

“According to Our Institute”

The Charter of the Congregation of the Mission

by John E. Rybolt, C.M.

Vincent de Paul often mentioned the “Institute” of the Congregation, calling it also “our Institute.” What is the meaning of this term? Does it have any continuing relevance?

An ambiguous term

The term “Institute” has been used equivocally, that is, with more than one meaning. The more common understanding is simply “Institution” or the “Congregation,” or in a more dynamic way, “foundation.” For example, Vincent often refers to *notre petit Institut* (letters 2910, 3191, 3281).

However, there are several places where this explanation is not sufficient, since it misses the basic meaning of “Institute.” Article 1 of the Common Rules has the Latin title: *De Fine et Instituto Congregationis*. The French original of these rules, composed by Vincent himself, reads: *De la Fin et de l'Institut de cette Congrégation*. The English, however, is less literal and strives for interpretation: “The Purpose and Nature of the Congregation.” Here, too, “nature” is not a direct translation of *institut*, but an interpretation. I propose that it should instead be “charter,” or “institute,” but understood in its fundamental meaning. This is the case in his mention of the “grandeur of our Institute” (Letter 634).¹ Vincent would not have exalted the greatness of the institution, but rather of its founding charter granted by the Church.

The term *institutum* is also used in several places in the Latin Common Rules (CR), but each of these, at least in the English translation, misses the central meaning of the word. The Spanish translation, however, simply translates the word directly. CR 2:15, (“repugnant to our charter,” English: “Which conflict... with our

¹ Letter 634, *Vincent de Paul. Correspondence, Conferences, Documents* [CCD] 2:373.

Congregation,” Spanish: *repugnan a nuestro Instituto*); 2:18 (“according to our charter,” English: “As understood in our Congregation,” Spanish: *según nuestro Instituto*); 5:1 (“according to our charter,” English: [omitted], Spanish: *según nuestro Instituto*); 7:1 (“on the basis of our charter,” English: “Obliged by our Institute,” Spanish: *por su Instituto están obligados*); 9:2 (“Although our charter obliges,” English: “By the very nature of our Congregation,” Spanish: *por razón de nuestro Instituto*); 11:11 (“other functions of our charter,” English: “Other ministries of our Congregation,” Spanish: *fundaciones de nuestro Instituto*); 11:12 (“according to our charter,” English: “By the nature of our Congregation,” Spanish: *obligados... por nuestro instituto*); 12:11 (“opposed to the charter of the Mission,” English: “The whole purpose of the mission,” Spanish: *contrarios al Instituto de la Misión*).

Even the French original was in one place mistranslated into Latin, showing a clear lack of understanding of this term. CR 1:2 has in French: *conformes à notre Institut* (“in agreement with our charter”), but the Latin obscures this intention: *prædictis functionibus deservientia* (English: “Ministry which is supportive to those mentioned”).

Other early sources, particularly the Codex Sarzana, also mention the Institute or Charter.² In the preliminary version of the CR 10:2, Codex Sarzana (CS) reads: *Cum iuxta Bullam Institutionis nostrae*, (“When, according to the Bull of our Institution [or Foundation]”), the final version has *Cum iuxta Bullam erectionis Congregationis nostrae* (“When, according to the Bull of erection of our Congregation”), a much clearer statement.

Codex Sarzana has several other references to the Institute, either in the preliminary version of the CR or in other documents, such as the Rules of Office. In a passage omitted from between CR 10:14 and 10:15, CS has “Each one will have the intention of dedicating himself for his entire life to the exercise of the mission in the Congregation according to our Charter” (*iuxta Institutum nostrum*).

Even more important for this purpose is the decree in Codex Sarzana entitled *Cum felicitatis recordationis* concerning vows. In this case, this text mentions the Charter or Institute as one of the various levels of legislation existing in the Congregation: statutes, ordinations, good order and government..., and everything not contrary to the holy canons, apostolic constitutions, the decrees of the Council of Trent, and *the institute*. It concludes by speaking of the

² For the text, see “Codex Sarzana,” *Vincentiana* 35:3-4 (1991), 307-406; it is also available in electronic form at http://via.library.depaul.edu/cm_construles/.

perfection required by the aforementioned institute (*perfectioni ad dictum Institutum requisitae*).

