

Our Vincentian Identity Today in Light of the Constitutions: Evaluation and Challenges

“Dear Brothers, not only have you made an outstanding contribution to the work of the Church over the last four centuries, for which she is profoundly grateful, but you also have ‘a great history still to be accomplished!’ (Vita Consecrata, 110). As you seek to consider how best to live the Vincentian charism, my message to you is this: ‘Duc in altum! Put out into the deep!’”¹

I. A CAREFUL LOOK AT THE RECENT PAST

The Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission are the result of a long process of discernment made in response to the Second Vatican Council’s call to communities to express, in a new way, their own charism and to revise their juridical norms.

The thorough and painstaking work of three General Assemblies ended with the writing of the definitive text which, after having received the approval of the Holy See, was promulgated on 27 September 1984.²

In promulgating the new Constitutions, the Superior General, Fr. Richard McCullen, stated: *“Within the covers of this book our*

¹ Message of John Paul II to the Superior General and the members of the 40th General Assembly, 18 July 2004.

² *Constitutiones et Statuta Congregationis Missionis* (1969), in *Vincentiana* (1969), 85-127. *Declarationes* (1974), in *Vincentiana* (1974), 286-302. *Constitutiones et Statuta. Textus completus Conventus Generalis anni 1968-1969 emendatus a Conventu XXXV* (1974), in *Vincentiana* (1974), 303-345. *Constitutiones et Statuta Congregationis Missionis* (1980), in *Vincentiana* (1980), 193-268. For the promulgation of the Constitutions, 1984 see: *Vincentiana* (1985), 3-11. For a study of the process used by the Congregation up to the promulgation of the present Constitutions, see: M. PÉREZ-FLORES, “Desde las Constituciones de 1954 a las de 1980,” in *Vincentiana* (1984), 751-784; “De las Constituciones de 1980 a las de 1984,” in *Vincentiana* (1985), 84-146. C. BRAGA, “The Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission. Historical notes,” in *Vincentiana* (2000), 289-319. R. McCULLEN, “Decretum Promulgationis,” in *Vincentiana* (1985), 5.

identity as a Congregation in the Church is delineated” and he expressed a fervent wish: “The text must now be imprinted on our hearts and lived out in our vocation to preach the gospel to the poor.”

We have reviewed and evaluated our life and mission in light of the Constitutions. We have sought to see how the Congregation, in its entirety, has lived the identity portrayed by the Constitutions.

We have committed ourselves to use the Constitutions as our guide. However, we have discovered that, in the midst of our daily activities, we often take for granted these guiding principles of our life and pay less attention to the Constitutions against which we should constantly measure ourselves.

Together we thank God that our Constitutions bring up to date the insights of St. Vincent and our Vincentian tradition, urging us to live as followers of Christ, the Evangelizer of the poor.

The Congregation, gathered in General Assembly, reaffirms the depth and richness of our Constitutions as the touchstone of our identity. We have clearly stated our appreciation of them and of what has been achieved under their inspiration. At the same time we have pointed out that our identity, which we accept in theory, comes under pressure as we strive to maintain it, amid the demands of life, ministry and the structures of the Congregation.

The question of our identity — who are we? — is responded to with new enthusiasm, with renewed hope, with fire, as we leave behind our own comforts to adopt a prophetic stance hallmarked by generous giving of ourselves to the pressing demands of the mission.

Congregation of the Mission, be who you are! Do not yield to mediocrity! Fan into a flame the fire within! Like St. Vincent, walk passionately in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, Evangelizer of the poor. Give new life to your charism, the gift that the Holy Spirit has entrusted to you. Work tirelessly to go beyond the boundaries of your mission! Full of conviction, give witness to and spread the vitality of your vocation!

From this creative fidelity we shall be able to show the reason for what we are and how we respond to the new challenges in the years to come.

II. A CLOSE LOOK AT THE PRESENT

From the time the Constitutions were promulgated many noteworthy changes have occurred and been lived out in the world, in the Church, in our provinces and vice-provinces and communities.

The recent Assemblies of the Congregation have offered guidelines to bring up to date our mission and our vocation.³

Following the same pastoral orientation of our recent Assemblies, the 40th General Assembly offers to all the members of the Congregation its reflections about the impact produced on our Vincentian identity by the principal changes which are taking place in society and in the Church. It also offers its thoughts about the principal challenges which we have to face in the coming years.

