

FIDELITY TO THE CONSTITUTIONS

*By Hugh O'Donnell, C.M.
Province of China*

To write about fidelity to the Constitutions is as difficult as it is important. Others have a better vantage point from which to do so, but they are making different contributions to this volume. My credentials for undertaking this task are two: participation in five General Assemblies (1974-1998) and extensive, though by no means sufficient, experience of the Congregation worldwide from having traveled widely and gotten to know confreres locally. As I write from a limited viewpoint, it is my hope that my views will stimulate your own reflection on this important subject and lead you to a deeper and more critically comprehensive view of fidelity in the Little Company than the one presented here.

What does it mean to be faithful to the Constitutions today?

During the first thirty-three years in the life of the Congregation the rules of the Congregation were tested and articulated through the give and take of daily experience. Then, for the next 325 years (from the distribution of the Common Rules by St. Vincent in 1658 until the confirmation of the Constitutions and Statutes in 1983) the Common Rules were our guide and inspiration. These were so deeply engrained in the minds and hearts of many confreres as the personal legacy of St. Vincent that it was not easy for some to let go of them and write our Constitutions and Statutes. With the approval of the Constitutions in 1983, the Common Rules kept a place of honor as part of our spiritual heritage but the Constitutions became our guide and rule of life. The full significance of this unprecedented and as yet unrepeatable event must be grasped in order to speak of fidelity.

If St. Vincent was the author of the Common Rules, the Congregation of the Mission was the author of the Constitutions and Statutes. If fidelity to the Common Rules meant fidelity to inherited norms, fidelity to the Constitutions and Statutes means fidelity to the spirit of St. Vincent in an evolving and transformed world. If we could sensibly feel the presence of Vincent in every word of the Common Rules, we sometimes today struggle to remind ourselves that our Constitutions and Statutes belong to the same order of emotive faith. The fact that we ourselves wrote the Constitutions sometimes hides from us that it was as men of faith trying to tune into the voice of God and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that we wrote them.

The two greatest differences between the Common Rules and the Constitutions, it seems to me, are found in answers to the questions: Why were the Constitutions written? and How do they operate?

Why were the Constitutions written? They were written in response to the renewal called for by the Second Vatican Council. At the heart of that call was the overall *aggiornamento* of the Church. The basic issue was that the world had changed and the Church had fallen behind, or at least was not sufficiently in touch with the new world. On October 11, 1962, John XXIII when opening the Vatican Council expressed his conviction about the birth of a new world. His words easily resonate in the hearts of Vincentians. He said, "Divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relationships." He was pointing to a world without violence, a world of true peace. Pope John felt for a long time the labor pains of the new world struggling with so much difficulty to be born.

The world had changed a great deal and was on the way to still more radical change. A profound cultural transformation was afoot. The stable, predictable and slowly evolving world of our predecessors was being transformed into a world of continual change opening up new ways for people to be together, a world of both unexpected promise and substantial danger. So, the Constitutions were written as an instrument of renewal, intending transformation and evangelical relevance in a much changed world. We were challenged in two directions: to reappropriate our charismatic roots, that is, the spirit of Vincent, and to be authentic apostles in the contemporary world. It is in this bipolar context that fidelity finds its meaning today, a meaning which is more complex and for that reason perhaps richer than in the past. Our fidelity is fidelity to the charism of Vincent **in a new world**.

The second question is: how do the Constitutions operate? They focus on the future rather than the past. They guide us into a future which is revealing itself to us one step at a time. They are thus oriented to the evolving mystery of God's historical and eschatological presence rather than to the customs and habits of traditional and religious regularity. They are an instrument of authenticity in a world-in-creation. They are an instrument of conversion.

They, therefore, actively involve the confreres, the local communities, the provinces and the general leadership in the twofold task of discerning the will of God in new circumstances and pro-actively planning a corporate response. This calls for a new way of acting and this new way of acting is found in the call for house and provincial plans and for corporate sharing of spiritual and apostolic experiences. Though we have struggled with house plans and provincial plans and may be frustrated because of only limited success in drafting and implementing

them, they represent a radical departure from previous ways of doing things. They acknowledge that the members of the house and the members of the province are in the best position to know the local and provincial situations respectively, to grasp the opportunities and needs and to respond effectively.

The development of these plans in their apostolic and missionary dimensions depend on the community life of the local house or province. This is why corporate sharing called for and fostered by C. 46 is also a cornerstone to the new way of doing things. It presents a vision of community in which confreres share not only a home, a common table and certain spiritual exercises but where confreres share their lives with one another. It presents a picture of personal relationships based on trust. We are encouraged and called to share with one another our spiritual and apostolic experiences as well as the Scriptures. This leads to the creation of a community of mutual knowledge, respect and cooperation, which in the end is capable of genuine discernment.

