

Mission and Charity: An Identity in Relationship

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The Latin American Religious Phenomena and the Vincentian Identity

Charity and Mission. This is the binomial which synthesizes and expresses the richness of the Vincentian Charism, its mysticism and its prophecy. It is that which structures and mobilizes our identity, delineating a form of being and acting in the Church and in the world. Immersed as we are in a very diverse, pluralistic, and multifaceted scenario in all of its areas (ethnic, esthetic, cultural, religious, ecclesial, spiritual, apostolic, and community), we cannot forget the grace and challenge to integrate, live, and radiate the values and demands of our charism – charity-missionary – with all that it inspires and requires, in the different contexts that we live as bearers of the inheritance that we have received from Saint Vincent de Paul.

Almost two centuries ago, the Vincentian Charism was planted in Latin America, beginning in the fertile soil of Brazil in 1820, with the arrival of the Portuguese Fathers.¹ During this period, the

¹ It was in the year 1820 that the Congregation of the Mission (CM) was formally established in Brazil, with Fathers Leandro Rebelo Peixoto e Castro (1781-1841) and Antonio Ferreira Viçoso (1787-1875), this future Bishop from Mariana, today *Venerable*, on the path to beatification. But it seems that, already in 1640, the *Propagation of the Faith* had offered Saint Vincent a mission in Brazil. This is what was taken from a postscript added by our founder to a letter written to Father Lebreton, resident of Rome (cf. CCD II, 105). Brazil was also on the apostolic horizon of the mystic of charity and mission! [cf., Rybolt, John. *The Vincentians: A General History of the Congregation of the Mission*, Volume 3: *Revolution and Restoration (1789-1843)*, New York: New City Press, 2013, p. 593-596].

nefarious prejudices of the European revolutions could not destroy the vitality of the missionary charism of the Congregation. At the same time, new perspectives were unfolding through an ultra-marine expansion, in particular within the American continent.² Little by little, other countries were being converted into fertile ground for mission and charity, thanks to the apostolic zeal of the sons of Saint Vincent: Mexico (1844), Chile (1854), Peru (1858), Argentina (1859), Central America (1862), Cuba (1863), Colombia and Ecuador (1870), Puerto Rico (1873), Costa Rica (1893), and Venezuela (1931).³ On the continent of hope and love, charity and mission revealed their fecundity, developing and producing abundant fruit, unfolding in action and institutions dedicated to the evangelization and service of the poor and an ongoing formation of clergy and laity. Our soil was watered by the sweat of hundreds of missionaries who gave their lives, clothed with the spirit of Christ and faithful to Saint Vincent. In our countries, geographically extending more or less, the Vincentian Family flourished admirably, attracting and sending men and women for the harvest of the Kingdom, serving the call of the Church, attentive to the current needs.

In this brief approach, guided by the “*Documento de Aparecida*” [“Aparecida Document”] (DA),⁴ we will take up some aspects of the Latin American religious phenomena. Then we will look to the Vincentian Charism for inspiration and impulse to revitalize charity and mission in today’s context. Lastly, we will present some insights for the purpose of making our fidelity more creative and effective.

² Cf. Román, José María, “Lecciones de Historia General de la Congregación de la Misión” [“Lessons from the General History of the Congregation of the Mission”] in *Anales de la Congregación de la Misión y de las Hijas de la Caridad*, Madrid, volume 113, n. 4-5, July-October 2005, p. 405.

³ Data taken from *Congregatio Missionis Catalogus Provinciarum, Domorum ac Personarum (2014-2016)*, Roma: Curia Generalitia.

⁴ Emanated from the *V Conferencia General del Episcopado de Latino América y del Caribe* [V General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean] (13-31 May 2007).

Secularization, crisis of meaning, and religious irruption

Cultural, social, and religious fragmentation has caused a generalized “disease” which has provoked in many people a profound feeling of insecurity, anguish, frustration, and anxiety, if not real emotional and psychic disequilibrium. Scholars refer to this phenomenon as a *crisis of meaning*. This crisis is not limited to the “multiple partial meanings that individuals can find in the everyday actions that they perform, but the meaning that gives unity to everything that exists and happens to us in experience, which we believers call the religious sense” (DA 37). All of these cultural tendencies and impacts take place mainly in urban settings, but their influence can also be detected in the rural context, principally due to the effects of globalization, abundant although unequal, and of the widespread communication media, particularly the dissemination of social networks with the advantages and risks they present. When the view of the transcendent dimension of existence is lost, dispensing the religious experience, circumscribing its movement and its goal to its proper interiority, in history or in nature (immanentism), the horizon of life and its fundamental relationships is narrowed. In fact, “the integrating force of the sacred permits that all of the created realities acquire, from it, its meaning, its value, and its consistency. To separate or withdraw from the sacred is to submit to anomie, to the loss of meaning, to chaos.”⁵ In other words, when religious meaning diminishes, the dynamic unity between *to be* and *to act* is diluted, and the *I* is imposed as the absolute and arbitrary unquestionable criteria, objective recognition of human dignity is debilitated, ethical values vanish, and the most radical aspirations give way to tyranny of the desires, the ecological conscience is impoverished, the social-transforming commitment is impoverished or degenerates into

⁵ Libanio, João Batista, *A religião no início do Milênio [Religion at the Beginning of the Millennium]*, São Paulo: Loyola, 2002, p. 94. In this masterful work, the author, who died in 2014, analyzes in detail the contemporary religious phenomenon distinguishing its forms, causes, and consequences.

sectarian and narcissistic ideologies, deprived of clear principles and ends. As such, an existential vacuum is established, often resulting in an attempt to fill with furious voracity, only to later throw one's self into the tedium of isolation (facilitated today by the virtual world), with a compulsion for sex or avid desire for consumerism. All of these tendencies, highly visible in postmodern culture, contribute to the fading of the meaning of life and the trivialization of values, feelings, and attitudes that ennoble the human being, its options and actions.

