

The Role of the Advisor in the Vincentian Family Lay Groups

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22.VII.2002.

Introduction

I hope my presentation will give you some idea of the profile, role and functions of the Vincentian Family lay group Advisor. I fear repeating what has already been written at great length on this topic over the last few years and has been thoroughly discussed in previous conferences, but one must not forget, like they say in Spanish “you must repeat the good things.”

I do not intend to exhaust this topic in any way, as there is not enough time to do it and you would not have enough patience to listen to me. I will try to present this in a simplified manner and at the same time give you some food for thought. Thank you in advance for your attention.

I. Profound Sense of the Advisor’s Function

It is very important that before beginning and while doing his/her mission the Advisor is clear on its profound meaning, that is, certain of the goal and view towards which he/she is journeying with the group being accompanied. This goal, in my opinion has two dimensions: following Christ and the spiritual experience of Vincent de Paul.

1. Following Christ

The function of the Advisor, while that of teaching Christian faith, is essentially directed at forming disciples of Jesus Christ, adult men and women of faith, people who progressively and responsibly shape the meaning of their lives and the direction of their mission along the formative axis of following Christ. In this sense, the mission of the Advisor is Christocentric teaching: seeking to make Jesus Christ the life center of persons and communities.

To be Christian consists of committing oneself to Jesus of Nazareth, knowing him as the Christ and Savior, through whom the Father offers us salvation in a permanent and lasting way. It is knowing that his way of living and speaking, his practices, are “messianic.” His individual identity as Messiah and Christ is thus revealed by his own response to the disciples sent by John the Baptist asking him

who he was: “*Go back and tell John what you have seen and heard...*” (Lk 7:22). But this knowledge carries with it a practical requirement: pattern our lives after that of Jesus. Knowledge implies following. To believe consists of committing oneself to Jesus Christ and taking on as our own the meaning that he gave to his life. Faith is a personal decision to follow Christ, a new way of understanding and valuing life in relation to Jesus Christ as the ultimate criterion and original source of the meaning.

Jesus did not only say that people would be interested in his doctrine. He looked to form disciples, men and women, who would make an option for life in favor of him. For this he called and invited some to live a life experience in reference to him. He defined this as discipleship and following: “*Come follow me*” (Mk 1:17), “*Come and see*” (Jn 1:39).

Jesus proclaimed his mission at the synagogue in Nazareth in taking up the prophet Isaiah: “*The spirit of the Lord ... has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the Good News to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord’s year of favor!*” (Lk 4:18-19). These words, qualified by John Paul II as “Christ’s first messianic declaration,” show that the Good News of the Kingdom is not a simple announcement, but puts into action what is proclaimed. To evangelize the poor, giving life and liberty constitutes, in the same way, the mission of Jesus. We are faced with two obvious characteristics of Jesus’ mission: his practice of life and freedom and the privilege of the poor, the weak and sinners.

For those of us today, who, at the faith level, want to experience discipleship, the return to Galilee is inevitable, to see him there and learn how to follow him: “*It is there you will see him, just as he told you*” (Mk 16:7). St. Paul’s expression regarding the disciple “*to live in Christ*” or, another, even bolder, “*It is Christ who lives in me*” (Gal 2:20), implies following Jesus and conforming our options, criteria and lifestyles to the words and practices of Jesus.

Therefore the Advisor’s function, as example of faith and discipleship, must consist of journeying together towards Galilee to find Jesus “*teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom and curing all kinds of diseases and sickness among the people*” (Mt 4:23). Following Jesus means taking on the meaning of his life and continuing his mission: proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom and healing those who are suffering.

2. The spiritual experience of Vincent de Paul, disciple of Jesus Christ

Apart from his correspondence, St. Vincent never wrote anything on his spirituality and above all did not seek to systematize it. That is why to make strong connections from what is called Vincentian Spirituality, one must modestly confine

oneself to what Vincent de Paul lived, his spiritual experience, as he himself described it, or was expressed or revealed in his conferences and correspondence: the concrete manner in which St. Vincent followed Jesus Christ, day after day, at the heart of historical events. It is about a spiritual experience whose starting point had been an encounter with the poor that led Monsieur Vincent to discover and intimately know Jesus Christ, evangelizer and servant of the poor and marginalized, throughout his life and to follow him as a disciple. In a letter addressed to Fr. Portail Vincent writes: *“Remember Monsieur, we live in Jesus Christ through the death of Jesus Christ, and we must die in Jesus Christ through the life of Jesus Christ, and our life must be hidden in Jesus Christ and filled with Jesus Christ, and in order to die as Jesus Christ, we must live as Jesus Christ”* (Coste, Vol. 1, p. 276). According to his first biographer, Abelly, Vincent *“thought of taking a firm and unbreakable resolve to honor Jesus Christ and to imitate him more perfectly than ever before by committing his entire life to the service of the poor”* (L. Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God, Vincent de Paul*, Book III, Chapter XI, p. 81).

