

AUTHORITY IN THE CONGREGATION *

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I have been asked to offer this day of retreat that will prepare us for the election of the Superior General which will take place tomorrow. Since this office is the highest authority in the Congregation, it seemed opportune to me to offer you a reflection on authority in the Congregation. Besides, I believe that the theme concerns us all, more or less directly, since we all exercise the ministry of authority: the Visitors are an authority in their respective provinces, the local Superiors in their communities, the pastors in their parishes, the formation directors with those whom they are forming..., etc.

We all know that the word “authority” originally meant “growth.” It comes from the Latin verb “augere.” Perhaps the image of a mother who does everything she can for her child can give us the deepest meaning of what authority is. It is the mother who nurtures and gives growth to her child who has been conceived. It is she who, at the right moment, knows how to give the child the autonomy and independence that the child needs to develop as a person. Of course, this sense of authority can be found in St. Vincent. According to him, all authority is given so that people can grow and achieve the goals to which God calls them. There is another meaning of authority, complementary to this one, and which has to do with institutions: it is authority’s role to assure that the institutions serve and achieve the ends for which they were created.

I will begin my presentation making reference to the authority of Jesus in the Gospels; I will continue with the experience and convictions of St. Vincent, and I will conclude by offering some reflections on authority in the Congregation that desires to move towards “*creative fidelity to the mission.*”

* Reflection in the day of retreat.

The Authority of Jesus in the Group of the Twelve

The reference to Jesus with regard to his authority is absolutely necessary, since he is not only authority, but rather the highest authority. "*Unus Dominus*" (I Cor 8:6). This means that all other authority is subordinated to his supreme authority. For St. Vincent, Jesus Christ is always the model for all authority. With a great understanding of how to teach, St. Vincent invites all superiors to ask themselves this question: "*Lord, if you were in my place, what would you do?*" (XI, p. 429, Spanish edition). I invite you all to enter deeply into this question that St. Vincent asks us, but to do so changing the verb tense: instead of asking ourselves what would Jesus Christ do, we can ask ourselves what he did. The past can and must illuminate the present and the future. And so, let us ask ourselves, how did Jesus Christ act, and how did he live out his mission of authority in the group of the Twelve?

The community of the Twelve must not have been easy to deal with given the diversity of mentalities and temperaments, the different ages and cultural levels. In the group there was, for example, a tax collector (Matthew), that is to say, a "collaborator" of the foreign power of domination. There was also a zealot (Simon), that is to say, a "resistance fighter." Peter and John, because of their ages, belonged to two different generations, and by temperament, were quite different: Peter was primal, emotional and active; John was secondary, thoughtful and contemplative. There were among them men who were impulsive and had self-interests, like the "sons of thunder" (Mk 3:17; Lk 9:49-54), and there was even a traitor and thief (Jn 6:70). James and his brother surely belonged to a family that was well-off, since they had an open door into the house of Caiphas (Jn 18:15). And so with this group of very different personalities, Jesus wanted to form the community of the Twelve. This biblical detail can help us ask ourselves: How can we foster communion and mission, respecting legitimate diversity and the internationality of the Congregation which is inculturated in very different settings?

It is very interesting to see how Jesus goes about creating community with a very particular style of exercising his authority, different, quite different, from how the Pharisees and other contemporary leaders acted. It was never said of them what was affirmed about Jesus: that never had anyone taught with such authority (Mk 1:27).

1. To begin with, Jesus knows people and accepts them as they are. He begins with the disciples just as they are, not as they should be, in order to lead each of them, slowly, to progressively deeper

