

# THEME

## *Highlights from the 2013 International Meeting*

### Our Vincentian Identity in Today's Church

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In 2012 on the feast of the Assumption, I traveled by bus from Santo Domingo de los Colorados to the city of Quito, the capital of Ecuador, a journey of one hundred kilometers (sixty-two miles). During the trip I had an interesting conversation with an unknown gentleman seated next to me. As we traveled toward our destination this man, somewhat intrigued, asked me: *Please, would you tell me who you are and what is your profession?* I explained to him as best as I could my situation: *I am a priest and I belong to a missionary community whose task it is to evangelize and serve the poor.* The man's eyes opened wide and he said: *I thought something like that. Now I understand! When we greeted one another at the beginning of the trip I suspected that you were someone special. So you are a priest! I like the fact that you serve the poor.* This unknown individual had obliged me to reveal, to a certain degree, my heart and to describe in a few words some characteristics of my Vincentian identity.

#### **Identity**

The word *identity* is derived from two Latin words: *idem* and *identitas* which means *the same* or, in other words, that which is proper and unique, that which characterizes an individual or a group of people. Individuals have an identity to the degree that they have clothed themselves in the qualities proper to their condition. They have this

identity when they are truly that which others expect of them; when their life and activity bridge the gap between the ideals that they have accepted and the response that they have made in light of those ideals.

### **Vincentian and Ecclesial Identity**

Vincentian identity of the Congregation of the Mission refers to its relationship as a whole: provinces, local communities, and individual missionaries in as much as they are followers of St. Vincent de Paul: the identity that is lived and revealed through word and action.

Within the Church there are various charisms, each one with its own uniqueness. Charisms handed down by the respective Founders and recognized by the Church compliment and give character to the visible presence of the Church in every era. The Holy Spirit gifted our Founder with a particular gift that led him to follow Jesus Christ evangelizing the poor. Therefore in the heart of the Church and in every era the Congregation of the Mission must give new life to the charismatic Vincentian identity that it has received from the Founder.

### **Objective identity**

Experts speak about two identities: objective and subjective. I will briefly present some documents which in the course of history gave concrete form to the objective identity of the Congregation of the Mission. I will refer to the writings of Saint Vincent and to historically significant documents, especially our Constitutions formulated after the Second Vatican Council.

### **The identity of the Congregation of the Mission according to its Founder**

The identity of an institution can be expressed in various ways: through its life, activity, events, and customs; through written statements and in particular, through the formulation of constitutions. The Congregation of the Mission is no exception. Our Founder designed a way of being for his most beloved establishment, the Congregation of the Mission.

The spirit that animated Saint Vincent as well as the confreres of the Little Company was the same: to dedicate their lives to the evangelization of the poor, providing for their corporal and spiritual needs. What follows are some words that reveal the personal spirit of our Founder... a spirit that he communicated to the confreres. For brevity

I will cite three passages from Vincent's later conferences that were addressed to the first members of the Congregation.

In the October 15 1655 conference on *Conformity to the Will of God*, we read: *The Son of God came to evangelize the poor. And are not we, Messieurs, sent for the same purpose? Yes, Missioners are sent to evangelize the poor. Oh, what a happiness to do on earth the same thing Our Lord did there, which is to teach poor persons the way to heaven* (CCD: XI: 283-284). We can conclude that a very special characteristic of the identity of the Congregation is found in the following of Jesus Christ evangelizing the poor. In the conference dated May 17, 1658 on *Observance of the Rules*, we find the following words: *Our Lord came and was sent by His Father to evangelize poor persons. Pauperibus evangelizare misit me. Pauperibus, to the poor, Messieurs, to the poor, as, by the grace of God, the Little Company strives to do* (CCD: XII: 3).

