

The New Evangelization and Saint Vincent de Paul

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We would do well to be attentive to the proceedings of the XIII Synod of Bishops, especially in light of the fact that our objective in the Church coincides with the theme of this gathering, namely, *the new evangelization for the transmission of the Catholic faith*. The bishops' reflections (that will continue until the redaction of a final document) ought to encourage, strengthen and animate us in our ministry of evangelizing those who are poor.

I have been asked to share some reflections on the new evangelization and Saint Vincent. Therefore I will apply the Vincentian vision to this plan with regard to the new evangelization because we can be sure that Vincent can help us understand this project. Furthermore, even though it might appear to be an anachronism, Vincent attempted to become involved in a process of "new evangelization" or more precisely, a re-evangelization process. When he was born, France was a country that was largely Catholic but was in need of someone who would remind the people about the great truths of faith (in their purity and with all their demands). From the time that Vincent was thirty-seven until the time of his death at the age of eighty, he dedicated himself and all the institutions that he had established to this task.

Raymond Chalumeau presents us the result of Vincent's evangelizing ministry with the following impressive statement:

*"In great part the Christian reconversion of France was due to the efforts of St. Vincent and his confreres. We have only to compare the religious situation in France in 1600 to the situation in 1675. We can find a certain satisfaction in the fact that those results were obtained by our Holy Founder and by the members of the Congregation that he founded"*¹.

The historian Daniel-Rops states something similar:

¹ R. CHALUMEAU, *San Vicente de Paúl y las misiones*, in *Vicente de Paúl, evangelizador de los pobres*, CEME, 1973, p. 128.

“Sociological studies carried out in our day have demonstrated that the areas which are still Christian in twentieth century France are precisely those in which missionaries worked hardest three hundred years ago, and the areas into which they did not penetrate, or hardly at all, are those unfortunately notorious areas which Canon Boulard has marked in red on his famous map indicating the frontiers of religious practice in present day France. No homage more definite than that could be paid to the missionaries of the seventeenth century and to the admirable men who led them so effectively”².

I have organized this presentation into two parts. In the first section we will look at that which is common to both Vincent de Paul and the new evangelization. In the second section, by way of conclusion, we will reflect on where the new evangelization is leading the Congregation and the confreres.

I.

POINTS OF CONFLUENCE BETWEEN VINCENT DE PAUL AND THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

Vincent de Paul was a charismatic man who, during the seventeenth century, played an important role in two very specific areas of the Church: charity and mission. As an individual, Vincent belonged to an era that was culturally, socially, religiously and theologically distinct from ours. It would be difficult for Vincent to shed light on the problems that we confront as we engage in the process of evangelization. Nevertheless, as a charismatic person who felt deeply within himself the urgency of evangelization, and as one who established various institutions, Vincent can make a contribution to this process of the “new evangelization”. As Vincentians, we must ask ourselves what insights and nuances can Vincent contribute to the new evangelization. This is important, given the fact that the Church will never ask us to put aside the spirit that animates us. Rather, we are invited to contribute the richness of our charism to the larger Church and to the world, that is, we are being invited to evangelize from the perspective of our charism. We can find four points of confluence between Vincent and the Church’s plan with regard to the new evangelization.

² HENRI DANIEL ROPS, *The Church in the Seventeenth Century*, JM Dent and Sons, Ltd., London, 1963, p. 90.

1. The catechumenate and catechesis

When Vincent stated with great conviction and concern that *the poor are being damned*, he was referring to their lack of knowledge concerning basic religious truths. In accord with the theology of that era, Vincent was convinced that religious ignorance was the cause of condemnation (CCD XI, 172-173, 343-344; XII, 71-72). The following text, for example, reveals Vincent's attitude in this regard. In a letter dated 1631 and addressed to Monsieur François Du Coudray who at that time was in Rome, Vincent stated, "*You must make it understood that the poor are being damned for want of knowing the things necessary for salvation... If His Holiness were aware of this necessity, he would have no rest until he had done all he could to set things right*" (CCD I, 112).

This conviction made Vincent realize that he and his followers had to emphasize the catechetical aspect during the popular missions. In fact, this characteristic has always distinguished the Vincentians from other missionary groups in the Church who emphasized the penitential aspect during the missions that they preached. Emphasizing the catechetical aspect of our popular missions Fr. Corea states, "*What poor rural men and women of faith needed was a systematical catechesis that would lead them to a sacramental and charitable orthodoxy and ortho-praxis*"³. Thus, Vincent utilized popular catechesis in order to re-evangelize France during the seventeenth century.