Fidelity is not only fidelity to the charism of Vincent in a new world, but also in a community on the move in this new world. The same house or provincial plan will not do from year to year and the experiences we share will also not be the same from one year to the next. If our Constitutions must be understood in relation to new times, then fidelity must be understood in relation to conversion. Our Constitutions call us by their nature to be open to ongoing conversion. In this light the basic conversion to which we are called is to let go of regret that the world is no longer the way it was and accept the world that God gives us today. Our conversion is to believe as unconditionally as possible that the Spirit of God sanctifies the world today and God speaks to us through the events and happenings of our lives. This is the heart and soul of Vincent's faith: God is here! "The event, that is God!" "God so loved the world...." And still does. Today. Here. Now.

Fidelity in this way has taken on a radically dynamic and contemporary meaning. We are called to discover and realize what it means to be faithful missionaries in our time, in our place, in a new world, with one another, as brothers, sharing our lives with one another, trusting in the mystery, here and now.

How can we be faithful to the Constitutions today?

Fidelity is first of all a matter of the heart. Perhaps it is too obvious to remark that the primary means of fidelity to the Constitutions is love. Love of God and of our vocation; love of Vincent and the Congregation; love of the confreres and our co-workers; love of the poor and the clergy; love of the vocation of lay people and those called to lay ministries and leadership; love of strangers and those on the

margins. When I was returning from the General Assembly of 1980 I asked myself what I would respond to the confreres when asked what the newly drafted Constitutions said. I decided my shorthand for the nine weeks would be: love the poor, love the clergy, open our hearts to lay collaborators. If we can abide in this love, whatever our mistakes, we will be faithful to our vocation and the Constitutions which reveal its spirit, end and dynamics.

One of the greatest sufferings is to live with a divided heart. Jesus tells us we cannot serve two masters. He calls us to be single-minded and to have an undivided heart. “Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus,” the author of Hebrews tells his struggling friends. If we have an undivided heart toward Jesus, our vocation, the confreres and the poor, we will be on the road of fidelity. This could also be called the virtue of simplicity in action.

Given the Jansenistic strains in our history and our formation, however, an undivided heart may not come to us easily, at least today. Integrating our humanity into our vocation so that our whole humanity is in the service of the gospel and love of neighbor is our central challenge. If we ignore this challenge or suppress it or rationalize it away, it will flatten out our affection for the people and our vocation and in their place invite danger if not crisis. St. Francis de Sales’ humanity was a lifelong inspiration to St. Vincent. Vincent experienced his own humanity as problematic and found in Francis a spontaneous love, a gentleness and a humanity which amazed him and inspired him to pray for his own conversion. Vincent’s melancholy and irascibility gave way to a humanity which was characterized by meekness and passionate love. Our fidelity must be incarnationally grounded, otherwise our efforts at fidelity will be in danger of backfiring.

At the heart of our humanity are relationships. St. Vincent was very wise when he called us to live “after the manner” of very dear friends. Since friendship is a gift, we cannot make it happen just because we want it. We cannot be friends with all the confreres and with all the people and with the poor. But our relationships with all these people should have the same human qualities seen in friendship. That is why Vincent says “after the manner of dear friends.” Our relationships with the confreres are to be profoundly human, marked by genuine affection, trust, mutuality, joy and humor. Fidelity depends on the level of human communion in the community. These same human qualities mediate God’s love in our relationships with co-workers and all those we encounter. Unaddressed loneliness and a lack of human intimacy have been among the reasons most often given for leaving our vocation.

Fidelity is further strengthened when we are willing to receive the gift of the poor. This is the paradox of our salvation. We obviously go to the poor or live among them because we have something we wish to share with them or because of something they need: the gospel or the necessities of life. But the real gift may be the gift we receive from them. Frequently their faith, courage, dependence on God, affection and gratitude transcend ours and challenge our security and invulnerability. It can happen that their poverty invites us to face and accept our own poverty. For St. Vincent the poor first of all were understood theologically – from God’s point of view. He knew the world was saved through the passion and death of Jesus and believed the ongoing salvation of the world was being accomplished in the passion of the poor. Where and how is Jesus redeeming the world today? Through the poor and those who suffer. So, in drawing close to the sufferings of humanity, especially of the poor, we draw close to the mystery of salvation in our day. Poor people are the Lord’s gift to us in our vocation. If we receive this gift with open hearts, we will know a great joy that will ground our fidelity. Jesus himself recognizes the apostles and disciples as the Father’s gift to him (Jn 17:6).