1. With regard to values

We are living in an historic moment, one which constitutes a veritable seismic shift. We are witnessing the rise and development of a culture which is giving birth to new paradigms for living. On the one side can be seen new forms of relationship, of solidarity in favor of peace, and a more evident global understanding. Also to be noted is the increased consciousness of the worth and dignity of the human person, a growing recognition of the rights of women, and a heightened interest in the defense of human life. In the area of the Faith we note signs of faithfulness to Jesus Christ. On the other side social institutions, both political and familial, are under increasing pressure. To this can be added a weakening of Christian values due to the growth of lifestyles that are socially individualistic, economically consumerist and religiously inward-looking.

These changes make a significant impact on our Vincentian identity since they demand of us new ways of relating, of insertion into and of presence in the world, together with a critical stance in the face of modern-day values. To respond to these changes we need an all-embracing Vincentian spiritual experience, an initial and ongoing formation that is coherent, theoretically and humanly, and a presence to the poor which is so committed that it is prophetic.

Changes such as these demand that we live out our identity and our Vincentian values, expressed in our vows and in the five virtues proper to our charism, in a manner that is credible both to ourselves and to a society which constantly tries to empty them of value.

³ The General Assembly of 1986 presented *Lines of Action 1986-1992* to the Congregation, in *Vincentiana* (1986), 549-605. The Assembly of 1992 in its Letter to the Confreres set forth various commitments in *New Evangelization, New Men, New Communities*, in *Vincentiana* (1992), 359-388. The General Assembly of 1998 promoted collaboration with the different groups of the Vincentian Family in order to respond to the challenges of the mission: *With the Vincentian Family we face the challenges of the Mission at the threshold of the new Millennium*, in *Vincentiana* (1998), 384-397.

2. With regard to our apostolic activity

We are experiencing the whole gamut of the effects of globalization. On the one hand, globalization has produced changes for the good such as the development of the means of communication, an interest in the plight of the poor and solidarity with them. In the Church we see the leading role for laity, and the efforts made to transform society. On the other hand there is the growing gap between the rich and poor; the destruction of local cultures, the degradation of the environment, unjust social structures, exploitation of workers, corruption, consumerism, an increasing flood of refugees and immigrants, an increase in the trafficking of women and children, and a wide variety of problems such as fundamentalism, war, terrorism and the threat of diseases on an epidemic scale.

The impact of these changes on our Vincentian identity shows itself in:

- a growing awareness of the need to seek an adequate understanding of the Church and of the Vincentian mission;
- a new readiness to take the initiative in seeking the help and collaboration of other groups within the Church and in society;
- a greater willingness to share our resources, both human and economic, with the worldwide Congregation, so as to respond, as best we can, to the cries of the poor.

All this means that we must work to share our common spirit with the other branches of the Vincentian Family, and together to heed the call to an ongoing conversion through which we become evermore deeply involved in the world and in the lot of the poor.

3. With regard to vocations and to community life

In some provinces of the Congregation we note the growth in vocations and the number of young confreres, while in others the numbers are falling and the average age of confreres is increasing.

This situation impacts on our Vincentian identity. In those provinces where there are young confreres and vocations are growing there is an effort to put in place long-range plans as well as a concern for the availability of economic resources for their support. In the provinces undergoing a fall in numbers and an increase in the age of their members there is a renewed commitment to the promotion of vocations and a greater interest in expressing the Vincentian character of our ministries and our apostolic life.

The implications of this for us are:

- a renewed commitment to follow Christ evangelizing the poor;
- an invitation to share with young people our prayer, our fraternal life and the work of spreading the Good News;
- a clarion call to make our community life such that it bears witness to our vocation, to our mission, and to our multicultural reality.

III. A HOPEFUL LOOK TOWARD THE FUTURE

1. Revitalize Our Vocation

“The spirit of the Congregation is a participation in the spirit of Christ himself, as proposed by St Vincent; ‘He sent me to preach the good news to the poor’ (Lk 4:18). Hence, ‘Jesus Christ is the rule of the Mission’ and shall be considered as the center of its life and activity (SV XII, 130)” (Constitutions, 5).

Faithful to our vocation we are called to:

- provide initial and ongoing formation, following the example of Christ, the Evangelizer of the poor, deepening our knowledge of our Vincentian identity through study, formational gatherings of young confreres, through provincial, inter-provincial and international meetings, and participation in spiritual exercises and retreats;
- take up frequently our Constitutions, studying them, praying over them, and reflecting together on their meaning in formational meetings, held at the local-community level and provincial level;
- give creative and faithful expression to our Vincentian charism in the cultures of different peoples and in the new culture of our age;
- establish, form and coordinate effective teams for the recruitment and pastoral care of those interested in joining us;
- warmly welcome to our community life, to our prayer and to our work of spreading the Good News those who show a desire to become Vincentians;
- be open to new styles of community life with lay people when appropriate to our mission;
- create and foster, in our works, groups of the Vincentian Family, and offer them a solid Vincentian formation.

