

STUDY

350th Anniversary of the Delivery of the Common Rules

The Spirituality of Work According to Saint Vincent de Paul

by José Ignacio Fernández H. de Mendoza, C.M.

“HE DISTRIBUTED THE BOOK OF OUR RULES”

On May 17, 1658, Vincent de Paul spoke before the community of Saint Lazare about the observance of the Common Rules. After stating with great emotion the motives and means to put them into practice, he reminded the missionaries that, in imitation of Jesus Christ who began to do before he taught, the Company had observed these rules for thirty three years (1625-1658). The Saint, not being able to contain his sentiments, manifested before the community his personal convictions, those proper to a man of faith, about the origin of the Rules. They must be attributed to God, and only to God. They were being pieced together, one after another in the measure that new situations required. Finally it seemed appropriate to have them written down and distributed to the members of the Community. The event occurred, as has been said, May 17, 1658. It has been three and a half centuries since then. In May 2008 we celebrate the 350th anniversary of this solemn act. Those who recount the event say that those who heard San Vincent “were not able to contain their tears and they felt diverse movements of joy in their souls” (SVPEs XI, 331).

The Common Rules contain the fundamental directives of Saint Vincent, referring to the life of perfection of the missionaries. They

have had a determining repercussion on the life of the Congregation for three and a half centuries (1658-2008). Today we find them printed in the same volume as the Constitution and Statutes of the Congregation. They lack judicial value, but in the 21st century they continue to be a place of reference for the sons of Saint Vincent.

“WORKS DIRECTED TO THE SALVATION OF THE NEIGHBOR” (CR I, 1)

The Common Rules are comprised of twelve chapters, each one with a distinct nature. Reading them carefully, we observe here and there the diverse ministries of the missionaries. At no time did Saint Vincent pretend to name all of the activities or ministries that in 1658 were carried out by the missionaries, much less put down in the Common Rules detailed reference to the occupations of the missionaries. To get to know them better, we have other writings of the founder: conferences, letters, prayer repetitions and rules. Truthfully for one reason or another there are numerous works mentioned within the texts of the Common Rules. The catalogue is extensive. The Congregation of the Mission proposes to imitate Christ “in the works directed towards the salvation of our neighbor... to preach the good news of salvation to poor people, especially in rural areas [and] to help seminarians and priests to grow in knowledge and virtue so that they can be effective in their ministry” (CR I, 1). What is stated refers to the general program of the Company, in order to achieve its own goal: to follow Jesus Christ evangelizer of the poor.

It is a function of the clerics “to travel through the towns and villages breaking the bread of the divine Word by preaching and catechizing” (CR I, 2). They are equally responsible to hear general confessions, settle disputes, establish the confraternity of charity, staff the external seminaries, give retreats, convoke conferences for the priests in their homes and perform other activities in conformity with the works enumerated. “The lay members help in these ministries like Martha” (CR I, 2).

We have before us a very complete design of the activity of the missionaries. But not all is said. In the following line the Saint will tell us that the Spirit of Jesus Christ shines through us in “the love for the sick,” in the missions and other activities (CR I, 3). “We will practice indifference including in the way we direct, teach and preach” (CR II, 11); poverty and chastity are to be practiced before all, “in our works and in the missions” (CR III, 2; CR IV, 1). Avoid idleness; mother of all vices, “always making good use of his time” (CR IV, 5).

Chapter VI is rich in allusions to a specific activity: the attention given to the sick of the house and those outside. It is concretized in visits to them and in the corporal and spiritual help given. There must be great efforts made “to found and visit the confraternities of charity” (CR VI, 1). It is the duty of the missionaries “to encourage others to receive and participate frequently in the sacraments of penance and the Eucharist” (CR X, 6). In Chapter X, Saint Vincent limits the penance of his priests because of “the continuous work of the missionaries” (CR X, 15). Following this he talks about another ministry: “Catechize the poor, especially the beggars, whenever the occasion presents itself” (CR X, 20). It will be in the following chapter that he will talk about the missions and other ministries of the Congregation in favor of our neighbors. We limit ourselves in enumerating the diverse activities that are mentioned here: spiritual direction, missions and retreats (CR XI, 2.5.6.7), preaching, catechism, hearing confessions and resolving disputes (CR XI, 3.4.8). The ministry of the missions must be the first and principal work for our neighbor (CR XI, 10); we must also “direct the Daughters of Charity” (CR XI, 11). We must not disregard many other activities: “In our homes with the external ecclesiastics, especially those who are to be ordained and the seminarians, and with those who make retreats” (CR XI, 12).

