

“St. Vincent as First Econome”. Address to Provincial Economes

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Introduction

Welcome to Paris and to the place I call “Vincentian Central”! As Parisians use August for vacation to flee the City of Lights, I am happy to join you here and to spend this time reflecting on the indispensable role each one of you plays as a Provincial Econome. We are here not just to discuss “wise money management”, but to make use of your wisdom as the tireless managers of the goods of the Congregation. I use the word ‘wisdom’ in describing you because I believe to be an effective Econome, you must be knowledgeable, not just in the ways of the world, but wisely attuned to your province, your confreres, their hopes and needs, and to your available assets.

Yours is truly a ‘hidden ministry’ as you toil in what must seem so far away from the active apostolates and works of the Congregation that bring your confreres personal and spiritual satisfaction. Yet, were it not for your competence and dedication to your duties as an Econome, much of what your confreres take for granted in the resources provided for their apostolates and community life would be missing. In your ‘hidden ministry’, the charism of the Congregation is able to grow and flourish; new members are formed and our elders are assured of proper care. You make it possible for the creation of a quality of community life, enabling our confreres to “live in the manner of dear friends” as Our Holy Founder St. Vincent envisioned.

St. Vincent as the First Econome!

Speaking of St. Vincent, we can all agree that he was a man of many talents and abilities, which for over 350 years have positively impacted the Church and the world. We can recall some of the illustrious accolades bestowed on Vincent by posterity, such as ‘Father of the Poor’, ‘Light of the Clergy’, ‘Organizer Unafraid’ and “First Priest of the Mission” to name but a few. Today, I believe it is time to unveil a new, long overdue title for Vincent. Are you ready? It is: “***Vincent DePaul: First Econome of the Congregation***”. Don’t wait for it to show up in our

community prayer books, liturgical calendars, or the stained glass windows of your oratories!

But I believe that to properly understand Vincent, his mindset, mission, and the charism he left us, we must realize that in his lifetime, Vincent de Paul learned how to be not only the first “shrewd money manager” for the Congregation, but more importantly, he mastered the complexities of obtaining property, funding for ministries, and formulating and enforcement of contracts that ensured the fiscal stability for the Congregation. If that sounds too mercenary for your taste, then perhaps delving into a little of our community history will prove my point.

In an illuminating study of the financial acumen of Vincent, Jose Maria Roman noted that whenever Vincent undertook a new work, “the contract stipulated exhaustively the financial conditions on which depended the number of members of the new community and their ministerial obligation” (*Vincentiana*, July 1984, 141). From the outset, Vincent envisioned confreres’ service to the poor to be done free of any financial obligations to those served. Therefore, it was necessary to have funding in place to insure the stability and continuity of a work. As Roman noted, “For every foundation in the canonical sense, there was a corresponding ‘foundation’ in the financial sense” (*Vincentiana*, December 1984, 153).

These funds came from many sources: bishops who invited the Congregation into their dioceses, donations from wealthy patrons, the Propagation of the Faith in Rome (for missionary endeavors), and even the treasury of the royalty. Vincent also made use of ordinary means of income in his day, which included leased farm land, rented properties, revenue from public transportation, and investments. All these served the same purpose: to stabilize the Mission and the community life of the confreres. If a funder reneged on a financial commitment, Vincent was not hesitant about withdrawing confreres. As John Rybolt noted in “St. Vincent de Paul and Money” (a most original title, I think!), “Vincent insisted on stable financial foundations for any new apostolate, and when he occasionally discovered that bishops were not honoring their commitments, he withdrew confreres” (*Vincentian Heritage Journal*, Vol. XXVI, No. 1, 2005, 92).

One final idea on why Vincent should be seen as “First Econome of the Congregation”: as we marvel at the many new pathways he blazed: works of charity with the laity, foundation of the Congregation and the Daughters, overseeing missionary activities, services he provided to other religious, civic officials, and the royal court; now imagine the complexity in negotiating, writing, and enforcing the financial agreements that made all that possible! One example will suffice. When Vincent took over St. Lazare from the Canons of St. Augustine, he inherited one of the largest ecclesiastical properties in Paris, with out-

lying farms and mills. But, it needed extensive renovations. Vincent also had to care for the elderly Canons who lived there, while adapting St. Lazare to the new works of the Congregation. He had to fund the education of his seminarians, and later, provide care for his sick and elderly confreres. The demands of managing that property could have buried any man, but he made it work! Vincent's patient trust in Providence, his attention to detail and collaborative ways enabled him to make St. Lazare a home for the Congregation and a renowned place for service to the poor and diocesan clergy formation.

