

Spirituality and Sense of Mission of the Provincial Treasurer

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- Is there a spirituality specific to the mission of the Provincial Treasurer?
- Does our service as treasurer have meaning?
- Do we need spirituality in order to exercise our responsibility?

Such are the questions that may be posed to us, by ourselves or others.

When we discover management courses given today in the major universities or in advanced institutes of commerce, there is often a course or some research entitled: “**Spirituality, Ethics and Paths of Meaning,**” as I read recently in the course outlines for a university in Montreal.

So, we are not the only ones to pose the question about meaning in the management of economic affairs and other questions which touch on the fundamental human attitudes which management requires.

Some faces may help us discover a spiritual path, an attitude towards our responsibility.

The faces are of those closest to Jesus, among his parents, friends and the group of apostles.

1. I think first of the face of **Joseph**, husband of Mary, father of Jesus, called ‘the Just,’ he appears first as a man who listens, in the account of the annunciation to him in chapter one of Matthew. Must we not also be listening men? A craftsman carpenter, he was in charge of a small business. In a certain sense, do we not also direct a business, with salaries, production, plans, undertakings? Did he not also, like us, have worries, in ordering things, managing his co-workers, paying insurance, dealing with bad clients, etc.
2. I also think of the face of **Thomas**: a concrete man, who demanded that he touch what was promised to him. The day after Christ’s burial, he is not there. Sometimes it strikes me to think that he was occupied with administrative tasks. This is my interpretation; I imagine that the group of apostles, now that they no longer had Judas, had given him responsibility for provisions: he had at least

12 people to feed, after the sad events like those involving Jesus. Had Thomas, perhaps, the courage to walk abroad in Jerusalem and the knowledge to haggle prices with the shopkeepers? The gospel tells us nothing of these abilities of Thomas.

3. I think of the faces of **Martha and Mary**. One is absorbed by the tasks involved in order to welcome her visitor well; the other is absorbed by thoughts and dialogue with their friend Jesus. I will return to these two women.
4. The face of **St. Vincent** could not be forgotten from this picture. Does not the man who sought an honest retirement reveal himself as an admirable superior wise in the business of this world in order, at the same time, to follow issues which touch on the temporal concerns of the community and responses to reach out to the poor of his time who were hungry, who were sick, displaced, in prison, forgotten by those in power etc.? What might he teach treasurers?

I return now to the faces of **Martha and Mary**:

As a preamble, I wish to underline that the reflections which follow are not those of specialist in economics; they are not founded exclusively on the observation of economic facts; they are inspired rather by general considerations.

They do not seek to offer a model. They raise questions about the attitudes which are desirable in management, by looking to the faces of Martha and Mary. In this, they join with many questions which come from eminent economists who admit with humility and perceptiveness that their science is in question. Even politicians have taken up the baton, like the former French Prime Minister who published an article entitled: "Disarray in economic thinking."

a. **To unite the qualities of both Martha and Mary**

The difficulty, in economics, is that the subject is multiform. It is made up, above all, of concrete, practical, palpable things: goods, which consist of buildings and securities, merchandise, often books published by confreres but also stocks of commodities, consumable goods, national and foreign currencies, etc.

but also of imponderables: the appreciation of the value of a thing, forecasts, the geopolitical context, etc.

And there are ideas which tend towards the infinite: What is the general interest? What idea is worth following up? What is the end purpose of the society into which we have been sent?

From all of this comes my suggestion to mediate often on one of the most intimate scenes of the gospel, which sets before us the two sisters of Lazarus: Martha and Mary, the two charming friends of Jesus.

We have, in our mission, to take into account the basic concerns of Martha as well as the contemplation of Mary.

On the one hand, as active participants, actors in a micro-economy — that of solidarity with the poorest — in supplying the missionaries who ask it of us with the means to a certain efficacy, we provincial treasurers, always missionaries, have both by nature and necessity the concern, not always exclusive but primordial, for that which is practical and immediate. On the other hand, others, those who make provincial policy, the Visitor and his council, are more attentive, by their function, to larger and loftier considerations, which will require time for reflection.