In Chapter XII, Saint Vincent offers some considerations in carrying out assertively some of the ministries mentioned beforehand: intention of pleasing God alone (CR XII, 2), never be dominated by vanity if our results are obvious, nor distressed if they turn out wrong (CR XII, 3); always be simple in the missions, in preaching, catechism and services to the clergy (CR XII, 5.6). A decisive point is the one which Saint Vincent reiterates often: it is bad to have the “undisciplined craving for learning,” but students “are not to neglect, because of this, their dedication to the studies necessary in order to carry out properly the activities of a missionary” (CR XII, 8).

One must be attentive to two vices that threaten us. The first one is the spirit of laziness that, according to Saint Vincent, leads us to search for comfort and the extreme care of our health, to the detriment of an interest in work. The second is an exaggerated zeal that places the person at the border of emptiness and cause them to act harshly towards themselves and towards others (CR XII, 11).

When he was finishing the text for the Common Rules, Saint Vincent reminds us of the five virtues which “make up the spirit of the Mission” (CR XII, 12). The missionaries will appreciate them, but “overall in the exercising of our ministries” (CR XII, 12). The founder

wants missionaries who are given to their works, to certain ministries, to the established order and true to the mission of the Company.

The Common Rules state, as we have seen, the path on which day by day the activities will make their way for the members of the Congregation.

VINCENT DE PAUL: TIRELESS WORKER

An example is worth more than a hundred sermons. Vincent de Paul spoke on diverse occasions before people, in and out of the community about work. But his words were consistent with his personal example. He was a man fully given to his work: “Let us love God, my brothers, love God, but with the strength of our arms” (SV XI, 40). “Some are happy enough talking to God in their prayers, but when it comes to work for God, of suffering, and mortification of instructing the poor... all falls down and their strength is gone. Let us not lie to ourselves. *Totum opus nostrum in operatione consistit*” (SV XI, 41-42). He expressed his convictions about work with authority because he did more than what he said. There were no empty spaces in his agenda.

The first biographers, as well as the recent ones, tell us of Saint Vincent's occupations: the list is broad. We give, in a brief synthesis, the general lines of his occupations. He was the Superior General of the Mission and responsible for Saint Lazare. He followed day to day the formation of his missionaries, paying particular attention to his major work, the Mission. He did the same in relation to the Daughters of Charity: founding, orientation and spiritual formation. He followed step by step the evolution of the new Company. On the other hand, he assumed responsibilities related to new lay groups: Ladies of Charity and the Confraternity of Charity. He dedicated time to the clergy with the Tuesday conferences and retreats for those to be ordained. He did all of the above mentioned without leaving other occupations: services to the nuns of the Visitation, the council of conscience, chaplain to the galleys, help in devastated regions and missions in the towns in which he participated well into his later years. These and other activities kept him fully employed. During the thirty years that he lived at Saint Lazare, he rose at four in the morning and went to bed at nine in the evening, after working ten to twelve hours. He dedicated many hours to correspondence — about thirty thousand letters to diverse addressees — and to the preparation of speeches to various groups: Daughters of Charity, missions, clergy and laity.

An incentive to personally work and at the same time to teach about this to his followers, he used, on the one hand, a saying from Mr. Duval: a priest must have more work that he can accomplish (SV X, 202) and on the other hand the example of the laziness of the religious and the idleness of the clerics of the epoch. The mendicant orders had lost their proper spirit, converting the petition of alms to a pretext to live at the expense of the work of others. Even in the Mission there were some backsliders in carrying out some of the works begun by the Founder: "It might happen that after my death some spirits of contradiction and easy-going confreres may say: Why should I take care of those hospitals? How can I take care of those people ruined by war...? ... some may criticize these works" (SV XII, 89-90).

Vincent de Paul, moved at seeing the poverty of his contemporaries, started many works in favor of the poor. Vincent counted on collaboration with other persons such as missionaries, Daughters of Charity and laity. It has been said that it is easier to do work on your own than to involve others but this is not the case for Saint Vincent. He personally worked hard and successfully involved many others in being fully committed in this noble enterprise.

A SIGNIFICATIVE CONTRIBUTION

We have said repeatedly that Saint Vincent was not a systematic theologian. This was not what he pretended to do and he did not give any doctrinal treaty elaborated to perfection. This does not mean that his contributions, in what refers to our reflection about work, can be called insignificant. We can say, to start with, that in his writings, his speeches and his practical work we can always find a place for it. He was personally, as it was said, an untiring worker and he was surrounded by men and women workers. He fed the spirituality of his missioners by frequently alluding to the obligation and the grandeur of work. More so, he supported his convictions in this respect on the firm base of the divine revelation: the creative activity of God, the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, and the responsible collaboration of humanity.