The traditional vow formula also mentioned the Institute, but the translations are less clear, making it appear that “Institute” and “Congregation” are identical: *juxta Instituti nostri Constitutiones et Statuta* (“according to the Constitutions and Statutes of our Institute”) (Statute 21).

The rules of office as given in CS also mention the Charter or Institute in several places. In the rules of the visitor: “In acquiring perfection according to the plan of our own Charter” (*iuxta proprii Instituti rationem*). Admission or readmission of candidates demands that they be apt or appropriate to our Charter (*ad institutum nostrum idoneos*). Visitors should, during official visits to houses, question whether anything is happening that goes against the works of our Charter (*a laboribus instituti nostri aborreat [sic]*), and provincial assemblies should see to it that the matters being discussed should conform to the major points of our Charter (*de substantialibus instituti nostri*).

Later versions of the rules of office (1850 and 1891) also refer to the Charter of Institute. One text in particular, article three of the rules of the secretary general of the congregation, distinguishes between the Congregation and the Institute: “He should be very devoted to the common good of the Congregation, and have an accurate knowledge of the Institute, the Constitutions, Rules...”³ Some other parts of the same rules, however, do not make this distinction.

In his letters and conferences, Saint Vincent mentioned the Charter or Institute occasionally, generally with certain fixed expressions, such as “contrary to our Institute” (letters 461, 716, 1869, 2684; conference to CM, 197); and “according to our Institute,” (letters 541, 1391; conferences to CM, 216, 221). There are several other instances in letters 1236, 1478, 2187, 2435, and conferences to CM, 180, 212 (but this latter reference is ambiguous, referring either to the Congregation or to its Charter).

The usage of the term in the Congregation is also ambiguous. This is most easily noticed in the circulars of the superiors general. The two expressions most used are: “Purpose (*fin*) of our Institute,” and “functions of our Institute,” but these and similar expressions

³ “Communi bono Congregationis debet esse addictissimus, et Instituti, Constitutionum, Regularum, Bullarum, Decretorum, Ordinationum, necnon et rerum aliarum omnium quæ gubernationem spectant accuratam habere debet cognitionem...,” *Regulae Officiorum Congregationis Missions...*, vol. I, Paris 1850, p. 11.

tend to identify the Institute with the Congregation. In general, however, the use is correct, that is, clearly noting that the Institute and the Congregation are not one and the same thing. In the earliest years of the Congregation, this was clear, whereas in later years, the distinction was blurred. Another ambiguity arises from the custom, in French, of calling Vincent de Paul *notre instituteur*, “our founder.” This originally arose from the necessity of distinguishing between the Gondis, who had endowed the Congregation (or assured its financial foundation) and could be called its “founders,” and Vincent de Paul, who began the Congregation. On his tombstone, however, this distinction is not evident since he is given both titles: *Hic Iacet Venerabilis Vir Vincentius a Paulo, Presbyter, Fundator seu Institutor et Primus Superior Generalis...*, but the engraving that forms the frontispiece of the first volume of Abelly calls him simply *instituteur*. This was the more common title in the earliest years of the Congregation, *instituteur* instead of *fondateur*.

The root meaning of the Latin *instituere* is “to found, establish” and in its various verb forms *institutum* or *institutata* are used to mean “foundations” or “establishments.” This led to such expressions as “a house of our Institute,” (*une maison de notre Institut*), “the Institute of Saint Vincent” (*l’Institut de saint Vincent*), “the Constitutions of the Institute” (*constitutions... de notre Institut*), or “the rules of our institute” (*règles de notre Institut*). Gradually, the sense of Charter or Institute was lost, being absorbed into another term, “institution.”