However, now and again, "the crisis of meaning and of value more easily provokes religious desires and needs in people who experience it."⁶ In Latin America, the process of secularization, with its characteristics of autonomy and indifference, works alongside a singular and complex religious outbreak. This phenomenon, in its impressive variety of forms and expressions,⁷ is characterized by a distancing from formal traditions to an emphasis on subjectivity and an insatiable search for satisfaction in the enormous variety of religious products available today to everyone. The phenomenon has its effects on institutional religion, which is more socially organized, has structured rites, symbols, and doctrines that are transmitted through tradition to a community adept in its faith and is seen as losing ground to this fluid, subjective religiosity, with its powerful affective-emotional content. The objective dimension of faith is renounced, such as that which is supported by transcendent data or by the revealed word, which calls us to attachment, conversion, and commitment of the *homo religiosus*.⁸ So what results

⁶ Libanio, *ibid*, p. 39.

⁷ As the great pastoral theologian Alberto Antoniazzi assures, in reference to the Brazilian religious scene: "The great tendency in these last decades or in modernity in the field of religion is diversification and fragmentation" (cited by Libanio, *ibid*, p. 25).

⁸ Father Libanio dedicates an entire chapter of his book to an interesting conceptual delimitation on the three semantic fields of religion, religiosity, and faith putting forth the differences and convergences (cf. Libanio, *ibid*, p. 87-110).

is the displacement from the institutionalized traditions and also a syncretistic confusion for intimate accommodations by spiritual conveniences or isolated practices, chosen according to taste and the urgency of each individual. The number of people disconnected from religious institutions increases in the search for other experiences that give meaning, vigor, and hope, without attention to where or from whom such existential unrest can be satisfied (traditional institutions, non-denominational churches, movements, Pentecostal believers, new age, neo-paganism, and others). J. B. Libanio has observed a perfect synthesis of the “sacred secularity” that makes up the contemporary religious phenomena in Latin America: “From within the announcing of the death of religion and advance of secularization, springs forth branches full of life of the most diverse religious expressions.”⁹ Today, the most recurring religious experiences tend to focus on the subject himself, gravitating between the profundity of his soul and the immensity of the universe.”

In view of the secularist pretensions which unceasingly affirm the autonomy of everything and everyone in relationship to religion and God and taking into account the complexity of religious irruptions of most subjective character together with their derivations (and degenerations), Christians are challenged to a stronger and more convincing adherence to the Gospel as a permanent inspiration of the experience of faith and supreme norm of its action in history. As followers of Jesus Christ, we firmly believe in the transformative power of his message, with its ability to communicate life and hope to all human beings, so as to enrich and purify all of culture which is exposed to its light, having as a dynamizing center the charity that comes from God and unites us to each other. According to each of the last Popes, (John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis) in spite of the variations of emphasis, each adopted the importance of the Gospel, with its lights and exigencies, to make up the background curtain of the New Evangelization. The transmission of the message

⁹ Libanio, *ibid*, p. 11.

contained in the life and mission of Jesus Christ, structural nucleus of the Christian faith, requires wisdom, faith, courage, creativity, and perseverance on the part of all the People of God.¹⁰ Through the testimony, service, dialogue, and proclamation, the Church is called to resonate the Good News of salvation in all hearts and in all corners of the world, comforted by the company of its Lord (Matthew 28:20) and affirming itself in fidelity to the Kingdom of God.

In the context of the radical “epoch of change” the Church in Latin America feels challenged “by new social and political turbulence, by the expansion of a culture distant from or hostile to Christian tradition, and by the emergence of varied religious offerings which try to respond as best they can to the manifest thirst for God of our peoples” (DA 10). This Church, which sees itself as a “home for all peoples and the house of the poor,” is also being pushed to a profound rethinking and relaunching of fidelity and courage to its mission in new circumstances arising in Latin American and the world, without falling into pessimism and losing heart, and to stand up to superficiality and conformity, adapting itself to the circumstances, without straying from the center and goal that the Christian faith gives it. Most urgent, here, is a return to Jesus Christ, who reinvigorates the Church as to her mystery and her mission: mystery of grace and holiness, mission of evangelization and service. Only in this way, can the Church confirm, renew, and revitalize “the newness of the Gospel rooted in our history, out of a personal and community encounter with Jesus Christ that raises up disciples and missionaries” (DA 11), committing itself so that “faith, hope and

¹⁰ Cf. Álvarez, Félix, “Reflexiones a propósito de la Nueva Evangelización” [“Reflections on the New Evangelization”] in *Anales de la Congregación de la Misión y de las Hijas de la Caridad*, Madrid, volume 121, n. 2, March-April 2013, p. 125-140. “La misión que el Señor confía a todos los miembros del Nuevo Pueblo de Dios requiere el coraje, la audacia y el profetismo de las mejores épocas de la Iglesia” [“The mission that the Lord entrusts to all members of the New People of God requires the courage, audacity, and prophesy of the Church’s best times”] (p. 140).

love renew the life of persons and transform the cultures of peoples” (DA 13). After all, “what defines us is not the harsh dramatic living conditions, nor the challenges of society, nor the tasks that we must undertake, but above all the love received from the Father through Jesus Christ by the anointing of the Holy Spirit” (DA 14).