In the December 6, 1658 conference on the *Purpose of the Congregation of the Mission*, Vincent stated: *Our Lord asks us to evangelize the poor; that's what He did, and what He wants to continue to do through us. We have great reason to humble ourselves here, seeing that the Eternal Father is using us for the plans of His Son, who came to preach the Gospel to poor persons... So then, what a great obligation we have to His Infinite Goodness for having associated us with Him in this divine ministry... but there isn't a single Company in the Church of God that has for its portion persons who are poor, devoting itself totally to the poor and never preaching... that's what Missioners profess to do; it's their special characteristic to be, like Jesus Christ, committed to the poor* (CCD: XII: 71).

### **The identity of the Congregation of the Mission according to some significant documents**

On January 12, 1632, Pope Urban VII in the bull *Salvatoris Nostri*, wrote: *The principal purpose and special goal of this Congregation and its members is, by the grace of God, along with their own salvation, to dedicate themselves to the salvation of those who live on the estates, in the countryside, on farms, in hamlets, and in insignificant places* (CCD: XIIIa: 298).

In the *Common Rules* that Vincent distributed to the Missionaries on May 17, 1658 we read the following words: *The whole purpose of the Congregation is: 1] to have a genuine commitment to grow in holiness, patterning ourselves, as far as possible, on the virtues which the great Master himself graciously taught us in what he said and did; 2] to preach the good news of salvation to poor people, especially in rural areas; 3] to help seminarians and priests to grow in knowledge and virtue, so that they can be effective in their ministry* (Common Rules, I: 1).

On September 22, 1655, Pope Alexander VII in the brief *Ex Commisa Nobis*, approved vows for the Congregation of the Mission, whose members would dedicate their whole life *to the salvation of poor country people* (CCD: XIIIa: 417). The Constitutions of July 19, 1953 contain the following text: *Its general purpose is to labor for the glory of God and the perfection of its members; its special purpose is: 1] to preach the Gospel to the poor, especially the country people; 2] to help ecclesiastics to acquire the knowledge and virtues required by their state of life; 3] to carry on works of charity and education* (C, article 2).

According to the 1984 Constitutions: *The purpose of the Congregation of the Mission is to follow Christ, evangelizing the poor. This purpose is achieved when, faithful to St. Vincent, the members individually and collectively: make every effort to put on the spirit of Christ himself (CR I, 3) in order to acquire a holiness appropriate to their vocation (CR XII, 13); work at evangelizing the poor, especially the abandoned; help the clergy and laity in their formation and lead them to a fuller participation in the evangelization of the poor* (C. #1).

Some have said that the Congregation of the Mission has been affected by ambiguity from its origin, with multiple formulations of our purpose. We are known by various names. We are clerics, not religious or diocesan priests. Nevertheless, it is true that subsequent formulations of the purpose of the Congregation reach one dominant point: the evangelization of the poor.

### **The identity of the Congregation of the Mission according to the present Constitutions**

In speaking about the objective identity of the Congregation we should reflect on the new Constitutions, written during the 1980 General Assembly, approved by the Holy See on June 29, 1984 and promulgated by the Superior General, Richard McCullen on September 27, 1984. The Constitutions took effect on January 25, 1985; thus, our Constitutions are twenty-eight years old.

We should give thanks to those confreres who followed the directives of the Second Vatican Council: to return to the original sources and to read the signs of the times; a process of reflection and research that led to the formulation of our new Constitutions. The Congregation, as a whole, made a praiseworthy effort to rediscover and redefine its proper identity. To arrive at that point the efforts of the local communities, provinces and General Assemblies of 1968-1969, 1974, and 1980 were all needed. We must also mention Father William Slattery who initiated the search for our post-conciliar identity by convoking the 1968 General Assembly.

The Little Company as a whole entered into a search for its nature, a search for its place within the present day church and world. Because of the diversity of cultures and ministries and the individual history of the provinces, it was a long and difficult journey. On the other hand during the fifty post-conciliar years innumerable Vincentian studies (the fruit of much research) have been published in various parts of the world. All this has contributed to greater knowledge about the identity of the Congregation. Viewing events from an historical perspective, we can now understand what the Congregation had proposed for herself and what she desired to achieve, namely, to define herself and to clarify her nature and proper identity. What does the Congregation say about itself? How does the Congregation want to be known? What is the Congregation of the Mission? What are its characteristics? During that era these and other questions were experienced and reflected upon by Vincentian throughout the world.