levels of growth and communication. He does not depersonalize them, creating a single model of man in community. He helps each one to grow in order to unite them in brotherhood. Peter, for example, is primal and first he acts and later on he thinks about what he has done. Phillip is slow to understand the realities of the Kingdom (Jn 14:8-10). When Thomas has his crisis of faith, Jesus does not abandon him in his unbelief. He gives in to Thomas' demands. He goes out to meet Thomas to clear up his doubts: "*Bring your finger here to the wounds in my hands...*" (Jn 20:2-70). He could have said to him: "*Now you have enough proof to believe....*" But Jesus is more interested in saving people than in defending his authority. As for the disciples of Emmaus who doubt the Resurrection of Jesus (Lk 24:19), He does not leave them in their sadness and disappointment. He goes out to meet them as well, and with a patient, simple style of teaching, he explains the kerygma to them again, "*beginning with Moses and continuing with all the prophets*" (Lk 24:27), as meanwhile he warms their hearts (Lk 24:32) in order to lead them to a full conversion. What conditions should exist in our community so that it can become a space that renews the life of the Missionaries? Authority, with its mission to animate the community, has a fundamental role in all of this.

2. In the group, Jesus is not only the teacher, but he also establishes a personal relationship of friendship with each one of the Twelve. We could say that he becomes friends with them, entrusting himself to them, opening his heart to them, believing them to be worthy of his confidence. "*I have called you friends, because all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you*" (Jn 15:15). St. Vincent, when speaking of the relationship between us, used the same expression that Jesus used: "*As friends who love each other well in the Lord.*" By patiently weaving a web of interpersonal relationships a group is formed in which what is most important is not life in common, but rather the community of life. It is not community practices that unite a group, but rather life which is shared with the common horizon of the mission. And obviously, only from this perspective community practices have value and meaning.

3. Jesus governs the community from the inside. Even a simple reading of the Gospels shows us that there is an infinite distance between Jesus and his disciples. Nevertheless, he lives among them and lives like them. He never places himself above the community, looking to be idealized. For him, authority is a service of love. And he takes this service to the extreme (Jn 13:1). Moreover, he lives the ideal that he proposes: "*Knowing that the Father had placed all in*

his hands..., he began to wash the feet of his disciples" (Jn 13:3-5), John solemnly tells us, indicating that this symbolic gesture of service is a characteristic of Jesus' authority. He does not tire his disciples with norms and more norms; rather he broadens their horizons and shows them new paths. Jesus only reprimands when something essential goes wrong, for example when they lack charity, or when they interpret the Kingdom using the criteria of the world (Mt 16:23). Jesus' leadership is spiritual, rather than imposed.

4. Jesus orients the group of the Disciples toward the mission. Faced with the continual temptation of his disciples to "build three huts" (Mt 17:4) to continue enjoying the physical presence of Jesus on Mount Tabor, the Lord prepares them for his absence: "*It is better for you that I go*" (Jn 10:7). The Spirit, who will descend upon them on the morning of Pentecost, will send them forth into the world (Acts 2) to act with the same freedom and faithfulness as Jesus Christ. The community of life is a path of growth in fraternity, but it is not an end in itself: it is for the mission. The Constitutions 19 reminds us of this: "*The Vincentian community is, therefore, organized to prepare its apostolic activity and to encourage and help it continually.*"

Beginning with the mission (his and that of his disciples), the Lord leads them to understand that his service as messiah is not about prestige, power or glory as the Tempter would want him to believe (Mc 1:12-13), rather it is about love carried to the extreme. Always from the experience of the mission that the Father has entrusted to him, Jesus tells them clearly that "*he must go to Jerusalem*" and suffer the passion (Mt 16:21). He tells them that they will face a similar fate (Jn 15:18-25). Jesus reveals the cross to them, but the cross accepted and lived in hope. And so he prepares them to face conflict, suffering and the cross; essential dimensions in every Christian life.

Experiences and Convictions of St. Vincent About Authority

The authority of Jesus Christ will always be an absolutely necessary reference for all of us who are part of the Church. But for us Vincentians, we also take into account the reference of our Founder, with his own way of understanding and living out authority. We know that St. Vincent exercised his authority of a father and a counsellor for very different groups: missionaries, priests of the Tuesday conferences, Daughters of Charity, Visitation nuns, and Conferences of Charity. He was a local superior and superior general. All of this gave him a very rich experience in the

governance of persons, communities and institutions. Fr. Flores sums up St. Vincent's experience of authority in this way: "*I believe that Saint Vincent died happy because throughout his life he had been a good superior*" (M. PÉREZ FLORES, "Autoridad," in *Diccionario de espiritualidad vicenciano*, CEME, Salamanca 1995, 43).