Two Key Themes for Today's Provincial Econome

When considering how I would like to frame our discussion today, different ideas came to mind. One could approach this topic in a business manner, or in a philosophical or theological context, but none of these would capture the vital nature of your work. So I decided to focus upon two key themes I believe are the 'drivers' directing your ministry as Provincial Econome. They are solidarity and stewardship.

Solidarity

The word solidarity is frequently used today to indicate one's personal, political, social, economic, or even religious preferences. In the Congregation, we have stressed the importance of 'economic solidarity', drawing on its biblical, catechetical, and historical roots. The early Church (as seen in the Acts of the Apostles) was a community of solidarity in all its forms. The teachings of the Church Fathers (esp. the *Didache*) reminded the early Christian community of the need to share their goods and to serve the needy as a reflection of God's will, as seen in the person of Jesus. And St. Vincent's Common Rule, his many conferences, and our Constitutions tell us "we live within a true community of goods" and "hold all our goods in common" (C. 32, No. 4).

Moreover, our Fundamental Statute on Poverty (the most detailed explication of the vows, promulgated in 1659) tells us how we are to understand and live our vow of poverty. If we are truly seeking solidarity with Christ, one another, and the poor, then it must be seen in the quality of our witness to the vows, specifically, our vow of poverty which centers on our relationship to and use of temporal goods. Solidarity moves us from an 'I-centered' attitude toward community life and temporal goods to a 'We-focused' mindset. We develop and dedicate our time, talent, and treasure not for ourselves, but for the good of the Mission and our confreres.

However, what does solidarity mean when viewed from your perspective as Provincial Econome? In answering this question, I think a good measuring tool to test solidarity is to ask this question: will this

decision or expense be consonant with our Vincentian charism, and will it be of benefit to the apostolate, the community, and the confrere? I suggest some ideas for promoting solidarity in your work as Econome.

- A task of the Econome is to help the Visitor to manage well the temporal goods of the province for the full benefit of the mission. Are the properties, houses, and goods of the province in a state that they are useful to confreres for their work and community life?
- The basic needs of confreres must always be met, and the Econome should work together with the Visitor to insure that they are healthy and able to live in a way that assists them in living the Mission and being of support to one another and their families.
- Regular dialogue with the Visitor and local superiors on the finances related to the works and living conditions of local communities insures proper communication and avoids problems in money management or distribution on the local (or even provincial) levels.
- Full transparency in financial interactions, written and oral communication, and reports and statements. When needed, an Econome should engage professional outside assistance to insure the highest standards of accountancy of all funds received and spent.

Stewardship

Stewardship is a concept one hears often both in secular and religious circles. Its biblical origins situate it as a human response to the awesome beauty and wonder of God's creation. In fact, much of our 'eco-theology' on the environment is based on biblical stewardship. But as Christian stewards, we share in the fullness of life given by Jesus, whose humanity brought us "abundant life". The Catholic Bishops of the United States captured well the meaning of stewardship for us: "As Christian stewards, we receive God's gifts gratefully, cultivate them responsibly, share them lovingly in justice with others, and return them with increase to the Lord" (*"To Be a Christian Steward"*, Pastoral Letter, USCCB, Washington, DC, 1992).