Interiority is a final key to fidelity. It has been said by Karl Rahner that in the future Christians will either be mystics or will not be Christians. William Johnston (*Inner Eye of Love*) has identified interiority as one of the pillars of living faith in the 21st century. This interiority goes by many names: contemplative prayer, solitude, centering, mysticism, silence, emptiness, and mystery. Whatever angle we approach it from, I believe interiority is necessary for happiness in our lives, fruitfulness in our apostolates and perseverance in our vocation. My generation and some previous ones were shaped by Dom Chautard’s *Soul of the Apostolate*, which put prayer at the heart of apostolate. Today we have many other guides. Nevertheless, it is Vincent himself who shows us the way to interiority. Today we understand more clearly how his spiritual path was shaped by Benedict of Canfield’s *Rule of Perfection*. Knowing God’s will through intimate friendship became the key to Vincent’s spiritual way of not treading on the heels of providence. St. Vincent tells us that, being apostles with work to do, we cannot spend the whole day in prayer, so we settle for an hour each morning. The Constitutions when drafted in 1980 did not mention this. It was, however, restored by the Superior General and his Council after the Sacred Congregation required clearer and more specific norms for prayer. A commitment to interiority and fidelity to a daily hour of prayer is the foundation of our fidelity. The author of Hebrews exhorts his brothers and sisters, “Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus” (Heb 12:2).

Are we faithful to the Constitutions?

The General Assembly of 1980 struggled throughout the summer, nine weeks altogether, to draft the Constitutions and Statues. The devotion and energy of the members of the Assembly revealed how important the task was to them. The General Assembly of 1968-69, which had already labored over two summers on what turned out to be an interim version of the Constitutions, labored in the same spirit of commitment. If seriousness is any portent of future fidelity, we can say that the omens were good.

To assess our fidelity to the Constitutions can only be done, at least by me, in a very general way. I will do it under four headings: acceptance, fruits (by their fruits you shall know them), questions and ongoing conversion.

Acceptance. Many provinces immediately accepted the Constitutions and moved to implement them with energy and enthusiasm. In some provinces, however, acceptance came more slowly. In particular, it took a while to understand the meaning of “Jesus evangelizer of the poor.” Some found it difficult to distinguish between mission and works, between Part One on Vocation and Part Two, Chapter One on Apostolic Activity. Gradually, however, the whole Congregation accepted the Constitutions.

The full meaning of the Constitutions was not apparent from the beginning. Whether acceptance or understanding came first, both were necessary as a foundation for future fidelity. Workshops, articles, assemblies, retreats and reflection were some of the ways used by the provinces and houses to assimilate the meaning and understand the implications of the Constitutions. Eventually the Center for International Formation was established to deepen the appreciation of our Vincentian vocation in the lives of confreres 35-50. In its program the Constitutions are a primary formation tool. The same service is now being extended to confreres over 50 at CIF in Paris. Worldwide the formation of formators has received and is receiving special attention. In this case too the spirit and thrust of the Constitutions provide the foundation of the programs.

In brief, I think it can be affirmed with certainty that the Congregation has accepted the Constitutions and made them the foundation and operative standard of our vocation. I believe that, along with acceptance and gradual understanding, there has come a growing appreciation of the genius of the Constitutions and a growing conviction that the Holy Spirit was working along side the original drafters.

By their fruits you will know them. The best test of fidelity is to be found in the fruits the Constitutions have borne.

Of these the most observable and remarkable is the way in which the entire Congregation has embraced Christ the Evangelizer of the Poor. As a Congregation we recognize and acknowledge that our vocation is to evangelize the poor. For some this was an easy enough journey, for others it was long journey which involved a change of mind and heart. The historical, cultural and economic circumstances of the various provinces played a significant role in the ease or difficulty confreres had in appropriating the symbol of following Christ the Evangelizer of the Poor as the end of the Congregation. Though the implementation of our end varies from province to province according to circumstances, we have a common understanding across provincial, geographical and cultural boundaries when we speak of the end of the Congregation. This unity is perhaps the most notable fruit of our fidelity to the Constitutions.