At this General Assembly, the members, meeting in continental groups, and taking into account the challenges we face, proposed these Lines of Action for revitalizing our vocation.

Asia - Pacific (APVC)

1. Give top priority to meetings for the formation of formators.
2. Intensify a dialogue that explores the face of Vincent in the Asia-Pacific region (e.g. Charism and Culture; Forum of Theologians/Experts).
3. Give attention, at alternating meetings for the formation of formators, to ongoing formation.

Europe and Middle East (CEVIM)

1. Strengthen CEVIM with a new statute and a new structure.
2. Start a European project for initial and ongoing Vincentian formation.
3. Promote the vocational dimension in all our apostolic activity.

Latin America (CLAPVI)

1. Continue to deepen our experience and following of Jesus Christ, evangeliser and servant of the poor, in the Latin-American reality, through meetings, regional courses of CLAPVI, etc.
2. Continue to concretise our charism, by way of an anthropological reflection on the poor, and by inculturating it through direct contact with and service of the poor.
3. Support and participate in the Latin-American School of Vincentian Spirituality.

Africa (COVIAM)

1. Continue the formation of formators (in Kenya).
2. Collaborate interprovincially in terms of personnel and students.
3. Study English and French (for better communication and closeness between provinces and vice-provinces).

USA (NCV)

1. Promote systematic and sustained cooperation among the Vocation Directors of each of the five US Provinces.
2. Continue support [financial and otherwise] for the translation projects and work of the *Vincentian Studies Institute*.
3. Initiate a national [possibly internet] program for studying and further assimilating the Constitutions.

2. Strengthen Our Apostolic Work

“The love of Christ, who had pity on the crowd (Mk 8:2) is the source of all our apostolic activity” (Constitutions, 11).

Faithful to our vocation we are called to:

- use the criteria set down in our Constitutions 2 and 12 to review our existing works, to begin new ones, to leave those not in accord with the above criteria, and to give new vigor to our present ones;
- commit ourselves to work together with the members of the Vincentian Family and with other Church groups for the evangelization of the poor, and to work with other social groups in defense of the poor and for the betterment of their lot;
- encourage interprovincial collaboration in our apostolic work so that the evangelization of the poor is done more effectively;
- develop, articulate and apply criteria to enhance the missionary and prophetic nature of our charism in each of the ministries, works and activities of ongoing formation in which we are engaged;
- promote, as true disciples of Christ, our availability and mobility in taking on ministries that suit our own charism;
- develop in our ministry new ways to integrate the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the Sacraments with the direct service of the poor;
- provide an initial and ongoing formation able to meet the demands which society places on our apostolic work;
- put renewed energy into the formation of those charged with the formation of our own members, of the diocesan clergy and of lay people.

At this General Assembly, the members, meeting in continental groups, and taking into account the challenges we face, proposed these Lines of Action for strengthening our apostolic work.

Asia - Pacific (APVC)

1. Put in place short and long-term programs of interprovincial collaboration in our apostolic activity (China, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Tanzania, etc.).
2. Encourage the provinces to find concrete ways of combining “priestly ministry with that of direct service of the poor.” Updates from the provinces will be discussed at yearly meetings of the Visitors of the region.
3. Strengthen programs of dialogue with the secularised world and other religions.

Europe and Middle East (CEVIM)

1. Promote in the European Provinces a common style in evangelization and in charitable activities.

2. Promote collaboration with the Vincentian Family and other organisations which work in Brussels in order to participate in the European Union's social solidarity projects.
3. Promote meetings for study and exchange of views for confreres from the various European Provinces, in order to deal with the phenomenon of immigration and Islam in Europe from a common Vincentian perspective.

Latin America (CLAPVI)

1. Continue our interprovincial missionary experiences and be open to the mission *ad gentes*.
2. Increase collaboration and interaction with the Vincentian Family in order to become active and recognised agents of social change on the continent.
3. Make of our works and ministries schools of missionary formation and charity, with specific attention to working with Vincentian youth.

Africa (COVIAM)

1. Make a commitment to the mission *ad gentes* in Mozambique.
2. Help in the formation of diocesan clergy.
3. Collaborate with the Vincentian Family in the struggle against poverty, especially against malaria and AIDS.

