

FEATURE

The Persistence of the Common Rules

*In the 350th Anniversary
of their Being Given to the Missionaries*



“Each one received the rules with great devotion...”
(SVP.ES XI, 330)

Presentation

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On May 17, 1658, exactly the same date on which this presentation is being written, but 350 years earlier, St. Vincent passed out the book of the Common Rules to the missionaries. Surely we have read about the scene many times and it still moves us to see the missionaries standing in line to receive the book of the Rules, kissing it devotedly, kissing St. Vincent's hand, listening to him give some words of encouragement and returning to their places with their hearts full of joy, thankfulness and good purposes of fidelity. The kneeling Fr. Almeras asked St. Vincent to bless the community which knelt down with him. St. Vincent, also on his knees, asked the Lord's blessing on the Rules and for the missionaries the grace of faithfully observing them.

VINCENTIANA does not intend only to remember a date, as important as it might be, but to invite today's missionaries to discover, through a careful and devout reading of the Rules, the values which, for many years, have sustained the Congregation of the Mission in its response to the Lord's call to give itself to evangelizing the poor.

When we speak about persistence, we are not referring to any juridical value that the Common Rules might have. They have none. The Assembly of 1980 decreed, and the subsequent Assemblies have confirmed, that the Constitutions, Statutes and Decrees constitute the only current proper law. No juridical value remains, then, for the Common Rules. Nevertheless, the same Constitutions and Statutes point out that the *spirit of Christ with which the Congregation needs to be filled in order to achieve the end which has been proposed, shines above all through the evangelical teachings as they are explained in the Common Rules (C 4)*. In their inspired letters, *the spirit of the Founder* can still be found (C 34), the authentic inspiration of our fidelity. Towards the rules, then, we missionaries of today should put on the same attitudes of cordial respect and courageous fidelity which St. Vincent recommended (CR XII, 13).

More than a nostalgic remembrance, VINCENTIANA wishes to stimulate a gratitude to God for the values which St. Vincent

expressed in the Common Rules and which have inspired and formed the missionary personality of the Congregation since its foundation. Just as St. Vincent pointed out that the Rules were being lived even before they were written down, we could also say today that, although the letter no longer has a value, they persist in the fidelity of the missionaries who live the spirit of the Founder.

VINCENTIANA thought that it should begin this little homage to the Common Rules, which this number wishes to be, by commenting on the cover of the original edition, on which St. Vincent tried to engrave the foundations of his spirituality in the mysteries of the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Eucharist, sustained in life's daily events, in the Family of Nazareth where the Incarnate Word wished to live obediently under the watchful eye of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Next will come putting on the spirit of Jesus which is the first task we have as missionaries and the three Evangelical Counsels as the arms we have to use to continue the mission of Christ. As for the rest, there was no more room, except for the new pulpit from which a great number of missionaries are called to preach today: sickness. In coming numbers VINCENTIANA intends to continue highlighting other values of the Common Rules which persist in the missionaries.

The Common Rules were not born all of a sudden. They are the written expression of a desire for fidelity which was strengthened, as St. Vincent said, over the course of almost thirty years. That is the result of the comparative study of the three codices in which the Primitive Rule of the Congregation of the Mission have come down to us.

Rome, May 17 2008

350th Anniversary of the handing out of the Common Rules to the missionaries by St. Vincent de Paul at St. Lazare



Common Rules and Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission first published in 1658