection of our Vincentian vocation and dedicating ourselves to the evangelization of the poor and helping clerics and laity so that they can, in their own vocations, participate in the evangelization of the poor. (Cf. Constitutions #1)*

27. The prayer, presented above, is not from St. Vincent. It is simply the conversion of the first article of the Constitutions into prayer. I have followed in this St. Vincent himself who often ended his conferences and repetitions of prayer with a prayer asking God's grace to obtain what he, with the conviction of faith, had explained to his listeners, priests and brothers.

28. Fr. Dodin, in his book, **En priere avec Monsieur Vincent**, after having written a brief treatise on the prayer of St. Vincent and his behavior in this activity which was so important to him, has left us a selection of eighty-four prayers on such different themes as asking for God's protection or obtaining the virtue of poverty. Fr. Luis Nos has done the same, choosing beautiful prayers from St. Vincent which he has adorned with his own literary gifts. In the themes for doing prayer in our communities frequently we go to St. Vincent to take from his writings which serve for prayer.



29. This first method of praying the Constitutions is easy. It is enough to present to God, through Jesus Christ, any of the spiritual, apostolic or community themes which are mentioned in the Constitutions.

### **Seeking the Signs of God's Will and Imitating Christ's disponibility**

30. For St. Vincent, prayer was not a way of separating oneself from reality, nor a subtle search for oneself. It was an expression of charity, a way of giving oneself to God and truly loving him. Although he is usually seen as a man of action -and he was- he was always conscious of God and his Divine Will. In article 40:2, having before us the contemplative vision of Christ who remained in intimate communication with the Father, the Constitutions add: *We, too, sanctified in Christ and sent into the world, should try to seek out in prayer the signs of God's will and to imitate the responsiveness of Christ, discerning everything according to his mind. In this way our lives are changed by the Holy Spirit.*

31. This key for praying the Constitutions is the one which most might interest a missionary because, as St. Vincent said and the Constitutions repeat, prayer is the source of the spiritual life. By means of it one puts on Christ and is imbued with his evangelical teaching, discerns reality and events in God's presence and remains in his love and mercy. By this grace, the spirit of Christ lends efficacy to our words and actions. It is seeking a response to the Theresian question: Lord, what do you want of me?

32. The great motive we have for praying is that Christ prayed and asked us to pray in order to be faithful to the Father, supreme motive of his life, his mission and of his self-gift for the salvation of the world. Christ read and meditated on what was presented as the Father's will: the Scriptures, events, the mission. This keeps prayer from being separated from life.

### **A Paraliturgical Service**

33. According to articles 45, 46 and 47 of the Constitutions, the prayer of the Congregation can be made and manifested in three different ways: liturgical, community and mental. The Constitutions can be prayed in these three ways, using them to make a type of paraliturgy. In this way, the Constitutions can be one of the readings and also the source of the prayers of petition and the final prayer. It all depends on how the paraliturgy is organized and what content one wants to give it.

### **Community Prayer**

34. Community prayer is highlighted in the Constitutions in article 46. *In*

*community prayer we find an excellent way of animating and renewing our lives, especially when we celebrate the word of God and share it, or when in fraternal dialogue we share with one another the fruit of our spiritual and apostolic experience.*

35. This way of praying the Constitutions is simple and supposes that there exists in the community sufficient confidence to manifest one's thought and desires about the chosen theme. Once the constitutional text has been read, nothing hinders the president or some other person in the group from giving a few thoughts on the theme. After a suitable time of reflection, freely and spontaneously they can express whatever they have thought about the theme, always with charity and humility, without accusing anyone, with the intention of only being constructive.

36. This way of praying the Constitutions can serve as an examen of conscience and for charitably denouncing the serious faults which have been discovered in reflection. Obviously not all of the chapters of the Constitutions lend themselves to what is intended here. The good judgment of the superior, with the help of his companions, will help to use this method of praying the Constitutions. The situation of the community can be an indicator of whether or not to use this method.

### **Mental Prayer**

37. This way of praying the Constitutions consists in choosing a paragraph or chapter as the topic of mental prayer and for meditating on the Constitutions. I understand by meditation the silent and prolonged reflection on a spiritual theme. This is not merely an intellectual act because meditation is done in God's presence and inspired by his love and should end in a type of prayer of petition, of repentance or thanksgiving.

38. As much as possible, the many pieces of advice, related to the tradition of practical prayer, that St. Vincent gives about mental prayer have to be taken into account. Manuals of meditation, like those of Fr. Busee, were used by the missionaries. At the same time, he was concerned about the orientations of St. Francis de Sales, taking full advantage of resources of affectivity. According to Fr. Dodin, St. Vincent on principle did not prohibit any form of prayer nor give a preference for any one in particular. Everything depended on the temperament, health, grace and the effectiveness of the method for the person using it.

39. Given the nature of the Constitutions, some more theological and others more practical, but all oriented toward the better following of Christ, it is necessary to give them a practical character, without inhibiting or smothering the feelings that might arise under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

## **Can the Constitutions be used like Psalms?**

40. This question was asked of me awhile ago. On the one hand, it made me hesitate to make the Constitutions equal to the psalms as a starting point for prayer, not just for clerics and members of Societies of Apostolic Life but also for every christian. In fact, there are many Christians who meet to sing the divine praises and pray the psalms. On the other hand, knowing the origin, composition and finality of the Constitutions and some communities, the idea of using them like the psalms seems to me neither naive nor to be discounted, if there is a person with poetic qualities who knows how to create the correct rhythm. The Constitutions can be used as a type of intermediate hour, if the liturgy permits, with a song, a short reading and a final prayer. This system, I believe has been used by groups in formation. This does not in any way give preference to a private psalmed prayer over the prayer of the Church.

41. When the Superior General has hinted at making prayer beautiful for God, he was referring, I believe, to the form; so that prayer, exteriorly beautiful in its content, songs and participation, might reach the sensitivities of young people, and also older people, without falling into an estheticism which would not be prayer no matter how beautiful the form. I believe that all prayer, made either in common or in private, in one way or another, is beautiful if it is done, as our Lord said, in spirit and truth.

42. I remember that during one of the assemblies, when nobody knew how to formulate the chapter on prayer and abundant ideas were offered, one of those present said to me: *All of this is fine, but the recommendation that the Church makes during the Eucharistic sacrifice would be enough: Pray, brothers.*

(JOHN PRAGER, C.M., Translator)