The happiness and grace of St. Vincent’s disciples consists in being inspired by, nourished by and taking on this experience. Therefore, it is also toward this goal that the Advisor must orient the Vincentian group being accompanied. This experience will become the deepest motivation for service and the proclamation of the Kingdom to the poor, suffering faces of Christ.

II. Profile of the Vincentian Advisor

Generally, an Advisor is not prepared to undertake this service without some previous training. And later, he/she will not be exempt from dangers during his/her service. There must be adequate preparation, ongoing revision and updating. I will only indicate certain aspects that merit our attention:

1. Spiritual and life experiences

It is only in living a true spiritual experience in encountering Jesus Christ, evangelizer and servant of the poor, that one can be in harmony with the Spirit of the group being directed. An understanding of theology and Vincentian spirituality is indispensable, but this is not enough if the Advisor is not attentive to this spiritual sensitivity, a sign of Christian maturity. That is, if the Advisor has not made the spiritual experience of Vincent de Paul his/her own. It is not about having this experience of God to a higher degree, but living an encounter with God, taking into consideration limitations in the different circumstances of life. This means that there must be an experience of life and a constant dialogue with the surrounding world.

2. Pastoral experience

Equally there must be a pastoral work close to the poor, deep knowledge of their sufferings and their spiritual as well as physical needs. By itself, evangelical activity for the poor will give the Advisor the needed sensitivity to guide Vincentian Family lay groups who are not theoretical thinkers but workers with the poor, working in their world of poverty.

3. Prayer of the Advisor

The Advisor must support the mission by prayer. Union with God and the group being accompanied are the two poles of this intercessory prayer: placing oneself before God and before the group, praying for them and oneself, in total selflessness (that is, forgoing one's own way of seeing things and self interests), allowing God to progressively transform hearts. In this way the Advisor will become more and more transparent and docile to the activity of the Spirit. Transparent in such a way that God, through the intermediary of the Advisor, communicates with the group and directs them towards the decision to follow Jesus Christ, evangelizer and servant of the poor. A good portion of the essential qualities for dialogue (welcome, respect, balance, mediation and love that revitalizes all) is rooted in this type of prayer.

4. Psychological traits of the Advisor

An experience of the Spirit is not something that just drifts along to people, it comes to them, such as they are and as they are psychologically. Forgetting this would be to ignore the teachings of the best spiritual guides, including Vincent de Paul, experts in human psychology.

An Advisor must be psychologically mature. Maturity is not perfection but acceptance of oneself. Therefore we speak of likeable persons, able to establish relationships with others, having a good dose of self-confidence that stems from healthy self-esteem. This, in turn, comes about from sufficient knowledge of one's limitations, strengths, tendencies and pitfalls and, above all, acceptance of them.

Yet this is not enough. The mission of a Group Advisor requires a minimum of psychological knowledge so as not to become lost amid the surrounding stumbling blocks. He/she must have some knowledge so as to know what to do and greater knowledge so as to know what not to do. The images of God, prayer, affection, desire, wishes, moral imperatives, etc. are areas where psychological wisdom has much to say, even in what concerns dialogue: transference, possible dependencies between the Advisor and group, etc. Also, given that an Advisor may find him/herself faced with people who suffer psychologically or from various pathologies, he/she must be prepared and informed so as to be able to direct them to

people who can help them face their problem without becoming involved in a therapeutic milieu him/herself.

Also important, the Advisor, if he is a man, must be aware of the dignity and vocation of women, their decisive role in the Church and today's society and the contributions they can offer within the Vincentian lay group.