But it is important to take into account, obviously, that as provincial treasures, we are very often in the position of being both Martha and Mary at the same time, because economics, due to the many factors which influence it, relies as much on Mary as on Martha.

- b. **Also, in order to live out courageously the service which is asked of us, it is important that we try to practice four virtues, while always contemplating them in our prayer.**

Practice **Temperance**: we need to know how to modify appetites, perhaps at table but also in the consumer society which continually provokes us. It requires us to have an attitude of moderation: not consuming everything, not spending everything, not having everything, leaving “the everything at once” in order to prepare for the future. This fits well with our activity as treasurer.

Practice **Justice**: this consists in giving to each his due, particularly to those who work with us, those in our pay, our lay or religious collaborators. Justice consists in a mutual exchange of respect.

Practice **Prudence**: before acting on a given issue, it is important to consider one or several feasibility plans, and to organize the goal, objectives and means.

Practice **Strength**: the task of the Provincial Treasurer may occasionally appear thankless, sometimes unpleasant. It requires courage since many activities are on the go at the same time and require great availability. All of which means that we have to build up a capital of perseverance, endurance, self-control, before seeking to accumulate goods, which will be used up in time.

The time has doubtless come to value again these four virtues, which seem to me to be the only ones capable of aiding us in the face of the brutality of certain human powers, in face of the excess of misery, in face of technological dangers, in face of psychological fragility, in face of environmental uncertainties. Yes, in face of the flows and wild hazards of the world, these four virtues can allow us to regulate our forces. We have to be attentive that none of our actions leads to an evil action elsewhere, through uncontrolled bouncing, like a rugby ball, tossed without direction. And it is necessary for us, without a shadow of a doubt, to believe that the fact of an honest action somewhere may lead to others elsewhere. It is a new opportunity for the world, it is a missionary collaboration which we can bring, it is a form of positive ricocheting which leads others on surer paths to respond to the immense needs of the poor.

I return to the face of St Vincent de Paul:

Our founder, Vincent de Paul, is a witness and a counsellor for us, as provincial treasurers, to take up our responsibility. I have reread the 16 letters of St. Vincent with Mathurin Gentil, who entered the Congregation at the age of 35.

One can consider him as one of the first treasurers of House of St. Lazare in Paris. In 1645, he was sent 200 kilometres from Paris to the Major Seminary at Le Mans, where he continued in this role and where he died in 1673.

This is what M. Jolly, second successor of St. Vincent, said of him:

All his happiness was to be unknown and detached from this world. He suffered for many years, with patience, scorn and affronts. He was transported with joy when he saw in the houses where he lived that everything went smoothly in good order and with regularity.

Here are the topics on which Mathurin sought advice or the matters St. Vincent asked him to settle:

- the lease of a building (Coste III, 234)
- the payment of the purchase of fertilizer, natural manure, and the use of the gardens of the seminary (Coste III, 234)
- the exchange of one house for another (Coste III, 235)
- the sending post by express (Coste III, 313)

- the overseeing of dinners offered to externs (Coste III, 313)
- the share to be returned to the family as the inheritance of a deceased confrere (Coste III, 388)
- the repurchase of fishponds (Coste III, 388)
- the role of procurator of the Congregation in matters concerning chapels (Coste III, 388)
- the reminder concerning Masses for the dead (Coste III, 389)
- the distribution of funds and official papers (Coste III, 389)
- the contract of association between different establishments (Coste III, 495)
- the renting of 100 beds for the ordinands' retreats at Le Mans (Coste III, 496)
- the quality of the food for feeding those residing in the Seminary (Coste III, 504): "Give good bread, good meat, do not sell good wine in order to serve a worse one, do not expose the community to complaints of miserly treatment."
- the works of repairing and permission to request (Coste III, 578)
- the diocesan taxes (Coste III, 578)
- the reserves and working capital before an important event (Coste III, 620)
- the reimbursement of a half-pension (Coste III, 620)
- the management of the granaries (Coste III, 623)
- the analytical management of the accounts of the Seminary (Coste IV, 54)
- the setting the price of board and lodging at the Seminary (Coste IV, 54)
- the getting the advice of the superior in smaller works and of the general in larger repairs (Coste IV, 272).