During the process of identifying and clarifying the purpose of the Congregation and, consequently, clarifying its proper identity, the path remained open so that changes and modifications could be made in the various areas that would eventually given form to our new Constitutions. Then and now a satisfactory response was/is required with regard to the proper nature of the Congregation. When the identity of the institution is accepted individuals, in our case the individuals are the confreres of the Congregation will recover a sense of belonging to the Congregation and will experience themselves as protagonists of their history.

In the decree of promulgation, dated September 27, 1984, we read the following words: *Between the covers of this book our identity as a Congregation in the Church is delineated. We must not be content to leave that delineation on paper alone. The text must now be imprinted on our hearts and lived out in our vocation to preach the gospel to the poor* (C & S, p. 14). The introduction that precedes the Constitutions expresses the same idea in similar words. The Congregation, docile to the will of the Church, revised its fundamental law in order to revitalize its proper identity, its proper purpose, its life and its mission in the present day world.

### **More about the objective identity of the Congregation**

The first part of our Constitutions, entitled *Vocation*, gathers together constitutive elements of the theology and canonical identity of the Congregation. The title, *Vocation*, refers to God's calling of Vincent de Paul to participate in a mission: to establish the Congregation of the Mission in order to evangelize the poor. Under the same heading of *Vocation* the Constitutions deal with matters that refer to our purpose,

nature and spirit. Those three words (purpose, nature and spirit) contain the essential elements of our congregational identity.

We read in our Constitutions: *the purpose of the Congregation is to follow Christ evangelizing the poor*. Nothing more and nothing less! To define the purpose is always important. The Congregation has a purpose and everything is ordered around that purpose: its life and its mission. Following Jesus Christ evangelizing the poor (and not the ministries or the three means which Vincent called purposes) unifies and gives a focus to everything. The articles in the various sections of our Constitutions will be fruitful and helpful to the degree that they are related to the purpose, that is, to the degree that they are related to that which is most unique with regard to the Vincentian charism which consists of following Jesus Christ evangelizing the poor.

The facets outlined in the first article of our Constitutions only have meaning in light of our purpose: to put on the spirit of Christ himself to acquire holiness; to work at evangelizing the poor, especially the most abandoned; to help the clergy and laity in their formation and to lead them to a fuller participation in the evangelization of the poor. According to our new Constitutions our purpose is the arbiter of our apostolic and community life, of the evangelical counsels that are confirmed through the profession of vows and of our prayer life. Our purpose is also the arbiter of the general governance of the Congregation. Our purpose and the other articles in the part entitled *Vocation* beside containing fundamental principles have another objective, namely they provide us with a point of reference that enables us to orient and direct and even evaluate everything in light of the time honored purpose, nature and spirit. The section *vocation* clearly indicates where the present, objective identity of the Congregation is found, where its authentic face, reason for being, personality, and essential constitutive elements are found. All of this is in harmony with and follows the path that was traveled by Vincent de Paul.

### **Subjective identity**

As we reflect on the plans of our Founder and our Constitutions, do we as confreres feel a healthy pride in being members of our Institute? Do we see ourselves as active subjects in our home, that is, in the heart of the Congregation of the Mission? With what degree of empathy do we relate to the Congregation of the Mission? To what degree do we accept (personally and as a community) that which is most unique with regard to Vincentian spirituality.

During a gathering for on-going formation, a group of confreres reflected on Vincentian identity. One of the confreres at this gathering expressed with great simplicity that he preferred to talk about the

activities and ministries he was engaged in on a daily basis rather than speaking of his identity. He said he was aware of the various activities he carried on day to day, but they did not lead him to question his personal identity. He really did not see the difference here.

He said that in the practical order the Vincentian catalogue of ministries includes a great number of activities and nothing seems to be excluded. He said he could not find that which is specifically Vincentian and which differentiates him from others. This comment made by one of our confreres who, without being aware of it, had become a victim of assimilation. He was unaware of the fact that he was a member of the Vincentian community. Unfortunately, the situation is repeated with some frequency among the present members of the Congregation.