Jean-Baptiste Etienne, however, had the correct sense of the word, using it in the meaning of Charter or Institute in his *Notice*.⁴

The Charter or Institute

What, therefore, is the Charter (or Institute) of the Congregation? The Charter contains the essential elements of the identity of the Congregation, the nucleus of all the other rules, constitutions, statutes and other legislation deriving from it. As such, it is the single most important statement of the identity of the Congregation. The primacy of the Charter is clear from several documents, among which is the response from the Holy See concerning the Constitutions submitted to Rome for approval, what was eventually called the “*Constitutiones selectae*.” The document declares that the

⁴ “On n’avait aucunement la pensée de charger notre Congrégation de ces œuvres, attendu que son Institut l’attachait spécialement aux Missions des campagnes et à la direction des Séminaires” (*Notice sur le Rétablissement de la Congrégation de la Mission après la Révolution de 1789* [Paris 1870]), p. 5; also p. 9.

changes inserted in the original document by the Holy See are confirmed concerning “the Institute of the aforesaid Congregation, its constitutions, rules and functions (*munia*).”⁵

The Charter itself is found within the bull of erection of the Congregation, *Salvatoris nostri*, 12 January 1633,⁶ a document addressed not to Vincent de Paul but to the archbishop of Paris, Jean-François de Gondi. The setting of the Charter makes it difficult to distinguish it from the rest of the bull.⁷ The standard procedure was that the petitioner, in this case Vincent de Paul, presented his final petition for papal approval. Following that, the Holy See examined the petition and, in fact, changed or improved some of its elements.⁸ These can be seen in the table below.

Urban VIII began the bull, containing the Charter, with a pontifical and historical preamble. As pope, his desire is to fulfill his pastoral office, which is helped by congregations, and in particular by this new congregation, whose history he sketches. An important sentence for our purpose introduces the Charter: “... and he [Vincent] prescribed that they observe the precepts and Rules written below.”

The text then lays out in general terms the identity and purpose of the Congregation of the Mission. This is its Charter, or Institute. The Latin text begins with the important word: *videlicet*, “namely,”⁹ introducing the details of the Charter. The English translation begins: “The principal purpose and special goal of this Congregation and its members is, by the grace of God, along with their own salvation, to dedicate themselves to the salvation of those who live on the estates, in the countryside, on farms, in hamlets, and in insignificant places.” It concludes with a paragraph on the election of superiors general and their basic rights. The papal document continues with further historical observations: “And so, from the very beginning of this same Congregation of the Mission, its priests have been engaged with untiring energy of mind and body....”

⁵ “Mutationes circa supra scriptas constitutiones factae à Praelatis quibus SS N.P. earum remissionem mandavit” (1669), manuscript in Archives of the Congregation of the Mission, Paris. Text available electronically, http://via.library.depaul.edu/cm_cls/g/.

⁶ *Salvatoris Nostri*, Doc. 84a, CCD, 13a, 298-300.

⁷ Letter 94a, CCD, 1, 140-44. See also ANGELO COPPO, “Documenti inediti per la storia della Congregazione della Missione, presso l’archivio della S.C. ‘De Propaganda Fide,’” *Annali della Missione*, 79:3-4 (July-December 1972), 222-246; also ANGELO COPPO, “San Vincenzo e i suoi rapporti con la S. Congregazione ‘de Propaganda Fide,’” *Vincentiana* 16:4-5 (1972), 173-177.

⁸ See the details in the untitled presentation on the bull *Salvatoris nostri*, *Annales CM* 106-107 (1941-1942), 32-40.

⁹ Doc. 81, CCD 13:260.

Even here, in this most solemn and important document, the Latin text uses *institutum* ambiguously. It appears more than once in the sense of “institution,” or “Congregation.” For example, the pope praises the Congregation as: *hoc pium institutum Deo acceptissimum*, “this devoted Institute... very acceptable to God.” At the same time, the term appears as Charter or Institute, as in the two following passages: *quatenus congregationem Missionis hujusmodi illiusque institutum et regulas* (“approve and confirm forever this Congregation of the Mission; its Institute and Rules...”); also, *qui institutum praefatum omniaque in praedictis regulis et capitulis contenta observare et adimplere teneantur* (“bound to observe and fulfill the Institute and all that is contained in its Rules and Statutes...”).

Contents of the Charter

A comparison of Vincent’s final petition and the Charter or Institute will show the care that the Holy See took in clarifying the founder’s main ideas.¹⁰

“ P E T I T I O N ”	“ I N S T I T U T E ”	TOPICS
	[1] The principal purpose and special goal of this Congregation and its members is, by the grace of God, along with their own salvation, to dedicate themselves to the salvation of those who live on the estates, in the countryside, on farms, in hamlets, and in insignificant places.	Purpose and Goal
1. First, the principal purpose of the said Congregation is to venerate the Most Holy Trinity and the Sacred mystery of the Incarnation.	[2] repeated from below ... these priests also foster in them special devotion to the Most Holy Trinity, to the sacred mystery of the Incarnation, and to the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God.	Devotions

¹⁰ The numbers in square brackets [-] have been added to facilitate comparison with the numbered paragraphs in Saint Vincent’s original petition.