No one doubts that St. Vincent was a guide with vision and charisma. Fr. O'Donnell says that, whether St. Vincent was or was not held captive in the north of Africa, it seems to him that the paradigm of alchemist fit Vincent well. St. Vincent possessed the art of confronting common situations and being able to transform them into something long lasting and of great value. For example, he was not the first to preach popular missions. They existed in his time. Nonetheless, with him they evolved and became a valid response to help people to begin a new life — by means of a general confession —, to promote reconciliation among families and towns, and to establish an efficient way to help the needy with the Conferences of Charity. This is to say that with his charismatic authority, he was able to transform ministries so that they could respond to the needs of the most abandoned.

Evidently he did not do this alone. We can say that St. Vincent was a guide with others, or in other words, that he did not exercise his authority alone, but rather always in collaboration for example, with St. Louise, with Fr. Portail, with Madame de Gondi.... He appreciated and sought out the collaboration of all kinds of people: men and women, rich and poor, from the city and the country. He trusted in others, valued their contributions, and expected from them more than they themselves believed they were capable of offering. This is the way a true leader is: capable of inspiring, of encouraging other people to bring out the best in themselves in benefit of others, in this case the most poor.

With respect to his doctrine, St. Vincent is not especially original when he speaks about authority. He limits himself to following what the traditional theology of his time proposed: that authority comes from God; that it is the prolongation of the authority of Jesus Christ; that it is a service; that authority is a mediation and an indispensable dynamism for the life, the mission and the good order of the community; that its principal mission consists in guiding souls to perfection, etc. These ideas were well known then and they are now as well. But what, in St. Vincent's thinking about authority, is most in tune with our times and our sensibilities?

In the first place, we highlight a general orientation that is valid for all and enlightens all who are entrusted with a responsibility in the governance of the Congregation: superiors have to be firm in their purpose and flexible in their means. "*Be firm as to the end and*

humble and gentle with regard to the means, steadfast in the observance of the Rules and holy customs of the Company but gentle in the means of seeing that they are observed," St. Vincent advised Fr. Jean Guerin (Vol. II, Letter 619). On another occasion he explains this conviction: because to be invariable in the end and moderate in the means is like having *"the soul of good leadership"* (Vol. II, Letter 642a). And both the end and the means must be enlightened by the Gospel, by the "evangelical maxims" in the expression used by Vincent himself. In the Common Rules there is a whole chapter that calls for the following of the evangelical maxims and for fleeing from those of the world (CR, chap. II). That which is a norm of conduct for the missionary, should also be an orientation for governance for the superiors. Or said in other words: St. Vincent always invoked the words of Jesus Christ and his way of acting as a motive and source of inspiration for making good choices in governance.

Perhaps one of the most interesting and delicate services of authority is the direct contact with persons. St. Vincent was not a superior who ordered people around, although he was always very firm. He was concerned with motivating and explaining what was ordered. In short he was concerned with facilitating obedience as is recommended now in the Instruction on *The Service of Authority and Obedience* in number 21. We could cite, to give an example, the letter he wrote to Fr. Du Coudray. This missionary refused to leave Rome where he had worked on the Syriac version of Holy Scripture. St. Vincent used all possible reasons to make his new assignment easier for him. He even told him that he imagined how the poor were calling to Fr. Du Coudray to come and evangelize them. He also gives other reasons, among them that his presence was necessary to give authority and consistency to a local community. At the end, St. Vincent does not order him with authority; rather Vincent prefers to motivate him so that he will decide for himself: *"Come, Father, please,"* he says to him (I, Letter 177).

