

# FROM THE GENERAL CURIA

## “Meditation Moment”

Under this title, *Meditation Moment*, the General Council, along with Vincentiana, offers confreres a series of meditations on themes in our Constitutions essential to our identity. We know that the Constitutions outline our present-day life and vocation. Therefore, in the Constitutions, we find the charism of St. Vincent, an inspiring gift received almost four hundred years ago and adapted to the present era. From this perspective we can say that it is as important to know the content of the Constitutions as Vincent’s writings. We want become knowledgeable about our Constitutions so it becomes the motivating force and source of inspiration for our life.

Fr. Richard McCullen, the Superior General at the time the Church approved our Constitutions in 1984, expressed this idea very well when he stated:

*“Within 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 to the gospel the poor”* (Constitutions, p. 14).

Our new initiative, “Meditation Moment on the Constitutions” points us in that direction. How will this be done? During each Tempo Forte the General Council will reflect on some parts of the Constitutions following themes in the Constitutions as recommended by Vincentiana. Then there will be an exchange of ideas, dialogue, and culling of the various ideas to write this meditation. Hopefully by publishing this in *Vincentiana*, we will encourage and stimulate both individual confreres and local communities to join in shared reflection on this subject.

One last word on how we will approach the Constitutions. These meditations are not meant to be an exhaustive study on the content of our Constitutions. We have many reflections on their history and theological content. Our objective is simple. ***We want to share with you what the Constitutions are saying to us personally, and where we believe our life and our vocation is directed.*** In 2014, we celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the promulgation of our Constitutions. We believe this is a fine way to assist confreres in deepening our appreciation of their value for us.

## VOCATION

### (Part One, Articles 1-9)

After having read, reflected on and dialogued about the first nine articles of our Constitutions entitled “VOCATION”, we came to the conclusion that these articles are very dense. In a few lines they say everything, that is, they provide an excellent summary. Later chapters will develop more profoundly the themes mentioned in these first nine articles.

Vocation: the Constitutions begin with this word with deep biblical roots. If our Congregation exists, it is because God called it to become part of the church. If all of us, as confreres, are part of this Congregation, it is because one day God called us. To maintain this theological insight fresh and alive is like cleaning away the ashes so that the embers of the brazier of our vocation might continue to warm us. St. Paul told Timothy: “*I remind you to stir into flame the gift of God*” (2 Tim. 1:6).

The Constitutions however, do not speak about just any vocation, but rather refer to the Vincentian vocation. In this case, this adjective is important because it defines and enriches the concept, “vocation”. Vincentians have been called to follow the Lord not in some general or undefined manner, but in the same way that Vincent de Paul did. The word “Vincentian” delimits, identifies, and orients our concrete manner of living the gospel.

This chapter does not speak of a personal vocation. The Constitutions do this implicitly in each section. Here, the vocation of the Congregation is presented. In Article 9, we distinguish between purpose, nature, and spirit. “Purpose” indicates the reason why the Congregation exists in the Church and world (Constitutions, #1-2). “Nature” defines the Congregation in the Church, and differentiates it from the whole of religious life as a *Society of Apostolic Life* (Constitutions, #3). “Spirit” responds to the style and the concrete manner of ministry and life in the Congregation in accord with specific virtues (Constitutions, ##4-8). We will now reflect on each of these three realities.

### 1. The Purpose of the Congregation

To be sure, the ‘purpose’ of our Congregation refers to the relevance of our charism. One of the great concerns of the Church is that of evangelization. From when Pope Paul VI wrote *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, the Church has ceaselessly convoked people to engage in this process. In 2012 Pope Benedict XVI, following up on the ideas of John Paul II, convoked the Synod of Bishops on the theme of the New Evangelization. In light of the urgent need to evangelize, our Vincentian vocation is most relevant as the Congregation can and ought to contribute to this effort through a specific form of evangelization. While that may

be difficult to do, but such are the popular missions which historically have been important in the life of the Church. Today, there is a need to up-date and renew this service/ministry of evangelization.

At the same time, another great concern of the Church (and of the world) is the situation of poverty which afflicts untold millions of people today. Often, the Church has defined herself as a church of the poor, with a preferential option for the poor. This has been especially true in the meeting of the Latin American bishops in Puebla (1978). In all of this we can see that the Vincentian vocation has two purposes: the mission and charity. The Church's two priorities and the great problems of world which continually create many other problems (such as violence), can only be resolved as we live out our Vincentian vocation.

Many other things could be said about us, including how we live and can improve our mission in the Church, but it could never be said that we have an irrelevant charism. In 1985, Blessed John Paul II gifted us and the Vincentian Family, with the following pearl: "*Your charism is one of indisputable relevance*". The fact that we have such a charism should never become a motive that leads us to cross our arms and to become caught up in the same routine as yesterday. We must actualize our qualities and potential as confreres and communities so that, as stated in article two of our Constitutions, *we open up new ways*. The Church needs the creativity of our Congregation and invites us to imitate the creativity of our Founder. There is certainly no more dynamic article in our Constitutions than the one we are commenting on now.

## 2. The Nature of the Congregation

With regard to nature, our Congregation is defined in article three as a *clerical society of apostolic life*. In the Church, there are only thirty-six Congregations that fall into that category, including the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Societies of Apostolic Life are characterized in the Church by the fulfillment of their own apostolic purpose. Our apostolic purpose was defined from the very beginning when Vincent stated: *the poor are condemned and dying of hunger*. Those words, internalized by Vincent in a way beyond our imagination, led to the establishments of his foundations, all of which had a clearly defined purpose, such as the Confraternities of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission, and the Daughters of Charity.