As stated by the Council of Trent the whole society needed to be re-evangelized. Nevertheless, Vincent and his confreres felt impelled to evangelize the poor country people. Those poor men and women were not seeking to be instructed in the lofty theological language of Trent or in the language of the theologians who inspired the Conciliar documents. Rather, they wanted some type of "little method" that would make the truth of faith available to even the simplest persons. In the words of Vincent de Paul, "*That man works wonders, he preaches like a missionary, like a missionary, like an Apostle*" (CCD XI, 259).

In accord with this contribution of Vincent de Paul, it should be noted that in the process of the new evangelization, the catechumenate plays an important role. Two references are relevant: in #14 of the Lineamenta (a basic document for dialogue during the Synod) we find an extensive and clear statement about catechetics and the catechumenate. These two realities comprise the "pedagogy of the faith" that the Church utilizes in order to transmit the faith in an active and profound manner. Also, Pope John Paul II, initiator of the new evangelization,

³ Cf., J. CORERA, *Nueva evangelización para vicentinos ayer y hoy*, in CLAPVI, #65 (1989), p. 338.

solemnly stated that *“catechesis was the specific application and the basic instrument of the evangelization”* (JOHN PAUL II, *Discourse to the Bishops of Campania*, January 11, 1987).

2. The “new ardor” as a characteristic of the missionary

Evangelization is impossible today unless there are persons who are converted and filled with hope and expectations, persons who feel profound happiness in their faith. Men and women who are skeptical, discouraged, afraid and indifferent can only be enlivened when they encounter people who are completely opposite, that is, men and women who are unselfish, happy and helpful. In all of this we want to state that the personal testimony of people who joyfully live their faith is decisive in this process of the new evangelization. Lineamenta #25 states, *“one of the obstacles to the new evangelization is precisely a lack of joy and hope among people. Oftentimes, this lack of joy and hope is so strong that it affects the very tenor of our Christian communities”*. When John Paul II referred to the new evangelization, he pointed out the fact that today evangelization is impossible unless there is a new ardor because new evangelization is not just *“taking up the first evangelization again, or simply repeating the past. Instead, it is the courage to forge new paths in responding to the changing circumstances and conditions facing the Church in her call to proclaim and live the Gospel today”* (Lineamenta, #5).

Vincent’s conviction about the need to be filled with fervor (what he called “zeal”) coincides with that which the Church today proposes in order to carry out this process of the new evangelization. This call of the Church, first proclaimed by John Paul II and now reaffirmed with emphasis by Benedict XVI, besides its insistence on new content and new expressions, also calls for a new ardor which is nothing more than the actualization of apostolic zeal or Christian charity. A missionary who is lacking in zeal is, as Vincent said, simply the skeleton of a missionary, one who has lost a sense of purpose in life. Vincent rejoiced when he saw confreres ministered with great zeal: *“I cannot restrain myself and must tell you quite simply that this gives me renewed, greater desires to be able, in the midst of my petty infirmities, to go and finish my life near a bush, working in some village. I think I would be very happy to do so”* (CCD V, 204). Vincent was seventy-five when he wrote that letter. When Vincent referred to the confreres serving as missionaries in Madagascar, he was filled with enthusiasm and exclaimed: *“These men are workers, they are true Missionaries”* (CCD XI, 192). Contact with confreres who were especially zealous gave Vincent a more positive vision of the Congregation, and at the same time filled him with enthusiasm and joy.

On the other hand, Vincent reacted with great virulence when he encountered Missionaries who lacked this virtue: “*When you see a lax Missioner talking this way, or inclined to have us abandon all those benefits I just mentioned, say boldly, behold the Antichrist is born; there he is!*” (CCD XI, 184). Fr. Antonio Orcajo, after a detailed study of the virtue of zeal as practiced by Vincent, has written words to enlighten all Vincentians called by the Church to engage in the new evangelization: “*The virtue of zeal is most significant as regards the missionary vocation. Its practice encompasses the exercise of all the other virtues*”⁴.

3. Evangelization and charity

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has slowly connected mission-evangelization with charity. The “*preferential option for the poor*”, which has been stated repeatedly in Church documents, is a clear proof that the poor (and the attention the Church gives to those who are poor) ought to be the object of evangelization. In fact, the *Lineamenta* states this reality, though it does so in a very timid manner. For the Church, the new evangelization ought to be “global”. This is explained as follows: “*This manner of acting ought to be all-encompassing, including our way of thinking and our deeds, individual conduct and public witness, the interior life of our communities and their efforts at being missionary, their attention to education and their concerned dedication for the poor, and the capacity of every Christian actively to take part in the conversations taking place within real-life situations and the workplace, so as to bring to these situations the Christian gift of hope*” (*Lineamenta*, #16).