<p style="text-align: center;">“ P E T I T I O N ”</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">“ I N S T I T U T E ”</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">TOPICS</p>
<p>2. The priests of the said Congregation are sent by the local Ordinaries – to whom the Congregation submits itself in this matter only, and to whom it wishes and intends, now and in the future, to show a perfect obedience – to the cities and towns and other places of the Kingdom of France which are subject to the rule of the Most Christian King, except those which have the title of Parlement or Bailiffship, where there is no lack of priests, either secular or regular, or other ecclesiastical ministers.</p>	<p>[2] In cities and towns, however, that are endowed with titles of archbishoprics, bishoprics, Parlements, and courts of assizes, the clerics and priests of this Congregation perform no public functions of their Institute; privately, they may, nevertheless, instruct those who are to be promoted to Orders and have been sent to them for a two-week period before ordination. So that these Orders may be received worthily, they make a spiritual retreat and a general confession of their whole lives; these priests also foster in them special devotion to the Most Holy Trinity, to the sacred mystery of the Incarnation, and to the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Rural Areas</p>
<p><i>[2, repeated from above]</i> – to whom the Congregation submits itself in this matter only, and to whom it wishes and intends, now and in the future, to show a perfect obedience –</p>	<p>[3] Although the members of this Congregation are subject to the Superior General and other Superiors in matters pertaining to discipline and direction, they are also subject to the local Ordinaries, but only in matters pertaining to the missions, insofar as the Ordinaries can send those designated by the Superiors to those parts of their dioceses that seem best to them.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Local Ordinaries</p>
<p>(2, cont.) They are sent to them to teach the Commandments of God to those who do not know them and to instruct them in the rudiments of Christian doctrine, to hear their confessions, to ad-</p>	<p>[4] In those places to which they are sent, they teach the uninstructed the commandments of God and the rudiments of Catholic doctrine, hear general confessions, administer the Most</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Missions</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">“ P E T I T I O N ”</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">“ I N S T I T U T E ”</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">TOPICS</p>
<p>minister to them the Sacraments of the Church, and to carry on among them the office of teaching catechism and preaching. However, they first obtain the permission of the pastors, without which they never go in to perform these functions, nor do they wish to be able to do so.</p>	<p>Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist, preach simple sermons that are easily understood by the people, and teach catechism. Beforehand, however, they obtain the permission of the Pastors, without which they may not become involved in the aforementioned ministries.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Missions</p>
<p>3. In places where they have preached, they establish, by authority of the Ordinaries, Confraternities of Charity, as they are called, if these are needed in order to help the sick poor, and they themselves contribute something to this holy work out of their own goods.</p>	<p>[5] In places where they exercise the function of catechizing and preaching, they foster, under the authority of the Ordinary, the establishment of what are known as Confraternities of Charity to aid the sick poor.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Charities</p>
<p>4. With the greatest possible charity they try to settle and calm lawsuits and quarrels in which the country people in particular are sometimes involved all through their life.</p>	<p>[6] They also try with the greatest charity to settle and resolve quarrels, enmities, and divisions.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Enmities</p>
<p>5. They welcome into their houses parish priests who wish to make spiritual retreats and receive instruction about the administration of their parishes. They make an effort to assemble these parish priests once a month to deal with cases of conscience and the administration of the Sacraments, whenever this can be done conveniently for the local vicinity and is without detriment to their churches.</p>	<p>[7] They receive into the houses of the aforesaid Congregation the Rectors of parish churches who wish to be helped in making their retreats and in governing their churches. Lastly, they do their best to have these Rectors meet together once a month, when this can be done conveniently by reason of proximity and without detriment to their responsibilities, to treat of cases of conscience and administration of the sacraments.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Clergy Retreats</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">“ P E T I T I O N ”</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">“ I N S T I T U T E ”</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">TOPICS</p>
<p>6. At ordination times they welcome into their houses those who wish to receive Orders so as to teach them how they are to exercise these Orders and receive them worthily.</p>	<p>[2, repeated from above] privately, they may, nevertheless, instruct those who are to be promoted to Orders and have been sent to them for a two-week period before ordination. So that these Orders may be received worthily, they make a spiritual retreat and a general confession of their whole lives;</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Ordination Retreats</p>
<p>7. The aforesaid Congregation does all these things without charge and without any expectation of compensation, and promises to do the same in time to come.</p>	<p>[8] They offer all these services free of charge and with no hope of any human recompense, expecting only a divine reward.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Gratuity</p>
<p>As time went on, lifting up their minds more and more to heavenly things, the aforesaid priests decided upon the following ordinances:</p>	<p>[9] Furthermore...</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Ordinances</p>
<p>1) The Congregation shall consist of laymen, clerics, and priests who shall have all things in common.</p>	<p>... the Congregation shall consist of laymen, clerics, and priests.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Lay and Clergy</p>
<p>2) The laymen shall be content with the service of Martha and take care of domestic matters.</p>	<p>[10] The laymen, restricted to the duties of Martha, shall take care of household affairs.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Duties of Lay Members</p>
<p>3) Clerics shall have to be seventeen or eighteen years old before they can be admitted into the Congregation, and shall become members of the Congregation after a year of probation.</p>	<p>[11] Clerics shall be received no younger than seventeen or eighteen years of age. If, after completing a year of probation, they have been judged suitable and intend to remain in the Congregation...</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Admission</p>