Consecrated life and ordained ministry are immersed in the secularized society and, as such, do not escape the danger that their identity can be diluted. This danger presents itself surreptitiously and often, intrudes in the life of not just a few. This is what we see, for example, among those who are, although very dedicated to important social works and activities of direct service in our institutions, do not escape a spiritual emptiness that attacks and is manifest in the introjection of the implicit code and correct reason of social justice, joint politics, gestation techniques, but not directly related to Christ and his Gospel. If it is true that “from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34), to not speak specifically about Christian faith may be the sign of an urgent need to *evangelize one’s own vocation*, again filling the heart with that which, or better yet, with that Whom we should be announcing and whose plan we are called to live. One consequence of secularization of which we are more or less aware is the emergence of partial adherence to selective aspects of the ministry and of consecrated life; that is, those aspects of the life that are more pleasing to the ego or more to one’s personal liking: a spirituality with many personal nuances, some of which are foreign to the Christian faith. We choose only certain people with whom we will live or the places where we will serve or do ministry, the selection of those more suitable activities and particular skills or experiences, a prioritization of virtues more easily incorporated to one’s personality, the development of a hybrid lifestyle that lacks convictions and commitments, adaptation to fashion and trends, psychological legitimization of all kinds of positions and justification of processes, being “each to his/her own,” “there is no accounting for taste,” “it is up to each person,” and “only God is the judge.” Rejection of objective values and principles gives light to the “lite,”

superficial, incoherent, decaffeinated, and weak in faith, in mission, in charity, in community, in the virtues, in the Evangelical Counsels, in one's essential identity¹¹ consecrated person, priest, or missionary. This can occur or worsen in any stage of life.

In the same way, the CM feels challenged to tone its spiritual and apostolic life, without ever losing sight of the dynamic center which is none other than Jesus Christ, sent by the Father to evangelize the poor (Luke 4:8), as Saint Vincent contemplated and proposed for our contemplation. Only when we put on the spirit of Christ, can we be on fire with his charity and fulfill his mission. In these times of secularization and the irruption of the crisis of meaning of the religious, nothing would seem to be more urgent than this: return to Jesus to evangelize.¹² Jesus Christ is the rule of inspiration and the fundamental content of the New Evangelization, to which we are called by the Church during this springtime of the pontificate of Pope Francis.

¹¹ Cf. González-Carvajal, Luis. "La fe de Vicente de Paúl ante una sociedad de increencia" ["The Faith of Vincent de Paul in Face of an Unbelieving Society"] in *Anales de la Congregación de la Misión y de las Hijas de la Caridad*, Madrid, volume 118, n. 3, May-June 2010, pp. 281-283.

¹² This is the title of a timely and enlightening article, published in preparation for the 42nd General Assembly, which warns us of the risk of regarding the apostolic identity of the Congregation from a purely pragmatic and operative consideration, without taking into account the indispensable presupposition of our spiritual identity (cf. Ubillús, José Antonio, "Volver a Jesús para evangelizar" ["Return to Jesus to Evangelize"] in *Anales de la Congregación de la Misión y de las Hijas de Caridad*, Madrid, volume 123, n. 3, May-June 2015, pp. 251-265). In note 3, the author states: "It appears to me that, if the external mission is imperative at this point in time, so is the internal knowledge of what is to be transmitted in the mission: Christ. One cannot give that which he or she does not have! I have the impression that, generally, we focus more, as is understandable, on the missionary demands and less on the offering; that is, on what we are to offer, transmit, and share, primarily, in the mission. This may be a sign, on the one hand, of the limited conception that we have of what the mission of Christ, the Church, and the CM is, or, on the other hand, of a spiritual problem (pp. 251-252).

2. At the source of charity and mission

In the midst of the plurality that characterizes our time and insertion in a Church enriched and defied by an ample variety of spirituality, we feel more strongly the need to go back to the sources of our charism; charism symbolized by the experiences of Folleville and Châtillon, from which Saint Vincent awakened to the singularity of the grace that was given to him for evangelization and service to the poor.¹³ Grace received in faith, assimilated in prayer, proven by action, and then shared with all those that will come together to the evangelical ideal of the mystic of missionary charity.¹⁴ Only by going back to the sources we can reencounter, strengthen, and update the essential values and the determinant features of the Church with the spiritual density and apostolic zeal which, with all good reason, can be expected from the sons of Saint Vincent.

¹³ With expert authority, Father J. M. Ibañez said, “In these experiences of faith (Gannes-Folleville and Châtillon-les-Dombes), Vincent discovers his vocation and mission. Due to the fact that, in the depths of himself, he decided to give himself to God in his service to the poor, he can no longer have doubts about where to find God and to live the demands of this gift; a gift from God that constantly feeds the confrontation of faith with the injustice perpetrated against the poor. From this double experience, Vincent decides to dedicate himself with all his strength to serve God in the poor, who “die of hunger and are damned” (*Vincent de Paul: a fê comprovada no amor [Vincent de Paul: Faith Proven in Love]*, Sao Paulo: Paulinas, 1997, pp. 53-54).

¹⁴ On Saint Vincent as a mystic, see Grossi, Getuilo Mota, *Um místico da Missao, Vincent de Paul [A Mystic of the Mission, Vincent de Paul]*, 2nd edition, Belo Horizonte: Congregation of the Mission, 2016, pp. 287-330, (Chapter VI: “Um místico da Missao?” [“A Mystic of the Mission?”]). Orcajo, Antonio, “San Vicente de Paúl, un Místico de todo tiempo” [“Saint Vincent de Paul, A Mystic of All Time”] in *Anales de la Congregación de la Misión y de las Hijas de la Caridad*, Madrid, volume 116, n. 2, March-April 2008, pp. 142-156. On Vincentian mysticism and its unifying character of contemplation and action, see Álvarez, Javier, “The Vincentian Mystique” in *Echoes of the Company*, March-April 2009, n. 2, pp. 103-115.

