

God's Providence Has Inspired the Company with This Holy, Ingenious Means

By: Corpus Delgado, CM

On 4 October 1647, Vincent de Paul wrote to Monsieur Portail who had been entrusted with the task of convincing Rome that in order to dedicate itself *to the heavy labors of our state*, the members of the Congregation of the Mission must remain among the clergy: *God in His Providence has finally inspired the Company with this holy, ingenious means of placing us in a state in which we have the happiness of the religious state through simple vows, and of remaining, nevertheless, among the clergy and obeying the prelates, with regard to our works, ... for who could reasonably attack something that is not contrary to the Councils, the Canons, or papal decrees, but is, rather, in conformity with the Church's custom before solemn vows.*¹

Then, after recalling the prohibition of instituting new religious orders, Vincent stated: *the Holy Father has not erected us in the religious state, but rather as secular priests. It follows that we do not belong to the religious state, since we declare that even though we make those simple vows, we do not intend to be religious, but to remain always in the ranks of the clergy* (CCD:III:248).

That *holy, ingenious means* that Vincent explained as *a work of Divine Providence* is bound up with the purpose of the Congregation of the Mission, namely, in order to dedicate ourselves *to the heavy labors of our state* (CCD:III:247).

¹ CCD refers to *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translated and edited by Jacqueline Kilar, DC; and Marie Poole, DC; et al; annotated by John W. Carven, CM; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014; volume III, pp. 247-248; future references to this work will be inserted into the text using the initials [CCD] followed by the volume number, then the page number, for example, CCD:III:247-248.

We will reflect on the nature of *those heavy labors of our state* and why, in order to accomplish those works, Vincent felt it necessary to make it clear *that we do not intend to be religious, but to remain always in the ranks of the clergy.*²

1. The heavy labors of our state

Vincent had not planned to dedicate himself to the ministry of popular missions nor did he intend to establish a Congregation that would be dedicated to that ministry. Rather it was the work of God: *If there is something in which human persons have no part, then God is the one who is acting* (CCD:XI:162).

The ministry of popular missions is rooted in the decisive experience that occurred in January 1617 in Gannes-Folleville. After having ministered on the de Gondi estate for several years, Madame de Gondi had the idea of maintaining *some priests to continue these missions, and, for this purpose, obtained for us the College des Bons-Enfants, where M. Portail and myself went to live, taking with us a good priest to whom we paid fifty écus a year. The three of us used to go off to preach missions from village to village* (CCD:XII:7-8). The foundation contract of the Congregation of the Mission (17 April 1625) which was signed by Vincent de Paul and the de Gondi's in the presence of a notary, refers to

a pious association of some priests recognized for their knowledge, piety, and ability, who would be willing to renounce the conveniences of the said towns as well as all benefices, offices, and dignities of the Church, so that, in accord with the wishes of the Prelates, each within the limits of his own diocese, they could devote themselves entirely and exclusively to the salvation of the

² This reality is made very clear in the Brief of Alexander VII, *Ex Commissa Nobis*, which approved the vows of the Congregation of the Mission: *We establish also that the Congregation should not therefore be considered of the number of religious Orders, but that it is of the body of the secular clergy* (CCD:XIIIa:418).

poor common people. They would go from village to village, at the expense of their common purse, to preach, instruct, exhort, and catechize those poor people and encourage all of them to make a good general confession of their whole past life, without accepting for this a remuneration of any kind or manner whatsoever, so as to distribute freely the gifts they have freely received from the generous hand of God (CCD:XIIIa:215-216).

Popular missions did not simply involve preaching, catechesis, and the renewal of the practice of the sacraments. Divine Providence had led Vincent to discover that *the poor are dying of hunger and are being damned* (CCD:I:112, IV:45). Therefore, the fact that the missionaries *devoted themselves entirely and exclusively to the salvation of the poor common people* (CCD:XIIIa:214) implied that they would also establish a Confraternity of Charity³ and would also respond to specific needs of each parish or village where they conducted a mission.

J. Ferté affirms the activity of the Confraternities of Charity in the parishes where a mission had been preached by Vincent or his followers. Such activity was continued until the end of the 18th century and this Vincentian practice was adopted by other religious congregations who recognized the benefits that resulted from the ministry of the members of the Confraternities.⁴

The fact that the missionaries *devoted themselves entirely and exclusively to the salvation of the poor common people* (CCD:XIIIa:214) also implied that they would become involved in

³ Cf. I Zedde, “La evangelización del pobre según San Vicente de Paúl” [“The Evangelization of the Poor According to Saint Vincent de Paul”] in collection, *Vicente de Paúl evangelizador de los pobres [Vincent de Paul, Evangelizer of the Poor]*, CEME, Salamanca, 1973, pp. 148-150.