In the Congregation, stewardship involves other key criteria: what impact will this decision or expense have on our patrimony of the poor? This idea goes back to the time of St. Vincent, who always encouraged his first generation of followers to move beyond the familiar boundaries of local communities and works. It was not an apostolic exhortation, or a personal call to conversion: Vincent believed the funds given us were for service of the Mission to the poor, and not for our convenience, comfort, or accumulation. This is why we find so much corre-

spondence between Vincent and local superiors on temporal matters that might seem trivial. Vincent knew that like conversion, stewardship is an ongoing process, requiring reflection and dialogue. In this regard, I would like to share several ideas to promote stewardship with you:

- Are our confreres willing to reflect and discuss the "Fundamental Statute on Poverty" I mentioned earlier? I think your facilitating a discussion of this type on both local and provincial levels about this statute is a good way to help confreres connect the relationship with stewardship, our finances, and the patrimony of the poor.
- In realizing that our goods are ultimately the patrimony of the poor, we must help educate confreres on the importance of "thinking globally, while acting locally" especially when it comes to sharing resources. This is especially important as many provinces are engaged in the process of reconfiguration and inter-provincial ventures.
- As Econome, you must walk the fine line between insuring your province's security and that of the confreres, works, and temporal goods, while not amassing excessive amounts of money or property. In today's uncertain economic climate this is most difficult, but it is still a goal you must set in union with the Visitor and his Council. I say it quite simply: avoid economic 'empire-building' at all costs.
- Finally, you must be 'wise stewards' in the Gospel sense. Funds given for a specific purpose must be used for the intention of the donor or returned. Reserve funds should be rare and only exist for a given intention and time span. And again, transparency and good communication with the Visitor, local superiors, and confreres when asked will be of enormous help to you in the long run, even if it can be time consuming.

Challenges Today

I suppose no talk on finances is possible without reference to today's current challenges. However, I am not going to focus on the world economy, on stocks or bonds, or other hot button items making up today's headlines. I am sure you are all well-versed in these matters, more than I hope to be! But I do want to discuss areas I believe are challenges you have or will encounter, and in light of our Vincentian virtue of simplicity, I will state them clearly and directly.

- A challenge I see for you today is how to navigate in a climate best described as a 'culture of entitlement'. While this term is ascribed to young people in the first-world countries, it is a world-

wide phenomenon, brought on by rampant consumerism. Yet, this problem is present in community life in other forms, including clericalism and elitism.

- Therefore, it is essential that in your dealings with confreres, you be even-handed, setting and adhering to standards expected of an Econome. Requests from confreres who are friends or by persons in authority should be filtered through already established policies and procedures. The appearance of favoritism should be avoided at all times.
- There should be no distinction in dealings with confreres who are income-producing and those who are not. As you know, our bonds as confreres are spiritual and are rooted in our charism as a community for mission. All confreres are full members, and equals.
- At a time when there is great external scrutiny of funding (particularly when monies given for works with the poor are mixed with private and public funds), it is essential that you have all the proper tools at your disposal to do your job effectively. I urge you to engage professional services when needed, and to make sure your reports are complete, current, and accurate. It is what we must do to protect the patrimony of the poor.

Best Practices of a Good Econome

It is common practice today to hear the phrase “best practices” used as a recommendation in business, education, or industry. Perhaps that is applicable here; but I prefer another phrase: the “Good Econome”. So what makes a “good Econome”? Allow me to offer several ideas.

First and foremost, a good Econome is a “team player”, who is willing to work with the Visitor, his Council, and local superiors. He realizes that his position is not one of power, but service for the good of the Mission and the province. His expertise and availability will serve the confreres of his province well, and they in turn will make good use of his service.

A good Econome takes an active interest in the well being of the province as an organic unit, as well as the local communities and individual confreres, becoming familiar with their working and living environments. He also is willing to train and keep himself updated in this work by learning new approaches and interacting with lay colleagues who can assist him. This is where in many places members of the Vincentian family can be helpful to an Econome. Lastly, a good Econome is a man of prayer and perspective. He comes to realize that his work, while hidden, and at times tedious is Vincentian at its core.

Like many of the countless meetings, letters, contracts, and entreaties made by Vincent de Paul during the course of his life, the work of

a good Econome is often unnoticed and unheralded. But is it the 'glue' holding the Congregation together. Your service reflects the timeless words of our Holy Founder: "And so, at the beginning, one does what one can, and little by little, Providence arranges things for the best" (COSTE: CED, 4:480). Thank you for your time and attention. May the Lord Jesus and St. Vincent strengthen and bless you in this important ministry of service to the Congregation of the Mission.