5. Ecclesial sense

The Advisor must also be prepared to fulfill his/her role with a deep ecclesial sense, that is, to assist the group to live out their vocation of service and evangelization of the poor in union with the Universal Church and to understand that, within this union, each distinctive action takes on universal value. To this basic element must be added adequate knowledge of the Church's social doctrine, which, since its origin with Leo XIII, is an expression, now in its centenary, of the Church's current general option for the poor. In the same way, it would be beneficial if the Advisor had knowledge of today's theological trends that give importance to the perspective of the poor in order to competently carry out his/her mission.

6. Knowledge of the Association with whom the Advisor works

The Advisor must know well the Association with whom he/she is working, its history and its own characteristics within the larger Vincentian Family. Differences do exist and it is best to maintain them so that the family has greater richness and avoids blending the different expressions. But, along with indispensable theoretical knowledge, the Advisor should feel a true love for the Association and seriously, as well as consistently, devote his/her time to it.

III. The Role of the Advisor in Vincentian Lay Groups

We are now entering the heart of the topic. I hope that what has been said thus far will help you to understand what is going to be said concerning the role of the Vincentian lay group Advisor.

1. Some preliminary points

1.1. A non-directive, freeing accompaniment

The person fulfilling the task of Advisor can only accomplish it by absolute selflessness in the knowledge that one is being allowed to enter; from the humility of the one who knows that he/she is invited to participate, only as an Advisor, in the journey that the group being accompanied must travel. With this attitude the

Advisor is able to go forward gently in deep respect, aware that he/she is on holy ground.

1.2. “Animated by the Spirit of God” (Rom 8:14)

The Spirit is the life principle and sole guide of a Christian. It is the Spirit that shows the way, guides and gives strength for the journey. No one can replace the Spirit.

1.3. “You must not allow yourselves to be called ‘Rabbi’ ... You must call no one on earth your ‘father’ ... nor must you allow yourselves to be called ‘teachers’ ...” (Mt 23:8-10)

The Advisor is not exempt from the dangers of influence, a swayed conscience or closeness. There is one Father, the heavenly Father, and there is one Lord and teacher, the Christ. The Father and Christ give us the Spirit.

1.4. “He must increase and I must decrease” (Jn 3:30)

As soon as accompaniment begins to progress, it diminishes in intensity and consequently the Advisor tends to disappear. The objective of accompaniment is that Christ, as evangelizer and servant, increase, “be formed” (cf. Gal 4:19) within those making up the group. Thus, participation of the Advisor in this task of growth diminishes little by little.

1.5. A group of lay Vincentians is destined to the mission

A group of lay Vincentians is a place where members prepare themselves to accomplish a mission, that is, to serve and evangelize the poor. Consequently, it is not exactly a bible or theological study group, nor a prayer group, nor a group for sharing ideas.

2. Role and functions of the Advisor

After having given the needed descriptions, I want to discuss, according to my opinion, what the Advisor’s role consists of within a group of lay Vincentians. This is accomplished through the following four functions:

2.1. Spiritual

A. The Advisor must, above all, be a person who knows how to transmit his/her experience of faith in Jesus Christ to the group. The Advisor must animate the members to become, like Vincent de Paul, disciples who follow Jesus Christ, and with Christ, fulfill the mission to evangelize and serve the poor.

B. The Advisor must be watchful that the group lives out the Vincentian spirit and allows itself to be guided by the Spirit and not by traditional or modern trends of spirituality that are not compatible with the true Vincentian spirit. It is almost a radically new way to live the old evangelical spirit (cf. Jaime Corera, *op.cit.*, p. 87). This does not exclude the possibility of enriching this spirit, as did St. Vincent, with spiritualities similar and near to this.

C. The fact that a group of Lay Vincentians is not exactly a prayer group does not say, in any way, that the Advisor does not have the possibility of promoting a life of prayer and Eucharistic celebration among the members that nourishes their faith and is a motivation to continue to evangelize and serve the poor, the true faces of Christ. For a Vincentian, prayer and Eucharist are but a stopping place on the road in following Jesus Christ in order to be spiritually strengthened and continue the mission.

2.2. Human

The human function of an Advisor consists in assisting people to grow by means of, what I consider, four fundamental attitudes:

A. The first is a sincere attitude of **welcome**, going far beyond, of course, being well-mannered, good-natured or initially congenial. To welcome is to affectionately and delicately receive and interact with the experience and life of another person, to know how to be in sync with his/her heart, far from words spoken or heard, without forcing silence. It is not being afraid to listen to or receive all that the other would like to say. It is treating the other with great mercy, not as a parent, but sinner to sinner.