In this direct contact with people, St. Vincent was always respectful with all, especially with the Sisters and the Missionaries, despite the irony that was sometimes hidden in his words and in his letters. He could not tolerate disrespect by superiors to their brothers. On one occasion a superior had the bad taste to write St. Vincent saying that he preferred to guide animals rather than men. He answered him with irony: *"You have only used these terms to express your difficulty better and to persuade me to relieve you of your office. We shall try, therefore, to send someone to replace you"* (IV, Letter 1344). A short time later, St. Vincent wrote him another letter announcing that he had named a new superior who would replace him in his function of directing the community. St. Vincent

finished his letter reminding the superior who had been replaced of his obligation of being “*the example of submission and trust each man owes to his Superior*” (IV, Letter 1366).

Vincent always placed great importance on information and communication, despite living in times very different from our own. Everything that he received he passed on to others. In his letters we see how he informed the communities of the events that affected them directly or indirectly. He was convinced that communication created a sense of belonging. He wrote circular letters announcing not only the deaths of members of the community, but also notifying the Congregation of the successes and the failures he had experienced with his projects. He saw both communities (the CM and the DCs) as two large families and each local community as a small family. He tried to get all of the members to be interested in everything. He favored communication within the community: “*As far as concerns me — these words are from St. Vincent himself —, I have the experience that where the Mission has some poor men, if there is a superior who is open and communicates with the others, all goes well*” (X, p. 773, Spanish edition). In this same sense, St. Vincent complained bitterly about a superior who lived in isolation, without communicating with the rest of the community, and even worse, did not treat his brothers with the affection they deserved. St. Vincent reprimanded him and suggested that he renew his charity and grow in humility. It was not at all unusual for St. Vincent to remind the superiors to be humble, taking into account that humility is one of the specific virtues of the Congregation (M. PÉREZ FLORES, *op. cit.*, pp. 35-43).

As we have seen, St. Vincent’s experience and convictions around authority continue to be enlightening for our times, despite the fact that he lived in a time when both ecclesial and civil authority were considered holy and unquestionable. Today authority has to confront problems and situations that were hardly experienced in the times of our Founder. For example, individualism, understood as the total autonomy of the person, or as a partial belonging to the Congregation, to the Province or to the Community. Individualism prevents one from finding a harmonious balance between the personal and community dimensions, because personal plans always come before community and provincial plans. Something of this is indicated in *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, no. 3. In this same number it is affirmed that cultural influence is a factor that has promoted this mentality. The search for personal fulfillment and well-being no matter what the cost, are other manifestations of the same reality. Moreover, today individualism may go by other names such as particular charisms, cultural differences or personal

processes. And all this can lead to more confusion. It is authority's role to discern where the limits are between legitimate diversity and individualism that destroys community life and weakens the sense of belonging. And of course, authority should insist on and remind us of the sense of a common mission, as St. Vincent would undoubtedly do if he lived in our times.

Authority and Creative Fidelity for the Mission

This 41st General Assembly has committed itself to reflect on the future of our mission, following the orientations of C. 2. According to this, it is to be expected that after the Assembly we make efforts oriented toward revising, renewing, adapting and creating our ministries, without forgetting, that fidelity also unites us directly to St. Vincent, his charism, his legacy and his spirit. It is necessary that we ask ourselves, here and now, this fundamental question: "How should authority in the Congregation be, in order to promote creative fidelity in the mission?"

We could begin by saying that creative mission requires an authority which is more charismatic than institutional. Evidently, there is no opposition between the two... only differences in tone or emphasis. Institutional or functional authority is more attentive to promoting the purpose of the Congregation, according to the spirit of St. Vincent, in a true communion of life and apostolate, according to C. 97. The Superior General, the Visitor and the Local Superior, each one at his own level, has his space within which he acts; each one complementing the others. Charismatic authority or leadership more easily looks toward the future, and moreover, looks toward it with confidence, seeking to be creative in ministry, or at least, to favor creativity in the ministry of others, as St. Vincent did in his time, as we saw earlier. Charismatic authority is convinced of the urgent need for evangelization and loves the mission passionately... the mission among the poor as St. Vincent wanted. For a superior, this is much more decisive than being a specialist in one ministry or another. These (the specialists) will never be lacking, thank God, but these are not usually the best at pointing out new paths or at animating others.