This list may seem somewhat fastidious. It is, nevertheless, a testimony given to us to establish good relations with our Provincial Visitor and those who have given us the task of provincial treasurer.

Fr. Félix Contassot, who was Assistant General of the Congregation during the mandate of Fr. William Slattery, published in 1964 a book entitled: *Saint Vincent de Paul, guide des supérieurs*. The last chapter of this work is concerned with temporal administration. It is very interesting for provincial treasurers because it gives a certain number of extracts from the letters or conferences in which St. Vincent gives his opinion on our role, our mission.

In Volume XII of Coste, pages 110-111, St. Vincent comments on the Common Rules, Chapter I, Articles 2 and 3, which are dedicated to the different offices in the Congregation. Here is a little passage where St. Vincent alludes to the obligation of having some confreres who are in charge of temporal matters:

O my God! necessity obliges us to have perishable goods and to preserve for the Company what the Lord has given it; but we must apply ourselves to this as God applies himself to producing and preserving created things as ornament of the world and as food for his creatures, in such a way that he takes care even of a worm; which in no way hinders his interior workings, by which he engenders his Son and brings forth the Holy Spirit; these he does and does not omit the others. As it is thus God's pleasure to provide for the needs of plants, animals and humans, so those who have responsibility in this small universe of the Company must also provide for the needs of those who are members of it. It is absolutely necessary, my God; otherwise, all that your Providence has given for their maintenance would be lost, your service would cease and we would not be able to go freely to evangelise the poor.

Our service allows, firstly, that missionaries may go to evangelise the poor. That is the objective which we must keep before ourselves in our work and the purpose which we can give to it each day.

But for St. Vincent the best means of working in the temporal matters of the Congregation is to work in cooperation with the superior, be he local or general. Numerous times, he recalls this in letters, as to Mathurin Gentil or in more general advice:

To Mathurin Gentil, he writes;

Do not undertake any building project, or major renovations without an express order from the General; for minor repairs the permission of the local superior is required. This is in conformity with the Rules and customs of the Company (Coste IV, 272).

To Superiors, he gives this advice:

It happened in one of our houses that, in the absence of the superior, the assistant and the consultors spent a large amount of money. Granted, it was for good things, but they were extraordinary things. It is of this that I am advising you, and I ask you to tell the members of your house that no building should be done, no lawsuits initiated, and no extraordinary expense incurred which exceeds six écus, without the order of the Superior General (Coste IV, 258).

In particular, he calls for prudence in business matters and in particular in investments, sometimes a hazardous thing.

He wrote once to Bernard Codoing, superior at Annecy, who had invested money without having notified St. Vincent:

It would have been well for you to have sent me both the proposals and then the reasons for and against, on which to base my judgment. I had a hard time consenting to a few unduly difficult clauses in the contract. That is why I beseech you, Monsieur, never to do anything like that again without writing to me about it ... I think you had been advised to send me the draft before signing. That is what everybody in the Company has always done everywhere and what is done in every well-regulated company. You will object that I take too long, that you sometimes wait six months for an answer that can be given in a month and that, meanwhile, opportunities are lost and everything stands still ... Please, then, correct yourself of your hastiness in deciding and doing things, and I shall work at correcting myself of my slowness.
(Coste II, 207)

The mission of the provincial treasurer is, without any doubt, a mission in the shadow of superiors. In order to respond better and with quality, it seems to me important to cultivate the call of the Gospel in it:

- with **ardour** like Martha
- with **reflection** like her sister Mary
- with **courage** like Thomas
- and also to cultivate the flowers of **trust** in Providence and of **cooperation**, to which the advice of St Vincent de Paul calls us.

(EUGENE CURRAN, C.M., translator)