### **Healthy subjective identity**

Let us consider the situation of a confrere whose life unfolds in a normal manner. One day he experienced the Lord's call to follow a certain path. He became a member of the Vincentian community and with the passing of years he experienced the normal "ups and downs". This confrere leads a lifestyle that provides for his growth. Like so many others, he belongs to a local community and engages in a specific ministry. Consciously and unconsciously he identifies himself with the Vincentian charism and despite some difficult moments, he never ceases to affirm his Vincentian vocation as a member of the Congregation. As time passes he has internalized the community values that give meaning to his life as a member of the Congregation. His house, his home is the Congregation of the Mission. There is no doubt that this is a confrere with a very clear Vincentian identity.

In my opinion the confrere I have just described is well represented in the Congregation. These confreres are satisfied and identify themselves with the community that gives meaning to their life. Their subjective identity, ever more explicit and intentional, is maintained despite the changes that occur as times passes and new circumstances affect the Congregation. This group, a majority of the confreres, is men who love the Congregation with their whole heart.

### **Mediocre subjective identity**

There is another situation that is not uncommon among confreres of the Congregation. In this group, I include confreres who, because of certain acquired habits, have come to a standstill in their personal identification as Vincentians. They find themselves in no man's land. The book of Revelation describes such individuals as 'lukewarm'.



We might characterize these confreres as men with no depth. They have been incorporated into the Congregation of the Mission and are content with doing the bare minimum, and view as suspicious any innovation or change. They consider too theoretical anything related to the objective identity of the Congregation and view St. Vincent's writings and our new Constitutions as pure theory. These confreres are caught up in mediocrity and often move about in a small circle of friends. They have no vitality and are not involved in the new congregational horizons that are the fruit of collective reflection. As I put these thoughts into writing, it seemed right to classify as mediocre the Vincentian identity of this group of dear confreres worthy of our consideration.

### **Broken subjective identity**

Here I describe the situation of vessels of great value that are broken. Experience has shown us this. We have all lived with excellent confreres, grounded in their vocation and identified with the purpose of the Congregation. Their life unfolded over a long period of time in more or less acceptable parameters. Then one day, for no detectable reason, these confreres lost their first fervor. Their initial plan collapsed. Allow me to say that in those cases (which occurred in the past and occur today) the deterioration was usually gradual, slowly surfacing, and then at a specific moment expressed itself in all its harshness. What happened? The subjective identity of those confreres faded. In their personal world, they began to experience psychological separation from that which is central to Vincentian spirituality. Then came the break. Their loss of identity can be attributed to multiple factors, including:

- An activism that has claimed not just a few confreres as victims. With the passing of time these individuals become impoverished interiorly, and consequently no longer feel identified with the Vincentian community.
- A lack of on-going formation. What is not known cannot be loved. The lack of information about our history and our present evolution as a Congregation leads certain confreres to a state of disinterest and isolation from the community, which often results in separation from the Congregation. Thus, we must deal with this issue of on-going formation so as individuals and as a community we can grow in our Vincentian identity.
- The deterioration of community life produces a great restlessness and/or discomfort in confreres, and ultimately he wants to distance himself from the Congregation to find a healthier environ-



ment. There is no doubt that personal and communal Vincentian identity must be strengthened through the re-creation of a fraternal spirit in local communities.

- As a result of spiritual inertia and a neglect of their prayer life, some confreres become disoriented and lose their Vincentian identity. In these cases, the decision to leave the Congregation of the Mission looms on the horizons.
- The desire to break with congregational structures that one has not freely accepted produces in some confreres a loss of Vincentian identity. This leads some confreres to abandon the Congregation to become members of the diocesan clergy.