To situate oneself clearly and passionately in this source of energy that is the mission, which is at the heart of our Constitutions, without doubt leads one to creativity in ministry and to open up new paths. This was exactly the case of St. Vincent: the passion and urgency he experienced for mission and charity led him to make thousands of initiatives. But passion was the driving force. Here we could cite the old principle filled with wisdom: "*That which the heart desires, the mind ends up manifesting.*" Curiously, St. Vincent said

something quite similar to a group of Sisters when he assured them that to desire something strongly is to be halfway to obtaining it. Perhaps zeal, one of our specific virtues, of which St. Vincent often spoke to the first missionaries, is something that we should insist on, especially to the superiors of the Congregation.

Creative fidelity requires superiors who are somewhat charismatic, that is to say, persons or leaders who are capable of inspiring others to bring forth the best in themselves, always in service of the mission. Because what truly influences others is not the power a superior has, but rather his moral authority. Power is linked to the office, the responsibility; authority is linked to the credibility of the person. We could say that credibility is the base of the moral authority of a superior. This does not come with the letter of appointment, but rather with his credibility and his authenticity, guaranteed by a coherency between what he says and what he does. Above all, a leader has to be a witness that convinces with his words, but most of all, with his life.

Creative fidelity for the mission requires leaders or determined guides who point the way forward and who have a certain capacity to risk. If not, creative fidelity could be only beautiful words. Or said another way: all the orientations that come out of this Assembly will not become reality if the superiors do not commit themselves to them, starting with General, including the Visitors, and ending up with the Local Superiors.

Let us speak now about some of the bases or essential qualities needed today to exercise this service of authority that looks forward and desires to be creative. For example, the superior should be a person who is deeply spiritual. *"In consecrated life authority is first of all a spiritual authority,"* says the Instruction on *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, no. 13a. The evangelical project outlined by the Constitutions has to be directed and animated by spiritual persons. St. Vincent says this quite clearly in the different norms for the local superior. If superiors are experts in one or various ministries, if they have an extraordinary knowledge in one field or another, if they have good communication skills, all the better. But none of these qualities can substitute the most fundamental of all, the spiritual dimension. Otherwise the communities, the Provinces and the Congregation can easily become a work team, or a group with self-interests or a lobby group. Evidently, a spiritual man, capable of leading spiritual men, should cultivate prayer and maintain direct and frequent contact with the Lord. Frequently Jesus went away to pray, alone or with his disciples, the Gospels tell us. He also prayed for those who had been entrusted to him: *"I pray to you, Father, for those whom you have given me..."* (Jn 17:9-10).

In the advice that Vincent gives to Fr. Antoine Durand we find this: *"You should turn to prayer to preserve your soul in His fear and love; I have the obligation to tell you, and you must already know, that many times we lose ourselves while contributing to the salvation of others"* (XI, p. 237, Spanish edition).

Another quality which is needed today by charismatic authority is the capacity for discernment. The Constitutions and creative fidelity drive us to be creative in the mission, in community life, in personal relationships, and also in prayer. But we cannot move forward any which way, because creativity should always be expressed beginning with our own identity and Vincentian charism. Otherwise, we could come up with initiatives which are quite up-to-date, but which are foreign to our own spirit. From this supposition we easily see that superiors (and indeed all the missionaries) need to have the capacity to discern, and so must be filled with our own Vincentian spirit. Today more than ever, this capacity to reflect is needed, because the situations that affect the communities, the Provinces and the Congregation are not obvious, but rather very complex.

Obviously, to enter seriously into the process of discernment, one must listen to the Missionaries and know how to dialogue with the laypeople who work with them. This sharing can be for a superior a true mediation that helps to discover what God is asking of a community. The Vatican Council II invites superiors to *"listen well to the brothers"* (PC 14), and not to *"stifle the Spirit, but rather examine everything and remain with what is good"* (LG 12). Without this sharing, there is no real guarantee of correctly interpreting the will of God. Moreover, one can confuse God's will with one's own will. *"Whoever decides something without consulting the person who will be affected, is mistaken, even if he is correct in his decision,"* Seneca, the famous philosopher, liked to repeat. We find this same argument in a letter which St. Vincent wrote to P. Jean Guerin: *"Receive the opinions of the two who have been named councillors...."* The Constitutions tell us that the opinion of each missionary is important and should be respected. Listening to them, the superiors can be in touch with the grass-roots movements in the Congregation and the Provinces, and interpret them as signs along the way.