A second area in which the fruits of fidelity are evident is the renewal and promotion of our apostolic works. Provinces around the world have had to deal with renewing established works, initiating new works and closing or leaving works no longer consonant with our charism (S.1). The closings have been painful. It called for sacrifice and courage. Mistakes were made. Nevertheless, a clear pattern has emerged which reflects "...a clear and expressed preference for apostolates among the poor, since their evangelization is a sign that the kingdom of God is present on earth (cf. Mt 11:5)" (C. 12, 1). In our apostolates, established and new, confreres have also made an effort to share in some way the condition of the poor and have tried to let themselves be evangelized by the people (C. 12, 3). Attention has also been given to taking on apostolates where the confreres can live in community (C. 12, 4). The popular missions seem to have taken on new life in a number of provinces and some have experimented with adapted forms of presence among the people suitable to de-christianized areas. The renewal of the popular missions has involved the participation of laity, sisters and seminarians from outside the area and lay leaders from within the area. The early phase is often a "dialogue of life" among the people, followed by neighborhood organization and the use of local leadership. The heart of the mission is celebrated in many ways and there is a follow-up. These elements have given new life to the missions.

The Constitutions gave an honored place to international missions (called in the Constitutions "foreign missions" and "missio ad gentes" – C.16). The Constitutions following Vincent's lead called all confreres to "readiness to go to any part of the world, according to the example of the first missionaries" (C. 12, 5) to preach the gospel or to be of service to the neighbor. The Congregation already has

a long and distinguished missionary history. Still, a new phase of missionary energy emerged in response to the Superior General's invitation to volunteer for the international missions to answer the many requests the Congregation was receiving. The volunteers have been sent to Albania, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Cuba, Rwanda/Burundi, Kharkiv (the Ukraine), Siberia, Algeria, China, Bolivia, the Solomons and Tanzania. Individual provinces have also taken initiatives, for example, in the Cameroon and Kenya. This initiative tapped into an unexpected reservoir of missionary energy and provided a sense of global mission and international cooperation, which transcended the vision and capacity of individual provinces. The stimulus of the Constitutions and the prodding of the General Assembly of 1992 bore fruit well beyond what was intended. Special attention has been given to priestly formation when possible.

The fruits of renewal in community life are harder to assess. One of the most evident fruits of the past 20 years, however, is the degree to which we have gotten to know one another across national and continental frontiers. Assemblies, international meetings, CIF, formation meetings and other forms of encounter have made it possible to know one another personally and in many cases to become friends. In this way we have also gotten to know what is happening in other provinces. We have also acquired a sense of being part of an international community, something not too long ago considered a liability, but now recognized as a great asset in a global world. Knowing our confreres from other parts of the world is experienced as a great blessing. This blessing perhaps also goes beyond what was foreseen in the Constitutions. Another remarkable fruit of these past 20 years – though I think this was always the case – is the respect and esteem shown toward the sick and elderly confreres. St. Vincent, as our Constitutions reflect, considered the sick and elderly confreres as a great blessing on the Congregation. In their faith and abiding interest in the mission of the Congregation they are esteemed and loved and in turn are a blessing on all our confreres and works. I believe this tradition is very strong among us. The Congregation is blessed in its elderly and infirm confreres.

A final fruit of these years is the increasing clarity about our identity as a community in the Church and in the world. With the Code of 1983 we finally found a positive place, our place, as a community of apostolic life. What is distinctive of communities of apostolic life is “the idea of being within the Church in the world with an apostolate or mission, while preserving a way of fraternal common life, a distinct spiritual life, a certain communality of goods, and a quest for Christian perfection ... in keeping with the specific apostolate and mission” (C. Parres, “Societies of Apostolic Life: Canons 731-746,” *A Handbook on Canons 573-746* [Collegeville, 1985], 288). Within this framework we are self-defining, and we have

been appropriating our own identity as followers of Christ Evangelizer of the Poor. A specific instance of clarifying our identity is found in our present understanding of the vows. Though our vows appear to be vows of religions they are not. In the General Assembly of 1980 and more clearly in 1992 we began to understand that the first vow is stability: a lifelong commitment to evangelizing the poor. The other vows are in consequence vows of missionaries not of monks. This has transformed our understanding of the vows and opened up their meaning to us in a way proper to our own vocation. A second aspect of our inherited identity, inherited from Vincent himself, is our secularity, which I will deal with below. So, one of the significant fruits of our efforts at fidelity to the Constitutions is a clarification and appropriation of our own proper Vincentian identity.

Questions

These questions may be understood as a judgment about areas in which we have not been faithful, but that is not my intention nor my competence. I present this part as questions in the hope that they will evoke answers that are helpful to our future fidelity.