Vincent had a global vision similar to that which we refer to when speaking about the new evangelization. Vincent stated that we had to evangelize “*by words and by actions*” or else the “*poor would be condemned to die of hunger*” (CCD XII, 78). There are many references in Vincent’s writing where we can find this sensitivity toward the poor, especially at those times when Vincent was considering the mission of the Congregation. These words were addressed to the first confreres, as can be seen in two texts. The first is from the *Common Rules*, where Vincent expressly stated that a Confraternity of Charity was to be established at the conclusion of each mission (cf., *Common Rules*, I, 2). In the second text, Vincent expressed his conviction that preaching and the promotion of charity should not be separated, as they are different aspects of a holistic evangelization. He said:

⁴ A. ORCAJO, *El seguimiento de Jesús según San Vicente* [The following of Jesus According to Vincent], Ed. La Milagrosa, Madrid, 1990, p. 213.

“If there are any among us who think they are in the Mission to evangelize poor people but not to alleviate their sufferings, to take care of their spiritual needs but not their temporal ones, I reply that we have to help them and have them assisted in every way, by us and by others, if we want to hear those pleasing words of the Sovereign Judge... To do that is preach the gospel by words and by works; and that is the most perfect way; it is also what Our Lord did” (CCD XII, 77-78).

This is the new methodology used by Vincent in his mission of re-evangelization: uniting charity with evangelization: making charity not only a Christian virtue, but also a pivotal dimension of evangelization. The object of evangelization is not only salvation of the soul (through catechesis) but also the salvation of the whole human person, body and soul. For Vincent, evangelization meant serving the poor by tending to their spiritual and material needs, *to make the gospel effective*. It must be said that the official church sustains this “global form” of evangelization even though it does so in a more timid manner than Vincent de Paul. Leaving aside for the moment the differences between Vincent’s era and our own, it may be inferred that the ideals of our Holy Founder share in the global concepts of evangelization, charity and justice as these have been developed in the theology of liberation in Latin America.

4. Evangelization and the laity

As we come to a deeper understanding of the new evangelization we immediately see the importance of the laity in this process. The new evangelization cannot be *“left to a group of ‘specialists’ but must involve the responsibility of all the members of the People of God”* (Lineamenta, #24). In reality, the laity have always been important in the Church. In practice, we know that for many centuries they were maintained in a passive role. Why, then, today do the laity have an indispensable role in the process of new evangelization? Their role is indispensable, because if we are attempting to evangelize the culture and transform society, then this mission corresponds more directly to the laity than to anyone else.

We know Vincent avoided this present concern because he never viewed the laity apart from the mission and charity. In fact, in opposition to the attitude of his era, Vincent understood that the laity could be a dynamic force as he attempted to renew the Church and society.

What is truly admirable in Vincent is that even though he shared the model of the Church that was presented by the Council of Trent, because of his zeal, he projected a distinct model, one that was more evangelical. We know that Trent over-reacted to the excesses of Prot-

estantism, thus exalting to the highest degree the person of the priest and relegating to a lower position the vocation of the laity. Within this context of Tridentine theology and its model of Church, Vincent, in addition to his option on behalf of the poor, would make another option that seemed to go against the grain: an option on behalf of the laity, especially women who were not seen as equals in society or the Church. It should be said that at no time was Vincent opposed to the official Church, but because of his sense of fidelity to the great traditions of the Church, he reminded people about those matters that Trent did not emphasize. It has been said that Vincent never took risks in the area of orthodoxy, but because of the urgency regarding evangelization and providing for the poor, Vincent took many risks in the area of ortho-praxis.

Our Founder was in perfect harmony with another conviction of the present day Church: baptism is the fundamental sacrament of Christian dignity (cf. *Christifideles Laici*, ch. 1). Thus, as noted by Vatican II, the holiness of the laity is rooted in their baptism. It is true the theme of the holiness of the laity was also popularized by St. Francis de Sales. But it is also true that Vincent de Paul was most enthusiastic about the doctrine expressed in the *Introduction to the Devout Life* and the *Treatise on the Love of God*. All of this demonstrates that Vincent was very sensitive to the role of the laity, something which rarely occurred at that time. It was this sensitivity that led him to mobilize so many lay people, not just the men and women who became members of the Confraternities of Charity, but thousands of other men and women who collaborated in his charitable endeavors. It was in this sensitivity toward the laity that we discover Vincent's missionary experience as he evangelized the poor. He saw the laity as God's instruments who allowed him to approach the poor in a different manner, thus, he began to find new ways to involve the laity in his ministry.