⁴ Cf. J. Ferté, *La vie religieuse dans les campagnes parisiennes (1622-1695)* [*Religious Life in the Paris Countrysides (1622-1695)*], Vrin, Paris, 1962, pp. 216-218.

restoring a calm and peaceful environment in the parishes where they preached. In other words, they would attempt to resolve those situations in which people viewed one another as enemies, situations that destroyed the bonds of unity. At the same time the missionaries would legalize marriages, restore to their rightful owner goods that had been stolen from them, and reconcile public sinners. The Bull, *Salvatoris Nostri*,⁵ that approved the Congregation of the Mission and the various elements that characterized the popular missions, give witness to all of these various ministries.⁶

This Bull also refers to a request that was presented by Vincent de Paul and describes another work, namely, the formation of the clergy (formation with regard to moral theology and the celebration of the sacraments). We find in the same document another reference to the missionaries receiving priests in their houses and offering them retreats as well as providing retreats for the ordinands. Like the other works that the Missionaries would undertake, these works would also be done freely.

The seminary for ecclesiastics was established at the Bons Enfants in February 1642 at almost the same time that Olier received the first three seminarians at the Vaugirard.⁷

⁵ CCD:XIIIa:296-305; this *pious association* was established on 17 April 1625; the priests of the Mission in 1627 and this group ultimately became the Congregation of the Mission. The Bull, which was signed by the Pope, was sent to the Promotor of the Curia on 30 October 1633. The Archbishop was named the executor of the Bull. Therefore, in light of said execution, the Bull was published on 14 March 1634 and, on 27 November of the same year, the Bull took effect. The king did not approve the Bull until 16 May 1642.

⁶ CCD:I:47-53, 248-257, 552-557; III:170; X:296-304; XII:214-215.

⁷ It appears to me to be useless to enter into a discussion about whether Vincent was the first person to establish this new type of seminary or should this fact be attributed to Olier: *These discussions are always useless; they should have no place among us and in fact such discussions reveal a lack of respect for the memory of the individuals that are intended to be honored. Neither Vincent nor Olier were concerned about such a matter. Vincent referred to Olier as "a man of God" and Olier called Vincent "our father." Both men ministered*

The Council of Trent proposed the creation of an institution that, from the time of adolescence, would endeavor to cultivate in possible candidates for the priesthood a human and clerical formation. Without neglecting that aspect, Vincent opted for a different direction. He focused on those who were approaching ordination (first offering those individuals the possibility of a ten-day retreat and then later, extending the length of those retreats). That concern for adult candidates, clerics, and even ordained priests led to a new form of seminary which quickly spread throughout France, as well as to other countries.

Three months before his death, Vincent confessed: *We have only the consolation of seeing that our modest works have appeared so beautiful and useful to others that they have been inspired to devote themselves to them as we have done, and with greater blessing from God – not only in missionary work, but also in seminaries, which are rapidly multiplying in France* (CCD:VIII:368).

for the greater glory of God and inspired by the same divine grace (a grace that they both felt they were unworthy to receive) they arrived at a similar goal. Therefore we do not enter in such a discussion that would only dim the extraordinary glory and the Christian fraternity that these individuals shared. E. de Broglie in F. Contassot, La Congrégation de la Mission et les Séminaires au XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles [The Congregation of the Mission and the Seminaries in the 17th and 18th Centuries], Paris, 1968, p. 17. M. Icard, in Traditions de la Compagnie des Prêtres de Saint-Sulpice [Traditions of the Company of the Priests of Saint Sulpice] writes in a similar way when he states: We had no true Major Seminaries in France until the time of M. Vincent and M. Olier ... men who were called by God to engage in this ministry and who, in reality, gave a solid foundation to said ministry. These two venerable priests were animated by the same spirit and were filled with zeal for the glory of God and for the sanctification of the clergy. They wanted to put into practice the teachings of the Council of Trent and therefore, sought to establish seminaries after the manner of the former episcopal schools. That was done, however, with certain modifications that were demanded by the reality of the 17th century. In order to achieve their objective, they established a common life for the clerics during the time of their formation and did that in accord with the rules that they judged to be most appropriate for the sanctification of the clergy.