“ P E T I T I O N ”	“ I N S T I T U T E ”	TOPICS
	gation for the rest of their lives, they can be incorporated into the Congregation and admitted as members.	Admission
	[12] They will participate daily in the Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, frequent the sacrament of Penance, and receive the sacrament of the Eucharist weekly. The priests, however, shall celebrate Mass daily. But everyone, priests as well as the others, shall meditate for an entire hour and also make use of the examination of conscience.	Spiritual Exercises
4) The above-mentioned Vincent de Paul shall remain Superior of the said house of Paris, and after the other houses of the Congregation have been founded, he shall be elected for his lifetime as Superior General of the Congregation.		[Vincent de Paul]
5) After the death of the said Vincent de Paul, the Superior General of the Congregation at any given time shall be elected every three years, and may be maintained in office for no more than one other term of three years.	[13] After the death of the aforesaid Vincent, another Superior General shall be elected from the body of the Congregation by this same Congregation.	Elections, Superior General
6) The Superior General shall appoint Superiors and other lesser ministers and remove them at his discretion. He shall visit each house of the Congregation, the property and members, correct, and have other authority	[14] This Superior General shall then have complete authority and superiority to appoint all other Superiors as well as lesser officials, in any of the houses of the Congregation; to remove and transfer them; and to visit and	Duties of Superior General

“ P E T I T I O N ”	“ I N S T I T U T E ”	TOPICS
and superiority which the Superiors General of similar or other Congregations have, may have, or will have in the future.	correct houses, affairs, and persons of this Congregation, which Superiors General of other similar Congregations have, can have, or will be able to have, over the houses, affairs, and persons of their Congregations.	Duties of Superior General

In the same document, following the text of the Charter (or Institute), the pope answered other requests for approval, privileges, etc. (The second and third blocks of the text of the bull have been rearranged to follow the text of the petition.)

“ P E T I T I O N ”	B U L L : S A L V A T O R I S N O S T R I	TOPICS
[A] Moreover, since experience has proven that this pious institute has brought forth abundant fruits, and since it may be hoped that such happy beginnings will have even happier progress, and since those things which are strengthened by the protection of the Apostolic See are more lasting, Vincent, the Superior of the said house and the other priests of the Congregation [of the Mission] humbly beseech the said Congregation [of bishops and regulars] to show itself especially gracious to the aforesaid Congregation, and through it to each of its members, and to approve and confirm by apostolic authority everything that has been done so far, strengthen it by apostolic recognition,	[A] Since, however, as this petition adds, experience has shown that the greatest results have come from this Institute, and it is hoped that these very happy beginnings will bring about even happier progress in the future, and since those Institutes that are strengthened by the protection of the aforesaid See are more firmly established, it was humbly asked of us, on behalf of Vincent and the aforesaid clerics, priests, and members, that we deign by apostolic kindness to approve the Congregation and to respond appropriately to the other matters mentioned in the petition.	Introduction