At the same time, however, Vincent never sent anyone to minister alone. Here, then, we find another idea that coincides with the attitude of the present day Church. Spontaneous and solitary acts of charity provide no guarantee for continuity and effectiveness, nor do they reflect our Trinitarian faith. Vincent provided structures that enabled people to minister together. The beginning of the Confraternity of Charity in Châtillon was an attempt to organize the laity so that they could work together as members of a team. Vincent's concern went beyond pastoral effectiveness. He told the members of the Confraternity to "*cherish one another as sisters who profess to honor Our Lord*" (CCD XIIIb, 106). They ought to pray for one another and "*share with one another the warmth of the love of God*" (CCD XIIIb, 386). In this manner, Vincent was attempting to create a community spirit, and to thus encourage all its members.

II.

CONCLUSION: WHERE DOES THE PROJECT WITH REGARD TO THE NEW EVANGELIZATION LEAD THE VINCENTIANS?

In light of everything that has been stated, neither the Vincentian institutions nor those persons who share the spiritual heritage of Vincent should find it difficult to accept and adapt themselves to this universal plan of the “new evangelization”. We only have to clothe ourselves in the Vincentian spirit and then we will surely find ourselves involved in the new evangelization. Is this a simple task? No! There is one exception: the new evangelization is directed toward the whole society, for all persons. No one is excluded, even though the Church has opted in a preferential manner for the poor. What is a preferential option for the Church in general becomes an exclusive option for Vincentians. Indeed, among the many ministries in the Church, serving the poor is our special ministry and charism.

This presentation could end here with an impeccable conclusion: our way of responding to the new evangelization consists in following the demands of our vocation. This is especially true since Vincent was a new evangelizer long before such a phrase became popular. The Church cannot demand anything more of us. Now the only thing that we can do in order to conclude this presentation is to ask which aspects of the new evangelization (aspects related to our mission) should Vincentians be especially attentive to in order to respond in a better way to this ecclesial project. The following might be our response.

1. It is necessary to grasp and discern and cultivate that which is new

There is much discussion about the new evangelization, new evangelizers, a new ardor, new expressions, reconfiguration, new ministries that are more aligned to our spirit, a new era... This objective newness exists, but is all of this understood by the Congregation and the confreres? It is not enough to be an observer or one who is informed about all these novelties. It is not enough to be a transmitter of these novelties. The new evangelization invites us to grasp, discern, accept, and cultivate this newness in our language and expression, and in the daily events in our lives and the world around us. At the very heart of the new evangelization, we discover an invitation regarding those things that are new: *“The new evangelization is not a matter of taking up the first evangelization again, or simply repeating the past. Instead, it is the courage to forge new paths in responding to the changing circumstances and conditions facing the Church in her call to proclaim and live the Gospel today”* (Lineamenta, #5). If Vincent had not opted for that which

is new, neither the Confraternities, nor the missions, nor the laity, nor the Daughters of Charity, nor the organization of the Charities, none of this would have become a reality. Things would have continued in their hopeless, downward spiral.

An observation: to embrace this newness does not mean abandoning the profound convictions and principles that provide a foundation to our life and our vocation as evangelizers. A building cannot be supported without cement. Therefore what must we do in order to confront the rapid and profound changes that affect us as evangelizers while at the same time maintaining our convictions and yet being flexible enough in order to travel along these new paths? There is no other path than that which was pointed out in the General Assembly of 2010: personal reflection, reading, a determination not to be out of sync with the thinking of the present era, and on-going formation. This plan will prepare us, as it did Vincent, to be authentic evangelizers.

2. The new evangelization can provide us with an opportunity to renew our ministries

Evangelization has never been easy, and the present time is no exception. We know that the new evangelization is demanding because it moves us forward while turning upside down our well-formulated plans and comfortable routines, all of which have become so futile. So then, what are the specific demands that the new evangelization places upon the evangelizer? Without a doubt the new evangelization challenges evangelizers to move beyond a conservative pastoral approach which, in light of the dawning of this new age, is no longer adequate. The poor must be given what they need, without falling into a pastoral immediacy proper to that type of attitude, and without succumbing to the frequent temptation of believing that the poor demand little. It is not a question of what the poor demand or request, but rather a question of what the Vincentian evangelizers ought to give to those who are poor.