In the second place, Societies of Apostolic Life are characterized by a common life. As this is such an important aspect, we cannot say that community life is a burden or imposed on us from a time long past. Rather, it is an agreed upon structure outlined within the broad framework of our Constitutions and therefore, cannot be neglected. Being "a community for the mission" provides us with a great flexibility to

adapt to any situation. Societies of Apostolic Life tend to the perfection of charity through the observance of their Constitutions. Thus, we need to know and continually deepen our understanding of the Constitutions. Finally, members of the societies of apostolic life do not take religious vows but another form of vows defined by their Constitutions. In our case, the ultimate significance of our vows is not to make us like some religious group, but rather our vows confirm and ratify our vocation as evangelizers of the poor.

We must say something about the word “secular” as a trait of the Congregation. Our secular nature is more than *carrying on its own apostolate in close cooperation with the bishops and diocesan clergy* (Constitutions, 3.2). Being secular is a mark of our identity and therefore gives meaning and a special character to our vocation. Our secular nature gives meaning and a special character to our roots through the dynamic of the Incarnation we are in the midst of the world and involved in all its affairs. Our secular nature gives meaning and a special character to our way of life, for example, we live in residences and not in convents or monasteries. Our secular nature gives meaning and a special character to our commitment to God, as expressed in the evangelization of the poor and reinforced by the vows that we take). Our secular nature gives meaning and a special character to our spirituality (which is quite distinct from any form of “flight from the world”). One of the clear signs of our secular identity is the language, which influences more than one might think or believe because in fact, language can influence reality. We speak in a “secular” manner when referring to the reality “of religious”. We do not use words like *convent, monastery, religious, novitiate, profession of vows, provincial or chapter*. Rather, we speak about *house, missionary, internal seminary, taking of vows, visitor, and assembly*.

### 3. The Spirit of the Congregation

The spirit is the spiritual identity of the Congregation expressed in article 4-8 of our Constitutions. Those articles present an authentic compendium of our spirituality which is Christ centered (article 5); Trinitarian and trusting in God’s Providence and ministering with a compassionate and effective charity toward those who are poor (article 6); missionary and clothed in the virtues of a missionary (article 7); always searching (article 8). With all of these different points of orientation, here we will focus on two, which we believe are most important.

The first point is that the spirit of the Congregation is a participation in the very spirit of Jesus Christ and thus, *Jesus Christ is the rule of the mission* (article 5), the center of its life and activity. Vincent considered Jesus Christ to be the key to his own spiritual life and therefore, Jesus should have the same importance in our life. But here we are not refer-

ring to the Incarnate Word that Vincent learned about Berulle (i.e., being the Word of the Father, the Word should be adored), but rather we refer to the Incarnate Word who became man, became a human person so that we might learn how to be human persons as we imitate Jesus. Vincent expressed this idea of imitating Jesus when he said that "*we must be clothed with the spirit of Jesus Christ*" (CCD: XII: 93). Abelly also places these words on the lips of Vincent: "*Nothing is pleasing to me that is not of Jesus Christ*". This ideal lays the foundation for a Christ centered Vincentian spirit.

As Vincent reflected on the person of Jesus, he highlighted in a special way Christ, the evangelizer of the poor. In contrast to the other spiritualities that dominated the scene during the seventeenth century and might be in vogue in our own era, we must focus on Jesus, evangelizer of the poor. This image of Jesus should make all Vincentians "passionate". It is in this way we interpret the words of Vincent about *clothing ourselves in the spirit of Christ*. Here we note that "passion for Christ" is not the same as "following Christ": "passion for Christ" involves following Christ with zeal, decisiveness, and profound love. For Vincentians, the word "passion" is expressive and significant. If some day we were to discover that we were no longer in love with Jesus, then we would automatically be in love with something else and would have lost our identity, meaning, and strength. In light of the vocational crisis the Congregation experiences in much of the world, in light of discouragement and lack of orientation which are part of our reality, and in light of the limitations each of us experiences, there can be no other solution than to search for Jesus Christ and to do this in a passionate way. It is a crucial link to so many other things.

There is no reason to be fearful because today things change in unimaginable ways and we do not know in what manner our life, our vocation, and Vincentian charism will evolve and develop. However, we do know that passion for Jesus Christ is always an indispensable element for all Christians and for various vocations within the Church. We have no doubt about that.

#### 4. Conclusion

As we conclude this meditation, we refer to article seven of our Constitutions, which indicates that to express the spirit of Christ from a Vincentian perspective, it is necessary to practice the five virtues that, according to Vincent, characterize the missionary: simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification and zeal for souls. There are great implications in living these virtues. Imagine simplicity shining forth as the splendor of truth in a world wounded by political, economic, and special interests! Imagine humility as an expression of our reaching out to others, our preference of them, and a countersign to rampant

selfishness! Imagine gentleness removing every form of violence from human relationships! Imagine mortification as it confronts a world of luxury and comfort! Finally, imagine zeal for the glory of God in an era of heightened secularism which tries to eliminate everything related to God from the face of the earth! In such a situation, zeal is very relevant and it coincides with the ardor of the new evangelization.

We are convinced that we should follow Jesus Christ in a Vincentian manner and practice the five virtues, as well as our personal contact with people, especially with those who are most abandoned. Taken together, all of this creates a profound joy for the members of the Congregation because it helps them to rediscover in a more profound manner their full identity. At this time in history, when everyone claims the right to fulfillment, our Constitutions point out a direct path for fulfillment as Vincentians.

#### SUPERIOR GENERAL AND COUNCIL

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