B. The second attitude is **humility**, true humility. We must be keenly aware that we are not the principal actors but limited instruments of God's action. It is about not looking to give lessons but being able to learn, day after day, the lessons that the group members give us, for, from the outset, we do not know everything or rather, we know hardly anything.

C. The third attitude is **patience**. Knowing how to listen unhurriedly and openly — not watching the clock, trying to save time, nor regretting what was spent. Being aware that before being able to say something significant to another there must be a great deal of listening and a great deal of being quiet. And when it is necessary to correct or reprimand, it must not only be done respectfully but also with the certitude that it is being done to truly help the other.

D. And lastly, **selflessness**. Accompaniment is a service, that is why the Advisor puts him/herself at the feet of the other. We cannot become the center of attention. We must be sensitive not to create any sort of dependencies nor have more

demands than those required in the following of Jesus and the service of the poor. We must give totally, without taking into account the affection, gratitude, esteem and appreciation received.

2.3. Formation

Even if good group accompaniment already constitutes an excellent means of formation, the Advisor must be concerned to find the necessary means so that those forming the group have, among other aspects, biblical, spiritual, Vincentian, pastoral and social preparation. This preparation will, at the time of serving and evangelizing the poor, allow them to act not only with their heart and good will, but also intelligently.

2.4. Pastoral

From the pastoral point of view, the Advisor must know how to motivate and guide the group toward the mission. For a Vincentian group, as we have already mentioned, this is always toward evangelization and service of the poor. This mission requires:

A. That the Advisor be aware of the social, economic and political problems in today's world that especially touch the poor and are a contradiction of the Kingdom of God, so as to help the group know and analyze them in light of the social teaching of the Church and take them into account when fulfilling the mission.

B. That the Advisor also assist the group to consider that the Good News carried by Christ has a universal destiny and that it is not necessarily linked to a specific culture. The Gospel must be inculturated; that is, the values present in the different cultures must be taken on and, like yeast in the dough, transform the counter-values that exist in the culture. Naturally, this is valuable for the Vincentian spiritual experience and charism.

C. And lastly, that the Advisor sufficiently know the situation and the most urgent challenges of his/her specific Church (diocese, country). This is a key point. Local groups find their ultimate meaning, as I have just stressed, in mission and service. One cannot obtain a good formation nor growth in a lay vocation if there is not solid reference to the context where the mission will take place.

IV. The Pedagogy of Jesus as Advisor of the Twelve

To conclude, I would like to share a brief reflection of the pedagogy of Jesus as Advisor to the twelve apostles:

At the start of his public life, Jesus called some people to follow him and be his disciples. He shared his life with them and had a very special concern towards them, especially after what is called the crisis of Galilee. He privately and clearly explained to them what he was saying to the multitudes through parables. *“He would not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything to his disciples when they were alone”* (Mk 4:34) for *“to you”* — he tells them — *“the mystery of the kingdom God has been granted”* (Mk 4:11). The disciples also had occasion to ask Jesus what was the sense and importance of his actions. And again they asked regarding the cure of the possessed epileptic after the disciples were unable to expel the evil spirit, *“When he had gone indoors his disciples asked him privately, ‘Why were we unable to cast it out?’”* (Mk 9:28).

He continually dialogued with them, instructed them, counseled them, in combination with hard and demanding criticism: *“This is not to happen among you...”* (Mk 10:43) and comforting concern: *“You therefore must be on your guard. I have forewarned you of everything ... Be on your guard, stay awake...”* (Mk 13:23, 33).

But it was undoubtedly the shared everyday experience *“Come and see”* (Jn 1:39), which constituted the fundamental basis of Jesus’ teachings: his life and actions attentively observed by his disciples became the norm for their future practice. *“It is enough for the disciple that he should grow to be like his teacher...”* (Mt 10:25), he once indicated to them.

Jesus’ manner of acting, his way of approaching people and reacting to their needs were carefully watched and adopted by his disciples as a paradigm of evangelical comportment.

Following Jesus, today and yesterday, consists of extending his mission of evangelization and service of the poor and marginalized in new historical contexts, while at the same time trying to discern his attitudes, options and actions for a true conversion. Within this task, the role of the Advisor of a group destined with a mission is fundamental.

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(Translation: TRANSLATION CENTER – DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY, Paris)