Our founder was already convinced of the importance of an ample and profound appropriation of the specifics of our vocation, but without this implying a superiority complex or narcissistic isolation. On the contrary, Vincent insisted that his Priests and Brothers would recognize the merits of the different spiritual families that adorned the Church of his time. That is what he made clear in his Conference on Charity on 30 May 1659: “God has raised up this Little Company, like all the others, for His love and good pleasure. They all aim to love Him, but they love Him in different ways: the Carthusians by solitude, the Capuchins by poverty, others by chanting His praises; and we, my dear confreres, if we have love, we should show it by bringing people to love God and the neighbor, to love the neighbor for God and God for the neighbor. We’ve been chosen by God as instruments of His immense, paternal charity, which is intended to be established and to expand in souls” (CCD XII, 214). Identity is the visible manifestation of that which we essentially constitute, the historical realization of what we are as a spiritual and apostolic identity. The Vincentian identity has a dual structure: inner or, charism, that includes values, predispositions, convictions, and motivations; and exterior or, prophetic, that translates itself in a markedly charitable and missionary lifestyle. Although it has a permanent character, the Vincentian identity configures itself in a continuous construction process, in light of the circumstances and needs of each context in which it roots itself and flourishes. It is thereby a “trajectory drawn between two rocks: that of the inherited essence and that of the historically constructed existence.”¹⁵

We are at the same time heirs and artisans of our identity. As to charism and prophecy, the Vincentian identity presents itself as a gift and task, not only a testament received from the past, but also a goal to achieve, a purpose to be assumed, enriched by

¹⁵ Suess, Paulo. *Introducao a Teologia da Missao. Convocar e enviar. Servos e testemunhas do Reino* [Introduction to Mission Theology. Called and Sent. Servants and Witnesses of the Kingdom], Petropolis: Vozes, 2007, pp. 186.

multiple interactions, always in the search of the unity that gives sense and endows consistency and content to our experiences and commitments.¹⁶

In the same way as a plant, regardless of how robust and vigorous it might be, needs the sap that comes from its roots, also the updating of a charism cannot be achieved without searching in its origins the freshness of the inspiration that gave birth to it and that maintains it dynamic; that is, open to timely adjustments and prophetic, capable of responding to different challenges and realities with effectiveness. “When the inheritance tries to impose itself as something finished and when the construction of the new leaves the roots aside, too many open or closed fields emerge.”¹⁷ The “news” that we want to offer to the poor and to the Church, as heirs and craftsmen of the Vincentian identity, in no way can do without going back to the intuitions of the holy founder, to the spiritual heritage he left us, and to the tradition that has been set over 400 years in carrying out the charism.

Following the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI recalled that return to the sources is a principle of permanent charismatic and apostolic principle, inviting everyone to be “faithful to the spirit of their founders, to their evangelical intentions and to the example of their sanctity. In this it finds one of the principles for the present renewal and one of the most secure criteria for judging what each institute should undertake.”¹⁸ The current Pontiff knew how to update this appeal: “Recounting our history is essential for preserving our

¹⁶ On the dynamic and evolutionary character of any identity, see: Bauman, Zigmunt, *Identidade. Entrevista a Benedetto Vecchi [Identity. Interview with Benedetto Vecchi]*, Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2005, pp. 16-31. Buehler, Pierre, “A identidade Crista: entre a objectividade e a subjectividade” [“Crest Identity: Between Objectivity and Subjectivity”] in *Perspectiva Cristiana [Christian Perspective]*: Concillium, 216 (1988/3) pp. 25-27.

¹⁷ Suess, *op. cit.*, pp. 186.

¹⁸ *Evangelica Testificatio*, n. 11.

identity, for strengthening our unity as a family and our common sense of belonging. More than an exercise in archaeology or the cultivation of mere nostalgia, it calls for following in the footsteps of past generations in order to grasp the high ideals, and the vision and values which inspired them, beginning with the founders and foundresses and the first communities.”¹⁹

Our task, therefore, is to shorten the distance between the return to the fundamentals and the projection of new routes for the present and the future of the mission and of charity. In fact, especially in times of so many “diversities,” we are not authorized to consider as sufficiently assimilated the principles that form the backbone of our identity, define our own physiognomy, and ensure the prophetic force of the Vincentian Charism. If we do not appropriate the specifics of our charism, we will not have anything to offer but a hybrid presence, an innocuous word, and an inconsistent performance. Deprived of its vital impulse, provided only by the charism that the Spirit gave through the mediation of the founder,²⁰ the Congregation would not be able to communicate hope to the poor or to cooperate in the new evangelization that the Church intends at this historic moment, at the same time convulsive and promising, encouraged by the lucidity of a

¹⁹ Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter to All the Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, n. 1.

²⁰ It is interesting to highlight here what is said about the Consecrated Life (CL). In the multiplicity of its expressions, the CL characterizes itself by its charismatic and prophetic aspects. The charismatic dimension points to the actions of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the founders, moving them to reply with concrete and original initiatives to the challenges of the Church and of society in each era, above all in crisis and lack of humanity. This founding experience turns into a framework of reference for each congregation. It will be necessary to refer to it again and again, under the penalty of incurring infidelity of spirit, in case it disappears into oblivion. The prophetic dimension has to do with the historic moment and the ecclesiastic socio-economic context in which the congregations operate (cf. Vitorio, Jaldemir, *A pedagogia na formacao: reflexao para formadores na vida religiosa* [*Pedagogy in Formation: Reflection for Formators in Religious Life*], Sao Paulo: Paulinas, 2008, pp. 21-22).

providential man named Francis (whom, perhaps, we would like to call Vincent!).²¹

Nobody can consider himself unaware of this truth of faith that Vincent de Paul wanted to engrave with golden letters in the hearts of his priests and brothers: “Christ is the Rule of the Mission” (CCD XII, 110),²² permanent inspiration, frame of life, and perfect model for each missionary. The latter, in fact, recognizes himself as destined to continue the saving work of the Son of God, sent to evangelize the poor (cf. Luke 4:18). For this reason, he needs to be in continuous relationship with Christ to receive all that should be placed at the disposal of those whom he evangelizes. To Saint Vincent, the complete adherence to Christ is the core of the charitable-missionary vocation of his confreres: “The state of the Missioners is one in conformity with the evangelical maxims, which consists in leaving and abandoning everything, as the Apostles did, to follow Jesus Christ and, in imitation of Him, to do what is proper” (CCD XI, 1).²³ This is the commitment that accompanies and enriches the existence of the Missionary, despite his limitations and weaknesses: progressively resemble Jesus Christ, conform increasingly to his person, assimilate his values and criteria, assimilate his attitudes and feelings (cf. Matthew 11:29; John 13:15; Philippians 2:5), in a continuous conversion process, so that the Gospel is revealed in the life, common life, and actions of the members of the Congregation: “The intention of the Company is to imitate Our Lord to the extent that poor, insignificant persons can do. What does that mean? It means that the Company aspires to take Him as a model in the way He acted, what He did, His ministries, and His aims. How can one

²¹ On the Consecrated Life in the Pontificate of Francis, see Palacio, Carlos. “O Papa Francisco interpela a Vida Consagrada” [“Pope Francis Addresses Consecrated Life”], in *Convergencia*, Brasilia, year LI, n. 488, January-February 2016, pp. 62-76.