What was once referred to as *the heavy labors of our state* were later called *our modest works*. When viewed from God's perspective, the heavy labors became modest works that now demanded the dedication of the missionaries:

In the beginning, the Company was concerned only with itself and the poor; at certain times it withdrew in private; at others it went out to teach the country people. God allowed that this was all we seemed to be doing, but, in the fullness of time, he called us to assist in the formation of good priests, in providing good pastors to parishes and teaching them what they should know and practice. Oh, what a lofty, sublime ministry! Oh, how far above us! Who had ever thought about retreats for ordinands and about seminaries? This undertaking had never entered our minds until God indicated to us that it was his pleasure for us to be engaged in it (CCD:XII:74).

In order to carry forward those modest works, the little Company of the Mission had to rely on God's Providence:

God didn't turn for that either to theologians or to so many Communities and religious Orders full of learning and holiness but to this weak, poor, wretched Company, the last and most unworthy of all. What did God find in us for such a great work? Where are our fine exploits? Where are the brilliant, renowned deeds we've accomplished? Where is our great ability? None of all that; it's to poor, wretched imbeciles that God, by his pure will, has turned to try once again to repair the breaches in the kingdom of his Son and the ecclesiastical state. O Messieurs, let us preserve carefully this grace God has given us in preference to so many holy, learned persons who would merit it more than we do (CCD:XI:280).

The modest works that God's Providence entrusted to Vincent de Paul and his followers gave form to the little company of the Mission.

2. *There isn't a single Company in the Church of God that has for its portion, persons who are poor*

For centuries, **the monastic ideal** prevailed in the Church. Consecration to God, expressed through a life of chastity, poverty, and obedience, introduced faithful Christians to *the state of perfection*. This ideal flourished as a result of the various and numerous expressions of consecrated life that gave and continue to give the Church impressive witnesses of holiness while at the same time making significant contributions to the development of Christian culture.⁸

The appearance and the flourishing of the Mendicant Orders in the 13th century provided consecrated life with a new face, namely, a greater presence in the cities (which became filled with convents) and an impressive creativity with regard to new ways of establishing relationships with people.⁹

When the Protestant Reformation caused the reconfiguration of Christian Europe, we began to see the emergence of a desire to return to gospel sources of consecrated life, a reality that produced fruit in the reform of the classical Orders¹⁰ and in the appearance of new Congregations during the era of the **Catholic Reform**. This reform was the result of the Council of Trent.

⁸ A. Bellella Cardiel, *Siempre Antigua y siempre nueva: la vida consagrada del siglo XV a nuestros días* [*Always Old and Always New: Consecrated Life from the 15th Century to the Present Day*], Sal Terrae, February 2015, 159-161.

⁹ A. López Amat, *El seguimiento radical de Cristo: esbozo histórico de la Vida Consagrada*, [*The Radical Following of Christ: An Historical Outline of Consecrated Life*], Ediciones Encuentro, Madrid, 1987, 2 vols. II:380.

¹⁰ Among the monastic orders, we mention here the Benedictines, the Cistercians. Among the mendicant orders, we mention the Capuchins and the various orders of observance. We also mention here the Teresian reform.

In this context of reform, there arose at the beginning of the 16th century the **Clerics Regular**,¹¹ who, in light of the decadence of the clergy, presented a clear alternative. First, there were the Theatines¹² and the Barnabites¹³ and the Somascan Fathers,¹⁴ who some years later were joined by the Society of Jesus that was founded by Ignatius of Loyola. The development and rapid spread of the Society of Jesus provided an inspiration for the majority of Congregations that were established during the 16th century.¹⁵

Thus, in 1574 in Italy, John Leonardi founded the *Clerics Regular of the Mother of God*, whose members dedicated themselves to the education of children and ministry among the poor. Also in Italy in 1586, Camillus de Lellis founded the *Company of the Ministers of the Infirm* and, in 1617, Joseph Calasanz founded the *Poor Clerics Regular of the Mother of God of Pious Schools* whose members provided free education to poor children.¹⁶

¹¹ The members of these groups took solemn vows, lived a common life, and were engaged in an active apostolate. They dressed like the secular clergy and not like monks; they were not subject to the cloister or to choral prayer, though they did participate in liturgical prayer. They resided in houses, not in monasteries or convents.

¹² This group was founded in 1524 by Gian Petro Carafa (their first Superior General and later Pope Paul IV) and by Saint Cajetan; cf. A. López, *op.cit.* II:368.

¹³ Known also as the Clerics Regular of Saint Paul, they were founded in 1540 by Saint Anthony Mary Zaccaria.