### **The identity of the Congregation of the Mission is dynamic**

I refer to objective and subjective identity of our Congregation as understood and accepted by confreres as members. Both types of identities are dynamic and active, not static. The proof of this is found in the Constitutions, formulated during the General Assemblies of 1968-1969, 1974, and 1980, and later Assemblies (even though they were more pastoral in character). We do not exaggerate when we say that today the objective identity of the Congregation is found in recent documents which must be taken into consideration. The Spirit blows where it wills. We must certainly include in the currents and signs of the time guidelines presented in the past twelve years, specifically in the Lines of Action 2010-2016 approved by the 2010 General Assembly and subtitled: *Creative Fidelity for the Mission*.

This being understood, the following concepts that have been universally accepted now have a place within the Congregation of the Mission:

***First, the concept of systemic change as an adequate method to provide charitable assistance to the poor.*** At the present time, there is nothing worse than to approach those in need with methods that were useful yesterday, but today are no longer valid. We therefore have an obligation to emphasize this method and a similar obligation to accept it wholeheartedly. The 2010 General Assembly gave a decisive impulse to systemic change as “the” method to evangelize the poor. We must understand the needs of the poor, and be aware of structures that create situations of poverty and marginalization. We must also remember that the poor are agents of their own liberation.

***Second, reconfiguration of the Congregation of the Mission.*** Here, we are dealing with a profound concept that involves both individual confreres and institutions of the Little Company. Some confreres

reduce reconfiguration to the union of provinces without seeing the superficiality of such a view. Reconfiguration suggests a profound reform of communities, individual persons, works and the institutions, and is always mindful that the purpose of the Congregation consists of following Jesus Christ, evangelizing the poor. The General Assembly of 2010 approved a text which refers to "intra"-provincial and "inter"-provincial reconfiguration.

**Third, another congregational sign of the present era is seen in the emphasis that for some years has been given to the Vincentian Family, composed of those who follow Jesus Christ in the same way as Vincent de Paul did.** Decisive steps have been taken in this regard. Nevertheless as a Congregation we must become more involved in this activity to make our evangelization of the poor ever more effective. In terms of our participation in the Vincentian Family, there is no room for clericalism or indifference. Indeed, the Congregation must encourage collaboration among the groups and associations inspired by the charism of Vincent de Paul. At stake here is our role as Vincentians in the evangelization of the world.

**Fourth, the Regional Conferences of Visitors came into existence for practical reasons.** Today we view these conferences as an accomplishment of interprovincial collaboration in various places throughout the world, for example, in the area of initial formation and interprovincial missions. We have only to recall Statute 79:1-3, approved by the XLI General Assembly, which includes wise consideration to the Conference of Visitors.

**Fifth, initial and on-going formation.** In accord with the 2010 General Assembly, we, as confreres of the Congregation need to give a new impulse to the process of integral formation in order to evangelize the poor. We need to give a new impulse to formation of aspirants and on-going formation of confreres. This will strengthen our identity, guarantee Vincentian fidelity, and promote creativity in ministry. Creativity concretizes our identity for the mission.

These are some concepts (by no means a comprehensive list) that the Congregation has assumed ownership of in recent years. In the context of this presentation, I would include those elements I have referred to in discussing *objective identity*. In accord with our creative fidelity for the mission these new rays of light have become part of our renewed and dynamic identity.

At this time of retreat allow me, the Visitor of a small province, to question myself and to ask you, members of the General Curia and Visitors of various provinces, if the new concepts and directives that have been embodied in recent documents: have these ideas been accepted readily and wholeheartedly by the confreres? Let us sincerely

ask ourselves if the subjective identity, that is, if the warm acceptance on the part of confreres remains assured in various areas of the Congregation of the Mission.

The acceptance of these new concepts is not an act that is accomplished in one single moment. We need time, and we also need to renew our commitment, and to renew it again and again. Let us reflect on the depth with which the confreres of the provinces have accepted the new institutional signs that are proper to the present era. It is good to engage in this reflection in order to set out once again upon our journey, and what better moment to do this than during this day of retreat.

Whatever our situation, we as Visitors have before us a wonderful task, namely that of serving and encouraging the confreres of our respective provinces; and to do this, we can rely on the intercession of Saint Vincent de Paul.

Translated from Spanish by CHARLES PLOCK, C.M.