In Vincent, we find the best example of ministerial creativity. When he began the popular missions, Vincent founded the Congregation of the Mission and established the Tuesday Conferences, a plan for on-going formation for the diocesan clergy. Vincent did this because with the existing parish structures and the ignorance of the clergy, it would have been difficult to carry out the re-evangelization of France. Vincent's passion as an evangelizer enabled him to see beyond a pastoral approach that was incapable of responding to the needs of the poor. It is precisely this Vincentian spirit that enables us to ask ourselves how to renew our ministries in order to respond to the demands of the new evangelization.

The commitment to serve the poor obliges confreres to confront the challenges that result from such a mission. Therefore, in order to evangelize the poor today, confreres need to be equipped with sound doctrine; they also need to be connected to the world of those who are poor, and to have knowledge of the Church's social doctrine in those aspects that affect the ministry of the evangelizer and the lives of those being evangelized. They also need to understand modern and post-modern thinking. Finally, confreres must be individuals with firm convictions. Perhaps it is in this sense that we should interpret Vincent's words, i.e. "*the poor are our lords and masters*". The poor can be the ones to teach Vincentian evangelizers because as missionaries, we have much to learn from them.

3. The new evangelization demands a broad vision

We lived in a world characterized by social, cultural and even religious pluralism, a world quite distinct from that of previous generations. It is a world characterized by homogeneity in every aspect and also characterized by the autonomy and the independence of each nation. The powerful means of digital communication (now within everyone's reach), and the world phenomenon of migration have been decisive factors in creating multi-racial European societies. This pluralistic perspective should be the starting point of the new evangelization. For example, for some, God is the center of their life and the voice of the Church is still credible. On the other hand, many other persons live in the midst of an environment of unbelief and indifference. More than a few groups of people profess a religious understanding that would be seen as marginalized from the perspective of the historical religions. Evangelizers who engage in the process of the new evangelization can no longer be satisfied with an outreach that extends to those who are under the Church's influence. Such an approach would reduce evangelization to a process of 'saving the saved'. Evangelization must be directed toward everyone.

Evangelizers today must have broad horizons; an attitude of acceptance that extends to everyone; a ability and a willingness to dialogue with those who are indifferent, and with those seeking answers to their burning questions; and with those who profess a different set of beliefs. I believe that, in a certain sense, this broad vision can be seen in Vincent, even though he lived at a time when any sign of pluralism was suspect. For example, when Vincent was appointed pastor in Châtillon, Calvinism had a strong hold on the people in that region. It is interesting to note that when Vincent arrived in Châtillon, he took up lodging in the house of M. Jean Beynier who, as a result of Vincent's influence, changed first of all his life-style and then his religion and was reconciled

with the Catholic Church⁵. Four or five years later, the events at Montmirail and Marchais further enlightened Vincent's path: three Huguenots were converted, one of whom complained (with reason) that the poor were spiritually condemned.

In his era, Vincent proposed a method of preaching to the confreres not unlike that of Calvin. Vincent said: "*A second example, which shows us how careful we must be to maintain our method (i.e., the little method) is that of the Huguenots. Calvin invented his own method of preaching: take a book, as Our Lord did, read it and explain it in the literal and spiritual sense; then draw some moral teachings from it*" (CCD XI, 267). Vincent spoke the following words to the Sisters opening a new house in Metz: "*You are going to make known to everyone, Catholics, heretics, and even Jews, the goodness of God*" (CCD X, 448). Vincent also wrote to a coadjutor Brother (a surgeon by profession) being sent to Madagascar and said: "*It would be well not to distinguish between Catholics and heretics in the services you give to God on this ship, for by this they will know you love them in God*" (ABELLY II, 27).

In conclusion, we see this broad vision, which we refer to as the new evangelization, reflected in Vincent, as he sent the Missionaries beyond the French borders to evangelize the non-Christian world. Vincent, even though his dreams would not and could not become a reality, dreamt of going to remote parts of the world, including Persia, Brazil and Canada.

⁵ Cf., JOSÉ MARÍA ROMÁN, CM, *St. Vincent de Paul, a Biography*, translated by Sister Joyce Howard, DC, Melisende, London, 1999, p. 120.