²² Conference on “Seeking the Kingdom of God,” 21 February 1659.

²³ Excerpt from a conference on “The Vocation of a Missioner,” not dated.

person represent another, if he doesn't have the same characteristics, features, manners, and looks? That can't be. So, if we're determined to make ourselves like this divine model, and feel in our hearts this desire and holy affection, it's necessary, I repeat, it's necessary to strive to model our thoughts, works, and intentions on His" (CCD XII, 67-68).²⁴ As our holy founder assures us, taking on our human condition, Christ "willed to place in us the seed of love, which is our resemblance to Him" (CCD XI, 131).²⁵ It is from Christ that the Christian receives his "shape" (Galatians 4:4).²⁶ Only in him, the human being finds his full realization. Outside of him, the apostolic work runs the risk of degenerating into compulsive activism and moralism without soul. Therefore, in the sense of Saint Vincent, the Missionary is, firstly, a convinced and passionate follower of Jesus Christ.

Put on the spirit of Christ to evangelize

Amid the setbacks of the current context, the DA shows the direction: "Christians must start over from Christ, from contemplation of Him who has revealed to us in his mystery, the complete fulfillment of the human vocation and its meaning. We need to become docile disciples, to learn from Him, in following him, the dignity and fullness of life. We likewise need to be consumed by missionary zeal, to bring to the heart of the culture of our time that unifying and full meaning of human life that neither science, nor politics, nor economics, nor the media can provide. In Christ the Word, God's Wisdom (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:30), culture can again find its center and depth, from which reality may be viewed with all its aspects together, discerning them in the light of the Gospel and

²⁴ Conference on "The Purpose of the Congregation of the Mission," 6 December 1658.

²⁵ "Exhortation to a Dying Brother" in 1645.

²⁶ In his Commentary on Galatians, Saint Augustine affirms: "Christ is formed in him who receives Christ's mould, who clings to him in spiritual love. By imitating him he becomes, as far as is possible to his condition, what Christ is. John says: *He who remains in Christ should walk as he did*" (Office of Readings for Thursday of the Fifth Week of Ordinary Time).

granting to each its place and proper dimension” (n. 41). We start from Christ, with the contemplation of his face, and the revelation that He brought to us about the paternity of God, source of life and love, and of the dignity of the human being, called to become who God made him to be in the same love that created him, holds him, and gives wholeness to him. So we have to make Christ the absolute reference of life, the focal point of our relationship with God and our neighbor, the permanent inspiration of our action. To do so, the first step is to become disciples who listen, learn, and assimilate. The second step, simultaneous to the first, is to share, propose, and announce what we have seen and heard in living together with the Teacher, convinced as we are that in Him are delineated the full sense of human existence, the perfect transparency of the Father, the most illuminating ethical criteria, and ultimate horizon of life and history (cf. Colossians 2:6-7, 9).²⁷

We believe in Jesus Christ as the complete and definitive answer to the mystery of the human being and of history, because only He reveals to us the source, the breadth, and the destiny of our humanity and all creation (cf. Colossians 1:15-20). In the person of Jesus – the way by whom God comes to us to attract us and by whom our steps are directed to God — “is the origin, that which is essential and to which we always have to return, especially in times of instability and change.”²⁸ The centrality of Christ, therefore, is not only an issue of spirituality. Its horizon is much wider. It also has to do with ethics on which our life, coexistence, and acting rests. From an authentically Christian mysticism, a behavior fueled by the same sap is born, bound with the same values and aimed at the same goal. A well-cultivated Christian spirituality inspires and boosts the sense

²⁷ Vatican II was sufficiently clear in illuminating with the mystery of Christ the most disturbing questions about human beings and the world: cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 10.

²⁸ Mesters, Carlos, “Voltar às origens: voltar ao essencial da Boa Nova que Jesus nos trouxe” [“Back to Origins: Return to the Essentials of the Good News That Jesus Has Brought Us”], in *Convergencia*, Rio de Janeiro, year XLI, n. 389.

and consistency of life, human integrity and personal consistency, honesty and transparency, fidelity and creativity, warmth and compassion, availability and dedication, service to others and the care of creation, hope and perseverance. Without the cultivation of Christian spirituality, without conscious and clear reference to Christ, all these values and attitudes, therefore, would be lacking a solid foundation, a safe guide, a continuous improvement, and vital impulse.