Vincent de Paul knew the theological reflection of his time about work. Without being original, he offered us some orientations that were specific and valuable. Whoever goes to the biography of the Saint and consults the passages that refer to work will be pleasantly surprised. He did not limit himself to a certain school or system, but knowing them, he elaborated and gave a synthesis with his own color, a synthesis constructed upon materials taken from the Holy

Scripture, theological tradition and an “in situ” reading of the signs of the times, the poor in particular, who had to be liberated in their corporal and spiritual needs, culminating in this way the creating work of God and liberating gesture of the incarnate Son of God. As long as there are poor, both things are incomplete. For the poor, it is worthwhile to start the task, to eliminate all that obscures the creative and redemptive work of God.

FUNDAMENTAL INDICATIONS

The Common Rules of the Mission contain, as we have said, an extensive catalogue of the activities proper to the missionaries although they are not rich in commentaries about human work in itself. What refers to work is found in the letters and conferences to the missionaries and the Daughters of Charity. Among the testimony preserved, one is more noticeable, by its length, solidity and reasoning: the conference given on November 28, 1649 to the Daughters of Charity. Its title is “*On the love of work.*” Gleaning here and there, we can see some pointers that the saint makes with major emphasis. What he deals with are the powerful, thoughts about the meaning of work and the obligation to work.

GOD HAS NOT SPENT “A SINGLE MOMENT WITHOUT WORKING”

Vincent de Paul took advantage of the theological conclusions in reference to work from humanity, shaped by the long Church tradition. However what was received from other hands, provides a step forward in order to give a solid foundation to his personal convictions about work. With this purpose he turned to, among other things, the word of God, where he found valuable paradigms, and was able to extract practical conclusions.

In the founding bull for the Congregation, he reminds us “that we are bound to honor the mystery of the Trinity” (CR X, 2). From the mystery of the Trinity he is going to take in this case, a life lesson: “God himself worked continuously, continuously He has worked and works. God works through all eternity within himself for the eternal generation of his Son, which will never cease to engender. The Father and the Son have never ceased in their dialogue, and that mutual love has produced eternally the Holy Spirit, through which they have, are and will distribute all of the graces to humanity” (SV IX, 489).

Vincent de Paul directs, in this case, his vision toward the transcendence of the God, One and Triune. In remembering the

explanations he had heard in the classroom about the inter-Trinitarian relation, he extracts the first conclusion: in imitation of God, that is God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and who works in his being, we are compelled to work with the sweat of our brows.

The founder of the Mission continues his discourse: “*God works, also, outside of Himself in the creation and preservation of this great universe, in the movements of the heavens, in the influences of the stars, in the productions of land and sea, in the nature of the atmosphere, in the regulation of the seasons and in all that beautiful order which we observe in nature, and which would be destroyed and would return to nothing, if God was not constantly guiding it*” (SV IX, 489). Vincent de Paul calls, in the next moment, to God the creator, and following the established theological guidelines, also conserver. God does not stop taking part in the work realized by his hands. God is involved continuously in sustaining it. God is present in the history and the outcome of the events. The project that God created and maintained is unfolded here among us. From what is said we can extract a lesson: collaborate like good workers in the procreative work of God: “*Humanity created in the image of God, through his work, participates in the creative work of God*” (*Laborem exercens*, 25). Human work here finds its reason for being.

Vincent de Paul, who has looked upon the creative God, offers us new shades of meaning: “*In addition to this general work, God works with each individual, with the draftsman in his workshop, with the woman in her housework, with the ant, with the bee, to do their collecting, and He does so constantly and continually. And why does He work?... for us*” (SV IX, 489). In other words, humanity collaborates in the transformation of the work created by God and it is in this collaboration that we find the dignity and authentic meaning of work. The Second Vatican Council teaches us: “*Humanity with its works develops the work of its creator, serves the good of its brethren and personally contributes in the carrying out of God’s design in history*” (*G. et S.*, 34). The Vincentian thought coincides, then, with the conciliar teaching. Let Vincent be the one to conclude this section “*how reasonable it is, that we, God’s creatures, should work, as He has said, in the sweat of our brows!*” (SV IX, 490).

“WHAT DID OUR LORD DO WHILE HE LIVED ON EARTH?”

The “*imitatio Christi*” occupies a central place in the Vincentian spirituality. The language of the founder in this respect is multiform: to follow and imitate Jesus Christ, to conform our sentiments to his, to work as our Lord worked, Jesus Christ is the invisible frame to

which we have to form our actions. The resources in the following of Jesus Christ are many: in the virtues, sufferings, work, through which path life and Christian behavior, as Vincent tells us, gain meaning and security.