Another important aspect of charismatic authority is its closeness to people, which could be called having the heart of the "Good Shepherd" (Jn 10:1-21). We could say that the most important mission that the Lord entrusts to a superior in the Congregation is the Missionaries. This is what we have found in Jesus Christ and in St. Vincent. Of course, this function of authority is more important than the concerns about houses, documents, rules, projects.... A superior who does not manifest the sentiments of a father, a moth-

er, and attitudes of a good shepherd can leave their brothers with wounds. The same situation occurs if the confreres feel that they are valued and appreciated only because of the tasks that they carry out or because of their effectiveness. The words of the Pope, addressed to men and women superiors general in the audience of May 22, 2006, are very significant: *“Of you, major superiors, I ask that you offer a word of special concern to those who are going through difficulties, to the elderly and the infirm, to those who are going through experiences of crisis and loneliness, to those who suffer and feel confused...”* To the list mentioned by the Pope, we should perhaps add those who have spent some years working in different ministries. They are persons who have given themselves totally and now may suffer the erosion of fatigue, and a certain disappointment because of the results. The good shepherd knows his sheep, and does all that he can for his flock. He leads it to good pastures, and cares for its growth (Jn 10:2). This biblical image, so appropriate for defining the figure of the Superior, and which appears in C. 97, has to become visible and real in ordinary life, by the close presence of the superior, the esteem, the interest and the prayer for each one of the Missionaries, as well as trust in their possibilities. These are all signs that speak for themselves of the superior’s heart, the heart of a good shepherd.

Conclusion

The exhortation *Vita Consecrata* says: *“In the consecrated life the role of Superiors, including local Superiors, has always been of great importance for the spiritual life and for mission”* (VC 43). We do not need many explanations to conclude that every human group needs authority, although the form may vary greatly from one society to another. We could say that it is an anthropological fact written into our nature and developed in all cultures. Christian revelation does not ignore this fact, rather it confirms it. St. Vincent tells us the same thing by using an image which is quite suggestive: *“Superiors — he tells us — are like pilots who take a ship into port”* (IX, p. 859, Spanish edition). It is possible that authority, in some ways, is more important than ever, and faces more difficulties than in the past, when structures were stronger and more sustaining. They helped authority to carry out its mission. Today things have changed. Structures have lost their credibility and have been considerably weakened, so much so that now they are in need of solid people who are capable of sustaining and animating the structures. Said another way, in earlier times superiors were accepted and respected by all, at least externally. Today this is not so clear. Moreover, institutional

authority relies on moral authority, perhaps more than ever. And this does not come with the office alone; it must be gained by dedication to the mission, by wholehearted, free service and by a life which is coherent.

Surely one of the most important functions that, in these days, has been entrusted to authority is that of animating communities, ministries and spiritual life. The C. 101, 102, 123 and 129 indicate this clearly for each one of the three levels of government. But this animation cannot be improvised, nor can it be done by force, confusing the essential with what is secondary, or expending energy without clear goals. Governance and animation need a map, a global plan, goals to be met as well as concrete strategies. Evidently this proposal of animation has to be in line, not only with our Vincentian charism, but also with the orientation that this General Assembly will give to the whole Congregation for the next six years. And this orientation will be about creative fidelity. This will require superiors who point the way ahead, who have a vision of the future, who dream the dreams of God and of St. Vincent, and who will take the risk of preparing and promoting what could be a new birth. I hope that the superiors of the Congregation will not allow themselves to be bogged down by an excessive institutional prudence that will make them ambiguous in practical decisions and fearful of making evangelically bold offers to the Missionaries! Thankfully, we count on the example of Jesus Christ and the experience of St. Vincent.

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