The World. A characteristic of our evangelization according to C. 12, 2 is “attention to the realities of present-day society, especially to the factors that cause an unequal distribution of the world’s goods, so that we can better carry out our prophetic task of evangelization.” Pope John Paul II at the end of one of the assemblies challenged us to get to the roots of poverty. Have we really done this? I know our universities have been asked to address these questions and answer this challenge. We are preparing to lobby on behalf of the poor at the United Nations and someday may be able to do so before the European Union. In this we can benefit from the informed and professional representations done by the AIC before both these bodies. Still it requires a serious commitment of personnel and resources to understand the contemporary situation and draw up a plan of action. Historically this kind of study and research has been outside of and beyond our way of doing things. Yet it is not enough to point out the limitations of capitalism or neo-liberal economics. We are called beyond moralistic positions to understand what is happening and how we might effectively respond with and on behalf of the poor. Is this possible? Is it unrealistic? Is it outside the purview of our vocation? If it is not, how might we begin seriously to address these questions and bring the energies of the Congregation to the service of the poor at this level? Does this not have an intimate relationship with our secular character of being in the world and for the world?

Education. In 1980 the General Assembly wrote some beautiful and profound paragraphs on education as one of our works. Actually the paragraphs constitute a strategic plan when taken one phrase at a time. These paragraphs, however, are not in the Constitutions, but are Statute 11. Education was a contested issue during that and previous assemblies. This is not an attempt to revive that debate, but an effort to raise the question in a new context. In the General Assembly of 1998 the International President of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, when the Vincentian Family gathered with us in Assembly, spoke several times of the crucial role of basic education (the ability to read and write) in the advancement of the poor. He put before us the intimate relationship between education and poverty. What he said concerning basic education, I believe is true at other levels also. We know that what poor parents most want for their children is education. I wonder if the time has not come to ask ourselves this question: in the contemporary context is education not integral to the evangelization of the poor? I was recently in India and visited a school run by a confrere in which there were 2500 students, 96 percent of them Hindu. Their education will be a gift for life. Every place is different, especially in terms of education, still do we not believe there is an intimate connection between education and human promotion?

Community. We have been reminded over the years that community is for mission. It is implied, or perhaps I have only inferred it, that mission is hard and community is easy. But I believe the opposite is most often the case. Mission is easier than living in community. I could have mentioned community above as a sign of fruitfulness and fidelity, because I have seen that the Congregation in the many places I have visited has made dramatic and continuing efforts at living our common life. This is seen in prayer, liturgy, living arrangements, sharing, fraternal relationships, joy and hospitality. Still I wonder if the level we have achieved reaches beyond religious observance to deeply human interaction. It is good that we have a circle of good, even intimate, friends outside the house as long as they are an extension of the intimacy of the community rather than a substitute for it. Some communities have achieved deep bonds of fraternal communion. Is there a felt need to deepen our bonds as brothers and confreres? Have we already achieved a sufficient level of fraternal communion?

Prayer. Many provinces and local communities have made significant efforts to foster a spirit of prayer and celebrate common prayer with devotion and dignity. Formation communities in particular have beautiful liturgies and give significant encouragement and support to the young confreres in formation for communal and personal prayer. From this point of view, prayer could easily have been listed as one of the fruits of fidelity to the Constitutions. Still we can be challenged by the following questions. Are we people of prayer? Are our communities known as

communities of prayer? Are we as a Congregation known for our faith and prayer? Are we men of interiority? Are we teachers of prayer? What kind of prayer life do we promise new candidates. The answer to these questions, for the most part, is to be given by each of us in the secret of our hearts. I raise these question not to judge or asses our performance, but because there is a vast difference between being prayerful and being a people of prayer. St. Vincent was the latter and expects us to be also. When people ask me how is my Chinese, I answer in a common Chinese phrase, “I have a long way to go!” It is true of my Chinese and of my prayer too. Is there anything that will contribute more to our fidelity to the Constitutions than being men of prayer?

Ongoing Conversion

The final comment is only to observe that the Constitutions are an instrument of ongoing conversion. They were written at the command of Vatican II to address a new world. We continue to live in a dynamic historical situation and so our conversion must be ongoing. Someone has distinguished between horizontal and vertical freedom. Horizontal freedom involves decisions within my present world of meanings and values. Vertical freedom involves decisions that move me on to a new world of meanings and values. Our ongoing conversion is a process that moves us on to new worlds of meaning and values, always however focused on following Jesus the Evangelizer of the Poor. This is another way of saying that our fidelity is not to past norms but to the present and future, to the new world opening out before us. Fidelity like authenticity is ongoing.

It is my hope that these reflections will lead to your own reflections on fidelity. Then, together let us thank the Lord for the gift of the Constitutions and for the many efforts to live faithfully to our vocation in following Christ the Evangelizer of the Poor.