“What did Our Lord do while he lived on earth.... He led two lives on earth. One, from his birth until His thirtieth year of age, during which he worked with the sweat from his divine brow to make a living. His trade was that of carpenter; he carried the hod and served as an unskilled laborer and as bricklayer. From morning till night he worked in his youth and continued until his death.... The other stage of the life of Jesus Christ is from the age of thirty until his death. During these three years what did he not work at day and night, preaching at times now in the temple, at other times in a small town, without rest, to convert the world and win over souls for God his Father?” (SV IX, 491-492) Vincent de Paul, in consonance with the life of the Son of God on earth, after contemplating his holy humanity, extracts another practical conclusion: Christ, the working man, asks that we be the same. In this respect he will say: this is the behavior of the Son of God; “we see him living by the work of his hands and in the lowliest and most arduous occupation in the world. And we, wretched, miserable creatures, are we going to be useless?” (SV IX, 492) we must share “in imitating the conduct of our Lord on earth; and earning a living in this manner, without wasting time, to earn a living as our Lord did” (SV IX, 492). On January 5, 1964, Paul VI left us, in Nazareth near the house of the carpenter, this message: “We want to greet all of the workers of the world and to offer the great model, our divine brother, the defender of all the just causes, in other words, Christ, our Lord.” In summary, human work contains a positive value in supporting the life of Jesus Christ the worker.

“HE USED DAY AND NIGHT TO DO WHAT HE NEEDED TO DO, ASKING NOTHING FROM ANY ONE”

A frequent resource for Saint Vincent was the example of Jesus Christ and the group formed by the persons that surrounded him during all his life in this world: Mary, Joseph, John the Baptist, the holy women, the apostles and Paul of Tarsus. All of them form a theophanic picture that must be an obligatory reference: “We must work to imitate our Lord, his holy mother and Saint Joseph who worked all of their lives” (SV IX, 485).

Vincent de Paul had measured without a doubt, the reach of the biblical indications about Saint Paul the worker: “For we did not

act in a disorderly way among you, nor did we eat food received free from anyone, but day and night through hardships and fatigue, we worked so that we would not be a burden to any of you” (2 Thessalonians 3:7-8); Paul was housed in the home of Aquila and Priscilla “and since he practiced the same trade, he stayed with them and worked for them. They were tentmakers by trade” (Acts 18:3); “you know that these hands provided for my needs and those of my companions” (Acts 20:34).

In the prior reflection made by the Church about human work, the example of Saint Paul, just as they are presented in the passages just mentioned, has occupied a preferential place; it has been an obligated place of reference in dealing with this subject. Saint Vincent is not an exception. He is in tune with the example and the teachings of the Apostle of the people: “Saint Paul, the great apostle, the man full of God, the elected vessel, earned his living by working with his hands; in the midst of his heavy labors, of his important ministries, of his continual preaching. He took time, day and night, to be self-sufficient so as not to have to ask anything from anyone” (SV IX, 492-493). Saint Paul concludes his discourse about his condition as a worker with an invitation: to these “we recommend and exhort, in the name of Lord Jesus Christ, to work quietly and to eat their own food” (2 Thessalonians 3:12). Taking this for granted, Vincent de Paul also asked of his followers that they, following the example of Saint Paul, value the work for their own good and for all others: “Who would not be full of shame at such an example?” (SV IX, 493).

WORK: HUMANITY’S VOCATION

The life and the teachings of Saint Vincent have little to do with a pessimistic vision of work in itself. According to the founder of the Mission the person who works rejoices in honor. In general terms his valuation of human work is high. God mandated humankind to make a living “by the sweat of their brows” (SV IX, 486). It deals with an “express mandate God gave humankind.... So specific that no one can be exempted from it” (SV IX, 487). This mandate does not seem to be a punishment or malediction on God’s part. It has to be considered for what it is, a fundamental human vocation: the work realized by humanity “to reach better life conditions, considered in itself, responds to the will of God” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 34). On the other hand, because of sin “work serves us as a penance by the fatigue it causes the body” (SV IX, 487); “*the farmer we see behind the plow tilling the soil and producing the grain that will feed people, fulfills this*

commandment, for their bodies suffer from it and toil at it with the result that sweat often pours from their faces" (SV IX, 487); *O God, "what a lesson you give us in the farmers of the field, the artisans in the city, the soldiers who go to war! They work unceasingly and suffer greatly for things that perish with them"* (SV VIII, 112). Certainly work has its limitations, for example, the inadequacy existing between the efforts and the results, the logic of the permanent obligation and the fatigue inherent in human activity. That fatigue offers humanity the possibility of participating in the paschal mystery: "Supporting the fatigue of work in union with Christ crucified for us, humanity collaborates in a certain way, with the Son of God in the redemption of humanity" (*Laborem exercens*, 27).