USA (NCV)

1. Establish a nationally sponsored apostolic work, with authority given to the National Conference of Visitors to assign confreres from each province to staff it.
2. Explore the possibility of:
 - a) a center [or centers] for formation of lay members of the Vincentian Family;
 - b) additional ways to offer specifically Vincentian formation to Vincentian lay associations;
 - c) further structured opportunities for youth to give service to the poor in the Vincentian tradition.
3. Hold a biannual workshop for training formators.

3. Renew Our Community Life

“The Congregation finds the ultimate source of its life and action in the Trinity.... Our fraternal life together, continually fostered by the mission, forms a community which promotes both personal and community development, and renders the works of evangelization more effective” (Constitutions 20; 21, § 2).

Faithful to our vocation we are called to:

- formulate, put into practice and regularly revise our provincial, vice-provincial and community plans;

- use the *Practical Guide for the Local Superior* as a means to renew our communities and, in a special way, to plan for our ongoing formation and to give support to superiors;
- dedicate time to plan the details of our common life with special attention to preparing our prayer and sharing its fruit together;
- cultivate co-responsibility and transparency in the administration of goods according to the Vincentian spirit of simplicity and solidarity with the poor;
- provide, in our communities, formation for our candidates so that they learn how to live in community.
- give, in our communities, attention and assistance to those confreres who are elderly, sick or otherwise in need.

At this General Assembly, the members, meeting in continental groups, and taking into account the challenges we face, proposed these Lines of Action for renewing our community life.

Asia - Pacific (APVC)

1. Provide, in places where confreres live individually, a structure for periodical prayer, sharing of faith and pastoral experiences, and accompaniment.
2. Commit ourselves to exert extra effort to strengthening a sense of community life in the formation of our students.
3. Give emphasis to the mentoring role of old and sick confreres for other confreres.

Europe and Middle East (CEVIM)

1. Encourage community relationships of friendship, trust and respect.
2. Strengthen the spiritual and Vincentian life of the members of the community.
3. Promote exchange of confreres throughout the European provinces.

Latin America (CLAPVI)

1. Intensify, in a special way, the human dimension of our initial and ongoing formation to allow for better insertion of the confreres in their work and in community life.
2. Increase interprovincial cooperation in every sense (hospitality, formation, interchange of personnel...) with a view toward creating a missionary and Vincentian consciousness at a Latin-American level.
3. Develop a sense of identification, of belonging and of commitment to the Vincentian ideal in our communities.

Africa (COVIAM)

1. Struggle against ethnic tribalism through 'sensitising,' human and Christian formation, equality, tolerance, balance, and respect for human dignity.

2. Struggle against insecurity and individualism through co-responsibility in the administration of goods, transparency and solidarity, having only what is essential for the mission and not accumulating things for ourselves.
3. Create a website with a bulletin to come out every two months.

USA (NCV)

1. Explore possibilities for a national effort to train superiors through a program based on the *Practical Guide for Local Superiors*.
2. Explore and implement national standards for financial accountability and transparency.
3. Embrace, in cooperation with the Conference of Major Superiors of Men [and Praesidium, their outside child protection accrediting agency], a program for training in and adoption of a standard code of professional ethics for behavior in ministry, and specifically for the protection of children.

The challenges in this document, framed in faithfulness to our charism, are put forward by the General Assembly to be made more concrete in provinces, vice-provinces and local communities. There are many who have lived that charism fully; their witness spurs us on to the task that lies ahead. The life and ministry of St. Justin de Jacobis, whose feast we celebrate tomorrow, is one of the more inspiring. Also, let us take to heart the words of our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, in his message to our new Superior General, Fr. Gregory Gay, and to all of us midway through the Assembly:

*“Duc in altum! Put out into the deep! (Lk 5:4) Do not be afraid to venture forth, to put out the nets for a catch. The Lord himself will be your guide!”*⁴

St Vincent once said: *“When the Mother of God is invoked as the patron for those things which matter, they will go very well and will give glory to Jesus her Son.”*⁵ To her, Jesus’ best disciple, we entrust our commitments as we journey toward an ever deeper identification with Christ, the Evangelizer of the poor, to whom our Constitutions continually refer us.

Rome, 29 July 2004,
on the eve of the Feast of St. Justin de Jacobis

⁴ Message of John Paul II to the Superior General and the members of the 40th General Assembly, 18 July 2004.

⁵ SV XIV, 126.