<p align="center">“ P E T I T I O N ”</p>	<p align="center">B U L L : S A L V A T O R I S N O S T R I</p>	<p align="center">TOPICS</p>
<p>[B] ... and allow the Superior General of the aforesaid Congregation and his successors, for the greater progress of this Congregation, to enact any other statutes, beyond the aforesaid ordinances, provided they are licit and proper and in no way contrary to the sacred canons and decrees of the Council of Trent. May they also be allowed, according to the nature of circumstances and times, and as often as it shall seem appropriate, to change, alter, modify, limit, and correct them, and have the power to issue new norms freely and unrestrictedly, provided the aforesaid statutes, their changes, alterations, modifications, limitations, corrections, and the new ones to be issued are first approved by the Ordinary.</p>	<p>[C] In like manner, we also impart in perpetuity to the said Vincent, and to the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission in office at the time, the permission and faculty to be able and empowered to issue and establish any Statutes and Ordinances concerning the successful rule, government, direction, and organization of the Congregation of the Mission and of its houses, persons, and goods, as often as it seems expedient to them, provided however that these are lawful and morally good and in no way contrary to the sacred Canons, apostolic Constitutions, the decrees of the Council of Trent,¹¹ the Institute, and the rules of the aforementioned Congregation of the Mission, and are approved by the Archbishop of Paris, as well as to revoke, alter, change, and modify them and establish anew, with, however, similar preliminary examination and approval.</p>	<p align="center">New Legislation</p>
<p>[C] May the Congregation itself and each one of the present and future members enjoy all and each one of the privileges, immunities, freedoms, exemptions, faculties, favors and graces, indults, indulgences and other concessions which other Congregations use, have, and enjoy, or</p>	<p>[B] If, in virtue of these present letters, you confirm, approve, erect, establish, apply, and appropriate, and do all the other things mentioned above, then we, by the aforesaid apostolic authority, according to these present letters, grant and approve in perpetuity for this Con-</p>	<p align="center">Privileges</p>

¹¹ Corrected English translation.

<p style="text-align: center;">“ P E T I T I O N ”</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">B U L L : S A L V A T O R I S N O S T R I</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">T O P I C S</p>
<p>may or will be able to use, have, and enjoy in the future. May they use, have, and enjoy them in the same way and to the same extent and without any difference, as if they had been specifically and expressly granted to the said Congregation, its Superiors, and other members. May you be pleased to grant and permit this and to declare null and void [everything to the contrary].</p>	<p>gregation of the Mission, its houses, Superior General, other Superiors and persons, and all its goods and affairs, that they may be able and empowered freely and lawfully to use, take advantage of, possess, and enjoy each and every one of the privileges, prerogatives, advantages, benefits, indults, indulgences, and favors, which any other similar or dissimilar Congregations, their houses, their Superiors General and other Superiors, ministers and persons, and their affairs, properties, and whatsoever of their goods use, take advantage of, possess, and enjoy, and are able and will be able to use, take advantage of, possess, and enjoy them in an equal degree and in the same manner and with no difference whatsoever, provided, nonetheless, that these be in use, not revoked or included in some revocation, and are not in opposition to the sacred Canons, the decrees of the Council of Trent, other apostolic Constitutions, or the particular Statutes of the Congregation of the Mission, just as if they had been granted specifically and particularly to them.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">P r i v i l e g e s</p>

Conclusion

The term “institute” has elicited various understandings within the history of the Congregation. Because of its ambiguous meaning, it has been applied both to the Charter of the Congregation as embedded in its bull of erection, *Salvatoris nostri*, and to the

Congregation itself. This happened even in the earliest days of the Congregation of the Mission. A close examination of its meaning leads us to conclude that the Charter (or Institute) is the nucleus or fundamental statement of Vincentian identity as approved by the Church in the Congregation's earliest days.¹² In the majority of its elements, the Charter has not been changed. It is the author's hope that others will study further the development of this basic document.

¹² Since the Daughters of Charity did not petition papal approval during Vincent's lifetime, there is no Charter from that period. But see a similar document: Doc. 146, CCD 13b, 133-138.