OTHER VINCENTIAN CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT WORK

You Will Work with Your Knowledge and the Strength of Your Arms

In Greek society not all human activities were considered equally dignified. Reason, culture and the marketplace had priority before the work that was proper to the artisan. Intellectual work prevailed over manual work. This hierarchy of the human activity has influenced Christian thought, even though the biblical concept of work was adapted to other measures. All work has identical dignity. There are no reasons to undervalue corporal work or to overvalue the activities of the spirit. Vincent de Paul considers all activities as equally dignified "You will work not only with your mind, but also with your hands, with your arms and your entire body, and will work so hard that sweat will fall from your brow" (SV IX, 487).

Work in the Service of the Community

The theological reflection about work has definitively reclaimed one aspect, which is recognized by the ecclesial magisterium. Human activity unfolds fraternally for help and promotion in support of the community. Saint Vincent will say: "*Thirdly, you must do it with the thought that you are working in the service of the neighbor, which is so cherished by God, that he considers as done for him, whatever is done for the relief of others*" (SV IX, 497). This aspect of work is the one most sought out by Vincentian spirituality. The goal for Vincent de Paul for the groups which he founded coincides at a central point: we exist and are for others and in particular, for the poor. Everything moves around this principle: people, time, work, ministries and goods.

An example taken from nature illustrates what we say: “The ant is such a little creature to which *God has given such foresight, that it takes to the community all that it can accumulate in the summer and in the harvest time*” (SV IX, 488); “*the bees do the same during the summer. They store up the honey, gathered from the flowers, so they can live on it during the winter and, like the ants, they bring it also to the community*” (SV IX, 489). “*And if the bees do this, as we have said before, by gathering the honey from the flowers and taking it to the beehives for the nourishment of the others, why are you, who must be heavenly bees, not going to do it?*” (SV IX, 490). The thinking of Saint Vincent coincides with recent directives of the magisterium: “Work seems to multiply the patrimony of all the human family, for all of the people who work in the world” (*Laborem exercens*, 10). Through work, the individual personally realizes himself, is integrated in society and shares bread with others around the common table.

Work in not an Absolute Value

Human beings have suffered in relation to work in two temptations. At times it has idolized it; people have exalted production and competition to the point of desiring success and money over all other good things. On occasions they have converted it into the undeniable center of life, the supreme value. Work, instead of being a means, became a goal itself.

The word of God dismantles this fallacy. God created the world in six days and on the seventh day He rested. It is said that work does not represent the totality of human life. Jesus, on the other hand, in the parable of the rich man (Luke 12:13-21) puts the overvaluation of human work into perspective. Neither work nor production is capable of guaranteeing life. Vincent de Paul moves in this same direction: “I am sure, Father, that you are suffering from having been deprived for such a long time of doing the principal works of the company; but, aside from the fact that you do them in part, in so far as you are serving souls for eternity and are showing priests how they should act, by the virtues you practice, you *also have the means of honoring the inactivity of Our Lord by not forging ahead — I mean with all your zeal — in the enormous tasks of apostolic workers*” (SV VII, 489). In similar terms John Paul II expresses himself, “humanity must imitate God in work and in rest, as God has desired also to present his own creation under the form of work and rest” (*Laborem exercens*, 25).

The second temptation invites us to underestimate work, to accept it with resignation, as something lacking in meaning. Saint Vincent

de Paul finds himself at odds with this version. Frequently and energetically he comments in his speeches about the vice of idleness: *"I confess that idleness can be a frequent stumbling block and that missionaries more than any other person in the world must avoid it, because they are made for work"* (SV VII, 488-489); to the lazy person, *"they will be pleased to sit close to the fire or not move very far from it"* (SV IX, 463). Effectively those who underestimate work, impede the circulation of the divine mandate: "You will eat your bread in the sweat of your brow" (Gen 3:19) and cut off the creative capacity that God has given us.

The gospel of Matthew reminds us that the owner of the vineyard went out to hire workers and said "why do you stand here all day idle?" (Mt 20:6-7). In the vineyard, it is the same now as it was before, there is always work. The poor of the world are legion. This is motive enough to accept the universal law of working together. It is ours.

Translation: ASTOR LUIS RODRÍGUEZ LÓPEZ, C.M.