¹⁴ Known also as the Company of the Servants of the Poor or simply, the Fathers of the Poor, they were founded in 1532 by the layman, Saint Jerome Emiliani; cf. A. López Amat, *op.cit.*, II:393.

¹⁵ The Council of Trent referred to the Company of Jesus as “the clerical state.” In addition to the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience, the Jesuits take a fourth vow of obedience to the Holy Father in which they vow to go wherever the Holy Father might command them. The government of the Society is vertical and the office of the Superior General is vital, since he is the one who chooses the provincial superiors and, in turn, the provincial superiors choose the local superiors. Paul III approved the Society in 1540 and, by the time of the death of their Founder in July 1556, there were more than 1000 members. Retreats, education, the struggle against heresy, and missions are their primary works and they have been excused from the choral recitation of the Office.

¹⁶ A. López Amat, *op.cit.*, II:471.

During this same era, another form of consecrated life began to appear: **the Oratory**. Philip Neri (1515-1595) in Rome and Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle (1575-1629) in France, founded communities that were characterized by a common life, the cultivation of holiness without solemn vows, concern for the reform of the clergy, involvement in an active apostolate. These groups inspired the establishment of the Seminaries of Saint Sulpice of Jean-Jacques Olier (1608-1657) and Saint John Eudes (1601-1680).¹⁷

The first male religious congregations with simple vows arose at the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th century and multiplied during the following centuries. Among the more significant of those congregations we mention here the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools founded by Saint Jean-Baptiste de la Salle (1651-1719), the Missionaries of the Company of Mary founded by Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort (1673-1716), the Passionists founded by Saint Paul of the Cross (1694-1775) and the Redemptorists founded by Saint Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori (1696-1787).¹⁸

Parallel to the development of these various forms of consecrated life, the monastic ideal led to the development of Third Orders that allowed the laity to participate in the spirituality and the various religious practices of the monks and the friars. Saint Francis de Sales wrote *The Introduction to a Devout Life* with the intention of making the ideal of perfection available to those individuals who were not able to live a cloistered life.

¹⁷ J. Álvarez Gómez, *Historia de la Vida Religiosa [History of Religious Life]*, Publicaciones Claretianas, Madrid 1990, 3 vol, III 350-363. For a more complete vision, see, M. VENARD, « Les séminaires en France avant Saint Vincent de Paul » [“The Seminaries in France Before Saint Vincent de Paul”]: *Actes du Colloque International d'études vincentiennes [Proceedings of the International Symposium on Vincentian Studies]*, Paris, September 1981. Rome, CLV, 1983; F. Contassot *op. cit.*; G. CARROLL, *Un portrait du prêtre: Les retraites de 10 jours pour les ordinands [A Portrait of the Priest: The Ten-Day Retreats for the Ordinands]*, Paris, Pierre Tequi éditeur, 2004.

¹⁸ J. Álvarez Gómez, *op. cit.*, III:387-432.

Vincent de Paul adopted as his own the missionary endeavor of Jesus Christ: *he sent me to bring Good News to the poor* (Luke 4:18). Vincent never tired of saying that the Son of God, the Missionary of the Father, came into the world in order to evangelize the poor. The vocation of the Missionaries is a continuation of Jesus' mission on earth:

In this vocation, we are very much in conformity with Our Lord Jesus Christ, who seems to have made his principal aim, in coming into the world, to assist poor people and to take care of them. Misit me evangelizare pauperibus ... So, are we not very fortunate to belong to the Mission for the same purpose that caused God to become man? And if someone were to question a Missioner, wouldn't it be a great honor for him to be able to say with Our Lord, Misit me evangelizare pauperibus? I'm here to catechize, instruct, hear confessions, and assist persons who are poor (CCD:XI:98-99) ... Aren't we blessed, my dear confreres, to live authentically the vocation of Jesus Christ (CCD:XI:121).

Vincent de Paul not only viewed the ministry of his companions as a prolongation of the mission of Jesus Christ, but he unequivocally affirmed that the poor are their proper portion, a heritage that had been entrusted to them by the Lord:

So then, my dear confreres, poor persons are our portion, the poor; pauperibus evangelizare misit me. What happiness, Messieurs, what happiness! To do what Our Lord came from heaven to earth to do, and by means of which we'll go from earth to heaven to continue the work of God ... That there should be a Company, and that it should be the Company of the Mission, composed of poor men, and that it should be entirely dedicated to that purpose, going here and there through hamlets and villages, leaving the towns behind – something that's never been done – and going to announce the Gospel only to persons who are poor (CCD:XII:4).