Given the fragility of religious experiences that swarm among our contemporaries at this time of many fleeting emergencies and few deep experiences in the field of spirituality and ethics, we easily come to see how much we need a more consistent faith, as well as a constant and overflowing spiritual life that makes us live and act accordingly to the gift of grace. The famous axiom of Karl Rahner, properly applied to our vocational identity also serves for us, Priests and Brothers of the Mission: the Vincentian missionary will either be mystical, someone who has made a strong experience of God in the center of his life, or he will not be a truly Vincentian missionary.²⁹ We all know that every true Christian experience of God requires, as *conditio sine qua non*, the following of Jesus Christ, understood and lived as identification with His person, assimilating His message and commitment to his mission. Saint Vincent de Paul leaves no doubt in this respect. Only robed with the spirit of Christ, we enter into communion with the Father, welcoming the initiative of His true love, discerning His will, and embracing the mission that He gives us by participating in the saving work of the Trinity. In the same way, only identified with Christ, can we be for the poor a new

²⁹ This is the exact affirmation of Rahner: “The Christian of the future will either be a mystic, that is, a person who has experienced something, or will not be Christian.” And he adds, giving us a picture of the society in which we find ourselves today “because the spirituality of the future will no longer be based on a unanimous, evident, and public conviction, nor on a generalized religious environment, prior to personal experience and decision” (*Escritos de Teología VII. Escritos Pastorales* [*Theological Writings VII. Pastoral Writings*], Madrid: Taurus, 1969, p. 25).

parable of the Kingdom, an irradiation of compassionate charity learned from the Teacher. The knowledge of Jesus Christ is the love that generates bonding, that gives us its shape or that forms it in us (*crístiformes*), that gives insight into His friendship (*crístófilos*), that makes us capable of taking Him in everything we do and talk about (*crístóforos*), allowing His heart to beat in us, allowing His feelings and criteria to be seen in our presence and performance.

A. To *conform ourselves to Christ*, cultivate friendship with Him, and take Him wherever we go involves, arguably, continuous rewriting of the spiritual dimension of our life, the only one able to nourish and develop the experience of God and Father of Jesus of Nazareth (cf. Luke 11:1ff), solidifying our convictions, improving our humanity, recreating our loyalty, and boosting our missionary zeal. Through the centuries, the Church has never feared to consider the three sources of encounter with Christ: the *Gospel*, the *Eucharist*, and the *Poor*. Saint Vincent knew how to keep them closely related in his experience of faith and apostolic commitment, insisting that his missionaries have them always present and integrated.³⁰ If we do not find Christ in himself, according to his humanity made of unconditional love of the Father and His brothers, as the Gospel presents it,³¹ if we do not celebrate his mystery in the Eucharist, in

³⁰ The Common Rules assure us of this integration: cf. CR I, 1; X, 3 and 8. In the conference on “Observance of the Rules” of 17 May 1658, the holy founder says, “Another motive why we should be exact in keeping our Rules is that they’re all drawn from the Gospel, as you’ll see, Messieurs, as you’ll see. All of them aim at conforming our lives to that which Our Lord led on earth. Our Lord came and was sent by His Father to evangelize poor persons ... to the poor, Messieurs, to the poor, as, by the grace of God, the Little Company strives to do” (CCD XII, 3).

³¹ A saintly bishop of the fifth century, Asterius of Amasea, shows, in one of his homilies, how we can evolve from the contemplation of the Gospel to the pastoral practice of charity: “Let us then be shepherds like the Lord. We must meditate on the Gospel, and as we see in this mirror the example of zeal and loving kindness, we should become thoroughly schooled in these virtues” (Office of Readings for Thursday of the First Week of Lent).

a conscious, active, and fruitful way, in communion with those who follow Him along the same way, how will we recognize his image in the disfigured faces of the poor, with whom He identifies himself and through whom He appeals to us? How can we see the poor with the eyes of Christ, taking into account the dignity and the value they have, if we do not know closely the sensitivity and care with which Jesus of Nazareth welcomed, understood, and catered to the least of his brothers? The encounter with Christ in the poor presupposes, confirms, and clarifies the encounter with Christ in the Gospel and the Eucharist. Whatever happens, Christ always leads us to the poor. It is impossible, for example, not to discover the poor as the usual company of Jesus in the Gospels and his main companions.³² The Eucharist, celebrated with honesty, always renews the call to charity and to the missionary mandate,³³ without which, the sacramental experience

³² Cf. Mark 1:32-33; 7:24-30; Matthew 5:3; 8:16-17; 11:25-26; 19:13-15; Luke 4:40-41; 6:20-23; 8:2ff; John 4:7-42. We already know what Saint Vincent said about the relationship between Jesus and the poor during the conference on “Perseverance in Vocation” on 29 October 1638, “And if we ask Our Lord, ‘What did you come to do on earth?’ ‘To assist the poor.’ ‘Anything else?’ ‘To assist the poor,’ etc. Now, He had only poor persons in His company and He devoted himself very little to cities, almost always conversing with and instructing village people” (CCD XI, 98).

³³ One time, talking to the Daughters of Charity, during the conference of 18 August 1647, Saint Vincent surfaced the relationship between the Eucharistic community, faithfulness to vocation, and charity towards the poor. “The Daughter of Charity who has made a good Communion does nothing displeasing to God because she does the actions of God himself ... So, when you see a Sister from the Charity nursing the sick gently, lovingly, and attentively, you may say confidently, ‘That Sister has made a good Communion’ ” (CCD IX, 262-263). Abelly collected this question addressed by Saint Vincent to his priests and brothers, “do you not feel divine fire burning in your breast when you receive the adorable body of Jesus Christ in communion?” (Book III, Chapter VIII, 79). Other references of Saint Vincent on the Eucharistic: Maloney, Robert, “Love Is Creative Even to Infinity. On the Eucharist in the Vincentian Tradition” in *Vincentiana*, Rome, year 47, n. 2, March-April 2003, pp. 107-126.

would be robbed of its most crucial aspects.³⁴ Nevertheless, without reference to Christ, the poor can be limited to a mere social category, against which, at most, we can report findings, give discourses, and carry out research, but not necessarily show compassion for and commit ourselves to because we lack what is most important, the basis of faith that allows us to recognize the dignity so often hidden behind the misery that degrades, the indigence that humiliates, and the despise that marginalizes. To be with the poor in a significant way, evangelize them, serve them, and let ourselves be evangelized by them, we need, therefore, to frequent the Gospel and to live the Eucharist; we need, at last, a rich spiritual life, consistent and diffusive that will debug us humanly as missionaries. To consider the poor only as comrades, without before seeing them as brothers in Christ, does not seem to be the specific Christian predilection for the disenfranchised of history, and much less of the destination to the poor that essentially defines the Vincentian identity. A proper vision of the poor will certainly afford us a particularly rich understanding of the Gospel and a more involved experience of the Eucharist.