Contemplating the possible objections of his companions, as well as the objections of future followers, Vincent stated:

But, Monsieur, we aren't the only ones who instruct poor people; do pastors do anything else? What about preachers in towns and villages? What do they do in Advent and Lent? They preach to the poor, and they do it better than we do. True, but there isn't a single Company in the Church of God that has for its portion persons who are poor, devoting itself totally to the poor and never preaching in large towns. That's what Missioners profess to do, it is their special characteristic to be, like Jesus Christ, committed to the poor. So, our vocation is a continuation of [Jesus' vocation] (CCD:XII:71).

Those who study the history of consecrated life have no hesitation in affirming that the various Vincentian achievements opened a path that has widened with the passing of the centuries.¹⁹ The *little company* of the Mission (like the Company of the Daughters of Charity) opened the horizons that, in the following centuries, led to many other forms of “non-religious” consecrated life. In that context historians note the uniqueness of the Vincentian insight.

3. *The state of religious life of Saint Peter (CCD:XII:306) – the apostolic life of Jesus with his disciples and its significance for the Congregation of the Mission*

Through the expressed will of Vincent de Paul, the Congregation of the Mission is positioned in the church as a group of *workers* (CCD:XI:192) who follow Jesus Christ and continue his mission on earth. That which is proper to this Little Company (and the other Associations and groups of the Vincentian Family) is that its members live as Christ did and prolong the mission that Jesus, as the Missionary of the Father, initiated on earth, a mission for which he convoked the Apostles and the women related to the Apostles (CCD:VIII:278).

¹⁹ CCD:XI:393-395; Cf. CCD:XI:297, 390-392; XIIIa:213, 226-227, 297. *If priests devote themselves to the care of the poor, wasn't that what Our Lord and many great saints did, and they not only recommended poor persons to others, but they themselves consoled, comforted and healed them. Aren't those who are poor the afflicted members of Our Lord? Aren't they our brothers and sisters? And if priests abandon them, who do you think is going to help them? (CCD:XII:77).*

Workers on behalf of the gospel and who prolong the mission of Jesus Christ, are members of an apostolic group, the state of life of Saint Peter: *I ask the Company to thank God for the institution of the Company, for the vocation of each individual in it, and for our being in this state of religious life of Saint Peter – or rather of Jesus Christ (CCD:XII:306).*

Vincent de Paul, faithful to this insight, exhorted the Missionaries and all the members of the Church to strive for this apostolic idea, assuring them that the Church needed apostolic men and women.²⁰

In that context, Vincent recommended preaching like an apostle, like Jesus himself and the apostles:

To preach like an Apostle, Messieurs, that is. to preach well and in a helpful way, you have to approach it with simplicity, using familiar speech, so that each person will be able to understand and profit by it. That's how the disciples and Apostles preached and how Jesus Christ preached; God has bestowed a great favor on this insignificant, wretched Company in giving us the happiness of imitating Him in that (CCD:XI:237) ... if a man now wants to be considered a good preacher in all the churches in Paris and at the Court, he has to preach like that, with no affectation whatsoever. And people say of the man who preaches in that way and who preaches the best, "That man works wonders, he preaches like a missionary, like a missionary, like an Apostle." O Sauveur! And M. X told me that eventually we have to come to that. And in truth, to preach otherwise is the height of impertinence, it's trying to preach ourselves and not Jesus Christ (CCD:XI:259).

²⁰ C. J. Delgado, "Hombres Apostólicos: Ser sacerdote a partir de la experiencia de Vicente de Paul" ["Apostolic Men." A Priest from the Perspective of Vincent de Paul's Experience], *Vincentiana* (2010), 39-61.

From the beginning, the Congregation of the Mission viewed itself not as a religious community but as members of the secular clergy. Vincent himself expressly stated that the Missionaries were to be viewed as members of the secular clergy: *We establish also that the Congregation should not therefore be considered of the number of religious Orders, but that it is of the body of the secular clergy* (CCD:XIIIa:418).

Conclusion

The members of this *pious association of ecclesiastics* in order to dedicate themselves to the evangelization of the poor and to the works that had been entrusted to them by Divine Providence, wanted to remain as part of the body of the secular clergy (CCD:I:141 – *a congregation of secular priests called Missionaries*).

Saint Vincent de Paul, filled with gratitude to God, did not hesitate to call this intuition a *holy means* and stated that it was the Providence of God that inspired the establishment of the Congregation of the Mission.

Translated: Charles T. Plock, CM