B. There is no one better than Saint Vincent to let us know this truth and imprint it on our being: only a spiritual life of continued growth and maturation can shape in us the true follower of Christ, the evangelizer of the poor. Abelly retained this statement of him who was

³⁴ An echo of our founder's intuitions regarding the Eucharist can be seen in Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Letter "Mane nobiscum Domine" (7 October 2004) in reference to the Eucharist as a project of mission and impulse of Charity towards those most in need: "entering into communion with Christ in the memorial of his Pasch also means sensing the duty to be a missionary of the event made present in that rite. The dismissal at the end of each Mass is a *charge* given to Christians, inviting them to work for the spread of the Gospel and the imbuing of society with Christian values. The Eucharist not only provides the interior strength needed for this mission, but is also — in some sense — *its plan* ... We cannot delude ourselves: by our mutual love and, in particular, by our concern for those in need we will be recognized as true followers of Christ (cf. John 13:35; Matthew 25:31-46). This will be the criterion by which the authenticity of our Eucharistic celebrations is judged" (nn. 24-25, 28).

his illustrious formator, “one cannot hope for much from someone who does not continually converse with God. Further, if someone does not serve the Lord as they should, it is because they are not attached enough to God, and have not asked for his grace with perfect confidence.”³⁵ Throughout the 8000 pages of writings, conferences, and documents of Vincent de Paul, one can notice how abundant are the references to the value and necessity of prayer, meditation, contemplation, discernment, sacraments, inseparable aspects of the spiritual life.³⁶ On one occasion, to encourage the vocational discernment of a selfless priest of the mission, who said that he was captivated by the gathering of the Carthusians, the founder said: “the apostolic life does not exclude contemplation but encompasses it and profits by it to know better the eternal truths it must proclaim” (CCD III, 344).³⁷ On different occasions, Father Vincent will reveal himself strongly convinced of the need to cultivate the contemplative dimension of the vocation of his missionaries, especially emphasizing the practice of prayer (cf. CCD XI, 361). Only a genuine mystic is able to give to prayer the place that it deserves as an exercise that disposes us to receive what the Lord wants to give us with docility to make our lives fruitful and boost our missionary commitment. After listening to the founder himself so clearly and incisively refer to the spiritual life and knowing his career was so strongly marked by the experience of prayer, it is impossible to say that spiritual life is not a priority among the members of the CM or that apostolic activity is sufficient for living the Vincentian vocation and configure

³⁵ Abelly, Book III, Chapter VI, 56.

³⁶ Cf. Maloney, Robert, “On Uniting Action and Contemplation. A Key to Understanding Vincent de Paul” in *Vincentiana*, Rome, year 44, n. 2, March-April 2000, pp. 171-188. See also, Dodin, André, *En prière avec Monsieur Vincent*, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1982 (with a large anthology of prayers composed by Saint Vincent). Also the ten articles compiled in the volume: *San Vicente de Paúl y la oración. XXV Semana de Estudios Vicencianos [Saint Vincent de Paul and Prayer. XXV Week of Vincentian Studies]*, Salamanca: CEME, 2000.

³⁷ Letter to Father Claude Dufour, missionary in Saintes, 24 July 1648.

our identity in the Church. It is also impossible to accept as normal that a missionary not set aside moments of each day for meditation; that a local community does not set times for prayer, supported by the liturgy of the Church and the Vincentian tradition; that we do not prepare to announce the word of God with conviction and in an understandable way; that we do not celebrate the Eucharist with devotion, simplicity, and beauty; that we do not regularly receive the sacrament of reconciliation, seeking pardon and peace that only the Lord can give us; that we do not create times and opportunities for silence in our houses; that we are not truly spiritual men, which would in no way make us less apostolic. In fact, quite the contrary, in our founder, we have a full and indisputable proof that the more we are strengthened from the sap of Jesus Christ in prayer, the more fruitful we will be in charity and in the mission, both personally and communally. From the advice directed to the young Father Durand, Saint Vincent said: “Something important to which you must faithfully devote yourself is to be closely united with Our Lord in meditation; that’s the reservoir where you’ll find the instructions you need to carry out the ministry you’re going to have” (CCD XI, 311).³⁸

In the decades prior to the Vatican Council, the spiritual life in the Congregation (and the Consecrated Life as a whole) was going through a kind of saturation, plagued with obsolete customs and practices, especially in reference to schedules, forms, language, styles, etc.³⁹ The process of reception by the Council, was the appropriate occasion to make the culture of personal and community prayer less rigid, without ceasing to be profound; less formal, while remaining constant; less legalistic, without ceasing to have its

³⁸ Antoine Durand, named Superior of the Agde Seminary in 1656.

³⁹ For a general view of Consecrated Life in the period immediately prior to Vatican II, from an emblematic experience: Matos, Enrique Cristiano José, *Um Religioso em Mudanca de epoca [A Changing Era for Religious]*, Volume 1, Belo Horizonte: CMM, 2010 pp. 123-134.

method. Among ourselves, our attempts to pray were not always faithful, fruitful, and happy, sometimes opting to relegate prayer to the background and serve ourselves, too often, from questionable justifications and even contrary to the spirit of the CM; for example, that our spirituality would be dedicated only to action and, therefore, this would become our prayer, dispensing us from praying. There is not, neither in Saint Vincent nor in the legitimate tradition of the Company, absolutely anything that would serve as the basis for this type of discourse or practice. It would be sufficient to analyze the argument surrounding the repeated phrase: “*Totum opus nostrum in operatione consistit.*” In truth what is called for is a perfect integration between contemplation and action, prayer and work, love towards God and the neighbor: “The Church is compared to a great harvest that requires workers, but hardworking ones. Nothing is more in conformity with the Gospel than to gather light and strength for our soul in meditation, reading, and solitude on the one hand, and then to go out and share this spiritual nourishment with others. This is to do as Our Lord did, and His Apostles after Him; it’s to unite the office of Martha to that of Mary and to imitate the dove, which half digests the food it has eaten and then uses its beak to put the rest into that of its babies in order to feed them. That’s what we should do, that’s how we should witness to God by our works that we love Him” (CCD XI, 33).⁴⁰ Only a consistent spiritual life, nourished by prayer, allows us to make our apostolic efforts a clear demonstration that we love the Lord, “with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows” (CCD XI, 32), holding together affective and effective love. In the last few years, we have taken into account the thirst for God and the desire for a deeper spiritual life of young people who come to our houses of formation, as well as many confreres in general, especially those who feel somewhat tired and disillusioned, even after having devoted their best energies to the Mission. Would this not be a sign

⁴⁰ Excerpt from a conference on “Love of God.”

of the times worthy of attention on the part of us all? Is it not time to modify the emphasis employed or move in directions that have been forgotten and adjust our ideas, discourses, and practices to a more faithful and unifying understanding of the heritage of Saint Vincent? Perseverance, loyalty, and enthusiasm necessary for charity and the Mission, are they not related to the rediscovery of the richness and depth of the spiritual life, which identifies us and gives strength to us as Vincentians? Would not this spark a renewal and coherence, which we need so much in our evangelical commitment to the cause of the poor?

C. As mentioned above, the cultivation of the spiritual life has divisions of remarkable ethical scope, because all mysticism has an impact on the Community and on the Mission, in the common life and in the work of the missionaries. As such, a well-cultivated Vincentian spirituality certainly will not fail to have an impact on the assimilation of the virtues that characterize the spirit of the Congregation.⁴¹ These virtues that lead us to “always try to follow the teaching of Christ Himself” (CR II, 1), looking for the Kingdom of God above all, and faithfully fulfilling the will of the Father. Saint Vincent wanted these virtues to be “the faculties of the soul of the whole Congregation” and “everything each one of us does may always be inspired by them” (CR II, 14).⁴² When configured

⁴¹ On the five Vincentian virtues see: Maloney, Robert, *The Way of Vincent de Paul: A Contemporary Spirituality in the Service of the Poor*, Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1992, pp. 37-69. Pérez-Flores, Orcajo, *El Camino de San Vicente es Nuestro Camino [The Way of Saint Vincent is Our Way]*, pp. 121-136. On the Christian virtues in general, including those that characterize the CM, it is worthwhile to know the outstanding work of Motto, Andrés Román, *La moral de virtudes en San Vicente de Paul [The Moral of Virtues in Saint Vincent de Paul]*, Salamanca: CEME, 2010.

⁴² Another image adopted by Saint Vincent to show the importance of these virtues markedly apostolic is to compare them to the “five smooth stones with which, even at the first assault, we will defeat the Goliath from hell in the name of the Lord of Armies” (CR XII, 12).

to Jesus Christ, the virtues humanize and empower the missionary to live his vocation as an evangelizer of the poor, according to the charism that the Spirit gave him through the founder.⁴³ At this point, we must be careful not to confuse virtue with natural inclination, psychological predisposition, or cultural heritage. The *Catechism* defines virtue as “an habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself. The virtuous person tends toward the good with all his sensory and spiritual powers; he pursues the good and chooses it in concrete actions.”⁴⁴ Virtue requires, as such, asceticism, commitment to freedom, permanent efforts to polish humanity itself and make it suitable for what is revealed as true and good, just and timely, because it is inspired by God (cf. Philippians 4:8). Therefore, the continuous exercise of the virtues that shape the spirit of the CM focuses and perfects the intelligence and the will of the Missionary, ordering his thoughts, words and actions in light of his specific vocation. In this line, charity and mission always will be accompanied by authenticity (simplicity), freedom (humility), tenderness (gentleness), perseverance (mortification), and passion (zeal).

The contribution of the CM to the New Evangelization requires the deepening and the recreation of its charitable-missionary identity, whose center is in following Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor, on

⁴³ The apostolic virtues of simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification, and evangelical zeal are powerful tools used by the mystic of charity to put on the spirit of Christ and to carry on his saving work (Orcajo, *San Vicente de Paul, místico de todo tempo* [*Saint Vincent de Paul, Mystic of All Time*], p. 156). Father Maloney also reveals the central role that the virtues play in the Vincentian tradition: “These virtues are so central to Saint Vincent’s thinking that in efforts at renewal all those who share in the Vincentian tradition must grapple with their meaning and the forms they might take in the modern world” (*The Way of Vincent de Paul: A Contemporary Spirituality in the Service of the Poor*, p. 37).

⁴⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1803.

the way travelled and indicated by Saint Vincent de Paul. Without this continuous reference to the sources, there is no fidelity that shows itself creative, as well as no creativity that maintains itself faithful. In fact, “the Vincentian spirituality is marked by the spiritual experience of Christ and the poor that Saint Vincent had. Thus, to be faithful today to our identity in its double aspect, spiritual and apostolic, involves our conversion to this experience: live a greater rooting of our life in Christ and a greater dynamism to continue His mission among the poor. From there springs up a new ardor to collaborate in the new evangelization to which the Church calls us today. Without this, it would be useless to discuss new methods and new expressions. Therefore, the CM, prior to evangelizing and serving the poor, must drink from the sources from which its identity flows. The first spring of living water was Saint Vincent de Paul’s passion for Christ and for His evangelizing mission to the poor, the one that transformed his life, providing new meaning and direction to his existence. To fine tune, resonate, and relive the spiritual experience of our founder is the condition *sine qua non* of evangelizing renewal.”⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Ubillús, José Antonio, “Volver a Jesús para evangelizar” [“Return to Jesus to Evangelize”], op. cit., pp. 252-254.